

The Yoke of Tithing

by D. Matthew Brown

If you grew up as I did in a good ol' Southern Baptist church, you probably remember hearing a sermon on tithing about once every month. For this reason in my early years as a Christian, I never questioned whether or not tithing was applicable to the Church; I just assumed that it was. I recalled to mind sermons from Malachi where the preacher exhorted the listeners to bring their tithes to the storehouse (which was conveniently the church in which he preached) and numerous testimonials of how money just appeared out of nowhere to the person who had faithfully obeyed God by giving to him his tithe. Then I started going to Preacher University where not giving a tithe would secure someone a spot outside the gate among the Gentiles. From all those influences I had come to believe that tithing was a no brainer; then a funny thing happened—I began to read the Bible for myself.

After hearing so many sermons on tithing, one would think that I would be able to give a solid argument from the Bible for the practice of tithing, but I could not. Sure, I could go back to the Old Testament to Abraham and Melchizedek and then to the tithe's incorporation into the Law, but as a Christian I naturally wanted to hear what the New Testament had to say to us, who are released from bondage of the law, on tithing. What I soon discovered was rather unsettling—there are only two references to tithing in the whole New Testament none of which apply tithing to the Church. There is first Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees for tithing all of their possessions while neglecting the weightier matters of the Law (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42), and there is secondly the reference by the writer of Hebrews to Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek to prove the superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham (Hebrews 7:4). What I found to be most interesting however was not the lack of references to tithing in the New Testament, but the audience to whom the references were primarily intended. Of the first reference, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are generally thought of to be directed toward a Jewish audience because of their writers, their writing style, and for what the writers include in their Gospels (e.g. Matthew and Luke are the only two Gospels that contain a genealogy of Jesus thus proving him to be in the lineage of David). Of the second reference, the Epistle to the Hebrews is written, need it be said, to the Hebrews. This alone did not convince me of the misapplication of tithing to the Church, but it did cause me to reevaluate what I had been taught.

The Silence of Paul

Though silence on a matter in Scripture is never adequate evidence for any kind of doctrine, it is interesting that Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles in all the discourses that he gives on Christian giving never once mentions the practice of tithing. Sometimes we

disillusion ourselves into thinking that the Galatians were reading the Epistle to the Galatians out of their King James Version of the Bible when in actuality most of the people to whom Paul wrote had no knowledge of the Scriptures of Judaism, that is to say specifically that they did not practice tithing in a corporate worship. Yet in all the letters that Paul wrote and in all the exhortations he gives on giving to the Church, he never once commands the Gentiles to give a tenth of their income to their local congregation. Paul however seems to be much more concerned with the Church's giving to widows and orphans and with its giving to others out of its poverty (cf. 2Cor 8:2) than he is with a percentage point. James says it well, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:26).

Where's the Priest At?

In all the instances of tithing in the Bible, the tithe is given directly to a priest of God. Abraham gives the first tithe (which is actually never called a tithe, it is always called a tenth in Genesis as well as in Hebrews) to Melchizedek who is called a priest of God Most High. When Moses incorporates the tithe into the Law in Leviticus, the tithe is not just given to anyone; it is given to a Levitical priest. If you are a Christian who believes in the tithe, unless you are a Catholic, you should be asking yourself, "To whom should I give my tithe?" Are you obligated to give a tithe directly to your local congregation (which many a preacher will tell you is the perspicuous command of God) or are you free to give it elsewhere? Do you look at the building where your church convenes as a temple and your pastor as a priest? Also, have you ever thought about bringing a lamb and some doves to sacrifice on Sunday mornings? Just a thought.

The Parallels of Circumcision and Tithing

Preachers for the most part are not uneducated and do read their Bibles and do realize that the New Testament is silent on the subject of tithing. Their main argument in light of the New Testament's silence lies in the tenth given by Abraham to Melchizedek. Tithe-proponents argue that since Abraham gave a tenth of his spoils before the Law was instituted that the tithe transcends the Law and is applicable today. The only problems with that logic is, one, Abraham gave the tenth of his spoils of his own accord and without the command of God, and, two, (unless you are a misguided paedobaptist who believes that wetting babies is a great, new method of circumcision) is that there is another institution that was given to Abraham that was also incorporated into the Law that Christians do not practice religiously—circumcision. Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of God's everlasting covenant with him and with his descendents that would come by faith. One would think then that among the two, circumcision and tithing, that if one were to transcend the Law it would be circumcision because of its covenantal significance,

yet this sign of the everlasting covenant was shown to be unnecessary and in fact to be an hindrance to the Church:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” [Thus] the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, *why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?* (Acts 15:1, 6-10, emphasis mine).

My point in quoting that text is not to equate circumcision with tithing, but it is to point out what imposing a part of the Law on someone else does. Peter says that imposing circumcision on the Gentiles is not only wrong, but that it also ensnares them to the Law from which Christ had set them free. Imposing a tithe does the same thing. When we tell someone that giving a tithe is necessary for that person to be in the will of God, we are binding that person to the yoke of the Law. Exhorting someone to give is one thing; exhorting someone to give a tithe is another.

Final Thoughts

My point in writing this is not to give a Christian an excuse not to give but, quite the contrary, to exhort the Christian to give as the New Covenant prescribes from beyond the yoke of the Law. The picture painted of giving in the early Church is not that of those who neglect the Law and give nothing, but it is that of those who give all that they have to their brothers and sisters in Christ even when they are impoverished. The requirement of the New Covenant is in fact much weightier than that of the Law, for the Law required its adherer to give 10 percent (actually 23.3 percent according to the various tithes of the Law); the New Covenant requires one to give 100 percent—their life.