

Tithing in the Church of Christ

From John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapters 11:5-20:7*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 2012), pp. 273-277.

"And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he [Abram] gave him [Melchizedek] a tithe of all." (Genesis 14:20)

John Calvin addresses the relevance of tithing for the Christian Church today:

Was tithing specific to the old covenant, or did it precede the giving of the law?

"Moreover, in the matter of offering tithes to priests, we see Abraham did so before there was a written law, and there is no doubt the Spirit of God induced him to do so."

God commanded His people under the old covenant to give a tithe, or the first tenth of their earnings, to support the Levitical priesthood. "'For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the LORD, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, 'Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.'" (Numbers 18:24). Tithes "were assigned to them so that the priests would be able to dedicate themselves to the temple service and the instruction of the people" (cf. Mal. 2:7). Offerings were also made to the poor from those tithes.

". . . as Paul says, if those who ministered at the altar in the Old Testament were provided for, those who offer sacrifices to God today in a more excellent way, that is, those who gain souls to sacrifice to Him, are likewise supported (cf. 1 Cor. 9:13-14). And even though God did not define how or with how much they are to be provided for, the law is still in place."

1 Corinthians 9:9-14: "For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.' Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say *it* altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, *this* is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown spiritual things for you, *is it* a great thing if we reap your material things? If others are partakers of *this* right over you, *are* we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat *of the things* of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of *the offerings* of the altar? Even so the Lord [Jesus] has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.

"So ever since God has been known by the preaching of the gospel and ever since some Christian order and policy have been in effect, tithes have been in use."

The Papacy (and modern "health and wealth" Pentecostals, among others) have abused the Biblical doctrine of tithing.

"We see in that how the Pope and those who follow him represent tithing falsely, for when they deal with the right of tithes in their canons, they understand it as if it were transferred to them after Jesus Christ brought to an end the priesthood of Levi. All that is only falsehood and misrepresentation, and they falsify and corrupt holy Scripture wickedly.

. . . let us hold to the rule that Paul establishes, namely, not to deprive the ox when it works to provide for our upkeep (cf. 1 Cor. 9:9-13). Greater then is the reason that those who proclaim salvation, who are ordained to that excellent charge, should not be deprived of their food and drink, but that they should be well provided for.

Now, as I said, when tithes and similar contributions are applied to good use, we must not inquire into the details of why that is the practice. There are extreme people who want to turn everything inside out. They say: 'Oh, now is not the time to pay the tithes, and because such and such a thing has been abused, that practice must not continue.' You would have to eradicate everything if you listened to them, for they think Christianity consists in changing the color of the sun and the moon. But, as I said, if something needs to be corrected, if there is some false opinion introduced by the papists, let that be eradicated!

Let us support things that have been well instituted. In other words, let us support the tithes and similar contributions to feed the poor and maintain those who serve the church.

Let those good things be restored to their legitimate use, and do not allow the insatiable chasms to consume everything. Let us not waste our goods on useless things, on show [worldly entertainments], in drunken revelries, and other dissolute activities [worldly pleasures], but let us realize that our goods are sacred and must be preserved for the use of the church, as much as to sustain the poor, as I said, as to provide for those who serve God and His people."