

# The Tithing Tradition

by Wesley D. Tracy

Deuteronomy 14:22-28, and 26:12-15; Numbers 18:8-32; and Leviticus 27:30-34

Tithing was God's idea. In early Hebrew times Abraham was the first recorded tither. He gave tithes to the priest of God, Melchizedek (Gen. 14:20). His grandson, Jacob, picked up the tradition, volunteering to give a tenth of all God gave him.

Later, Moses taught the people of God to tithe their increase. The people were to give a tenth of their increase from both the field and the flock every year (Deuteronomy 14:22). "The tithe is the Lord's" Moses taught them (see Leviticus 27:30). At first, all tithes were carried to a central place of worship (Bethel or Jerusalem) and a great tithe feast of worship and praise to God was held. The remaining "tithes" were distributed to the needy and to the priests. As time went by it was seen that the tithe festival in a central place neglected the poor in the rural and small towns back home. Thus, every third year the tithe festival was held locally and the local needy were served better.

## TITHING ISN'T MAN'S IDEA

Tithing was God's idea. In early Hebrew times Abraham was the first recorded tither.

The Levites collected the tithes, and were charged with distributing them for worship ceremonies to the needy and, last of all, to themselves. They were to tithe the tithe they received. Further, they were to give the best of the tithes of grain and flock to God for worship, then to the poor, and they got what was left over. God knew that some priests would be tempted to keep the best for themselves, so God had Moses tell them that if they cheated on the tithe, the Lord would kill them!

In later times the prophets railed at those who robbed God of tithes and offerings (Malachi 3:8-11) and at those who legalistically paid tithes but lacked a heart for mercy and justice (Amos 4:4). As time went by the spiritual meaning of tithing eroded and the tithe became more of a temple tax which the powers that be in Jerusalem levied and collected with vigor.

In New Testament times Jesus said little about tithes. He once criticized the Pharisees who carefully paid tithe on everything right down to the herbs growing in their backyards—so God couldn't claim their tithes weren't paid up and levy a judgment on them—but neglected mercy and justice. But Jesus also said "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets: I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17 RSV).

The first century church seems to have said little about tithing. They gave so much more than a mere tenth that giving all rather than the Old Testament minimum was often practiced by those who risked livelihood, reputation, persecution and even death for their faith.

The Didache (pronounced Dee Doc Kay), a second century writing, prescribes tithes or “firstfruits” of “money, clothes, and all your possessions.” Such fourth century leaders as St. Jerome and St. Augustine clearly taught giving a tenth to God.

Throughout Europe tithing was the traditional way of supporting the work of the church by the fifth and sixth centuries. In the eighth century the Carolingian rulers made tithing a part of secular law.

During Medieval times the tithe system was refined and made quite complicated with predial tithes (crops), personal tithes (wages), and mixed tithes (livestock). Some tithes were paid to the local priest and some to the vicar.

In 16th and 17th century England tithes were part of the law. Collections supported the state church. The Puritans rebelled against tax-type tithe and went to war (there were other issues, too) demanding voluntary tithing for support of clergy.

## **THE TITHE IS NOT TO BE SEEN AS A TAX**

Historically, when the tithe has been made a tax its spiritual dimension has been lost. When it follows the spirit of 1 Corinthians 16:2-3, where everyone is to give, and give regularly (weekly), and give proportionately (according to one’ ability), it proves to be a bountiful blessing.

But what does proportionately mean to us today? The Old Testament minimum was a tenth. But the New Testament says “See that you also excel in this grace of giving” (2 Corinthians 8:7, NIV). Surely excelling means something different from the minimum requirement of Old Testament law. If the Jewish law-keeper gave a tenth, how could a Christian saved by grace give less? Perhaps we should think of **how much** we can give and not **how little**.

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