



*Three Old Women, by Adolphus Ealey, director of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, Washington, D.C. Oil*

# Reflections on A Tenth of Everything!

## READINGS

The following suggestions may help those who want to develop their own version of the graduated tithe. First, discuss the idea with the whole family. Everyone needs to understand the reasons so that the family can come to a common decision. Second, spell out your plan in writing at the beginning of the year. It is relatively painless, in fact exciting, to work it out theoretically. After you commit yourself to the abstract figures, it hurts less to dole out the cash each month! Third, discuss your proposal with a committed Christian friend or couple who share your concern for justice. Fourth, discuss major expenditures with the same people. It is easier for a slightly more objective observer to spot rationalizations than it is for you. (They also may have helpful hints on simple living.) Five, each year try to reduce your basic figure *and total expenditures*. The ultimate goal should be to reduce total expenditures (rather than the basic figure on which one pays a tithe of 10 per cent) to the point where you enjoy a standard of living which all persons in the world could share.

As the perceptive reader has already noticed, this proposal for a graduated tithe is really an extremely modest one. In fact the proposal is probably so modest that it verges on un-

faithfulness to Saint Paul. But it is also sufficiently radical that its implementation would revolutionize the ministry and life of the church! Many Christians are experimenting with far more radical attempts to win the war on affluence.

—Ronald J. Sider, in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, p. 178<sup>1</sup>

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To tithe our time  
and tithe our money  
is to deepen our fellowship  
with God Almighty

To tithe without show  
because we want to  
is to grow in our knowledge  
of God Almighty

To tithe with gratitude  
and not because we ought to  
is to strengthen our relationship  
with God Almighty

Lois Shank Hertzler<sup>2</sup>

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*Distortions about tithing.* In direct contradiction of Scripture which says this is a minimal starting place from which we should then go on to grow and increasingly give more offerings, much of the Christian community thinks of tithing as a high and lofty perch that only a few fanatical radicals have reached after years of struggle. Indeed, it is at the bottom or beginning place where any serious Christian would be with a critical minimum of daily Bible study and prayer. In other words, we go on tipping instead of tithing. Another very interesting example of how we delude ourselves about tithing has recently become apparent within the Church of the Saviour community,

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which for thirty years has had tithing as one of its minimal disciplines for becoming a member. With some members' deaths in the community in recent years, it is apparent several of the estates (however modest) of these members were not directed through their wills, consistent with their spiritual goals and commitments while alive. In some cases heirs have been hurt rather than helped. Outdated wills directed money to causes that had long since been discredited. In other words, one can tithe and be lulled to sleep feeling that area of life has been dealt with once and for all. If our spiritual autobiographies do not find a responsible and logical consummation in one's *Will*, we need to start asking questions of ourselves. To find such help, some of our mission groups are now sharing our Wills openly with each other as we shared autobiographies.

—Don McClannen, in *Wellspring*<sup>1</sup>

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“Filthy lucre,” as money is sometimes called, has been a favorite topic of conversation for us since the early days of The Church of the Saviour. We talk about it probably as much as Jesus did. When the founding members, young and poor, were forming themselves into a properly incorporated community of faith, they struggled for a discipline of membership that would help them and future members to deal concretely with at least some aspects of the handling of money. In its first writing the discipline read, “We commit ourselves to giving 10 percent of our gross income to the work of the Church.”

While there was some precedence in biblical history for the 10 percent figure, our first members felt that this kind of giving would enable them to begin to tackle the injustices of society in a way that would be meaningful to themselves, as well as to others. Their proposed constitution and disciplines were submitted to Reinhold Niebuhr, an eminent theologian of the last generation, who had agreed to read them and comment. His only suggestion concerned the discipline on money. “I would

<sup>1</sup>Used by permission of *Wellspring*.

suggest," Niebuhr said, "that you commit yourselves not to tithing but to proportionate giving, with tithing as an economic floor beneath which you will not go unless there are some compelling reasons." The discipline was rewritten and stands today in each of the six new faith communities:

We covenant with Christ and one another to give proportionately beginning with a tithe of our incomes.

None of us has to be an accountant to know what 10 percent of a gross income is, but each of us has to be a person on his knees before God if we are to understand our commitment to proportionate giving. Proportionate to what? Proportionate to the accumulated wealth of one's family? Proportionate to one's income and the demands upon it, which vary from family to family? Proportionate to one's sense of security and the degree of anxiety with which one lives? Proportionate to the keenness of our awareness of those who suffer? Proportionate to our sense of justice and of God's ownership of all wealth? Proportionate to our sense of stewardship for those who follow after us? And so on, and so forth. The answer, of course, is in proportion to all of these things.

—Elizabeth O'Connor, in *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*, pp. 6-7<sup>1</sup>

## QUESTIONS

1. Discuss your own feelings about giving to the church. Do you believe that tithing would strengthen your experience of God? If you are already tithing, can you think of ways to make this practice more valuable?

2. Contrast the meanings and implications between "paying a tithe" and "returning a tithe." What do these two statements say to us about our attitude toward possessions?

3. Do you feel that the tithe should be figured on income before or after taxes? Explain your answer.

4. How much of your tithe should go to the church and how

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much to other worthy causes? Give reasons for your answer.

5. Why do most persons who tithe feel that their lives have been blessed? Is this a good reason for tithing?

### MEDITATION-

*"Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me, bless his holy name!  
Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits,  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases . . .  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live . . ."*  
*(Psalm 103:1-5)*

Dear Lord, your gracious gifts surround us all. Thank you, Father, for the abundance of good things, spiritual and physical, that you generously provide for your children. Your constant care, limitless love, and many blessings are so much a part of life that sometimes I hardly notice them, or neglect to express my thanks. With deep gratitude I thank you now for your tangible and intangible gifts to me and to others.

Teach me to share my life and resources with joyful obedience, and in ways that are pleasing to you. Help me to realize that all I have is really yours, and to rejoice in opportunities to use it for your glory. May I celebrate your goodness and respond to your love in a manner that deepens our relationship of faith and trust. Thank you, gracious God, for the incomparable gift of Christ. In his name I pray. . . .

*Personal prayer*