WHEN TITHING BECOMES A DEAD WORK

This article is a follow-up to my earlier one titled, “Lose that You May Find” (http://perichorus.wordpress.com/2008/11/25/lose-that-you-may-find/). In that writing, I explored the “dark side” of wealth, and how people, including Christians, become easily seduced into allowing wealth to become a god over our life, which Jesus called, Mammon, meaning a god (Matthew 6:24). Now within Protestantism, there has been a long held assumption propagated that the biblical prescription that decisively keeps us free from the idolatrous power of wealth, and facilitates the discipline of biblical stewardship, is the practice of tithing. This assumption is usually propagated as a Christian doctrine, which consists of the following teaching: that the Bible enjoins Christians to continue on with the Old Testament tithe, and that if they do not, they are under a curse, as presumably described in Malachi 3:10. They are under a curse because according to Malachi 3:10, the tithe belongs to God. If believers practice the tithe however, God’s blessings towards them are thus— insured. Let it here be said however, that this is a false teaching.

I will later in this essay outline a proper approach to tithing, which is nonetheless wholly antithetical to this common assumption. It is an approach which defines the practice of tithing as a practical and liturgical expression of submission to God’s lordship, within a context of voluntary acts of worship. But for now, I need to again reiterate that to define tithing as a conduit to God’s blessing and the failure to do so as a theft of God which places a believer under a curse—is a false doctrine. It is a false doctrine because this kind of reasoning itself does the opposite of what is proponents argue, for it is a reasoning that places both believers and churches under the curse of the Old Testament law. It is a reasoning which makes the practice of tithing, which can to some extent serve as a viable act of worship, a dead work—a work which leads to death (Heb 6:1; 9:14). Rather than freeing people from the “dark side” of wealth, we have in other words too often failed to acknowledge that the tithe does not free people from materialism, but instead enslaves them to a law-based spirituality. We have simply driven people to give by threatening upon them a curse from God if they don't give, in order to expediently and pragmatically finance salaries.
and other congregational expenditures. But again, such a paradigm will not lead to revival. Such paradigms rather quench the Spirit and kill any hope for genuine revival.

What prompted me to enter this posting was recently listening to a evangelist argue to a congregation that their failure to tithe hinders revival. The episode also calls to mind another incident several months ago when my wife and I had visited, a very large Pentecostal church, with a setting incidentally which was quite decked out in the complete entertainment-driven ethos that is often passing for the biblical idea of praise and worship. Then came collection of tithes and offerings, wherein the speaker warned the audience that if they don’t give, God’s judgement will fall on them, just as the government’s “judgement falls on people who don’t pay their taxes (eg., Rom 13:1-2). The senior pastor never corrected this exhortation; if anything, he endorsed it. The basic root of this problem however is the same. Protestant Christians has developed a theory whereby the Old Testament tithe, along with its existence within the Old Testament covenantal framework of blessing and curse, transcends the law and is enjoined upon Christian believers. But this is precisely the problem addressed when the Scripture say, “Having started in the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal 3:3) Or, “Does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing works of the law or by your believing what you heard?” (Gal 3:5)

The truth is that it is precisely that kind of guilt-driven preaching and exhorting from the pulpit, which is hindering these kinds of churches from entering into revival. Vast segments of Christian believers are indeed bound into a “dead work” form of Christian faith, and experiencing a falling from grace! (Gal 5:4). We must also realise that other major Christian traditions have never held such a doctrine of the tithe, such as what we find in Roman Catholicism and in the Orthodox traditions. The practice developed early within the Protestant movement as a means of establishing a practical method for funding the newly founded Protestant churches, and it has thus continued with us ever since. Historical precedence alone, should thus alert us to the hermeneutical weaknesses which under gird the Protestant practice of tithing. I have earlier examined this issue in my article titled, “The Decline of Pentecostalism as a Revival Movement” (Part 2 of “Spirit-Baptism & the Prophetic Imagination;” http://perichorus.wordpress.com/2008/09/08/the-decline-of-pentecostalism-as-a-revival-movement ). That article demonstrated how this practice has become today one example of how revival and renewal movements within Evangelicalism, particularly as evidenced through the Pentecostal movement, are now in a state of declension which are evidenced a several institutionalising trends. These are trends whereby a revival movement seeks to recapture the original spirit of a revival through the principle of “law” and thus processes of institutionalisation.

Mistaking of liturgy for stewardship in consumer oriented societies

Another problem with the Protestant approach to tithing arises from present 21st century settings indicative of high levels of affluence within consumer-driven cultures. Tithing as a privatized expression of Christian stewardship within consumer-driven cultures, presents to the believer the risk of mistaking the practice of tithing in itself, to be the full extent of biblical stewardship.¹ For many believers, tithing thus serves as a sedative rationalisation that through such a liturgical practice, one thus practices the biblical discipline of stewardship. Pertinent here are observations drawn some years ago by Thomas Alan Harvey, who argued that there is today a “paradigm shift” presently occurring regarding Christian ethics. This shift involves “a movement away from what is known as ethics of obligation to emphasis on ethics of virtue.”² By the ethic of obligation or duty, Harvey refers to belief in “universal rules, principles and rights which all humans are enjoined to uphold,” whereas the ethic of


virtue calls for the “development of certain dispositions, character, and virtues that enable
groups or individuals to achieve their true end.”

