Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine.

(Proverbs 3:9-10)

by
Tom Nelson
INTRODUCTION

Ravi Zacharias tells the story of a pastor whose integrity was tested greatly. In his community resided two very wealthy brothers. Both of them were self-absorbed scoundrels, seldom darkening the door of the church. Both of the brothers had earned a reputation for their great vice. Then one day, one of the wealthy brothers died.

Much to the pastor’s surprise the surviving brother showed up at the pastor’s door. The surviving brother got right to the point. He said, “Pastor, I know you need a lot of money for the new church building. In this envelope is a check for a million dollars. But I have one stipulation. When you do the funeral of my brother, I want you to tell everybody that he was a real saint.”

The pastor agreed and immediately took and deposited the check in the church account. The day arrived for the funeral and the church was filled to overflowing. The funeral service proceeded as planned and the surviving brother eagerly waited to hear the pastor’s comments. Finally the time came for the pastor to give his remarks about the brother who had died.

Much to the shock of everyone gathered, the pastor said, “I want you know that our dear departed brother was one of the most selfish, rude, greedy, lying, cheating people in this community, but compared to his brother he was a real saint!”

I love that story because when it comes to money and giving, few of us could claim some kind of canonized sainthood. We all have a long way to go in this very important area of financial stewardship, yet I believe God is calling His people back to Himself and His perfect design.
for living.

Holy Scripture shows us that when God truly renews a people, there is a transformation in their understanding and practice of financial giving. At the very heart of true spiritual awakening is a renewed commitment to first fruits giving. This was most definitely the case in Nehemiah’s day.

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**A BRIEF BACKDROP TO NEHEMIAH**

In the book of Nehemiah we are given one of the most comprehensive pictures of true spiritual awakening in all of Holy Scripture. In chapters 1 through 7, under the great leadership of Nehemiah, God’s people rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in just 52 days! In chapters 8 through 12, under the great leadership of Ezra, God’s people undergo a tremendous spiritual renewal at a place called Water Gate.

In the book of Nehemiah, we observe that true spiritual awakening brings back people to God’s design, reflecting a seamless fabric of both spiritual revival and societal reform.

In what might be described as a remarkable revival at Water Gate, we can observe seven timeless signs of true spiritual awakening as found in Nehemiah chapters 8 through 12.
SEVEN SIGNS OF TRUE SPIRITUAL AWAKENING
(Nehemiah 8-12)

Sign #1 A Renewed Commitment To Holy Scripture
Sign #2 A Renewed Commitment To Biblical Exposition
Sign #3 A Renewed Commitment To Team Leadership
Sign #4 A Renewed Commitment To Corporate Worship
Sign #5 A Renewed Commitment To Spiritual Disciplines
Sign #6 A Renewed Commitment To First Fruit Giving
Sign #7 An Outpouring Of Contagious Joy

At the very heart of this remarkable spiritual awakening was God’s people getting back to God’s design and desire for first fruit giving. In Nehemiah chapter 10, beginning with verse 28, we read these words:

Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given through Moses, God’s servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes; and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sab-
TWO TRUTHS ABOUT FIRST FRUITS GIVING

In this passage, we observe two bedrock truths about first fruits giving. **Truth #1 The Foundation Of First Fruits Giving Is A Matter Of Obedience To God’s Revealed Word.**

In verses 28-31, we observe true repentance in action. We must remember that repentance means first and foremost turning from our sin and re-aligning our wills under the reign and rule of God. So committed are God’s people to embrace God’s design and desire that they make a binding covenantal oath modeled after the book of Deuteronomy. In other words, as God’s people return to Him, they move to a seamless life of obedience living under the rule and reign of God. This true repentance involved embracing God’s design for marriage (vs. 30), the marketplace (vs. 31), and the implementation of social justice involved in forgiving debt every seven years.

