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Iowa tent preacher knew the joys of extracting money

By DON PICKEN

I've seen the Sunday morning TV evangelists appeal for money to "keep our ministry on the air," and I've heard the late-night radio pitchmen offering Jesus Christ glow-in-the-dark ballpoint pens if I'll just send a donation to them at Del Rio, Texas.

I've listened to offers for anointed prayer cloths and plaster saints, all devised to raise money.

No doubt those people do raise money, but they don't do it with the style Brother Walls did back home.

We only saw the Rev. E. Wilbur Walls once a year at camp meeting time, because he was from the state of Washington, way out on the West Coast. That one time was when people gathered at the Free Methodist Campground in Birmingham, Iowa, pitched their tents, and lived for 10 days spending their time in church services, prayer meetings, love sessions and Bible study.

On the last two days of the annual gathering, the elders met secretly to decide which preacher would go to which town for the next year.

Usually they'd be returned to the

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FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

congregation they'd served the previous year. Sometimes, however, an extremely popular preacher would be assigned to a larger town, or one whose kids were causing trouble would be sent to a smaller town where it was easier to keep tabs on them. All of these big decisions cost money, and when it came to raising money, Brother Walls really knew how to do it.

It always happened on the last Sunday night. The next day everyone would take down the tents and go home, but on the final night, the bishop himself was going to preach — that is, after we heard from Brother Walls.

"Brothers and sisters, as this great camp meeting comes to a close, I'm going to have to tell you that we haven't quite met our obligations. We've got financial obligations that must be met before we go our separate ways. The Lord wouldn't have us leave any other way!"

"Amen! Amen!" It was a murmur, not a shout. They knew this was going to cost money.

Brother Walls adjusted the knot

of his navy blue tie and opened the front of his double-breasted pin-stripe suit, leaning his ample stomach into the lectern. A lock of his bushy white hair fell forward as he tilted his head toward the microphone and spoke softly.

"Now, I've been praying about this obligation, and the Lord has answered my prayers. He told me that there would be at least 10 people in the congregation tonight who have \$100 of the Lord's money and would be ready to give it back to him. Let's see those people stand up."

Two men stood immediately. Everyone was sure that the real estate man and the construction man would stand up. They always did.

They were soon joined by three more, then another and another. That made seven. I wondered who the other three would be, and so did Brother Walls.

"Did I hear the Lord wrong?" he asked. "I thought he told me there were 10." Brother Walls moved to the side of the lectern.

"Now, you good brothers, just keep on standing. The other three will join you. We've got three more here tonight who probably forgot about that \$100 of the Lord's money, but now they're remembering, and they're going to stand up and be counted. That's right! Stand up!"

The organist had been playing chords softly, almost unheard in the background, but now she caught the spirit of the occasion and began to play loudly, "Stand up! Stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross!"

And sure enough, the other three remembered about the Lord's money in their pockets and rose to their feet.

Next, Brother Walls found 20 people who had \$20 of the Lord's money, and 50 people who had \$10. Then he asked the organist to stop playing,

"ups" sat down, and the only people left standing were those who hadn't given anything. It turned out that all but about 20 of those standing had \$5 of the Lord's money and were allowed to sit down. The remainder bought back their seats for a dollar.

I see in the paper these days about Jimmy and the rest with their hundred-million-dollar annual budgets, so obviously they know how to raise

money, but I confess that I have yet to send anything to them.

I'll also confess that I paid \$5 to avoid being in the last group standing at the Free Methodist Campgrounds in Birmingham, Iowa, that Sunday night back in 1950.

Besides, Brother Walls did it with class.

Readers' submissions for "First person singular" will be

Next, Brother Walls found 20 people who had \$20 of the Lord's money, and 50 people who had \$10. Then he asked the organist to stop playing, moved back behind the lectern, and got his very friendly voice going. "These wonderful people have been standing up for about 10 minutes" he purred, "and it's time for them to sit down." "Let's all change places. Those of you who are sitting, stand up, and you good folks who've been standing can sit down and rest. You've done your part." So the "downs" got up and the