



PROPORTIONATE GIVING

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By
Robert P. Richardson

What does it mean for me to be a proportionate giver? What do the Scriptures teach me about proportionate giving? In particular, what does it mean for me as a Presbyterian to be giving proportionately? Let me reflect on my own attitude as a Presbyterian.

I believe that every area of my life is claimed by God's grace, as I Peter 2:9-10 suggests. Therefore, my *whole* life belongs to God, not merely a portion of it. As a youth, I dedicated myself to God once when I made a profession of faith. As a parent I joined my wife to dedicate the lives of our children in infant baptism, for they too belong to God. And, whether or not I admit it consciously, my whole life—through all my days, my work and leisure time—is constantly making a witness for God as I relate to others. There is nothing *partial* or *proportionate* about such giving. For I *am a whole life steward*, in my belief and in my practice.

So—what is proportionate giving about? And how does it fit into the scheme of things for me as a Christian, as a Presbyterian? As I begin, I have to understand “proportionality” as a principle to be practiced when it comes to the ways I use my possessions. Possessions are part of the stuff of this earth which are worth something, and I believe that strongly or Jesus would not have spent

so much time talking about possessions. But I use *them*; I don't want them to use *me*. My life does not consist in accumulating possessions for their own sake. First of all I have to look at the *needs* I share with my family. That is basic to a consideration of what is a worthy proportion. If my family is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then I must surely satisfy some basic needs. Necessities of this life, which are not luxuries or mere wants, are important priorities for me as a steward, and have to be determined by our family. That determination is based primarily on our scale of values, and that obviously influences where I come out on proportionate giving.

My decisions are influenced by Scripture, by tradition, by the teachings of the church, and by my experience in the faith community. Biblical guidelines for proportionate giving are many and varied, and they sometimes complicate the question for me. A tithe (let's say that is 10 percent of all my income) is one response I could make. It is based upon Old Testament law, which may be a reasonable standard of giving, a worthy goal perhaps for some, but hardly a challenge for many people I know. Jesus went beyond the Old Testament legalism to its spirit in his encounters with various kinds of people. The rich young ruler seeking eternal life was told by Jesus that to be his disciple meant for him to sell *all* he had and give it *all* to the poor (Matthew 19:16-22). A widow was praised by Jesus for giving only the

smallest of coins because she gave all that she had (Mark 12:41-44). Zacchaeus opened his life to Jesus, gave half of his goods for the poor, and then received the Lord's blessing and salvation (Luke 19:1-10). The Corinthians were urged by Paul to give weekly, proportionately, out of their income (I Corinthians 16:2). In his urging, Paul called attention to the example of the Macedonians. Their commitment to Christ showed itself in giving of their means and beyond their means to share with those in need (II Corinthians 8:1-5).

Then what is proportionate giving? “Proportionate giving is giving according to our means (ability) and beyond in grateful and obedient response to God's love made manifest in Jesus Christ,” said one individual. My decision to give in that way, however I define “proportion,” has to be made with two things in mind: “*my faith which informs my decision, and my own human need to live with dignity.*”

One conclusion is the unhappy position that I may be a better *percentage* giver than a *proportionate* giver. *It is easier for me to give a certain percentage of my income, and even to grow each year incrementally with percentage giving, than it is to give proportionately.* I have found that arithmetical calculations may be helpful to me in arriving at some giving guidelines, or in comparing my giving to others' giving in the church. But figures and statistics are no way for

me to deal with the challenge of true proportionate giving of life and possessions.

If I had to estimate where I come out on the biblical scale, I guess I would find myself somewhere between the rich young ruler and the widow. I know I am not up to the level of Zacchaeus' proportions. I confess that I stand where we all do, falling short of being complete stewards, and even of being proportionate givers. But I must continue to face the demands of costly discipleship in the arena of my personal stewardship. For I know that when all is said and done, percentages and proportions always leave me at the place where I am confronted with the total giving of Christ himself. So, I find myself living in the tension between where I am and where by God's grace I want to be.

Indian Bishop A.Z. Azariah said it well: "Christ's giving went into the depths of his being so that he emptied himself, becoming poor that others might become rich. No giving can be called too much in the light of this love."

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