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What Is Generosity?

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YOU WILL BE ENRICHED in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God (2 Cor. 9:11).¹

Within the church, there is currently a significant 'generosity movement', but generosity is also a debated topic among Christian leaders. How we understand the role of generosity in our lives—and in the Christian communities in which we do life together—perhaps says more about our faith and our understanding of the gospel than any other single aspect of our faith.

Christian leaders tend to fall into one of three categories. Those in the first category have adopted generosity as the standard by which they live out their faith. It is the lens through which they interpret the will of God and their role in his kingdom on earth. Those in the second category embrace generosity as an appropriate substitute for the more established language of stewardship. For decades, the language of stewardship has been used to refer to believers' responsibility to support the work of the church and to faithfully use their resources to serve its mission. Finally, those in the third category are sceptical of the notion of generosity. This group includes Christian leaders who are disillusioned by the church and its relationship with money. They see hypocrisy and sense that there is a fundamental disconnection between what the church practises and the biblical principles of stewardship that the church teaches.

These three groups view the same subject—how our faith informs our relationship to money—through three perspectives. But they have more in common than they might think.

We believe it is necessary to view

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generosity through each perspective and to learn where these views converge, based on what the Bible teaches. Doing so will lead to a shift in lifestyle among the followers of Christ—nothing short of a revolution, one that will attract countless people who are looking for a new way to live that is not based on self-serving motives but instead represents the heart of the one who made us and generously gave himself for us.

I A Working Definition

Let's begin with a working definition of generosity. Generosity is at its core a lifestyle, a lifestyle in which we share all that we have, are, and ever will become as a demonstration of God's love and a response to God's grace. It is not enough for the church to talk about generosity, nor is it enough for individual Christians simply to commit to being generous. What makes generosity a real and powerful witness to God's love is our action. Generosity flows from an understanding that all that we have, are, and ever will become is not ours to possess, and it results in sharing what we've been given with others for the advancement of the kingdom and the glory of God. Generosity embraces a biblical understanding of stewardship:

- God is the owner of everything.
- What we have has been given to us by God.
- The resources we possess are assets to be invested in the kingdom.

Before we can be generous, we must understand what it means to be a steward, recognizing that what we have is not ours to own and confessing that Jesus is Lord over our money, posses-

sions, positions of authority, and talents. You can't be generous without the discipline of biblical stewardship, and biblical stewardship demands generosity. The gift of God's grace shapes our faith and leads to the conviction that all that we have—our time, talent, treasure, and testimony—has been given to us for a purpose. We cannot separate our acceptance of God's grace from the practice of generosity. We are generous because God was first generous to us, freely giving his life for our sakes. As followers of Christ, we seek to imitate the one who gave himself for us (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). Stewardship is more than an obligation. It's an opportunity to witness to the reckless nature of the God who gives the gift of salvation by grace to all who will receive it. Generosity is the fullest expression of the life of a steward, one who has been given a gift that must be used wisely and for a purpose, bringing glory to God.

II Why Should I Care?

Given the challenges that many individuals, families, and churches are facing in the aftermath of the global economic crisis that began in late 2008, the topic of this book is more timely now than ever before. When our security is threatened by job loss or scarcity, we are tempted to lock up what we've stored away. But God is working in amazing ways as churches and individuals choose the opposite approach. Instead of fearfully locking away their resources, they choose to share what they have with people in need, and their generous giving has drawn attention. In some cases, these faith communities received local and national media coverage for their acts

of generosity.

Even though their financial security was uncertain, some churches gave away their surplus to meet the desperate needs of people in their communities. This act of generosity, motivated by love for God, earned these churches credibility and made an impact on their communities, changing the lives of those who gave as well as those who received. The financial crisis became a bridge that enabled the church to take the message of a generous God to a struggling world. Churches, in ways they never had done before, began to talk about money, teaching their people how to gain freedom from debt and emphasizing the discipline of sacrificial giving.

Generosity, when it flows naturally from the heart of a church community, is contagious. It has an undeniable effect on people who come into contact with it. It expresses in practical and powerful ways the message at the core of our faith: God gave his only Son to us that we might have life. Generous churches believe that they have been given everything, and as an expression of their love for God, they share what they have with one another and with people in need.

III Who This Book Is For (and Who It's Not For)

This book is based on our individual experiences and observations over nearly twenty years as we have worked with hundreds of churches, consulting and teaching on the topic of stewardship and generosity. Most recently it was born of a multiyear emphasis, organized by Leadership Network, called the Generous Church Leadership Com-

munity. Church staffs from across the country came together to talk about the ways in which generosity was changing their church communities. Leaders listened to each other, sharing what worked, what didn't, and what they had learned along the way.

