

Spontaneous Giving

by Richard Plache

In today's religious marketplace, we are confronted by a host of hustlers competing for the Christian dollar.

Monthly in letters, weekly from pulpits, and daily over radio and television, their plaintive pleas arise, placing us under constant pressure to give. They make it sound like a matter of *survival*. They emphasize that obedience to God's financial laws is essential for our spiritual welfare, and don't omit to make mention of the fact that their financial survival will be jeopardized if we don't send them donations to pay their bills!

All of us want to help financially with the Lord's work. But how are we to know where to give, when to give, and how much? Are we left to fall prey to the various emotional and psychological gimmicks that preachers use? Is it a question of giving to the most persuasive of them, who somehow convinced us of his great needs? Perhaps in the end we begrudgingly respond because of some guilt trip that has been subtly laid on us.

What does a Christian do? Is there any help in the Bible?

When it comes to the Bible, preachers are divided, falling mainly into two camps. The first of these comprises those who advocate *tithing*.

We don't want to get into a deep doctrinal examination of tithing, but we do need to clean out a few theological cobwebs which still linger in some minds.

The first mention of a "tithe" is in Genesis. Abraham gave a tenth of his spoils to Melchizedek one time. In that single act, the author Hebrews tells us, the whole of the Levitical priesthood showed the superiority of Melchizedek over Aaron. It was a one-time, voluntary incident.

Jacob also tithed. If God would go with him, he would give Him a tenth of all his increase. He knew of no "tithing law," and had never been brought up to tithe by his father Isaac. He did this spontaneously, of his own free choice.

Tithing was instituted as a law in the second year after the Exodus, along with the other Levitical laws connected with the worship of Israel via the Tabernacle. It was intended to provide the Levites with sustenance and payment for their services. It was introduced when those services began.

Many seem to have overlooked the fact that God specifically designated the types of increase which were subject to the tithing law. The tithe was only taken on agricultural products — crops, fruit trees, flocks and herds. There isn't a single instance of anyone ever tithing on monetary increase, inheritances, or other means of gain. In fact, even spoil was no longer to be tithed, though Abraham had given a tenth of it; instead, it was to be divided among Israel in a prescribed manner.

The only ones ever authorized to receive tithes were the Levites. Ever since the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., it has been impossible to keep the tithing law. This is the very reason Orthodox Jews, who still believe in the validity of the old covenant over their lives, do not tithe! No one is qualified to receive tithes now that the priesthood and temple have gone.

There isn't a word in the entire Bible authorizing anyone to tamper with God's law. It stands or falls as an entity. If one wishes to tithe, he must do so exactly as God commanded, neither adding to nor diminishing from the law. If we want to take up with keeping any part of the law, we are to do it all (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 4:2). We have no authority to pick and choose from among the various parts of the law, retaining the designated percentage of the tithing commandment, but applying it to income other than from agricultural sources, or disregarding to whom tithes are to be paid. Christian ministers are *not* Levites, and have no right to tithes!

Jesus' remarks concerning tithing were made while the old covenant was still in force. Right up until His death, He upheld the entirety of the Mosaic system (Matt. 23:1-3, 23). Those who quote Jesus in support of tithing should also quote what He said in regard to one who was healed showing himself to the priest and offering the prescribed sacrifices (Matt. 8:4; Lk. 17:4). It is a simple matter of rightly dividing the Scriptures. Not all that Jesus upheld in His earthly ministry is retained after the cross!

During the early years of the church, Jewish Christians in Palestine basically continued in all the legal requirements of the old covenant. All who would be saved were to submit to those laws. This included the initiatory rite of circumcision, sacrifices, and no doubt tithing to the Levites who worked in the temple.

Paul, however, took a different course with Gentile converts. They were set free from the customs of the old covenant. Only four restrictions from the law were left upon them, in order not to offend Jews who lived in every city and probably felt they needed to keep the law, even though converted to Christ. (See Acts 15.) God finally pronounced judgment on this mixture of old and new among Jewish Christians by eliminating the focal point of Jewish worship, the temple.

It is absolutely *impossible* for anyone today to truly obey the biblical law of tithing. But what are the alternatives?

While teaching that if Christians don't faithfully set aside the first tenth of their paycheck they are robbing God, many preachers also know that tithing ensures a more consistent and greater income than if giving were left to the unpredictable whims of people.

This presents a problem for those who reject tithing as an old covenant practice which is no longer binding. How are they to maintain the flow of funds into their coffers?

Many solve the problem by stressing that tithing has been replaced by a law of giving. They claim there is a moral duty for Christians to support their church enterprise. So they boldly urge financial support, and people are *expected* to give. Appeals go out in letters, from pulpits, and over radio and television.

