

CHRISTIAN GIVING Part 2

In the recent study called “Church Giving” the most complete NT statement on the subject (2 Corinthians 8 & 9) was considered in some detail. This study noted that translators had used an English word, ‘liberality’/‘liberal’ (or ‘generous’ in later versions) which suggested the size or extent of the gift, to represent a Greek word *haplotes/haplos*, which really meant ‘sincere, simple, unaffected,’ and related to the heart attitude or motive of the giver.

At least seven reputable linguistic authorities give the correct rendering of ‘sincere’ etc. and appear unable to explain the translators’ preference for ‘liberal’ or ‘generous.’ Two of them openly acknowledge their difficulty with the common rendering: “The passage from single-mindedness or simplicity to liberality is not quite obvious” (Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament), and “In all the others *liberality* is, at best, very doubtful. The sense is unusual, and the rendering *simplicity* or *singleness* is defensible in all the passages” (Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament).

This particular example occurs three times in the two chapters concerned, and it brings to the passage a completely different impression from that which is intended by the original text.

- The Greek refers to what is prompting the gift: “simplicity, sincerity, unaffectedness’ from *haplous*, ‘single, simple’ in contrast to *duplous*, ‘double’...in a logical sense, unconditionally, simply,” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words), and “*singleness, simplicity, sincerity, mental honesty*; the virtue of one who is free from pretence and dissimulation...*in simplicity*, i.e. without self-seeking,” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament).
- This real meaning holds a significant and valuable concept for the giver. It involves not expecting anything back by way of reward. For example, the genuine Christian giver does not seek recognition. In Matthew 6:1 Jesus says, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them.” This original concept should not be overlooked in favour of promoting an alternative ‘virtue’, no matter how well intentioned the translators might be. The original meaning has its own vital place in Paul’s words on the overall subject of Christian giving.
- The Greek word does not refer to the amount or extent of giving that might result from that prompting, as the English translation suggests. The heart-attitude of simplicity, sincerity, and unaffectedness, may result in a gift that is liberal or generous. Equally as valid is the possibility that it may not. The point repeatedly made by the apostle is that the Christian gives according to his or her ability and out of what he or she has (not out of what he or she does not have), and that the gift is to be freely given, without any element of compulsion. God does not want a begrudging giver, encouraged to strive beyond what the Lord has already provided, and then falling into resentment at the burden of it all.

There must be a peace in our giving. Otherwise all the spiritual benefit of it to us is lost. Too often the Christian is urged to give generously (i.e. beyond their means) in the belief that blessing will surely follow. The reality is that blessing follows obedience, and to be obedient it is only necessary to lay all things at Jesus’ feet and allow Him to lead. The principle of Christ’s pre-eminence in all things applies equally well to the amounts of our giving, just as it does in everything else. We approach Him to ascertain the amount, rather than strive to copy His generosity.

The true figure, which we arrive at by seeking the Lord on the matter, will give us peace. Recall the words of the apostle Paul in part of the passage we looked at closely in the previous study.

“And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.” (2 Cor 9:8). This is an assurance that just as God has promised to provide all our material needs (“that you, always having sufficiency in all things”), so He has included what He requires us to give (“may [also] have an abundance for every good work”).

God supplies all that is required of us. This is true of Christian giving as it is of all things in the work and ministry of the Church. Consider Romans 12:3-8.

- **“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith, or ministry, let us use it [i.e. what we have been given—no more and no less] in our ministry; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality [Gk *haplotes* “sincerity, simplicity, unaffectedness”]; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”**
- Once again the Greek word *haplotes* is wrongly represented by the English word ‘liberal.’ We know that it should read “he who gives, give with sincerity/without self-seeking.” Now look at the phrase in the context of the complete passage. Each one of us has been given *a measure of faith*, and each one of us is to minister to one another in the body *in proportion to our faith*. In other words, God has supplied what we are in turn required to pass on. There is no lawlessness in this picture of the functioning Church, no earnest striving in our own strength to achieve God’s work. Instead harmony and peace, with God providing exactly that portion of what is required to meet a particular need. If our gift for others is prophecy, then let us prophesy in proportion to our faith (i.e. in accordance with what we have been given to prophesy). And so on through ministry, teaching, exhortation, and giving. Let us use it (which is the precise measure of faith each one of us has been given by God) in giving as well as in everything else.

The spiritual effect of translators distorting the meanings of individual words such as *haplotes*, has been the stealing away, or theft, of the average Christian’s peace in giving. It has led many to burden themselves beyond what they can comfortably sustain, which in turn has meant they have become begrudging givers. This is not God’s way. **“So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity** [i.e. without any sense of compulsion]; **for God loves a cheerful giver.”** (2 Cor 9:7).

