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ROYAL PRIESTS, TIN CUPS IN HAND

by Gary North

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

This is an inspiring passage, the fulfillment of Exodus 19:6: "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel." Royal priests in principle possess title to both offices: civil and ecclesiastical. A royal priesthood is not Levitical; it is Melchizedekal: both kingly and priestly. "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God" (Gen. 14:18). This priesthood's task is to rule among the nations:

The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth. The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (Psa. 110:2-4).

The mark of this Melchizedekal priesthood is its legal right to the tithe: "For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all" (Heb. 7:1-2a). He gave Abraham bread and wine. He blessed him. Then he accepted Abraham's tithe. **He did not have to beg Abraham in order to receive what was lawfully his.** Hebrews argues that Jesus Christ is the true Melchizedek. Jesus Christ does not beg. Why, then, do His representatives beg? Why have they become full-time beggars?

Today, pastors beg for "free will offerings." The Church of Jesus Christ does not need free will offerings. It needs predestinated tithing. Royal priests should not beg.

Beggars Can't Be Rulers

In our day, the Church of Jesus Christ has been reduced to begging. It is a pathetic sight to see. It begs because its leaders, deep down in their souls, despise God's law. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the moral requirement before God for every voting member of the congregation to tithe ten percent of his income to the local church? For that matter, when was the **first** time?

The Church has become almost medieval in its concerns. It endlessly begs for money in order to build another building. Unlike medieval cathedrals, however, the buildings that today's churches build are unlikely to become architectural classics that inspire men for centuries. They probably will not survive the next outward wave of urban blight. Or as we could say of Rev. Schuller's crystal cathe-

dral, "People who preach in glass houses shouldn't build on the San Andreas fault."

The pastors beg. The congregations make down payments on buildings. Then they struggle for 20 years to meet mortgage payments. Mortgage debt transfers power to **spiritual blackmailers**: "Preach what we like to hear or we walk!" To tickle their ears, pastors preach less and less from the law of God. They preach possibility thinking, or positive confession, or some other variant of "think and grow rich." If they are more traditional in their theology, they preach the doctrine of the imminent Rapture, which promises to relieve God's people from the pressure of paying off heavy mortgages. The most traditional pastors preach amillennialism: the eschatology of Christianity's guaranteed defeat in time and on earth, but without the hope in an imminent secret Rapture. So, God's royal priesthood shuffles along, looking over its collective shoulder for bullies.

If local congregations want more income, here is a sure-fire way to get it:

1. Require every voting member to tithe: no tithe-no vote.
2. Have deacons police the voting members' income, just as the IRS polices it. Deacons represent an institution with greater covenantal authority than the State lawfully possesses.
3. Organize evangelism programs that bring more people into the congregation.
4. Challenge newcomers and non-voting members with a vision of victory that calls forth great dedication.
5. Provide motivation for people to make more money by getting more education and better jobs.
6. Show people ways to save 10% of their income each payday.
7. Preach on the moral obligation to get out of debt.
8. Start paying off the church's mortgage as fast as possible to set a good example.
9. Start allocating a tithe from the church's budget to help the poor.
10. Stop preaching that Christianity is the religion of losers until the day Christ returns bodily.

But this program is unacceptable to churches. It is based too heavily on discipline, personal responsibility, thrift, and long-term planning. This is not the beggar's way.

Hat in Hand vs. Checkbook in Hand

American evangelical churches have no power and little influence because they are beggars. No one in a position of authority pays a great deal of attention to organizations that have so little discipline over their own members that they must go outside the local membership to beg for money. **The identifying mark of failure in life is beg-**

gary. The modern evangelical pastor is like Oliver Twist, standing in front of Mr. Bumble, empty bowl in hand: "Please, sir, may I have some more?"

Let us compare a local church's influence with that of the Rockefeller Foundation. Who pays attention locally to the suggestions of local churches? Hardly anyone. Who pays attention locally to the suggestions of the Rockefeller Foundation? Lots of dedicated people do, people who want only to serve the public (at \$75,000 a year plus expenses). They sit up and take notice. The Rockefeller Foundation - actually, there are several Rockefeller Foundations - does not come to beg. It comes to write large checks. This makes all the difference.

