

You have perhaps noticed that I don't generally use this "column" to promote church events or activities, primarily because I don't like "pastor's columns" that promote church events and activities. Nor do I always use the *Laptop* for explicitly theological purposes, though I generally do.

My basic goal in taking the time to do this each week is to offer theological reflection on various topics that don't lend themselves to worship. I don't generally preach about social issues, but I do address them from time to time in these pages, because I believe it's important for Christians to engage the world around us in thoughtful and theologically relevant ways. I have three widely-varying topics this week: personal stewardship; personal firearms; and personal devotions, in that order.

Personal Stewardship. One of the many things we did in our Annual Meeting was to approve our Ministry Budget for 2016. Ministry Budgets generally have three broad categories: (1) infrastructure; (2) personnel; and (3) ministry.

Infrastructure has to do with expenses associated with having a place to meet and with office costs associated with supporting the work of ministry. Personnel expenses have a number of facets, including direct compensation, employment benefits, and expenses associated with congregational ministry. And ministry expenditures involve both direct gifts to mission organizations (local, national, and international) as well as the expenses involved in those ministries.

I like to think of *mission expenditures* as "those expenditures that advance the cause of Christ locally and around the world and from which we ourselves receive no direct benefit." I define "missions" in this way because churches sometimes fudge on this and count expenditures as "missions" that they're actually spending on themselves.

I'm convinced that the Bible teaches the principle of "tithing," which means that a tenth—the *first* tenth—of all our personal income is intended to come "into the storehouse," or the local church. This is a *minimum*, not a maximum, and its primary intent is to keep us reminded that we are *stewards*, not owners, of whatever material resources are within our management. We're accountable to God for our use of all of it, of course.

I'm also convinced that the principle of tithing is valid for local congregations, which means that at least 10% of our annual budget should be invested in advancing the cause of Christ in ways that do not benefit our congregation directly. CBF has tithed our budget in the past, but about ten years ago we stopped doing that for one reason or another.

It's true in congregations as it is often true in our personal lives that it may not be practically possible to move from our current level of giving to a tithe in one year alone. So, two years ago, we committed ourselves to increase our missions giving by at least 1.5% a year until we reach *at least* the minimum of 10% of our budget going to missions. This year, we've given 6%, and next year's budget provides for at least 7.5%. Here's a list of the missions causes we've committed to supporting in 2016:

Water Wells in Ghana	\$600
Backyard Bible Club	\$250
Baptist Convention of MD/DE	\$1,200
Baptist World Alliance	\$1,500
Local Benevolence	\$2,000

Coalition for Compassion	\$2,500
Fire & Light Community Church	\$6,000
Help End Homelessness Howard County	\$1,600
Huehuetenango (Guatemala) Youth Home	\$1,000
Mid-Maryland Baptist Association	\$1,500
Route One Day Center	\$300
SBC Cooperative Program	\$500
Yet-to-be-Allocated	\$3,550

Your faithful stewardship week after week (and it HAS been faithful—we've been ahead of budget *all year long!*) makes it possible for us to support these and other Kingdom-building causes in meaningful ways. You'll remember that just last month we were able to give \$4,000 to support the Fire & Light Church (a new church being founded in Reisterstown) and \$8,000 to support refugees in Eastern Europe through the Baptist World Alliance ☺.

At the same time, increasing our mission giving every year means that each of us needs to continue to take seriously our own personal stewardship, increasing our giving so that the congregation as a whole can make similar increases. The chart below is a place to start as you contemplate both your year-end stewardship and your plan for next year, and this video from "the Advent Conspiracy" may also be an encouragement to you:
<https://vimeo.com/30570938> LOVE ALL.

Finally, the reason that all this is not "church promotion" is that Christian stewardship is really not about infrastructure, personnel, or even ministry. Christian stewardship is about spiritual health and growth. It's about *obedience*. If God has given clear instructions about management of God's own resources—and God has—then following those instructions is essential if we are to grow in understanding of who God is and what God is up to in both

