

TIME-HONORED ERROR

Christian Stewardship and the Tradition of Tithing

By

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For Ella, and the children and grandchildren
whom God has blessed us with

Custom without truth is only time-honored error.

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Introduction

Inspecting the Foundation

Annie Miller got saved. Really. Three years ago this June, right down the road from her house at Ichabod Memorial. But Annie Miller isn't in church anymore and neither are her children. Some of the good folks at Ichabod think that she was probably never saved to begin with, and some think that she is just a backslider, but neither assumption is true. She believes, prays, and reads her Bible—well, okay, she reads Psalms and the New Testament. She doesn't understand too much about her new faith, and if she doesn't get some help she probably never will, but she has in fact been born again. Really.

You see, the truth of the matter is that Annie Miller is a “God-robber”, and because of that, she is “cursed with a curse.” So said Malachi, and as anyone who knows anything knows, Malachi was one of those Old Testament prophets. That is why she didn't get that raise, why her old car keeps breaking down, why Jimmy broke his arm, and why the cat got run over by the fuel oil truck. This is the payback for not paying her tithe and she believes it. She believes it because she learned it right down the road at Ichabod, where people know a lot more about God's Word than she does and the pastor even has a doctorate degree in it. Well, okay, they didn't exactly tell her these things in so many words, but they talked about it a lot and that is the message that she took home from it.

Annie Miller and her children are going to start going back to church just as soon as she isn't ashamed to show her face down there—meaning just as soon as she can afford to pay her tithe. Well, okay, she could probably pay it now if she could find a cheaper place, save on electricity and fuel oil, get a better car, and maybe tell Janie the truth about Santa Claus. Maybe then God would bless her. After all, she has been taught that she can't afford *not* to tithe. But what would she do about Jimmy's teeth? No, church will just have to wait awhile longer. Annie Miller is unhappy and confused. She doesn't understand how God operates, and neither does Jimmy and Janie. They just know that their mom is sad and their cat is dead and that somehow God and the church are mixed up in it.

Perhaps you think that I am jesting. I wish I were. The truth of the matter is, there are a lot of Annie Millers out there, not sitting in some of the empty chairs in our Sunday school classes and

the empty places in our pews, and guess what? They have a lot of company.

On the other hand, Ichabod has Bobby and Betty Lucre and they *do* tithe, without fail, ten percent, right to the penny. That's why God has blessed them with wealth, unlike some. Their kids are grown, so now they can enjoy the fruits of their labors and investments—the second home on the lake, the new cars every other year, the fat portfolio, the bigger, better boat—and travel. Oh, how they love to travel. The Lucres have been members going on thirty years and Bobby is a deacon. They even know a little bit about the Bible.

Poor Ichabod Memorial--attendance is way down since the factory closed, and the budget is seriously in the red. You would think that folks would need the church even more after getting laid off, but that doesn't seem to be happening. They're drifting away and taking their money with them. A tithe from an unemployment check or a part time job at the Tasty Freeze would be better than nothing. Even more slackers like that Annie Miller, with their fives and tens, would help too if there were enough of them, but they never seem to stay around long enough to make a difference. Ichabod's motto is *Vision for Mission* but the mission of the moment is just paying the pastor and keeping the lights turned on.

For every big-box church, bursting at the seams and flush with money, there are dozens of once vibrant churches barely able to keep the doors open. The days of reckoning have come for the Christian church in America, and it is ill prepared to meet the challenge. Spirits of pluralism, multiculturalism and postmodernism are testing the truth of the Gospel message and drawing away souls after them, while globalization empowered by the Internet siphons off the economic strength of the nation. The church cannot stand against the storm that is already beginning to blow unless it rests on firm footing, but one of its foundation stones has been removed—the foundation stone of sound stewardship. In its place is a shoring of sticks and there are cracks in the walls above. The strong foundation stone lying to the side, nearly covered with earth and grass, is the new covenant stewardship practiced by the early Christians. The shoring used to prop up the building above is the tradition of tithing.

The earthly remains of the first Christians had long turned to dust before the shadow of tithing began to creep into a church already rocked by schism, drifting in doctrine and compromised by adultery with the Roman state. Bearing no resemblance to the well defined doctrine of the Jewish nation and never practiced by the early Gentile church, what is falsely called tithing today is a cobbled together tradition of men usurping the rightful doctrine of stewardship within the body of Christ.

It is not possible to successfully defend today's doctrine of tithing from Scripture or the practices of the early Christians. Rather, it rests upon a three-legged stool of faulty logic, namely *appeal to tradition*, *appeal to authority* and *appeal to the people*. Simply put, *appeal to tradition* states that "this is right because we have always done it this way." *Appeal to authority* bases the truth-value of an assertion on the authority, knowledge, expertise or position of the person or body asserting it, be it parent, minister, writer, seminary, church or denomination. Validity of a claim does not necessarily follow from the credibility of the source. Claims must be tested, lest unsound doctrine pass from generation to generation like a bad gene. *Appeal to the people* concludes that a proposition is true because many or all people believe it. See, Jesus rose from the dead, was born on December 25th, was secretly married to Mary Magdalene, and turned water into grape juice. Sex outside of marriage is wrong, and so is dancing, tattoos (we don't care if it does say "Mom"), going to the movies, and women in pantsuits.

New covenant stewardship rests upon a three-legged stool of time, talents (gifts) and material possessions (including money). Keep it in repair and the Great Commission gets done and it gets done right. But try patching up a broken leg with glue and sit down, if you're feeling optimistic. The next time you pass a broken down, boarded up church that is not in the middle of a ghost town, ask yourself what happened to it.

You may have a warm, fuzzy feeling right about now, assuming that I am going to take your side in a matter pertaining to stewardship. Perhaps, but if you are looking for an excuse to be chintzy with God, you will not find it here. Or maybe your blood pressure is already up ten points because it looks like I am about to gore your ox and shoot the sacred cow from within the pages of a little book. If you think that I am going to expose the tradition of tithing to be false doctrine, you are quite correct, but only to call for returning the original foundation stone to its rightful place.

Nonetheless, let me give credit where credit is due. Tithing has done a lot of good in the world. It has helped build churches, schools, hospitals, and missions of every description. It sends missionaries, pays ministers and staff, electric bills, water bills, all kinds of bills, buys buses, electronic and music equipment, Sunday school literature, cribs for the nursery, Christmas baskets, light bulbs, and fertilizer for the lawn. It has helped countless individuals and families to put God first, discipline themselves, budget their money, and live within their means.

On the other hand, it has kicked the poor believer to the curb, driven out those who have fallen on hard times, caused Christians to neglect their families, padded the pockets of the well-to-do, barred the church door against some trying to enter, allowed God-given gifts to go unused, constructed a wall of separation within the church, established a cult of exclusivism, a caste system and a pecking order, and weakened the body of Christ both financially and spiritually.

This will never do. Sound doctrine does not produce mixed results of this nature. Unsound doctrine does. A doctrine that cannot be followed by the vast majority of Christians in the Third World and by many in the richest country in the world is spurious, right up there with prayers to Mary and the saints. True doctrine can be followed by any Christian, rich or poor, American or Ugandan, migrant worker or CEO, wheelchair bound or Olympic athlete, 24-7.

Financing the Great Commission takes money. It takes a *lot* of money. And it's going to take a lot more money in the time, perhaps the *short* time, remaining before the Lord's return. The material needs of the twenty-first century church, especially in the developed world, bear little resemblance to the needs of earlier days. That is a given. But ends, however worthy, do not justify means. The God of truth is dishonored when counterfactual teaching, refuted rather than substantiated from the Bible and church history, is foisted off as fact.

We cannot allow anything less than one hundred percent honesty to be the engine that drives church doctrine. Tradition cannot be allowed to trump truth, thereby forcing ministers and teachers of the Word to become spinmeisters of Scripture, tampering with the evidence and resorting to convoluted reasoning in an attempt to defend the indefensible. The world is watching, and if you have looked around lately you may have noticed that it is not impressed. It rather suspects that if we are untruthful about little things, we may be untruthful about big things. The church should ever be the repository of truth, and when truth is compromised in part it cannot but have a negative effect upon the whole.

Of necessity, this book is confrontational and I make no apologies for that fact. God has a bone to pick with his church over this matter and has called upon a number of individuals to address it. The triune God is by nature confrontational. The apostles were confrontational, especially Paul, who even rebuked Peter to his face when he compromised his integrity in fear of

the Judaizers (Gal. 2:11f). Phillip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church, Volume 1*, page 358, has this to say about the matter. "*The bold attack of Paul teaches the right and duty of protest even against the highest ecclesiastical authority, when Christian truth and principle are endangered...*" Aquila and Priscilla took Apollos aside and corrected his teaching to the blessing of many (Acts 18:24-26).

We are indeed called upon to admonish one another (Rom.15:14), not out of mean-spiritedness, not for tearing down but for building up the body of Christ. I will be the first to admit that calling tithing into question can appear as a slap in the face to the many faithful souls who have sincerely believed, taught and practiced it, often at the cost of great personal sacrifice. They will not lose their reward. It is no small thing to have someone imply that what you learned at your parents' knee and in Sunday school is a distortion of Christian doctrine and, as I said above, it has accomplished much good. Be that as it may, God is calling his church to repentance. How we as individuals, local bodies and denominations deal with the issue will be critical for the future of the church. There is room for disagreement but not division. Controversy can be either destructive or constructive. Destructive if it brings conflict, hostility and bitterness resulting in division, constructive if it leads to meaningful dialogue in a spirit of humility, civility and familial love resulting in correction.

Although called upon by the Spirit for some time to prepare this book, I resisted, not willing to be the cause of division within the church and especially not wanting to hurt the many dear brothers and sisters in Christ, including those in ministry, who may disagree. Preparation of the book was begun in earnest in April of 2005, and is backed by thirty-five years of in-depth study of the Word of God. Answering a call to a ministry of the written word in 1975, I have heretofore confined my work to editorial writing on a number of subjects, chiefly in opposition to abortion and scientism. Continuing within the Southern Baptist denomination from childhood, I am neither an ordained minister nor seminary trained, and retired from secular labor in 2002.

If, as it is said, "a picture paints a thousand words", the reverse is also true--a thousand words can paint a picture. Along with chapters that dissect the doctrine of tithing, I have included a number of illustrative chapters and a short story, which plays out as the book progresses. Proponents of tithing are fond of quoting success stories to illustrate and extol the virtues of the doctrine. Quite naturally, they draw upon a biased data selection, but there is another, darker side of the matter that my own examples will serve to illuminate. While my "slices of life" are drawn from truth, there being countless actual cases like them, none are based on real individuals or real churches. They are entirely works of fiction; so if you think that you recognize yourself or your church in any of them, do not be alarmed—it is not you. One can argue a case point-by-point, but unless a human face is put on it, the mind, weakened by the fall as it is, may not come to comprehension. Hobbled by habits, preconceptions and prejudices, ingrained thinking is difficult to penetrate, and there is truth to the old saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up." Jesus, being fully aware of this matter, often taught in parables.

The book itself is directed primarily at ministers and other church leaders, but is not beyond the easy comprehension of the average Christian. Whether your church teaches tithing as an admixture of law and grace, or as an expected example, or perhaps does not teach it at all, this book is for you. Although I avail myself of multiple versions of the Word in my own studies and advise all others to do the same, I have quoted from the King James Version throughout unless otherwise noted, the reason being that most readers are familiar with the prose.

The bibliography at the end of this book includes authors of both persuasions and I have listed them in alphabetical order, rather than separating them into two camps. No subject worthy of

serious consideration should be studied from one side only. Prior to my own writing, I read the pro-tithing positions of Ron Blue, Larry Burkett and R.T. Kendall, and the opposing position of Russell Earl Kelly, which is exhaustive in its presentation of the subject matter. The other authors' works were read after my own was completed and in preparation of this introduction. There are any number of other materials on the subject, some out of print, and some confined to the Internet. I do not necessarily hold to every statement or opinion of those opposing tithing, nor disagree with those who favor it. It appears to me that each individual is genuine in his or her desire to serve the Lord.

Returning the foundation stone of new covenant stewardship to its rightful place, with its concept of *grace giving* rather than the supplanting tradition of tithing, is crucial in restoring health to the body of Christ. God expects a set percentage from no one and the very best from everyone in terms of time, talents and material possessions. I have no illusions that the restoration will come about easily. A battleship is not turned on a dime, and there are powers in the spiritual realm whose vested interests are not those of the triune God. Nonetheless, until health is restored to the body, revival will not come, and the Reformation remains incomplete.

Chapter 1

Raymond and Marisol

Clutching a basket of dry laundry, Marisol climbed the metal steps to her mobile home and fought with the screen door, pushing Felonious the cat back inside with a bare foot. Upending the basket onto the double bed for the fourth time, she turned to check on twenty-month old Manuel, asleep in his crib—the crib that had once held Carlos, and before that, Estara, and before that, who knows?

The crib sheet was damp from perspiration, and the baby tossed restlessly in his sleep. The late afternoon September sun that had saved wear, tear and the expense of running the clothes dryer, made the aging mobile home feel like a bakery. Marisol walked into the living room, and looked at the thermostat, set on eighty-six degrees.

“Nope, better not,” she thought. “Ray was already mad over the last bill.”

Her mind turned to dinner. “Something simple,” she thought. “Not gonna run that oven, nope. Maybe some macaroni and cheese and tuna—and a salad—yeah, a salad to go with it.”

“Right, Felonious?” she spoke aloud to the cat.

The unmistakable sound of a school bus drew her attention to the window, and Marisol pulled back the curtains--looking out to see the bus door pop open, and eleven kids disgorge into the semi-rural, Florida landscape. If Manny had been awake, she might have picked him up and been there to meet them—maybe visit with Vanessa, out there to collect her own two kids.

Carlos was first through the door, followed by Estara and her best friend, Bethany. Carlos dropped his books onto the kitchen table, pulled off shirt and shoes, leaving them on the living room floor, and plopped down in front of the television. “That’s not where they go, Carlos,” Marisol said.

“Yeah, Mom. Okay,” the seven year old replied, turning on a cartoon.

“Can I go to Bethany’s, Mom?” nine-year old Estara asked, heading for the door.

“Umm, okay, until supper, but change clothes first.”

“Were going to play inside, Mom.”

“Okay, but put your shoes in your room.”

“Mom!” Estara replied, exasperated.

“You’ve got to keep your school shoes nice, okay? They’re the only ones you’ve got.”

“But, Mom!”

“Look, Estara, if you don’t want to go without, find your flip-flops, but put the good shoes away. And, shhh! You’ll wake up Manny.”

“My mom wont let me go barefoot outside,” Bethany volunteered, as Estara stomped off to her room.

“Why is that?” Marisol asked.

“She says it’s dirty, and it’s not safe.”

“Oh.”

The two girls went out, banging the screen door behind them. Marisol sat at the kitchen table, twisting a damp strand of black hair around her finger. The baby was awake. “So now we’re dirty—and we’re not safe,” she sighed. “Whatever.”

Raymond, 28, and Marisol, 26, come from a migrant background, their families following the crops from north to south over the eastern United States. It is a hard life, especially for the children, who must shuttle between schools and still help their families in the fields and orchards. Raymond’s education came to a halt midway through the tenth grade, when his father’s broken ankle forced the young man out of the classroom and into the fields permanently.

Soon thereafter, he caught the eye of pretty and diminutive Marisol Gomez, a fourteen-year old honor student, who followed him around like a puppy, much to the consternation of her parents and the keen observation of her grandmother.

“This is the one,” Abuela prophesied, with a wag of a bony finger. “A good boy, strong, a good worker. God will make them one, you will see.” Abuela had an admirable track record, and her words were held in high regard.

Love blossomed, and on her sixteenth birthday Marisol’s parents signed the papers that would allow the young couple to marry. The newlyweds, their simple ceremony blessed by the local priest, and without a honeymoon, moved into the cramped quarters of the Estrada household--Raymond’s parents shuffling four younger children around to give the couple a room of their own.

As she had done in her parents’ home, Marisol dutifully helped with the chores, and in short order was expecting Estara. Despite the discomforts of pregnancy and the demands of motherhood, she continued her education--Raymond’s mother caring for the infant while she was at school.

Graduation arrived at last, and both families clapped and whistled loudly, as Marisol, now expecting Carlos, received her diploma--the first member of either family to complete high school.

Marisol placed Manny on the floor of the shower, and reached out for a towel. “Okay, fella, let’s get you dried off first. Now we’re all clean for Daddy.”

Stepping onto the tile floor, she regarded her reflection in the full-length mirror on the door, turning around twice, and frowning. “You’re starting to look like your mama, girl,” she thought to herself.

“Mommy needs to go to the gym,” she announced to Manny, kneeling down to get him dressed.

“Like I could afford it,” she thought crossly.

“Bim?” inquired Manny.

“Yeah, the bim,” Marisol laughed.

Stirring a pot of macaroni, and dancing to a song on the radio, Marisol looked up at the clock. Raymond would be home soon. “At least my guy gets his butt home right after work,” she smiled to herself. “He don’t go to the bar, he don’t fool around—nope, not like some. You’re doin’ all right, girl.”

The front door slammed, and Estara popped into the kitchen. “Hi, Mom. What’s for supper?”

Marisol pulled her daughter close and gave her a big hug. “Macaroni and cheese and—Estara, where are your flip-flops?”

“Oops! Sorry, Mom,” Estara replied, sheepishly. “I guess I left them at Bethany’s. Want me to go back?”

“No, baby, you can get them tomorrow. I just thought that you didn’t want to—oh, never mind. You got homework?”

“No, Mom, not this early,” Estara replied, bouncing off to her room.

Marisol walked into the living room and set the thermostat down to seventy-eight degrees, the agreed upon temperature for the evening.

Raymond and Marisol had dreamed of having a home of their own, of raising their family in a more stable environment. While both families were working the southern end of the circuit, Raymond accepted a minimum wage position with a local cannery, and rented a run-down house not far from his job. Expenses took all that the young couple had, but they were determined to make a go of it. They easily qualified for food stamps, and other government assistance programs, which they accepted—for a time.

Raymond was a hard and dedicated worker, and handy—qualities that soon drew the attention of management. He was promoted to a mechanic’s assistant position, helping to keep the canning equipment running. Raises followed, and in time he became a full-fledged equipment mechanic. Returning to night school, and with help from Marisol, he achieved his high school GED diploma. Raymond smiles, remembering the day that he and his wife walked into the government assistance office, and told them, “Thanks for everything, but we can make it on our own now.” In actuality, they still qualified for help, but felt that they did not need or deserve it at that point.”

Most of Raymond’s co-workers had wives or significant others who worked, and some of them asked why Marisol didn’t.

“I don’t want my wife to have to work,” Raymond replied. “That’s my job, and she feels the same way. She needs to be there for the kids, just like our moms were there for us. Besides, she works harder than I do.”

One afternoon, Raymond came home from work all excited, and picked up his pregnant-again wife, swinging her around in circles. Good news. A co-worker was selling a half-acre of land, with an older mobile home and an outbuilding. It needed some work, but Raymond could handle that. It was closer to town, closer to schools, and still an easy drive to work.

The young couple had budgeted their money from the beginning, and they sat down to see if it was feasible—yes, if they were careful. They were living paycheck to paycheck, in the frugal manner learned the hard way from their parents. But the property was within their means, with no money down.

“It was like our dream had come true,” Marisol recalls. “We felt really blessed.” Four months before Manuel was born, they moved in.

Marisol met Raymond at the door with a kiss, and got pulled into a hug. “Mmm, somebody smells good,” he said.

“Stop it, Ray! You’re all greasy—you’re gonna get my dress dirty!”

“So what? It’s just an old house dress.”

“Yeah, but it’s a clean old house dress, see?” Marisol kissed him again.

“Hi, Dad!” Carlos yelled from the living room.

“Hey, big guy!” his father answered.

Manny left his spot alongside his brother, in front of the television, and flew into the room, throwing his arms around his father’s leg. Raymond swooped him up, and turned him upside down, bringing squeals of delight. Estara ran in, still wearing her school clothes, and climbed on her fathers back.

“Ray, you’re all greasy!” Marisol moaned.

“What can I say?” Raymond laughed. “I’m a popular guy!”

“Hey, Ray, before I forget, the pastor called this morning and wondered if he could drop by, like, tomorrow evening?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Raymond replied. “What’s it about?”

Marisol hesitated. “I think it’s about the church budget.”

Like many individuals and couples, Raymond and Marisol entered the church through their children. Catholic by birth, they had attended childrens’ and youth activities off and on at local missions, and went to Mass on special occasions, but had never known Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Shortly after moving into their own home, Estara met Bethany Hutchinson, whose parents had just constructed a new house several properties away. The girls, both being new to the neighborhood and of the same age, soon became the best of friends.

