

# TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

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## THE COMING CRISIS FOR THE DIACONATE

by Gary North

I have been active in the "hard money" circles from the beginning. I predicted the disappearance of silver coins in June of 1963. I recommended the purchase of gold American coins in 1964. I predicted Nixon's price controls in January, 1971, seven months before he imposed them. In short, I have been in the thick of the "doom and gloom" forecasters for over 15 years. People who took my advice have made a good chunk of money.

Since the mid 1960's, there has been an escalation of crises in both the domestic and world economies. The crisis of the dollar in the summer of 1978 is only the latest of these crises, and it will not be the last. It should be quite obvious to any thinking person that our economy is headed for greater trouble in the future, as price inflation accelerates beyond the present grim rate of 10% per annum. Unemployment, price controls, shortages, and the breakdown of our monetary unit are all easily predictable. Or at least I think they are.

It should be pointed out from the beginning that my views are not shared by conventional investment advisors, editors of major newspapers and magazines, Presidential advisors, or the vast majority of seminary professors and Christian college instructors in the United States. I am not in the least concerned about the failure of the secular media to agree with me. I am concerned about the lack of concern — indeed, outright ridicule of my predictions — by the tenured, salaried, and (they incorrectly hope) pensioned academics on Christian campuses.

The reason I am concerned has very little to do with them personally. If they wish to bury their heads in pietistic sand, that's their business. But I am very worried about the lack of understanding on the part of their students. These students will be the leaders of the conservative churches in a few years, and their lack of practical training — including practical theology — is guaranteed to leave them stranded when the crises really hit the institutional church. The big crises lie ahead.

It is no accident that antinomian pietism and economic ignorance have gone hand in hand in the Christian classrooms of the country. After all, if a man does not believe in the binding nature of the laws of the Bible, then he will have little incentive to study them carefully, and no incentive to apply them in contemporary circumstances. Failing to take seriously the concept of binding biblical law, the antinomian pietists in the classroom have also failed to take seriously the concept of binding economic law. Economics is all random, as far as they are concerned — an aspect of the *adiaphora* (indifferent things).

Let me be specific. Seminary students are seldom informed by their instructors that they need not (and should riot) belong to the Social Security system. Most of the faculty members belong themselves. If you are under Social Security for over 24 months after ordination, you no longer have the right to pull out. Does anyone sound the warning on campus? Do faculty members counsel with students, telling them of their legal and moral obligation not to join — not to mention the sound economic reasons for staying out? You be the judge.

### The Shortage Economy

The Mormons require every family to have a year's supply of dehydrated food for each member of the family, and Mormons have large famines. At close to \$1,000 per person, this is a sizable family investment. Nevertheless, since April of 1977, it has been made mandatory. This is the minimum preparation advised by the church's leadership. They also strongly recommend clothing, water storage, and other tools of self-sufficiency. They do not have their members go on government welfare. They maintain church-operated farms, where unemployed members can seek employment, and which turn a profit. They have always paid taxes on their profit-seeking activities.

In a crisis, especially a food-related crisis, the Mormons will be in a position to exercise leadership in their communities. Their people will not become burdens to other taxpayers. They may have extra food to share. If we have learned any rule of politics over the last 6,000 years, it is this: one power flows in a time of crisis to those who voluntarily bear responsibility.

Given this basic political fact, it should be obvious that Protestant churches ought to be actively imitating the survival programs that the Mormons have required of their members. If Protestants expect to compete for leadership with Mormons or other future-oriented organizations (including underworld organizations), they have to begin to alert their members of the grim reality of price inflation, price controls, and shortages. The shortages of goods and services will grind the economy down when full-scale price controls are imposed and enforced. Controls play havoc with food supplies.

Over three decades ago, E. Parmelee Prentice wrote *Hunger and History*. This extremely important book, now out of print, demonstrates the impact of food shortages on society over man's history. Prentice concluded that the great enemies of productive agriculture in history have been

socialized land policies, unstable currencies, and price controls. Without exception, these policies have disrupted the supply of food in urban areas. Yet it should be obvious to anyone except a tenured professor that these three policies are in effect all over the world today. Remember, there are only three grain-exporting nations remaining in the 1970's: the United States, Canada, and Australia. Socialism, inflation, and controls are rapidly overtaking all three of these societies. We can expect food shortages on an international scale sometime in the 1980's.

