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Voluntary Giving

by Fr. Tim Church

Throughout history there have been different ways of supporting the church. In fact, every way that our imagination can provide has a representative in the past. There have been taxes, gifts from the wealthy, begging or a combination of these where an attempt is made to conceal the fund raising method. Famous people have loaned their face and their endorsement for the effort. It is hard to say what is the most common method today. Every media of communication, once realized as a fund raising tool is almost immediately employed in the effort. For a few decades the television was the primary tool, one that spawned the televangelist as a near art form. Now the internet, in fifteen short years, has become the primary weapon against selfishness.

Perhaps it will make for a curious study to look carefully at the fund raising practices of the church. The Gospel of John tells us that Judas was the steward of the funds that assisted the ministry of Jesus. (John 12:6) The existence of this "money box" might be surprising. Was it kept for the poor? But who could be poorer than Jesus? Were the funds intentionally raised or were they an accident of the ministry of Jesus? Certainly, if they were "thank offerings" for a miraculous healing, their existence would be perfectly reasonable, the result of a compelling human need to show appreciation for gifts received from God. But these offerings are never stated as an expectation.

It would be helpful if we could see the difference between gifts that are fair and just and those that are purely voluntary, if indeed that is a distinction. Once Jesus was criticized for not paying the temple tax, a fund collected from everyone to maintain the Temple.

... that we may not offend them, go to the sea, drop in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the temple tax. Give that to them for me and for you." (Matt 17:27-1)

The coin is actually named in the text, a "stator", worth about four times a denarius which was probably a day's wage for a common laborer. Even though the amount was small, Jesus' participation in the tax provides some reflection on our own participation in the needs of the church. The motive here appears to be Jesus' substitution of himself for the legal requirement of the tax. He provides what Peter needed to be on the right side of the law. In another example Jesus is debating with a Pharisee concerning their practice of setting aside the precepts of the law by creating a "tax loophole". Their method involved withholding the required support for their elderly parents and to have the money shielded in an

account that could be used for the support of the Temple. We can find a half dozen applications of this practice and Jesus condemnation of it. The point for us here is the attitude toward "required" support. What we see in many places in the New Testament is that offerings were seen as both required and voluntary.

One famous scene is recorded both by Luke in Acts and by Paul himself in 2 Corinthians. A severe famine had broken out in many places but the church in Jerusalem was suffering seriously. Paul appealed to the church in Corinth, to help but he saw this as an opportunity to grow in their understanding and practice of the faith. He thought they should decide about doing this, not on the basis of command, but for a different motive.

Now as you excel in every respect, in faith, discourse, knowledge, all earnestness, and in the love we have for you, may you excel in this gracious act also. I say this not by way of command, but to test the genuineness of your love by your concern for others. For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:7-9)

The gracious gift of **faith** that comes as a result of Jesus accepting suffering for our sake is motive enough. Yet there is another motive as well, that of **fairness**, more of a legal concept.

For if the eagerness is there, it is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have; not that others should have relief while you are burdened, but that as a matter of equality your surplus at the present time should supply their needs, so that their surplus may also supply your needs, that there may be equality. (2 Corinthians 8:12-14)

Among the many reasons for giving, the example of Jesus' selfless life, given for our sake is, of course, the most powerful. Even still, we must wage a spiritual battle to accept both the precept of giving, as an act of fairness and the law of love. This law is the law of the cross, which Jesus establishes for our sake. Ultimately, it is this that is the reason that we give.

Through him (then) let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have; God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind. (Heb 13:15-16)

AA Church