



Four Fundamental Shifts

“... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *generosity*, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...”
(Gal. 5:22-23, NRSV — emphasis added)

Encouraging grace-filled, spirit-led giving.

By Gary G. Hoag

DID YOU KNOW THAT “GENEROSITY” is a fruit of the Spirit? If you look it up in a Greek-English lexicon, the word rendered “goodness” may be better translated as “generosity.” For years I thought generosity was the result of my sermons or direct-mail appeals. Paul is sending a message to the Galatians (and to us): Generosity is the result of God’s work, not man’s work, in the lives of believers.

This begs the question: What is the role of the Christian leader in encouraging grace-filled, Spirit-led generosity? The aim of this article is to offer a four-fold answer based on Galatians and related New Testament passages.

(1) CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GIVING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT SHIFT FROM LAW TO LOVE

Galatians is one of the early epistles of Paul (A.D. 45-55). The Galatians had received the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ on Paul’s first missionary journey, but had drifted to embrace a different gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). Scholars describe the Galatians as thinking that believers were required to follow the Old Testament law and embrace the New Testament gospel of grace. For doing so, they are labeled “foolish” (Gal. 3:1).

The Galatians were not to take the Old Testament law and the New Testament gospel of grace and add them together. Why?

Their relationship to the law changed upon embracing Jesus by grace through faith (Gal. 3:23-26). They weren’t under the law anymore. In trying to follow both the Old Testament law and the New Testament gospel of grace, the Galatians were returning to slavery rather than experiencing the freedom Christ intended for them — and for all who believe (Gal. 5:1).

The purpose of this freedom is to serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13). Related to giving, believers are released from giving out of compulsion and instead get to give from willing hearts filled with compassion (2 Cor. 9:7).

(2) THE NEW TESTAMENT TERM FOR GIVING SHIFTS FROM PERCENTAGE TO PARTICIPATION

Paul urges the Galatians to “share” all good things with those who teach them God’s Word (Gal. 6:6). They are literally invited to participate in the ministry of their spiritual leaders through their giving. This term appears all over the New Testament and stands in contrast to the Old Testament word for giving to spiritual leaders. (Examples: Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32, Phil. 1:3-5, Rom. 15:25-27, 2 Cor. 9:13, etc.)

In the law, God’s people were to “tithe” a percentage. Interestingly, most people today misinterpret the tithe, which was actually more than a tenth. As Craig Blomberg, in his book *Heart, Soul and Money*, states: “Those who still think tithes are mandatory

normally do not insist on 23.33 percent — 10 percent to go to the temple, 3.33 percent to the poor and 10 percent in celebration during festival time.”

Did you know that Jesus never used the term “tithe” in teaching his disciples? Why? It’s law language. The only time Jesus refers to the tithe is when he condemns the Pharisees — the keepers of the law — for being prideful for giving a percentage while failing to demonstrate love and justice (Luke 11:42, Matt. 23:23).

The tithe may be the most Galatian-like teaching in the Church today and one of the greatest hindrances to grace-filled, Spirit-led generosity. The terminology tied to giving changed for Paul under grace, and it should change for us today.

Christian leaders, please release those you serve from the bondage of percentage giving and help them to grasp the profound truth that they get to participate with God, and with you, in the ministry through generous sharing.

(3) REMEMBERING THE POOR SHIFTS FROM OBLIGATION TO MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO HELP OTHERS.

According to the law, God’s people had an obligation to support the poor. They were required to bring a tenth every third year for those in need.

In Galatians, Paul states that Peter, James, and John urged Barnabas and him (Paul) to “remember” the poor (Gal. 2:10). To remember the poor would be to extend voluntary, counter-cultural, Christ-like care to the destitute — those who could not work or had insufficient resources to live.

The ministry of Jesus reveals that he “remembered” the poor as he often stopped to care for them. In the New Testament world, the blind, lame, and sick were often discarded from their communities. When the Roman emperors distributed corn or other resources to those living in cities, the poor would not receive a share.

Interestingly, the poor were not only forgotten in society, they were deemed as “undeserving” of care. Thus, in the New Testament context, remembering the poor is making the most of every opportunity to show that God’s grace and loving care is for everyone.

Are you encouraging people to take every opportunity to serve the poor?

(4) INVITE BELIEVERS TO SHIFT THEIR FOCUS FROM THE EARTHLY TO THE ETERNAL

Paul does not force the Galatians to shift from investing their lives and resources from the earthly to the eternal. He invites them to do it.

“If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Gal. 6:8-10, NRSV).

Notice Paul simply proclaims truth regarding their sowing, and beckons them to a new way of life, which may be hard from an earthly perspective, but worth the effort in light of eternity. To do this requires an abundance mentality and a trust in God to provide the resources for your generosity (2 Cor. 9:8).

Four shifts Christian leaders must make to encourage grace-filled, Spirit-led generosity

Law	▶	Love
Percentage	▶	Participation
Obligation	▶	Opportunity
Earthly	▶	Eternal

WANT TO ENCOURAGE GRACE-FILLED, SPIRIT-LED GENEROSITY?

Surrender to the control of the Spirit, realizing that God is the only one who can produce the fruit of generosity in your life and in the lives of others.

Make the shift from law to love, and talk about giving not as something Christians have to do out of compulsion but as something they get to do out of compassion.

Don’t exhort people to give a percentage! This enslaves them and limits their participation in God’s work. Urge them to share generously with their spiritual leaders, that is, their local church and other ministries.

Call people to remember the poor not out of obligation but in gratitude for receiving the grace of God. Remind them to take every opportunity to bless others, especially needy brothers and sisters in Christ.

Lastly, invite believers to raise their sights from the earthly to the eternal. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis summarizes this best:

“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. ... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in.” Aim at earth and you will get neither.”

I am finding that God’s love is what empowers me to empty myself in service to others; that participating with God in his work by sharing generously with my spiritual leaders brings me joy; that remembering the poor, especially Christian brothers and sisters, is one of the most meaningful privileges of my life; and, the only way to take hold of eternal life is to let go of all that is in this earthly one.

Care to join me? Will others follow us? Research by George Barna in *How to Increase Giving in Your Church* shows that the best way to encourage this grace-filled, Spirit-led generosity is to model it. By grace, let us lead the way. ●

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