Church and Parachurch

Churches are the astronomical black holes of Christendom: money that goes in stays in. Pastors complain about parachurch ministries. These rival ministries absorb donors' money, but they are not accountable to any organization, say the pastors - usually pastors of local, autonomous churches that they run personally. But they have a good point about institutional accountability or lack thereof: **he who pays the piper calls the tune.** The donors to parachurch ministries provide the economic votes of confidence that sustain these ministries. Giving is voluntary. The parachurch ministries therefore have adopted scientific fundraising techniques that local pastors cannot successfully mimic. This places churches at a disadvantage in the begging race.

If the churches would demand the tithe from their voting members, parachurch ministries would see their funds begin to dry up. Then the churches could begin to support those parachurch ministries that perform kingdom services that are difficult for the churches to perform. The churches would thereby invoke the division of labor (1 Cor. 12). This would better promote the kingdom of God, and it would also put churches back into positions of authority.

He who pays the piper calls the tune. The reason why almost no one plays tunes that the Church wants to hear is that the Church refuses to pay the highly competitive pipers of this world. It decries the lack of accountability of other ministries, yet it refuses to insist on accountability from its own members. "We're under grace, not law!" shout the antinomian pastors of many ecclesiastical traditions. "Amen to that!" respond the members of these congregations, putting away their checkbooks and pulling out their lonely \$20 bills for this week's "sacrificial" family offering. Tithing is relegated to an Old Covenant that was run by a harsh and demanding God. So the Church begs. It pleads. It asks "pretty please." And God's people cheer, Bronx fashion.

Should Charity Begin in the Parking Lot?

Several years ago, my wife and I came into a great deal of money. I gave all of mine away. My wife gave half of hers away. I gave my share away in the name of other people. I went onto no computerized begging lists. My wife told each charity that this was a one-time donation, that she was not to be put on their mailing lists. Fat chance. Ever since, she has received the automatic mailings. "More. Send more. Jesus wants you to send more." She tosses them away. They keep coming. **There is nothing sure in her life except death, taxes, and fund-raising letters from parachurch ministries.**

They took her money and put her on their mailing lists (sucker lists, if you ask me), violating the terms of the original donations. These ministries have no honor. Does this surprise anyone? **Beggars are not noted for their honor.**

My wife announced that she would be giving away money in \$10,000 chunks. She asked that groups send her proposals. She received about 200 proposals. I helped her

go through piles of requests. This may have been the most discouraging Christian experience of my life. A few proposals were fine: retarded children needing help, missionaries needing help, battered wives needing help, and so forth. But too many of them were like the fellow who wanted \$10,000 so that his church could landscape its parking lot. That one stands out in my memory. People are literally starving out there. Was my wife to worry about a landscaped parking lot? This would help bring in God's kingdom?

Most of the requests were for buildings. Request after request: help us with our building fund. Endless. Pathetic.

The Edifice Complex

People think of me as a fount of many blessings. Pastors and others keep hustling me for money. Requests run at an average of \$5,000 to \$10,000 a month. (This includes crackpot investment schemes run by Christians who have yet to start a successful business.) These are "across the transom" requests, not computerized. The requests rarely come from people who have ever donated to ICE or have bought a book from ICE. They come from beggars who have heard from some source that I am an easy mark. An old reputation dies hard. I have been burned so many times that my once-soft heart has callouses. I cannot be manipulated. I tithe. Beggars can ask my deacons for money. But I used to be stupid. I used to give to beggars. This created a very bad precedent. I am still paying for the foolishness of my youth.

The most common request is for money to buy a church building. The second most common request is for money to help some church-run school. Let me consider this request first. Christian schools ought to be run on a profit-seeking basis. When schools depend 100% on income from parents, the parents gain maximum sovereignty over their children's education. **Parents are sovereign in education, not churches.** Their demands should be met, but at their own expense. They should not normally be subsidized. If a local church sets up a scholarship fund for needy families, wonderful, but why should any church fund the educations of the children of middle-class parents or even wealthy parents? This is what is being done when tuitions are lowered by means of outside subsidies.

