Learning to Give is Basic to Being a Christian*
II Corinthians 9:1-15

Introduction

During September of 1991, Mrs. Costen and I led a delegation of American Presbyterians to Kenya where we participated in the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. This church is probably the most vibrant communion on the African continent. It is an adult church—highly mature, ecumenical in its outlook capable of sending and receiving missionaries, and faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ.

One hundred years ago the Presbyterian Church of Scotland established a mission in a little place known as Kibwezi. All but one of the missionaries, Tom Watson, died from malaria. From this spot, about halfway between Nairobi and Mombasa, the gospel of Jesus Christ among Presbyterians was started, spreading to the highlands and to other places in western and northern Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. From this first planting by Scotland's faithful churches, individuals and groups have helped in this church's development.

At this point, you, Wilton Presbyterian Church, Wilton, Connecticut, enter the picture. For about four-fifths of this church's life, you have been active in giving

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support to the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, providing your love, prayers and financial support. This church was active in starting a dedicated mission among the Masai people in the Ngong Hills. You participated in building a manse there. As the result of your efforts, this congregation is thriving.

Through the efforts of this church, Moses Wareru, a Kikuyu, has dedicated himself to a desperately needed ministry among the Masai. You made it possible for him to complete his studies at Hartford Seminary. We saw Moses recently and he sends his loving regards. His eyesight is impaired, but his body is vigorous and his outlook is bright.

Wilton Presbyterian Church participated in building the manse at Tumu Tumu, a community north of Nairobi. Your gift made it possible for the minister and his family to have adequate housing while ministering to that church and five or six other churches in surrounding areas.

On September 10 of this year, Mrs. Costen and I stood in front of a nursery school being dedicated at Kibwezi, built with the financial support of this church. You need to know that this work was attempted among the Kambai people in 1891 but failed. It is now bearing fruit in 1991.

On September 8, I preached two services at the Bahati Church in Nairobi, where Julius Nairobi is the pastor. The Bahati Church has a membership of about 3700 members and is packed with eager worshipers each Sunday. Additionally, Bahati Church has produced another church in Nairobi, contributing pastoral and financial support. Wilton Church is providing a manse for this congregation to house its

second minister.

I could continue sharing the role you are playing in educating the next generation of leaders in Kenya. I could tell you about the support you have given to Johnson C. Smith Seminary, Atlanta, and the impressive ministries in which its graduates are engaged throughout the world. You can see that your sense of mission is bearing much fruit. It is in this context that I share with you our subject, "Learning to Give is Basic to Being a Christian."

Learning to Give

The apostle Paul was a converted Jew, changed on the Damascus Road. From an earlier life of persecuting Christians, he became the major reason for spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ from Palestine to Asia Minor and southern Europe. His personalized mission was to spread Christianity among the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles. His concern was that persons in other parts of the world would have the benefit of Christ's teachings, void of all the ceremonial and cultural biases of the Jews. Also, he wanted to engender a spirit of interdependence. Therefore, the needs of the mother Church in Jerusalem concerned Gentile Christians, and the travail of the Gentile converts was to be high on the agenda of Christians in Judea.

In this context Paul wrote his second letter to the Church at Corinth. This church had been troubled, beset by divisions, false doctrines and bad-mouthing

the first century's "radio and television evangelists." Things had gotten so bad that Paul wrote a stinging letter which apparently was lost. This is why he is so elated upon seeing how lavishly the Church of Macedonia supported the mother Church in Jerusalem. He used the positive example of the Church in Macedonia to spur Corinth into a similar response toward the famine and the hard times of the more prosperous Church in Jerusalem.

My major point is that giving is not tangential to the life of the Christian; it is basic. Listen to Paul as he describes the gift of the Macedonian Church: "They have been severely tested by the troubles they went through; but their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they were very poor. . . . Of their free will they begged us and insisted on the privilege of having a part in helping God's people in Judea." Contrary to what many believe, being a Christian embraces the whole of one's life—body, soul. personality, time, financial and physical resources. Learning to give is essentially learning to be Christian. The process of learning to give falls into three categories. First, it involves aligning oneself fully and unreservedly with Jesus Christ; second, it is the discipline of responding to legitimate needs; and third, it is the fountain from which might flow an amazingly unending stream of God's grace.

Alignment

In the first place, learning to give is aligning oneself unreservedly with Jesus Christ. The instinct to

give is not a natural one. The natural instinct is to receive. From the time a baby is conceived, the baby receives. Growing up to maturity, the child receives from family, school, church and society. All too often individuals grow into adulthood and never learn to do anything but acquire. They often become incapable of giving and sharing love. All that is necessary is having their personal needs met. I think the world is responding warmly to Magic Johnson's revelation of testing HIV positive because he is such a giving person.

