



Giving out of love (with apologies to C.S. Lewis)

In this season of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion*, we might be tempted to overlook the passion of those whom Jesus touched. One example is the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with an expensive perfume (Luke 7:38). The Pharisees surrounding Jesus considered the woman a sinner and were appalled he would let himself be contaminated by her touch. The response of our Lord indicates he understood her gift came from love borne from thankfulness. Her great debt to God had been forgiven and now she gave back to God.

There is no shortage of material to categorize how and why people give. Some lists draw from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Some draw parallels between one's motive and their emotional or spiritual maturity. Some create strata based on relationship depth between giver and recipient.

Each typology is helpful in getting inside the mind of the giver – but for what end? To understand them? To manipulate them into giving even larger gifts? And how does this information help the giver?

From our work in Design For Ministry™ we know that outrage is a reason people will give. Some congregations and ministries exploit this with white-hot rhetoric on the latest political or cultural controversy. We know others give from guilt they have not yet done their part; still others because they do not want to create offense - giving gifts to make solicitors leave them alone. Others give to have power over the recipient.

People may give out of these motives, but they should not be cultivated by Christian leaders. Those motives stand against the spirit of God's salvation. Further, these motives offer no assistance to become a life long giver.

No matter how you categorize motives, the motive Christian people choose to develop is love. And not just any love, but committed and abiding love for God and God's work. Only this quality of love builds generosity into the fabric of a believer's life.

In 1960, famed Christian writer C.S. Lewis published his book *The Four Loves*. In it he detailed four distinctive definitions of love present in the New Testament. His categories help us decide what types of love we want to move beyond and what type of love to develop in our lives and our congregations.

Storge, what Lewis describes as the affection between parents and their offspring, is often involved as people give. Simply put, they give to what they birthed. Christian people give out of *storge* because the missionary activity, the world relief effort, the building campaign, or the nursery school is borne from their efforts in service. They feel affection because it sprang from their life. Look at the roster of givers in a new church plant and you will find much *storge* there.

Philia – Lewis titles it *friendship* – is another form of love expressed in giving. Here the loving person gives out of respect for what another person birthed. That is, because I know you and respect you, because I trust and appreciate your work, because I love you, I give. Perhaps you guessed already – *philia* is a root word in *philanthropy* (love for humanity).

Eros – sensual love – is also expressed in giving. Here I give and exchange pleasure. The recipient takes joy in my gift. I receive joy, delight, pleasure, or sensation in return. *Eros*

can be found in the enjoyment of a charitable auction, or a gift to a ministry organization because it emphasizes relationships and interaction between the giver and thereceiver.

The fourth type of love – what Lewis defines as *charity* – is *agape*. Here is the committed love we are called to. Here is the love of God shown to us we now show back to God. The destination of the giving is almost irrelevant as it is an act of worship to God that only just happens to have a charitable benefit. The one who gives out of this love gives because they have been touched by love. Lewis writes, "*In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give.*"¹ We receive God's gift of love and love God with our gifts.

Having listed the four types of love, it is important to also list several observations:

- ⊕ These loves can and do mingle with each other. For example, I might give because I helped birth something **and** because a friend of mine I care for is at the head of a particular ministry.
- ⊕ The first three types of love come and go much more easily than the fourth. The first three loves ebb and flow as pastors change pulpits, as strategic plans emerge within a particular ministry, as worship styles change, and as long-loved programs give way to something newer and more relevant. If I love what my or your hand created or what helps me feel good, I give. But giving disappears if the connection seems diminished or lost.
- ⊕ Healthy congregations are held up by people connected to *agape*. They are the major givers. Their giving

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The four loves*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960, p.175.

weathers the storms any congregation faces. Their giving grows from connection to God's love shown them and is an expression of love to God in return. Connection to *agape* builds giving from *agape*.

Congregations are wise to cultivate and call for *agape* – and not just because it improves cash flow. Doing so requires a sustained effort, however. Connection is best done via the telling and retelling, the celebrating and recelebrating, of where we met God's grace. But be warned: featuring the deep love of God has a way of interrupting the most carefully crafted liturgy.

Congregations that emphasize private spirituality or strive to remove religious obligation may find they have additional obstacles to overcome. Unless we cultivate committed, charitable love in our congregations, however, we will be left with even more of the fickle forms plaguing us now.

Mark L. Vincent is lead partner with Design For Ministry™, a network of experts who assist congregations and ministry organizations move from where they are to where they feel God calls them to go.

Additional Reading:

A Stewardship Manifest, by Mark L. Vincent, a .pdf file available from www.DesignForMinistry.com

Firstfruits Living, by Lynn Miller, Herald Press, 1991.

Hosts for God: recovering love for the gospel, by Mark L. Vincent, a .pdf file available from www.DesignForMinistry.com.

Speaking about money: reducing the tension, by Mark L. Vincent, Herald Press, 2002.

Possible sidebar:

Featuring agape: four methods

1. Consistent use of testimony. One life-long pastor made a habit of three minute interviews with new Christians, asking them what brought them to Christ. One congregation publishes testimonies of all people preparing to join the church. One rural congregation with a tradition of publicly sharing their praises and concerns invites all participants to open their first sentence as follows: "*I saw God when . . .*"
2. Evaluate your communications. Put this article in the hands of those responsible for managing and communicating about congregational finances. Compile a year's worth of financial reports, bulletin announcements and fundraising letters. Compare the spirit of those messages with the spirit of agape. Where can you improve? What exactly will you do to improve? Who will do it and when? How will these new efforts be evaluated?
3. Draw on this theme when preaching on stewardship, and in preaching in general. Think of all those who gave extravagantly in response to the love God showed to them: Abraham, Hannah, David, Mary, Zaccheus. Reread 2 Corinthians 8,9 – the apostle Paul's longest passage on generosity – with generosity in mind.
4. Give attention to the offering. In many Lutheran congregations, the monetary offerings are connected to the Eucharist. Wonderful! Except the reason for it is seldom pointed out. A little creativity – even just an occasional explanatory word that our offerings are a loving response to a loving God – goes a long way.