

Community of Christ

President's Address October 5, 2014

Hello and welcome! Today we are discussing the part of the words of counsel that addresses God's grace, the church's mission, and our generosity. Let's listen to those paragraphs again:

Free the full capacity of Christ's mission through generosity that imitates God's generosity. Discover deep joy and life's meaning by promoting divine purposes on Earth. Listen to the testimonies of those who are responding and follow your soul's yearning to come home to God's grace and generosity.

Remember, a basic discipleship principle is growing Christ's mission through both local and world mission tithes according to true capacity. Giving to other worthwhile organizations, while an important part of A Disciple's Generous Response, follows world and local mission tithing and should not diminish or replace it. If a law is needed to focus and balance response, then let these tithing principles serve that purpose.

Tithing is a spiritual practice that demonstrates willingness to regularly offer every dimension of one's life to God. When defined by faith, love, and hopeful planning, including resolving indebtedness, capacity to respond becomes much greater than initially assumed.

Last time we discussed the first paragraphs of the words of counsel and how the five Mission Initiatives function together to continue Christ's mission today. We emphasized that the Mission Initiatives are a divine calling and spiritual venture of great importance to fulfilling God's purposes.

So, what will it take to release the world-changing power of the Mission Initiatives? According to the Spirit, we should "free the full capacity of Christ's mission through generosity that imitates God's generosity."

A primary characteristic of God is eternal love expressed in grace and generosity, especially as received through Jesus Christ.

As human beings created in God's image, our purpose is to reflect God's nature. Generosity is a primary way we both receive and respond to divine grace.

With that spiritual truth emphasized, the counsel lifts up, once again, the importance of tithing as a spiritual practice that grows us in God's image. I said "once again" because inspired counsel about the relationship between God's purposes and our generosity is a frequent theme in Continuing Revelation.

Because of questions about the definition of tithing, we'll now define it. This statement is the official interpretation of the Presiding Bishopric for the church today:

Tithing is offerings to support local, mission center, and worldwide church ministries. Tithing is a disciple's generous response to God's grace and generosity revealed in Jesus Christ. A disciple's calling is to give according to true capacity as a witness of God's generosity and as a spiritual practice that helps disciples grow in relationship to God.

Disciples seek to share 10 percent or more of their annual income as tithing before saving and spending. For some people, though, there is not enough income to meet basic living expenses. Then tithing is an offering of any amount or item desired, including giving one's life in service to Christ and the church.

Tithing is given to local and world ministries equally (Doctrine and Covenants 162:7d). Giving to church affiliates is the priority after tithing. However, those contributions are not tithing. Contributing to other charitable organizations that recognize the worth of persons and are committed to bringing Christ's ministry to them is encouraged. But, those contributions are not tithing either.

As understanding of God's grace grows with true capacity to give through wise savings, responsible spending, and debt reduction, disciples make additional tithing contributions. This often includes contributions and estate gifts to church endowments that ensure one's legacy as an ongoing generous contributor to Christ's mission.

I personally want to thank everyone who supports Christ's mission through world and local mission tithes. Your generosity is a blessing to many people throughout the world.

Community of Christ is a worldwide family of disciples and seekers, living in varied circumstances. For those in harsh poverty, income may be below or limited to what is needed to survive. Their generosity is remarkable and inspiring. It is truly sacrificial.

For those whose basic living needs of food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and health care are met, who live in relative material comfort and have discretionary income, there is greater capacity for giving. This is especially true if wise decisions are made about spending and reducing debt.

And for those blessed by affluence and the ability to generate wealth, the Spirit's call is to excel in abundant generosity. Excelling in generosity evidences the priority of Christ's mission in one's life. It brings joy to life and motivates others to excel in generosity, too.

Generosity is a primary indicator of the Holy Spirit's presence in human lives (Galatians 5:22–23 NRSV). According to scripture, generosity is among the outstanding characteristics of those who belong to Jesus Christ.

A brilliant illustration of this is in 2 Corinthians 8:1–15 NRSV. Apostle Paul had been working over a year to organize an offering to help disciples in Jerusalem who were trapped in poverty.

Some congregations, such as those in Macedonia, responded enthusiastically. The response of others was slow. Evidently, the church in Corinth was viewed by Paul as having greater capacity to give in a more timely fashion. Let's read the text:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written,

“The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

Time does not allow us to explore the whole passage today. However, I want to highlight some spiritual truths I gained from studying it.

First, note that Paul begins by emphasizing the “grace of God that has been granted...” Every point that follows relates to how God's grace is given freely, and how generosity flows from receiving it.

