

EMBEZZLEMENT: THE CORPORATE SIN OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY?

An Examination of How Local Congregations in the Early Church Spent Their Money and the Implications for Us Today.

By Ray Mayhew

While reading some patristic documents recently I was startled to discover that the Church Fathers are univocal in their insistence that the bulk of the revenue collected by a local church belonged by right to the poor. There was no expectation among them that a large percentage of what was collected by a local congregation would be used for its own maintenance and ministry. In fact, to do so would have been viewed by them as a misappropriation of funds.

In the plethora of books and articles I have read over the years that champion the poor and urge believers to adjust their lifestyles accordingly, I have come across almost nothing that examines the fiscal priorities of congregations in the light of this patristic legacy. Articles abound on the responsibility of individual believers to conscientiously steward their financial resources but silence prevails on what is the appropriate use of this sacred revenue by the church once it has been collected.

I am not saying that we are obligated to follow the example of the early church. But most of us do believe that they have bequeathed us an important legacy. We take this with great seriousness in the area of doctrine, and I am simply advocating that we listen to them with equal seriousness in the area of stewardship.

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The fact is that the twenty-first century church is very rich—not necessarily my church or your church, but the global Church—and, as we are all painfully aware, we live in a day when 2 billion people somehow manage to live, or die, on less than \$2 per day. Most of us are saturated with statistics and they can become both tiresome and depressing (and I, for one, have no desire to use them for guilt manipulation), but it is necessary to use some to set the context of any contemporary conversation on the appropriate use of church finances.

According to a United Nations study published in 1998 the combined wealth of the world's seven richest men could wipe out poverty and provide access to basic social services for the quarter of the world who live in severe need. The net wealth of 10 billionaires is worth 1.5 times the combined national income of the 48 least developed nations. However, despite commendable initiatives of Bill Gates, relief for the global poor is not likely to come from the rich and powerful.

Reggie White, in a courageous speech before the Wisconsin Legislature, asserted that more money passes through our churches than is given to the federal government. While we all love Reggie, and admire his forthrightness, I don't think his statistics are correct—how I wish they were! . Remarkably, however, it *was* true in the 1850's. At that time more was given by believers to the church than was paid by the general population to the government. Personal income and Federal spending have, of course, soared in the last 150 years, but giving to the church has not increased at any where near the same rate (it is now averages about 2.5 percent of personal income).

In the latest edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* the estimated personal income of Christians world-wide (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox) was around \$15 trillion. The amount given to church and para-church bodies was in the region of \$276 billion—not nearly what it should be, but still a *lot* of money. However, the big question is, when we look at that which is given to the church, is how do we spend it?

The United Nations has calculated that for \$35–\$40 billion per year, basic social services could be provided to all the poorest people on the planet. This includes both primary schooling and basic health care and nutrition. Reggie's point, therefore, is undoubtedly true. There are vast amounts of revenue in our midst, which, if properly channeled, could have a huge impact on global poverty.

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Sadly, only a fraction goes in this direction. All the research indicates that the percentage of our budget given away *that in no way directly benefits our members*—and therefore can be channeled to missions and the poor—is decreasing year by year (now at about 15 cents of every donated church dollar). Unfortunately, it appears that we are not any more transformed in our church spending patterns that in our personal consumer spending patterns, and many now regard their giving as a “fee-for-service” responsibility rather than as a biblical imperative.

To give just one example, from the 75 million dollars in annual income received by some of the Protestant churches in Chicago, it is estimated that less than 6 million dollars was spent outside the local congregations where the money was raised.¹ Such current priorities are difficult to justify in a world where 17 million die unnecessarily every year from

infectious diseases and inadequate nutrition. Biblically, all of them are our neighbors—and many of them are our brothers and sisters. Our commitment to alleviate their suffering is of highest priority if we are to effectively incarnate the message we are called to proclaim. In the face of this, a re-examination of how we spend our money in the light of the Scriptures and the practice of the early church is long overdue.

The fact that some churches tithe their income and give away ten percent to other ministries only reflects how deeply we believe it is “ours” to use in the first place.

As mentioned above, the assumption of most church leaders today is that we have the right to spend our revenue in ways that we believe would be most beneficial to the work for which we are responsible. Budgets are drawn up, employees paid, buildings built and maintained, and missionaries supported. This is the way things are done, and as long as there is an annual audit and no misappropriations of funds, all is well. But is it?

All of the above is built on two assumptions that are rarely, if ever, questioned. The first is that the revenue collected is “ours,” belonging by right to the congregation that gave it and who now, therefore, has the right to spend it. The fact that some churches tithe their income and give away ten percent to other ministries only reflects how deeply we believe it is “ours” to use in the first place. The second assumption is that how this money is spent is a pragmatic decision that varies from congregation to congregation (and culture to culture), depending on the perceived needs and objectives of each local church. I believe that both of these assumptions need to be reexamined in the light of scripture and church history.

It has been well said that the reason we study history is not simply to find out what happened, but to discover who we are. In the area of economic justice and the use of church revenue there is no better way to “discover who we are” than to read the early patristic writings. The record is unambiguous, church revenue, prior to Constantine, was used, both locally and in other parts of the Empire, primarily for the welfare of the sick, the poor, the imprisoned, the widow and the orphan. The local congregation did not expect a large percentage of what was given to be used for its own maintenance and ministry. In fact, to do so would have been viewed by most of them as a misappropriation of funds.

