

THE ATTRIBUTES OF A BIBLICALLY GENEROUS CHURCH

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How do we discern “every wind of doctrine” from true theological revelation?

How can the diverse community of faith distinguish passing theological fads from lasting and relevant spiritual insights? Surely, sincerity of conviction should not be the standard. On the other hand, using conditional and tentative language that absolutes seems to be disingenuous at best.

John Wesley suggested that practical theology should be built on scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. So, this is approaching the subject. And the subject demands attention! Whether it is provoked by the impact of the “great recession” behaviors caused by affluenza, the connection between our faith and our money and time and talents is an ever present, continuing issue.

The explosion of discretionary income in the prosperity of the last fifty years in the United States is unparalleled in history. Unfortunately, this wealth has brought some significant challenges. While discretionary wealth has grown, proportional giving has declined. We have more and give less of it. Corporately, the church is also seen a general decline in giving beyond local churches. The fixed expenses of the overhead of “doing church.” Rather than addressing this challenge from a perspective of spirit and cogent thought, the leaders of the church have most often gravitated to fund raising rather than connecting faith and leadership. Leadership has most often been characterized by fear rather than Paul’s admonition that we should not have a spirit of fear, and of love, and of a sound mind.

Another major issue that has had direct negative impact on the culture and shaped the terrain is the emergence of easy credit. “The Great American Dream” has been defined by acquisition and financed by credit. One theologian put it this way: “The goals of the culture seem to be the pursuit of personal affluence and personal peace.” And within this issue is “the elephant room” – the excessive use of unsecured credit in the form of credit cards to finance a self-indulgent lifestyle. One pastor says: “we spend money we don’t have to buy stuff we don’t need to impress people we don’t know.” The result has been the loss of the joy of salvation to the voluntary enslaving of ourselves and our future to financial bondage. In this reality, how does generosity look like?

How can we divine God’s direction in connecting our faith and our money? Is the best analysis of generosity seen in the “meeting the budget?” Although a common default mission, no one ought to intentionally express the mission of the church that way. So the purpose of this paper is to begin to consider the attributes of a biblically generous church. Ten attributes will be addressed but the list is not intended to be comprehensive or complete. Our expressions could always be worded differently for different audiences or might include additional attributes depending on the local spiritual community. However, these ten seem to capture the essence of generosity across many different communities of faith. It will be surprising to some that one of the attributes considered. While tithing is generally stated as the goal or standard of giving by many churches and denominations, tithing is seldom confused with generosity. Tithing is also complicated by historical Christian behavior. Tithing has been an exception and not the rule since the time of the early church. A verbalized concept or emotional catharsis about tithing does not advance the consideration of what a generous church looks like. So the subject of tithing must wait for consideration by **1. Biblical stewardship and generosity are seen as whole life issues (time, talent, and treasure).**

Church leaders see biblical stewardship as a whole life issue rather than being just about money. The church works to develop the skills, experiences, and gifts God has given the lay members. Members are taught about the importance and effective use of spiritual gifts. Leadership models generous service in the church and community and encourages members to do the same.

This has to do with ownership and the nature of God. The word Lord is exalted language and indicates authority – command, absolute. One of the first attributes is how the church sees the issue of Lordship. Is God really the creator – owner? If so, we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be God’s? In the western culture, the issue of ownership is huge. One of the de-holistic perspective is the notion that we need to address all of these subjects as one. However, scripture has definitive passages to address each of these issues – not as one, but individually. A great number of churches assert an expectation of participation in holistic terms: Will you support this local church with your prayers, presence, gifts and service? Unfortunately, these are usually presented as a multiple choice of discipleship. The truth is that biblical stewardship and generosity are relevant in each. Usually the result of theological imbalance when one aspect of Christian life and thought is pressed to the disregard of others. Therefore, a biblically generous church holds our time, our God given talents and service, and our earthly treasure in balance as important to our maturation as a disciple.

2. The concept of biblical stewardship is woven into the culture and values of the church.

Interested visitors would quickly see that biblical stewardship is a core value of the church. The Senior Pastor and other leaders appear to be comfortable teaching and modeling biblical stewardship. Stewardship related information is easily available in various places around the church, including the web site. Giving opportunities are widely promoted in the church. The church works to ensure the congregation is appropriately connected to the financial state of affairs of the church.

