

RUTHERGLEN WEST AND WARDLAWHILL PARISH
CHURCH OF SCOTLAND



Christian Giving

*A sermon by Rev John W Drummond, MA, BD
originally given in the Summer of 2009*

Next year is the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Scotland, which took place in 1560. The Church of Scotland became the National Church, and the reformers led by John Knox saw it as a priority that a church and a school be established in every parish in Scotland.

The responsibility for children's education is now in the hands of the Scottish government. But still, in these days of falling membership, the Church of Scotland emphasises the importance of the ordinances of religion and the services of a parish minister being available, if requested, for everyone. Along with every other minister, I am not only the minister of this congregation; I am at the same time a parish minister.

The Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian church, not a congregational church. And I would not want this to change.

The Kirk sees this model as being based on the way in which Jesus exercised his ministry, available to everyone in need.

Fifty years ago this wasn't a problem. Most people valued the presence of a church building in their community, and the church, as well as being a place of worship on Sunday, was also at the centre of the community's social life and fellowship. Most families' contributed financially to the upkeep of the church building and the stipend of the parish minister.

Today those of us who are members of the Church are facing a massive problem. The Kirk could abandon its policy of a nationwide responsibility. The larger churches in residential areas and the leafy suburbs would survive. The smaller churches in urban priority areas and rural areas in the highlands and islands would soon close down and disappear.

The alternative – and this is the policy which the Kirk is still following – is to spread limited money and a dwindling number of ordained ministers thinly and evenly throughout the length and breadth of Scotland.

Rutherglen is a burgh with a population of around 25,000 people. The Church of Scotland is saying, “Given limited resources it is unfair for Rutherglen to have the services of 5 ordained ministers, and to hold on to 5 church buildings.”

Since the union in 2007, we have had a strong and positive congregation. We have grown in number, but only because we are the sum total of 2 smaller congregations. Because we are larger we are now required to contribute significantly more to the wider work of the Church of Scotland.

Rutherglen West and Wardlawhill is financially supporting smaller congregations, like for example in Toryglen, Castlemilk, Gorbals and Bridgeton. These churches would have to close their doors if they did not receive financial help from central funds. It's called the strong helping the weak, and it's a principle, which was adopted, in the early years of the Christian Church. Paul emphasises this in his New Testament letters.

I feel it is my duty to say to you that in 2008, and so far in 2009, our weekly freewill offerings, plus the thousands of pounds the congregation raises by other means, plus gift aid money refunded to the church by Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs – all of this is not meeting our monthly payments to the Church's central funds.

Each and every one of us needs to review our giving, or else our reserve funds, which we have to dip

into year by year, will disappear and our buildings be either demolished or adapted for some other use.

To help us to review our giving, we read earlier what St Paul had to say to the members of the Church at Corinth about giving to the Lord's work. It's important that our giving is based on what is written in the New Testament. In Second Corinthians, Chapter 8, Paul is writing to the Corinthians about the churches in Macedonia. He says this about these churches:

“They have been severely tested by the troubles they went through; but their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are very poor. I can assure you that they gave as much as they could, and even more than they could. Of their own free will they begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God's people in Judea.”

In these verses, Paul is laying down 3 important principles for Christian Giving. We should give JOYFULLY, we should give SACRIFICIALLY and we should give WILLINGLY.

First of all, we should give joyfully. In the eighth and ninth chapters of Second Corinthians, Paul is commending the example of the Christians in Macedonia.

“Their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving.”

Notice, Paul doesn't say how much they gave. He probably didn't know, because often the most generous gifts to the Church are given anonymously. The Church in Jerusalem needed financial support from the congregations in Macedonia. The need had arisen in Jerusalem because the church's precious source of help had been cut off. And here were Christians in Macedonia happy to help.

Paul was encouraging the Corinthians to take the same course of action. He underlines the need to give joyfully in our second Bible reading from Second Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 7:

“Each one should give, as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives GLADLY.”

Similar instructions to give joyfully occur several times in the Old Testament in the Book of Deuteronomy. Infact, so strongly was this principle of joyful giving emphasised to the Jewish nation, that their teachers had a saying which said, that to receive a friend with a joyful countenance and give him nothing, is better than to give him everything with a gloomy countenance.

The modern equivalent would be for someone to say, “I’m fed up with the Church always asking for

money. I’m making a big donation so that I don’t hear again about a shortage of money.” The Church would receive no blessing from a gift given with a grudge.

Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century Scottish historian, tells how when he was a boy, a beggar came to the door. His parents were out and he was alone in the house. On a boyish impulse he broke into his own savings bank and gave the beggar all that was in it. And Carlyle records that never before nor since in his life did he know such sheer joyous happiness as came to him in that moment.

Secondly, we are all called to give sacrificially. Paul says that the Christians in Macedonia gave “even though they were very poor” and goes on to say, “they gave as much as they could and even more than they could.” As I was preparing this sermon, I was almost patting myself on the back and saying to myself,

“Well, you give joyfully to the Church, and you give willingly. You tick 2 of the 3 boxes...” But at the same time I knew that I don’t give sacrificially. “How can I encourage others to give sacrificially, if I don’t make a positive response myself?”

So, I am happy to put an extra £5 a week into the offering envelope. The person who thinks that he is giving sacrificially should speak to one of our senior citizens who has lived through the poverty and depression of the 1930s. And that elderly Church member will be able to tell you about sacrificial giving to keep God’s work going through those difficult times.

The way in which gifts are made to the Church is completely the opposite from the way in which contributions are made to other organisations. Senior citizens going to the pictures or the theatre pay less. There is often a discount given to senior citizens in clubs, and large stores.

Senior citizens travelling by bus in Scotland contribute nothing. In the Church, senior citizens on a fixed income give the most generously and allow the Church and its services to be available for people who are wage earning, and contribute little.

Give joyfully, give sacrificially, and lastly we are called to give willingly. In Second Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 3 and 4 we read that it was:

“...of their own freewill. They begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God’s people.”

I’ve already mentioned the 2 phrases, which Paul uses in chapter 9, “Not with regret or out of a sense of duty”.

There’s a lot of overlap between these 3 principles of Christian Giving. In order to give joyfully, our gift to the Church must be made willingly, because duty can take away

the opportunity for joyful giving. No minister, no treasurer should tell members of a congregation how much they should give to the Church.

What is often called the collection is in fact an offering, a freewill offering. We don't have collection convenors; we have freewill offering convenors. The envelopes, which are at the front of the church, are not collection envelopes; they are freewill offering envelopes.

Offerings are given freely and willingly – enclosed in an envelope because your gift, my gift, is no-one else's business.

It's a matter between ourselves and God. God who loves the person who gives gladly.

Rev Jack Drummond
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