



Churches Of God Outreach Ministries
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What Does God Require?

Every Christian ministry needs support. Do they all deserve it?

What principles should underlie your giving?

by James McBride

Rarely does a Christian ministry fail to publicly request financial support. Virtually every magazine, every newsletter, asks its readers for more money. Not surprising, really. For the production of a magazine - or virtually any 'work for God' - apart from some personal evangelism - requires money! Money doesn't often float from the sky when the invoices are stuffed through the door, or when wages have to be paid. Perusal of Christian newspapers confirms that many enterprises are crying out for funding, even going to the wall. Previously well-endowed ministries face a traumatic falling away of donations.

It's required of those behind any such work that they are responsible for the good stewardship of all donations - large or small. We need to question, for example, the structure of the organization. The pattern set by the early church didn't require a headquarters building stuffed with salaried staff. Nor was there an extensive network of district superintendents, area superintendents, national co-ordinators *etc.* All unnecessary when the Biblical pattern is in place. There was no 'corporate identity', but local assemblies were independent. Labour was volunteered.

Another factor is how the income is allocated. Donations are often channelled to a central headquarters where a seemingly endless tangle of committees vie for a piece of the pie. (*Yes* - this is Christianity today!) The current blue-eyed project sets about empire building, usually soaking up more administrative funding. Each empire remains and continues to gobble up resources, even when the focus of attention has moved on to another project. It is not unknown for administration and salaries to consume half and even three-quarters of income. A paltry proportion of hard-earned cash goes to fund 'preaching the gospel'.

Accountability

God requires of every ministry *accountability*. We are accountable, primarily, to the Head of the church - Jesus Christ. He is the overseer of every authentic work carried out in his name. He is always present, though our personal shortcomings too often blind us to that presence. An example of that divine oversight is the concern Jesus had

for the 'seven churches' cited in Revelation chapters two and three.

Then there's the element of *fear*. Every ministry is accountable to those willing to part with their hard-earned resources in support. None would function at all were it not for an uninterrupted flow of finances. If you are locked into a system that believes it is 'the only one' and outside of it is eternal doom - then you will fear to stop your giving. The Biblical pattern for giving is set aside, with hints - even direct threats - if brethren do not 'tithe'. Failure to tithe will lead to being struck off the membership roll with the implication that you won't be in the Kingdom. A powerful pressure especially in those churches which consider themselves to be 'the one true church'. It happens, and in independent assemblies as well as in denominational churches.

Tithing to 'Headquarters' too often serves as a cover for gross misuse of donations. It's not unknown for the leaders of large income churches to 'live the life of Riley' off the backs of brethren and co-workers who can ill-afford what they give. Funds earmarked for orphanages and widows and the destitute are plundered to furnish leadership mansions and a royal lifestyle. There is, all too often, no financial transparency.

Walk Free

And accountability to the Head of the church demands that its leadership - whether of a large denomination or an independent local assembly - is faithful to his Word. Too often, blinded by power or ignorance or vainglory, a remote corporate leadership or a headstrong local elder will blunder into a wilderness of false teachings. Each of us - each individual Christian - is personally responsible to be faithful to the Word of God. Walk blindly into that wilderness and you suffer the consequences. *Yet you can be free!* You are free to walk away. Free to fellowship where the Word of God is revered and taught. Indeed your departure might conceivably be a catalyst for change. No money, no work!

On the other hand, if you associate with an assembly that's faithful to the Scriptures, *stay loyal*: "*Never let go of loyalty and faithfulness*" (Proverbs 3:3). Too many

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Christians wander from assembly to assembly without being firmly rooted and supportive of one. Jesus places his spiritual gifts as he pleases in each assembly, or each association. All are essential to his purpose in that place. (The New Testament pattern was for a number of independent 'house churches' in each town or area, voluntarily working together in outreach. There were no denominations.) Your wandering undermines his work!

How Much?

