

SUPPORTING THE GOSPEL

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21, RSV

In a recent issue of *Leadership*, there was a cartoon which shows a church with empty pews. The minister is standing behind the pulpit and he is saying, "As I announced last week, the topic of today's sermon is tithes and offerings." I wasn't sure how many would be here today when they saw the sign out front with the sermon title on it.

The problem of supporting the gospel has always plagued the church. It was a problem in both the Old and New Testament times. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul gets the most outspoken and the most detailed about some of the problems even he faced as one who worked for God:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:1-7, 11-14, RSV).

This week on the "Today" show, they invited a man who is an economist, a stockbroker and an investment counselor and who supposedly saved New York City from bankruptcy, to comment on the current financial situation.

"People don't realize it yet but we are in an emergency. We may never have the kind of crash we had in the depression, but we are in a real emergency. The oil prices have meant that the percentage of the money we are spending on imports has gone up unbelievably from \$8 billion to \$160 billion in the last decade; housing and government spending have gone up, which has fueled inflation even more. People are not saving their money (and there are reasons for that). They are spending it because they see that prices are going up and they are buying whatever they feel they may need in the future. This means the dollar shrinks. We print more money but it doesn't really amount to much. Unless people can cut back on their style of life, on their willingness to spend, etc., the situation will grow even worse."

What happens in the economy as a whole does not bypass the church. We're right in the middle of the four-lane highway through which all of these events are rolling. Christians are cutting back. Hard choices are now being made. Do we or do we not send our children to a Christian school? Do we or do

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we not continue to pay tithe? Do we or do we not continue to support the church offerings? Do we or do we not buy the home, the car, the clothing, whatever it is?

Because of the scriptural teaching on tithe, most Seventh-day Adventist Christians feel a sacred obligation to pay a faithful tithe. They do not feel that same obligation for other offerings and that is curious because the point of the tithe is to support the local congregation. Sligo has been very conscious of its budgetary problems. A person who thinks that he has inexhaustible supplies in these days is not in reality. For the last several years our church has refused to increase the budget. We had hoped that the giving would catch up, but the giving has dropped. It's almost as if we are being punished for being frugal and not increasing the budget.

We are grateful for the increase in capital improvement giving. We do need a building; our children are wandering the community because they have no Sabbath School space to call their own. Each year, however, the church expense income has been falling behind. I'm not here to reprimand the congregation. Many of you are very faithful and supportive. But I am trying to point out a fact to you and analyze something that's going on in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a whole. Each year our reserves are being eaten away because we have to make up the difference in expenses and income. [I must mention that our business administrator has kept expenses under the budget.]

We feel that we are understaffed in this church, especially in support staff, but also in pastors. Many of our pastors are doing work that the Bible outlines that they should never do—finding their own paper clips, sharpening their own pencils and typing their own letters, answering emergency requests on the weekend and late at night for food. The same situation existed in the early period of the Christian church and is described in Acts 6. The church got larger, the social problems became more complex and there was an economic crash in Jerusalem. Luke tells us:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-5, 7, RSV).

The concern expressed in this passage is not one that we can ignore. There are some things that must be done but that ought not to be done by those who are called to preach the Word, or at least they must not be overburdened with them.

What I want you to understand this morning is that Acts is saying to us that the bottom line of either mismanagement or poor administrative structure or lack of funds to get the kind of personnel we need, is that people's needs start being neglected. The pastor who has to spend his time doing work that he shouldn't be doing doesn't have the time to visit people who aren't attending church, people who are hurting or to pray with those members who need to be prayed with.

This was reinforced for me very profoundly last week. I went to see a couple who had not been attending church for a long time. I had not bothered to check their tithe record. I had just been told that it would be good to make a call on them. I got to this home and had a wonderful visit. They were so grateful to see me. They had only attended church a few times in five years. What had happened was that they had felt that an Adventist institution had dealt unfairly with them. Some events had happened in their family that they felt merited some pastoral care, which they didn't get. So they were hurt.

As we talked tears came into their eyes. I stayed an hour and a half with them. I wish I could spend the same amount of time in every member's home. This couple said they really missed church fellowship and that they wanted to come back. It would have been wonderful if a lay person could have visited them, but they really needed a pastor because a pastoral visit symbolized the church and its attempt to be reconciled with them.

On the way home I kept saying to myself, "I think of all the things that I do during the day that are so trivial in comparison to the importance of what I've just done." You can't escape all the detail work, but we need to avoid as much of it as possible.

As the financial crush gets worse, people are taking their children out of Sligo School, Takoma Academy or Columbia Union College. People are being hurt. One of the problems we have is thinking that our offerings take care of everything, but they don't. The offerings are supposed to be used in the right way to do certain things. That's why Amos says, speaking for God,

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them...Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24, RSV).

The point is that worship, giving and offerings are useless if people are neglected. Building buildings and putting on programs is not the point. It's people. They're what matters and that's what the money is supposed to do. People who need the loving touch, the sincere prayer, the grace of Jesus mediated to them through the various ministries of the church—that is the point of offerings. When we talk about supporting the gospel, that's what we are talking about.

