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Purchasing a Purpose: Money and the Limitations of Worldly Power

A Commentary by Jason Curry



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When I first heard someone saying the phrase “quid pro quo,” I wasn’t exactly sure what it meant. Later on that year, I learned that it is a Latin phrase which means “this for that.” For example, people often trade electronic devices (e.g., computers) for other electronic devices (e.g., flat screen televisions). Other people are willing to give information about a person to someone else in order to get information about another person. People engage in quid pro quo agreements on a daily basis. However, it is important to note that Jesus did not enter into many quid pro quo arrangements. On one hand, Jesus told Peter to have faith, and to hold his hand so that he could lead Peter across the water (Matthew 14:22-32); however, Jesus prevented a woman from being stoned (John 8:1-11), healed a man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9) and performed many other miracles without asking for anything in return. In fact, it was because of Jesus’ love and initial generosity that many people

joined the early, Christian church. Indeed, Jesus’ unconditional love for humanity was brilliantly captured in the refrain of a great hymn by Frederick Whitfield: “Oh, how I love Jesus because he first loved me.”

I am becoming increasingly disturbed by a novel religious perspective which wholeheartedly embraces a worldly or financial, quid pro quo system. Recently, I heard a televangelist say that a person would receive a financial blessing, a purpose and a destiny if he or she would send money to the church. The ministers’ appeal reminded me of a passage of scripture in which Simon, who used to be a sorcerer, tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit. According to Acts 8:18-19: “And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.’” Peter criticized Simon because of his remarks,

and Simon asked for forgiveness from God.

In a time in which the nation grapples with the realities of a much-needed, campaign finance reform (e.g., excessive corporate and philanthropic giving to political candidates) as well as people who suggest that one’s purpose, destiny or blessing is inextricably connected to financial gifts, it is important to remember that we cannot purchase God’s blessings. God’s unmerited love for humanity is still called grace, and it is freely given (2 Corinthians 13:14). The book of Acts reminds us that power from God resides in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as opposed to the quid pro quo schemes that sometimes reside in the hearts and minds of those around us.