Bethany’s mother, Robin, came by soon afterwards to introduce herself, exchange telephone numbers and information, and invite the Estradas to church.

“We’ve been with First Church forever,” Robin offered. “We’ve got a great fellowship, and Bob Turner is our pastor—he’s a really nice guy. You’d love him. My Jerry teaches Sunday school, and I help out in the nursery. We’d all love to have you,” she smiled warmly.

“Gee, I don’t know,” Marisol replied. “We’re, like, Catholic.”

“Do you and Raymond have a church home?” Robin asked.

“Well, no, but...”

“I’m sorry if I sound pushy,” Robin explained. “It’s just that I wouldn’t be a good neighbor if I didn’t offer, and we really would love to have you.”

“Well, I’ll have to talk it over with Raymond,” Marisol replied, “but thanks, that’s really nice of you.”

Raymond was reluctant, but Marisol kept after him. “We need to at least try it, Ray, we really should. We should really do this for the kids.”

Raymond considered the options, not the least being the relationship with his wife, whose occasional cold-shoulder could be very unpleasant, and arrived at a decision. “Okay, let’s do it,” he announced.

The following Sunday morning, the Hutchinsons picked them up for Sunday school and church. Arriving home, Marisol was ecstatic.

“Wasn’t it great, Ray?” she bubbled, pulling off her only pair of heels. “Oh my God, I almost forgot how to walk in these things. Did you see all the people wearing jeans, Ray? And flip-flops. Some of the women had on flip-flops.”

Raymond smiled. “Yeah, I’ve got to admit, I felt comfortable. I was worried that we might look, you know, kind of poor, but they seem like ordinary folks.”

As the weeks went by, Raymond and Marisol were increasingly drawn into the life of the church, and both felt God calling them into his family, as did Estara. After attending First Church for seven months, mother, father, and daughter surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and were baptized.

Now, it was a requirement of First Church that prospective members complete a training class prior to being presented for membership in the local body. The tenets of the faith were explained, as were expected standards of faith and practice. The doctrine of tithing at least ten percent of gross income was held to be the minimum standard of giving for individuals and families in all income ranges. The practice was strongly encouraged, but not strictly enforced, save for those in church leadership positions.

Prior to attending First Church, the Estradas had managed to put two hundred dollars a month into a “savings account”, after the fixed expenses were budgeted. Clothing, home and vehicle repairs, medical and dental bills, prescriptions, Christmas, birthdays and other occasions, and any other non-budgeted items were drawn from this account, so it is easy to see why it evaporated on a regular basis. They did not have a credit card. Vacations were out of the question and the family had never enjoyed one.

Looking over their frugal budget, Raymond and Marisol decided that they would “step out in faith”, and pledge one hundred dollars a month to the church, making this a priority. This reduced their “savings” by half. Since Raymond’s salary at the time was \$28,000 per year, a tithe would amount to \$233.33 per month. Nonetheless, the Estradas adjusted as best they could. They sold Marisol’s car, which didn’t bring much, but did save on insurance, gasoline, and repairs. It also left Marisol without the means to keep doctor’s visits and other important tasks, forcing her to either drive Raymond back and forth to work, or to impose on friends and neighbors.

Another “luxury” cut from the budget was Marisol’s birth control prescription. “We just gotta be careful, Ray, we really do.”

Chapter 2

The Guilt Trip

The following evening, Bob Turner, pastor of First Church, came by as promised, accompanied by Jess Alderman, deacon and head of the stewardship committee. Marisol had coffee and cookies to offer, and after the initial pleasantries, the foursome sat down at the dining table to discuss the Estradas' level of financial contribution to the church.

"Guys," Pastor Bob began, "I'll get right to the subject. You all have been with us long enough to realize that First Church expects all of her members to tithe at least ten percent of their gross income. Now don't get me wrong, I know how difficult that can be. My wife and I went through some tough times ourselves when we first got married. We were still in college, and Barbara wanted to start a family right away, but we knew that God came first, and that we needed to be faithful to him with what little bit we had at the time. In fact, it was almost nine years before we could afford to start our family, but the family of God comes first. He blessed us, over the next five years, with two beautiful kids."

Marisol twisted her napkin, and studied the pattern on the faded tablecloth.

Pastor Bob continued, "Ray, you stated that your income is twenty-eight thousand a year, but your giving is a hundred dollars a month, which is less than half of a tithe. Now, I know that you have been faithful in giving that amount, don't get me wrong, and I know that you folks are bringing home less than most of our members, but you really need to commit to the full amount. This is not coming from me, guys, but from the Lord. He'll bless you for it—after all, you can't out give God."

"Marisol, get out our budget book," Raymond said. "I want everyone to see what we have to work with, and where the money goes."

Jess spoke up, "Raymond, we don't need to do that. We don't have any business prying into your personal budget. We do offer an ongoing class on Wednesday nights that helps families in all income ranges to pay off debt, stay out of debt, and invest for the future. I will say this, that the best financial investment anyone can make is to put God first, and take your tithe right off the top, before anything else."

Jess chuckled, then continued, "It might look like it will never work, but trust God, and he won't let you down."

“Guys,” Pastor Bob added, “I’m not trying to pick on you. Believe me, a lot of our members are not tithing, and some of them are bringing home a lot more than you are. That’s why we’re committed to paying every non-tithing family a visit before our annual stewardship drive gets underway, so they can get onboard and not miss out on God’s blessings.”

Pastor Bob ended the visitation with a prayer, that the Estradas, and all members of First Church, would not rob God of his tithes and offerings, but be obedient and commit to bringing the full amount into the storehouse.

After their visitors had left, Raymond and Marisol sat back down, budget book open on the table before them. Raymond was stunned, and for the first time since having to drop out of high school, felt as if his life was spinning out of control.

Marisol placed her hand on his, and he looked up at his wife. Tears were welling in her eyes. “What are we gonna do, Ray?” she asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know, baby,” he replied.

Howard and Florence McMillan had been tithing members of Whisperwood for over forty years, and had raised three children in the church. Howard had gone on to join his Lord at age 69, leaving Florence, who had been a homemaker, to live as best she could on Howard’s social security, and an occasional gift from one of their children.

Initially, Florence was able to tithe from the proceeds of the monthly check, but as time went on, she found herself struggling to do so. The small savings was soon spent on home and car repairs, and increasingly on doctor bills and medication as the years took their toll. Even Dolly, the couple’s little terrier, was growing old and in frequent need of vet care.

Pastor Evans had been at Whisperwood nearly as long as had Howard and Florence, and was a kindly, understanding man of God. Although he taught the doctrine of tithing as he himself had learned it in seminary, he was well aware that certain individuals and families within the congregation were in no position to do so. When Florence approached him on the matter, Pastor Evans reassured her that the couple’s long history of faithfulness and her current small offerings were “well pleasing in the eyes of God.”

But Pastor Evans retired, and a new pastor arrived who had not known Howard and Florence. Several months later, the new pastor visited Florence at her home, chiding her for failing to tithe, and for spending the Lord’s money on a dog.

Florence and the Estradas appear to be in a bit of a quandary, or as the old cliché goes, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. If the rock represents God’s inflexible standard of giving, required of his people in all times, places and situations, and the hard place represents their current lot in life, then they are in some serious trouble--and they are hardly alone.

On the other hand, if the church has misinterpreted and misapplied God’s will and word on the subject, then it is guilty of wrongly dividing the Word of Truth, devouring and scattering the flock, and hampering God’s work in the world.

Let us then, without being overly pedantic for a book of this nature, continue on to discover what God does have to say on the subject of stewardship in general, and tithing in particular, through his living Word, and how this was interpreted and carried out in practice, during Old Testament times, in the early church, and through the present day.

Chapter 3

Scripture Twisting

For years, Carl had voluntarily prepared the church bulletin, and other printed material, as a labor of love. Each April, his church conducted its annual financial drive, concluding with a stewardship banquet. And each year, at the bottom of the program's front cover, right under the picture of choice, Carl dutifully placed 1 Corinthians 4:2, paraphrased to read, "And furthermore, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful."

After the banquet, members of the congregation would place their pledge cards in the colorful box provided by the door, and no one questioned the familiar scripture passage printed on the program, least of all Carl. Then one day Carl was convicted to do a very unusual thing among Christians; he began to read the Bible through and to study it. Imagine his surprise and consternation to discover that the context of 1 Corinthians 4:2 has nothing whatsoever to do with finances.

We often encounter 1 Corinthians 16:2 distorted to teach that Christians are to give to their home church each Sunday, when the historical context involves a special collection, a love offering, being gathered by the various churches on behalf of the poor believers in Jerusalem.

Believers across the land are whipped with Malachi 3:8-10 on a regular basis. Some are whipped into submission, and some are whipped in sorrow and shame right out of the church. Malachi 3:8-10 is a very familiar passage, if the rest of what Malachi has to say is not. It reads, "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

Well! This sounds like serious business. But Malachi 3:8-10 has nothing to do with money, everything to do with post-exilic Judah, and nothing whatsoever to do with the Christian church.

Sadly, these are not isolated incidents. Week in and year out, Christians are being fed a diet of baloney on the subject of stewardship, and the Church is the poorer on account of it.

In studying the Word of God, it is important to grasp some rather arcane sounding words and concepts that are not difficult to understand when explained in ordinary language. *Exegesis* involves the critical explanation or analysis of a text, allowing it to communicate on its own

terms the original meaning of its author. *Eisegesis* involves forcing one's own meaning onto a text regardless of the intent of the original author. The illustrations given above are classic examples of *eisegesis*, or scripture twisting as someone has so aptly defined it.

Hermeneutics is the science and methodology of interpretation, especially of the scriptural text, and involves the principles and processes employed in the extraction and communication of its meaning.

Carried out correctly, the study and teaching of God's Word is a painstaking and exacting process; holy ground only to be tread with the shoes of our hearts and minds removed, with earnest prayer, and with the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit.

It is beyond the scope of this book to give an in-depth explanation of the above disciplines, involving historical-cultural, contextual, theological, lexical-syntactical, and literary analysis. Fortunately, much of the legwork has been done for us by those called to labor in these particular fields. And yet, there has been and remains honest disagreement over many portions of scripture, and doctrines derived from the same.

One could not do better, perhaps, than to remember the famous lines from the poem by Rudyard Kipling, drilled into our heads by many teachers.

*I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*

In embracing and applying a doctrine of stewardship appropriate not only to our time, but also for all time, not only in Silicon Valley, but also in Appalachia, the projects, and the Third World, we must take care. We must take care that our doctrine is God-centered and not worldly or self-centered. We must take care that we have correctly interpreted and applied the Word of Truth, (2 Tim. 2:15). We must take care that we do not lay the yoke of legalism on the necks, and stumbling blocks in the paths of the children whom Christ has redeemed at the cost of his own blood. We must take care that we do not grieve the Holy Spirit in the teaching and application of these principles.

It is a sad fact of Christian life that the average believer is ignorant of God's Word and the tenets of the faith, easily led, and "carried about with every wind of doctrine," (Eph. 4:14). But there is no excuse whatsoever for called men and women of God to imbibe and pass on false doctrine, whether they are pastors, seminary professors, missionaries, Sunday school teachers, or anyone else entrusted with the dissemination of the truth. The tools of serious Bible study are readily at our disposal. As I said before, there are honest differences concerning many portions of scripture, and the various doctrines and interpretations that have been born from these differences. Woe unto us, however, if we are careless enough or willfully stubborn enough to stand truth on its head, for it is not our own word that we are dealing with, but God's.

There is an old saying that applies to the teaching of false doctrine, and I hesitate to repeat it here because it cuts like a knife; indeed, I would not but for the fact that it illuminates the problem so well. It is this, that "when we tell a lie often enough, we come to believe it ourselves." True, there is no shortage of charlatans within the church, wolves in sheep's clothing who are not afraid to misrepresent God by pretending to speak in his name, bilking innocent believers out of their paychecks and life savings in order to feather their own nests. But I am confident that this is not the case in the vast majority of churches where tithing is being taught.

Doctrinal error, once entrenched, takes on by tradition a life of its own, coming to be seen as doctrinal truth. The sentiments of church father Cyprian, that "*custom without truth is only time-*

honored error”, remain valid today. The distortion of the Old Testament statutes of the tithe, and their misapplication to the New Testament church, did not come about overnight. Neither will it be possible to correct the error overnight. It is not just that Christians, churches and denominations are set in their ways, although this tends to be true. It is in admitting that they have been wrong. It involves, if you will, a humbling loss of face. For an institution as powerful and righteous, yes, sometimes even self-righteous, as the Christian church to admit and repent of error, replacing it with sound, fruitful teaching, will take more than human effort; it will take a mighty act of God.

Chapter 4

Before the Law--Abraham

The first mention of the tithe in the Bible is found in Genesis, Chapter 14, in which Abram (later Abraham) armed a large number of his own men, and together with his Amorite allies, went in pursuit of a confederated battle group which had waged war throughout the area, carrying off captives and goods from Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram's nephew, Lot, was among the captives.

Abram's party fell upon the raiders by night, routed them, and relieved them of their spoils of war. Upon his victorious return, Abram was met by the king of Sodom, and the priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek, who brought out bread and wine and blessed him by God Most High, El Elyon. Abram in turn reciprocated by presenting Melchizedek with ten percent of the recovered goods.

Since many Christians point to this instance as the starting point of their defense of tithing, it will be well to take a closer look at it here, and again when we consider the book of Hebrews, which refers back to the incident. The gist of the tithing advocates argument is that since this event took place hundreds of years before the Law was given through Moses it represents an eternal, God-given requirement that was not put aside when the old covenant of law came to an end at Calvary.

Obviously, the unfolding of events did not take place in isolation, and the following must be considered. What was Abram's concept of God? Who was Melchizedek, what was his concept of God, and what was his relationship to Abram and the king of Sodom? What were the customs prevalent in the region during this time frame? The printed resources concerning these subjects are voluminous, and the reader is invited to pursue such at his or her desire, but I must summarize.

The peoples of the Fertile Crescent and surrounding regions presented many offerings and sacrifices to their gods, and performed many rituals in their names. Temple and government were often conjoined. Prescribed taxes were paid to gods and rulers, most always a percentage of this or that, and this was quite often a tithe or ten percent.

Abram's story begins in Ur of the Chaldeans. Traditionally, this has been held to be the ancient and major city at the southern end of the Fertile Crescent, although recent scholarship favors Urfa (Aramaic name Urhai), thirty miles north of Haran. This does not imply that his family was city-dwellers, since the narrative of his life would indicate that they were a fairly large and wealthy nomadic band. They most likely dwelt in the close proximity of Ur, and had social and business relations with those in the city and throughout the region. Abram's father, Terah, as clan-leader, moved the group to the vicinity of Haran, near the top of the Fertile Crescent, and lived there until his death.

At what point in Abram's life Yahweh first appears is nowhere given. The peoples of the region worshipped, as did most at this time in history, a multitude of gods and goddesses with one usually singled out as above all. We may assume that his father's clan observed the cultural beliefs and practices common to the area. At any rate, Yahweh, whom Abram rightly perceived to be the supreme god, addressed him in some manner, and commanded him to leave the vicinity of Haran, and his father's house, and go to a land that he would show him. Yahweh promised that he would make Abram, who was childless at the time, the father of many nations, and that he would give the land to which he was being led to his descendants.

Wherever the clan would settle for a time, Abram built an altar to the Lord (Yahweh) and called upon his name. This is important to note, because as a Semitic clan-leader, Abram was a priest in his own right and had no need of another to offer worship and sacrifice in his place.

We must be cautious, and not read our own more complete knowledge of God, as revealed through Jesus Christ and the apostles, back into the life and times of the patriarchs. Some of their actions may seem alien and questionable from our point of view, but we must remember that this represents the dawn of redemptive history. Their concepts of God were embryonic, and their lifestyles shaped by the cultures in which they lived. Abram's wife, Sarai (later Sarah), was in fact his half-sister, but there is no condemnation within the text of this incestuous relationship. On two occasions, the couple deceived the rulers of the lands in which they were sojourning into believing that they were brother and sister, but not also husband and wife. This resulted in Sarai being taken into the harem, while Abram saved his skin and was made rich in the process. God's hand was heavy on Pharaoh of Egypt, who may well have consummated the relationship, and Abimelech of Gerar, who had not. The plot uncovered, both rulers restored Abram's wife to him, and sent him away with a stern admonishment. Apparently the couple had no qualms about the indiscretion. At a much later date, Isaac, the couple's miracle child, sought to pull off the same deception concerning his wife Rebekah.

While Sarai was yet barren, she persuaded Abram to conceive a child in her place through her Egyptian servant-girl, a common practice of surrogate motherhood during these times, with the sorry result of the pregnant girl being badly mistreated, and she, along with the resulting child being ultimately banished from the camp.

After the child of God's promise, Isaac, had been born to the renamed Abraham and Sarah, Abraham perceived that Yahweh required him to offer the child as a human sacrifice, and was only prevented from doing so at the last moment by divine intervention.

I mention the above, not to bring these well known and beloved characters into disrepute, but to illustrate that they were children of the times and culture into which they had been born, and subject to the beliefs and practices of the same. At a time when the knowledge of the one true God had been distorted beyond recognition and had all but vanished from the earth, God intervened and, as always, worked his will through the medium of human weakness, so that the resulting glory would rightly come to him and not another, lest anyone should boast.

As Abram's victorious military group approached the city of Salem (later to become, it is thought by many, Jerusalem), he was met by the king of Sodom and the priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek, with their accompanying entourage. Since the captives and stolen goods had come from both Sodom and Gomorrah, and the king of Gomorrah is not mentioned at this point, it may be that he had fallen in battle, and that the king of Sodom was acting on behalf of both cities. This is the more likely, since Abram returned the captives and the bulk of the recovered goods to his hand, after presenting a tithe of the goods to Melchizedek, and after Abram's Amorite allies had been given the opportunity to take their share.

What relationship existed between the parties in the Genesis 14 narrative is difficult, if not impossible, to discern with any confidence. Was the king of Sodom traveling north to meet the returning victors when he met them near to Salem, or was he already at Salem in the company of Melchizedek? Did Abram and his allies set out only to recover Lot, or were they chiefly acting on behalf of the king of Sodom? It is also possible that Melchizedek himself was the chief outfitter of the expedition, since all parties met at Salem following the victory, and the priest-king brought out bread and wine to refresh the returning warriors. The king of Sodom, having just been defeated in battle and having had his city sacked, was certainly in no position to do so, although he had by far the most to gain. Abram and his allies should not have had to foot the bulk of the expense under any circumstances, and it is doubtful that they did so.

The narrative of Genesis 14:17-24 does not appear to indicate spontaneity on the part of the parties involved, but rather prearranged war protocol common to the times and region. If Abram and his allies had ventured forth on their own, then they would normally be entitled to all of the captive booty, both goods and persons. But, these goods and persons had themselves been captured from neighboring cities. To keep them would have certainly made the victors stink in the opinion of the entire region. Abram and his allies were all clan princes and wealthy in their own right. They had no need to be enriched at the loss of their neighbors' goods. To this day among the peoples of the region, honor is a far more important consideration than is personal gain. The king of Sodom's offer for Abram to keep the goods, and Abram's reply in decline appears to be in keeping with established protocol, however odd it may appear to us (see Genesis 23 for another classic example). The tithe given to Melchizedek was likely in keeping with this protocol, either because it called for it to be given to the local high priest, or to be given to Melchizedek because he sponsored the expedition if such was indeed the case, or both. The contents of the tithe were in fact from Sodom and Gomorrah, not from the prior possessions of Abram and his allies, nor is there any indication that Abram, being a priest in his own right, ever tithed any of his own possessions to the Canaanite priest-king of Salem.

Sodom, Gomorrah, Salem, and Hebron (near which Abram resided) were all among Canaanite cities in the area, but what exact relationships existed amongst them at this time is uncertain. Although Sodom and Gomorrah had earned especially bad reputations in the eyes of God, it is reasonable to assume that the entire region shared a common cultural, religious, and economic background.

