

Why Pastors Should Know What People Give

John Galloway, Jr.

One afternoon I sat in the front set of a hearse (if I must be in a hearse, I prefer to be among those sitting up and talking). The funeral director got in and sat behind the wheel. While we waited for the signal that the procession was ready to go, a large, expensive car crossed in front of us and pulled into one of the few available parking spaces, clearly marked "For church use only." A dignified-looking gentleman got out of the car, saw me in the hearse, waved, and nonchalantly walked out of the parking area, away from the church, and out onto the main street. Whatever his business happened to be that day; it did not involve church, except to occupy a "For church use only" parking space.

The funeral director slapped the steering wheel and laughed. "How about that guy. You can't do much about that, can you? It's guys like that who pay the bills around your place. You have to let him be as rude as he wants to be." The illegal parker was well known as a member of our church.

He was also a well-known leader in the business community. He and his wife lived in a large house just south of town, a place they had called home for several decades.

Over the years they had developed a significant reputation for being powerful people. They sat on boards. They belonged to clubs. He occupied the front corner office of a respected company in the community. Everyone knew he was something of a blowhard, but they put up with it because "he is like that." Besides,

The whole ethos of our church life is quite easily infected by an unbiblical chasing after rich people.

Not knowing what people give in no way exempts us from the game. In fact, it may make us more vulnerable.

people like to be graced by the moneyed and powerful, however rough the edges.

He was a man who spoke with authority around the church. If he wanted to see me, various people in the hallways would escort him to my office, breaking in on whatever I might be doing so that Mr. So-and-so could say "Hi." If word got out that he disapproved of something the church was doing, people quaked in their loafers.

Reflecting on the awe in which the funeral director and people around the church held this man, it became clear that being unbiblically influenced by money has nothing to do with what a person gives

to church. The funeral director did not have any idea what if anything the man gave. The people who scurried down the hallways to open doors for him to barge into my office had no idea. All they knew was that the man had a prominent, very-well-paying position. It was quite natural, though unbiblically, assumed that he and

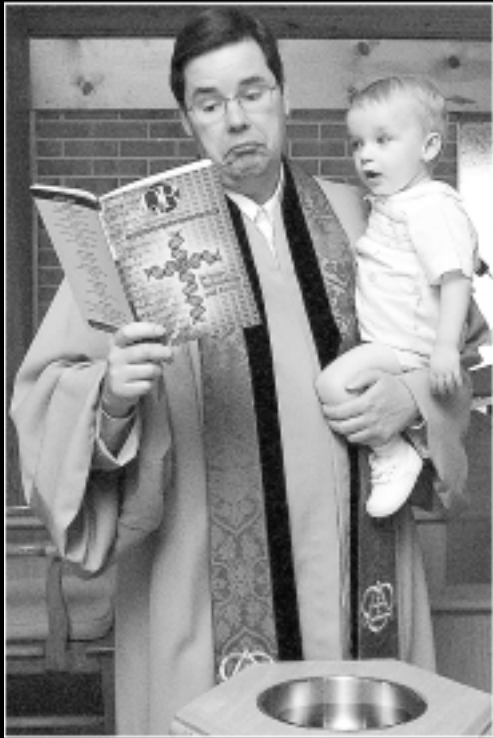
his wife should have the finest seats in the church and illegal parking privileges in our church lot.

Every pastor has heard the refrain and even joked about it. The captain of industry moves to town. The biggest house in the neighborhood has new owners. The professional family with expensive sports cars arrives on the scene. Haven't we all heard it? "I wonder what their religious affiliation is." "Those are the kinds of people we want in the church." People come to us on the q.t. and hint that they might be able to set up a meeting for us to get to know "the family in the big house." Then parishioners urge us on to land the big fish. "They'll give a boost to the budget."

The whole ethos of our church life is quite easily infected by an unbiblical chasing



Theology... on a need-to-know basis.



“Why won't you rebaptize my child?”

“Why do people get divorced?”

“What do we believe about war?”

As a spiritual leader, it is up to you to help your church find answers to troubling questions. *Quarterly Review* provides you with *need-to-know* resources for helping your congregation.

Subscribe to QR for \$24 by calling Cokesbury at 1-800-672-1789; or subscribe online at www.quarterlyreview.org.

after rich people. Not knowing what people give in no way exempts us from the game. In fact, it may make us more vulnerable.

After many years in the pastorate, I am convinced that being sinfully influenced by money is much more insidiously a part of our ministries than we want to admit. It is often part of a largely unconscious game our church plays with us. Part of the reason that some members of the church family do not want us to know what they give has nothing to do with our being unbiblically influenced by money. These people may be more spiritually savvy than we are. They may know that we are fallible, sinful folk who are susceptible to being swayed by money. They just don't want us to be influenced by what they give. They are much more comfortable when they think that we are influenced by what they *have*.

Notice that in James 2:1-7 there is no mention of what people give. All that is mentioned is that one person is rich while another is poor. The sin that James highlights is favoring those who have, while ignoring those who have not. Alas, we in church have not done well in our ministry to the haves and have-nots. We routinely cozy up to the haves. Nothing out of the ordinary about that, sad to say. When a church member welcomes a shabbily dressed have-not, we have a story that finds its way into devotional guides and pops up repeatedly in our e-mail. Hobnobbing with the poor is news.