In the second century, Tertullian provided us with details of the church services in North Africa. He spoke of every man bringing money, “whenever he wishes and only if he is willing and able. It is a free will offering. You might call them the trust funds of piety. They are spent on the support and burial of the poor.”²

Justin Martyr provides us with similar insight from the second century practice of the Roman church. Speaking of the Sunday service he says, “the money thus collected is deposited with the president who takes care of the orphans and widows and those who are

in straits because of sickness or any other cause and those in prison, and visitors from other parts. In short, he looks after all who are in need.”³ Justin explains that regular gifts

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were brought to the communion service to be used for the common fund. The church in the port city of Ostia, Italy, devoted as much space to storing goods to be redistributed to the needy as they did space for their worship services.⁴ The general rule, for both individuals and churches, was, according to Augustine, that “not to give to the needy what is superfluous is akin to fraud” and “when you possess the superfluous you possess what is not your own.”

Giving in this way was not seen as generosity, it was viewed as an act of restitution. It belonged to the poor by right. Augustine instructed his own church to set aside at least a tenth of all their possessions and income for the poor (not the church). This was actually a concession to what he saw as greed because his congregation was not prepared to give up everything that was “superfluous”!⁵

Quotations similar to those above abound in the early literature available to us. Sadly, our contemporary approach has been very different. We usually calculate how much it costs to run the church, and then decide how much we can give away to missions and the poor. However, this is not usually done out of selfishness or lack of concern for the poor. It is the direct result of our theology of stewardship which appears to be quite different from that of the early church.

For example, unlike our early forefathers, many draw a parallel between giving to the Levites in the Old Testament, via the tithe, and giving to the church (rather than the poor) in the New Testament. In several ways, this is a fundamental mistake. Sociologically, the church is parallel in function to the synagogue (which incidentally, also took offerings for the poor), not to the Levitical system of temple, priest, and sacrifice. The religious infrastructure centered on the tabernacle or temple no longer exists, and has no physical or financial parallel in the church.

While, theologically, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, we operate functionally more like synagogues in our local communities. Therefore, a parallel between giving the tithe for the maintenance of the Levites and temple under the old covenant, and giving it for the maintenance of the church and clergy under New, is tenuous at best. A more appropriate parallel might be between giving to the rabbi in the synagogue and the pastor in the church. However, rabbis did not qualify as recipients of the tithe, and until the Medieval period most would not accept any payment whatever for their services.

We should also not miss the obvious: when the Old Testament tithe was given, *it was given away to others*. It was given to the Levites, a tribe to which those doing the giving did not belong. In contrast, when I give to the church, it is not “given away” at all. I

am the church! Revenue given to the church directly benefits me as a believer in providing pastoral care, Bible teaching, family counseling, facilities for my children and a building for me to worship in. In that sense, very little is given away. Most of the money I give to the church is spent by the church on meeting my needs and those of my family. For this I am very grateful. However, I am also suspicious as to whether I am a valid recipient of such expenditure.

A refinement of the questionable fiscal construct mentioned above (that giving to the church and clergy under the new covenant parallels giving to the Levites and the temple under the old covenant), is to concede that indeed the Levitical system cannot parallel the church, as it has been fulfilled in Jesus. But then to argue that a meaningful parallel *can* be drawn between the financial support of *priests* (as distinct from Levites), under the old covenant dispensation, and the support of the clergy under the New.

Priests were indeed the shepherds of Israel and it could be argued that while the system requiring the manual labor of a Levitical tribe passed away, the teaching and shepherding responsibilities that were part of the priestly role continue and are today exercised by the clergy.

Priests were of course supported by the Israelite community. The house of Aaron made up about 5 percent of the Levitical population and received a “tithe of the tithe” (Neh.12:47). [While the Old Testament system of tithes and offerings is complex and difficult to unravel, many of us believe that though they are no longer a legal requirement under the new covenant, the concept of the tithe does provide us with some helpful guidelines in the Church Age]

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Therefore if we conclude that there is, in fact, a parallel between the support of the priests in the Old Testament and the clergy in the New, and use a simple tenth as a guide, then a “tithe of the tithe” would still only qualify the clergy (and those working with them) to receive ten dollars out of every hundred given to the church. It is my contention that the poor should be the primary recipients of the remainder—not the demands of an ecclesiological infrastructure (on average, eighty five dollars out of every hundred given to the church is spent internally, leaving only fifteen to be given away on causes that in no way directly benefit our members).

With the exception of I Corinthians 8:13, which I will discuss below, neither the apostles or the ancient church seemed to make these Old Testament comparisons in developing their fiscal policy. However, surprisingly, they did make a direct comparison with the old covenant in developing their theology of the poor. Their radical posture of

generosity towards the needy was a continuation of what was already initiated under the old covenant.

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The care for the destitute and disenfranchised under the Mosaic legislation was, as we know, in stark contrast to their exploitation in the surrounding nations. Laws governing the gleaning of fields, loans without interest, the remission of debt and the provision of Sabbath and Jubilee years were unique to Israel and set her apart as a society. When the Talmud was eventually written, it would reflect this tradition by proposing that one fifth of one’s possessions be given to the needy, and devote an entire volume (“Pe’ah”) to the appropriate use of the tithe and the rights of the poor.⁶

The genius of life under the covenant was that obedience would mean the whole nation would prosper, and poverty would only exist in exceptional circumstances. As already mentioned, this meant that they were able to support, by the regular tithe, a large community of Levites. The Levites would, in turn, maintain the elaborate and costly system of tabernacle and temple. [However, the funds for the construction and maintenance of these sacred buildings were primarily supplied by free will offerings and did not draw on the tithe]

With the institution of the new covenant everything changed. The church, unlike national Israel, was now scattered among the nations, included Gentiles, and its members subject to injustice, oppression, persecution, and the common lot of living in a pagan society. The Mosaic provision for God’s poor in the old covenant (gleaning, loans, Sabbath and Jubilee years etc.) was no longer available for God’s poor found throughout the Empire. However as the new covenant community they had the advantage of being free from the financial burden of maintaining a Levitical tribe along with the elaborate ceremonial system that went with it.

