THE Age of Global Giving

A Practical Guide for Donors



10th Anniversary Edition

Gilles Gravelle

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The Age of Global Giving: A Practical Guide for Donors (10th Anniversary Edition)

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The Role of the Donor: A Historical View

Jesus, Paul, and Money—A Modern Understanding

The financial donor's involvement in church planting ministry and missionary efforts had a simple beginning. Around the year AD 53, the Apostle Paul helped people in Corinth, Greece, set up their missions giving program. In a straightforward manner he instructed the individual church members to save a portion of money from their weekly wages. Then at the end of the month, they could all combine their donations into one large gift for missions.

This collection was not a mandatory Old Testament tithe, when giving a tenth of one's assets was strictly enforced by religious leaders. Paul stressed that each person was free to determine how much they could give based on their income level and probably other giving commitments too. Paul knew that the Corinthian church was a mosaic of social classes. Some of the church members were slaves, and some of them were quite well-to-do. There was also a middle class majority. The reason for the collection was simple. There were believers in Jerusalem who needed financial assistance and the Corinthian Christians were capable of helping, hence the first donor-recipient connection for the young church gathering.

Paul didn't explain in his written instructions to the Corinthian church how their donation would be used. It is clear that the money was for God's people in Jerusalem. House churches were springing up there, especially among the poor, so perhaps the Corinthians' giving would help strengthen that movement. This might also be the first time donors were asked to give money to the ministry on the assumption that the ministry workers would use it wisely and effectively. The amount was large enough to require a small group of people from the Corinthian church to deliver the generous load of coinage personally. Maybe the people bringing the donations planned on

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providing the due diligence for the Corinthian givers on how the Jerusalem believers planned to use that money. Therefore, the idea is made clear in those Bible passages that believers should use a portion of their funds for the greater good of the church. One could say that the Corinthian believers were the first missions project donors.[1]

Judging by their inclusion in a list of who's who in ministry, Paul revealed to the Roman church believers that people who give from their wealth were direct participants in mainstream church ministry (Rom 12:8). There was no clear indication that the list was given in order of importance, although beginning with prophet may hint of that. The role of providing financial help is fifth among seven important ministries described. Moreover, because this service was critical to the day-to-day life of the church, Paul urged the givers to carry out this ministry with serious intentions. Including the role of "giver" among other important ministry roles indicated that giving was not believed to be a separate department of the young church nor was it an adjunct to the more "spiritual" roles. Instead, the givers were co-ministers of the church. Not everyone had a surplus of money, therefore to have extra money seems to be meant as a spiritual gift from God for the functioning of the church.

Those passages in 1 Corinthians and Romans seem to indicate that God sovereignly creates wealth in certain individuals for his purposes. Are we reading too much into this? As we will see a little later, some wealthy people in history did indeed believe this was why they were blessed with the ability to make money, and lots of it. The important point to remember here is that giving away money was a ministry equal to other church ministries. Clearly, there was no division between the laity and the ministry at this point in time with respect to those who were gifted as generous givers.

The Apostle Paul was not the first person to talk about money in terms of spiritual matters. About twenty three years before that, Jesus had a lot to say about money, for example its joyful use, wise use, selfish use, sharing

1 Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 16:1 that he instructed the Galatian believers to do the same, so they could be the first to function as ministry donors, rather than the Corinthians. Also, a few years before this, some of the Christians in Philippi and Macedonia assisted Paul financially with his missionary journeys. The Corinthian example seems to be the first organized effort of believers pooling their funds for the work of the church in other places.

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it, hoarding it, serving it, worshiping it, over-depending on it, and being deceived by it. This frequent topic should not be surprising, because much of his teaching was meant to help people attain peace, joy, and fulfillment in this life, and money then, as now, was a complicating factor in achieving that.

On more than one occasion, Jesus warned people about the shortsightedness of accumulating wealth without using it for the benefit of others. Jesus once told a story to point out that the accumulation of wealth was not the correct measure of a person's success in life. Instead, a person's true success was measured by the degree of beneficial impact their wealth had on other people. As the story goes, there was a rich person whose business was producing an enormous financial windfall. The man was gifted at making money, so much so that it was necessary for him to find creative ways to preserve it all. Then he could enjoy an early, secure, and comfortable retirement. What he didn't plan on was an early death, but that's what happened. He left all of his wealth stashed in various accounts with little to show for it. Sadly, that is how he would be remembered, even two thousand years later; a negative example of hoarding instead of helping.[2]

