

Giving the tithe

When fall arrives, Baptists know what to expect. It's church budget time, so there will be sermons about



Michael Olmsted

tithing and a budget campaign. A prominent Texas Baptist pastor I knew preached on stewardship one whole month every fall. Sunday attendance dipped significantly that month, but the church always exceeded its financial goal. Someone suggested the congregation was generous because they suspected he would preach on into the next month if the financial goal were not reached!

Abram's offering to Melchizedek in Genesis 14:17-20 is the first mention of tithing in the Bible. The second mention is Jacob's pledge of "a tenth" he will give to God for his blessings in Genesis 28:16-22. Giving certainly involves responsibility, discipline and seeing beyond your own needs, but also the blessings and privileges of ministry and honoring our gracious God.

When Abram's story reaches Genesis 13 he has become so prosperous that his flocks, herds and family entourage cannot be supported in the immediate area around Hebron. So Abram evaluated the situation and generously gave his nephew Lot the more fertile lands of the valley toward Sodom (13:12).

Canaan, where Abram remained, was a cluster of competing little kingdoms. Finally war erupted between the alliance of the Canaanite cities against Chedorlaomer of Elam and his vassals. Abram stayed out of the conflict until Lot and his family were captured in Sodom. Abram and his 300 fighting men mounted a successful night raid, rescuing Lot and his family and seizing all the valuables that were stolen from Sodom.

On the return home, Abram met the king of Sodom and Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of El Elyon (God Most High). Melchizedek provided bread and wine to Abram and his fighting men, then blessed them in the name of El Elyon. Abram accepted the blessing and gave Melchizedek a gift

of "one tenth of everything" (14:20). Abram's plunder from the victory would have been sizable.

According to the custom of that day, Abram could do as he pleased with this bounty, so he returned most of it to the king of Sodom, gave a tithe of gratitude to Melchizedek and kept only enough to feed his men (14:22-24). The ten percent amount may derive from an ancient tax, but Abram is clearly giving a gift of gratitude for God's protection and blessing.

The second tithe example is found in the Bible when Jacob has a life-changing dream (28:10-22). Jacob had stolen the birthright from his brother Esau by deception. So Jacob was in exile, hated by Esau and uncertain about the future.

Jacob had a vivid dream in which angels were ascending and descending a heavenly staircase. God spoke to Jacob in the dream and promised Jacob that his descendants would be a blessing to the entire world. God would protect Jacob wherever he went (28:13-15). Although Jacob awakened fearful, he responded to this promise from God by erecting a stone monument (altar) and named that place Bethel (House of God) (28:19).

In spite of his fear and uncertainty, Jacob responded to God with reverence and blessing, voicing his own promise that if God was with him and protected him, he would give a tenth of his possessions back to God (28:22). This tithe story clearly shows that Jacob understood that all he would possess was a gift from God, not something to be earned or deserved.

Here are two stories about individuals who gave to God out of gratitude, who had experienced God in the struggles of life and understood God cared about them and was promising to bless them in spite of their imperfections. Their response to give to God was not "payment for services rendered" or "an investment with guaranteed returns." They were learning about God's grace.

You can label Abram and Jacob as the "first tithers" in the Bible. Their stories teach us that we can never rise to the

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level of God's generosity, but we can honor and thank God for his gracious blessings by giving our lives, our time and our abilities, as well as our finances, to make a difference in this world.

Can you look back over your life and see the times and ways God has blessed you? With few material resources and numerous challenges, I look back with amazement at how I got through college and seminary. Every step of my pilgrimage has been impacted by wonderful people who were the voice of God to me and whose lives reminded me that I could overcome the challenges. In my imperfections, I learned that to surrender to God — to give to God — is the most freeing and fulfilling way to live.

How do you respond to God when life is disappointing or frightening? I remember all those pledges of the budget campaigns, building funds and mission offerings. I tried to limit sermons on tithing to special occasions.

In one of my churches a family had been visiting for several months when we came to our annual stewardship campaign. I preached one sermon on giving and received an irate letter from the visiting husband, accusing: "Why do you preachers always accost us with sermons asking for money?" So I went back through that year's preaching list and wrote back explaining that this was my only stewardship sermon for that year. I also explained that a church budget not only pays utilities and staff salaries but also sends children to camp, supports missionaries and cares for those in need. Stewardship is how we do ministry, not just the dollars we give but the hours, personal abilities and involvements.

Giving, no matter the percent designated, is the way we honor God and live out the grace he has given us through Christ.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.