

Freely You Have Received, Freely Give Leonard Sweet

Toward a Post-Tithing, Post-Stewardship, Postmodern Theology of Receiving

"What have you got that you did not receive? If then you received it,

why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"

Apostle Paul (1Cor.4:7)

"It is not what we eat but what we digest that makes us strong; not what we gain but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read but what we remember that makes us learned; not what we preach but what we practice that makes us Christian." -- *Francis Bacon*

The mysterious Watergate informant known as "Deep Throat" was right. "Follow the money," he told reporters Woodward and Bernstein. "Follow the money."

It's a lesson the church, fixed on the power of politics in a world where the power paradigms are economic, has yet to learn. Money talks. And how Jesus loved to talk about money. If clergy preached on economics as often as Jesus did, there would be at least one sermon a month devoted to what Douglas W. Johnson calls "a theology of finance," or "think[ing] about money theologically."¹ But clergy have historically been reluctant to take a leadership role in the church's money matters and fund-raising.

There are lots of reasons for this, not the least of which is that nothing has produced more friction over the years between a pastor and a congregation so much as economics.² Likewise, some of the biggest fights in church history were caused by economic issues. The Reformation after all began in part as a dispute over stewardship and fund-raising. But generally, stewardship thinking and planning has been led by the laity, not the clergy, who have been slow to appreciate how they can help people minister with their money.

The profusion of fund raising appeals that bombard us daily, from metal mailboxes outside to electronic blinking boxes inside, make it actually *more* rather than less important that we talk money. Some television evangelists spend an average of 26 minutes of every hour fund-raising. The church has been even more creative over the years in its attempts to attract funds.

In the early twentieth century some innovative rural congregations in Georgia supported their church by a unique raffle which required some skill in horseback riding. For fifty cents one could enter a contest in which each participant would ride as fast as possible under a certain tree. Tied to a high branch of the tree by its legs was a live goose with a greased neck and head. The contestant who reached out and pulled the head off the goose won the fowl.³

In addition to tax support, colonial churches used pew rents, subscription lists, lotteries, and special offerings to underwrite their ministries. Throughout American history, lotteries (including raffles and bingo), bazaars, church suppers, the "talent plan" (which always gets the most local publicity), rummage sales, auctions, coupon redemption schemes, business enterprises like revenue-producing real estate, bond sales and endowment insurance have been some of the ways the church has let money talk in its midst. Our present system, based on the combination of faith and pledge budgets supplemented by free-will offerings and special fund-raising projects, didn't take root until after the First World War.

What all of these fund-raising gimmicks have in common is their expediency. In a world of give-and-take, Mabel Boggs Sweet used to say, the church does not have enough people who give what it takes. But beyond the fact that the church is filled with members who lose more in change a year (\$100 average) than they give to the church a year (23% give less than \$100) is the larger issue of whether the church's money speaks a different language than the language of a mammonized world. Money talks, but in different languages. Is our money speaking the language of Christ, or is our money saying one thing and Jesus another?

The primary monetary language throughout church history has been the holy tax of 10% called the tithe. Something almost mystical hovers about the Jewish tradition of the sacred, separated portion--the special consecration of one nation in the world, one tree in the Garden, one city in the Promised Land, the firstborn in

the family, one day in the week, one-tenth of one's possessions. But the tithe, or what Chinese Christians came to call "fragrant money," long antedates Judaism and Christianity.

In classical antiquity, according to Censorinus, tithing was no big deal. "They used to sacrifice some part of all these to the gods, more to prove themselves grateful than because they thought the gods needed it. And so, when they had gathered in the crops, before they ate, they made ready to pour the gods a libation; and since they possessed their fields and cities by the gift of the gods, they dedicated a certain portion of them for temples and shrines where they could worship them."⁴

Athens citizens maintained their shrines by a tithe; Romans presented to Hercules a tenth of the spoils of war; Hindus and Muslims practice tithing to their faith in much larger amounts than merely 10% (although in Islam zakat, one of the 5 pillars of faith, exacts a good deal less than 10% of one's income, supplemental voluntary gifts are encouraged and expected). Laying aside a tenth to the gods is an ancient practice, almost as old as the dawning of human history itself. Adopted by the Israelites from the ancient world, tithe-giving was common in as diverse cultures as Babylonia, Carthage, China, Egypt, Greece, Persia, Phoenicia, and Rome.

The history of the institution of tithing has yet to be written. Until then an accurate picture of tithing and the exact shape of tithing systems, which differed greatly over different parts of the world and different periods of history, cannot be reconstructed with surety. The Bible itself reveals different attitudes and approaches to tithing, even within Pentateuchal sources. We do know enough, however, to realize that much of what is popularly known about tithing is wrong.

