

Keep or Break: The Biblical Basis for Tithing in Medieval Europe

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Abstract: The biblical teaching is that, on a practical level, tithing embodies an ideal division of labor with distinct responsibilities. By tithing to the Church, Christians provide the clergy with the necessities of life, enabling them to concentrate on the sacraments without having to worry about worldly matters, and at the same time, offer material support for the holy ministries of the Church, helping to improve the financial situation of the Church. On the level of faith, tithing is an expression of faith in God. The voluntary and full payment of the tithe is a great manifestation of one's faith in God. It maintains the harmonious relationship between God and man, which brings God's abundant blessings to man. The Church in Medieval Europe collected tithes based on the clear and strong scriptural basis of the Bible. However, in practice, the Church abused the tithe to enrich itself and ignored the poor lives of the people, which was destructive to God's good intention in the establishment of the tithe and was not in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

Keywords: Tithing, Bible, Medieval Europe, Church, Corruption

1. Introduction

In 313 AD, Constantine the Great, along with Licinius, issued the Edict of Milan, granting Christianity a legal status within the Roman Empire. About fifty years later, in 392 AD, Theodosius I formally declared Christianity as the state religion, and since then, Christianity has spread throughout Europe. The Church remains an essential component of the Christian framework. The Church serves God and is responsible for spreading the Gospel of the Kingdom and saving souls. Its actions hold a holy importance. Nevertheless, the Church has not always had a positive image, as some of its actions in Medieval Europe, including corruption, have received widespread criticism.

During the Middle Ages, education was not easily accessible to the general public, and the clergy in the Church were often the only ones who had the opportunity to learn about culture, given their need to interpret the Bible. Churchmen who possessed reading and writing abilities were undoubtedly preferred by kings and lords over uneducated commoners and were employed in secular positions to aid secular rulers with their affairs. The coronation of a monarch necessitated the acknowledgment and approval of the pope, resulting in the gradual ascendance of the Church's influence over that of the monarchy. This contributed to the rapid proliferation of the Church's power and its eventual secularization, which sparked the Church's corruption during Medieval Europe. In the ninth century, the Church received numerous forms of wealth, including vast estates. Thompson reports that the wealthiest monks earned anywhere between \$85,000 to \$225,000 annually, while the average of rich

monks was around \$28,000 to \$56,000 a year. Additionally, even poor bishops and abbots had a salary of \$5,000 to \$14,000 [1].

Liere argues that there is no doubt that the Medieval Church was corrupt, just as Churches in other eras were corrupt [2]. Nonetheless, my aim is not to delve into the specifics of Church corruption in Medieval Europe. This essay was motivated by the following question: Medieval clerics held the Bible in their hands, presented themselves as God's servants, and proclaimed all their works to be holy, but was it consistent with the teachings of Scripture to derive wealth from tithes, indulgences, and the veneration of saints' relics? I will consider this question using the tithe as an example.

The tithe was the longest-levied tax in Europe. In 779 AD, King Charlemagne of the Franks approved the tithe as a legal obligation for the inhabitants of the Frankish Kingdom. Subsequently, countries in Western Europe followed suit and began to impose tithes. Tithes were consistently levied until the 18th and 19th centuries, with Britain imposing it until 1936. For nearly a thousand years, the collection of tithes placed a significant burden on peasants, often exceeding one-tenth of their income and causing considerable hardship. Consequently, the peasants made it one of their primary demands for the abolition of the tithe during the German Peasants' War and the Reformation. In this essay, I will demonstrate that, despite the biblical foundation for the implementation of the tithe, the Church's actions in Medieval Europe resulted in negative impacts did not align with biblical teachings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Nature of Tithing

Neusner asserts that Christians tithe by offering their first fruits to represent acknowledgment of God as the source of all their possessions, and as an expression of gratitude for His blessings [3]. Similarly, Hartley states that tithing is about "holy to the LORD", and that the offering belongs to or is owed to God [4]. Herman interprets tithing anthropologically, using gift-exchange systems in other cultures as a comparative framework. According to Herman, tithing serves to maintain or strengthen the relationship between man and God. Importantly, Herman argues that tithing is not an exchange of gifts between partners of equal status, but rather an expression of a covenantal relationship between two parties that remains forever separate, unequal, and somehow insecure due to the essential difference between man and God. The Israelites were believed to receive a divine blessing when they fulfilled their philanthropic duty of tithing [5]. Baumgarten considers tithing to be a "hieratic tax" meant to support the Levites [6].

