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Christian Giving: Games, Goals, and Grace

The subject of money, and the love that follows it, is difficult for any saint to consider. It is being pulled in two directions at once.¹ It is something like a cartoon recently published. It showed a rather disheveled man, holding a guitar, and standing in front of a piano. He is speaking:

Before I sing my next song, I want to just say that God deserves full credit for this number. He gave me the words, and the melody, and the ability to put it together. But...if any of you try to use it, I'll sue your socks off!

Two directions. On the one hand, greed and gain promoted by what we see, and who sees us. And, on the other hand, the appropriate and necessary sense in seeing all that we have as from God.

This information would have been easier to write 15 years ago! It is not that the job has become harder, but that affluence, like the frog that was slowly boiled in the science lab at a fraction of a degree per hour, slips up on our blind side. The desire for things can consume us with hardly a protest or whimper. Wisdom in matters of stewardship and money call for careful discernment and planning.

GAMES LEADERS PLAY—FOR EARTHLY REWARDS

The carnivals come, and the midway booths are set up. The barkers give their spiels, and the games are on:

He is a skilled Assemblies of God pastor from Maine with a lyrical Irish accent. He begins calmly, “I just want to share a few verses of Scripture with you here, and then I’ll be done.” But, like a politician warming to his audience, he soon begins embellishing. A crowd erupts into applause. In front of them a well-groomed, smiling man in a vested suit nods his head enthusiastically, holding his hands high and leading the applause, mouthing “Amen” and “Praise the Lord.” Beyond them, to the left, singers dressed in pastel evening gowns are arranging themselves on risers....Miss Illinois of 1959 is clearing her throat...four cameras mounted on silent electric carts—\$80,000 cameras, the best in the business—sweep over the scenes, focusing now on the preacher, now on an intense listener. Other people flutter around the studio, dodging cameras and stepping over electric cables thick as an arm. Beautiful, stylishly dressed women whisper instructions to the next guests while a makeup expert freshly powders their noses. Offstage, all this activity is fed into an audio control board which is rumored to be the most sophisticated in the country. Twelve videotape-editing machines, worth \$75,000 each, patch together the very best camera angles.²

And, adding insult to injury, you are told that “unless we hear from you this month—and unless you send a generous financial gift—we will not be able to stay on the air!”

Reading these kinds of descriptions brings a range of emotions and thoughts to mind. Admittedly, these are difficult areas. But the blatant and calculated *business* of the church has, simply, been the

logical extension of the indiscreet thinking of the church for the better part of this last century. Electric or not, the American Church loves visible success.

FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO

Almost a hundred years ago, as earlier noted, Christianity was hammering out its existence in frontier America. The mix of revival tent meetings, and Bible conferences, brought conversions and growth to the Church.

But, all the while, we were looking around, and comparing notes. We noticed the growth in denominations at the turn of the 20th century. We watched the way respectable, large urban cathedrals, and eloquent preachers, attracted community and national attention before World War I. And, we suspect, secretly, we longed for the day when we could arrive at similar standings and status.

But, hold on—how can you measure a person's thinking, and motives? You can't—for a while. But eventually, as even Christ taught, you will know a tree by its fruit (cf. Matt 7:15-20). After a while, the things that have captured the mind and heart will show up in the house and garage!

So, in the last 60 years, the church has increasingly been characterized by two credentials: the building(s), and the senior, or single head pastor. Neither can be justified on any primary basis, as emphases, in the New Testament, but that has hardly slowed us down. And to these ends,³ we designate out dollars.

And these same things show up in the church, and, in this case, *become the church*. That is why we say the reward is for this life only—if indeed the motivation is to be known and seen by men. If a person's ministry motives include building a private or personal kingdom, then this work will last only until the Refiner's fire (cf. 1 Cor 3:10-23).

Again, words come easy, but following through is more difficult. What is the attitude and expectations of your church in relation to

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owning a building? How has your church leadership taught you in these areas? Is the Old Testament cited more than the New? Have you worn out the tabernacle courts of Exodus, and the temple courts of 1 Kings, in this regard?

Even in the best of new groups or organizations, it is but a year or two before there is a concerted building program in the works. Why? We think it is because the leadership promotes programs, and recruits people, as means toward the end of visible illustrations of the Kingdom—in buildings of brick and mortar instead of buildings of flesh and blood! In other words, finding church buildings on nearly every corner in some communities is a massive illustration of ministry motives—recorded in ledgers assumed as heavenly and eternal assets, but likely, counting as much or more as temporary liabilities lasting no longer than the materials used for construction.

To be sure, ministry takes money. And in that regard, the Scriptures do not object. Both our Lord, and his disciples, taught that “the worker deserves his wages” (cf. Luke 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18). But \$900,000 for an audio control board? And \$300,000 for TV cameras? Does the Kingdom depend on charismatic cue cards?

