

Handling my giving in regard to the local church

My reason for continuing to make comments on this subject is straightforward - the gospels show handling money and personal resources was a topic Jesus spoke on more than anything else. In contrast many of us have grown up thinking we should never talk about money in the fellowship of the church, and somehow it will all work out in the end! It doesn't. It is a very spiritual as much as a practical matter. Therefore it is an area in which most of us, probably, need to be transformed in how we think if we want to live knowing the good and perfect will of God (Romans 12v1-2).

At the same time I am content to provoke new thinking about this subject because life is too short - there is not enough opportunity for me or anyone to get round to preaching this in all our churches simultaneously; using printed and digital media has to be part of our 'teaching-to-transform' way of ministering in the 21st century. At the same time I am definitely not unique in what I have come to believe, nor have I arrived at this contribution without reading widely what others think and say on the matter. Even so I suspect I am also a bit wiser than I was and happy to accept others come to different conclusions (even if I still think I am more right than they are!)

When it comes to our personal relationships here is how I conduct myself for the sake of our mutual fellowship in ministry together: I am happy for anyone to ask me about my own practice but I avoid studiously knowing or being invited to see what any other person gives financially to the work of churches in the Papworth Team Ministry. This means I can focus on unfolding God's word, sharing how I work things out in my own life (see Philippians 2v12-13) and be able to look everybody in the eye without anyone thinking I am 'having a go' at what they do or don't do! I simply do not know what you give and that is how it will remain. Now for this month's contribution on the matter.

A question that crops up frequently goes something like this: ***“Nigel, when it comes to giving 10% of my income to a church — my tithe — can I split the money and give, say, 5% to my church and 5% to a non-profit Christian ministry?”*** What do we say about splitting the tithe?

My guess is that some readers, as soon as they hear that question will ask: Do I even share the assumption that Christians have to tithe? So let us start there.

No, the tithe, ten percent of my income, is not a “have to” in the New Testament. The New Testament puts the life of the Christian on a new footing that is different from the Old Testament law. Paul said in Romans 7v6: *“Now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not the old way of the written code.”*

So (whilst Jesus never dismissed the tithe), when Paul gives instructions about how we should give, he never instructs us to lay aside a tithe. He says things like, *“...put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper...”* (1 Corinthians 16v2). And then he says in 2 Corinthians 8v3 that we should give according to our means *“...as I can testify, and they gave beyond their means, of their own accord.”* And in 2 Corinthians 9v6-7 he describes the giving that God delights in. *“...whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

The point is not that we be governed by percentages. They are not mandated. Rather, we should be governed by the principle of lavish sacrificial generosity; that overflows freely and joyfully.

What does this mean? I have often heard said that a middle class Christian person in the West who is only giving ten percent is probably robbing God. The scriptures they cite often include Haggai 1v2-6 and Malachi 3v7-12. In other words, these teachers suggest we have become so accustomed to our western prosperity and its ways of life that we think five or ten percent is generous.

In case I am not clear, tithing is not a “have to,” not a New Testament rule. I am thinking something like this: Suppose a sports coach who is trying to raise the fitness of his squad does NOT say to his high school team, “Everybody must get up at 5:00am every morning and run three miles so as to be fit for the maximum effectiveness of this team.” Instead the coach says, “I want you to love this sport with all your heart and I want you to give it all you have got this season. I want you to pursue maximum excellence and serve this team to make it as great as it can be.” Now which of those two ways of talking to the team sets the higher standard? The second way doesn’t have any rules attached to it. The first one does. Up at five every day. Three miles. It sounds pretty rigorous. But I suggest the second exhortation from the coach is the higher standard. It touches the heart of squad members. And if any of them uses the absence of rules to justify half-hearted allegiance, he or she is simply not following the heart of their coach. And so it is with giving in the church.

Now having said all of that, the stage should be set to answer the initial question. When we give of our resources to support the cause of the gospel and the growth of God’s kingdom, does God require that a certain percentage go to the local church? In view of all that we have seen, the answer is no. The question is not decided by rules and percentages. The largeness of our heart, our humility and readiness to be instructed by the Bible in how we live, and the wonderful value of other ministries we know and care about will decide the question.

Yes, I do think the local church and the life of its parish has a distinctive and special place in God’s plan and, therefore, a special claim on our giving. Other kinds of ministries are often wonderful; therefore we want to be faithful to God, and the obedience others had in setting them up, by supporting their ministry. Many of us will be involved in one or more; within our Team the longstanding support for WCCYM is an excellent example.

However the one body in the world that is clearly rooted in the New Testament and in the gospel of God’s kingdom is the local church. If that fails, all other ministries become ineffective. The local church (in our case the Team Ministry within the wider family and under the authority of the diocese of Ely) is the seedbed for all other ministries. The church is the place where participants in those ministries find their family, spiritual nourishment, also the context for expressing corporate worship as well as our engagement in God’s mission.

Accordingly I think it is a good rule of thumb to start aiming for a level playing-field where we begin to tithe to our local church, then give over and above elsewhere. That said, for many who have never thought like this previously, it may be something to move towards over a period of time - because currently we have built our budgets round a different set of assumptions.

Even so what I suggest is not a rule or a mandate. I can't say, "Thus saith the Lord." It is not a requirement. It simply may be a helpful guideline. We all are responsible before God for giving careful and prayerful thought to the matter in the light of reading the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit. That's why some people will also give to the Papworth Team as well as their local PCC - mirroring and enhancing the agreement we have between the PCCs in the Team > whereby each PCC gives (in addition to the Ministry Share to the diocese) a sum to support the particular responsibilities fulfilled by the Team Council.

(I know this sounds complicated so take it on trust; I will try to explain how the relationship between parishes, the Team and the diocese works on another occasion.)

Because of the locality we are in, I know there are a few people who may assume they can't begin to tithe to their local church because their tithe would be bigger than the church's budget. It's a perspective I understand but don't share.

I prefer to remember when Annie and I were part of another local church in the '70s and early '80s where the main agenda in business meetings was finding people or ministries we could bless with the excess of our income over against our expenditure! It was exciting. It felt a bit like the scene we see more than once in the Acts of the Apostles where people sold fields, houses and valuable possessions voluntarily, then gave the proceeds to the local church; so that through the church we can fulfil our responsibilities and meet needs in the wider community as much as the church as they arise (eg Acts 2v45 and 4v34-35).

It is close to the heart of us being PEOPLE FULLY ALIVE and being invited into initiating and often leading the ongoing transformation of our local communities.

My experience back in the '70s and '80s confirmed what I find in the Bible. From a base of generous giving it is definitely far more fun to be stewarding a large bank balance than trying to enlarge an overstretched budget by finding creative ways of paying the bills, to repair the roof or install new facilities. In the meantime that's what we need to do until or unless our thinking changes and with that step-changes in how we give.

I prefer to put all the emphasis on: Let's be lavish in our generosity; let's be sacrificial in our giving; let's be engaged with the opportunities we can create as the local church and the work of the Team round the vision God is birthing among us. And let's be farseeing in our support for many ministries. I think God will handle the percentages.

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