

# Sacrificial Giving

by Maurice Smith

The comedian Henny Youngman once quipped, "I've got all the money I'll ever need . . . If I die by 4 o'clock." I think he would have felt right at home in the house church movement. In fact, I think I've finally figured out why there are so many "prosperity gospel" preachers and teachers today. The answer is really quite simple when you think about it: It pays better (Well, duh!) At least in this life. Unfortunately, the accounting that really matters comes later, after it's too late to do anything about it. Now, don't worry. I'm not planning to begin preaching prosperity and wealth. I'm allergic to polyester and hair spray, and despite repeated attempts, I still can't stretch the word "God" into three syllables.

Not too long ago I heard Wolfgang Simson say that there are three issues facing the church today:

1. Restoring what is church,
2. How Christians can work together, and
3. How Christians handle money. (Hmm, some things never change!)

I recently heard the pastor of a large seeker-friendly church relate the following statistics regarding Christian giving:

80% of all giving in the church is done by 20% of attendees.

The remaining 20% of all money is given by the next 30% of attendees.

If you're following the math, this means that 100% of all giving is done by 50% of church attendees.

The remaining 50% of church attendees give NOTHING. Ouch!

So it should come as no surprise (a disappointment, yes, but no surprise) that reliable studies show that only 8 to 12 out of 100 born-again believers tithe. Let me be as clear as I know how to be. I do not think that "tithing" is really the issue when it comes to Christian giving. Why do I say that? Because I am convinced that the New Testament standard and model for giving is not tithing, but radical sacrificial giving out of a transformed life. Now, I don't really want to engage in a "debate" over tithing, but I would challenge anyone to produce a single New Testament passage where tithing is demonstrated in practice in the life of the New Testament church. I can't find one. But I can find many examples of radical, sacrificial giving out of a transformed life which went far beyond tithing.

Let's face reality. The statistics (cited above) don't lie. Christians by-and-large don't give; not by any measurable biblical standard. And that hurts to admit. Let me make an observation at this point regarding what I believe the biblical standard of giving to be. I believe that the New Testament transforms and redefines the believer's responsibilities before God. For example, in Matthew 5:27ff Jesus transforms and redefines adultery from an outward physical act to an

inward attitude of the heart. In effect, Jesus "raises the bar" from simply avoiding the physical act of adultery (which we should all avoid, in case you're wondering!) to examining our inward attitudes and thoughts (that ol' secret lust issue). Keeping the requirements of the Law is no longer a matter only of external conformity, but a matter of inward transformation. This is the heart of Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians 3 as he explains the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31. The Law of Moses emphasized outward conformity. The Law of the Spirit emphasizes inward transformation. The Law kills. But the Spirit transforms lives. What does this have to do with giving in the New Testament? Simply this: The New Testament transforms the believer's responsibility concerning giving from an outward fixed percentage to an inward attitude of radical sacrificial giving. As I said earlier, I can find no New Testament church example of believers tithing. But I can find numerous examples of radical sacrificial giving. Consider the following:

**1. God Himself** - That's right. Radical sacrificial giving begins at the top. God Himself is our model and example, and God doesn't tithe. Instead, He gives radically and sacrificially. God gave to us radically and sacrificially by giving to us unworthy sinners the unfathomable gift of His Son. He "spared no expense" to redeem us from our fallen and lost condition. And so Paul could declare, at the end of his discourse on giving in 2 Corinthians 8-9, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15) Now do you understand why it really is impossible to out-give God?! "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) Amen! God is a radical sacrificial giver!

