

# The Development of Church Organisation: Governance, Generosity, and the Heart of True Christian Community

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## ***Abstract***

The governance of churches has progressed significantly, influenced by societal changes and secular regulatory bodies such as charity commissions and non-governmental organisations. While these bodies ensure accountability and protection, they often challenge the spiritual essence of the church. This paper examines church governance in light of biblical principles, focusing on generosity as a key indicator of spiritual health. It argues that coerced giving undermines the church's mission, and that true generosity reflects one's alignment with the vision of the gospel. Discipleship, stewardship, and communal responsibility are presented as essential remedies to modern challenges of individualism and want.

## **Introduction**

The organisational structures of churches today reflect a tension between ancient spiritual principles and modern regulatory requirements. Secular authorities, such as the Charity Commission in the United Kingdom, require churches to meet stringent financial and operational standards to ensure accountability and transparency.<sup>1</sup> While these measures protect stakeholders, they can conflict with the church's identity as a spiritual organism, not merely an institution. This paper explores the heart of what defines a true church, emphasising generosity, shared responsibility, and alignment with the gospel's mission. It critiques the practice of coercing giving, arguing that generosity is a spiritual issue rooted in one's priorities and discipleship.

## **Historical Context: The Evolution of Church Governance**

Historically, church governance has adapted to cultural and theological shifts. The early church exemplified a model of shared responsibility, as seen in Acts 2:44–45, where “all who believed were together and had all things in common.” This communal ethos was central to the church's identity, reflecting Christ's call to selflessness and generosity.

The Reformation introduced congregational governance, emphasising the priesthood of all believers.<sup>2</sup> This model democratised church leadership, allowing members to share in decision-making and ownership. However, modern legal frameworks require churches to adopt corporate governance models, prioritising financial and operational accountability over spiritual principles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charity Commission, *The Essential Trustee: What You Need to Know, What You Need to Do* (London: UK Government, 2023), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 45–46.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 121–22.

## Generosity as a Spiritual Indicator

Jesus taught that “*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matthew 6:21), linking giving to spiritual priorities. Generosity is not merely a financial obligation but a reflection of one’s spiritual maturity and commitment to the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

When churches resort to coercion or manipulation to encourage giving, they undermine their mission and risk alienating members.<sup>5</sup> Instead, true giving flows naturally from a heart transformed by the gospel, driven by love for God and His people.<sup>6</sup> A lack of generosity often indicates deeper spiritual issues, such as materialism, individualism, or a failure to grasp the church’s mission.<sup>7</sup>

## The True Church: Community, Generosity, and Shared Responsibility

A true church is characterised by its commitment to biblical principles of community and generosity. The early church’s practice of sharing resources to meet communal needs is foundational to its identity as the body of Christ.<sup>8</sup> When these qualities are absent, the church risks becoming a social club or a business rather than a spiritual community.<sup>9</sup>

Generosity reflects the alignment of one’s heart with the church’s vision and mission.<sup>10</sup> The apostle Paul emphasised this in 2 Corinthians 9:7, stating that “God loves a cheerful giver.”<sup>11</sup> Coerced or reluctant giving reveals a disconnect from the gospel, while sacrificial generosity demonstrates spiritual maturity and faith.

## Challenges of Generosity in Modern Society

Modern individualism poses significant challenges to encourage generosity within the church.<sup>12</sup> Economic pressures, consumerism, and a focus on personal success often overshadow the biblical call to communal living.<sup>13</sup> This cultural context complicates the church’s efforts to cultivate a spirit of giving and shared responsibility.

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<sup>4</sup> Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle: Unlocking the Secret of Joyful Giving* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005), 15–16.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission Around the Table* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 55.

<sup>7</sup> David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2013), 65–66.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 101.

<sup>11</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2011), 165–66.

<sup>12</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 241.

<sup>13</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 49.

In such environments, the issue of giving becomes a matter of discipleship.<sup>14</sup> As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, “Discipleship is not an offer that man makes to Christ; it is a command to follow Him.”<sup>15</sup> Churches must teach and model the principles of stewardship and generosity, helping members align their financial priorities with the mission of the gospel.

### **The Role of Regulatory Oversight**

Secular regulatory bodies, such as charity commissions, play a vital role in ensuring financial accountability and transparency.<sup>16</sup> However, their focus on compliance can sometimes conflict with the church’s spiritual priorities.<sup>17</sup> For example, regulatory requirements may prioritise institutional survival over communal generosity and hospitality.<sup>18</sup>

Churches must navigate these tensions by integrating compliance with their mission and values.<sup>19</sup> This involves maintaining a clear focus on the gospel while fulfilling legal obligations, ensuring that the church remains true to its identity as a spiritual body.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The essence of a true church lies in its commitment to biblical principles—generosity, hospitality, and shared responsibility. A church that must coerce its members to give has lost sight of its mission, reducing itself to a business rather than a spiritual community.<sup>21</sup> Generosity reflects the heart of a believer, aligning them with the gospel’s vision and mission.<sup>22</sup>

In an individualistic society, encouraging this outlook requires intentional discipleship, stewardship, and a renewed emphasis on communal living. Churches must resist cultural and regulatory pressures that prioritise institutional goals over spiritual vitality. By maintaining their identity as communities of faith, churches can thrive and fulfil their mission to embody the gospel in every aspect of life.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 78.

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Charity Commission, *The Essential Trustee*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson, *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 123.

<sup>18</sup> Charity Commission, *The Essential Trustee*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 142.

<sup>20</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 200.

<sup>21</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 89.

<sup>22</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 211–12.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 292.

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