

Tithing – The Bible Principle

*“All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth;
but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” Luke 21 v 4*

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1. GOD SPEAKS A CLUE

About a year after Liberty Trust began, God gave an important clue to the trustees in regard to what was to be our purpose, through a prophecy. We were meeting for a night of prayer regarding an issue upon which we had not obtained unanimity: “Should we tithe the contributions that the Trust was receiving?” It was the only subject that had ever divided us. Humanly, it seemed insoluble.

That night God spoke in prophecy. He said: **“You are a Part of My Storehouse”**. It came as a complete surprise. We didn’t even know what a “storehouse” was, or what connection it had with “tithing”. Nevertheless someone remembered that the term came from Malachi chapter 3: **“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse”**. The common teaching which is still current today is that “the storehouse” is the local church. We therefore interpreted that God was telling us that we were a part of “The Church”. And as churches don’t generally compulsorily tithe what they receive, we concluded that He was telling us that neither should we. The wisdom of the answer astounded us. We had previously determined that we were not going to let the issue continue unresolved. We would not go home that night until God answered.

However, in the weeks that followed I began to sense that I had concluded that prayer-time prematurely. I sensed that there was more God had wanted to say. As I drove home from my work in Kawerau one day I prayed: *“God, why did you say that we are a part of your storehouse? Why didn’t you say that we are a part of Your church? (We all assumed that the two were synonymous.)*

To my surprise a loud voice spoke above the noise of the car. It said: **“Because My Church is not My Storehouse”**. As He said it I could sense sorrow as He spoke. But instead of being astounded I shouted back in anger: **“How can you say that?”** I was shocked.

He replied slowly: **“Consider- what does it store.”**

Weakly, I replied: *“Well – nothing.”*

Immediately my mind was flooded with memories of families I had visited when we began a year before. We had visited those applicants who were receiving government welfare in order to find out whether they could really afford to contribute, or whether they needed sponsorship. Each time I had left their homes silently crying at what I had seen. In every case we found that their expenditure exceeded their income by around \$100 per week, (which was a lot in those days). Yes, God was enabling them to keep up their hire purchase payments and tithe to their church, sometimes incredibly sacrificially, but why were they in that position, largely unnoticed by the rest of the church? Most of them were still in the same financial position.

“Because The Church is not My storehouse.” Could this “word” somehow be the answer?

I shouted back for more explanation but there was none.

Back at home I rushed to look up Malachi 3 v 10. I sensed already that we had just been given a vital clue. What was it? My mind was full of questions.

Over the next few weeks God began to reveal the answers as I searched. If we were a part of His storehouse, “what was His storehouse”?

The common teaching by those who taught on this subject was that one’s local church was the storehouse because that is where you are fed. But fed what? Obviously it wasn’t feeding financial support!

“No”, they would say, “you are fed spiritually.” – But did that make sense? Either Malachi chapter three should be interpreted as a financial, or as a spiritual instruction- but not both at the same time! Bible passages can be interpreted in the natural and later in the spiritual – but never both at the same time. I seemed that there was much more behind these verses.

Over the next few weeks God began to explain much more. Best of all He began to explain the purpose behind why He had commissioned us to begin Liberty Trust. After-all, none of us had really understood up to that point.

2. THE BIG SEARCH – Where is the Elusive Commandment on Tithing?

One of first questions was: “Where did Malachi get his teaching in chapter three from?” After all, Bible prophets never originate new doctrine. They always proclaim by way of reminder, some Bible teaching which their hearers already understand from Scripture. But where was his foundational teaching found? In all the many teachings on finance I had listened to I had never heard Malachi’s source taught!

What followed was the beginning of an intensive search through every reference I could find to “tithing”.

There had to be a commandment somewhere in the Old Testament in regard to “tithing” which preceded Malachi’s challenge. There just had to be a passage somewhere that described to the Israelites how they were to tithe. You see, prophets such as Malachi simply provided commentary in their time on the current state of observance of God’s Law by God’s people.

They did not write new Law. The commandment that inspired Malachi’s anger therefore had to be somewhere back there in the Old Testament. Where was it? It had to be a passage that was extremely well known to Malachi’s hearers.

I spent many months searching for it. It shouldn’t have been difficult to find. There are not very many financial commandments in the Old Testament. But where was it? This became my goal:- to find the mother teaching upon which all of today’s Church’s tithing practice and belief is based. I had no doubt it was there somewhere. If God meant “tithing” to be so important He would undoubtedly have given us more instruction on how we are to obey the commandment, than simply Malachi’s judgement on its lack of observance.

- And there it was:

Then one night - what excitement - the night I spotted the dual words “**store**” and “**tithe**”, both in a single verse in Deuteronomy.

It just hit me. That word “**store**”. Could it be the key to my search? The tithes had to be

stored. Excitedly I asked, “Did this refer to the term “**storehouse**” in Malachi 3 verse 10?”

Then next came the term: “within your gates”. (I was reading from the New King James Version) What did that mean?

Furthermore the passage referred only to every third year. Apparently the tithe in the other two years went to the cost of the annual holiday for all the family at The Festival of Tabernacles. Was the commanded tithe really only given every third year? Amos 4 v 4 indicates that this was the practice.

