

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Giving money to God

For many Christians, the subject of money is taboo in church. Many don't want any advice from the church about how to spend their money. They don't want to hear requests for money, either.



That's odd, because Jesus apparently spoke often about money, and he didn't mince any words about how it should be used. The Old Testament prophets did the same. In fact, use of money is one of the subjects addressed most often in the Bible.

Two main kinds of giving

Much of what the Bible says about money deals with giving to the poor rather than using it for living luxuriously ourselves. Especially in the Old Testament, however, we also read about giving to God, which at that time was apparently understood as giving to the temple through its priests. Some of those required gifts were for the poor, but some were for the support of the temple and the people who operated and maintained it. Presumably today's equivalent of that would be giving to the church. In our culture, however, seeing how best to give to the poor and to the church can be hard.

Reconsidering our giving



Recent events in the local church that my husband and I belong to, and in our Annual Conference (regional division of the United Methodist Church), have made us feel the need to rethink some of our previous decisions about giving to each of those, and to make some changes in our commitments to them. I'm therefore doing some of my thinking here by writing, in the hope that it will help me clarify my thoughts about giving money and maybe at the same time help some readers clarify theirs.

Does God command tithing?

If you'd like to refresh on how tithing was practiced originally and what it meant, I suggest that you read Leviticus 27:30-44, Numbers 18:21-32, and Deuteronomy 14:22-29 and 26:12-15. In case you're as fuzzy as I was on the background of these passages, let me remind you that the priests mentioned in them were Aaron (brother of Moses) and his descendants. The Levites and their descendants, assigned to assist the priests with worship and the maintenance of the temple, were one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They descended from Levi, a son of Jacob, whom God renamed Israel.



To get a perspective on what tithing may mean for us, notice the many other customs and detailed instructions described in these Bible books, and ask yourself how pertinent they seem to the settings in which we live. Should we consider all of them as God's commands to us today? How can we see only a few

of them as applicable now, as some Christians do, without feeling that all the others in the same context also apply to us?

What did Jesus say?

Next, it's important to look at what Jesus said about tithing, according to Luke. But remember that we can't be sure

whether Jesus actually said these exact words, given the gaps between his death and the time the gospels were written, the audiences and purposes they seem to have been written for, and the way in which they reached their present form. Assuming that Jesus did say this or something similar, however, what does it mean for us today? How is it similar to or different from his other statements about continuing to observe "the law," such as those in Matthew 5:17-48?



To me the teaching of Jesus seems to say that promoting justice and loving God by loving others have higher priority than following any ancient religious custom.

How much? and how?



The question of giving money to God has two main parts: first, how much of one's income to give, and second, how to give it. In church, the answer we usually hear to the first part is that every Christian should tithe—give a tenth of his or her income. Advocates of tithing point out spiritual benefits that they believe it brings, and they cite scriptures in which they believe God commands us to tithe.

A command from God?

**Will anyone rob God?
Yet you are robbing
me. ... In your tithes
and offerings! ...
Bring the full tithe
into the storehouse ...
see if I will not open
the windows of
heaven for you and
pour down for you an
overflowing blessing.
—Malachi 3:8-10**

I can't deny the spiritual benefits these Christians report experiencing. However, because of what is known about the Bible's origins and the nature of documents considered sacred by religious groups, I doubt that the few scriptures about tithing are God's timeless commands.

It seems to me that the Bible's commands about tithing, like those about several other subjects, apply only to the settings in which they arose. They seem to be merely human impressions, and not necessarily correct impressions, of what God requires, based mainly on customs of earlier times. However, I know that many other Christians have a different view of the authority of scripture, so for considering the subject of giving money to God, let's move on instead of getting stuck there.

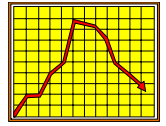
**All tithes from the
land, whether the seed
from the ground or
the fruit from the tree,
are the Lord's; they
are holy to the Lord.
—Leviticus 27:30**

Tithing would help the church

Whether or not God commands tithing now as the way to decide what amount to give, it could help many worthwhile ministries get done if we all did it. Thus it's not surprising that the church so often claims that God wants every Christian to tithe.

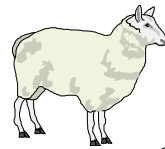


For members with the most money available to give today, however, merely determining what's ten percent of their income may not be easy. They don't know whether the ten percent should come from gross income or after-tax income, and their income may come from several sources and in several forms, some of which aren't liquid or easily measured, such as profits on long-term assets.



