

Commentary — From the Margins

The Problem with Tithing

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? (1 Co 9:3-7)

Disciples are living stones built into a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5), its foundation laid by the Apostle Paul (1 Co 3:10-11), with Christ Jesus being the chosen and precious cornerstone. Thus, disciples are, today, the living temple of God (*vv.* 16-17), built when the *stones* [i.e., religious leaders] of Herod's temple were cast down at Calvary. Disciples are the temple built after three days. And herein lays the problem with tithing: natural Israelites paid tithes on the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th years of a seven year cycle to the temple. The temple didn't pay tithes to itself.

Although Levities—the priesthood—received the tithes of Israel, these same Levities returned a tenth of the tithe (a tithe of the tithe) back to Israel so that everyone could eat of the tithe when Israel came to Jerusalem to keep the high Sabbaths of God (Deut 14:22-27). Israel was to remember the Levite within its towns, for the tribe of Levi received no land inheritance when Israel entered the Promised Land. Rather, God had taken the tribe of Levi from among Israel in lieu of taking the firstborn of every Israelite womb. By election, the Levites represented the firstborn of Israel that belonged to God. Physically, the Levities were to God prior to Calvary what disciples have been since, for as the Levitical priesthood served in a temple of stone and wood, the new creature born of Spirit that dwells in a tent of flesh serves God in a tent of flesh, making the fleshly bodies of disciples analogous to the stone structure of the temple and making the new creature or new nature analogous to the Levite within the temple. Hence, disciples are a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), with Christ Jesus being the High Priest.

- Typologically, the Levitical priesthood from Moses to Calvary forms the lively shadow of disciples from the Wave Sheaf Offering to the Second Advent.
- In the Millennium when the Levitical priesthood is returned to its office, with the exception of the sons of Zadok, God will cause the Levitical priesthood to bear the punishment of Israel, “[b]ecause they ministered to [Israel] before their idols and became a stumbling block of iniquity to the house of Israel” (Ezek 44:12).

As the Levitical priesthood served idols during the reign of Israel and Judah's idolatrous kings, the visible Christian Church has served idols and demons while teaching lawlessness to babes; thus, those disciples who have relaxed the least of the commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:19) while those who have taught iniquity will be denied in their resurrection and will go into the lake of fire (Matt 7:21-23). And one of those previously concealed things of God is that those disciples who have practiced lawlessness and have taught others to be lawless will bear the punishment of Israel as bulls and goats bore the punishment of Israel until Calvary; those who relaxed the commandments will bear their being called *least* as the Levitical priesthood will bear the punishment of Israel by being butchers in the Millennium.

The command for Israel to tithe is explicit:

You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. And before the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the [second] tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. ... At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. (Deut 14:22-23, 28-29)

Jesus seems to confirm the necessity of Israelites tithing:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the other. (Matt 23:23)

But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (Luke 11:42)

Sadducees and Pharisees were not likely to also be Levitical priests; so Jesus' condemnation of them for carefully tithing while neglecting love for neighbor must be applied carefully to Levites, the lively shadow of all disciples, not just the ministry of the Christian Church.

Therein lays the primary problem for Christians concerning tithing: the majority of the Church's ministry teaches that disciples are spiritual Israelites [or spiritual Gentiles] and that the organized ministry represents the Levitical priesthood, and as such, is the proper recipient of tithes and offerings of the Church. This majority teaches that disciples are to tithe to those who teach and pastor, thereby relieving this ministry from working with hands to earn its livelihood. By its teachings, the ministry tells parishioners, *You work and earn a living so we can focus on God*. And this ministry will cite the first Apostles: "It is

not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2).

Let us here concede that the first Apostles were preaching the word of God, but today, that does not occur ... it is not the word of God that the visible Christian Church preaches, but lawlessness and a cheap grace. The visible Church preaches a false gospel and a different Christ Jesus; it teaches doctrines of demons and the worship of demons. It teaches the old serpent’s lie that *you shall not surely die* (Gen 3:4) if the disciple eats forbidden fruit [i.e., determining good and evil for oneself]; that human beings have immoral souls that cannot die but can only be separated from God, who can abide no transgression of His law.

