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OUR GENEROSITY

Pledge

As members of this church, we pledge:

To ^a give gladly to ^b support the ministry, ^c relieve the poor, and ^d spread the gospel to all nations;

^a 2 Cor. 9:6-9; ^b 1 Cor. 9:13-14; 1 Tim. 5:16; ^c James 1:27; ^d Rom. 15:23-29

Scripture

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7

Two Cows

“Well, what a pleasant surprise to see you, preacher!”

Farmer Jones had been sitting on his front porch one summer afternoon, chewing on the stem of a long piece of grass, when he saw his pastor strolling up the path toward the big farm house.

Jones gave his pastor a wide grin, but inwardly he felt worried. Last Sunday the pastor had encouraged the members to take a collection to help a widow

and her five children, who had lost nearly everything they owned in last week's flood. So far, Jones hadn't given a dime.

"Have a seat, pastor," Jones motioned the empty rocking chair next to him. The pastor sat down and rocked slowly back and forth for a while. From the distance, they could hear the pleasant lowing of cows.

"Jones," the pastor said, "If you had two pigs, would you give one to the Lord?"

Jones moved the grass stem to the side of his mouth to say, "Oh, yes, pastor! If I had two pigs, I would give one to the Lord!"

"I thought so, Jones," the pastor smiled warmly.

They both sat there for a little while, enjoying a cool breeze.

"Jones," the pastor spoke again, "Supposin' you had two horses. Would you give one to the Lord?"

Jones nodded and moved the grass stem to other side of his mouth. "Oh, yes, pastor. If I had two horses I would definitely give one of them to the Lord!"

"I thought so, brother."

A distant mooing came again from the cow pasture as Jones and the pastor sat on the porch. Jones chewed the grass stem more vigorously.

"Now Jones," the pastor said slowly, "Supposin' you had two . . . *cows*. Would you give one to the Lord?"

Farmer Jones suddenly spit out the grass stem. "Doggone it, pastor! You *know* I have two cows!"

Money and the Christian³

From the earliest days of the church, money and generosity played an important role. The first description of the church's life after Pentecost

³ John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) is best known for his incredible wealth. Adjusted for inflation, his net worth is estimated to be about \$400 billion, more than twice the amount of the current richest person, Jeff Bezos (\$125 billion). But long before he was ever the richest man in the U.S., he was one of the most generous. As a young man making only a dollar a day, he would give away 5, 10, or even 25 cents of that dollar to charity. "His first recorded gifts," writes Christopher Levenick

were relatively modest and tended to flow toward Baptist causes: the Five Points mission, the Mite society, foreign missions, 'a poor woman in the church,' and so forth. As his resources grew, he increased his charitable giving. In 1857, he recorded \$28.37 in donations. Two years later, he gave away \$72.22—including

included a statement about their use of wealth: “They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:45). Shortly after this, we read of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who tried to leverage their perceived generosity to gain influence in the church. The result, as we know, was disastrous (Acts 5:1-11). Paul’s journeys, correctly understood as “missionary” journeys, also included raising and distributing funds (2 Corinthians 9:5).

A survey of Scripture passages dealing with money yields this observation about how a Christian should view money:

Money, like everything else in life, ultimately belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). Therefore, I should put my money in the service of God’s purposes, which means providing for myself and my family (1 Timothy 5:8), planning wisely for the future (Proverbs 21:5), and giving generously to others (Proverbs 11:25).

Supporting this view is a deeply-rooted conviction that nothing of personal value (whether health, wealth, personality, relationships) has the power in itself to satisfy a person, but only as it is treated as coming from God and used for God (Ecclesiastes 5:10)—“for from him and through him and to him are all things” (Romans 11:36).