First, there is no such thing as the "biblical tithe." The Hebrew people did not give a tithe. They gave two or three tithes. Although Tobit represents a special case, and reflects somewhat the condition of the Second Commonwealth.⁵ The first mention in the Bible of a tithe tells of Abram giving a voluntary donation of ten percent to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High.⁶

According to the Holiness Code, set forth in Leviticus⁷—more than 250 years later, the tithe was given to the priests and their household for the maintenance of the sanctuary and its personnel. Later, according to the Priestly Code, every year the people gave a first tithe or a Ma`aser Rishon which was paid in kind to the sons of Levi, temple personnel at Jerusalem who performed sacred as well as civic duties but who were without an inheritance of the land (Num. 18:21-32). Levitical cities served as royal temple cities where tithes were stored and assigned. The Levites in turn set aside a tithe of this first tithe called Ter'umat ma'aser, to support the priests who used the tithe for the maintenance of the central shrine in Jerusalem.⁸

According to the Deuteronomic Code,⁹ every year the Hebrews also paid a second tithe or Ma`aser Sheni. This was originally a first-fruits offering used only at Jerusalem for social purposes (part went for partying--feasts, sacrifices, and festivals which were signs of rejoicing and of glorifying God). Later part of the offering also went for relief of the community's orphans, widows, strangers, and other destitute persons. Tithes now were eaten rather than given away partly because cultic reform had abolished those institutions previously maintained by the tithe (provincial sanctuaries and their cultic officials). These Priestly and Deuteronomic tithes were most likely one and the same but carried out differently at different stages in response to changed conditions. By the period of the second Temple the two different scriptural readings of the same law came to be understood as referring to two separate tithes. Hence they were combined and harmonized in the Hebrew canon as a double obligation.

Every third and sixth year of the seven year sabbatical cycle was designated the "Year of the Tithe" at which time the religious experience of Judaism obligated a third tithe called the "poor man's tithe" or "The Welfare Tithe" (Deut.14:28-29). Whether this third tithe laid aside at home replaced the second tithe in alternative years, or was an additional requirement, is still unclear, although most argue the former.¹⁰

What is clear is that far from tithing representing a "tenth" of one's income, the Hebrew tithes of terumat and ma'aserot established by the rabbinical system constituted at least 20 percent annually of "whatsoever is used for food and is kept watch over and grows from the soil," except the seventh year, when the land lay fallow.¹¹ In sum, the Levite Tithe (Num.18:21-26) was given to support the Levites. The Festival Tithe (Deut.14:22-27) was brought to Jerusalem for a massive party. The Welfare Tithe (Deut.14:28-29) was gathered every three years for the orphans, aliens, and widows. Put the three "tithes" together and you get a total payment of 23 1/3 percent annually. This does not include taxation.

Second, for most of history, the tithe was more like a tax, not a voluntary offering as it is in America today. Of course, when Israel was a theocracy, there was no need to fund government. Before the monarchy there was no need for taxation, so to understand tithing as taxation in Hebrew history is mistaken. Under the kings the Hebrew people paid taxes in addition to the tithe (see I Sam. 17:25; 2 Kings 23:35; Ezra 4:13, 20; Neh.5:4). But in the sense that one has no choice but to pay taxes, tithing was like a tax. Rich and poor alike had to face the tithe collector. Those who were most trustworthy and constant in their tithe collections became candidates for induction into the high order of haberim and ne'emanim. Unlike the secular tax collector (publican), the haber came to be so respected and loved for their scrupulous dealings with people that the very name haber became

synonymous with honesty and integrity in administering funds. Both rich and poor were also required to bring their second tithes to Jerusalem each year to be eaten there (although the wealthy could commute their tithes into money, which would then be taken to Jerusalem with an added quarter to be spent for upkeep while visiting the holy city).

Not until the fourth century did the practice of tithing become firmly established in the Christian tradition, although in the second and third centuries there was increasing but conflicting evidence of its usage. After the sixth century tithing became a legal obligation for Christians, under penalty of excommunication and civil punishment, and by the thirteenth century tithing was nearly universally practiced throughout Christendom.

The combination of church tax and state tax imposed tremendous economic burdens on Jews and Christians. At the time Jesus was born, the combined religious tithe and Roman tax approximated 40 percent. Giles Constable has asserted that even after factoring out historical realities from legal documents of European history, no tax can compare with the tithe for "length of duration, extent of application, and weight of economic burden."¹²

Third, the New Testament literature says virtually nothing about the tithe. The only two references Jesus makes to tithing are not laudatory, but instead sound an alarm about the entire tithing system.¹³ In fact tithing's lack of significance for Jesus, plus Paul's total silence on the subject, are striking given their emphasis on money and possessions. This silence needs to be seen within a double framework. First, during Jesus' time there had been quite a bit of urbanization. The city folks did not have to give as much for tithes as their country cousins. Hence there developed resentment among the Galilean amha-arez ("people of the land") at what was felt to be unfair discrimination. Second, the Rabbis extolled voluntary giving as "acts of lovingkindness" (gemitut hasadim). The New Testament's concentration on gifts and offerings rather than on tithes was in keeping with the Rabbis. It was also one reason why the Protestant Reformers were critical of a required tithe.

