

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/> Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Biblical Principles of Giving

John W. Robbins

Recent events have disclosed that many churches, seminaries, and organizations once thought to be doctrinally sound are riddled with theological termites. These disclosures require Christians in the pews, who finance the churches, seminaries, and organizations, to reconsider their habits of giving, and to decide again to whom their money should be given. To continue to support persons and institutions – whether by money, goods, time, or regular attendance – that teach, defend, or fail to correct erroneous ideas about salvation and the Gospel is a very serious sin.

The burden of philanthropic responsibility, however, is not new; it is a constant burden for all Christians. Christians are stewards of God, who has entrusted them with property to use for the furtherance of his kingdom and glory. They cannot escape this responsibility, nor can they delegate it to others.

Ecclesiastical Tax Collectors

Some church leaders treat church members as so many workers and drones. Leaders demand that members bring their tithes “into the storehouse,” and embarrass, humiliate, or discipline them if they fail to do so. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Church-State collected the tithe as a tax – no doubt a model for those who desire to re-establish Christendom today. Some modern ecclesiastical tyrants have suggested that church leaders examine the income tax returns of church members to make sure they are tithing the full amount due. They want members to send their intrusive 1040s not merely to the IRS, but to the church Session as well, which, meeting in secret of course, will decide who is

paying his church taxes and who is not.

Other church leaders wheedle and cajole and urge members to fork over the cash by making them feel guilty of being selfish or stingy, or of lacking faith. They strong-arm members to make “faith promises,” that is, to make presumptuous promises to give more money to the church than the member can afford to give, and frequently more money than the member owns. Such “faith promises” teach the member to presume upon God by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple, expecting that God will catch him.

Still other church leaders use a combination of tax money, guilt, intimidation, and false promises to amass endowments by which they fund their sinecures, build monuments and bureaucracies to their own glory or to the glory of idols, construct palaces to live in, influence rulers, and control the destiny of nations. That is how the Roman Church-State became the wealthiest institution on the face of the Earth.

In the face of all this clerical treason, manipulation, and exploitation, what is a Christian to do?

Private Property

The first thing the Christian must do is to realize that his property is his. It does not belong to any church, seminary, or religious organization. This is an axiom of giving: One cannot legally or morally give away that which one does not own. Giving is the voluntary transfer of a property title by one party to another, without receiving title to other property in return. (That is why government charity is a contradiction in terms: Government *forces* taxpayers to fund the welfare programs. There is no *voluntary* transfer of

property titles.) If one receives title to property in return, one has traded; one has not donated. (If one takes property from the person who possesses title to it without his consent, one is stealing.) When a person shops at Wal-mart, he gives title to X number of dollars to the store (by signing a credit card agreement, by writing a check, or by actually handing over cash), and Wal-mart gives title (in the form of a receipt) to certain property to him. But when he gives a gift, he gives title to property to the recipient, without receiving title to property in return. All of this (and all of society) assumes a framework of law and justice, without which it is impossible to speak of property titles, giving, trading, and stealing.

In order to give or trade property titles, one must first own the property, that is, possess title to it. Addressing Ananias in *Acts 2*, Peter put it this way: "While it [Ananias' possession] remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it [the money received from the sale of the possession] not in your own control?" These rhetorical questions require affirmative answers: The property was Ananias', and after Ananias sold it, he controlled the money he received for the property. Any other answer makes nonsense of Peter's questions.

Please note well: Unlike later clerics, the Apostle Peter did not lay claim to any of Ananias' property. Instead, he explicitly acknowledged that the property belonged to Ananias, and to no one else. Peter did not demand that Ananias turn his property over to him, or to the church. Peter did not even suggest that he, the church, or the poor had any claim to Ananias' money. Peter acknowledged the right of private property. Neither the Roman Church-State nor many other organizations do so.¹

But someone will immediately object: Isn't all property a trust from God? Isn't God the ultimate and "real" owner of all property? If one agrees that this is indeed the case, from this agreement the objector jumps to the conclusion that churches, or at least church leaders, are somehow morally if not legally entitled to the property of members. But this conclusion does not follow. In fact, it rests on an elementary and fatal confusion: mistaking the church for God.