And undergirding *this* conviction is a truth about God himself: he is the greatest giver. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). God’s radical generosity frees us to be radically generous. No one can outgive God.

funds to purchase and liberate the enslaved wife of an African American in Cincinnati. During the Civil War, Rockefeller broadened the scope of his giving. He made contributions to a Catholic orphanage, a nonsectarian industrial school, and a Swedish mission in Illinois. By 1865, he was giving away more than \$1,000 annually.³

By the end of his life, Rockefeller had given away an estimated \$540 million (today, worth about 11 billion dollars). What we find most interesting about Rockefeller’s donation is not the amount, but his rationale for giving. Rockefeller’s reasons for giving were not merely financial or sentimental. Rather, as his biographer explains, they were first and foremost, *theological*. “I remember clearly,” Rockefeller recalls, “when the financial plan—if I may call it so—of my life was formed. It was out in Ohio, under the ministrations of a dear old minister, who preached, ‘Get money; get it honestly and then give it wisely.’ I wrote that down in a little book.” Chernow goes on to remark that “the practice of tithing . . . instilled habits of thrift, self-denial, and careful budgeting. . . . John D. Rockefeller was the Protestant work ethic in its purest form.”³

How Much Should Christians Give?

In the Old Testament, Israelites were required to give a variety of tithes (or “tenths”), adding up to far more than a tenth of their income. One purpose for these tithes was to support the Levitical priests who, unlike other Israelites, did not own land. Their livelihood came from the offerings of the people. Another purpose for these tithes was to teach them the power to provide for their needs came ultimately from God, not themselves.

Jesus commended a widow who, though she gave far less than others in actual *amount*, gave far more in *percentage*. “He called his disciples to him,” Mark writes, “and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (Mark 12:43-44).

The New Testament does not give a specific *percentage* that Christians should give. Rather, it gives a principle of heart-felt generosity: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Corinthians 9:7). However, the tithing principle is a good starting point for how much to give. Begin by committing to give ten percent of your gross income.

What does the money go toward?

Allowing pastors to serve full time

There are many differences between the Levitical priests of the Old Testament and pastors of the New Testament. But one similarity is relevant to this discussion about giving. Like the Levitical priests back then, the livelihood of many pastors today depends on the freewill offering of their people. True, not all pastors *must* take a salary from the church they lead. Churches that are led by a team of pastors may include pastors who hold secular jobs. Many churches are pastored by men who are bi-vocational—they work part-time, and the rest of their income is supplemented by the church. However, in many cases, pastors and churches mutually benefit when the church’s financial support frees pastors to devote themselves completely to the work of pastoring.

Church Operations

The church is not the building, but church buildings have always played an important role in the life of the church. It is significant that in the book of Acts, Luke often mentions *where* people gathered—synagogues, lecture halls, or personal homes. In addition to being a venue where many people can hear

God's word and fellowship with each other, the aesthetics and architecture of a building can powerfully communicate the beauty of God's being, and the joy of gathered worship.

Of course, it is possible to place an undue emphasis on the building, to the detriment of the very reason the building exists: to be a gathering place for the church. Moreover, churches can thrive even when they cannot afford buildings, or when they have been driven "underground" because of government oppression. But where opportunity and money have been available, church buildings have been an important aid to the church. Buildings, and the operational costs necessary for the ongoing maintenance, is another expense a local congregation may commit to supporting.

Foreign and local missions

The Apostle Paul was an itinerant minister, meaning that he did not stay in one place for years; rather, he traveled around to teach and preach the gospel. He was not supported financial by a one single congregation of Christians. Rather, he sometimes supported himself (Acts 20:33-35), sometimes accepted support from other churches (2 Corinthians 11:8), and sometimes refused support simply to avoid the accusation of being in it for the money (2 Corinthians 11:7-11). In our day, some money given to the church goes to supporting people, who like Paul, travel beyond their home country to evangelize and plant churches.

People in need

In an era without government welfare, people who were poverty-stricken or disabled could rely only on the support of family. But without family, they had little hope for survival. In the spirit of Jesus' concern for the poor and outcast, the early church undertook to help such people. But given widespread poverty, who should they begin to help? Obviously, they would want to help everyone in need, but in light of the principle of caring for one's own family, the order was what Paul expressed in Galatians 6:10, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

Putting the Pledge to Work

5. Why might topic of money and church make people feel uncomfortable?
6. Why is 10% of one's income a good place to begin giving?

7. What convictions must a person embrace in order to give generously?
8. When it comes to handling finances, what precautions must churches take to ensure that they are handled with integrity?