

Question: Where did the idea of tithing come from? Should churches expect people to tithe?

The word “tithe” comes from an Old English word that means “tenth part”, and it has come to mean the practice of contributing a tenth of one’s income to the church. According to the Bible, the ancient patriarchs Abraham and Jacob practiced tithing (Genesis 14:18; 28:20-22). Their descendants, the Israelites, were taught to give a tenth of their produce from the fields along with the firstlings of their flocks as well as giving a tenth on other special occasions. Some scholars believe the Israelites gave as much as 25%. God’s prophet, Moses, told them: “When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 26:12).

However, unlike the Old Testament, very little is said about tithing in the New Testament. In fact, it is only mentioned in passages that reference the Old Testament practice in Israel. Instead of tithing, Christians are encouraged to make freewill offerings. These offerings should be based on the way God has blessed his people, and they should also be an expression of the degree of one’s love for the Lord and faith in him.

The most extensive discussion of Christian giving is found in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Here we are told that the Christians in Macedonia gave generously, even out of their own poverty to help their brothers and sisters in Judea. Paul said that “they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:3). This spirit of generosity in material things developed because “they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us in keeping with God’s will” (2 Corinthians 8:5). The call for them to give was not a command but was a test of the sincerity of their love (2 Cor. 8:8). Paul told them: “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have” (2 Cor. 8:12).

Instead of giving a command to tithe, the apostle of the Lord told the Corinthians: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). He also reminded them that “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8).

Although tithing is not a command given to Christians, many use the practice as a general guideline for giving. They believe that the tithe should be only a starting point of giving for those who have received forgiveness and spiritual blessing beyond measure through the coming of Jesus Christ. While some Christians may view their giving as “paying their tithe” to the church, a more appropriate approach is to view it as a privilege to serve the Lord who gave his life for us. To the extent that God continues to bless us, we need to see the measure of our giving as an indication of our faith in and love for the Lord and for others. In view of these biblical teachings, I believe that a church should not demand a weekly tithe but to teach their people to love the Lord and show that love by their giving.

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