

# A Perpetual Pitfall of Preachers

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## Introduction

I made my first miserable attempt at preaching a Gospel sermon in July 1954 to a Sunday evening assembly of the old Fourth and Bannock Streets Church in Boise, Idaho. My father, Henry Warden (“Red”) McClish, preached for this congregation and served as one of her elders at the time. I had worked hard on my sermon on “The Conscience,” and thought I surely had enough material to last at least half an hour. I “ran out of soap” in ten minutes and offered the invitation (maybe the last time I ever preached with such brevity!).

I was sixteen years old. I had been around preachers as long as I could remember. Some months before that first pitiful sermonette, I had decided I wanted to preach the Gospel. The late and lamented Guy N. Woods and my father were friends, and while visiting in our home he learned of my plans. Hearing that I was planning to enroll in Abilene Christian College, Brother Woods immediately recommended Freed-Hardeman College to me (and later, me to them). I was thereby able to skip my senior year of high school and begin my college work two months after that first sad sermon attempt.

We freshman “preacher boys” were exposed to a rigorous schedule of classes, most of them on the Bible and Bible-related subjects. Additionally, the “Preachers’ Club” met one night a week under the practical (and critical!) tutelage of the inimitable W. Claude Hall. He apparently had more confidence in me than I had in myself in those days. In my freshman yearbook, *The Treasure Chest*, he scrawled:

This boy is tall; He will not fall.

He has the ball to run for all.

He will make it, W. Claude Hall.

## Some Sober Cautions

The good men who taught us the Bible (including brethren Hall, Frank VanDyke, and H.A. Dixon, F-HC President) were all faithful preachers who had been “in the trenches” several years. They had known preachers who had destroyed their influence and effectiveness (and sometimes lost their faith) by succumbing to various temptations. Some of those pitfalls were so recurrent as to form a pattern, concerning which they warned us young wannabe preachers. The two principal areas of their repeated somber warnings were the dual lusts for money and

women. The almost five decades of my preaching life have confirmed the truth and wisdom of their cautions.

I suppose a book could be written about either of these areas and filled with illustrative cases to prove both points. Of course, these factors have also been the downfall of hosts of men besides preachers. However, because Gospel preachers live “fish-bowl” lives and are (appropriately) expected to practice what they preach, their failures are thereby magnified. I will discuss here only the first of these pitfalls.

Most preachers I know are honorable to the core. Preacher salaries have improved in recent years, as well they needed to. However, many men and their families yet sacrifice much and must live far more frugally than most church members live. All of us should hold such saints in the highest esteem.

As with any field of endeavor, so it is with preaching: The many good men suffer because of the misdeeds of the few. Some unthinking folk assume that all religion is fraudulent because of a few corrupt televangelists. Likewise, all Gospel preachers are often saddled with the reputation of the most unscrupulous ones among us. For years loan institutions have recognized preachers “in general” (including those in the denominations) as poor credit risks.

Anyone is subject to being overwhelmed by such things as illness, accident, or loss of employment/income which may precipitate an unavoidable financial crisis. My family has experienced these occasions “up close and personal” more than once through the years. Ignorance and/or carelessness may also precipitate money problems. However, the downfall of many preachers continues to be greed—the “love of money,” which Paul labeled as “a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). Those who are otherwise strictly conservative in their doctrine and morals are not immune to this sin.

### **Illustrating the Problem**

Likely anyone who has preached several years knows some preachers who have allowed money to get the best of them. I know a few myself. A preacher in the west Texas city where I once lived bought a business from which he expected a financial windfall. He rented expensive office space and furnishings and went broke in a few months. He slipped quietly out of town, leaving no forwarding address. His creditors began calling the offices of other congregations in town trying to find him, giving “occasion to blaspheme” the Lord’s church (they did not think kindly of any of us!). His name surfaced in a California church bulletin a bit later. He became terribly upset when some of us warned brethren in California about him. I know of other preachers who knowingly left behind unpaid bills—with no intention of paying them. The

congregation is left to pay the bills and try to repair the damage. In such cases it often takes the church years to recover its good community influence, even though the congregation was not the culprit.

Preachers often have rather free access to church funds (especially where there are no elders), which seems to be an irresistible temptation to some. “Easy credit” via credit cards has been the snare of others. One preacher who failed to file his IRS 1040s for a few years barely escaped a prison sentence when discovered. This same brother was caught **selling** books which the author published for **free** distribution. In another instance he arranged the printing of a book for another brother, but ordered a quantity of overprints for himself at the publisher’s cost. He had already sold several at a handsome profit before the publisher learned of his theft and rightly demanded the remainder of the overprints.

In the book publishing and distribution business Lavonne and I owned for 20-plus years I have more than once had to contact (or threaten to contact) elders to get preachers to pay for books they ordered or picked up on credit. (The identity of some of these men would shock and surprise many readers.)

Recently a brother who helps preachers with financial counseling and taxes arranged for his clients to receive a discount credit card from a nation-wide office supply chain. The company cancelled all of the cards within a few months because of more than \$6,000.00 worth of overdue unpaid accounts. This brother also manages group medical insurance for preachers and constantly struggles with the problem of getting some of them to repay the premiums he has advanced for them.

