

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN



Question. What is your bounden duty as a member of the Church?

Answer. My bounden duty is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his Church; and to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom.

(from The Offices of Instruction, Book of Common Prayer, 291).



Our “bounden duty” is the behavior that is appropriate to our status as followers of Christ. Apart from Christ, we are free to do as we wish (Romans 8:20-22). As followers or servants of Christ, we are “bound” to practice new behavior that is characterized by prayer, service and stewardship. These are not onerous obligations. They are joyful privileges. We should want to do these things. But they are duties because we are called to do them whether we feel like it or not. In the last chapter, we discussed how to pray. In this chapter we will discuss what it means to “work” and “give” for the spread of the kingdom.

Working for the Spread of the Kingdom: Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts

How do we “work” for the spread of his kingdom? One principal way is through the use of spiritual gifts. A “spiritual gift” is a special talent or ability that God gives to each Christian for use in service to others. There are four principle passages in the New Testament that speak about spiritual gifts.

Romans 12:6 says, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” Romans then lists prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving of money and acts of mercy as representative gifts of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:8 says, “He gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

1 Peter 4:10 says, “As each one has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God’s manifold grace.”

1 Corinthians 12:27 says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

The primary word used for gift in these passages is the Greek word *charisma*. A person who has a gift from the Holy Spirit has a charisma. The word “charismatic” is frequently used to refer to Christians who emphasize the particular gift of speaking in tongues. However, the term “charismatic Christian”

is redundant in the same manner as “born-again Christian.” One cannot be a Christian without being charismatic—that is, without having a charisma—any more than one can be a Christian without being born again (cf. John 3:5).

The concept of charisma is related to Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. The Hebrew word *Messiah*, and its Greek equivalent *Christ*, mean “the anointed one.” To say that Jesus is the Messiah or the Christ is to say that he is the one anointed by God to save his people. Jesus’ Messianic identity is revealed in his baptism (Luke 3:21). The Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. He was revealed to be the one anointed with the Holy Spirit. He is revealed as the Messiah or the Christ. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the first Christians. The church became anointed. 1 Corinthians says, “By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13). In the outward sign of water in baptism, God gives us the gift of the Spirit. In Confirmation, the Bishop prays that we will “daily increase” in the Holy Spirit. In receiving the gift of the Spirit, we became “anointed” or “charismatic” (cf. 1 John 2:27). In receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, we receive a gift or gifts to use for Christ in service to others.

A Ministry Based on Gifts

Your gifts are things that God enables you to do naturally in service to others in the body of Christ and in the world. The person who has a gift is able to exercise it without needing anything in return.

A spiritual gift should not be confused with a “need to be needed.” Some people volunteer for things because the work fulfills a personal need to be at the center of activity, and have others depend upon them, or because they like to be in control. Those being served in these circumstances are not typically edified by the work that is done. The work typically creates as many problems as it solves. People with a genuine spiritual gift are willing to do the work, but are not over eager. They do not demand or lobby for the job or task.

A spiritual gift is not the same thing as a natural talent, although the Holy Spirit may cause a natural talent to become a spiritual gift. Your gifts may or may not be related to your occupation. We should not assume, for example, that those who teach for a living will necessarily have the spiritual gift of teaching. It may or may not be so. To assume that what people do for forty to sixty hours each week is what they will also do in the church is a sure way to burn people out.

One aid we use to help people discern their spiritual gifts is a spiritual gifts inventory. We have found the “Wagner- Modified Houts Questionnaire” to be particularly helpful. This is a separate handout. We encourage you to complete this inventory and reflect upon what it says about your gifts.

Ministry works best when the people doing the ministry are exercising their spiritual gifts. If we think God is calling the church to do something, the way to test the call is to see if there are people in the church with the necessary gifts. If there is no one in the body with the gifts, the time and the willingness to do the work, we can conclude that it is not something God is calling us to do.

