

An Open Letter to Church Leadership:

“How happy would Jesus be with His Church if He came back today?” We wonder this, in part, because we know that He was not terribly happy with the religious experts of the day, 2000 years ago – and we know that we have a long history of turning away from His desires for us, even corrupting them. So it would seem wise to ask the question, as a self-check every now and again....

Many churches are grappling with serious challenges confronting their general operating budgets for the coming year; at the same time, many congregants are dismayed to learn how little financial support for the poor actually goes out the church door. Over the last several years, a number of potentially prophetic, well-regarded Christian books (*The Dangerous Act of Worship, Radical / Radical Together, The Hole in Our Gospel*) have taken the Church to task for its evident lack of engagement with the poor, *particularly* those living in extreme poverty around the world. In describing the life of our churches, the same phrases are used over and over again: consumers of religion, sleeping, internally focused, self-absorbed. And unfortunately, the numbers back it up. An old adage says that if we want to know what is truly important to an organization, just follow the money. In the average American church’s case, we find that **90%** of the budget is devoted to staff, buildings, and programs which serve the membership; **less than 2%** is devoted to serving the billion people trapped in extreme poverty! **Tragically, many who do not know Him (both here at home and around the world) equate the Church’s indifference with God’s – a profoundly negative witness to a watching world.**

The apostle John writes, *“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in Him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”* James echoes this theme when he writes, *“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”* Might this mean that God’s people, and their churches, should actively be about tangibly demonstrating God’s love for the least and the last – as in helping the world’s most desperately poor people with things like safe water and sanitation, improved and sustainable agricultural/food production, basic medical care, primary education, opportunities for economic development, and solutions to human trafficking?

Yet, reaching out to the least and the last requires tremendous resources and expertise to effectively research, design, fund, and implement long-term undertakings in the missions field – undertakings that, in an increasingly complex world, most of our smaller and midsized churches are simply not equipped for. Fortunately, many excellent Christian humanitarian organizations (e.g., World Vision, Hope Int’l, Gospel for Asia, Compassion Int’l) *fill this gap with remarkable effectiveness.* The **parachurch**, as these organizations are collectively known, has grown into a lead role in tangibly demonstrating God’s love in Christ to the least and last. This is to be celebrated, for the parachurch is truly an extension of the Church proper – would we rather that role (and opportunity for witness) be filled by government, or secular agencies? **We would suggest that our churches enthusiastically embrace the role of championing and supporting the work of the parachurch, to the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom.**

As individuals, *and as churches*, are we not clearly called to sacrificially abandon our native self-interest, and instead be about God’s agenda? This means moving away from the present model of funding internal ministry to the near exclusion of external ministry, and towards something a bit more closely aligned with God’s biblically evidenced heart for the least and the last. *This is where church leadership can proactively step up and make a sacrificial difference themselves....*

As church leaders, let us imagine the following scenario: Giving increases by 25%, overnight, in our congregation. Would we be willing to pass the increment, the increase, through in its entirety – to ministries serving the suffering, the hopeless, the exploited, in Christ’s name? Would we, and our congregations, be willing to call our present building, staff, and programs “good enough for now?” *What might be the results of such a massive outpouring of help for the poor – for our membership, for our churches, for the broader church, for evangelism efforts, and of course, for the poor?*

Notice that we are not talking about redirecting gifts that presently go into the general budget. The point here is that **our churches should be asking for more -- and then not taking it for themselves**, but instead passing it along to externally focused ministries that serve the desperately poor in the name of Christ.

Perhaps this kind of thinking was behind John Calvin's assertion that churches should spend 50% of their budgets on serving the poor. And this does not require a massive undertaking in reinventing the missions wheel; on the contrary, the most efficient way to pass this increase in giving along would simply be to *include* a few exemplary parachurch organizations within a church's "menu" of options for donor-directed giving. *Such organizations are indeed God's people, doing God's work, in His power and name, for His glory.... and with demonstrated, remarkable effectiveness.*

What we are talking about is using the donor-directed giving mechanisms that are already in place in most of our churches to inspire and facilitate an increase in sacrificial giving to the least and the last. This is certainly consistent with the Church's mission: Are we in the business of growing disciples, or growing our budgets? When we serve the poor, we spread the Good News of the Gospel. *And when we grow givers, we are growing disciples* – helping God's adopted children learn to lay aside the idols and desires of this world, to lose their lives and so find them in Him.... *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* Again: Are we in the business of growing disciples, or growing church budgets that minister to inwardly focused memberships while a desperately needy world suffers in hopelessness and despair?

Can we return the stewardship keys, at least *in part*, to God's people, to the benefit of Christ's work in the world? *Can we work to inspire sacrificial giving to serve the least and the last, and then let our congregants direct these sacrificial gifts, over and above what they presently give to the general budget, to the external ministries that God has given them a heart for?* This is workable, for three reasons. First, our present programs and ministries, which presumably do indeed serve to advance God's kingdom, would be preserved at current levels. Second, it avoids the "missions tax" – that is, when a church formally commits to spend 20% of its budget on missions, all new items in the general budget become 20% more expensive. And third, **many people stand ready to give more** – if they can direct these additional gifts to effective ministries that are personally and **spiritually meaningful to them** as a result of God's call on their hearts to serve the least and the last.

We strongly suspect that there exists a vast pool of "frozen" funds, heretofore unavailable to our churches because of their insistence on self-centered spending patterns. Many of her members are ready, willing, **wanting to give more** – but not for fancier choir robes, new buildings, and additional church staff. They want to give where **they** feel it will **make a real difference** – a difference in the lives of the suffering, the hopeless, the exploited. *All that these ready givers lack is the permission and framework for directing their gifts to these kinds of needs, free of uncertainty and confusion over not supporting the general budget more fully with these additional, sacrificial gifts.*

In this 21st century since the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, the Church must grapple with what it means to be radically abandoned to Him, both individually and corporately. We would suggest that ***including the parachurch within the sphere of who we are and what we do as the body of Christ on earth, actively promoting their efforts within our congregations, and providing ongoing opportunities for our congregants to support their work can bring glory to God in powerful ways:***

- The resulting witness strengthens the Church's reputation and relevance in the eyes of a watching world
- Local church bodies are revitalized as they refocus on a purpose larger than and outside of themselves
- Individual believers discover joy in sacrificial giving, growing in their discipleship
- Parachurch organizations receive the funds they need to do their most effective work for Christ
- The least and the last are served, their lives and communities literally transformed in the name of Christ

Our churches must choose between proclaiming indifference, or the love and hope found in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 58:1-10 burns in our hearts; our obedience to this call brings with it the opportunity to transform a profoundly negative witness into a brightly shining light. Shall we?

Soli Deo Gloria!