



Biblical Perspectives on Giving

Discernment in Giving by Gary D. Latainer

Should tangible results be the most important criteria in selecting which Christian ministries to support or do the Scriptures suggest a different emphasis?

Generosity is one of the primary ways in which Christians evidence the fruit of the Spirit at work in their lives. Yet a Christian who commits to giving as much as possible towards God's work, as soon as possible, faces a major challenge as a steward over God's resources. With a multitude of Christian ministries that could be supported, how does one choose just which ministries to support in order to make the most effective use of God's resources?

Living in a society that values results, most of us are inclined to support ministries that produce good tangible and visible results. Whether those results are measured in terms of how many people made professions of faith, how many Bibles were distributed, how many hungry were fed, how many students were educated or some other measure relevant to a particular ministry, they are the main standard by which most people judge a ministry. The better the results demonstrated by ministries we have supported, the more confident we feel that we have wisely exercised our stewardship responsibilities. Even the focus many of us place on financial efficiency, evaluating such criteria as the share of a ministry's budget devoted to fundraising and administrative expenses, is generally a focus on results, as a more financially efficient ministry should produce better results for each dollar contributed than a less financially efficient ministry.

In this paper, we will attempt to show that such a results oriented decision process is not the emphasis the Scriptures would have for us. Rather, Scripture shows us that we should evaluate Christian ministries first and foremost based on their faithfulness and commitment to God's Word. Once we have judged a ministry to be spiritually faithful, we may

consider secondary factors, among which financial integrity and need are most important. While we do not have to ignore results, only when these more critical areas have been examined should we consider results. Ordering our decision process in this way recognizes that

1. God is responsible for the results of His servants.
2. God will ensure that the resources necessary for His work are distributed where He requires them.
3. The visible results of faithful ministry may not be evident for years or even generations.

Framework for Ministry Selection

In many ways, investing a large sum of money is an easier task than giving a large sum of money. To begin with, since our potential investments will be in for-profit entities, we can evaluate them based on a tangible yardstick by which to measure results, namely earnings. Indeed, the collapse of many Internet businesses confirms that over time, investors will not fund a business without some realistic prospect of visible earnings. Furthermore, once we have invested, we can much more readily see whether we have done so wisely based on another tangible measure, namely our returns, than we can in the case of giving. Lastly, we can more clearly see whether an alternative investment would have been a better choice than the investments we actually made, than we can see whether an alternative ministry would have been a better choice to support than the ministry we actually supported.

In each of these three areas, selection, monitoring and comparison, what facilitates the decision process in investing is the presence of visible, concrete measures that form the basis of our evaluations. With Christian ministries, however, we do not have an equivalent basis for evaluation. The difficulty is not so much that results may be hard to see, although frequently this is the case. Rather, the difficulty is that results may not be what they appear, misleading us in two potential ways.

First, the results we would like to see and the timetable we would like to see them on may not be the results God has planned or the timetable He has in mind. A ministry's apparent lack of visible and concrete results does not automatically mean that God is not at work in that ministry and that it is not deserving of our support. Secondly, ministries that are not faithful to God's word may produce what seem to us to be the results God would want. While we may perceive that a ministry is producing concrete and visible results or a ministry itself may proclaim that it is producing concrete and visible results, this does not necessarily indicate God's blessing upon that ministry and that it is deserving of our support. Scripture repeatedly tells us that God does not value outward appearances, but looks upon the heart. Given our sinful and prideful natures, we can easily be misled by outward appearances, judging Christian work by man's standards rather than by God's standards.

How Reliable Are Results?

To illustrate the ways in which visible results may mislead us, we look at two examples from Scripture. First, consider the history of the nation of Israel after it was divided into two kingdoms following the reign of Solomon. As described in the books of I Kings and II Kings, God repeatedly sent prophets to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The prophets had a twofold message of repentance and judgment, warning God's people that they had broken His covenant with them and needed to turn back to Him or face His judgment. There is no doubt that these prophets were doing God's work, for He refers to them as His servants (II Kings 17:13). As such, they represent the type of ministry we should want to support: God's servants doing God's work.

Yet, in the case of the northern kingdom of Israel, there was no evidence that the prophets' faithful

declaration of God's word was having any impact. For roughly 200 years, through king after king, God's prophets warned the kingdom of Israel, yet not once did the kingdom repent and return unto God. If measured on results, these prophets looked like failures. Not only were the people and their leaders not repenting, but the message of judgment that the prophets were delivering was slow to come to pass. While individual kings and their families were judged, the nation went on for decade after decade, even enjoying a period of relative prosperity almost 150 years after the first prophetic warning. Fully 200 years went by before God's ultimate message of judgment was fulfilled when Israel was finally taken captive by the Assyrians.