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This meant that the provision for God’s poor among the nations could now come from the income that previously went towards maintaining the old ceremonial system. The mechanism under the new covenant for the equity that was available under the old would be the redistribution of wealth through the tithes and offerings of a church released from the burden of Levite, Temple, sacrifice and ceremony.

While, to my knowledge, we cannot establish with absolute certainty the theological connections made by the ancient church between giving under the old covenant and giving under the new, examples abound that illustrate at least some of their thinking. For example, Irenaeus, in the second century, argues that the teachings of Jesus did not

abrogate provision for the poor in the Mosaic law, but rather enlarged and extended them, and that “instead of the law enjoining the giving of tithes” (which would go to the Levites), Jesus tells us “to now share all our possessions with the poor.” Many of the subapostolic documents, from a very early date, attest to the parallel between giving to God via the Levites under the old covenant and giving to God via the poor in the new covenant. Lactantius, early in the fourth century, forges the same connection in exhorting the church to give their resources to the poor. He calls on them to “bestow your riches upon the altar of God”. This is another example of how giving to the poor in the new covenant was viewed as equivalent to giving to “the altar” under the old.⁷

Prior to 70 AD, for Jews living in Babylon, Rome or Athens who could not go regularly to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple, giving alms was seen as an acceptable substitute, a “spiritual sacrifice,” equally acceptable in the sight of God.⁸ This same concept was embraced in later Judaism when the temple was no longer standing. The term, “hekdesch,” which had originally referred to property consecrated to God, or dedicated to the needs of the temple, came to mean property consecrated for the poor (or to the synagogue, which, in turn, cared for the poor).⁹ Our failure to recognize this connection has resulted in our liberty to use church revenue primarily to maintain an ecclesiastical system—that now replaces, in the minds of some, the old covenant system—and only in a minimal way to view this sacred revenue as God’s provision for those denied the necessities of life.

The recent resurgence of interest among evangelicals in patristics is very heartening. However, we are in danger of embracing their doctrine while ignoring their ethics; of admiring their orthodoxy, but failing to imitate their lifestyle. Tradition has been defined as “the living faith of the dead,” but traditionalism as the “dead faith of the living.” It is imperative that we, as those responsible for the finances of the contemporary church, abandon our traditionalism which has been content to do so little for the global poor. We need to rediscover the Great Tradition of radical commitment to redistributive justice that was expressed so beautifully in the lives and theology of the church fathers.

It is not surprising that, after immersing himself for a lifetime in the patristic writings, John Wesley wrote his now famous lines that, “any Christian who takes for himself anything more than the plain necessities of life lives in an open, habitual denial of the Lord.” As we know, he practiced what he preached by giving most of his income away, wearing inexpensive clothes and eating only simple food. “If I leave behind me ten pounds,” he wrote, “you and all mankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber.”¹⁰ Strong words, but a faithful echo of patristic orthodoxy and ethics.

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As I have mentioned, there is no *necessity* for us to embrace the example of the fathers. We are at liberty to argue for a much more affluent lifestyle in an age shaped by very different economic structures (as Dinesh D’Souza ably does in *The Virtue of Prosperity*). However, in the light of global poverty and the worst public health crisis in human history (the Aids pandemic is now claiming the lives of 6,500 Africans every day—many of them innocent women and children with no access to anti-retroviral drugs), it is important for us to at least be aware of this ancient legacy of radical stewardship.

In establishing such priorities the early church did not deny that the laborer was worthy of his hire, and that some elders deserve “double honor”—interpreted by many commentators to allude to some sort of financial compensation (1 Thess. 5:17–18). A high priority was placed upon financially supporting those who preached the Gospel, along with ministering to the poor. Paul, himself, makes an analogy between supporting the priest in the Old Testament and the evangelist in the New. He uses the example of “those who perform sacred service” and points out that they were allowed to eat the food of the temple as a reward for their work. In a similar way, those who minister spiritual things under the new covenant should be allowed to reap material rewards (1 Cor. 9:13).

However, as mentioned above, the maintenance of the priests (a tithe of the tithe and a portion of certain sacrifices), only represented a small percentage of the total income that was given to God by Israel. If, as “priests,” we qualify for some remuneration (as Paul indicates), we only qualify for a very modest percentage of total church revenue. Extending this privilege to include most of the tithe, and replacing the old Levitical administration with a new ecclesiastical one would be an illegitimate application of Paul’s analogy in the church.

[Incidentally, Paul uses the *priests* from the house of Aaron as an example of those who qualify to receive portions of the temple offerings, but he does not extend this privilege to Levites—only one category of ministrant is in view in 1 Cor.9:13, not two, as in the NIV.¹¹ To do so would be to distort the old covenant parallel the Levitical tribe were recipients of the tithe, but not of the temple offerings.]

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As there is now no “Levitical tribe” within the church the tithe that supported them can now be given to God *as we channel it to the poor*. The expenditure of sacred revenue to maintain other aspects of the local church is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament. If we require a costly infrastructure of buildings, programs, and extra staff to function effectively in a given culture—which we often do—then other sources of revenue must be found. These expenses should never siphon off funds that God designates for the support of the poor.

As a pastor in a growing church of 3,000, located in an “edge” city in the Midwest, I am acutely conscious of the potential implications in my own life, as well as our congregation, if the above thesis is correct. Questions and doubts pile up one upon another: where does the money then come from to maintain the programs, staff, and buildings that we need? If we give most of it away, will we simply cease to exist, and then have nothing to give? Are we caught in a web of cultural and congregational expectations from which it is impossible to extricate ourselves without the whole edifice collapsing?

Another factor in molding the churches’ decision on the appropriate use of their funds was the Jewish consciousness that the tithe was “holy unto the Lord” (qadash). It was sacred revenue, and therefore using it properly was of paramount importance.

