

Are you giving, or shopping?

by Dean Merrill

For kids in Sunday school, the offering process is pretty simple. The brown envelope comes around the circle, the children put in their dimes or quarters, and that's that. No one asks specifically how the money is going to be spent; they're just giving "to Jesus."

For grown-ups, things get sophisticated. We designate our gifts for certain projects. We direct our money to the youth camp scholarship fund, not the church's electric bill. If we're giving to missions, we precisely target the radio outreach in the Philippines, as opposed to, say, Bibles for the Ukraine or earthquake relief in Peru.

Granted, many fund-raisers steer us in this direction. Some parachurch ministries even put out "giving catalogs" that look and feel like something from Land's End or Eddie Bauer, where glossy pictures and enticing sales copy let us know that for only \$250 we can sponsor this, and just \$500 will accomplish that. Nearly every Christian organization feels compelled to plan its work in terms of fundable "projects," from small to large, that will catch the donor's eye.

I have a question for fund-raisers and donors alike: Is this biblical giving, or is this modern marketing? Whatever happened to just giving your money "to Jesus" and letting it go at that?

Of course, I admit that this would imply trusting spiritual leaders to make wise use of the money given. That

hasn't always been the case in recent years. So the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme: tight, precise, surgical pinpointing on our offering envelopes. *Spend this money exactly as I tell you, and for nothing else. And by the way, let the record show that I, Dean Merrill, was the generous sponsor of this work.*

Didn't Jesus say something about giving to be seen by others? Whatever happened to not letting your left hand know what your right hand was doing (Matthew 6:3)? In our case, not only are both hands fully informed, but the church treasurer and the ministry leader as well. It's all fully spelled out on the tax receipt — and sometimes even in the next newsletter.

I'm not saying it's wrong to give to a specific cause, so long as the motives are pure. But if we mainly feel proud of ourselves and our generosity, we "will have no reward from [our] Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1, NIV).

The co-host of a nationally known Christian radio broadcast confided in me once, "When I get to the end of the recording and start doing the wrap-up appeal, I almost feel like I'm escorting the listeners through a shopping mall. 'Here on your left, you can acquire this for a donation of only X amount, while here on your right, this project can be yours for just Y amount.' In that moment, I wonder about what I'm doing."

What does it mean to *give*? It means to release, to let go, to surrender control. Jesus said to His follow-

ers, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). So far as I can tell, God does not "designate" His gifts to me. When He gives me an unexpected check in the mail, He doesn't say, "Now you have to spend this on a nice jacket for your wife — nothing else." No, He leaves that decision up to me, for good or for ill. He trusts me.

Too many of us today are not giving — we're shopping. We have very set ideas about what we want to accomplish. We want to control the outcome. We want lots of fol-

low-up reports, charts, data — all in the name of "accountability." What we don't admit is that we are not really giving after all; we are investing in our own prestige and self-fulfillment.

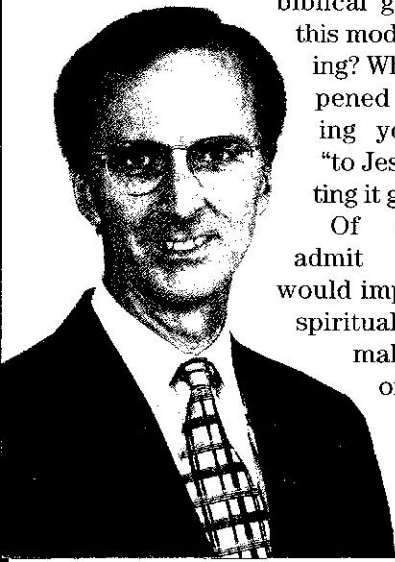
When the Philippian church sent money to the apostle Paul — undesignated, so far as we know — he called it "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18). That led him to say in verse 19, "And my God will meet all your needs [needs apparently caused by digging deep into their pockets to give to Paul] according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

Here's an odd suggestion: Next time the offering plate comes around, try giving a gift just to the Lord, period. No designation. No strings attached. This will no doubt feel strange, but do it anyway. You may be surprised at the simple joy of letting Jesus control the outcome. ■

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Dean Merrill is a deacon at Living Springs Worship Center (Assemblies of God), Colorado Springs, Colo., and is vice president of international publishing for the International Bible Society.



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