

# BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

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## TITHING AND SUBMISSION

by Gary North

*Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it (Mal. 3:10).*

One storehouse, one tithe: this is the heart of the matter. The day that men multiply storehouses is the day they begin to lose the blessings of God in history. Why? Because the existence of many storehouses reveals that men no longer believe that there is a single, sovereign, God-authorized collector of the tithe. The tithe is broken up into a series of offerings; the offerings become voluntary; and voluntarism transfers sovereignty to the donor: he who pays the piper calls the tune.

Then the tax collector steps in and reimposes compulsion.

### Voluntarism and Sovereignty

The modern church is consistent. It does not preach the mandatory tithe because it does not preach the mandatory law of God. By abandoning five-sixths of the Bible as "God's Word, emeritus," it has cut its own purse strings. When it preaches that God has no legal claims on modern man's institutions, it places itself under another God with another law. God is presented as if He had no legal claims on modern man. "God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life" has been substituted for "God claims you, and has placed you under an eternal bond, which you have broken." The doctrine of a claims-less God has had financial consequences for the churches, just as it does for the people in them who refuse to pay:

Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wage to put it into a bag with holes (Hag. 1:3-6).

This warning is easily dismissed today as "Old Testament stuff." Non-judicial preaching has regarded the church as a voluntary institution, contractual rather than covenantal. Such preaching treats the communion table just as it treats the law: an occasional ritual for remembrance's sake alone. The church is barely distinguishable theoretically from a non-profit social club, and very often in fact. There is no sense of the judicial presence of God anywhere in modern church liturgy. Men may sing, "All hail the power of Jesus' name; let angels prostrate fall," but neither angels nor the power of Jesus' name are taken seriously. At best, such events are seen as non-historical; at worst, mythical.

The church sets the pattern for the world. This, too, is not believed by the modern church. We find that there is

no sense of the judicial presence of God in the civil courtroom, the voting booth, and on inauguration day. The following phrases are mere formalities: "SO help me, God" (courtroom oath), "In God we trust" (slogan on U.S. money), and "God bless you all" (tagged onto the end of televised speeches by American Presidents). Government is seen as strictly voluntaristic. It is a matter of mere convention. This is the triumph of philosophical nominalism: Occam's famous razor has been used to shave God out of history.<sup>1</sup> That was its purpose from the beginning.

### The Marks of Sovereignty: Oath and Sanctions

The presence of a self-maledictory oath is the mark of covenantal sovereignty. Only three institutions lawfully can require such an oath: church, state, and family. Such an oath implicitly or explicitly calls down God's negative sanctions on the person who breaks the conditions of the oath. These sanctions are historical, although few Christians believe this, despite Paul's warning:

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

Self-judgment, institutional judgment, and then God's judgment: all take place in history. But the modern church has grave doubts about this idea of God's negative sanctions in history. It therefore does not expect to experience God's promised positive sanctions in history. The next step is obvious: to lose faith in meaningful historical progress. Here is the origin of pessimism's lack of confidence in the work of the church, the effects of the gospel, and the future of Christianity.

Without the oath and its associated sanctions, the church is not legally distinguishable from any other oathless institution. Furthermore, the oath that creates a new family is taken no more seriously than an oath of church membership. So, only one oath-bound institution remains that is still taken seriously, because of the sanctions at-

1. William of Occam, the fourteenth-century philosopher, promoted the idea that there are no metaphysical Greek forms undergirding reality. We name things by convention and reason. Reality is individualistic, neither corporate nor covenantal. This became the philosophical foundation for the modern contractual theory of government. His famous "razor" was the proposition that the simplest explanation of any phenomena is the best.

tached to the oath: the **state**. The rise of statism is always accompanied by a decline of the church and the decline of the family.

Which oath is supposed to be central in society? The church's oath. Why? Because only the church survives the final judgment. It alone extends into eternity. It is the church that alone has been assigned the task of baptizing whole nations in Christ's name (Matt.28:18-20).

Today, this view of the centrality of the church is not taken seriously. Liberals affirm the centrality of the state. Conservatives affirm the centrality of the family. Both views are at war against the plain teaching of Jesus.

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Matt.10:28-37).

### Family Values and God's Sanctions

"Family values." Everywhere we turn, we hear conservatives proclaiming family values. Whole mailing list empires are built on family values. Politicians are supposed to profess family values, and all of them do.

But a question arises: Which kind of family values? How about Islam's family values? How about defending chastity the Islamic way? The family gets together and executes the unmarried daughter after she has delivered the baby. Not the right approach? But these are surely family values. Are you against family values?

We are all for family values. No doubt about it. Show me the politician who stands up and says: "Basically, I'm all for adultery and abortion." Not many, right? But how do they vote? How do they live their lives? Like people who are unafraid of God's negative sanctions in history. And why shouldn't they be? The church teaches that there are no such historical sanctions.

