

TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

Institute for Christian Economics 1979

Vol. II, No. 3

May/June, 1979

WILTING LILIES OF THE CHURCH

by Gary North

Back in 1963, Sidney Poitier starred in a delightful film, "Lilies of the Field," in which he portrayed William Smith, an itinerant Jack-of-all-trades who was charmed by a Mother Superior into building a chapel, free of charge. He kept reminding her of the biblical principle that the laborer is worthy of his hire (Luke 10:7), while she kept reminding him that God takes care of His people: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith" (Matt. 6:28-30)? Was he, William Smith, of so little faith? So Smith stayed on and completed the chapel. He was never paid, except with the warm glow generated, internally and externally, from his work.

What a wonderful story! It won Poitier the Academy Award that year. But one thing is certain: Poitier didn't work on the film for free. I'm willing to bet that his fees didn't go down the following year, either. Actors are Luke 10:7 men, not Matthew 6:28-30 men. Most of us are, when it comes right down to it.

How Much Faith

Are we therefore of little faith? Should Smith have been paid? It depends. Charity is a fine thing. That's what the Mother Superior wanted: Smith's skills, donated voluntarily. That's what she received. But Smith had a good point: he was entitled to his pay. But he was also entitled to walk away from the job. He decided to become a charitable donor. Either approach is all right. In any case, Smith could always get in his car and drive away to seek out more remunerative employment. He was not tied to an ecclesiastical calling. He was not a "full-time Christian servant," to use the language of twentieth-century fundamentalism.

The reason why most of us can exercise charity is because we are gainfully employed. In other words, it is the willingness of employers to heed the words of Christ concerning the laborer's value in the market which in turn enables the workers to give a portion of their income away. It is not that a man who asks to be paid for services rendered to a church is a man of little faith. The context of the

"lilies" passage is fear of the future. Christ warned us not to worry about material wealth. However, this section of the Sermon on the Mount ends with the familiar verses: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow. . ." (Matt. 6:33-34). I use a reference to these verses on the masthead of my investment newsletter, *Remnant Review*. They teach us not to be worried, and to seek God's kingdom first, because these material blessings will eventually come to us. In short, God Himself honors His own principle, namely, that the laborer is worthy of his hire. We shall receive full wages (1 Cor. 3).

It may be, of course, that these wages may not be paid until after this life's work is over. Still, the accounts will be settled. What the disciples had failed to understand fully was this inescapable principle of payment. They did not really have faith in God's promise of full payment for services rendered. And the reason why this payment can be relied on is that Christ, living a perfect life, demonstrated His complete faithfulness to God's law (Matt. 5:17-18), and was resurrected by God as the firstfruits testifying to God's faithfulness to His principle of full payment to Christ and Christ's disciples (1 Cor. 15:20-23). The meaning of "ye of little faith" is that men have little faith in a God who will keep honest accounts and pay His servants in terms of them.

Hiring an Elder

1 Timothy 5:17-18 reads: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward." The language could hardly be plainer. All effective ruling elders should receive payment for their services, not just pastors. Those who preach and teach are especially deserving of pay, but not only them. The church which systematically ignores Paul's explicit language is a church which will be marked by ineffective ruling elders. The laborer is worthy of his hire. If a church relies on long-term donated labor – the perpetual services of a theologically competent William Smith – it will find that its lilies of the field have shriveled up.

