

# Rethinking the Tithe

## Part 2

By Douglas Weaver

In part one of this series we took an interesting look at the actual Old Testament practice of tithing and how that relates to the modern Christian paradigm. Now we will consider the history of tithing since the resurrection, centering our attention on why and how the practice has become so prevalent.

To do so we must reach as far back as the 3rd century AD when a man named Constantine came to power in Rome, and follow a trail of power, corruption, greed and manipulation that continues to plague the people of God in the 21st century.

First though, lets look what some scholarly sources have concluded regarding the practice of tithing and the early church, these being only a handful of what is available.

"It is admitted universally that the payment of tithes or the tenth of possessions, for sacred purposes, did not find a place within the Christian Church during the age covered by the apostles and their immediate successors." (*Hastings Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*)\*

"The Christian Church depended at first on voluntary gifts from its members." (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)\*

"The New Testament nowhere explicitly requires tithing to maintain a ministry or a place of assembly." (Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*)\*\*

"The silence of the N.T. writers, particularly Paul, regarding the present validity of the tithe can be explained only on the ground that the dispensation of grace has no more place for a law of tithing than it has for a law on circumcision." Orig. (*Baker's Dictionary*, 1960 p.80-191 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), s.v. "tithe.")\*\*

"Historically, you cannot find any Christians tithing until the eighth century! The eighth century. This is historical fact. The Christians in the first century did not tithe. The Christians in the second century did not tithe. The Christians in the third century did

not tithe. It wasn't until 700 years passed that tithing became a Christian institution. But that's not all.

"Brothers, it wasn't until the fourth century--under Constantine the Roman emperor who converted to Christianity and made a Christian state out of the Empire--it wasn't until Constantine that the church had a paid clergy. Church leaders did not receive a salary from God's people until the days of Constantine. Do you understand? Tithes were not practiced among the Christians until eight hundred years passed. It was not part of the first-century church's practice." (Frank Viola, *Straight Talk To Elders*)

\*(Extracted from the paper "How do we Give to the Eternal?" by Richard Tafoya and Norman S. Edwards)

\*\* (Extracted from the book "Should The Church Teach Tithing?" by Russell Earl Kelly)

Scholarly sources, whether theologians or historians, are unanimous in their opinion that the early church did not practice tithing. Not to mention that there is no biblical reference to or pattern of tithing in the early church. Indeed, the word *tithe* in any form only appears four times in the New Testament: Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42, Luke 18:12 and Hebrews 7:8, all of which deal with matters pertaining to the old covenant.

So then how has tithing become a mainstay in Christendom when both doctrinally and historically it has no legitimate basis under the new covenant? Well, there are myriad reasons, but for this article we will concentrate on the most fundamental issue: the distinction between clergy and laity.

## The Wrong Priesthood



When Jesus arose from the dead and the corporate body was born there was a short period of time during which the Spirit of Christ exercised leadership amongst the believers. There were great miracles and the testimony of Christ was powerful, as evidenced by the incredible growth of the body during this time. But before long men began to posture and position themselves as leaders within the body, slowly usurping the solitary headship of Christ, desiring, as John testifies of Diotrephes, "to

be the first" among the brethren. Some of these men imported aspects of the Law, being converts from Judaism, which became incorporated in the worship of some groups of believers. This is evidenced by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, speaking of such influences and how detrimental they were to the faith. Unfortunately, these idealisms were integrated into the lives of believers, and within a short period of time the old covenant priestly class had been effectively transferred into the covenant of grace.

Now it is true that both Peter and Paul recognized certain individuals as elders and commissioned them to care for the flock. However, this was merely an acknowledgment of maturity and commensurate responsibility, not the reinstatement of the Levitical system. Commissioning a group of individuals with the responsibility to care for the needs of the saints is one thing - dividing the body into the "called" and the "un-called" is quite another.

For when a priestly class is layered between God and His people they require a consistent influx of money to support their work. They cannot work to support themselves for they are "busy" with the work of God. Not to mention their need for a centralized facility from which to conduct their service that will have to be purchased and maintained. So then it becomes the duty of each believer to faithfully support both the facility and the priesthood so that ministry can occur. Sounds a bit like a covenant that was set aside in lieu of a new and better one doesn't it? But wait, I am getting ahead of myself. Let's return to the early days, say around 300AD, and look at events which ultimately institutionalized the religion of Christianity, legitimized the separation of clergy and laity, and consequently embedded tithing as a prescribed practice for believers.