Harvey warns us regarding the dangers of focusing on the cultivation of virtue apart from
a corresponding concern for what he calls, the “obligation ethic.” The danger arises within
highly developed economies, when a self absorbed spirituality emerges, which “bends our
souls inward as we order our human existence through the satiation of our material appetites
and passions.” The result of this paradigm shift has been the privatizing of virtue as a
privatized matter, dichotomized from the defining of virtue according to community
responsibility. Harvey’s observation into the continual privatization of virtue resulting from
the increasing focus upon acquisition of material goods within consumer-oriented societies,
also illustrates the dangers of dichotomizing the spiritual from the material in Christian faith.
More specifically, the danger Harvey alludes to involves a dichotomizing of the cultic or
liturgical expressions of Christian faith, from expressions of faith that touch more precisely
on the material dimensions of human life. Nowhere is this often more evident than in
matters regarding the managing of one’s material wealth and possessions in 21st century
consumer driven societies.

Within congregational life, the holistic implications of the metaphor steward is too often
subject to a “truncation of the concept,” which has limited its meaning to the ever present
need of acquiring and managing “ecclesiastical monies and properties,” that “the mission of
the church might be fulfilled.” Stewardship is therefore defined as “the material means by
which the spiritual end (i.e., mission of the church) is achieved.” This however is only a half
truth if one’s understanding of stewardship fails to touch every aspect of his or her life. The
truncating of biblical stewardship from its true holistic meaning is indeed another symptom
of Paul’s diagnosis in Romans, concerning the human tendency to find religious satisfaction in
religious ceremonies.

Vern Poythress, professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, vividly clarifies this subtle trap of mistaking the practice
of tithing as the full extent of biblical stewardship, by drawing attention to the demonic roots
of counterfeit forms of genuine spirituality: “We thought that we surrendered the lust for
riches when we committed ourselves to tithing. But we only later become aware that we
greedily claim the remaining nine-tenths as fully ours.” To reiterate what I have thus
declared at the onset of this article, we have in other words too often failed to acknowledge
that the tithe does not free people from materialism, but instead enslaves them to a law-
based spirituality. We have simply driven people to give threatening a curse from God over
them if they don’t give, in order to expediently and pragmatically finance salaries and other
congregational expenditures. Again, such paradigm will not lead to revival. Such paradigms
rather quench the Spirit and kill any hope for genuine revival.

Common arguments towards tithing as an obligatory New Testament practice

1. Arguments on basis of historical precedence

Before I outline what I believe can help transform the practice of tithing into an authentic
demonstration of worship to the Lord, I need to first further examine weaknesses to several
arguments commonly used to set forth the conviction that the Bible enjoins tithing as a
obligatory New Testament practice. One modern argument for tithing argues for its

3 Harvey, “Carnality, Concupiscence and the Common Good,” 92.
4 Harvey, “Carnality, Concupiscence and the Common Good,” 98.
7 S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Studies in Romans-Part VI: Rite Versus Righteousness,” Biblio Theca Sacra 130, no.
8 Vern S. Poythress, “Counterfeiting in the Book of Revelation as a Perspective on Non-Christian Culture,”
9 It is ironic however, that few contemporary theological works have been written on the subject of tithing; in fact,
literature is hard to come by concerning the subject of stewardship theology altogether. Much of the available
injunction upon believers by virtue of its universal practice throughout the ancient Near East, and its longevity throughout church history. Written from within and for the Anglican setting, Henry Lansdell’s The Sacred Tenth was presumably one of most modern comprehensive studies undertaken prior to the 1960s, involving an exhaustive study of pagan, Jewish, and Christian literature, in an attempt to prove that the tithe is obligatory for Christian life. By reference to numerous ancient Near Eastern sources, Lansdell sought to argue that apart from and before the existence of the Bible, ancient humanity recognized it “as a duty to offer a portion of his substance to his God; and that the portion so dedicated, throughout the ancient pagan and patriarchal world, was almost invariably a tenth.” In a review of the book, James Rand concluded that Lansdell’s work failed however, to demonstrate how tithing could be reconciled with the dynamic of God’s grace as the key denominator in Christian life.

2. Arguments on basis of Malachi 3:7-10

One source that well conceptualizes much of the common 20th century rationales for tithing is Stephen Olford’s The Grace of Giving: Messages on Stewardship. Olford centers his arguments for tithing on the broad biblical themes of grace, stewardship, and worship. Olford begins his treatise on giving by saying that “giving is a grace:” He then develops the theme of “giving as a grace” in chapter three of his book, through reference to the Macedonian churches’ example of giving. Olford draws attention to 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, wherein Paul wrote “we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia . . . their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.” From this text Olford develops the idea that Christian giving is a ministry of the Holy Spirit inwrought in personal experience and outworked in practical expression.