Certainly, any local assembly—outside Phoenix—needs a place to keep the rain off! How much better would it be to rent? We know the discussions of investment wisdom, and building up equity—of giving an impression of permanence. But what are we really to represent? Are we, first of all, titleholders to real estate? Are we investment corporations?⁴ *We find ourselves wondering whether the function of shepherds is to feed, or to fleece, the flock!*

One of the small church fellowships John works with in Portland was concerned about the continued problem of the death of innocents through abortion, and of the problems of marriages, families, and children who are broken up through divorce and abuse. Rather than organizing to simply make a politic statement, this group—beginning through discussions in one of the shepherding groups—decided to use love and compassion as the method of ministry.

From these discussions, this small church has opened, and

staffed, a storefront ministry center. In this center, free pregnancy tests are offered—accompanied by counseling, and medical or legal advice. Additionally, this center—staffed by various pastors in the community—provides free personal, marital and family counseling. Further, some of the volunteer staff—coordinated by a full-time director—have been asked to teach certain aspects of high school health classes. They are currently negotiating for an onsite health clinic which recommends, in gracious terms, abstinence, and the preserving of the lives of the unborn. And the ministry options are multiplying faster than the staff can keep up!

What's the point? It is this: this small group, and the small church, that sponsored this clinic, have designated over 50% of their total budget to this project. This was, and is, done while having no permanent building—nor any full-time pastoral staff. The facilities for the church meetings are rented from a local school, and the pastoral responsibilities are handled by elders who all have full-time jobs besides their pastoring and teaching responsibilities.

What church has seven or eight prostitutes—over the course of one year—come into its building for counseling? This church did—at the storefront center. What church is perceived as neutral enough where the concern for the unborn, or the sexually active, is addressed in a local high school's health class? This church did—through the ministry center. What church has been commended by the local community for its willingness to reach out to the needs of the poor—without fee or obligation? Very few, but this church did—because it committed financial resources to people instead of a building.

The opportunities are almost endless—if churches will think of themselves as buildings of flesh and blood—serving the living God. This will happen, increasingly, if churches understand they exist in order to build lovers—lovers of God, and of others—and not to make a statement about *community permanence* or *investment equity*.

LETTING HISTORY BE OUR TEACHER,
NOT OUR THINKER

Historically, for the first 200 years of the Church, believers were careful to avoid ownership and possessions. Certainly, there were a number of reasons—not the least of which was that they were a people under persecution. They were on-the-run, in a rather literal sense.

But, for other reasons, they saw themselves as aliens and strangers in a foreign land—as ambassadors with a citizenship in heaven more than on earth. In that sense, it made sense to maximize life-opportunities in a way that prospered true Kingdom purposes for the Church. They understood, better than us, that the value of the Church was in God, and in the people. The church was not for people-using, but for people-building.

In that sense, we would offer some suggestions about the games Christian leaders play—or the myths they promote—especially as it relates to the twin pressures of the electric church, and the extreme preoccupation with buildings as a measure of church worth:

1. *The Peril of the Professional Priesthood*: there is substantial effort to continue the separation of clergy from layman. This distinction is artificial, and unbiblical. Massive, professional ministry efforts—as well as brick and wood monuments—perpetuate this myth. These activities provide as assumed justification for continuing on—without review and critique. Think carefully about how your church needs to establish, and maintain, proper biblical assumptions and relationships between leaders and believers. And, don't believe someone simply because he has on silk robes, and because he uses stained glass as his backdrop!
2. *The Peril of the Calculated Crisis*: it is standard knowledge, in the world of Christian publishing, that certain things produce certain results. Pictures of starving children

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work well. Offering *free* gifts, for certain donations, are equally effective. Some *christian* organizations pre-plan ministry crisis' to carry the group through the *slow* times of the year.

We recommend that your giving, in major part, be proportional to the local work(s) of which you participate, and share. Honest accountability is the banner-call in this regard. Virtually any organization can, overnight, create crisis which produce insatiable appetites for the ministry dollar—based simply on manufactured need. One way you can help to reverse this is by not supporting it.

On the other hand, if a Christian group offers you ministry and service without charge, or compulsion, then point some of your dollars that way.⁵ In that sense, measure your support somewhat in proportion to *not* hearing of needs. Odds are that this group has ministry integrity worth supporting.

3. *The Peril of the Socially Separate*: to some extent, it is important to be in the world, but not of the world.⁶ But emphases on mega-men, mega-ministries, and mega-monies all create an alienation as much as a platform for giving the gospel.