The southern kingdom of Judah showed much better faithfulness to God's covenant with them during this period, as we read of many kings doing "what was right in the sight of the Lord". Even here, though, we see a strong illustration that consistent Godly ministry may produce highly variable results. Despite the same prophetic message being consistently preached, the response of God's people differed drastically. For example, King Hezekiah is so greatly praised for his obedience to God that II Kings 18:5 declares, "He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah nor who were before him." Yet, he is followed as king by his son Manasseh, who does such evil that II Kings 21:11 says, ". . . he has acted more wickedly than all the Amorites who were before him . . .".

The history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah illustrate the case of faithful ministry failing to produce the results we would expect to see under the timetable we would expect to see them. Our second example from Scripture illustrates the case of unfaithful ministry producing apparently favorable results and is taken from Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians. In chapters 10-13 of this letter, Paul addresses a situation in which the Corinthian church is being drawn to false apostles. Although, according to II Corinthians 11:4, these false apostles were preaching another Jesus and a different gospel from what Paul had preached, many were tolerant of these teachings. From a numbers standpoint, these false apostles were apparently enjoying fruitful ministry, having ready success in attracting followers and drawing the Corinthians away from Paul. Judged by outward appearances, they apparently

had more to offer than did Paul. The culture of that time valued oratorical skill and worldly wisdom and the false apostles apparently projected a dynamic presence and dynamic speaking skills. In contrast, they claimed that Paul's "bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible" (II Corinthians 10:10).

To those not thoroughly grounded in the true gospel message, the work of these false apostles would have looked more worthy of support than that of Paul. Yet in no way were these false apostles doing God's work. Rather, Paul describes them as deceitful workers of Satan, disguising themselves as ministers of Christ (II Corinthians 11:13-15). (Apart from Scripture, an excellent example of unfaithful ministry apparently producing successful results is that of Charles Finney, one of the most influential evangelists of the early 1800s. His preaching drew enthusiastic crowds and he appeared to be leading a great revival, yet this man denied the core doctrines of Scripture. In reality, the visible "success" attributable to his evangelism proved to be anything but real.)

The Importance of Faithfulness

These Scriptural illustrations help to highlight that unless we understand a ministry's level of faithfulness, obedience and commitment to, as well as dependence upon the Word of God, we have no basis on which to evaluate its work. Before any consideration of results, we must examine spiritual faithfulness, which does not necessarily manifest itself in near-term visible results.

To understand why spiritual faithfulness is so important, we need to look closely at the purpose of Christian ministries and our giving to such ministries. According to Scripture, the work of Christian ministries is never to be seen as an end in and of itself. Rather, the ultimate goal of Christian ministry is that God may be glorified. Matthew 5:16 tells us to "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven". While we can rejoice when people are benefited by Christian ministry, our greatest joy as Christians is that God be glorified. Indeed, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, the very first thing we ask is that God hallow His name (Matthew 6:9).

In we are to fulfill this purpose, as we carry out Christian work, we are to do so in the name of

Christ. Only when a ministry works in Christ's name is it working with the purpose of glorifying God. Colossians 3:17 tells us, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." To do all in the name of the Lord Jesus is not simply a matter of declaration, but one of aligning our will with His will, seeking His purposes and relying on His power and authority.

Having our focus on glorifying God and working in Christ's name both acknowledges our inability and weakness for ministry and recognizes that whatever results a ministry may attain, it does so because of God's power to accomplish His purposes. We are instruments that God uses to accomplish His purposes. Our role is absolute faithfulness and obedience, with God alone responsible for whatever results were achieved. Indeed, Scripture assures us that faithful ministry always produces the results God desires. Jesus declares in Matthew 16:18, ". . . I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

Throughout his epistles, the apostle Paul consistently acknowledged these truths in describing his ministry. Consider these two verses:

- II Corinthians 3:5 - Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.

- I Corinthians 3:7 - So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

Because God is responsible for results, we can be confident that His work will never lack the resources necessary to achieve these results. As Paul writes in II Corinthians 9:8, "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work." Thus, making faithfulness the absolute priority in our giving, is the best way to assure that the resources God has entrusted to us as stewards will be used to achieve the results He has ordained. Indeed, examining faith first is the best way to fulfill our stewardship responsibilities.

Evaluating Faithfulness

But how exactly do we go about examining faith? Clearly, we cannot know the hearts of those

involved in Christian ministry. We can only look at a ministry's faithfulness from an external perspective and as such, our examination will be imperfect. Nevertheless, there are indicators that should be evident in a faithful ministry whose presence or absence make a strong statement about the faithfulness of that ministry.