- If God can abide no transgression of His law, then why does the visible ministry teach parishioners to transgress the law by working and shopping on the Sabbath and assembling together on the first day of the week?
- If sin entered the world by Adam, what “sin” did he commit other than to disbelieve God, which every Christian does when placing importance on the flesh and the things of the flesh: the desires of the body and pride in possessions?
- If Adam received an immortal soul, when did he receive it? He did not have it when he was driven from Eden (Gen 3:22-23).

If the Apostle Paul had an immortal soul, then why does Paul write,

When you were slaves to sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:20-23)

To say that the Christian ministry represents the spiritual priesthood that replaced the Levitical priesthood sounds plausible if no thought occurs, and if parishioners are biblical illiterates as the visible ministry attempts to keep them.

When disciples were sons of disobedience (Eph 2:2-3), consigned to disobedience (Rom 11:32), they were free in regards to righteousness, meaning that they did not have to keep the law because they couldn’t keep the law because they were slaves to sin. But when set free from sin, disciples are able to keep the law. Now as servants or slaves of God, disciples have no choice about keeping the law that is not far from them, but written on hearts and minds: they must keep the law to the best of their ability considering that sin and death still dwells in their fleshly members (Rom 7:21-25). They must be true *legalists*, that pejorative identifier of all who are of God rather than of the prince of this world.

- Every minister who teaches lawlessness is a servant of Satan, who comes to Christendom disguised as an angel of light (2 Co 11:14-15).
- Every disciple who practices lawlessness is of the synagogue of Satan.

Today, the visible ministry of Christendom does not preach the word of God, so this ministry should be waiting tables if it wants to eat. Actually, it should repent of its lawlessness before consciences become so seared that repentance isn't possible ... Jesus has already promised to deny in their resurrection all who teach lawlessness regardless of great works done in His name (Matt 7:21-23).

To be great in the kingdom of heaven, a disciple will keep the commandments and will teach others to do likewise (Matt 5:19) — and there it is: disciples will teach. It isn't just the first apostles that preach the word of God, but of the seven chosen to serve tables, Stephen briefly taught Israel when he was taken and stoned. Philip proclaimed Christ in Samaria, and to the Ethiopian eunuch. And Saul, renamed Paul, was commissioned by Christ to know His will (Acts 22:14) and to lay the foundation of the house of God (1 Co 3:10-11). Those first apostles who gave themselves over to preaching the word of God added nothing to Paul when he privately preached his gospel to those who seemed influential in Jerusalem (Gal 2:2, 6-9).

Every disciple will be either called great in the kingdom of heaven, or will be called least in the kingdom, or will be cast into the lake of fire. And it isn't men who make this determination; it is the glorified Jesus to whom all judgment has been given.

1. To be called great, a disciple will keep the commandments and will teach others to do likewise.
2. To be called least, a disciple will relax [not break] the least of the commandments and will teach others to do likewise.
3. To be cast into the lake of fire, a disciple need do no more than to be a hypocrite, knowing to keep the law but not doing so. Thus, every disciple who teaches lawlessness is a hypocrite.

Whom does God anoint to do His work? He appointed Ananias, “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews” (Acts 22:12) to baptize the Apostle Paul, who testified before Festus that, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense” (Acts 25:8). So God appoints those whom He knows keep the law to do work for Him.

The Church at Corinth, one Paul raised up, eventually came to question whether Paul was truly of God. In his two canonical epistles to the Corinthians, Paul expends many words defending his ministry. In one place he writes, “Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Co 14:36-38).

