

# Christian Stewardship: Our Part in God's Plan

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Brothers, take a moment and transport yourself back to the days of your boyhood, back to age four or five. Your father is busy in his basement workroom knocking together a new birdhouse or bookcase or... whatever. And you are watching. After a bit, he looks up from his work and sees the glint of longing and anticipation in your eyes, and with the loving telepathy that is a frequent by-product of parenthood he knows exactly what you are thinking.

With a grin, he holds out the hammer and says, "Here, you take it. I'll hold the nail and you drive it in." Fumbling with excitement, you grab the tool and, with tongue-between-the-teeth concentration so you'll be sure to do your very best, you take a few hearty, if ill-aimed whacks. Maybe the nail goes in and maybe it bends over; maybe your dad gets away with his thumb in tact and maybe he doesn't. But that's not really what matters. Because, in a moment, you are bounding up the stairs in a flush of excitement and announcing at the top of your lungs to Mom or Sis or anyone who'll listen, "Daddy let me help!"

What pure joy! At that moment, you're not thinking at all about how great a contribution you may have made to the project or what effect your work may have had on the eventual outcome. What filled you to bursting with excitement and happiness was that your dad had loved you and trusted you enough to include you in what he was doing, to give you a part in his plan.

Now you may be asking yourself, "What has all this to do with Christian stewardship?" I put it to you, brothers, that it has everything to do with it. I'd like to suggest that the preceding paragraphs might serve as a modern parable of Christian stewardship, in which the father is God, the child is us, and the hammer... is the trust that God displays toward each and every Christian steward. The lesson of the parable then, is that the anticipation, the excitement, the joy of that little boy in doing what his father gave him to do is—or, at least, can be—ours when we come to know Christian stewardship for what it really is: Our Part in God's Plan.

I don't know whether there is a right way to approach a topic as long, broad and deep as "Christian Stewardship." If there is, it probably has evaded me. For want of a better approach, therefore, the grand old Catechetical Method has suggested itself. (If it was good enough for Luther... etc.) This paper asks and then attempts to answer eight questions concerning the issue of stewardship.

By the time we are through, you may well be in favor of re-titling the paper "Long Answers to Short Questions." I confess that I seldom use one word where ten will do. However, please do not carry away the impression that because some of these answers are lengthy they are presented as being exhaustive. Far from it. (Exhausting, perhaps, but not exhaustive.) Much more could be said in responding to each of these questions and, in my opinion, more should be said... but we'll get to that later.

Finally, when all is said and done, it may be that the questions this paper raises will strike you as being more important than the answers it suggests. And that's just fine. If this paper does no more than to goad you into asking these questions yourself, to looking Christian Stewardship straight in the eye and asking, "What are you, really?", then the effort and the ink will be well spent.

Without further ado, then, let us turn to:

## Question #1—What is Stewardship?

"Steward" and "stewardship" are words that have nearly disappeared from common use outside the context of church life. Witness the fact that those words, which appear in eleven different instances and over thirty times in the King James Version, are used in only one instance and appear only four times in the New International. It appears that we here find ourselves possessors of a pair of significant theological "buzz words" that have all but lost their objective meaning. Of course, as "professionals" accustomed to freely tossing off such gems as "justification" and "sanctification," this further extension of our theological unspeak may not

trouble us. But It may trouble our people, who have the disturbing habit of wanting to know what we are talking about even when we are not sure.

The translators of the NIV, with a high degree of consistency, have chosen to substitute the words “manager” and “management” for “steward” and “stewardship.” Whether this is an improvement or just a change, you may judge for yourself. Other versions often seem to opt for the consistency of inconsistency, rendering these same words almost randomly as: foreman, trustee, servant, agent, officer, dispenser, accountant, bailiff and paymaster.

Clearly, there is no answer here. If we want to play this Bible word game, we will at least need to go back to the original words.

There are six words or phrases in Scripture that the KJV renders as “steward.” Four occur in the Old Testament:  $\lambda(a r\#\$e)j \#\$)ihf$  (Ge 43);  $\tau yiba\% \lambda(a r\#\$e)j$  (Ge 44);  $q\#\&eme Nbe@$  (Ge 15); and  $K\#\&a$  (I Ch 28).

