

Why I Still Believe in Tithing to the Church

Malachi 3:6-12

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When you know that right after church you're going to hop on the boat and be gone for a week, you can preach on just about anything. In light of the fact that this is Stewardship Month and the fact that I have one foot out the door, I have chosen to preach on why I still believe in tithing to the church.

Let me highlight four words in that title. The first word is "I." This is my personal view, and it may not be yours. In a Baptist church we believe that every believer has the Holy Spirit as a guide, and everyone is free to interpret the Bible for himself or herself—although recent Baptist statements have said that we are free to interpret it as part of a community of faith, not in isolation so that we are prey to our own wacky presuppositions. But all that is the Baptist way of saying that the preacher doesn't know everything.

Nevertheless, the pastor has an obligation of teaching the scriptures and the Christian life as he understands them. In the case of tithing to the church, I feel obligated to present one ethical model for dealing with personal finances that has been influential over the centuries and works for me. I feel that obligation especially because it seems that tithing is not something that has been tried and rejected in this church, but something that has never been talked about much in recent decades. It almost feels like a vestige of an earlier time when people took their faith very seriously and the church was much more important in their lives. I'm not eager to go back to an earlier time, but I often wonder if they knew something we don't.

That's why the second word is "still." "Still" means that I have been tithing ever since I started earning money and it's been a continuous guide rail in my life. "Still" means confessing that I have not come to this recently. I was raised Southern Baptist in churches where belief that God expects tithing was the norm, even if the practice of it lagged. Now that I am American Baptist I still believe in it; and the fact is that the American Baptist Churches as an organization still calls for tithing; the General Board adopted a strong policy statement on encouraging the tithe in 1992, and the vote was 163 to 0. It's not that American Baptists don't believe in it. It's that in most mainline Protestant churches like this one we have drifted from relying on the tithe to relying on fundraising projects that call on unbelievers and people from other churches to support our church. Church has become just one of many charities on our list rather than the body which gives our individual lives their meaning and their sustenance. The average level of giving in most churches is around 2% of the income of members. The median annual giving for us is about \$1,000. If the median household income is about \$50,000, that puts giving at around 2%. So we're average. But nowhere close to tithing.

What is tithing? (That's my third word.) It's been in the news lately because a certain Mormon candidate actually tithes to his church. Tithing means giving a tenth. There are a few individual examples of tithing in Genesis, but once we get to the Law it's pretty straightforward. In Israel, those who were part of God's people were commanded to bring 10% of the crops they grew to the tabernacle and then to the Temple in Jerusalem. Three types of tithes are described: one to support the Levites, the landless tribe in charge of operating the Temple—the clergy class; another tithe was commanded when you came to Jerusalem for a family feast—and this tithe was mostly eaten; and a third tithe was commanded to support the poor—orphans, widows, and foreigners in your midst. It's hard to tell if these tithes were rotated on a calendar or collected one on top of the other. Some scholars argue that the

combined tithes came to more like 22%. In New Testament times, the rabbis taught observing all three tithes: giving to support the clergy, sharing food for festivals, and donating to the poor.

Patrick read a classic text from the prophet Malachi on tithing. The people of Israel have wandered away from God. “Return to me, and I will return to you,” God says. “How?” God’s answer is that they can return by going back to the standard of the tithe they had abandoned. “You are robbing me,” God says. “How are we robbing *you*?” “By keeping my tithe for yourself.” If you want to experience my presence and my blessing, try keeping my commandment. Do an experiment: bring all 10% of your crops into the Temple treasury and see if I don’t bless you with harvests.

That’s pretty heavy stuff, saying that we have robbed God. There are plenty of ways around this. You can say that the Jewish Law doesn’t apply to us, because we have been set free and are under grace. You can say that we are not the nation of Israel, which was a theocracy, so this was more like a tax. You can say that we are not farmers, and the tithe only applied to crops, not to other income—although in the *Didache* written at the end of the first century the church leaders explicitly said that church members were to tithe money and not just crops.

I’m certainly not saying that tithing is a law that Christians must obey. Jesus did not go around telling people to tithe, even though he may have assumed it in Jewish practice. He did say in Matthew 23:23 that the scribes and Pharisees were so picky about tithing that they tithed the crop of little herb plants like mint and dill, but they ignored the more important matters the law commanded, like justice and mercy. But then Jesus says, “Those things you ought to have done, but you ought not to have neglected the other.” That is, you should focus on justice and mercy and not on the little stuff like tithing every plant in your herb garden; but you should not neglect the tithe, either. The apostle Paul talked a lot about giving, but he talked about generosity and sharing and proportional giving rather than telling his mixed Jew-and-Gentile churches to follow the Jewish law of the tithe.

So if you want to, you can find reasons not to tithe. But what my parents taught me as a kid still makes sense: If the Jews gave 10% before Jesus came, now that God has given us Jesus shouldn’t we give even more? In fact, Jesus doesn’t talk about giving 10% much, but he does talk about giving 100%. And when people are converted, they sometimes give 50% of all they have, all at once. It still makes sense to me that the idea of a tithe is not a law but a guideline—meaning not a target to shoot for, but a baseline.

If you haven’t tried committing to the tithe, it may sound impossible. But I can tell you—and countless others would testify—that you really won’t miss it. If you plan your budget around 90% of your income and just automatically slice off 10% for God’s work, it doesn’t make a huge difference in your lifestyle. You’ll get used to it. If you can’t do it all at once, you can move gradually to the tithe by giving 1% of your income more each year—and then it’s just within the normal fluctuations of prices and expenses.

