



What is Wrong with the Heart of the Giver?

"Stewardship Alignment" by Dr. Keith Schwanz

From his column "It's Your Money"

Someone observed that two cultures dominate life in the United States: December and the rest of the year. People seem to act more generously in the twelfth month.

As the holiday season approaches each year, morning radio shows collect coats for kids. Marines gather Toys for Tots. Television news stories feature groups feeding the homeless and putting together food baskets. I lost track of the number of bell ringers and red kettles I walked past in 2014. December seems to bring out the most altruistic impulses of Americans.

The content of my mailbox indicates that nonprofit organizations seek to capitalize on this phenomenon. Almost every day in December, it seemed, I received mail from charities urging me to support their cause. This effort gets a boost from Giving Tuesday, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving and the philanthropic cousin of Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

This year, I received a catalog that encouraged me to select a project to support. Another solicitation included a gift for me. I suspect this organization has learned that creating a sense of obligation increases contributions. Repeatedly, I have been reminded that whatever I give to a nonprofit provides personal benefit for me when I file income taxes. Some requests have offered exclusive access to persons or programs in exchange for a donation of a stipulated amount. Still others publish a list of persons who contributed in the previous year grouped by the size of their gifts. The largest contributors appear at the top of the list as "gold" people in contrast to the "bronze" folks at the bottom.

Almost all of the solicitations I receive come from faith-based organizations, and I am increasingly uneasy with the methodology they use. If I tried to express my feelings with fundraising leaders, I probably would be told they are using "best practices" that effectively increase funds available for the Lord's work.

But is it really the Lord's work if the methods used contradict the gospel?

Jesus did not applaud those making large gifts, but commended the poor widow whose sacrificial offering consisted of two small coins (Luke 21:1-4). Jesus warned about drawing attention to charitable giving (Matt. 6:1-4), an admonition seemingly contrary to offering naming rights for a new building in return for a large donation. Jesus told one of his banquet hosts to include those unable to reciprocate—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14:12-15). The rich were not to be given preferential access.

I am not alone in my discomfort. In Revolution in Generosity, editor Wesley Willmer collected essays that delineate the disconnect between fundraising techniques often used by Christian organizations and the gospel. If Willmer saw the solicitations I received in December, he would point out that almost all utilized some type of transaction. Fundraising, even in the church, often relies heavily on a charismatic personality to make “the ask” and persuasion to “close the deal.” Donors receive a benefit in exchange for their donations. Contributors to Willmer’s book note that transaction methods appeal mostly to the sinful nature.

Instead of a transaction, they say, the quest for transformation should guide those who invite others to contribute to organizations seeking to fully engage in God’s mission.

Paul described the churches of Macedonia as grace-full. The generosity of these Christians could not be attributed to their wealth because they lived in extreme poverty and endured severe affliction. Instead, it was grace (*charis*) that transformed them into a community (*koinonia*) that expressed itself in freely serving (*diakonia*) (2 Cor. 8:4). Paul said that the Macedonian Christians first gave themselves to God. That total consecration included a self-emptying that resembled the kenosis of Jesus (Phil. 2:7). Being formed in the likeness of Christ created a generosity expressed from the inside out. No one had to ask for a donation. Grace-full living emerged from the work of God that made them a new creation.

Pastors serve as the resident theologians for their congregations. In the concern for the financial health of a congregation, which directly affects the pastor’s own financial stability, they must seek first the spiritual transformation of those who support the ministry. The primary objective must be inviting people to turn their hearts toward God in total allegiance to the Creator of all things. Biblical stewardship begins in the heart; generosity emerges organically from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Words matter. Pastors must lead their congregations in such a way that what they say and how they structure stewardship programs clearly align with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pastors must also embody a generosity in sync with the gospel. By leading through example in their personal finances, what is caught by the congregation will be consistent with what is taught. Only through a holistic discipleship in which words and deeds enhance each other can the church exhibit the generosity that reflects the grace received from God.

Keith Schwanz has served as a pastor, church musician, and seminary educator. He now works as a writer, editor, and publisher.



Every Tongue Confess

The Church of the Nazarene's annual Easter Offering for the World Evangelism Fund has been a denominational tradition for more than 75 years. Many English resources are now available for you to use for the 2015 Easter Offering. We received an indescribable gift when God sent His only Son to

die for our sins. This Easter, we reflect on that precious gift of salvation and the joyful opportunity we have been given to share it with everyone, everywhere, in the hopes that every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord!

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Quotes:

Mildred Wynkoop



"Love is so central to Christian faith that to touch it is to find oneself entangled with every element of Christian doctrine and life."