Clearly the greatest emphasis here in chapter 10 is their binding commitment to the giving of their first fruit resources to God! God’s people get back to a foundational and unchanging principle, namely that all their material wealth belongs to God. They anchor their lives in the timeless truth of the psalmist: *The earth is the Lord’s and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it* (Psalm 24:1). Mankind is not the owner, but simply a steward or trustee accountable to God, the owner of it all. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the accountability of stewardship: *In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy* (1 Corinthians 4:2). Jesus also drives this point home with a compelling thud in his parable of the talents. (See Matthew 25:14-46.)

In Nehemiah chapter 10, God’s people gather together in corporate
Two Truths About First Fruits Giving

Tom Nelson

worship to give back to God their very best. Notice the emphasis in verses 35-39, on bringing their “first fruits” to the temple (in verse 35, ...first fruits of our ground, first fruits of every tree; verse 36, ...first born of our sons, of our cattle, our herds, our cattle...for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God; in verse 37, ...first of our dough...our contributions...fruit of every tree...the new wine...the tithe of our ground...).

What does this great emphasis and repetition mean here? Set against this agrarian cultural backdrop we need to understand that this was a commitment on behalf of God’s people to give the best part of all their wealth and income to God. This was not a token of mere obligation, but a clear and compelling tithing perspective! It was about giving God their best, not their leftovers.

In the book of Proverbs we are given a timeless mandate for first fruit giving: Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first of all your produce (Proverbs 3:9).

Here we have laid out for us with compelling clarity our baseline of obedience. Honoring God with our first fruit giving is a timeless principle of Holy Scripture, one that is as relevant and compelling for us today as it was in Nehemiah’s day.

The first check ever given to Christ Community had on the upper left corner these words: “First Fruits Account.” This apprentice of Jesus not only had a God-honoring heart, but also understood God’s design for financial stewardship. First fruit giving is fundamentally a matter of obedience to God’s revealed word. Yet there is also another bedrock truth about financial stewardship found in Nehemiah chapter 10, a truth that is often tragically overlooked in our day.

Truth #2 The Focus Of First Fruits Giving Is Centered In and Around Corporate Worship

It is not incidental, nor accidental, that God’s people give their first fruits in the context of corporate worship. The compelling emphasis of Nehemiah chapter 10 is wrapped in and around the repetition of the phrase the house of our God. Even a casual glance of this chapter will overwhelm the reader with this heightened emphasis. (Notice how this phrase is repeated in verses 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, and 39.) Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer of Nehemiah is driving a point home that he does not want us to miss. First fruit giving is inextricably linked to God’s people and the place of their corporate worship!

Nehemiah chapter 10 ends with a stunning crescendo in verse 39. God’s people declare with a covenantal commitment, ...We will not neglect the house of our God.

To the original reader, these words would have brought a cascade of emotion to the heart. The Hebrew word translated “neglect” is highly emotive and can also be translated, “to leave,” “to abandon,” or “to forsake.” This Hebrew word is often used in Holy Scripture with great emotion relating to the egregious violation of the marital covenant and family life.

The prophet Isaiah uses this highly emotive word in a compelling way referring to the wayward nation of Israel:

For the Lord has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected (Isaiah 54:6).

If we pause long enough to put this in our own linguistic and cultural context it would bring to mind the all too common occurrence of someone in midlife abandoning their marital covenant, divorcing their spouse for a newer younger model. This kind of flagrant abandonment of a covenant relationship should evoke a sense of outrage. The fact that in our contemporary context this kind of flagrant abandonment doesn’t move us deeply speaks loudly about our spiritual condition.

The writer of Proverbs captures this kind of flagrant abandonment employing this emotive Hebrew word in referring to the adulteress: That leaves the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God, for her house sinks down to death, and her tracks lead to the dead (Proverbs 2:17-18).

What then did God’s people suddenly “get” that they hadn’t “got-ten” before in Nehemiah chapter 10? Simply and profoundly it is this: to, in any way, “neglect,” “forsake” or “abandon” God’s house by not giving one’s first fruits was as unthinkable as neglecting, forsaking, or abandoning one’s marital covenant for other lovers. Both God’s time-
This is also true of honoring God. The words of Proverbs once again come to mind,  
*Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first of all your produce* (Proverbs 3:9). God’s timeless desire and design is that we give Him our very best, not our leftovers!