2.2. Tithing in the Old and New Testaments

Moretsi notes the contrast between the teachings of the Old and New Testaments regarding tithing. The Old Testament prescribes tithing as a formal practice, while the New Testament emphasizes the giver's attitude of love and generosity over the amount given, as a response to God's love [7]. Croteau conducts a thorough analysis of tithing in the Old and New Testaments and concludes that there was no mandate for tithing in the pre-Mosaic period. In the Law of Moses, only land-related items were subject to tithing. Additionally, the Israelites actually tithed more than 10% of their income. Furthermore, there are no passages in the Historical books or the Prophets that provide support for continuing to tithe. Lastly, the New Testament passages that reference tithing do not advocate for Christians to continue tithing [8]. In summary, there is no biblical evidence from either the Old or New Testament to support the continuation of tithing in the new covenant period [9]. According to Budiselić, tithing is a practice established in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, Christians can provide financial support to the Church without any legal obligation. The Church cannot enforce tithing through coercion or condemnation [10].

2.3. Whether Modern Christians Should Tithe or Not

The issue of whether modern Christians should tithe or not is complex, as argued by Collins, due to the discrepancy between the Bible's teaching on the subject and the practice of tithing in Churches [11]. Igbo's re-evaluation of the concept of tithing and its historical context finds that some contemporary Nigerian Church leaders seem to depart from the biblical context and place undue emphasis on tithing. They exploit unsuspecting Church members for their own financial gain [12]. Kelly asserts that Christians ought to tithe based on their "new nature" in Christ, rather than out of a sense of obligation or fear of punishment for not doing so. Voluntary giving is an act of faith. Under any circumstances, mandating the giving of one-tenth of gross income contradicts the Bible [13]. Collins points out that if a Christian is both capable and willing to give one-tenth of their gross income, then such an act is commendable as it serves as a good guideline. Nonetheless, one must always remember that giving should be voluntary. Hence, if any individual holds a different view on tithing, neither the Church nor the individual can condemn them [11].

However, it begs the question, if tithing were entirely voluntary, would people still give? At the turn of the 21st century, a research study conducted among middle-class urban Christians in South Africa revealed that the South African Churches' teachings on Christian giving, particularly tithing, were based on the Old Testament law. This has led to a lack of understanding of biblical teachings among Christians in these Churches and has prevented them from experiencing the joy it brings. If Christians were instructed in the proper principles of tithing and released from the legalism of their Churches, they would likely give generously beyond the commonly suggested "one-tenth" [14].

2.4. Conclusion

The tithing of the Israelites in history, as reflected in the Old Testament, has been recognized and positively evaluated by scholars as an expression of the relationship between man and God.

After the end of the Old Testament era, do Christians still have an obligation to tithe? This is a matter of great concern among scholars. The general consensus is that there are no passages in the Bible that indicate that Christians in the New Testament era have an obligation to tithe. Of course, it is good for Christians to tithe, but it should be given voluntarily and according to one's ability, not a tithe imposed by the Church.

In a review of the literature, few scholars have examined whether the imposition of tithing in Medieval Europe was consistent with the teachings of the Bible.

3. Analyse

3.1. The Tithe: A Dividing of Labor with Distinct Responsibilities

The Levites of the tribes of Israel were chosen by God to manage the affairs of the Tabernacle due to their faithfulness. As stated in the book of Numbers, the patriarchs of each of the twelve tribes of Israel gave the staffs with their names written on them to Moses, who followed God's will and placed the twelve staffs inside the Tabernacle of the ark of the covenant law. The following day, God appointed Aaron, the patriarch of the Levites, to serve as a priest by causing his staff to sprout and blossom and produce almonds (Numbers 17:1-8). In order to aid Aaron in his priestly responsibilities, God instructed him to select Levites from the same tribe to help protect the Tabernacle and carry out its tasks jointly (Numbers 18:2-4). To fulfill the material requirements of the priests and Levites, God granted Aaron and his descendants the entirety of the offerings the Israelites made to God (Numbers 18:8-19), and He gave the Levites a tithe of the Israelites' inheritance as a reward for their service to the Tabernacle (Numbers 18:21).

God Himself provided for the material needs of the priests and Levites through offerings and tithes. This allowed them to devote themselves to the law of the Lord (2 Chronicles 31:4) and not be distracted by worldly matters. Therefore, God did not allow the priests or Levites to acquire any more property of their own, but rather they were to make God their share and their inheritance (Numbers 18:20, 24). The Levites who were selected were prohibited from pursuing wealth as they had already been provided for by God for their holy work. The tithes from the inheritance of the other tribes of Israel were to provide material support for the Levites so that they could serve God with one heart.