Jesus himself was not a tither. He had no income. As a devout Jew who did not break the law, Jesus would have tithed if he had anything to tithe. But when the collectors came for the temple tax, Jesus had to send Peter to get some money, not from a church treasury, but from a fish.¹⁴ The only time Jesus said anything about the tithe was when he argued that tithing was not enough:

"Alas for you, lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites!
You pay tithes of mint and dill and cumin; but
you have overlooked the weightier demands of the
law, justice, mercy, and good faith. It is these
you should have practiced, without neglecting the
others."¹⁵

Actually, the Pharisees weren't at all comfortable about giving tithes to the Hasmonean dynasts (who were also priests) in Jerusalem and would have shared some of Jesus' reluctance.

The arguments for the tithing system, not as a hard and fast rule but as "a minimum guide to giving rather than a prescribed amount"¹⁶ are numerous and strong. First, tithing is a simple, neat, dignified formulaic administration of income which gives priority to the church and its ministry. In the words of Clement of Alexandria, through tithing "we are instructed in piety, and in liberality, and in justice, and in humanity."¹⁷ At a time when real disposable income has risen 60 percent (from 1960 to 1980) while per capita giving to the church has increased only 12 percent, the establishment of some economic baselines and starting points for Christian giving are especially helpful.

Second, tithing fosters disciplined giving, removing liberality from the ups and downs of crisis giving and placing it as part of a daily walk with God. Tithing as a spiritual discipline can actually move people to deeper levels of faith and awareness of God's presence.

Third, tithers dare non-tithers to find one person who tithes and regrets it. Evidence, they say, is overwhelming: all tithers recommend tithing. 100 percent. People who complain about tithing are those who, if one multiplied their "tithe" by ten and this became their weekly income, would soon starve. Homes where tithing is practiced for any length of time seldom quit because families find, by developing the image of God in them, what home really is.

Fourth, universal tithing would have tremendous benefits for troubled churches. Church members give on an average 1.6 to 2.5 percent of their income. A 10 percent average would increase giving by 100 billion a year, an income presenting churches with a whole host of problems they've never even imagined.¹⁸

Those who oppose the tithe have marshaled equally vigorous arguments to support their case, and to my mind they are persuasive. First, as we have shown, the tithing principle is not nearly as clear and neat as it first appears. According to the *halakhah*, some even interpreted the law of the tithe to include not three tithes, but

one tithe divided into three parts: one-third for priests and Levites, one-third for the temple treasury, and one-third for the poor. Or in today's terms, is one tithing net or gross income?

Was not tithing part of the ceremonial law of Moses which had been abrogated, thus making it no more binding than unleavened bread, sacrificial lambs or circumcision (this was the position first laid out by Epiphanius and later picked up by the Quakers)? Did not tithes depart from their Old Testament purpose which was "that there might be no beggar in Israel" and become instead, as one seventeenth century divine put it, a means by which clergy "maintain themselves in ease, and them and their wives and children in pride and idleness."¹⁹

Second, rather than generosity and compassion, does tithing not generate a spirit of legalism and self-righteousness? Constraints to give must come from within, not without, if we are to fulfill the law of Christ to "freely give."²⁰

Third, the tithe sets too low a standard for the rich, too high a standard for the poor. The tithe is fundamentally a regressive tax levied at a single rate on the rich and poor alike. On the one hand, the tithe entails no sacrifice for today's affluent. "The tithe is an Old Testament scheme that lets the rich get out of giving"²¹ is how the president of a major fund raising organization lays it on the line. Might this be why the tithing system as we know it was a lay-led movement at the turn of the 19th century. Tithing is God's financial plan for supporting the work of the Kingdom, argue tithers like Samuel Colgate of soap, Milton Hershey of chocolates, Henry J. Heinz of pickles, Henry P. Crowell of oats, and John D. Rockefeller of oil, who more than anyone bequeathed to the church the notion of tithing as a 10% gift to God of what we own.²²

On the other hand, from the poor's perspective, the tithe is too much to take, like the government that asked its people to tighten their belts, only to receive the reply: "Send belts." By the year 2000 the majority of poor will be women, children, and the elderly (most of whom are also women). When in 41 A.D. a famine prevailed in Judea, Antioch Christians sent relief according to everyone's "ability." Any system of giving that does not accommodate diversity of "abilities" and economic conditions is both inadequate and insensitive. Tithing does not accommodate prosperity giving--"as God has prospered us."

Fourth, tithing hasn't worked!²³ Nobody wants to talk about this, but after 100 years of haranguing parishioners to tithe, the church's giving patterns aren't changing. A November 1994 article in the *Riverside Press-Enterprise* estimated that only 5000 families nationwide truly tithe.²⁴

Fifth, tithing is so tied to money that God's claim on the rest of one's life can only be applied with great conceptual legerdemain. What is more, its application to the world of "money" is increasingly dubious. In the modern world "money" meant "cash." In the postmodern world money is information. In the modern world we asked people to take the temperature of their commitment to Christ by looking at what they put in the offering plate, and in the high modern era by looking at their checkbook. In the postmodern era one's temperature can only be tested by looking at one's list of automatic withdrawals.

