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Two surprising things about tithing



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SCAN FOR AUDIO

When I was a teenager, the conference Stewardship director preached at my church each year. One of his favorite sermon illustrations was about a tithe-paying farmer who lived in a valley where farmers generally grew wheat. Then a locust plague approached. The farmer took his family outside and read Malachi 3:10, 11 with them, and then they prayed together that God would keep His promise to "rebuke the devourer" (v. 11, KJV). By the time the locusts had passed, every green thing in the valley had been eaten except the wheat and other plants growing on the farmer's property.



I often heard similar stories. There was the farmer from Western Australia whose cattle were dying in a severe drought. But when he read Malachi 3:1–12 aloud and prayed, his cattle survived. Businessmen would tell me about a business about to fail, but when the partners started tithing, it then prospered. Individuals told how they had been encouraged to test God to see whether He would keep His promise and how He did.[1] I even received evidence from farming families in two different states in Australia of tithe-paying farmers whose wheat crops were saved from a locust plague that devoured their neighbors' crops, just as in the story that the Stewardship director often told.

Since I have heard these stories, the conviction has been growing in me that, in tithing, most church members clearly see the hand of God in their lives. Thus, as ministers, when you encourage tithing, you are not acting in your own self-interest alone in that the conference gets money for your wages. Rather, you are encouraging your people to be faithful and also enabling them to experience the hand of God in their lives firsthand.

However, when my colleague Steve Currow and I did a survey about the motives for tithing in the church, we got some unexpected results.[2] And these results are what I want to share.

Survey results

The General Conference funded research into tithing throughout England, the United States, Africa, and Latin America, which I carried out from 2012 to 2014.[3] Several questions asked whether people were tithing because they thought that God would bless them if they did.

And here is a surprising result. There is a weak negative relationship between tithing for the purpose of receiving a blessing and actual tithing practice, at least in some of the countries. In fact, in most countries, *the more respondents thought they would tithe because they wished to receive a blessing, the less likely they were to tithe.* Again, the relationship is only a weak one.[4] On the other hand, there is a very strong positive relationship between tithing practice and the motive of gratitude (typical question: "I contribute tithe because I am often overwhelmed by how good God has been to me.").

Though there are several other motives that have a strong relationship to tithing behavior,[5] we can draw this conclusion: it is better to use the motive of gratitude to God as a means of encouraging members to tithe than to use the motive of blessings from God.

It is also interesting to compare the responses of those who tithe and those who don't tithe when asked whether God will bless them if they tithe. In the survey, respondents were asked to report how much of their income they had returned as tithe in the last year. Somewhat arbitrarily, those that were contributing 8 percent or more of their income were classified as "tither,"

and those less than 8 percent as "nontither." Table 1 presents the responses of the two different groups for the aggregated data.[6]

Figure 1 shows the difference between the responses of tithers and nontithers , addresses the question as to whether or not they believe God *has* blessed them because they tithe.

These responses enable us to answer the question, Do tithers think that God has blessed them because they tithe? Not everybody who tithes agrees. In fact, 280 out of 3,138 tithers strongly disagree. On the other hand, 2,558 (or 82 percent) of 3,138 tithers either "strongly agree" or "agree more than disagree" that God *had* blessed them because they tithe. Thus, the overwhelming majority of tithers would answer yes to the question.

Why tithe?

But what about those who tithe and do not experience a blessing? This leads me to a letter that I received in 2004 about a faithful tithe-paying farming family who had their crops destroyed by a hailstorm while they were at a camp meeting.

"The next day we visited our neighbors whose farms adjoined our farm to see how much damage they had suffered. We discovered that not a single hail stone had fallen on the farms of these non-tithe paying, non-Adventist, non-church attending neighbors. They probably had never read the book of Malachi. That destructive cloud had remained stationary for an hour above the farm of the faithful tithe paying elder of the Adventist Church, and there it dumped its entire frozen cargo.

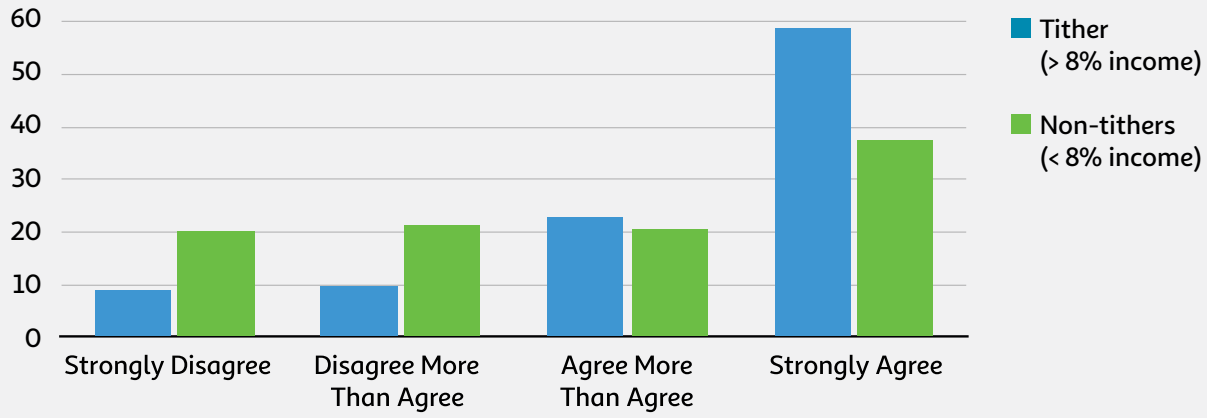
"When Pa and Ma returned from camp meeting, I'm sure they must have been shocked by the devastation they encountered. But amazingly I never heard a word of discouragement coming from their mouths. Pa seemed to understand clearly that the offer in the third chapter of Malachi was not for him. Those words were directed to a bunch of thieves—in fact, thieves of the worst kind, the kind who will even steal from God! My Pa was an honest man, and he wasn't about to turn into a despicable thief just because a disaster struck his farm. So we all set to work to salvage what could be salvaged, and Pa kept right on returning to God His tithe, even though there wasn't much to return that year. And we still had our church school that year. And, believe it or not, Marcelle even returned to Enterprise Academy. We rarely had an abundance, never more than our 'barns' could hold, but we never lacked good food to eat and adequate clothes to wear, and somehow the bills all got paid. As far as I know, my father was never in debt. And best of all, his children stayed in the church."

