

Support of the Gospel Ministry

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An important objective of the Adventist church, as set forth by General Conference President Robert H. Pierson, is to discover solutions to outstanding problems of the church. One area of concern is church finance.¹ As a student of finance directly interested in the future of the church, I would like to present a viewpoint that may be helpful in developing a better understanding of Adventist church finance.

I

Many of God's promises can be claimed by the Christian who follows God's plan for church finance. God challenges those whom he has supplied with bounties to prove him: "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."²

The solution to the problem of financing church programs is tied to the principle of tithing stated by Ellen White: "God's plan in the tithing system is beautiful in its simplicity and equality. . . . If one and all would accept it, each would be made a vigilant and faithful treasurer for God; and there would be no want of means with which to carry forward the great work of sounding the last message of warning to the world."³

Why is it, then, in spite of such promises and such church plenty, that many members find themselves struggling with financial problems?

Although the plan for support of the church by its members is simple, the expected result is not forthcoming. Some believe that the reason this is so is that the members are apathetic — that if they were close enough to God, their financial problems would be solved. But perhaps spiritual condition is

not the only causal factor. Inconsistencies in church policy may raise honest questions, with the result that some persons decrease their financial support (at least that portion given through established channels). Thus, although some may blame members for church financial problems, inconsistent church policy may indeed be a contributing factor.

A Jewish rabbi, commenting on the Adventist interpretation of the tithing system, recommended that Adventists look carefully at the way tithe funds are allocated. After closely observing Adventism for an extended time, he concluded that the church has defined the uses of tithe too narrowly. He suggested that church financial policy may be too restrictive, or at least that it is applied too narrowly.

The Adventist policy of using church tithe to support the gospel ministry is stated thus: "The tithe is to be held sacred for the work of the ministry and Bible teaching, including the carrying forward of conference administration in the care of churches, and of field missionary operations. The tithe is not to be expended upon other lines of work such as church or institutional debt-paying or building operations."⁴

In practice, briefly, the tithe is used for the support of ministers and the conferences, but not for church institutions or church congregations. This restriction is subject to challenge on two counts: first, the church tithe policy is man-made, since biblical counsel on tithe does not seem to be as restrictive; second, actual practice is even more restrictive than the statement of the official church working policy.

Some aspects of this restrictive use of tithe funds may be rather difficult to defend. In the present finance method, almost any conference office expense can be paid from tithe funds, whereas almost no expense incurred by the local church or the institutions of the church can be paid from this source. Thus, the system is really neither simple nor equal. An artificial distinction, based on the classification of the spending organization, divides the church into units that have and units that have not — all of which function for the same purpose.

In recent months, church leaders have emphasized that an institution such as Loma Linda University *is* the church and that its purposes are one with the church. But this oneness is then denied in effect by an artificial barrier between the ministry that takes place in the college classroom, in the patient's hospital room, and in the conference office promotional planning room. The case might be made, perhaps, that the first two are more directly related to gospel ministry than the last is.

In biblical times the tithe was devoted exclusively to the Levites, the tribe

that had been set apart for the service of the sanctuary. The Adventist church appears to have interpreted the Levitical plan to mean that the tithe is solely for the support of the ordained clergy. It is time that the church reexamine the roles of its personnel to determine what is meant by support of the gospel ministry. Are not the grade school teachers and hospital dietitians ministering in the Lord's vineyard?

The real problem stems from the arbitrary division of conference employees from other employees. The barrier exists in the financial structure as well as in the concept of *who* composes "the ministry." A conference office janitor is legitimately paid with tithe funds, but a church janitor is not. Surely a case could be made for the latter to be paid from tithe funds if the system were related to biblical tithing.

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The present division of tithe use is a comfortable one. To change would open a number of questions and would demand considerable rethinking. Nevertheless, the rationale of the current system is not easy to defend. Thinking persons may be expected to question the motives for maintaining a position because it is comfortable to do so, even though that position may be based on unsound reasoning. Either all classifications of church employees are ministers or they are not. They cannot be gospel ministers when it is convenient to so classify them in official statements, but something else when it suits the purpose to put them in another classification. Either they are engaged in a soul-saving ministry, or their work is in the category of purchased professional or technical skill.

Programs in welfare, medicine, and education were not outside the scope of ministry in Old Testament times. The work of the Levites was varied — extending into music, healing, teaching, church care, and church finance, as well as support of the welfare program. Nehemiah clearly presents musicians and persons appointed to collect the tithes as being legitimately part of the priesthood that shared in the distribution of tithes. "All Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion; and they sanctified holy things unto the Levites."⁵

In the Levitical system, from which our tithing concept springs, part of the tithe fed those in need. "Thou shalt bring forth all the tithe of thine increase; . . . and the Levite . . . and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow . . . shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord thy God may bless thee."⁶

Those who took care of the temple and its furnishings were also supported by the tithe: "Thou shalt appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of

testimony . . . and over all things that belong to it; . . . the Levites shall take it down; . . . the Levites shall set it up.”⁷

Paul states that “some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and teachers, for building up the body of Christ.”⁸ A parallel text also lists teachers, healers, and administrators as those involved in the work of the ministry.

II

To support God’s work is a duty and a privilege. The rigidity with which the church has viewed the allocation of tithe may not necessarily be God’s plan. Some may have formalized timely practice into timeless biblical principle. Occasionally fiscal rules have come to be regarded as sacred. It is time to reexamine holy counsel without undue concern for maintaining precedent or convenience for its own sake. Preservation of the status quo should not be the ultimate purpose in church governance. Actions should be based on principles. What is needed is primitive godliness, combined with a search for efficient ways of achieving goals. First the church must concern itself with what is right; then it must concentrate on getting results.

