

“Six for First”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” (II Corinthians 5:18)

This past Sunday I spoke on the subject “The Gift and the Giver.” In that sermon I presented the theological rationale for giving to the church. In the Presbyterian Church the giving of one’s financial resources is guided by a certain number of important principles: 1) Giving is Biblical. The precedent for this is in the Old Testament and New Testament alike. 2) Giving in the Presbyterian Church is proportional. We are all called to give, not the same amount, but in proportion to what God has given to us. 3) Giving is always an act of worship and an exercise of grace.

This morning I want to speak about stewardship from a somewhat different perspective. I want to delineate six reasons that are compelling for me, and I hope for you as well, in terms of giving to First Presbyterian Church as we come to Dedication Sunday next week.

I.

The first reason is that giving is a privilege and one which we should not take lightly. No one is forced to give. The church is a voluntary society. Every person has the opportunity to give, but no one is coerced to make a pledge to the church.

Some years ago I was preparing my federal taxes one evening. One of my children asked what I was doing and I replied that I was preparing by annual taxes that helped to support the government of the United States. When my child asked me why I was doing this, I replied by saying that there are some things that one has to do and others that one doesn’t have to do, and paying one’s taxes is something we have to do.

But no one has to give to the church. We give because we are responding to what God has done for us. We give also because we have the privilege to support the cause of Christ and we are grateful for the freedom to do this.

A second reason that we are asking you to give to support the ministry of this church is that the church has a special mission that no other organization in our community possesses. Dr. John

Leith, in his book *The Reformed Imperative*, notes that the church has a word to say that no one else can say.

To be sure, there are many organizations in our community that do a lot of wonderful things. There are organizations that feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, offer special services to families and children, counsel individuals in times of stress, and a host of other things as well.

But the church offers a word that no other organization can offer, and it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth he speaks of what he calls the ministry of reconciliation. That is the ministry of the church. It is the proclamation of the news that the great distance that separates us from God, from one another, and from ourselves has been bridged by God. This is the work of Jesus Christ and this is the ministry of reconciliation that the church proclaims.

In his book *The Reformed Imperative* Dr. Leith makes an observation that the central question that faces the church today is the question that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Those churches, Dr. Leith observed, who can say without hesitation, equivocation, or qualification with Peter "You are the Christ, the Son of God" are precisely those churches that are growing, prospering, and ministering effectively today.

A third reason that compels us to give to First Presbyterian Church is that our church has a system of accountability that gives each member assurance that the money given to the church is properly accounted for and used for the purposes given. In the past years we have all witnessed churches and other religious groups that have not demonstrated this kind of accountability. The result of this are salaries for ministers that appear to be significantly higher than one would expect, funds unaccounted for, and a host of other financial practices that do not lead people to have confidence in an organization and its leadership.

In the Presbyterian Church, and at First Presbyterian Church, we seek to demonstrate the highest standards of accountability and financial responsibility. Our Board of Deacons is entrusted with the financial oversight of the church. We have a treasurer and assistant treasurer. The salary (or terms of call) of our ministers has to be approved each year by the congregation and by the Presbytery of Charlotte as well. These salaries are published and are a matter of public record.

Our books are audited each year and we attempt to be as transparent about our finances as possible. It is important to note that First Presbyterian Church consists of a number of entities that compose our ministry. The operating budget of the church is approximately 3.2 million dollars. In addition, there are 350 children that are enrolled in our Child Development Center and our Weekday School. Our church also sponsors a television ministry that is funded apart from any budget or corporation funds. The total amount of funds that our church manages for all its programs is approximately 6 million dollars a year.

Obviously, with the scope of this kind of ministry, strict financial oversight is critical.

A fourth compelling reason to support the ministry of First Presbyterian Church is that the funds given to our church are augmented greatly by the enormous amount of volunteer support that allow us to leverage these funds in ways that are truly extraordinary. For example, our church

houses the largest Loaves and Fishes pantry and distribution site in all of Mecklenburg County. Each week we give groceries to a 100-120 families. This food is shelved by volunteers, given out by volunteers, and managed by volunteers. Can you imagine what we would have to pay, if we employed people to do these services?