We will return to the person and significance of Melchizedek when we cover the references to him in the letter to the Hebrews, where the author looks at him from an entirely different perspective. All that can be stated of him from the narrative of Genesis 14 is that he was king of Salem and priest of El Elyon, God Most High. That is to say, he was a Canaanite priest. He was definitely not, as some have suggested, the pre-incarnate Christ. He blessed Abram in the name of God Most High, El Elyon, while Abram referred to God Most High as Yahweh. Both men were referring to their conception of the highest god, and both doubtless believed in the existence

of other, lesser gods. This is an inescapable fact of history. Canaanite religion involved, as did most religions in this part of the world at the time, some very repugnant practices, including ritual sexual rites and occasional human, including child, sacrifice. Had God been pleased with their mode of worship, he would not have called out one man, Abram, to ultimately establish a new nation from whence his only begotten Son would, in due time, enter the world. Nonetheless, God allotted another roughly four hundred years for the peoples of the region to further degrade before beginning their displacement by the children of Israel (Gen. 15:16, Deut. 9:4,5). Christians do not emulate other practices common to these religions, and they should not pick and choose tithing as the one pagan practice that they will emulate in an attempt to bolster their doctrine.

While admitting that there is far more to the narrative of Genesis 14 than first meets the eye, and much of a speculative nature, I conclude that there is nothing here that would lend support to the modern day concept of tithing.

Chapter 5

Before the Law—Jacob and Joseph

The next mention of tithing prior to the Law comes in Genesis 28. The narrative tells of the patriarch Jacob fleeing his brother Esau's wrath, and traveling to his grandfather Bethuel's household in Padan Aram, with instructions to take a wife from the daughters of his uncle Laban (namely his cousins). In that sense he received a multiple blessing, if we may so construe it, since he ended up with two wives, two concubines, twelve sons, and an unknown number of daughters (only one, Dinah, being mentioned by name).

As Jacob traveled through the Canaanite countryside, he camped for the night near Luz. Yahweh appeared to him there in a dream, reiterating the promises given to his grandfather Abraham, promising to be with him in his sojourn and to bring him back again to his father Isaac's house. When he awoke in awe from the dream, Jacob named the place Bethel, or House of God. In the morning he took the stone upon which he had laid his head and set it up as a pillar, or sacred stone, and anointed it with oil. This act indicates the antiquity of the narrative, since these pillars, or standing stones were later prohibited under the Law.

There Jacob made a vow, saying "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee." (Gen. 28:20-22). See also Gen. 31:13; 35:1-7. At this early stage of redemptive history, God was in the process of developing a family, which would in time become the nation of Israel. Their concept of God was vague, and colored by the customs of the area in which they lived. Yahweh was seen then, and would be seen for many long years to come, as one god among many, whose realm of influence was restricted, perhaps, to a locality (Gen. 31:19, 29-35; 35:1-4).

Many interpreters have taken that Jacob, the proverbial trickster, made his vow conditional by saying "if", but that does not seem to be warranted given the solemnity of the situation. No doubt he was sincere. How and when and under what circumstances he fulfilled his vow are unclear, save that he did return with his clan to Bethel and worshipped twenty years later on his way back to his ancestral home.

That Jacob's vow to Yahweh was ten percent would seem to indicate that the formula came

readily to his mind. Was it a local Canaanite custom? If the practice was passed down from his forefathers, to whom was it given? Hopefully not to the local pagan priests whose practices of worship were abominations in the eyes of God. As stated earlier, the tribal clan leader served as priest during these times. Was the tithe in the form of sacrifice at the locally constructed altar? Was it given to the poor? Was it repeated, or a one-time thing? The tithing formulas under the Mosaic Law were yet far in the future and instituted for entirely different reasons.

Acknowledging God for the blessings that he has bestowed upon us has ever been the proper response of a humble and thankful heart. That is timeless, and that is as it should be. But we cannot establish a formula of giving based upon pagan religious practices from which we would not emulate another thing. When we turn to the formulas given by God to Moses for the nation of Israel, we shall see if those apply to Christians today.

The well-known story of Joseph, and his trials and triumphs in the land of Egypt (Gen. 37, 39-50), is not often associated with tithing, but since it presents what may be some background material, I will mention it in passing.

The Hyksos, themselves a Semitic people as were the Hebrews, overthrew Egypt and ruled as a warrior aristocracy from their capital of Avaris for two and a half centuries. It was during their rule when Joseph was sold by his brothers and came to enter the land. This goes a long way towards explaining how a shepherd, repugnant to Egyptians, was ultimately able to rise from a prison cell to become in charge of the nation, second only to Pharaoh.

Joseph's advice to the Hyksos pharaoh was to collect a fifth of the produce of the land during the seven plenteous years ahead and store it against the coming famine (Gen. 41:34-36). As the famine persisted in the region, Joseph collected the money, livestock and finally the people themselves together with their land in exchange for the food that had been placed in storage, and all passed into Pharaoh's possession. The people were given seed to sow the land, and allowed to retain the bulk of the harvest, with a fifth going to Pharaoh (Gen. 47:13-26).

The Hyksos were known to have retained their subjects' rules and customs. The fifth part related in the narrative may well constitute a doubling of what had been the normal tax rate or tithe on produce, collected for the running of the kingdom and the provision for the large priesthood of Egypt's many gods and goddesses, which was itself exempt from taxation (Gen. 47:22). Granted, these figures have nothing to do with Christians today but, as we shall see, they bear a resemblance to one form of tithing under the Law.

Chapter 6

Under the Law

Tithing ordinances instituted by God through Moses are not as simple and straightforward to understand as may be supposed. It is the position of many biblical scholars that the narrative as it exists has been compiled from a number of sources, and brought into its final form after the return of the Judean exiles from Babylonian captivity, hundreds of years after the events described therein. It is not within the scope of this brief book to attempt to reconcile arguments of this nature. What concerns us here is whether or not tithing ordinances established for the theocratic government of Israel are applicable to Christians today.

During the approximately four hundred years after Israel (formally Jacob) and his family entered Egypt under the care and protection of Joseph, the clan multiplied exponentially into twelve tribes. In the meanwhile, the Egyptians had thrown off Hyksos rule and forced the numerous and despised Hebrews into slavery.

Having been led out of captivity by God under the leadership of Moses, the ever-rebellious Israelites were forced to endure forty years of wilderness wanderings before being allowed to begin to take possession of the land promised to their forefathers. It was during this period that the Mosaic Law was established, including the tithing ordinances that would apply upon possession of the land. It is important to note that while ordinances concerning the many types of sacrifices and offerings applied during the years in the wilderness, tithing was not applicable until the tribes had come into their inheritance. Although the Israelites had brought their flocks and herds with them out of Egypt, they remained nomads until established in their own land. The animals would serve for a prescribed sacrifice, but they were nowhere near plentiful enough to be used and tithed for ordinary food purposes. Neither did the Israelites grow crops during this period, so there was nothing to tithe from this still future source. Rather, God provided manna from heaven to be collected and eaten on a daily basis, and a double portion to cover the Sabbath when no manna would fall. Individual sacrifice as had previously been performed was prohibited, and could only be carried out by certified priests in accordance with prescribed ordinance.

Now is the time to discover what tithing meant to the nation of Israel, and why what is

erroneously called tithing today does not resemble it in any manner, shape or form. Tithes were strictly in the form of produce from the field and animals from the flocks and herds. They were not in the form of currency, although tithes of produce could be redeemed for money by adding a fifth of the value to them (Lev. 27:30-34). Some modern day tithing advocates argue that money was not available during these times, but nothing can be further from the truth. Metal, not necessarily or always in the form of coin, was readily available throughout the region, and used on a regular basis for many transactions as described in historical texts and from the Bible itself, including offerings, redemption money and various taxes.

Only producers of agricultural products were required to tithe, naturally, since the tithes were gathered from these resources. A large landowner would tithe, but his hired servants did not. The poor were exempt from tithing. Craftsmen and those of other occupations did not tithe, since they did not produce agricultural products. This fact alone is a heavy blow to proponents of tithing today, since it makes it clear that Jesus and his father Joseph, being carpenters, did not tithe. The apostle Paul did not tithe, since he was a tentmaker, nor did Matthew who was a tax collector. The apostles Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen, and not subject to the tithe. We may be sure, however, that all paid the prescribed taxes and sacrifices and gave offerings from the heart.

Food grown or raised outside of the land of Israel, or gotten from a non-Jew, or Gentile, was unclean and not acceptable to be presented as a tithe, sacrifice or offering. Originally, the tithe of produce was grain, wine and oil, according to the Word of God. At a much later date the Pharisees, ever apt to go to the extreme, applied it to all edible produce, as we find described in the Mishnah and Talmud. This even extended to herbs from the garden, the nit picking practice mocked by Jesus (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42). Still, the tithe was in the form of food, not money.

We refer to the tithe in the singular, but there were three tithes mentioned in the Bible; the Levitical tithe, the festival tithe and the poor tithe, each serving a distinct purpose. The latter two are somewhat difficult to understand exactly, and some scholars have suggested that they may have been combined.

It is the Levitical tithe that has often been used to justify what is called tithing in the Christian church, but this is a gross misrepresentation of the Word of God. During their sojourn in the land of Egypt, the sons of Jacob (renamed Israel by God) became heads of their own clans, which grew over time into twelve tribes. Following the exodus from Egypt, each tribe except one was given an allotted portion of the promised land of Canaan. On his deathbed, Jacob had prophesied the future of his descendents. Levi's lot was to be scattered in the land of Israel (Gen. 49:5-7), and so it came to be. The tribe of Levi, from whence came Moses and his brother Aaron the priest, was given no inheritance in the Holy Land; God was their inheritance (Num. 18:20-24; Deut. 12:12; 14:27,29; 18:1-2; Josh. 13:14,33; 14:3; 18:7).

The priesthood passed in perpetuity through the Levitical line of Aaron. The other Levitical families were to be servants to the priesthood, functioning in many diverse capacities in the service of the tabernacle and later the temple, and in other forms of service throughout the nation. The priests and Levites were given forty-eight cities within the borders of Israel in which to live along with their families while they were not in immediate service at the tabernacle, temple or elsewhere (Num. 35:1-8; Josh. 21). This also included land surrounding the cities for the flocks and herds tithed to them from the other tribes, and probably to grow produce not included under the tithing system. From the days of King David, the priests and Levites were divided into twenty-four courses, each course serving at the temple a week at a time on a rotating basis (1 Chron. 23-26; Ezra 6:18; Luke 1:5, 8,9,23).

God made ample provision for the priests and Levites, along with their families, the foremost description of which is Numbers 18. The Levites were to be given the tithes of animals and produce from the other tribes, brought to the cities in which they lived (Neh. 10:37b). They in turn were to select the best of what they had themselves received and tithe that to the priests (Num. 18:21-32). The priests themselves did not tithe. Therefore, the Levites, who served in many capacities, including singers and musicians, craftsmen, temple guards, and teachers of the Law received, along with their families, ninety percent of the tithe. The priests with their families received a tithe of the tithe, or ten percent of the total. They also received abundance from the many sacrificial offerings, firstfruits (which were a token amount, not a tithe), and the redemption money for man and unclean beast.

The second tithe referred to is found in Deuteronomy, throughout chapter twelve, and in 14:22-27. It was to be brought to the tabernacle/temple on specified occasions and eaten there by the offerer, his family and servants, and shared with the Levite. If it had to be carried a long distance, it was permissible to exchange it for money and use that to buy food and drink, even strong drink, with which to celebrate with thanksgiving before the Lord. This is often called the festival tithe. It is the position of some scholars that this represents an earlier statute that was superseded by Numbers 18 and elsewhere, while others find it to be imposed in addition to the Levitical tithe.

The third tithe mentioned (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12-13) was called the poor tithe. Collected every third year, called the year of tithing, it was stored within the gates of city or town to provide for the fatherless and widow, the stranger and the resident Levite, there serving as a teacher of the Law. Obviously, it was meant to be distributed over a three-year period. This may harken back to the days in Egypt, when Joseph laid aside food for the lean years ahead. There is again disagreement among scholars over the interpretation of this ordinance. Some hold that it took the place of the festival tithe every third year, but this is far from certain.

A seldom-noted fact concerning the subject is that every seventh and fiftieth year, the land was neither sowed nor reaped. These were the years of Sabbath and Jubilee described in Leviticus 25. What grew of itself was to be gathered and eaten on an as-needed basis, by the owner of the land, his family, servants and hired hands, his animals, and the stranger. Naturally, no tithing of produce took place in these years, every sixth and forty-eighth years providing a bountiful harvest to cover the years in which the land rested.

Construction, maintenance, and provision for the tabernacle and temple were supplied by freewill offerings and often (concerning the temple) from the coffers of rulers themselves, who had derived their wealth largely through taxation, trade and tribute. God had imposed a half-shekel temple-tax required of each male age twenty and upward (Ex. 30:12-16). After the return from exile, a yearly one-third shekel temple-tax was imposed (Neh. 10:32), which had again become a half-shekel by the time of Jesus (Matt. 17:24-27).

Sadly for the Israelites, things did not often turn out as ordained by God through Moses. Time and again, the people rebelled and followed what seemed right in their own eyes rather than following God. They turned to the false gods of the land of Egypt from which they had come, and of the land of Canaan into which they came. Levite, priest, and tabernacle alike were often neglected. Consequently, the tribes were unable to completely drive out the inhabitants of the land, who not only became a snare to them by reason of their abominable practices, but who often gained the upper hand militarily. In spite of repeated deliverance by the hand of God, the people finally rejected his sovereignty and demanded a king (1 Sam. 8). It was the king who would take the tithe of field and flock, olive grove and vineyard, dispensing them as he saw fit.

Under David and his son Solomon, Israel came to its zenith but it was not to last. In the days of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the northern tribes rebelled and broke away under the name of Israel, leaving the tribes of Judah and Benjamin alone under the southern kingdom of Judah. False worship centers were established at the northern kingdom sites of Bethel and Gilgal in direct disobedience to God's command. The Lord issued a scathing rebuke to Israel through the prophet Amos for their rebellion and false religious practices, but amazingly Amos 4:4 is often quoted in support of tithing. Many of the loyal Levites and priests migrated to the southern kingdom during this time, the details of which are vague.

The northern kingdom, under a series of corrupt rulers and addicted to false gods and practices, was ultimately conquered by the Assyrians and deported from the land, passing from the pages of history. The southern kingdom fared little better in the long run, under both good and bad kings, true and false worship, until God finally had enough and allowed it to be conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem, along with the marvelous temple erected by Solomon, was destroyed and the majority of the survivors taken captive to Babylon.

During seventy years of captivity, many of the Jews came to their senses, realizing that what had befallen their nation and themselves was the direct result of their disobedience to God. Babylon itself was defeated, and what had once been the southern kingdom of Judah was incorporated into the Persian provincial region Beyond the River. Under the authority of the Persian rulers, Jerusalem was restored and a new temple erected. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe at length the return of a remnant to the vicinity of Jerusalem, the rebuilding process under great opposition, the teaching of the Law, and the restoration of worship. The Levitical tithe, at least, was restored. Nonetheless, the province was subjected to heavy taxation by the Persian rulers, as it would continue to be under the subsequent rule of Greece and Rome.

Not even by stretching truth to its breaking point can today's proponents of what is falsely called tithing find scriptural support for their position from the ordinances established for Israel under the Old Testament economy. Simply put, there is nothing this side of Calvary that corresponds to it. Nonetheless, we will consider Malachi 3:8-10 separately, since this passage of scripture is the most quoted and abused proof text in their arsenal.

Chapter 7

Malachi 3:8-10

“Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”

Malachi 3:8-10 is one of the most misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misapplied passages of Scripture today, used to funnel money into churches and denominations around the world. And the sad fact of this scandal is that not only does it harm many individuals, it harms the church as a whole. Jesus said, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17b), and so it is, but the misuse of this scripture stands truth on its head and brings the Word of God into disrepute. Here’s why.

Malachi (meaning *My messenger*) is contemporaneous with Ezra–Nehemiah and likewise deals with the situation that existed in post-exilic Judah. Without a basic understanding of the ordinances established under the old covenant law, especially the tithing ordinances, and without an understanding of Ezra-Nehemiah, one will find it hard to grasp the book of Malachi.

Following the Persian ruler Cyrus’s decree allowing the Jews to return to their land and to rebuild the Temple of God in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4), the great work began, proceeding slowly under much opposition. Years and rulers came and went. Temple and worship had been restored, but all was not well in Zion. Jerusalem was still in ruins, its wall breached and its gates burned with fire. Only a handful of people lived there. The law of God had been largely forgotten and was imperfectly understood and obeyed, even by the priests.

Under the reign of Artaxerxes, the priest and scribe Ezra, an expert in the law of God, was sent by the Persian ruler to teach and to correct any deviations from the Law that he found. He was followed and assisted several years later by provincial governor Nehemiah, one of whose chief duties it was to rebuild and repopulate Jerusalem.

Under the jurisdiction of these two men, the Law was read and explained to the people, all who could understand. The past sins of the nation were confessed, and the covenant with God was renewed, signed, sealed and sworn to (Neh. 9:38-10:31). Furthermore, this covenant called

for a curse for disobedience (Neh. 10:29), just as it had under the Deuteronic covenant of Moses, (Deut. 27:26; 28:15 for example), which had just been reiterated. Ordinances were established concerning the temple-tax, offerings, firstfruits and the Levitical tithe (Neh. 10:32-39; 12:44-48).

All was now in order, but Nehemiah the governor returned to Artaxerxes for a time and, in his absence, the situation quickly deteriorated, especially amongst the priesthood. Upon his return, he had to take matters firmly in hand (Neh. 13:1-31). This is the background of Malachi, which a number of scholars feel may have been written by Ezra himself.

The letter of Malachi is addressed, first and foremost, to the priests, and only secondarily to the nation. I say nation in the sense of national identity, since they were no longer a nation in the strict sense but a Persian province. Nonetheless, they remained a separated nation in the eyes of God, who continued to work on undeterred towards his ultimate goal.

Malachi begins to upbraid the priests for their behavior in verse 1:6 and continues on through the end of the third chapter. It was they who were the root of the problem, and by their indiscretions as leaders and representatives of the people was the nation itself brought into jeopardy. Malachi 1:1-5 emphasizes the chosen nature of God's people, while 4:1-6 is an end-time prophecy. Chapter 3:1-5 has a secondary and well known prophetic sense concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, although the immediate meaning is the return of the governor Nehemiah to Jerusalem and the strong measures that he took to correct the problems that he found.

Chapters 1:6–2:3 not only rebukes, but also curses the priests for offering polluted sacrifices upon the altar. A Sunday school lesson that I reviewed recently sought to pin the blame primarily on the people for bringing such unacceptable offerings, but this is absurd. It was the duty of the priesthood to uphold the Law, which forbid the offering of a blemished animal for sacrifice. If they did agree to accept such an animal, it was their fault and could only mean that the priesthood itself was polluted and sold out to falsehood. Since the priests offering the sacrifices were to receive a portion in many cases, this explains why they turned up their noses and found the table of the Lord contemptible. Since the Levites were to tithe to the priests the best of the clean animals that they themselves had received from the people, the priests would certainly have had an ample supply with which to fulfill their own personal vows (verse 1:14).

The regular prescribed offerings were to be bought out of the proceeds of the temple-tax (Neh. 10:32-33), and it may well be also that the priests were buying unfit animals on the cheap and pocketing a portion of the money.

Chapter 2:4-17 coincides with Neh. 13:23-30a, rebuking the priests for leading the people astray, in fact leading the charge by marrying foreign women in defiance of the Law and thus bringing in false gods, worship, and customs. Only recently had Ezra corrected this problem (Ezra 9-10), but in Nehemiah's absence it soon reappeared. In addition, the priests had further sinned against God by divorcing their wives.

As stated above, Chapter 3:1-5 deals with Nehemiah's coming reforms, and in a secondary sense prophesies concerning the Son of God. Verses 6-7 bring to remembrance the renewed covenant so recently signed (Neh. 9:38-10:31) and so quickly broken, and the ordinances established (Neh. 10:32-39; 12:44-48).

"Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings." What is the writer of Malachi referring to in verse 3:8? The clear and concise answer is in Neh. 13:1-14. The storeroom set aside for the service of God had been emptied, and the room turned over to Tobiah, an Ammonite official and bitter enemy of Nehemiah. His very presence there constituted a desecration of the temple (Neh. 13:1), and the

room had to be ceremoniously cleansed after Nehemiah threw out Tobiah's belongings. The tithes that should have been stored there were to be brought in by the Levites on a regular basis as food for themselves and the priests as they served in their weekly rotations. The Levites and singers, most of whom lived outside of Jerusalem, had nothing to eat while performing their duties and had returned to their homes and fields, their appointed service to God left undone. The Levites could eat at home, but it was God who was robbed by their being unable to perform his services.

