

Newsletter June 2012

This brief discussion of Christian giving is based upon edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book II, Chapter 9.3. In the entire New Testament, we find no examples of giving money to a denomination or to support one's local church. Denominations did not exist at that time and local churches were simple gatherings of believers meeting wherever they could assemble in safety from persecution to worship Christ.

True Christian stewardship has to do with the dispensing of the Gospel that was entrusted to us as believers, not stewardship over material wealth. Without exception, it refers to the Gospel of Christ that we have received in trust to care for and invest throughout the world in order to gain a "payment of interest" to Christ in the form of new believers for his Kingdom. We are to be faithful stewards acting on his behalf in that great endeavor. That emphasis is made clear by all of Paul's writings (cf. 1Co.9:17; Ga.2:7; Col.1:25; 1Th.2:4; 1Ti.1:11; Tit.1:3). Stewardship examples that we find in the Gospel texts are figurative allegories (i.e. parables). Because Jesus used material wealth as a metaphor for spiritual riches in them, many have erroneously assumed that the point being stressed was actually Christian stewardship over money. However, they actually refer to a spiritual trust fund rather than a trust fund of material wealth.

The examples of material giving that we do find in Scripture all have to do with believers giving to satisfy the material needs of other men and women — other believers in particular. In material giving to individuals in times of need, we show ourselves able stewards of all that God has given us. When we give to others in their personal need, we give not from our own wealth but from the wealth of Him who "owns the cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps.50:10). We find that all legalism is cast out as both inappropriate and unnecessary because the motivation for Christian giving comes from within through the indwelling Holy Spirit, who pours forth the love of Christ in our hearts, not from without written in tables of cold stone. True Christian giving is an outgrowth of our faith and our personal knowledge of the mind of Christ and love for his people.

Paul, speaking of the generous giving of the Corinthians for Hebrew Christians in the time of their great need, referred to their giving as a "grace," not as a precept. "Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also" (2Co.8:7). Paul is also quick to point out that commandment does not enter into it: "I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love" (2Co.8:8). We freely give materially to others because we recognize that we have become spiritually rich in Christ, even as He gave his all in order for us to receive it (2Co.8:9). The act of material giving [to others] is but a reasonable response to the spiritual gift that we have freely received through Jesus Christ.

When we give that which we have earned through the works of our own hands, we are privileged to give a part of ourselves as well. Christian giving is not the strict obedience to any rule or law, but is instead an expression of God's love flowing through us. In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul said, "...though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not [love], it profiteth me nothing. [Love] suffereth long, and is kind; [love] envieth not; [love] vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up..." (1Co.13:3,4). If we give in accordance with a legal precept out of a sense of duty, our pride may easily become elevated in a sense of meeting that accomplishment, but such pride destroys genuine love. God is pleased when we give to others out of love and concern for their welfare rather than from any legal constraint to do so. "For God is not unrighteous to

forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (He.6:10). Only when we give to others in need from a willing heart is it a clear demonstration of God’s love. “But, whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him” (1Jn.3:17)? Having tasted, even having drunk deeply of God’s love, we cannot fail to have compassion on our brothers who suffer from material needs. We know exactly how far God’s love was extended toward us, “...in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro.5:8).

Therefore, we simply cannot withhold our generosity from fellow believers that are truly in need. “Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away” (Mt.5:42). “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise” (Lu.3:11). In these words of Jesus, we do not read that we should deprive ourselves through giving, only that we should give freely out of our surplus and abundance. We must, of course, first direct our giving to brothers and sisters in Christ as we read in Romans 15:27. We who share spiritual things should quite naturally share our material blessings. In context, Paul is speaking of the Macedonian Christians sharing with the Jerusalem Christians because of their great material need at that time (cf. Ro.15:26). However, as Christians, we are not limited to giving only to other believers for Jesus said, “... love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again...Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (Lu.6:35,36). The Christian’s giving extends outside the sphere of the local church to believers in other congregations and even to neighbors in the unbelieving community as a witness to God’s love and mercy.

