

THE MISSION OF THE TITHE
First in a three part series: “The Mission-minded Church”
January 22, 2017 --Numbers 6: 13-26 --The Church of the Covenant

This begins a three-part sermon series on being “The Mission-minded Church”. In many ways it comes from my experiences in mission over 30 plus years of ministry. But it also comes from my doctoral paper in 1990 which was on “Ethical Church Budgeting” –how do we assign priorities in a church operating budget that are faithful to what we say we believe. Because how we use our money really reveals our heart and what are the real priorities in our life. Do we put God first or not?

Many, many years ago in another church I served there was a giant Women’s Association Rummage Sale. The building was huge and they would fill it up with giant amounts of rummage twice a year. They would raise \$30,000 each time or about \$60,000 a year from their Rummage Sale. And all of the proceeds went to mission or so it was said. There were beautiful things in that rummage sale; people donated very nice items, liquidated their estates via the Rummage Sale. It took close to 300 people to staff it. It was pretty amazing. But I noticed something. The first day of the rummage sale was reserved for the people who worked the rummage sale and they would pick up the nicest donated items. Then the second day of the sale only church members were permitted and would go and they would scoop up the next best items. Then the general public was invited and they would scoop up the next best items. Then on the last day of the sale the poor were invited and everything was at a heavy discount. Then, the last items remaining would be donated to the Salvation Army. My office faced the parking lot and I would see the long lines of the poor snaking around the church and I had a very sharp and distinct feeling that somehow all of this was wrong. By the way, the Women’s Association of that church then would sometimes use the proceeds of the rummage sale for renovation projects and other things at the church itself. We would spend the proceeds on ourselves. But I think we had gotten it backwards. First of all, we were charging people and even the poor for items we ordinarily would have just donated to the Salvation Army. But also, maybe the order was reversed –maybe the poor should have come the first day and gotten their choice of the nicest things at a deep discount; then the general public; then the church members; and finally on the last day the workers could buy and at full price. The first shall be last... And then all of the proceeds should be donated to mission, not just some of them. I think we had gotten it backwards somehow. And by the way, so much of what I refer to as “church world” gets it backward also –we take in money and make sure we spend it all on ourselves first and then whatever crumbs remain on the table we give away to the poor. If a church loses its “Mission Mindedness” it can wind up being just a rummage sale that winds up spending everything on itself.

At this point I want to say I know I am speaking to a mission-minded church. I know that The Church of the Covenant has a big heart and has a big heart for mission. That’s your history; that’s who you have been and that’s who you are; that’s who, by the grace of God, you will ever be. You don’t just give money, by the way, you give your time and your love; a lot of people here are engaged in hands on mission on a weekly basis. So, just to be clear, this is a sermon on mission-mindedness to a mission minded congregation whom I love.

But the larger Presbyterian Church has declined in its mission-mindedness over the years. When I did my doctoral thesis, I researched the statistics and in the Presbyterian Church in 1965, from all receipts from all churches, the Presbyterian Church as a whole gave away almost 32% of everything it received. The Presbyterian Church at the height of its effectiveness and spiritual power gave away almost 1/3 of every dollar it received. There were many “dollar for dollar churches”, churches that gave away 50% of every dollar they received. When I wrote my paper in 1989 that percentage figure had declined from 32% to between 8-9%. I would be amazed if that figure were even 5% today. We are rapidly becoming a rummage sale for the benefit of our own members and using more and more of what we receive from

God on ourselves. Many people cite many reasons for the decline of the church; if I were to cite my theory it is that we have lost sight of why we are here and we have forgotten the Biblical reasons why we are to be a church for others and not a church only for ourselves.

How does the Bible give us help in setting the priorities for our own lives and the life of our own congregation? Our scripture from the Old Testament from the book of Numbers notes that the offering was to be "one male lamb...without blemish" (Numbers 6: 14) In a rural culture where many tended sheep, God's guidance was to set aside your first male lamb to give to God. You set aside the best lamb, the one "without blemish". You gave to God the perfect lamb, not the worst one. In a typical flock, a large flock, that flock would produce perhaps 5 to 10 lambs in season, so God was asking the shepherd to set aside at least 10% or even 20% of every lamb for the Lord. In the Old Testament was the tithe. Where people were expected to give 10% of all their income to the Lord. Over and above that they would give their offerings and their alms. 10% was the floor, not the ceiling. From Biblical Truth emerges two principles –PRIORITY (it is the best lamb, the lamb without blemish, not the worst lamb; and the first lamb of the season, not the one at the end that is left over) –PROPORTIONALITY –WHAT WE GIVE AWAY IS THOUGHT OF IN PERCENTAGE TERMS, THE TITHE. Today in our society we tend to spend everything we want on ourselves and then we give the chump change to the Lord. We eat until we are overfull and then sweep up the crumbs from our table and give them away to the poor. We pick through the rummage sale and get everything we want first and then charge the poor money to buy what is left over and then pat ourselves on the back. No! What we give away is to be our PRIORITY. What we give away is in PERCENTAGE terms. Biblical stewardship is Priority (first fruits to God, not last) and Proportionality (what is the faithful percentage to give away to the poor?). The way a church operating budget is to be put together is by the same Biblical principles –Priority, what we give away is important and Proportionality, what we give away is thought of in percentage terms. See, thinking Biblically is the solution to the issues of mission mindedness in the church today. In my opinion, thinking Biblically about Mission and Priorities and Proportionalities is the key to the revival of the church. I used to do seminars on this very subject across our denomination; I'm not sure anyone is really listening...

Why do we give? There is another lamb without blemish that has been given and that lamb has been given to us. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is perfect, the perfect expression of God's love. Jesus is the little lamb, the first fruit of God's love for us, born in a manger and surrounded by simple shepherds. Jesus is the lamb of God sacrificed and given for us on the cross at Calvary. For God so loved the world that He gave this little lamb to be sacrificed for us that we might be saved and not condemned. We have been given 100% of God's heart when He has given us this Lamb without blemish; that's proportionality. And we have been given the first fruits, the first lamb, the only Son, the perfect lamb of God in Jesus; that's priority. We give because we have received a priceless gift. We have been bought with a price. That price is God's only begotten Son, the closest thing to His great heart of love. "One male lamb...without blemish".

I recently heard an interview with a child from Haiti. She asked the mission person: "Why does God love America more than Haiti?" And the mission person stuttered around and tried to answer the little girl. I think my answer would be this –"Yes, little one, God has blessed America and God has blessed the American Church. But it is for the purpose of BEING A BLESSING then to those in need in our church, in our community, in our nation and in our world." We have been BLESSED in order to be a BLESSING. I don't want to be a rummage sale. I want to be a Mission Minded Church. Amen and Amen.

**By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!**