

How Much Should I Give to My Local Church?



To answer this question, many begin with the principle of tithing in the Old Testament (see for example Leviticus 20:30-33), where God requires each family to bring one tenth of all their farming produce to the central meeting place as an offering to God. This was known as 'the tithe' and was the means by which the Levites (the priestly tribe) were supported. Levites had no other inheritance (no land of their own) or means of support. They were set apart to serve the people of God.

There were times in the history of Israel when the tithe was neglected. The prophet Malachi brings a strong word from the Lord to address this (Malachi 3:10-15). One of the interesting features of this word is God's promise that if his people will honour him by bringing the full tithe to the House of God then He will 'open the floodgates of heaven' to bless them. God says, 'Test me in this...'

So, is the principle of tithing applicable to us today? Some say it is. Many churches advocate and practice it. However, the New Testament does not directly instruct us to tithe our income as members of the New Covenant. A much more radical perspective is given.

Jesus called his disciples to give up everything for the sake of the Kingdom of God – leaving behind family, wealth and possessions to follow him. Some were called to sell all they possessed and give all their money to poor (Matthew 19:21). Jesus calls his followers to beware the danger of greed and to live free (joyfully free) with regard to money and wealth. This is an unsettling and penetrating perspective that gets right to the heart of the matter – our relationship with money and material things. The principle of tithing seems a much smaller deal by comparison.

In the early chapters of Acts we see this radical teaching take shape in the Spirit-filled community of believers (Acts 4:32-35). A portrait is given to us of a vibrant community whose members 'shared everything they had', with no-one claiming ownership of their possessions. What is truly remarkable is that the generosity that marked this early Christian community was spontaneous and unforced – a result of God's empowering presence.

This is not to say that the first-century believers needed no encouragement or teaching in the matter of giving. Paul addresses 'the grace of giving' in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, setting out some really helpful principles. He teaches that giving should be according to our means (8:11–12), decided upon freely (9:7), generous (9:6) and joyful (9:7). Read 2 Corinthians 8:6–15 to get a feel for the flowing and infectious generosity of the Kingdom of God.

So where does all this take us? Do we leave behind the idea of tithing in favour of joyful, generous giving? As I have reflected, I have come to the view that the principle of tithing still holds value. It can help us get started in the way of joyful, sacrificial giving. Tithing might be considered like a set of stabilizers (*aka* 'training wheels') on a first bike. They get us started but can be discarded once we are trained by them and set free to enjoy the exhilaration of the ride. Another analogy might be a launch pad for a rocket – important for lift off, but ultimately left behind as we soar high.

Another value of the tithing principle is that it enables a local church, such as ours, to resource the vision shared by its members. There is a rough parallel with the support of the Levites by the other tribes of Israel – the tithe provides the means to support those who are set apart to lead the ministry of the church (including ministers and other paid staff). Yet it reaches beyond this too: giving to our local church enables us to fulfill the vision we share – to see lives transformed in our locality and abroad. You may or may not be aware that a generous proportion of our income as a church is used to fund mission: through local projects

(such as CAP, Bookham Youth Project and B@titude), international charities (such as the Baptist Missionary Society and *Aprender*) and through our mission partnerships in Brazil, Lebanon, Siberia and Slovenia

So, at BBC we do encourage our members to tithe, as a spiritual discipline (training wheels) and as a practical means by which our life and witness together can be resourced. Yet it is not the final word on giving. Some will find they are able to give well beyond a tenth of their income to their local church *and* make further offerings to other causes that God lays upon their hearts. The tithing principle is not meant to limit giving. Others may find the thought of tithing daunting – it may not seem reachable. Let me offer a few words of wisdom on this.

If you are currently working your way out of debt, then this is most likely not a season for you to give a tenth of your income to your church. Some would disagree with me on this, arguing that honouring God through tithing will lead to a healthier financial position. I am not convinced that is as spiritual a response as it sounds. It would seem better to ask God to help you know the right amount to give in the situation you are currently in, and to enable you to be able to increase your giving as things change.

If you are married to someone who is not yet a Christian, then proposing to tithe your household income may become a source of tension. Again, the best thing is to pray and seek God's counsel on how to talk the matter over with your spouse and what to give. Be at peace about this.

If you are not in the habit of tithing, it is not too late to begin. Again, seek the Lord to help you take your first steps. You may build this up over time, letting the training wheels do their work.

When our children begin to earn money of their own, we might chat to them about giving, encouraging them to give ten percent of what they earn to their local church. The idea here is to begin a habit with a small amount – maybe £1 out of £10 for a Saturday job – which can then be applied to larger amounts as they earn more. At some point, giving moves beyond percentages, led by the Spirit, by which time the 'training wheels' will have done their job.

What if your giving is already committed in other ways? When Sara and I first came to Bookham, a large proportion of our giving was committed to the support of individuals and causes that were long standing. It took time to raise our giving to our local church to the level of one tenth of our income. We did it in steps over the years, trusting God each time.

Some will ask if our tithe should be based on net or gross income. Ours is based on our net income at present – though by filling in a simple form to allow the church to claim back the tax on our giving we effectively tithe most of our gross income. *Hopefully you are all aware of this facility: for every £1 of giving (by tax-payers) we (the church) can claim back 25p.*

Finally in this matter as with all things, may I encourage you to seek the Lord. Let him lead you. Talk with others. Take a step of faith. Whether you are at the starting blocks or well on the way, ask God to help you grow in the grace of giving and may your heart be filled with joy!

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