We should give according to how God has prospered us. Under the old covenant of law, giving was regimented in a legalistic manner by requiring an exact tithe (Nu.35:8; De.16:10,17). Since the Holy Spirit was not living in the old covenant believer to direct them in their giving, law was a necessary external constraint, but under the new covenant of grace, no specific percentage can be set without doing impairment to that grace. The smaller gift of the poor is made equal to the greater gift of the affluent as Jesus demonstrated when He spoke of the widow’s offering of two mites (Mk.12:42–44). The state of the giver’s mind is more important than the exact amount given, “for if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened” (2Co.8:12,13). If a man gives from a willing mind, he will give all that he is able to give according to how God has prospered him to fill a true need that he recognizes in others. That obviously does not mean that we should impoverish ourselves by giving so that others can become rich from our generosity and labor rather than from their own efforts. For, if an able man refuses to work, we have no moral obligation to sanctify his laziness (cf. 2Th.3:10).

With regard to giving to unbelievers, we must remember that the Christian’s primary mission to them is to present the Gospel message with a view to their eternal salvation, not provide them temporal physical comfort. While it is possible to personally convey this message directly to close family and friends and even many strangers that we may meet along life’s way, it is not physically possible for us to reach the great masses outside our personal sphere throughout the world. Nevertheless, it is the mandate of the Visible Church, of which we are each and all members, to reach every living creature on earth with the teaching of Jesus Christ (cf. Mt.28:19,20). To aid in this great effort it is quite proper that we provide monetary support for Christian missionaries who have dedicated their lives to reaching the lost of the world on our behalf. Many of those missionaries are associated with a temporal church or denomination, while still others depend upon wider support from

various churches and individuals. Many of the lost throughout the world are difficult or impossible to reach with human missionaries because of highly oppressive national governments. For that reason, electronic media including radio, television, and the Internet have been pressed into service in this age to reach many of them with the Gospel as well as provide them much-needed Christian teaching. (We discuss various aspects of Christian missions in Book III *Pentecost to the Eternal Ages*, Chapters 18.4 and 19.1).

With regard to benevolence to near-by brothers in Christ it is important that we also provide them sound Scriptural teaching as well as wise counseling to help build them up in the knowledge of the faith. In doing so, we enable them to reach still others for Christ with the Gospel. Although we must not neglect our personal responsibility to aid them directly, as we are able to do so, it is in this connection that we give funds to support various temporal organizations, the most common of which is a local church or denomination. Unfortunately, many temporal churches of this age in which we live do not always provide sound Scriptural teaching but have instead gone over into teaching humanism in which mankind becomes the object of worship (cf. Book III, page 220). Humanism is being presented by many churches as a form of Christian benevolence to the extent that the Gospel message of eternal salvation has been relegated to a state of insignificance or even nonexistence.

The electronic media today is also rife with organizations teaching many false doctrines, as well as those godly few who still diligently hold to sound biblical teaching. As good stewards of the Gospel, it is imperative that we closely examine every temporal organization as well as individual missionary efforts that we support in order to ensure that we are truly giving to the Lord's work. We must be very sure that we are not instead contributing to an effort to ensnare and confound the ignorant and unwary into accepting cultic doctrines or falling into a form of baseless Churchianity (cf. Book II, Section 13).

Lastly, it is necessary for us to briefly take note that the current effort of secular governments throughout the world to redistribute wealth from the wealthy to the poor through forced taxation of the rich is not in any way a form of Christian giving; secular governments are not Christian organizations. Nevertheless, many liberal churches today unwittingly support national socialism (cf. Book III, page 517) through their own humanistic teachings. Liberal-minded politicians advocate increasingly higher taxes on the rich out of a false sense of humanistic benevolence and an egotistic desire to be continuously reelected by those who receive government benefits. The cold fact is that a growing number of those who receive government distributions are not the truly needy, but are quite often those who continuously seek to live off the work and wealth of others. They have become willing pawns of the state, having relinquished their personal liberty in exchange for a meaningless life of ease that ultimately leads into a permanent state of both material and spiritual poverty.

In conclusion, we find that Christian giving, whether of the Gospel or of material wealth specifically refers to voluntary personal giving by individual believers, who are internally motivated by the love and grace of God, to others who are in true need without any form of legal restraint commanding them to do so. Christians give with great simplicity in as much as it issues forth from the new nature that they have received through the indwelling Holy Spirit as members of the body of Christ. *Arthur J. Smith June 2012*