Money is being dematerialized. The wealth of our people is in an electronic infrastructure. Of the \$7 trillion foundation on which the US economy is based, only \$300 billion of this is in cash, and less than 40 percent of this \$300 billion is even transacted within the US.²⁵ Postmodern culture is a cashless society, a world where "cash is dirty; cash is heavy; cash is quaint; cash is expensive."²⁶ The only people with whom cash is popular are paranoiacs, tax dodgers, crooks, drug dealers, and churches. Jesus would be pleased with us for the company we're keeping, but not for the reason we're keeping it.²⁷ Try and get Federal Express to take cash--they haven't accepted cash for 10 years. Try and get a rental car company to take cash--you have to sign your life away. Try and use cash to buy a couch from the pricey furniture merchant Scan International Corporation of Silver Spring, Maryland. They'll refuse to sell you the couch before they'll take your cash.

Finally, tithing tends to give definition rather than direction to stewardship. "The theology of stewardship is buried under the legalism of tithing" is how one critic puts it.²⁸ By divorcing giving from the more complex, more comprehensive issue of stewardship, tithing encourages the attitude of leaving God "a big fat tip." By only identifying stewardship with financial concerns, tithing fosters a spirit of giving akin to paying the tax on a bill, even if it is God's sales tax. In short, tithing may provide Christians with the will for giving, but not the way.

What would a post-tithing method of church fund-raising look like? Let's begin with a story from the desert wisdom tradition:

Once some of the elders came to Scete, and Abba John the Dwarf was with them. And when they were dining, one of the priests, a very great old man, got up to give each one a little cup of water to drink, and no one would take it from him except John the Dwarf. The others were surprised, and afterwards they asked him: How is it that you, the least of all, have presumed to accept the services of this great old man? He replied: Well,

when I get up to give people a drink of water, I am happy if they all take it; and for that reason on this occasion I took the drink, that he might be rewarded, and not feel sad because nobody accepted the cup from him. And at this all admired his discretion.²⁹

The tithing system is based on a "theology of giving." God calls me to give 10% of what is mine to the work of the kingdom. There are two main problems with this theology of giving that has undergirded church fund-raising in the modern era.

The first is revealed by a simple question that tells more about someone's mental and spiritual health, the state of a soul and body, than anyone will care to have known: "Can you accept praise?"

Or: "When the affirmation we all want comes to us, how do we accept it?"

Most people in the pews have one of the greatest spiritual problems anyone can have. They are better givers than receivers. Clergy especially suffer from this disease. I confess: I am a better giver than receiver. I don't celebrate birthdays for a lot of reasons (I gave up birthdays when I turned 40), chief among which is the fact that I am uncomfortable receiving. I love to give presents; I am awkward and ill-at-ease in receiving presents. For me the joy is in the giving, not the getting.

My soul is in mortal danger every day. I pray daily over this debilitating spiritual disease that imperils my very soul. Why?

What is my fundamental category in relationship to God? What is God's fundamental category in relationship with me? God is the giver. I am the receiver. The very best things about Len Sweet are what I have received. The very fact that I can love is because "Christ first loved me." The fact that for me the joy is in the giving, not the receiving, means that I don't like my category of receiving. I'd much prefer God's category of giving.

In other words, I have a "god-complex." And there are few more dangerous spiritual conditions than this.

The modern world built a "stewardship ethic" on a deeply flawed foundation: the theology of giving. The fact that the phrase "the joy is in the getting" grates on our spiritual nerves testifies to the very nature of our problem with basic theological doctrines of divine grace, love and providence. It is time to build a postmodern "stewardship ethic" on a theology of receiving foundation rather than a theology of giving.

Here is the most fundamental insight of a faith that is postmodern: All is a gift. Everything. Here is the most elemental biblical attitude toward life: God is the owner. I am the owner. When King David dedicated to God everything and everyone who was a part of building the first Temple in Jerusalem, he offered this prayer:

Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendor, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.

1 Chronicles 29:14³⁰

` Know that the Lord is God! It is He that hath made us, and we are His; . .
' Psalm 100:3

God owns everything. You and I own nothing. All I think I "own" anyway I "owe" (I only "own" the mortgage). The best things about Len Sweet are not what I am able to give, but what I have already received. This has perhaps never been expressed in community life better than the membership commitment of The Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C.

"I commit myself, regardless of the expenditures of time, energy, and money to becoming an informed, mature Christian. I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources. I give God the throne in relation to the material aspect of my life. God is the owner. I am the owner. Because God is a lavish giver I too shall be lavish and cheerful in my regular gifts."

The second major problem with a theology of giving is that it deludes us into believing that what we are giving God is ours to begin with. Stewardship is more than a stale word that conveys to the hearer a host of couldas, wouldas, shouldas. More is at stake in the word "stewardship" than nomenclature. The entire "stewardship" metaphor is anachronistic, and arrogant.