But the passage didn't look at all like what I had been expecting. My experience and understanding of tithing was based, I have to admit, on church tradition. This difference from what we expect is a problem to all who have been brought up on church tradition. This is what I read:

3.Deut.14 v 28-29 – The birth of The Commandment to Tithe

v.28 *“At the end of every third year you shall bring out **the tithe of your produce of that year and store it within your gates.***

v.29 *And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow **who are within your gates**, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do”. (NKJV)*

Actually these two verses are part of a larger commandment on tithing. To be more accurate we should read it in its full context:

v.22 *“You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year.”*

v.23 *“And you shall eat before the Lord your God in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstlings of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.”*

v.24 *“But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the Lord your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the Lord your God has blessed you,*

v.25 *then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place where the Lord your God chooses.”*

v.26 *“And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires; for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink” (the New Living Translation uses the words “some wine or beer”, the NIV says “or other fermented drink” as if to emphasise the nature of this particular feast), “for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the Lord thy God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.”*

v.27 *“You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates (we shall examine the term “within your gates” shortly), for he has no part nor inheritance with you.”*

Then v.28 and v.29 *“At the end of every third year etc.”* (above)

Were verses 28 and 29 really the actual commandment on tithing that Malachi was referring

to? I knew the particular command to tithe would be hard to find as I had never heard anyone who was teaching on tithing, refer to the Scripture that Malachi must have been referring to.

Afterwards I realised that both the schedule of blessings and the schedule of curses in Deuteronomy 28 refer to the commandments *“that I give you this day”*. Therefore that missing commandment regarding tithing was most likely among those commandments in Deuteronomy 5 – 27 which were read by Moses to the Children of Israel on the same day that he read chapter 28 to the nation. Malachi uses the same imagery of curse and blessing in Malachi 3 v 8 – 10 as Moses in Deut. 28. Now, in hindsight, the link between Malachi 3 and Deut. 14 was logical.

Frankly I was elated when I found the words. - The last 6 words (above) of verse 28: *“and store it within your gates”*, or as the NIV and other modern versions say: *“and store it in your towns”* – These had to be those elusive words!

- Here was the missing gem that gave rise to all the other teaching on “tithing” in the Bible.

- Here was the written foundation for the practice of “tithing” which has continued for thousands of years. Yet the words didn’t look at all like I had expected. In fact, because they are so different from what one would expect them to say, they create a stumbling block to all who discuss this subject with me.

“They can’t be”, is their sincere reaction.

“If not, then please find me an alternative”, is my reply. “Malachi plainly didn’t originate this Bible principle.”

For if “tithing” is regarded by some as the most important financial principle in the Bible, then Deuteronomy 14 verses 28 – 29 could be the most important financial teaching in the Bible.

Let’s examine the evidence:

These verses share four elements in common with that in the Malachi passage:

1. They speak of **“tithing”** - **not “first-fruits”** or forms of **“offerings”**.
2. They are addressed to all Israel; not just to the Levites who were to tithe to the Temple storehouse at Jerusalem. (See Nehemiah for how the tithes for the temple were collected separately from different people and kept separately from offerings and were used for different purposes than offerings.)
3. They command the giving of the tithe to others. (We have seen in verses 22 – 27 that the tithes in two out of every three years were to be used for an annual feast of celebration with one’s own family.)
4. They refer to **“storing”** the tithe. (Remember - Malachi speaks of “the storehouse”). It was the word “store” that first alerted me to the fact that this was the missing foundational passage that I was searching for.

The last item is particularly important. The tithe was to be *“stored within your gates”* for four classes of people who were *“within your gates”*. What did that mean?

(a) “Within your Gates”

“Gates” referred to in this verse were those of **the city or town**.

As you probably know, the current widespread teaching on the meaning of Malachi 3 v 10 today is that the Israelites were to bring their tithes to the Jerusalem Temple.

My wife recently pointed out to me quite logically – “**the Jerusalem Temple had doors, not gates!**”

These two verses certainly weren’t referring to the (future) Temple. In fact, if you check your Bible you will find that nowhere in Scripture does the phrase: “*within your gates*” refer to the Temple. Nor does it ever refer to a place of worship.

The phrase “*within your gates*” first appears in Exodus 20 v 10 as part of the Ten Commandments, when it advises that the keeping of the Sabbath also applies to the alien “*within your gates*”. Aliens were not permitted in the Temple (Ezekiel 44 v 9), which is another evidence that these verses were not referring to the future Temple.

The phrase appears in Deuteronomy 17 times. Not only do each one of these refer to the gates that protected the citizens in fortified towns and cities, but also it is equally obvious that they did not apply to the Temple, as it had not been built then, and wouldn’t be built for several centuries.

It occurs again in Psalm 122:

v.1 *I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.”*

v.2 *Our feet are standing **within your gates**, O Jerusalem*

To put the above two verses in their context, if you read Psalm 122 you will find that it is dedicated to the praises of the city, “Jerusalem”, and not to “the temple”. It was sung as the pilgrims ascended the last hill to Jerusalem.

This meeting place at the gates of the city, as you can imagine, was the meeting place of the heads of families, the notable men of the city. This was normal practice in the Middle-East. There are many such references to this centre of justice and authority throughout the Old Testament.

Our passage appears to say that tithes were to be stored inside the town or city under the **civil authority** of the elders of the town or city.