What can I say about this profoundly moving letter? That it caused me to seriously rethink my theology of tithing? It surely did. That the analytical part of my brain was not quite sure how the profound truth of this letter fit with the profound truths of the stories about tithers who were spared such disasters?

Table 1: Responses to "God *has* blessed me because I tithe" from tithers and nontithers

	TITHER (> 8% INCOME)		NONTITHER (< 8% INCOME)	
	Number of respondents	Percentage	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	280	9%	130	20%
Disagree More Than Agree	300	10%	137	21%
Agree More Than Disagree	712	23%	132	21%
Strongly Agree	1,846	59%	240	38%
Subtotals	3,138	100%	639	100%

Figure 1: Percentage responses to "God *has* blessed me because I tithe" from tithers and nontithers



In the end, I found that the statement of the Hebrew worthies about to be thrown into the fiery furnace summed up my conclusions. When told by Nebuchadnezzar, "'But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?'" (Dan. 3:15, NKJV). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego replied, "'If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up'" (vv. 17, 18, NKJV).

Is the correct attitude to tithing like that? Sure, God will bless us. He is able to rescue our farms from plagues of locusts and our businesses from financial destruction. But should He choose not to do so, we will still worship Him and faithfully return His tithe to Him.

Can God bless us wonderfully because we tithe? Yes. Will He "rebuke the devourer" for us? Yes. Does He always do so? No. Do the vast majority of people who tithe believe that God has blessed them financially because they tithe? Yes. Should we, therefore, promote God's blessing as a reason church members should tithe? Probably not.

Though we all like to hear stories about God blessing those who have tithed, and we should tell those stories when we can, it is much better to use gratitude to God as a reason to tithe, which should be the main motive for tithing to begin with, whatever financial blessings might, or might not, follow.

1 I have recounted these stories in more detail in Robert K. McIver, "What About Those Tithing Stories?" [South Pacific Division] *Record*, September 22, 2001, 8, 9. Cf. Robert K. McIver, "Should I Share These Stories?" *Adventist Review*, February 12, 2004, 25, 28.

2 Robert K. McIver, "Report on Survey of Motives for Tithing among Seventh-day Adventists from Four Conferences on Four Continents." General Conference Future Plans Working Group, October 16, 2015. https://stewardship.adventist.org/dr.-robert-mciver,-four-country-tithing-survey

3 Robert K. McIver, *Tithing Practices Among Seventh-day Adventists: A Study of Tithe Demographics and Motives in Australia, Brazil, England, Kenya and the United States* (Cooranbong, Australia: Avondale Academic Press, 2016).

4 Why this is so is somewhat technical. For the aggregated data, the scale "M2 God will bless" (see McIver, "Survey of Motives," p. 5), has a beta coefficient of -0.059. For NCC, it is -0.148; for SEC, it is -0.122; for SPC, it is -0.164; and for WAC, it is +0.083. Overall, the effect of the motive is that for every one standard deviation of change in the scale, tithing behavior is affected by less than 6 percent of one standard deviation; although in NCC, it would be 15 percent. As I said, it is rather technical, and many reading this will not have the necessary background in statistics to make sense of those numbers. All that needs to be said, though, is that the relationship between motive "M2 God will bless" and tithing is measurable with statistical significance, but a change in M2 will have only a small effect on actual tithing practice.

5 For example, the practice of regular study of the Sabbath School pamphlet and regular prayer were both found to be strongly correlated to tithing.

6 The question might be asked, How can a nontither say that God *has* blessed them because they tithe? This is possible because of the definition of *nontither* that was adopted. Some of them "tithe" but return less than 8 percent of their income. Others may not have tithed in the last 12 months but tithed previously. Tables that show responses for each country may be found in McIver, *Tithing Practices*, tables 9.10; 9.11. If a (one-tailed, paired data) t-test is applied to the data in the table as shown, the probability of this result being random is 0.047. In other words, it is statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. [N.B. Tither percentage actually adds up to 101 because of rounding.]

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