Church members can be trusted with open discussion of church problems. Study of the tithing system need not be regarded as a prelude to withdrawal of financial support. Understanding can increase support.

The Adventist position on tithe allocation appears to be based almost exclusively on this quotation from Ellen White:

A very plain, definite message has been given to me for our people. I am bidden to tell them that they are making a mistake in applying the tithe to various objects which, though good in themselves, are not the object to which the Lord has said that the tithe should be applied. . . . One reasons that the tithe may be applied to school purposes. Still others reason that canvassers and colporteurs should be supported from the tithe. But a great mistake is made when the tithe is drawn from the object for which it is to be used — the support of the ministers. . . . The tithe is sacred, reserved by God for Himself. It is to be brought into His treasury to be used to sustain the gospel laborers in their work. . . . Let the work no longer be hedged up because the tithe has been diverted into various channels other than the one to which the Lord has said it should go. Provision is to be made for these other lines of work. They are to be sustained, but not from the tithe. God has not changed; the tithe is still to be used for the support of the ministry.⁹

An earlier statement by Ellen White, containing a seemingly contradictory message, suggests that school work, at least in mission lands, should be supported from the tithe.

The islands of the sea are waiting for a knowledge of God. In these islands schools are to be established, to prepare students. . . . In our own country there is much to be done. There are many cities to be entered and warned. . . . It is the neglect of Seventh-

day Adventists to improve these providential opportunities that is hindering the cause of God. . . . The Lord has made us His stewards. . . . He has reserved the tithe as His sacred portion, to be used in sending the gospel to all parts of the world.¹⁰

When you see a young man or a young woman who is a promising subject, advance or loan the sum needed, with the idea that it is a loan, not a gift. . . . But the money is not to be taken from the tithe, but from a separate fund secured for that purpose.¹¹

Is this kind of loan fund an example of the school purposes that are not to be supported from the tithe?

One cannot escape the principle of tithing set forth by Ellen White: "A tithe of all our increase is the Lord's. He has reserved it to Himself, to be employed for religious purposes. It is holy. . . . This fund should not in any case be devoted to any other use; it is to be devoted solely to support the ministry of the gospel."¹²

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What is the ministry of the gospel? In the foregoing discussion the missionary and the overseas educational worker have been included in the scope of the ministry. Who else might be included?

Some who do not see the advantage of educating the youth to be physicians both of the mind and of the body, say that the tithe should not be used to support medical missionaries, who devote their time to treating the sick. In response to such statements as these, I am instructed to say that the mind must not become so narrowed down that it cannot take in the truth of the situation. A minister of the gospel who is also a medical missionary, who can cure physical ailments, is a much more efficient worker than one who cannot do this. His work as a minister of the gospel is much more complete. . . . No line is to be drawn between the genuine medical missionary work and the gospel ministry. These two must blend. They are not to stand apart as separate lines of work. They are to be joined in an inseparable union, even as the hand is joined to the body.¹³

Thus the medical missionary's work is also part of the ministry and as such should receive tithe support. How does the hand draw its support from a different source than the body does? The conclusion is that all workers who devote their lives to the church are ministers in the same endeavor.

The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women.¹⁴

If we have fellowship with God, we are His ministers, though we may never preach to a congregation. We are workers together with God in presenting the perfection of His character in humanity.¹⁵

The management and instruction of children is the noblest missionary work that any man or woman can undertake. . . . The great day of God alone can reveal the good this work will do.

III

Clearly, Ellen White's writings reveal the ministry in both a broad sense, including all dedicated gospel workers, and in a narrower sense, referring to the ordained clergy. The problem in determining tithe allocation is to determine whether her statements should be used in the broad or in the narrow sense. Persons who attempt to answer this question for themselves should first reconcile their view with the biblical tithing system.

The implications of the broad definition of the gospel ministry are sweeping.

First, such a definition would call for a unified approach to the work of the church rather than a compartmentalized approach. Teachers and medical (and adjunct) personnel would be seen as full partners in proclaiming the gospel. This outlook would not only emphasize the direction of their work, but would help remove the artificial barrier between the ordained clergy and other gospel workers.

Second, the problem of finding methods to legitimize the flow of tithe funds would be solved. The practice of exchanging checks between accounts in order to be legalistically correct in statements to the constituency would not be necessary any longer. No one is entirely comfortable with this system, and quite likely God in his foresight had no such plan in mind.

Third, the church would be on much safer legal ground in its employment practices if the wider definition were used. The question of religious discrimination makes Adventist reluctance to hire qualified non-Adventists hard to defend. On the other hand, opinion is a long way from viewing positions of ministry as having no religious prerequisites. The differentiation that Adventists make between minister and teacher is different from that made by Catholics between priest and teaching sister. The Adventist position that church colleges *are* the church would be more consistent if teachers were considered gospel ministers. If they are not, then the reason for establishing church schools is subject to question.

Fourth, decision as to the use of tithe funds would not be on the basis of who sponsored the program but on the basis of cost-effectiveness. Tithe funds could be available for the pastoral ministry, the medical ministry, or the educational ministry — on the basis of capitalizing on those opportunities promising the greatest results. In this atmosphere all would feel impelled to justify expenditure. Stewardship of the funds would be called to account by the pressure of alternative uses.

Fifth, Adventists intend to be accurate in interpreting biblical principle.

Therefore, the more sense a system makes, the greater should be the response from thinking individuals. When conscientious persons detect something wrong, their dissatisfaction is often revealed by a decrease in their support of the church.

To be effective, tithing ought to be beautiful in its simplicity and equality.

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