

UNDER THE HOOD

A Peek At The Engine of Institutional Church Habits... Below The Surface

May, 1999. By Tim Aagard

Institutional Church Giving Habits

Has God ever taught you a shocking truth with an ad that comes with your phone bill? This ad appeared on my cell phone bill. I'm sure this line rings a bell with you. It's a perversion of the

biblical quote "It's more blessed to give than receive." The phone folks have made a clever switch of concepts from the original. It matches perfectly with their sales pitch and motivation to entice more people to buy a cell phone. You can feel like a generous giver as you provide a nice service for yourself. This line awakened me to the thought that this is EXACTLY what institutional church giving is. We give our tithes and offerings and receive back a LARGE percentage in institutional services for ourselves. The typical local church budget designates 75 - 85% of gathered resources for funding professionals to plan and do ministries that benefit mostly us. These services include a weekly sermon, a professionally planned service, professional counseling if we experience a crisis, and if you belong to a larger church, professionally overseen programs for our kids, jr. high, sr. high, college, singles, and lots of office support. Most of this serves us, the givers! (I say most because a small amount of this percentage results in local outreach.) I'll never forget the shock I felt when I realized most of my giving to the institutional church was coming right back to me. Equally surprising to me was that I found the very context of the real quote gives the solution to our traditional habits of giving primarily to ourselves.

Context of The Real Quote

"It is more BLESSED to give THAN receive" is a quote from Jesus. Paul is using it to teach the Ephesian elders / pastors to follow his example. The example he is referring to is refusing the right to be paid for helping God's people grow. Paul knew these elders / pastors were "laborers worthy of their wages". Paul knew the "ox should not be muzzled while treading the grain". Yet Paul wanted these pastors to meet their own physical needs while they helped

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people grow spiritually. Paul not only told them, he set the example. Paul proved this ministry concept was possible with his life. Today, this example and plea is ignored. The exact opposite is taught. The teaching of today is that you aren't in "full time ministry" until you're on the church payroll and not working a "secular" job. Look to see Paul's passion and reasoning. Notice he is adding the authority of Jesus to support his challenge. Notice that real giving means local church leaders are to refuse their rights to be paid.

In Acts 20:28 Paul confirms he is talking to pastors. "*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*"

Acts 20:32-38

*"Now I commit you to God
and to the word of his grace,
which can build you up
and give you an inheritance
among all those who are sanctified.*

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.

*You yourselves know
that these hands of mine
have supplied my own needs
and the needs of my companions.*

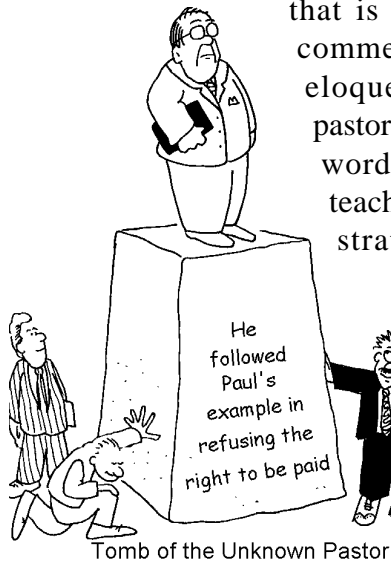
*In everything I did, I showed you
that by this kind of hard work
we must help the weak,
remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said:
'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

*When he had said this,
he knelt down with all of them and prayed.
They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him."
(NIV)*

Paul could not say it more clearly. His deep desire was for these Ephesian elders / shepherds / pastors to follow his example. Paul knew and taught that they all had a right to be paid for spiritual work. But Paul also taught a higher

purpose for God's resources than for saints to give money to fund ministry to themselves. This is not an isolated concept. Please examine more scripture that teaches the same message; 1 Corinthians 9 & 2 Thessalonians 3.

I have never heard a sermon on this ministry concept. If asked about it, pastors tend to say Paul only meant this for himself, not today's pastors; or, this was a cultural area that is not practical today. One



commentary on Acts 20 waxes eloquent on every element of pastoral ministry but says not one word about Paul's intentional teaching and modeling on this strategic ministry economy.

Another commentator says it was a pity that a man with such spiritual talents as Paul would be reduced to working with his hands to meet his own needs.

It has been the opposite of what Paul taught for so long, it's hard to conceive there would be any other way to do church. The lenses through which we interpret God's word may be thick with human tradition. We enjoy and value what we "receive" from all this self directed giving. We can hardly think that our spiritual life would be growing if we didn't have this ministry directed to us. Would our love for Christ fizzle out if we didn't have our weekly lecture from the Bible prepared by a professional? Would our kids all grow up to be punkers if we didn't have all the professionally designed events for them? Our "worship" experience would certainly be boring and dry if we didn't have the professional assistance in spicing it up. Or would it?

