

# To tithe, or not to tithe

June 6, 2008

Should you tithe?

For most Baptists of a certain age, the answer is easy: “Yeah, sure.” Of course, answering correctly and actually doing anything about it aren’t the same.

In our house, my sister, brother and I learned to tithe before we even had any money. Every Sunday, each of us carried an envelope to Sunday school, and on the line behind the dollar sign, Mother wrote an amount that equaled our prorated share of Daddy and Mother’s tithe on their wages. Then, when we had money, we were expected to tithe it, too.

In fact, seems like one of my first “come to Jesus” conversations had to do with whether or not I should tithe my birthday money. Around our house, “storehouse” tithing extended far, far beyond wages Uncle Sam could tabulate. We were expected to tithe on birthday money, Christmas presents and the occasional surprise dollar that arrived in the mail from a grandparent. Later, by the time I got my first “job,” I wasn’t even inclined to debate tithing with my pastor/daddy. Although, in retrospect, I recall trying to figure out a good way to give the Lord a tenth of the quarter I earned each week for picking up Sunday bulletins and straightening hymnals in our little church’s sanctuary. On the advice of very good spiritual counsel, I rounded up. Jesus got a nickel.

## The faithful 5

Well, apparently Mother and Daddy were in the minority in teaching us to tithe. Tithing hasn’t exactly caught on among Americans. In fact, a recent [survey](#) by [The Barna Group](#) , a religion research firm, revealed only 5 percent of American adults tithe. You really ought to [read](#) the results.

On the up side, the survey showed that 24 percent of evangelicals—the religious category that represents most Baptists—are tithers. That’s almost five times better than the national rate.

On the down side, tithers still represent slightly less than one in four supposedly committed Christians. (This finding reflects the longstanding 80/20 Rule: 80 percent of the members of a church or other volunteer organization do only 20 percent of the work, leaving 20 percent of the members to do 80 percent of the work. Same goes for financing the church or organization.)

### **Age-old debate**

Just about every time I write about tithing, I get letters from folks who say something along the lines of: “Tithing doesn’t apply to the Christian church. Tithing is an Old Testament concept. Neither Jesus nor the New Testament taught tithing. You’re just being legalistic when you say Christians should tithe.”

Legalistically, they’re correct. But you’d think a faith built upon a Founder who sacrificed his very life for his followers would exceed, not fall below, the standards of the practices that preceded it. OK, so Jesus didn’t preach tithing. But Jesus died so that you can have eternal life. How are you going to respond? You’d think such sacrifice would compel Christians to demonstrate their love and gratitude far beyond the old practice. You’d think every Christian would give at least 10 percent of income back to God, and they’d want to do more, more, more.

### **Love, not legalism**

Unlike my childhood requirement to tithe on my birthday money and the quarter I made picking up bulletins, our gifts to God should be motivated by love and gratitude. Health-and-wealth preachers aside, the “blessing” of tithing comes from the way you feel when you give a portion of your means

back to God. It's kind of like the first time you were in love, and you couldn't do enough to make the object of that love happy. Every gift you gave originated in a heart of love, and that love grew by giving.

By the way, a corollary to tithing should be volunteering time and talent to strengthen and empower the cause of Christ. What if every Christian tithed time and talent? Just think of the impact for Christ we could have on our communities and world.

### **Looming crisis**

If trends continue, churches are going to have an increasingly difficult time funding their ministries. Sylvia Ronsvalle, executive vice president of [Empty Tomb](#) , an organization that tracks Christian charitable giving, predicts disaster. "There could be a crisis in the very heart of the church," she told [Religion News Service](#) .

Ultimately, tithing isn't about "ought-ness." It's not about legalism or the expectations of others. It's about (a) faithfulness to God, (b) gratitude for Christ and (c) whether or not the kingdom of God as expressed by its churches is going to have the financial capacity to do the work of Christ in the world today.