God is indeed the creator and owner of everything. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. And God has indeed entrusted his property to men. In fact, God has entrusted his property to specific human beings who morally and legally own that property, to the exclusion of all other human beings.

In the beginning God entrusted the Garden, indeed, the whole Earth (excepting one tree), to Adam. That is the legal

meaning of *Genesis 1:26-30*. Those verses are a conveyance of trust from God to Adam. True, Adam lost the privilege of living in the lush Garden that God had prepared, for Adam stole fruit from God's tree. He did not respect God's property. But Adam did not lose his ownership of the Earth. That legal title passed from him to his children, as Adam determined.

God has obviously not entrusted either church leaders or the poor with property that he has entrusted to others. Nor has God given the church or the poor a moral or legal claim to the property of others. "Trust" in this context is a legal concept, and as trustees of God, property owners enjoy the right and responsibility of using their property as they, and not other human beings, see fit. That also is the legal meaning of *Genesis 1:26-30* and *Acts 2*. To own something means that one controls it. Peter put it this way: "Was it not in your own control?" The collectivist (Communist, Fascist, Environmentalist, Liberal) notion that a person holds property in trust for others – for society, for the state, for the race, for the people, for Mother Nature, or for the poor – has no support in Scripture. A property owner owns his property. A property owner is in fact, in law, and in ethics a property owner.

As trustees for God, property owners have the right and duty to use their property in accordance with the law of God. That law requires them and all men and institutions to refrain from stealing the property of others (whether the others be Christians or not), from defrauding others of their property by lying or misrepresentation, and so on.² That law

² Questions 141 and 142 of the *Larger Catechism* list some of the duties required and sins forbidden by the Eighth Commandment: Duties: truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to everyone his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the rightful owners; giving and lending freely according to our abilities and the necessities of others; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose the things that are necessary and convenient for the sustenance of our nature; a lawful calling and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and suretyship, or other like engagements; and an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own. Sins: theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing; false weights and measures; removing landmarks; injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depopulations; all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves; covetousness, inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods; envying at the prosperity of others; idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming, and all other ways whereby we do

¹See my book *Ecclesiastical Megalomania: The Economic and Political Thought of the Roman Catholic Church*, 1999.

also authorizes and requires a property owner, and him alone, as Peter said, to decide who is to benefit from his gifts. Ananias and Sapphira did not die because they refused to give their property to Peter, but because they lied to the Holy Spirit.

Principles of Giving

It should be clear to all that there is no passage of Scripture that says anyone today must give money to a specific church or organization. Therefore, no specific church or organization has an *a priori* claim to receive the property of others. The totalitarian claims of the Roman Church-State are false. The pope is not entitled to receive property from anyone.

So if a Christian property owner wishes to give gifts, as he should, how is he to decide to whom to give, since there are thousands of churches and institutions that claim to be Christian? There are some general principles of the Word by which all such decisions must be guided.

No Compromise of the Truth

First, everything is to be done for the glory of God. That does not mean that people may “glorify” God in any way they wish, but only in the way God desires. God, who is truth, desires that his Word be glorified, that his Gospel be preached in all its purity and power, for in the Gospel God most clearly exhibits, and we most clearly see, the goodness, mercy, and wisdom of God. Doing everything to God’s glory implies that giving any sort of support to any organization that teaches false doctrine, or fails to teach and defend true doctrine, is sin. John makes this very clear in his second epistle, in which he gives philanthropic commands to the elect lady and her children:

This is love, that we walk according to his commandments.³ This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist... Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the

Son.

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine [the doctrine Christ taught] do not receive him into your house nor greet him, for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

John’s instruction and warning could not be clearer: The test that any teacher must pass who is seeking support from Christians is a doctrinal test. In his instructions to the elect lady and her children, John does not mention racial, ethnic, personality, psychological, or any other type of test. The test is intellectual, that is, doctrinal. It is the test of truth, which John delights in, and finds delightful in others: “I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father.”

The doctrinal test that all organizations and persons who seek the support of Christians must pass is not merely the doctrine of the incarnation, as some misunderstand John’s words, but all the doctrine Christ taught. That is what the phrase “the doctrine of Christ” means. We have no evidence that the Judaizers in Galatia denied the doctrine of the incarnation, but they did deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and Paul damned them for that. They did not bring the doctrine that Christ taught.

