

Giving in God's House

John Kalsbeek Jr.

Last month we considered the importance of personal giving. We emphasized the idea that proper giving is rooted in the love of God. When that love is in our hearts we then feel the desire to give liberally as we have been blessed. The burden of this present article is to consider the methods used in our churches to encourage Christian giving.

In article 11 of our church order we read that "the consistory, as representing the congregation, shall also be bound to provide for the proper support of its Ministers. . . ." Years ago, one method used to collect the needed funds was to divide the church into a number of various sections and to charge a certain amount of those who sat in those sections. Thus, the more desirable seats were purchased by the rich for the larger sums of money. Another method used by some churches to collect some of these necessary funds was and is by church sponsored bazaars, lotteries, soup suppers and auctions. It seems like some people need earthly stimulants to help them loosen the strings of their purses. Thankfully, none of these methods are practiced in our churches.

How then can the church through its consistory encourage the congregation to give as they should for the support of the minister?

The method most often used today is that of the budget. Churches who use the budget system try to estimate their yearly expenses. They add up the minister's salary, the Synodical assessments, and the various anticipated expenses and divide the total by the number of families in the church. This amount is then divided by the number of weeks in the year to determine the amount each person is obligated to pay per week to meet the running expenses of the congregation. Such a budget is indeed needed in order that the church be able to meet its obligations. A budget system presented by the consistory, approved by the congregation, and rigorously followed throughout the year provides system and order in the Church of Jesus Christ. It's wise and orderly for a country, a business, a family to make periodic budgets and to try to live within such a budget. A country so foolish to repeatedly ignore such budget restrictions finds itself in a bankrupt situation such as our country faces today. So also with the church. God is a God of order and He demands order in His church.

Some who object to a budget system argue that it is nothing more than a tax system. Rich and poor alike are required to pay the same amount. Such a system is unfair. It destroys, so they say, responsible giving because the rich pay the budget and often refuse to pay more. And the poor are required to pay more than they can afford.

It must be remembered that a budget system has one and only one purpose and that is to bring order to the church in its financial affair. A budget is not designed to force people to give. If that were so why do our deacons so often have to admonish individual members of the congregation to meet their financial obligations?

(In Volumes IX and X of the Standard Bearer, Rev. Ophoff carries on a rather lengthy debate with a Mr. Hoekstra on the budget question. Some interesting arguments are presented in support of the budget and also against the budget system.)

Approximately seven years ago I happened to be in a church of another denomination for a wedding service. In the songbook rack in front of me I found a mimeographed sheet with the envelope numbers for the church budget. Behind each

number was a column containing the amount of money given by the person who had that particular number. Of course, the names of the people were not included on the sheet. A second column contained the amount that particular account was behind or ahead. Thus, #47 had so far given \$125 and was behind \$500. And #83 had given \$500 which was more than the budget called for and so on.

This example was cited in order to turn our attention to the envelope system. This system is a method that is used in many churches to collect the budget. Each member is given a box of envelopes that has a given number. Each Sunday the budget payment or donation is inserted into one of the envelopes and deposited in the collection plate. The deacons then keep a careful record of the amount each member has paid throughout the year.

What was done above; is an obvious misuse of the envelope system. What right does a consistory have to make public the giving habits of individual congregational members? Many of them were below the amount expected for that time of the year. Apparently it was an attempt to shame the poor giver to meet his budget obligation and to encourage the more prosperous to try to outdo each other and to see who could give the most. I personally hope that none of our own congregations have had to resort to such tactics. Such action is coercive and does not promote giving out of love for God.

This is one of the dangers that can easily result in the use of the envelope system. The question that comes to mind is "Why did the church begin using such a system?" Did it originate because the members refused to meet their budget responsibilities? Or was the envelope system adopted in order that the deacons could in this way find out who the poor were so that they could go to them to give them the mercies of Christ? If the first answer is true then the envelope system is nothing more than a means to force church members to meet their obligations. Is force a proper means for the church of Christ to use in this instance? Oh, it'll probably work. God's people will give regardless but those who lack the love of Christ in their hearts will now give just to keep up appearances. If the envelope system was adopted in order to find out who the poor are then the deacons must have been blind. Surely there are other better ways in which to seek out and find the poor. Personal visits by elders and deacons alike often help them to see who are the poor and needy.

On the other hand, I have heard of a congregation who gave up the envelope system just because the deacons had become weary in the work of visiting delinquent members and admonishing them. By disregarding the envelope system, they no longer knew which members were falling behind in their budget responsibilities and didn't have to visit them anymore.

I personally wonder if Christ would put His divine stamp of approval on the envelope system? With the inherent dangers of misusing such a system a congregation would be wise to forgo the use of the envelope system. It's a shame that an envelope system has to be used to extort the budget when giving should be a happy exercise of faith.

Why not then use the tithe? There is no doubt at all in my mind that were each individual child of God to give to the church a tenth of all he made the congregations would have a surplus. The tithe was an Old Testament practice, and part of Israel's ceremonial law. Since it was the law Israel was obligated to pay it faithfully. The tithe amounted to one-tenth of a person's crops, herds, and/or wages. In Israel, the tithe was to

be used to take care of the needs of the Levites and priests. Even before Israel developed into the nation, the patriarch Abraham paid a tenth of the spoil of his victory over Chadorlaomer to Melchizedek, king of Salem.

Many arguments may be advanced in favor of the tithe but such a system is not one the New Testament church should use. Tithing is certainly a systematic way of giving yet it violates the exhortation of Paul to the Corinthians, "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by himself in store, as God has prospered him." (I Cor. 16:1-2) We must give in the New Testament church "as God has prospered" us. For many the tithe would then be an easy, cheap way out of paying what he should. For others the tithe might be an extreme and unfair burden. (For more information on tithing read Rev. G. Ophoff's three articles in Vol. 17 of the Standard Bearer, pp. 358, 383, and 430).

I believe the same objection can also be directed at our budget system. For some the budget is an easy way out and for others it may be an extreme and unfair burden. Financial inequities are found also among God's people. There are rich and poor alike in the Church of God here on this earth. For this very reason our churches have set up benevolent funds and take poor collections every Sunday. The wealthy members use this means to help the poor. They pay their budget faithfully and fulfill the calling to lay in store as God has prospered them by giving liberally to this fund. And the poor who are unable to pay their budget must go to the deacons with their need and receive the mercies of Christ so that they can meet their budget obligations. Such is the God ordained way. The problem many of our deaconates face is that our poor often find it far easier and less embarrassing to receive help from the government forgetting that the mercies of the wicked are cruel. Perhaps the deacons sometimes find it less work to allow individuals to do this also.

Giving in God's house demands of us certain obligations. Rich and poor alike need to pay their budgets-no more add no less. In the way of giving and receiving alms the wealthy member humbly gives as he is blessed and the poor humbly receive in his need. This system obviously is grounded in the love of God. Only where that love is in existence will it work. Then there will be no need for an envelope system and no need for repeated admonitions from the pulpit. Scripture clearly tells us that it is more blessed to give than it is to receive. Let's remember this and give as we are prospered.

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