Olford defines the idea of giving as “a grace,” to be the essence of Paul’s “doctrine of Christian stewardship.” I must say that Olford’s attempt to anchor the believer’s capacity to give as a work of God’s Spirit, or as a manifestation of God’s grace present in the believer’s life, is commendable. The “operation of God’s grace” as the enablement of Christian life is certainly a key theological theme throughout the Corinthian epistles. Regarding Paul’s emphasis on grace in the Corinthian epistles, Donald Guthrie observes that “In 2 Cor. 9:14, Paul significantly linked the super abundant grace of God with its production of a liberal spirit of giving in believers. . . . In no clearer way could Paul express the practical outcome of the effective operation of divine grace.” T. A. Kantonen’s Theology of Christian Stewardship outlined a thorough discussion regarding the believer’s motive for giving as an expression of recognizing one’s self as God’s steward over whatever He has given to the believer. Kantonen also observed that since the “keynote” of “Christ-centered theology is grace,” the capacity for effective stewardship of one’s possessions lies in “the riches of God’s grace freely bestowed upon us in Christ.”

literature is quite outdated and seems to reflect quite an intense interest in the subject of stewardship during the 1950s, especially in Europe. Nonetheless, a few arguments can be discerned supporting the practice of tithing. Helge Brattgard, God’s Stewards: A Theological Study of the Principles and Practices of Stewardship, trans. by Gene J. Lund (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963). Brattgard provides an intriguing discussion into the historical interest in tithing during the 1950’s era, especially with reference to its discussion within the state sponsored European churches.


15 Olford, The Grace of Giving, 41.

16 Olford, The Grace of Giving, 42.


18 Guthrie, New Testament Theology, 621.


While Olford’s treatise on giving is permeated by this emphasis on the role of grace in Christian giving, his argument ironically breaks when he begins to use the principle of giving as a grace, to substantiate the practice of Christian tithing. Here his argument breaks down for essentially two reasons. First is the book’s sequence of argumentation, wherein his discussion on the role of grace in giving is undermined by a greater emphasis given to the presumed normative injunction of Malachi 3:7-10 upon Christian life. The second reason why Olford’s argument breaks down is his failure to offer any kind of discussion regarding the hermeneutical concerns of the biblical text, with reference to the nature of giving between the Old and New Testaments.21

Olford anchors his exposition on tithing on the classic tithing text of Malachi 3:7-15, and argues that the Malachi text has authority over how giving is to be carried out in the New Testament church.22 Olford however, offers no exegetical examination of the text, to substantiate its presumed injunction upon New Testament Christian life. What Olford has essentially done, is to impose the Malachi text upon nearly every New Testament text concerning giving in the local church. Given the practice of New Testament writers to synthesize Old Testament texts into a midrash for use as “proof texts” in substantiating New Testament theology, I find it important to observe that neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer, makes no attempt to utilize the Malachi text when referring to matters of financial giving.

The irony of Olford’s continued reference to the “grace of giving,” is that he nonetheless tries to present tithing as an obligatory practice that the Bible enjoins upon New Testament believers.23 In contrast to Olford’s failure to address the silence by New Testament writers on tithing when addressing the subject of giving, Kantonen has presented an excellent discussion regarding the incompatibility of approaching tithing as an obligatory practice enjoined upon believers, with the emphasis given by Paul to the New Testament concept of grace. In theory, the experience of grace challenges believers to give according to their personal growth in moral reasoning, recognizing one’s role before God as a steward of God’s resources, rather than from a motive of maintaining or gaining God’s favor, which one should already be certain of, by sheer virtue of knowing in experience the grace of God through Christ.24 Kantonen writes: “our stewardship does not originate with what we do for God but in a response to what God does for us.”25 “A stewardship that does not originate in the response of faith to the grace of God is not Christian stewardship.”26

Concerning Olford’s exposition on Malachi 3:7-15, it should be noted that his concern is not to develop a biblical theology of giving. Olford rather developed his book more as a homiletical exhortation, regarding the believer’s responsibility as a steward. Furthermore, Olford largely evaluated one’s faithfulness to God as a steward, according to one’s consistency in the practice of tithing. The greater problem which Olford’s book raises however, is that the more homiletically brilliant a preacher is, the more influence he or she can have regarding Christian faith and practice, especially if his or her life possess the credibility to substantiate one’s teaching. Olford certainly has the credibility in character and experience. However, brilliance in the pulpit or by writing is certainly not evidence of correct theology.