Let us illustrate. Suppose your church starts a Christian school.⁷ Apart from what the church thinks, what do you think the typical pagan community member thinks? Is he happy that these families are out of the public schools? Is he pleased that Christians have decided that, though the schools are good enough for most of the children in the community, they provide inadequately for these children from Christian homes? The response of the typical unbeliever is one of strong disapproval—not approval.

The point is not that we make decisions for our children

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or churches *exclusively* on the basis of what unbelievers think, but rather that the tail is wagging the dog. We build a building—usually with the promotion such a project involves—because we think we should. Then we need to use the building—like good stewards. So, we either fill the week with programs for the building, and the people—to the detriment of the family and home, or we start a school.

The tail tends to lead the dog. This would happen less if we realized that we do not need *mega* anything to have a substantial and successful church. We need saints characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 14:17), and we need saints committed to building relationships with unbelieving neighbors and friends.

If we are not careful, *stewardship* can be simply a smoke-screen for exploitation or greed—all in the name of Christ.

GOALS LEADERS PROMOTE—ON QUESTIONABLE GROUNDS

But what of other ministry practices that reflect the approval and recommendations of Christian leadership? In this regard, we need to look briefly at two: first, the model of giving from the instructions to Israel.

MONEY, AND THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI

Certain thinking today draws on the Old Testament as primary proof for ministry emphases, and recommendations for giving. This thinking is represented in the Stewardship Sunday messages drawn from Malachi 3:8-10:

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How do

we rob you?” In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it.

In this text we have all the makings for a good sermon on giving—along with (potentially) a little fear and guilt for seasoning.

This passage, along with many others, speaks of the system of tithing in Israel.⁸ Tithing means “tenth”—and, therefore, many Christians imagine that giving a tenth of one’s income to the Lord is what is required of a saint.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with giving a tenth of one’s income to the work of the Lord! However, the work of the Kingdom is enhanced if we can take our perspective—along with the progress of revelation—into New Testament patterns, and recommendations for giving.

The problem with the reference from Malachi is more one of application than interpretation. These words were, indeed, a prophetic inditement on Israel in the 5th Century B.C. But, as we shall see shortly, we have been given *updated* information in the New Testament on these matters.

Further, the problem is a misunderstanding of the Old Testament in relation to the New. In other words, as we developed in chapter six, the age of grace, and of Christ, has affected the application of the Law. Unless a command is repeated in the New Testament, particularly in the epistles, we should be cautious about a one-to-one applicational transfer.

Today we do not have “storehouses” and the “house of the Lord” and a promise of “blessing” in the same sense. The temple of God is the body of the believer, our blessings (or guarantees) are spiritual, not physical, and we cannot find a building on the face of this earth today that is deserving of the adjective “sacred”—except

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for men made in the image of God, and more specifically, believers saved by His grace.

GIVING, AND THE PROGRAM OF *FAITH PROMISE*

If you find it difficult to knock success, you will have a tough time here! *Faith promise*, as it is called, is a gift or pledge that, as God supplies, you will give—over and above your regular giving. It is a promise that, by faith, you will trust God for funds you do not yet have—or necessarily know where they will come from—and, as they are provided, you give accordingly. This method is dependent on the individual believer to think, or bring to mind, a certain dollar figure or amount, by prayer or meditation.

Two things are both apparent and true about this method. First, it works! Certain churches organize their giving, and missions' budgets around a rally night. As the totals are turned in, lights flash, the giving thermometer rises, and the church is filled—the building, that is—with prayer and song.

Second, there are things to commend this program. God is certainly the one who provides for us. It encourages a kind of sacrificial giving—which is good. When Christians prayerfully consider giving sacrificially to the work of the Lord, it is commendable. But there are a few large flies in the ointment.

The first problem is that this practice is hard, or rather impossible to defend—from the perspective of the epistles, and the instructions on giving. Rather than wondering about giving, or imagining a certain dollar amount, or fixing in on certain percentages or tithes, the saint is to follow the model of grace giving, which will be explained shortly.

Second, this program is open to strong misconceptions about the life of faith, and the subject of the leading of God in relation to decision-making.⁹ Though a believer may be as obedient and sacrificial as his situation allows, if he does not come up to his subjective

mental money total offered as a faith promise pledge, his view of faith is fogged, and his view of God is confused.

God does not expect us to imagine (or visualize) certain dollar amounts in relation to giving, but rather to live wisely, and with discernment, as we evaluate the whole range of decisions associated with stewardship. Giving in the New Testament—or Old Testament for that matter—was never left up to imagined goals determined through prayer. Rather, it was the obedient life of a saint giving of *all* that he had—because of the need, and out of God’s provision for him.