The last two of these are almost certainly just weak translations in the KJV.  $q\#\&eme Nbe@$ , literally, ‘son of acquisition,’ is how Abraham describes his servant, Eliezer, who stood to inherit Abraham’s estate because the patriarch at that time wasn’t one. The NIV handles the verse in question this way: But Abraham said, “O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and *the one who will inherit my estate* is Eliezer of Damascus?” More words but less confusion.

The  $K\#$  was apparently the holder of a certain military rank or designation in the army of King David. The NIV calls him an “official.” Other versions simply speak of “the one in charge.”

The remaining two Hebrew references,  $\lambda(a r\#\$e)j \#\$)ihf$  and  $\tau yiba\% \lambda(a r\#\$e)j$ , are probably two forms of the same term. They mean, respectively, “the man who is over” and “the one over the house.” Both are clearly rooted in the idea of full or at least partial management or supervision of a household.

One of the two New Testament words to be translated “steward” is  $e\theta\pi i\&t\theta\pi o$ , literally, “one to whom a thing has been entrusted.” The word seems to have had an official connotation and in classical usage was, at times, taken to mean “governor” or “procurator.” Indeed, one of its two New Testament usages is in reference to an official in the court of King Herod. The word is significant for us in its elements of “a trust or commission from one in authority” and “accountability to that higher authority,” but since its New Testament usage is limited (twice) and narrow, it is less important for our consideration here.

The other Greek word for “steward” in the New Testament is  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta j$ . From it is derived the only word in Scripture to be translated “stewardship”:  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta a$ . These two terms occur in the great majority of Scripture’s direct references to stewardship,  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta j$  being used nine times and  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta a$  three times.

As with  $\tau yiba\% \lambda(a r\#\$e)j$  in the Old Testament, these Greek terms again refer to service within a household. They are compounds of  $\theta i\theta k\theta j$ , meaning “house,” and  $n\theta\&\mu\theta i\theta n$ , meaning “to divide, distribute or apportion.”  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta i\theta a$  (stewardship) has various meanings in classical Greek but its most direct application is to the administration or management of a household for example, in matters of food and drink. The  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta j$  (steward) was the one entrusted with managing the business affairs of the household. The word often referred to a slave who was given responsibility over certain money, property, goods or other slaves. The word, then, carries the idea of a “trustee,” someone to whom something of value is entrusted.<sup>1</sup>

With these roots, it is not hard to see why the KJV scholars would, in their day, have chosen the word “steward” as the closest English equivalent of  $\tau yiba\% \lambda(a r\#\$e)$  and  $\theta i\theta k\theta n\theta\&\mu\theta j$ :

In early medieval days, the sty warden, or *stigward* (Old English from which our word “steward” is derived) was overseer of his lord’s livestock. But before long the term broadened, and he became overseer of all his master’s goods and, yet later, an officer of the royal household. But never in history

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled from: Otto Michel, “Article on the Root  $\theta i\theta k$ - and Compounds,” in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich, ed. (Ref. G. Kittel), Vol. 5. pp119-159. And J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, “ $\theta i\theta k\theta j$  and Compounds,” *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, pp440-443.

did the steward own the things with which he worked or which he invested; he was always responsible to his master for his care of them. So, a steward is a trustee of something that belongs to someone else.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of this “trustee-ship” is further elaborated in a number of our Lord’s parables in which He speaks of the roll and function of stewards (Mt 18; 25; Lk 12; 16; 19). At times without even mentioning stewards directly, Jesus’ parables help to elucidate the key concepts of stewardship:

Stewardship in the parables involves three critical elements: master, servant and estate. ...There are also three stewardship motifs of faithfulness to the master, wisdom and the servant’s accountability to the master for his actions. These motifs might be better understood today as: freedom, responsibility and accountability in our lives before God. The common themes are quite clear, whatever the differences in the parables. The master entrusts oversight and management of his estate to his steward during his absence, while retaining ownership of the property. The steward is the designated representative of the master and is responsible for managing all the owner’s resources until he returns. He oversees the estate in genuine freedom without any detailed instructions. But he is expected to be faithful to the master, to act wisely, and, in unexpected situations, to make an independent creative response. The critical point of the parables is that the steward is ultimately accountable to the master for his exercise of stewardship trust.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the background of the key words, along with the commentary of the parables, we may say that *stewardship* is basically a trust, received from one of higher authority, a trust over valued items that are not one’s own, a trust that allows the steward certain degrees of freedom and discretion in the use of those items but a trust that leaves the steward responsible for their use and accountable for the outcome to their owner.

