

THE CHURCH part 1
First Things First
Part 5
Dr. George O. Wood

We've been in a series Things That are New, steps we take as we come to the Lord. The last couple Sunday especially we've looked at the theme of the church because what's new when we've come the Lord. A kind of theme verse for today as we pick up part three in the last of a series of messages on Things That are New is what Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, the Sermon on the Mount, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added to you."

The last two Sundays we've looked at the first 7 steps each Christian should take upon coming to the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to take a moment to review by rephrasing the principles I've been teaching by rephrasing them in questions.

Am I a member, not only of the universal church (the invisible church) but am I a member of the local church participating member of the body of Christ at a local level?

It may be you're here and you stumble on the first part of that question. You say what in the world is the invisible church? The universal church? It is the assembly of all those who have trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That's first. Before you ever become part of a local church, you first of all become part of Jesus Christ and his eternal body, which he has been gathering through all time.

Since no two churches are alike have I become part of one that I can be involved in and grow in?

Am I coming out of anonymity within the local church? We all come as strangers when we first come to the local fellowship. But gradually God wants us through a process of attendance and service to become hosts to others. Am I coming out of anonymity?

Do I see myself as committed to the local church? That's different than attending. It's being committed.

Am I praying for the church?

Are my life and words witnessing for Jesus so that others may be drawn to him and to his church?

Have I learned to deal with disappointments that I receive at the hands of others in the body of Christ?

The number of yes's or no's to those particular questions will tell you a lot about spiritual health and vitality in your life.

The eighth question I want to ask today is one we want to consider in the series. Do I support the local church with my tithes and offerings?

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Years ago I picked up a book The Silent Thousands Suddenly Speak. It was a collection of sermons preached by Charles Blair in 1968. He sought to elicit responses from people on what subjects they'd most like to hear a sermon about. He received 5000 written responses to his requests. He took them and tabulated them all and then preached a series of 10 sermons on the 10 most requested topics. I remember reading through the book and the most fascinating chapter in the book was the 11th chapter. "Is Anyone Interested in Stewardship?" – the sermon that didn't get a vote. Nobody out of the 5000 responses had requested a sermon on that.

I don't fault those for not choosing stewardship. It would probably not be number one on my list either. Although I recognize that the Lord may have a different view of that. It may be high up on his list.

I've been extremely reluctant as pastor in talking about the subject of money and the support of the Lord's work. This is my 4th sermon on tithing in 14 years so I'm certainly not going to break any records on the subject. I probably have been more reticent to speak on money and stewardship than Jesus himself. I know I have.

First, someone may be here that has never been in church or not been in church for a long time. Maybe you attended a service 10 years ago and the pastor spoke on tithing and you haven't been back in a church service since then. Now again, you've found yourself in church. And would you believe? Another sermon on tithing. So you may go away saying, Every time I go to church all I hear about is money!

I want you to know that the heart of the gospel is not what you can do for God but God has already done for you. In giving us his only Son, God set a standard for giving none of us will ever match no matter how hard we may try. His free gift of salvation is exactly that – free. Free to us, it wasn't free to him. But it's free to us.

A second reservation I've had is that leaders of churches and parachurch ministries have not always been careful to follow Bible principles in the collection and expenditure of money given by God's people.

I become concerned when ministries use anti-biblical and antichrist methods to gain money. Such as misrepresenting what it's for, motivating persons to give by promising them a gift in return for their offering or promising some form of public recognition, manipulating donors through wrongful use of emotional appeal. I also become concerned when I see kingdom dollars being used to support extravagant lifestyles. And being mismanaged so that what is being given produces no real benefit to Christ or his kingdom.

From the days of the book of Acts Simon Magus, Ananias and Saphira, there have always been those persons who have sought to exploit the body of Christ for their own personal financial gain. This has happened all through church history. In fact in the reformation was triggered by such.

Really when you look at it, it's not surprising that throughout the whole history of the church wrongful financial practices have plagued the church because that simply pleases the devil. Nothing could delight him more. When such activities occur they have a number of results. They produce cynicism. The devil loves cynicism.

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Secondly, it makes all church leaders and churches and ministries suspect. We all get painted with the same brush stroke when there's a crook that's raising funds in the body of Christ.

Third, money is siphoned off to these kinds of false efforts, which could have instead gone to build the work of God.

Fourth, many are discouraged from investing in the kingdom of God when they see the poor standard of stewardship on the part of some within the body.