Whenever Jesus talked about money, he never condemned the making of money. Indeed, he never condemned people for having a lot of money, either. He mostly advised people with extra money to be generous towards people who had a demonstrable need for money. Perhaps his best known business and money analogy (according to my modern North American interpretation) is given in a story about an investor and a team of three fund managers. The investor gave a sum of money to each of the managers to invest. The amount of money each manager received was based on their level of investing skills. Sometime later, the investor was ready to sell off his holdings and take his profits, so he contacted the fund managers to ask them about his rate of return on each investment. The first fund manager was happy to report that his work yielded his client a 100 percent return on investment. The client was highly impressed, so he gave that fund manager twice the original amount to reinvest. Obviously, the manager was making a nice living off of the client, too.

The next fund manager was still somewhat new at investing, so the client had given him less money to work with. Even so, this manager reported that he also doubled the client's money. Seeing how the manager

2 Luke 12:18–21.

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had demonstrated his ability as a shrewd and faithful investor, the client entrusted him with twice the amount he had given to him before. That came with a big raise in pay.

Finally, the last manager sent in his investment report. In the report, the manager informed his client that he was aware of his reputation as a serious investor. He knew that he didn't tolerate losses in the stock market nor did he tolerate fools. Because of this reputation, the manager was afraid to make a bad investment that could have resulted in a net loss for his client. Therefore, he simply put the money in a non-interest bearing bank account. He was happy to report that all of the client's money was still there, safe and sound.

The client was not stupid. He knew that inflation alone had already eaten away some of the value of his money. Instead of receiving the expected praise, the manager was severely scolded by the client for his bad performance. He sternly reminded the manager that he could have at least put the money in an interest-bearing account and made even a little bit of profit. Therefore, he fired the manager and transferred the investment funds to the first manager who had doubled his money. He also made sure that the bad manager could never work in the investment industry again or enjoy the benefits of that work.

There are a few important takeaways from this modern rephrasing of the parable of the talents,[3] but one point is particularly clear. Essentially, Jesus gave his audience a stern warning. He told them that no matter what God has entrusted to people, whether it is a little or a lot, insignificant or important, he fully expects them to be wise in how they use what they have been given. Resources are given so that more good can come from them. And those who keep the resources for themselves risk losing it all, even if it is just a small thing. The good news is that people who are wise and faithful managers of what they have been given will be honored with more, but only to be reinvested for the even greater good.[4]

Pastors and theologians have applied this money metaphor to all sorts of situations in life and ministry, and admittedly, my business culture interpretation may not be shared by others. Even so, a salient point of Jesus' teaching seems to be that God sovereignly gives things for his purposes,

3 A talent was a unit of measure of probably gold or silver.

4 Matthew 25:14–28.

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and he has the sovereign right to take things away—and he does! Applying a financial stewardship interpretation, apparently being a generous giver is only half of the responsibility of having extra money. It appears that the wise and shrewd management of that money is the other half. How have the givers and the church in general done with this principle over the ages?

Ministry and Money—
The Donor on the Outside

In the earliest days of the church, believers who associated with various church gatherings were called on to use some of their funds for the benefit of the church. The first recorded funding appeal in the New Testament was meant to assist newly planted churches in other places. This pattern went on for another 1,700 years and so the church grew and spread throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe.

By the eighteenth century, Europe had become largely a Christian land, but efforts to spread the gospel to the rest of the world were still rather limited. Protestant denominations were beginning to form, and most of them formed for good reasons. They were attempting to address a doctrinal imbalance or rectify areas of neglect in ministry or society. Even so, a negative side effect of these adjustments was schisms. Rather than developing cooperative ways of working together, the denominations often created divisions and barriers to cooperation.

It was also during this time that the Old Testament concept of "tithing"—giving one tenth of one's income to the church—had become common practice. The practice seems to have neglected the Apostle Paul's teachings on giving as described in his first letter to the church in Corinth. Now giving was based on a simple, mathematically defined Old Testament formula. Furthermore, in many churches, the church hierarchy or administration decided how to spend the money. Some of the funds were for starting more churches, but only churches that preserved and promoted the doctrinal particularities of the denomination. As one church historian commented, it seems that at this point in time the church shifted from being outwardly focused to self-regarding (Walls 2005, 16). More and more of the givers' money was used internally to maintain a growing church infrastructure and budget, and less was applied directly outside of the church budget for expanding the gospel and alleviating pressing social problems.

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