



**ChristCommunity**  
an Evangelical Free Church

# EXPLORING GOD'S DESIGN FOR GENEROSITY

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This paper is an excerpt from Tom Nelson's book *The Economics of Neighborly Love*, Chapter 8: Wise Generosity.

*Tom Nelson, The Economic of Neighborly Love, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 110-126.*

*Exploring God's Design for Generosity*  
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*"Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce, then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine."*

*Proverbs 3:9-10*

## DESIGN-BASED GIVING

If we are going to be wise stewards, we need to embrace God's design for generosity. At Christ Community, we've come to call this approach "design-based giving." Design-based giving challenges us to reconsider our priorities, and to reevaluate the focus of our generosity.

Before we press further into the details of the design-based giving approach, perhaps more discussion of what we mean by "design-based" would be helpful. As followers of Christ, we believe that God has a design for how we are to live our lives. We believe this design is revealed to us in Holy Scripture. Made in the image of a generous, outpouring God, we've been designed to be generous with our time, talents and our treasures. Design-based giving not only recognizes that we are to be generous, but also embraces the truth that God has given us a design template for how we are to give. At the heart of this design is a gracious generosity that looks through the lens of Holy Scripture and sees the local church as the primary focus of financial giving.

Scripture presents to us a design for true human flourishing and the collective common good. As image bearers of the Triune God, we were created to be generous by One whose very nature is generous outpouring.<sup>1</sup> Harold Best insightfully makes the point, *"Because God is the Continuous Outpourer, we bear his image as continuous outpourers. Being made in the image of God means that we were created to act as God acts, having been given a nature within which such behavior is natural."*<sup>2</sup> Each one of us has been created by our generous God to be generous. We were created not with a closed fist, but with open hands. An unwillingness to be generous or a decision to embrace a selfish greed goes against the grain of our original creation nature and design. In this sense, nothing is more unnatural than a person lacking generosity. Jesus' words *"it is more blessed to give than to receive,"* affirms this bedrock theological truth anchored in God's creation design (Acts 20:35).

Though sin entered God's good world, marring the divine image we were created to reflect, our generous God sent his son Jesus to this sin-scarred earth to shed his atoning blood on a cruel Roman cross. The Apostle Paul describes the generous outpouring of our salvation. *"But when the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, but the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior"* (Titus 3:4-6). When we in faith and repentance embrace the Gospel, we are not only forgiven of our sin; we become new creations in Christ. As new creation individuals originally created to be generous, we are in Christ recreated to

<sup>1</sup> Harold Best puts it this way, "God is the uniquely Continuous Outpourer. He cannot but give of himself, reveal himself, pour himself out. Even before he chooses to create, and before he chooses to reveal himself beyond himself, he eternally pours himself out to his triune Self in unending fellowship, ceaseless conversation and immeasurable love unto an infinity of the same."

Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 23.



be generous. We are called into a new creation community, the local church, where generosity finds its full and collective expression. Though it is beyond our scope to highlight the many biblical texts that speak of being good and generous stewards of our financial treasure, we would like to erect a theologically-informed, paradigmatic scaffolding for design-based giving based upon three bedrock ideas:

- God owns it all.
- We give God our best.
- The local church is plan A for the world.

## GOD OWNS IT ALL

At its heart, design-based giving embraces the bedrock truth that God owns it all. The Psalmist declares *“the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it”* (Psalm 24:1). The writer of Chronicles echoes this foundational truth. *“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all.”* (1 Chronicles 29:11-12a). Because God owns it all, we recognize that all our financial assets belong to Him.

