

Christian Stewardship and Giving as an Act of Worship

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Recently, I was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that pastors teach a 10% tithe out of “pragmatism, tradition and ignorance, quite frankly.” While this represents the essence of a statement I made during the course of a thirty-minute phone conversation, I am concerned that taken out of context, my comments are likely to be misunderstood. As interpreters of Scripture, we all know how important context is in understanding someone else’s message. By failing to supply the larger context, the *Wall Street Journal* in effect rendered my comments liable to be misconstrued. Hopefully, providing you with the background and larger context will show you my true heart in this and illustrate how easy it is to be misrepresented in one’s true intentions, no matter how cautious one is in dealing with the media, even publications as reputable as the *Wall Street Journal*.

When the *Wall Street Journal* reporter called me shortly before Thanksgiving telling me how I would be quoted, I immediately objected, pressing that the word “ignorance” be changed. The reporter flat-out refused. When I insisted on the change, she said she would take up the matter with her editor, but she could not promise that the change would be made. In the end, the quote was left as it was. I also objected to the reporter’s characterization of me as “challeng[ing] tithing in classes on the New Testament,” but again to no avail. It appears that I was needed as a representative of “Anti-Tithing in the Classroom” (the subheading), even though this is only a very partial and tendentious representation of my teaching practice.

What do I teach with regard to Christian stewardship and giving? The answer is: I teach *exactly* what the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* says on this issue: “God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him. Christians have a spiritual debtorship to the whole world, a holy trusteeship in the gospel, and a binding stewardship in their possessions. They are therefore under obligation to serve Him with their time, talents, and material possessions; and should recognize all these as entrusted to them to use for the glory of God and for helping others. According to the Scriptures, Christians should contribute of their means *cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionately, and liberally* for the advancement of the Redeemer’s cause on earth” (emphasis mine).

Note that the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* does *not* use the word “tithe” or “tithing” or specify a particular percentage of one’s income. It (rightly, in my opinion) sets financial giving within the larger context of one’s overall stewardship of all of one’s possessions, material and otherwise. It also shows that Christian stewardship (including giving of one’s resources) is part of one’s worship and lists several New Testament principles regarding *how* one should give: cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionately, and liberally. As Daniel Akin rightly noted in a recent BP First Person piece, these are the distinctives of what can be called “Grace Giving.” At the same time, and this was my point in answer to the reporter’s question, neither the New Testament nor our confessional statement make mention of a specific percentage, be it 10% or another percentage, as mandatory for all believers today.

So, is my teaching “anti-tithing in the classroom”? Not at all. My focus is not on how *not* to give, but on the New Testament principles for giving highlighted in the Baptist Faith and Message. As one who grew up Roman Catholic in Austria at a time when a fixed percentage of “church tax” was deducted on an individual’s tax form, I have come to cherish the New Testament emphasis on *voluntary* giving. I am concerned that if we stipulate a minimum percentage figure for giving as required in a church covenant, for example, giving will no longer be voluntary as the New Testament teaches. It is true, therefore, that if a student in one of my classes asks me if I believe that the New Testament teaches that all Christians must give (at least) 10% of their income to their local church, I cannot in good conscience say “yes” to that question but must qualify my answer in several respects: the heart attitude is more important than the specific amount; giving is part of our Christian stewardship and worship and should occur in a spirit of grace, not legalism; and so on.

Did I therefore convey by my comments that Christians need not give, or need only give a small amount to their local church? Not at all. To the contrary: it seems to me that rather than inducing believers to give as little as possible, God’s grace should most certainly be expected to move the grateful redeemed sinner to give liberally, even sacrificially, recognizing that all that he or she has is not his or hers, but God’s in the first place. In this context, I told the reporter that we should approach the matter of giving not in a spirit of pragmatism or in fear that unless we teach a 10%-minimum requirement people will not give, or give only little. Rather, we should have faith in God’s work in the hearts of our people, trusting that he will move them to give freely just as they have freely received.

If I may be so bold as to add a comment to all of us as Bible-believing Southern Baptists. Battles have been fought over the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, and this doctrine is rightly important to us, for from it flow many other scriptural doctrines. Yet inerrancy must be more than merely a doctrine we affirm in general terms; inerrancy must be *practiced* as we approach any given issue, including that of Christian stewardship. This was my point when I spoke to the reporter about “tradition.” When we deal with a question, we should ask: What does the Bible say on this issue?, not merely: What is our tradition? In this context, when I spoke of “ignorance,” what I had in mind was the fact that *some* (though by no means all) may be insufficiently familiar with the biblical teaching on Christian giving. But if we hold that the Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice, we should know and study what the Bible says. Certainly, I would hope that as Southern Baptists we can have a meaningful discussion on what Scripture teaches on a given subject, including Christian giving.

I realize that this is a particularly volatile issue, because money is at stake, and this strikes very close to our livelihood and security. But in this area, as in all others, we should trust the Lord to provide for all our needs. Do I think all those who teach a 10% tithing requirement do so out of ignorance? Not at all. Do I believe Christians should not give or only give a little? No! Instead, they should give as much as they possibly can, which in most cases, I believe, should be considerably *more* than 10%. Do I believe that the New Testament teaches a 10% giving requirement for all Christians? I do not, and here some of you may disagree, and I am open to further discussion on this topic. I trust that this piece serves the purpose of clarification and better understanding. I have learned that when scholars are subjected to the laws of journalism (where all too often soundbites trump accuracy in substance), the whole truth often becomes the casualty. But who knows, perhaps God is able to use even a *Wall Street Journal* reporter to his good ends of helping us learn more about how, and how much, we should give to advance his kingdom? I believe he is.

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