Many leaders of the Church over the centuries have been only too eager to grasp these misunderstandings in Scripture, and popular Charismatic teaching is no exception. There are a couple of NT verses that are frequently quoted by them.

- (2 Cor 9:6) **“But this I [Paul] say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”** In the previous study we observed that the English word ‘bountifully’ is an inappropriate translation of the Greek *ep’eulogiais*, which has the literal meaning of “with blessings.” It refers to a gift given so that blessings may accrue to those who receive it. The intention in the giver’s heart is to bless the recipients. It does not refer to the quantity or quality of the gift, as the word ‘bountiful’ suggests. Likewise the English word “sparingly” does not adequately render

the Greek *phaidomenos*, which really means having some left over (some ‘to spare,’ not all used). Once again we have a verse that seems to advise us not to be miserly and to give generously, but really means to give exactly the amount that the Lord has already provided for the purpose.

- (Luke 6:38) Jesus said **“Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.”** We have only to read the words on a packet of breakfast cereal (“Some settling of contents may occur during shipping and handling”) to know what Jesus means by “good measure.” He is referring to a measure that is honest. The contents have been “pressed down, shaken together, and running over,” like a bowl of grain that is truly filled to the brim—‘filled to overflowing.’[1] If we give with “good measure” (i.e. sincerely and in accordance with all that He has purposed in our hearts to give), then so shall He return to us all that we have given. Jesus is not encouraging us towards irresponsible giving here. Neither is He saying ‘The more you give, the more you get back,’ as some imply. Instead He is saying that when we give all that we have to give (and remember, this is established by our time with Him, not by the expectations of others), we are not to fear for He will surely replenish us with the same “good measure.”

Those who promote ‘generous’ giving in the power of the flesh, often refer to the Old Testament practices of Tithing and First Fruits. The first and most obvious point to make about this reliance on the Old Testament, is that the Old Testament should always be interpreted in the light of God’s most recent written revelations to His people, which are found in the New Testament. Christ did not displace the Law, but He is the fullness of the Law, or the Law completed. God’s commandments to the Jews were meant to be obeyed by them in the literal sense, but for the Christian they supply patterns and principles that he or she then recognizes, as the sanctifying grace of Christ works them out in their lives.

- Tithing comes from the OT Hebrew word *asar*, meaning ‘to give a tenth.’ Its NT Greek equivalent *apodekatoō* also means ‘to give away a tenth.’ Both terms refer to God’s instruction to give back to Him 10% of income. The difference is that while the Hebrew word was intended to be taken in the immediate sense by God’s OT people, the Greek word contains no such intention for God’s NT people. When the words tithe/tithes/tithing are used in the New Testament, they refer to the Old Testament practice of tithing, which still applied at the time of Christ’s ministry on earth. They do not apply to Christian giving, or the time after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Christians are not expected to give 10% (or even an approximation of that figure) of their income or wealth. What principles or patterns can we therefore safely glean from this OT practice? Very few. Certainly that we are meant to give back to God a portion of what He has given to us. Perhaps it also provides an indication that the amount we give is neither so small as to be insignificant, nor so large that it becomes onerous by cutting into the physical necessities of life. But probably not a lot beyond that.
- First Fruits refers to God’s instructions to the Jews that they honour Him, the source of all their provision and blessings, by returning the first of their increase. This included the first-born child, the first progeny of livestock, and the first fruits (or the initial yield) of harvest. There is no indication in the New Testament that Christians are required to apply this Old Testament practice literally. The Greek word *aparche* (meaning ‘an offering of first fruits’) is often applied to spiritual things, such as the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer as the first fruits of the full harvest of the Cross (Romans 8:23), or to those “who follow the Lamb wherever He goes” as the first fruits of all who

are not yet on this path (Revelation 14:4). The principle to be gleaned from the OT practice of first fruits is related to the heart-attitude of honouring God; by recognising He is the source of all things, the Author of our blessings, and that He should have the first share of what He has granted us, rather than the begrudging last.

PERSONAL CONCLUSION:

Most of what has passed for teaching on the topic of Christian Giving is without foundation in Scripture. It is based on misleading translation and false interpretation. (I did not intend this conclusion and neither did I expect it). In reaching this conclusion, it is necessary to state that this in no way denigrates a genuine spirit of generosity in the Christian giver. It remains true that Christ's generosity towards us is breath-taking. He became poor in the things of the Kingdom that we might become rich. He chose death that we might have life. But we cannot give back to Him what He has not first given us. To give of the flesh rather than the spirit is not acceptable. It simply cannot stand.