These matters were hardly a secret. Many farmers and herdsmen undoubtedly withheld their tithes, feeling that since the Levites were no longer performing their services to God, they could fend for themselves. After all, the Persians were already collecting heavy taxes from the province including agricultural products. Tithing to a corrupt religious system only increased the burden and added insult to injury. However, God is not mocked.

"Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation." Who is being cursed here in verse 3:9? Primarily it is the priests, the ones responsible for the debacle. God has already cursed them four times in verses 1:14 and 2:2 and he is still addressing them here. As a consequence of their sin and shortcoming, the nation itself has been stumbled. Only recently had they all renewed their covenant with God, with its threat of curse for disobedience. They had disobeyed and God had cursed them. Verses 10 and 11 indicate that God had brought drought and locust upon the land. Because of their refusal to serve him, he had withheld his blessing.

"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." The "windows of heaven" is rain to grow the crops. What is the meaning of this verse? Again, the answer is in Nehemiah 13. The returning governor took charge, undoubtedly corrected or dismissed the priest or priests responsible, saw that the defiled room was cleansed, and restored the Levites to their service. Seeing that the service of God was restored, the people once again gave to the Levites their portion.

Verses 11 and 12 are seldom quoted in conjunction with 8-10, but they are an integral part of it. Since they don't meet the needs of modern day tithing proof-texters, they are left out and many people do not even know that they are there. In them God continues in his promise to remove the curse of locusts and to once again supply a bountiful harvest, if only priest and people return to their obedience. Incidentally, the devourer in verse eleven is *not* Satan in this instance, as some have implied; it is simply locusts.

In verses 3:13-15, God continues to rebuke the priests. Those who had attempted to serve him in spirit and truth had become disillusioned and discouraged in their service, upon seeing corruption pass by seemingly unnoticed. But God had seen, and offers encouragement and a promise of blessing to the faithful priests through Malachi in verses 16-18.

Here is the simple, straightforward explanation of Malachi as it deals with problems and their solutions in post-exilic Judah, circa 433-425 B.C. The storeroom established for the rations of the priests and Levites as they served in their twice-yearly, week-at-a-time rotations does not somehow morph into the New Testament church. Those misusing these scriptures to teach tithing as applicable to new covenant Christians are guilty of one of two things. Either they do not understand their meaning, or they do understand and are being deliberately manipulative. Either way, God is not pleased.

Chapter 8

Jesus and the Law

The historical narrative up to this point indicates that the practice of tithing served specific purposes for the patriarchs and for the nation of Israel, but does it still apply in any sense to the Christian church today? Many think that it does, and quote a number of passages from the Gospels to strengthen their position. Here we find the earthly ministry and words of the very Son of God and they are not to be handled lightly. Indeed, they are best approached with bowed head and on bended knee.

Most Christians draw a dividing line between the Old and New Testaments, between Malachi and Matthew, but this is inaccurate and can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Indeed there is a line between the covenant of law and the covenant of grace, and it passes through the person of the Son of God, but it is to be drawn at Calvary and not at a stable in Bethlehem.

Jesus of Nazareth was born under the Law (Gal. 4:4), lived his life under the Law, walked according to the Law, did what no one else could *ever* do by fulfilling every jot and tittle of the Law (Matt. 5:18), and was nailed to the cross under the Law. But, praise his name, when the sin debt of the world had been paid in full, and he uttered the cry of victory, “It is finished”, the separating curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom and creation greeted the dawn of a bright new day (Matt. 27:50-51; Mark 15:37-38; Luke 23:45-46; John 19:30). He set us “free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2), “blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Col. 2:14).

The majority of Christians understand full well that they have been redeemed from the curse of the Law by the precious blood of Christ, not by a vain attempt to keep the letter of the Law under which all have fallen short and are guilty, deserving only of death. By the same token, they understand, or they should understand, that they are obligated to walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the deeds of the flesh. But most are not quite sure how to go about it. They spend little time reading, and less time studying, the Word of God. It is a foreign language to them, and they usually swallow whatever doctrine is taught by teachers and preachers, many of whom have a deficient understanding of it themselves.

Here is a key to understanding many of the difficult sayings contained in the Gospels. The three-year earthly ministry of the Lord was a transition (Matt. 11:11-15; Luke 16:16). Until the sin debt of the world had been paid in full at Calvary, the letter of the Mosaic Law was still in effect for the children of Israel, and *only* for the children of Israel, and the proselytes, slaves and others to whom it applied. From the days of Adam, it had never been presented to any but the children of Israel and the above mentioned (Eph. 2:11-12). Indeed, until his mission on earth was finished, Jesus' ministry was to none but the children of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6; 15:22-26; Mark 7:24-27), although he had compassion on those of the Gentiles who approached him (Matt. 8:5-17; 15:21-28; Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-30; Luke 7:1-10; 8:26-39; John 4:3-42).

Jesus was born a Jew, and the Law applied to him. Although his opponents accused him of breaking the Mosaic Law, this was due solely to their ignorance and animosity. Numerous times he corrected false understanding of the Law and provided correct interpretation, but not once did he ever break it. Had he broken the Law in any respect, he would have been guilty of sin (John 8:46), and could not have become the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb without blemish, the second Adam. We would all die in our sins and be lost for eternity.

Here is where we need to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15), distinguishing eternal and universal applications from ordinances intended only for the Jewish nation during a specific period of history and rendered null and void at the cross. The events of Calvary and of Easter morning brought an end to the entire system of animal sacrifice. There was no longer a need for temple, priest and Levite, although the Jews attempted to continue on as before until the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. as foretold by Jesus.

The Gospels contain several passages which proponents of tithing quote on a regular basis, and which we will need to consider. Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42, and Luke 18:12 are the only references to tithing to be found in the Gospels. Mark and John do not mention it at all, and the only other reference in the New Testament is to be found in Hebrews, which we will consider at length in another chapter.

In Matthew 23:23 and in Luke 11:42, Jesus is castigating the scribes and Pharisees for taking it upon themselves to extend the tithing ordinances to extremes, while neglecting justice, mercy, faith and love. But what does he mean by, "These ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone?" Any of the scribes and Pharisees who were required to tithe under the Law as explained in previous chapters would be held responsible for doing so. They had themselves extended the original tithe of produce to include all edible plants. I have not been able to determine if this man made extension of the Law was imposed upon household vegetable gardens, but this may have been the case (Matt. 23:4, Acts 15:10). At any rate, since they had so construed the ordinance of tithing and were proud of their strict observance of it, God would hold them responsible for fulfilling their vows. These tithes were only of foodstuffs and must be given to the Levites. They do not apply to anyone today.

In Luke 18:9-14 we find the example of the Pharisee bragging upon himself, including his paying tithes of all that he possessed. If this included products outside of the prescribed ordinances or currency other than redemption money, it could only have been given as a freewill offering. Tax collectors were not producers of agricultural products and thus exempt from tithing under the Law. The tithing system has been gone for nearly two thousand years, but the illustration of pride and humility stands forever.

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least

commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:17-20, and the shorter Luke 16:17 are passages that have stumbled and confused many, but this needn’t be the case. First of all, Jesus was addressing his Jewish countrymen and the Mosaic Law was still in effect. Jesus himself did what no one else could *ever* do and fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Law, abolishing by his perfect sacrifice the old law of ordinances (Col. 2:15; Eph. 2:15 et al.). It shouldn’t take a theologian to determine which laws and principles are meant for eternal application, and which pertain to the Israel of history. We do not stone adulterers, Sabbath breakers, and various others, nor look askance on men for rounding the corners of their beards, nor observe hundreds of other culture bound laws and ordinances. Well, most of us don’t anyway, there being exceptions. And one exception is the embarrassing twisting of the tithe into a “beginning point” of Christian stewardship as my own Southern Baptist denomination is wont to put it. Does our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees who were counting upon their own merits to earn acceptance with God? You bet. It is the righteousness of the Son of God, who has washed away our sins with his own blood (2 Cor. 5:21). Seeing that we have been given the unmerited gift of eternal life, we ought to walk in the Spirit, following him in the paths of righteousness.

“Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38). I cringe when I hear these words of our Lord abused. Proponents of the “health and wealth gospel” and many tithing advocates often paraphrase this into the well-worn cliché, “You can’t out give God”, meaning that the more money that you give to God the more he will bless you financially and otherwise. It means nothing of the sort (do the *exegesis*). The previous verses provide the context, and refer to how to treat others, including our enemies. God will deal with us as we have dealt with others. The early Christians knew exactly what our Lord meant, showing the love of God even to their persecutors and executioners. It was this witness, and not a cheap investment scheme, that turned the Roman Empire upside down.

The beautiful and heartwarming story of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4) is seldom used by sincere proponents of tithing, since the illustration does not fit. First, it was a freewill offering to the treasury in the temple, not a tithe of foodstuffs to the Levites. Hers was a sacrificial gift from the heart. Perhaps she did this on more than one occasion, but had she done it on a regular basis it would likely have resulted in her death. Seeing that she was poor, she should herself have been a receiver of the poor tithe. Sadly, there have been unscrupulous preachers who have robbed even poor believers out of their daily bread, their social security checks and their meager savings to line their own pockets and the coffers of the church. God will be their judge. By contrast, Jesus advised the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22) to sell what he had and distribute to the poor, not to the temple. When salvation came to the crooked tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8), he vowed to give half of his goods to the poor. Now those are illustrations that you won’t often find preached from the pulpit or broadcast over the airwaves in this day and age.

By the earthly days of God’s Son, the scribes and Pharisees had taken the Mosaic Law, intended for the good of all Israel, to ridiculous extremes, and the Jews groaned under the burden of their persnickety rules and regulations. Nonetheless, since they sat in Moses seat, Jesus taught

the people to follow their instructions but not their example (Matt. 23:2,3). As long as the Law was in effect, Jesus kept it and advocated it (Matt. 8:2-4), but the time was at hand when the yoke of the Law (Acts 15:10) was to be broken and a new yoke applied (Matt. 11:28-30).

No, there is not a shred of support in the Gospels for the commandments of men (Matthew 15:9) that pass for a doctrine of tithing in the Christian church today. However, Jesus did teach a principle of stewardship that is applicable for all time, and I will reserve comment on that for a later chapter.

Chapter 9

Acts and the Epistles

Initially, Christianity, or the Way as it was known at the time, was regarded as one of a number of sects within Judaism, as were the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. This is also how the early Jewish believers regarded themselves. The long awaited Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and they had received him, if others Jews had not. The majority of early Jewish Christians, including the apostles of Jesus, did not depart from the religion of their fathers, along with its regulations and customs, but rather incorporated the new beliefs into it. They continued to observe the Sabbath, worshiping at synagogue and temple, and also met together, especially on the Lord's Day, to worship, share the teaching and observe the rites of the new faith.

Judaism, by its very nature, was not and is not an evangelistic religion. It was marked by exclusiveness, separatism, and racial purity, although proselytes from amongst the Gentiles were accepted.

Following the martyrdom of Stephan (Acts 7:57-60), a great persecution arose against the Jerusalem church, with the future apostle Paul (Saul as he was then called) leading the charge. This resulted in many believers fleeing for their lives and safety throughout the region, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ as they went. Thus, from the fires of persecution, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) was begun in earnest.

As time passed, and the Gospel spread, the church at Jerusalem was presented with a quandary. The Holy Spirit was falling on Gentile believers, quite apart from their conversion to Judaism. Phillip had preached to the Samaritans with saving results, the apostles Peter and John joining in the work (Acts 8). Peter was convinced through a vision that God made no distinction amongst nationalities (Acts 10; 11:1-18). The arch persecutor himself, Saul (Paul) was miraculously converted and commissioned to bring the faith to both Jew and Gentile, and especially to the Gentiles. The Jewish Christians were amazed at this turn of events, but not all were accepting or appreciative.

When Paul and Barnabas (who was a Levite) returned to Antioch from the completion of the initial missionary journey, they called the church together and related all that God had

accomplished through their efforts, including how great a door of faith had been opened to the Gentiles (Acts 14:26-28). Then certain individuals came there from Judea, teaching that it was necessary for the Gentiles to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses, or they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). This resulted in a great conflict of opinion, so that a delegation from the church at Antioch, headed by Paul and Barnabas, was appointed to bring the matter before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2-3).

When the mother church met to consider the issue, believers from the sect of the Pharisees voiced the opinion that it was indeed necessary for the Gentiles to be circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15: 4-5). Following a speech by Peter, James the brother of the Lord (as distinguished from James the apostle) and leader of the church at Jerusalem, passed his decision. With the consent of the apostles, elders, and the church, they chose Judas Barsabbas and Silas from among their number to return with the delegation to Antioch with a letter stating the decision of the Holy Spirit and the church. The letter, to be vouched for by Judas Barsabbas and Silas, was to inform that Gentile believers were under no obligation to the Law of Moses, but to abstain from what had been sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what had been strangled, and from fornication (Acts 15: 6-33; 16:4; 21:25). Thus, they could show respect to their more scrupulous Jewish brothers and sisters, and be more readily accepted by the same.

There we have the distinction, from the Word of God itself, as to how the apostles and leaders of the mother church viewed the obligations of Jewish and Gentile believers. All alike were under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21), but the Gentiles, who had never been under the Mosaic Law in the first place, were free from the laws and statutes that pertained to Jews only. The Jewish Christians' realization that they themselves were now free from these same laws and statutes was slow in coming (Acts 15:21; 21:17-25). Jewish Christians who had been obligated to pay tithes of foodstuffs to the Levites were no doubt continuing to do so, although the sacrificial economy under the Law had passed away in truth. And under this economy, no tithe would be accepted from the hands of a Gentile.

The epistles of Paul relate an ongoing conflict with traveling Judaizers, who disputed the Gentiles' freedom and sought, sincerely no doubt, to bring them under the old yoke of the Mosaic Law. Even Peter and Barnabas were afraid of them, as Paul relates in depth in his letter to the Galatians. This centered chiefly on circumcision, but also extended to other ordinances as a reading of the Epistles amply illustrate. The references are too numerous to note here, but the Epistles themselves are easily read in an evening or two.

As stated previously, there is no direct reference to tithing anywhere in the New Testament, other than the passages in Matthew, Luke and Hebrews. Nonetheless, believers in the continued validity of the practice quote chapter and verse in an attempt to find support for their positions. We will consider the usual "proof texts" from Acts and the Epistles at this point, and cover Hebrews 7 at length in the following chapter.

A tithing tract that I have before me as I write this uses Acts 4:34-35 as an example of how Christians should give liberally to the church. For some reason, verse 32 is left out of the message, which in its appeal for funds seems to disregard the historical context entirely. Many Jewish believers had been persecuted and ostracized by their fellow countrymen and had suffered considerable material loss in the process. But, in the joy of their newfound faith, the Jerusalem Christians recognized themselves for what they really were, one body with Christ as the Head (Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). They had all things in common, freely sharing their money and possessions with a glad heart, as any had need (Acts 4:32,34-35; 2 Cor. 8:13-15). This is not tithing by any stretch of the imagination. How many modern day churches are

demanding a tithe from even their poorest members, leaving them in the lurch rather than seeing to it that their needs are met? This is not what the early Christians did.

One of the most misused passages of Scripture in support of tithing is 1 Corinthians 4:2, “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” Well, as a cardinal principle that goes without saying. We are all stewards of God’s resources (we have none of our own), including the time, talents, and material possessions allotted to us by the Father. Nonetheless, the passage of scripture from which the verse is twisted from its context refers to the apostles’ stewardship of the mysteries of God with which they had been entrusted. It has nothing at all to say concerning the disposition of material resources. Those who take it upon themselves to quote Scripture out of context in order to prop up their own positions are being untruthful and dishonest, hardly commendable stewards of God’s Word. Were Paul to enter a Christian church today and find his letters used to support a defunct Jewish ordinance, he would doubtless tear his robe. Needless to say, the repercussions would not be pleasant.

The improper use of the first part of 1 Corinthians 16:2 to support regular Sunday giving to the local assembly is the high water mark of tithing proponents mishandling of the Bible. Ends, however worthy, do not justify means, especially when this means resorting to falsehood. The quote is usually given as follows, “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.” The end of the sentence, “that there be no gatherings when I come”, is mysteriously left out. Such is the work of the slicers and splicers of scripture.

Here is the passage in its entirety. “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem. And if it be meet that I go also, they shall go with me,” (I Cor. 16:1-4).

Well! That changes the perspective considerably. But what is this “collection for the saints” that Paul is referring to? As noted above, Christians situated in the very heart of Judaism had suffered severely for their faith in Jesus Christ. In addition to this, a severe famine, caused by a succession of bad harvests, swept the region during the reign of Claudius Caesar (AD 41-54) as foretold by Agabus the prophet (Acts 11:27-28). Beginning from Antioch, gifts of money and possibly other material goods were sent to the relief of the poor believers in Jerusalem, out of Christian love and acknowledgement of the spiritual debt owed the mother church by their Gentile brothers and sisters in the Lord (Acts 11:29-30; 24:17; Rom. 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9; Gal. 2:10). It is incredible how this beautiful love offering can be turned on its head in support of a fabricated doctrine of tithing.

The early Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, did not have church buildings, grounds, clergy and staff as would come much later and as we know today. Believers worshipped at the temple, while it still stood, and in the synagogue, as well as in each other’s homes and in open-air assemblies. Localized bodies of believers, including the leaders, continued to work at their respective trades in order to support themselves and to have something to share with the poor, especially fellow Christians. It was expected that the apostles and others laboring in God’s fields would find shelter and sustenance amongst fellow believers as they traveled about teaching and sharing the Gospel. Jesus himself taught this (Matt. 10:1-13; Mark 6:7-10; Luke 9:1-4; 10:1-7; 1 Cor. 9:14), as did Paul, although it was Paul’s custom along with his fellow worker Barnabas to labor with his own hands, sharing the good news free of charge (I Cor. 9:1-18; 2 Cor. 11:7-9; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:10-20; 1 Thess. 2:5-9; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; 3 John 5-8). Although we find the

rudiments of support for Christian leaders and workers in these passages, there is nothing here that would lend support to a doctrine of tithing. In the next chapter, we will turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews and consider references to Melchizedek and tithing found there.

Chapter 10

Hebrews

It is essential that we have some concrete background concerning the letter to the Hebrews in order to arrive at a correct interpretation of the passages being considered. First, it is doubtful that the writer was the apostle Paul, a conclusion that most interpreters agree upon based chiefly on style. Whoever the writer was, there is general agreement on the following. The letter was written to a congregation of Jewish Christians, quite possibly in Jerusalem, who were in the process of undergoing persecution for their faith, and in danger of slipping back into Judaism proper. This is an important consideration, since for the most part Christianity was considered to be a sect within Judaism and most Jewish Christians simply modified their beliefs and modes of worship to include it. Many of the Jewish leaders themselves had become believers.

Although the apostles and other leaders of the Jerusalem church had made specific instruction concerning Gentile believers (Acts 15 and 21), finding no necessity for them to observe Jewish laws and ordinances, there were many in their number who disagreed. The apostle Paul had a running confrontation with these Judaizers, who insisted that the Gentiles be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Indeed, the majority of Jewish Christians rejected the person and letters of Paul and became a sect on the fringes of Christianity that ultimately passed from the pages of history.

Most Jewish Christians, including the apostles, continued to observe the Sabbath and to worship at the temple and synagogue, and there is little doubt that they also continued to observe the other laws and ordinances, including tithing for those who had been obligated to pay tithes. They also met together in house churches and open-air assemblies on the Lord's Day, and incorporated baptism and the Lord's Supper into their worship. In short, they had a difficult time accepting that the old covenant of law and ordinances had passed away with the Savior's final words "It is finished", that the middle wall of separation (Eph. 2:14; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45; Heb. 9:8,24; 10: 19-20) had been broken down forever, and that a new day had dawned for the

Jews and all peoples of the world. They continued trying to sew new patches on old garments and to put new wine into old wineskins (Matt. 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39) and to this day many Christians are trying to do the same.

The intent of the author of Hebrews is to prove the superiority of Jesus Christ and the new covenant forever established by him. The old covenant, with its tabernacle and temple, its priesthood, its sacrifices, its regulations and ordinances, had been but a shadow and type, pointing to the perfect that was to come and did come in the person of the Son of God. Its day was over, and its attempted continuation on the part of the Jews was now a meaningless exercise in futility. The nation for the most part had rejected their Messiah, and even for those who had been born again through him, their comprehension was dim and slow in coming. Soon, the Romans would destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and the means to carry out the old covenant would be blotted out forever as foreseen by Jesus himself (Matt. 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 19:41-44; 21:5-6).