I have been told by one pastor that the Levites were the civil leaders. That is an interesting theory. Following his claim I have searched but can find no evidence whatever in Scripture to support his belief that the Levites carried out civil duties, and plenty to suggest that the civil leaders **were not** Levites.

But back to our discussion on where the tithes were stored.

Obviously the produce was not literally stored at the gates, as this was the main thoroughfare into the town. “Gates” referred to the “civil authority” in the town or city. Smaller towns did not have protecting walls and gates. They may have had elders who sat at the entrance (if they had an entrance) but tithes for villages and small towns were probably stored in neighbouring walled towns that had walls and gates to protect the storehouse. Gates were therefore most important. Where there were gates there could be a storehouse, administration, protection and justice. i.e. a functioning community. From the storehouse the tithed produce would be shared among the four classes of peoples named in Deuteronomy 14 v 29, within the wider

region, and probably anyone else in an emergency. Here was the chief reason for Israel's storehouses.

Malachi is deliberately linking his warning in chapter three to the words in Deuteronomy 14 that his hearers knew so well. To them, tithing and their storehouses were intrinsically linked together. They knew that God had commanded through Moses that they must give a tenth of their crop or a tenth of their increase in livestock to their local storehouse, every third year.

The interesting point we can all learn from Malachi 3 v 10 is that God used the term "storehouse" as a metaphor, by adding the words: *"that there may be food in My house"*. To understand that metaphor we first have to know the meaning of the term "My house".

(b) The Phrase "My House"

Some Bible teachers have missed the metaphor, and assumed that "My house" simply refers to "God's House", i.e. the physical Temple. They then translate this into today's terms as meaning simply "a church building", thereby missing the imagery and the real meaning behind God's words. i.e. They have failed to think big enough!

Let's look in the Bible at "My house" to find its true meaning.

The meaning of the phrase "My house".

The words for "house" in the Bible can have two meanings:

They can either mean:

- a "physical house",
- or they can refer to a people, tribe or family. e.g. "the house of David".

In both the Hebrew and Greek the same word is used for both uses of the word.

Significantly in the New King James Version of the Bible, in Malachi 3 v 10, the word "My" begins with a capital "M".

Turning to my Bible computer program, which co-incidentally is also in the NKJV, I checked for the phrase: "My house". I was looking only for those occasions when the phrase commences with a capital "M", in the same way as in Malachi 3 verse 10.

When is the first time the phrase is used in Scripture with a capital "M", to denote that the house belongs to God, as it is in Malachi 3 v 10?

ANSWER: It's in Numbers 12 v 7.

The context is the deeply-felt jealousy by Aaron and Miriam of their brother's unique God-given ministry before God. This finally manifested in racial criticism of Moses' wife by Miriam.

God answered from the pillar of fire:

*"If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord make Myself known to him in a vision, and I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all **My house**. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings;"*

What do you think the phrase means here?

God obviously wasn't referring to the temple. Nor was He referring to its equivalent at that time: the tabernacle tent.

Here the word "house" refers to **God's rule; God's dominion among all His people.**

- In short: **God's Kingdom on earth.**

As you know, it's important to check the meaning of a phrase when it first appears in Scripture, as this normally determines its meaning throughout subsequent Scripture. This is termed by Bible teachers as "the doctrine of first-mention".

When God says:

*"Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in **My house**",* He is referring to His dominion and rule upon this earth among His people. This is most important; since the verse in Malachi also goes on to explain the purpose of the tithe:

"that there may be food in My house"

If the meaning of "My house" in Malachi 3 verse 10 has a spiritual meaning, meaning "**God's Kingdom**", this completely changes the meaning of the verse from the way that Bible teachers have always taught it.

Instead of teaching that it has a natural meaning: - that tithes were to be given **to the Temple in Jerusalem**, God was teaching a spiritual lesson – that tithes were to be given **to His Kingdom**. This is extremely important if we are ever to understand the principle of tithing.

And what was "His Kingdom" then?

– His world-wide rule, His people - not the priests in the Temple, as we are often taught.

If you still have any doubts remaining on the above meaning on the term "My house", God Himself gives a Bible commentary on Numbers 12 verse 7 in the New Testament, as if to make the meaning of the term used in Malachi 3 v 10 absolutely clear. It is found in Hebrews 3 verses 1-6:

*"Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as **Moses was faithful in all God's house**. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. **Moses was faithful in all God's house**, testifying to what would be said in the future. **But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are His house**, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast."*

Can there still be any lingering doubt regarding the meaning of the first-mentioned "My House"?

When is the second time the term: "My house" is used in Scripture?

The term is next used in 1 Chron. 17 v 14.

It is part of a prophecy given by Nathan the prophet, to David, in reply to David's request to build "a house" for the Lord. Throughout the message delivered by Nathan, beginning at verse 4, God refers to the house which He will enable one of David's sons to build as "**a house**".

Then half way through verse 12 the mood changes: "...and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father and he will be my son." – and one senses that the prophet is now prophesying

of the Messiah:

*"I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over **My house** and My Kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever."*

What does "My house" mean in this passage?

The passage itself refers to King Solomon, but verses 12, 13 and 14 are prophetic of the coming Messiah - Jesus. **i.e. God will establish His kingdom and His throne forever.**

Again this talks of God's rule, **God's Kingdom.**

Do you agree? Look it up yourself.

