

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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TARNISHED BUCKLE ON THE BIBLE BELT

by Gary North

I live in the sovereign state of North Carolina. Well, it's not really *that* sovereign. The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has cut off funds to the University of North Carolina because of an insufficient number of blacks on campus. Naturally, the local editorial writers are screaming bloody murder, since they want those Federal hand-outs. Without Federal money, the sovereign states would have to act in a sovereign, unsubsidized manner, and all of them want Washington's subsidized lunches. Every state wants more revenue back from the Federal government than is taken out of the state by Federal taxes. This is somewhat difficult for all of them to achieve simultaneously (unless the Federal Reserve System creates additional fiat money, which it is doing daily).

In any case, North Carolina is in the Bible Belt. Everyone knows this. Everyone north of the Mason-Dixon line is absolutely confident that everyone south of the line is a Southern Baptist. Well, it simply isn't true. There are a bunch of Methodists down here, too.

There is no question that the number of voters who are classifiable as fundamentalists would be a heavy majority of those voting in North Carolina. This is a rural state, with the most dispersed population of any large population state in the Union. With 10 million people, there is no town over 400 thousand. It is a state of small towns. You would imagine that the state is quite conservative, but you would imagine wrong.

At this moment, the state educational bureaucracy has filed suit against several dozen independent and church-connected Christian schools. The state bureaucrats are demanding that forms be filled out by these schools, which is usually the first step in controlling Christian education. (On this point, see Alan Grover's book, *Ohio's Trojan Horse*, 1977). The war against the Christian schools has begun here, just as it has in Kentucky, where the head of the state board of education is an ordained Southern Baptist minister.

Are the fundamentalists up in arms? Hardly. Most of them send their children to the secular "free" schools provided by tax dollars. They may (and do) criticize the bureaucrats at HEW for interfering with the state university system of North Carolina — "to interfere": saying how someone else can spend the money you give to him — but there is little or no concern about the fact that the equally secular state bureaucrats are trying to interfere with schools that do not receive any money whatsoever from the state treasury.

Financing the Religion of Humanism

I have in front of me the booklet published by the state, *1977 Individual Income Tax Instructions for Form D-400*. North Carolina's fundamentalists have supported the creation of a most "progressive" (graduated) income tax. Everything above \$10,000 is taxed at 7%. This used to seem like a good way to "soak the rich," since the income level of the average North Carolina family was under \$10,000. Inflation is driving most families into the trap which they set for the rich many years ago. Real income may stay the same, but money income is rising, and so is everyone's tax burden.

What I found most interesting was the following provision of the tax code. Bear in mind that this is supposedly the Bible Belt. This is a state filled with fundamentalists. Here is the tax code's provision for deductible gifts:

You Can Deduct Gifts To: . . .

Churches, Red Cross, Boy Scouts, American Cancer Society, etc. The deduction for such contributions is limited to 15 percent of the adjusted gross income on page 1, line 11 of the return.

Gifts to the State of North Carolina or any of its political subdivisions or any of their institutions, or agencies and to non-profit educational institutions or hospitals located in North Carolina are deductible without limit (p. 6).

Consider the implications of this tax code provision. Churches and other agencies, including charitable private societies, are legitimate charities for up to 15% of adjusted gross income. But beyond 15%, the giver must treat them as ordinary organizations. He receives no further tax break for additional giving. So then he goes looking for another charity to give to. And the tax code offers him a whopper: the State of North Carolina. Those who believe in the phony neutrality of the religion of secular humanism have seen to it that the citizens of the state have an opportunity to finance the chief state institution devoted to secular humanism, namely, the state itself. In other words, they encourage one religion (secular humanism) at the expense of all others. And in North Carolina, "all others" means Christianity, as far as most voters and taxpayers are concerned.

It is not surprising that the bureaucrats of the state prefer to have their religion subsidized in this fashion. It allows them to extend the domain of their power. They receive a 93% bonus this way: losing 7c on each forfeited tax dollar in order to gain that dollar. Who wouldn't prefer a deal like this? To have your own religion subsidized at the expense of

all rival religions is a great advantage, at least initially. (Eventually, the subsidy leads to nasty repercussions, since any violation of the rule of law creates the seeds of resistance.)