Why tithing is not an obligatory practice for Christian life

If we truly ascribe validity to the confirmations of biblical scholarship, we must acknowledge that there is virtually no supporting evidence from the New Testament that

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21 Another prime example of the tendency of the evangelical tendency to gloss over the New Testament’s silence on tithing is: Randy C. Alcorn, Money, Possessions, and Eternity (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), 206-224.
25 Kantonen, A Theology of Christian Stewardship, 55.
26 Kantonen, A Theology of Christian Stewardship, 91.
confirms the practice of tithing as an obligatory discipline for Christian life.\textsuperscript{27} Regarding this observation, there are three conclusions possessing nearly universal consensus between both Bible exegetes and early church historians. First, there is in the New Testament virtually no evidence that tithing was carried over from Judaism.\textsuperscript{28} In his study on \textit{Tithing in the Early Church}, Vischer suggests that one crucial reason why Jesus and the early church leadership did not set forth tithing as a normative Christian practice, is because of Jesus’ concern regarding the believer’s trust in either God or one’s material possessions (Matt. 6:24). On this account, tithing as a mandatory institution “often leads to the false conclusion that “the problem of Mammon has been met and conquered,” which is simply “not the case.”\textsuperscript{29} Second, early church literature seems to indicate that the conviction within the early church, was that the Gospel encourages a willingness to give far beyond that suggested by the tithe.\textsuperscript{30}

Finally, both Jesus and Paul extended the Old Testament themes of stewardship, God’s kingship, and covenant relationship with God into a very comprehensive theology of stewardship, which far transcended the tithe concept, touching not just upon the believer’s finances and possessions, but every aspect of one’s life in Christ.\textsuperscript{31} It was the conviction of early church fathers (eg., Irenaeus, Cyprian, Chrysostom) that Christian giving and stewardship virtually transcends any need or attempt to anchor giving upon the Old Testament practice of the ceremonial practice of tithing. Irenaeus for instance, preached that the Jews “had indeed the tithes of their goods consecrated to Him, but those who have received liberty set aside all their possessions for the Lord’s purposes, bestowing joyfully and freely” (\textit{haer.} 4:18 in ANF 1:485). These early church fathers thus consistently preached through their homilies, that the principle of New Testament giving transcends and cannot be built upon the Old Testament practice of tithing.\textsuperscript{32}

The Melchizedek Narrative (Gen 15) as a helpful paradigm for Christian tithing

While we must conclude that there is virtually no support from Scripture to support tithing as an obligatory New Testament practice, I believe that there are existing paradigms, which can transform tithing into an authentic act of Christian worship and a helpful start towards nurturing a spirituality that reflects biblical ideas of stewardship. We can find a true validity for tithing when we approach its practice not as an obligatory aspect of Christian spirituality, nor as a primary fulfillment of Christian stewardship, but as a voluntary act of worship within the context of a biblical theology of worship. Such an approach to tithing will then also transform tithing into a practical that more realistically and authentically reflects a biblical theology of stewardship. Furthermore, I believe that the Melchizedek narrative (Gen. 15:18-20), which introduces the first reference in the Bible to the concept of the tithe, can provide a most helpful orientation towards approaching tithing as an act of worship. I will therefore present this paradigm for tithing with the assumption that such a model can effectively anchor the practice of tithing within the broader scope and nature of biblical stewardship theology. Such a paradigm for tithing may thus place the motive for tithing within a framework that minimizes

\begin{itemize}
\item David C. Norrington, “Fund-Raising: The Methods Used in the Early Church Compared with those Used in English Churches Today,” \textit{Evangelical Quarterly} 70, No. 2 (1998): 124. Norrington point out the probability however, that tithing may have certainly been carried over within Jewish sectors of the early Church.
\item Vischer, \textit{Tithing in the Early Church}, 10.
\item Norrington, “Fund-Raising: The Methods Used in the Early Church,” \textit{Evangelical Quarterly}, 118-123; Vischer, \textit{Tithing in the Early Church}, 113-16; Both Norrington (129) and Vischer observe however, that tithing was eventually laid down, once the church became more stabilized, thus creating opportunity for the construction of churches and the financing of a full-time professional clergy; 17-20, 25-30.
\end{itemize}
the false notion that the practice of tithing is the fulfilling of one’s role as a steward in the economy of God. Such a paradigm also removes tithing from the false law-based assumption that tithing must be observed in order to avoid incurring a curse.

To reiterate, while we must acknowledge that although the New Testament does not affirm tithing as an obligatory practice, tithing can nonetheless have a viable role in Christian stewardship if approached not as primary fulfillment of Christian stewardship, but as a voluntary act of worship within the context of a biblical and historical theology of worship. Helpful here are some observations drawn from Old Testament scholar, Claus Westermann, with reference to the Melchizedek narrative (Gen. 15:18-20), which provides us the first mention of tithing in the Old Testament.  

Westermann’s suggestion that the Melchizedek narrative (Gen. 15:18-20) was presented in Genesis as a paradigm for approaching the practice of tithing from the motive of worshipful acknowledgement of God’s sovereign reign over the worshipper’s life, provides a most helpful framework for anchoring the practice of tithing within the broader scope and nature of biblical stewardship theology. While the Mechizedek narrative can be a helpful text for deriving some helpful paradigms for transforming tithing from a law-based paradigm to a more grace-based paradigm, much of the material presented here will appear highly technical. This factor alone should further reinforce how dubious it actually is however, to construe from Scripture that tithing is an obligatory New Testament practice.