Others carry the law of giving still further. There is gentle pressure for Christians to give at least as much proportionately as was required of Israel. If ten per cent was demanded of carnal, unconverted people, they reason, shouldn't we give more under the new covenant? Some suggest we haven't actually begun to *give* until we have bettered the ten per cent figure.

Naturally, the "tenth" is just a *guideline*, if you please, not a law!

But does the New Testament retain tithing even as a principle?

Surprisingly, God hasn't spelled out a framework to dictate how we should give. Neither has He given the church the responsibility of determining when, where, or how much we are to give.

Giving certainly played a prominent role in the lives of early followers of Christ. But many today have taken the New Testament practice of spontaneous giving and changed it into a binding obligation. It has become one of the many "ought to's" of the church.

Why has this happened? Because of a fundamental flaw in understanding what is to motivate the believer's life and determine how he should live.

Is life in Christ a set of principles which are imposed from without? Or is it a spiritual life-force dwelling within? This is the crucial issue. What is the direction of the process of change from the world's lifestyle to the believer's lifestyle? Is it from outside in, or from inside out? Does it proceed from law to life, or from life to law? Could it be we have gotten things not only upside down, but also inside out — or is it outside in?

External "ought to's" can't create the Way of life. Adherence to all of the right principles cannot produce a renewed mind. Life in Christ is not a matter of being conformed to a code of conduct. It is *being transformed by Life*.

The mainspring of the Way of life is the operation of "*the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 8:2). This law is remarkably different from a written code of law or set of external principles. It isn't a spiritually magnified code of conduct which puts emphasis on one's thoughts as well as actions. If it were, the list of do's and don'ts would make the nit-picking of Talmud look like child's play. We would need to legislate on every thought, spelling out exactly how one is to think under any and all possible situations. The Jewish yoke of bondage would have nothing on the ponderous burden of such an ethic!

The Way of life of the New Testament isn't an external standard we strive to live up to. It isn't trying to copy the way Jesus lived while He was on earth. Though Jesus challenged people to try living as He lived, perfectly like his Father, that challenge was intended to show them their utter inability to duplicate such a life! He was pointing them to the absolute necessity of His own death on the cross.

The Way of life is Christ Jesus living His life in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. This isn't only the central fact of how we live, it is the *only* fact. There is nothing we can add to it.

The "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" is the moment-by-moment unfolding of Christ's life in our flesh. It is Him responding to all of life's situations in and through us. This is the way, the only way, that "every thought" can be brought into "*the captivity of Christ*." It is how we "let this mind" be in us "that was in Christ Jesus." It is what Paul meant when he said it was no longer he who lived, "*but Christ lives in me*."

Jesus is the Way. The Way of life is Christ in us in His own way, responding to life's situations as He would respond. We don't try to live that life. It flows spontaneously through us.

Just as it is impossible to create physical life in a chemical test tube, so it is impossible to create spiritual life in a theological test tube. Though there are certain basic chemicals involved in all living organisms, mechanically arranging them in the right proportions will not of itself produce life. Neither will externally imitating and artificially arranging the basic beliefs and actions common among believers produce spiritual life. We may assemble the correct doctrines, and we may take up the correct posings, but life comes only from life.

For us to have live, we must have Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. “He who has the Son, has life; he who has not the Son, has not life.”

Simulating life by urging external ought to’s on people in order to bring them into conformity to the way Christ would act simply produces bondage. No matter how well-meaning we may be, we are saddling people with a yoke that will be unbearable. To measure up to the stature of Christ, we must take His yoke upon us so that His life flows through us. Life will then come easy.

This, then, is why giving, along with all other virtues, can never be reduced to the category of “ought to” It is a fruit of the Spirit, a manifestation of the personal presence of Christ in us.

The believer has become joined as one with Christ. So everything he has is available for the use of Christ. Not just ten percent, but the whole of his income is under the control of the One who is his life. He has relinquished control completely.

Is new covenant giving left to the direction of the whims of the individual as preachers fear it would be if they quit their pleadings? No, because it is “no longer I” who controls my finances, but Christ who lives in me! He is the One who has the final say. I cannot give ten per cent, or whatever figure I may feel is required, and then determine what I do with the rest. He directs *all* of my finances.

When giving is in response to inner spiritual motivation, it doesn’t come from external pressure or a feeling of “having” to give. It springs from the direct inner commandment of Christ, in the heart, as His love constrains us (2 Cor. 5:14). Not even our own human concern and compassion are right motivations; our giving is to be an expression of the mind of Christ in us, as He thinks His thoughts through us. In fact, giving is one of the spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8). It is Christ reaching out and meeting the needs of others through us. Unless it comes through His love operating through us, even if we give all we have to others it is utterly worthless! (See 1 Cor. 13:3.)