The anachronism comes from the cultural irrelevance of the word itself. There are no stewards around anymore. In an agrarian culture, a "steward" or literally a "keeper of a pig sty" was a word laden in meaning and laden with power. We named our church treasurers "stewards." We named our caretakers in flight "stewardesses." A "steward" was someone to be trusted.

The only "stewards" postmoderns come into contact with are at 5-Star restaurants--and they're the ones giving out the libations. The word itself has lost its rich referents to creation and life. "Stewardship Sunday" is now not about costly care for creation, but the cost of keeping church and fund-raising. If anything, modern "stewardship" appeals have separated people from creation more than connecting them to WholeLife Discipleship. Stewardship means "money." For postmoderns, the currency of the future is time more than it is money.

Biologist Lynn Margulis hammers home the arrogance problem: "The idea that we are 'stewards of the earth' is another symptom of human arrogance. Imagine yourself with the task of overseeing your body's physiological processes. Do you understand the way it works well enough to keep all its systems in operation? Can you make your kidneys function? Can you control the removal of waste? Are you conscious of the blood flow through your arteries, or the fact that you are losing a hundred thousand skin cells a minute? We are unconscious of most of our body's processes, thank goodness, because we'd screw it up if we weren't. The human body is so complex, with so many parts, . . . a system which is far more complex than we can fully imagine. The idea that we are consciously care-taking such a large and mysterious system is ludicrous."³¹

Even if we were to argue that it's a viable metaphor intrinsically, it's not a metaphor that works. "Stewardship" is like trying to reach people for Christ in postmodern culture with a button or bumper-sticker that says "Jesus Saves" or through the "Four Spiritual Laws." I once was in a car with some Gen-Xers who cracked up when a radio program came on. The Christian broadcast was introduced with organ background music, with the announcer saying "Welcome to New Testament Light." Of course, the kids didn't hear "Light." They heard "Lite."

Two New Testament Greek words are translated by "stewardship." One is *epitropos*, which means "manager, foreman, steward, governor, procurator, guardian." (the latter as in Galatians 4:1-2--; The other more common NT word is *oikonomos*, which also means "manager, steward, administrator." It is formed by combining two words--*oikos* or house and *nomos* or law.

What wee gave, wee have;
What wee spent, wee had;
What wee left, wee lost.

Epitaph on Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon (d. 1419) and his wife at Tiverton.

I wish to argue that the best postmodern translation of both *epitropos* and *oikonomos* is trustee. For the former, see Galatians 4:1-2: "What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father." For the latter, see Paul's use of the word, as here in 1Cor.9:17: "If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me."³²

Postmoderns understand the complex nuances and connotations of "trusteeship." Many are on the Board of Trustees of local organizations, including the church. Many themselves are "trustees" of estates. Whereas "stewardship" has been stripped of all legal overtones and fiduciary consequences, postmoderns understand that the trustees of anything are the legal guardians of that organization or estate. They do not "own" it. But they are legally accountable for its health and well-being. If the church is sued, it is not the pastor who's going to jail, nor the members of the congregation who's money is one the line. It's the trustees. Once again, in the words of Paul, "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1Cor.4:2).

The fundamental question of anyone who is a "trustee" of an estate is not "How much do I give away of what is mine?" but "How much of this estate do I receive for myself so that the estate might grow and prosper and do good?" The language of "trusteeship" is the language of "receiving" first, and only after the "receiving" question is settled does it become the language of giving.

"Give as you have received . . ."
--Jesus (Matt.10:8 Phillips)

The issue of receptivity was central for Jesus' ministry. Jesus demonstrated a marvelous capacity for receiving: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt.25:35). To see this theology of receiving at work in the life of Jesus, theologian Elizabeth Barnes turns us to the story of the hemorrhaging woman, which illustrates Jesus' "reciprocal giving and receiving of gifts."

Barnes contends that "Jesus felt the exchange between them precisely because she also gave something back to him. . . He has been the grateful *recipient of her trust*. Many, no doubt, had jostled against him in the press of the crowd. But she had touched him with intention and hopeful trust. So doing, she has given to him, as well, a precious gift, even as he returns a priceless gift to her. Something truly human and healing *for them both* has occurred in this exchange. . . she gives to Jesus--needful of human community as much as she--the incomparable gift of trust, confidence in him and all that he is and his healing power in relation to her."³³

Or consider the story of the woman at the well near Sychar. Jesus is exhausted and parched. When a Samaritan woman approaches the well, Jesus asks her for a drink (she is the one with the bucket). Maria Teresa Porcile of Uruguay retells the story of the woman at the well (John 4:1042) in this way:

In the shanty-town there was no water . . .

It was evening, and the day had been very hard. . . .

And Jesus said: 'Give me a drink.'

A woman passed that way, coming from afar. She was a stranger, someone they didn't know and she carried a bucket. She went up to the well where the children were sitting, and the old people and the men and women, looking at the water in the well--the water, so near and yet so far.

And Jesus said: 'Give me a drink.'