While I am laying on you your responsibility as stewards, I must also lay upon myself and upon all church leadership our responsibility as stewards. There is a stewardship of giving and a stewardship of spending. There is a stewardship of supporting the church and a stewardship of administering the church. Leadership must use your [financial] gifts honestly, frugally, wisely. I've become very sensitive to the ethics of religious fundraising, which is what we are doing here.

Abuses are widespread today and the public is becoming more suspicious of anyone who asks for money for any religious cause. Most religious groups have given up knocking on doors for fundraising, because people have become so suspicious they don't respond. They are doing it through direct mail, through television, etc. It has been learned that much of this money is being dissipated into what we call "overhead." The guideline is that about 15 percent of all the money raised should go for administration, but in many organizations it's 50-75 percent so that only 25 cents of every dollar wind

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up going to the people to whom the money was directed. The rest of it gets frittered away in the problems of raising and administering the money.

I've learned that there ought to be external audits, that people ought to realize that they will be audited by the public to whom they are responsible. I learned that there is a very strict law about truth-in-advertising, that the money must go for what you say it [is to go for]. I also learned that a board should be appointed and the members of that board must not have any potential conflict of interest with relationship to the money over which they have responsibility. You can't, therefore, sit on the board of a corporation in which you have a major investment if it is a fundraising situation.

The point of all of this is that people want accountability. What I want to emphasize is that church members have more access to information and we have more accountability to you than at any other level of the Adventist organization. Any member can see a financial statement at any time. You are welcome to come to the board meetings. You can see how the money is spent and how it is raised. I realize that many Seventh-day Adventists have become disenchanted with the stewardship of some of its leaders. Some of them know that millions of dollars have been lost by ministers playing stockbroker, investor and businessmen. I myself participated in a union session some years ago at which it was revealed that millions of dollars had been lost in almond groves and all kinds of other investments that apparently nobody knew anything about. I will never forget hearing lay person after lay person standing up, saying, 'Do you mean to tell me that I have asked ladies who are widowed and on Social Security and on fixed incomes to sacrifice and give their money for what they thought was the gospel, and you're telling me that we lost it on such ventures?' It was probably one of the most shattering experiences that a group of lay people ever had.

Some changes do need to be made. Business managers ought to manage and ministers ought to minister. If we need a minister to manage, then he should be given training in that field. Ordination does not make one an investor. While this disillusionment may be justified, I want to tell you that this boomerangs on the local church more than on any other segment of the organization.

I want to explain why and to encourage you to rethink what you are doing. The easiest dollars to raise in the church are tithe dollars because we all feel a sacred obligation to turn in this money. The hardest dollars to raise are those beyond the tithe. The problem is that the local church has absolutely no control over its tithe. It is all sent on to the conference. Sligo Church members contributed \$1.6 million last year and it all went to the conference. We get back a percentage of it to pay the salaries of our workers and in some other kinds of appropriations. The conference picks up almost 50 percent to run its structures, the union gets another percentage and the General Conference gets a percentage and 8 percent goes into the retirement fund. None of this is wrong. I'm simply saying that the easiest dollars to raise are administered and spent by agencies above the local church. Programs can be voted at every level of this church, money can be appropriated, buildings can be set up, but the local church has to raise the money. The same procedure is true for the government. All kinds of taxes can be voted in the congress but in the end those who vote for the disbursements do not pay it; the taxpayer at this end provides the money.

What keeps the Sligo Church going is the money that we give beyond the tithes. Because this church has many denominational employees on whom a policy applies concerning paying tithe, we have a good tithe base. All of these local institutions exist to serve this congregation, yet we have an inverted

pyramid. Many of the local pastors feel that the point of the pyramid is sitting on their heads because if the monies don't come in pressure is applied on them. This church doesn't do God's word without money. I want to reiterate that the hardest money to raise is the money the local church has to use to support its own ministry. The goose that lays the golden egg has to get fed or there is no more golden egg. The local church, in my opinion, is the most critical point in the church which needs the most solid financial foundation, but in many respects it is just the reverse.

The front line work of the church is here. Some people have talked about a percentage of the tithes staying with the local church. I'm not sure if that is a good idea or not but some way must be found to help local churches. The government started revenue sharing, but I don't know if this approach would be good for this church organization. On the other hand we must support a worldwide work and cannot be selfish.

There are many people who cannot afford to run a local church in many parts of the world and the excess funds that we give do help to do that. My plea is that when you read our Scripture Reading for today and the texts I have used in this sermon that you remember the local church. Sixty-five percent of the members of this church remember their tithes and offerings, which support the organizations above us, but only 30 percent remember the local church. When you are planning your wills don't remember just the General Conference, union or local conference, etc., and forget the local church. The local church is where [church] happens. Here is where men and women are nurtured and disciplined; and here is where the work goes on to make a people ready to meet their God.

May God help each of us to think about our priorities and responsibilities to support the gospel.