In summary then, if we are going to honor God’s desire and design in our financial stewardship we must understand two bedrock truths from Nehemiah.

- **Truth #1:** The Foundation Of First Fruits Giving Is A Matter Of Obedience To God’s Revealed Word.
- **Truth #2:** The Focus Of First Fruits Giving Is Centered In and Around Corporate Worship.

Tragically, there are a lot of well-meaning people who have embraced distorted understandings when it comes to God’s design and desire for our financial stewardship. Of course there is also a myriad of unscrupulous hucksters perpetuating some very self-serving and distorted ideas out there about charitable giving today. How do we navigate through these perilous waters? In order to avoid the toxic, extreme edges of a “rigid check-off-the-box legalism” on one hand and a “whatever goes, cheap-grace license” on the other, we need to step back and get the big picture of God’s design laid out for us in Holy Scripture. Then we can see how first fruit giving truly fits in the big scheme of things and align our financial resources accordingly.
EXPLORING GOD’S DESIGN FOR FIRST FRUIT GIVING

When it comes to putting things together, I am not exactly “Tim, The Tool Man.” The words “Some Assembly Required” make my armpits run and my stomach churn. The box containing a shelving unit that my wife purchased for me to put in my son’s closet had those dreaded words, “Some Assembly Required.” When I dumped out all the contents of the box, I knew I was in trouble. Like a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, small pieces of this shelving unit scattered all over the floor. Also in the box were the assembly instructions, many steps and a multitude of diagrams that only confused me more.

Well, I gave my best effort to put this shelving unit together and about halfway through my project, my son, Schaeffer, showed up. He looked at the mess, turned around and went downstairs. When his mother asked how the shelving unit was coming, he looked at her and putting on his best face said, “Don’t worry, Mom. Dad has the destructions.” Though we think Schaeffer meant to say “instructions,” we all concluded that he truly got it right the first time.

Without taking the time to truly understand the design of something we often juryrig things together hoping they will work. Sometimes they do for a while, but, in time, when design is ignored there are inevitable negative consequences. Just try ignoring for a long time the oil changing instructions in the owner’s manual on your automobile. By ignoring the designer’s instructions you will eventually have problems. Big problems!

This is also true of financial stewardship. When it comes to giving of our financial resources, we need to take a close look at the Designer’s
instructions. God’s Word does not leave us in the dark here. In God’s Word we can indeed see the Designer’s design and desire. Yet, if we are going to see a clear and compelling picture of God-honoring financial giving we need to connect the dots of a truly biblical theology.

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**CONNECTING THE DOTS OF A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

Where do we begin? We need to first understand that immersed in the great story line of Holy Scripture there are two divine institutions. These two divine institutions are marriage/family and the church. Both divine institutions have been created by God and are foundational for us to have dominion and to accomplish God’s purposes in the world. Though marriage is not the totality of society, as marriage and the family goes, so goes a society. Though the local church is not the totality of the kingdom of God, as the local church goes, so goes the kingdom of God. We must not miss that the institution of marriage and the institution of the church are central to God’s creation mandate and redemptive mission.

The creation of marriage is anchored in the first two chapters of Genesis. Here we read,

*Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1:26-28)."

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone;
will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:18-19).

Again we must emphasize that in the same way marriage/family was not mankind’s idea or creation, the church was not mankind’s idea or creation. The New Testament as it proclaims the good news of new life in the glorious kingdom of our resurrected Lord will weave these two “creations” together. More about that later.

