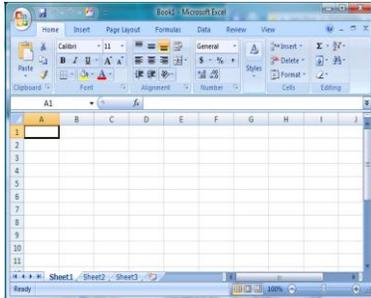


## The Real Excel

2 Corinthians 8: 1-7

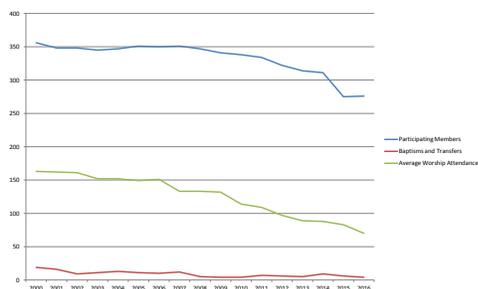
First Christian Church, Bedford

May 7, 2017

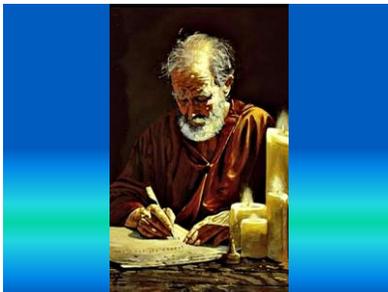


Do you Excel? Likely many of you do. Excel is, of course, a very popular and powerful program. There are all sorts of ways you can use it to organize data. You can enter data to keep track of information and then compare it to other data.

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For example I entered some statistical information about your church into an Excel spreadsheet and then was able to generate this graph that shows changes in participating membership, worship attendance, and baptisms and transfers over time. Such a tool is useful to spot changes or trends, or to confirm relative stability. That's Excel.



But that is not exactly what Paul had in mind when he told the Corinthian church to *excel* in the passage we just heard. Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to excel in their faith, their speech, their knowledge, and most importantly an offering. I thought

of this scripture when Bruce Ervin asked me to preach to you today in the midst of your stewardship campaign about Disciples Mission Fund.

So let's think about this scripture. The early church, as you know, was scattered across a big geography. Paul, who I think was actually the first Regional Minister, travelled extensively to connect with these congregations, to help start new communities of faith, to train leaders, and to resolve disputes. He also promoted an offering. The offering was for the church in Jerusalem. That congregation, the first place that Christianity took root, had developed an extensive ministry to care for widows and orphans.



It is described in the book of Acts. This social ministry had become bigger than the Jerusalem church itself could manage or support and so they looked for mission partners to assist them.

Paul made it a part of his ministry to encourage the churches scattered across Galatia and the Roman empire to help with this ministry. He did so for several reasons. The need was real, of course. There is historical evidence that Palestine faced famine conditions in the mid 40's A.D. That coupled with overpopulation in the Jerusalem area and double taxation imposed by Roman occupiers led to persistent food shortages. That was reason enough to promote this offering. But it was not the only reason.

Paul also believed that by encouraging the far flung churches in Galatia to support this project in Jerusalem he could begin to connect their lives. He wanted them to understand that they were not disconnected franchises of the Jesus movement, but rather one church united. Funding a project together was a tangible way of identifying, claiming, and expressing that connection. They would be less likely to view one another as distant, other, and strange if they were engaged in a common work. If they did not share in this offering they risked becoming dangerously disconnected.

The third reason Paul promoted this was he knew it would be good for them spiritually. This congregation in Corinth had a very diverse membership that reflected the diverse cosmopolitan community in which it was located. That diversity was a gift but it also led, at times, to division and quarrels. Paul on more than one occasion seeks

to give them counsel about how they relate to one another including his attempts to help them recognize each other's gifts,



his attempts to resolve tensions around the fact that some persons gobbled up more food at the potluck before everybody had a chance to go through the first time. You know the usual church stuff!

