

Churchgoers say they tithe but not always to the church

May 15, 2018

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Most churchgoers say the Bible commands them to give, but their tithes don't always go in the offering plate.

Half of Protestant churchgoers say their tithes can go to a Christian ministry rather than a church. A third say tithes can go to help an individual in need. And more than a few—18 percent—say tithes can even go to a secular charity, according to a new LifeWay Research study.

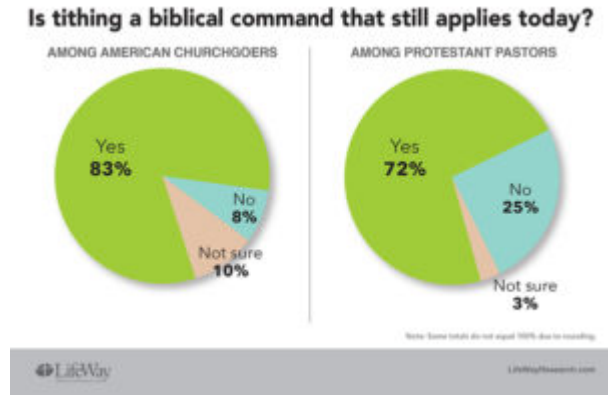
“For many churchgoers, tithing is just another term for generosity,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

For the study, LifeWay Research surveyed 1,010 Americans who attend services at a Protestant or nondenominational church at least once a month, as well as 1,000 Protestant senior pastors.

Follow the biblical command

Most churchgoers believe they are commanded to give. Many believe in the idea of tithing, often understood as giving away 10 percent of a person's income.

Eighty-three percent agree when asked, “Is tithing a biblical command that still applies today?” Eight percent say it is not. Ten percent aren’t sure.

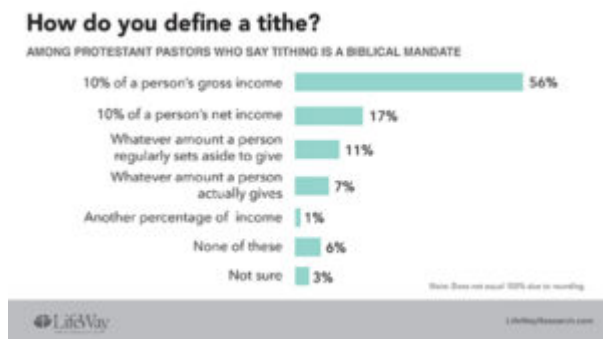


Most of those in the South (85 percent), as well as the Northeast (74 percent), say tithing applies today. So do African-American (87 percent) and white churchgoers (80 percent).

Those with evangelical beliefs (86 percent) say it is a biblical command for today. So do 79 percent of other churchgoers. Many Baptists (87 percent), Pentecostals, (86 percent), nondenominational churchgoers (81 percent) and Lutherans (68 percent) agree as well.

More than half (54 percent) of churchgoers say they give at least 10 percent of their income to the church. That includes 37 percent who say they tithe and 17 percent who say they give more than 10 percent. One in 5 (20 percent) give regularly but less than 10 percent. A similar number (17 percent) say they try to give but aren’t always consistent. Eight percent say finances make it hard for them to give. Two percent do not give to their church.

“Even those who can’t tithe believe that giving matters,” McConnell said. “Most churchgoers say they give—even if it’s a struggle.”



The more churchgoers attend services, the more likely they are to tithe. Fifty-seven percent of those who attend services at least once a week say they give at least a tithe. That drops to 28 percent for those who go once or twice a month. A

third (35 percent) of those who attend once or twice a month say they are not consistent in giving—compared to 14 percent of those who attend at least once a week.

Those who go one or two times a month are twice as likely to say finances make it hard to give (13 percent) than those who attend at least once a week (7 percent).

Two-thirds (64 percent) of those with evangelical beliefs say they give at least 10 percent to the church. Forty-one percent of other churchgoers say they give at least a tithe.