There IS a fruitful, meaningful, exciting alternative to this giving-to-self SYSTEM of church life. You won't find it by calling churches in the yellow pages. You'll see it if you read the book of Acts. Even today, believers can meet and fully minister in small groups in homes with no professionals or budget necessary. Now 100% of giving can be actual giving. Now believers giving will go beyond themselves. Now all gathered offerings can go to fund ministry to those who have never heard the gospel. Now there is more than a token amount available to help saints around the world who are close to starving or who live in cardboard homes.

There is a very important need to have professionals working in God's household, but for purposes far more essential than to give weekly sermons to those who have heard hundreds or thousands already.

We have gained and learned much of God's will for our lives from the services provided to us from our giving. No one can discount that God has produced some of His plan in us and our families from the current system. This is something amazing about God's grace. He can use our shallow, short sighted, self-centered efforts to produce supernatural results. With full respect for the grace of God, we must ask ourselves some questions:

1. When we discover that our habits and traditions are faulty, will God continue to bless us if we intentionally refuse to correct them?
2. Should we be content with a lower level of giving and faithfulness than we are capable of?
3. Are we mesmerized by what we have attained for Christ, such that our vision is blurred to what is yet to be attained?
4. Will we lose what we have gained if we re-engineer our church life to be faithful to the true nature of giving - giving and not receiving?

Experience the rewards of selfless giving.



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True to form, another reminder comes the next month to suggest I can be "selfless" in my giving and get lots of "goodies" for my self - FREE!

I have no doubts that God will bless his saints who continue in the institutional church system. I am concerned about what blessing and eternal reward they are missing by not being willing to grow in the grace of giving more to others than to themselves. I want to press on in my spiritual growth

to apply truth institutional church leaders do not talk about. I don't want to be mesmerized by past gains so I can't see anything new and different from what I have experienced. I must repent (reverse direction of life). I must re-engineer my church life to be consistent with the clear Word of God in the areas he has allowed me to see.

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What do you think about "It is better to give and receive" as the institutional church carries on this dynamic rather than what the scripture teaches? Will you let me know? There is much more to be said. Even at this length, there are many more traditional assumptions to be dealt with.

Questions

1. Didn't Paul encourage believers to give him gifts and support? Yes, when he was ministering in other areas and when he was in prison. He thanked the Philippians for supporting him in his ministry to the Thessalonians. (Phil. 4:14-18). This is far different than believers being dependent their whole life on hired professional teachers & care-givers.

2. Didn't Paul say "those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel"? Yes, in 1 Cor. 9 he quotes the Lord's command, but this is not the end of his teaching. The end of his point is that he should refuse this right and offer the gospel "free of charge" (v. 18). There is a reward for preaching "voluntarily" (v. 17). He would "rather die than be deprived of this boast." (v. 15). Paul often taught both sides of an issue, but the side he ends with is the most mature and wise approach. There are countless places where saints cannot teach or preach the gospel unless they are paid to be there. Standing before groups of saints who have heard hundreds and thousands of sermons is not one of them.

3. Tim, are you saying no one should ever be paid to minister? No, I am saying that we are denying the basic premise of giving when we direct huge amounts of our giving to fund ministry to ourselves. God designed us to grow up to do ALL of what our leaders do, not be perpetually dependent on their services.

*A student is not above his teacher,
but everyone who is fully trained
will be like his teacher. Luke 6:40*

The fact that so little of this reproductive fruit results from so much professional assistance points to the lack of God's blessing on us for receiving back most of what we give.

4. Doesn't Galatians 6:6 contradict what you say? "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor." If this verse is used to justify the current situation, then all Sunday School and VBS "instructors" should be put on the church payroll just like pastors. There are many more "good things" to "share" with "instructors" that are much more important than gifts of money, i.e., an open heart, personal relationship, working hard to follow their example or even a good meal. This passage does not say a teacher of God's Word should never work as an engineer or plumber. The scripture I am pointing to clearly says church leaders should refuse their right to pay and meet their own needs where it is possible.

By Helen Steiner Rice

*Only what we give away
Enriches us from day to day,
For not in getting but in giving
Is found the lasting joy of living...*

4. How can you contradict the traditional understanding of 1 Timothy 5:17 where elders are worthy of double honor when they direct church affairs well and labor in the Word? The fact that leaders who function this way are worthy of double honor and pay is undisputable. The fact that these leaders should also refuse this right when possible is also undisputable. Paul's clear apostolic instruction and example, authenticated with the words of Jesus, teaches both. Tradition only teaches one side.