To draw this definition into the scheme of life, we have only to identify the principals:

- The Owner:** This is easy. Scripture couldn’t be more succinct—*The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it; the world and all who live in it. (Ps 24:1)*<sup>4</sup>
- What He Owns:** Again, Scripture makes it simple. God claims everything—*The land is mine...(Le 25:23); ...the cattle are mine (Ps 50:10); The silver is mine, the a gold is mine (Hag 2:8); Every soul belongs to me (Eze 18:4); The whole earth is mine (Ex 19:5)*
- What He Gives:** I do not wish to slight Scripture here but, knowing Dr. Luther’s faithfulness to the Word, I think we may safely quote his First Article explanation:  
*I believe that God has made me and every creature, and that He gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my mind and all my abilities.*  
*And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, cattle and all I own, and all that I need to keep my body and life, and by defending me against all danger and guarding and protecting me from all evil.*<sup>5</sup>
- To this full yet only partial list of God’s gifts we must surely add:  
*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son... (Jn 3:16)I and, ...He has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 to 5:19).*

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<sup>2</sup> Turner Clinard, *Responding to God: The Life of Stewardship*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Cunningham, *Creative Stewardship*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Holy Scriptures in this paper are taken from the *New International Version of the Holy Bible*, as referenced below:

*The Holy Bible, New International Version*, New York International Bible Society, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> David P. Kuske (ed.), *Luther’s Catechism*, “The First Article,” (Milwaukee: WELS/BPE, 1982), p.139.

**To Whom He Gives:** The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made. ...The eyes of all look to You, (O Lord) and You give them their food at the proper time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. (Ps 145:9,15; Cf: Ps 33:5; 104:14,24, Mt 6:25f)

Since all that God gives He still owns, what He gives is given in trust. All who receive are holders of that trust. Since, as Scripture says, all people are receivers, we see that all people are stewards.

That fact is inescapable. From the very first gift a person receives from God—human life—that person is placed under a bond of stewardship before God, allowed by God the freedom to use all that he receives but also made responsible under God for how he uses it and held accountable before God for the outcome.

Stewardship, then, is not a matter of choice. All are stewards, whether they choose to be or not. The only distinction to be made lies between good stewards and bad stewards.

For the sake of clarity, let it be stated that one does not need to be a Christian to be a steward. However, one does need to be a Christian to be a good steward. That fact requires us to become more specific in our inquiry and ask:

### **Question #2—What is Christian Stewardship?**

Since we have already seen that all people are stewards, it might be very easy to answer this question by saying that all believers are Christian stewards and what they do with what God has given them is Christian stewardship. That, of course, would be true. But not only is that answer far too short for my tastes, but it also fails to consider what I take to be a very important dynamic of Christian stewardship.

Though some of the stewardship parables of Jesus help to reveal, by illustration, the characteristics of Christian stewards, they do not (nor were they intended to) leave us with as full or rich an understanding of Christian stewardship as we might like. Until we discover that, it is less likely that we will grasp the full message of those parables.

A portion of Scripture that is much more to the point is Paul's beautiful letter to the Christians in and around Ephesus. By a creative use of the Greek language the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to set down in that letter a very vivid and instructive look at what Christian stewardship is all about.

As we read Ephesians, we detect a thread of thought that runs through the letter, a thread that Paul begins to unwind in the very first verses:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for giving us through Christ every spiritual benefit as citizens of heaven! For consider what He has done—before the foundation of the world He chose us to be, in Christ, His children, holy and blameless in His sight. He planned, in His love, that we should be adopted as His own children through Jesus Christ—this was His will and pleasure... (Eph 1:3-5a - Phillips)

Immediately, Paul directs the Ephesians to the fact that God had an eternal plan, a plan that centered in Jesus Christ, a plan that was aimed at bringing people Into God's spiritual household by faith in Jesus Christ.