If anyone does not recognize that Paul's words are commands of Christ Jesus, the person is not recognized by God or by the Church — and Paul's words will spiritually defrock the visible ministry of the Church; for Paul also wrote,

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband, to present yourself as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led

astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. /Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? ... /And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (2 Co 11:2-7, 12-15)

Paul preached the word of God without charge to undermine false teachers, who were charging for the soiled messages they delivered, charging by collecting tithes and offerings. Although Paul does not here give an explicit command not to collect tithes—he was receiving support from the brothers who came from Macedonia—Paul does provide the test to determine who is faithful to God and who is false: if Paul did not take moneys from the saints at Corinth in order to lay low the ministries of deceitful workmen [who today abound in the splintered Churches of God], then those who build on the foundation that Paul laid in heavenly Jerusalem should also not ask for support, though accepting what is extended without request.

Only by realizing that disciples are spiritual Levites and not all of Israel; only by realizing that disciples are the temple of the living God; only by realizing that the living stones of the temple do not pay tithes to each other can endtime disciples begin to squeeze from Christendom the myriad of false teachers, false prophets, and deceitful workmen that now vie for the tithes and offerings of those who are not invested in this world and can barely afford to feed and clothe themselves.

Before any disciple takes pen in hand to write a check, or takes a wallet from his or her pocket to remove from it folding moneys, the disciple needs to assess the needs of the one teaching or preaching as well as his genuineness. Does the one who teaches or preaches actually preach the word of God, or does he preach another Christ, another gospel, not that there has ever been another? Does he teach that the uncircumcised person who keeps the precepts of the law will have his or her uncircumcision counted as circumcision (Rom 2:26)? Does he preach repentance? Does he teach disciples to turn from sin, from lawlessness? Or does he preach that because Jesus kept the law, Christians are under no requirement to live righteously?

The one who teaches or preaches might be outgoing, affable, fun to be with, but unless he preaches repentance, he is false; he is a servant of Satan.

Does the one who teaches or preaches labor at a secular vocation? Or is this one employed fulltime in ministry—and if fulltime, why, when Paul worked fulltime in ministry as well as with his hands to support himself and those with him?

If the one who teaches or preaches diligently labors at his secular vocation but is unable to supply his needs, then he needs to be supported by those whom he teaches: this is in accordance with the example Paul established to undermine deceitful workmen. But for the minister to live on the offerings of parishioners above the mean of his congregation mocks God.

For fifty years in the middle of the 20th-Century, disciples taught by Herbert Armstrong were encouraged to pray-and-pay, and discouraged from themselves teaching others. Consciously or subconsciously, Armstrong patterned an organization after the Roman Church, with him functioning like a Pope. He declared his decrees on all matters the expressed word of God, and he directed that all moneys be sent to headquarters (or for a few fiscal quarters, to him personally in Tucson). And from headquarters local rentals were paid and local ministers compensated. Thus, ministers' loyalties were to him, not to the disciples they taught or even to Christ Jesus.

As an organizational model, Armstrong rejected a democratic association like that of Baptists or even the Orthodox Church. He wanted control, and he had control. Moneys were used as he determined best, with proclaiming the *good news of the soon coming kingdom of God* receiving highest priority, and the salaries of him and senior ministers receiving like priority, for he and these senior men were the ones doing the proclaiming. They were bringing in the money—lots of it (\$80 million/year in the early 1970s)—and Armstrong insisted that they should be compensated as executives of worldly corporations grossing an equivalent amount of money.

A secular corporation grossing \$80 million in sales might net seven percent of that gross, or \$5.6 million. More likely, the corporation would net three percent, or \$2.4 million. But the *Church* was a non-profit corporation. All of its gross had to go somewhere, had to be expended on publication costs, building costs, salaries ... senior ministers for Armstrong were making six figure incomes in the 1960s, with both senior and junior Armstrong [Herbert and Garner Ted] reportedly making more than \$300,000 per year at a time when a union factory worker was making about \$2.50 per hour—less than \$6000 per year.