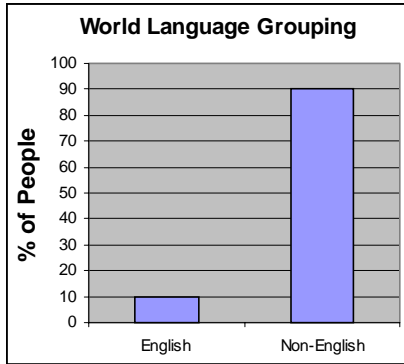
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The Money Trail Around The World

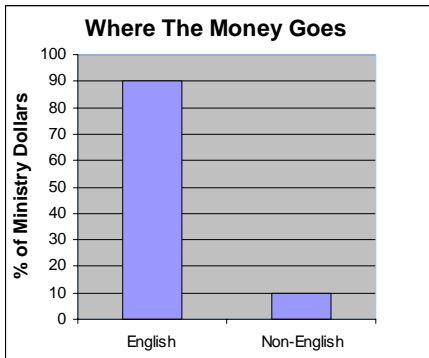
In February, 1999, Dr. Viggo Olson, a veteran missionary to Bangladesh spoke to a group of college students. In his challenge to the students, he gave this scenario of where the money goes in God's vineyard. What he said was quite shocking. He showed with a graph that 10% of the world speaks English and 90%



speak other languages. Then he put up an overhead graph that showed a flat rate of spiritual growth among English speakers and a tremendous spike of growth over the last thirty years among the Non-English speaking



people. The final graph showed us where the money is going. My first thought was "what is God going to do with us as he sees us directing 90% of God's money to our own



language group who make up such a tiny percentage of God's harvest. God has given us the money and instructions to be good stewards. It seems clear to me we are close to failing as we direct so much to fund ministry

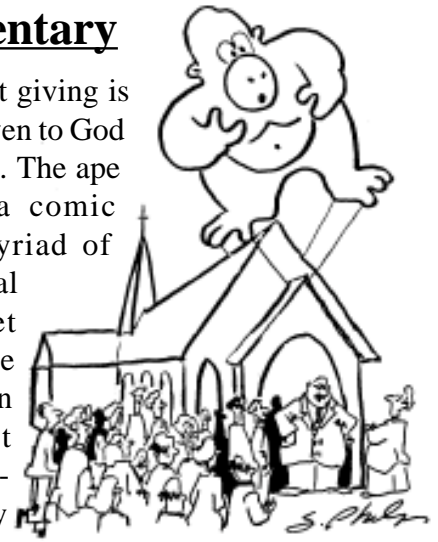
to ourselves. My previous church is very missions oriented, yet only 25% is free to fund ministry beyond themselves.

Dr. Olson was concerned about this disparity, but he did not talk about what he thought the solution might be. I don't know what his reasons were, but I know it seems impossible to try to change an institutional system dynamic this deeply ingrained while being paid by the system. God has given me freedom in this arena. I must speak the truth in love. I have no doubts I will be perceived as being unloving or in error. Many before me gave their lives to champion core values reformation. I will suffer little in comparison.

There is no easy solution to this tragic form of self directed stewardship. We can see that God's mercy is great in that he has not given our language group what we deserve for many generations of systemic self-giving. We know that God's gracious generosity has continued towards us in spite of our shortsightedness. This same grace and mercy stands ready to help us grow. Are we willing?

Comic Commentary

Two point nine percent giving is the average amount given to God by American believers. The ape balloon is merely a comic metaphor for the myriad of gimmicks institutional churches use to get people in the door. These lures have no basis in God's Word about building God's household. Often they contradict it. "If it works", or "the people enjoy it" become



"Yeah, it brings in a lot of people, but they all want 2.9 percent tithing."

authorities with more power than Biblical revelation. These gimmicks are seen as having no negative influence, yet they lure leaders and followers to take on a whole system of church life that is less than mediocre in accomplishing God's desired results. Consumer oriented drawing cards produce consumer level commitment. Leaders get excited about the crowds they draw but are frustrated by the spiritual results. They seem unable to test what they do with God's Word. In my opinion, the concept of church life which requires perpetual dependency upon hired gifts, is at it's root, a well-intentioned consumer system. God designed his church to be a giving system, not a consumer system. The meager giving rates of the wealthiest believers on earth who have been taught thousands of sermons ought to produce humble reconsideration of our habits. I don't think God would bother convicting American saints to give more than 2.9% when he knows 75 - 85% of that is going to fund ministry primarily to those who give it. God can see we are mostly pooling money to benefit ourselves. I am convinced believers will experience far more pleasure ("blessing") in giving to God when their giving meets the deep needs of others rather than maintaining an institutional system of church life with a huge overhead. Can we ask hard questions about deeply seeded traditions? Can we take another look at giving in God's revelation of church life?

"The great danger is not that we will renounce our faith, but that we will settle for a mediocre version of it."

Author Unknown

Phil 4:10-19

10I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

14Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. 17Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. 18I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. 19And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
NIV

1 Cor 16:1-3

16:1Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. 2On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. 3Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.
NIV

1 Cor 16:13-14

13Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. 14Do everything in love.
NIV

*And do not forget
to do good and to share
with others,
for with such sacrifices
God is pleased.*

Heb 13:16 (NIV)