Of course, there is no particular spiritual gift for setting up and taking down tables and chairs, or for cleaning up after church activities. It is the common responsibility of the body. All Christians are responsible for helping the needy, loving others—including our enemies—and fulfilling the general obligations of obedience. We cannot excuse ourselves from some general duty of Christian faith by saying we don't have a gift for it. This reveals a lack of charity or love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

It is also possible to be lazy or slothful in the use of our gifts. A church might well have the gifted people it needs to carry out some ministry, but the gifted people may be unwilling to get involved. That is a separate spiritual problem. Each Christian must make responsible and faithful decisions about how to serve. There are errors in two directions. We might be lazy and leave undone things that we ought to have done. Or we might be over-involved, always feeling responsible and not being able to say "no" when our plate is too full. The answer to these faulty tendencies is to be faithful in the life of prayer so that we might hear the voice of God and rightly discern what God is calling us to do, and what God is not calling us to do. We also need counsel from other faithful and wise Christians, who will hold us accountable for our unhealthy inclinations.

To use our spiritual gifts in the right way, we must develop a true understanding of the nature of the church. Many people view the church as a building or an organization to which they give money or time. They fail to understand that the people are the church. In the Old Covenant, God lived in the midst of his people in a temple building. In the New Covenant, God lives within his people. The people of God are the new temple (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19).

Another way this truth is communicated in the New Testament is through the teaching that the church is the body of Christ. In first century Israel, Jesus did the work of the Father. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are extensions of his incarnate presence throughout the world. You are a living member of a living body. You are the hand, the foot, the ear, the eye. If you don't understand this and fail to exercise your ministry in the body, then the body is without a hand, a foot, an ear and an eye. Other parts of the body must compensate for the absent or inactive parts (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12f.).

A story told by one minister illustrates the wrong and the right view of the church. He was approached after church one Sunday by a member of his congregation. She was indignant. She said, "I met a man last week who needed food and a place to stay. I called the church on Wednesday several times but no one answered the phone. I had to give him food and put him in a hotel myself." Then she said, "Don't you think the church should be available to help people like this?" The minister responded, "It sounds to me like the church did a very good job of helping him."

Wherever you are, Jesus is present through the gifts and resources he has given you. Sometimes people will say, "What is your church doing for people?" What they want is a catalogue of the church's charitable activities. However, it is wrong to think of the church merely as a list of programs. What the church is doing for people is not defined merely by extent of our corporate charities. What the church is doing for people is determined by the sum total of the daily ministries of its members. It should be emphasized that most of the ministry of the church takes place outside of the church building. We are

called to use our gifts in service to others as we go about life from day to day. Our sense of Christian vocation must transcend the idea of volunteering for things at church.

We are also called to serve God in our life's work. One consequence of sin and the fall is that work becomes either drudgery or merely a selfish attempt to accumulate. In God's economy, the primary concern is what we have to contribute to the good of society. Indeed, we will find our life's work fulfilling only inasmuch as our primary aim is service to God and others, and gain is seen as the by-product. As Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

Giving for the Spread of his Kingdom: The Stewardship of Money

The word "stewardship" is often used in church, but it is less frequent that people really think of themselves as being responsible for the care and use of resources that belong to God. Consequently, talk about giving in church can become an exercise in attempting to extract money from reluctant givers. The church aids and abets this faulty view when it resorts to guilt and gimmicks in stewardship campaigns. If Jesus is Lord in any meaningful sense of the word, then he is Lord of all that we have. What we do with our money is necessarily a matter of faith.

The Biblical Pattern for Giving

The world views money as something to pursue and accumulate in order to get and do more things. The assumption of the world is that having more things will make us happier. From the perspective of the world, giving to God is what we do after we have satisfied our needs and wants.

This pattern is the consequence of sin and is the exact opposite of the pattern revealed in the Bible. The rule that God established in Israel was that the first part of all the increase belonged to God. Leviticus says, "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is holy to the LORD" (27:30). Tithe means "tenth." Israel tithed by measuring out one tenth of all the grain and giving it back to God. In Exodus God says, "Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine" (13:3—see also Leviticus 27:32 for the tithe of the flock).

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:3-7, the story of Melchizedek in Genesis 14:14-20 and the story of Jacob in Genesis 28:22 confirm the principle that the first and best, the tithe, belongs to God. This standard of giving was assumed in the New Testament. Jesus, as a pious Jew, tithed. While Jesus criticized the motives of the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel, he commended their meticulous practice of tithing (Matthew 23:23).

