

# TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1980

Vol. III, No. 4

July/August, 1980.

## CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

by Gary North

The capital asset which is most highly valued in the Bible is godly wisdom. The early chapters of the Book of Proverbs are concerned with this topic, but so are many of the Psalms. Wisdom is worth **sacrificing for**; it is worth giving up present income in order to store up this most crucial of capital assets.

The trouble with accurate knowledge is that it is very expensive, and the more productive a man is, the more expensive it gets. Why should this be? The reason is simple: the most precious original asset a man has is time. He earns other assets, but he begins with time. God gives a man his allotted portion of time, and the man is judged in terms of the success or failure he produces with his time. Redeeming the time is the fundamental Christian occupation. If a man is able to produce a hundred dollars' worth of goods or services per hour, then every hour used for other purposes costs him, and the community, a hundred dollars, less the value of his substitute output. If a man can write an article in a day and earn \$1,000, and he instead repairs a leaky faucet, which would have cost him \$50 to get repaired by a plumber, then he has lost \$950 (\$1,000 minus \$50, excluding tax considerations). This assumes, of course, that he can crank out \$1,000 worth of articles every day of the week, and that the lost income cannot be retrieved by writing the same article the next day, a day which would have been otherwise non-productive.

When anyone develops his talents to the point that he has become a productive member of the community, he finds that his "free" time becomes more precious, precisely because it really isn't free. In fact, of anything he owns, his time is no longer free. A child may have relatively free, meaning inexpensive, time on his hands. He hardly knows what to do with all his spare time. But spare time, or spare anything, is an asset that disappears once the possessor finds ways to put it to profitable, income-producing uses. The day a man finds ways to make money from his spare time is the day he no longer has time to spare. Every minute devoted to television watching is a minute's worth of income forfeited.

### Busy Illiterates

An illiterate is a person who cannot read. What should we call a person who can read but refuses to? I would call him an illiterate. The results are pretty much the same, either way.

Today we find businessmen who cannot find the time to read books. They read the *Wall Street Journal's* headlines. They may read a business magazine and the sports pages of a newspaper. They read business reports from their employers, or from a customer. Perhaps they read a financial newsletter or two. But on the whole, they're stuck. If they don't read, they can only grow or advance along proscribed lines. Not surprisingly, they tend to advance along the lines suggested by their reading. **They advance in those areas where they still continue to read.**

The busy man always places a high premium on his time. Why not? This is his one non-renewable resource. Once an hour is gone,

it's gone forever. So the busy man husbands his time. (Some wives believe that the verb, "to husband," when connected to the noun, "time," means "to take away from wives and give to the National Football League.") He allocates it carefully. He doesn't have any time to waste. Time is money. Wasted time is forfeited money. At some point, he is more willing to waste money than time. He pays retail when, with some extra shopping time, he might have paid only wholesale. He isn't being irrational, either. He selects the resource which is less valuable to him, and he is more careless with the less valuable resource.

What about pastors? They seldom have extra money. At the same time, they seldom have extra time. The pastor, unlike almost all other professionals, is perpetually short of both time and money, from the beginning of his career to the end. He never gets ahead on either resource. This is the nature of pastoral service. The pastor may be laying up treasures in heaven, but he is usually devoid of treasures on earth.

The problem the pastor faces is that it is very difficult for him to put a price tag on his time. His alternative uses for his time are all non-profit. He doesn't ask himself, "How much money will I lose if I take a day off?" He asks himself, "What services will I not be able to perform if I take a day off?" He can't put a dollar value on his time, precisely because the kinds of services he provides are not normally for sale in a competitive, profit-seeking market. We aren't supposed to sell the message of salvation to the highest bidders. Salvation is not a mass-produced item to be sold through mass-marketing techniques, however often certain modern evangelists try to adapt such techniques.

If a man finds it difficult to put a price tag on his time, then he had better figure out another kind of allocation standard. If five conferences want to get a big-name evangelist to appear in one month, and he isn't willing to sell his time to the highest bidders, then he had better have an alternative standard in mind.

The standards tend to become highly personal, since they are not fundamentally monetary. The pastor decides to counsel someone with a family problem rather than someone else with an employment problem. He tends to cater to those who have problems that match his problem-solving talents. Since he is not operating in a market, he has a tendency to ignore free markets, as well as economic theory. He devotes his time to solving personal problems that are not essentially economic problems. He compares Mary Jones' personal needs with Billy Smith's personal needs, and he doesn't use dollars to evaluate these needs. He doesn't say "Mary has an \$87.50 problem, while Billy has a \$37.25 problem, so I'll sell my time to Mary, since I can ask up to \$87.49 for my counsel." He says, "Mary has an emotional problem, while Billy has an academic problem, and which is the one which needs a solution immediately? And whose problem can I solve most easily?"