The people of the Corinthian church had a selfish streak so Paul encourages them to think about others, including the widows and orphans in Jerusalem who could use their help. He challenges them to excel in their giving.



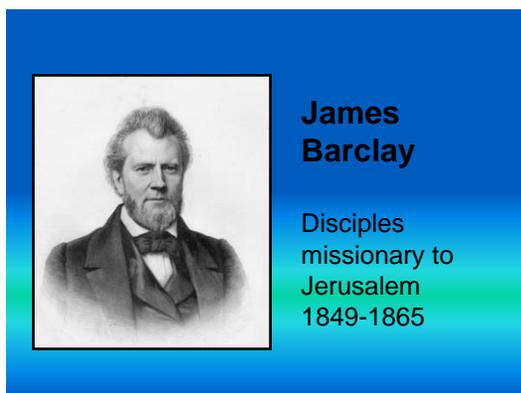
He also lifts up the Macedonian church as an example. He tells the Corinthian church that the Macedonian church, who is clearly not as well off as the Corinthians, begged him for the opportunity to support this offering. He says that "entirely on their own they earnestly pleaded with him for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." Surely you can do that or more he says to the Corinthians. In this matter as well as others he encouraged them to excel.

There is also a little back story on this as well. We know from comments Paul makes in chapter 9 of this book that one reason that the Macedonian church got so excited about this offering is that when Paul visited them he talked about how excited the Corinthian church was about it. Now, it appears, a delegation from Macedonia is going to bring their offering to Corinth so that it can be combined with the offering there, before Paul heads back to Jerusalem. Uh-oh. It is time for the Corinthian church to

come through and not be outdone by their country cousins. So Paul says, excel, excel, excel!

Little human dramas like this have always been a part of the life of the church even to today. But the needs then and now are real. Paul was right. Sharing in a common mission work is spiritually healthy for a church and deepens the relationship between congregations.

Fortunately, the founders of our denomination were students of the scripture and recognized the same. Right of the bat at the founding of our church they encouraged us to collect offerings for common mission. And you know what we did with them? We sent them to Jerusalem.

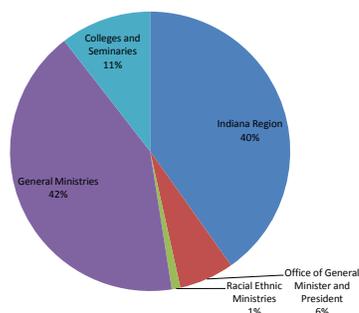


Our first missionary was James Barclay who moved with his family to Jerusalem in 1849 to represent our church. Barclay was a fascinating fellow, a renaissance man in many respects. He was a physician, a science professor, an archeologist, an artist, and an active lay leader in the church. He and his family were living in Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's former home, before they headed to the Middle East. The intent of Barclay's mission was evangelism, but as soon as he got there he recognized he needed to also use his medical skills to address rampant malaria in Palestine. In that respect he set the pattern for all future missionaries of our church to listen for what the people you are serving need, not simply assume you know what they need.



The common work of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) today follows the pattern of Paul's offering for the Jerusalem church, and the Barclay mission to Jerusalem. In the 1930's we set up a way for our churches to efficiently pool our resources for ministry. We initially called it Unified Promotion, and then later on Basic Mission Finance, and today Disciples Mission Fund. It provides a way for our congregations to make offerings that are shared across the life of our church. Some of your giving ends in Haiti at a school for nurses, some in hospital in the Congo, some at one of our seven seminaries like CTS in Indianapolis, some at our summer church camps you help us provide where we pass along our faith to children and youth, and some to the Region to help provide for care for congregations and clergy.

