

Our Stewardship Call

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[Dedicated to the glory of God, to the service of the church, and to the memory of my father, who was looking forward to hearing this essay, but instead was called to his eternal home and laid to rest last week.]

Twelve years ago we met as a Synod in convention on this same college campus. Not only was the campus different then; so was the atmosphere. We sat in the seats of the old auditorium with the tightness of tension in the pits of our stomachs. Lines of strain were etched on our faces, the strain of those whose call is to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. At that convention the urgent call of the hour was for fidelity to the Word of our God and to the practical obligations of such fidelity. Standing as we were then on the threshold of the sixties, it was an immediate crisis which called for resolution. Standing as we are now upon the threshold of the seventies, it is primarily long range goals and programs which command our attention, our consideration, and our dedication.

Without question the atmosphere has changed in the dozen years which have elapsed since then. The atmosphere is different because our focus has changed from one of faithfulness to the Word to one of faithfulness in bringing the faithful Word to a faithless world. The change is reflected in the Book of Reports and Memorials in a shift in bulk of content from the section on Doctrine to the section on Missions—Home and World. A decade ago we were engrossed in a concern for preserving the Gospel. Now we are engrossed in an concern for proclaiming the Gospel. In the decade about to end our Lord has been training us for our *Missio Dei* in the decade about to begin. To put it in the jargon of the space age, Operation Preparation is behind us. Now all systems are “go!” What lies behind us has been a preparation on the launch platform for the mission which now lies before us.

As we stand upon the threshold of the new decade, making plans as preparations for it in this convention, our concern is with mission, and with stewardship which is the muscle of mission. The companion essay to this one has expounded the continuing purpose of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Our assignment is to spotlight the objectives of the Synod as set down in the report of the Administration Survey Commission and then to let the light of God’s Word illuminate the means of achieving these stated objectives. The objectives are these:

1. To share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people.
2. To uphold the Truth of God as fully revealed in the inspired, infallible Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Lutheran Confessions.
3. To provide a preaching and teaching ministry qualified to proclaim the Word of God faithfully, effectively, universally in accord with the Lutheran Confessions.
4. To assist in counseling and equipping all members of the Synod for greater service to the Lord, to each other, and to the world.
5. To assist all members of the Synod in being active in deeds of love toward our fellow man in need.

6. To foster confessional unity of faith among Christians throughout the world.

“To achieve these objectives, the members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod commit themselves to employ their total combined resources in the most God-pleasing and effective manner.” That, succinctly stated, is our stewardship call. Stated in terms of Scripture rather than in terms of the Administration Survey Commission report, our purpose is to seek to accomplish for God’s Christians in the Synod what St. Paul once sought to accomplish for God’s Christians in Corinth. After showing them how the grace of giving was operative in the faith-life of their neighbors to the north, the Macedonian Christians, Paul exhorted “See that ye abound in this grace also”. (2 Cor. 8:7) The Christians in Macedonia were performing like free-flowing artesian wells. Their liberality was spontaneous and voluntary. The Christians in Achaia were like pumps that needed a bit of priming with the Water of Life to increase their output. We need our Lord to transform us from the Corinthian type into the Macedonian type in order that we might answer the call of the seventies as He presents it to us.

Our purpose in this study will be to review the theological or Biblical basis for our stewardship call, and then to focus that theology on you directly and practically, and thus also on our congregations and Synod. It was the intention of President Naumann that this essay should supplement the essay entitled “Our Call to Serve.” One underscores the purpose of the stewardship life, the other underscores the exercise of the stewardship life. One points us to what God in His mercy has done, is doing, and will do for us. The other points to what we by God’s grace are doing and will do in response. We propose first of all to examine our stewardship call in its theological perspective, and secondly to look at it in its practical perspective.

Our Stewardship Call in its Theological Perspective

Our stewardship programs and practices must of necessity issue from a clearly defined theology of stewardship. Any stewardship effort which is not based on Biblical theology will end up ultimately misdirecting God’s Christians. It will insult God, and it will ultimately fail of its purpose because it lacks His blessing. Waldo Werning in his book *The Stewardship Call*, says “It is the task of theology to interpret the essential nature, meaning, and purpose of the Gospel for the life of the church: its function is also to judge what is wrong or missing.” The theology of stewardship is the discipline which keeps our stewardship programs oriented in the Gospel and centered in Christ. If our theology of stewardship is Biblically sound, it will serve to deter us from employing the fund-raising means and methods of the business community in the community of the sanctified.

