

## Passing on the Plate: Why Your Congregation May Not be Tithing

By Janet Chismar, [Crosswalk.com](http://Crosswalk.com)

Do members of your church seem reluctant to tithe? Do you know why? For many Christians, the issue of money is a touchy one. Mark Leeson of Fontana, Calif., says he tunes out whenever a pastor discusses giving. Part of his distaste stems from hearing televangelists who prescribe giving as the way to gain riches. Too often, says Leeson, these personalities link failing to give with a lack of prosperity. "Do we really need to buy God's blessings?" he wonders.

Marcy Peters of Nashville, Tenn., understands that giving is a biblical mandate, but she questions whether a 10 percent "tithe" still applies to Christians today. "Isn't tithing an Old Testament concept?" she asks. "I don't think Paul ever talked about tithing."

Peters is not alone in her confusion. In 2006, Ellison Research surveyed 1,184 people who attend Protestant churches at least once a month. Only 36 percent of respondents said they believe there is a biblical command to tithe 10 percent to their local church.

Another 23 percent believe there is a biblical mandate to tithe, but not necessarily to the local church. Twenty-seven percent feel the Bible commands Christians to give, but not a set proportion or amount, while 10 percent believe Christians are under no mandate to give anything. A quick Google search on tithing pulls up numerous websites that blast the concept.

TithingDebate.com, for instance, states that it is "dedicated to bringing you the other side of the story. The side a portion of Christian leaders would rather you did not hear." One section contains a tithing rebuttal by Russell Earl Kelly, an author who studied at Covington Theological Seminary, and who runs his own website titled "Should the Church Teach Tithing?"

Almost every tithe teacher begins at [Malachi 3:8-12](#), writes Kelly. However God began the specific condemnation in Malachi back in [Malachi 1:6](#) and [Malachi 2:1](#) where he addressed the priests with the pronoun "you."



If you follow this pronoun from 1:6 to 3:12, Kelly continues, it is evident that it does not change. It is the priests, not the people, who are cursed four times in [Malachi 1:14](#) and [Malachi 2:2](#) because they had stolen from God. The priests' question in [Malachi 2:17](#) is answered with a severe chastening in [Malachi 3:1-5](#).

"There is no legitimate textual reason to conclude that [Malachi 3:6-12](#) is not a continued rebuke of dishonest and greedy priests," reasons Kelly. "Malachi is speaking to dishonest Old Covenant Israelite priests and is not speaking to the New Covenant church."

Dan Barker, a former Assemblies of God pastor, also stands against tithing. "There is nothing in the New Testament in favor of tithing," according to Barker. "Neither Jesus nor Paul commanded believers to give 10 percent to their local church, or to go to church at all. Jesus mocked the scribes and Pharisees who tithed ([Matthew 23:23](#)), and denounced a self-righteous Pharisee who boasted about tithing ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). The writer of Hebrews, who observed that the old tithe was collected by the Levites, [Hebrews 5:1-10](#)."

A website called Truth or Tradition.com contains an extensive article on tithing that claims we must first understand what parts of God's Word are written to Jews, what parts are written to Gentiles, and what parts are written to Christians. According to Truth or Tradition, we are currently living in what the Bible calls the Administration of the Secret ([Ephesians 3:9](#)), which began on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)) and will conclude with the [rapture](#) of the Church.

"The message of Scripture to Christians is that because of the finished work of Jesus Christ," says Truth or Tradition, "we do not live under the Mosaic Law, during which tithing was instituted and commanded as part of the Law. Therefore, tithing as a commandment of God has no relevance to believers today."

### **Countering the Arguments**

At this point, you may be thinking it is time to dust off your sermon notes on tithing. Or, you may need a few key arguments at your fingertips when a church member objects to tithing. During a recent phone interview, Andrew Hill, professor of Old Testament Studies at Wheaton College, provided a primer on tithing, answering the most common objections.

Hill says he likes to put all of the Biblical texts about giving together as a whole to extract principles that would be helpful, as opposed to emphasizing one or two verses against other verses.

"It is true that there really is no carry-over stipulation in the New Testament to give a tithe," says Hill. "Ten percent seems to be an assumption rather than a given imperative." According to Hill, the only real verse we have is the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 23 where Jesus admonishes the religious people of His day for being so careful about tithing even their spices. They'd forgotten about the greater principles of justice, mercy and faith. Jesus, at that point, says the leaders should have done the former – kept the tithe – but added the other components to it.

“You have the injunction from Jesus at that point in time that the tithe is valid for the Hebrew people,” Hill points out, “but that was still pre-Pentecost.” Those who would argue for a New Testament without a tithe can say that although Jesus mentioned tithing, it was pre-Pentecost and so relegated to the Jews, “not necessarily to the church in later times.”

Hill says he personally thinks the 10 percent mandate from the Old Testament should be a minimum carry over from the old covenant to the new. “It’s a baseline, a suggested idea for proportional giving. The tithe in the Old Testament was designed to make a statement about God as the source of good things. By giving our tithe, we acknowledge God as source and tangibly demonstrate our thanksgiving and faith.”

Moving past the Gospels, Hill notes that Paul affirms generous giving in 2 Corinthians 8. “Generosity is *the* principle of giving,” says Hill. “Yes, a tenth was traditional, but in the new covenant, given the lavish gift of Jesus Christ that God has bestowed on the Church, our giving should be extremely generous – well beyond even a tenth.”

In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul states that people should give according to what they are able to give, but it should be done cheerfully and joyfully. “So the New Testament does provide some self-determination as to what to give,” says Hill. “But my thought would be that a tenth is the lowest common denominator from the tradition of the Old Testament. Christians would be encouraged in the new covenant era to exceed that – joyfully and generously.”

Hill addresses those who overly emphasize the blessings associated with tithing. “At what point does it become a cosmic slot machine? If we give the tithe, are we supposed to get something back? Some people expect an even greater bounty given back to us. I don’t think we should give from that motive.”

God can and often does choose to bless when we give, Hill adds, “but it certainly shouldn’t be a formula for us.”

Ashley Clayton, associate vice president for stewardship for the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), also spoke with Crosswalk.com about the tithing debate. “When you take all of the Scripture, in its entirety, then you can contextualize your thoughts about it,” Clayton began. “All of the Bible is inspired by God. You need to take both Testaments together and seek what the Bible is saying.”

According to Clayton, the SBC believes that in the Old Testament, 10 percent was a benchmark for giving. “In the New Testament, we believe that while 10 percent is not necessarily the benchmark, we don’t see it as a movement to lesser giving. In the New Testament, there are people who gave everything. They are recorded in Scripture as an example of giving more not less.”

Clayton points out that tithing is more a Lordship issue than anything else. Tithing is a demonstration of our faith and our obedience. “I think that we miss the boat in our discussions of tithing when we

are looking for a dollar amount,” Clayton says. “Tithing represents more than dollars to me. Tithing is a response to God’s grace; it’s not just another thing on a checklist.”

When we tithe, he adds, we join hearts and hands with other believers all across the world to do God’s work. “I become part of something much larger than myself. It separates me from the way of the world that says to get all you can and keep all you can,” Clayton concludes. “Jesus says in [Luke 12](#) that a man is not defined by his possessions. Tithing is an indication I believe that and live that way.”