

MAKING FIRSTFRUITS PRACTICAL

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Introduction

By necessity, I am writing this essay primarily to Christian believers who are generous givers. I know ahead of time that I may not have a huge audience because sociological surveys show that a surprising majority of those who consider themselves practicing Christians do not so much as tithe their income to God. In fact, giving among U.S. church members across the board has been under 3% of their income for decades. This is sad because believers who do not at least tithe their income, despite all the other good qualities they might display, cannot expect God to move them into their full destiny because they are choosing to rob Him. I am aware that there are those who might argue that this concept falls outside of the covenant of grace because the warning about "robbing God" comes from Malachi who was under the Old Testament law. I am not convinced. Suffice it to say that such people, with very few exceptions, are hoping to make their stinginess sound reasonable and religiously acceptable. This essay is not for them. We are giving by faith in grace of God, not by law.

Rather, I am addressing those of us (Yes, I include myself here!) who consider the tithe as a bare minimum and who, year in and year out, give considerably more than the first 10% of their income to the kingdom of God. Most of us in that category have habitually referred to our giving as "tithes and offerings," considering the first 10% as tithe and the rest as offerings. Up to recently, however, very few of us were more than marginally aware that a further biblical principle of giving was firstfruits. I had heard and read comments on firstfruits from several leaders over the years, but none of them seemed to move me to action. In fact, some of them even seemed to contradict one another.

However, in recent years two leaders have brought firstfruits front and center in my thinking and action. One was Chuck Pierce who, in his Glory of Zion Outreach Center in Denton, Texas, began a monthly firstfruits celebration under the Hebrew concept of Rosh Chodesh. The other was Robert Henderson of Wellsprings Church in Colorado Springs, who has specialized in teaching and practicing firstfruits for many years. His book on the subject, *Caused Blessing*, has my nomination as the current key textbook in the field.

To Whom Do We Give?

As Henderson shows in his book, the Bible contains more specific information on firstfruits than

most of us had thought. The principle is so clear that I believe that regularly giving firstfruits should be considered as necessary a part of worshipping God with our material possessions as are tithes and offerings. If we are serious about our faith and about our desire to please the Father, we'll give all three habitually.

Most of us who tithe have recognized that our tithe is supposed to go to the storehouse. Yes, there are some legitimate differences of opinion as to what the "storehouse" in each one of our lives might be, but most of us have interpreted it as our local church, and this is what I practice. I am not aware of any specific guidelines as to where our offerings, namely gifts over the 10% tithe, are to go. I think this is at the discretion of the giver.

Firstfruits

This brings us to firstfruits. The first mention of firstfruits in the Bible is Leviticus 23:10, "When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest." The priest, then, is the one who receives firstfruits. A much more detailed explanation of this is given in Numbers 18 where the giving of tithes and the giving of firstfruits are contrasted with each other.

For example, here is what it says about tithes: "Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting" (Numbers 18:21). While it may not be an airtight case, I believe it is reasonable to conclude that our functional equivalent to Levites today would be the pastors of our local churches.

How about firstfruits? All of Numbers 18 is a quote-unquote word of the Lord to Aaron, the high priest. God is telling Aaron how he and his offspring will be remunerated for the priestly work to which He has assigned them. Among other things, this is what God says: "All the best of the oil, all the best of the new wine and the grain, their *firstfruits* which they offer to the Lord, I have given them to you. Whatever first ripe fruit is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours" (Numbers 18:12-13). Again, this may not be an airtight case, but today's equivalent to yesterday's high priest is most likely the apostle. A strong hint of this comes in Hebrews 3:1, "Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus." This seems to equate apostles, a New Testament office, with high priests, an Old Testament office.

What principle can we derive from this? Our firstfruits should be directed to those with whom we are spiritually aligned, ideally to the apostles whom God has assigned to oversee our lives and ministries and to whom we are accountable. Granted, not all segments of the church recognize the office of apostle, but all do have structures in which those who are over us can readily be indentified. It is to those persons that I believe our firstfruits should be directed.

On a personal note, my wife, Doris, and I practice firstfruits giving. We are apostolically aligned with Chuck Pierce in Global Spheres, so we give firstfruits to GSI on a regular basis. We are also members of Glory of Zion, and they have our ordination papers, so we give firstfruits at certain Rosh Chodesh celebrations.

When Do We Give?

The original design of firstfruits is that they were given at the beginning of the harvest of whatever crop happened to be ripening, as well as the firstborn of livestock. The tithe, on the other hand, was given *after* the harvest. However in an urbanized society these agrarian guidelines need interpretation and adaptation. One principle would be that firstfruits should be

given regularly, at least on an annual basis for each crop that ripens. That would turn out to be several times a year, and the Glory of Zion Rosh Chodesh celebration at the beginning of each month would be one good way to systematize it. How is this done? The congregation gathers in a festive mood on Saturday night for joyous worship, prophetic ministry, spontaneous intercession, warm fellowship, and a time of cheerful giving. Are the members of the church grumpy, saying "All this church talks about is money!?" Just the opposite! The members rejoice in God's provision so that they can continue living their exciting lifestyle of giving, giving, and giving!

How Do We Give?

One thing about firstfruits, it cannot be legalistic like the tithe. The tithe is easy to determine, just calculate 10% of your income. Suppose, in Old Testament days, a farmer had one acre of barley. It all gets ripe at the same time, and he wants to give firstfruits to the Lord. But since the Bible doesn't give us a formula for calculating it, the farmer has to use his or her own judgment. Leviticus does mention "a sheaf." This would be adequate, but not particularly generous because it would hardly provide one meal for the priest and his family. My guess would be that some of the more openhanded would harvest their barley, throw it on the threshing floor, and what the ox would tread out the first morning or the first day would be firstfruits for the priests. However, that's just a guess.

