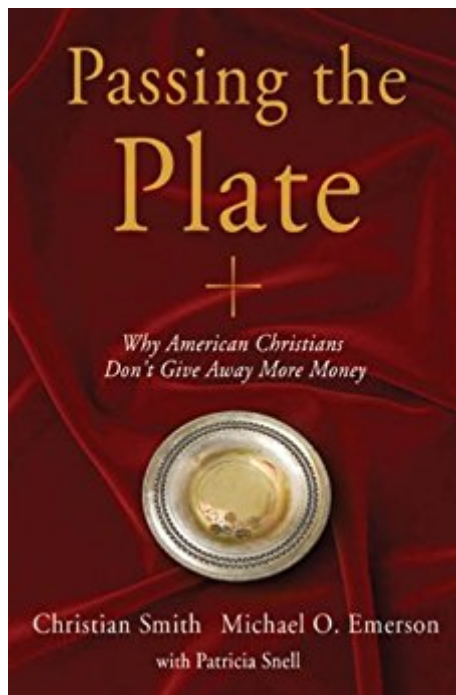




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Passing The Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money



Synopsis

Passing the Plate shows that few American Christians donate generously to religious and charitable causes. This eye-opening book explores the reasons behind such ungenerous giving, the potential world-changing benefits of greater financial giving, and what can be done to improve matters. By illuminating the social and psychological forces that shape charitable giving, Passing the Plate is sure to spark a much-needed debate on a critical issue.

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Customer Reviews

Christian Smith has provided a helpful resource to American Christian leaders as "Passing the Plate" brings American Christian stinginess into sharp relief. In short, American Christians CAN give a lot of money but choose not to for a variety of reasons. Smith and his cohorts report that American Christians give roughly 2% of their gross income to churches and religious charities - total! Many Christian denominations officially recommend a more generous figure for giving, ala 10%. Smith does a lot of "what if's" with that data. For example, what if American Christians all gave 10% of their income to address the concerns American Christians say they want to address? To be fair, I

skimmed quite a few paragraphs that explained charts and stats in detail. The charts were by and large sufficiently explanatory, but the additional explanations are helpful for reference. Despite this necessary abundance of information, the information is extremely helpful. In chapter 3, Smith explores 9 hypotheses to explain American generosity. The interviews with pastors and parishioners in chapter 4 were also quite illuminating, if not entirely surprising. Chapter 5's "mental experiment" on tithing underscored the negative influence of American individualism on churches. There are clear practical implications for pastors and church leaders. The most significant challenge is theological: recoupling God's authority with the influence and life of the Church (cf. 171). In other words, how do Christians reconnect God with God's body (i.e. the body of Christ), the Church? Many interviewees were willing to give to God but didn't connect that sensibility with the concreteness of the Church. This book is a must for pastors seeking to create a culture of generosity to meet the needs of all God's children.

I found the book well researched, full of useful data and information, and an easy read. Sections are summarized such that if you do not want to wade through all of the statistical details and data, you can scan the numbers and cut to the chase (conclusions and observations). High marks from this reviewer

For research, GOOD; for fun...Stop right now. I gave it four stars because the research deserves an A for effort. But this is not a fast read. If you are a pastor or a seminarian or sociologist, or researcher, get this because it is fine work. This is not, however, casual reading.

As the pastor of an evangelical church, I regularly talk to missionaries, charity workers, and street people who desperately need money. Sometimes I am able to help them. Other times I am not. On the whole, my church is very generous, although we could probably give more. And I have the sneaking suspicion that other churches could do the same. "Passing the Plate" by Christian Smith and Michael Emerson is a sociological study of "Why Americans Don't Give Away More Money," in the words of the subtitle. Sociologists of religion, which Smith and Emerson are, will find this a useful read for what it says about American Christian giving habits. But I enthusiastically recommend this book to Christian pastors, denominational leaders, and charitable organizations. It reveals both why American Christians don't give, and what can be done to encourage them to give more. Smith and Emerson begin by noting how much money would be available on an annual basis if American Christians gave regular tithes (10% of their income) and occasional free-will offerings

(over and above the tithe). Doing so would add an additional \$133.4 billion to what American Christians already give. Again, that's on an annual basis. In addition to evangelism, church planting, Bible schools, and other traditional church activities, this money would adequately fund humanitarian causes such as eradicating malaria and polio, providing money for micro-enterprise loans, providing clean water, etc. Using similar statistics, Ron Sider has argued that if American Christians just tithed, they could fund the completion of the UN's Millennium Goals with private dollars. Unfortunately, American Christians don't tithe. Twenty percent of American Christians give nothing at all. The mean average of pre-tax income given by American Christian households is 2.9%. The median gift, however, was about \$200 or 0.62% of pre-tax income. This paltry giving comes in spite of the fact that American Christians generally have the resources to tithe, if they decide to, and in spite of the fact that most Christian traditions teach tithing. Why, then, don't American Christians give more generously? Smith and Emerson advance a complex explanation based on five factors: (1) American Christians "have not seriously confronted and grappled with the theological and moral teachings of their traditions to give generously." (2) "Their churches settle for low expectations of financial giving." (3) They "lack a complete confidence in the trustworthiness of the churches and charitable organizations to which they do or would give money." (4) "There are few or no real consequences or costs to stingy, intermittent, or no giving." (5) They give "on an occasional and situational basis, not as a disciplined, structured, routine practice." Smith and Emerson are practicing Christians, in addition to being sociologists of religion, so they offer a few tips for Christian leaders to increase generous giving. (1) Teach tithing. Tithing is already part of most Christian traditions in America, but it is not taught consistently. (2) "Live the Vision" rather than "Pay the Bills." Smith and Emerson strongly recommend laying out a holistic understanding of how money could be used to accomplish all the good things a church should be doing, from evangelism to humanitarian relief. Unfortunately, too many pastors are so concerned about paying the bills from week to week that they don't instill in their parishioners this larger vision of what could be done with more money. So, to pastors, denominational leaders, and Christian charitable organizations, I say, "Read this book!" And to pastors I say, "Develop a sermon series, Bible study, or small group using biblical principles about money and the statistics provided by this book." Teach your people to give, and then use that money to do good both in America and around the world.

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