

## HOW MUCH SHOULD I TITHE?

Even today a potential contributor to a charity drive wants to be told the “requested” donation, because people like to know in advance how much they are expected to give.

In biblical times tithing was an explicit expectation: 10 percent of specific agricultural products and newborn livestock, based on the recognition that all possessions came from God. According to Deuteronomy 14, the tithing family was to have a merry feast with God’s share of the year’s bounty. Every third year, instead of a family feast, the tithed portion became a local banquet for “the Levite,...the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Deut. 14:29).

References to tithing—defined as giving a specific portion of one’s income—in the New Testament are limited to reflection on Old Testament examples and unflattering allusions to self-serving tithing by the Pharisees (Heb 7:4-10; Luke 11:42; 18:12). From this, scholars infer that first-generation Christians did not embrace tithing as such. The Acts of the Apostles, for example, suggests that at least some Christian communities held all possessions in common (Acts. 2:44-45).

But within a hundred years the early Christian document called the Didache refers to Christians tithing money as well as agricultural goods, though the practice was unevenly accepted among the early Christian leaders. Augustine later endorsed tithing as an acceptable minimum standard for Christians.

Since the 16th century the obligation to contribute financially to the church has been treated as one of the “commandments” of the Catholic Church. The Baltimore Catechism disseminated this teaching for the past century, but without recommending 10 percent tithing. In fact until very recently that kind of tithing was almost exclusively associated with Protestant churches. Catholic parishes often relied on an unholy blend of bingo, festivals, lotteries, “50-50s,” and multiple Sunday collections.

Canon 222 of the Code of Canon Law outlines two financial obligations of the faithful: “to assist with the needs of the church” and “to promote social justice and...assist the poor.” Those Catholic parishes that have adopted tithing often embrace that dual focus, encouraging a gift of 5 percent of gross income to the parish and an additional 5 percent to charitable causes.

Occasionally the spirit of biblical tithing is demonstrated dramatically. Ten years ago in New Jersey, a devout Catholic woman won \$11.8 million in the lottery. The news reporter described her as unmarried and retired, with a pension and a modest, mortgage-free house. Her 30-year-old car was generally reliable (although being repaired). So she gave the winnings away: half to her parish and the rest to various local organizations. Friends had to convince her to retain enough to cover the income taxes. She kept nothing else. “God takes care of me,” she explained.

*By Jim Dinn, a freelance writer retired in Pennsylvania.*