
THE MORAL OBLIGATION OF THE TITHE

By Thomas E. Peck¹

Moral obligation can be created only by some intimation of the will of God. God alone can bind the conscience. The will of God can be made known to us only in one of two ways: either by the “light of nature” or by revelation. The light of nature becomes manifest either through the constitution and consciousness of the individual man, or through those of the human race expressed in the “*consensus populorum*.” That which has been believed always and everywhere and by all is very apt to be true; and that which has been felt to be binding upon the conscience, with the same universality of times, places and persons, may be concluded to be of moral obligation. The voice of the people in this sense may be regarded as the voice of God. The moral sense may be undeveloped, or it may be perverted in its judgments by ignorance, prejudice, passion, and habits of wickedness; but where it has a fair opportunity to be heard, and especially upon questions upon which its judgments are opposed to the desires and appetites of man, sinful and selfish, it would seem to speak with the authority of man’s Maker and Ruler. It is conscience, the “categorical imperative,” against what is voluntary in man. It is an authority which man feels cannot be resisted with impunity.

Both these kinds of proof, reason and revelation, have been appealed to by the defenders of the moral obligation of the tithe. But before we proceed to the examination of the proof, let us understand what the question precisely is. It is not whether men are not morally bound to acknowledge God’s propriety in them and in their substance, to confess their dependence upon his providence, and to give thanks to him for his bounties; nor is it whether they are not bound to do these things by offering to him a portion of their substance as well as by a form of words; nor whether all their worldly goods are not held by them as his stewards, and are to be used for his glory. There can be no debate upon such questions among those who acknowledge a divine providence. But the question is, whether the precise proportion of the tenth is the divinely-ordained proportion—that proportion alone (or, at least, the smallest) which God will accept as a rental, or as an expression of our dependence, our gratitude, our devotion to him. To discuss any other question than this precise one is, in our judgment, a waste of time.

I. The Proof From the Light of Nature

1. The proof from the light of nature for the tithe is easily disposed of. It has not been shown to be universal.

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2. Where the custom did obtain, it seems to have been observed, when statedly observed, as a mode or the mode of sustaining the priesthood; when occasionally observed, to have been offered as an acknowledgment of special divine favors. The only pre-Mosaic instances in the Bible are those of Abraham (Gen. xiv.) and Jacob (Gen. xxviii.). The tithe paid by Abraham was a solitary instance, was a tithe of the spoils of war, not of his own property or income, and was a tithe paid to a priest. If the instance proves anything for the theory of moral obligation, it proves that there ought always to be a visible priesthood to receive the tithes. In point of fact, as we shall see, the divine obligation of the tithe was not asserted in the Christian church until the ministry of the word had become a priesthood. The two things, tithe and priesthood, stand or fall together in every free church. The case of Jacob is a clear case of a voluntary vow, of a vow made to do a thing which there is no previous moral obligation to do. The cases of these two patriarchs have been mentioned here only in connection with the proof from the "light of nature." We shall have something more to say about Abraham's tithe when we come to examine the argument from Scripture. As to both cases, they were sporadic and occasional, and can furnish no proof of the moral obligation of the tithe in the only sense in which we are using the term in this paper, that of a tenth of one's income statedly paid for religious uses.

3. If the light of nature reveals the moral obligation of the tithe, how comes it to pass that the church did not see it for the first three centuries of its existence? Surely, Christians were not blinder than the heathen to the light of nature. Yet we have the statement of a scholar in the tithe-supported Church of England "that the fathers of the first three centuries nowhere speak of tithes as even a minimum due *de jure divino*, though they had occasion for saying so, had such been the opinion of the church, or had tithes generally been paid as legally due; they frequently and earnestly exhort to almsgiving, they never exhort their hearers to give tithes."² These facts are all the more weighty from the tendency in the church to revert to the Mosaic institutions of a mortal priesthood, temples, altars, and ritual sacrifices. A similar argument might be made from the fact that the tithes were not easily collected, even from the Jews themselves, although the "light of nature" was reinforced by a positive divine command. (Mal. iii. 8.) It appears to us, therefore, that the argument from reason, or the light of nature, ought to be given up. The utmost that it can prove is, that God ought to be acknowledged and honored by giving him of our substance.