Greed drives some preachers to another damnable form of conduct. They have become “hirelings” in the most literal sense by preaching for personal advantage—usually money. Some otherwise good men have become adept at contracting “pulpit/pen lockjaw” concerning certain errors and the men who preach them (e.g., marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the distinctiveness of the church, fellowship, worship, et al.)—when preaching on them would jeopardize their jobs. They may not even preach (or believe) outright error on such subjects, but their failure to “preach the whole counsel of God” amounts to the same thing.

Brethren should support faithful preachers fairly and generously, for so the Bible demands (Mat. 7:12; 10:10; 1 Cor. 9:4–14; Gal.6:6). Ironically, some congregations are nowadays offering and paying preachers too much! The lure of high salaries (mostly by big liberal churches) has made liberal theology extremely attractive to those greedy of filthy lucre. (Of course, greed does not motivate all liberals. Some are actually sincere in their liberal errors.)

It is increasingly common to hear of “preacher packages” that exceed \$100,000 annually. (We should applaud one self-sacrificing liberal preacher, who, when offered \$100,000 by a congregation, said that he could not in good conscience accept a penny more than \$70,000!)

One man kept a job for over fifteen years as one of the preachers in a big apostate church. His job included endorsing and promoting the work of that church (which had a “big name” ecumenical preacher and kept a steady parade of the same type coming through its pulpit). Yet, he claimed all the while that he had neither changed his earlier well-known sound convictions nor compromised the Truth. It is certain, however, that he could not have kept his job had he **not** done one or the other (perhaps both?). (Ironically, since he moved to another state, conservative brethren [some knowing the above information] have repeatedly invited his articles for publication and his services for their lectureships. If he ever repented, it was done “in a corner.”)

Regrettably, many preachers, like Esau of old, have sold their souls for a miserable mess of pottage called “money.”

### **Preaching to Preachers**

The Bible frequently and consistently warns God’s people against financial malfeasance, including the motivations behind it. Of all people who should be aware of these precepts, preachers should be foremost. The Decalog forbade stealing (Exo. 20:15). The use of diverse weights, measures, and balances in Israel was an abomination to Jehovah (Lev. 19: 35–36; Deu. 25:13–16; Pro. 11:1). To borrow and not repay is wickedness (Psa.37:21). To count deceiving one’s neighbor as a game is a form of madness that produces suffering and death (Pro. 26:18–19). Vows made are vows that must be paid (Num. 30:2).

The New Testament is rife with this same theme. One’s word should be good without an oath (Mat. 5:34–37). God struck Ananias and Sapphira dead for lying about money (Acts 5:1–11). We are to behave honorably before all men (Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21). Paul reproved those who use godliness as a way of gain (1 Tim. 6:5). As noted above, love of money—covetousness—is the root of manifold evils (v. 10).

One who shirks his financial obligations is not merely a **thief**, but is also a **liar** (because he has promised, whether implicitly or explicitly, to do something he refuses to do). He who lies has made himself a son of Satan, the father of all liars (John 8:44). Those who premeditate receiving some sort of gain by defrauding their creditors, add **covetousness** to their sins, which is another name for **idolatry** (Col. 3:5). Hundreds of other passages touch on this subject, revealing God’s attitude toward all dishonesty, including misuse of money.

## Suggested Solutions

When one becomes financially bogged, down he may be tempted to feel that his situation is irremediable. Ignoring unpayable debt is definitely not the solution! However, one can resolve such problems if he sincerely wants to. Honesty demands that he contact his creditors, expressing his willingness, but his inability to pay. He will find that in many, if not most, cases they will work with him to give him more time. He will thus demonstrate his honorable intentions, and should then faithfully fulfill his agreements to pay what and when he is able.

If a credit card debt is several thousand dollars, the monthly finance charge may exceed the amount one can pay on the principal. Thus, the debt increases each month, even with no new charges. This problem may require the help of a consumer credit/debt counseling service, which can often negotiate a lower interest rate and arrange an extended repayment plan.

Lamentably, some preachers have proved by their behavior that they do not intend to pay the obligations they have incurred. Some seem even to act as if they should not be expected to pay. The Bible solution for them is simple: “Repent or perish” (Luke 13:3). They are thieves who will have no part in the kingdom of Heaven (1 Cor. 6:10). Paul admonishes all such as follows: “Let him that stole steal no more” (Eph. 4:28a). Failing to turn from their evil way, they will find that in the Last Day their greed has led them astray and pierced them with many sorrows, which they will regret eternally (1 Tim. 6:10).

## Conclusion

To my preaching brethren, I issue the same sober caution which my wise teachers and counselors gave me. Young men must ever be on guard against the innate pitfalls of money. Men of experience and years who have lived honorably in these matters must never relax their vigilance concerning them. I exhort those who have succumbed to the lure of greed, theft, and/or fraud to repent. May all of us who **preach** the Gospel do all that we can to **live** by the Gospel, since we have greater responsibilities than others do (Jam. 3:1). The influence of preachers—for good or evil— is multiplied because of their work. Their moral failures especially stain the reputation of the Lord’s holy bride (Eph. 5:25–27). We preachers need to indelibly imprint 1 John 2:6 on our minds: “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked.”

**[Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the August 2001 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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