Someone said that “the gap” (Ezek.22:30) is the distance between the way things are and the way things ought to be. The question I wrestle with is has “the gap” now grown so wide that attempting to bridge it has become a futile task? However, before addressing this issue in the light of budgets, bank balances and other pragmatic imperatives, there are a few more historical foundations to uncover.

In molding the churches’ decision on the appropriate use of their funds the Jewish consciousness that the tithe was “holy unto the Lord” (qadash) became very important in the church. It was sacred revenue, and therefore using it properly was of paramount importance. At this point, it will be helpful and illuminating to try stand in the shoes of an early Jewish convert. Jews throughout the Empire already had a “culture of tithing.” However, as Jewish converts slowly began to be alienated from both the synagogue and temple, one of their obvious perplexities was where to give the tithe. (Not that the tithe was seen as a legal necessity, but it continued to provide a good benchmark of faithful stewardship.) Obviously, it would now be given to the church. However, the big question was what does the church do with it now that there is no longer a Levitical tribe to maintain?

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This was no easy decision to make. church funds were not seen simply as revenue to be spent as needed. The incident with Ananias and Sapphira was an indication of how seriously God viewed the issue. Their decision, as we know, to use it primarily to bridge the chasm between the “haves” and the “have nots” and their first appointed officials were dedicated exclusively to this task (Acts 6). However, *why* they chose to do this was a deeply theological decision. It had to be. In the issue of sacred revenue they were conscious of standing on holy ground and handling holy things.

If the early church had possessed the political freedom to build churches, employ staff, and run programs they probably would have done so. However, with the exception of supporting those who preached the gospel—which we will come to later—Jewish believers would not have seen building churches and employing staff as a valid use of the tithe. Revenue would have to come from elsewhere. How to use what was “holy unto the Lord” was not theirs to decide.

Their decision to give it to those degraded by hunger and disease had a huge evangelistic impact but this was not the motivation for their actions. However pressing the need or valid the cause, the tithe was not seen as theirs to redirect as needed. They gave it to the needy *because they understood it as belonging to them by right*. The bulk of their funds did not even go into the missionary enterprise for which they both lived and laid down their lives—it went to those lacking the basic necessities of life.

They were examining scripture in the light of Christ, and it was reshaping their understanding of justification, the Law, the prophets, the temple, the priesthood—and the tithe. Their conclusion that it should now be given to the weak and destitute was as considered and weighty as Paul’s in defining the doctrine of justification. The fact that there is more about money and possessions in the Gospels which they wrote than there is about heaven and hell reflects how deeply they pondered these issues. It is safe to say, from the time and attention that they devoted to it, that for the Fathers, “the problem of poverty and wealth was the most important specific social issue that the early church faced, as indeed it has perennially been.”¹²

Some may object that even though tithing was practiced by Jews, it would not have been known among gentile converts. While this was initially true (although tithing in the ancient world, to king or sanctuary was not unknown), it is obvious from the response of the Macedonian churches that sacrificial giving was seen as normative even among the gentile converts (2 Cor. 8 & 9). No doubt as these churches matured and discovered their Old Testament heritage, tithing would have become a guideline for them, as it has for many of us—most of whom are also gentile converts. The early patristic writings enthusiastically endorse the provision for the poor under the Mosaic legislation, and then go far beyond the tithe in championing the rights of the destitute. Today, if we are going to teach the tithe as a benchmark of faithful stewardship, we need to also teach how the early church used these trust funds in ministering to the needy.

There was one further legacy that was instrumental in developing this commitment to economic sharing in the early church. The wisdom literature of Israel unequivocally asserted that “to give to the poor is to lend to the Lord” (Prov.19:17). It was upon this foundation that later rabbinic scholars placed almsgiving *even above prayer and fasting* as the primary act of devotion to God himself; “prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving.”¹³ Jesus, himself, builds on this legacy by teaching in Matthew 25 that

giving and caring for those deprived of wealth and dignity was indeed giving and caring for the Lord himself.

In the fourth century, Basil the Great was so moved by such truths that he built a 'city' on the outskirts of Caesarea devoted to providing medical care for the sick, shelter for travelers, clothing for the poor, and work for the unemployed. In describing Basil's work, Gregory of Nazianzus instructs his readers to "go forth a little way from the city, and behold the new city, the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, in which the superfluities of their wealth, aye, and even their necessities, are stored."¹⁴

Basil's work became a model that was copied by many others who were equally determined to courageously and imaginatively obey the mandate of Matthew 25. This astonishing passage which climaxes and concludes the formal teaching of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, merits close examination, as it appears to have had a decisive impact in shaping the theology of stewardship in the early church. Five things should not be missed. First, it is the only place where our Lord gives a comprehensive description of final judgment. What is intimated elsewhere in parabolic language is here revealed with dramatic detail and vividness.¹⁵ The text emphasizes that "all his angels" and "all the nations" are gathered to witnesses that which will distinguish the righteous from the wicked on the day of judgement.

Second, the most striking structural feature of the passage is that the list of six basic needs, characterizing all those bereft of basic human rights (hunger, thirst, stranger, naked, sick, and in prison), is repeated no less than four times. Such a catalogue is as contemporary now as it was then. Almost all human suffering is embraced by this six fold catalogue of human heartache.

The Jews used the word 'zedakah' both for righteousness and almsgiving. Giving alms and being righteous were considered one and the same thing. Jesus endorsed this and used it as the criteria in separating the sheep and the goats at the end of the age.

Third, on the day of judgment, the people of God will be identified as those who ministered to these specific needs. This should not surprise us. Giving food to the hungry and providing clothing for the naked was uniquely regarded as the work of the righteous in the Old Testament (Ezek. 18:7, 9; Ps. 112:1–10; Job. 31:13–23, etc.). We usually define righteousness by what we *don't do*, a catalogue of misdemeanors, but here it is defined by what we *do*, specifically on behalf of the needy. Righteousness is proactive. Many righteous acts can be identified, all the way from prayer and fasting to giving one's body to be burned. However, only *one* is used at the Great Assize; our actions in relieving human suffering. This is what will identify us as the community of faith.