What is surprising, one might think, is that the people who elect and re-elect those who passed this tax code are southern fundamentalists. Where is the resistance to this arbitrary subsidy of the religion of secular humanism? Where is the understanding that this legislation is discriminatory against all forms of private charity? Where is the awareness that this legislation subsidizes political religion at the expense of private religion? One thing is sure: voters ignore all these issues. The tax code remains untouched.

Endlessly Preaching the ABC's

Obviously, the preachers of North Carolina are unconcerned about the discriminatory provisions of the tax code. But this really is not so surprising after all. First, there is little self-interest involved. Christians virtually never give away anything like 15% of their adjusted gross incomes. Tithing is not practiced. The pastors are not faced with congregations that find it costly to give away money on which they are also taxed, meaning donated money above 15% of their adjusted gross incomes. "Tithes and offerings" in the twentieth century is a phrase meaning "offerings."

The second reason is more important, but less understood. Preaching in this century is politically, culturally, and socially irrelevant. Preaching means an endless repetition of the familiar themes of salvation, damnation, and the evils of cigarettes and booze. (In Durham, where thousands are employed by the cigarette manufacturers, the focus is more likely to be on the evils of booze.) As Rushdoony has noted, the ABC's of theology never get beyond the letter "C". Over and over, for a lifetime, a man hears the same simple, comforting, and finally boring themes. No theme, no matter how crucial, can safely become a steady intellectual or spiritual diet. It leads to a kind of cultural myopia. Anything in a sermon which is not familiar is instantly forgotten, if in fact it is ever absorbed in the first place. A sort of theological paralysis sets in.

The same phenomenon can be observed in retrospect in the preaching of the late-seventeenth-century American Puritans. A special form of sermon, subsequently titled "the Jeremiad" by the Harvard scholar, Perry Miller, became a weekly occurrence. It was a pessimistic listing of the sins of the era, the lack of spiritual concern by young people, a failure of people to "affirm the covenant" and join the church, the warnings of God against broken covenants, and the promise of forthcoming judgment. This same outline was used for thirty years by almost every preacher in New England who ever printed his Sunday sermon. I can attest to the fact that after eight hours a day of reading these sermons, and certainly after two weeks, a rational person can become so saturated with these polemical exercises that he

wonders how any congregation could have put up with it. The result, finally, was the Great Awakening, with its "roll them in aisle" preaching, wandering preachers, and emotionalism (which soon cooled to cynicism). The preaching of inevitable doom finally doomed those who clung to an artificial, overworked sermon outline.

Today, the churches are facing a serious problem. It is not easy to keep people interested forever in the same old outlines, unless the preacher is enormously talented and/or entertaining. The narrow focus of theological concerns paralyzes the spiritual maturity process that ought to accompany orthodox preaching. We are fed forever on spiritual milk, and skim milk at that. The results are predictable: cultural irrelevance, political impotence, and economic stagnation.

The Impotence of Pietism

When the orthodox preacher stands in his pulpit and presents a picture of imminent destruction, final judgment, spiritual growth through suffering and defeat, and the hopelessness of the unbelieving world, he is unlikely to have any more local influence than the hand-clapping, shouting, ecstatic Pentecostal pastor is going to have through the effects of his congregation on the community. A retreat can be ecstatic, or it can be somber, but it is still a retreat. The permanent remnant psychology is dominant. The theology of defeat leads to the creation of easily defeated people.

The remnant of the Bible was something far different. It was a group of people who knew that judgment was coming, but that they would eventually return to the land in victory. This is why Jeremiah was instructed by God to buy the field from his relative (Jer. 32; see my essay, "Jeremiah's Job," *The Freeman*, March, 1978). They were not running scared; they were simply rolling with the punches in order to return to fight another day.

Today's preaching is culturally paralyzing. It fails to inform men of their comprehensive responsibility before God to subdue the whole earth to His glory (Gen. 1:28, 9:1-7). It fails to inform men of the promise of victory in this task (Isa. 2, 65, 66). It fails to motivate them, prepare them, or discipline them for dominion. Naturally, those who listen to ABC sermons, even when they are complex, obscure, reference-filled sermons, are unwilling to bear the full responsibilities of leadership. Why should they? They have been told that all such efforts will lead to defeat, even when the preacher in question has bothered to mention the existence of such responsibilities (and modern pietism denies even this.) The preaching of contemporary orthodoxy cannot hope to be culturally effective if it presents nothing more than revised versions of 300-year-old outlines. Such sermons are little more than museum pieces. Museum-piece preaching will not reverse the drift into chaos.

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