Why do these schools refuse to charge full-cost tuitions? Why do they expect rich people (they have heard) a thousand miles away to finance the educations of the children of middle-class and even well-off families? Besides, since they do not charge full-cost tuition, they will be back on the street again in a month or two anyway, hat in hand. **Without full-cost tuitions, private education is a bottomless pit** - just like public education. Why do Christians expect other Christians to fund local bottomless pits except in cases of pure charity, where the recipients cannot possibly repay?

Now let us consider churches. It is a very strange thing: people in some tiny, distant congregation who have not been able to raise enough money from their own members in twenty years to make a down payment on a building want me to send them a portion of my children's inheritance. That is what these requests amount to. They cannot raise the money from their own members, or from the national denomination's constriction loan fund (if there is either a national denomination or a fund), but they think I may be interested. Why?

Buildings. Why do they need to own a church building? Where is it written in the Bible that renting is a New Covenant curse of God? I understand the convenience of owning, but the same amount of money invested in a Christian day care center would convert lots more children and waste far less money. Let the congregation rent a day care center on Sundays.

I can imagine the response of America's pastors. "O, God, what have I done to deserve this? Meeting in a day care center! After all, I had to learn enough Greek to pass a test, once, twenty years ago!"

I keep thinking of black churches and Pentecostal churches. They have no sugar daddies in reserve. They have no Board of Home Missions to jump-start them. They begin in storefronts. Most fail. Some survive. A few may make it to 200 members. A tiny number get even larger. But the pastors who start them understand that they must start small without subsidies from outside the local congregations.

Not, apparently, pastors of middle-class whites. These pastors think their churches just have to own buildings. Nice buildings. Church-looking buildings. "If we can't get a decent building of our own, in a respectable section of town, no one will attend." Really? Are you sure? You are? Well, there is this always alternative: with the income your members can afford, rent a storefront and serve the spiritual needs of those in the community who do not equate eternal salvation with a \$2 million building located within a short drive of a racquetball club.

"What? Nice, middle-class families mixing with . . . with **those** sorts of people? My people would never stand for it!" Fine, if that is their decision, let all of them who feel this way take a seat on the one-way train to hell. Or in the local mainline church congregation. Or both. There is nothing in the Bible that says that middle-class people in America's richest cities – the richest people in mankind's history – are owed tickets to heaven that are partially subsidized by donors living a thousand miles away.

What is it that persuades pastors to ignore the requirement of tithing but insist on the need for respectable, "churchy" real estate? They understand neither God's law nor the gospel.

But, some indignant pastor may reply, "my church is in an urban area with very expensive real estate. If we don't conform to what people expect, the church cannot grow." To which I reply: "Why do you think that God is more interested in saving the souls of people who live in high-cost urban areas than people who live in medium-sized cities or towns where real estate is less expensive?" Put differently, there are millions of people who are headed straight to hell. Why not serve the needs of less socially conscious people who are willing to pay for a building that they can afford instead of asking outsiders for money to help well-heeled but socially fastidious families to pay for it?

Here is the problem. First, God says that everyone deserves to go to hell. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). This condemnation includes people who own \$250,000 homes in large U.S. cities. Second, by God's absolutely sovereign grace, He elects some people to eternal life. Third, those who are elected by God's grace were elected before the foundation of the world. "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Eph. 1:4).

It seems reasonable to assume that there are lots of people living in smaller cities and towns who need to worship God. Why not serve their needs first? Why not assume that people who are willing and able to pay for their own church building are those who have been elected by God? Why assume that God has elected members of congregations that insist on owning nice meeting facilities which they cannot afford, and if they do not get a subsidy from someone else, they will go and worship elsewhere?

I would tell these people to go and worship elsewhere as fast as their new Ford Tauruses will carry them. Of course, I am not a pastor.