And the woman answered: 'Why do you ask me for a drink? You are poor and I am rich. You are thirsty but the bucket is mine.'

And Jesus said: 'Woman, what of the well? Whose well is it?'

And the woman's eyes were opened and with her bucket they began to draw water for the whole district.³⁴

I am not the first to argue for a trusteeship ethic and its concomitant transition from giving to receiving, of course. Andrew Carnegie, who slept all his life on his poor-boy's metal cot, expressed his wealth ethic in precisely these terms of "trusteeship:"

This, then is held to be the duty of the man of wealth: to set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance; to provide moderately for the legitimate wants of those dependent upon him; and after doing so, to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer . . . to produce the most beneficial results for the community.³⁵

Albert Einstein orchestrated his life from a self-composed receiving ethic: "A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other persons, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving."³⁶

More recently, Harry Wendt, President of Crossways International (Minneapolis, MN), is joining me in arguing that the whole language of "giving" needs to be abandoned in favor of what he calls "Christian distribution."

When we place our so-called "gift" on the offering plate, we are not giving God anything. . . . [W]e are not *giving God but God's own!* We are merely getting our grubby little hands off what has always belonged to God. In short, we are not called to practice Christian *giving*, but Christian *management* and Christian *distribution*, and this applies not merely to what

we 'give' on Sundays, but to our total use of life as we manage this planet to the glory of God and for the good of all.³⁷

In a theology of receiving, the first question is not "How much to I give to God of what is mine?" Rather it is "How much of God's do I keep for myself?" At various times in my life, I may need to receive from the estate that has been entrusted to me almost 100%. At other times in my life, I may need to receive for myself from the estate less than 10%. But whatever stage of my life, one thing is clear: All that I have is a trust from God. I came into this world with nothing, and I leave this world with nothing. What Jesus told the rich young ruler, "You must give it all away," Jesus says to every one of us. None of us leave life without having given it all away--to someone, to somewhere.

"Be forewarned: Man and money cannot remain together forever. Either the money is taken from the man, or the man is taken from the money."

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov³⁸

Erma Bombeck was constantly asked if she saves up her best ideas for the next column, or how she parcels out and dribbles out her best ideas. Before Bombeck died she answered these queries in a column, "What's Saved is Often Lost."

"I don't save anything. My pockets are empty at the end of a week. So is my gas tank. So is my file of ideas. I trot out the best I've got, and come the next week, I bargain, whimper, make promises, cower and throw myself on the mercy of the Almighty for just three more columns in exchange for cleaning my oven.

"I didn't get to this point overnight. I came from a family of savers who were sired by poverty and . . . worshiped at the altar of self-denial.

"Throughout the years, I've seen a fair number of my family who have died leaving candles that have never been lit, appliances that never got out of the box . .

"It gets to be a habit.

"I have learned that silver tarnishes when it isn't used, perfume turns to alcohol, candles melt in the attic over the summer, and ideas that are saved for a dry week often become dated.

"I always had a dream that when I am asked to give an accounting of my life to a higher court, it will be like this: 'So, empty your pockets. What you get left of your life? Any dreams that were unfilled? Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven't spread around?'

"And, I will answer, 'I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm as naked as the day I was born.'³⁹

As Jesus sent forth his disciples, he said to them: "Freely ye have received, freely give" (KJB). It is only by having been blessed by God's gifts that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

We cannot give until we have first received. We cannot bless others until we first receive for ourselves God's blessing. And out of that receiving, we give--most importantly ourselves ("they first gave themselves to the Lord" [2Cor.8:5]), and then our trust.

John Wesley, when he first became a Christian, had a salary of thirty pounds per year. He lived on 28 pounds, and gave two to the church.

When Wesley's salary was increased to 50 pounds per year, he lived on 28, and gave 22 to the church.

When Wesley's salary was increased to 100 pounds per year, he lived on 28, and gave 72 to the church.

We are not called to give. We are called to invest what is God's in the work of God's kingdom. God did not call us to "have dominion" over the earth. God called us to be trustees of God's estate.

"The flowing out of God always demands a flowing back."

--Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381)

Whether the church's economic deployments begin with a theology of receiving or a theology of giving is important because where one begins alters the spirit in which the church's economic life takes place. And spirit matters. In a study for the Center on Philanthropy, Boston College sociologist Paul G. Schervish has found that charitable giving has very little to do with income or wealth. Rather, it has everything to do with one's associations, attitudes, abilities to identify with the needs of others, and faith.⁴⁰

Jesuit theologian John Haughey contends that "It is absolutely false to ever use the words 'my wealth.' It is radical fallacy to consider wealth as mine. It is not my wealth! This is a lie hot from hell! 'My' does not fit on the world 'wealth.' 'Nation's wealth' is a lie! 'Corporation's wealth' is a lie! Whatever wealth I have disposition over is not my wealth. It is the wealth of the Owner. If there is anything worth hearing, it is this statement: 'My' must never again be attached to the noun 'wealth.' It's NOT my wealth. Rather, it's my responsibility about the Master's wealth."⁴¹

Where the theological work needs to be done with our congregations is first in their theology of receiving. How much should we take of what is God's?