Everyone has problems, and they try to get them solved with the least expenditure of resources. The pastor gives away his time,

officially. Therefore, he has to allocate it by non-monetary means. "Yes, Mary, I'll be able to counsel with you next week. No, I'm not available before then. Yes, I know your husband is a boozier. No, I can't come over now. Well, if he's beating you with a hammer, that's different. Maybe I can make it the day after tomorrow. I'll check my schedule with my secretary." Pastors have a tendency to get caught up in the "finger-in-the-dyke" syndrome. Which crisis seems imminent? Which one has to be treated immediately? They run from crisis to crisis. Managers do this, too, as the management textbooks tell us, but at least managers can put estimated price tags on their decisions. Ministers of the gospel aren't supposed to operate this way, at least until they get on national television.

One thing is sure: **there will be greater demand for a pastor's time than his supply of time, at zero price.** His time is a scarce resource. He has to allocate it. And given the "finger-in-the-dyke" syndrome, he tends to become a crisis-management man. He acts in terms of crises. He learns to allocate his time in terms of the comparative catastrophe method.

On this scale of measurement, reading has a low priority. Family quarrels are much higher up. Visiting dignitaries rate higher yet. Departing oil executives who tithe are still higher on the list. ("All souls are equal, but some are more equal than others.") But reading is down there at the bottom, running neck-and-neck with catechism classes, paper cup supplies, and the wife's birthday.

Pastors are too often functional illiterates. This doesn't mean they can't read. It means they don't read anything except the daily newspaper, overdue bill notices, and articles under two pages long in *Christianity Today*. They read only those items aimed at people who have lost the ability to discipline themselves enough to tackle anything long, serious, complex, or thought-provoking. Only those pastors who really enjoy ideas, the way that Pentecostals enjoy "new things," Episcopalians enjoy prayer breakfasts, and Presbyterians enjoy committees, are willing to struggle with tough books. Serious reading, like serious anything, takes practice—systematic self-discipline on a long-term basis. What is the pay-off in the short run? Not popular sermons, since congregations that haven't been weaned on complex sermons are unhappy with them at first (and possibly forever). Not more personal income, since congregations are paying for immediate pastoral services, like counselling and raising money from bake sales. **There is no visible pay-off in the short run.** And besides, word has gotten out about elder Mitchell and the choir director's daughter, and an annotated bibliography of Bonhoeffer isn't going to help much when this crisis blows up.

The problem is, people advance along those lines established by their reading habits. (Or maybe they discipline themselves to read in those areas in which they hope to advance.) Pastors who have become busy illiterates are almost guaranteeing their personal stagnation. The best they can hope for is bigger, more influential stagnation, or even syndicated stagnation. ("Keep those cards and letters coming, friends, and be sure to let your local station manager know how much you appreciate these broadcasts [since the S.O.B. has been burying me at 6:30 a.m., right after the Department of Agriculture's weekly "fertilizer and our future" films].") A program of systematic reading must be started early, maintained continually, and adhered to religiously. If it isn't, crisis

management will overcome good intentions and thereby guarantee personal stagnation.

### Crisis and Solutions

It may not be possible to break out of bad habits without getting an immediate pay-off. If crisis management has become basic to a man's ministry, meaning his allocation of time, then he may have to start reading in those areas related to the predominant crisis. It may be marital problems. It may be personal finances. It may be church finances. It may be problems with certain age groups. It may be anything, but there are books written constantly to deal with these issues. If it takes (crisis) to get a man reading systematically, then at least they have produced positive change in someone.

Crisis management should not become a way of life for pastors. The pastoral function is more than beating away wolves. If a pastor makes it clear that the basis of his ministry is crisis management, then congregation members who want a piece of the pastor's time will manufacture a crisis or two. Sheep in wolves' clothing will become a familiar phenomenon in pastoral counselling.

One way to clear up crises is to identify profit-seeking professionals in the Christian community, and then to direct the crisis-prone person to these professionals. **There are too many pastors** who are spending too much time holding the hands of people who really only want someone to complain to, free of charge. The pastor had better seek out professional counsellors to whom these people can be sent, checkbook in hand, after the second session. Or if this isn't possible, the person needing the counselling had better be shown how much benefit a personal service therapy would be to them. Let them learn to work. Like the dried-out rummies in Alcoholics Anonymous, these people need to find someone even worse off to go and help. Pastors have to stop operating the local Institute for the Absorption of Pastoral Time. They have to get people thinking in terms of costs. They have to find ways to put price tags on their services, if only to cut down the demand. Let people donate to the church. Maybe pastors can't legitimately make a profit this way, but they can at least reduce demand. If someone has to pay in order to solve a problem, he will tend to get the problem solved faster. He will co-operate with the problem-solver, not return with ever-new problems for the solver to deal with, free of charge. He will accept a solution sooner.

### No Diplomas

Students will read systematically in order to earn a diploma. There is a great temptation to stop reading and learning, once there is no one remaining who will offer still another diploma, or no one who cares whether anyone holds one.

The pay-off for the pastor isn't another diploma. The pay-off is the ability to make accurate connections between what the Bible says and the events in the world around us. We are to exercise dominion. Books open up the areas subject to biblical dominion. The pastor who does not read will not be ready to call all men to the tasks of dominion. Stagnation isn't the proper goal. The computer boys tell us, concerning inaccurate data, "garbage in, garbage out." The pastor's version is, "pabulum in, pabulum out." Used pabulum isn't going to turn the world around.

**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.