The correct concept together with the right practice of stewardship is dependent upon two things, a right understanding of regenerate man in relationship to his God, and a right understanding of the purpose and mission of the Church in the world. Too many stewardship efforts are nothing more than crash programs to meet crisis situations in the church. The theology in which such programs are cloaked suggests a methodology which employs *Nave’s Topical Bible*, or paragraph 2121 in the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible*. You pick out a couple of familiar, old standbys about tithing and cheerful giving, coach the visiting stewards about the needs of the church, and then send them out to apply the gentle pressure to relieve the crisis. To paraphrase a statement in our Synod’s *Called to Serve* manual, such an effort may raise money, but it does not raise men.

Pressure hardens; love softens. Commitment comes from soft hearts, not hard ones. It is only when the theology of stewardship gives substance and direction to the practice of stewardship that God's divine purpose is served.

Before we proceed with a study of the theology of stewardship, it might be helpful to offer a definition of Christian stewardship. According to Werning (op. cit. p. 18) "Christian stewardship is the believer's response to God's love in creating, redeeming, and sanctifying him. It can be called the Christian's management of his redeemed life and possessions, by the Spirit's power and direction through the Word—to God's glory and for man's benefit. Christian stewardship is the fruit of saving faith. It is faith in action, the expression of the Christian faith, the evidence of how sincerely the child of God believes the truth he embraces. A Christian steward is a person who is entrusted with a life redeemed by Christ. To be a steward is to follow where God leads using the abilities and strength he gives."

Now to put this in theological perspective! The stewardship call is one that issues from Eden. The creation account reminds us that men are not the masters of planet earth, they are its guests. The Eden experience of Adam and Eve makes it obvious that the Creator intended to enjoy the company of His noblest creatures. We were meant to grace God's world with the goodness with which He originally endowed us. He made us in His own image, like Father like son. His enjoyment and ours was to derive from that Father-son relationship, a partnership of the highest order. In the person of our first parents, we recklessly cast that image aside, ruined God's masterpiece, and in the process made ourselves objects worthy of contempt. The guests in God's world chose to ignore the Master's house rules.

Thus God's original plan was thwarted and His good world was fouled up in the process. The absolutely incredible thing is that he did not vaporize us with the heat of His holy wrath and start all over. Instead, before he even created the world, he thought about us and about our plight. Calvary crossed His mind as He determined upon a way to accomplish His good will for man by a process of recreation. He would not reduce us to the level of a subhuman species, though man often does that himself. He refused as abhorrent the alternative of making robots out of us, forcing us to conform our will to His. He simply would not take the magnificent mind He had made and program it like a computer to respond like a machine to accomplish His holy purpose in our lives. Love found another way, a better way. He devised a plan, a plan whereby he could get His way with us, prompt us to starting thinking His way again, and lead us to do His will willingly without interfering with our basic humanity. The theology of stewardship finds its formulation in that plan.

God put that plan into effect when He confronted fallen man hiding anxiously behind the trees in Eden. After exposing their sin, he got right to the heart of his plan immediately. Instead of saying "You must", he said "I will." His frustration and anger did not prompt him to say "You fools, don't just stand there; do something!" He saw them in their pitiful state, and it evoked pity from him. He saw their helplessness, and it prompted an offer of divine help. He would destroy their destroyer. He would end their alienation from God, their hostility toward Him, by alienating them from Satan and restoring the broken bond of fellowship through His Son, Eve's Seed. That is God's approach to those who think they are smart enough to be this world's masters when in reality apart from God's grace in Christ they aren't even good enough to be its guests.

Those momentous words, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman”, provide the evidence and the essence of God’s plan for recreating His world. In that plan stewardship finds its divine dynamic as well as its shape and substance.

St. Paul testifies to the fact that all of human life, the world which contains it, and the history that unfolds it is centered in Christ in keeping with God’s plan. Paul has his own special word for it. He calls it God’s economy, His “oikonomia” as it is in Greek. The term comes from the Greek word for “house”, and from the verb “manage”—literally, housemanager. The word suggests the idea of God as Master of a great household. He is busily and wisely managing its affairs, and he does this through His Son. In the Authorized Version the translators used the word “dispensation”, “that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ.” J.B. Phillips puts it this way, “For God has allowed us to know the secret of His plan, and it is this: he purposes in his sovereign will that all human history will be consummated in Christ, that everything that exists in heaven or earth shall find its perfection and fulfillment in Him.” If the President were to invite you to sit in on a meeting of the Security Council, privy to its vital secrets, you would consider yourself a privileged person indeed. And yet you and I share a privilege infinitely greater than that. The Creator Himself “has allowed us to know the secret of His plan.” And as Paul points out, there are stewardship implications in the fact that God has made us privy to His secrets. “Here is the staggering thing,” he says, “that in all which will one day belong to him, we have been promised a share...so that we...may bring praise to His glory.” (Eph. 1:11, 12). Staggering indeed is the thought that God should want to use us as mirrors of His glory.