First, we should understand that our God is an extravagant God (Eph.3:20; Phil.4:19). God wants to lavish on you an incredible trust. Will you receive God's trust. Will you become God's trustee? Will you receive the estate God has in store for you? If our people really understand this, they may come to feel toward God like that person in junior high school who had a crush on you.

Second, God wants you to receive for yourself an abundance (John 10:10). In Luke 19:28-30 Jesus promises those who would abandon everything and follow him that they should receive "many times over" (RSV) with respect to their earthly needs and human friendships.

When we pray "Give us this day our daily bread," St. Jerome contends, we are not praying for a prison diet of bread and water, but for an abundant supply of whatever it takes to make us good and faithful trustees. The word the Evangelists coined which we translate "daily" (*epiousios*) actually conveys to Jerome the meaning of abundance ("*supersubstantialis*"). We can take from the trust far beyond what we deserve or need for subsistence.

The precise meaning of "abundance" is illumined in Proverbs 30:8, a key text in any theology of receiving that relates finances to faith. "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food that is needful for me" (RSV). Or as another translation puts the last clause: "provide me with food sufficient for my needs" (AT). The ethical axis does not tilt either toward sparsity or superfluity. Its poles are at one end selfishness or at the other end obedience. Jesus did not call trustees to asceticism, or to affluence. Jesus called trustees to obedience.

Second, the ethical axis in a theology of receiving is one of necessities versus luxuries, what I need as opposed to what I want, and when in doubt erring on the kenotic side of self-limitation and other-generosity because God tilts in the same direction. Clement of Alexandria compared a person's possessions to a person's shoe size. Possessions must fit the person--they will be cumbersome and uncomfortable if too large; painful if pinched. Each soul has a different size. That is why, as the Parable of the Talents teaches us (Matt. 25:14-30), inequality does not spell injustice. We all share as equals, but we are not all given equal shares. It is not wrong for one person to have more than another person because each person has many different needs, some of them more costly than others.

The soul can be an expensive thing to grow. It may need books, music, art, travel, and beauty. Jesus made all these things a part of daily bread that we can receive freely.

The most dramatic strike in American history broke out in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, when 25,000 unskilled immigrant workers under Wobbly leadership fought for ten weeks an oppressive industrial system. Ray Stannard Baker called it "the first strike I ever saw which sang." One of the lines these workers sang was:

Hearts starve as well as bodies
Give us bread, but give us roses.

Because God called the world good, the Old Testament scholar Walther Eichrodt explained, the Hebrews believed that all of creation was to be enjoyed. They reveled in "earthly possessions, many children, long life, friendship, and love, as well as wisdom, beauty, honor, and political freedom." When we get a taste of the new life in Christ, or what Paul referred to in Ephesians 3:8 as "the unfathomable riches of Christ" (NEB), there is an intensification, not a diminishment, of the colors of art, science, culture and nature. The gospel of Jesus Christ gives us eyes to see new beauties in earth, sea, sky and human experience. In the words of the old George Wade Robinson hymn:

Heav'n above is softer blue
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen.

The postmodern church, then, is to be a place where rich and poor will reconceive themselves in light of each other. It will end up being a place of abundance. Just as in the early church, postmodern churches should have no poor among them. Its rich will have learned to recite the trustees' prayer, "God, help me handle possessions with a light touch," and to live a life where, not "The one with the most toys wins," but "The one who bounces his/her last check wins."

The postmodern church will not be afraid of economics and will have learned the biblical truth that you cannot serve God and money, but sometimes you can serve God better with money than without it. The church's theology of giving will not be based on guilt, or scorn for possessions, or some abstract principle of "unto the least" makes us increasingly intolerant of inequality. Rather, our theology of giving will be based on a spirit of compassion, love, and a trustee's accountability for creation and the common good, which has absolute pre-eminence over property and class.

Jesus has invited us to come to his table. We do not come in a spirit of guilt or glee that we have received more than others. We do come in a spirit of gratitude for the abundance God has entrusted to us, and with grit and grim determination to see that we invest our estate wisely that others can share in the abundance God has promised for all. Let there be no poor at God's table because of our greed and selfishness.

In many native American cultures, the "*potlatch*" or giveaway was at the heart of their economic system. One gathered wealth, not to accumulate for oneself, but to give it away and invest it in the community. The richest person in the community is the one who gives the most away.⁴² Only a theology of receiving can get the postmodern church beyond a tithing system's ten percent tip to God (which isn't even adequate in restaurants anymore) toward a potlatch discipleship.

