

**Why People Give What They Give To The Church
(And What To Do About It)**
by William A. Yon

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There are some words in scripture which discourage public boasting about one's generosity, and I think it fair to say that in my branch of the Christian family there are few scriptural injunctions more scrupulously observed than that one. Episcopalians neither boast of their generosity, nor confess their stinginess, nor talk out loud at all, if they can help it, about what they give, how they decide what to give, or what it means to them.

That conspiracy of silence regarding this important aspect of Christian discipleship has become a major target for change in my fifteen years' work in stewardship education. The first thing we try to help people do is not to give more, but to talk more, to break gently through that ring of isolation within which Christians are left to flounder on their own toward some kind of responsible practice. We aim to stretch the conversational norms to permit the data of personal experience to flow more freely among fellow pilgrims. In the process, I've learned some things about why people give what they give to the church. The following is a sample.

As the twig is bent

Jack said that as a boy he went to church with his father and observed that his father regularly put two dollars in the collection plate. Jack admired his father, believed him to be a good Christian, and vowed that when he became a man he would do likewise. And did--until many years later he heard for the first time discussions of giving according to one's means. His father's example was the only model he had.

When our children reached the first grade and began to master the mysteries of arithmetic, we instituted the "three bottle system." Each week's allowance of twenty cents was deposited in the "spending bottle" (16 cents), the "savings bottle" (2 cents), and the "giving bottle" (2 cents).

(The "giving bottle" was first called "God's bottle," but we decided that was bad theology. They are all God's bottles.) On Sunday the 2 cents from the "giving bottle" was retrieved and placed in the alms basin at church. I was sometimes

uncomfortable about this when I saw another kid put in a quarter (which his father had just fished from his pocket). But I contented myself with the thought that that other kid was learning to give a quarter. Mine was learning to tithe.

I know a plumber who told me that he is a tither, but that he doesn't like to talk about it. I asked him if he had ever known a plumber before he decided to become one. He said of course he had. His uncle was a plumber. He agreed that it was hard to imagine anyone deciding to become a plumber who didn't personally know one. I suggested that it was equally hard to imagine anyone deciding to become a tither who didn't personally know one.

I've started asking this question: "Do any of you know anybody who tithes?" The most common answer has been something like: "I don't know. Maybe I do. But I've never heard anybody say that they tithe."

Pick a number....any number

I was having lunch with O'Neal. I happened to know (in fact, I had decided to make a point of knowing) how much he gave to the church. It was \$900 a year, a bit higher than the average for our congregation. I asked O'Neal how he went about deciding how much he would give to the church. He said, "I don't have any idea. I just pick an amount that seems about right." I said, "Why don't you pick 10% of your income?" He said, "That's too much!"

O'Neal was practicing what I call "random dollar giving." It's hard to feel either good or bad about that kind of giving. We invite those who practice random dollar giving to consider intentional proportionate giving.

Harold was a random dollar giver who discovered that he had unintentionally become a tither. In the midst of a training session for stewardship workers, he pulled me aside and showed me his work sheet. There it was:

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1. Total Annual Income | \$ 250,000 |
| 2. Contributions: | |
| (a) to your parish | \$ 9,000 |
| (b) To other causes outside your family | \$ 16,000 |
| Total line 2 | \$ 25,000 |
| 3. Divide line 2 by line 1. | |

This is the percentage of your income you are now giving: 10%

"I'm a tither," he said. "I didn't know that!" As a person of means, he was frequently solicited for contributions to charitable causes and would respond as the spirit moved. He had stumbled by accident into tithing, and then decided that he wanted to be a tither and has intentionally continued the practice.

Compared to what?

When people would ask him "How's your wife?" my friend Oron's favorite response was: "compared to what?" Random dollar givers are making a step forward when they learn to make that response to the question: "How's your giving?"

Paul said that his first big step in stewardship came when someone suggested that you can tell what a person's values really are by looking at the way he spends his money. Paul looked and didn't like what he saw. He said: "I resolved right then and there that I would not give less money to my Church each week than I spend on Scotch Whiskey." (A real Scotch lover, he doubled his pledge.)

That's a start and leads inexorably to the question: "Compared to what else?" The boat? The season tickets? The house, even?

Sacrificial giving and "first fruits"

That leads to the question of sacrificial giving. Teddy said: "I knew this stewardship program was getting to us when my wife and I got into this big hassle about whether to increase our pledge instead of buying new dining room chairs." That's sacrificial giving: giving up something you want in order to give the money away. One of the very few specific recollections I have of the Sunday school teachings of my boyhood was the idea of giving up an ice cream cone to put money in my Lenten Mite Box. In my view that still represents sacrificial giving of the highest order.

I have a certain admiration for sacrificial giving, but neither practice it myself nor recommend it to others. I find that if I think too much about something that I really want, but can't have if I give the money away, I wind up buying it on credit, and then have to pay for it later. It is simply easier to decide first how much I'm going to give away and then figure out how I'm going to live on what's left, than it is to give away a significant proportion of my total income from what is left after I've paid for all the "necessities." The Biblical notion of giving the "first fruits of the harvest" turns out to be a gracious concession to our natural resistance to the pain of sacrifice.

"Necessities"

That word belongs in quotes, because it is nothing more nor less than a figure of speech. It has no objective meaning. One person's luxury is another person's "necessity." Yet the term dominates discussion of whether tithing is merely a "laudable goal" or a realistic possibility for serious Christians.