Being co-eternal with God, Jesus assumes our humanity. Listen as Paul describes this gift: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; rich as he was, he made himself poor for your sake, in order to make you rich by means of his poverty."

Stewardship, then, or giving—financial or service—begins with Jesus Christ. To recite glibly the words of the Apostles' Creed or other creedal statements does not address our true relationship to Christ. This is done most appropriately when we confess that Jesus is the Lord of our life. This means that what he said and did are worthy of being followed in our daily lives. We are so consumed by the power of his life that we are willing to share it with others. This is a true evangelist; it is effective witnessing.

Several weeks ago Mrs. Costen and I had an audience with His Excellency, Daniel Arap Moi, President of Kenya. In our conversation he talked at length about the need of Christians to love Jesus with their heart, soul and mind. He also shared that Christians should avoid the entanglements of politics and taking social stands. "Leave this to the politicians," he said. I mention this because too many of us make this kind of distinction; we separate knowing and

believing the word of God from doing and sharing the Word. When this happens, our believing is questioned and our evangelistic edge is dulled. We become hearers only.

Giving ourselves to Jesus Christ means that his example of selflessness becomes our model. Our motive is fueled by the fact that "we love because he first loved us." The applause of others is a lesser need. Giving out of a sense of duty or to gain prestige pales in meaning. Our giving flows out of the compulsion of God's love. The first lesson regarding giving is that it is in response to the gift God has already given each of us in Jesus Christ. Compared to this gift—this complete sacrifice—no amount, no percentage, is adequate.

Discipline

The second feature of giving as a Christian is in relation to legitimate needs. Paul says: "Each one should give, then, as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly."

To decide is a conscious action, one of the mind, implying forethought. Christian giving is not whimsical but is a matter of the will. It denotes that one has been presented with facts related to particular needs. We respond based on the compelling nature of the need.

Each year the officers of churches meet and develop a budget based on programmatic and mission needs. The budget represents a number of items: salaries and benefits, building upkeep, insurance,

utilities, capital repayments and development, judicatory assessments, designated and general mission giving. This latter category tests a congregation's vitality. What we do for ourselves is necessary, but it does not demonstrate our zeal to be partners in the one mission of the church—Jesus Christ.

Frank W. Harrington, pastor of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, now numbering about 9600 members, recently led his church into a $12 million capital campaign. The church was excited about building a super-ostentatious structure. What they built cost $6 million. What I admire about Peachtree is that for each dollar spent on their building they raised an additional dollar to be used for the mission of the church in Atlanta and around the world. Therefore, this church is inaugurating new churches, pursuing evangelism emphases, supporting education facilities, building camps and conference sites, supporting missionaries at home and overseas and building affordable housing in Atlanta through Habitat for Humanity.

When the needs of the church are presented, mature Christians respond generously. The two criteria for this response are the compelling love of Jesus Christ and the ability to give. To give sparingly when one has the ability to give generously is evidence of the need for growth. A recent Gallup poll indicates that the average American loses $75 each year. This represents money that falls out of our pockets between sofa pillows, in our pockets and forgotten, or in clothing sent to the dry cleaners. Seventy-five dollars on an average is not a terribly large sum. However, this same Gallup poll indicates that the average man and woman around the

world have an income of $69. Our traveling around the world has validated these statistics. American Christians have been blessed.

Given the magnitude of the need, our only response, our natural response, our Christ-led response is to give as generously and as gratefully as humanly possible. A number of years ago I saw the movie "Magnificent Obsession." You probably remember it as well. One line in that movie stands out in my memory: "You only keep what you give away." What a wonderful message for us in this day of conspicuous consumption. As a previous Presbyterian stewardship emphasis highlighted, "When you know you care, and when you care you share." Giving is first a decision of the head that is given substance by an action of the heart and of the hand.

Fountain

The third aspect of learning to give is that giving is the fountain from which flows an amazingly unending stream of God's grace. Writing to the Gentile Christian converts in Corinth, Paul says: "For this service you give not only meets the needs of God's people, but also produces an outpouring of grateful thanks to God."

Our beloved Presbyterian Church is losing members at an alarming rate. Some say this is the result of the church speaking out on positions such as human sexuality, abortion, civil and human rights. Personally, I do not believe this is the reason. Too many of us have gotten timid about sharing our faith, helping

people know what changes Christ can bring to their lives and standing with them in the secret places through which they must pass. To do this you must give, first of yourself and then of your resources. When those to whom you witness see that your faith leads you to give, they are prone to seek out this Christ who is at work in your life. Like a flowing fountain the stream of God's unending grace floods their souls and causes them to accept Christ and continue the witness. This is effective evangelism.

Conclusion

Having committed one's life and work to Christ, having responded to the legitimate needs placed before you, and having been the channel through which God's grace can flow—you will have learned the greatest lesson of all. You will have learned that giving is basic to being a Christian.