

UNDERSTANDING TITHING (PART 4)

This is the concluding part of the series, Understanding Tithing. We began the series three weeks ago to clear misconceptions about tithing. In Part 1, we looked at the historicity of tithing - how tithing began. It began with a gentleman named Abraham. We saw the two regimes of tithe in scriptures – elective and non-elective. In Part 2, we looked at practical aspects of tithing, examined the question of whether tithing is compulsory. In Part 3, we looked at the theological dimensions of tithing, analysing the priesthood of Jesus. In this last part, we shall be looking at the political dimension of tithing – agitations over tithing. To read Parts 1 - 3 of Understanding Tithing, please go to www.myilluminate.com. You can download for free.

There are two types of agitation over tithing. They are the theological and the political. The theological seeks accurate understanding of the subject of tithing. People want to know exactly what the Bible says. From this series we've come to realise that tithing is deeper than imagined. The tithe paid by Abraham to Melchizedek signified the change of priesthood from the Levitical order to the order of Melchizedek. The essence of Abraham paying tithe to Melchizedek was to point to the priesthood of our Saviour, Jesus the Christ. (Hebrews 7 and 8).

Abraham tithed in adoration and worship. No one compelled him to. It was an act of genuflection before God. (Genesis 14:19-20) Abraham was a donee of grace, and to underscore the grace factor he took communion with Melchizedek. (Genesis 14:19-20) Because Abraham is the father of faith a Christian can choose to emulate him by tithing in worship, just as he did.

A few chapters further in Genesis we come across the commitment of Jacob to tithe. (Genesis 28) Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau having snookered him out of his birth right. He went on exile. Things looked so bleak for Jacob as he journeyed into the unknown that he made a tithe commitment to God: "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give a tenth to you." (Genesis 28:20-22) And so we see Jacob commit to tithing under extraordinary circumstances. He came up with his own rationale. Jacob's tithing was conditional upon God protecting him and prospering him. Therefore a Christian can commit to tithe in extraordinary circumstances, either for deliverance or prosperity, or both. Abraham's and Jacob's stories are direct examples from scripture. "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another." (2 Timothy 3:16 MSG) There's something in those stories for us to

learn from. We can, like Jacob come up with our own rationale for tithing. His rationale was based on the issues confronting him. Interesting also that his tithing was conditional: "If God does this, I will do this." (Genesis 28:20-22) We can come up with a conditional pact with God predicated on tithing. And Jacob's words suggest he committed to continual tithing: "I will surely give you back a tenth of EVERYTHING you give me," he said. (Genesis 28:22)

However you slice and dice scriptures you CAN'T get past the tithing of Abraham. He is the father of racial and spiritual Israel. (Galatians 3:29) His tithing comes across as a very deep and personal covenant with God. That's what tithing is.

To the extent that Abraham and Jacob tithed voluntarily without being compelled, we shall call their tithing elective tithing. Elective tithing is the only option available to the Christian since the other regime of tithe is under the Law. There is no justification under the Law. (Galatians 2:16) Let's talk about that second regime.

The second regime of tithe in the Bible is the regime of the Ten Commandments. Unlike the tithing by Abraham and Jacob (which preceded the regime), this was compulsory and it was specific to the Israelites. When God was dividing the Promised Land he excluded the Levites from state allocation. God insisted he was their inheritance. (Numbers 18:20) The Levites were to serve him in priestly capacity. To compensate the Levites God mandated everyone to pay 10% of their income to them as pay. (Numbers 18:20-24)

But the idea of tithe under the Ten Commandments was rather broad. It goes beyond our normal understanding of tithe. It was inaugurated as a political solution to the problem of state creation no doubt, but it had welfarist components. The idea of tithing under the Law was more from the perspective of the functioning of a state. And so there was social security (tithe) cheque for the poor, the aliens and widows; as well as wellbeing tithe for the tithe payer himself. He had to go on an annual vacation pilgrimage. (Deuteronomy 14:22-26) The concept of tithing under the Law of Moses was very clever and very novel statecraft. It balanced out society. It wasn't like the kind of tithe Abraham and Jacob paid. Those began and ended with the individual. Tithing under the Law was the state seeking political balance, ensuring the welfare of the productive segment of society and running a poverty alleviation programme.

Now, as disparate as these two regimes of tithe were, the New Testament shows us the relationship between the two. In fact, it links them up. Hebrews 7 teaches us that Levi, the primogenitor of the Levites was genetically cooped up in Abraham. (Levi

was a descendant of Abraham). And so when Abraham paid tithe to Melchizedek, Levi was also paying tithe to him. (Hebrews 7:9-10) Since Melchizedek blessed Abraham, the priesthood of Melchizedek was superior to that of Levi based on the principle of prophetic super-ordination: "The person who has the power to give the blessing is greater than the one who is blessed." (Hebrews 7:7) The writer of Hebrews tells us that Melchizedek was a type of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was a priest-king. (Hebrews 5:6) That means that when Abraham paid tithe to Melchizedek he was in effect paying tithe to our Lord conceptually, Melchizedek being his adumbration or shadow. And so was the priesthood of Jesus established conceptually. Melchizedek also brought communion along to share with Abraham. The communion signified the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was a celebration of Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews stated that the priesthood of Jesus was physically established by the power of resurrection. (Hebrews 7:16) Jesus became a priest "by the sheer force of resurrection life." (Hebrews 7:16 MSG) (He didn't qualify as priest under genetic lottery draw since he wasn't a Levite; he was from the tribe of Judah). And because Jesus can never die, his priesthood is eternal. (Hebrews 7:3) The purpose of the eternal quality of the priesthood is to establish "He's there from now to eternity to save everyone who comes to God through him." (Hebrews 7:25) He pleads our cause ALWAYS. And so we see the covenantal value of Abraham paying tithe to Melchizedek. It goes to the very root of Christianity.

