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THE RISE OF THE PARACHURCH MINISTRIES

by Gary North

The size of the largest parachurch ministries dwarfs any church in America, except those "electronic" churches that are really parachurch ministries, financially speaking. The impact of these ministries is concentrated. If an "electronic preacher" tells his audience that such and such is true, or that they should do the following, many of them respond. A large denomination may have more members or collect more money than a given parachurch organization, but denominations are made up of lots of congregations, and the leadership (let alone "followership") is not unified. The transmission belt of authority in a denomination is more complex. Decisions are more bureaucratic. People are less likely to talk about what the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. says than what Jerry Falwell says. Jerry Falwell actually says things; he speaks out. A denomination publishes a report. The impact is not the same.

Ironically, this has angered the liberals who control most of the major denominations. Two recent books, *God's Bullies* and *Holy Terror*, systematically attack leaders of the New Christian Right as founders of a new "inquisition." The liberals, being collectivists, are very good at assembling panels and publishing reports. They are not equally adept at gaining large personal followings on national satellite television. The liberals see that fundamentalist pastors are now gaining a large audience. This bothers them. So they attack the "electronic churchmen" as deviations from historic Christianity.

The American Tradition of Voluntarism

In American history, the idea that local charitable institutions not controlled by the churches should flourish goes back to the Puritans, beginning in England. The book by W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England, 1483-1660* (1959), shows how devoted to independent charitable activities the Puritan merchants of London were, how they reshaped British society by means of their giving. In New England, charitable schools were always the focus of giving. Rev. Cotton Mather's anonymously published *Bonifacius: An Essay upon the Good* (1710) extolled the idea of independent charitable giving. It was a tradition that extended well into the nineteenth century.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a century and a half ago, visited the United States and then wrote his classic study, *Democracy in America*. The second volume, published in 1840, commented on the seemingly endless number of voluntary associations in America:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to

build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association. (Book 11, Chapter 5)

Neither the church nor the state was paramount in American history, except in New England, and then only before 1650. It was the voluntary association, including the family, which dominated the society. Most Americans were not members of churches; indeed, most Puritans after 1650 were not actual members. Most Americans were only loosely associated with political parties through the first half of the nineteenth century, and the civil governments had few benefits to pass on to voters; they were too small, too restricted. So it was the proliferation of voluntary societies that marked the development of American culture, especially after 1800. (See George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* [Yale University Press, 1970], pp. 13-17.)

Independency and Voluntarism

The civil governments today command a huge proportion of the income of Americans. The compulsory nature of these payments to civil government make it difficult for voluntary associations to finance the charitable activities that they did before the First World War. When over 40% of national income goes to various branches of civil government, there is far less money available for charitable giving.

The churches have also created difficulties for these associations. As the civil government has commanded an increasing proportion of the income of Americans, the churches have been hard-pressed to maintain their growth. The tithe is not preached today. The churches have not allocated significant portions of their income to support charitable ministries outside the institutional church. They have taken most of the money — under 10 per cent of their members' income, of course — for use in evangelism, mortgage payments, pastoral salaries, and similar ecclesiastical institution-expanding activities. Money has flowed into the churches; it has not flowed back out.

Had the churches taken the lead by serving as a funnel for the non-ecclesiastical charities, they could have retained far more influence over the culture. The churches have been content to buildup their own operations, while not supporting other Independent works of charity, including education. The result should have been predictable: the transfer of cultural influence from ecclesiastical institutions to independent charitable organizations.

This independency is not simply institutional independency. The individualism inherent in the direct fund appeal has also decreased the authority of the churches. An individual reads a letter directed to him by an ecclesiastically independent organization. He writes a check to that organization, probably without consulting his pastor or church elders. Or perhaps he sits in front of a television screen listening to an "electronic churchman." The **total impersonalism of the television screen creates the illusion of personalism:** the T.V. pastor "looks the viewer right in the eye," close up, as a pastor cannot do. A pastor cannot make eye contact with each member of the congregation all of the time, but a T.V. preacher can. Thus, the electronic illusion of personalism can be used by the T.V. preachers to motivate people; these men understandably have devoted followings.