One of the most critical items we can examine is a ministry's statement of faith. The statement of faith must be in accord with the essential truths of Scripture. While we do not want to get caught up in debate over obscure theological points in evaluating a statement of faith, we do want to make sure that the ministry has in no way watered down any of the truths of the Gospel so as to sound more palatable to potential supporters. Any ministry that is afraid to boldly proclaim its belief in essential Scriptural truths should not be considered for financial support. Such a ministry has substituted secular reasoning for faith in God, ignoring the words of Paul in Romans 1:16, where he declares, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes . . .".

Of course, if we are to evaluate a statement of faith in this way, we ourselves must be able to recognize what the truths of the Gospel are and what they are not. This does not mean knowing what our church might teach or what a well known Christian personality might teach, but knowing what the Bible says. To help in this evaluation, we would recommend that donors become familiar with a document entitled, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration", published in the June 1999 issue of Christianity Today. This document, signed by dozens of leading evangelicals, is an outstanding summary of the essentials of the Gospel as presented in the Bible. A more thorough exposition of this document can be found in the book, "Getting the Gospel Right", by R.C. Sproul.

Not only should a ministry's statement of faith say the right things, but as the ministry carries out its work, it should evidence that its statement of faith guides all that it does. Jesus warns of the many who will claim to have done great works in His name, but of whom He will say, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21-23). Unfortunately, a once faithful

ministry can lose its way such that a Scripturally grounded statement of faith written long ago has little bearing on how it carries out its work today. As an illustration, consider a seminary whose statement of faith declares Jesus Christ to be fully God and fully man. Yet over the years, its faculty becomes filled with those who deny either the deity or humanity of Christ and teach accordingly. Regardless of what it says in its statement of faith, such a seminary demonstrates a total lack of faithfulness in what it does and would obviously not be deserving of our support.

Just as critical in examining a ministry's faithfulness is evaluating the priority it places on glorifying God. If we examine a ministry's web site, publications, solicitation material or any other written material, if we have discussions with the ministry's leaders or other staff, what impression do we form of how much the ministry projects a desire to glorify God in its work? All too frequently, a ministry will emphasize the work it is doing, seeing that work as an end in and of itself. A ministry's work though, is a means to show the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and thereby glorify the Father. Even a humanitarian ministry must recognize that its ultimate purpose in meeting human needs is to glorify God. Indeed, Paul concludes the most detailed passage on giving in the Scriptures with a recognition of the priority of glorifying God. The occasion for this passage, covering all of chapters 8 and 9 in II Corinthians, is the collection of money to meet the physical needs of the church at Jerusalem. Concluding in II Corinthians 9:12-15, Paul writes, "For the administration of this service not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also is abounding through many thanksgivings to God, while, through the proof of this ministry, they glorify God for the obedience of your confession to the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal sharing with them and all men, and by their prayer for you, who long for you because of the exceeding grace of God in you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"

When this emphasis on glorifying God is not abundantly apparent in a ministry, we must seriously question whether the ministry is deserving of our financial support. When it is present, we are ready to give that ministry further consideration.

Lastly, as we consider a ministry's faithfulness, we want to consider the faithfulness of its board of directors. The role of the board of directors is analogous to that of elders in the church and its importance cannot be overemphasized. Paul wrote detailed instructions to Timothy and Titus concerning the character qualifications of those who would oversee the church. By their character, elders are to be an example to those under them. Paul exhorts Titus to be such an example, writing, ". . . in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you." (Titus 2:7,8). Board members should present these same character qualities.

While we cannot look directly at the hearts of those on the board, looking at board policies and how the board governs to see if these are consistent with Scripture can help us discern the faithfulness of those on the board. Counsel and Capital believes that certain board practices and procedures should be present when a board is committed to the authority of Scripture. Among these, a board that emphasizes unanimity in its decision making, encourages transparency in the ministry's communications and deals formally with issues of governance and nominating board members is demonstrating that it takes seriously its Scriptural role.

If we view ministry selection as a screening process, examining a ministry's statement of faith, the consistency of its work with that statement of faith, the priority it places on glorifying God and the faithfulness of its board of directors is the first and most essential step in that process. Having taken this step, we should be able to substantially narrow down the list of ministries we would potentially support to those that give clear evidence of spiritual faithfulness. By limiting our giving to ministries that are spiritually faithful, we have taken the most important step in fulfilling our responsibilities as stewards over God's resources.

