

Three Attitudes Toward Giving

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The author believes that three wide-spread attitudes about giving need more careful attention from church leaders.

The "Dues" or "Fair Share" attitude. The first attitude is that of paying one's dues. The basic thought here is something like the following: "I am paying the equivalent of a membership fee, and in exchange for it I am receiving something from the church." The "something" could be a general warm feeling or it could be a deeply moving inspiration. It might be a sense of ensuring the availability of the pastoral offices, such as Baptism, Holy Matrimony, or Burial of the Dead. Or it could be that the "giver" wants to establish eligibility for other benefits, such as pastoral counseling. Another motivation might be to buy entrance into a beneficial moral environment, which will help in the upbringing of one's children.

Of course, nothing is wrong with wanting any of these things from the church. However, if the attitude of the person who is making a so-called gift to the church is that the person is only paying the fair share for what they are getting, then they are not really giving, they are only engaging in a purchase. While paying one's fair share for services received is more responsible than being a free-loader, it does not really deserve to be called giving. Moreover, there is plenty of biblical precedent for believing that a 'fair share' is ten percent of one's income.

The Program Oriented (or Goal-Oriented) Attitude. A second attitude is that of one whose giving is motivated principally by the desire to see some particular thing done, perhaps helping those who have a particular need. A giver whose motivation is, for instance, to support feeding of the poor, or to support activities of the Sunday school (especially when the giver has no children in the Sunday school), etc., is clearly giving charitably. One could refer to such giving as mission-motivated or, where applicable, as outreach-motivated. Such giving to benefit others is in accordance with the second of Jesus's summary commandments: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Giving Out of Thankfulness and Love for God. A third attitude is that of the person who is giving to God in gratitude for what the person has received from God. Here, the attitude is one of thankfulness, and of returning out of plenteousness. In the ideal, this person is giving without attention to which of God's purposes the gift will be used for. The giver here is giving up any control over the gift, even indirect control. It is only when the giver totally releases control that the transfer can really be called a gift. Part of the giver's attitude may be that the giver never felt that they owned what they are giving away. Think of the idea that:

"All things come of Thee, O Lord; of Thine own have we given Thee."

The idea that all things belong to God is what Jesus had in mind when he said: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; render unto God the things that are God's."

Don't be Too Soft on Your Flock. Many church members (and leaders) have a problem with the ideas that even people with low incomes have a Christian responsibility to give, that such people will find joy in giving, and that such people can even give out of a sense of plenteousness. In today's secular world, many (or possibly even most) Americans have a sense of not having enough. Every day, we are bombarded by advertising messages which reinforce the view that we are lacking, and that our lack can only be cured by certain recommended purchases. Such a view is, of course, profoundly non-Christian. Not only can salvation not be earned or purchased, it has already been given to us. What could possibly be more valuable than that?

Often, Christian leaders who do not have a sense of plenteousness have difficulty in seeing the

rightness of teaching to lower-income church members the practice of gratitude-oriented giving. While the problems of those who have very low incomes are not to be taken lightly, the joy of giving to God is also not to be taken lightly. Remember the respect that Jesus showed for the widow who gave the widow's mite; in this story he was teaching us that giving is a consequence of faith, and that he greatly values faithful giving.

Some of the most joy-filled church members feel that they are being given so much by God that they want to give a sizable proportion of it back -- even if such giving means significantly lowering their standard of living! Voluntarily lowering one's standard of living in this way goes strongly against current secular culture, but it is profoundly Christian. Seemingly well-intentioned church leaders who are not willing to teach gratitude-based giving are denying their followers one of the greatest joys of being a Christian: that of being a significantly contributing member of God's team.

As pointed out above, giving to support mission can be seen as being obedient to the second of Jesus's summary commandments. In a similar fashion, non-program-motivated giving out of love for God can be seen as obedience to the first and greatest of the summary commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with *all* thy heart, *all* thy soul, *all* thy mind, and *all* thy strength." The standard of this commandment is *total* commitment.*

There is no indication that Jesus meant the actions directed by these commandments to involve only those resources resulting from incomes of upper middle class level and above. (There is, to the contrary, strong indication that Jesus wanted all his followers to help people in need.)

Failure to teach the giving aspect of Christianity not only cripples the functioning of the institutional church, it omits one of the most clearly mandated, and most joy-producing, aspects of the Gospel.

It is sometimes argued that asking token givers to tithe (or to adopt a defined program of moving toward tithing) is too much of a shock - "It would be better to bring them along through the above stages." To me, this is like asking people to steal only half as much next year, or to commit only half as many acts of adultery, etc.

In the Church, there is significant resistance to the idea that the Christian life necessarily involves significant levels of giving. For those who feel this way, I ask you to remember what Jesus said concerning the relative importance of the two summary commandments: "[The commandment to love God with *all* that one has] ... is the first **and greatest** commandment. The second is like unto it..."

Both of these two commandments involve substantial amounts of giving.

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* In mathematical terms, one can see that the standard of giving implied by the first summary commandment is 100 percent, not the ten percent specified in the tithe. Remember that the Episcopal Church's position is that the tithe is the *minimum* standard of giving. The uppermost standard is 100

percent. The second summary commandment would seem to imply giving to others half of what one has.