So, we have this equation: original sin – (God's historical sanctions + God's common grace)= modern jurisprudence. All the weeping and wailing and direct mail solicitations about family values will change nothing until Christians at last admit that their view of God's historical sanctions is the same as covenant-breaking, late-twentieth-century humanist man's is. The argument is over the degree to which the state's negative sanctions will deviate from the Old Testament%. In a society governed by unsaved men, we know what the legislated civil sanctions will be: minimal. No-fault divorce, no-fault abortion, and no-fault adultery are fundamental tenets of belief on Wall Street, Main Street, and Capitol Hill. 1) "If it feels good, do it." 2) "if it leads to morning sickness, kill it."

Then there are the economic considerations. 1) "If it ever gets born, you must pay for it." 2) "If you can't pay for it, the government will." Therefore, "Balance the family budget: kill the unborn" soon becomes, "Balance the Federal budget: kill the unborn."

The covenant-breaking state and the covenant-break-

ing family are common allies against the church whenever the church preaches God's law to them. But the church no longer preaches God's law. So the covenant-breaking state and the covenant-breaking family can safely ignore the covenant-ignoring church.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt.5:19).

### He Who Holds the Hammer Calls the Tune

Neither the mandatory tithe nor God's negative sanctions in history: here is the message of the modern church. No mandatory tithe, no positive sanctions in history: here is the economic result of such preaching. Because the church will not impose negative sanctions against members who refuse to tithe – the loss of voting membership – it finds itself incapable of bringing a crucial positive sanction in society: charity. The churches are hard-pressed to buy a debt-encumbered piece of land, build a debt-encumbered building, and pay a debt-encumbered pastor. The moment they pay off one building, they build another building. They seem to have an edifice complex. What they do not have is a "helps" ministry.

There is a legitimate division of labor in society. There are many things that the church cannot do well – running a Christian school, grades K-12, comes to mind, or running a crisis pregnancy center, or running a drug-rehabilitation center (a basic need in any society where the state runs the schools, grades K-12). The church should support Christian agencies that can do these things well. These agencies, to the extent that they are dependent on the money provided by the churches, will reflect the standards of the churches. Why? Because of the fear of negative sanctions: the refusal to write future checks.

Churches today write checks mainly to bankers. The bankers have the negative sanction: no payment, no church building. They, not the churches, "hold the hammer." Then the local government finds that it can disrupt the flow of funds by revoking a church's property tax exemption. There are now two hammers. Then the Federal government threatens to revoke a church's tax-deduction status. There are now three hammers.

Where is the churches' hammer? In heaven. But the churches insist that God does not bring negative sanctions in history. His hammer is exclusively non-historical. In short, the church offers no threat of a hammer in a world that does not acknowledge God or eternity. Or, as a pair of famous political theorists has put it:

And Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go (Ex.5:2).

Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands? (Dan. 3:15)

He who holds the largest hammer gets paid first. The church preaches that it holds no hammer at all. The church therefore gets the leftovers: after personal and family taxes; after personal and family debt payments; and after food, clothing, college expenses, and entertainment.

### If Not Tithes, Then Offerings

The church, burdened with debt, devoid of meaningful sanctions, comes to its members and pleads: "Do what

the Spirit leads you to do." But what the Spirit apparently leads them to do is less – far, far less – than He required from God's Old Covenant people. There is no American Protestant denomination in America that collects anything approaching half a tithe from its members.

The Old Covenant people were spiritual children, we are assured. This is why God gave them many laws. He told them what to do. But we are adults. No one tells us what to do (not counting the state, of course). So, we must respond as adults do. We must sacrifice. That we sacrifice at less than half the required rate of sacrifice of Old Covenant children is beside the point. After all, they were a rural, tribal people. We are urban globalists, about to enter a glorious New World Order. Should we expect the laws of such a primitive people to serve us well today? Of course not. We're all adults here.

Ten percent of our income? Primitive! Barbaric! Childish!

What then? Not tithes and offerings. Just offerings. The limit of these offerings is exclusively our decision. So is the recipient. Sovereignty belongs to us. We the people impose the sanctions around here (not counting the state, of course). We the people giveth, and we also taketh away. Blessed be the "name of the people. We administer the oath. We baptize the church. Shape up, church!

So the church's officers come before the people as representatives of the people. They beg in the name of God, and collect checks in the name of the people. They are then sent back to God, offerings in hand. There is hierarchy here: the people tell the church, as God's agent, what they are willing to pay.

Modern Christians come before God and remind Him: "Not a cent more, mind You! You should be grateful for whatever You get. Don't pull any of that fire and brimstone rhetoric on us! That's Old Testament stuff. We don't take kindly to it. We can walk across the street and join another church, you know. It needs our money. It will be glad to get us. This is a buyers' market, Old Fellow. We can shop around. This is a free market system. We are price sensitive. We'll take the best package deal offered by one of Your churches. There are so few of us these days It's a declining market. This makes us valued customers."

