

GIVING: Or Tithing?

This is a time of emphasis on the grace of God. Salvation is free. Christ did it all for us. We cannot obey enough or work enough to earn it. It is not gained by the keeping of laws. Having received it, it is a permanent gift, not dependent on our goodness or ability to perform. So the explanations go, whether right or wrong. But then guilt is laid heavily on all who are not forthcoming with tithes and other offerings.

That must describe the setting that brought forth the barb: “Salvation is free; all it costs is 10% of your gross income and extra offerings also.” Trust in grace is undermined by anxiety and uncertainty as to whether one is “giving” enough. Tithing and giving are not always the same thing, however.

To supply the church treasury, some preachers who usually proclaim grace will revert back to the tithe of the Law of Moses as a legalistic standard. They may try to soften the legalistic aspect by contending that it is a love-offering and that the tithe has been the standard for such offerings in all ages. But any way you cut it, that is still legalistic.

The tithe was a tax – an income tax. Paying taxes is not “giving.” If the tithe is a lawful requirement, then paying tithes is law-keeping. Whether you call the old covenant requirement a principle of guidance in giving or a law, it becomes a legalistic quota system by which one fulfills that obligation. It becomes a part of a legal system of righteousness.

Cruden’s Concordance distinguishes the kinds of tithes. *“There were three sorts of tithes to be paid from the people (besides those from the Levites to the priests) Num 18:26, 27. etc. (1) To the Levites, for their maintenance, Num 18:21, 24. (2) For the Lord’s feasts and sacrifices, to be eaten in the place where the Lord should choose to put his name there; to wit, where the ark should be, the tabernacle or temple. This tenth part was either sent to Jerusalem in kind, or, if it was too far, they sent the value in money, which was to be laid out for oxen, sheep, wine, or what else they pleased, Deut 14:22, 23, 24, etc. (3) Besides these two, there was to be, every third year, a tithe for the poor, to be eaten in their own dwellings, Deut 14:28, 29. In the New Testament, neither our Saviour, nor his apostles have commanded any thing in this affair of tithes.”* Some of the tithe was used to supply food and wine for their festive gatherings! An interesting “principle” for our giving!

Tithing was mentioned before Moses and the Law. After Abraham had defeated the five kings, he gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the booty taken in war (Gen. 14:20). Is that an example for us to give a tenth -- of the spoils of war? And to whom would we need to give it since the king of Salem is no longer around? And what did Melchizedek use it for? Jacob vowed to give God back a tenth of all by which God prospered him if God would bless him in Mesopotamia (Gen 28:22). Are we supposed to make a similar bargain with God? And to whom would we need to give it in order to route it to God?

Neither Jesus nor any inspired writer pointed to those as examples or principles for us to follow.

Considering the texts above from the Law of Moses, some preachers have concluded that the Jews were required to give 37 1/3 % of their income. Then they hit their people on the head with it. If the Jews, under an inferior system were required to give over 37% by law, how much more we should be willing to give in appreciation for salvation in Christ. A measly ten percent is almost insulting to God considering what he has done for us. They may shame each other in song, “I gave my life for thee; what hast thou given for me?”

While decrying righteousness by works of law, the lawful tithe is used by some as the pattern for giving. Did Jesus and the apostles teach that? Not a word of it. If we follow the Jews’ example, where are the Levites and tabernacle/temple where tithes are to be delivered? Are the pastors and churches the priests and temples of today following the laws of tithing set forth in the Law of Moses? Read on.

In a recent email send-out that I received, a pastor defended tithing as “grace-giving” rather than a religious ritual or dogma. Then he concludes: “It took a 10% tithe just to care for the ministers in Israel, and yet today we are trying to run the entire work of the Kingdom of God on this same amount! The pattern for New Testament grace-giving is the Old Testament tithe. 10% is a good place to start in supporting the work of the church, but remember – it takes more than that to do the work of God around the world!”

When will we come to recognize the vast difference in the design of the Law of Moses and the covenant of grace? The Law was given before God’s congregation became a kingdom. The kingdom came out of rebellion against God’s design. (Strange that so many look for its restoration on earth!) Under Moses, God established a Theocracy, a “church-state” arrangement, in which he ruled both the civil and religious affairs through the tribe of Levi. The tithe was the tax enabling the system to operate. The 10% was their income tax supporting the combined civil government and religious system.

The Levites served as assistants to the priests and as teachers who preserved, transcribed, interpreted, and judged the law (See Deut 17:9-12; 31:25-26). There is no mention of a police force in Israel but, perhaps, the Levites served as enforcers of the law also for they were “gate keepers.” So, in supporting the tribe of Levi by a tithe, they were paying for the entire religious-civil system. Later, the kings would subject the people to additional taxation (1 Sam. 8).

If we listen to the money-raising preachers urging us to give 37+% to the church, we will still have to pay all our local, state, and federal taxes in addition. Counting all the taxes we pay to the government, that total may exceed the combined figure that the Jews paid for both government and religion.

Why do preachers not tell you these things? I don’t want to be arrogant and harsh in judging them, but I can think of only two possibilities. They may be ignorant of the truth

being pointed out here. Or, they know the truth and are unwilling to give up their money-raising manipulations. Can you think of any other reason? Surely you will not excuse such conduct by claiming that the end justifies the means, that is, “it is all for such a good cause.”

Which image of the church does the public see most – hands outstretched to help the needs of mankind, or hands outstretched begging for money to support the system itself?

The way we use our resources, whether selfishly or unselfishly, reveals the heart. The decision is our own to make. In raising money for the poor saints in Judea, Paul wrote it simply: “*Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*” (2 Cor. 9-7). It must be of free will rather than by demand of law, given cheerfully, for God loves a “cheerful giver” -- not a “dutiful payer.”

More to come, if the Lord wills. []

(Cecil Hook; August 2004)

Talkin’ Texas: El Paso is closer to California than to Dallas and closer to Los Angeles than to Beaumont.