We are stewards of the time, talent and treasure He has entrusted to us. Randy Alcorn rightly recognizes stewardship as a foundational category in Christian discipleship. *“Stewardship is not a subcategory of the Christian life. Stewardship is the Christian life. For what is stewardship but that God has entrusted to us life, time, talents, money, possessions, family, his grace and even his Son? In each case he evaluates how we regard and what we do with that which he has entrusted to us...It is living life with the acute awareness that we are managers, not owners, that we are caretakers of God’s assets, which he has entrusted to us while we are on earth. How we handle our money and possessions will be determined by whom we really believe to be their true owner—and ours.”*<sup>3</sup> We are stewards who will be held accountable for what we have done with what we have been given. The sobering reality is this: we are not owners, but managers. This truth must stay in front of us and remind us that our wealth and economic capacity is not ours to do with as we please. Rather, we must do with it what its true Owner would desire.

## GIVING GOD OUR BEST

Designed-based giving not only embraces the bedrock truth that God owns it all, it also affirms that we are called to give our very best. The writer of Proverbs reminds us that we honor God by giving Him the first fruits of our economic activity and productivity.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the first check we write each pay period and the first consideration in our yearly financial plan, as well as in our long-term estate planning, should be focused on our God-honoring generosity.

Making financial giving our highest budgetary priority is most often not a matter of the head, but the heart. Jesus reminds us that if we get our economic treasure right, our heart will follow. Perhaps no place in the New Testament is this truth more vividly expressed than in Jesus’ encounter with a chief tax collector by the name of Zacchaeus. Embracing Jesus as his Messiah, Zacchaeus immediately realizes the implication for his wealth. Zacchaeus says to Jesus, *“Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold”* (Luke 19:8) When Jesus sees

<sup>3</sup> Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 172, 184.

<sup>4</sup> We see this priority in giving at the early dawn of creation, when Cain and Abel bring offerings to God from the first fruits of their work. For some reason - most likely a wrongfully motivated heart - Cain’s first fruits giving was rejected by God.



that Zacchaeus is putting his treasure in the right place, he knows his heart is in the right place. John Schneider looks to the transformation of Zacchaeus, *“In this story it is not that a man is saved from the economics of the world, but that the world is redeemed in and through the salvation and the new economics of the man.”*<sup>5</sup> The primacy of giving God our best both in proper motive and substance is also seen in the contrast in giving between Barnabas, and Ananias and Sapphira. While Barnabas gives his very best, Ananias and Sapphira deceptively create the illusion they have given their best when they indeed have not. The severity of the consequences resulting from their stewardship deception should make us shudder.<sup>6</sup>

When we give God our best, we start with the foundational baseline of tithing. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s covenant people offered God their tithes and offerings in the context and place of their corporate worship. For example, the renewal of God’s covenant people in the time of Nehemiah emphasized the generous giving of God’s people as it was directed toward the house of God.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, when we read the design for giving that is presented in the Old Testament, we push back against it, saying it is a form of “legalism”. In those private conversations of the soul, we persuade ourselves that things are vastly different in the New Testament. But, if we take a closer look at the Holy Scriptures we actually see a great deal of continuity between the Old and the New Testaments.<sup>8</sup> Not only does the Apostle Paul describe the New Testament church as the “household of God”, he also speaks of regular giving that occurred above and beyond the baseline of tithing.<sup>9</sup> In the New Testament, we observe that the local church is the primary recipient of Christ followers’ generous giving.

## THE LOCAL CHURCH AS PLAN A

Design-based giving embraces the bedrock truth that the local church is “Plan A” for God’s purposes in the world. In Holy Scripture, institutions matter. God designed the local church to be the central path through which humans fulfill God’s kingdom purposes in the world. God did not design His redeemed world to be filled with isolated, redeemed individuals. Rather, He desires for new creation communities, bound together in common purpose, to flourish in particular places and times, so that they might be a blessing to their neighbors.

When we speak of the institutional nature of the local church, we affirm the importance of ongoing organizational structures that make possible a long-established, faithful church presence in a particular location. When the New Testament speaks of the church, its primary focus is the local church. Indeed, the Apostles interpreted Jesus’ words given to his disciples that he would build his church as a clear and compelling mandate for planting local churches throughout the world. The planting and multiplication of local churches throughout the book of Acts demonstrates that the

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5 John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 165.

