

## GIVING AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP

In recent years I have seen a very troubling trend in churches across America – congregations removing the offering time from their worship services. Many have installed offering boxes in their foyers for people to drop in their offering on their way into or out of the worship service. Many churches are now even making online giving available. I am not suggesting that there is anything inherently wrong with either of these, but I do fear that the church has inadvertently “thrown the baby out with the bathwater.” Let me share with you the two main reasons why churches seem to be removing giving from their worship services.

### INCORRECT THEOLOGY

Many churches and pastors are not really clear in their understanding of the nature, motivation and practice of giving and as such either consciously or unconsciously end up teaching on giving (if they are even teaching on it at all) as if we are still living under the law, even though Paul reminds us in II Corinthians 3:6 that, “...*the letter (of the law) kills, but the spirit (of grace) gives life.*” Most teaching on giving could be likened to putting new wine into old wineskins. Jesus points out in Matthew 2:22, “...*no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins.*”

Often the church reduces its teaching on giving to the point that their people feel like they have a bill to pay to the church and if they don't pay the amount prescribed by the church they are in trouble with God—making giving feel like *law paying* instead of *grace giving*. In this case, giving can be viewed as a financial burden and an obligation that is expected to be paid for the church services rendered. And what pastor wants to talk about this topic and be seen as the bill collector. This is further reinforced if they hear from a church leader in a worship service that the church does not expect the visitors to put anything in the offering - implying that its services to the visitors today are being provided to them at no cost. Members, however, are expected to pay.

All these overt and subtle teachings lead people to misunderstand the very nature and purpose of giving especially within the context of worship. Which leads me to the second reason why many churches have jettisoned giving in their worship services.

## AWKWARDNESS

Churches have most certainly correctly assessed that the giving portion of the worship service as is traditionally practiced, is very awkward for most of their members (who do not give) and certainly all of their visitors. And we certainly do not want to be found guilty of the age-old accusation that “all they want is my money.”

I will be the first to admit that the way offerings are taken in most churches is extremely awkward. If the church’s theology is bad, their methodology is even worse. There is no discussion or teaching on any aspect of giving. The prayer is usually spontaneously given by some deacon. The lights are dimmed and soft music plays to cover up the discomfort of almost everyone in the room as the offering is “taken.”

I love to give, but I only get paid once a month and so I only give once a month. But the offering plate is passed weekly. So, 75% of the time, when the plate passes under my nose, I am giving nothing. What are the people around me thinking when they see me putting nothing in the offering plate? I am so grateful for the attendance cards we are told to fill out, so at least I have something to drop in the plate each week. Let’s be honest, it is just plain awkward. I get that. But what makes it awkward is *how* the giving is being done, not *that* it is being done. This is a critically important distinction to keep in mind.

So, with this as a background, allow me share with you three essential points that must be taught and practiced if our giving experience is going to be all God intended for it to be.

### I. Our Giving is to God

A very common theology taught in churches is that the tithe (10%) belongs to the church and anything over and above that “payment” a believer is free to give to other Christian organizations and causes. This teaching is fatally flawed in several ways, but the flaw I want to point out here is that people’s giving is to the *church*. May I plead with you to reconsider this thinking! People’s giving is *not* to the *church*, their giving is to the *Lord*. And this is not some arcane and nearly irrelevant distinction. The difference between these two thoughts is massive.

The church simply receives our gifts to God and then hopefully utilizes our gifts to Him for His glory and His purposes according to His will. If our “giving” is nothing more than a payment to the church, boxes in the foyer or online payments are entirely appropriate. But if we understand that our giving is not to the church or any other Christian organization, but to our divine, eternal, omnipotent, sovereign God, it exalts giving to a sacred and holy act of worship worthy of an honored place in our corporate worship experience. Which leads me to my second point.

### II. Our Giving is an Act of Worship

There is no story in the Scriptures that more vividly connects giving to worship than the story of the wise men when they entered the very presence of this God-baby, Jesus. Here is how Matthew describes the scene in 2:11, “*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*” These magi could not worship Jesus without also opening their treasures and presenting their gifts to Him.

May I even go so far as to suggest that giving is not just a part of our worship, it is the *central* part of our worship. As Ralph Cushman says, “The worship that is empty handed is, according to the Scriptures, simply not worship at all. The bringing of an offering to God is pictured in the Scripture as a high and inestimable part of worship.”

The Bible is teeming with examples of people coming to worship God with offering in hand. They would never even consider coming to worship God without an accompanying gift to offer Him.

Sadly in our “user-friendly” approach to our worship, attendees attitude is often much more focused on what they will get out of worship than what they are bringing to worship – and no giving in the worship service only reinforces that attitude.

The solution to the awkwardness of traditional offering time is not to remove the worship of giving, but to redefine and redesign it to make it something that people look forward to and enjoy and celebrate – believers and guests alike, which leads me to my third point.

### **III. Our Giving is to be a Celebration**

Lynn Miller says so well, “The worship offering [is] a pure gift to God in thankfulness for what we have already received. It should therefore be an exciting and major part of the service.”

I have been on a number of mission trips to third world countries over the years and I can tell you that the offering time in their worship services are incredibly inspiring. They are singing and dancing as people come up to bring their, admittedly, paltry offerings to the front – a chicken with it feet tied, a small bag of corn, a few coins, everyone in the room is rejoicing that they have something, anything to bring as a gift to the Lord.

I cannot even rehearse these offering scenes in my mind without tearing up. They have so little to give and yet they make such a big deal about it. I can tell you this. They have it right! And we can learn from them. Giving is intended to be an exciting act of worship, a celebration of our love for Him and His love for us. The fact that the pastor is going to be the one eating the chicken and the bag of corn was irrelevant. They were making their gifts to the Lord.

Our worship offering time also needs to be a big deal – unapologetic, sound teaching on giving; personal testimonies of those who have been blessed in their giving or those who have been blessed by other people’s giving; lively music; hearty singing; heartfelt prayers of thankfulness and joy. We need to make the offering time a time of celebration, make it something that everyone, including visitors, look forward to, are excited about and inspired to be part of.

If we want our churches to experience the full, life changing power of giving, we need to make sure we emphasize that (1.) our giving is to God, (2.) our giving is the central way in which we worship Him and (3.) our offering times are filled with enthusiastic, corporate celebration. And who knows, just maybe the offering time might actually someday become the most exciting part of our entire worship service!

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR — E. G. “JAY” LINK**

E. G. “Jay” Link has a unique combination of being an ordained minister with a Master Divinity degree in Biblical Theology and a professional Stewardship planning coach who for over 40 years has been working with very affluent Christian families to enable them to optimize their Kingdom impact with all that the Lord has entrusted to them to manage. After retiring from his personal practice, he then served for five years as Director of Taylor University’s Stewardship Planning Ministry, which he launched for them. Most recently, Jay founded the Stewardship Resource Group to serve Christian ministries, colleges, and churches to better minister to their highest capacity families. He has written six books, hundreds of articles and has provided extensive training curriculum for hundreds of professional financial and legal advisors in how to provide stewardship planning services for their clients.