What we must realize is while the nation of Israel is in the spotlight in the Old Testament; the local church receives the spotlight in the New Testament. My point is not to affirm a dispensational theology that makes a clear distinction between the nation of Israel and the church or to affirm reformed theology that denies this distinction. My main point is to affirm what the New Testament affirms, namely that the primary storyline is confirming the veracity of our Lord’s prophetic statement, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

In a powerful way, the book of Acts records the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). (Note the KJV using the majority text has in verse 47, the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.) Most importantly for our discussion is noting how the progression of Acts highlights the missionary enterprise of the early members of The Way. This missionary enterprise proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom focuses on the intentional multiplication of local church after local church throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 9:31 (KJV); 11:22, 26; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 22, 41; 16:5; 18:22; 20:17, 28).

The early followers of Jesus understood and embraced the centrality of the local church in God’s kingdom design. The primacy of the local church in both God’s desire and design is overwhelmingly seen in the New Testament (Romans 16:1, 5, 16, 23; 1Corinthians 1:2, 4:17, 6:4, 7:17, 11:16,18, 12:28, 14:4,12,19,23,28,33,34,35, 16:1,19; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 8:1,18,19,23,24, 11:8,28, 12:13; Galatians 1:2, 22; Philippians 4:15; Colossians 4:15, 16; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1
church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body.

FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband (Ephesians 5:22-33).

As noted earlier, the two divine institutions of church and marriage are linked together. The Apostle Paul speaks much about “the church.” The singularity of his language in Ephesians is often used to describe “the universal church;” however, any doctrine of the universal church should be seen primarily in light of it being a collection of a myriad of local churches that honor Christ and His Word, not just some ethereal entity of which the local church is just a part. When we think of the divine institution of marriage we do not think of some abstract concept of “universal marriage.” Rather, we understand that marriage at its core essence is two real human beings, a man and a woman, in geographical proximity entering into a permanent covenant relationship. Marriage has little compelling reality apart from its local and interpersonal context. This helps us to put the “universal church” in its proper perspective, neither denying its reality, nor allowing it to overshadow the centrality of the local church.

We also need to understand that Paul uses the phrase “church of God” and “churches of God” interchangeably. The vast majority of writings of the New Testament are clearly set within the local church context. (See 1 Corinthians 11:22, 16:19; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6; Colossians 1:18, 24; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; 1 Timothy 3:5, 15.)

Now let’s look for a moment at how the Apostle Paul connects the two divine institutions of the church and marriage in Ephesians. As I mentioned, Paul speaks much about the church (ecclesiology) in this entire Epistle. And let’s not forget that the letter to the Ephesians is written to a local church (See 1:22; 3:10,21; 5:23,24,25,27,29,32). In chapter 5, Paul profoundly connects God’s two divine institutions together in a most compelling manner:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the
WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT GIVING AND STEWARDSHIP?

I believe Jesus anchored his kingdom teaching regarding money and giving with these words, “For where our treasure is there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

In addition to this, Jesus strongly affirms in The Sermon On The Mount, the appropriate nature of bringing an offering to the altar in the context of worship in the temple (Matthew 5:23-24). First fruit giving in the context of the place of corporate worship was very much a part of the “religious culture” in which Jesus was immersed. Jesus doesn’t negate this with a kind of “you have heard it said, but I say to you” kind of rabbinical refutation of the current religious status quo. Rather Jesus raises the bar beyond a mere giving first fruit obligation and external compliance to the Law of Moses. Jesus’ focus is more on the proper motivation of giving.

In great contrast to the common practice of His day, Jesus calls all who indwell his kingdom righteousness to a God-honoring giving that is not ostentatious or that in any way draws attention to the giver. Jesus advocates a kind of “secret” giving that embraces proper motive, moving beyond the baseline of mere obedience to a lifestyle of charity and the wonderful promise of a great future reward. Jesus declares,

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you,
It is not my intent to give a full rendition of Jesus’ teaching about money and stewardship here, but rather to give a brief glimpse of His kingdom teaching on this important subject. What even a cursory examination of Jesus’ teaching reveals is that rather than diminishing financial giving into a sort of “whatever, cheap-grace” kind of deal, Jesus affirmed the importance of giving and raised the bar of generosity beyond mere firsts fruits obligation. He also highlighted the pernicious danger of greed and emphasized the importance of proper motivation in giving.