Sam Walton's Strategy

(Written before he died)

I have very few heroes. One of them is Sam Walton. If he had not been smart enough to give away his shares of Wal-Mart to his children before the shares appreciated, he would be the richest man in the U.S. As it is, he is probably worth \$2 billion. How did he make his money? In the toughest business on earth: retailing. There are no government barriers to entry, no licensing requirements, nothing to shield the entrepreneur from the forces of the free market. Sam Walton's operation is now larger than Sears, Roebuck. He did it in one lifetime.

How did he do it? By first serving the needs of small-town people living in the Mid-South. He sold them decent goods at rock-bottom prices. No one else would. Wal-Mart grew. The larger the operation grew, the better the discounts he could negotiate with sellers. He then plowed the profits back into the company. But he did this where Sears and Montgomery Ward and K-Mart did not have local outlets. He sneaked up on them. By the time he was ready to invade their turf, he was too powerful to beat.

He runs the whole show from Bentonville, Arkansas – what one can safely call a low-rent district.

Had he waited to go into business until he could put up a middle-class store in Little Rock, let alone in Los Angeles, he would still be waiting. And Sears would still be number-one.

His strategy was simple: start where you have the advantage, which no one else knows about or cares about, and build outward. Give the people what they want at a price they can afford, and let your success finance the next move. Be content with cheap real estate in out-of-the-way places until you can afford to buy prime real estate in the upscale places.

But this strategy is much too plebeian for tiny, underfunded, and theologically rigorous congregations in tiny, underfunded, no-growth denominations. Their seminary-trained pastors are unwilling to do mission work in the boondocks. They want to do missions work in the upscale areas, which the denominations cannot afford to penetrate with the resources at their disposal. And so they run the equivalent of mom-and-pop stores – and I do not mean mom-and-pop stores run by efficient Koreans.

What we need is a denomination with a plan. We need one that will assess its resources and target the "markets" that can be taken inexpensively, which will then serve to finance the penetration of the next "market." They need to do surveys to locate regions that are not on the way down, but have not yet become the "hot" areas. They need to adopt a national evangelism strategy that will take at least a century to get into high gear, at least at today's pace of expansion. **They need to build home bases in heartland America.** The strategy needs to be coordinated.

The problem is, no one is able to coordinate anything. In the officially Reformed denominations, bureaucracy still reigns supreme, and bureaucracies are capable only of vetoing things. They cannot initiate. The charismatics are either independent or else their denominations are premillennial-dispensational who are getting ready for the Rapture. The Missouri Synod Lutherans are still tied up in knots over the old conservative-liberal battle, although they do run day cares to generate income, showing that they are closer to a successful strategy than any competitor. The Southern Baptists are, as always, expanding through their time-honored home missions program of local church splits. In general, nothing is being done except to mark time.

Christianity in the U.S. has drifted along in humanism's cultural and political stream for so long that, apart from the grace of God, it would now be too late. Premillennialists and amillennialists insist that it is too late. This makes the

work of resistance and reversal that much more difficult for the rest of us, but no more difficult than the task facing the prophets in Isaiah's day.

Missions

Several years ago, I spoke to a large gathering of Christians in Jamaica. I made this observation: we can identify the shift from a spiritually young church to a mature church with one test: the end of its absorption of missionary funds and the beginning of its missions programs to other nations. **Sending out missionaries is the mark of ecclesiastical spiritual maturity.**

Missionary activity is basic to the Church. It enables us to bring the gospel to individuals **and cultures** that have been in personal **and cultural** darkness. Missions demonstrate to God that we are serious about Christianity — just as tithing does. Missions also allow churches to test methods of evangelism: what works, what doesn't, where, and under what circumstances. This enables churches to gain the experience they will need when the Holy Spirit at last begins to move in a mighty way, hopefully early in the next millennium.