Paul uses the same word “oikonomia” again in the third chapter where he points out that God had called him “to make plain to all men the meaning of the divine secret which he who created everything has kept hidden from the creation until now.” (Eph. 3:9) What God was calling Paul to do then, He is calling His church to do now in our time. “The purpose,” Paul says, “is that all the angelic powers should now see the complex wisdom of God’s plan being worked out through the church in conformity to that timeless purpose which He centered in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” (Eph. 3:10, 11 J.B. Phillips)

Thus Paul presents God as the great Householder, the Prime Administrator of world affairs. He carries out His administration according to plan through those whom He has redeemed and chosen to be His very own. That plan provides the theological foundation for Christian stewardship. I cannot be a responsible steward without seeing that plan and knowing I have a part in it any more than I could be an ambassador without knowing the president’s foreign policy. Because God in His amazing grace has let me in on His divine secrets and is using me to further His plan, I can rise in life above the level of those whose aims are trivial and whose goals are worldly. That is stewardship. It is a matter of gladly placing myself at God’s disposal and letting Him use me for His gracious purpose.

The Old Testament Scriptures offer us insight into the details of God’s plan. The Old Testament is not just a collection of Sunday school stories to show what happens when a person gets God-connected or what happens when he gets disconnected. The Old Testament unfolds God’s plan. It shows how He moves step by patient step toward the final consummation of his purpose. History in His-story, as someone has aptly said. History as God has unfolded it always assumes the shape of an hour glass, or better yet the shape of a manger,

which viewed from the end looks like an X. John Bright in a word entitled "*The Kingdom of God*" (Abingdon-Colesbury, 1953, pp. 232, 233) describes it like this: "Through the Old Testament the reader senses that the focus has been continually narrowed. It begins with the broad canvass of creation and tells of the dealings of God with the whole race of mankind (Gen. 1-11); then narrows to the people of Israel, whom God had called to be the special servants of His purpose; then still further to the search for a pure Remnant within Israel fit to be the vessels of the divine intention. At the center of the Bible's drama the focus has changed to one man; the Messiah, Christ. But from Christ the focus again turns outward—first to the new Israel which is His church and then, through that Church, into the entire world. The Church is called to take up the destiny of the true Israel, Servant Israel, and become the missionary people of the Kingdom of God."

Just as the Old Testament serves to unfold God's plan, so the cross and grave serve to spotlight that plan. God changes tenses at Calvary from future to past, from "I will" to "I did". Life makes sense only when it is viewed in terms of what God did on the cross and in the grave. "He was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). When Jesus deposited the ransom price for fallen mankind on the altar of the cross, He reestablished God's rightful claim upon the lives of men. By virtue of what Jesus did, God now has a double claim on us. First He made us, then He bought us. In Eden's lovely garden He displayed his recreation. According to God's eternal plan the display of His new creation was not to be a once-for-all thing on that glorious resurrection morning, but an ever on-going thing. For "like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4) The Spirit of God works to bring us all to the point of saying, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me." (Gal. 2:20).

The introverted concern of the Old Testament narrowing down through the centuries from the creation to the cross becomes an extroverted concern in the New Testament broadening out again through the centuries from the focal point of the cross to the end of the present age. In the New Testament age the unfolding of God's plan begins with eleven men on Olivet standing there with the word "go" ringing in their ears. Now it encompasses an unnumbered host of every nation, tribe, and tongue. In the process God's love in Christ encountered our hearts, softened them up, inscribed our names in His Book of Life. "He hath made us kings and priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6). Now he wants to discover to us the secret of His plan so that we see it, particularly our part in it, with ever increasing clarity.

When the Holy Spirit of God lets this view of life penetrate minds and hearts fogbound in sin, a transformation occurs. The penetrating warmth of the rays of God's love in Christ dissipate the fog letting the light of God's love penetrate the mind. Divine love works a two-fold transformation within us. The same love which works instantaneously transforming sinners into saints also works gradually and persistently transforming slaves of self into stewards of God. It accomplishes our justification and motivates our sanctification. The life of a believer is actually an invasion of the total personality by our Master who calls us into His service and gives us the life to render that service. This is the way St. Paul saw his life. He viewed it in terms of a take-over by his Lord. "To me, to live is Christ", he says (Phil. 1:21). "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life I live now in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:30).