That is true as well with our ministry to children and to the homeless in our community. Church members tutor at Westerly Hills. Volunteers are the base of our Camp Grier ministry and Freedom School in the summer.

Many of our members spend the night at the church with homeless families at our church during the winter months as part of the "Room in the Inn" program. I remember several years ago, on a Christmas Eve, leaving the church after our midnight service. It was almost 1:00 AM in the morning and I was glad to be headed home after a long day. As I passed by the Fellowship Hall, I noticed that there were 15 of our members who were spending Christmas Eve, sleeping on cots with these neighbors who had no home to go to on Christmas Eve. Even as I was very grateful to these members, I wondered what it would cost if we had to hire people to spend the night in a church with homeless families.

I remembered a friend of mine who once told me about visiting a leper colony in Central Africa a few years ago. He watched as a group of Catholic nuns moved about these people, many of whom had lost hands and feet and who were in a very difficult physical condition. My friend heard a member of his group say to a friend, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." One of the nuns happened to hear that remark and replied, "I wouldn't do it for a million dollars either."

All of this is a way of saying that giving one's financial resources to a church like First Presbyterian gives a person a wonderful way to make our dollars do even more than we might ordinarily expect.

A fifth compelling reason to give to First Presbyterian Church is that our church is part of a ministry that goes beyond the boundaries of our congregation and community that is international in scope. Several years ago I had the privilege to be part of a mission team of members of our church that spent a week as guest of a small church – Hope Baptist Church – in Ryazan, Russia. The members of this church have maintained a remarkable ministry in the midst of strong opposition from their government and in the midst of severe economic difficulty.

Over the past few years our church has expanded its global outreach in a number of places – in Mexico, Haiti, Russia, Kenya, and a number of other places as well.

As Christians, we live under the mandate of the "Great Commission" that Christ gave to his disciples – to go into the entire world, preaching, teaching, and baptizing in the name of the one whom we serve.

The sixth reason for giving of one's financial resources to the church is that giving is one of the ways we demonstrate our commitment to Jesus Christ. At the end of the day, one's pledge or gift to the church is a deeply personal matter and it is a matter that is between each individual and God.

There are many reasons that people chose not to give to a church. Some believe that their money can be used better by other organizations that they believe do far more good than the church.

Some don't like the church for various reasons. They don't like the minister. They don't like the music. They don't like some of the people that are members of a particular church. Some people are angry at our denomination or are upset by some particular political or social issue.

But, it is impossible to understand the New Testament apart from the church. The church is the "Body of Christ." It is part of the "new creation" of which Paul speaks.

Moreover, the church is entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation that informs all that we do. Jesus promised that even the "gates of hell" would not prevail against his church.

Albert Einstein, the great scientist, once paid a great compliment to the church. He noted that in Nazi Germany when every other group had crated under the pressure of Hitler's National Socialism, the Confessing Church of Germany stood alone in their opposition to Hitler. All of the great universities had bowed to Hitler; all of the great newspapers of Germany had kowtowed to the Nazi party line. Only the church, observed Einstein, refused to bow down to the terrible tyranny of Nazi Germany.

II.

Next week is Dedication Sunday at First Presbyterian Church. On that Sunday each of us is asked to attend worship and to place on the communion table our pledge to the church for 2010.

The year 2009 has been a challenging year for our community and our nation as well in the midst of a severe economic recession. 2010 promises to be equally difficult with unemployment still very high and many people uncertain about the future.

The stakes have never been higher. The real question for all of us is what kind of church to we want to be. Do we want our trumpet to bear an uncertain sound or do we want to say to those around us that we believe in Jesus Christ, we believe in Christ's church, and we believe in the First Presbyterian Church?

May God give us his grace that this church may be a light in the darkness of great suffering and point people to the one who is the light of the world.

Amen!