I mention that because this list I am giving you is just a guess as well. You have to use your own judgment. The more generous the better, because you will reap what you sow. It's better to err by giving too much than too little. But God doesn't expect us to give the whole acre of barley. He wants us and our families to prosper in our personal lives as well.

So here are some suggestions. They are not intended to be legalistic, but rather they are simply to help you develop a mindset of firstfruits giving.

- When you get a raise, give the full amount of the raise as firstfruits. Suppose you have been getting a pay check of \$1,000 per week, and you get a raise to \$1,100. The extra \$100 in your first pay check is firstfruits. This does not substitute for your tithe on your normal amount of income—it is over and above the tithe.
- If you make a new investment, give the first month's or quarter's returns on the investment as firstfruits. If you lose, reinvest your returns to repay your loss, then after you are even, give the first returns in the black as firstfruits.
- If you get a new job, give your first day's or week's or month's wages as firstfruits. The principle is to give something, but you decide the amount. In any case it should be significant, and definitely more than if you just tithed what you receive in your first paycheck.
- If you publish a book either give a good portion of your advance or if you don't get an advance, give your first royalty check as firstfruits. If you self-publish, give your earnings on the first box of books that you sell as firstfruits. You might even give the gross sales instead of the net profit on that first box of books..
- Suppose you're into real estate and you buy a house, fix it up, sell it, and make \$80,000. In your business plan, this \$80,000 is not personal income, but investment capital to buy more homes. Because it's not personal income, you don't tithe it, but how about firstfruits? It's up

to you, but my thought would be to give a chunk, like \$5000 or \$10,000 as firstfruits and reinvest the rest.

- Some people, and I fit into this category, regularly give much more than the basic 10% of their personal income as their "tithe." I put "tithe" in quotation marks because tithe literally means 10%, but you might be giving 20% or 30% or more. Rick Warren for example, has said that his income stream is so large that he can "tithe" 90% off the top and live on just 10%. If you are tithing more than 10%, your firstfruits giving to those with whom you are aligned spiritually can come from these funds in whatever amount you determine, as well as giving additional firstfruits from some of the other things on this list if God prospers you in that way.
- Maybe you are just scraping by, living on a fixed income like Social Security. You're not buying real estate or making investments or writing books. Even so, the first thing to do is to tithe your 10%. Then the principle becomes giving some firstfruits, not the amount. Suppose that from time to time you give a \$10.00 or a \$20.00 bill to a person with whom you are aligned spiritually and say "I want you to have this. It is my firstfruits." God will honor that just as much as the \$10,000 the real estate agent gives. But in all cases be sure that you give something on a fairly regular basis.
- I have been teaching that we should all strive for at least five streams of income. If you reach this goal, be sure to keep firstfruits in mind for each of the five streams (or more, if that is the case) separately.
- What if you are doing contract labor? You might give the first payment on each contract as firstfruits, then tithe the rest that you make.
- If you get an unexpected gift through the mail or a bonus, it may be good to give firstfruits from that rather than a tithe.

Should You Give in Order to Get?

A prominent theme throughout the Bible is that God blesses those who are generous and vice versa. Take, for example, Proverbs 11:24-25: "There is one who scatters yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich." Surprisingly, statements like this tend to disturb some believers. They feel that it might be somewhat disreputable to entertain any notion that by giving to God, He might give back to you. They are worried that our motive might not be primarily to serve God and to worship Him through giving, but that it could cross the line into greed and selfishness. They are concerned that certain ungodly leaders could use this for manipulating donors.

Undoubtedly, these are helpful warnings against carnality and excess. But they should not lead to the conclusion that God prefers that His people be poor or just scraping along rather than rich. There is a pernicious Spirit of Poverty out there who is an evil agent of Satan assigned to persuade believers that poverty is directly related to piety, and, tragically, it has been rampant in our churches at least since the Middle Ages. This Spirit of Poverty needs to be sharply rebuked and we should determine to move in the opposite spirit which is the Spirit of Prosperity. Look closely at how giving firstfruits is designed by God to lead to prosperity: "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the *firstfruits* of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Prov. 3:9-10). It is hard to take this

scripture at face value and miss the obviously intended cause and effect relationship. Accuse me of being greedy if you wish, but scriptures like this make me want to be a firstfruits giver more than ever!

Let's conclude by looking at one of the most quoted Bible verses in churches of every stream when it comes time to receive the weekly offering: "Give and it will be given to you: in the same measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over" (Luke 6:38). This sounds very much like a promise, and from none other than Jesus. In my Bible it is in red letters. In applying this, it is good to keep in mind that the giving referred to here is giving *your own* money. Consequently it does not include your tithe, which is not actually your money, but God's. This word about receiving more than you give is directed toward offerings and firstfruits, over and above the tithe. Consequently, if you are not tithing, you cannot qualify for the promise of Luke 6:38. But if you do qualify, God invites you to give with a pure heart, why? In order to receive what He returns to you. If you do have a pure heart, what will you do with the abundance? Of course, you will give more in order to advance God's kingdom here on earth.

God designed generous firstfruits giving for His kingdom's purposes. And as you move into the process, He will be able to bless you and your family as well!