

An Open Letter on Giving in Kenya

—Gideon Kiongo

TO MY BROTHERS IN THE LORD:

I would like to share some thoughts with you regarding giving by the Church in Kenya, hoping that your understanding will be enriched and that you will be further equipped to challenge the church in her giving.

First, I agree wholeheartedly that the Church in Kenya has been endowed with wealth - I mean material riches. One has only to drive from Nairobi to some up-country town and observe the level of development and investment. Many have built stone or brick houses with a tile roof which are quite expensive to build. This is because our people believe that the up-country house is their real home rather than the town dwelling which is just the house from which one occupies while working in the city prior to retirement.

If you visit the “houses” in the cities, you will observe (on the average), expensive furniture and electronic equipment. Those in the church go to the weekly celebration

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meetings and give what is acknowledged to be “very little” in tithes and offerings. Is it because the Church has not been taught about tithing and giving? The answer to that is an ever-resounding YES. I believe that from the beginning, such teaching has been inadequate. This has often resulted in giving which is not Biblically balanced. These have to be addressed as one seeks to teach giving. The Church must be made to understand where we have become “lopsided” in our teaching and practice.

The very offertory plates and baskets we use suggest what our people are expected to contribute. These are designed to hold money (notes and coins) which limit giving other things to the church. However, when you look at giving in both the Old and New Testaments, you clearly see the giving of substance which, of course, included money but was not limited to that. I believe our earliest teachers misunderstood the essence of giving to the church from an African perspective. I would go further and state that their “theology of giving” was not Biblically balanced either. The examples they used were that of the “coin” that Jesus instructed Peter to get from the fish so he could pay the government tax and that of the poor widow who gave two mites. Each of these narrations is instructive in giving. However, we should be aware of the context as we draw out the teaching. Sadly, we have basically

carried on the misconceptions of those who first brought us the Gospel.

Some years ago, I met a retired missionary from Burundi. Among other things, we discussed giving in our local churches. He told me about an experience in the local church in which he served. Giving was so low that the needs in the church were not adequately being met. Their sermons were about things other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After prayer, the Lord impressed on them to have the local leaders study the Word of God in regard to giving and then prepare to teach their own people.

What they discovered revolutionized giving in that local church. Giving back to God of the “substance” God had given them was the catch phrase. They came up with a list of things which included cows, goats, chickens, rabbits, maize, bananas, avocados, papayas, beans, vegetables and the like. They also reminded people that their gifts could include their time, their energy and their labor.

Next came the issue of how to give this “substance.” They decided to “redesign” the offertory basket. At the furthest end of the church grounds they built an enclosure for animals which would be offered to the Lord. They also built a raised rack covered with grass thatch roofing to hold any agricultural produce given. They then visited church members in their homes with the “new,” yet old teaching on giving as unto the Lord. What they had to say was simply taught and simply understood. They reported to their people that God gives us our daily bread, and He does not mind receiving from us on a daily basis either. As such, someone was placed near the church on a daily basis (a full-time Christian worker), who accepted and recorded all that was given. In addition, each contributor was given an official receipt for their tithes and offerings. The livestock and agricultural produce that were received were then sold on the next market day which happened to be each Tuesday.

They acquired a stall and an area on the market grounds from which to sell their produce and livestock. The full-time worker was kept busy. They would then deposit the proceeds, and soon their account in the local bank was comparable only to that of the richest man in their small town! Since many church members also purchased their produce on a weekly basis, they were only too glad to buy from the church stall. The local church also used the produce given as tithes and offerings to help needy members as well as needy unbelievers amongst them. This made those involved in the benevolence ministry very encouraged because there was now something to share.

This all reminds me of the church as narrated in the first chapters of the

other input from the listeners. The moral of the story is then embraced or “owned” by the entire group. These stories, told by real people to other people, can be used to complement the pulpit (TV included) and tape ministry on the same subject. Sometimes modern forms of communication are overrated in regard to being the most effective ways to teach our people to obey what Christ commanded. We must “reincarnate” giving as understood by the local people in the context, reminding them that they have received from the Lord and need to give back something in return. Looking at that Burundian local Church, note the importance of giving to the local believers in need (Christ’s body), but also to those not yet in Christ (the unevangelized).

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book of Acts. It exemplifies a doctrine understood by the African Church within its customs and values. This is where I believe those who brought the Gospel could have done better. What will it take to undo the wrong teaching? We must talk about it, especially in our homes and in the marketplaces. We must involve our church members in the discussion as we seek to understand what God requires of us in obedience. It is important that we employ the ever so powerful mode of communication in which Africans are renowned experts. I am referring to African “storytelling.”

African stories are not scheduled, but are simply told as we sit in our houses, walk in our streets and visit in the marketplaces. We discuss things on the way to work even as we ride the buses. The storyteller is at times interrupted with questions and

I leave you with a thought that bothers me a great deal. When God asked the people to bring tithes into the storehouse as we read in Malachi 3:10, was He not referring to the “temple”? For it was in the context of the Old Testament. This concept, together with Christ’s work of the Cross, should inspire us to meet the needs of those who are needy in our midst. I am not saying that we do not need to build church buildings. I am suggesting that we look seriously at both the Old Testament and New Testament in order to grasp the importance of this matter of giving. If we do this, we will begin to understand the privilege of giving found throughout God’s word. ☉

Your brother in the Lord,
Gideon Kiongo

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