When we last looked at Melchizedek in Genesis 14, it was from the perspective of a Canaanite war spoils protocol. But, there are other, more involved references to this mysterious figure of history that we will need to consider in seeking to unravel the question of tithing.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews makes a strong comparison between the Canaanite priest-king of Salem and Jesus Christ, and refers back to Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 to do so, these being the only references to Melchizedek to be found in the Old Testament. Chapter seven of Hebrews includes the only New Testament reference to tithing to be found outside of the Gospels.

There is no doubt that the Davidic Psalm 110 is a prophecy of the coming Christ. Jesus himself refers to it (Matt. 22:41-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20: 41-44), as does Peter (Acts 2:34-35), Paul (1 Cor. 15:25), and the writer to the Hebrews (1:13; 5:6,10; 10:13; 6:20; and 7:17,21).

It is our writer's intent to prove the superiority of Jesus Christ to Abraham, Moses, angels and the entire old covenant system with its temple, its altar, its ordinances, and its Levitical priesthood. His hearers must understand that Judaism had died as intended giving birth to Christianity, and that for Christians, even Jewish Christians, there could be no turning back.

The writer quotes Psalm 110:1, "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." There is no argument concerning the interpretation of this passage. It is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, the Christ, and no one in heaven or earth save he has the authority to sit at the right hand of God the Father. The writer proves his point that this prophecy has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Psalm 110:4 reads, "The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." The writer goes to great lengths to prove that the old priesthood has been abolished and replaced by the eternal high priesthood of the Son of God, who fulfilled the requirements of the Law in its entirety, paid the sin debt of the world with his perfect sacrifice, provided open access to God through the interface of his own person, and ever lives to make intercession for those who come to God through him.

His argumentation is somewhat confusing to the modern mind, but to the Jewish readers of his day it made absolute sense. It was necessary to explain just how Jesus, of the tribe of Judah, qualified to be a priest in the first place. Only a genealogically certified priest in the line of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, could serve according to the Law. Not only would Jesus himself have sinned according to the Law if he had ventured beyond the court of Israel in the temple, he would have been taken out and stoned to death. But Psalm 110 indicates that the Messiah would be a priest of the order of Melchizedek, who not only was not of the Aaronic family of Levi, but

not even of the Israelite nation.

In presenting his case, the writer is following established rabbinic method, which gave four meanings, *Peshat*, *Remaz*, *Derush*, and *Sod* to any passage of Scripture. Rather than interpreting the references to Melchizedek according to *Peshat*, the literal meaning, he is using *Sod*, the allegorical or inner meaning, in which it was permissible to depart from the literal context and to construct an argument even from the silences of Scripture.

A careful consideration of the references to Melchizedek in Psalm 110 and in Hebrews clearly shows that the Canaanite priest was being presented as a type of the coming Messiah, and not as a pre-incarnate manifestation of the same. This is where many go astray in their interpretation. Melchizedek's one and only appearance within the Old Testament gives no hint as to his lineage, which was obviously Canaanite, or to what became of him after his meeting with Abraham. The fact that there is no record of his parentage would immediately disqualify him or anyone else from even being considered an Israelite priest under the Law. Neither is there a record of his death, which obviously occurred, so there is no hint as to whom his priesthood passed to. The Christ who lives is the *priest forever* referred to, not Melchizedek, whose death is not recorded. *After the order of Melchizedek* establishes that the Christ is not of the Aaronic lineage of the tribe of Levi, and that he replaces this temporary arrangement with his own eternal high priesthood.

To the writer, Melchizedek is a type of Christ, who by rabbinic reasoning is the one blessing and receiving tithes from the patriarch, who by extension is the representative of the Israelite nation and the Levitical priesthood. Since the lesser is blessed by the greater, the superiority of Christ is established.

It is obvious that it is the writer's purpose throughout his entire letter to prove, as did Paul, that Christ is the end of the Law. The tithing reference in chapter seven is clearly to help establish Jesus Christ as superior to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation and the tribe of Levi, from whence came Moses and Aaron, and the Levitical priesthood. That is the sole intent. It is not to reintroduce support of an imperfect and temporary system forever put aside at Calvary. Tithing advocates will find no support for their argument here.

In the next chapter, we will briefly consider stewardship as it was practiced in the years that followed, and how the current practice of tithing came about.

Chapter 11

Doctrine Distorted

The early Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, paid a dear price for their allegiance to Jesus Christ. Persecution was rampant, including imprisonment, torture, execution, and the loss of homes, jobs, and material resources. Love for their Lord unto death, love for one another, and love for humanity extending even to their enemies set them apart from others. This witness was a major factor in Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine (306-337).

During these early days of the kingdom, a church hierarchy, as would later emerge, did not exist. The apostles had appointed leaders in the various churches, and other positions of servanthood were added as needed. All Christians, leaders included, were expected to work at their trades; indeed, many were slaves. Peddlers of God's Word were not viewed in a favorable light.

Many of the early Christians followed an ascetic lifestyle, content to live in utmost simplicity while sharing the fruits of their labors with the poor. This was in keeping with the many admonitions of their Lord and the Apostle Paul, which they took quite seriously. A reading of the earliest church leaders, or Anti-Nicene Fathers as they are called, bears proof that voluntary collections were taken up, usually on the Lord's Day, and especially upon the occasion of the Lord's Supper, and distributed to those in need.

Tithing does not begin to impose upon the church until the days of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in North Africa, who was converted in 245 or 246 A.D. and martyred in 258 A.D. Cyprian's opinion that church leaders relinquish all secular labors and depend solely upon the tithe was only binding upon his own small sphere of influence. Christianity at the time had no one center, but many competing centers, Rome, Jerusalem, Syrian Antioch, and Ephesus being among them. Still, Cyprian himself had relinquished a sizeable fortune at his baptism and lived the ascetic lifestyle that he recommended of all church leaders, taking only a bare sustenance from tithes and offerings and distributing the balance to the poor.

By this time, the transformation of "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) from the pure and simple doctrine of Christ and the apostles to the powerful church-state colossus that it would become was well under way. The priesthood of all believers, in which

anyone with a gift endowed by the Holy Spirit was allowed to teach, preach and administer sacraments was being eroded. Intended to replace the Old Testament system of high priest, priest and Levite, it was rapidly degenerating into a new hierarchy of bishops, presbyters and deacons, erecting an artificial wall of separation between the new classes of clergy and laity.

Not until *The Council of Tours*, 567 A.D. and *The Council of Macon*, 585 A.D. were decrees requiring tithing enacted. These were of a regional nature only and were not backed by civil legislation.

Following the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church increasingly immersed itself in politics; often acquiring by intrigue, mandate and brute force what could not be won by faith in God and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Citizens of the realm were “converted”, whether they wanted to be or not, and considered to be Christians. Competing centers of the faith solidified at Constantinople and Rome, with Rome gaining permanent ascendancy upon the coronation of the powerful Frankish king Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day of the year 800.

Many laws requiring tithing in support of the state church came to be put into place and enforced throughout the realm. Still, tithes were usually in the form of produce. Space does not permit a detailed listing of these, which varied over time and locality. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) ordered that tithes in support of the church be given priority over all other taxes.

Especially prior to the invention of the printing press, the majority of the populace was illiterate. Lay individuals were discouraged, if not outright prohibited from reading or studying the Word of God for themselves, or from becoming involved in church affairs. Thiessen’s *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979 revision, page 45, gives an excellent summary of these matters.

“During the Middle Ages, schoolmen put the creed above the Bible. While most of them still sought to support the creed with the Scriptures, tradition became increasingly important. The state church assumed the authority of interpreting Scripture, and the study of Scripture by laymen was restricted and regarded with suspicion, if not absolutely forbidden.”

During the time of the Reformation, when the Bible was translated into the tongue of the common people, the established church put severe restrictions on the reading of the Bible on the ground that laymen were incapable of interpreting it. The reader was not to seek to interpret for himself. Many laid down their lives for the simple reason that they were the followers of Christ and put their trust in the Scriptures. Laws were even made to prohibit the publishing of the Bible.”

During the period of history known as the Enlightenment, governments began to divest themselves of church-state entanglements, although to this day some countries continue to exact taxes on behalf of the church. The United States has never done so.

Few churches and denominations today practice mandatory tithing from their members, although a good number teach it as an expected standard of giving for all Christians. Some bodies do require the practice for holders of church offices and positions, however, and /or for consideration of membership or continued membership.

Chapter 12

Some Counterarguments Considered

Proponents of the tradition of tithing are on pretty shaky ground when it comes to being able to back up their positions from Scripture and the history of the early Christian church. At this point we will briefly consider some of their reinforcing arguments, although part of this material will be repetitive as to what has been covered before.

Firstly, they present the argument that, since tithing predates the Mosaic Law, it remains in effect even though the Law was set aside at Calvary. To this I respond that tithing, along with circumcision and sacrifices, were all prior ordinances incorporated into the Law, modified by the Law, validated by the Law and made an integral part of the Law. All were rendered null and void at the cross as stressed in the teachings of Paul. The decision of the Jerusalem church defined in Acts 15 and 21, as pertaining to the Gentile believers, while retaining conciliatory ordinances to avoid blood, what has been strangled, and meat sacrificed to idols, and to avoid fornication, makes no mention of it. And of course, Gentiles could not tithe in any event.

Another attempt at persuasion is that if Jesus did not directly abolish the tithe, he meant for it to continue. A tract published in 2006 by the Florida Baptist Convention includes the following argument. *“Jesus stated that He came not to replace the law but to fulfill it. In no instance did Jesus abolish the tithe. When He intended to destroy or condemn a practice, those who heard Him were not confused about what He meant. In fact, it was because He said He would destroy the Temple that they crucified Him. Jesus was clear on the things He abolished.”* This line of reasoning, if I may so dignify it, shows a rather deficient understanding of the Word of God and Christian doctrine. It is presented quite often, albeit not with the added misunderstanding of the reason for Jesus’ crucifixion. The Law continued in full force for the Jews, and only for the Jews, until it was nailed to the Savior’s cross. Jesus did not “abolish” the Sabbath either and Jewish Christians continued to observe it along with the Lord’s Day, but Gentile Christians observed the Lord’s Day only. I have dealt with the subject at length in the chapter *Jesus and the Law* and elsewhere.

An argument that has resurfaced of late, although not presented in direct reference to tithing, pits the teaching of Jesus and that of Paul against one another, as being two strains of early

Christianity. This is hardly worthy of refutation by any competent scholar and, if true, would destroy the integrity of the New Testament. It stems in part from the fact that Paul's teaching concerning the Law was rejected by many Jewish Christians, especially by those belonging to the Pharisees. Nonetheless, the Gospel preached by Paul was given to him in direct revelation by the risen Lord, and confirmed by the apostles in Jerusalem (Gal. 1-2:10; 2 Peter 3:15-16).

Some fall back on 2 Timothy 3:16-17, that "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." So it is, but there are those who are unable to rightly handle the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). They cannot separate allegorical from literal teaching, discern the progressive nature of revelation, understand the difference between the old and new covenants, deal with prophecy, or unravel doctrine of any but the most basic nature. They have yet to pass from milk to solid food (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12-14). All young believers are babes in Christ, and that is to be expected, but many remain in that state all their lives, some even professing to be teachers.

The last position we will consider is that, since tithing is not mentioned in the New Testament after the Gospels save for the qualifying arguments of Hebrews 7, the practice is assumed to be valid and in force. This is the *argument from silence*, and can be likewise rebutted. The Old Testament was the only written Scripture possessed by the very early church until the letters of Paul and the other apostles began to circulate, along with apostolic preaching material later incorporated into the early Gospels. Other letters, sermons and the like no doubt existed, such as the hymn preserved in 1 Timothy 3:16. The argument is usually stated that the early Christians were incorporating tithing from the Mosaic Law as given in the Old Testament. That stance shows a seriously deficient understanding of the practice under the old covenant, as explained in earlier chapters. Again, I state that the ordinances of the Mosaic Law had been replaced by the new covenant. Not only had they come to an end in truth for the Jews, they had never applied to the Gentiles in the first place. Paul was ruthless in his opposition to those who would attempt to apply the yoke of the defunct Jewish Law to the Gentiles. That tithing is never mentioned in his letters is proof, rather, that the practice did not exist. What the early Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, *did* do was freely share their abundance with one another and the poor, so that no one suffered lack. This was the *grace giving* taught by Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles, and practiced by the early church.

Let us continue on in the following chapters to consider some of the pitfalls of the practice that has produced a mixed blessing within the family of God.

Chapter 13

It is Corban

Marisol tossed restlessly, and sat up for the fifth time to adjust the pajama top that she was very unused to wearing. “This thing has gotta go,” she thought crossly, unbuttoning it and pulling it off. Then she put it back on. “The kids,” she thought. “Better not do that.”

Now she was wide-awake, and it was barely four o’clock. Turning on her side, she regarded her sleeping husband. “This kind of sucks,” she thought, sadly. Privacy and intimacy were both at a premium. She tried and failed to go back to sleep, and now it was four-thirty.

Marisol got up and tripped over the corner of the air mattress on the living room floor. Now her nose was bleeding.

“Huh, what just happened?” Raymond asked groggily.

“Oh, shut up, you!” Marisol snapped, pinching her nose shut, and heading for the bathroom.

“What did I do?” Raymond asked.

“Nothing!” his wife replied, turning on her heels. “Totally, freaking nothing!”

“Sheesh!” Raymond said, and turned back to sleep.

Abuela had fallen again, bruising herself badly, but fortunately sustaining no further injury. Marisol’s mother had called from Indiana with the news.

“Baby, I hate to do this to you,” Maria Gomez told her daughter, “but Abuela will have to stay with you. She has nowhere else to go, and she can’t be by herself anymore. She can’t be with us on the road, and she can’t go back to Mexico.”

Marisol was stunned, but did not hesitate in accepting her duty. “Sure, Mama, she can come. We’ll take good care of her.”

“Put Carlos on the couch, Marisol.”

“No, Mama, Abuela can take our room. It has its own bath. You know how much she has to use the bathroom.”

“What about you and Ray?”

“Don’t worry, Mama, we’ll work it out, really.”

“Put Carlos on the couch.”

Raymond and Marisol are displaying obedience to God's command to provide for our families, whom he has placed in our safekeeping. The care of our children, grandchildren in many cases, aged parents, grandparents, and all other family members who live in our homes, or for whom we share responsibility, should be our prime consideration. I am not referring to music players and designer jeans, but the provision of food, shelter, clothing, and proper medical care. These basic necessities of life must take priority over our own desires, and even over our monetary offerings to God.

And yet, there are many believers who, being under the thumb of a dictatorial or coercive church leadership, fail to do just that, even to the point of depriving their own children of proper care. Sad to say, I even remember a case where a pastor, upon finding that a young mother had no money, had the nerve to tell her that she should tithe her food stamps.

Jesus reprimanded the scribes and Pharisees for teaching that a person may waive the responsibility of caring for needy parents by declaring that what help they may have received from their child was *corban*, that is, dedicated to God by a vow (Matt. 15:3-9; Mark 7: 9-13).

Paul taught that those who did not provide for their own, and especially those living under the same roof, had denied the faith and were worse than unbelievers (1Tim. 5:4,8).

True enough, there is in the United States, and many other nations, a "social safety net" in place, to assure that the basic needs of the poor and indigent are met. In many parts of the world, this is not so. Even in America, countless individuals, especially the young and the aged, go to bed and wake up hungry, and do not have their most urgent illnesses cared for. Needless to say, God is not pleased.

Chapter 14

Shooting the Wounded

Dell and Jamila had attended the same church for nineteen years, and were faithful tithers until Dell suffered a debilitating stroke. In time, Dell recovered much of the movement in the left side of his body, but was never able to return to his trade as a pipe fitter, and was placed on permanent disability.

Struggling financially, Dell and Jamila continued to give to the church, but the amount came to considerably less than ten percent of their income. Although Dell had served faithfully as a deacon for over ten years, he was never considered for the position again. In keeping with the church guidelines, Jamila was asked to voluntarily resign her position on the church property committee.

Sam and Alicia had been attending their local assembly for twelve years, and tithing faithfully for the past seven. Sam was an executive for a national insurance company, and Alicia a stay-at-home mom. That is, until Sam's job was outsourced or "right sized", in Orwellian terminology, to a country overseas.

Confident at first of Sam finding a comparable position, the family lived off their savings and Sam's unemployment check, and continued their level of giving. As weeks turned into months, however, their financial picture began to look bleak. In spite of seminars, networking meetings, and evening classes at the local college to bolster his resume, it became increasingly apparent that Sam was not likely to find a comparable position. To add insult to injury, the lesser positions that he applied for found him to be "overqualified".

As the savings dropped to zero, and with the unemployment checks running out, Alicia found a clerical position for \$10.50 an hour. Unable to afford day care for their two small children, Sam stayed home to watch them. Finally, he accepted a part time evening position at the local college, teaching the profession that he found himself unable to return to. The couple's combined salaries add up to less than half of Sam's former income, and they no longer have health and dental insurance, but at least child-care is not a problem.

Behind in their bills, and with their mortgage company threatening foreclosure, Sam and Alicia are currently giving nothing at all to the local assembly, and because of that, they are too embarrassed to come.

Dave and Nancy's youngest child, Savannah, was diagnosed with a terminal illness. In spite of their insurance, medical expenses were wiping them out. Nancy resigned her job in order to stay at home with their sick child, although this made it necessary for them to accept financial help from both Dave and Nancy's parents.

In spite of their hardship, the couple had to endure the incessant drumbeat from the pulpit, that the giving of at least ten percent of pre-tax income was the minimum requirement of all Christians, no matter how much or how little they had, and that God would withhold his blessings from those who refused to give accordingly.

Dave, Nancy, and their remaining children are presently unchurched.

Bob's supper was cold by the time the police officers knocked on the door, and reluctantly informed Sara that there had been an accident and that her husband, and father of their three young children would not be coming home again.

The couple had not been tithers, but had been struggling to achieve that level of giving, at the constant reminder of their church, in spite of being unable to put aside anything for a rainy day, retirement, or their children's education.

Sara's income was not large, and much of that went for child-care expenses, and to pay for many of the repairs that Bob had once done himself around the house. Fortunately, the house itself was now paid for, from the majority of Bob's life insurance. Sara realized that she would be financially unable to pay for her children's education, and invested the balance of the proceeds in a college fund.

The bereaved family continued to attend Sunday school and church. After all, they needed comfort and assurance now more than ever. Respectfully, no one badgered Sara about the small amount that she placed in the offering envelope each payday—for awhile.

When the yearly stewardship drive rolled around, each church household was visited by one of the three pastors, and the deacon assigned to that particular individual or family. Sara greeted the senior pastor, and her deacon at the door. Both men had been extremely comforting and helpful in the weeks after the tragedy, and Sara was grateful.

But now, things got rather personal. Sara was asked if she intended to go ahead and tithe the proceeds of Bob's life insurance, now that the house was paid for, and that the remaining balance would more than cover that amount. When Sara explained that the money had been invested for the children's education, she received a lecture about seeing to the church first and letting God take care of the rest.

When Sara revealed how she was struggling financially, they reminded her that it was still her duty to tithe from that amount, and even suggested that she remarry, so that she and the children would have a more substantial means of support. Sara was an attractive woman, and one of the men of the church had asked her out several times, although she had respectfully declined.

"I'm still in love with Bob," Sara said tearfully to her next-door neighbor. "I'm not ready to start dating again. I know the kids need a dad, and maybe I will someday, but not now. How could they be so cruel?"

There is no need to expound on the above illustrations. They can be duplicated over and again from real life, and speak for themselves.

Chapter 15

Respecter of Persons

All Christians are equal, but some Christians are more equal than others (apologies to George Orwell, *Animal Farm*).

Nelson and Mindy had not been in church since childhood, but, as is often the case, they came to attend through their children. Their older daughter was invited to Freedom Church's summer fun camp by a schoolmate, resulting in all three children taking part. Soon, Mindy began to attend Sunday school and services along with the children, followed in due time by Nelson.

As the Spirit moved in their lives, the family was increasingly drawn into the life of the church, and one Spring morning Nelson and Mindy came forward during the invitation and accepted God's free offer of eternal life.

Now, Freedom required that all who wished to join their fellowship as members first complete a series of classes designed to teach the basics of Christian doctrine and the requirements of church membership. One of the requirements was tithing.

But Nelson and Mindy were not in a position to tithe, or even to come close. They gave on a regular basis, and sacrificed to do so, but that was not good enough for the good folks at Freedom. Denied full fellowship, Nelson and Mindy eventually drifted away and, along with their children, are presently unchurched.

