

Is It Stealing From God to Split Your Tithe Between the Church and Other Charities?

Three views on what it means to give faithfully.

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LeBlanc [posted 10/16/2012, Christianity
Today]

Care for the Poor

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No, but a nuanced "no." Stewardship theologians have to be as balanced as the economists about whom President Truman famously complained, saying he wanted a one-handed economist because his economists' advice began "On the one hand ... on the other."

On the one hand, Jesus did immortalize the widow who gave her last mites in the temple. But on the other hand, that was more about her amazing faith than her choice of beneficiary. Someone explained once to a gathering of stewardship officers that Jesus did not say to sell what we have and give it to the temple, or even for the gospel, but to the poor. Neither did Malachi say to bring the full tithes for the operation of the temple. The storehouse was for the needy.

Those ideas, though, are not often pointed out. The church is a mostly human institution, particularly when it comes to money, and human institutions, whether governmental, corporate, or ecclesiastical, can be quite self-centered. My friends John and Sylvia Ronsvalle (emptytomb.org) have long studied how churches use donations. The Ronsvalles have a passion for giving—particularly for getting America's affluent churches to open their hands to those around our world in the greatest need. Their most recent report is not encouraging for the Christlike faces of the poor, thirsty, and naked.

The report shows that congregational giving has not kept up with our rising incomes, and benevolent giving to the poor, including denominational support, has suffered even more. I've been the board president of two affluent mainline churches and discovered in both that we spent more of our general budget on lawn care than true benevolences. The Ronsvalles' studies likely affirm that anecdotal evidence. The eight evangelical denominations they studied gave more to the needy than did the mainline denominations, but even that was due to a growing number of members.

Of course, we should remember that many denominations have affiliated social service ministries. For example, my Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is affiliated with Lutheran Social Services of America. That could be the largest social ministry in the country if its various state agencies are combined, according to *Forbes*.

Many evangelicals give to charities like Habitat for Humanity. I expect that is closer to Jesus' idea of giving to the house of the Lord than the testimonies we often hear on pledge card Sundays.

It's important to consider the role of the church in social welfare in our country. As Robert Schwarzwalder, senior vice president at the Family Research Council, pointed out, the Jewish worship system provided civil and administrative services for its communities, including systematically providing for the poor. The modern Christian church simply does not fill that statelike function on any regular basis.

So it's largely a matter of rights and responsibilities. Should the church reassume more biblical responsibilities, it would be entitled to more of the biblical tithe. Until then, church leaders might reflect that giving to the poor can't be stealing from God when Jesus, owner of all, pointedly said that what we do for the poor, we do for him.

Not Theft, But ...

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Is it "stealing" from God? No. But is it obedient to his Word? No.

Despite what a lot of people say, tithing is not a confusing principle, and it is not spoken of differently in the Old and New Testaments.

Tithe means *a tenth*, and when the divinely inspired writers of the Bible wrote about tithing, they often wrote about it in conjunction with another prevalent biblical principle: first fruits.

So we give a tenth, and we give our first tenth, and we trust God to bless the other 90 percent.

And the tithe goes to the local church. Deuteronomy 26:1-4 is pretty specific about this: You take the first portion to "the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name," and "[t]he priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God."

That place—the altar and the place God's name abides—is the church. Malachi 3:10 says to bring all the tithes "into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house." Again, that's the church.

Malachi also distinguishes between tithes and offerings: Offerings are the gifts we give over and above the tithe.

So while paying your mother-in-law's cable bill is a very nice thing to do, it doesn't count as your tithe. Neither does supporting a child through a faith-based sponsorship organization, though that is an incredibly wonderful thing to do.

Donating to a television ministry is also not tithing. Most of the honest and best television ministers—including one of my favorite teachers, Joyce Meyer—will tell you the same thing.

When we support the local church with our first 10 percent and then use additional income to give elsewhere, we fully reflect the generosity of God's heart and see the windows of heaven open and pour out blessings on us, as promised in Malachi 3:10.

God outlines how he would like for us to give, and his ways are almost always different from the direction in which human nature tends to steer us. As believers we can choose to bicker and nitpick about these Scriptures and search for evidence

to give less. We have the freedom to do that. We can "sow sparingly" and "reap sparingly," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:6, or we can "sow generously" and "reap generously."

Verse 7 says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

We all should endeavor daily to become more like Jesus, and no one gave more than he did. We have the freedom to give less or to give more and freedom to feel good or bad about either decision, but we should remember that a generous heart is a blessed heart and is a blessing to others.

Don't Patronize God

Douglas LeBlanc is the author of Tithing: Test Me in This.

After my late father, Lester LeBlanc, encountered the resurrected Jesus in 1972, he made two life-transforming decisions for our family. We would join a charismatic Episcopal congregation and we would tithe to it. In Dad's plain-sense reading, the first sentence of Malachi 3:10 ("Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house") meant that your tithe goes to the place where you worship God.

Whether my father's exegesis would pass the muster of scholastic theologians does not matter to me. Dad's reading does not establish an onerous law that every Christian must fulfill to be saved or to gain God's favor. It does not oblige God to do anything in response. It does, however, resonate with the consistent message of the Old and New Testaments: Everything belongs to God, who invites us to imitate his generosity in the mundane details of our life.

The most dedicated critics of tithing wrap themselves around the axle that this discipline is a matter of bondage to Old Testament law. If Christians in prosperous countries are vulnerable to any spiritual bondage, the more likely master is mammon. Even in evangelical churches, we too often speak of tithing as the Mount Everest of Christian stewardship. As Randy Alcorn and others argue, tithing is more appropriately compared to training wheels.

I do not insist that we rob God if we split our tithe between our congregation and our favorite charity. Giving 10 percent in this way is better than tossing an occasional spare \$5 bill into the collection plate and thinking we have done our part. We do, however, patronize God and distort tithing to mean something foreign to Scripture. God has drawn us into a specific community of believers, where our lives are redeemed by our presence at Holy Communion, Bible studies, Sunday school, fund-raising dinners, and even tedious committee meetings. In God's economy, this specific community grinds down the rough edges of our egos and helps us recognize brothers and sisters in people who otherwise would cross neither our minds nor our paths.

If we aim to tithe, why would we deprive this specific part of the body of Christ? Do we believe that the nearest soup kitchen, animal shelter, or United Way better fulfills God's purposes? What keeps us from donating above and beyond a tithe to causes we consider worthy of support? What keeps us from giving of our talents or time in those places?

How I donate money expresses power. If I carve my tithe into slices of my own liking, I tighten my grip on power, and mammon tightens its grip on me. I am better aware of the ever-deepening joy found in God's generosity when I surrender control of the first 10 percent to the community that welcomes me, a wretched sinner, week after week and challenges me to become something more.