

Charlie Allen (2009)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

Charlie Allen was the town banker, and a member of the governing board of the first church I served after seminary. He was a taciturn man, as frugal with his words as he was with the bank's money. He seldom spoke at any length at the board meetings, and they usually weren't that exciting anyhow, an undistinguished little Presbyterian church in a quiet little town in the Red River valley of North Texas.

When the young people came up with a project to purchase choir robes, I got a quick and unanimous vote of approval. They wanted to hold an old-fashioned box supper, auctioning off boxes filled with the delicious offerings of our talented cooks, along with the presence of the preparer as your dinner partner.

I presented the proposal and prepared for the vote; I thought we'd get home early. Then Charlie Allen spoke up. He liked the young people, several of whom were his kinfolk, and he liked the idea of the choir robes. What he didn't like — in fact, what he opposed in its totality — was the idea of the auction taking place on church property. It was exactly what Jesus had condemned in the Jerusalem temple, "turning the house of the Lord into a market-place." Church was where you gave your money, not raised it by selling things.

I explained carefully, as though to someone with a hearing impairment, that these were our own young people, that the boxes would be contributions and so would the payment therefor, that no one would be forced to purchase one, and that everyone would get to eat. It would be a fun way to get contributions, and no one would object. No one but Charlie Allen, that is. He shook his head at every argument, refused every compromise, quietly and steadfastly pressed his point of view. No auction, no way, nohow.

The young preacher was forced, finally, to call for the vote. The other elders had, unsurprisingly, let me handle the bulk of the debate, because they knew Charlie better than I did. I called for the Yesses: five. I called for the Nos: one. I proclaimed needlessly, "The motion passes, and the idea is approved."

The night came for the dinner, and the fellowship hall was full. There were high spirits and a lot of people and beautifully decorated boxes and wonderful victuals, and a spirited auction with substantial proceeds: but

there was no Charlie Allen. Some of us looked around nervously, hoping he'd show up, but he could not attend what he so strenuously opposed.

Then someone came to tell me that I was wanted at the door. I went to see what it was... and it was Charlie Allen. He stood in silence as I came out and shut the door. He looked me in the eye, and then he said, "Here, preacher: this is for the choir robes," and he handed me a five dollar bill.

I have remembered that lesson for over fifty years: a man of enormous integrity (and a good deal of stubbornness, too): he could not compromise his opposition to the auction, but he could show his support for the young people and their cause. Would that all opponents of all sorts of propositions could have the same courage of their convictions... and the same compassion when they get outvoted.