It seems helpful to first precipitate discussion on the Melchizedek narrative with a brief survey concerning the meaning of the tithe within its ancient Near Eastern setting. The Hebrew term for “tithe (masêr)” means “ten” or a “tenth;” the verbal form means, “to give or take the tenth of.”

There seems to be widespread observance that the concept of tithing was not an indigenous Hebraic practice; rather, it was an ancient and widespread practice throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, among both Semitic and non-Semitic peoples; there is more than sufficient evidence of the practice in ancient Phoenicia, Tyre, Babylon, southern Arabia, and in ancient Greece and Rome. There is also reference in ancient Chinese literature (such as in the Confucian Analects,) to tithe on the harvest that is collected annually.

Many Bible dictionaries survey the ancient origins of tithing as strictly a religious practice. The ancient prevalence of tithing in the ancient Near East however, indicates a more secularized origin, utilized as a means of taxation or tribute collection, wherein a king levied a tithe upon a vassal king or people. The purpose for tithing was therefore anchored in acknowledging a king’s sovereignty over a people or land. Such a practice is demonstrated not only in ancient Near Eastern sources such as the Ugarit, but in the biblical account of kingship practices in I Samuel 8:15, 17, which was not in any way a reflection of the annual tithing system for religious purposes in Israel.

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33 I also believe that this thesis is confirmed by Claus Westermann’s suggestion that the Melchizedek narrative (Gen. 15:18-20) was presented in Genesis as a paradigm of approaching the practice of tithing from the motive of worshipful acknowledgement of God’s sovereign reign over the worshipper’s life. Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-36: A Commentary, trans. by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 24-27.


Westermann proposed that with the centralizing of the Yahweh cultus in Jerusalem during the emergence of the Davidic monarchy, the Melchizedek narrative (Gen. 15:18-20) is presented in Genesis as a paradigm for presenting the seminal purpose of tithing as a means of acknowledging God’s sovereignty as king over his vassals, being the people of God. From this thesis, Westermann’s identification of the three-fold blessing, vow, and tithe motif linking the narratives of the Abrahamic-Melchizedek story and Jacob’s vow at Bethel, provide a helpful paradigm for retrieving credible motivations congruent with a sound of theology of biblical stewardship, for the practice of tithing.

Westermann suggests that the major purpose of the patriarchal stories in Genesis 12-50 is to set forth the patriarchs as paradigms that later Hebrew generations can imitate concerning the implications of Hebraic faith upon human life. The call to imitation was based on the premise that Abraham is “the father” of all succeeding generations of Hebrew ancestry. This personal identification of paternal relationship with Abraham as one’s ancestral father thus prompted Jesus’ contemporaries to say, “Abraham is our father” (John 8:30); it was this same concept that prompted Paul to claim that by virtue of one’s faith in Christ, the Gentile believer also has Abraham as his or her father (Rom. 4:9). This concept of ancestral relationship with the patriarchs, is further rooted in the Eastern paradigm that one’s personal existence exists only in relation to one’s community and ancestors. The purpose of the patriarchal stories then is that by recalling their life stories, their descendants may discover their identity in the story itself.

2. Exegetical analysis of the Melchizedek Narrative

The entire chapter narrates an event concerning a coalition of four Canaanite kings who rebel again the ruler of Elam (Gen. 14:1-9). After invading the Canaanite towns, the Elam armies take Lot and his family as prisoners (Gen. 14:10-12). After receiving this news, Abraham and his household defeat the Elamite warriors, rescue the captives, and retrieve the Canaanite loot (Gen. 14:13-16). The narrative then recalls how because of Abraham’s victory, Melchizedek’s bestows a blessing upon him, for which Abraham responds by giving him a tithe. (Gen. 14:18-20). As shown earlier, the Melchizedek story disrupts the chapter’s greater’ focus on the battle of the Canaanite kings (Gen. 14 1-17 and 21-24); indeed, verses 21-24 would better fit in after verse 17.

The Melchizedek story (Gen. 14:18-20) actually interrupts the preceding narrative concerning Abraham’s battle with the Canaanite kings. Together however, the two stories compose a single narrative unit within the larger Abrahamic narrative. Such a critical approach need not deny the historicity of the actual event however; Jewish midrash allows for synthesizing of various traditions into a single narrative, in order to convey the theological intent of a given narrative. If we approach the text from a critical perspective, one can discern three distinct units within Genesis 14: Part A- report of the Canaanite campaign (vv. 1-11/12); Part B- liberation narrative (vv. 12-17, 21-24), and Part C- the Melchizedek story (vv. 18-20). Distinctions can be shown in the text by how part C breaks the continuity of parts A and B.

George W. Coats suggests another structure to the chapter, which divides it into two parts. Part one is designated as a “report of a battle and its consequences” (vv. 1-17). The second part combines the Melchizedek story (vv. 18-20) with Westermann’s “part B” (vv. 21-24) reference to the “liberation narrative (vv. 12-17, 21-24), as “an account of disposition for

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41 Westermann, Genesis 12-36: A Commentary, 27.
44 Sarna, Understanding Genesis, 116.
45 Sarna, Understanding Genesis, 116.
46 Westermann, Genesis 12-36: A Commentary, 190.
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spoil taken in the battle." Coates concludes from this structure, that the second part (vv. 18-24) shifts the narrative’s focus completely away from the concern of Lot to solely on how the spoils of war should be divided between Abraham and his allies.