This is the theology that underlies our stewardship call. This is the theology behind the thesis which says that we commit ourselves to employ our total, combined resources in the most God-pleasing and effective manner.

Now precisely what does it mean to let Christ live in us? Simply stated, it means to try with the Spirit's help to live the whole of life as Jesus Himself would live it if He were in our place. It means to let Jesus continue to serve the needs of humanity through our words and actions.

When God calls us to faith and to responsible Christian stewardship, He is calling us to the obedience of faith in every human endeavor. The life of a Christian is not something you can separate neatly into sacred and secular packages. If you think the stewardship call summons you to give up a part of your life in the service of the Master, and that it allows you to keep the rest of it to do with as you please, then you aren't hearing the call as God is transmitting it. God intends that His Christians should live out their calling not only within the framework of service in the Christian congregation, but also in all family duties and relationships, in friendship situations, in gainful occupations, in the activities of citizenship—in everything—all the time, whether you are eating or drinking or whatsoever you are doing, you are called to do it all in your role as steward to the glory of God. Luther says that the plow, the lathe, the desk, and the kitchen sink are all altars where you can and should offer the worship of service of God (W.A. 101, 1, 29, 16ff).

Elsewhere Luther says that every Christian is called by God to obey His commands in relationship to the things and the people that have been allotted to him. Talents and neighbors are given by God, not chosen by men. Christian obedience demands that the two (talents and neighbors) be brought together in a spirit of loving service. "What is God's will for me?" is answered by asking "What are my neighbors' needs of me?" (W.A. 10, I, 1, 308). Notice Luther does not equate stewardship with "church work" or with giving. He speaks of the stewardship call rather in terms of being a Jesus to your fellowman in the world. The call is getting through loud and clear when God's Spirit has led you to the point of praying over and over: "Let me think like Jesus! Let me act like Jesus! Let me be like Jesus, all the time to everyone!"

It is precisely at this point that our comprehension of the theology of stewardship is oftentimes weakest. We tend at times to think of stewardship in terms of service to the church rather than in terms of service to our fellowman and through them to our Lord. That Christian is immature who tends to use the church, enjoy the fellowship, accept the blessings it affords with little or no thought about his responsibility to others. "The church is no mere association of people with similar religious interests who happen to get together. Life in the church certainly means something other than preoccupations with religious piety and moralism, or even the desire to escape the world." (H.G. Coiner, *Guidelines for a Theology of Stewardship*.)

In this connection let me share with you a pertinent observation from W. Werning's "The Stewardship Call":

"The life of the church is not what takes place only on Sunday morning, and stewardship is not only what is done in the church programs. More "pew sitters" can be gained without getting the church more into the world. The church is not brought out of the world for one morning a week in the hope of sterilizing the members for another week of contamination in the world. The goal is not to gain recruits

for church services, but to gain recruits for the total ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. The church's major arena or activity or battlefield is not in its committees and conferences, but in the common life of all Christians in their homes, in the stores, in their government, and in their total lives.

We have an ambassadorship that covers the social, political, and economical areas of our lives. The Scriptures do not teach that church tasks are sacred while everyday things are non-sacred. Rather, we have an all-embracing purpose for our lives, a unity of the spiritual and the material. This means service to ourselves and to others in spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social concerns.

In practice, congregations have tended to limit the Christian vocation to what happens in the church building or church program.”

Limiting our view of the Christian calling to what goes on in church buildings and church programs is like limiting one's view of involvement on a football team to warming a spot on the bench. In the church such a narrow view of the Christian's call to serve is harmful to the cause of Christ. It cripples the church because it misrepresents Christ to the world. It results in an institutionalized church, one whose vision does not extend much beyond the city limits. Its concerns tend to be inner-directed rather than outer-directed. It becomes adept at image-polishing at the expense of Gospel proclaiming. It results in misdirected efforts to build the institution instead of wholehearted efforts to build the kingdom.

Happily, in our own Synod serious effort is being made to help us all to broaden our view of our stewardship call so that we see the whole world as our field, not just our own back yard. We are being reminded that the Church is a spiritual community in which we by God's choice are involved, and through which God is seeking to reach out to all men with His love. This is the point of emphasis which stands out in the Synod's stated objectives in the report of the Administration Survey Commission. And this is what our Lord wants to impress indelibly upon our minds as He leads us to commit ourselves as faithful stewards of His plan for the world.

To summarize briefly what we have said about our stewardship call in its theological perspective:

God has a plan for the world and He is its Administrator.

His Church in every age is the instrument through which He accomplishes that plan.

You have been called by God to be a part of it.