**2. The Widow** - In Mark 12:41ff the writer paints a fascinating picture. He tells us that Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the multitude were putting money into the treasury." Imagine this scene. Jesus, God in human form, sitting there at the temple treasury, studying people's giving habits! He sat there watching as "many rich people were putting in large sums." You would think that Jesus would be impressed with that kind of generosity. But He wasn't. But then someone caught His attention. A widow. A poor widow we are told. She put in two small copper coins. What were they worth? Around one sixty-fourth (yep, 1/64th) of a denarius (a denarius was equal to one day's working wage). It was a mere pittance, compared with the gifts of the rich donors who visited the treasury on that day. But unlike them, her gift was radical and sacrificial. Of all the gifts placed into the Treasury that day, only hers earned Jesus' attention and blessing: "This poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty [literally, "destitution"], put in all she owned, all she had to live on." Had she "tithed" her income? Hardly. She had given everything, "all she had to live on." And God Himself, sitting there in human flesh, had seen and taken notice. If God were to study and take notice of your giving habits today, what would He notice about you (or about me) and how would He respond?

**3. Zaccheus** - In Luke 19 we learn the story of Zaccheus. He was a "publican" or someone with a "public contract" with Rome to collect taxes at a profit on their behalf. We all know the story of Zaccheus climbing the tree to get a better view of Jesus and Jesus calling him down, saying, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." (Luke 19:5) A curious thing occurs in verse 8. Zaccheus tells Jesus, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." So

much for tithing. Zaccheus isn't responding to any requirement of the Law concerning tithing or concerning fraud. Under the Law a thief was required to return what he had stolen plus an additional 20%. But Zaccheus, responding out of a transformed life, promises to repay 400% to anyone he has defrauded, plus to give not 10% but 50% of everything he owns to the poor (nothing about this in the Law)! Now that's radical sacrificial giving! You know that God has "set somebody's hair on fire" when they respond like that!

**4. Barnabas** - Actually, his name was Joseph, not Barnabas. But he had such a gift of encouraging others that the Apostles had apparently "nick named" him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." The young church in Jerusalem was in need. Thousands of people had come to new-found faith in Christ as a result of Pentecost and subsequent events. Many of them had stayed in town to learn more about their faith and the church was now confronted with the challenge of how to meet their needs. Barnabas saw the need and responded. We are told that he "owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet"(Acts 4:37). That's radical sacrificial giving to the needs of the Kingdom. Barnabas saw the need and acted radically and sacrificially to meet the need.

**5. The Macedonians** - This one, like the widow of Mark 12:41, is both heart breaking and convicting. Paul tells us about the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8, "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God." I could spend a whole letter just exegeting this passage and not do it justice. The language of the Greek alone is overpowering as Paul describes people who (as we used to say back home in North Carolina) were "dirt poor." Yet, in the midst of this "deep poverty" they overflowed with joy and liberality, so much so that they gave not simply according to their ability but "beyond their ability." This, too, is radical sacrificial giving by people who, like the widow whom Jesus commended, had nothing and gave everything. (By the way, this passage is the biblical basis for giving away cars to people in need, after all, it says "they gave (of) their own Accord." O.K. that was bad.)

### **A Summary for People Whose Hair is on Fire**

I confess. My favorite media psychologist has become Dr. Phil McGraw. And I stole the "hair on fire" analogy from him (Although it was C.H. Spurgeon who once told one of his students from Spurgeon's College, "Young man, set yourself on fire; and people will come just to watch you burn!"). Let's face reality. We are in desperate need of a generation of Christians whose hair has been set on fire by God and who are powerfully motivated for desperate and radical kingdom living . . . and giving. Some 25 years ago Dr. Francis Schaeffer warned the church that it faced the potential of embracing what he called the two terrible values of "personal peace and personal affluence." Translated this means, "Leave me alone ("peace") with my materialism (affluence, things, toys, lifestyle) and I don't really care what else happens in the world around me." I genuinely fear that Dr. Schaeffer's prophetic warning has come to fulfillment. The church has replaced radical kingdom living with radical comfort ("personal peace and affluence"), and the

results, for both the church and the world, has been disastrous. We are no longer a generation of believers whose hair is on fire for God, and the world has taken note and is abandoning the Church in droves!