Financial Integrity

Once ministries have been screened on the basis of spiritual faithfulness, we can then consider secondary factors that will enable us to further discern which ministries we should support. Because it so

often reveals much about the sincerity of a ministry's profession of spiritual faithfulness, financial integrity is key among these factors. Financial integrity involves a ministry handing its finances in a way that inspires confidence that it is efficiently and faithfully utilizing God's resources.

We see a number of admonitions in Scripture concerning the importance of financial integrity in ministry. Notably, in the detailed exposition on giving in chapters 8 and 9 of II Corinthians referred to earlier, Paul emphasizes the theme of financial integrity. As he takes up the collection for the Jerusalem church in this passage, Paul recognizes that avoiding even the suspicion of mishandling financial resources is essential if a ministry is to glorify God. Despite his position as an apostle, Paul knew that if he were to take the money that had been collected for the church to Jerusalem himself, some might question whether he might use some of the money for his personal benefit. His concern with avoiding even the appearance of financial impropriety is so great, that he calls on the churches themselves to appoint trustworthy representatives to accompany him to Jerusalem to deliver the money. He describes his purpose in so doing as, "avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us - providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men." (II Corinthians 8:20,21). In other words, Paul recognized that when it comes to finances appearances matter, for the mishandling of finances detracts from the glory of God.

How can we tell whether a ministry is committed to financial integrity? Note that Paul, on his own initiative, takes an explicit step to assure those who gave towards the collection that the money they gave would be used properly. Unfortunately, many Christian ministries have missed this key lesson, often failing to adequately communicate how they are using their present resources and how they would use additional resources in a manner that inspires confidence that those resources are being used efficiently and faithfully. While many ministries take some steps in this direction, these steps are frequently limited to having audited financial statements or membership in the Evangelical Council For Financial Accountability. Such steps alone are not sufficient to assure us of a commitment to financial integrity, nor does the lack of

audited financial statements or membership in ECFA necessarily indicate a lack of commitment to financial integrity. Similarly, while examining certain financial ratios such as the share of a ministry's budget devoted to fundraising and administrative expenses may be helpful in judging financial integrity in some cases, without additional investigation, it can be misleading in others. The burden therefore still remains largely with the individual donor to ask the proper questions in order to evaluate how appropriately a ministry is using its resources. This is one area in which Christian ministries could benefit by drawing on some practices of the secular for-profit world, where accountability to shareholders, scrutiny by research analysts and widespread media coverage make effective communication an absolute priority. As part of its commitment to financial integrity, a ministry should not only have the goal of using its resources as efficiently as possible in carrying out its work, but have a commitment to communicate just how it is doing so.

Scripture also makes reference to a more subtle aspect of how a ministry handles its finances. Passages such as I Timothy 6:5, II Timothy 3:1-4 and I Peter 5:2, among others, warn against those who see the gospel as a means to financial gain. While Christian workers are entitled to earn a just and fair living from their work, financial gain is not to be the motivation for their work. Nor is a ministry to waste resources through lavish expenses that appeal to our pride or our attraction to the pleasures of the secular world. Admittedly, Christian ministries are hardly known for their overly generous salary structures. Yet this does not mean we should take for granted that a ministry is not using its resources lavishly in this or any other way. For example a ministry can spend money on luxurious facilities to project the right profile or impress potential donors. Or a ministry that sells products such as tapes or books may sell them at markups more appropriate for a for-profit business than for a Christian ministry. The point is that if the ministry projects even the appearance of being concerned with anything but doing God's work, this should raise a red flag for us and unless closer investigation suggests otherwise, we must seriously question whether to support that ministry.

Indeed, while financial integrity is important to any organization, it should be even more important to a

Christian ministry than to a secular organization. Lack of financial integrity on the part of a Christian ministry doesn't just lead to potential problems for the ministry, but more importantly, can give occasion to non-Christians to profane the name of Christ. For this reason, a ministry cannot be truly committed to glorifying God unless it is committed to financial integrity. Continuing to view ministry selection as a screening process, examining financial integrity is thus a logical second step in that process. Having first narrowed down the list of ministries we would potentially support to those that give clear evidence of spiritual faithfulness, requiring that a ministry demonstrates a commitment to financial integrity further narrows this list.