(People ask me: What does it matter what eschatology a person holds? I will tell you. Postmillennialists are not persuaded that the present "down market" in converts is permanent; pessimillennialists are persuaded. This means that their eschatology reinforces "buyers' market" concept. It affects their churches' discipline: gutting it.)

There was a time, three centuries ago, when Christians believed that there are only three ways out of the church: death, excommunication, and letter of transfer. They no longer do. Excommunication is old fashioned. Barbaric, even. Letters of transfer only carry weight when receiving churches sanction them, rejecting the "immigrants," if only for the sake of creating respect for their own letters of transfer. But in a buyers' market for voluntary donations, churches are not choosy. Beggars can't be choosers.

The churches no longer hold the hammer. They dropped it over a century ago. Why? Because they adopted the philosophy of nominalism: a world of competitive contracts, not binding covenants. When communion became a memorial, the church covenant became a contract. When weekly communion went to monthly communion, and monthly communion went to quarterly communion, the tithes became offerings. When the principle of the tithe was abandoned by the church, it was adopted by the state and multiplied four-fold. The state picked up the hammer and started swinging.

### A Soup Kitchen for Beggars

The modern Christian regards himself as the adminis-

trator of God's soup kitchen. It is mighty thin soup, too. Each month, the ragged beggars line up. As they come through the line, they hold out their bowls, and the man with the ladle doles it out to them from the big pot, one by one. The beggar mumbles his thanks, and the master of the ladle says, "Bless you, my son." Or maybe he just says, "All right, let's keep it moving!"

But eventually one of them comes back. He holds out his bowl. "Please, sir, may I have some more?" Every eye in the room is on him.

This is the moment of truth. If he is sent back in derision, the line remains orderly. But if the ladle master is compassionate that day and spoons out another ladle full of soup, he will be in for a hard time. Every beggar in the room will make a rush for the pot. They all want some more. Lots more. More than any pot can hold.

The administrator now has to make some rules. If the allocation system is not the familiar "first come, first served, once," then what will it be? The most touching story? The comparative thinness of the beggar? The loudest shout? The grayest beard? Whatever it is, the beggars will learn and adopt appropriate responses. "You want a sad story? Wait until you hear this!" And so on.

### Stories in Your Mailbox

If the church is not based on a covenant, then it is just one more competitor for your funds. Once it acknowledges this by preaching voluntary offerings rather than the compulsory tithe, your mailbox is going to fill up. The stories you will be told! You like starving children? You will have a photo of one below the letterhead, and a brochure full of photos in the envelope. You like scare stories? A thrill a minute? A bureaucratic outrage for breakfast and two Constitutional violations for lunch? They are as good as committed! How about a ministry deeply in debt, with you - yes, indispensable you - as the last barrier between that poor girl tied to the rails and the train? Why, I can hear the train whistle now, can't you? This is an emergency!

And what better way to demonstrate this than to send a letter disguised as a telegram? Organization X did:

I HAVE JUST RECEIVED A CRITICAL REPORT ON [ X ]'S FINANCIAL STATUS. [ X ] NOW FACES A MAJOR OPERATING DEFICIT OF \$287,000.

WITH APPROACH OF YEAR END, AM DEEPLY CONCERNED. AM COMPELLED TO RUSH YOU THIS URGENT MESSAGE. MUST SHARE NEED WITH YOU.

At first, I regarded this language as imitation "telegraphese." But then I had a flash of insight! It may be imitation Sioux-American. I am tempted to write back:

BAD NEWS. HEAP BIG OPERATING DEFICIT HERE, TOO. NO WAMPUM LEFT. GREAT WHITE FATHER IN WASHINGTON SEND BLUE COATS. TAKE WAMPUM. TAKE BUFFALO JERKY. TAKE FIREWOOD. LEAVE ONLY DRIED BUFFALO CHIPS. FREEZING MY TAIL FEATHERS OFF. I USE TELEGRAM FROM YOU TO START FIRE OF BUFFALO CHIPS. SMOKE NOW FILL TEEPEE. SMELL REAL BAD. NEVER HAD TROUBLE WITH BUFFALO CHIPS BEFORE. MAYBE PROBLEM WITH TELEGRAM. TAKE NAME OFF MAILING LIST TILL YOU USE BETTER BRAND OF PAPER.

You know what a \$287,000 deficit means? It means the outfit did not budget properly. It means that its director violated the warning of Luke 14:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it

begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish (Luke 14:28-30).

