Tithing: A benchmark for giving

DAVID S. BELL
VICE PRESIDENT OF STEWARDSHIP OF THE UNITED METHODIST FOUNDATION OF MICHIGAN

Tithing requires the theological premise that our possessions and assets ultimately belong to God. All that we have in life is a gift from God!

Faith-filled, first fruits giving is our opportunity to return a small portion of God's abundant blessing in our lives. Moreover, these blessings are not limited to financial assets or possessions.

Most of us can examine our own lives and find numerous blessings, perhaps even some astounding miracles. As Christians, we are called to give to God "what is right, not what is left," as the popular quote from a church marquis states. God calls us to offer our "first fruits," not the "leftovers."

Tithing becomes a benchmark for the modern-day Christian. Since few regular worship attendees have achieved the mark of tithing, how might pastors and church leaders encourage congregants to strive to tithe? If pastors and church leaders promote proportionate giving, worshippers will be called to examine their current giving levels and will be challenged to move closer to the tithe.

Why is tithing a benchmark rather than a goal? In his sermon, "The Use of Money," John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, preached about "earning all you can, saving all you can, and giving all you can." For Wesley, the tithe was not the ultimate goal of the Christian—it was the standard, the normative mark, the common denominator.

Jesus' teaching and example urge us to examine our choices with all of our possessions and assets, not just 10 percent of them. Frankly, Jesus asked his disciples for 100 percent commitment.

In post-modern culture, financial giving is usually not the first monetary decision people make, rather it is one of the last.

We might rationalize these priorities by considering our primary financial decisions to be those of basic need. We make choices about housing, food, relationships, transportation, employment, and recreation to name a few, before we make choices about charitable gifts. Our lifestyle and all of its financial requirements take precedence over our obligation to share financial resources.

The decision of defining how much is enough for our lifestyle is a difficult one. As Christians, we are constantly called to balance between our desired and our perceived needs. In contrast to the post-modern model of giving, God offers us a different perspective on giving. It is one filled with abundance, freedom, and joy. It is the ancient model of tithing. Tithing can help us take a step toward achieving a God-honoring balance with our financial resources. One of the best tithing stories is that of Jacob (Genesis 28:10–22.)

The ways in which we choose to earn, give, save, and spend money are really spiritual decisions. When our first decision is one of giving, we place a greater level of trust in God.

We begin by saying, "Thank you God! All that we have received is a blessing from you." We acknowledge that we worship God and not money!

Giving frees us from the bondage that money can have over our lives. Tithing encourages us to focus on God as the source of our strength, rather than our own achievements or financial assets. Tithing leads to spiritual growth.

Wesley taught that one who earned and saved money, but failed to give money was not living as a faithful Christian. Tithing introduces spiritual discipline to our financial choices. The bipolar contrast between the pull and push of the hyper-consumer culture versus the biblical principles of tithing is so clear. Tithing dissuades us from absorption into the competitive posture of hyper-consumer-driven communities. Tithing challenges the common assumptions of economics and debt. It offers possibilities of economic justice, moderate consumption, and self-control.

Finally, tithing provides the financial assets for congregations to launch and expand a wide continuum of ministries. Together, we are able to accomplish far more than most of us can achieve individually.

We might consider that we are giving money through the church, rather than to the church. When people give to the church, they are giving to sustain the institution. However, when people give through the church, they are empowering ministry.

The spiritual discipline of tithing is one of giving through the church. Tithing congregations are beacons of spiritual vitality and health.

They are communities grounded in spiritual relationships, beginning with a relationship to God as the primary source of strength, hope, and life.