

## BIG QUESTIONS

### Church/Bible/Doctrine

**My grandfather passed away recently. He had been a member of his church for 30 years. When the pastor visited my father and uncle to make funeral arrangements, he outlined costs the family should expect. These included paying him for performing the service. Doesn't his regular salary cover this? Is this "double dipping" allowed within the Christian Reformed Church?**

Your question totally baffles me. I had no idea such a practice existed anywhere within our denomination. I have struggled for some time to come up with possible motives that would allow me to provide a reasonable rationale for it. Slim pickings there.

A minister of the Word is to feed the flock, not feed *on* it. He or she is called to "preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship services, catechize the youth, and train members for Christian service" (Church Order, Article 12a). Other duties include exercising pastoral care and shepherding the congregation, a subset of which is the solemnization of marriages and the provision of funerals and memorial services (CO, 69–70). For all this and more, the local church is expected to "provide for the proper support of its minister(s)" (CO, 15). So yes, the pastor's salary covers this.



Early Reformed liturgical forms for ordination warned against the sin of simony, the selling of sacred things for material gain. The word *simony* is based on Luke's account of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8. In the ninth and 10th centuries, the practice was rampant in the Catholic church. Priests, for example, would provide absolution for pay. I do recall warnings against it in my seminary education in the late 1960s. Perhaps that has fallen by the wayside precisely because simony has largely disappeared from the scene.

Couples who came to me for the solemnization of marriage or families that asked me to lead a funeral or memorial service were routinely told that a monetary gift should only be given to volunteers—an organist, for example—and not to a minister or anyone else already being paid for the service provided.

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### Vocation/Calling

**As a high school senior I feel so much pressure in making decisions that might affect my career and life: Do I go to college or not? What programs do I choose?**

These are challenging decisions. Which paid occupation should I

pursue? If the one I choose requires further education, which school should I attend? How will I balance the need for income with doing what I love to do? How do hopes for marriage and family fit with plans for career and paid work?

For Christians these questions are deeply related to understandings of vocation and God's callings. Neither the Bible nor the great Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin address these questions in detail.

But they do set forth some principles that can help you make these important decisions. The first is Christian freedom. In the Bible, God commands or forbids us to do or to not do many things. But there is no command to marry or to remain single, to become a carpenter or a pastor, a plumber or a professor. Whatever we do, we should do it "in the Lord" and "for the Lord" as a grateful response to the marvelous gift of God's grace. Belonging in body and soul, in life and in death to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, is the most important aspect of Christian vocation.

But we still must make important choices.

The second principle is discernment. Perhaps on rare occasions, God tells us what to do in a miraculous way, as God did with Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and Paul. But for most of us, the pattern of discernment follows the book of Acts. This pattern identifies the needs of a community and the

gifts necessary to meet these needs. Which needs of this world burden your mind and heart? Do you have the gifts and opportunities whose development and use can meet those needs?

If so, in prayerful gratitude and hope, take steps to find the particular ways in which your life choices serve Christ by serving the needs of your neighbors. If you lose yourself in service to Christ by serving your neighbors, you will find yourself.

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### Digital Life

**Our deacons are promoting electronic funds transfer (EFT) as a giving option for our church. I think I can figure out how it works, but doing it this way makes my gifts feel less thoughtful and deliberate.**

I have the same feeling about adding “God bless” as an automatic signature on my e-mails. It sounds nice and all, but if it happens automatically, is it a genuine expression of my feelings that is conveyed every time I send an email?

Giving to your church via EFT for the recurring electronic transfer of money from your bank account to your church’s is not a new idea, and churches who offer this usually have a step-by-step guide for setting it up securely.

For the church, it’s great because the computers behind these transactions are more reliable than we humans sometimes are. It also requires less administrative work for church staff and volunteers. It can even be argued that giving via EFT is more secure. For givers, it’s something they can set up and forget about.

But it’s the forgetting that’s the problem, right?

Maybe pick a time—the end of year is good, or the beginning of a church year—to think deeply and pray hard about your planned contributions for the following year. For many of us, this once-a-year exercise could actually be more thoughtful—and wise—than the weekly checkwriting you do as you’re rushing out of the house on Sunday morning.

Or maybe, instead of committing to writing a check each month, commit to keeping an eye on the financial reports published by your church. Ask a question if something doesn’t look right. Increase your gift if need be. Your time and attention is worth something too.

Finally, as with any technology, you can always opt out of the deacons’ suggestion to use EFT. Maybe giving online doesn’t feel secure to you. Maybe giving electronically makes the act invisible to your kids or grandchildren. Maybe you’re simply not ready. Whatever the case, it’s the thought behind your giving that matters.

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### Stewardship

**I recently finished school, found a job, and have my first steady income. I want to give appropriately to my church and other organizations. How do I decide how much to give and to whom? Is a 10 percent tithe required of Christians?**

Christians have never viewed the tithe (based on Abraham’s giving 10 percent to King Melchizedek in Gen. 14:20) as a religious or legal obligation but have always honored the principle. Recognizing God as the source of all blessing, we give back to God out of gratitude.

A tenth of your net income is a good place to start your calculations, but other factors play a role. Nowadays it’s not unusual for recent graduates to have significant student debt with substantial monthly payments. The cost of living in your area may be higher or lower than the average; your income may barely cover food, housing or other necessities.

If, on the other hand, you bring home more than what you need to pay for essentials, then you can consider contributing more than 10 percent. It may seem like an odd rule of thumb, but if you are spending more on nonessentials such as entertainment, vacations or hobbies than you are contributing to church and kingdom causes, you should probably increase your giving.

As to how to apportion your giving, it may be that your church recommends a certain percentage. Ask one of your deacons. Churches I’ve attended have recommended giving anywhere from 3 to 6 percent of income to the local church, with the remainder of one’s charitable contributions going to other ministries and causes. In this way, churches encourage their members to contribute both to the church and to other kingdom causes.

Here’s an example: Leeann just started a job paying \$48,000 per year. She has \$15,000 in student debt and is paying \$650 per month in loan payments. Living expenses in her area are high and total \$2,000 per month before loan payments. Ten percent of her income would be \$400. Because of loan payments and other constraints, Leeann decides to set aside \$300 per month for charity, of which \$125 to \$175 will go to support her church community.

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