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"God Loves a Cheerful Giver"

- 2 Co 9:7

"The Bible teaches it; I believe it; tithing." Such are the words chanted weekly by the congregation of a large church. Some career clergymen have declared that unless God's people tithe, they are robbing God (Mt 3:8-10)! One mega-church has its members cite the "Tither's Creed." They repeat, "The tithe is the Lord's. In truth we learned it. In faith we believe it. In joy we give it. The tithe!"

The Bible does teach tithing. The Bible also teaches God's people not to eat shrimp or oysters. The real question is whether such Old Covenant laws are still binding under the New Covenant. Is the law of Moses identical to the law of Christ?

Without dispute the New Covenant extols the virtue of generosity. In Mt 6:19-21, Jesus teaches us to store up treasures in heaven. In Mt 19:21, Jesus told the rich young ruler that by giving to the poor, he could have treasure in heaven. 1 Ti 6:18-19 exhorts us to be "generous and willing to share . . . lay up treasure . . . as a firm foundation for the coming age." We are to share with others, "for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb 13:16).

But how much should we give? The answer depends on how much we want to reap later, how much we want to be blessed, and how much treasure we want in heaven. Scripture says to remember this: "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Co 9:6-7).

According to the New Covenant, each man should give "what he has decided in his heart to give." That's all there is to it! Tithing, as required by Moses, is not a New Covenant practice. Notice that the text declares our giving is not to be done "reluctantly or under compulsion" (2 Co 9:7). If some preacher says you have to tithe, else you are robbing God, is that not placing people "under compulsion"?

The OT tithe was compulsory, not voluntary. Its purpose was to financially support a theocratic government. It was like our federal income tax. It supported the whole levitical system with its priests and temple (2 Ch 24:6, 9). Unlike Israel, the church is not under an earthly theocracy, but human, secular governments. Unlike Israel, the church has no special class of priests, but rather all in the church are priests. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, the New Covenant has no elaborate temple to build and upkeep. Instead, believers themselves (both individually and corporately), make up God's temple (living stones in a spiritual temple).

Just as there is no more temple, no more separate priestly class, no more theocracy, no more "holy" land, no more restrictive diet (oysters, shrimp), so also there is no more tithing. Tithing is never commanded in the New Covenant. There has been a "change of law" (Heb 7:12), the former regulation has been "set aside" (Heb 7:18), and the New Covenant made the first one "obsolete" (Heb 8:13)!

One objection to this is that the practice of tithing precedes the Old Covenant. Abraham tithed to Melchizedek, and since the Old Covenant was not initiated until several hundred years after that event, tithing must be seen as an ongoing practice that transcends any one covenant.

This argument seems plausible at first. However, once it is realized that this is an isolated (not an ongoing) event in the life of Abraham (the same can be said for Jacob's tithing), and that Abraham also offered sacrifices and circumcised the males of his household (both of which are now considered obsolete religious practices by all Christians), the strength of that argument wanes.

Another objection is based on Jesus' statement that "you give a tenth of your spices . . . but you have neglected the more important matters of the law . . . you should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Mt 23:23). The key to correctly applying this to today lies with the word "law" (Mt 23:23). Jesus was speaking to the teachers of the law and to the Pharisees—men who lived prior to the initiation of the New Covenant. The "law" is that of the Mosaic Covenant, not the New Covenant. The Israelites of Jesus' day were indeed required to tithe (and, by the way, to make animal sacrifices). We of the New Covenant are under no such requirement since that first covenant and its law has passed away. Viva the law of Christ!

Of course, there is nothing wrong with tithing if that is what God has led you to do. As was pointed out above, Abraham and Jacob both tithed voluntarily before the law was given. They serve as good examples to follow! The key is that our giving is to be according to how we have purposed in our hearts to give.

Since the house church in which I participate rarely takes up a collection, how do I give? Every time I get a paycheck, I set aside a percentage of it into a special "giving" fund. Week after week funds accrue there, until a need in the congregation arises. Giving in our church is usually directly from giver to "getter," with no middleman involved (though collections are occasionally taken).

Only two causes in the NT warrant a collection from the church. They are to help other believers who are in need (Ac 11:27-30; 24:17; Ro 15:25-28; 1 Co 16:1-4; 2 Co 8:1-15; 9:12) and to support apostles (church planters) in their work (Ac 15:3; Ro 15:23-24; 1 Co 9:1-14; 16:5-6, 10-11; 2 Co 1:16; Php 4:14-18; Tit 3:13-14; 3 Jn 5-8).

Whenever believers in another place were undergoing hardship (due to famines or whatever), the other churches were called upon to supply financial aid. It is important to note that such collections were never ongoing—they ceased after the need was met (Ac 11:27-30; 12:25; 1 Co 16:1-4). Local giving to the poor was done in secret and directly (Mt 6:1-4, 19-21; Eph 4:28). Evidently a "list" of local widows who qualified for assistance was kept by a church (1 Ti 5:3, 9, 16).

The church was also obligated to support the sending out of apostles (church planters). The Greek word for "send" (*propempe*) is, in the NT, associated with helping someone on their journey with food or money, by arranging for traveling companions, means of travel, etc. (BAGD, 709). It is to "send" an apostle off with material sustenance (Ac 15:3; Ro 15:24; 1 Co 16:6, 11; 2 Co 1:16; Tit 3:13; 3 Jn 5-8).

The same case can be made for the word "welcome" (Php 2:29; 3 Jn 10). To "welcome" a church planter was to provide temporary lodging for him and to meet his physical needs. NT church planters were given lump sums to get them to their destinations. Once there, they would evangelize the area, establish churches, train them in the basics and move on. En route they might be "welcomed" at existing churches and then be "sent" along again.

1 Co 9:1-14 states that apostle/church planters have the "right" to earn their living from the gospel while on mission trips. More is known of Paul's activities than anyone else's, and a look at his "career" is enlightening. His first mission lasted a year (AD 47-48) and then he was home about a year. His second expedition lasted around three years (AD 49-52) and then he came back for a short time. Paul's third trip lasted some four years, after which he returned to Jerusalem. The lesson to learn from this is that he did not spend his whole life in one place or among one people group. He traveled extensively, and his work was segmented into specific projects (a one year trip, a three year trip, a four year trip). Paul was also versatile enough to be able to supply his own needs when church funds were lacking.

Don't feel obligated to tithe. Give whatever you have purposed in your heart to give, and don't waste your giving resources on career clergy, special church sanctuaries, janitorial fees, landscaping, fancy throne-like furniture for hired pastors to sit in, or eighty thousand dollar pipe organs. Instead, use it as God intended: to help the needy and to support church planters!

- S.A.

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