The reasons why we neglect 1 Timothy 5:17 are many. First, we do not really think elders are important. They are figureheads who rubber stamp a pastor's decision. So why pay any of them? They don't make any difference. Our pay to them reflects this. Second, we don't think being a successful elder takes much time. Whatever time it takes from other pursuits — work, leisure, hobbies — is both minimal and unimportant. An important man's spare time is precious to him. He may be willing to tithe his monetary income, but not his most precious resource, leisure. So we recruit our elders from the ranks of the less busy men. The busy man knows instinctively that the modern eldership is impotent and relatively unimportant, since elders command no price. It's not that the job of elder is "priceless"; rather, the job is simply cheap. Who needs it? Third, we pay our pastors little. If pastors are worth very little, then how much use is an elder? Obviously, not much. So we are unable to convince men that it is a true mark of distinction to serve as an elder. Fourth, churches are afraid to impose punishments, which are perhaps the most painful, costly, and avoided aspect of serving as a ruling elder. Yet it is the heart of the office (1 Cor. 6). Since those being charged with misconduct can simply quit and transfer to the wide-open fundamentalist, antinomian, or liberal church across the street or town, the threat of disciplinary action is not very great. So much for effective rulers. They get paid precisely what modern Christians think the office is worth: nothing. Even those taking special care, or serving extra hours, or making difficult decisions, receive the same pay as the part-time or inactive elders: nothing.

If, through some action of the Holy Spirit in our day, the modern churches should start paying their most effective elders, what rate of pay should they adopt? Are there any guidelines? We tell unregenerate men that "the Bible has the answers," but do we believe it? Do we believe that the Bible has specific guidelines for even the most ecclesiastical of questions (let alone "secular" questions), namely, a biblically proper pay scale for elders? Or do we just "get the feeling" about pay scales? You know, the way we "get the feeling" about how much to donate to Christian charities. The way we "get the feeling" about the criteria for serving as an elder. Or, more interesting, is the eldership governed by a free market? Are we bidding for men's services in the same way General Motors bids for labor against Ford and Chrysler? (I know of one Midwestern Reformed denomination in which you would certainly think so. The denominational college radicalizes so many of the young men who go there that by the time they are seminary graduates, they are far more liberal than the predominantly rural church members, so the few conservatives getting ordained are "hot properties" indeed. So fierce is the competition for them that the denomination had to pass a rule: no church can bid for a pastor's services until he has spent

at least 12 months in his new pastorate. It's a sight to see!

The One Percent Rule

Those who deny the continuing authority of Old Testament law are frequently — indeed, usually — highly reliant on feeling. "Whatever the Lord leads," meaning however they feel at the moment, is good enough for them. And where it comes to money, the Lord is content with less than the tithe. The God of the New Testament has apparently "gone soft" on money matters compared to the way He treated His saints in the Old Testament era.

For those who take the whole counsel of God seriously, the rule of pastoral compensation is clear: a minimum of one percent of the after-tax income of the members of the church. "Thus speak unto the Levites, and say unto them, When ye take of the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then ye shall offer up an heave offering of it for the Lord, even a tenth part of the tithe. And this your heave offering shall be reckoned unto you. . . . And ye shall eat it in every place, ye and your households: for it is your reward for your service in the tabernacle of the congregation" (Num. 18:26, 27a, 31). The ministerial priesthood was guaranteed this minimum income. It was to be used to support their families. It was their equivalent of produce on the floor of the threshing room (Num. 18:27 b).

If a congregation has 200 families earning \$15,000 each, the total income after taxes is in the range of \$2.5 million. The pastor and the truly busy elders are therefore entitled to a total budget of at least \$25,000 for salaries. Pastors spend more of their time in service and deserve the larger portion, but the Bible insists that they do not deserve all of it. Larger, richer churches should hire more pastors to establish new congregations. Missionaries are also included in this one percent rule. Voluntary offerings can legitimately increase their pay, but they are guaranteed one percent, denomination-wide, if necessary. Within the confines of total denominational income (one percent of all members' income), "supply and demand" and "feelings" can rule — so much for this missionary, so much for this elder, etc. But a basic income floor for the eldership is assured. This would include a housing allowance, should the local church segregate the accounts in such a manner.

There is therefore a relationship between success and managerial responsibility on the one hand (large, complex church membership) and growing income to the elders (managers). Incentives for success are valid, both for increasing church membership and instruction in personal family finance (to get increases in members' income). Elders should encourage growth of both kinds, for they benefit financially from such growth. The successful laborer is worthy of his hire.