God shows you the part he wants you to fulfill, and He moves you to fulfill it by overwhelming you with His love in Christ.

As he holds you in the grip of His love, He wants you to place the whole of your life at his disposal, not just a portion of it.

He wants you to do it in wholehearted cooperation with your fellow Christian.

Our Stewardship call in its Practical Perspective

Now that we have examined our stewardship call in its theological perspective, it remains for us to view it in its practical perspective. That is, we want to apply the Biblical principles of stewardship to our own lives

and then also to the life and the work of the church, especially to our Synod at this particular point in the unfolding of God's plan for us.

Jesus has something to say at this point to give direction to our thinking. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except that it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except that ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." (John 15: 1-8)

The husbandman is presented to us as being concerned about the quantity and the quality of his fruit. He isn't satisfied with a five ton per acre yield when it ought to be fifteen. Quality-wise, he prefers fruit he can market as table grapes rather than raisins. So the husbandman deals with every fruit-bearing branch in such a way "that it may bring forth more fruit." He says, "The same bringeth forth much fruit." Finally Jesus says, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." Like any good husbandman, the Lord is pleased with bumper crops.

What's the fruit that Jesus has in mind? It includes everything the faith in your heart puts on display in your life. Jesus isn't thinking only about the obvious things: worship on Sunday, teaching Sunday school, serving as a convention delegate, and being a generous giver. His is thinking about the frequency of repentance in your life, about the way you talk to your wife, the way you discipline your children, the way you use your leisure time, the attitude with which you do your work, what you talk about during coffee breaks, your prayer life and your devotional habits, as well as your spending habits. He would have you to understand that every waking hour of every day presents you with opportunities for fruit-bearing. You can even bear fruit in your sleep by not overdoing it in the self-indulgent, Sunday morning style of the slothful. You bear much fruit when you seek to redeem the time because the days are evil. God would have you to ask with respect to everything in your life, your eating, your drinking, your working, your playing: Does this serve God's purpose and man's need?

What is true for each of us individually is also true for all of us collectively. Collectively and synodically we bear fruit in a manner that pleases the husbandman when we are of a mind "to provide a preaching and teaching ministry qualified to proclaim the Word of God faithfully, effectively, universally in accord with the Lutheran confessions", and "to assist all members of the Synod in being active in deeds of love toward our fellowman in need", and "to foster confessional unity of faith among Christians throughout the world." We bear much fruit when we not only state these things as our Synodical objectives, but when we work with every fiber of our being to achieve them as God provides the means and motivation.

God's dealings with us are always designed to increase the yield of fruit. "Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." But precisely what is it that He does to get us to produce more fruit? The answer we give to that question is of critical importance to the individual Christian as well as to

the Church. We succeed or we fail in our mission depending on how we answer that question. It is a question which brings us face to face with the matter of stewardship motivation. A wrong answer leaves the church asking people to commit themselves to what the church feels it needs. A right answer makes for a church which comes to people to help them take inventory of their God-given abilities encouraging them to develop, enlist, and use them in the cause of Christ. A right answer encourages faithful service as stewards with the resources God has given.

What then is the proper motivation for stewardship or for an increase in fruit bearing? In the same breath in which Jesus speaks about bringing forth more fruit, He says, “Now you are clean through the Word which I have spoken unto you.” He doesn’t say “Think about what you can do for me.” Rather does he say “Think about what I have done for you.” Branches cannot produce fruit of themselves. They are dependant upon the vine which supports and nourishes them. “I am the vine, ye are the branches,” Jesus says. “He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.” And lest we think we can take the credit for any increase, Jesus adds, “For without me ye can do nothing.”

Turn where you will in Scripture, and the same truth springs out at you from almost every page. In that classic passage on stewardship in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to participate in the offering he was receiving to help starving Christians in Jerusalem, who were victims of persecution and famine. The Corinthians had started to receive gifts for the cause, but the effort had bogged down in familiar and typical fashion. The Corinthians were not the practicing stewards they ought to have been. Paul’s approach to the situation is marvelously instructive. He begins by recounting for the Corinthians what the Macedonian Christians had done on behalf of their starving brethren in Jerusalem. In spite of the fact that they were in a bind themselves, they got so carried away with their generous giving that Paul could hardly restrain them. Yet when Paul presents the example of their generosity to the Corinthians, he is careful to give the credit where the credit is due. He writes, “Now my brethren, we must tell you about the grace that God has given to the Macedonian churches. Somehow, in most difficult circumstances, their job and the fact of being down to the last penny themselves, produced a magnificent concern for other people. I can guarantee that they were willing to give to the limit of their means, without the slightest urging from me or anyone else. In fact, they simply begged us to accept their gifts and so, let them share the honor of supporting their brothers in Christ.” (2 Corinthians 8:1-4 Phillips)