What next?

Following these two, we find a number of references in the Scriptures to the temple as "**My house**" during and after its construction. This reflected the people's preoccupation at that time with this new building in their midst, as if it had now literally become God's spiritual home, in the same way as the neighbouring heathen peoples believed their chief god resided in their temple. In other words, the people at that time came to believe that God had come down from heaven and literally made His home in their midst, in the Jerusalem Temple. They were simply copying their neighbouring nations who believed that their gods lived in their temples. In doing so they were limiting their understanding of God, and also limiting their vision of God's reign over all the earth. To them the Temple in Jerusalem was the extent of God's presence, His Kingdom, on the earth. This was despite the words in Solomon's magnificent prayer at the dedication of the temple"

"But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built." 2 Chron. 6 v 18

From this time we see the beginning of an exchange of the two meanings of the word "house" that I noted earlier – "a physical house" or "a people". The Bible had at first used the phrase "My house" to say that **His people** comprised His kingdom, His reign on earth. With the building of the Temple the Israelites changed their world-view to that of the nations around them, by believing that the Temple represented His sole presence on earth. The phrase "My house" then came to mean **a building**, the Temple in Jerusalem, because they believed He literally lived there. They had reduced their vision of God's Kingdom down in both size and majesty to simply their temple. They had therefore limited God.

Following this period, it's difficult to judge whether the phrase refers to the Temple building, or to God's reign, as the Israelites began to see God and the Temple as indistinguishable.

For example, Jer.12 v 7:

"I have forsaken **My house**, I have left my heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hands of her enemies." - It could mean either!

In Is.56:6 we have the famous phrase applied to the Temple by Christ in Matthew, Mark and Luke:

*"For **My house** shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."*

This definitely referred to the physical building, not to God's Kingdom represented by His people. Sadly they had come to understand that the Temple was now God's throne on earth.

However by the time of Zechariah and the latter prophets the phrase was beginning to mean

God's kingdom once again - His people:
Zech.3 v 7:

*"Thus says the Lord of hosts:
If you will walk in My ways,
And if you will keep My command,
Then you shall also judge **My house**,
And likewise have charge of My courts;"*

and Zech.9 v 8:

*"I will camp around **My house** because of the army,
Because of him who passes by and him who returns.
No more shall an oppressor pass through **them**....."*

It was once more God's dominion and possession.
In these two passages it clearly refers to "His people".

Then of course we have the phrase '**My house**' in Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets. Why should it disagree with the meaning of the phrase in the other later prophets?

Finally may I quote the last time the phrase is used in Scripture. This time it was in a parable of Jesus, and this time the "m" is not a capital letter as it refers, in this parable, to the "house of the master":

Luke 14 v 23:

*"Then the master said to the servant, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that **my house may be filled**."*

We can easily see that on the surface Jesus is referring to the physical home belonging to the master.

However, what is the deeper spiritual lesson that Jesus is teaching?

- In the same way as Malachi, four hundred years earlier, Jesus was deliberately using, as a play on words, the double meaning of the word "house" as a metaphor.

Obviously Jesus wasn't really referring to a physical building. Jesus clearly refers here to nothing less than the whole glorious heavenly realm reserved for those who accept the invitation of our Lord to enter into the wedding feast. Again the meaning is 'God's Kingdom', but this time it is in its final heavenly form.

"That My house may be filled."

- Not a building
- Not even a people
- ***But HIS KINGDOM***

"That there may be food in **My house**" clearly speaks of **the Kingdom of God** and the provision promised for the work of His Kingdom now.

The Words of Stephen The Martyr

One night my wife and I were reading together as our evening devotion the account of Stephen in Acts 6, his speech to the Sanhedrin, and his death by stoning. What an inspirational story.

I was especially challenged by chapter 7 verses 48 – 50:

“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?’ says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

Has not my hand made all these things?”

Stephen was quoting from King Solomon’s dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 8 v 27 and from Isaiah 66 v 1 – 2. He used these quotations in the course of his historical review of the nation’s sin and hypocritical claim to be the justifiable sole possessor of the true God. In particular the quotations are a vehement attack upon its claim that the Jerusalem Temple was God’s house on earth; the “My House”.

I wonder how many of us have wondered whether God inhabits our church building in some special way. I know as a child I used to wonder why adults called our church “God’s house” when I knew He lived in Heaven.

Those who insist that “My house” in Malachi 3 v 10 refers to the Jerusalem Temple – aren’t they making the same hypocritical error as those in the Sanhedrin who stoned Stephen?

Verse.15

“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was the face of an angel.” -

Who among you would honestly say that Stephen “got it wrong”?

How then can you possibly say that “My house” is a church?

4. SUMMARY TO THIS POINT

If the command to tithe in Deuteronomy 14 verse 28”:

“At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites”

- is God’s commandment to tithe, then we should give these verses even more attention than we give to Malachi’s commentary. After all, it’s the original commandment which gives the authoritative detail such as “how”, “when”, “where”, “why”, and “for whom”. (under the doctrine of “first-mention”) Malachi simply preaches on the degree to which the people of his time complied with the original commandment in God’s Law that I had been searching for.