How Disciples Mission Fund dollars are shared



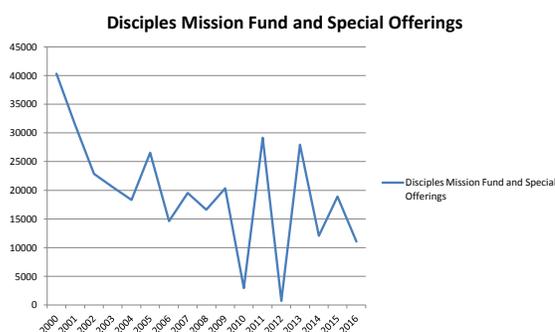
This pie chart shows how it is divided—40% for the Region's work, 49% for our general ministries collectively, and 11% for our colleges and seminaries. All in all over 70 ministries are supported. Let's watch a short video to see how that happens.

(video)



Since the year 2000 this congregation has supported the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with gifts totaling almost \$334,000. Not unlike what Paul said about the Macedonian church you have given of your means and even beyond your means to support our common mission. Thank you. You have been over a long period of time a model for others.

## First Christian Church, Bedford



I know that maintaining your historic level of giving has been difficult in recent years as you have navigated some challenging circumstances. As your partner the Region has invested \$6,000 in your budget in the last three years, because we believe in you and want ministry here to continue to thrive. But, in the spirit of Paul, I urge you to once again to share in our common mission as a congregation through your contributions and financial support. It is good relationally, it strengthens the life of this fellowship and it is good spiritually for you to do so too. Generosity builds confidence and faith.

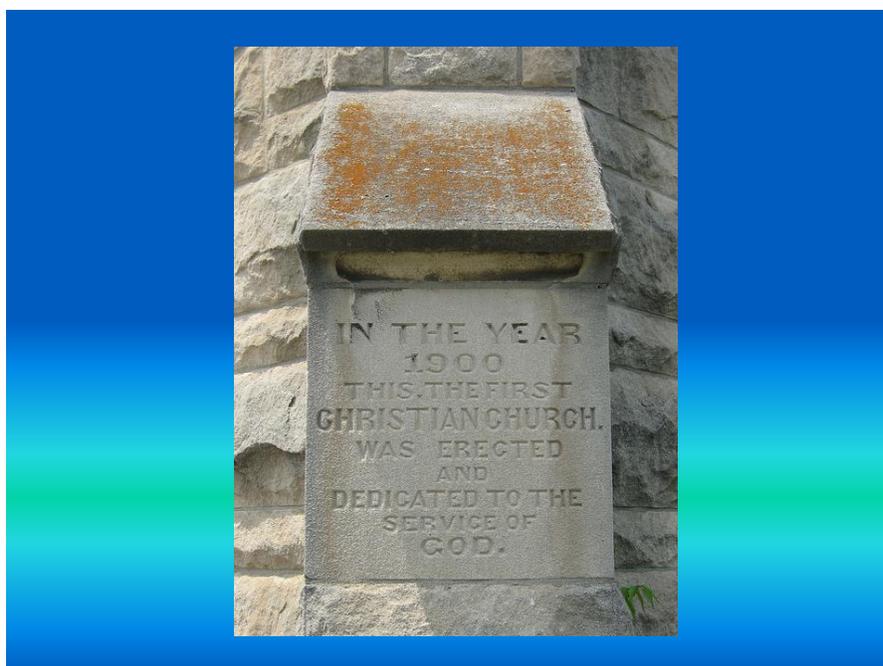


There one more reason to do so too. The Macedonians are coming to town. Well not exactly them, but their relatives. This summer our Region will once again host the General Assembly of our church in Indianapolis. It is sort of like that time Paul talked about when the Macedonians came to the Corinthian church. The last time we hosted

the General Assembly, in 2009, we welcomed nearly 6,000 Disciples from around the world. A group not unlike that number are making preparations to come. I hope a number of you will also be present.



When Paul knew that guests from other parts of the church were coming to Corinth he says to the Corinthians, "Get your offering ready. I have bragged you up in so many places. So now show them what you can do. Excel, excel, excel."



I know that you can do the same, for we, like this building, are dedicated for service to God. May God's blessing be on each one of you. May God's blessing be on this congregation. And may God's blessing be on the one church we share.

Rick Spleth  
Christian Church in Indiana