Fourth, the Jews used the word "zedakah" both for righteousness and almsgiving. Giving alms and being righteous were considered one and the same thing. Jesus

endorsed this and used it as the criteria in separating the sheep and the goats at the end of the age. [It is insightful to substitute “almsgiving”, or “generosity”, for righteousness in certain New Testament passages: Rom. 14:17 becomes, “the kingdom of God is...generosity, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. See also 2 Cor. 9:9.]

Finally, the Matthean passage is also significant because Jesus tells us, without any ambiguity, that God views ministry to the neglected and oppressed as the mechanism by which we can minister to him. As we have seen, this came as no surprise to the Jews, who already understood giving to the needy as giving to God himself. Their literature abounds in affirming the truth of Proverbs, that to give to the poor is to lend to the Lord. The rabbinic parallel in the midrash on Deuteronomy 15:9 is just one example: “My children, when you give food to the poor, I counted it as though you had given it to me.”¹⁶ Others include such statements as, “almsgiving is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High”¹⁷ and, “the one who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering.”¹⁸ “Zedakah” was not only the manifestation of a righteous life, it was also understood as the mechanism by which the pious Israelite could give to Yahweh himself.

John Chrysostom echoed Matthew 25 in lamenting, “thou hast been bidden to give freely to the hungry.....but thou dost not count him deserving of a loaf; but thy dog is fed to fulness while Christ wastes away with hunger.”

Jesus builds on this legacy with his words, “in as much as you have done it unto one of these the least of my brothers you have done it unto me.” What shocked his hearers was not that ministry to those in dehumanizing poverty was regarded as ministry to God himself—this was something they already knew. The shock was that *Jesus* now assumed the role of deity as the recipient of such ministry, and the role of the eschatological judge—a right restricted to Yahweh himself. Today, for us, his claim to deity is clear. What we need to recover *is what his hearers already knew*; that by giving to the poor we can give to the Lord himself. Not to do so is to deny him what is his by right and to thereby risk find ourselves among the goats, not the sheep, on the day of judgement.

In the late fourth century John Chrysostom echoed Matthew 25 in lamenting, “thou hast been bidden to give freely to the hungry.....but thou dost not count him deserving even of a loaf; but thy dog is fed to fulness while Christ wastes with hunger.”¹⁹ Such perspectives were normative in informing the theology of stewardship in the early church.

As I have said, with the arrival of the new covenant the avenue of Levite, sacrifice, and temple were terminated as mechanisms by which believers could give to God, but another still remained that they were all familiar with—zedakah, giving to the poor. Now freed from the burden of the Levitical tribe and the ceremonial responsibilities of sacrifice and offering, their gifts to the hungry and hurting became the conduit by which they ministered to their Lord. They firmly grasped that by giving generously to the poor, they

had the joy of giving to Jesus himself. This paradigm would eventually be developed by the church fathers into an entire theological rationale for giving—and one championed in our own day by the likes of Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity.

Although the realities of poverty are not new to me—I became a Christian while living in an Indian village when I was eighteen—I was still jolted by an article written by Maggie O’Kane, a journalist with the *Guardian Weekly*, after she had just returned from Niger—which now has the dubious distinction of being the poorest country in the world. It deeply moved me and merits quoting at length.

“The sieve-maker’s daughter, Zeinabou, has half a face, the rest has been eaten. She has been visited by the sickness the ancient Greeks named the Grazer, for it grazes steadily through the muscles, the tissue and the bones. The Grazer was last seen in Europe when it visited the children in the Nazi concentration camps. In Niger there is no war, famine or pestilence, but the Grazer is kept supplied with children by the starvation diets and a collapsing health system caused by the pressure of international debt. In the beginning all she needed was antiseptic cream and a mouthwash.

But without them the Grazer ate through her young face; first her lips and gums, then tugging her eye out of shape, sucking on the edge of her pupils, threatening to steal her sight. One day the rotting flesh fell away, leaving her baby teeth and her pink, healthy tongue exposed. The Grazer likes children around two years old: gentler skin, softer layers of tissue, easier to settle in. It’s carried by ordinary bacteria in ordinary mouths and could be kept at bay by the sort of medicines a child in the West is given for a cold. Eighty to ninety per cent of them starve to death fairly quickly within a year because the muscles in their jaw are eaten away, and they can’t eat, so they just disappear.”²⁰

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Such things should not be, and such things need not be. It is within our power as the Church to do something about it, and to not do so is to ignore both the directives of the New Testament and the example of the early church.

After Pentecost, the apostles immediately embraced the Matthean mandate. The economic sharing in their midst became both exhilarating and dramatic. Augustine’s words, spoken some 400 years later; “whatever you have in excess is not your own,” reflected the lifestyle that began in the streets of Jerusalem. Paul, himself, was even exhorted by the church council to remember the poor (“the very thing I was eager to do”—Gal.2:10), and the only systematic teaching we have in the Epistles on church giving (2 Cor. 8 and 9) is in the context of an intercontinental offering for the relief of the needy in Jerusalem, which Paul undertook on several occasions. Paul describes the collection for

the poor in Jerusalem by using the priestly terminology which was used for offerings given to God himself ('latourgos', or 'priestly service', in 2 Cor. 9:12).

The German theologians, Karl Holl and Ethelbert Stauffer, saw this collection for the poor in Jerusalem as corresponding to the traditional Jewish temple tax.²¹ Whether their thesis is correct or not, scholars agree that ample evidence exists that giving to the poor was now being viewed by the church as the equivalent of giving to God, via the cultus of temple, tithe, sacrifice and offering under the old covenant. I have often unintentionally misused the Corinthian passage by preaching from it on the importance of financially supporting the local church. However, on a closer reading, it is obvious that it does not have anything to do with taking an offering for the maintenance of one's local congregation. In fact, we have no instructions in the Epistles on taking a collection for ourselves. What we find is teaching on the redistribution of wealth for the benefit of the poor in our midst, and the support of the laborer who is worthy of his hire.