I am not in a place to be able to tell you what radical sacrificial giving should mean or look like in your life. That's between you and God. What I am certain of is that the Church is entering one of the most challenging seasons of ministry in its history. The spiritual battle for our generation is raging. And I believe that the sound of the trumpet is calling the available church to ride to the sound of the battle. God is about to release great blessing for those who are willing to serve Him radically in the Kingdom for the next several years. And He is going to hold each of us accountable for how we utilize the resources he has given us to advance His Kingdom causes during this season. And as David Wilkerson recently pointed out in his February 24 newsletter entitled "The Spoils of Spiritual Warfare" (access it at [www.timesquarechurch.org](http://www.timesquarechurch.org)) those who fight in this spiritual battle will collect the spoils of war for reinvestment in the Kingdom. But the spoils only go to those who show up for the battle.

As someone who has experienced financial failure, bankruptcy foreclosure and other financial disasters that other Christians only have nightmares about, I suspect I and my family have a unique perspective on these things. Having literally suffered the loss of all things my wife and I have made a personal commitment to live by faith and to never allow money to deter us from pursuing God's Kingdom purposes for our lives. I am slowly beginning to understand what Jim Elliott meant when he said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." That's radical sacrificial giving, the overflow of a transformed life.

### **"Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can"**

There are shining examples of radical sacrificial giving throughout church history. One of my favorites comes from the life of John Wesley. During the Evangelical Awakening in England during the mid-1700s John Wesley adopted rules for his Methodist Societies which called upon every professing Methodist to live a modest lifestyle and to avoid gaudy clothing & jewelry, to avoid pawning goods (a primary means of obtaining consumer loans), to avoid borrowing any money without a reasonable expectation of repayment, and for Christians to prefer one another in business dealings (a novel thought!).

But Wesley did more than merely offer these simple rules. He offered himself as a living example of a lifestyle dedicated to radical sacrificial giving and free from the love of money. Each year Wesley calculated what he needed in order to live. Once that figure was calculated he gave away everything in excess of that modest amount. In one particular year Wesley lived on approximately £30 (in today's currency, approximately \$2,400). In that same year he earned and gave away an additional £1,400, which means that he gave away nearly 98% of his earnings for that year. Early in his long ministry, in 1743, Wesley wrote, "If I leave behind me £10 . . . you and all mankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber." Wesley regarded his life and wealth as a stewardship, entrusted to him by God for the benefit of those around him.

Wesley believed in industry and hard work, helping many fellow Methodists to start successful businesses. His financial motto was simple. "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can." The sale of his pamphlets could have made Wesley a wealthy man, had he not chosen to be a conduit for the less fortunate instead. In the year 1776 Wesley received a note from the Commissioner of Excise. At that time the government imposed a luxury excise tax upon all silver plate (dinnerware, etc.). The Commissioner of Excise claimed that Wesley owned more silver plate than he had declared and paid tax on. Wesley responded curtly but profoundly, "I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread."

But Wesley took additional steps beyond his own personal lifestyle. He formed what today would be called credit unions. The "Benevolent Loan Fund" made short-term loans to Methodists in financial need. Wesley personally solicited capital donations for the fund, and loaned money on more than one occasion to assist a Methodist to start a business. In addition, Wesley founded the "Strangers Society" which, according to Wesley, was "instituted wholly for the relief not of our Society, but of poor, sick, friendless strangers." These early "credit unions" were intended to assist individuals in need that might have no other alternative.

On the eve of his death with his strength failing, John Wesley closed his personal financial Account Book with these words: "For upwards of 86 years I have kept my accounts exactly, I will not attempt it any longer, being satisfied with the continual conviction that I save all I can, and give all I can - that is all I have."

When the day comes and it is time for us to settle and close our accounts here on earth in preparation for the reckoning of heaven, may we be able to say the same.

***Maurice Smith leads the Parousia Network of house churches in Spokane, WA. (see their website: [www.parousianetwork.com](http://www.parousianetwork.com))***

[www.house2house.tv](http://www.house2house.tv)