The concern of chapter 14 then, focuses on Abraham’s understanding regarding the source of his victory in battle, and more importantly, the source of his acquired wealth. This observation is shown by how the Sodomite king offered Abraham full claim to the spoil in exchange for all prisoners of war, of whom the king would have subject to slavery. Had Abraham agreed to the exchange, the Sodomite king could have laid claim to be the source to Abraham’s newly acquired wealth- which Abraham would have acquired had he agreed to the Sodomite king’s generous offer. Instead, Abraham offered his tithe from the spoil to Melchizedek as a means of acknowledging God as the source of his battle victory. J. Gerald Janzen suggests that Abraham’s tithe to Melchizedek was perhaps an expressed “vow of giving up all personal claim of possession over the people and spoils he just rescued, and rather acknowledging that the victory was by God’s intervention alone.

It can further be observed that the event of Abraham’s vow in v. 22 relates to Jacob’s use of tithe as a means of making a vow to God in Genesis 28:22. For the Hebrew, vows to God were understood as acts of worship whereby the one making the vow promised to give God something in response to answered prayer. An example would be Hannah’s offering up of Samuel to God (1 Sam. 10-28); here in Genesis 28:22, what Jacob vows to God is a tithe, as an act of worship and an expression of faith God’s future continued care and intervention in his life. More importantly, the vow to tithe all future income was an expression by Jacob to place his life under the sovereignty of God’s kingship. When Jacob committed himself to tithing, he did so with the expressed “awareness of the source of his provisions—of everything you give to me,” referring to God’s promise to him concerning the land (Gen. 28:13) and the provisions of food and clothing Jacob acquired during his preceding journey (Gen. 28:20).

3. Possible grounds for using the Melchizedek Narrative as a correct Old Testament paradigm for tithing

Concerning this article’s thesis, Westermann proposes that the author’s placement of the Melchizedek narrative after Abraham’s battle with the Canaanite kings (Gen. 15:12-16) had a deliberate cultic motive reflecting need to legitimizing the cultic tradition of tithing, beginning with the centralizing of the religious cultus in Jerusalem. This thesis may explain the story’s link with the city of Jerusalem, which is not mentioned anywhere else in the patriarchal stories. The scene concerning Abraham and Melchizedek “consists of an exchange,” wherein Melchizedek performs a blessing upon Abraham (v. 18), and Abraham responds by acknowledging the “priestly dignity of Melchizedek” by giving him the tithe. The tradition behind the Melchizedek narrative is therefore the cultic exchange of “blessing by the priest and the giving of the tithe.”

Reasons for the need to legitimize cultic traditions such as tithing, may have developed from the sociological and economic transitions that transpired with the emergence of the

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49 Coats, *Genesis, With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 120.
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Hebrew people as a nation-state beginning with the Davidic era. The patriarchal form of society centered largely on the “family unit” as a self-contain political, economic, cultural, and religious community, living according to a nomadic lifestyle. The need during the patriarchal era, for a centralized system of worship was therefore neither needful nor appropriate as a religious institution. The concept of a “sacred place” could be ascribed to any tree, rock, or hill could be temporarily deemed a “sacred” spot for Yahweh worship. The large-scale cultus was a necessary component for the Hebrew faith, given the sedentary lifestyle of the Hebrews beginning with the judges period, which climaxed with the emergence of the Davidic monarchy.

4. The tithe as homage to the king’s sovereignty
There is one error I find to Westermann’s hypothesis. By construing that Abraham’s tithe was a response to the “priestly dignity of Melchizedek,” Westermann has failed to appreciate the earlier ancient Near Eastern covenantal purpose of tithing involving vassal homage to a king’s sovereignty. Nonetheless, Westermann’s treatment of the exchange of blessing and tithe between Melchizedek and Abraham, provides an intriguing examination within the Hebrew setting into how the tithe was intended not only as a means of acknowledging a king’s sovereignty, but to express worship and thanksgiving to God in response to receiving his blessing. Note that Melchizedek is first to acknowledge that Abraham’s victory was entirely the work of God. Melchizedek’s blessing is set in a poetic rhythm (Gen. 14:19) emphasizing Abraham’s receiving of God’s blessing through Melchizedek’s action of both worship towards God and blessing upon Abraham, for which he gives a tithe as means of “acknowledging the blessing.” (Paralleling Jacob’s motive for vowing a tithe to God in Gen. 28:22)

It would seem most probable though, that the political usage of tithing naturally carried over into religious purposes, since in ancient cultures kings were considered divinely authorized representatives of deities, and deities were considered to be divine monarchs. Throughout the ancient Near East, tithes were collected for the maintenance and upkeep of religious institutions and buildings, even as they are today. The Melchizedek narrative thus presents a common portrayal of God, which is a theology of divine kingship. As Walter Brueggemann correctly indicates, Israel’s “preferred mode of theological discourse [about Yahweh] is political.”