6 See Acts 5:36-6:11

7 See Nehemiah 10

8 There is a significant degree of debate about tithing both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Some see discontinuity between the Old Testament and New Testament, while others see continuity. We believe Randy Alcorn rightly recognizes a strong thread of continuity, concluding that Jesus didn’t ever suggest the “floor” set by the tithe was eliminated, but rather that “the ceiling of Christian giving was far above it.”

See, Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 216.

9 See 1 Timothy 3:15; Acts 2:44-45, 4:34-35



Apostles understood local churches to be uniquely designed and gifted by the Spirit to be God's "Plan A" for fulfilling both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

The local church, as Christ designed it and indwells it, is both a growing organism as well as an ongoing institution. Throughout the book of Acts, we not only see the transformation of individuals as the Gospel is proclaimed, we also see the intentional establishment of local church structures with institutional organization that supports this organic growth. Local churches were planted and embryonic leadership structures were quickly established that allowed these churches to eventually become more fully developed institutions, with increased numerical size and sociological complexity. Because of this institutional design, local churches are able to establish an ongoing faithful presence in a community that transcends any one individual.<sup>10</sup> This faithful presence allows for the continued fulfillment of the church's mandate to be salt and light in a particular cultural context, contributing to the common good and presenting an ongoing, incarnational apologetic for the gospel.

## FOGGY THINKING ABOUT "GRACE GIVING"

While there is strong biblical support for design-based giving, there remains a good deal of foggy thinking around God-honoring generosity, particularly concerning what is often described as "grace giving," or the ability of New Testament Christians to give freely, as their heart leads. One reason for this confusion is a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching on generosity. While writing to the local church at Corinth, Paul says, "*Let each one do just as he purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver*" (2 Corinthians 9:7). What is Paul saying to the local church at Corinth? Is Paul saying their economic giving is to be guided solely by what feels right? Not exactly.

Paul's inspired words must be seen in their proper context. Paul's letter to the local church in Corinth was written as he was travelling on his way back to Jerusalem. Along with a group of his companions, Paul decided to take a special one-time collection from the local churches he has planted throughout Asia Minor. This collection was intended to support the local church in Jerusalem, which was facing financial difficulty. In spite of the clear context of Paul's financial appeal, this text is commonly used to promote the idea that individuals are free to give to whatever or whoever he or she desires. That is simply not the case.

A careful reading of 2 Corinthians clarifies that Paul's instructions to the Corinthians do not address baseline obedience to tithing, or first fruits giving. Rather, Paul is encouraging the Corinthian believers to give "above and beyond" their regular financial support of their local church to meet a specific need. Paul is not exhorting those in the Corinthian church to give whatever they feel like. Rather, Paul is saying that when it comes to "above and beyond" giving, individuals retain

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<sup>10</sup> In our thinking about local churches as institutions, we are greatly indebted to James Davison Hunter's excellent formulation of the call of the church to be a faithful presence within its cultural context. James Davison Hunter, *To Change The World, The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity In The Late Modern World*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).



the freedom to decide if or how much to give as a matter of conscience. In reality, Paul is prodding the Corinthians toward a greater lifestyle of generosity.

In the early church, “above and beyond” giving was not to be dictated by anyone, but to be done voluntarily from the heart according to the Spirit’s leading. The early church’s redistribution of wealth and the giving of Barnabas, for example, reflect this kind of voluntary, “above and beyond” grace giving.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to observe that expressions of “above and beyond” giving were not given individual-to-individual in New Testament churches, but to and through the local church to which the giver belonged.

When Paul’s inspired words to the believers in the local church at Corinth are taken out of context and presented as the guiding template for giving in the New Testament, we distort the Bible’s teaching and reinforce cultural values of individualism, pragmatism and anti-institutionalism. We minimize the local church in God’s design for generosity, and instead act according to our own values and preferences. All too often, the confusion between design-based and “grace giving” leads to creative rationalizations for not tithing to a local church.