Share the wealth

Tithes can be spread around, according to churchgoers. Ninety-eight percent say money from tithes can go to their church. Half (48 percent) say funds can go to a Christian ministry. A third say tithes can go to another church (35 percent) or an individual in need (34 percent).

Some churchgoers (18 percent) say their donations to a secular charity can be part of their tithe. That includes more than four in 10 Lutherans (44 percent) and a third of Methodists. Baptists (12 percent) and Assemblies of God/Pentecostal churchgoers (13 percent) are less likely to say donations to a secular charity can be part of their tithe.

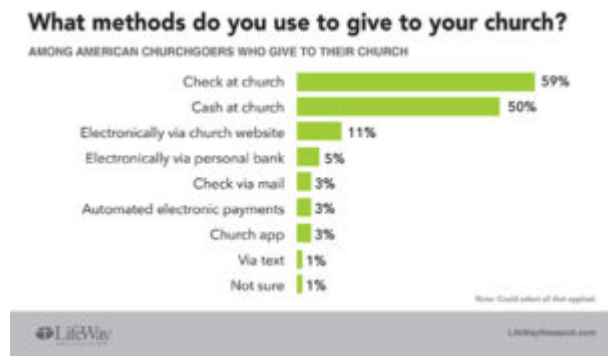
Lutherans (55 percent) are most likely to say their tithe could include gifts

to an individual in need. Nondenominational churchgoers (37 percent), a third of Assemblies of God/Pentecostal churchgoers and more than one-fourth of Baptists (28 percent) are less likely to agree. So are churchgoers with evangelical beliefs (28 percent).

Fewer than half of churchgoers (47 percent) say only giving to the church counts for tithing.

Traditional methods of giving dominate

Whatever amount they give, churchgoers prefer to drop their tithes and other donations in the offering plate at church. Six in 10 churchgoers (62 percent) give to their church by check. That includes 59 percent who give a check at church—and 3 percent who mail one. Half say they give cash at church. Eleven percent give through their church website. Five percent give electronically through their bank. Three percent have automatic payments set up, while another 3 percent give using a church app. Some give through more than one method.



There’s something about putting cash or a check in the offering plate that still appeals to churchgoers, McConnell said.

“Giving is considered an act of worship—and clicking on a mouse may not feel as holy as putting your offering in the collection plate,” said McConnell.

Preaching about money

As part of the study, LifeWay Research asked Protestant senior pastors how often they talk about tithing.

Two-thirds say they preached about tithing at least once in the past year. Nine percent had preached on tithing in the last month. Twenty-eight percent had done so in the past six months, while 31 percent had preached on tithing between six months and a year earlier. Five percent had preached in the last two years. Six percent had preached three or more years ago about tithing. One in five never made tithing a primary focus of a sermon.

Pastors are less likely than churchgoers to say tithing still is a biblical command.

Seventy-two percent of pastors say tithing is “a biblical command that still applies today.” Twenty-five percent say it is not. Three percent are not sure.

Pentecostal (94 percent), Holiness (91 percent) and Methodist (88 percent) pastors are most likely to say tithing still applies today. Baptist (77 percent), Lutheran (56 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed pastors (54 percent) are less likely.

Of pastors who say tithing is still a biblical command, 73 percent define tithing as giving 10 percent of a person’s income. More than half (56 percent) say it should be 10 percent of a person’s gross income. Seventeen percent say it should be 10 percent of a person’s net income. Eleven percent say a tithe is whatever a person sets aside to give, while 7 percent say it is whatever the person actually gives.

“Both pastors and churchgoers see giving as a vital part of their faith,” said

McConnell. “They don’t always agree on how much a churchgoer should give. But most seem to see 10 percent as an ideal to strive for.”

LifeWay Research conducted the churchgoers study Aug. 22-30, 2017. The completed sample of 1,010 surveys provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

The phone survey of Protestant pastors was conducted Aug. 30-Sept. 18, 2017. The completed sample of 1,000 surveys provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percentage points. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.