Tithes, according to this foundational teaching in Deut.14 v 29 - 29, were to be stored by the community leaders and given:

- To the Levites - that twelfth tribe of Israel, appointed by God to minister to Him on behalf of the other eleven tribes. They had no right to inherit or even possess land of their own.
- To the strangers.
- To orphans, and

- To widows, in that community.

i.e. to all those who were in need of financial social welfare because they were outside the system of inherited family land.

The earliest recorded storehouses in the Bible were to provide food for people in need, on a communal basis.

Therefore God is really saying Malachi 3 v 10:

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse that there may be food for My people.”

Malachi is thought to either be a contemporary of Nehemiah or lived soon after him. He was preaching during that renaissance of faith and practice after the return of the remnant from the captivity in Babylon. But the passage on which his preaching was based was nothing like I had expected. It bore no similarity to current church teaching or practice. Yet it obviously linked to Malachi’s words for a number of reasons.

As I went on to research the subject I began to feel that here was a major Bible principle that somehow still applied for today, and somehow it applied to the purpose of the book I was writing. It seemed plain that I must examine in depth the subject of tithing, yet all my research conclusions were in the negative. It was the one subject I did not want to study. What did it have to do with the purpose of my research into **“Why God’s Kingdom is limited by a shortage of money”**

But equally I couldn’t deny that God was leading me into a study of Malachi 3 v 9 – 10 and “the storehouse”. What was the connection between “the tithe” and “the storehouse”? – I didn’t understand.

And, did the commandment to tithe pre-date the Mosaic Law? After all, God will not bless His Church if it is still trying to obey the commandments of the Old Covenant.

And, did tithing, or the absence of tithing, really have anything to do with the subject of the book?

Moving On

For the next three years I researched what became a fascinating and extremely rewarding topic as I studied every Bible reference there is on “tithing”. Yes, “tithing”, I found, was indeed a key element in my search for the truth that I was researching – the reason for the shortage of finance in God’s Kingdom, but I could see no way that I could incorporate my findings into the book. At the end of three years I felt I had spent a huge amount of time, only to reach important but negative conclusions. I seriously considered deleting the entire topic altogether, feeling that I had wasted three years of study.

Finally I turned to my last remaining tithing mention in the Bible. I had never been comfortable with the writer of Hebrew’s purported debate on “tithing”, and his connection to the somewhat mystical king with the difficult name “Melchizedek” way back in the beginnings of the Bible. It happened to be the very first reference to “tithing” in the Bible. There, to my astonishment, I discovered God’s “principle” of the tithe, and for me the light suddenly turned on. Not only did it provide the answer to the “tithe” question, but it also placed the tithe squarely into the New Covenant and the centre of the gospel message; the Lord’s Supper.

Here is what I wrote as I finished writing on my newly discovered principle from the book of

Genesis:

“O why, why, why didn't I start with the first Bible mention of “tithing” – the principle - and save three years of struggle? It's the very lesson I have been telling you: - **Start first with the principle and thereby find God's heart.**” Understanding God's heart pours the light into the most difficult darkness.

Let's move straight into the principle.

4. Gen.14 v 18-20 – The birth of The Principle of the Tithe

As you would expect, and in accordance with the doctrine of “first mention”, the principle of the tithe is explained at the first mention of the word “tithe”, in Genesis 14 v 18 - 20.

Come, I want to show you a real cameo passage, a gem just packed with principles, and very suitable for a teaching sermon in church or at a home group, or even as a series. In fact as I have meditated on it since, I have felt God saying that this passage is the foundation of one of the most important principles of Scripture. I am talking of no less than the true meaning of the reason why we were commanded by Christ to celebrate the Lord's Supper together “*in remembrance of Me*”. i.e. the foundational Scripture regarding “The Principle of the Community of God's People”. This is extremely important. (However I will explain this in my next paper.)

For now I am speaking on another very important principle that is birthed in this passage, “The Principle of the Tithe”.

Let's read this astonishing passage together:

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram saying:

*“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.*

*And blessed be God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand”.*
Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.”

Bread and Wine!

What was so special about “bread and wine”?

What did “bread and wine” symbolise to Abraham?

But more importantly, what does it symbolise for you and I as New Covenant believers?

- Yes – Christ's redemption on the cross.

Did Melchizedek give the bread and wine to Abraham as a “type” in recognition of Christ's future crucifixion 2000 years later?

Or, did Christ deliberately choose bread and wine at the “last supper” to deliberately link the event with Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham?

And why did Christ choose bread and wine anyway?

Let's turn to “The Last Supper” for an answer.

The Last Supper

I have always been taught that Christ used bread and wine because these were the common foods of the day. But wasn't the object of the Passover feast the sacrifice of the Passover lamb? Yet none of the gospels or the letters to the New Testament churches even mention the presence of lamb on the menu! Certainly the lamb was to be the chief feature of that last supper, not bread and wine. (Luke 22 v 7 – 8) Yet Jesus deliberately chose to use bread and wine, to illustrate that the bread represented His body, and the wine the "New Covenant" in His blood. - WHY?

I ask that question as a challenge to The Church.