Jesus not only addresses proper motivation in giving and future reward, in his kingdom teaching. He also addresses the importance of lifestyle stewardship. For example, in Jesus’ parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus emphasizes the blinding peril of greed and the futility of hoarding (Luke 12:13-21). Also in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, the theme of generosity to meet the needs of others is powerfully cemented in the reader’s mind and heart (Luke 10:25-37).

Zaccheus’ change of heart in regard to money and giving was one of the things that led Jesus to declare, …Today salvation has come to this house…(Luke 19:9). Zaccheus’ fruits of true repentance went far above and beyond first fruits giving. Jesus clearly affirms Zaccheus for this and rejoices with him in great style and celebratory exuberance. Jesus also pointed out the importance of God-honoring sacrificial giving as he watched a poor widow give in a very sacrificial manner:

And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on (Luke 21:1-4).

Following His parable of the Shrewd Steward, Jesus gives a compelling teaching on our call to lifestyle stewardship and its inextricable link to knowing spiritual truth:

“If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon (i.e. money and wealth) who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Luke 16:11-13).”
WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS TEACHING ABOUT GIVING?

When writing “to the churches of Galatia,” the Apostle Paul clearly sets financial giving within the local church context. In Galatians, chapter 6, we read:

The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him. Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.

So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith (Galatians 6:6-10).

We must not miss here the language of “house” or “household.” Paul’s language sounds a lot like Nehemiah 10, doesn’t it? The Apostle Paul instructs his protégé Timothy on how to do local church ministry. In 1 Timothy chapter 3, verse 15, Paul writes, but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

For the Apostle Paul, the local church was the house of God and clearly in this context it was the local church at Ephesus.

Paul also writes about financial giving to the church at Corinth. To understand the apostle’s intent here we must realize that the context of
It is time that we cast aside the unbiblical caricatures that we have often embraced and raise the value of the local church in our culture. It is time that our first fruit giving reflect God’s design and desire for the local church.

What About the Rest of the New Testament and Its Teaching about Giving

his instructions is a collection being made from local churches for the church in Jerusalem that was in dire financial need. Paul’s thoughts are not about first fruit giving, but rather sacrificial giving. In 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9, Paul commends the “local churches” of Macedonia (8:1) on their sacrificial giving to the church in Jerusalem. Paul notes that they gave not only according to their ability, but beyond their ability: For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord (2 Corinthians 8:3).

With this in mind, Paul lays out a timeless principle as it relates to sacrificial giving (i.e. above and beyond first fruit giving). Let each one do just as he purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

This text so often confused and abused, is not in any way advocating a whatever, cheap-grace license kind of giving! Paul is speaking about sacrificial giving and places the contours of each person’s involvement as a matter of their own conscience. Sacrificial giving was not to be dictated by anyone, but to be done voluntary from the heart as God led each individual. The early church’s redistribution of wealth and the sacrificial giving of Barnabas, for example, reflect this kind of voluntary sacrificial giving. (See Acts 2:42-47; 5:32-37.)

Here in 1 Corinthians we have a wonderful example of how the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament. In Christ, we are called to move above and beyond the baseline of obedience of first fruit giving to greater grace giving. This call to sacrificial giving does not in any way diminish the importance of tithing to the house of God, the local church. Rather it calls us to move above and beyond our rightful obligation in supporting the house of God to personal, voluntary, prayerful, joyful sacrificial giving. Randy Alcorn makes this salient point when he writes,

“Jesus didn’t ever suggest that the ‘floor’ set by the tithe was eliminated, but simply that the ceiling of Christian giving was far above it. When Jesus told the disciples to go the second mile, he assumed they had gone the first step.” (Money, Possessions & Eternity, pg. 216)
RAISING A QUESTION

People sometimes ask me, “Doesn’t Paul teach in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? Doesn’t this then mean that the house of God is our body and therefore not a place of corporate worship?” The questions often infer the assumption that a “place” of corporate worship is irrelevant in a New Testament progressive revelation context. As if to say the place, support and priority of corporate worship is no longer really that relevant or compelling. Of course, this “works” well in assisting the individual giver in rationalizing giving patterns that divert priority from the local church. Yet a closer examination of this text will dispel any such erroneous conclusion.