We wrote this book to speak to the concerns of those who are leading churches and missional communities and who are working to maximize kingdom impact through local church ministry. We appreciate these leaders' dedication and obedience to God's call, and we sincerely hope this book will encourage you and challenge you. This is not an academic text, nor is it a theological book. Neither of us is qualified to address the subject of generosity in those ways. However, we acknowledge that this book has significant theological implications. Our intent is to facilitate a much broader conversation about generosity, based on the experience of church leaders and our own experience as guides to church leaders on this topic.

We also wrote this book for individual believers. Some of the greatest movements in history began because individuals didn't wait for those in positions of leadership to take the first step. Perhaps you want more from your faith experience but just aren't sure what that looks like. You are curious about generosity, and your desire is to practise generosity in your personal life and inspire it in the life of your church. In an attempt to make this book as valuable as possible, we decided to limit its scope by addressing two things: financial generosity and how our generosity relates to the church. We acknowledge that there are many books that address generosity

and that there are often many generous individuals within a church. But this book is intended to focus on those aspects of generosity that apply to the corporate experience of the church.

The local church is the primary means that God uses to build his kingdom on earth. And every local church has a unique culture that shapes its identity. Our personal beliefs are grounded in our culture. Our actions reflect our culture. And our impact on our community is determined largely by our culture. We believe that church leaders have been given the primary responsibility for creating a culture of faith and practice that aligns with biblical teaching on generosity.

We also limited our conversation about generosity to money and finances. We certainly believe that generosity can be expressed in many other ways, but one of the most common ways in which people give to the work of the church is through financial gifts, so we've limited our focus in order to make this book a valuable tool for church leaders.

Money is perhaps the most measurable aspect of our faith. How we spend our money reflects our commitment to our faith, indicating whether we practice what we say we believe. But that same standard should also be applied to our churches, corporately. How a church uses the resources God has entrusted to it is a reflection of what the church values and what it believes. A church that does not reflect a generous spirit will struggle to grow and disciple generous givers.

IV Two Guides

Imagine sitting in a tree by a river,

watching boats dock and unload their cargo. If you spent enough time in that tree, you would observe some patterns. Some of the boats' crews would work more effectively, while others would make decisions that lead to mishaps. After watching long enough, you might anticipate the success of the docking process, based on the initial moves made by the boat and its crew.

We didn't write this book because we are more gifted or more qualified than you are to lead your church. Instead this book synthesizes our observations of countless churches as they navigate the challenges of developing a culture of generosity. After watching long enough, we've learned to anticipate what is likely to happen when a church takes specific steps.

Chris Willard has served in several strategic roles within para-church ministry, on executive church staff, and now as director of generosity initiatives for Leadership Network. Part of his role is to organize leaders around strategic subjects, like generosity, and help them to dig deep in order to gain a broader, deeper understanding of a particular subject's application in local church ministry. The other part of his role is to work one-on-one with churches to help them implement thoughts, ideas, and practices that are proven to accelerate generosity.

Jim Sheppard began his career in the world of accounting and finance. Working with numbers is a natural gifting for Jim that God later used in a way he never anticipated. As a principal of Generis, an innovative church-generosity consulting firm, Jim, like Chris, works with churches to help them navigate the waters of everyday giving, project giving, and legacy giving.

Together we have worked with leaders in the Christian community to answer their questions, advise their decision making, and help them inspire a spirit of contagious generosity that transforms their churches from institutions that protect a tradition to communities of faith that engage in changing lives. We know that many pastors sit on the edges of this conversation. They want to know more, do more, and be more radical in their generosity. Some are simply waiting for an invitation. Consider yourself invited, and prepare to join a movement that is sweeping Christian communities around the world.

There is no list of ten steps to success hidden within the pages of this book. Instead we invite you to grow, to learn, and to struggle through the complex issues every church deals with:

- What is generosity?
- What does being a generous church look like?
- How can I encourage the members of my church to be more generous?
- What is God calling us to do that we never dreamt would be possible?
- Who can benefit from our financial blessing?
- How can we use our excess to transform the communities where we live and work and play?
- What can we do to free people from unbiblical habits related to money?
- What does leading my church to be generous mean for me as pastor or leader?

There is no quick fix, fast track, or answer key in this book. Leading your church to become a generous church often begins with an honest appraisal and a time of confession, bringing your

personal habits with money into the light of God's truth. You may need to repair some relationships with your church leadership, depending on how you've made financial decisions in the past. Perhaps you'll also need to make some adjustments by adding or removing positions in your staff and organizational structure. The changes God is calling you to make will not be easy. There is a cost to everything we do. Jesus warned people who were interested in following him that they had to be willing to put aside their own desires, leaving what was comfortable and accepting the cost. They had to put their feet into action and follow him. The same is true for us. If we want to be churches that create a culture of reckless, contagious generosity, we need to be willing to pay the price.