The problem of tithing was evident in the operational practices of the Worldwide Church of God throughout the 1960s and '70s: disciples were discouraged if not prevented from doing personal evangelism while disciples were internally judged by the amount of money they sent to headquarters. The more money, the greater the disciple's faithfulness and spirituality for God was obviously blessing this person. The greater the disciple's spirituality, the more likely the disciple would be chosen to move up the hierarchal ladder of deacon, local elder, pastor, preaching elder. The degree to which a person "served" was

seemingly determined by the amount of money headquarters received from the person. Thus, shortly after the senior Armstrong died, the work that he was doing also died. Perhaps one in eight disciples baptized by Armstrong's ministers still keep the Sabbaths of God; three in eight attend services on Sunday; and half attend nowhere.

But the above percentages are not unexpected: on His way to Jerusalem where He would be crucified within a week, Jesus told the parable of the ten *minas* [a laborer's wage was about four *mina* a year] because His disciples supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately (Luke 19:11). He said,

A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, "Engage in business until I come." But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to reign over us." When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. (Luke 19:12-15)

The remainder of the parable is familiar to everyone. One servant had gained ten minas, or as it is usually translated into English, ten pounds. One, five. One had buried the mina, and the nobleman tells this servant, "You knew that I was a severe man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money in the bank [or with the moneylenders], and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?" (19:22-23).

In the parable, Jesus is the nobleman. The kingdom He is to receive is the kingdom of this world. The citizens who will not have Him rule over them are disciples who will not keep His commandments. And what He gives to these ten servants is knowledge of God ... all disciples are to do business with their knowledge of God until Christ returns. Thus, the disciple who buries this knowledge is worthless. But how does a disciple put this knowledge out to a moneylender—by tithing and giving offerings to a ministry that is making disciples for Christ Jesus.

Herbert Armstrong placed disciples in the position of only being able to put their knowledge of God out to the moneylenders. He did not allow anyone other than senior ministers to do business with their knowledge of God. He did not allow lay members to make ten disciples for Christ, thereby increasing the lay member's knowledge by ten ... the tendency is to think in terms of "self"; to think that an increase of ten requires that the disciple knows ten times more than before. But if the disciple gives the knowledge that he or she has to ten others, the amount of knowledge of God in this world has increased ten times.

If a disciple were to do business with the knowledge of God that the disciple has, the disciple will quickly expend more in time and resources than the disciple would pay in a tithe, perhaps the reason why tithing would be the least a disciple can do and not be called worthless by Christ.

Physically circumcised Israel was not in the business of making more Israelites through converting Gentiles; rather, they made more Israelites through biological procreation. Thus, this nation paid tithes to the temple four of seven years, and stored the tithes in their cities two of the seven years. The nation did not harvest its fields on the seventh year. And the analogy emerges that natural Israel's tithe equates to disciples made.

Spiritually circumcised Israelites do not procreate biologically. They are only made when the Father draws a person from this world (John 6:44, 65)—or raises the person from the dead (John 5:21) through receipt of the Holy Spirit. These newly born sons of God are in need of nurturing by older disciples who are commanded to do business with their knowledge of God. But these new babes are not exempt from doing business with their limited knowledge as seen in the parable of the talents.

The purpose here is to open up the problem of tithing, a problem glossed over by the myriad of fellowships that support themselves through the tithes of others ... extorting a tithe from the poor has been the standard operating procedure of the Churches of God for so long that if a disciple does not tithe, the disciple feels as if he or she is committing sin.

Therefore, the first problem encountered when a disciple approaches tithing—or rather, teaches about tithing—is determining how the Levitical priesthood tithed; for one of the idols that the Church has served is money/gold. The Roman Church used its ecclesiastical authority to divert, maybe, half the wealth of medieval Europe into its coffers. It transformed “grace” into an idol when it sold indulgences. At no time in ancient Israel's history was the Levitical priesthood more corrupt than the Roman Church was corrupt in the first four centuries of the second millennium of this Common Era. But greed is not confined to Rome. It was well established in the Worldwide Church of God of a generation ago, and it has infected every one of the splinters. In fact, there is no denomination that hasn't been inflected with greed ... in 1960, the pastor of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Sandy, Oregon, announced that from henceforth a “tithe” [literally, 10%] of a member's income would be 12%.

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