Television allows the operator of a foreign orphanage or medical evangelism program to parade dozens of starving or broken children before the eyes of the viewers. Again, the **direct impact of television as a medium** virtually erases the authority of local church officers in screening the recipient programs. Steadily, as churches have abandoned charitable giving, or have given only to projects under the direct administrative control of the local **church or denominationally** controlled projects, independent ministries have overtaken the churches in influence.

There are hundreds of kinds of charities that are beyond the abilities of church leaders to operate directly. Thus, the independent parachurch ministries that operate programs that no church would have begun must seek support directly from individual donors. Once churches take the attitude that "If we can't run the show, we won't send a check," they have transferred tremendous authority to the directors of the independent ministries and to the individuals who support them. There are many cultural, educational, and social needs that must be met; if churches refuse to meet them, then other agencies will. What the churches have failed to understand is this: meeting **basic human needs is an important aspect of gaining authority and influence.** In short, power flows to those who are willing to exercise **responsibility.**

Screening

Churches that devote a substantial portion of their income to charitable giving have a responsibility to investigate the organizations that ask for financial support. If churches were regularly sending funds to independent charitable ministries, then the directors of those ministries would have to answer to elders of numerous churches. The churches could pool resources and information in a program of researching the expenditures made by these various organizations. If some organization were using the funds primarily to rent mailing lists to **raise** more money, this fact could be transmitted rapidly to the various churches. Church officers could buy the equivalent of a *Consumer Reports* for charitable organizations.

The individual donor would then gain the expertise of deacons or elders in the distribution of his funds. He would not be responsible directly for sending funds to some wasteful, emotion-manipulating **parachurch** ministry. He could rely on the judgment of his officers. These officers could approach the directors of parachurch ministries as ordained men possessing lawful authority. They could require the

groups to produce financial statements and other relevant records in order to continue to receive support: no records, no support.

No single church could exercise total authority over any **parachurch ministry**, for numerous churches would be sending in money. There would also be donations from people who give money above the 10 percent **minimum**, that is, offerings. But the **parachurch** ministries would have to recognize the authority of the churches, and to consider the goals of churches when formulating their plans and programs.

Covenantalism

The Bible does not teach either individualism or collectivism. It teaches covenantalism. The failure of **parachurch** ministries to integrate their operations with responsible churches will eventually work against them. What becomes of some "one-man [woman] show" when the leader dies? When a **ministry** is built on the charm or dynamic qualities of one person's personality, what survives the death (or reported adultery) of the leader? **Parachurch** ministries have a tendency to become one-generation ministries, and those that survive rapidly depart from the goals and principles of the founders. (What happened to the "C" in the YMCA? Are swimming lessons appropriate substitutes for evangelism?)

The problem with **covenantalism** from the point of view of today's churches is that **covenantalism is governed by biblical law. Biblical law puts requirements on churches that modern church officers prefer to avoid. The churches, by abandoning charitable giving to non-ecclesiastical institutions, have also abandoned one very important aspect of biblical covenantalism. The rise of the independent parachurch ministries testifies to the failure of the churches to finance, advise, and screen the various independent ministries. The churches, by abandoning their financial responsibilities, have steadily transferred authority to independent ministries, especially authority in social and economic matters.** The loss of influence of churches in this century is in part a product of their abandonment of a fundamental principle of life: "He who pays the piper calls the tune." Politicians and bureaucrats in civil governments have understood this principle, and have drastically increased their control over us as a result.

This abandonment of financial responsibility has combined with a theology of retreat to create near-impotence. Churches, seeing that major evangelism ministries are **independent** of them, and recognizing the short-term nature of most of these ministries, have consoled themselves by saying that no long-term programs of **Christian** reconstruction can be successful. Their own institutional impotence has helped to convince them of universal Christian cultural impotence. Their pessimistic **eschatologies** appear to support their policies of minimal giving to ministries outside the institutional church, the policy of "the buck stops here."

By refusing to become funnels of the tithe, and funnels for other forms of charitable giving, the churches have reduced their own influence in society. They have also reduced their influence over the **parachurch** ministries. When churchmen begin to **complain** about the rise of the parachurch ministries, and when they seek out the cause of the independence of these ministries, they should begin their investigation with this principle: "**The bucks stopped here.**"