V The Decision is Yours

The Old Testament book of 1 Kings relates a story of a widow and her son, a family so impoverished that they have enough flour and oil left for only one more meal. They are prepared to eat their final meal and then die. The prophet Elijah is in town that day, visiting the drought-stricken region, and he asks this poor woman for some bread and water. At first the woman assures the prophet that she does not have enough food to feed all three of them, but he tells her first to make him a loaf of bread and then to bake one for herself and her son. He encourages her, telling her not to be afraid and promising her that God will not let the oil or the flour run out before the drought is over.

In faith, the widow obeys the word of the prophet and finds that she does

indeed have enough flour and oil to feed them all. Not only that, but both her flour jar and her oil jug remain full until the rains return and the drought ends. She and her son are kept alive, demonstrating the abundant life that God is ready to give us when we choose to step out in faith and share what he has given to us.

This pattern of faith-filled, sacrificial generosity is in direct conflict with a theme in American culture. We Americans perpetuate the myth that tells us that we must be independent, providing for ourselves, and that we must pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We believe that we are responsible for our own success and therefore that whatever success we find is ours to keep and to use to meet our desires and needs. But as followers of Christ, we have a different perspective. We understand that everything we have is not just something we've earned or deserve; it's a gift of God's grace. We recognize that we are stewards and that everything we have belongs to God and is intended to be invested in the growth of the kingdom. Developing a culture of generosity begins with an understanding of who owns what. If I own what I have, am, and will become, then it is mine to give at my discretion. But if God owns it all, then I am merely an instrument of generosity designed to distribute his resources for the abundant advancement of the kingdom.

Unfortunately, much of American Christianity has tended to believe that we have to preserve our wealth in order to meet our own needs and that being generous is a matter of convenience. In their book, *Passing the Plate* (Oxford, 2008), Christian Smith and Michael Emerson introduce the phrase

'discretionary obligation' as a way to understand the typical American Christian's approach to giving. Smith and Emerson suggest that Christians believe that they should give generously to the kingdom, yet at the same time feel free to give at their discretion, giving only what they can, when they can, and never feeling burdened by a compulsion to give. If 'discretionary obligation' defines our understanding of generosity, we will never experience true abundance in our churches.

Though many Americans have faced significant financial setbacks in recent years, we have observed that wealth in America has increased at a record pace over the last sixty years, even after taking into account the economic retraction of 2008. However, the percentage of income Americans give to churches has been decreasing over the same period of time. This just doesn't make sense. We have more than ever, but we give less than ever. The American church can no longer turn its back on this issue. It is time to take a look at ways we can reverse this disturbing trend of more wealth and less giving to the church.

The culture of a church is revealed when there is a crisis of faith. When the global recession hit in 2008, some churches thrived, some churches plateaued, and some churches declined. Few churches had a safety net, so a portion of those that declined did so with great speed. Some churches responded in fear, locking up whatever cash they had in order to weather the storm. Others decided to take another path, recognizing that the recession had revealed significant need in their communities.

In our conversations with church

leaders, we found that many of the churches that chose to share, even when there wasn't a clear path to replenishment, experienced something unexpected and transformational: abundance, learning that there were more resources available to them than they had ever imagined. They used what God had given them to prevent foreclosures, promote adoptions of orphans, feed the hungry, help those living in extreme poverty, and assist communities recovering from natural disasters. These churches witnessed a level of spiritual formation that rapidly

and holistically changed their cultures.

We had a front-row seat as a number of these churches processed what they were experiencing as individuals and corporately. We have worked hard to harness the observations we've made along the way. But if all you do is read this book, then we have not done our jobs. Our hopes and prayers are grounded in the expectation that you will become more intentional about building a culture of generosity in your church so that your church can be an accurate reflection of the Christ we profess as Lord and Saviour.

We are grateful to Zondervan Publishing Company for permission to print the first article in this issue which is the introduction to their book and forms the starting point for discussion of our theme in this special issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology*.

Contagious Generosity: Creating a Culture of Giving in Your Church

Chris Willard and Jim Sheppard

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Church funding practices that are the generally accepted norm aren't producing the same results they have in the past. Most pastors and church leaders recognize that something has changed. A growing number of leaders are beginning to discover there is another way. In this book, their collective wisdom provides a simple, working definition of 'generosity' and reveals the 'secrets' that are resulting in unexplainable ministry growth and unprecedented church funding even in tough economic times. The content of *Contagious Generosity* was developed and refined by Jim Sheppard and Chris Willard through years of ministry leadership in the local church, consulting with church leaders across a broad spectrum of church settings, and through participation in and leadership of the Generous Church Leadership Community facilitated by Leadership Network.