

TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1980

Vol. III, No. 2

March/April, 1980

WHO SHOULD SACRIFICE?

by Gary North

The Double Honor

One problem which will forever plague pastors is that they are invested with a specifically priestly office, yet they are unquestionably part of a competitive labor market. Their inevitable problem is the issue of pricing their labor services. Which market is determinative, the priestly market or the labor market?

Whenever a person engages in the sale of labor services that are related to issues of life, health, death, and sorrow, then the seller faces moral obligations and decisions that are fundamentally different from those faced by most sellers of labor services. Should a physician charge "all the traffic will bear" when he asks a hemorrhaging patient how much he is willing to pay to have the physician stop the bleeding? Should a man have to redeem his very life with his whole fortune? The honor code taken by physicians throughout the West would not permit such pricing. The code is supposed to restrain physicians in their professional dealings. The code, however, is not explicit about what is a fair price, nor has any ethically based code of any semi-priestly profession ever established price guidelines that have stood the test of time. The physician's conscience is supposed to govern the transaction. His peers reserve the right to review his actions, however.

The same sorts of pricing problems face the minister of the gospel. Should he demand a salary comparable to that commanded by comparably trained professionals? Should he be paid in terms of the size of the congregation, or the wealth of its members? Should he be given a raise because he has successfully watered down the creedal commitment of his preaching thereby filling up the pews? Should he be given a raise at the birth of each child, irrespective of his success as a preacher? What standard should prevail, that of market competition or something else?

If the answer is unclear, it is because the criteria for payment applicable to other occupations do not easily apply to the minister. The gospel is geared to the whole of humanity. The free offer of the gospel is to be made to all men, not just the wealthy. Therefore, the minister is not to concentrate his attention solely on the potential economic pay-off of his preaching. The salesman realizes that his time is limited, and he has to husband it wisely. He has to sell to the hottest prospects in order to get the highest return on his invested time and capital. The minister also husbands his time, but not in terms of an exclusively financial pay-off. He deals with those most likely to be responsive to the gospel, but he is not supposed to allocate his time in terms of the income level of the potential converts. He is forbidden to cater to the pride of the wealthy church member at the expense of the self-respect of the poorer members. (James 22-4).

The minister of the gospel is therefore judged by standards other than a financial profit-and-loss sheet. But if he is not governed in terms of profit and loss, then what criteria may he legitimately use in establishing his income level? If not the free market's price competition, then what?

"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" (1 Tim. 5:17-18). These words of Paul have been quoted again and again, but one wonders if many commentators and Bible quoters really grasp the implications of this passage.

First, Paul defends his call for higher wages for elders by means of a direct appeal to Old Testament law, specifically, Deuteronomy 25:4. The ox must not be muzzled as he works in the field. First, this means that oxen should not be muzzled in the field. We tend to forget this. If the general conclusion is lawful—a laborer is worthy of his reward—then the specific case-law application is still binding. We do not honor the general principle by neglecting the specific case law. Second, the elder is deserving of his reward because he is in a labor market, though not the profit-and-loss market of the competitive business. There is a market for his labor, whether ecclesiastical or secular. His labor has value. He faces losses from another occupation's income potential when he chooses to serve in the ministry. The economists would say that there are alternative uses for his labor, and therefore he faces alternative costs—the income he does not receive from one ceiling when he chooses another.

Not all ministers face the same alternative costs. One man may be incompetent in the very highly paid professions, yet very good in the pulpit or counselling room. Another may have the potential for managing a large corporation, but he chooses instead to shepherd a congregation. The church is unable to pay the potential corporate manager the wage offered to him by the corporation, yet it would also be immoral for the church to pay the first minister the wages of an unskilled laborer, simply because his skills are not immediately salable on the private, competitive market. What, then, should it pay?

One reasonable application of the criteria outlined by Paul would be for the members of the congregation to decide what it would cost them, as individuals, to hire another pastor of comparable skills. What is the market for pastors? I know of one denomination that prohibits churches from pursuing any man who has not been in his new pastorate for at least a year, so ferocious is the wage bidding for conservative preachers within this theologically drifting church. The laymen are more conservative than the pastors, who are radicalized, year by year, by the denomination's church college and affiliated seminary. This church recognizes the nature of the market for pastoral labor, and it seeks to reduce the prices bid by regulating the "auction."

The question of demand brings up the question of supply. How many ministers are available? If there is a glut of candidates, many

of them younger, single, and fresh out of seminary, then older men with large families are at a competitive disadvantage, if price is the primary consideration. However, experience and demonstrated competence in shepherding a flock also count heavily, especially for members of an established congregation. (An "established congregation" could probably be defined as one with enough members to have enabled it to get deeply into debt on a church building.) So what we find is that younger, less expensive men go to the struggling congregations, and the older men with an established "track record" go to the better financed congregations.