Justo Gonzalez in his book, *Faith and Wealth*, an exhaustive study of patristic writings on the subject, affirms that there is no doubt that the early church was univocal in endorsing the same fiscal priorities. The *Didache*, written sometime between 75 and 140 AD, instructs believers to "share all things with thy brother" and advocates that offerings go to the poor or to the itinerating prophets and teachers who minister in their midst.

Dionysus, Bishop of Corinth in the second century, speaking of the church at Rome, said, "for this is your practice from the beginning to do good to all the brethren in various ways and send contributions to many churches in every city, thus refreshing the poverty of those in need... by these gifts which you have sent from the beginning, you maintain your ancestral custom... providing great abundance for distribution to the saints."²²

F.F. Bruce maintains that one of the chief means of linking the Christian groups planted all over the eastern Mediterranean world was the practice of mutual aid. Writing about AD 125, the Christian philosopher, Aristides, noted that, "if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed, all of them provide for his needs. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy and they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast for three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food."²³

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The power of this witness did not go unnoticed by the pagans. Even Julian, the Apostate, who tried to stamp out Christianity, was forced to admit that "the godless Galileans feed not only their poor, but ours also."²⁴ By the year 251, the church of Rome was supporting

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more than 1,500 widows and needy persons, all of whom were “fed by the grace and kindness of the Lord.”²⁵ Endorsing the rabbinic tradition, Cyprian maintained that prayer and fasting was of no avail *unless accompanied by giving to the poor*,²⁶ while Origen ranked almsgiving third in importance, immediately behind baptism and martyrdom.²⁷ However, their definition of almsgiving went far beyond giving their loose change to the hungry and homeless. It was defined as spending on oneself *only that which was absolutely necessary* and giving the remainder away. Nothing superfluous should be kept as long as others lacked the necessities of life. According to Gonzalez, “not to do so was tantamount to theft and even homicide” in the estimation of the Fathers.

John Chrysostom defined “necessities” as those things it was impossible to live without—everything else was relegated to the category of “superfluities.” If you could eat only pulses and stay healthy you should do so. If not, “garden herbs” could be added to your diet. However, he regarded meat as a luxury only to be consumed in moderation by those who were physically weak.²⁸ Eating a Big Mac would most certainly be categorized by Chrysostom as indulging in a “superfluity”! He practiced what he preached and devoted his substantial personal income, as bishop of the imperial capital, to helping the needy—insisting that if we use more than is absolutely necessary on ourselves (as individuals and *churches*), we will be guilty before God of having embezzled what does not belong to us. His simple logic was that the superfluities of the rich were the necessities of the poor, and belong to them by right. For such preaching he was eventually deposed and exiled from the capital.

In our day, Karl Hein has said that the problem of power is as great as the problem of guilt. The same was true in Chrysostom’s day, and he was fearless in speaking out against the abuse of power and advocating economic justice. Today, we are in danger of bifurcating our prophetic witness by preaching only on personal guilt and avoiding the tough issues of power—the abuse of which is locking so many into degrading and dehumanizing poverty.

However, defining “almsgiving” as economic justice was not unique to Chrysostom. It characterized most of the church during the first centuries of its existence. Ambrose, on becoming bishop of Milan, melted down all the objects of gold in the church, much to the anger of many, with the words, “the church has gold not to store up but to lay out and spend on those in need. Would not the Lord himself say: why didst thou suffer so many to die of hunger?”²⁹ In a similar vein, Jerome sharply attacked the developing practice in the fourth century of building elaborate churches, by reminding us

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that our duty is “to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit Him in the sick, to feed Him in the hungry, to shelter Him in the homeless.”³⁰

Charles Avila reminds us that “a salient characteristic of Christian service—*koinonia* was “eleemosune” or “compassion.” The term originally meant the feeling from which the act of giving alms sprang. In time, however, it came to mean almsgiving itself. In the patristic age it signified a substantial transfer of one’s own income or property to a fund designed to enable the destitute and socially marginalized to live without suffering absolute want or degradation.”³¹

In Asia Minor and Syria, towards the end of the fourth century, it was still common for men to bequeath their entire remaining property and possessions to the poor rather than to their own family. Even in the fifth century, when the early fervor for the downtrodden was diminishing, the church at Rome still gave 25 percent of its revenue to those on the official list of the sick and poor.³²

The historian, Henry Chadwick, concludes that the practical application of charity *was the most potent single cause of Christian success in the ancient world*. This was not surprising as almsgiving was virtually unknown among the Greeks.³³ The German theologian, George Kretschmar, said that in the final analysis it was not the miracles of the early church that impressed the populace—miracle workers were a familiar phenomenon in the ancient world, but the *conduct* of the Christians, the “propaganda of the deed”, that had such impact. Christians were unbelievably generous with their money, and it was always recognized that the prime responsibility of the church treasury was to provide for the needs of those degraded by hunger and disease.

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But what about us today? Should we, and can we, recover the ancient priorities imbedded in our heritage? Enmeshed as we are in our contemporary church culture, can we turn the clock back or does our social context compel us to adopt different fiscal priorities? Are any attempts in the twenty-first century to make comparisons with the early church both inappropriate and futile?