II. The Proof From Scripture.

1. It is argued that Abraham must have offered the tithe to Melchisedek in obedience to a recognized custom of the religion of the day. We answer, that Abraham did not offer a tithe of his property or of his income, which is the only kind of tithe that we are concerned with, but of the spoils of war. Was it a custom with that patriarch to offer tithes of that sort? Was he ever engaged in war but this once? Did he ever go to war for the purpose of getting spoils, out of which he might offer a tenth? Further, after the tithe was instituted in Israel, was there a rule that a tenth of the spoils of war was to be offered to God? There was no such rule. If places were put under an anathema, no portion was to be reserved under pretense of sacrifice or any other sacred use, as Achan and Saul found to their cost. If they were not anathematized, all the spoils were left entirely to the people that went to war, without any sacred decimation. When God would have a sacred portion out of the spoils (as those taken from the Midianites, Num. xxxi.) to show that they did not fall under the law of tithes, he took, not the tenth, but one portion of five hundred from the soldiers, and of fifty from the people. "Hence," says Dr. Owen, "the giving of the tithe of

² Dr. Sharpe, in Smith's *Dict. of Eccl. Antiq.*, under "Tithes."

spoils was not from the obligation of any law, but was an act of free will and choice in the offerer.”³

But it is said that the apostle’s argument (in Heb. vii.) requires the assumption that tithes are always to be paid, because there is always a priest to receive them, and that Abraham was acting under a law of tithing. We answer: (a), That we cannot see it. (b), What is much more to the purpose, Dr. Owen did not see it. He takes occasion, from this very passage, to argue against this perpetual obligation of the tithe. “Keen optics must he have, I ween, who sees what is not to be seen,” or who sees in the Epistle to the Hebrews what escaped the vision of the great theologian and venerable saint who wrote four bulky volumes of commentary upon it. (c), It has already been shown that Abraham was not acting under a law of tithing. (d), The apostle’s argument is not based upon the facts in the case of Melchisedek, but upon the record concerning him. He does not mean to say that that strange person had neither father nor mother, but that there is no record of either. In other words, God so ordered the history of Melchisedek, and the record of it, as to furnish a “sign” of the coming of that seed of the woman who was to be both king and priest, and a priest without a priestly genealogy, without predecessor and without successor; a priest “after the power of an endless life.” Melchisedek is of no historical import whatever. His appearance is not the effect of anything in the history that precedes, or the cause of anything that follows. He was no doubt a real person, as real as Abraham himself was. But his appearance was a mere sign or type. “His name emerges but a moment from deep obscurity, and night falls upon it again. It is as a shadow passing for a moment along an illuminated portion of a wall on a dark night: the outline of some figure silently steals out of the gloom into the line of illumination and vanishes into the darkness again.” He is mentioned no more for a thousand years (Psalm cx.), and then only once; and then, after the lapse of another thousand years, he reappears in the exposition of his typical significance in the Epistle to the Hebrews. And yet upon the fact that Abraham once made to this personage a voluntary offering of a tenth of the spoils which he had taken in battle is made to hang the moral obligation of paying stately a tenth of one’s income to the ministers of religion! Some of our brethren have the boldness to say, “Everything here affirmed of Melchisedek must be affirmed of Christ; and everything here affirmed of Abraham must be affirmed of the church; otherwise the representation is faulty, and the whole incident loses its significance.” Upon this statement we remark: (a), The moderation of Dr. Owen is greatly to be preferred, who says, “What is represented in the type, but is really subjectively and properly found only in the antitype, may be affirmed of the type as such.” (b), To say that the antitype, Christ, receives tithes in the sense that he receives them in response to his demand for them, is a bald begging of the question. Whether he demands them or not is the very question in debate. “He that liveth” is Melchisedek, and not Christ. (Heb. vii. 8.) (c), There is a fallacy and a begging of the question in the use of the word “church.” The apostle affirms nothing of the church in its Christian form; he refers only to the Levitical church, a church that had a mortal priesthood, of the tribe of Levi and of the family of Aaron, and that supported that priesthood by tithes. He proceeds upon the notorious act that the Levitical church paid tithes. To make what he says applicable to the Christian church it must be assumed or proved that the Christian church has a priesthood of mortal men which it supports by that method. Truly, if the argument of the apostle had been what the brethren on the other side take it to have been, he might well have said that it was “hard to be uttered” (“hard of interpretation”).

Before taking leave of this argument from the meeting of Abraham and Melchisedek, which the advocates of the moral obligation of the tithe seem to regard as their Gibraltar, we

³ See Owen on Heb. Vii. 1-3, in Vol. V., p. 349, of Edinburgh edition, 1814.

would call the attention of our readers to its sacerdotal tendencies. The tithe and the priesthood: these are the twin ideas, the correlated facts. If the priesthood is by law, the support of the priesthood must be by law also. Nothing under such a system can be left to the voluntary contributions of the people. They have nothing to do with the making of priests, and they will have nothing to do, unless compelled, with supporting them. The two methods, support by tithes which are obligatory, and support by voluntary offerings, are in their nature, genius, and operation the opposites of each other. The one is of the nature of a tax; the other, of a free gift. The one is the expression of obedience to law; the other is the expression of the liberty which belongs to a voluntary compact. The one implies simply submission, more or less sullen; the other is the expression of confidence and affection towards him who dispenses the ordinances of the gospel.