Choosing Among Qualifying Ministries

At this stage, the ministries that remain have passed the most important Scriptural tests in that they are spiritually and financially faithful. But what if we are still left with too many ministries to support and want to further narrow down our choices? The key difference at this stage is that there are no wrong choices. Conceivably, we could give to any of these ministries and be comfortable with our stewardship, leaving the results in God's hands. Nonetheless, Scripture again gives us some guidelines by which to make this decision. Consider these two passages of Scripture, dealing with the manner by which the early church distributed financial resources:

- Acts 2:44,45 - Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

- Acts 4:34,35 - Nor was there anyone who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

In these passages, the criteria for determining where to give was need. We can likewise evaluate those ministries that we are considering in terms of the needs that are present. How though, can we judge where the need is greatest? Much as we might like some process by which such a decision could be made for us, at this point, it is up to us, using the best information we can to make the best decision we can. Whether we do so on our own or enlist the help of outside resources available in the Christian

community, we must be sure though, that more than our secular wisdom is involved in this process. Rather, we must rely humbly on the Lord, prayerfully seeking His wisdom and asking that His will be done. We further want to pray that He remove any self-seeking motives from our heart as we make our final decisions on which ministries to support. Once we have done so and supported a particular ministry, we can fully trust God for the results He intends, confident that we have done what He asks of us as stewards.

Conclusion

Romans 1:17 tell us that the just shall live by faith. Yet when it comes to stewardship, we too often want to live by sight. We are concerned that if we have supported a ministry that fails to produce the results we want to see in the time we want to see them, we have wasted the resources God has entrusted to us. We try to look even harder at prospective results the next time, hoping to put God's resources to better use. Yet it is not our failure to look carefully enough at results that reflects poorly on our stewardship, but rather our emphasis on visible results over faithfulness that reflects poor-

ly. We do not neglect our stewardship by giving to a ministry whose results are not up to par, but by giving to ministries that are not faithful to God and His Word, taking resources that should be used for His kingdom and diverting them away from His kingdom.

If we have the right motivation in giving, namely to serve and glorify God and the right understanding of our role versus His role in building and furthering His kingdom, we will make the evaluation of faithfulness and commitment to God's Word the top priority in selecting ministries to support. According to Ephesians 2:10, ". . . we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." If God has already prepared the good works that we shall do, we can trust that He will direct our giving to the right places.

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Q. Should results play any role at all in the process of selecting ministries to support?

A. If, after having considered the more critical variables of spiritual faithfulness, financial integrity and need, we then want to consider results, we can certainly do so. Given a choice between two spiritually faithful ministries, each demonstrating a commitment to financial integrity and each having the opportunity to address a need of similar importance to God's kingdom, there is nothing wrong with favoring the ministry we believe has the greatest likelihood of delivering the most favorable results. The key is to incorporate this into our selection process after the other criteria and not before them.

Q. Won't most evangelical ministries have a Biblically sound statement of faith?

A. While most evangelical ministries may have statements of faith that contain no inaccurate statements, there is a difference between a statement of faith that contains no Scriptural inaccuracies and a Biblically sound statement of faith. Too often, when examined closely, a statement of faith will be found to contain ambiguous language that softens key elements of the Gospel or it will have left out essential elements of the Gospel altogether. Sometimes a ministry has a watered down statement of faith because it is seeking to be as inclusive as possible or because it wants to avoid offending any of its constituencies. Rightly or wrongly, this gives the impression that the ministry is relying on secular reasoning, that the success of its work is seen as more important than glorifying God. Sadly, there may be other occasions in which a ministry has a watered down statement of faith because it does not understand basic Biblical truths or even more sadly, its statement of faith does contain Scriptural inaccuracies. On the other hand, when a statement of

faith makes reference to man's completely sinful nature, God's eternal punishment of those who are unsaved and Christ as the only means for us to be reconciled to a holy God, it is indicating that the ministry is not afraid of offending anyone by boldly proclaiming God's truths.

Even when a ministry has a Biblically sound statement of faith, we must remember to examine whether its work reflects that statement of faith. How many of us have had the experience of visiting churches that describe themselves as Bible believing and Christ centered, only to find that they are nothing of the kind?

Q. You've described a fairly intellectual approach to giving decisions. Shouldn't giving be more a matter of the heart?

A. Our giving is an expression of our love for God and we are to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30). To give wisely, we need both our hearts and minds in the right place. We should view the ministry screening process as a means to faithfully carry out the desire to give that God has placed in our hearts in the way that will give Him the greatest glory. If we see a ministry screening process as an intellectual exercise that allows us to eliminate as many ministries as possible, perhaps because we secretly desire to hold on to God's resources, we are indicating that our hearts are in the wrong place. On the other hand, to select a ministry impulsively solely based on our hearts, perhaps in response to an emotional appeal or charismatic leader, without any investigation of the ministry, can be equally dangerous. We still have a sinful nature whose first priority is self-gratification and we should be cautious about rashly trusting the first impulse that comes into our hearts.