The people of Israel were also instructed to be generous to the needy (Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 11). They were told not to harvest their entire field, and not to pick up what fell to the ground. They were to leave some fruit on the vine, on the tree and on the ground for the poor to eat.

These giving priorities match up with the Summary of the Law. Jesus said the two great commandments are to “love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:36-40). God’s people are to honor God with the first part of their income, the tithe, and are to be generous to those who are in need.

Tithing and Covetousness

Tithing is part of the answer to covetousness, which the New Testament explicitly links with idolatry (Ephesians 5:5, Colossians 3:5). To be an idolater is to worship the creation rather than the creator (Romans 1:25). Psalm 24 says, “The earth is the LORD’S and all that is therein.” However, in the Original Sin, man said of the creation, “This is mine.” Giving the first part back to God is the symbolic way we acknowledge God’s ownership of all that we have. It is the way we undo the Original Sin and say to God, “This is yours.”

Tithing helps to detach us from our money. One company CEO said in a Forbes Magazine article, “When I began to tithe, I found a freedom from my possessions. I don’t hold on to things as tightly anymore” (“Irrational Act,” Rich Karlgaard, Forbes.com, 02.14.05). As Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

The Blessing Promised for Faithful Giving

One problem we have with the practice of tithing and generosity is that the devil has done a good job of teaching us his faulty math. The devil teaches us that giving is a zero sum game in which one person’s gain must lead to another’s loss. Thus, if I give money to someone in need, he is richer and I am poorer.

The Bible teaches that generous giving enriches both the giver and the recipient. There are numerous Bible passages that make this point. For example:

Proverbs says, “Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine” (3:9).

In Malachi, God says, “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse...And try me now in this, says the Lord of hosts, If I will not open for you the windows of heaven, And pour out for you such blessing, That there will not be room enough to receive it.” (3:10).

In 2 Corinthians we are told, “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (9:6).

Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

The Evidence in the Lives of the Faithful

The evidence for these promises is found in the lives of those who have made tithing and generosity part of their practice of the faith. There is a well known story of a man who began to tithe from the proceeds of his business and gradually increased his giving over time. God so blessed his giving that he came to the point where he was able to give away ninety percent and kept ten.

There are also stories of people whose faithful stewardship lead to a different kind of blessing. One man began to tithe from the proceeds of his business, which subsequently went broke. He was asked, “Did you lose everything?” He replied, “No. I still have all the money I gave away.”

God does not promise us a particular outcome for our faithfulness in giving. Rather, he says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). Because God always rewards our faithfulness in ways that more than compensate for what we have given, we will always be better off for having been faithful stewards.

The Tithe as an Act of Faith

The biggest barrier to the practice of tithing is fear. We are afraid that if we give the first part to God we won't have enough left for the needs and wants of life. This is why tithing is an act of faith. We have to give to God first and trust that he will be faithful to his promises. As Hebrews says, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

The Rest of our Finances

Tithing is the beginning, not the end of stewardship. Responsible use of money also includes making a budget so that we live within our means and save for the future. It includes avoiding excessive debt, spending money in responsible ways and being diligent not to get caught up in the consumer and marketing culture that teaches us that we must have more things to be happy. Giving God the first part does not excuse us from being faithful with the rest.

God gives varying amounts of material wealth to different people. God calls us to be content with what he has given us and avoid covetousness. The world sees money as something to pursue as the goal of life. The Bible teaches us that money is a temptation, of which we must beware (1 Timothy 6:8-10). We will not be judged on the basis of how much we had, for “We brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we can carry nothing out” (1 Timothy 6:7). We will be judged on the basis of how faithful we were with what God gave us.

Questions for Review

1. What, according to the Prayer Book, is our bounden duty as a member of the church? (BCP p. 291)
How does one fulfill each of these duties?
2. Why is every Christian a “charismatic”?
3. What does the discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13 have to do with the exercise of our spiritual gifts?
4. What is, or should be, the relationship between our spiritual gifts and our vocation in life?
5. How does the biblical teaching about giving relate to the Summary of the Law?
6. Beyond tithing and charitable giving, how should faith in Jesus Christ influence our use of money?