Note that Paul is not saying to the Corinthians, “Look at what those Macedonians did for those poor starving people in Jerusalem. Don’t you think you can match them?” What happened in Macedonia, Paul insists, was a display of the grace of God in the lives of responsive Christians. “We must tell you about the grace that God has given to the Macedonian churches.” It wasn’t the generosity of the Macedonians that Paul was playing up. It was the grace of God. Then he proceeds to encourage the Corinthians to follow through with what they had begun. “See that ye abound in this grace also.” (v. 7) Then comes the mighty motivating word. “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.” (v. 9)

Paul understood that if there was going to be a greater yield of fruit in Corinth, God, not Paul, would have to produce the increase. Paul’s words of encouragement would reach men’s ears, but only God’s word of

grace could touch their hearts. He didn't debase these people of God by applying pressure, or by employing first century forms of modern promotional methods. He didn't appeal to their sense of duty or their sense of pity by saying "You aren't going to let those impoverished Macedonians outdo you, are you?" Nor does Paul play up to the needs to be met. In fact, he does not even make a specific reference to the problem of the Jerusalem Christians. He only alludes to it. He wants us to keep our thinking straight about needs and giving. Christians do not give to a need. The grace of God leaves them with a need to give, like the Macedonians. "They begged us to accept their gifts and so let them share the honor of supporting their brothers in Christ." No promotional programs or pressures in the Church will ever produce an attitude like that. Such an attitude is born only of the grace of God. And it moves a child of God in the direction of total commitment.

Scripture is permeated with passages like the two we have just reviewed, passages which couple exhortations to sanctification together with Gospel motivation. It's unfortunate that we often miss the connection unless we are consciously looking for it. Here are a few examples: "Ye are bought with a price, (the motivating words) therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's." (The call to serve) (Col. 3:1) Observe too, how Paul urges us to "be strong in the Lord" and to "stand fast in the Lord." Not "with", but "in". "With" suggests that you stand fast in a do-it-yourself stance. "In" suggests that you stand fast in the strength he provides. Our stewardship call seems much less formidable when we remember that God in His grace provides both the means and the motivating power to respond to it.

There are tremendously important practical implications in what we have tried to say about God's method of increasing the yield of fruit in the lives of His Christians. In the life and work of the church, it means simply this: We must ever confine ourselves to the use of that one method by which God moves people to offer dedicated lives and sacrificial gifts acceptable and pleasing to Him. This means that we must ever keep clearly in mind that it is the responsibility of the church, now as always, to open the Bible to God's people and to communicate it (and I mean really communicate it without inhibitions and without imposing artificial barriers between God and His people)—communicate it in such a way that they come to it in faith, ready and eager to hear God speak and to be led by God into a fuller partnership with Him. God's people have need ever and again to listen to the story of their life, how God in love took them to be His people when they were no people, when they were nothing but chaff and scum. And as they listen to that still, small voice something happens again inside. They get turned on. Man meets God and God meets man, and a new thing is created anew, a life that cries out and asks "Oh God, how do you want to use me?" And when that happens, another Macedonian miracle is in the making.

But unfortunately it isn't always and only the new man with whom we have to deal. There is that rebel in our hearts always complicating things, turning opportunities for service into occasions for stumbling and self-indulgence. That is what was troubling the Corinthians, and that is why they bogged down in their giving. Situations such as this make it necessary for us to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering." We see it as a continuing problem in our own lives and in our congregational and synodical life as well. Again and again we find ourselves frustrated because God has matched the opportunities he gives with the means to meet them, but we haven't. We've let the old man hang on to what the new man would have let go if he would have

had his own way. The problem calls for some reproof and rebuking and for exhorting Christians to a proper stewardship of their material possessions.

This is the kind of work that calls for exacting care or we end up compounding the problem we are trying to solve. God's means of getting results and the world's means of getting results are completely contrary to each other. The world has developed the matter of getting results into a science. You can take courses in it at universities, or learn it at a Carnegie Institute. And because the results are so spectacular, we may wonder if we aren't missing out on a good bet, conveniently forgetting that the Lord is as concerned about means as He is about results. In fact, results achieved by improper methods are a stench in His nostrils (Isaiah 1).