Still, citing the difficulty of identifying our ten percent may be begging the question. It may be merely a way of trying to justify giving less than we should. But we each have to decide that for ourselves. For now, let's leave it unsolved and move on again, in our consideration of giving to God.

Give it all to the local church?



How do we give whatever amount we decide to give? How does giving to God happen in today's world, for those of us who live in a system based on money rather than on plants and animals that we personally grow and barter?

"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse," says one of the most-quoted scriptures, apparently referring to the room in which the temple's sacred objects and tithes of grain, wine, and such were stored in Old Testament times. But in our setting, what's the equivalent of that storehouse? Is it the bank accounts of the local congregation we belong to? Yes and no, I think.

An obligation to pay our share



I believe that as a member of a local church I'm obligated to furnish some of the financial support it must have in order to exist. I remember one member saying he didn't give to the church because he paid taxes to the U.S. government, which was now supporting the poor in the way that churches formerly did. Another said he wasn't giving to our local church because he gave to the Boy Scouts and the local United Way.

Those reasons make no sense to me. Those organizations may do good things, but they don't do all that's needed to help the poor. Also, I feel that all of us who are financially able are obligated to pay



for whatever services we use, whether they come from the church or the electric company.

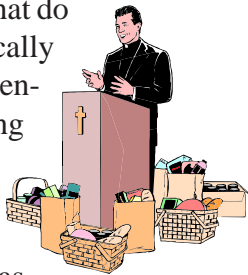
However, I believe the church is much more than my local congregation. For United Methodists it's also the worldwide UMC and its various agencies. It's also other denominations, of course, and I believe it's also people who follow the teachings and example of Jesus but aren't in any institutional church. Therefore, I give some of my monetary gifts outside of my local congregation, to individuals, projects, and organizations that I feel are promoting what Jesus taught and demonstrated. I feel I'm giving to God when I do that.



Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.
—Luke 18:22

What qualifies as giving to God?

What about organizations that do good things that aren't specifically mentioned in the Bible? It mentions healing the sick, providing food and clothing for the poor, caring for the earth, and helping to eliminate unjust treatment of people, but I assume God's work also includes more than those.



What about promoting education, which helps people develop and use their God-given abilities in order to support themselves and help others? What about supporting the arts, to promote the beauty and creativity that reflects God's nature? How can we be sure when we're giving to God and when we're not? Maybe we can't.



Obey God, or our "high priests"?

Because of what my husband and I see as unchristian and unjustified treatment of several church staff members during the past several years in our local church, culminating in recent unjust treatment of the senior pastor by both congregational and UMC Annual Conference officials, we have now decreased our giving to both of those institutions and have removed them from our wills. We give to many other UMC-related agencies and programs, but we want to give only to those that promote justice rather than injustice. We believe we're obeying God in this decision, but such decisions aren't easy or clear-cut.



The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders ..." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."
—Acts 5:27-29

Is it wrong, we keep asking ourselves, to rely on our own prayerful discernment and that of other Christian friends to identify where God is at work and thus where we need to give, instead of financially supporting all the decisions of official church bodies? What if the "high priests" of our church give orders that we believe contradict the orders of Jesus? What if the official decision-makers of our congregation or denomination allot funds to purposes we believe are contrary to what following Jesus requires? Should we give to those institutions and programs anyway?



I don't think so. I believe we need to use our money as well as our voices and actions to promote what we believe to be God's will. But if we with-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.

I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.



hold money as a way of opposing what we believe is against God's will, are we trying to exert unjustified control over the church? Are we using money as a threat, or as a way of getting a larger voice than any member deserves? Are we trying to use money to overpower the members who can't give as much as we can? I don't think so, but other Christians may say yes.

I'm not even sure what to think about the money I spend on *Connections*. It's more than most other church members could spend to make their concerns known. Am I thus exerting power unfairly by using money in this way? I don't think so. I don't count

what I spend on publishing *Connections* as a contribution to the church, and it's not tax-deductible for me or for the *Connections* readers who contribute. I see it as using a God-given resource to pursue a God-given calling, but I may be wrong about that.



For Christians, having money is a privilege but also a challenge. Even when we make our best effort to use it faithfully, it's hard to be sure whether our choices are right or wrong.

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Happy are those who consider the poor ...
— Psalm 41:1

Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
— Luke 6:24



Jesus said to [the rich young man] "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor ... Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven."

When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

— Matthew 19:21-23



[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

— Mark 12:41-44