

Commercial Christianity

sermon digest

July 17, 2011

Acts 8:9-13;18-23

larry dipboye

From the outset the Christian church has always had something of an ambivalent view of money and the world of commerce. Blame Jesus. He refused the wealth of the rich young ruler and told his disciples that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The itinerant rabbi may have had a few wealthy friends, but the Gospels leave no hint that he exploited wealth in order to advance his own cause or station in life. The poverty of Jesus, a man without a place to lay his head, became legendary in Christian memory; yet, people of means periodically emerged to bless the Jesus movement. For example, Joseph of Arimathea, who provided his own tomb for the burial of Jesus, must have been living above the poverty line. He was a member of the Sanhedrin with the means to purchase and prepare a place for his own burial.

According to Acts, the first Christians in Jerusalem addressed the problem of persecution and ostracism through a communal existence, laying all of their wealth at the feet of the feet of the Apostles, who redistributed according to need. Asceticism, self-deprivation of luxuries and some basic human needs, never became a virtue for early Christians, but neither did entrepreneurship or the achievement of financial success. In the Roman world of Jesus and the early church, the masses of people lived in dire poverty. Jesus and his closest followers, later known as Apostles or The Twelve, identified with the people at the bottom of the economic scale. There is some evidence that Paul may have had adequate financial resources, but he also alludes to making tents to support himself and refusing to extract support from churches.

The dynamic of the church is from God rather than from political or economic strength. One salient Christian value which ties the early church to the ministry of Christ is the refusal to rely on secular power.

Following Paul's orchestration of the stoning of Stephen, Luke's story of the early church crossed the border of Judea into Samaria. The deacon Philip, identified with the seven chosen to relieve the Apostles of the menial distribution of aid to Greek widows in the church, moves into Samaria with a ministry of preaching and healing. There, Simon, a popular Samaritan wizard, was counted among the converts baptized by Philip. Evidently Simon had completely misunderstood the meaning of the gospel; he viewed Philip as a fellow magician and followed him around observing with amazement his signs and miracles.

The story draws a significant distinction between magic and miracle. Simon performs magic for his own aggrandizement and profit, demonstrating his control of transcendent powers. Christian miracles, also known as "wonders," were also demonstrations of power and amazement, but they were viewed as acts of God in which the disciple was an instrument in the hands of God, not the wizard in control of God. Simon's identity with magic in addition to his distorted understanding of the power of God created a negative image for posterity. Simon became a rival to Judas as one of the worst villains of early church history.

Because of the new community of faith being formed in Samaria, the Apostles Peter and John entered the scene to nurture the new Christians in the faith. Simon made a connection; the Holy Spirit was received through the Apostles' prayers and laying on hands. Aha! The magic must be in the hands of Peter and John. So, Apostles were more powerful than deacons controlling the power of God with magical hands. If Simon could learn the Apostles' tricks, he could dazzle his followers even more than before. Rather innocently, he acted out the roll of the entrepreneur. Like a good capitalist American, he offered money to buy the power of the Holy Spirit. He did not steal or manipulate to get something that did not belong to him. Peter's reaction was inordinately volatile: "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!" Simon offered words of repentance, and we can assume changed his view of marketing the Holy Spirit, but history did not treat Simon with kindness.

Based on this story, Simony became a word for anyone who attempted to turn the Christian faith into a commercial enterprise. Fathers of the early church like Irenaeus called Simon the first Gnostic heretic. An early legend further demonized Simon as a villain who challenged Peter to a contest before Nero of their respective magic powers. Simony, however, was about the attempt to buy or sell

the power of the church.

I was a pastor in Louisville. One afternoon I was greeted by the church secretary with a giggle and an announcement: "I sold the church while you were out." Someone had come into the office to inquire about a church building that was for sale. He was actually looking for the church down the street that had relocated and had put the property on the real estate market. Doris was amused by the thought, "what if I sold the church while Larry is out!" With mock piety, I expressed grave concern for her spiritual health and accused her of committing Simony.