And why did He command that we observe this ceremony using the bread and wine, and not a lamb, as a memorial to Him and a proclamation of His death? (Lk.22 v 19, 1 Cor. 11 v 24 – 25) Didn't John the Baptist and many others describe Him as "*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*". (Jn.1 v 29) Certainly He would have been completely justified in centring the meal on the traditional lamb. The lamb (or goat sometimes) was traditionally the central feature of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Bible reports that Christ's death on the cross, in the ultimate sacrifice for our sin, fulfilled the Passover. It was the blood of the Passover lamb that saved the Israelites from God's judgement when they escaped from slavery to freedom. (Ex.12 v 21 – 23) Christ became our Passover lamb. (1 Cor. 5 v 7) He was killed at the very time of the anniversary-commemoration of the Passover Feast. And it would have linked with the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah chapter 53, the sacrificed lamb. Why then didn't Christ refer to it in His words at the last supper? We have to answer that question.

There is something mysterious about Christ's 'bread and wine'. I have come to the conclusion that Jesus deliberately emphasised the bread and wine in order to direct us to that time when Melchizedek brought bread and wine to Abraham, and blessed him. There is a message behind that little ceremony in Genesis 14 that illuminates the real meaning of The Last Supper and Christ's death on the cross.

Melchizedek, I'm sure, didn't bring the symbolic bread and wine to the rest of Abraham's men, although they were no doubt just as hungry and thirsty after the conquest. He brought them reverently only to Abraham, to honour him, as he recognised Abraham's unique role as the Lord's chosen instrument in the establishment of God's chosen people. He also brought them as symbolically representing Christ's body and blood that would be ultimately be given for us by God's son.

What did the bread and wine actually represent then? Perhaps we had better leave that to a later subject: "The Principle of Community". We have quite enough to consider in Genesis 14 at the moment.

Melchizedek

And why does the Bible call Melchizedek a priest? This, importantly, is the first occurrence of the word "priest" in the Bible. He is priest of "*El-'elyon*" meaning "the Supreme God" (verses 18 and 22). The Old Testament concept of a priest was: "one who represents God's among His people".

Abraham acknowledged him as THE direct representative of "*El-'elyon*".

Chapter 7 of the book of Hebrews identifies Melchizedek as both a king and priest of God Most High (El-'elyon), king of righteousness, king of peace, without beginning or end, and a priest "forever". It then quotes the messianic prophecy in Psalm 110 v 4 which was addressed to

Christ. What does it say?

“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek”.

The book of Hebrews interprets this verse and explains that Melchizedek was a priest in the same priestly “order” as Christ. (The “order” of each priest determined his duties and responsibilities in the Temple.) **Melchizedek therefore fulfilled the same priestly function as Christ, as God’s representative on earth.**

It’s easy to concentrate on this drama as the account of the tithe given by Abram to Melchizedek, the representative of God himself according to the book of Hebrews. In doing this we tend to miss the mystery of the earlier event that occurred; Melchizedek’s blessing of Abram with the bread and wine, which in turn led to the giving of the tithe. Notice, even the writer in the book of Hebrews seems to completely miss the wonder of the occasion: “that Melchizedek, God’s representative, actually blessed Abraham”, and not the other way round, as we tend to assume. Think about that now.

(a) The Importance of that Meeting

What is the meaning of that little scene in Genesis 14?

-There were two human players who took part in it. One, Abram, (who was renamed Abraham by God in the next chapter) represented God’s chosen people.

The other (Melchizedek) represented God Himself. Melchizedek was the representative of “El-elyon”, as I have said.

I expect in fact that this scene actually portrayed the symbolic meeting between God’s chosen people, represented by Abraham - and God, represented by Melchizedek, who was priest forever in the order of Christ. In other words it was like the formal meeting of two ambassadors over a meal in preparation for the signing of a treaty by their leaders which would govern the relationship between God and His chosen people at that time. (Remember - sharing a meal had huge significance in the Middle-eastern culture)

Did the ambassadors sign a treaty there? – No they didn’t. This was the preparation by the two ambassadors for the treaty. God Himself was about to formalise the covenant between Abraham as representative of God’s chosen people, and God Himself, in the next chapter of Genesis.

Even more importantly it was a symbolic forerunner of The New Covenant, the new relationship between God and mankind that would later be established through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. In other words it was a picture of the **future** re-joining of mankind, represented by Abraham, the father of God’s chosen people, to God Himself, through Christ. (*“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek”.* – Ps. 110.v.4)

This then is the reason why Christ deliberately emphasised the bread and wine as a fulfilment of those few simple verses in Genesis.

Matt.26 v 26 – 28, Mark 14 v 22 – 24, Lk.22 v 20 and 1 Corinthians 11 v 24 – 25 all link this celebration to **the birth of the “New Covenant”**.

For example:

*“The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way after supper he took the cup, saying, “**This cup is the new covenant in my blood;***

do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

And so do we in that symbolic act called “Communion”, “Eucharist”, or “Lord’s Supper”.

We celebrate the re-joining, reconciliation, of man with his maker, prophesied by the loving sacrament of the bread and wine administered **to** Abraham (representing mankind), **by** Melchizedek (representing Christ), and fulfilled later by Christ. Christ made a way so that we could once more be reconciled with our creator (Rom.5 v 10, 2 Cor. 5.18 - 20). Christ has blessed us, as symbolised through the bread and the wine, just as Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and restored the oneness relationship to mankind that we once enjoyed with our creator before the fall.