Handicapped from childhood as the result of polio, Charlene completed high school and was able to support herself as a seamstress. Traveling back and forth between her small apartment and work on the city bus was exhausting in itself, but Charlene still managed to board the bus and attend church services each week. In spite of her meager income she was faithful in bringing her small offering, believing in her heart that it was her duty, and that God would put it to good use.

As the years went by, it became apparent to Charlene that she would never marry, although

she had longed for a family of her own. A strong believer, and well versed in God's Word, she came to feel his call to teach a children's Sunday school class.

Sadly, even this was denied her—because her gifts to God came short of a tithe. Not only was Charlene badly hurt by those who should have known better, so was her Lord, and the children and the church shortchanged from want of a loving, dedicated teacher.

Antoine loved the Lord. From childhood in his native Haiti, he would never miss a church service, rain or shine. Arriving in the United States as a young teenager, he was enrolled in school, struggled to succeed, and graduated with honors. He longed to attend seminary, but his family was poor and could not afford to send him. Furthermore, he was expected to help provide for the immediate needs of his mother and his younger siblings. Antoine became a construction worker.

As the years passed, Antoine married and became the father of a son, and four daughters. His family attended their local church at every opportunity, and Angelica, his wife, taught afternoon children's Bible study classes from their home. Well versed in God's Word, and using every opportunity to grow in and apply that knowledge, Antoine and Angelica were well respected within their church.

But the family was poor in this world's goods; they often had nothing to give back to God except themselves, and of that they gave unselfishly. On several occasions, Antoine's name was put forth to serve as deacon—and each time it was rejected by the pastor because the family did not tithe.

When churches set up standards such as the above, which exclude Christians from full fellowship and participation in the life of the church, know of a certainty that they are teaching as doctrine the commandments of men (Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7).

James, the brother of our Lord, made plain in what is now the second chapter of his epistle how we are to show no distinction between rich and poor within the body of Christ. Yet, many churches and denominations are guilty of committing this sin on a regular basis. Repentance is long overdue.

Chapter 16

Resentment

Jason was perturbed. The bills had piled up while Leah was on maternity leave, and the extra expense of a new addition to the family was putting a major strain on the budget. On top of everything else, Christmas and Donna's birthday were right around the corner. He and Leah could and would slash spending on each other, but Chris and Donna would be expecting Santa to be generous. Little Sierra would need gifts as well, even though she was too small to understand what was going on. Jason felt bad—and guilty; sometimes he resented himself for getting his wife pregnant again, especially now that things were tough. Worse, he was struggling with resentment towards Leah and the baby. "Real Christian men aren't supposed to feel this way," he chided himself, but he did.

Jason and Leah had tithed, as was expected, since joining Friendly Valley five years ago, and as an accountant, Jason was soon elected to serve on the finance committee. Friendly Valley did not require proof of income, as some churches are accustomed to do, but Jason could pretty well tell who tithed and who didn't. It irked him that a good number of the members were not "doing their fair share," including some in his Bible study group. Ben and Darlene Hurley irked him especially.

The Hurley's fourteen year old daughter, Angela, had gotten in with the wrong crowd at her public school, and had been caught using drugs. As part of the solution to their problem, the Hurleys had decided to place Angela in a Christian school. This decision had placed the family's budget in the red, and necessitated some financial juggling, part of which was to reduce their giving to a level beneath a tithe.

Nothing was said to the Hurleys about their no longer tithing, and truthfully, they continued to give consistently, but Jason was resentful. After all, if his family could struggle and pull its weight, why couldn't everyone else?

Heather gritted her teeth. "There she goes again," she thought to herself. "She" was Heather's Bible study teacher, who was telling her class for the umpteenth time how she loved to tithe in

obedience to God, and reminding one and all that it was *their* duty as well.

Heather felt ill. “Does she even give a damn that I’m on food stamps, that Jack stopped paying child support, that my brakes are going out and I can’t afford to get them fixed, and if I lose my car, I lose my job?”

After class, Heather picked up her two year old from the nursery, trying to hide the tears that were already starting to well up. Sixteen-year old Mandy gently woke the sleeping child, and handed him to his mother.

“Not staying for church?” the girl asked, and then noticed the tears. “Heather, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing much,” she replied, trying to smile. “Just a girl thing.”

Heather strapped her son in his car seat, and sat behind the steering wheel in the church parking lot. “Maybe I shouldn’t be coming here,” she thought sadly to herself, tears beginning to flow. “Maybe I just don’t belong.”

Heather had started attending Friendly Valley as a child, through the bus ministry, and had given her heart to Jesus at age thirteen. Married out of high school, divorced three years later, she was and is among the “working poor”. Always with an offering to God, but never enough to qualify for “participating membership”, the inner circle of tithers, Heather will start missing church services and finally stop coming altogether.

Satan has many select arrows in his quiver, and one of the most deadly is resentment. Synonymous with bitterness, and often followed by animosity, it strikes to the very heart of the body of Christ, spilling the precious blood of Christian love and fellowship to the ground.

If ever there was a snare of Satan, designed to disrupt “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3), it is resentment. As our above examples illustrate, the door swings both ways, and, as the proverbial expression goes, it is likely to hit someone in the rear on his or her way out.

The author of Hebrews 12:15 warns us, “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.” See also Ephesians 4:31. If we do not want to reap a bitter harvest, let us take care what we sow, and how we cultivate.

Chapter 17

One Size Fits All?

Rob and Martha sat on their deck, going over the family budget as they had done together since their marriage twelve years earlier.

“Rob, we need to get this pledge card filled out and turned into the church by Sunday. I really do think we can give more than our tithe—after all, look how God has blessed us just in the past year alone, with you getting a better job and my promotion.”

Rob groaned, inwardly and outwardly. “There you go again, Martha. I mean, like, we are definitely giving more already, because we’re earning more. We’ve been tithing almost from day one—we’re fulfilling the expectations, and a lot of others aren’t. Don’t you think that’s enough?”

“No,” his wife replied.

“Do I have to spell it out for you, Martha? The budget is right there in front of you. I mean, everything is going up—food, gas, taxes, you name it. Just look at our savings, hon. Numbers don’t lie. We’ve got less than twenty thousand put aside for the kids’ college. Divided by three kids that’s a drop in a bucket. Barely six months salary in case one of us gets downsized. And don’t get me started on our retirement savings, after the hit our stocks took awhile back. We’ve got maybe sixty-three thousand tops, and we’ll hit the big four-zero in a couple more years. Dave said we’re going to need about one point five million by the time we retire, and that’s if inflation doesn’t take off.”

“Yeah, yeah, Rob, I know all that. But, does it ever occur to you that while we’re out here sitting on our deck, admiring the pond and the garden, and watching the kids playing in the pool that cost us beaucoup dollars, that there are millions of people, Christian people too, who don’t have squat? And a lot of them—‘Becca, don’t push her head under the water like that!’—a lot of them have never even heard about Jesus.”

“See there?” Rob replied. There’s another example right there. That pool guy just jacked his price up seven percent. If this keeps up, I’ll be maintaining the pool myself.”

Meanwhile, as Rob and Martha agonized over their proposed pledge to the Lord, in a

somewhat less affluent part of the same town, Nick and Anastasia were doing likewise.

“Annie, we got to get this pledge card in by Sunday,” Nick reminded his wife.

Anastasia sighed. “I know it. I just wish we could see a way to give our ten percent.”

“I guess they’ll just have to be satisfied with seven percent,” Nick replied. “Well, almost seven percent anyway.”

“Yeah, well somehow I think the Lord Jesus is satisfied, but I can’t say the same for the pastor, and I can’t say the same for a lot of the folks down there.”

“Annie, we can’t give what we don’t have. We got to pay our rent and utilities; we got to buy our food and medicine. We don’t have a dime put aside if that old car breaks down again, and the next thing you know it’ll be Christmas. I know the kids will understand if we can’t get them anything, but Lord knows, I sure do want to get at least one halfway decent present for each of the grandbabies. Almost makes me wish we had a credit card.”

“Nick, we struggle to give, and you know we can’t even vote in a business meeting? Sometimes I just feel like giving up. Our little gift, what does it matter?”

“Well, it may not matter much to some folks, but I’ll bet it matters to God.”

Terri put the baby in his playpen and waddled into the kitchen, looking dejectedly at a sink still filled with breakfast dishes. “OK, here goes,” she thought to herself, leaning into the counter and receiving a swift kick from within. “Sorry, guy,” she said aloud, rubbing her swollen abdomen, “but you gotta do what you gotta do.”

Standing at the table, she sorted the day’s mail--bill, late notice, junk, collection notice, junk, letter from the church, offering envelopes, more junk, bill. Terri sat down and opened the letter from the church. It contained a proposed budget to be voted on at the next business meeting by “participating members”, that is to say regular attenders who tithed at least ten percent of their income to the church. It also contained an appeal for a pledge of ten percent or more of gross income, signed by the pastor and the head of the stewardship committee, and a pledge card to be signed and returned on or before the following Sunday.

Terri tossed the junk mail and collection notice into the wastebasket; followed by the offering envelopes, pledge card, and other material from the church. Feeling a pang of guilt, she reached back in and retrieved the offering envelopes.

“Man, that job is killing me,” she thought to herself, rubbing her back. “Why, oh why, did I ever let that guy--oh, well, love hurts, don’t it? Better get some supper going.” Terri rose from the table and tossed the offering envelopes back into the wastebasket. “Guess they won’t miss my few bucks now and then.”

Interestingly, each of the above families belongs to the same church. It goes without saying that their radically different life situations can be duplicated within the body of almost any congregation, of any denomination, any time, anywhere. This illustrates the effects of a one size fits all doctrine of financial stewardship.

By the world’s standards, Rob and Martha are almost on the right track, but they could eliminate or cut back on that tithe, and sock away some more money for their kids’ college and their own future retirement. From a Christian point of view, it seems obvious that they could be doing a lot more for God with the resources that he has blessed them with.

Nick and Annie are giving too much, even at seven percent, and it is all coming out of their social security check. Their faithfulness far exceeds that of the yuppie couple, but not in the eyes of their pastor and their church, where they don't even have a vote in the monthly business meeting.

The church should be about helping Terri get her life on track; instead, it is badgering her for an amount of money that she does not have to give. God does not despise her meager offerings—why should they? What they should be doing, at this stage in her life, is lending a hand, and assuring her that her gifts of time and talents, which she could afford to give, are every bit as important and acceptable to the cause of Christ in the world as are financial contributions.

The church may blithely trot out some well-worn cliché, such as “You can't out-give God,” and offer up texts to “prove” that faithful giving will more than meet our material needs. Praise God, it is often so, but that is entirely at his discretion. Just as often, faithful Christians find themselves in dire straits, which God often uses for our ultimate benefit. Christians are not immune to the ups-and-downs of life. The apostle Paul stated that he had learned “both to abound and to suffer need” (Phil. 4:11-13). At all times, we need to prayerfully consider our relationship to God and his ongoing work in the world, letting the Holy Spirit, and not man, fine-tune our stewardship of time, talent, and material resources to the praise of his glory. This includes the mutual sharing of help and compassion within the body of Christ.

Chapter 18

Uninvited

Burke and Sharon Anderson had new neighbors. They also had a dilemma on their hands. The Andersons went out of their way to make the Thompsons feel welcome—with one exception. They did not invite them to church.

“Shar, I just don’t know how to handle this,” Burke explained. “From talking to Louis, I know they’re having a tough time keeping their heads above water. Monica is home with the kids—how the heck could she hold a job? The day care alone would eat them up, and one of the kids is always sick. She’d be fired in no time, just having to take time off.”

“Burke, they see us leaving for church every week—well, almost every week. How can we just keep driving off and not even invite them? It makes me feel guilty, and it should.”

“I know you’re right, honey,” Burke replied. “I know you’re right. I’m just afraid of hurting them and causing them to be embarrassed. You know what the rules for membership are, about tithing and all, and I just don’t feel right about subjecting them to that. Lead them to Jesus, and then shake them down for money.”

“That wasn’t very nice, Burke. We tithe—remember?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. But, how many folks like Louis and Monica do you see in our church, Shar? Oh, they come all right. And then, after a few weeks or months, they’re gone. They almost never join. Look at our Bible study group. Everyone in it is Mr. and Mrs. Middle-class. Ever wonder why?”

Sharon folded her arms across her chest and looked out the window. Louis Thompson was changing the spark plugs on his family’s faded van. “Well, I still don’t feel right about it.”

Our Lord told the parable of the man who gave a great supper and invited many guests (Luke 14:15-23), whereupon most gave an excuse as to why they could not come. Now the parable refers to Jesus’ rejection by those of his own country, and the free offer of salvation to whosoever will—including the poorest of the poor.

“Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets

and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” (Luke 14: 21-23).

God forbid that anyone should think, “I’m too poor to go to church.” Membership in God’s church is not for sale. It is open to all, without distinction, regardless of the ability to provide financial support. You do not invite sinners to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and then block them from church membership because of their inability to divvy up ten percent of their income. To place a stumbling block such as this in the path of his little ones is a stench in the nostrils of God. On the other hand, many are reluctant to invite well-to-do friends and neighbors, afraid of them getting the impression that the church is as interested in their wallets as in their souls.

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” (Isa. 55:1).

“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” (Rev. 22:17).

Chapter 19

The Revolving Door

Derek had lain awake for over an hour, turning things over in his mind. The last raise had been a joke—heck, it didn't even keep up with the cost of living. At least he still had his job, which was more than Ben and Alex could say, but maybe relocating along with the company hadn't been such a great idea after all.

Derek heard the television in the family room come on, followed by the twins' bickering. "Leave it ALONE, girl!" Derek Jr. yelled at his sister.

"Derek, Ayanna, don't make me have to jump up from here!" their father admonished, the commotion waking his sleeping wife.

"Kids going at it again?" LaToya asked, sleepily, snuggling next to her husband.

"Right on schedule," Derek replied.

"Wow, look at the time!" LaToya remarked. "We'd better get moving or we'll be late for church."

"Don't really feel like going this morning," Derek announced.

"Oh, come on Derek, we didn't go last week. I don't want this to turn into a bad habit. Why you don't want to go?"

Derek swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Frankly, it's because they won't stop preaching about money. Here we are, struggling, the company is struggling, and they never miss a chance to make you feel like a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God if you don't give your ten-percent."

"Maybe they're struggling, too," LaToya offered, slipping on her bathrobe.

"Do they look like they're struggling?" her husband asked.

"Well, not exactly, but I know the church has bills to pay along with everyone else."

"OK, we're going, but I feel like maybe we ought to keep looking before we decide where to join. God knows, I believe we need to take giving back to him seriously, and I sure want our family in church, but have they got to be so legalistic about it? Honey, our church back home wasn't like that. They made you feel good about giving. Got a lot done for the Lord, too."

LaToya sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right on that point. Maybe we really should look

around.”

Hear the parable of the poor Puerto Rican woman. Once there was a poor Puerto Rican woman, who was struggling to raise two little girls by herself after her husband left her and returned to Puerto Rico.

The poor Puerto Rican woman had a beat up old Buick, with bad tires and good brakes, to drive back and forth to her job at the cleaners where she worked for eight dollars an hour.

One Sunday afternoon, the local church canvassed the neighborhood and knocked at the door of the poor Puerto Rican woman, told her about Jesus, and invited her and her little girls to church. She came, and she came again. The people at the church were so friendly, and she and her girls were enjoying listening to God’s Word, the activities, and the new friends they were making.

Life was hard for the poor Puerto Rican woman, but she wanted to give something back to God. One week she struggled to bring five dollars for the offering; another week she brought ten. Some weeks she had nothing at all to bring, but she brought her daughters and herself.

And then, one Sunday, the pastor told the congregation that those not tithing ten percent of their income to the church were “robbing God” and were “cursed with a curse.”

The poor Puerto Rican woman left the service that day with tears in her eyes. She put her little girls in the back seat of the old Buick and drove out of the church parking lot--and she never came back.

It is the purpose of the church to obey the command of our Lord to go throughout the wide world, teaching the living Word, baptizing those whom he has called in the name of the triune God, and instructing believers in the obedient paths of righteousness. This is ever our Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). One local church’s mission statement is *to know Christ, grow in Christ, and show Christ to others*, and this is an apt paraphrase.

The church is bound by its Master to teach the whole Word of God, and to hold nothing back, even if doing so causes some to turn away. But let every minister and teacher of the Gospel, of every church, of every seminary, of every denomination, take care what to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-15). If there be any offense in our presentation of the Word of God, let it be the offense of the cross, and not false doctrine.

It has been said that one can “prove anything out of the Bible”. Unfortunately, that old derisive dismissal has a ring of truth to it. Too often, passages of God’s Word are lifted from the context in which they were written, strung together, and made to teach as doctrine the commandments of men (Matt. 15:9). We are instructed to rightly handle the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). It is one thing to be innocently ignorant; to be willfully stubborn is quite another. If we, by our teaching of false doctrine, lay stumbling blocks in the paths of God’s little ones, rest assured that we will have some answering to do on the day when we stand before him to give an account of our own stewardship.

Chapter 20

Gluttony

When Big Box Baptist's new sanctuary was in the planning stages, the senior pastor and building committee met with the architect and voiced the desire that the building be well lit, inside and out—exceptionally well lit—extravagantly well lit.

“Uh, it's up to you of course,” the architect explained, “but I really feel that it would be overdone. The electric bill would be enormous, not to mention the added initial expense and the ongoing costs of maintenance.”

“Mr. Jones, we have a bountiful blessing from the Lord,” the senior pastor responded. “We want to build him a house worthy of his name; a house that will stand out in the community; a house that our members can be proud to attend and bring visitors to; a house of light. We don't want any dark, dreary corners.”

And so it was.

Local college students Trish and Angela climbed into their co-owned car and buckled up. Trish fiddled with the radio. “Oh my God, Angie, did you see all those lights? We're paying for that? Don't they have any sense of conservation?”

Todd checked the time on his Rolex, and opened the passenger door of the Lexus for his wife Simone. The service had run over as the guest speaker had glowingly described her mission work among the poor in South America. Pastor Bentley had taken up even more time, urging the congregation to give above and beyond their tithes to support this worthy cause. The wait at the restaurant would be long.

“Always asking for more money,” Todd grouched. “As if we don't give enough already. Hey, let's drop by the dealership on the way home, babe. I need to look at the new models.”

Simone frowned. “I don't want to spend Sunday afternoon looking at cars. What's wrong with this one?”

“It's nearly three years old is what's wrong with it. Can't expect me to call on clients in an old car. Projects a bad image.”

“Well, in that case, you can just drop me off at the mall.”

“Whatcha’ looking for in there?”

“Clothes.”

“Clothes? You have to throw things out every time you buy more, and you don’t wear half the stuff you buy.”

Simone gave her husband an innocent look. “I don’t throw them away, I give them away. Besides, a girl can’t go around in yesterday’s fashions. Projects a bad image.”

Wheels turned in Simone’s head. “My car’s almost four years old. Now that’s *really* old. If you’re getting a new car, I am too. Todd rolled his eyes, but bit his tongue. There would be no getting out of this.

Simone’s thoughts turned to the missionary. “Oh, and speaking about South America, we’ll be going to Mexico again this summer. I’m gonna need more clothes and stuff for that too.”

Sam opened the door of the older model Ford for his wife April, while Jeff and Samantha piled in the back.

“Hey Dad,” Samantha spoke up. “Are we gonna help with the missionary thing? That’s a good thing to do, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, well sure,” her father answered. “We’re not even giving much to the church itself, but yeah, that does sound like a good project.”

April rolled down her window. “You better get this air conditioning fixed first.”

“Hey Dad,” Jeff spoke. “Can we go to Burntburgers?”

“Yeah, let’s do that, Sam,” April put in. “I don’t want to cook, and it’s cheaper than that restaurant at the mall.”

As they pulled into the mall parking lot, Sam addressed his family. “You guys kind of hold it down in there, okay? These credit cards keep going higher and higher. What are you all looking for anyway?”

“Oh, you know,” his wife answered. “Clothes and make-up, and maybe a new rug for the front door.”

“And a CD and some magazines,” Samantha added.

“What’s wrong with the old rug?” Sam asked. “You just got it last month.”

“I just don’t like it after all,” April answered. “Besides, the dog peed on it.”

“Women!” Sam thought to himself. All he had come for was a new fishing reel to replace the one that had broken on his last trip. But, walking past the video store, he saw a sidewalk sale—three DVDs for ten dollars. That was just too good to pass up.

Jeff ran up while he was making his selection. “Hey Dad, there’s an expansion to my new game back there, and it’s on sale. Can I get it?”

“Geez, with all the games you have already?”