Stewardship is ultimately anchored in the kingship of God
With regards to the political nature of God’s relation to both humanity and all creation, Vischer has herein overlooked an important emphasis in Old Testament biblical theology, with reference to his correct argument against tithing as a normative New Testament practice. In order to demonstrate why tithing is not a New Testament normative, Vischer stressed how the Old Testament tithe had more the “character of a tribute payment” rather than the character of a sacrifice given in worship. From this observation, Vischer concluded that the Old Testament tithe lacked the dynamic of worship because of its eventual transformation “from a harvest sacrifice into a mere tax payable to the priests and Levites,” thus becoming a “form of cultic tax.” But what Vischer failed to remember is that it is this political setting of the tithe, that in fact permeates the whole scope of biblical theology

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59 Sarna, Understanding Genesis, 116.
61 MacCulloch, “Tithes,” In Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics.
64 Vischer, Tithing in the Early Church, 2.
65 Vischer, Tithing in the Early Church, 4.
with reference to its portrayal of God. The spiritual significance of the tithe was therefore in no way diminished by virtue of its transformation into a cultic tax.

It is via the setting of political metaphor that the Bible sets forth a theology of stewardship altogether, with the human being set upon the earth as a steward of God’s royal authority over creation, while God is the one Sovereign over all creation (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8:3-9). It is the political kingship of God, though on a cosmic scale, that ultimately anchors the whole concept of biblical stewardship. The concept of stewardship begins with the placement of humanity upon the earth, entrusted with a “delegated authority,” to “have dominion over the earth,” and so humanity is entrusted with the responsibility “to fill, subdue, have dominion, till, and name.” The creation which humanity is entrusted to manage belongs to God for He is the Sovereign owner of creation: “The world and all that is in it is mine.” (Ps. 50:10). Kantonen therefore rightly concludes it is the “eternal sovereignty of God over all existence” that is the essential “keynote of the theology of stewardship.” The New Testament concept of Christian stewardship is therefore founded upon the Old Testament portrayal of humanity bearing the likeness of God in the garden of Eden, as God’s steward over creation.

Closing reflections

1. As an voluntary act of worship, tithing can remind us we are stewards of all that God gives us

The climax to this article is that the Melchizedek narrative provides a helpful orientation towards approaching tithing as an act of worship. Westermann’s suggestion that the Melchizedek narrative was inserted into the Genesis as a paradigm for approaching the practice of tithing from the motive of worshipful acknowledgement of God’s sovereign reign over the worshiper’s life validates this paper’s thesis. Perhaps the motives for utilizing the Melchizedek as a paradigm for approaching the tithe from as acknowledgement to the sovereignty of God, indicates that just as in our contemporary setting, the ancient Hebrew people also fell prone to the tendency to mistake the tithe for the broader essence of true stewardship.

Prior to the Davidic monarchy, the children of Israel were largely a loose collection of tribal peasants, with no centralized form of government. From an economic perspective, the pre-monarchical Hebrews were to obliged “to trust in God as their sovereign in the suzerain-vassal relationship of their covenant treaty” that was secured in the Sinai desert. With the transition into an economically prosperous kingdom, and with resultant class distinctions, the Hebrews were prone to forget how all they possessed was entrusted to them by virtue of their suzerain/vassal relationship with Yahweh. The Melchizedek narrative as a paradigm for tithing may therefore help to effectively anchor the practice of tithing within the broader scope and nature of biblical stewardship theology. Such a paradigm for tithing can thus place the motive for tithing within a framework that minimizes the false notion that the practice of tithing is the fulfilling of one’s role as a steward in the economy of God.

The Old Testament tithe ultimately signified how a human being is God’s vassal upon the earth, just as a the tithe of a vassal to a king in the ancient Near East, signified such a king’s sovereignty over the land. The implication concerning tithing today, is that the tithe can serve the believer as a reminder of God’s sovereignty over every aspect of our lives. If we assume that the law of the first fruits more or less derived from the concept of tithing, we can

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67 Cunningham, Creative Stewardship, 39-40.
70 Brattgard, God’s Stewards, 69.
72 Blomberg, Neither Poverty nor Riches, 69.
then consider how tithing can facilitate a correct approach to stewardship, if one does not fall into the trap of mistaking the practice of tithing for the entire scope of Christian stewardship. Or even worse, assumes that tithing must be practiced in order to avoid a curse from God, and thus blessing through tithing. When tithing is approached as an obligatory practice in order to ensure blessing and safeguard one from God’s judgment, one is giving not in the spirit of grace, but rather in the spirit of works. And in this manner, tithing is in fact nothing but a dead work; a work which does not produce life but only death (Heb 6:1; 9:14).