I think the cure on our part is not to cease giving to the Lord's work but to give responsibly and to give where we are sure that there are fundamental levels of accountability in place.

A person in our congregation recently came to talk to me. She said with tears in her eyes, Pastor, I'm not a tither. My income is only \$1000 a month. By the time I pay my apartment and my car payment and my bills there's just not anything left and I wonder does God expect me to tithe to the church.

My initial response to her on a human basis was to simply say to her, No, you have a meager income, a lot of needs. I don't see how you could afford to tithe either. But my human response was checked by my biblical response. And by my own experience. So I gave far different counsel.

When Jewel and I were first married we both had good salaries. Then Evangine came into our home and Jewel quit working and suddenly three people living on one salary. So we quit tithing. And we had plenty of justification for not tithing. We couldn't afford it. Second, the pastor made more money than we did. And third, we were sure there had to be other people with more money that could support the church. Even without tithing however we were spending more money every month than we were earning and we were digging a hole and getting hopelessly in debt.

During that time some principles came to us.

First was simply what does the Lord ask us to do? Not what do we think we can do or should do but what does the Lord ask us to do. I had justified my non-tithing partly on the basis that it was an Old Testament principle only and that in the New Testament we were freed from legalism.

The Lord began to speak more seriously to my heart. If in the Old Testament the people were asked and required to give a minimum of ten percent to keep the institution of the Old Testament alike – the temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial system – how much more a commitment are we to have who have a better temple a better sacrifice, a better priesthood.

I got to thinking, someday I'm going to meet some of these Old Testament persons face to face in heaven. What if one of them comes up to me and says, "I gave to keep the Old Testament system going. But you had the gospel and the full knowledge and revelation of Jesus Christ. What did you do to advance the greater revelation?" When I began to realize that if people under a system that ministered death tithed, how much more ought we in a covenant of life be willing to commit to the support of the Lord's work.

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I came to understand that tithing is simply a jumping off place. It's where you get started in your Christian stewardship. You can go beyond that.

Once I became convinced that tithing was scriptural, secondly I began to look at the principle of universality. I think this is always a good test for any kind of behavior in our Christian life. The question of what if every Christian did what I'm doing? What if every Christian gave the way that I give? I immediately recognized that the kingdom of God would be devastated if everyone followed my example. I became convinced that God designed the church to operate on the tithe. To the extent that any one of us do not tithe do we bind up the church or constrict its ministry. If a lot of people begin doing it then it really wraps it tight so that it cannot go on with the work of the kingdom God has given us to do.

What's fascinating is at the time I was going through this struggle, because I was a religion faculty member at a Christian college, and I partly justified my failure to tithe on the basis that I was already sacrificing by working in a Christian college. However if everybody followed my example in giving then only those who made enough money would tithe. And whoever makes enough money? I was a Bible teacher needed to obey and trust God. It was a great lesson.

So we came to understand that tithing was sort of a jumping off place in the scripture and secondly it was a personal responsibility.

But third, we were in such financial mess. We thought we were so head over heels in debt anyway it isn't going to hurt anything if we give the tithe to the Lord's work. We hadn't made ends meet without tithing. So what if we don't make ends meet while tithing. We're not making it either way.

I realize that was very contorted reasoning but sometimes you get philosophical and say, I might as well go a little deeper and obey God. If I go down, let's go down obeying God. I began to discover as we started tithing and giving beyond the tithe that we were learning a very practical lesson in faith and obedience to the Lord. To this day I do not understand how we met our bills and obligations while tithing. I just know that God helped us then and he's helped us ever since. That's the testimony of those who become regular tithers.

In fact in tithing and giving beyond the tithe that's one area of our life we get very experiential in our faith. There's no room for theoretical things there. That's very experiential where we see God meeting our household budget.

I think the fourth thing that motivated us to tithe is we began to look around and see the sacrifice of others. The church we enjoyed, the college we loved, the missionary work, which was done throughout the world was all being done by people who gave. I began to see that what I had benefited from was the result of other people's sacrifice and their own commitment to the Lord. I couldn't live with my own conscience if I did nothing if others that we knew had done so much to advance the Lord's word and His name. The time had come for us to join our comrades in the honor and the obligation of supporting God's work. It was right that we should also share in the responsibility. So we began to tithe.