It is plain that, if the views of the advocates of the tithe should come to prevail, our whole conception of the pastoral office would be revolutionized by changing the method of support. A pastor would not be dependent upon his congregation, but upon a common fund administered by a committee or a commission appointed by the General Assembly. If the tithe should be honestly paid, said committee would have a great fund at its disposal, which would corrupt both the dispensers and the ministers to whom it should be dispensed. We should soon have a lording it over God's heritage with a vengeance. The people would lose, virtually, their right of electing their pastors; at least, it would be maintained with difficulty in the face of so mighty a "patron" as such a committee would be. The right of election and the right of patron are not easily kept separate, as the history of the Church of Scotland and the existence of the Free Church of Scotland demonstrate. If the right of patronage be delegated to a central committee, how long would the right of election be retained? And, the right of election having been surrendered, how long would it be before the ministry of the word would become a virtual priesthood, independent of the people, and lording it over them, claiming to be the "clergy," the inheritance of God, and despising the "laity" as sheep worthy only of being fleeced?

We do not desire to see the revenue of the church collected "by law." Our tithe brethren insist that such a method of collection is necessary; and they ask, with an air of triumph, if any other kingdom could subsist upon the free offerings of the people. The answer is easy: There is no other kingdom like the kingdom of Christ; no other kingdom of truth, righteousness, joy, and peace; no other in which love is the reigning principle, love to the King and to his people; no other which is moral and spiritual in its origin, aims, methods, and ends; no other which, from its very nature, must abhor an appeal to force.⁴ One of the weightiest objections to the tithe method is, that it would unspiritualize the church. "Our present system of ministerial support," as Dr. Thornwell maintained against Dr. Hodge, more than forty years ago,

is as perfect in theory as the wit of man can make it. While it institutes a near and tender relationship between every pastor and his charge, it binds the charges together in ties of mutual charity and dependence, which bless alike the givers and the receivers. It is a plan

⁴ Editor's Note. Consider the words of R.L. Dabney: "Money is power. The possession of power naturally begets the desire to use it. The permanent endowment of spiritual societies with great wealth is therefore dangerous to free government. It tends to convert the clergy, who should be servants of all, into usurpers. . . . The safest policy for Church and State is to carry on our evangelical enterprises with the least possible of hoarded wealth: to rely for our current wants on gifts fresh from the brotherhood. When a Continental Diplomat taunted Queen Elizabeth with the scantiness of her exchequer, she replied: "My exchequer is in the hearts of my people!" Noble answer; far nobler for a spiritual commonwealth. Let us on the one hand, encourage the people of God to give liberally, (even lavishly, if you choose) to His service. But let us disburse as lavishly, as fast as it is contributed; so that the Church shall still be poor in this world's wealth, and rich only in generous deeds and blessings." MS at Union Theological Seminary. Box 1, file 2. "Lecture. The Dangers from the accumulation of Wealth in Ecclesiastical Hands." 4x7 handwritten lecture; 10 sewn leaves (partially disbound), 38 numbered pp. of text.

in beautiful accordance with the spirit of the gospel; it preserves the unity of the church without disturbing the free and healthy action of its parts.”⁵

Let it be repeated for the thousandth time, that what the church needs is, not other methods, but more life. Let us leave legal and compulsory methods to the papacy, which is a kingdom of this world, and, therefore, cannot rely upon the love of its people to Christ, and upon the power of the Holy Ghost.

What has been said concerning the tendencies of the tithe method is fully confirmed by history. The passages from the fathers which have been quoted by the brethren on the other side, those of them which clearly teach the divine obligation of the tithe upon Christians, belong to a period in which the ministry was considered a priesthood. If they prove anything, therefore, they prove too much for Presbyterians. Search and see if there has ever been a church which enforced the tithe which did not hold sacerdotal views of the ministry, or was not in unscriptural alliance with the civil power. The tithe has not kept good company in Christendom.

But to return to the scriptural argument. The advocates of the tithe are sorely pressed for any New Testament support to their cause. It is not merely the silence of the New Testament that troubles them. This of itself is not conclusive, as we all hold, in regard to some subjects. The trouble is, that it is not silent in regard to the support of the ministry. It says a good deal on that subject, and what it does say makes it impossible to account for the omission of any allusion to the tithe, if the moral obligation of such a mode of supporting the ministry of the word was acknowledged or acted on. For example, let us take the classic place in I Corinthians ix. The apostle there argues at some length the right of those who preach the gospel to live of the gospel. Instead of arguing the point from the tithe as a permanent law which had been in force for centuries, he argues it from principles of natural right. His illustrations are drawn from the ordinances of Moses, from military usages, from husbandry, from the shepherd's calling, from the usages of the temple service, all of which are exemplifications of the principle that the laborer is worthy of his hire.