But isn't it possible to make a mistake under pressure? Of course. But this outfit sends out one of these letters every month. My parents are on the list, but they stopped giving last year. Too many appeals. I have spoken with other conservative Christian activists, and they have told me the same thing. It is an endless stream of appeals, horror stories, and scare tactics.

Why? The person who heads it is neither incompetent nor immoral. Yet the appeals are all hype, and have been for the last two years. What went wrong?

There was a transfer of sovereignty: from the visionary who heads it to the fund-raising technicians who write the letters. Again and again, this has been the fate of the large parachurch ministries. The "pushers" take over, and once they do, the ministry is doomed unless they are all fired. This seldom happens in time.

### The Making of an Addict

I have a home study course by the man who pioneered these letters in the 1970s. He has lots of samples of his work, and some very big evangelical have their names on the letterheads. Step by step, he shows you how to write the hype. I won't do it.

These techniques work, but only for a while. Here is how it works. The dedicated visionary signs the first appeal letter, and a mountain of money rolls in. Fantastic! Think of the goals that can be attained now. Why, we can do so much more!

The vision expands (the dominion impulse), new commitments are made, new staff is hired, and the money starts running out. What to do? Another letter. More money, more mailings, and more goals. The mailing list expands. The "free" literature goes out. The deficit grows. More appeals. More horror stories. More new projects to get donors excited about.

And then, finally, the day of reckoning. A mailing piece doesn't work. The follow-up fails. Staff must be laid off. The visionary's reputation is on the line. Disappointment. Desperation. Maybe even bankruptcy – called a victory, of course. (Where is the Moral Majority today? Where is Oral Roberts' medical school? His law school?)

Why? Addiction. The experts who get hired to raise the funds know the techniques. The techniques are designed to hook the organization. Like the junkie who needs more doses to keep himself going, and who no longer gets the original "rush," so is the non-profit organization that hires its first specialist in direct mail techniques. Like the organic farmer who uses chemical sprays "just this once" to keep away this season's pests, so is the Christian parachurch ministry that hires professionals to tell a more impressive story each month than the local church can come up with.

Once is never enough. The pushers know this when they offer the first one free of charge. "Wait until you see what we can do for you!"

The pushers steadily take over the ministry. This is a subtle process. It takes time. They become the lifeline to

the source of the funds. Once they addict the ministry to Big Things, it takes Big Injections to keep it going. Once the staff is hired to meet the initial level of donations, the deal is done. The debt addiction is established. One more project! One more victory! One more appeal! Three more full-time experts! Radio! Television! A magazine!

And then the first mailing piece fails. And the second. The organization suffers withdrawal symptoms.

HAVE ALREADY REDUCED [ X ] STAFF BY 10 PERCENT. . . .

PLEASE STAND WITH ME. ASK THAT YOU ACT QUICKLY. . . .

NO TIME TO LOSE.

PLEASE SEND YOUR MAXIMUM CONTRIBUTION BY OCTOBER 31.

October 31: Halloween Day! Trick or treat, Christians. Fail to send money, and the goblins will get you: "MADALYN MURRAY O'HAIR . . . A.C.L.U. . . . SEN. TED KENNEDY."

### Conclusion

It is tragic when this happens, but it is the inevitable price for any ministry that sees itself doing work on so large a scale that only a cooperative church effort could accomplish it. Yes, the churches have defaulted, so these parachurch ministries try to fill the gap. They can't, of course, but they try. Then the hype escalates, the mailings multiply, and the fiscal crisis hits. Add to this a major recession, and you can see what is coming: another giant ministry on its back. We know what will happen next: "All that behold it begin to mock him [or her], Saying, This man [or woman] began to build, and was not able to finish."

We must go back to the fundamental principle: God's work done in God's way. The problem is, without the law of God, we cannot know what God's way is. So the church - locks itself inside its cloister, and the parachurch ministries rise up to fill the gap. The result will be another defeat for Christianity.

We must get it clear: there is no **substitute** for the church. When it fails, Christianity suffers a body blow. No parachurch ministry can do the work of the church unless it is supported by the churches and is authorized by churches. Parachurch ministries should be supported by donations from churches and offerings from Christians. The day one of them adopts the techniques of political direct mail to get tithe-sized donations is the day God begins to shut it down. And so I say:

CUT YOUR STAFF ANOTHER 10 PERCENT. BEGIN WITH THE DIRECT MAIL STAFF. THEN GET MORE CHURCHES INVOLVED. LOWER YOUR GOALS. DON'T BITE OFF MORE THAN YOU CAN CHEW WITH LOW-HYPE OFFERINGS FROM SUPPORTERS. SEND PLEAS FOR MONEY FOR ONE PROJECT AT A TIME, AND DON'T START ANOTHER PROJECT UNTIL THE LAST ONE IS FINISHED. UNTIL THEN, TAKE MY NAME OFF YOUR MAILING LIST.

I hold the hammer: No more checks.