



Shaped by Generosity

January is the time for resolutions, even though someone wryly observed that resolutions are simply things that go in one year and out the other.

If I could pronounce a single resolution for the whole Evangelical Covenant Church it would be to make 2011 the Year of Living Generously.

Superintendent Mark Novak of the North Pacific Conference recently convened a “Generosity Summit” attended by some 125 people from two dozen area churches as well as other superintendents and Covenant leaders. It was facilitated by Generous Churches, a group working to promote generosity in congregations. The purpose was not to talk about fundraising but about living a life that reflects the essential character of God.

John tells us that God is love, and quite simply love reveals itself through giving. It is intrinsic to the Trinity. For God so loved the world he what? He *gave* his one and only son, Jesus. Ephesians 5 reminds us Jesus in turn so loved the church that he *gave* himself up for it. There are different spiritual gifts operating in the church, but 1 Corinthians 12 tells us the same Holy Spirit *gives* them.

God is a giving God. Generosity helps us reflect that very character. No wonder Jesus tells us freely you have received, freely give.

Generosity carves an ever-deepening channel in our lives through which the heart of God flows to the world. For a more adventurous life with God, quicken the current by pouring out ever more of every good thing. By being generous with your time, aptitudes, affections, graciousness, forgiveness, appreciation, and helpfulness your own world feels more aligned because you are indeed more aligned with the character of God.

Generosity clearly encompasses more than finances, but finances are an important dimension. Jesus says where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. As we invest in the things of God, our heart follows.

James Amadon, pastor of Highland Covenant Church in Bellevue, Washington, the congregation that hosted the Generosity Summit, shared how his young family downsized their home in order to have more financial capacity to be able to respond to more God-driven opportunities. It’s countercultural to lower your standard of living to increase your standard of giving, but I have

other friends intent on doing the very same thing.

In Congo, a place of grinding poverty, generosity abounds. I noted there is a big attitudinal difference between *having to give something* and being grateful for *having something to give*.

Covenanters are ahead of most in this area. The organization Empty Tomb does studies of giving patterns among denominational groups. The ECC is almost always in the top five in per capita giving. Even so, I often hear people longing to be freer to do more for the kingdom.

If that is you, here are three simple concepts from the summit to be moving in the direction of greater generosity: be a percentage giver, a priority giver, and a progressive giver.

Percentage giving is the biblical principle of proportionality. Convert your current giving to whatever percentage of income it represents, and use that percentage as a baseline moving forward. If you keep the percentage the same, your giving capacity will rise if your income rises. Should your income decline, you are still faithful because you are giving a percentage, not an amount.

Priority giving is the biblical principle of giving of the first fruits of the harvest to God, not the last. We honor our giving first, then shape the rest of our spending rather than vice versa.

Progressive giving is about moving forward. Progressing to a tithe (10 percent) is a worthy goal, but the tithe is never presented in the Bible as an end in itself. Indeed, for some it can even be an excuse preventing them from being as fully generous as God is inviting them to be.

Covenant pastor Craig Groeschel has said sacrifice is when we give up something we love for something we love even more.

More than our own self-interest, may we love living from the posture of radical generosity in every way. May we love a holy imagination for how God can bless others through our open hands. May we love being people of character shaped by the generous character of God.

As we move toward more generous living, may we hear the words of martyred missionary Jim Elliott, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” ■

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