Sally said, "I think clergy should only be paid enough to cover the necessities." We were riding at the time in her late model Mercury Montego. I asked: "How did you decide that it was a 'necessity' for you to buy this car rather than an old VW?" "I wanted it" is a comprehensible explanation. "It was a 'necessity'" isn't.

It is not a "necessity" for anybody to have a swimming pool. It is a necessity (no quotes this time) for me to pay off the \$7,000 bank loan that I got last summer to build a swimming pool in my back yard (which is, not irrelevantly, less than what a late model Mercury Montego costs).

Alas, one year's luxury becomes the next year's necessity.

Tithing taught me that I don't need all the money I make just to live. Once the point sunk in that I could live on 90% of my income, the question occurred: "Why not 80%?" And that's when I learned to save. There is a wonderful freedom which is both profoundly spiritual and eminently practical in the discovery that I don't need all the money I make just to live.

Tithing

You've noticed that I have just tossed in a number of comments about tithing without any prefatory explanation or justification. Tithing is, simply, the only standard we have in our tradition. It is commended in scripture, although it was a bit of a surprise to be reminded what the Old Testament folk did with their tithes. They took them to church and ate most of them, leaving some aside for the preachers and the poor. That discovery raised the Parish Covered Dish Supper to a whole new level of theological significance for me.

Hinton said: "I first heard of tithing five years ago, and I hold every pastor I knew before that time personally responsible for the fact that I did not become a tither forty years ago." I vowed that although there would doubtless be other complaints about my ministry, that would not be one of them. I've kept my word.

Tithing as a value and strategies for stewardship education

My own approach to stewardship education has been informed by Sidney Simon's work in values clarification. He defines a value as something which is (a) freely chosen (b) from among alternatives (c) after careful consideration; (d) acted upon (e) in a consistent pattern of life; (f) cherished, and (g) publicly affirmed.

Take those criteria one at a time:

(a) Freely chosen. We invite people to decide, to become intentional. We scrupulously refrain from must/ought/should. We ask people to decide whether or not they want to give more money away. The idea of wanting to give money away strikes most people with all the force of a brand new idea. "Yeah, that is something I want to do."

(b) From among alternatives. In facilitating the flow of communication among church folk about their own personal understanding and practice of giving, we are precisely increasing the repertoire of behavioral alternatives available to each. No one is likely to become a plumber or a tither unless she knows one. In guiding the communication flow we stress "I statements," the sharing of personal understandings and personal behavior, and the avoidance of abstractions, generalizations, and trip-laying. When you tell me what is true for you, I find myself considering whether or not that is true for me. When you tell me what you do, I find myself considering whether or not that is something I might want to do. When you tell me what is true for me and what I ought to do, I find myself becoming resistant and defensive. (And by the way, I didn't think I could afford a swimming pool until I saw Bernie's, and he told me he paid \$6,000 for it.)

(c) After careful consideration. Standard advice to canvass callers not to leave without a signed pledge card may be counterproductive. When someone says: "We need more time to think about it," that is precisely what we want to happen. It may require a follow-up contact, but to accept and affirm that response honors the process by which one's giving becomes a value in one's life.

(d) Acted on. What are you going to do? That's when the rubber hits the road. If there is some acknowledgment that tithing is a "desirable goal," the next question is "what are you going to do next year to move a step toward that goal?" (Watch out for "laudable goal." That is a clear tip-off that it is a goal which is believed to be impossible, therefore unrealistic to attempt.)

(e) In a consistent pattern of life. For giving to become a value in one's life, it must go beyond the occasional impulsive response. We encourage a pattern of annual re-examination and look for a continuing process of growth, rather than instant conversion.

(f) Cherished. Claudia tells me that sacrifice causes resentment. God forbid that we should be encouraging people to increase their giving year by year if that means that each year they will be come more resentful. If we discover someone ready to make a step beyond that which he can genuinely "cherish," it would not be inappropriate to encourage him to lay

back a bit. Don't put claims on her wallet beyond the point to which her heart has grown.

(g) Publicly affirmed. Back to data-flow. If I am not willing to talk publicly about my giving--in terms that show due regard for the sensibilities of others then my giving has not quite become a full-fledged value for me. Self-righteous boasting is less of a problem than we fear it will be. Harry is a tither, but when I asked him "What are the growth points in your stewardship?" he did not say: "What do you mean 'growth points'? I'm a tither. I'm finished." He's still searching and growing God is not finished with a person when she becomes a tither. Wherever a person may be on the path, there is a story to tell, and it is always an unfinished story.

Foot-Note on Guilt

Charlie said: With all this talk about tithing it seems like you are trying to make us feel guilty about what I give to the church." I backed off. God forbid I should make anybody feel guilty. The American Psychiatric Association could have me up on charges.

I have repented. I have done Charlie a disservice. Here is what I wish I'd said: "I hate to tell you this, Charlie, but you are guilty, so it is not inappropriate for you to feel guilty. Guilt feelings may be God's way of telling you you are doing something wrong. "But here's something else, and that is, you are forgiven. If you do not feel forgiven, maybe you need to listen to the Gospel again more carefully--and let that reality penetrate your feelings also. "The question remains the same, Charlie, guilty and forgiven, what are you going to do this year?"

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