It has been asserted that the apostle, in the fourteenth verse, uses the expression “even so” to indicate that the ministry is to be supported exactly in the same manner as the Levitical priests, that is, by tithes. On which we remark, (a), that in the preceding verse, where he is enforcing his point by the usages of the temple service, he probably has in mind only the offerings upon the altar, of which the priests, and the priests only, were allowed to eat;⁶ not the tithes, of which the tithe payers could also eat. (Deut. xii. 6, 7.) But, (b), if the tithes are referred to, then the “even so,” as rigorously interpreted by our brethren, must imply that the preachers of the gospel are priests, for the priest and the tithe go together in the illustration. (c), The “even so” refers to all the preceding illustrations, not merely to that in the verse preceding; and if so, what a batch of absurdities would the interpretation of our brethren result in! Ministers should live on grass, on grapes, on milk, etc. (d), The meaning is plain enough: that as in all the preceding examples God has ordained that every worker, man or brute, should live by his work, so he has ordained concerning the worker in the gospel, that he should live by the gospel. There is no more proof from this passage that the minister should live upon a tithe than there is that the ox should, or the soldier, or the shepherd, or the planter of a vineyard.

But the New Testament is not merely silent about the tithe. It proposes a method of raising a revenue inconsistent with the method of the tithe. It is the method of voluntary contribu-

⁵ *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. I., p. 82.

⁶ See *Hodge's Com.*, *in loc.*

tions, in opposition to a tax, whether a tenth or any other. The proportion is a proportion to prosperity, of which the believer is to be the judge; and the judgment is to be made under the guidance and impulse of love. He that was taught in the word was to communicate to him that taught in all good things. (Gal. vi. 6.) Paul himself received a "gift" from his Philippians which he delights in as "a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing unto God." (Phil. iv. 17, 18.) If it should be said that Paul was no longer ministering to the church at Philippi, and was not entitled to the tithe, that this contribution to him was, therefore, of the nature of a free gift, and had nothing to do with the tithe which was paid to the settled minister in that church, we ask, What, then, becomes of the plea which is so persistently urged in favor of the tithe, that it will furnish abundant means for sustaining and enlarging our missionary work, as well as for sustaining our pastors? Was there ever a missionary who deserved an ampler support than the great Apostle to the Gentiles? And considered as an apostle, and, therefore, as having plenary authority over all churches, a sort of universal pastor, he would have had a right to the tithe, to say nothing of the special obligations by which the Philippian church was bound to him as its founder, and as a sufferer in its behalf. The Philippian tithe, therefore, is a pure fancy.

The attempt to evade what is said in the New Testament about voluntary offerings, by making these offerings additions to the tithe, is a pure begging of the question, and need not be noticed until an attempt is made to prove that they were so. As to the fears that voluntaryism will not yield sufficient revenue, it may be said, (a), that if voluntaryism is God's way, it will yield enough, and all fears are begotten of unbelief. (b), That neither method will yield enough without the Holy Spirit of God in the hearts of his people. It is vain to attempt to make a law to do the work of the Spirit. A dollar is not a dollar in the kingdom of God. A dollar given from love to God is more than a dollar given from conscience or fear merely to comply with an external statute. (c), That the history of the two methods is, to say the least, not against the voluntary. (Compare Ex. xxxvi. 5, 6; 1 Chron. xxix. 3-9, with 2 Chron. xxxi. 5-10, and see also Mal. iii. 8, 9.) In these passages we have recorded an abounding liberality, both of tithes and of voluntary offerings; but it is only in the case of the latter that it is said the people had to be restrained from giving more, while in the place of Malachi God charges his people with robbing him in the matter of tithes. So, also, in Scotland when the exodus of the Free Church took place, not only its enemies, but its timid friends, predicted that voluntaryism would prove a disastrous failure; but the event falsified the prediction.

An additional argument in favor of the proposition that the voluntary method is incompatible with the method of the tithe, and that, therefore, the use of the one for the support of the ministry implies the disuse of the other, may be drawn from the nature of the ministry as depending for its effectiveness upon the mutual confidence of minister and people. In other words, voluntaryism is in harmony with the nature of the ministry, and the law of the tithe is not. But as we have already touched upon this before, it need not be enlarged upon here.

The other arguments from the New Testament urged by the brethren in favor of the tithe do not seem to be worthy of serious refutation. We, therefore, conclude this essay by begging our readers to remember that the sole question we have been debating is, whether there is now a law of God requiring his people to give him a tenth of their income for the support of the offices of religion.