There is a lot to think and meditate on here, and no doubt you will be rewarded with even more explanations of the wonder of these verses as you rest in Him.

What a lot there is in the Bible. It continually amazes me as I study His principles. The Bible is “one”. We humanly underestimate it.

Is the above “new teaching”? – That the bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper are linked to Genesis 14 v 18? It certainly is news to me! I can’t find any reference to the symbolism of the “bread and wine” given to Abraham in any of my Bible commentaries. It amazes me that they don’t connect it with Christ’s “Last Supper”. Psalm 110 v 4 simply endorses that linkage.

(b) What Then Does This Tell Us about the Principle of the Tithe?

We need to firstly consider what took place at that meeting of the two. Abraham, chosen and called out by *Yahweh* to become a great nation and bless all peoples on earth (Gen 12 v 2), there met with the Melchizedek, Canaanite king of Salem (probably “Jerusalem”), worshipper of *El-elyon* and “*priest of God Most High*”. Furthermore Abraham must have understood this Canaanite king to somehow be the representative of the true God Himself whom they both worshipped. This was despite the fact that each knew God by a different name.

As Scripture later says, he was a priest in the same order as Christ!
And Melchizedek brought the symbolical bread and wine, and **he blessed Abraham**.

What do you think Abraham did then?
I’m quite sure Abraham lay prostrate on the ground, worshipping God. What do you think?
And then it says:
“Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.”

We can correctly point out that this tithe was a custom of the day. But remember, Christ deliberately linked this ceremony with The Last Supper, and the Bible deliberately links Melchizedek with Christ through Psalm 110 v 4’s prophecy as well. This scene is extremely symbolic.

What does it tell us about the tithe?

The little scene tells me:

1. Like Abraham’s tithe, our tithe is simply symbolic of the offering of our whole selves completely
2. in worship

3. to one who is greater than ourselves
4. in full reverence and loving adoration; to a king (remember)
5. in humility
6. and in gratitude - **after, (not before), we have first been blessed by the king,**
7. blessed, not in monetary terms, but by Christ's gift of himself on the cross, reconciling and restoring us to His Father.

It was not the proportion that Abraham gave, but the fact that his gift was representative of his total humility and worship before God's representative that was important.

To stress the proportion of income given, instead of the fact that it represents the complete offering of ourselves, turns the beautiful Bible principle of **an offering** into a fixed obligation, and thereby completely destroys the very principle itself. Can you see what I am saying? I will say it again:

“To stress the proportion of income given, instead of the fact that it represents the complete offering of ourselves, turns the beautiful Bible principle of an offering into a fixed obligation, and thereby completely destroys the very principle itself”.

I'll explain:

On the basis of “first mention”, we have just studied the Bible principle of tithing in Genesis chapter 14. If those verses contain the principle, and if the principle that they show tells us that the tithe given by Abraham was a free-will offering, **then there simply cannot be a command to tithe in accordance with that principle** anywhere in the Bible. It therefore follows that any passage in the Bible relating to **a commandment to tithe** will be speaking about an entirely different principle to that in Genesis 14. After-all, how can you be “commanded” to give a free-will offering of 10% of your income? Following from this then **there can be no connection between the commandments to tithe in The Law of Moses (and Malachi which takes up that law), and the principle of tithing in Genesis chapter 14.**

This is why I cannot find a commandment anywhere that is associated with the principle shown in the account of Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek. How could a commandment be associated with the principle of a free-will offering? The offering God longs for is our decision to lay down our lives and take up His. Every offering we give to Him must be an expression of our total being, given to Him in worship at His feet. How could such an offering possibly be commanded? To command such an offering would destroy the very principle of that offering.

It would be like God commanding us to enter into salvation. Would He ever do that? – NO And equally - nor would He “command” us to tithe.

In Rev. 3 v 20 God says:

“Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him.” He doesn't command – He invites.

Again the equally well-known John 3 v 16 says: *“that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* - The choice is ours.

By His very nature God's desire is for our free-will surrender of our lives to Him. Any offering to Him is, by definition, an offering of our whole selves in simple, unreserved, surrendered obedience. Paul summarises God's desire in the well-known Romans 12 v 1:

“Therefore I urge you brothers.....to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.”

Under the New Covenant every offering to God, no matter what we call it, can only be a free-will offering, symbolising our lives surrendered to Him.

What did Abraham Tithe?

- Can we Create a Tradition by Copying What He Did?

“And Abraham in return gave him “a tenth of everything” as an offering to God’s anointed representative.”

Do we know what it was that Abraham tithed?

How many of you wondered what it was that he gave when you read that Abraham gave “a tenth of everything”? (Gen.14 v 20) Some translations state, “a tenth of all”. The Hebrew word used for “all” is “kowl”, meaning “whole”.

We assume that he gave a tenth of the spoils won in the battle. But the observant reader will have noticed that there were actually three people present throughout this little scene of worship.

The king of Sodom was the first to greet Abraham. He no doubt came to congratulate him and claim his goods and his people, rescued by Abraham, and whatever other spoils he could get. He watched as Melchizedek arrived with bread and wine for Abraham, and watched as Abraham gave Melchizedek, in turn, a tenth “of everything”, and worshipped.

If Abraham at this ceremony represented “God’s chosen people”, and Melchizedek represented Christ, who do you think the King of Sodom represented?