The wonderful Good News that Paul had to share with the Ephesians, as with us, is that the plan of God—what we knowingly refer to as His *plan* of salvation—was not just for a few, not just for the Jew. It was for all people!

*In all His wisdom and insight God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan He had already decided to complete by means of Christ. God's plan, which He will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and earth, with Christ as Head! (Eph 1:8b-10 - TEV)*

What relates Paul's Gospel message to the Ephesians to the theme of our paper is that the key word in these early verses, the word translated in v10 as "plan" by the TEV<sup>6</sup> is οἰκονομία—"stewardship." Paul, by inspiration, is here describing God's eternal plan of salvation in Christ as God's "stewardship," that is, His scheme for managing (νεμεῖν) the affairs of His spiritual household (οἰκοῦν).

To extend this illustration of God graciously reaching out to bring undeserving sinners into His household of faith and forgiveness in Christ, Paul repeatedly in this epistle refers to believers either as "children" and "heirs" of God (1:5,14,18; 3:6,14; 5:1,8) or as members of God's spiritual *household*. οἰκοῦν and its compounds become key words in the letter. Consider the closing verses of chapter two in which Paul reveals the results of God's saving οἰκονομία (plan) for the Gentile Ephesians:

*Now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ...For through Him we both (i.e. Jews & Gentiles) have access to the Father by the same Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens (παροικοῦν—"those outside the house"), but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's own household (οἰκοῦν), built on (ἐποικοδομεῖ) the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building (οἰκοῦν) is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him, you too are being built together (συνοικοδομεῖ) to become a dwelling (κατοικητήριον) in which God lives by His Spirit. (Eph 2:13,18-22 - NIV)*

Then Paul advances from showing the Ephesians the benefits of God's plan for them to describing the practical effects of that plan in their lives. In chapters four through six Paul gives general admonitions and encouragements as well as specific directions regarding marriage, children, employment and the use of the Means of Grace and prayer. In these chapters, the thought-thread of God's οἰκοῦν—His spiritual house—and God's οἰκονομία—His plan for that household—is drawn on by the repeated use of οἰκοδομεῖ—literally, "to build up (the house)" but also, figuratively, "to edify" (4:12,16,29). This up-building or edification of God's household of believers is clearly the on-going purpose of His saving plan.

The verse of Ephesians that must serve as the fulcrum for our understanding of Christian stewardship, however, occurs in chapter three, verse two. There Paul writes: *Surely, you have heard that God, in His grace, has given me this work to do for your good. (TEV)* The underlined words in that verse are the TEV's treatment for οἰκονομία. What this shows us is a second use of the same key word, within the same context but with a slight but significant difference in meaning. In 1:10, Paul speaks of God's οἰκονομία—His eternal plan of salvation that God intended to carry out in drawing together His spiritual household in Christ. Here in 3:2, Paul speaks of the οἰκονομία that God had given to him; that is, the part that God was allowing Paul to play in the actualization of His saving plan.

Having been directly called by God, Paul knew precisely what part God had for him in His plan: *I am less than the least of all God's people, yet God gave me this privilege of taking to the Gentiles the Good News of the infinite riches of Christ, and to make all men see how God's secret plan is to be put into effect. (Eph 3:8,9a - TEV)* Yet Paul knew that he served God's plan and carried out his part in it not only by the words he spoke but by all that he did. That's why he referred to himself as "a servant of the Gospel" (3:7), "the prisoner of Christ Jesus" (3:1) and "a prisoner for the Lord" (4:1)—not just because of his captivity in Rome but because of the complete devotion of his entire life to God's plan.

