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The State of Church Giving through 2020: A Theology for an Age of Affluence (32nd Edition, March 2023)

“I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” — *Jesus addressing the disciples in John 14:12 (NIV)*

Chapters 1-5: Data Trends: The 32nd edition in *The State of Church Giving* series found that giving declined in 2020, the first year of the COVID pandemic. Data in chapters 1 through 5 also shows longstanding trends in giving as a percent of income and membership as a percent of population that began before 2020. Further, the trends were evident across the theological spectrum. Those findings suggest that one or more factors were influencing church giving and membership patterns apart from events such as the pandemic that began in 2020.

Chapter 6: The Potential of the Church: Data suggests church members have the potential to increase giving to previously unseen levels. However, current giving levels show that this potential has not been reached.

Chapter 7: Why and How Much Do Americans Give?: Americans who indicate they donate to charity routinely tell the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey that the majority of their giving goes to “church, religious organizations.” In 2020, the Under-25 cohort once again indicated over 80% of their giving went to “church, religious organizations.” This finding suggests that young people who donate to charity learn about philanthropy in religious settings. If downward trends in giving and membership point to a weakening of the church, the consequences will likely be felt in other areas of philanthropy as well.

Chapter 8: A Theology for an Age of Affluence: To open chapter 8, the analysis of per capita (per person) Year 0 to 1998 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) done by economist Angus Maddison is charted. That graph demonstrates that Christians in the U.S. currently live in unprecedented affluence. In 1700, U.S. per capita GDP was \$527, and in 1998, was \$27,331 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Yet church members have not chosen to use their growing resources to expand the work of the church to glorious new levels. Further, Figure 21 and the related discussion (pp. 129-138) suggest that as affluence spread through U.S. society, people became more invested in their present existence. For example, the phrase “pie in the sky” was not used until 1911.

As church trends have headed downward, U.S. society has also experienced increased violence, youth mental health problems, and an increase in “deaths of despair” (pp. 138-142). Author Tom Holland has written that the effect of Christianity is so pervasive in Western culture as to be hidden (p. 130). Perhaps that widespread influence is now being sensed in the side effects accompanying Christianity’s mounting absence in American society.

Chapter 8 then explores a theology of affluence needed to counter the tsunami of resources overwhelming so many (pp. 143-149). Suggested elements of this theology include: Believe Jesus (John 14:12); More than consumers (Romans 12:2); Created for a purpose (Eph. 2:8-10); Rewards and consequences (1 Cor. 3:10-15); “Humilitarianism” in the face of the impossible (Matt. 17:20); Repentance (James 4:17); Oneness as a source of power (John 17:20-21); Age of intentional miracles (Matt. 6:14-16). A positive agenda for affluence is offered as a means of acting on the emerging theology (pp. 149-162).

Bernard Iddings Bell wrote in 1942 that the church needed to rediscover its own function or “the Church is hardly likely to matter any more tomorrow than it mattered yesterday or than it matters at the moment, which is just about not at all” (p. 141). It is suggested in chapter 8 that part of that function is vision-casting. “Young people and their mental health might be positively impacted if the church declared in word and deed: You are so much more than consumers” (p. 144). The church to date continues to have one of the best distribution networks, even into global rural areas (p. 147). Former UNICEF Executive Director James Grant said, “In practice, it could be argued that the U5MR [Under-5 Mortality Rate] is the best available *single indicator* of social development overall ...” (p. 151). A vision of reducing the global U5MR could serve as a positive agenda for the tsunami of affluence that is drowning so many, church members included (p. 149).

Chapter 8 poses the choice voiced by the character Mark Watney in *The Martian*, describing being abandoned on Mars: “And you’re going to say, ‘This is it. This is how I end.’ Now you can either accept that, or you can get to work.” The critical question before the church might well be stated: Do Christians want to accept the decline of the institutional church in the U.S., or get to work?