Remarks, delivered at Fountain Street Church on July 18, 1999

Arend D. Lubbers
Grand Valley State University
My remarks today are the result of thoughts about Fountain Street Church, and the thought process began when we were informed that our budget had to be reduced because income didn’t match expenditures. I didn’t seek to ascertain the details of the situation, but I was troubled that our church community was so confronted. I feel comfortable talking with you about the subject this morning because most of you, I believe, are loyal Fountain Streeters. If you disagree with my analysis and conclusion, we know that is no serious problem because we handle disagreement here better than most. For you who are guests and non-members, I regret that you have to listen to a talk that deals with our budget shortfall.

First let us list the reasons people give their money for charity.

1) They give because of commitment to a cause.

2) They give because they are educated to see a need that they agree should be met.

3) They give because of peer or some other pressure.

4) They give for self-interest.
Sometimes a combination of these motives comes into play before a contribution is made. Seldom is the giving significant, nor does it reach the affordable limit unless the potential recipient is skillful in persuading the potential donors of the need and the amount of money required to meet the need.

Churches are dependent primarily on commitment of the members to make their budgets, though self-interest may lurk hidden in the minds of some who don’t want to risk not paying for the ticket to heaven. Since commitment is where our church’s budget lives or dies, that is what I want to analyze this morning.

In the Bible Jesus says, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Though we agree about Caesar’s share, the law finally tells us what it is. God’s share is a different matter. We can determine that for ourselves. We can define it as we like, or we can ignore it. Our thoughts about God are the most fundamental aspect of our conscious life. If we are agnostic, that leads to a life view. That view is different from one held by a believer in a specific religion, and both are different from one who embraces a non-sectarian religious life. The point I am trying to make is the way a person deals with or fails to deal with a concept of God determines his or her explanation of life. Jesus makes another statement that is germane to this matter, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” In other words, something is going to be most important to you. You can have a God without even knowing it.
The growth of the church in western civilization is western man’s attempt to make sense of life through commitment to God and God’s revelation. The resources that came to the church were the “rendering to God.” What a magnificent structure the ancient, medieval and Renaissance Roman Catholic Church was. The holder and purveyor of the truth. It represented the striving in human nature to know and codify the truth, all in one system, in one body. It answered questions, it handled doubt, and it provided certainty. While it understood man’s quest for certainty, it could not ultimately deal with man’s curiosity, independence, and will to follow where individual understanding led. Ironically, yet not unexpected, independence and understanding led to a myriad of certainties which proliferate in the modern church. Yet those certainties, as perceived by the millions of church members, form the basis for the commitment of treasure.

I grew up in Second Reformed Church of Pella, Iowa. The Reformed Church in America is a denomination with its roots deep in the theology of John Calvin. Don Hoekstra tells stories about his home church in the same denomination. I have only good memories. Some of my favorite people were in that congregation and still are. I remember that Second Reformed Church always met its budget. The people had a highly developed understanding of “rendering unto God.” In a group of about 150 families, there can’t be identical belief or the same intensity of commitment, but when all the belief and commitment were combined they led to a
balanced budget and generous giving. Why was that? There is no doubt the larger community culture encouraged an unquestioning Christian belief. It led to a sense of responsibility towards the church, and the church helped you define and fulfill your responsibility. It was one important way God worked through you. No problem with your treasure, your heart was in it. There was an unobtrusive certainty about it.

Today we hear and see certainty spread all over the television. Thumping their Bibles week after week, TV Evangelists tell many very effectively how to “render unto God.” They chart a clear course. They are good at sin and forgiveness; they are good at guilt. They and those who follow in their train have brought theatre back into the church and religion and the dollars they raise must stretch the capability of the Eternal Bank to handle them. They help many, but they don’t help all.

To Fountain Streeters, their voice is not persuasive, but simplistic. But what of our voice? Does it call us to the same level of commitment? Do we have our certainties that move us to place heart and treasure here? Similar to other churches, we believe in what I like to call the sacrament of worship. Look at our cathedral-like sanctuary for worship and you know that coming together as a community in a special and holy place to have our spirits charged and our minds challenged is
crucial to our life as a congregation. Our pulpit is special, as no other pulpit is special. Our pulpit is free, as no other pulpit is free.