But then the question arises, what happens to all that tithe collected by pastors? (Though the right question should be, what happens to all the tithe collected by churches?) This is the heart of the political agitation. The answer depends on the kind of church you attend, the thematic focus of the church. Though if we're honest with ourselves only a critical mass in any local assembly support the work of ministry. And not everyone pays tithe. The administration of tithe is as diverse as churches. Different denominations, different rules.

First, many churches pay tithe on their tithes and offerings. 10% (or more) goes towards the support of other ministries, especially missionaries and young churches. Then there are cost centres. There are four major headers: admin expenses, internal benevolence programme for the poor in the local assembly, the preaching of the gospel itself, as well as community programmes. For the church to function efficiently and effectively, it must have a strong compliment of admin staff. These people earn salaries, sometimes competitive salaries. They have to earn enough to take care of their families, just like the rest of us. The pastoral staff are of course paid. You can't muzzle the ox that treads the grain. (1 Timothy 5:18, 1 Corinthians 9:7-11) Admin expenses include power, water, telecoms, security, rent (where applicable), vehicles, etc. Those buses that convey people to church from different locations don't run on

halleluyah gasoline. The driver is someone's father (or mother). There's also maintenance of premises. Prayers are not plugs for leaking roofs. And of course there are building programmes. The church has to meet somewhere!

The churches also have strong social programmes. There's hardly a church without an outreach. In many developing economies, the church has had to step in where the state left a gap. It's why churches build roads, sink boreholes, organise empowerment seminars for youths, set up schools and universities, establish hospitals, take street urchins and "area boys" off the streets, administer drug rehabilitation programmes as well as rehabilitation programmes for sex workers. Many churches run homes for the aged, organise skill acquisition programmes, run literacy programmes, soup kitchens, counselling centres for victims of sex abuse and domestic violence. Some grant small loans to young entrepreneurs. Some adopt schools and some run full scholarship schools for children of the indigent.

Then there's the preaching of the gospel itself. There's the church service. Those camera men in church are paid. Those projections of songs on the screen are done by staff. There are "crusades," TV programs, radio programs... There's production and distribution of media - the buying of airtime on TV, etc. There are also social media platforms to manage. Angels don't tweet. Those postings on Facebook are not by Prophet Zechariah either. They're done by staff. Then there are guest preachers and music ministers. They're paid honorariums. There's also Children's Church. That playground, those resource materials, the cribs... The huge expense profile of running a ministry is why many churches depend on volunteers. Ministry is costly. We are costly to minister to. Good music, good sound equipment, air conditioning... And the bigger the church grows the more the cost management profile. Additional furnishing must be ordered. More people are needed in the counselling unit.

Now, this is not to defend the avarice and greed of certain ministers. There will always be those. Their god is their belly. (Philippians 3:18-19) It will be professional malpractice for Satan not to raise such. Peter wrote about fake men of God: "In their greed they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money but God condemned them long ago, and their destruction will not be delayed." (2 Peter 2:3) The law of anomaly dictates that in every twelve there will be a Judas.

But we must avoid hasty over-generalisation. We cannot condemn the entire class of ministers. That is class warfare. There are so many, many, many good pastors, most labouring in obscurity, some in penury. Those who tar pastors with a broad stroke forget these men of God are most times our first and sometimes only port of call when the waves of life overwhelm us. Not everyone is in it for money. Many pastors don't collect salary from their churches. Some were already successful professionals and entrepreneurs before going into ministry. Many still keep their secular employment, like Paul did. (Acts 18: 3)

Yes, SOME men of God are wrongheaded, but what about the many who have been huge blessings in our lives? Pastoring may seem glamorous but it's one of the most lonesome and most difficult jobs, after all you and I are the congregants. And they have the Devil to contend with on an industrial scale. It's why they're always fasting. And when they make mistakes they're horribly magnified - same mistakes you and I make on a daily basis. They hardly have friends. There's no overnight success in ministry. Many don't attain limelight until decades in ministry. Perhaps the pastors need to tell us their stories, how they started.

But then there is still the theological issue of the monitoring of offerings and donations. The question naturally arises, at what point does our transaction with the church terminate: is it at the point of giving our offering, or at the point of usage by the church? Some treat offering as shareholding. But if someone gives you a gift and then begins to monitor and dictate usage the question has to arise whether indeed it is a gift. Perhaps a simple homily will help: if it's still yours you haven't given it. Each person must determine whom he or she is giving to: to the pastor or to God? But if the seed does not die it cannot germinate with new life. (John 12:24)

If you're not satisfied with the governance of your church go to another church rather than get into offences. And better not to give in to bitterness and anger. (Ephesians 4:31) The wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God. (James.1:20) Though one must wonder if Abraham asked Melchizedek how he used that tithe. Now, that's another debate! And this concludes the series, Understanding Tithing.

If you'll like to receive Jesus into your life please pray this prayer: "Father I acknowledge that I am a sinner, that Jesus died for me, that you raised him from the dead. Father please forgive me. I accept Jesus today as my Lord and my Saviour. Amen."

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