

Financial Resources and the Kingdom of God

Jesus said our hearts are where our treasure is.

by John Holzmann

I was dismayed a couple of years ago to find that, on average, of every \$100 they earn, church members worldwide give less than 10 cents to foreign missions.

David Barrett, editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, said that though the personal income of church members worldwide in 1985 equalled close to US\$7.45 trillion, the total given to global foreign missions would equal barely US\$7 billion ("Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1985," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (IBMR), January 1985, p. 30).

According to the U.S. Center for World Mission, frontier mission (unreached peoples) efforts receive less than 10 percent of "foreign mission" income, so, based on Barrett's statistics, *church members worldwide gave less than 1 cent of every \$100 of their personal income to reach unreached peoples in 1985.*

I was stunned by the implications. Jesus said that the location of our treasure is a good indication of where our hearts may be found (Mt. 6:21). If these statistics are to be trusted, they mean that Christians's hearts are focused anywhere but where our Lord would want them focused—on the establishment of His Kingdom among the peoples of the earth.

"But what good are world statistics?" I asked myself. "Can I be held accountable for all the failures of so-called 'church members' the world over? Should committed evangelicals be lumped together with nominal Roman Catholics, liberal protestants, and baptized members of European state churches? Personally, I wouldn't expect members of these groups to have as high a degree of interest in missions as evangelicals do!"

Far more enlightening than a "world church" number would be a statistic that indicates the proportion of personal income given to frontier missions by *evangelicals*. And since my main audience is in North America: the proportion of personal income given to frontier missions by *North American evangelicals*.

Further, I thought, since people don't have much control over income they never see, it would be much better to get a handle on North American evangelicals' giving as a proportion of *disposable* personal income (i.e., after-tax take-home pay) rather than Barrett's "personal income" figures based on Gross National Product. (GNP in the U.S. is almost one and a half times as large as total disposable personal income.)

So how are North American evangelicals doing?

North American Evangelicals & Frontier Missions

North American evangelicals should earn well over \$650 billion disposable personal income in 1987.

Comprising a third of all church members in North America, they will give very nearly half the money donated to Christian causes by North American church members of all types—about \$27 billion.

“Christian causes” include everything from Christian schools and television programs to churches and mission agencies.

It is impossible to determine precisely how much North American evangelicals will give this year to “global foreign missions,” but the North American church as a whole—protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical and liberal—will give just over \$3.2 billion.

Since we don’t know exactly how much each of these groups gives, let’s be generous with the evangelicals. Let’s pretend that they are the only ones who have an interest in missions (they aren’t) and credit them with all \$3.2 billion given by North Americans to “foreign missions.”

Being exceedingly generous, then, as we’ve described, we come to the conclusion that, *at best, North American evangelicals are mission-minded to the tune of less than 50 cents per \$100 disposable income.*

Furthermore, with only 10 percent of all mission funds being earmarked for preaching the gospel to peoples among whom there is no indigenous gospel witness, we have to conclude that *North American evangelicals are frontier mission-minded at a rate of less than a nickel per \$100.*

Again, these numbers are obtained when we credit evangelicals with the entire North American contribution to “global foreign missions.”

If we are a bit less charitable and guesstimate that North American evangelicals contribute proportionately the same to missions as they do to the Christian cause in general (in other words, half the North American total), we find that North American evangelicals this year will give less than a 2.5 cents of every \$100 they earn—less than \$160 million total—in order that peoples who have no indigenous gospel witness might hear the gospel for the first time.

Beyond this, we can draw a couple of additional conclusions:

1. Though a far smaller proportion of their disposable personal income is used to buy items necessary for survival, North American evangelicals’ giving patterns hardly differ from those of church members worldwide.
2. Despite the fact that God’s clear priority throughout history has been to establish His Kingdom among the nations, evangelicals’ hearts are dedicated to other pursuits. Evangelical leaders and mission mobilizers must discover ways to turn the hearts of North American evangelicals to the task God has given them to do.
3. Rather than shying away from making financial appeals for legitimate Kingdom work, evangelical leaders and mission mobilizers need to call God’s people to greater faithfulness in the financial realm. Christians must be taught to release the resources God has entrusted to them for the purposes for which God gave them.

Mission Research

Besides statistics on Christian world finances in general, Barrett dedicated a significant portion of his 1983 “Silver and Gold Have I None” article to a discussion of Christian research.

“Many commercial and industrial enterprises allocate 5 percent of their total income (to research), some as high as 10 percent,” he said. “This is . . . essential . . . in research, since in scientific or industrial applications any new line of research has only a 1:8000 chance of success.”

Barrett said that in 1980, 2.33 percent of the U.S. GNP, 2.3 percent of the European GNP, and 3.47 percent of the Soviet Union’s GNP went to scientific research and development.

By contrast, he said, he estimated that a mere 0.019 percent of all the funds dedicated to Christian causes in 1980—\$19 million—went to research “on the entire range of Christian issues, from biblical archeology and biblical exegesis to human rights and futurological topics. . . . Only a small fraction of this goes to research on global mission,” he said.

According to Barrett, church members worldwide in 1980 contributed more money to secular and military research (**research!**—\$130 billion, 2.2 percent of their GNP incomes) than they did to the entire cause of Christ (\$100 billion). Limiting our focus to “Christian or church-related research,” Christians “pay less than 0.0003 percent (three ten-thousandths of one percent) of their (GNP) incomes.”

“Such a low outlay is shortsighted in the extreme by contemporary standards,” he concluded.

Amen.

Statistics in this article come from Barrett’s “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1987,” IBMR, January 1987, p. 25; the U.S. Census Bureau’s 1986 Statistical Abstract of the United States (p. 433); and proportions derived from Barrett’s “1980 Christian Financial Resources” table (from “Silver and Gold Have I None: Church of the Poor or Church of the Rich?” IBMR, October 1983, p. 150).