The Apostle Paul declares,

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Clearly the context of Paul’s teaching here is not about ecclesiology but about moral purity. The apostle reminds us that when we are in Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells our physical bodies, and therefore we must be concerned about keeping them morally pure. The great pagan temples flooded with prostitutes in Corinth could not have been far from Paul’s mind here.

Paul’s language here removes once and for all the erroneous idea that God’s Shekinah glory is restricted to some sacred physical space (i.e., the holy of holies in a Jerusalem temple). Paul affirms that God’s Spirit now dwells in the temple of every regenerate human heart.
AN IMPORTANT CLARIFICATION ABOUT PARACHURCH MINISTRIES

By affirming the high value the New Testament places on the local church, I am not seeking to denigrate, diminish, or devalue other ministries outside the local church. I am very supportive of many of them and served on the staff of a parachurch organization for 10 years. What I am saying is this: Central to Holy Scripture, and at the very heart of God, is the local church. Our Lord Jesus’ primary kingdom design and desire is the local church.

Rather than marginalize the local church even though she falls short at times, we must once again raise the value of the local church and love her in the way Christ loves her, nourishing her, cherishing her and supporting her. When God’s people truly return to Him they return to His bride, the church. In true spiritual awakening we not only repent and live under the reign of Christ, we also return to God’s design. For a true spiritual awakening to be sustained, at its very heart will be the local church. This is God’s desire and design.

Again let me say it is not my intention to diminish any of the other expressions of the kingdom of God, but rather to raise the value of the local church, in a world where it has been diminished, neglected and marginalized even by well-meaning, yet misguided, Christians who have unknowingly embraced cultural values over biblical values.

I often hear people say, “Well, look at the church with all its problems. The local church is just not getting the job done. The church is often such a mess!” Let me say that the local church like the kingdom will always be a mixed bag. Jesus reminds us that the wheat and the

This text in no way minimizes the place of corporate worship as the house of God or can it be used to diminish in any way the local church’s importance and support. In fact I would suggest that this only heightens it.

The Apostle Peter, using the language of corporate worship, describes the local churches he is writing to that are scattered throughout Asia Minor as “living stones.” Peter writes, You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

Once again much can be said about this weighty passage so bursting with rich theology, but notice Peter’s language here of “house” and “stones.” Here we have brought together “living stones” and a “spiritual house.” Peter focuses on the reality that the local church is not just a localized place of brick and mortar, but a localized people (living stones…temples) gathered together in geographical proximity growing together in Christ the one true cornerstone.

When we step back for a moment we realize that the centrality of the local church in the New Testament is so overwhelming. How can we miss it? Exalting the wonder of the “universal church” without raising the central importance of the local church is not only a foggy abstraction, but also a tragic deception perpetuated by the evil one who hates the bride of Christ with a hellish fury.

Like the divine institution of marriage, which anchors its reality in each individual marriage, the divine institution of the church is anchored in each individual local church. For centuries and centuries, God’s people clearly understood this. In many ways we have tragically been blinded by our own cultural myopia and have lost sight of God’s design and desire. Is it any wonder why we as God’s people have become so marginalized in our postmodern culture.
When we withhold our first fruits from the local church, we not only disregard God’s design, we dishonor Him and we weaken the church’s ability to be faithful to its transformational mission in the world.

Without the resources God intended the local church to have, how can she be more beautiful in her expression and more effective in her mission?