The pragmatic reasons why the ancient church was able to redistribute most of its revenue to the needy are obvious. Christianity was a *religio illicita* and therefore could not legally own buildings or land. They met, for the most part, in private homes. The number of remunerated church workers was small, as local ministry was usually in the hands of unpaid elders. The church understood that they were a holy priesthood, and every member was therefore mobilized in ministry and mission. Those who were in full-time ministry were mainly itinerant evangelists and were remunerated from a variety of sources which included free hospitality, gifts from the churches, (and when necessary, these itinerants simply supported themselves from their own earnings).³⁴

We see an early dividend system emerging in North Africa in the time of Cyprian, but there is no early evidence (to my knowledge) of local churches paying salaries.³⁵ The mind-set simply did not exist that the work had to be exclusively maintained by professional clergy who would absorb most of the revenue. The rabbinic attitude of refusing to accept payment for teaching the Torah may have encouraged this self-supporting attitude among local congregational leaders in the early years. Even the Jewish medieval scholar, Maimonides, said that a clever artisan could devote three hours to his trade each day, leaving nine for the study of the Torah!³⁶

The story of how the church moved from such a radical posture to where we are today does not need to be retold. “By the mid-third century, following upon greater and greater donations by landlord Christians, bishops and priests had begun to consider themselves full-time workers in the service of the church and had begun to take salaries from their benefices”³⁷ (but not initially from the common fund for the poor). Churches began to acquire property as early as the third century. At first they acquired only places of worship and burial grounds, probably in the legal guise of a loose mutual-aid association,³⁸ their reputation for almsgiving having paved the way for such recognition by the authorities.

After Constantine the construction of church buildings proliferated, but they did not immediately abandon Lazarus lying in the gate. It continued to be recognized that the primary responsibility of the church treasury was to provide for the needy.

Sadly, the continued rise and multiplication of professional clergy, the construction of more elaborate buildings, and the decline of sacrificial giving as the norm, slowly eroded their radical commitment to the poor. Eventually the common fund which had been the source of food, clothing and shelter for the destitute began to be appropriated for the needs of the clergy and the construction of buildings.³⁹ However, there was still general disapproval for bishops who preferred to spend money on rich adornment and ornate churches. It was still considered lamentable that less revenue was given to the sick and hungry, and there were few who sought to justify this shift in priorities.

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But what about us, 1500 years later? Am I advocating that we now abandon the buildings and religious infrastructure that we use to maintain the ministry of our local churches? Absolutely not. As a pastor I don't see how this is realistically possible. However, I do believe that a radical course correction is called for. We must learn from our forefathers, and not allow these ecclesiastical necessities to absorb our congregational giving to the detriment of those denied what they need to earn a living and escape dehumanizing poverty. To do so is to spend on ourselves money that by right belongs to the needy, and betray our calling as those who seek to demonstrate God's new order of justice and equity.

The Fathers used the motto “*conversatio morem*”—translated either, “death to the status quo!” or “constant conversion.” As we enter the twenty-first century, no other area demands a more urgent “*conversatio morem*” than our attitude towards church expenditure. The bulk of the tithe belongs to the poor and expenditure even on the “necessities” for running the local church must not be allowed to divert it.

The Fathers used the motto “*Conversatio Morem*”—translated either, “death to the status quo!” or “constant conversion.”

In pioneering our way back, I find it helpful to stop looking at the church as an organization I need to support, *and to begin to see it as the primary community to which I belong*. This community embraces distributional justice and lives on only ninety percent of its income, most of the rest being given away. The biblical model is not that, as an individual, I give away ten percent of my income to a religious organization (to which I belong), to finance its activities. Instead, the model is that the community to which I belong (the church) is made up of people who live on ninety percent of their income so that as a *community*, as one unit, they can give away ten percent of their combined personal income. Being financially responsible as part of this body means that my remaining personal income is now spread between meeting the needs of my nuclear family (personal housing, food, clothing, etc.) and the needs of my extended family (worship building, pastoral leaders, etc.). I cannot separate the two. The church is not an institution “out there”, which I support. It is the community that enfolds and identifies who I am as an individual.

The excitement of belonging to the church so defined is that, corporately, we have the economic power to do something of major significance about the issue of global poverty (in my own congregation we could potentially release over two million dollars annually).⁴⁰ We don't have to bemoan the fact that our government is so slow to act (less than half of one percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid). Through the cross, God has created a body that has within it the economic resources to provide affordable housing, long term community development, and primary health care to everyone who needs it. Universal primary education would cost \$8 billion a year—roughly what the world spends on arms every four days, or half what parents in the US spend annually on toys for their children. This might mean that as believers we will have to break rank with consumerism, live more frugally, and do church more simply—but this will only help us to express the type of community we are committed to become, a community which lives sacrificially, gives away

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generously and resources all those bereft of their basic human rights.

One of the reasons I, personally, believe that church members in the United States don't give more generously to their churches (on average 2.52 percent of their personal income) is that giving is usually done out of a sense of obligation and therefore generates very little enthusiasm, even among the committed. After all, there are dozens of good churches in most of our cities, the majority providing good preaching and pastoral care. To give sacrificially simply to maintain the one I prefer can hardly provide a passionate motivation for costly generosity. However, if we radically restructured our fiscal priorities, and it became known that most of our money went directly to emergency food relief, primary health care, agricultural development and micro enterprise projects among the poor, I believe that the amount given would drastically increase.

In my own church, when we put a dollar amount how many blankets can be purchased, prosthetic limbs manufactured, meals served, and wheelchairs purchased, before taking an offering for disabled children in Kenya or the victims of war in Afghanistan, our giving has risen dramatically. Most people want to invest their lives in changing the ugly specter of malnutrition and disease that is all too common on the nightly news. As the church now operates, the society around us is astonished at how much we spend on our operating costs. If we were seen, instead, as a group whose first fiscal priority was to empower those living in degrading poverty with the education and the tools they need to get jobs and feed their families, the evangelistic impact in our communities would be massive.