“It’s the new expansion, Dad. You and Mom and Sami are all buying stuff.”

“How much is it?”

“It’s on sale for twenty-nine dollars, Dad. That’s ten dollars off.”

Sam looked at the new fishing reel and the DVDs in his hand. “Well, yeah, I guess so, but that’s it for today.”

Gluttony and creeping consumption are symptoms of the body of Christ being too full of itself

and too much like the world to be an effective witness. When the church presents a poor example and a halfhearted effort, is it any wonder that the world shrugs its shoulders and turns away?

Chapter 21

Pride

Jerry and Francis Nettles arrived at the church a little later than usual, and circled the parking lot five times, looking for a spot near the front. Perhaps someone leaving after Sunday school would free up a space, but not today.

“See?” Francis said. “If we had gone to Sunday school we would have probably gotten our regular spot.”

“Yeah, well I still think they ought to have reserved spots for those of us who have carried the church on our backs all these years,” her husband grumbled, “and especially the deacons.”

“Well, you’ll just have to park in the side lot, dear, but drop me off first. I’ll be all sweaty if I have to walk from over there, and I’m certainly not going to trek through that dirt in these heels.”

Entering the sanctuary, Francis tugged at her husband’s sleeve. “Jerry, those kids are in our seats,” she whispered.

“Well, they’ll just have to move over, won’t they?” Jerry said aloud.

“Sorry to disturb you folks,” Jerry grinned at the young couple, “but we’re running a little late, and this is where we usually sit. Could we get you to scoot down a bit?”

“Sure, no problem,” the young man smiled back. “I’m Edgar and this is Melissa. We’re new in town, and we’re looking for a church home.”

“Well, we’re mighty glad you folks could come. I’m Jerry—I’m one of the deacons—and this is my wife Francis. You folks married?”

“Soon,” Melissa smiled, holding up a left hand bearing an engagement ring and two others.

“How nice,” Francis replied, studying the young woman’s outfit.

As it became obvious that the service would run over, Jerry began looking at his watch, along with a number of others in the congregation, holding his wrist in front of his face so the pastor would get the message. He was hungry, and the line at the restaurant would already be forming.

“Oh, well,” he thought, “at least the game’s not on until four.”

Leaving the sanctuary, Francis tugged at her husband’s sleeve. “Jerry, I think that girl is pregnant,” she whispered.

Pastor Russ Mercer glanced across the table at Julio Vasquez, his Minister of Education, taking note of the exasperated look on the younger man's face. This was Julio's proposal and he had a lot of work, not to mention prayer, invested in it. Russ believed in it, believed God's will was in it, had labored in prayer over it with Julio and Mary Ann Nolan, the new youth pastor. But, he had led this congregation for eleven years, and he knew in his heart that it wasn't going to fly.

Deacon Jerry Nettles had the floor. "Julio, we've been down this road once before, not too long before we called Russ. We bought a bus--a nice one too. Got it insured and all, and started bringing those kids down here. It just didn't work out. Most of the kids didn't know how to act, and that was no surprise to any of us. They were disruptive, there were a few fights, Alice Newton's daughter got hit in the mouth, and we lost several influential families who just decided that they weren't going to put up with it."

"These kids need to know Christ," Mary Ann interjected. "I mean, nobody has any illusions about it being easy, but it's the right thing to do. It's the very reason that we exist as a church."

"This church is here to serve its' members, young lady," Jerry admonished.

Mary Ann's mouth dropped open, but she shut it quickly and bit her tongue.

"I'm sorry, Marry Ann, that was a little out of line, but there are other reasons. We baptized seven of that last group, and not a one of them is here now. Long gone. You can't get the parents, or whoever is raising them, to come. Oh, they might visit, but they don't join. Most of these folks are not going to be in the neighborhood long anyway. And they're poor. Now I'm not knocking poor folks, but they don't contribute. They're takers, not givers. I hate to be blunt, but that's just the way it is."

"Jerry," Julio pleaded, "let's at least give it some more prayer and thought. I think that if we have a plan in place to properly supervise these kids, we can make it work. I agree with Mary Ann--this is what the Lord would have us do."

Jerry sighed. "I'm sorry, Julio. I hate to be disagreeable, but outside of a handful, the deacons don't want it. The wives don't want it. From what I've picked up on, most of the older members don't want it. I'm sorry, but we're not going to bring it before the congregation."

Following the meeting, Mary Ann's boyfriend, Brandon, met her in the sanctuary. "How'd it go?" the young man asked.

"I can't believe that guy!" Mary Ann replied, through tears. "It's like he thinks he owns the church!"

"Maybe he does, baby," Brandon mused, "maybe he does."

"Julio is still trying to push starting up another bus ministry," Jerry explained to his wife on their way home.

"Oh, we can't go through that again!" Francis retorted. "Did you bring up about replacing the carpet in the sanctuary?"

"No, Fran," Jerry sighed. "By the time we got done kicking the bus thing around, it was time to wrap things up."

Francis rolled her eyes. "That was important, dear," she replied, looking out the passenger window.

"Well, Julio was really gung-ho on his proposal."

"Maybe it's about time Julio started packing his bags. Let's stop and get some ice cream."

While the above illustration may seem to be an extreme case, it is not an unusual one. Human nature being what it is, the problem would doubtless exist even in the absence of the tradition of tithing. Until the Lord calls us home, or until we rise to meet him in the air at his return, our old natures, if not kept in check, will continue to war against the Spirit, placing stumbling blocks in our own paths and the paths of others.

It is a constant, creeping temptation for pastors to allow pride to slip in and begin to think more highly of themselves than they ought. Other positions of leadership carry the same danger and responsibility. Sadly, one of the biggest dangers to others, God's work, and ourselves lies in our financial support of his church. Notice that I said *his* church (Matt. 16:18). It is not our church, no, not so much as a brick or board of it, except for the fact that he has adopted us as wayward children into his family and into his house.

Returning to God from the financial resources that he has blessed us with is surely an important expression of our love, and a vital means of feeding the flock, doing the works to which he has called us, and bringing other lost sheep into the fold. Equally important is the giving of our time, our talents, our very selves, means with which we are to honor him and use to bless others, (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:7,8).

God's church is not a country club to which we must pay dues to belong. It is not a supper club, where we must pay a cover charge for services. Nor is it corporation, where the largest shareholders have the most say.

But, too often the largest contributors do have the most say, regardless of their spiritual qualifications. Members, whose conduct is unbecoming to the cause of Christ, and who cannot locate a book within the Bible, hold positions of authority within the body, based solely on their level of giving and on how long their names have been on the church role. This is a sore grieving of God's Holy Spirit, and a hindrance to his work in the world.

Chapter 22

A Solution of Sorts

Marisol and Vanessa loaded the yard sale merchandise, vegetables, folding tables and lawn chairs back into Vanessa's old pick-up truck, and prepared to leave the dusty roadside lot where they had spent the last seven Saturday hours.

"Oh my God, girl!" Marisol groaned. "This is so not gonna happen again anytime soon."

"Well, I'm twenty-eight dollars richer than I was this morning," Vanessa replied, "and you made, like, forty-three with your veggies, right?"

"And twenty-five cents," Marisol answered. "Big whoop. That'll just about cover half of Manny's last doctor bill. Plus, we got hit on all day long like we were a couple of hookers."

"That's only 'cause we're hot," Vanessa grinned. "Hey, that one kid without the shirt was kinda cute, don't you think?"

Marisol rolled her eyes.

Arriving home, Marisol spied her husband's legs sticking out from beneath the family sedan. "What's the matter with it now?" she asked.

"Just the starter," Raymond replied. "No big deal."

"Well, how much is that gonna be?"

"Not too bad. Eighty bucks, maybe, to get a rebuilt one."

"Cool," Marisol said. "That's about twice what I made sitting in the sun all day."

"What's for supper?" Raymond asked.

"Something involving tomatoes and zucchini," his wife threw back, kicking off her flip-flops and pushing a box of unsold vegetables through the front door.

Later that evening, the couple sat at the kitchen table, going over the family budget, while Abuela and the older children played a board game in the next room. Manny was asleep in front of the television.

"Baby, we're not making it," Raymond sighed. "Even with me working at Sal's part time, you growing vegetables, and your mom sending us a little along to help out, we're not making it."

"Ray, I know you don't want to hear this, but I think we're going to have to stop tithing. Not stop giving, just stop tithing."

Raymond shook his head, “No,” and a strained silence ensued.

“Uh, we got this in the mail a couple of days ago,” Marisol offered, handing Raymond an envelope. “Not one of those high interest deals; this is from our bank.”

“Marisol, I told you a million times, no credit cards. We can’t keep up as it is; how are we going to pay a credit card?”

“The interest rate is really low, Ray. Just a minimum limit, so I don’t have to, like, be embarrassed when I take the kids to the doctors and stuff. And Manny’s birthday is in three weeks and we have nothing at all to give him.”

Raymond read the details of the offer. “Let me think about it,” he said.

Chapter 23

An Enemy Has Done This

We have been considering some of the problems caused, largely inadvertently on the part of the church, by the doctrine of tithing, but how did it come to this? How did a program set up with good intentions result in such a mixed blessing within the body of Christ?

At Calvary, Jesus wiped away the handwriting of laws and ordinances that condemned us, nailing it to the cross. In the process, he made fools of Satan and his minions, who thought that they had succeeded in thwarting God's plans and keeping the human race in permanent bondage (Col. 2:13-15). Had they known that they were playing into God's hands, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). Some commentators argue that the Corinthian passage is referring to human rulers, and in one sense it is, but the Bible makes it abundantly clear that it is the principalities and powers that are pulling the strings.

Satan does not give up easily. The blood on the cross was scarcely dry, before the Prince of Darkness was cutting his losses and planning how best to attack the newborn church going forward. Whatever damage he can inflict, large or small, suits his purposes well. After all, he knew that when the body of Christ neared completion, the Lord's return would spell the end of his age long reign of tyranny, sickness, suffering and death.

"The devil you say! Why, I don't even believe in him." No matter, that is to his advantage. He believes in you. It has ever been part of his strategy to attack with full force on the one hand, while his agents infiltrate the ranks of defenders from the rear. Sow division. Divide and conquer. Beat them down if you can, but "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em." He has never lacked a "man with a plan" and before you realize it, "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) has been compromised. In the eyes of the world, at any rate, his strategy has been quite successful. Brutal persecution commenced at once and continues to this day, compounded with church-state entanglements, cults, compromise, unbelief and all manner of doctrinal error and foolishness. This should come as no surprise. The Lord warned us beforehand, as did Paul and the other apostles.

In Jesus parable of Matthew 13:24-30; 36-42, the servants of the owner were puzzled as to how tares, which resembles wheat but whose seeds are a sleep inducing poison, were found

growing along with the good crop in the field. The owner replied to them, “An enemy has done this.” In explaining the meaning to his disciples, Jesus revealed that the tares were children of the wicked one, who had stealthily sown them amongst the wheat. Nonetheless, rather than risk uprooting the good crop, they were to be left until the final gathering. God knows those who are his. Perhaps I shouldn’t say this, but the next time you see a thousand dollar suit prancing about the platform like Mick Jagger, and demanding money in the name of JEEESUS right before the bucket brigade sallies forth, give it a thought. The ability to work a crowd does not necessarily indicate that the spirit involved is the Holy Spirit.

One of the main tricks up Satan’s sleeve is to mimic the works of God. What he sees God doing, he will try to counterfeit to his own ends. God works miracles, so can Satan, as when Moses went up against the magicians of Egypt (Ex. 7;8), and in the account of Simon, the sorcerer of Samaria (Acts 8:9-24). God can heal, so can Satan, but his healings exact a terrible price, as workers amongst the occultly oppressed can testify. He and his demons can prophecy truth mixed with lies, teach, preach, and speak in tongues. Am I knocking tongues? No, but be aware that the powers of darkness have been in the world before us, and know every language that ever was. Now, some may be offended by what I am about to say, but in gatherings where the Holy Spirit is moving, and emotions and religious fervor are running high, demonic spirits present can sometimes be incited to manifest and create a disturbance. Make no mistake, the Holy Spirit will not cause an individual to howl, bark, grunt, laugh like a hyena, thrash about the floor, or exhibit any other known symptom of demonic possession, and if you think otherwise, you have been deceived. Therefore we are exhorted to try the spirits, whether they are of God (1 John 4:1-3). Here is some insight—many spirits are not afraid to say the name of Jesus, but if confronted by someone gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to discern them and cast them out, they will divulge their true identity readily enough. Can believers be oppressed, possessed, tripped up and otherwise duped by demons? Sadly, yes, as I once was myself as a young Christian, through involvement in the occult. You have been warned.

Satan’s main strategy, however, is to pervert the “faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). This admonition from the Lord’s half brother, the son of Joseph and Mary, was reiterated by the other apostles, especially Paul in his running battle with the Judaizers, who were intent upon bringing Gentile believers under the yoke of the dissolved Mosaic Law. Paul did not mince words. On his last journey to Jerusalem, he called the leaders of the church at Ephesus to himself, and warned them that after his departure, “shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock; also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:16-38). He was concerned for the Corinthians, that ministers of Satan, as he revealed them to be, were already perverting the pure doctrine that he had brought to them (2 Cor. 11:2-15). Paul was exasperated at the Galatians, wanted to know who had bewitched them (Gal. 3:1) by turning them to the Law, and called a curse on anyone, including himself, his fellow workers and even an angel from heaven who would preach a perverted Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). He darkly hinted that the pushers of circumcision ought to go all the way and castrate themselves (Gal. 5:12). I didn’t say these things, the apostle to the Gentiles did. Satan is not afraid to use the Word of God to his own advantage, and neither are his underlings. He is the spin-doctor par excellence. He tripped up Adam and Eve in their unfallen state (Gen. 3), did not hesitate to twist scripture in the face of the Son of God (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), and to try him through the mouth of his friend and chief apostle (Matt. 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33).

A reading of Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church* and other works of Christian history reveal an almost unbelievable amount of schism, misunderstanding, heresy, error and

confusion infecting the church from the time of the apostles on through the present day. Satan, finding opportunity through the spiritual and mental weakness of believer and non-believer alike, has not been idle. Arianism, which held that Jesus was not God, but the highest creation of God, and which was condemned as heretical by the First Ecumenical Council in A.D. 325, surfaces again in the Jehovah Witness cult. Gnosticism has returned in force with many early but spurious gospels now being reprinted and taken seriously by the uninformed. Jesus and Mary Magdalene are linked romantically in book and film. The Catholic Church has compounded error over the many centuries, including the false doctrines of purgatory, papal infallibility, and the marriage of Christianity and pagan superstition revolving about Mary. Their minds have been sealed concerning these things, having invested in them so heavily for so long that they cannot afford to let them go. They are far from being alone. The psychological term for this state of mind is called *logic-tight*, being an opinion or stance that is impervious to logical argument. Thus the enemy establishes his strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44; Acts 5:3), and there is no lie like a lie with “thus saith the Lord” attached to it. In light of the above illustrations, and others like them, the tradition of tithing appears mild by comparison, yet any doctrinal error divides and weakens the church and plays right into the hands of the enemy. It must be relinquished if the church is to return to the faith bought by the blood of Christ and handed down by his apostles.

Chapter 24

A Steward's Job Description

"Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets," (Matt. 22:37-40).

Jesus got right to the point. His reiteration and recombination of Deuteronomy 6:4,5 and Leviticus 19:18 sum up the entire duty of Christian stewards. These are not suggestions, but commands; commands that can be carried out by any child of God and by any body of believers, no matter how rich or how poor, at any time and in any place. Nothing could be more demanding, yet more free. In conjunction with God's will, we are free to live, free to love, free to give, empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so as long we do not allow our old natures to quench the Spirit and spoil the results.

We, who have been ransomed from hell and the grave by the very blood of God's only begotten Son, can live for ourselves no longer. We are not our own; we were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19b-20a; 7:23a).

Many Christians are accustomed to think of stewardship in terms of money given to their home church, but it is far more than that. It consists of our lives in their entirety, including our bodies, minds and spirits, our time, our talents, and our material resources. Nothing that we are and nothing that we possess belongs to us, but rather to the One who has brought us into being and entrusted us with the stewardship of what is his. We are not monads, but priceless parts of the church universal, the body of Christ, responsible to and for one another and to Christ as the Head. Stewardship includes our dealings with all those, including strangers and even enemies, who are placed in our paths. It includes the earth and the flora and fauna sharing it with us. Our money is God's money, our time is his time, our children are his children, and our talents are those gifted to us by him for his service. Every atom and every hour of the space-time universe was created by him and for him, and in him we live and move and have our being (John 1:3; Col. 1:16,17; Acts 17:24-28).

Because the concept of stewardship is often viewed in terms of money, let's start off by

talking money. We are sometimes admonished to “give God his portion”, but that is baloney, since it is all his to begin with. Not ten percent but one hundred percent. Don’t think that you can tip God ten or twenty percent of your paycheck and do what you please with the rest. Make no mistake; we are accountable for every nickel and dime of it.

Our first responsibility to God is to provide for those whom he has placed in our care (1 Tim. 5:8). This usually, but not always and only, consists of immediate family members. Neither are we to neglect ourselves. This includes the adequate necessities of food, shelter, clothing and medical care. The operative word here is *adequate* not *extravagant*, and that should apply to all, regardless of how large our incomes may be. Christians have no business over-spending in these areas, no matter what the worldly-minded may think. Do you serve meat eight days a week, when there are people in the world literally eating dirt? How many clothes do you think you need to cover your nakedness? Think about others. Remember the local food bank when you do your grocery shopping, and the missionary teams bringing physical and spiritual care to the poor worldwide. Remember Jesus’ instruction, to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness (money) so that God may entrust you with the true riches (Luke 16:9-13).

After the bare necessities of life have been met and our just debts paid, it is time to prayerfully consider how we may best serve our Master with the balance. Every family unit, be it a single college student with a part time job, or a mother and father employed full time with five children at home, must prepare a budget and commit to live by it. This budget should be reviewed and adjusted on a regular basis, and especially as economic changes arise.

There are many financial books available, including several by Christian counselors. One would do well to study them, for they contain much helpful advice, including charts for financial planning. Unfortunately, some assume a rather Pollyannaish scenario involving college-educated parents with two children, father able to support the family on one income, mother working (possibly) part time for the “extras”, tithing off the top, six months salary squirreled away against the unexpected, and investing for retirement and the children’s education. Ah, how sweet it is! The model does not fit many people living in the real world, no, not even in America, where only the fortunate few are able to go for it. One bit of sound advice they do give, is that, as far as is humanly possible, STAY OUT OF DEBT.

How much should we give by grace to directly advance the kingdom of God in the world? Just as much as we can. He will ask of us neither more nor less, but know of a certainty that there are no legal requirements (2 Cor. 8:12-15). Can you give half of your income back to God and live off the remainder? Why not try it? But not from compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). We do not know the day or the hour when we shall stand before the Master to give an account of our stewardship, and there is much needing to be done. Is a five-dollar bill all you have left after you cover the bare necessities and pay your just debts? Don’t be ashamed to bring it. Others may sniff, but I assure you that your gift is acceptable and precious in his sight. The One who fed thousands of people with a little boy’s lunch is able to multiply your gift as well. First and foremost, God’s surplus should ordinarily go to the church to which we belong, *providing* that it is fulfilling its God given purpose. Better a church meeting in a warehouse with a leaky roof that is spreading the Gospel, feeding the poor and pouring money into missions, than a rich church that supports a stable of ministers with corporate level salaries, and pours the rest of God’s money into beautifying buildings and grounds.

Financing the Great Commission is not always as simple as it sounds, however. What other Christian causes may we justifiably support? Certainly none that spend the bulk of their receipts on administration, or who are not forthright about where the money goes. Neither should we rob

Peter to pay Paul, meaning that if it will harm the local church, don't do it. In any event, do some serious research before committing God's money to any cause. That said, if the Holy Spirit prompts you to spontaneously give to a needy individual or cause, do not second guess him or withhold your hand (Matt. 5:42; 25:31-46; James 2:15-16). This does not mean supplying the habits of professional swindlers, whether on the street, through the mail, on the Internet, or over the airwaves.

Every Christian family should build a home library of biblical basics, including commentaries, Bible dictionary, concordance, church histories, the several theologies, apologetics, and the like, as well as other wholesome Christian literature, music and media material. I began to build my own Christian library back in the day by collecting scrap metal. *Christian Book Distributors* (<http://www.christianbook.com>) is one large and excellent source available. We are all in ministry, are all gifted to serve, and it is all our responsibility to grow in the knowledge of the Lord. Unfortunately, most never pass beyond the level of Christian novels and self-help books, content with Christianity lite and never sounding the depths of the understanding of the faith. Share media with family, friends and neighbors. Never throw Christian magazines away; as well as sharing them with the above, leave them in doctor's offices, break rooms, auto service centers, airports and other public places.