Pietists are also strong verbal proponents of foreign missions. **For pietists, however, distant missionary activities are a substitute for Christian maturity at home.** A standard ploy of the standard premillennial pietist is to criticize anyone who says that Christians should spend money on things like higher education, books, or political involvement, with this refrain: "Couldn't this sum be better spent on missionaries? The Bible (*sola scriptura*) is or should be sufficient for us. Each of us will stand before God someday and account for our time, money and what we did with the truth and light we possess!" (See *Biblical Economics Today*, May/June 1992: "Ghetto Eschatologies.") This refrain is mostly a smoke screen by Christians who have poor educations, are not well read, and who think it is too great a bother to vote. Sending a few dollars a year to "missions" provides these people with a sense of justification for their abandonment of personal responsibility for anything outside the local church and home. I would be more impressed if these people did not own television sets and spent three to five hours a day in prayer instead of being glued in front of the tube.

We can estimate a local church's commitment to missions by examining its budget. (We can use this tactic in evaluating a church's commitment to just about anything.) How great is this commitment in most churches? I am reminded of Bob Dylan's first album, released in early 1962, back when he was in his folk singing-acoustic guitar-harmonica days. I think of the lyric on his "Talking' New York" blues. He described his experience with one employer. "I got a harmonica job. I got to play, blowin' my lungs out for a dollar a day. I blowed inside out and upside down. The man there said he loved my sound. He was ravin' about it. He loved my sound. A dollar a day's worth." American churches love foreign missions. A dollar a day's worth.

There is another factor worth noting: the need for home missions. America's public school system, which is where most Christians send their children, has become exactly what A. A. Hodge said it would become over a century ago: **the greatest engine for atheism in man's history.** Humanist education has taught generations of students to think without any reference to the God of the Bible. This has led to the widespread worship of the god of humanity.

As a result, the United States in the great cities and their suburbs has become a pagan nation. The Board of Home Missions in an American denomination is today is trying to evangelize people who are as ignorant of the gospel of saving grace through faith in Jesus Christ as the people the Board of Foreign Missions is trying to evangelize. (By foreign missions, I have in mind places of overwhelming pagan darkness, such as Western Europe.)

Bootstrap Operations

If a local congregation wants to accomplish something, it has to bootstrap the project by the power of the Holy Spirit. Its voting members must tithe; voting members who refuse should be cut from the list of eligible voters. They may lawfully take communion, but they should have no say about what the local church does with its money. To allow non-tithing members to vote in a church is the same as allowing non-taxpayers to vote in civil elections. A hundred and fifty years ago, Karl Marx said that if the property qualification for the vote was ever abandoned, socialism would triumph. We need to recognize the same principle in churches: **he who does not pay the piper should not be allowed to call the tune.**

This is the starting point: **tithing churches.** Everything else is either Protestant begging, Roman Catholic bingo, or Pentecostal magic trinkets for donations of \$20 or more.

The next step is to recognize that to build a church building, it will take sacrifice, prayer, and a willingness to worship God for a long time in rented quarters. Young married couples just starting out should not expect to begin with furniture equivalent to what their parents own, nor should they expect to buy a comparable home by the time the second child is born. Any couple that does not understand this is heading for trouble. They can expect either a lesson in reality or a divorce. This is what parents should tell prospective newlyweds. It is also what new pastors should tell new congregations.

How long should church members be willing to wait to get a nice church building? For as long as a newlywed could should be willing to wait to buy a house: **until they can afford it.** But present-oriented, immature people get bored, or impatient, or discouraged. Church members transfer to larger congregations with the same readiness that married couples get divorced. Couples ask their parents for the money to make a down payment. Pastors ask rich people who live across the country to donate money. The psychology is the same: **if we cannot do it ourselves, someone ought to do it for us.**

Parents who give newlyweds the down payment money are subsidizing a looming disaster. They are creating a false sense of reality in the minds of their children. So are people who donate money to other churches' building funds.

In Dallas, there is a fundamentalist ministry, Christ for the Nations. It is a very big foreign missions organization. They make this offer to local indigenous churches on the mission field: they will supply each congregation with a roof when the church's foundation and walls are erected. This makes sense, not just for missionaries in darkest Africa but for Home Missions Boards in darkest America. Any congregation that asks for a dime from anyone outside the local congregation is placing a sign across its doors: "Missionary Church: Still in Spiritual Diapers."

Royal priesthoods should not be clothed in diapers.

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