We can, of course, continue to justify almost any expenditure for larger buildings, multiple programs, extra staff and media saturation under the banner of reaching our community for Christ. However, if the guidelines of the New Testament and the example of the early church mean anything, we have to examine these expenditures in the light of more sober global realities. America is not only one of the wealthiest nations on earth, it also has within it more churches, Christian colleges, radio stations, bookshops and para-church ministries than anywhere else on the planet.

While it can't be denied that more needs to be done, no one in America is without access to Gospel truth. Continuing to pump multiple millions into reaching the same population pool without reference to the global poor and those without any access to the Good News is to violate the New Testament guidelines in using sacred revenue. As we have seen, except for the reference to some elders being worthy of double honor, the texts on the use of money center on giving to the poor and the support of those who we would describe today as missionaries.

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Tertullian, in defending Christianity, asserted that Christians spent more in the streets (among the poor) than the pagans did in their temples.⁴¹ No early congregation of believers in the Mediterranean world would have lavished their money on their local congregational expenses in the way that we do (even though they too could have justified it as a valid expense in reaching their community). In the light of Matthew 25 and the Great Commission, they steadfastly refused to consume sacred revenue on themselves. They pumped their funds into supporting the Christian poor in the Empire, and financing those going to the regions beyond. And it was, of course, this example of extravagant generosity that gave their local witness such impact and credibility.

Donald McGavran maintained that one could ride all day on a train through an Indian plain of 10,000 towns and villages, and that 9,965 of them would not contain a Christian church. Those that do will frequently include those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and in prison. In the light of such realities, faithful stewardship compels us to examine every expenditure we are responsible for. Pumping more millions (15.7 billion was spent on new church construction alone between 1984–1989)⁴² into a population pool that already contains more resources, both material and spiritual, than any nation under heaven, cannot be pleasing to God—even if it is under the banner of reaching our community for Christ.

Rediscovering the truth of sacred revenue, “the trust funds of the piety,” is an issue of utmost priority. The revenue we collect is not ours by right. We are simply the community that has the responsibility of redistributing it on the Lord’s behalf. Like any bank we might need to use a percentage in order to do this efficiently, but no bank would spend most of the money deposited on its operating costs! We need the courage to take a fresh look at scripture and church history and determine how much we are obligated to give away to those denied the necessities of life, and, then, to address the issue of how we can financially maintain the local work in a way that is both sensitive pastorally and effective evangelistically.

I must confess that I bounce between two extremes in wrestling with these issues. One is to simply give up because our way of doing church is now deeply established and difficult to change. The other is to immediately and decisively (overnight!) radically realign our fiscal policy. Neither is the path of wisdom. A radical realignment of how we spend our money, along with discovering imaginative ways to generate the extra income necessary to cover our operating costs, can only happen incrementally. Feasibility studies need to be done, and congregations have to grow in vision and passion for the poor. Perhaps a local church could make such a paradigm shift in five to ten years, but even if it takes fifteen to twenty, it is still worth the effort. World poverty is not going to go away.

Christians today have a total annual income of over ten trillion dollars, and, yet, 34,000 children continue to die every day of hunger and preventable diseases. 1.3 billion live on less than one dollar a day. All of them are our neighbors, and many of them our brothers and sisters. The wisdom literature of Israel warned that “whoever deprives the needy of bread is a murderer,”⁴³ and the Fathers insisted that “he who is able to succor one on the point of perishing, [and] fails to do so, kills him.”⁴⁴ If what we handle in sacred revenue is not channeled to Lazarus sitting in the gate we will not be guiltless before God.

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Seventy-five percent of Rwanda’s population is comprised of widows and orphans from the appalling genocide of 1994. World Relief’s shelter program has provided 4,000 tin roofs for them.

The head of their project, Pierre, will normally greet a widow with the words, “this roof comes as a gift from Jesus, provided by His people around the world.”⁴⁵ Such acts of kindness underpin our verbal proclamation of the gospel and make it credible to a watching world. The need is to multiply them on a massive scale.

Many of the present economic relationships in the worldwide body of Christ are both unbiblical and sinful. The way back will not be easy. Programs and expenditure will have to be re-evaluated in the light of new priorities and contemporary strategies developed to finance local church necessities. However, church history abounds with examples of those who have made the journey before us. Authors like Ron Sider continue to place before us sensible and practical guidelines of what can be done in partnerships with the poor that not only provide them with long term community development, but that also would eventually benefit the American economy.

It takes only \$500 to create a new job among the poor and improve the living standard of a family of five by fifty percent within one year.⁴⁶ If one percent of the worldwide income of Christians was used in this way, we would create 200 million jobs in one year—eliminating poverty among one billion people and empowering them to eventually purchase goods and services from the United States. Reducing our

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consumption and investing wisely in projects among the poorest of the poor is not only Christian compassion, it would also be to our long term advantage economically..

Richard Hays in his much acclaimed book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, concludes that, “no matter how much hermeneutical squirming we may do, it is impossible to escape the implication of the New Testament’s address to us: imaginative obedience to God will require of us a sharing of possessions far more radical than the church has ordinarily supposed. For the church to heed the New Testament challenge on the question of possessions would require nothing less than a new reformation.”⁴⁷ Ignatius characterized heretics as those who had “no care for the widow , the orphan, the oppressed, the hungry, or the thirsty.”⁴⁸ By his criteria perhaps we are indeed heretics and a new reformation is long overdue.

In my own church, 24 percent of our budget of 5.4 million dollars is now used for inner-city and cross-cultural ministry (I recently met a missions pastor whose church gave over 50%). We have two pastors on staff pioneering projects among the urban poor, another heading up our cross cultural outreach and a fourth focusing exclusively on mobilizing resources to our adopted people group in Central Asia. We still have a long way to go, but we are further forward than we were two years ago. In administering the “trust funds of piety,” the challenge of the third millennium is to get back to where we were in the beginning of the first and if we, the richest Christians in the world, can’t do it, then who can?

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