Stewardship is not seen or approached as an adjunctive issue. The old dysfunctional paradigm is that stewardship is at the top of the list of issues where appeals are made in some sense of

financial need. The annual “lamentation of desperation” is a well used model that is not well integrated into the DNA of the church. The attribute of the generous church is that stewardship is a part of the spiritual formation and values of the church. It is not adjunctive to core values of discipleship – rather, it is a core value of discipleship. The well worn phrase “all they talk about is money” reflects at least two realities. One is that the speaker is not making the comment from a generous heart and the other is that the church has not effectively woven the message of stewardship into the expression of faith.

3. Stewardship has strong support from church leadership.

The Senior Pastor and church leadership clearly and consistently model biblical stewardship and generosity. Stewardship is a recognized and distinct ministry within the church. The church budgets money needed to achieve the goals of our stewardship ministry. There is concerted prayer support for the stewardship ministry. The various church departments, programs, and ministries take the initiative to partner with the stewardship ministry.

One of the issues that must be addressed is the vetting process for identification, recruitment and equipping of leaders. The Senior Pastor or someone designated needs to make sure that leaders are generous in their financial contributions. Because giving is often cloaked in secrecy, some non-generous members have been appointed to positions of leadership. They often offer no support or faith in matters of stewardship because it is foreign to their current state of spiritual immaturity. This must be an intentional expectation, openly discussed in an appropriate setting. There also needs to be an intentional consideration of spiritual maturity for the task at hand. For instance, a CPA or banker might well be suited to serve on a financial leadership role, but not be qualified for the stewardship role of educating, motivating, and equipping. Finally, it is simply foolish to enlist a leader who has inadequate time for the task at hand. If a person’s work schedule or other obligations preclude participating in an established meeting and then the person should not be enlisted until those restrictions and expectations change. Strong support from church leadership is essential to achieve these primary considerations.

4. There is widespread understanding and application of biblical stewardship principles among the congregation

Church leadership works to understand the level of understanding and application of biblical stewardship practices in the congregation and implement strategies to increase both understanding and application. Members are encouraged to grow by taking advantage of resources that would help them grow in their understanding and application of biblical principles of stewardship. Principles of biblical stewardship are an integral part of membership and pre-marriage classes.

Evaluative criteria often present a challenge in theological expression. What could be considered widespread understanding and application? How is understanding defined and what constitutes understanding. Is the evaluation of widespread application meeting the church budget? What is the field of consideration – formal church membership, adherents, attenders, those who are not members financially? Under application, a subjective issue is seen in the member who speaks of being generous and gives an amount that is a very small percentage of income. What is their understanding of generosity? When three people in a church have different professions, economic ability, and radically different experiences in generosity – how is understanding and application evaluated?

So, some objective evaluative criteria needs to be established for what widespread, understanding, and application mean in the context of the culture of a local community of faith. It might be different on the basis of age, gender, family, region, etc. The temptation to use tithing as a universal standard exists as a part of this conversation, but should not be elevated to sole criterion. Tithing in the church since the time of Christ has been a very subjective consideration and a minimal experience for the issue needs to be addressed from a clear statement of expectation with the foundations of those expectations being expressed in the local church.

5. Giving opportunities and generosity are reflected in the prayer and praise of the church.

Stories of generosity with time, talent, and treasure are shared regularly at church events and worship services. Church leadership prays regularly for those in need and prayer needs within and outside the church are shared with the congregation. Stewardship teaching is regularly a part of the worship service.

The visual and spiritual impact of return on investment stories has a place here. The celebration of how the church through

stewardship has individually and corporately touched lives is a critically important educational experience. This should be equivalent with the old board placed in the sanctuary that lists offering amounts, or a bulletin insert that gives a dollar as weekly or monthly reporting. And this should also not be confused as appeals for funding. Instead of an ask, this experience openly raising the level of discourse about the understanding and application of stewardship as an expression of faith.

6. Generous lifestyles are lived throughout the congregation.

Church leaders model biblical stewardship in the use of their time and life gifts. A significant number of the congregation live generously of their time as volunteers in our church. Members of the congregation regularly generate ideas for new service outreach ministries for the church and community. There is an overall attitude of cheerfulness in giving throughout the church. When Paul encourages the Philippians to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ, this attribute is a part of that challenge. When a dentist uses vacation time to provide mission dental care in an underserved area, or a young person serves in a mission field raising their own financial support, or when a member uses half of their annual vacation to volunteer in vacation bible school, we are observing a generous lifestyle. When the staff and finance committee continue to initiate and fund new ministry ideas and opportunities despite a challenging economy, when a member continues generous giving while experiencing diminished income, when church steps out in faith with a ministry budget, this attribute is again visited. When the casual leadership converses more with blessing and abundance than limitation and scarcity, generous lifestyles are seen.