By this, we mean that stewardship involves money, but it involves much more. *Actually, we are stewards of four things of which we will give a full account: they are money, possessions, time, and relationships.* Money is but a part of the larger picture of understanding that God is the Author of this world, and life, and everything in it. In the days we have, we live by His will, and in order to glorify Him. This means God is to gain His due.¹⁰ This happens with the proper use of our *lives*—in the fullest sense—not just our bank accounts.

While the system of faith promise does result in God’s people giving in substantial ways, its deficiencies are due to a neglect of the essential New Testament teaching on giving.

GRACE GIVING AS THE MODEL FOR LEADERS AND BELIEVERS

As we discussed with evangelism, giving is not first of all what we do, but rather what we are! Whatever we give—of money, possessions, time, or relationships—flows from our obedience to God, and our love for our neighbors. If we are lacking in those areas, no amount of giving can fill up that lacking.

The temptation is toward tokenism. A story is told of the French queen Marie Antoinette. On her palace grounds, in Versailles, she built a replica of a peasant village. Every week she would visit the

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village, and pretend she lived the life of a peasant. After all, maybe they had something in life she was missing!

So it is in our churches and lives. We provide minimal amounts, and minimal commitments—missing the greater point that the beginning of life itself, and everything life represents, is Christ (cf. Col 3:1-4)! Therefore, the temptation of tokenism may salve the conscience, but it will never satisfy our Creator.

The only thing that will unseat greed is grace! Grace forms the roots out of which a living freedom in Christ—even in areas of money—is realized.

The best model for New Testament giving, in an extended description, comes from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9:

gave as much as they were able (8:3)
even beyond their ability (8:3)
entirely on their own (8:3)
finish your work . . . according to your means (8:11)
according to what one has (8:12)
that there might be equality (8:13)
give what he has decided in his heart (9:7)
not reluctantly, or under compulsion (9:7)
having all that you need, you will abound in every
good work (9:8)

These important phrases rule out, and rule in. They rule out tithing. It speaks against compulsion or external obligation. It is to be giving as purposed. This is not giving according to intuition or impressions. It is giving with a plan—a plan that has been determined by our needs, by God's overall provisions, and with a desire for being characterized by good works (cf. Acts 11:27-29; Eph 2:10).

Instructively, it brings in the principle of equality. This principle establishes that no one in the church is to have too little, and no one is to have too much—but rather, there is to be equality in all

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(cf. 2 Cor 8:13-15, 9:6-11). This determines not only a plan for giving according to the above standards, but also an ongoing awareness of needs of others in order to provide out of what God has given us (cf 1 Cor 16:1-4; 1 Tim 6:17-18). For the church, then, and its leaders, giving is to be a vital and special part of our growth in Christ. But this is best accomplished according to Scriptural patterns.

One additional text speaks powerfully to these issues as they relate to church leadership:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith (Heb 13:5-7).

Isn't this text remarkable? It instructs us as leaders to live in relation to money in a way that demonstrates contentment. Further, that we can show, by our lives, that we believe God will not forsake us, and that He remains always our helper! These kinds of leaders, as models for the church—in money matters, and in matters of life—result in a church of leaders and believers which are “strengthened by grace” (Heb 13:9)!

CHRISTIAN GIVING: GIFTS OF GRATITUDE

The narrator asks, “Can you really afford to go another business day without the Wall Street Journal?” That's a question for our world, but that's not a good question for the church.

A better question is asked by our Lord, who, in a parable about a rich fool, talked about the foolishness of living only for this life:

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will

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be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

Giving is to be measured by grace—by a relationship to One really known as the giver of all good gifts.

Wealth is the parent of luxuries, and money is the matron to greed. All of us have the disease—it lies in various stages of dormancy and desire—watered by the flesh, and willing to spring to life in response to the slightest justification, or proof text from electric preachers.

Too much is at stake to make wrong decisions here. The greatest needs of our hearts—in loving God, and in loving others more than ourselves—are dependent on the direction provided by our Christian leadership.

Do we really believe it is more blessed to give than to receive—even as a church (cf. Acts 20:35)? Are we willing to mortgage the spiritual welfare of our churches to the indebtedness, and encumbrance, of physical structures and buildings? If our minds and lives are pursuing the traditional *party line*, then believers in our churches have little chance for *private party connections*.

But if we as church leaders do live apart from the love of money—being content with what we have—then we are providing the model and message for a church that wants to live rightly, albeit radically. We are saying that, first and foremost, our citizenship is in heaven—whether or not we own any of the stuff of earth. We are believing that the only two things that are eternal—God and His Word, and people made in His image—are worth the greatest of sacrifices and gifts.

That is tracking closer to what Christian giving is to illustrate, and is worth someone standing up with cue cards, and mouthing “Amen” and “Praise the Lord”!