

## Contents

	Introduction	9
1.	The principle of giving	11
2.	The priority in giving	16
3.	Providing for pastors	23
4.	Teaching this truth	41
5.	Some practical principles and patterns	54
6.	Thinking more widely	73

## Introduction

Christians give. It is one of the instincts of the Redeemed heart. They give of themselves—their time and their energy. They give of their substance—their money and their things. That generous instinct arises from a heart made new after the image of God in Christ, a heart eagerly disposed to give sacrificially for the sake of others. When the apostle Paul wants to encourage God's people to be faithful, generous, ready givers, he points them back to Christ Jesus: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9).

The Christian is also called to be a wise steward. Even though he who gives is to give with liberality

(Rom. 12:8), all those who receive a gift from God are to minister that gift to one another ‘as good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ (1 Pet. 4:10). Every Christian is to be a good steward who is both wise and faithful (Luke 12:42; 1 Cor. 4:2).

As believers, we ought to be primed to give our time, our energy, our money—whatever resources are at our disposal—for the work of the Lord, for the health of his kingdom. But what does that actually look like?

# 1

## The principle of giving

Primarily, a Christian's giving means giving to the local church of which you are a committed member. The church is the one institution with direct divine sanction for the work of Christ's kingdom. It is the one missionary organisation with a heavenly mandate. It is the one establishment with a celestial constitution. Its work is defined by divine fiat—that is, God himself has spoken with authority concerning the church's identity and activity. It is the one body with a guarantee of perpetual existence and unending profitable service. It is also the one organisation which has the primary and legitimate claim on our financial contributions to the kingdom of God.

I appreciate that true believers may have different

convictions about the nature and function of the church, but the principles are plain. My convictions manifestly inform what follows, but I trust that the principles can be taken and applied righteously in various contexts, whatever the specific practice of them.

### **Giving to the local church**

It is clear from the Scriptures that Christians should support the work of the Lord by systematic and proportionate giving made through the local church (Mal. 3:8–10; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8 and 9). Whether or not you take formal tithing<sup>1</sup> as a helpful principle, it is certainly indicative of the attitude of God's people concerning giving to God's kingdom. And what of gifts and offerings made according to one's ability and willingness of heart (Gen. 14:18–20; Ex. 36:2–7; 2 Cor. 8:1–5)? There is no blessing from God, perhaps directly through the church and its ministry, for which an offering of thanksgiving might not form part of an appropriate response. The true principle of giving in the new covenant is for someone to do so 'as he may prosper' (1 Cor. 16:2). This is a grateful generosity in which giving is the instinctive and cheerful response of the one who has himself received all things, not least salvation, as a free gift (1 Cor. 4:7). Such giving is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Tithing is the setting apart of one tenth of one's income for investment in the kingdom of God.

civil or ecclesiastical tax, nor is it the responsibility of any civil or ecclesiastical authority to elicit a payment by edict, threat or force. The only obligation here is the obligation of the renewed and instructed heart. Any necessary administration in the matter is primarily the administration of the local church.

It is true that there are other institutions, organisations and associations besides the local church which are doing fine work. Many of them are doing work that lies outside the proper remit of the church. These too might deserve your time, attention and support. Some of them do not have the capacity or desire, or even the need, to clamour for your probably hard-earned cash. Some of them are known to thousands, some to few. Some of them are eminently worthy, others debatably so. You may certainly consider supporting them financially, if you are able. I also understand that there are some avenues of genuine Christian service that are difficult to define in terms of the role of the church either as the direct instigator or overseer.

But that is not the question here. Our question is, 'What should be my priority in giving?' The answer is that the first call on your financial investment ought to be the church to which you belong. That particular local church is particularly called to engage locally in the work to which the whole

church of Christ, more generally considered, is called. Do not divert your investment from the body constituted and instituted by the Lord by giving to other bodies of human invention which are seeking to replicate that work. If you trust the elders and the deacons (one presumes that you do, if you belong to the church), and if they have a sincere and wise desire for kingdom investment (and they ought to have such a desire), and if you have a little extra that you wish to give or to do (and many of us have that), why not give a little more to that church of which you are a part? Most church officers and the congregations they serve already know where and how and why they might invest any further funds made available.

### **Giving to other churches and causes**

And what of other churches? Do you know of congregations that are seeking to support missionaries, or plant churches, or erect or purchase buildings? Are there churches that struggle to support their pastors? If you have given all that you might and all that you could to your own congregation, might you suggest to the elders and deacons that this could be a worthwhile investment? If your church is already involved in such support, and you have more in your pocket, why not pass it along independently and anonymously?

If, after your righteous investment in Christ's church, you have additional discretionary funds or wish to make further sacrifices to other Christian endeavours, then by all means go ahead. I suggest that—should you feel conscience-bound to make such an investment—you reserve those gifts only for work that lies outside the remit of the church, rather than investing it in something that is replicating or replacing that church work but without a divine mandate. And unless and until you find such a need, then look nearer at hand and, I hope, nearer to heart. Christ loves his church. It was to a church that Paul wrote concerning the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). It is in and through the local church that the first response to this example ought to be made.