Should parents send their children to Christian school, even if it will mean giving less support to the church? Or should a parent give up a job to home school, with the same result? Certainly our children require the best Christian education that they can get if they are to grow to serve the Lord, in an environment safe from bullying, worldly indoctrination, and other negative factors. Sadly, this is not an option available to many, and especially the poor. On the other hand, Christian children can be a powerful witness for Christ in the midst of what has become a hollow shell of the formally wholesome education system in America. These are matters to be decided over much searching in prayer.

The purchase of a home or the payment of rent is one debt that most cannot avoid, and it is justified so long as it is within our means, meaning within the means of one provider. Illness, job loss or pregnancy can easily spell foreclosure and /or eviction if two salaries are required to meet payments. If possible, save up and pay cash for motor vehicles. Buy used with a decent new car warranty remaining. Renew the warranty before it expires, or put aside for necessary repairs. Don't try and make a flash by purchasing a new vehicle that will lose a substantial amount of its value as soon as you drive it off the lot. Remember, this is God's money that you are dealing with. Jesus rode a donkey and a pair of sandals back in the day, but were he here now, you would probably not see him climbing out of a new Cadillac.

Credit cards can bury you under a mountain of debt. I've been there. Many poor souls are paying hundreds of dollars a month on credit card interest that doesn't purchase so much as a new package of underwear. The future will probably see a totally cashless financial system in place, making it even easier for the undisciplined to get in over their heads. Sadly, even some churches are now accepting plastic as well as paper. If at all possible, find a way to pay cards off and get rid of them. Carry one at the most and pay it off each month. The credit card issuer won't like you any more if you do that, but you won't be throwing God's money down a bottomless pit. Securing purchases, especially online purchases, emergency car and home repairs, medical emergencies, travel expenses, and a few other areas are legitimate uses for a credit card, provided that you keep the balance paid off, if not right away, as quickly as possible. Carrying cash rather than a credit card will definitely reduce the amount of money you spend, but if you lose your purse or stare down the barrel of a gun, you will likely never see that money again.

Financial counselors, including Christian counselors, advise putting aside six months salary as a hedge against job loss and other financial pitfalls, but not many families are able to achieve this level of security. If you can do this without gutting kingdom giving, go for it. Ideally, it is the responsibility of family members to come to the aid of those in need. If this help is unavailable, it is the responsibility of the church. In America and many other developed nations, government programs have usurped the place of family and church in these areas, often because families and churches have neglected their God mandated duties.

Concerning retirement planning, here is where I part company with most financial gurus. The amount of assets that they suggest we accumulate for retirement has reached obscene levels. Far too many Christians are concerned with padding their portfolios, while the world goes to hell all around them. This is not what the early Christians did, but we have not lived up to their example. Children were to care for their elderly parents and other relatives, with the church stepping in as necessary. At least that was the original plan. Children were once seen to be blessings from the Lord, but abortion and other family planning methods have reduced their numbers to the extent that even the Social Security system in America faces insolvency.

Wealth can lead to poverty of spirit if we come to trust it rather than God. If you have been given the ability to generate wealth, don't hoard it for yourself. Don't let it go to your head or your heart; use it to advance God's kingdom and to bless others. Jesus taught that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions, continuing on to teach the parable of the rich fool who squirreled away enough to live on for many years, yet died without enjoying a bit of it (Luke 12:15-21). Then he instructed his disciples to put God's kingdom first and let him provide for our genuine needs (Matt. 6:24-34; Luke 12:22-31). He exhorted us to lay up treasures in heaven where they will endure for eternity, rather than treasures on earth that have no value in the long run (Matt. 6:19-21; Luke 12:33,34). We will not take our hobbies, collectibles, sports equipment, electronic equipment, clothes, jewelry, or vehicles with us in the hour that we cross the river.

The key concept to keep in the forefront of our minds in considering each purchase, large or small, and each financial decision, is will it please the Lord? Will it be the new, fully loaded honker that gets ten miles per gallon with a good tailwind, or the economical, two-year old economy model? Designer purse or one from the big-box? Rolex or Timex? No matter how much money we have in our bank accounts, extravagance and overabundance are never pleasing to God. Shop and plan as if the Master were at your side (he is, you know). Some purchases are never justified in his sight, no matter how little they cost. Vulgar media material, including films that portray gratuitous violence, music that debases women and drags sex into the sewer, video games that glorify gang life, anything that smacks of the occult, and similar soul rotting bacteria have no business in the heart, mind, or home of anyone and especially a Christian.

God does not expect the majority of his children to take vows of poverty, although he has required it of some. Pastimes and possessions are neutral in and of themselves, so long as they are pleasing to God. But far too many of us have sold ourselves into slavery by means of our homes, our cars, our lifestyles, our hobbies, and the multitude of junk that possesses us. Paul admonishes us to be content with what we have, knowing that just as we brought nothing with us into this world, we can take nothing out, (1 Tim. 6:6-12), as does the writer to the Hebrews, (Heb. 13:5). John puts it this way, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for

ever,” (1 John 2:15-17). See also Colossians 3:2. That is good advice to follow.

We are to steward time, the hours and minutes God has allotted to us before we were born (Ps. 139:16), and the talents gifted to us for his service. The years pass swiftly away, and opportunities neglected seldom come again. On a day predetermined by God, our souls will be required of us (Luke 12:20) and we will be judged and rewarded according to how we spent our gifted time. Even those alive at the coming of the Lord will find their opportunity for earthly service suddenly brought to a close (Matt. 25:1-30; Luke 17:34-36). Jesus has called each one of us to labor in his fields (John 4:34-38; 1 Cor. 3:6-8), but like the Master, we must work while it is day, before night falls and earthly work is finished (John 9:4; Eccl. 12:1-7).

How are we to be empowered and equipped for service? By private and corporate Bible study, worship and prayer. Each is essential, and apart from these we are in danger of separating ourselves from the God life of the Vine (John 15:1-6). Christians in many parts of the world are even now studying the Bible and meeting in secret for fear of their lives. Can those of us blessed to live in the free world, with all the opportunities at our disposal, do less? We are admonished to be nourished with the milk of the Word, grow up to solid food (1 Pet. 2:2; 1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12-14), pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), and not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:24,25).

We who have been given the gift of eternal life are not to keep it to ourselves. Jesus taught the children given to him by the Father that they were to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16), and at the close of his earthly ministry, commissioned them to go to the whole world with the good news of salvation; making, baptizing and instructing new disciples (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). We are all ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-20), and nothing that we will ever do in life is more important.

Not many are called to preach, teach at seminary, or join the foreign mission field, but we are all called to support them with our love, prayers and offerings. God has richly supplied each member of the body with one or more spiritual gifts that, taken together, make for abundant and fruitful life (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13; 1 Cor. 12,13,14; Eph. 4:4-16; 1 Pet. 4:10,11). Whether at home, school or work, at church, in traffic, on the Internet, or at the mall, each hour of the day presents opportunities to grow in Christ and show Christ to others. Let us not squander them.

We are to respect the bodies God has loaned us, as well as the bodies of others, the interfaces that connect the physical and spiritual creation. They are not to be abused with drugs, including excessive alcohol consumption, smoke inhalation, abusive eating, and sexual immorality. See to it that they get sufficient rest, and take them to the doctor and dentist for preventive and urgent care. Make certain that your motor vehicle is maintained, that everyone in it is properly secured, and drive like it is the most dangerous thing you will ever subject yourself, your loved ones, and your fellow travelers to, because it probably is. Own a gun? Secure it. Lock your doors, practice fire safety, know where your kids are. You get the picture.

Set the standard for stewardship of the earth and the life forms entrusted to our care. It is the nursery, the birthing place of the children of God. Therefore, the powers of darkness would like nothing more than to destroy it and us along with it. Here are mysteries beyond our current comprehension, but as much as is in our power, let us preserve the creation until the day arrives when God refashions it according to his will (Rom. 8:18-23).

Our spiritual lives ebb and flow according to how much time we devote to contemplation and prayer. Jesus spent much time alone in communion with the Father (Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 6:12), as well as with the disciples (Luke 9:28-36). Examples of his prayers (John 11:41-44) and teaching on prayer (Matt. 6:5-13; Luke 11:2-4) fill the pages of the Gospels. If

prayer was so vital to the very Son of God, how can we be careless in our commitment to it? Old Testament and New Testament alike are replete with the prayers of the apostles and saints, as is the written record of Christians from the dawn of the church down through the present day. Prayer directs and empowers stewardship and there can be little progress apart from it. Above all, do all from love (1 Cor. 13). The well known, anonymous poem *Only One Life* puts the subject of stewardship into perspective.

“Only one life, ‘twill soon be past;

Only what’s done for God will last”.

Indeed, we do have but one life to live. Let’s make it count. Time, talents, possessions--let us steward these commodities in such a manner that we will one day hear the Master say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”

Chapter 25

Danger Ahead

Pastor Thomas turned on the lamp, closed the door to his study, and eased himself into the desk chair with an aching hip and a heavy heart. The business meeting had not gone well. Why now, after all this time, had division arisen within the church? Three more families had left within the week, including a deacon and his wife. Never in all his many years of ministry had he imagined that a doctrine so long established could erupt into such hostility and bitterness.

West Boulevard had weathered challenges before and come out on top. The all white, middle class congregation that he had inherited in the early seventies had become a healthy socioeconomic and ethnic mix over the years with barely a ripple. Lost souls of every description had been welcomed, saved, baptized and grown in the Lord--and now this. He feared a church split, and over tithing of all things. Trinity, two miles up the road, had stopped teaching it altogether in favor of grace giving and had been voted out of the denomination along with a number of others. Several of his members had joined there, and a few had just left, period. He had not taught the doctrine as a matter of law—he knew the Bible better than that—but as an example. Could he have been wrong?

Pastor Thomas--Myron Thomas--who had driven in the winning run in the regional championship of 1950; who had walked Bobbi Jo McKenzie home from school in the pouring rain with her books and saddle shoes wrapped in his jacket, and then kissed his future wife for the first time on her parents porch, bubble gum and all; who had come home from Korea with a bronze star, purple heart, and a permanent limp; who had pastored West Boulevard for thirty-seven years, married six hundred and eighty-three couples and conducted more funerals than he wanted to remember, including Bobbi Jo's seven summers ago—put his face in his hands and wept.

God forbid, this is what can happen if a long-standing doctrine is disturbed, yet the issue can no longer be ignored. The buzzword of the day is *authenticity*, but the church of the living God cannot be authentic if it is teaching a mixed message of truth and error. Nothing can do as much behind-the-scenes damage to the truth of Christianity as teaching that is easily discredited, and the tradition of tithing fits this description painfully well. As one bad tooth can spread infection throughout the body, doctrinal error must be corrected or extracted before health can be restored. Don't kid yourself; the church of present day America is a ninety-seven pound weakling. There are strong members within, but the body as a whole is puny and powerless and increasingly ignored by the world around it. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against his church (Matt. 16:18), yet for the most part it has been on the defensive. It has gone against the enemy one way and fled before him seven ways. Here is a warning—the Lord will not abide error. He has been pulling up candlesticks left and right for centuries (Rev. 2:5). Say, what remains of the faith in Europe and the lands of the Bible? A glance at the many boarded-up, broken down churches in America, and congregations of fifty rattling around inside a sanctuary built for five hundred is ample indication that the very same thing has been happening here. Is this the legacy that we would pass on to our brothers and sisters in Christ in Africa, China and elsewhere, where the frontlines of the battle have gone?

O minister of God, take inventory. Do you truly understand and believe the tithing you teach, or are you just passing along a tradition learned at seminary? Are you afraid of being removed from your position? Of seeing your church voted out of your denomination? Are you a Law-yer, cursing your congregation and nailing Christ back on the cross? Do you not realize that those trying to live by the Law are under a curse, if they break any part of it (Gal. 3:10)? Have you built on the foundation of Jesus Christ with wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:9-15)? Or are you aware that there is a problem, but don't know how to go about correcting it? Tithing is not a cardinal doctrine, so it is easy to leave it alone rather than risk what may come about from rocking the boat, yet Edward J. Young has this to say in his commentary on Isaiah, Volume 3, page 396: “...*the minister of the Gospel has a duty solemnly to warn his people of the nature of the heresies and false theories that are ever about them. He who keeps silent on these matters, under the guise of not wishing to disturb the peace of the Church, is a faithless shepherd.*”

It may appear that the church is impaled on the horns of a dilemma, but take heart--a far more serious example of blatant error has been resolving before our very eyes. In the Southern Baptist church of my childhood, no dark-skinned person would have dared enter to worship. Ungodly error of the worst sort was parked in every pew and we were too blinded by Satan to see it. The truth that all people on the face of the planet originated from one family group was right there in the pages of the Bible, long before science had proved it beyond a shadow of doubt through DNA research.

Controversy can lead to conflict, correction or both. If self and Satan gain the upper hand, the result will be bitterness, animosity and division, and the church will be weakened even further. If the triune God holds the throne of heart and mind, the result will be meaningful dialogue in the spirit of humility and familial love, resulting in the strengthening and building up of the body of Christ. Let us pray with all diligence that it will be the latter, for we no longer have the option of looking the other way.

The winds of change are shifting the fortunes of the United States around in ways that most would not have imagined just a few years ago. Globalization, supercharged by the Internet, is letting the air out of our balloon, and the water of wealth is ebbing away, seeking its own level in

China, India, Russia and elsewhere. In the years ahead, the middle class of today may no longer have two wage earners in every family, two cars in every garage, and a chicken in every pot. Already, the nest eggs of many are suffering the fate of Humpty Dumpty, or hatching only to spread wings and fly away. If that is to be the future of the “haves”, what will befall the “have-nots?” Ours is not the generation of Americans that weathered the Great Depression and the Second World War. In a spoiled, hedonistic nation where even the poor are relatively well off compared to most of the world, hard times may lead to anarchy and hopelessness. In such a climate, the faith of many may grow cold. Satan has many false religions and belief systems ready to grasp the hearts, minds and souls of a dispirited population. Yet, here lies the opportunity of a great period of evangelization and revival. Will Christians be equal to the task?

The church in America cannot well ride out the storm that has already begun to blow, built on a shaky foundation of tithing. Only by returning to the strong rock of stewardship taught by Jesus Christ and the apostles and practiced by the early Christians can it thrive as a beacon of light and hope in the deepening darkness.

Chapter 26

Whatever Happened to the Estradas?

Marisol trudged back from the mailbox, opening bills and weaving around sandspur patches along the way. Three credit card bills and the electric bill. At least Dominic would let them slide a few days on the house payment. “Always freaking broke!” she thought, dejectedly.

She turned to watch the school bus grind to a stop in front of Vanessa’s next door. Carlos got off, Bethany got off, Vanessa’s youngest got off. No Estara. Marisol’s heart picked up its pace.

“Where is your sister?” she asked, as Carlos walked up, swinging his book bag.

“She got a ride,” Carlos answered.

“Who with?” Marisol demanded.

“Angel and Ben and some other guy.”

“You mean those gangbangs? Your dad and I told her to stay away from them.”

“Angel’s her boyfriend, Mom,” Carlos offered.

Marisol raised her voice. “No he’s not! He’s seventeen! Estara’s fourteen! And I don’t want her riding around in a car with him and his punk friends!”

“Well, it wasn’t my idea,” Carlos shrugged, heading for the door.

Marisol reached the kitchen just in time to see Jada push her sister out of a chair. Jana landed with a thump and a howl, and the three-year-old twins were at each other tooth and nail.

“I’m on it, Mom,” Manny announced, grabbing Jada from behind and lifting her, feet kicking, off the floor.

“You leave me ‘lone!” Jada screamed. “She gots my cookie!”

“Take her in the bathroom, Manny, and I’ll be there in a minute,” their mother ordered.

“These two need a bath and a nap.”

Supper was on the stove, and Marisol was fuming when the sound of a car announced her oldest’s arrival.

“Where have you been?” she demanded, as Estara approached the door with Angel in tow.

“And you!” she pointed at Angel. “You stay the hell away from my daughter!”

Angel glared at her and walked back to the car, turning to sign a message to Estara, who

signed back. As Angel drove away, Estara, tears of humiliation and anger running down her cheeks, directed a stream of invectives at her mother. Marisol grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

“Get in that house, girl!” her mother shouted. “You’re grounded! And we’re gonna have a little talk!”

“Yeah, whatever!” Estara shouted back over her shoulder, as she headed for her room. “And no we’re not!”

Marisol sat at the kitchen table, twisting a damp strand of black hair around her finger and trying to hold back her own tears. “Oh, Abuela!” she thought aloud. “Do you see this? I wish you were still here!”

“Let’s go outside, baby,” Marisol addressed a sullen Estara, after supper. “I’d rather not drag your dad into this drama unless I have to.”

Sitting on the steps in silence, she regarded her daughter, already three inches taller than herself--the long black hair, the black nail polish, the honeybee tattoo on her left instep (“Please! It’s only a little bee!”). “She doesn’t look fourteen,” she thought. “She looks way older.”

She thought back to herself at fourteen, she and Ray. “But that was different,” she thought. “Ray was a nice guy. And we waited until we got married. Really. Sort of.” She felt a chill, in spite of the warm October evening. “Oh my God, how can thirty-one seem so old?”

“Estara, I’m just worried about you, that’s all,” Marisol started. “Angel is too old for you, and he’s been in some trouble. He’s not even in school any more.”

“I’m almost fifteen, and it’s not much different than you and Dad,” Estara replied.

“Yeah, well your dad was never in trouble, and he had to quit school to help out.”

“Angel’s a nice guy too, Mom. You and Dad just don’t want to see that.”

“Well, he’s in a gang,” Marisol argued.

“So am I, Mom!” Estara shot back. “I mean, it’s not really a gang. We just hang out together, and watch each others backs, that’s all.”

“And that’s why you all dress alike, I suppose. Why don’t you hang out with Bethany and your old friends any more?”

“That _____!” Estara retorted. “She and her little friends don’t want anything to do with me, and even if she did, her mom thinks I’m poison.”

“It’s the gang, Estara, and skipping school, and your grades, and your language,” her mother sighed.

“Like I said, I’m poison,” Estara shrugged.

Marisol put her arm around her daughter’s shoulders, and gave her a hug. “No your not, baby,” she said. “Your special. God don’t make any junk.”

“Yeah? Look, Mom, the church pushed us away. Those people took everything we had and then disrespected us because we didn’t have enough to pay our tithe anymore, not even when I put in my allowance and baby-sitting money. We’re just a bunch of ex-migrants squeezed in a trailer, and we’re not up to their standards. That’s where my so-called ex-friends are, and I’m not in their little club anymore, see? At least the friends I have now respect me for who I am.”

Marisol tried to think of a reply.

Estara stood up to go inside. “I’ve got homework, and Mom? God didn’t make Angel junk either.”

Marisol checked on the twins, sharing the old crib in their parents crowded room, and slid in bed beside her husband. Listening to the sound of the window air conditioner running up the electric bill, she tried to think of what to say.

“Ray? You awake?”

“Sort of,” he mumbled.

“Ray, we need to start going back to church again, we really should--especially for the kids.”

“We tried that once already, didn’t we?” Raymond answered back. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“There are other churches, Ray,” she offered.

“Yeah, and I’ll bet they’re all alike,” her husband retorted. “Look, I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

Marisol was just dozing off when Estara slipped silently into the room, and touched her on the shoulder. “Mom, can we talk?” she whispered.

“Now?” her mother replied, sleepily.

“Please Mom.”

Mother followed daughter back to her room, with magazines and CDs strewn everywhere, and clothes on the floor, and music posters on the wall, and Felonious the cat curled up over there on top of a pair of dirty jeans. Marisol quietly closed the door and sat next to her daughter on the bed. She could see that Estara had been crying.

“It’s okay, baby,” she said, giving her a hug. Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.” She suddenly thought Estara looked like an angel, with her long black hair and white nightgown.

A lump started in her own throat as the tears renewed running down her daughter’s cheeks. She knew. From motherly instinct, she knew. “Oh God, she’s so young!” she pleaded, silently.

Estara bit her lip in an attempt to stop the flow of tears. “M-Mom?” she managed. “Mom, I’m two weeks late. I think I’m pregnant.”

Well, they’re gone. How many families like the Estradas have passed through your church? And what do you intend to do about it?

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” (2 Cor. 13:14).

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