Yes you are probably right. He is usually present at times of worship, silently observing.

So why then did Bera, King of Sodom say to Abraham: “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself?”

- Hadn’t he just watched Abraham give away a tenth of the goods already?
- But had Abraham given away a tenth of the goods?

Abraham replies that he has just raised his hand to El-‘elyon, (through Melchizedek - His representative), and has taken an oath that he will not accept anything belonging to the King of Sodom. He would keep back nothing except what his men had eaten and the share that belonged to the men who had fought with Abraham, in order that the King of Sodom could never say later, “I made Abraham rich”. In other words, he gave Bera his people and all the spoils of war except what Abraham’s men had eaten and the share that belonged to the men who had fought with him.

Abraham couldn’t and wouldn’t have already given a tithe of the spoils of war as an offering to Melchizedek! He wouldn’t, because as he states in verse 23, he regarded the goods, with those two exceptions, as belonging to the King of Sodom. – At least that’s my interpretation.

How could he offer to Melchizedek a tenth as an offering to God Himself, that which he already regarded as rightfully belonging to the king of Sodom?

Where then do we get the idea that he had tithed the spoils of war?

- We get it from the book of Hebrews. It comes from Hebrews 7 v 4. Verse 2 says that he gave “*a tenth of everything*”, but in verse 4 it says he gave “*a tenth of the plunder*”, or “*a tenth of the spoils*” depending upon which translation you are reading.

So what did Abraham tithe? - What do you think?

I would like to think that he gave a pledge to Melchizedek of 10% of his own **personal** possessions and future possessions. This would nicely answer the question of whether his gift was a oncer or whether it established a principle for his whole life. However Hebrews 7 v 4 puts my hope in doubt. We simply don't know.

This again simply illustrates the futility of treating the principle expressed by this gift as a clear law to be copied and obeyed. We simply don't know the details. And I'm glad we don't know the details, as someone would be sure to try and copy them. Instead we are following a principle, and principles don't need details.

This is neatly explained by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 v 6:

“He has made us ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life”.

- In other words the New Covenant under which we live today is not “of the letter of The Law”, but “*of the Spirit*”.

It doesn't matter what he gave? – It wouldn't have mattered to God at any rate. God looks on the heart.

6. REFLECTIONS ON THE PRINCIPLE OF TITHING

I wonder if Moses ever realised the confusion it would later cause in The Church, when he chose “*a tithe of the annual crop, every third year*” as the rate of **tax** to be levied upon farmers for the financing of the social welfare system for those who would be outside the system of family land inheritance.

God had already given him instructions for several forms of offerings to be brought by the people. “Tithing” as an offering, was an ancient rite of Israel's patriarchs, which hadn't been practiced since Israel's entry into Egypt. In its place were set laws and procedures governing worship and offerings at the tabernacle through a formal structure of priests.

It is only now when we blow the dust off the pages of Genesis, that we find revealed the true glory of the original, as a free-will offering of oneself.

The principle we find exposed tells us:

- The tithe must be brought as a key part of our worship to Him. I am absolutely certain that Abraham gave his tithe as he lay prostrate on the ground and worshipped God.
- Tithes are an offering of ourselves, the same as any other form of offering.
- It's not the amount that we give that is important, according to Christ's teachings,
- but it's the attitude in which we give it - as a genuine symbolic offering of ourselves,
- and its the quality of our offering,
- that are of overriding importance.

If we follow Abraham's example, our tithes should be given as an offering of ourselves as we

lie prostrate before Him, in worship. But then if we followed his example it would only end up as another traditional ritual, while we take pride that we have “obeyed a commandment”.

God is not so much interested in what we give, but in how we give and what we do with it. For example, do we give as an offering a financial substitute for our time and energy, like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, because we avoid putting time and energy into the Kingdom?

God doesn’t want obedience to commandments. He wants obedience to His principles, and they require meditation and a heart response. It’s much easier to follow commandments, and we all subconsciously tend to do so if given the opportunity. That is why God later disdained their sacrifices.

We will never understand and know the heart of God by religiously following commandments.

I pray that His Church seeks and finds His principles. They are eternal, and tithing is one of them, not the detail of how much, but how. Again quoting Paul:

“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion.” (2 Cor. 9 v 7)

For if you think about it, it’s impossible to bring to God an offering of ourselves when we are bringing it in obedience. The principle of “an offering” is completely cancelled by a gift given out of a sense of obedience. And that is the heart of the principle. Unless it is given as a symbolic spontaneous free-will offering of ourselves, it is not an offering.

I am not saying that **all** our giving to God should be given as an offering. This would be at variance with another very important Bible principle; the principle of “Stewardship”, which states that all that we have is already His. We are His stewards, bringing the fruit of His gifts in our lives to Him.

But presently, some in The Church seem confused between these two extremely important principles – giving back to God as a steward, and presenting an offering of ourselves. I often hear in church the phrase: “giving our tithes and offerings”, as if they are different. “Tithes” and “offerings” are the same. I pray that many others will think this through and teach this truth to His Church, for mandatory “offerings”, disguised as tithes, are one of the major reasons why God’s Spirit today is being grieved, and we are not seeing the promised blessings in His Kingdom, both in the financial and in other areas.