But this still does not deal with the meaning of "double honor." What the text teaches is that elders who are skilled in presenting the gospel, judging men's disputes in terms of the word of God, and keeping the whole counsel of God before the people, are to be paid in terms of their honored position. Any paycheck which does not do honor to that pastor—which embarrasses him in the congregation, which forces him to live in terms of an income markedly below the average income of the congregation—is unlawful. It violates Paul's words. If the congregation is large and made up of upper middle-class people, and a pastor is meeting their spiritual needs, enabling them to maintain their high income without needless guilt, or disastrous family crises, or the other afflictions of the ungodly, then that pastor should be paid better than the average member. On the other hand, if his congregation is small and struggling, and the members are poor, he cannot expect to be paid as well as his colleague who pastors the richer church. He should nevertheless be paid better than the average member of his local congregation is paid.

The pastor whose congregation is so tiny that the tithes of the members cannot bring his income to the level of the above-average member faces a real problem. He is a legitimate candidate for temporary support by other churches. He should not be guaranteed a lifetime income by the board of home missions just because he once went to seminary with other members of the "pastoral club," but a few years of support maybe called for. He should not be starved out of the ministry.

At the same time, if he wishes to maintain his independence from the congregation and the bureaucrats (yes, bureaucrats, if the denomination or board is over a decade old and its members receive salaries) in the home missions board, then he should seek outside employment, as Paul did. He must, in effect, subsidize his own place of honor. He must serve the needs of the non-ecclesiastical world by entering the free market's competitive structure. He must gear part of his days to the rigors of profit and loss.

Complaining Congregations

A congregation that complains about the "tentmaking" pastor's lack of extra time to spend on their needs is mocking God. That congregation has to take responsibility for showing the pastor that they can support him. They have to get out and evangelize the neighborhoods. They may have to work extra hours in order to raise the income level of the congregation. They have to find ways to reduce their family expenditures in order to give more to the church. If they are unable to show the pastor double honor in his monthly paycheck, they cannot legitimately complain when he decides to take on employment outside the institutional church.

There is a tendency among Reformed denominations to call upon their pastors to sacrifice. They expect the pastor to tighten their belts, wear hand-me-downs, dress their children in hand-me-

downs, and neglect their children's educations. They treat them like missionaries. (Well, not that bad, but almost.) They want their pastors to be specialists in the division of labor: preaching, teaching, and sacrificing. They, in turn, believe that it is legitimate for them to specialize in their end of the ecclesiastical task: sitting passively, singing a few hymns, and grumbling about how the Baptist church on the corner of the town's main suburban intersection (there is always a Baptist Church there, caty-corner from the Episcopalians) has such a fine youth program. As R. J. Rushdoony has said: "They want their religion, but they want it cheap."

Pastors have operated in terms of this perverse employment market for so long that they have come to accept its terms. They feel guilty about seeking raises. They try to justify their own financial crisis by means of some Protestant version of the monastic vow of poverty. They ask their families to take the same. (The Roman Catholics at least have the good sense to enforce celibacy on their monks, thereby limiting these sacrifices to those with a specific ceiling to a life of sacrifice.)

Medieval Jews, predictably, had more sense. Recognizing the honor of being a rabbi, successful Jewish businessmen would marry off their daughters to them, and encourage the couple to have a large family, thereby increasing the number of better educated Jews in the community. The businessmen wound up with even brighter grandchildren, who could then be trained either for the priesthood or business if they were males, or for marrying rabbis or businessmen if they weren't. They left the "ideology of sacrifice" for the Gentile priests to worry about.

Overcoming Theological Masochism

It is imperative that pastors make their congregations understand that it is God's will that the heathen sacrifice, not the faithful (Deut. 15:6). If the pastor is to sacrifice, then he is not to sacrifice as much as the members of the congregation. If the members are sacrificing, then they will have a financial incentive to work harder to build up the church, and work harder to build up their incomes. The goal of sacrifice is victory. The justification of today's sacrifice is tomorrow's visible, measurable success. One reason why a pastor sacrifices now is that he might share in the prosperity of the whole congregation later.

The pastor who sees his sacrificial lifestyle as a permanent way of life is a masochist. He is sinking in a sea of self-justified failure. Pastors are entitled to a "piece of the action" in their congregations. If their congregations become financially successful, both institutionally and as individuals, then they, too, are to benefit from this success. A businessman who started his career on the assumption that he would be forever sacrificing his present income, having no real possibility of turning his company into a successful operation, would be bankrupt five years later. Why work hard in order to make those around you prosperous, yet never receive the fruits of your labor? Even the oxen could hope for more corn, better corn, and even an occasional apple. Pastors are more than beasts of burden. Or should be.

One further point: a congregation that allows its pastor to adopt a theology of long-term personal sacrifice risks the possibility that his theological masochism may rub off on them. They may wind up as pessimistic about their future as he is about his own. People who expect failure generally see their expectations fulfilled. Their goal should be prosperity for the faithful, especially the full-time elders. Let the heathen worry about sacrificing.

Tentmakers is published six times a year by the Institute for Christian Economics, a tax-exempt religious and educational organization. It is available free of charge to pastors, elders, deacons, and other church officers, as well as to members of Christian religious orders. Subscription requests must be made on church letterhead stationery. Address: P.O. Box 25, Sterling, VA 22170. A tithe or offering on any money saved by these reports would be appropriate.