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At first, tithing is very difficult. You naturally wonder, how in the world am I going to make ends meet? It requires faith, it requires commitment, it requires some time of working it through, but you'll find several things about it. First, the Lord will meet your needs. He will. Secondly, as you develop that as a discipline you will come to live as well on the 90% as you lived on the hundred. God will give you good business management. Which I think is the third principle. Greater financial discipline will come to your life as you become a better steward and establish right priorities. Fourth, God will bless your involvement in the church. Where your treasure is there will your heart be also. I become deeply involved to the things I'm making major commitments to.

I encourage you if you've not already developed this spiritual exercise to giving your time to the Lord's work to do it. It's become a little ritual with me. Always when I receive my paycheck, before I pay any bill, the first bill I pay – a privilege – is I make out my offering check to the Lord's work. I do that symbolically because I want the Lord to know and I want me to know that that always has first draft on my funds. That somehow I'll operate on the rest. That's my way of taking Matthew 6:33 "Seek first the kingdom of God" and having a practical way to implement it for joy in our life.

The older we get the more we realize that giving to the Lord and to his work is the best investment we are making.

Maybe you haven't given your life yet to the Lord. Before you ever start talking about giving your money, give your life to the Lord. Make him the Lord and Savior of your life. If you're here and perhaps you're a Christian but you have not yet begun to really become obedient and move out in faith in Christian stewardship. I don't know anything that will facilitate more spiritual growth in your life than to become relationship serious and faithful about stewardship to the Lord's work.

I'm always impressed with the fact that the heart of the gospel is giving. "God so loved the world that he gave." Philippians 2, Paul tells us "Jesus thought not that equality with God a thing to be grasped but he emptied himself and became a servant."

I was struck some years ago with the words of Jim Elliot the missionary martyr to the Auca Indians. Before his death he had penned these words as a prayer to the Lord: Father, let me be weak that I might lose my clutch on everything temporal. My life, my reputation, my possessions. Lord, let me lose the tension of the grasping hand. Even, Father, would I lose the love of fondling. How often I have released a grasp only to retain what I prize by harmless longing, the fondling touch. Rather, open my hand in order to receive the nail of Calvary as Christ was open that I releasing all might be released. Unleash from all that binds me now. He thought heaven, equality with God not a thing to be clutched at. So let me release my grasp." And Jim Elliott went on to say "He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

I want to be motivated by that honest and sincere desire in my heart to recognize that the Lord has total ownership on my life. I pray that for you as well.

Our Father, as we bring this service to a close we want to thank you for bringing us here today and we want to thank you for the stewardship of the many people who've made it

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possible for us all to enjoy what we enjoy in the kingdom of God today. We praise your name. We ask Lord for everyone in this room that if there's any here who do not know you as their Lord and Savior that in a service where we talk about stewardship, they may consider the stewardship of their own life. Who gave them life. To whom they are returning. What is to be done from the time life was given them until the time they stand in your presence. Even as you gave your life for us so we also as an act of response, not because it is a duty but because it is an act of joy responding to your gift, we too are to present our whole life to you. If there are those here in this service today that have not made that gift of their own life to you by acknowledging you as Lord and Savior we pray that their stewardship would begin at that very point. And they would come to know you as their Lord. From you we have come and one day we must all stand in your presence. Lord, we want with all of our hearts to live and move and have our being in you. There are young people, Lord, who have never made it a practice of Christian stewardship. They have come to know you but have only a small means of income and it seems like such a small matter to begin tithing. You've taught us in your word that the person is faithful in little is given responsibility over more. And that each of us has a part of being responsible in your kingdom. So from those with the least income to the greatest, from the youngest to the oldest help us all to be good stewards. Faithful to you to advance your cause and exalt your name in this world. Perhaps there are persons who have come to this service from whom other people have taken something from them. Maybe they didn't give it up but it was taken. Their honor, their marriage, their respect. Something very precious to them was robbed out of their hands. Stolen from them. Taken by deceit or guile or coercion. Something precious to them. We pray that the gift you give them will make up for any loss that they have suffered. More than adequately fill the void that they sense so that perhaps having come to this service empty they might leave full of your blessing and grace. For your grace is sufficient for every need. We pray that perhaps which the locusts have taken and the worm has destroyed will be restored. And not simply restored at its past value but restored many times over and over by the joy that you bring to those who know your gift. Thank you too for teaching us that Christian stewardship and responsibility to you is not a duty in order to earn favor with you. But it is an act of thanksgiving on our part as we express our gratitude for what you have done for us eternally in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. We give you praise and we ask your blessing upon us now as we come to these altars and present our needs and our lives to you. That your Spirit would be here to touch, to quicken, to awaken, to enliven, to heal. We ask in your name. Amen.