This is what Christian Stewardship meant for Paul. The apostle reveals that God, by grace in Christ:

...has not only made him a *member of God's household* (οἰκοῦν) but has also made him a part of his Christ-centered *plan* (οἰκονομία) for *building up* (οἰκοδομεῖ) His house. God has thus made Paul a *manager, administrator or steward* (οἰκονομοῦν) of His plan. All that Paul does as a member

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<sup>6</sup> Note: "Plan" also the translation of RSV, NEB, Berkley, Phillips & Anderson.

of God's household of faith in following or serving God's plan is Paul's *stewardship* (οἰκονομία). Since Jesus Christ stands at the center of God's plan, since the redemptive work of Christ is the reason Paul has a part in that plan and since Christ's love for Paul is Paul's motivation for serving that plan, what Paul does is truly *Christian stewardship*. It follows, however, that to be a faithful steward of God, Paul's actions must follow God's plan and serve to edify/build up God's household, the Church. Where Paul fails at this, his stewardship is no longer faithful or Christian.<sup>7</sup>

What draws us and all Christians into this understanding of Christian stewardship is Paul's indication in Ephesians that all (Jews and Gentiles alike) who are brought to faith in Christ are thus brought into God's household (οἰκοῦντες—2:19), and are built together (συνοικοδομεῖται—2:22) in Christ by the Spirit. Paul thereby implies that all believers likewise have a part in God's plan. God has entrusted them (us) not merely with things, but with a purpose, a function, a goal. "In Christ" (a phrase that occurs dozens of times in *Ephesians*), believers are to live their whole lives differently. No longer are Christians to live for themselves but for God and in the service of His saving plan (2:10; 4:1,14,15,25-6:20).

It is in this much fuller sense, then, that all believers are stewards of God and all that they do as believers is their Christian stewardship.

In case we might wonder whether this is reading too much into Paul's words, it is worth noting that Peter makes the very same point in his first epistle: (1 *Each one should use whatever gift he has received, faithfully administering (or, as a faithful administrator of—MPM) God's grace in its various forms.* Pe 4:10 - NIV) The underlined words, once again, are translations of οἰκονομία. Peter, like Paul, bears out that God's grace brings to each believer an οἰκονομία, a special stewardship, a part in the carrying out of God's plan. The parts God may have us play may take various forms, requiring a variety of gifts, talents, abilities and resources, which God likewise supplies. But no believer is left out. Each is a member of God's household (οἰκοῦντες) by faith in Christ and each one is given a part to play (οἰκονομία) in God's plan for up-building that household of faith.

In this light the pictures of Jesus' parables take on fresher and brighter color as we see them as illustrations of our part in our heavenly Father's plan. How much easier it is to apply Jesus' habitual opening line "The kingdom of heaven is like..." (Mt 13:44;18:23;20:1;25:14;Lk19:11) when we see that what follows is a lesson concerning our God-given function within that kingdom. And how much broader our application of those parables becomes when it can extend beyond the *what* of Christian stewardship—the prudence, wisdom, diligence, faithfulness—to the *why*, namely, because our prudence, wisdom, diligence and faithfulness are serving God's saving plan.

This is what makes *Christian* stewardship so different and distinct from the stewardship incumbent upon the unbeliever. The unbeliever may indeed recognize the need for good stewardship, at least in certain areas (ecology of natural resources for example). But for the unbeliever, stewardship is only an obligation. Its power is most often the threats of the law. Its motivation is either fear (of loss or punishment) or pride (in accomplishment or personal fame). Stewardship, at best, is only a peripheral aspect of the unbeliever's life. And it is an aspect entirely regulated by the unbeliever's own ideas and opinions.

For the Christian, stewardship is and must be something entirely different. As Paul's letter teaches us, *Christian* stewardship is not merely an obligation but a privilege, a blessed opportunity from God, an evidence of His continuing grace and so, for the Christian a source of continuing joy and satisfaction.

The power for and inducement to *Christian* stewardship are found, not in the force of the Law or in the sinful inclinations of natural man, but in Christ and in His Gospel. It can well be said that Christian stewardship proceeds both from and toward Christ. *From* Christ since it is because of Christ and His redemptive work that we sinners are stewards of God with a part in His plan (Eph 2:1-10) and *toward* Christ since it is to serve, glorify and show our love and thanks to Christ that we function as Christian stewards (Eph 5:20).