If we withhold our spiritual gifts, talents, and resources that God designed the local church to have, the local church simply cannot be what God has called it to be and do. God designed the local church to be the house of God, the household of faith. Outside of Jesus Himself, the local church is truly the enduring hope of the world.

The Holy Scriptures place the local church at the very heart of God’s redemptive plan. It is His timeless design and desire. When God’s people are truly awakened they embrace this design and desire with a renewed zeal and passion! What has happened in our day? Our financial giving is often mediocre at best and the local church is just one of many charities in a “choose whatever smorgasbord.” How have we so lost the ball of truth in the weeds of deception and distortion? How is it that we have so often drifted to the extreme edges of toxic faith? Why have we so eagerly embraced the ever-changing fickle pragmatic winds of culture and ignored the wisdom of timeless design?

An Important Clarification about Parachurch Ministries

When we withhold our first fruits from the local church, we not only disregard God’s design, we dishonor Him and we weaken the church’s ability to be faithful to its transformational mission in the world.

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CONFRONTING SOME DISTURBING GIVING DISTORTIONS

A common prevalent distortion as it relates to financial giving is a kind of what I call the Check-Off-The-Box, Guilt-Ridden Legalism approach. This approach to giving holds up a 10% “tithe” as a legalistic standard. The problem is that this approach sounds biblical, but ignores the spirit of the law, as well as our call as followers of Christ to live a lifestyle of joyful giving and sharing of our material resources with others. (How else can we explain what the early church did in the voluntary redistribution of their wealth in Acts 2?) Tragically this check-off-the-box approach leads the giver to conclude, “I have done my duty so let someone else do the rest!”

Another very prevalent distortion about giving in our day is what I call a Whatever, Cheap-Grace License approach. Here the believer buys into a corrupted interpretation that “each one do just as he has purposed in his heart.” This view blatantly ignores the timeless principle of first fruit giving in Proverbs and conveniently ignores the baseline of obedience. Clearly grace is corrupted and of course this kind of unbiblical teaching appeals to radical individualism untethered from community responsibility, let alone any accountability for a baseline of obedience. The Apostle Paul writing to the Roman church said of those who corrupted grace as a license to sin even more, “May it never be!”

Another very disturbing mindset of our day that drives much of our thinking about giving is what I call Get-The-Job-Done, Utility-Based Pragmatism. As a culture, we are not only highly individualistic in our orientation to life, we are also enamored with short-term success. In
other words, if something appears to work, it must be right. Never mind if the long-term consequences of our short-term successes are perilous for us as well as future generations, should the Lord tarry. Pragmatism wherever it infects the mind or an organization will eventually cross the boundary of God’s timeless design. Why? Because pragmatism is guided by short-term quantifiable outcomes rather than long-term transformation. How else can we explain the mentality of “good stewardship” such as “getting the most decisions for the giving buck?” Listen to the common evangelical language of our day: “We give to God’s work.”

God’s people of old said, “We give to God’s house.” Does our giving language reveal the depths of pragmatism’s invasion of our thinking? There is nothing inherently wrong about wanting to get the job done or desiring success or wanting things to work. But God’s kingdom is not driven by pragmatic considerations, but by what brings the greatest glory to Himself! Having the Son of God leave the Triune throne room, be born of a virgin in a cave in Bethlehem, die on a Roman Cross in Jerusalem and be raised on the third day, hardly sounds like a pragmatic approach!

Pragmatism also tends to downplay beauty and that which has intrinsic value, exalting instead, utility, functionality and extrinsic value. How else can we explain the dismal state of awe-inspiring architecture and the paucity of great art in the vast majority of evangelical churches today? Tragically we in the evangelical tradition have sanctified the wedding of the bastard children of cultural pragmatism, radical individualism and an apocalyptic eschatology. Is it any wonder we have such dysfunctional offspring? Is it any wonder we have so much well-intended, yet so off base and misguided ideas about financial giving and the local church? God is calling us back to His design and desire!