We have no creeds because we believe the spirit and the mind must be free to develop and even change. Each individual is here with a different past. Some are fifth generation Fountain Streeters, some are refugees from spiritual harassment, and others seek a religious home after years in an intellectual wasteland. We come with varied beliefs and approaches, but we want a religious community. We want to grow, learn, and receive insight. We want an understanding of God knowing our human condition will keep us on the search. There are churches of the Open Bible. I like to see ours as the Church of the Open Mind. We believe that insight and revelation are ahead of us as well as behind us.

We feel the moral imperative to serve in the greater community. We do not convert people to a set of beliefs that guarantees them a happy landing after death, but we help to improve conditions for life here where we know it. We want people to live better, think freely, and seek for themselves insight into matters of life and death. To serve those we can, as many as we can, even the least of those who live amongst us is our mission.

These are our certainties. Are they enough to make you excited? Are they enough to make Fountain Street Church, its character and mission, a key
commitment in your life? How much treasure will each of us give? The money is the scoreboard. That tells what really counts in our lives.

Our budget shortfall really bothered me. In 39 years as a college or university President, I had one deficit year, the 2nd year, and I was so uncomfortable I never suffered through that again. I don’t want our church to have deficits, and I don’t want its program and effectiveness diminished. I asked myself if I was overly concerned, if we were stretching ourselves to the limit, and had to economize. I decided to compare Fountain Street Church to a few others in the area. My study was hurried so I can’t vouch that the comparison is totally valid, but the results are worth knowing and contemplating. The churches I chose had members, I thought, with a similar economic profile, and with the exception of one, gave to other community causes as we do. Fountain Street Church has 1,750 members and in 1998 raised $800,000. Westminster Presbyterian Church, with 1,300 members, raised $990,000. LaGrave Christian Reformed Church’s 1,270 members gave a total of $1,240,000, Central Reformed Church, with 508 members, raised $725,000, and First United Methodist Church has 930 members and raised $693,000. These are downtown or near downtown churches. A financial success story of our area will not surprise you. It is one with a high certainty quotient, Calvary Church, and their 3,000 members gave to the church $5,400,000. The average giving per member at Fountain Street is $457, Westminster is $761,
United Methodist $745, LaGrave $976, Central $1,427, and Calvary $1,800. If Fountain Street could meet the average of the second lowest, United Methodist, we would have over $1,300,000 for our church.

There could be many explanations for the differences. Perhaps we have more people on our roles who cannot give, but I think we need to begin with our church leadership, and find ways to give more voltage to the commitment.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a leading American Theologian of the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s and Professor at New York’s Union Theological Seminary said, “we come closest to the truth in the paradox.” As I have tested that statement in my life I have found it valid and I think it pertains to our church. We have seen how religious certainties bring out the dollars. It seems sometimes that the fee to keep ambiguity and uncertainty away runs high. In our church one of our certainties is that new knowledge may lead to new understanding that may undermine the former certainty. Now that is a paradox.

I remember a series of sermons Duncan preached on the nature of God. I loved hearing those sermons. I admired his courage and I appreciated his intellect. We observed his mind and spirit at work. He took it where he could. In the end he stressed the overriding mystery; a mystery to probe, a mystery you don’t understand totally, but you feel it more than you observe it. He described mystery the best he could and as always, he did well, but the mystery is always the opening
to the next round. To be in a church where there are assurances and comforting repetitions, but also the excitement of the next round, is where I want to be. It is worthy of the level of commitment a fundamentalist gives to his church.

Fountain Street Church is composed of several functions and many people, but the pulpit is the head of the church body. The preaching provides the learning and the inspiration that nourishes the body. Much good can take place in the church, but the level of the church’s effectiveness and the degree of good ultimately depends on the articulation from the pulpit of all those subjects that people must concern themselves about if they are to reach their highest spiritual existence.

With a new leader we can anticipate new opportunities for church development. Let’s make sure the opportunities are never curtailed because funds are unavailable. Let’s keep him in good mental and physical condition for that pulpit.

If we all render unto God what is God’s, it will make the life of His new servant at Fountain Street Church much easier.