ENDNOTES

1. Douglas W. Johnson, *Finance In Your Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 15.
2. See e.g. Susan Brigden, "Tithe Controversy in Reformation London," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 32 (July 1981): 285-301; Giles Constable, "Resistance to Tithes in the Middle Ages," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 13 (October 1962): 172-85; Lawrence P. Buck "Opposition to Tithes in the Peasants' Revolt: A Case Study of Nuremberg in 1524," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 4 (October 1973), 11-22; Salim Rashid, "Anglican Clergymen and the Tithe Question in the Early Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Religious History*, 11 (June 1980): 64-76; William Reginald Ward, "The Tithe Question in England in the Early Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 16 (April 1965), 67-81. By the beginning of the 19th century, the tithe was no longer much of an irritant in English society. It did not become an issue in American religious life until the 1880's.
3. Luther P. Powell, *Money and the Church* (New York: Association Press, 1962), 151.
4. Censorinus, *De Die Natali*, 1.9-11, as quoted and translated by Kathryn Argetsinger, "Birthday Rituals: Friends and Patrons in Roman Poetry and Cult," *Classical Antiquity*, 11 (October 1992), 177.

5. Tobit 1:7-8
6. Gen. 14:18-20
7. Leviticus 27:30-33
8. Nehemiah 10:38-39
9. Deuteronomy 14:22ff.
10. In their book *Partners with God: Bible Truths about Giving*, Bobby L. Eklund & Terry Austin (Nashville: Convention Press, 1994) argue that the notion that there were three separate tithes, which they say "has been circulated among commentators for a long time," is less "true to Scripture" than "the traditions of biblical interpreters" (65).
11. Maaserot 1:1. Martin S. Jaffee, *Mishnah's Theology of Tithing: A Study of Tractate Maaserot* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), 25-61.
12. Giles Constable, *Monastic Tithes, From the Origins to the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), 2.
13. Luke 11:42, 46; 18:12
14. Matthew 17:27
15. Matthew 23:23 NEB
16. Douglas W. Johnson, *The Tithe: Challenge or Legalism?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 18.
17. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies* 2.18 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Fathers of the Second Century*, vol. 2 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 366.
18. John & Sylvia Ronswalle, *The Hidden Billions: The Potential of the Church in the USA* (Champaign, Ill.: C-4 Resources, 1984).
19. George Whitehead, *A Brief Treatise on The Truths Behalf in Discovery of Falsehoods...* (London: Printed for Thomas Simmons, 1658), 9.
20. A good example of this argument can be found in S. Beam's "New Testament Giving Versus Old Testament Tithing," *Reformed Church Review*, 5 (April 1901), 204-20.
21. Fred Smith, "The 4 Faces of Stewardship," *Leadership*, 5 (Spring 1984): 114.
- 22.. See the John D. Rockefeller pamphlet on tithing that was widely distributed.
- 23.. There are some notable exceptions. In the Church of the Nazarene, none of the District Superintendents give less than 10%; 44% give 15% or more; 37% give 20% or more.
- 24.. As cited in Tim Riter, *Deep Down* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995), 123.
- 25.. *Wired*, August 1996, 137.
- 26.. James Gleick, "Cash is Dying," *New York Times Magazine*, 16 June 1996.
- 27.. Doug Manchester has captured the lingering appeal of cash in his observation that "Handing cash and coin back and forth and counting it at any time and in any place has a certain comfort for us. Even though we have learned to adapt to the invisible machinations of electronic devices, such as the VCR and PC, we still have an inherent need, albeit suppressed, to understand what is happening behind the scenes." See his "Smart Cards: Key to Cashless Economy?" *The Futurist*, 31 (January-February 1997), 31.

28. Marvin E. Tate, "Tithing: Legalism or Benchmark?" *Review and Expositor*, 70 (Spring 1973):161. This is the best single treatment of the issue I have encountered.
29. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 70..
30. Here is an alternative translation: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand." Quote this from Today's English Version as well.
See also these following texts:
`All the earth is mine,' Exodus 19:5.
`The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts,' Haggai 2:8.
`Know that the Lord is God! It is He that hath made us, and we are His; . . .' Psalm 100:3
31. See the interview with Lynn Margulis in Jonathan White's *Talking On the Water: Conversations About Nature and Creativity* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 76.
32. For other examples see Matt. 20:8; Luke 12:42-43; 16:1-2, etc.
33. Elizabeth Barnes, *The Story of Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 53-55.
34. As quoted by John S. McClure in *The Round-table Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 106.
35. Andrew Carnegie, *Gospel of Wealth* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1998).
36. Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1949), 1.
37. Harry N. Wendt, "Second Presentation, June 14, 1997," to the Chicago Synod Assembly, ELCA, 7-13. See also H. N Wendt, *The Divine Drama* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Shekinah Foundation, 1983), 293-303, 301-302.
38. *The Empty Chair: Finding Hope and Joy* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 22.
39. As quoted by John M. Buchanan, "'Give It All,'" Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, 23 October 1994, 1.
40. See the working document *Wherewithal and Beneficence: Charitable Giving by Income and Wealth* (from Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 317-274-4200).
41. Father John Haughey, S.J., as quoted in *Ministry of Money* newsletter, Number 98 (October 1995), 5.
42. Of course, even potlatch's can be (and were) used to lord it over others and to arrogate to oneself power and social standing.