Passing the Plate

After America ended state support of churches in the early 19th century, the collection of "tithes and offerings" became a standard feature of Sunday morning worship.

As instrumentalists play or a soloist sings, as ushers file slowly down the aisles, congregants give money as an act of worship and to support the ministry of the church. If the people don't give, then the pastor goes unpaid, the building never gets built, and the missionaries stay home. When Christians go to church, most expect the collection of an offering as much as they expect preaching, singing, and prayer. Unlike preaching, singing, and prayer, however, the weekly offering did not become a fixture in American worship services until the late 19th century.

Colonial American churches did not depend on voluntary, weekly giving from their members. Instead, as had been the case in Europe, the government established churches, sanctioning certain congregations and supporting them financially. Most New England colonies established Congregational churches, while the Southern colonies along with New York, New Jersey, and Maryland established the Anglican Church. Most of the colonies could not imagine a state without an established church. A prosperous society depended on having citizens of good character, and the people expected churches to create virtuous citizens. Since churches served the public good, it made sense to fund them through public taxes and fees—such as poll and property taxes—rather than voluntary offerings.

Public funding of American churches did not cease immediately after the American Revolution. While the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibited Congress from establishing a national church, the states still supported churches through taxes. In the years following the Revolution, men like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Leland fought against religious establishment in Virginia. Isaac Backus and other Baptist ministers led the charge in New England. Only in 1833, when Massachusetts rescinded its religious tax, was every state church in the Union officially disestablished.

On their own

Religious disestablishment, which historian James Hudnut-Beumler calls "the largest instance of privatization in all of American history," forever changed the way American churches did business. Churches and pastors could no longer look to the government for money. They had to come up with new ways to raise the funds they needed in order to survive and thrive in the free market of 19th-century American religion.

Churches used a variety of methods to raise money. For example, while some Christians today act like they own the pew they occupy each Sunday, many Christians in the 1800s actually did own their pew (or at least rented it). Some churches rented pews by auction each year, while others sold them to pay for the building and then taxed the value of the pew for annual revenue. The most expensive seats were in the front, and the cheap seats were in the back. Free seats were available in the back or the balcony, but a free pew carried a social stigma.

Other groups, such as the Baptists and Methodists, often preferred to use a subscription book, which listed the total funds needed in the front. A church would pass the book around, and the members would record how much they pledged to contribute that year. Some churches used free-will offerings in the early 1800s. Churches collected them only occasionally—maybe at Thanksgiving or Communion—to support missions or the poor, not to pay for regular church expenses.

A biblical mandate

As pastors and other Christian leaders sought to motivate people to give, they increasingly looked to the Bible for support. Now that the government no longer compelled giving through taxes and fees, many rediscovered the depth of biblical teaching concerning money and stewardship. Some, like Parsons Cook, pointed to 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 as "a rule which binds all to the principle of setting apart, every Sabbath, or at least [regularly], a portion of their income … for charitable uses." Others, like Charles Finney, taught that God was "the owner of all" and that the believer "should hold all at the disposal of God, and employ all for the glory of God." Hudnut-Beumler explains that after the Civil War, the idea of "the tithe" as God's minimum standard became popular. Pastors exhorted believers to bring their tithes and offerings into the "storehouse" (Malachi 3:10)—the local church—as an act of worship and commitment to God.

In the late 19th century, people had come to see giving as a biblical mandate, a spiritual matter, and an act of worship. Therefore, it made sense to incorporate the collection of offerings into Sunday morning worship alongside preaching, singing, and prayer. By 1900, most American churches took up weekly offerings. A dedicatory prayer or the doxology normally preceded the collection. Members enclosed their money in preprinted, two-sided envelopes. By this point, churches depended on these weekly offerings for most of their funding.

The weekly offering has remained the chief method of church funding for over one hundred years. Today, more and more churches are making online giving available; nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that the weekly offering plate will ever lose its privileged place in American worship.

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