Here we observe an optimal division of labor between the Levites, who concentrate on administering sacraments and aiding the Israelites in their ongoing relationship with God, and the Israelites, who furnish material support for the Levites. Since God had given the Levites the tithe of Israel's possessions, the payment of the tithe was a divine command for Israel to obey.

Moretsi asserts that while the Old Testament mandated Christians to tithe, the New Testament emphasizes the principle of "giving" and reminds Christians to give according to their ability. He posits that humans are mere stewards of God and that all possessions ultimately belong to Him. Consistent giving or tithing implementation can help to improve the financial situation of Churches [7]. Therefore, in addition to the fundamental reason of "God's command", which is derived from the Bible, there is a direct, simple, and practical reason for the Church to demand tithing from believers: the need for material support for the life of the ministry and the clergy. Since this material support is a necessity, tithing is also a necessity for the believer.

3.2. The Tithe: An Expression of Faith in God

According to the book of Leviticus, when God commanded Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites, it was clearly stated that "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD..... The entire tithe of the herd and flock—every tenth animal that passes under shepherd's rod—will be holy to the LORD." (Leviticus 27:30, 32) This means that the tithe was a law that Israel had to keep. In the book of Deuteronomy, we find the same meaning expressed. When it comes to the decrees and laws that the Israelites were to observe as long as they live in the land (Deuteronomy 12:1), there is mention of tithing in the places of worship that God had established (Deuteronomy 12:6, 11). The end of the twelfth chapter emphasizes that these laws were not to be changed: "So that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it." (Deuteronomy 12:32) In fact, not only in the verses listed above, but in many chapters of the Old Testament, we find the same fact: By God's command, Israel was obligated to tithe.

But that doesn't mean that tithing is just a cold, rigid command and obligation. The earliest historical record of the "tenth" in the Bible is found in the book of Genesis. Abram was the first to give a tenth of his possessions, before "a tenth" became "tithes" in the law. According to the book of Genesis, after Abram had defeated the kings of Kedorlaomer and others, rescued his nephew Lot, and recovered his possessions, Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God, came to greet Abram with bread and wine and blessed him in the name of God. Abram then gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:14-20). Another passage in Genesis that specifically mentions "a tenth" is the account of Jacob. Jacob left his father's house and traveled to Paddan Aram, and when he arrived at Luz (later renamed Bethel by Jacob), God promised Jacob in a dream that He would give him the land where he lay and that He would be with him forever until the promise was fulfilled. Jacob awoke with a sense that God was in this place and made a vow that if God would watch over him on his journey so that he could return safely to his father's house, he would make the Lord his God and give a tenth of what God would give him (Genesis 28:10-20). Similar to Abram, Jacob voluntarily committed to give a tenth after receiving God's blessings and promises. The circumstances of Abram's and Jacob's giving of a tenth can help us to see the original motivation and meaning of "giving a

tenth": an expression of thanksgiving to God and the maintenance of a good relationship between man and God. It is a reflection of faith in God.

In Jacob's vow, he specifically said that he would give a tenth to "God". In fact, whether it was Abram who gave a tenth to the priest Melchizedek, or whether it was the Israelites who gave material support to the Levites in the form of tithes, the giving of a tenth was essentially an offering to God. Both the priests and the Levites were appointed by God, and their holy work on earth was done in God's name. As we know, one of the cornerstones of Christianity is that God is perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, and lacking nothing. Thus, the tithe is not paid because God needs material things. "Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always..... Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice." (Deuteronomy 14:23, 26) The aim of the command was to pay the tithe and eat it with joy before God, so that people would learn to revere God all the time. Collins states, based on Matthew 6:1-4, that all giving is a private matter between the individual and God [11]. In this sense, tithing is only an outward form. What God values most is the inner faith of the Christian.

This point is even more evident in the book of Malachi. Malachi 3:8 is often used to urge believers to pay their tithes: If a believer does not pay his tithe in full, he is "robbing God" by taking for himself what belongs to Him. But in the verses that follow, we clearly see God's encouragement of man's faith in tithing. He encouraged the man to send his entire tithe into the storehouse, allowing him to "test" it to see if God would send such an abundance of blessings that there would be no room for it (Malachi 3:10). In other words, God promised that He would not allow godly believers to suffer the loss of their possessions by paying their tithes in full, but rather that believers would be richly rewarded by God for their great faith in tithing. Herman argues that regular tithing maintains divine protection and a continuous flow of blessings [5]. In this sense, perhaps we can go further and say that tithing, based on faith and as an expression of faith, maintains God's blessings.

