

HOUSEKEEPING

NEHEMIAH 10:32-39 | We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. ³⁴ We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law. ³⁵ We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord; ³⁶ also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; ³⁷ and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor. ³⁸ And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. ³⁹ For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.

Before the exile, Israel clung to the temple like a talisman to ward off disaster. After the exile, they swung to the other extreme and neglected the temple altogether (EZRA 6:8-10; 7:14-23). During the exile, they had learned to live without the house of God. Like some of us.

The covenant pledge of Nehemiah 10 concludes with a solemn oath to finance all the services and supplies of the temple (:32-39). The Persian kings initially underwrote these expenses (Ezra 6:9-10; 7:14-24). But this

could not and should not last forever. Israel now takes full responsibility to support the work of God, the workers of God, and the worship of God.

This is a radical fruit of repentance for an economically strapped community on the fringe of a sprawling empire. It shows just how deeply the Word of God has impacted their lives during the renewal movement, transforming their values and resetting their priorities. They don't use their hardship as an excuse to hold back and hoard their pittance. They put God first in everything. They put their treasure where their heart is. Do we?

Israel could never have survived without strong institutions. The twin pillars of temple and Torah held them together for the next 500 years. God is not against institutions. The Church in heaven can do without them. But down here, they are vital organs of the Body of Christ. God is a God of order, not confusion. Institutions provide an orderly arrangement of the life and ministry of the Church in the world.

The Church can survive without your tithes and offerings. But can you? When you give part of your income to God, you acknowledge that everything you have is his. The altar sanctifies your gift (MATT 23:19). Not only is the portion you give holy. What you keep for your needs is also sanctified, provided you give with the right motives and don't keep too much. To neglect God's house is to neglect God. For your own sake, pay your tithes at least. Support the work, workers, and worship of God

WALL OF DUTY

■ Some of us have become self-centric. We have fallen for ideas swirling around in the cyberworld that the days of the institutional church are over. Reject this naive notion and toxic thinking. Watch and pray: God created us for community. Any group that meets together intentionally and regularly for any purpose under any form of leadership, order, and accountability is already an institution. *Your church is an institution. Don't be embarrassed by that. But do keep your church on an upward trajectory of life-giving renewal... so*

that its Gospel purpose is served more and more powerfully all the time, in everything you do. A church making the real Jesus non-ignorable in your city and far beyond—that's an institution worthy of your all (RAY STEDMAN).

■ Some of us have gotten too comfortable staying home on Sundays during Covid. Post-pandemic, will the neglect of God's house become a chronic problem? *Many churches have expanded their virtual reach in innovative ways and enlarged their social media presence. This is exciting. But we shouldn't forget that the church stands or falls with the doctrine of the incarnation. 'Jesus drew near to them,' scripture reports. Intimacy, proximity, and personal presence will carry more genuine authority in a post-pandemic church than touting a large [online] platform* (PETER MARTY). Watch and pray. *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion* (HEB 3:15).

■ Some of us have stopped giving to the house of God. Spooked by the economic impact of the pandemic, we have succumbed to the fear of lack. Let us return to the Word. Listen. Pray. Obey: *Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts* (MAL 3:10-12).

Pray: Lord, forgive us. In withholding what belongs to you, we have robbed you. In not trusting you, we have shortchanged ourselves. We have deprived ourselves the promise of divine supply and freedom from anxiety about treasures on earth.