2. What God blesses is not tithing, but our giving to Him

When tithing however is voluntary practiced as an act of worship, signifying one’s submission to God’s Lordship, only then can one draw upon such educative texts, which call us to reflect upon God’s care over our lives. According to the Old Testament texts, the setting aside of the first fruits or first born served an educative function for the Hebrew people: “When a member of the younger generation asked about the meaning of this ordinance, the father could provide a clear answer . . . to God’s total dominion” over every aspect of their lives (Ex. 13:11f; Deut. 6:20f.; 26:5f.). From this perspective, “Tithing gives us perspective,” in that it “reminds us that all we are and all we have is from . . . the Lord.”

Moreover, only in this voluntary spirit can one actually believe that God will bless and will pour out blessings upon one’s life, because God does indeed bless acts of worship and sacrificial giving. This is of course exactly the point that Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 9:6-12, particularly in verse eight: “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

3. God blesses giving that insures the fulfilling of church-based ministry

The apparent and very real problem of acknowledging the truth that the Old Testament tithe cannot be substantiated as an obligatory aspect of New Testament Christian spirituality, is that such a reality thus seems to jeopardise the financial base of church-based ministry. The truth is that yes, such a realisation—from the standpoint of human responsibility, response, and involvement, can potentially jeopardise the financial base of church-based ministry, which includes not only the material costs of ministry, but the livelihood of all paid staff or clergy employed through a church ministry. It is for this reason therefore, that Christian leaders commonly propagate a presumed obligatory tithe in Christian life, particularly through strong warnings of incurring a curse of God’s judgment or limitation of His protective favour, should Christians fail to tithe. I have already at the onset of this discussion highlighted how this kind of reasoning actually degenerates Christian spirituality into a law-based spirituality that borders on a shifting of faith in Christ to a faith in works of law.

What we now need to understand, is that the New Testament documents, particularly as demonstrated in Paul’s letters do address this potential problem, but in a manner radically different from the common attempt to persuade believers to tithe or give through warning them that failure to do so would incur a curse as allegedly forewarned in Malachi 3:10. To understand the New Testament motive for adequately supporting church-based ministry, several observations need to be made. First is to recognise that the explicit practical purpose of the Old Testament tithe was on one hand to adequately finance the Levitical priesthood (eg., Deut 14:27), and on the other to materially provide for landless sojourners, orphans, and widows (Deut 14:28–29; 26:12). On a very practical level, it is thus for these reasons that the Law of Moses enjoins the worshipper to tithe only that which is wholesome and not defected (Lev 27:30–33).

The tithe was therefore actually a means of affirming and assuring the dignity, worth, and proper material well-being of all those for whom the tithes are designated for, meaning all those who comprise the priest-hood and the poor and landless in the land. It is thus in this

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73 Brattgard, God’s Stewards, 85.
74 Alcorn, Money, Possessions, and Eternity, 211.
context that the prophetic rebuke provided in Malachi 3:10 must be properly interpreted and understood. Within the covenantal framework of life lived under the Law of Moses, the curse incurred from the failure to tithe, results from a failure to provide for those people who depend on the tithe for their very existence. The curse described in Malachi 3:10 thus arises from God’s preferential concern towards the poor and landless, which is earlier expresses in Exodus 22:21-29; Deuteronomy 14:27-29. What these text demonstrate is that within the covenantal framework of Old Testament Israel, God’s blessing upon His people is contingent to how the landless priests and the landless in the land, are adequately provided for, which was to be ensured through the practice of tithing. Failure to do so, is to “rob” God (Malachi 3:8). It “robs” God, because He listens to the “cry” of the “poor” when the people fail to adequately provide for their well-being. On the other hand, the prophet exhorts throughout Malachi 3:8-15, that God will amply bless His people as they continue to provide for the landless, even in times of crop failure, natural disaster and economic downturn.

What is important to note here is that fulfilling the social purpose of the tithe, as part of the Mosaic law in its cultic, cultural and ceremonial entirety, was a mandatory obligation under the Mosaic law. It was mandatory because its practice was written into the very terms which Israel was bound to to keep within their covenantal relationship to God as their Sovereign Lord. And so it is precisely here that we come to terms with much of what it means to live under grace that is given to us in Christ and not under the Mosaic Law. Under the Mosaic Law—the Old Covenant, God inculcated a moral way of life through the principle of coercive legislation. Under the New Covenant however, which we enter into through Christ, God inculcates us towards a moral way of live through the principle moral persuasion, through the appealing to our conscience which is being sanctified through the writing of His law upon our hearts (Hebrews 9:10-13).

It is therefore through the principle not of coercion, but of moral persuasion, that Paul for instance, seeks to inculcate the Corinthians to give in a manner that would ensure varied church-based ministry expenditures are adequately met and financed (2 Corinthians 8:8-15). This is why Paul says quite plainly, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 8:7). When believers therefore develop disciplines that generously endow the financial needs of church-based ministry, Paul thus argues that God will indeed amply bless believers, even through means and signs of material wealth (2 Cor 9:10-15). This alone is the kind of giving that leads to a “harvest of righteousness,” or what Paul elsewhere calls, a “supply” of His Spirit (Galatians 3:5)!