The huckster method of promoting stewardship is not unknown in the church. Attractive packaging, persuasive arguments, and repeated slogans are the trademarks of the huckster method of promotion as all viewers of TV commercials are painfully aware. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with attractive packaging, persuasive arguments, or even slogans such as "Missio Dei." In fact, we would soon be projecting an image like the Amish if we did not update our packaging of the Gospel and make it as attractive as possible with graphic arts and all. Our call obligates us to be all things to all men. But as every consumer knows, it may be the label that entices the eye of the buyer, but it's what's in the can that counts in the end. So it is also in the church in stewardship promotion. The package may appeal to the eye, but only the proper content can stir the heart.

We need to beware of the danger of trying to dignify worldly methods, adapt them to the church's need, and then look for spectacular results. We may well get them, but by constraint, not by love, and to the glory of the promoter, not to the glory of God. Paul, remember, did not employ any promotional gimmicks to raise funds for the needy, homeless, and hungry children in Jerusalem. Nor did he try to get results by encouraging a little friendly competition between Christians in northern Greece and southern Greece. He told what happened among the Macedonian Christians only so that he could teach Corinthian Christians something the proper principles of stewardship. Huckster gimmicks offer nothing that will build or encourage the new man. Indeed as employed by the world, they flirt with the old man, leaving him as complacent and contented and proud as ever.

Probably if we neglect to raise and answer the question here, someone will ask later whether our stewardship call presents an encouragement to tithing. Strangely enough, tithing seems to be receiving an ever wider endorsement within the Lutheran church. The question about the propriety of promoting the tithe is one which is adequately answered in the thesis of the Survey Commission which says that to achieve our objectives, we "commit ourselves to employ our total, combined resources" to God. Our stewardship call is one that urges us to strive for a 100% effort, not a 10% one. Tithing is a worthy goal for giving if it represents what we purpose in our hearts and is given in singlemindedness of purpose. But tithing can also lead to stagnation, if, when we set that as our goal, we think we have eliminated the sanctification gap between what we *are* giving and what we *could* be giving.

The practical perspective of our stewardship call requires that we focus on yet another unhappy approach to stewardship, one that is too often too prevalent among our people. And that is the timid approach. Isn't it so that we sometimes approach stewardship with an apologetic attitude as though we fear we are invading some private domain where even angels would fear to tread? The church has been condemned and

whipped so often for talking too much about money (and sometimes justifiably so) that we have developed a kind of stewardship complex.

Without question there is no more touchy subject with many of our people than the subject of giving. The reason it is touchy with some Christians is because they do not perceive the grace of Christian giving. Those who complain chronically that the church is always asking for money do not understand that God has a plan for providing financial gifts for the work of His kingdom. Their giving is often prompted by worldly considerations and motives like the giving of the unregenerate to the United Fund appeal. They give disproportionately, irregularly, and unwillingly, not “as unto God”, but as unto men. Their criticisms, and this is really sad, are usually an expression of their own guilt feelings about giving. But they suggest this is caused by pressures which the church applies rather than by a need on their part to give as God has prospered them. The fault is the church’s, not theirs, they insist in their ignorance of fundamental psychological principles. You can write it down as a rule of thumb, that when a man does not give or serve happily in the kingdom, he is indicating thereby that he has a deep spiritual problem. We need to examine our own hearts on this score. If we are hypersensitive to talk about Christian giving, we are not in a class with the Macedonians, or even the Corinthians. And if we tend at times to be critical of our Synod’s efforts to promote God-pleasing stewardship among our people, we need to ask carefully and considerately, “Is it my old Adam that’s reacting, or the new man in me?”

Conclusions

When St. Paul presented this matter of the stewardship call to the Corinthians, he pointed these Christians in the direction of Macedonia and Jerusalem. His purpose was to spotlight the need in Corinth for a more responsible stewardship life. Paul’s purpose in citing the Macedonian example together with the Jerusalem need was not to motivate, but to illustrate. (When it came time to motivate, he pointed in the direction of the manger and the cross.) Now in closing, I would like to venture something like that too, prefacing my subjective observations with the reminder that Paul was inspired while I am not.

If we read our history as a Synod carefully, we must humbly admit that stewardship has not been our forte, particularly with respect to the stewardship of giving. The record shows our giving to be a weakness of long standing. We can analyze it, and we can explain it, but we cannot excuse it. In explanation, we can cite our antecedents in the state church in Germany where taxes made offerings unnecessary. We can readily understand why our German forebears in this country did not place much emphasis on stewardship. The church in the new world called for the establishment of new methods. In general, the method that evolved was initially just another form of taxation, in some cases overt, in some cases more subtle. Some churches evaluated a man’s means and assessed a quota to be met. Some churches divided expenses equally among all families regardless of the donor’s degree of affluence or lack of it.

