

Cheers for Republican Governor Riley and Tax Reform

The Republican Governor of Alabama, Bob Riley, deserves three cheers from those who believe that the biblical witness mandates the pursuit of justice.

Inheriting one of the nation's most regressive tax systems and a state in deep financial trouble, Riley courageously pushed a tax reform plan through the Alabama legislature.

Under the old tax system, families making as little as \$4,600 paid state income taxes. Families earning less than \$13,000 had to pay a whopping 10.9 percent of their income in state and local taxes, compared to families making \$229,000 who paid only 4.1 percent.

Riley's plan shifts the tax burden from the poor to the wealthy and increases taxes on corporations, banks and agribusinesses.

One of the motivating factors for Riley, who established a conservative voting record in Congress, was his reading of the Bible.

"I've spent a lot of time studying the New Testament, and it has three philosophies: love God, love each other, and take care of the least among you," said Riley. "I don't think anyone can justify putting an income tax on someone who makes \$4,600 a year."

But Riley's political affiliation and theological affirmation may not ensure passage of his \$1.2 billion tax and accountability plan, which must be approved in a statewide referendum Sept. 9.

While Alabama Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Baptists have all adopted resolutions supporting tax reform, the religious right rejects a tax increase.

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The Christian Coalition of Alabama “opposes raising taxes” and blames the state’s financial crisis on “years of poor stewardship and fiscal irresponsibility.”

“The gross mismanagement of entrusted, hard-earned tax dollars is not the liability of the taxpayers,” said the Coalition.

The Christian Coalition concluded that it “is unable to support any new permanent tax proposals to cure historical systemic failures and poor public policy of reckless and unmerited spending habits.”

The Christian Coalition did support the elimination of the tax burden on the poorest Alabamians, but did not really address the question of fairness embodied in the biblical principle of justice.

United Methodists did, however. Both the Alabama-West Florida Conference and the North Alabama Conference of United Methodists recently recommitted with resolutions which supported tax fairness.

In an editorial about the Methodist resolutions, the [Birmingham News](#) said, “The Methodists recognize the obvious. Alabama’s current tax structure is indefensible under any moral code, and most especially the Bible.”

The editorial concluded, “The Methodists have taken a stand. Will they be standing alone?”

That’s a good question for Baptist preachers to ponder, especially if they read the Bible with the same prophetic clarity that Gov. Riley does.

Robert Parham is BCE’s executive director.