If we are not careful, and if we are not sensitive to our own sinfulness and the sinfulness of our congregation, we will quite easily drift into a terribly unbiblical quagmire. In a world where money talks, the leadership of our churches will get into the hands of the wrong people. Instead of seeing the spiritually gifted and authentically committed souls in positions of authority, our churches will be taken over by conspicuous consumption. The millionaire-retired schoolteacher will be passed over because she does not conspicuously consume. The extravagant couple in debt over their heads to pay for their mansion, sports cars, and fine clothing will be asked to be church officers because they conspicuously consume. Such is the inevitable consequence of “not being biblically influenced by money.” Such is the inevitable consequence of being naïve about our own sinfulness. Such, I believe, is the sad consequence of not knowing what people give.

As I sat in that hearse and listened to the funeral director go on about how that man with the big car paid our church's bills, I

knew that the man for all his supposed wealth gave \$300 a year to the church. He had given the same amount every year for years. I also knew that the janitor in the man's office building, who was a church member as well, gave \$850 a year. Since in most instances the guy with the office window makes more per year than the guy who empties his wastebasket, it was a short mental leap for me to reason that the janitor was giving a much higher percentage of his earnings to the work of Jesus Christ through our church than his boss was. Since I am convinced that Halford Luccock was correct when he said that the best way to discover what people really believe is to look at their check stubs, I came to understand that the janitor was a more faithful disciple of Jesus Christ than was the well-tailored chap whose office he cleaned. Now when in the halls of the church the two men each voiced an opinion, who do you suppose I listened to more intently? I listened to the janitor, not because he appeared sociologically to be poor compared to the other man's apparent riches, but because he showed himself in his giving to be faithful and the other man did not. Armed with info from the financial office, I could see what I might ordinarily have missed. In their personalities, one was a generous servant; the other was a conspicuous consumer, a tightwad, and a bully.

To say that any of us is never influenced by money is to be naïve and probably to tell an out-and-out lie. Money talks. The question is whether we will be biblically or unbiblically influenced. It has been necessary for me to have access to giving records so that my ministry can stand over against the tendency to be unbiblically bullied by the apparently well-to-do. Our ministries need to be based on the simple truth—quite obvious when you think about it—that the local church should be led by the Christians and not by the conspicuous consumers.

Some caveats and observations:

1 Realizing our sinfulness, we need to be constantly reminding ourselves that our pastoral care and all aspects of the church's ministry are open to all. There is no financial prerequisite for singing in the choir, working on a mission project, or receiving a hospital visit.

2 The gross amount of giving can tell us who is helping the church budget. It is not a definite indicator of spiritual com-

mitment. Back to the story of the widow's mite. We assume the rich folk were lobbing higher amounts into the coffers than she was. Gross amount was not what caught Jesus' attention. Her gift was a higher percent of her net worth and was thus spiritually more important. For this reason, if the captain of industry giving \$4,000 a year gets upset, we have a political problem that we can hopefully handle through some appropriate management technique. If an elderly person living in a one-room apartment over a drugstore, having only a bed, a dresser, and a hot plate and giving \$3.28 a week, gets mad at us, we have a spiritual problem that will require time, patience, careful listening, and much prayer.

3 If every member of the church family were asked to list the top ten givers in the congregation, no one would get it right. No one would even be close.

4 I can be influenced by money. I admit it. That is why I need to know what people give, so I can be influenced biblically rather than fall into the trap of being influenced unbiblically. I want to be influenced by people whose giving shows they are serious about their faith. I do not want to be influenced by people whose giving shows little to no commitment at all. This is a very rough concept. But I believe that Christians should have the most influence in the church.

5 People assume they are typical. The tightfisted assume that the congregation will respond to a new idea in a tightfisted way. Persons who tithe figure most people tithe. An idea to develop a new program will thus tend to be opposed by most of the tightfisted because they cannot believe that the church would lend its support. The tithers say, "Go for it. We'll find the money."

6 It has been my experience that a disproportionately high percentage of generous givers are very supportive of mission. They are disproportionately willing to take risks to expand mission. The less generous are more likely to see a balanced budget as akin to the kingdom of God. Generous givers are more likely to believe the Lord will provide if we venture forth in trust. After all, that is what they themselves are doing in their large financial support.

Each pastor must resolve this question in his or her own ministry. Faithful ministries are carried on by persons who come down on either side of the fence on this issue. I have found that having access to financial records has provided most helpful guidance in the battle to keep the church from being taken over by conspicuous consumption. I have also found myself leaning on the influence of the generous. They inspire me to be more prophetic. They lead me to become more

mission-drive. They witness to what it is to trust the Lord. Why not be influenced by givers? □

This article is from *Ministry Loves Company: A Survival Guide for Pastors*, © 2003 John Galloway, Jr. Adapted and used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press. (See p. 19 to order.)

John Galloway Jr. is pastor of Wayne Presbyterian Church in Wayne, Pennsylvania.

A CELEBRATION OF PREACHING

SEPTEMBER 16-19, 2003

**HEAR GREAT PREACHERS
LEARN FROM GREAT TEACHERS**

**Fred Craddock
Teresa Fry Brown
Bob Kysar
Tom Long
Gail O'Day**

For more information call 404.727.0714 or visit
<candler.emory.edu/ACADEMIC/OCME>

Candler
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
EMORY UNIVERSITY
ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30322

DUCATING

FAITHFUL

AND CREATIVE

LEADERS FOR

THE CHURCH'S

MINISTRIES

IN THE WORLD.

EMORY