The Levitical priesthood was the cornerstone of Israel's religion. They were responsible for the maintenance and worship of the Tabernacle, and later, the Temple. To them fell the considerable physical effort of the sacrificial system. The Temple music, too, was their responsibility. And throughout the land they taught God's Law. To maintain these responsibilities there was a system of tithing - the giving of a tenth of 'increase'. Along with offerings, the tithe was considered as the norm for most people. Unlike medieval Britain there was no coercion! Hence support for the priesthood waxed and waned - a mix of the quality of the priests' service to the people, and the spirituality of the people (*cp* Malachi 2:1-9, 3:6-10).

Give Your All!

Is 'tithes and offerings' what God requires of Christians? If so, very few comply! For most, giving to the church isn't a priority, and only a minority of those labelled Christian tithe. And those who do tithe squabble over what it means - 'gross income, or net' *etc.*

The calculation, however, is simple. It is *total commitment*. Not just your increase, no matter how computed. But your all. *All* your resources - your spiritual gifts, your natural talents, your time, your money belong to God and to Jesus. You are their 'slave'! Simply direct-debiting your tithe to the church, yet failing to personally and wholeheartedly integrate in an available local assembly or ministry is not the way of the cross. Jesus demands all.

Balanced Decisions

Of course, that's not a call to live in a tin hut and in poverty. There is no doubt that some early Christians were 'rich' (*eg* James 1:10), that some lived in substantial homes. And no indication that on becoming Christian they were encouraged to sell up and live on the street or in a hovel.

As with so much of our Christian walk we are faced with choice. Do I really need to replace working 'white goods' - with late model fridge, washing machine, dish-washer *etc*? Or purchase the latest hi-fi or a plasma TV? What is an appropriate amount to spend on food and drink and restaurants? How many suits, dresses, shoes do I need? Do I really need to climb the property ladder? Those furnishings are 70s style - but do I need to 'keep up with the Joneses'? Your car still looks good and goes well, so

need you invest in a BMW? How are you using your time? Do sporting and leisure activities devour large chunks of both time and money? Too much time in the pub? It's very much a matter of balance. Could your leisure time be better spent on encouraging other brethren by letter, by phone, by a visit?

If your income improves, however, and your accommodation is basic then it may be appropriate to climb another step up the property ladder, or to refurbish your home, or replace a rusting car.

But too many of our citizens - including Christians - live with a mountain of debt; in Britain nearly a billion pounds worth on loans and credit cards last year. The apostle Paul's admonition is apt: '*owe no man anything*' (Romans 13:8). He didn't depend on others for support (Acts 20:33-34), but worked to earn a living - and to pay the rent: he '*dwelled two whole years in his own rented house*' (Acts 28:30). We live in a society bent on acquiring, and it's all too easy for followers of Jesus to become entangled in the mad rush for the trappings of wealth. It is, says Paul, a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5), from which we are to flee (I Corinthians 10:14). Especially in precarious times we ought to exert every effort to become solvent!

Giving To God

Your financial status may be such that it is an affront to God that you give *only* a tenth. On the other hand, while God may applaud your attitude, it may be that in your poverty it is wrong to give as *much* as a tenth.

Anyway, whatever you give, what does it mean to 'give to God'? It is usually taken to mean that you give to humans! Your perception of a particular ministry may not be God's perception! Huge sums are funnelled annually into works which are promoting serious error. Or ministries that are fronts for enriching its leaders. Before being conned into supporting a ministry be sure to thoroughly check it out.

Ultimately, however, it's *you* that is responsible for how you use your resources. The principle applies: '*...while it remained was it not your own? And after it was sold was it not in your own power?*' (Acts 5:4). If you have a local assembly to attend then it is important that you support its activities - from your resources, including financial. If you are a 'wilderness Christian' you might support a carefully selected ministry that has transparent finances.

Personal Evangelism

But it is you who should be wisely using your resources - *personally*. Can you imagine the impact if every Christian were to be an unashamed witness to Jesus Christ? That's what Jesus is looking for. There is a vital place for dedicated evangelists. But each of us has the responsibility to be a witness wherever we live, using all our resources appropriately. — Are you?

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