3.3. Compliance or Contradiction: The Abuse of Tithing

To summarize, in the framework of the Bible, from a spiritual point of view, tithing is a sacred duty of every Christian and an expression of faith in God; from a secular point of view, tithing provides financial support for the holy work of the Church and the life of the clergy, and those who pay the full tithes receive God's blessings in material terms. In short, tithing is not a bad thing, and there was a biblical basis for the Church in Medieval Europe to collect tithes. If this is the case, why was tithing opposed? Actually, it was not the tithe itself that was opposed in the Middle Ages, but the abuse of the tithe by the clergy who used it to enrich themselves.

According to the book of Deuteronomy, God commanded the Israelites to help the poor with tithes, which were to be given every three years to the Levites, the aliens, the widows and the orphans (Deuteronomy 26:12). According to Medieval Church law, some of the tithes was always earmarked for the poor, whether it was one-third or one-quarter. But by the 13th century, the Church's work on behalf of the poor had all but ceased. The main reason was the "appropriation" that began in the 12th century. The tithes provided the bulk of the Church's income, and the appropriation caused much of the income that would have gone to the Church to go to the monasteries. The monasteries, which did little to serve the people of their parishes, took huge amounts of the tithes and became corrupt. In contrast to the growing poverty of the people, the monasteries grew richer. What's more, with the advent of the "vicarage", the parish rector left the work to the vicar, who did not live in the parish and was naturally unoccupied with charitable matters. Part of the tithes had always been the salary of the parish staff, and the parish priests grabbed a large portion of it, but instead of assuming their responsibility to help the poor, they were content to enjoy themselves [15].

When the Church imposed the tithe on the people, it claimed that it was a command from God in the Bible and that it was sacrosanct and could not be disobeyed. The people, intimidated by their authority, worked hard and paid the tithe, and the pastors should have used the tithe in a reasonable and legitimate way, such as maintaining the Church facilities, providing materials for worship, helping the poor, and so on, but they used the tithe to enrich themselves. This is not in keeping with God's intent for Israel to provide for the Levites with the tithe. Obtaining material supplies for the sacraments is in no way the same as being corrupt in this way and taking possession of vast wealth that is not their share. Furthermore, the corrupt clergy possessed great wealth, and the people were not rewarded for faithfully paying their tithes. Hard-working but always poor, the people began to resent tithing, and it seemed to them that God's promise in Malachi 3:10 could not possibly be fulfilled. How can one talk about faith in God in such a bad situation? Therefore, the corruption of the Church in Medieval Europe in the use of tithes was not holy at all and was contrary to the Bible.

4. Conclusion

In 585 AD, a Christian council convened in Marseilles, where the Church introduced the concept of tithes. Non-compliant Christians were subject to excommunication. In 779 AD, King Charlemagne declared the tithe a legal tax of the Church, making it mandatory for all residents of the Frankish Kingdom. This ruling marked the beginning of tithing in Europe that continued for almost a millennium. During the early Middle Ages, productivity was limited, and the social economy was underdeveloped. The number of tithes was insufficient, and it only served to sustain the survival of the Church. During the middle and late Middle Ages, the social economy saw rapid development, leading to a significant increase in the total amount of tithes. These tithes greatly exceeded the Church's needs to maintain its survival and instead became a vital source of wealth. However, this also contributed significantly to the Church's corruption and attracted widespread opposition [16].

The biblical teaching is that, on a practical level, tithing embodies an ideal division of labor with distinct responsibilities. By tithing to the Church, Christians provide the clergy with the necessities of life, enabling them to concentrate on the sacraments without having to worry about worldly matters, and at the same time offer material support for the holy ministries of the Church, helping to improve the financial situation of the Church. On the level of faith, tithing is an expression of faith in God. The voluntary and full payment of the tithe is a great manifestation of one's faith in God. It maintains the harmonious relationship between God and man, which brings God's abundant blessings to man. The Church in Medieval Europe collected tithes based on the clear and strong scriptural basis of the Bible. However, in practice, the Church abused the tithe to enrich itself and ignored the poor lives of the people, which was destructive to God's good intention in the establishment of the tithe and was not in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

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