

The Tithe, Guilt, and Luxury

The title of this brief essay may suggest no meaning to you, but I hope that it will stimulate your curiosity to see if I make any sense of it.

Under the Law of Moses given to Israel, the first fruits were claimed by God. A tithe, or ten percent, of all crops and produce belonged to the Lord. It was dedicated (made holy, set apart) for sacrifices of worship and for taxes. This tithe was the Israeli's sole contribution, or tax, to support their *church-state* system. It was their entire religious contribution and government tax combined. The remaining 90% was considered as personal prosperity.

We heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement, along with most other followers of Christ, understand that such a law was given specifically to Israel and it was never made an obligation for those under grace instead of Law. Our relationship and service to God, which includes the money we give, are not based upon or measured by legal requirements. Our giving is motivated by love, the highest of principles, which cannot be measured by quotas. We are holy, having dedicated our entire beings to the worship and service of Him who blesses us with talents and the fruits of them. Our intensity of love determines the use of all the gifts God gives to us.

So far, so good, but here is where *guilt* enters. In order to increase *giving* to support the local programs of the congregation, preachers and elders will lean very dependently upon law to define quantity. While confessing that we are under no real law requiring a tithe, they will insist that the tithe has been God's standard for giving in all times. By this they reinforce the concept of the Law which designated some of our blessing as being God's and the rest of it as ours. And we dare not use God's for self, robbing him of tithes and offerings. Guilt is laid on the less wary hearer so that the tithe is produced to clear the conscience of the dreaded sin of robbing God. Thus the tithe becomes a tool with which to manipulate guilt in raising money for support of a congregational system. Our motivation of love usually is appealed to with insistence that the love must be shown through the tithe given to God through the church.

This concept mistakenly distinguishes between what is God's and what is ours. It wrongly identifies giving money as an act of worship that is more praiseworthy than our giving ourselves as living sacrifices in using all that God gives us.

If we give to the extent of our love, how can we justify living in *luxury*? We see popular TV preachers amass fortunes and live the affluent "good life." How do they justify their extravagant lifestyles? They give the Lord his part in a tithe; the rest is theirs to enjoy! They boast that you cannot out-give God; they give, and God gives them yet more! He enriches those who trust in him! *But their love is measured by a tithe!*

Now don't become too smug about those preachers. You are not a preacher, but do you practice the same thing? God gave you a gift for making money. You use your whole gift, work hard, and he blesses you with money. So you give him his portion, ten percent. *The rest is your?*

Again, this concept incorrectly distinguishes between what is God's and what is ours. It segregates life into the religious and the secular. That, however, is not true holiness through complete dedication to God. That is dedication of ten percent of the capabilities that he gives us. It is not whole-life service.

“What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”, Paul shamed the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:7). The gifted executive or attorney makes a fabulous salary while the gifted school teacher, nurse, or policeman receives modest pay. Each works equally hard in using the gift given by his/her Maker. Does God intend that one take advantage of his gift to live in luxury while the others must pinch pennies financially? Each should be dedicated to use the gift as fully as possible in whole-life service. It is becoming in none of us to use only ten percent of what he/she has been endowed with, whatever the talents may be.

This is not meant as a chiding of you who are wealthier than I am. There is no merit in impoverishing ourselves, though such may be praiseworthy if it is done in demonstrating love for others. This is my appeal for us all to demonstrate love in proportion with our gifts, whether we have one talent or give. How can you measure love by percentages?

I am not judging your case; I'm having hard enough time judging my own!

The tithe must not be considered as a measurement of righteousness or as God's portion of our lives. It should not be used as a guilt-manipulating tool to raise money. Nor can we rightly justify selfishness by demonstrating love through use of only ten percent of our generous gifts from God. []