Systems of “taxation” were followed by an emphasis on needs. It is debatable whether that step was even a step in the right direction. At least it was a change. I can remember churches like that from boyhood days. Offering plates were used only when there was a need to be met. Members were classed as dues paying and non-dues paying, and the dues paying ones were assigned to one of three groups of contributors—lower,

middle, and upper. “The Lord hath need” was the magic, motivating word, as though somehow the good Lord were dependent upon us. Now, even with the advent of weekly offerings and envelopes, budget needs are sometimes still regarded as primary considerations suggesting that the needs specified in the budget have some bearing on what a Christian ought to give.

Moreover, we have not always been as precise and as explicit as we might have been in defining stewardship as the total involvement of the whole new man in the service of the Master. What you do with your time and your abilities is no less important to God than what you do with your material possessions. Yet I am sure that there are many in our churches who, when they hear the word stewardship, think only in terms of a Christian’s financial responsibility to their Lord. Our hymnal does not help much to correct such a short-sighted view of stewardship. The Stewardship section contains six hymns, as over against twelve in the Reformation section and thirty-three in the Redeemer section. And all six have to do with sharing our material blessings to spread the Gospel and to help the poor.

After a century of de-emphasis, stewardship theology is now surfacing in our Synod chiefly as a consequence of the situation with which God is confronting us. For more than a decade we were involved in an internal struggle with fidelity to the Word of God as the central issue. Articulating the theology of fellowship in an ecumenical age engaged our attention and our energies. Now that struggle is over, thank God, and a new era beckons. The emphasis is shifting from fellowship to stewardship. First we were called to be faithful, now we are being called to serve. The progression is a most natural one and is reflected also in the words of Paul to the Corinthians. After urging them to begin anew with the offering for the Jerusalem Christians, Paul continues, “Therefore, as ye abound in everything, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also”, the grace of giving (2 Cor. 8:7).

God is dealing with us in a similar manner in this hour of our history. Having tested our fidelity, He is now testing our sincerity. That is precisely how Paul put it to the Corinthians. “I am not commanding you”, he said. “I am only suggesting it after observing the eagerness of others to help. And here is the way for you to prove the sincerity of your love.” (2 Cor. 8:8) God does not insulate us from the world so that we can isolate ourselves from it. The insulation with which He keeps us warm on the inside does not let us become cold on the outside.

Isn’t it obvious what God is trying to do for us? And isn’t it in many ways a carbon copy of His dealings with Israel of old? The mighty miracle of deliverance is behind us. He parted the muddy theological waters in which others are now trapped and He let us escape. He has use for us. The new lands that need to be invaded and conquered for Christ now lie before us. Indonesia is calling, and India, and Mexico, all pleading “Come over and help us!” My county has a million and a half people—and only one Wisconsin Synod congregation.

Others almost as populous are still waiting for number one. It’s glorious, really glorious to survey the scene with the thought in mind that this is what we are privileged to do for God, we who “know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” But we cannot bog down in a futile effort to try to separate the mustard seed from leaven. We cannot be lengthening cords on the Synodical tent without strengthening the stakes that anchor it at Mequon, Watertown, New Ulm, and wherever else we have schools in all the way down to Kindergarten. We have got to have the confidence that God is not going to open any doors for us Synodically unless He has first

given to each of us individually the means to step into these doors. Our stewardship call is meant to remind us that the incredible affluence we enjoy is intended by God to enable us to serve Him not to enjoy the creaturely comforts of an alien world.

This is our shining hour. This is our hour of destiny as a people of God. This is no time for us to project to the world the image of an historical debating society for the preservation of the Lutheran Confessions. This is no time for us to remain introverted so that people snidely say of us that we've got the pure Gospel, and we are determined to keep it—for ourselves. This is a time to rise with our actions above our worldly concerns and involvements so that with our words we can convince people of the glories of the world to come. With the help of God we have proved we are stout on defense. Now by the grace of God it is time to show how aggressive we can be on offense.

There is one more thing, one more critically important thing. The shadows are lengthening and the darkness deepening. We are not living in the twilight anymore. We are living in the eleventh hour of the seventieth week. There is no time left for dilly dallying. There is a voice calling to us, an urgent voice, a familiar one we have come to know and love so well. "I know thy works, and thy labor and thy patience," it is saying, "and how thou canst not bear them which are evil; and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars; and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou are fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place except thou repent...(Rev. 2:2-5). Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it; for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word and hast not denied my name (Rev. 3:8).

That is our stewardship call. May we all, by the grace of God, hear it loud and clear, and be moved to action. For "to him that overcometh I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God." (Rev. 2:7)