7. There is a designated stewardship leader to champion the cause of biblical generosity throughout the church.

The church has a staff member or lay volunteer in place and dedicated (i.e., a stewardship leader) to facilitate the stewardship of our church among the staff and congregation. This role has a clearly defined role and responsibilities and the full support of senior leadership of the church to do his/her job.

While many in leadership might have a commitment to biblical stewardship, this attribute of a generous church takes the next level. This is not the finance chair who also has fund raising as a part of the responsibility. This is not just the Senior Pastor's personal conviction and distinct leadership role. This is a person with both gifts and commitment in the specific area of stewardship. This is also not the youngest leader or least experience. This is the E F Hutton who has credibility and when they speak, the congregation listens.

8. A well developed stewardship strategy with clear success measures is in place.

The church has a clear, well-articulated stewardship vision that is aligned with the larger vision of the church. There is a plan in place to achieve that vision. Programs are in place (teaching, training, communication strategies, etc.) to move closer to that vision. Progress toward becoming a biblically generous church is monitored and discussed on a regular basis and changed when necessary. Too often, stewardship is an after thought that comes up on the basis of need or calendar but not from an intentional vision approach. This limits creativity and diminishes effectiveness. With regard to a stewardship strategy, activities can be used to measure progress. The number of thank you cards sent, the number of lessons developed, financial courses taught, sermons preached, all could count in evaluating strategy. But the real evaluative criteria are more difficult and revolve around two basic principles: the increase in the number of those who give of their time, talent, and treasure and the other is how the quality of the giving has increased. In the area of finances, the two criteria would be the number of new donors and how the existing donors had grown. While the stewardship leader and other leaders can only measure their activity level, it stands to reason that the right combination of activities should result in qualitative analysis as well.

9. Stewardship and biblical generosity are taught as a part of the teaching and training of the church.

The church has a thoughtful strategy to ensure they are presenting good teaching and training regarding biblical stewardship to the congregation. Church leadership is clear about the stewardship message they want to convey to the membership (i.e., what we should understand, believe, and do about stewardship). Time is set aside each year to teach/train members on biblical stewardship. Stewardship teaching is available for all age groups (adolescent and adult) in the church.

There is a theological imbalance when we fail to address the sheer quantity of stewardship teachings through the Bible. We should teach about believing, everyone would agree – after all there are almost 300 verses that address that subject. We could be said of prayer with almost 400 verses or about love and justice where over 700 verses could be identified. Why do we avoid financial stewardship when there are well over 2,000 verses? Education should not be confused with asking for contributions. Again it has to do with Lordship and relationship. This must be incorporated into a spiritually and theologically sound teaching.

perspective of discipleship values. When the church only speaks of stewardship at the point of need instead of consisten throughout Christian education, the church has missed the mark of this attribute.

10. Church needs are abundantly met.

The operational and capital budget needs of the church are consistently and well met. The congregation enthusiastically growing missions and outreach budget. In times of economic uncertainty and turbulence the church financial needs con well met. The needs of those who are financially challenged or are in need (poor, widows, single parent families, etc.) \ church are met.

The church budget is a variable tool valued differently in different settings. The measure of a church is not whether the budget” but whether the expenses of their ministries are well met. To often a chart of accounts line item budget is misu: vehicle of communication for a church member. A narrative budget is more appropriate and effective in seeing steward holistically instead of a mathematical tool. When the budgeted needs of the church are well met, it means that funds are pay for what God has called us to do. One challenge in this area is hearing the voice of the Lord in capital development experienced when wide awareness and support is found in a church for a project. Too often a small group of leaders ha vision and it is not effectively communicated beyond the small group. Leaders lead, they don’t issue unfunded mandate enabling the funding. When David prepared for Solomon to build the Temple, the leaders modeled giving and the peop gave willing with a whole heart. Debt is not a reflection of the lack of faith nor is it forbidden biblically. However, exc that adversely impacts ministry funding is another example of imbalance.

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