Though the Jewish brethren were in dire need at one time because of a famine, Paul did not put any pressure on the Gentile churches to give other than what they themselves had already determined of their own freewill. Every man was to give as he purposed in his heart, under the direct guidance of Christ, and *not of necessity* — not under a sense of compulsion (2 Cor. 9:7).

Some have thought that Paul urged the Corinthians to give in this situation. But the truth is that they had volunteered to help when they learned of the need, because they had already heard the command of Christ in each one’s heart. It had not been possible, however, for the gift to be received immediately; now that the time had come for it to be delivered, Paul said that it was right for them to do as they had planned a year earlier. Still, he emphasized that any gift ought to be as a result of *wanting* to give at heart and not simply because there was great need.

This incident does not establish a precedent for asking people to “sacrifice” for the “work of the Lord”! It was a one-time gift, not a regular collection. Neither were the Corinthians asked to sacrifice. They “reigned like kings”; they had abundance. Since they had received help from Jerusalem, they now had an opportunity to reciprocate by giving out of their plenty. If a person wished to sacrifice, that is up to him. The Lord moved the Macedonians to do so, and they had to *beg* Paul to take it because they were not materially prosperous and he was reluctant. Never did Paul plead for money! Besides, this money was not to support *his* work at all, but was for brothers in need.

The major emphasis on giving in the early church is not for the planned expenses of a full-time ministry, but rather for meeting the needs of our fellow humans, such as family, friends, neighbors, even strangers, whether in or out of the church.

John said that if we have the love of Christ in us, we will not shut up the flow of compassion when we have the ability to meet a brother's need. Paul said that those who formerly sought only to get will want to labour in order to "have to give to him that needs." Jesus taught that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We are to "do good to all men" as opportunity arises, especially to God's people. The rich above all are to use their money "to do good," "contributing to the needs of the saints."

These and many other statements of the New Testament have to do principally with giving to individuals in need, not to giving to corporate "works of the Lord." Giving to our fellowmen is one of the most direct ways we have of serving Jesus Christ. When we do it unto "one of the least of these my brethren," we have done it to Jesus Himself.

Too often in our age of organized, institutionalized giving, we relinquish the responsibility of distributing our gifts to others. We fail to be personally sensitive to the needs of those with whom we have come into contact, and the inner voice commanding us to help is quenched. We miss out on the fulfillment that comes with the freedom of on-the-spot Christ-inspired giving.

When we know the daily reality of the indwelling Christ monitoring our lives and moving us into action, we realize that He brings to our attention and causes to cross our path those who are in need of ministry from Him. Through us He continues the ministry of meeting men's needs that He began while He was here in the flesh. Giving, then, moves from the artificial, mechanical fulfillment of a formula, such as placing an envelope in the collection plate each week, into the spontaneous ministry of Christ toward those He has chosen to have mercy upon.

What about the clergy then?

The New Testament does show people involved in full-time ministry. Paul told the Galatians it was good to provide for such people: "*And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches.*" He also expounded the right of ministers to be supported in I Corinthians 9. If someone ministers to you, you will want to minister to him, just as a man in the armed forces has his expenses paid, or as a farmer eats of his produce. Notice, however, that it is the *individual* meeting of needs that is spoken of here, not a pleading for funds so that a minister can "do his own thing," creating his own empire.

The present pathetic scene of mass-media preachers begging for money so they can expand their organizations is totally foreign to the early church's experience. There is no record of any minister asking for money for himself! Paul never asked the church for financial support. If God moved people to minister to his needs, he was grateful; if not, he simply did a job. Many times he suffered want, but there wasn't a word of complaint. He took it that such was God's intention for him at that moment.

There is a very simple, practical way whereby any "work of faith" can demonstrate both to itself and others that it is indeed a work God wants done.

The purest expression of a true work of faith is to totally trust God to provide whatever income He chooses to send. The verse that says "*ask, and it shall be given to you*" isn't

authorizing us to ask others for money, but to ask the *Father* who gives all good things. There is no biblical example authorizing ministers to urge people to send *them* money.

If God has begun a ministry and is pleased with the fruits being borne, He will move upon the hearts and minds of His people to provide for that ministry without any pleading for money. He will cause his people to give spontaneously. If a man really wants to know if God is in what he is doing, let him *let Christ decide who should survive!*

Instead of listening to the pleas of men for support and dutifully contributing out of necessity, we need to hear the "*still, small voice*" from within. This is the voice of the Good Shepherd, and He has promised that His sheep will hear His voice and follow where He directs. We will *know* where to give, not because someone has asked or can demonstrate great need, but because He commands us in our hearts.