Tithing Computation Chart

WEEKLY INCOME	BEYOND A TITHE		TITHE	UPPER RANGE GIVING			MIDDLE RANGE GIVING			LOWER RANGE GIVING		
	15%	12%	10%	9%	8%	7%	6%	5%	4%	3%	2%	1%
\$200	\$30	\$24	\$20	\$18	\$16	\$14	\$12	\$10	\$8	\$6	\$4	\$2
\$300	\$45	\$36	\$30	\$27	\$24	\$21	\$18	\$15	\$12	\$9	\$6	\$3
\$400	\$60	\$48	\$40	\$36	\$32	\$28	\$24	\$20	\$16	\$12	\$8	\$4
\$500	\$75	\$60	\$50	\$45	\$40	\$35	\$30	\$25	\$20	\$15	\$10	\$5
\$600	\$90	\$72	\$60	\$54	\$48	\$42	\$36	\$30	\$24	\$18	\$12	\$6
\$700	\$105	\$84	\$70	\$63	\$56	\$49	\$42	\$35	\$28	\$21	\$14	\$7
\$800	\$120	\$96	\$80	\$72	\$64	\$56	\$48	\$40	\$32	\$24	\$16	\$8
\$900	\$135	\$108	\$90	\$81	\$72	\$63	\$54	\$45	\$36	\$27	\$18	\$9
\$1,000	\$150	\$120	\$100	\$90	\$80	\$70	\$60	\$50	\$40	\$30	\$20	\$10
\$1,100	\$165	\$132	\$110	\$99	\$88	\$77	\$66	\$55	\$44	\$33	\$22	\$11
\$2,000	\$300	\$240	\$200	\$180	\$160	\$140	\$120	\$100	\$80	\$60	\$40	\$20
\$3,000	\$450	\$360	\$300	\$270	\$240	\$210	\$180	\$150	\$120	\$90	\$60	\$30

1. Find out where YOU are on the chart (your weekly income/giving).
2. Move one block to the left to determine what GROW ONE% would be for you.

time and eternity. **Don't give "to the budget." Don't even "give to missions."**
Give to God. You'll be glad you did!¹

Personal Firearms. This is one of those topics that doesn't fit very well on Sunday morning, but I do want to weigh in after last week's horrific shootings in San Bernardino.

I've told you before that I "like guns." I've had firearms of several kinds for a number of years. I've been a member of gun clubs for years. I've had a concealed carry license for years. I like to target shoot. I go hunting from time to time. I had sinus surgery a decade or so ago because I could no longer smell gunpowder. I am a supporter of "Second Amendment Rights." I've even been a member of the NRA (but no longer). I tell you these things as background to what I'm about to say

Last week's killings in California remind me of the fact that the original weapons protected by the Second Amendment were almost entirely the ordinary hunting weapons ordinary citizens used to feed their families. The "assault rifles" being used in these killings and the huge magazines sometimes used by these killers have *no other purpose* besides *hunting humans*. Armed forces at war sometimes have such a need. Ordinary citizens do not.

I understand that all but a microscopic percentage of persons who own such guns will never do anything with them except target shoot (*they are generally forbidden for hunting animals* [!]). I understand that criminals will always have access to whatever weapons they have the money to buy. I get it.



But I see no reason why we should make it easy for these isolated jihadists and other irrational people to get access to weapons for hunting humans. We don't let ordinary citizens have surface-to-air missiles. We have to draw the line somewhere. I, at least, support the restriction of assault weapons to the military only.

Personal Devotions. On a happier note, as we approach the end of the year, it's time to begin reflecting on how your personal devotions have gone this year, and for thinking about how you'd like for them to go next year. Daily prayer and Bible study are just as important for spiritual growth as is joyfully-obedient stewardship, but we often struggle to make time for them.



God



Others

On Sunday I challenged each of us to spend at least ten minutes a day talking and listening to God (prayer and Bible study) and at least ten minutes a day in face-to-face talking and listening to persons important to us. I've attached the schedule I use to read the Bible through every year. It folds up and I keep it in my Bible to mark my place.

If you're just beginning the discipline of daily Bible study, I encourage you to be gentle with yourself as you establish new habits. If you get behind, don't try to catch up. Just read the reading for the current day and keep going as best you can. Eventually, the pleasure of the experience will become self-reinforcing.

¹ In our discipleship structure of WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO, stewardship is a part of WORSHIP, GROW, and Go.

Sometimes it's hard to find just the right resource to assist us in Bible study. If you'd like a little more help, we provide free copies of *Our Daily Bread* each quarter, and that's a very good resource. Two other daily devotional guides that have been important for me are Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God Day by Day* and Job & Shawchuck's *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*. Both of my copies were gifts from others, and are well worn.



I've just received *The Paraclete Psalter*, also as a gift, and I've already added that to my daily devotional time. It looks wonderful.

Please let me know if I might offer additional encouragement on the journey, and may God's blessings be yours in abundance this Advent.

Dave

JUST
DO IT.