These possibilities should be of great concern to every deacon in the nation. An extraordinary burden will be placed upon diaconates when the crises escalate. Fixed-income church members, including the pensioned pietists who ridicule prophecies of impending judgment, will find their monthly checks buying less and less. Those widows who have been bamboozled by the seminaries, colleges, and churches to sign up for church-sponsored annuity programs, thereby becoming usurers, will find themselves under full judgment for their disregard of sound economics and biblical law. They will throw themselves on the mercy of the diaconates throughout the country. Urban diaconates will not be able to solve the problems, or at least not the crucial problems, merely by passing out some additional fiat dollars. The problem faced by these people will be a glut of dollars and shortages of necessities. What will the deacons do then?

Is anyone even discussing these problems with the deacons of America? Has the pastor sat down with them and outlined what their responsibilities are, what kinds of problems they are likely to face in the future, and what kinds of solutions might be found? Have they been trained? I think most pastors know the answer. The diaconate, as an office, has been ignored for generations.

The deacons of the 1980's and 1990's will very likely face problems as difficult as those faced by deacons of the 1930's. But the problems will be very different. In the 1930's there were goods available but little money. In the coming decades, there will be money available but few goods, at least not on the legal, official, government-policed markets.

Urban diaconates will feel the pinch far more tightly. Rural churches will have access to garden crops, if nothing else. Barter in rural areas is easier than in the highly specialized production environment of the cities. So rural diaconates will be asked by urban ones for aid. Hierarchical denominations may be able to handle this problem better than independent churches. Independent churches in urban areas had better see to it, in advance, that they are on good working terms with churches in rural areas. Their survival may depend upon them.

## A Training Program

One thing is certain: the denominations, consociations, and church magazines are going to systematically ignore problems like these until the crisis is literally upon them. They will proceed as before, ignoring the external realm of economics, not to mention politics, until the modern political economy comes down around their ears. Whatever is going to be accomplished will be accomplished in advance only by scattered local congregations, possibly in communication with other like-minded congregations. Forget about getting the hierarchy interested. Forget about a symposium on the impending crisis at the next General Assembly meeting. If you get such a meeting, regard it as a miracle in our day. It will take a miracle to get an entire denomination to take effective actions in advance. After all, the Mormons have been told for generations to store up food, yet it was only a year and a half ago that the leadership made food storage absolutely mandatory. They had been educating their members for many years prior to the formal announcement.

What we need, then, is a program of training for local diaconates to be followed by training programs for the local congregations. It will not be easy. It will involve a rethinking of the modern diaconate. It will involve a restructuring of church priorities. It will unquestionably involve systematic (non-monetary) savings programs on the part of church members, and there are a lot of members who have never saved anything except Blue Chip Stamps. Saving, like tithing, is the product of habit. It involves a future-oriented perspective. It involves the concept of personal responsibility. It also involves effort and self-discipline. Effort and self-discipline have not been marks of our generation.

I have decided to produce a series of tapes that will provide concrete guidance to local diaconates. They will be produced by I. C. E. and distributed by the Mt. Olive Presbyterian Church Tape Ministry (Box 142, Bassfield, MS 39421). I will announce the availability of these tapes when they are ready. I also intend to write and publish *The Deacon's Handbook*, a paperback introduction to the theology, history, and purpose of the diaconate, along with sections dealing with the most likely burdens that deacons will face over the next two decades. The book will be a development of the tapes.

To assist me in the preparation of the tapes and the book, interested pastors and deacons should send me suggestions concerning 1) useful sources (if any) on the nature of the diaconate, 2) problems faced in the past economic crises by deacons, and hopefully some solutions; 3) problems faced today, and possible solutions; and 4) topics that ought to be treated by the tapes and book. What questions need to be answered first? Mail all suggestions to:

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