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**Confronting Some Disturbing Giving Distortions**

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**TAKING A REALITY CHECK ON “FIRST FRUITS” GIVING!**

Former Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson noted, “Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other single thing because, when it comes to a man’s real nature, money is of first importance. Money is an exact index to a man’s true character.” (as cited in *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, pg. 15)

Financial stewardship is a big deal indeed. It is a foundational piece of true apprenticeship. When Sam Houston was converted, he made a financial commitment to his local church to cover much of the pastor’s yearly salary. When asked why he would do such a thing, Sam Houston said, “When I was baptized, my pocket book was too!” It was the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, who talked about two necessary conversions – *first the heart and then the purse.*
THREE REVEALING QUESTIONS

1) Am I Robbing God?

The question Malachi raised to God’s people of old is still compelling to us today. Most of us would find stealing in any form unthinkable in our lives. Yet by withholding tithes to His house (the local church) we are robbing God of what is rightfully his.

2) Am I Neglecting His Bride?

In chapter 5 of the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul clearly and compellingly links the two divine institutions of marriage and the church. He calls us not only to love, nourish and cherish our spouse, but also His bride the church. We are to treasure what Jesus so awesomely treasures. Jesus said, where we put our treasure our heart will follow! A.W. Tozer noted we discover our true treasure by answering four basic questions:

1) What do we value most?
2) What would we most hate to lose?
3) What do our thoughts turn to most frequently when we are free to think of what we will?
4) What affords us the greatest pleasure?

(As cited in Money, Eternity & Possessions, pg. 124)

Do we truly love what Jesus loves? If we do, we will do everything possible to pray for, nourish, support, serve, love and cherish the local church.

3) Am I Pursuing Joyful Grace Giving?

Joyful grace giving is first and foremost a matter of the heart, but it is also a function of one’s financial fitness. Many times our heart desires
to give, but our management of our financial resources are such that we are unable to respond to needs in a generous manner. If we are going to honor God in giving, then we will need to pursue a disciplined financial life that protects us from the edges of personal indulgence and extreme frugality. God leads us to a rhythm of both joyous celebration and joyous sacrifice. Times of feasting and times of fasting.

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**TAKING SOME KEY STEPS TO GREATER FINANCIAL FITNESS**

Since we all start at different points in our financial fitness, it is important to first truly assess where we are and then begin small regular steps moving in the right direction. Seeking out accountability and good advice concerning your financial goals is essential. Here are just a few quick reminders regardless of your income level and net worth. I call them “million dollar nuggets” of wisdom.

- **Nugget 1** Remember, God owns it all.
- **Nugget 2** Honor God with first fruits giving to your local church.
- **Nugget 3** Develop and follow a spending plan (budget).
- **Nugget 4** Work diligently to minimize consumer debt.
- **Nugget 5** Develop a savings plan for future needs like college and “retirement” or “slowdown.” Watch out for hoarding.
- **Nugget 6** Create financial margin (spend less than you earn and do it for a lifetime). Increase giving beyond first fruits. Give sacrificially as needs arise.
- **Nugget 7** Monitor carefully your lifestyle creep (as your financial and wealth margin increases) and embrace legacy kingdom giving as God leads.
THE CHURCH POTLUCK

One of the traditions I grew up with in a small rural church was the all-church potluck. Every church member would bring their own special food dish and place it on a large table. I remember being amazed at the bounty that was always set before us. Sure some members brought larger and more elaborate dishes, but everyone brought something to the table. No one brought any leftovers! Not a person, whether richer or poorer, ever left the church hungry. In fact, most of the time we were all stuffed to the brim not only with the good food we enjoyed, but the wonderful conversation of simply sharing life together as a spiritual community.

Memories of those days now long gone still linger for me, yet I am reminded that God designed the local church to be a very special people and place. A place where all of God’s people bring the first fruits of what they have been given to the table of fellowship. What a beautiful sight! What a beautiful bride!

With God’s people of old let us declare in solemn commitment, “Thus we will not neglect the house of God!”

Soli Deo Gloria!