### **The Emperor's New Clothes**

Having survived the vicious persecutions of Diocletian and Nero, the followers of Jesus were about to face the most devastating attack on the purity of their message and the faith: the acceptance of Christianity by Emperor Constantine. Constantine was a pagan idol worshipper living in a pantheistic society, so his acceptance of Christ into the pantheon was not necessarily a notable act. However, of all the gods in the pantheon he chose to place his allegiance in the God of the Christians, having supposedly seen a vision of the cross of Christ prior to an ensuing battle, from which he emerged

victorious. And although most historians suggest that this alleged vision, along with his subsequent conversion were questionable, most likely arising from superstition, the ramifications of his profession of faith were profound.

Immediately he began spending considerable time and resource in the construction of Christian temples and established a hierarchy of Christian leadership. Initially most of the financing came from the empire, but as time passed the financial burden was shifted to the people in the form of a spiritual taxation, or tithe, that was tied to ones individual profession of piety, and eventually to their salvation.

Even today such heresy is still spewed out as can be seen in this quote from S. Reginald Michael, Ph.D. (Director, Northeast Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists) in an open letter to the churches entitled "Tithing and Salvation".

"Tithing is a salvation issue which by withholding can cost us eternal life. Our salvation is based on certain principles, all of which returning the tithe encompass."

And again in the same letter:

"Can one be saved while knowingly not returning the Lord's tithe? The answer is clearly 'No.'"

## **The New Christianity**

Now it is important to understand that the general populace is a superstitious and poverty stricken. So the wealth and prestige of the church alone was intimidating. And since the priests held, as it were, the keys to heaven, the people sought to stay in their favor. What better way to accommodate this symbiosis than to bind people's heavenly status with their earthly behavior in the matter of giving. This satisfies the peoples' need to give an offering to God, and the priests need for money to keep the system working.

The infusion of pagan and heathen influences, coupled with the resilience of Jewish philosophy lead to a reinstitution of many Old Testament practices. Among these tithing was of great significance due to the amount of money it generated for the new clergy class. And it was quite conveniently imposed due to its place in the Law. Remember,

most of these so-called "ministers" never really became believers in Christ, and they saw Christianity as a means of financial gain.

With leaders of other pagan cults and religions now professing faith in Christ a diabolical transformation occurred. The once pure faith of believers, having been proven in the fires of persecution, was now being infiltrated and corrupted by the wealth, power and idealisms of heathen religious leaders. The distinction between the people, or laity, and the priestly class, commonly known as the clergy, effectively brought the people of God back under a system of Law. Indeed, by the fifth century Christianity had, for all intents and purposes, become a paganized religion.

## **Conclusions**

What do we say to these things brethren! Simply that it is the clergy/laity system with its priestly, or pastoral, class that precipitates the need for a system of monetary collection. Remove this mediatory class and subsequently the mendacious system of conscripted giving becomes unnecessary. More importantly, is the incredible amount of monetary resource made available for use as the true tithe was originally intended: to help the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

As I said before, true believers need no law to ensure their generosity, for the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus compels them to share their blessings with one another that all might be equal. Ironically, the practice of tithing spiritualizes greediness, allowing the wealthy to hide behind a veil of spirituality as they encourage the poor to "Honor the Lord with your tithe, and believe God for increase." The wealthy can now feel good about giving God His due and relieve themselves of the responsibility to their brethren by placing the onus on the Lord.

But as Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:17-18,

"Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share."

Saints, you are free from the law of tithing but are bound by the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus. You are free from mandated giving but bound to your brothers and

sisters by the fellowship of the Spirit of Jesus. Remember, the law strengthens sin. And many are strengthening their lack of generosity by adhering to the law of tithing. Do not be fooled beloved. If there is one amongst you that lives in abundance while others are in need of daily sustenance, sin is not far away.

Lastly, consider this. If the application of tithing, as given by modern Christianity, should prove to be in error do we not bear the responsibility to reject and expose both the practice and the system that perpetuates it? Should we not also help those who are enslaved to a misinterpretation of the Law, to walk in the freedom of the Spirit? And shouldn't we honor the Lord by celebrating His faithfulness and sharing with those in need rather than investing in extravagant buildings, programs and the opulent lifestyles of the clergy?

I leave both these questions and their answers to each of you, trusting that the Lord has given you a spirit of revelation and wisdom in these last days.