There are many rationalizations for not faithfully supporting the local church, such as “my tithe goes to a missionary,” or “I give my tithe to parachurch organizations,” or “I am helping out a family member get through college,” or “I have a neighbor who is in need.” The capacity for human rationalization is endless. Like the Good Samaritan, we are to be available and generous in helping someone in immediate need. This is the calling of every true follower of Jesus, but it doesn’t relieve us of the privilege and responsibility to generously support our local church. Giving to a worthy parachurch organization is a good thing, but this is not a substitute for local church giving. Giving to worthwhile organizations in addition to maintaining our responsibility to our local church calls each of us to cultivate greater economic capacity as well as embrace non-indulgent lifestyles where increased economic generosity is made possible. We are not to negate our responsibility for honoring God’s design by tithing to the household of God, our local church. In the Old Testament the failure to do this was rightly labeled “*robbing God*” (Malachi 3:8).

Properly understood, the biblical framework of design-based giving assists us in making wise stewardship decisions regarding the direction of our generous giving. When we embrace design-based giving, we understand that God owns it all, that tithing to the local church is the baseline of God-honoring obedience, and that the local church is God’s “Plan A” for His redemptive purposes. The local church as both an organism and institution is designed to be an ongoing faithful presence in a community, and is irreplaceable in its effectiveness for Gospel proclamation and Gospel mission in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> See Acts 2:42-47, 5:32-37



# CONCLUSION

In all of this discussion, perhaps the strongest reason we can and should give generously to the local church is by recognizing how deeply loved the church is by Jesus Himself. While Jesus' mission in the world begins and ends with divine love, only one thing in all of creation is ever described as His Bride, and that is the local church.

In chapter 5 of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes to the believers about marriage, and the roles a husband and wife play in loving one another. We can learn much from Paul's writing about flourishing human marriage, but Paul's ultimate point is not about husband and wife, but Christ and the church. Indeed, human marriage is presented as a reflection of Jesus' marital love for the church: *This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church* (Ephesians 5:22-23).

Although the importance of the universal, invisible church is taught in the book of Ephesians, the primary thrust of Paul's teaching is directed toward local church life. Most of Paul's emphasis and instruction is lived out in historical time, embodied space, cultural diversity and geographic proximity. In other words, a local church filled with actual people! It is to this embodied local church that Paul ascribes this most extravagant title: you are the Bride of Christ! Jesus' love for the local church can only be described as a loving husband enraptured by his bride for all eternity.

When we begin to see the local church as Jesus does, it becomes much easier to love and support her as we ought. As apprentices, we learn not only how to live like Jesus, but also to love what He loves. If we take Paul's metaphor seriously, then Jesus' love for the local church, even Christ Community, is like nothing else in all creation. If Jesus loves the church like that, we should, too!

One of the most important aspects of loving Christ's bride is our generous first fruit giving, as well as Spirit-led above-and-beyond giving. Design-based giving requires loving what Jesus loves, and reflects a properly ordered heart.<sup>12</sup> Randy Alcorn puts it well: Do you want your heart to be in your church? Give money to your church. Your heart will never be where your money isn't. It will be where your money is.<sup>13</sup>

When embraced wholeheartedly, design-based giving provides a local church with the economic resources necessary to empower its catalytic gospel mission for the good of others to the glory of Christ.<sup>14</sup> And more than that, when we love the local church well, we are that much closer to the heart of Jesus. So let us strive to excel still more in loving Jesus' Bride for His glory.

<sup>12</sup> For a broader discussion of the local church and particularly the importance of the bride of Christ metaphor, see Tom Nelson's book, *Ekklesia: Rediscovering God's Design for the Church*.

<sup>13</sup> Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 130.

<sup>14</sup> To learn more about how to give to Christ Community, please visit our website: [www.ChristCommunityKC.org](http://www.ChristCommunityKC.org)