You have to start where you are. John D. Rockefeller Sr., that rich old Baptist, said, “I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 per week.” Becca and I started when we first got married. Why would we want to do less than that? What could we need more than to please God and be a part of God’s work in the world? Sir John Templeton—one of the great wise men of finance who gave much to Princeton Seminary—said, “I have observed 100,000 families over my years of investment counseling. I always saw greater prosperity and happiness among the families who tithed than among those who didn’t.”

Aside from making a difference in your personal contentment, the practice of tithing would make a tremendous difference in our church. It’s never fair to compare churches, because there are so many variables, but I want to give you an example of what tithing can do. The church I served in Madison, New Jersey, had about the same number of members on roll as Harbor Church, about 100—although

with a lot of kids our average Sunday attendance was much higher, almost 200. That church, though, had a strong tradition of believing in tithing and teaching it to new members. When we collected pledge cards, 70% of members checked the box saying that they tithed. Here at Harbor Church we took that box off the pledge card because almost no one checked it. I'll grant you that the average income in Madison was probably double that on Block Island, but the difference in church giving was tenfold. My last year there, in 2001, the pledges received from members totaled \$730,000. Last year our pledges at Harbor Church totaled \$70,000. Most of that difference is attributable to members practicing giving a tithe of their income. Do you know what that meant to the church? It meant we could give 25% of our budget away to missions. We could sponsor a Filipino congregation nearby and a new Korean church in our building. We could take mission trips to Germany and India. It meant we could hire a full time youth minister and a professional music director. We could allot 5% of the budget to outreach advertising. It meant we never had to do a fundraiser. We gave to the community rather than asking it for money. We felt like we were depending on God rather than on our neighbors.

I don't mean to brag about that church or to make Harbor Church feel small. I just want you to know that I've seen church when people practice tithing, and church when people don't—and tithing is more fun.

But why should your tithe go to the church? That's the fourth word I need to focus on—tithing to the *church*. Some of you give 10% of your income to charitable causes but spread it around to many organizations. This is certainly an area in which Christians can disagree and respect one another. My personal ethical model has been based on the Jewish model of bringing the whole tithe into the Temple storehouse; what was given for the poor and for other social good was separate—either another tithe or just alms given as needs arose.

Maybe you can understand where I'm coming from if I talk about circles of concern. You may see the church and other nonprofits on a list or as slices of a pie, but I look at some things as more central than others. Here's how I view a Christian's circles of concern [on a flipchart]. At the center is a circle marked "Self & God." Concern for God himself and my relationship with him is at the very center. The next circle is Family. The one who doesn't care for his family is worse than an unbeliever, according to 1 Timothy (5:8). The next circle is the body of Christ, the church. Next to my family, my priority and my chief responsibility is this body, this organism of which I am a part. I say this not as a pastor but as a Christian. Then the next circle is my local community or neighborhood. The circle beyond that is my nation. And the outer circle is the world and all the needs in it. Now I may have particular concerns that speak to me and for which I feel a calling from God—in my community or nation or in other nations. But I think in general, that's the priority of my responsibility. And the key point for our discussion is probably that I believe that our responsibility for the local body of Christ—of which we are a part, which we are to build up, that group of people we hurt with and rejoice with, that group we are given spiritual gifts to function with—our responsibility to that body has priority over our responsibility to the whole town or the whole island. As a generous person I should do what I can in all the circles of concern, but the ones that are closest to me I am most responsible for.

My view of this could also be expressed as circles of identity. The core of my identity is my sense of self-in-relation-to-God. The core is not my nation or my town. The next most important source of identity is my family—both my family of origin and the one I have produced, and my roles as husband and father and son. And the third source of identity for me is that I am part of the church; I am a living part of the living body of Christ, his continuing incarnation in this world, his way of acting in the world. I suspect that how we feel about tithing to the church has a lot to do with how central the church is to our sense of identity. In my own framework (and perhaps this is partly because I have moved so much), the next and lesser source of identity is the sense of place and home, my town, my neighborhood.

And an even less important source of identity is my sense of myself as a citizen of a nation-state, in my case the United States. And finally, I see myself as a citizen of the world and a member of the human race. This may be very different from the way you see your own identity, but I think I can make a case that I am thinking about it biblically and the way the apostles might have thought about it.

One more thing I have observed: When people tithe to the church through the regular budget, it is an exercise in humility and submission to one another. Nowadays many people prefer designated giving; they prefer to give to projects they can name and see results from. They prefer to give to more glamorous things rather than the routine running of an organization or paying the pastor's insurance. A lot of people like to have some control in where their money goes. But when you give to the church, you are saying that you are trusting that this body as a whole might have better wisdom than you do as an individual. You are saying that I am really *part* of this body, and if the body decides to engage in this ministry I want to support it, even if I would not have voted for it. When you tithe to the church, you are not picking your pet thing and you are trusting God to lead the church through his Spirit and the Spirit's gifts. Am I humble enough to let somebody else decide how my money is spent? If we are able to do that—and believe me, it's a struggle for most pastors—it is good for our souls. It means that giving is not a way to extend my influence or my control over events. I am giving away not only my money but my power. That is something all human beings need to learn to do. That's one reason I still believe in tithing to the church.