We returned for the seventy-fifty anniversary of the church in 2003. A successful businesswoman in the church engaged me in conversation about some of my quirks. She reminded me that as a pastor I had repeatedly blocked the organization of an annual rummage sale on the parking lot. She informed me that after I left the church they initiated the rummage sale with significant financial success and no apparent ill effect for the church. No lightning struck the church and no one was visibly injured by the new practice. I realized in that conversation that my conservative roots were still showing. From childhood, I learned that the church should avoid commercial involvement; the church should support its own ministries internally through offerings rather than asking the secular community to foot the bill. I still find wisdom in this view of church finance.

Simon is alive and well in Christian America. Like many ethical issues in religion, money problems are often more clear to the secular world outside the church than to leaders within the church constantly struggling to make ends meet. In 1967, Alfred Balk, feature editor of *Saturday Review*, published *The Religion Business*, an exposé of the mutual exploitation of business and religion emerging from U.S. tax laws at the time. The law has since changed. But Balk exposed the numerous instances of churches and church institutions buying or being given controlling interest in a business in order to outmaneuver the competition through church tax exemption. Dr. Eugene Blake, a Presbyterian leader and General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, endorsed Blake's book with the word:

When one remembers that churches pay no inheritance tax (churches do not die), that churches may own and operate business and be exempt from the 52 per cent corporate income tax, and that real property used for church purposes (which in some states are most generously construed) is tax exempt, it is not unreasonable to prophesy that with reasonably prudent management, the churches ought to be able to control the whole economy of the nation within the predictable future.

Blake observed the connection of commercial religion to the foundations for church-state separation in the Bill of Rights, the First Amendment to the Constitution. The problem that corrupts religion while corrupting the state is both economic and political union. A politician, then Vice President Hubert Humphrey called to the attention of church leaders that the churches had turned inward, spending enormous sums on building up campuses while spending less than forty-one cents per member per month on outside causes.

A phenomenon that developed mostly in the 1980's has become known as "the prosperity gospel." It was not a new idea about church. In the Great Depression such religious entrepreneurs as Father Divine had amassed wealth in the shadows of poverty with his promises of prosperity for those who supported his ministry.

In *Crosscurrents* (summer, 2004) Shayne Lee wrote about the "Prosperity Theology" of "T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar." The author noted that at one time being Pentecostal and being poor were synonymous, and the simple life of separation from the world and denouncing worldly luxuries were virtues. But the influx of young, upwardly mobile, middle-class neo-Pentecostals brought an economic revolution. Lee traces the root ideas to a black neo-Pentecostal, Frederick K.C. Price, who, along with Kenneth Copeland, became the first prosperity teachers on national television. Price boasted about his million-dollar salary and Rolls Royce and taught that black Americans could have their heaven on earth if they were faithful to the church (financially) and would walk in faith.

The exploitation of poverty is particularly effective with people at the bottom of the economic ladder. I can recall hearing my pastor promise to a working-class congregation in the early 1950's that if they give a tithe of what they earn, God will bless them with abundance and "repay" many times over. He promised us that day that if anyone could show him that they had been harmed financially or

spiritually by tithing that he would on the spot pay them back with 100% interest. I don't know of anyone who asked for reparation, but most of us heard about the law suit a few years ago in Florida filed against a pastor who had made a similar promise.

The problem has spread to the Third World. Philip Jenkins (*Christian Century*, November 30, 2010) noted the emergence of the prosperity gospel in West Africa, and others express grave concern about the brash promises of wealth to new converts in poverty-stricken Latin America.

Early Christians came to denounce Simon as the prime example of Christian heretic. It appears that Simon is alive and well in the 21st century and that he has repented his repentance. Without question, the church lives in this world and must have financial support to survive; but the principle set forth in the encounter with Simon is still valid. The church exists by the power of God. When the church's energy comes from commercial enterprise, she has ceased to be the church.