Second, generosity is a lifestyle of growing response to God's never-ending gift in Jesus Christ! The text states they (Macedonians) “gave themselves first to the Lord.” Their generosity overflowed from that relationship. Instead of seeing Paul's request as a burden, they begged earnestly for the “privilege of sharing.” They did not have to be commanded.

When generosity is “the privilege of sharing” because we belong to Christ, the embodiment of God's generosity, we grow spiritually. This same principle is lifted up in Doctrine and Covenants 147:5a: “Stewardship is the response of my people to the ministry of my Son...”

Third, when calculating capacity to give, the Macedonians did not focus on what they did not have. Instead, they based their generosity on faith in the sufficiency of God's grace to sustain them. Despite their situation, they believed they were wealthy in Christ. Their spiritual richness overflowed in a joyful "wealth of generosity" (2 Corinthians 8:2 NRSV).

Fourth, the Macedonians' generosity to help the Jerusalem Christians is a clear sign the church—the body of Christ—is one living organism. Paul consistently taught that the body of Christ transcended local, national, and cultural identities.

Paul was delighted the Macedonians' faith had increased so they were not concerned just about themselves. Their generous response is especially remarkable because it happened after the debate started by disciples in Jerusalem about whether Gentile Christians, such as the Macedonians, were legitimate members of the body. Despite religious and cultural differences, the Macedonians gave to help other parts of the body because the "dividing wall" is broken down through Christ (Ephesians 2:14 NRSV).

Giving to local and world mission today means we have discerned the true nature of the church. To Paul it was a principle of a "fair balance" between true capacity in some areas and evident need in others so, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (2 Corinthians 8:15 NRSV). The need to clearly define tithing for the church today is apparent, and we have done that. However, my ongoing experience with God's Spirit is that the response desired is beyond meeting a literal definition of tithing.

God desires disciples who live in the spiritual condition of generosity because they constantly are mindful of God's grace. Our definition of tithing moves us toward the spiritual condition of generosity, but it is not the journey's final aim.

Our vision is a worldwide community of oneness and equality in Christ, among whom there are no poor or oppressed because the spiritual condition of generosity is pervasive. Of course, that vision describes the spiritual condition necessary for the realization of the hope of Zion—God's just and peaceful reign on Earth.

So, how are we doing with generosity? Last April I stated that "...tithing trends are not meeting the income projections..." in the world mission budget. In response, we reduced expenses. We also lowered the tithing goal from \$15.4 million to \$12 million, an amount similar to tithing received in 2010. That was a \$3.4 million reduction in projected income.

Last June, the World Church Finance Board approved a fiscal year 2015 budget that kept the tithing goal at \$12 million and proposed expenses exceeding income by \$3.8 million. This occurred with the understanding that other income sources would cover the deficit, and the Presiding Bishopric was working on a plan to balance the budget by the beginning of fiscal year 2018.

Since then, the Presiding Bishopric has drafted a five-year financial plan to achieve a balanced budget. The work analyzed all church income, funds, endowments, assets, and current and future obligations.

Because of uncertain global economic conditions that continue to impact investment earnings, world mission tithing trends, and our obligation to provide for current and future payments of pension and post-retirement benefits, the Presiding Bishopric, with the support of the World Church Leadership Council, has decided to take a more cautious approach to world mission budgets.

Based on reduced expenses already achieved, the plan now is to further reduce expenses during fiscal years 2015 and 2016. This will result in a balanced budget in fiscal year 2016 of approximately \$20 million for world mission.

Of course, the income source that has the greatest impact on funding the mission of the church is tithes. In this regard, a much larger amount is given to support local and mission center budgets than world mission.

Please hear me clearly. I am not saying that giving to local and mission center mission should be decreased to increase funding for world mission. I am asking members to consider the whole mission of the church, evaluate their true capacity, and increase giving to world mission tithes accordingly.

Before the need to reduce expenses, we were preparing to implement mission strategies that include expanding the church into new nations, revitalizing congregations in the USA and Canada and planting new ones, developing the Temple as a spiritual formation and global peace center, and greatly enhancing church communications around the world. As income increases, we will be able to accelerate—rather than delay—these efforts.

Looking to the future, we can be confident we have a divinely inspired vision and mission. I am encouraged by efforts under way to create additional income to support world mission. And, I am especially grateful for the growing number of members in places like India, Africa, and Central America who are starting to contribute to world mission tithes while continuing to support local congregations.

I also am inspired by past generations of church members who met great challenges to the church's future with boundless faith, determination, and sacrifice. While our future is not in jeopardy, the opportunity we have to rise up together in faith, hope, and abundant generosity is just as compelling. I have faith the church of today will respond!

Generosity is an act of faith and prophetic hope in response to divine love revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a disciple's investment in the future of Christ's mission on Earth. What is your commitment to that mission?