John’s commandment is clear: Do not receive any person who does not teach what Christ taught into your house, nor even greet him. John forbids absolutely all financial and moral support for the person or organization that does not teach the doctrine of Christ. The elect lady, who here represents all ordinary Christians who are not teachers in the churches, is not to offer him hospitality, not to feed him nor provide him shelter. She is not even to greet him. And the only reason John mentions for these stern commands is a doctrinal reason: The person does not bring the doctrine Christ taught.

John’s reason for this absolute prohibition on giving moral and financial support to any person or organization that does not teach the doctrine Christ taught is equally clear: “He who greets him [and all the more so, he who offers him hospitality and money] shares in his evil deeds.” Today almost everyone has abandoned Christ’s teaching that false teaching is an evil deed. They may admit that false teaching is unfortunate, or perhaps even misleading, but they do not see it as evil, nor the activities of false teachers as “evil deeds.” But that is what John and the Holy Spirit say. And when one supports, either morally or financially, persons or organizations that do not teach the doctrine Christ taught – either because they do not believe them or because they are too cowardly to teach them (John makes no distinction) – one is sharing in his evil deeds.

unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defraud ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God has given us.

³ This is not the definition of “love” used by many churches or organizations today. Their love is a sentimental indulgence that ignores one’s own sins as well as the sins of others, especially the sin of teaching false doctrine.

Of course, the elect lady, who represents all ordinary Christians who are not teachers, would not be doing the false teaching were she to greet or to entertain false teachers; but she would be enabling them to teach falsehood, and encouraging them to do so. And those are sins. John warns the lady and her children, "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward." The elect lady, of course, cannot lose her salvation, but she can lose her full reward by supporting those who do not teach the doctrine Christ taught.

Giving Not Necessarily a Good Thing

Second, there is no particular virtue in giving *per se*, as many people seem to think. It is only giving to the glory of God that is not sinful. Showing hospitality to false teachers, as John points out, is an evil deed. Furthermore, when the consideration is giving to the poor, rather than to teachers, it is not the giving of a cup of cold water that Christ commends, but the giving of a cup of cold water *in his name*. Even the simple act of giving a cup of water to a person in need must be done explicitly in the name of Christ. Even charitable giving – giving to the poor – must meet a doctrinal test in Scripture. Giving *per se* is not a virtue. Only giving to the glory of God is. That implies, among other things, that Christians should not support non-Christian charities. It also means that Christians should not vote for or advocate government welfare programs.

The thinking of churches and churchgoers has been so corrupted by altruism that they think that giving is good and commendable for its own sake. This notion is destroyed by Paul's instructions to Timothy in *1 Timothy*. In chapter 5 verse 17, Paul writes, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." Notice the apostle's emphasis on paying good teachers very well – double honor. Doctrine and teaching are obviously of first importance to Paul. What makes this all the more striking is that Paul, immediately before giving his command to pay doctrinally sound teachers well, had given explicit commands that certain widows were not to be supported by the church. Paul twice wrote, "Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number" and "refuse younger widows." The church's resources were to be spent on promoting the Gospel, not on supporting widows who ought to remarry or be helped by their families. Paul clearly valued the financial support of doctrinally sound teachers above the financial support of widows, because he understood the primacy of truth and doctrine.

This altruism, this notion that giving *per se* is good, is the result of a theological Liberalism that does not recognize the

Biblical doctrines of private property, Christian self-interest, and doing everything to the glory of God.

Conclusion

This brief look at the Biblical principles that must guide a Christian's giving has brought several to light:

1. Each person actually owns his own property;
2. No church or religious organization has a claim to the property of others;
3. There is no moral duty to give merely for the sake of giving;
4. All giving, which is commanded by God, is to be done to the glory of God;
5. Only giving done in the name of Christ is commended by Christ; and
6. Giving to persons or organizations that do not teach the doctrines Christ taught is sin.

New Book Available

What Is Saving Faith? the new combined edition of *Faith and Saving Faith* and *The Johannine Logos*, is available from The Foundation for \$12.95, plus \$6 shipping and handling. Order from The Trinity Foundation, Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692. Here are the contents of the book:

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