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<sup>7</sup> "A New Look At Christian Stewardship," study helps, (1985), p.3

Christian stewardship can never be left on the periphery of a believer's life because, as Paul has shown, our place in God's household and our part in God's plan involves every aspect of our lives and every blessing, spiritual and material, that He brings into them (Eph 4:7,15,17f).

And, finally, Christian stewardship can never be left to the regulation of our own sinful human ideas and opinions because, as it was for Paul, so it is for every believer—the plan, ultimately, is God's and so, to be faithful Christian stewards within that plan, we too need to live and act as believers according to God's direction (Eph 4:20-24; 6:10-17).

What, then, is *Christian* stewardship? It is the opportunity God gives to every believer to serve the cause of the Gospel by living his life within God's world according to God's will as revealed in Jesus Christ. More briefly, Christian stewardship is the part God allows each believer to play in carrying forward His plan of salvation.

What a grand and glorious picture that is of our rolls as Christian stewards! But one has cause to wonder how many of the people who sit in our pews (or folding chairs) have been led to see that picture clearly.

From the informal survey work I did in my own congregation and among the members of a number of our other Florida congregations, the response I got to the request for a definition of "stewardship" came out consistently surprising as if the word ought to be spelled: *\$TEWARD\$HIP*. It would seem that R.B. Cunningham's observation in the introduction to his book, *Creative Stewardship*, may have application in our midst:

The scene is a typical, average-sized American city. As a family drives past their church, they notice the bulletin board. It announces "Christian Stewardship" as the title of next Sunday's sermon. "Oh," sighs the husband, "it looks like the pastor is going to preach on money again!"

That incident is more the rule than the exception. When many American Christians hear the word stewardship, its sound immediately releases a flood of thoughts about budgets, tithing, financial campaigns, pledge cards, offering envelopes and catchy slogans. It also triggers conflicting emotions.

Such reactions are predictable, given the frequent American tendency to use the word mainly in the context of financial needs and fund-raising. No wonder for many people the word reverberates with the sounds of cash registers, promotion, programming and selective economic application. The irony is that stewardship is a common word in the vocabulary of American churches, but a word subject to superficial definition, trivialization and misunderstanding. The damaging result of limiting stewardship primarily to financial concerns is that the real nature of Christian giving cannot be understood in isolation from the wider horizons of stewardship. Consequently, many people never come to see the far-reaching implications of stewardship for how they live all of life.<sup>8</sup>

We may not be happy that our people think of their part in God's plan only as *\$TEWARD\$HIP*. We may even feel sure we are telling them what is right when we preach our stewardship sermons and conduct our stewardship Bible studies. But ask yourself: If the most visible functions of our Synod's Stewardship Board continue to be sending out reports on offering receipts and materials for the solicitation of funds; if the primary (or sole?) function we allow to our congregational stewardship committees is to formulate and fund the annual budget; if the part of our annual stewardship program that relates most directly and personally to our members is that which talks about their church offerings; if we save our best, most dramatic and heart-touching stewardship messages for those times when we are asking our members to give... can we be surprised if our people learn more about stewardship from what we do than from what we say?

Christian stewardship is so much more than money, so much more than giving. The prophet Micah knew that all the way back in his day. He wrote:

*With what shall I come before the Lord*

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<sup>8</sup> Cunningham, p.15

*And bow down before the gracious God?  
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,  
With calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
With ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has shown you, O man, what is good..  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
And to walk humbly with your God! (Mic 6:6-8)*

The prophet's point is that the kind of response God wishes from His people is more than sacrifice, more than giving in any amount. It is a whole-life response God seeks. And that is what Christian stewardship is: our whole-life response to God's grace in giving us a part in His eternal plan.

Our people need to hear that. They need to be taught that they are Christian stewards. They need to learn what it means to be Christian stewards. And they need to be shown:

### **Question #3—What is Required of Christian Stewards?**

As much as I might like to, there just is no way to compose a long answer to this question since Scripture answers it with just one word: Faithfulness. We recall the familiar wording of the KJV: It is required in stewards that a man be found *faithful*. (1 Co 4:2)

That one word, faithfulness, at once removes from our consideration of Christian stewardship all discussion of "quotas" and "fair shares," all talk of "statistical averages" and "projected minimums and maximums." When such matters come up, the subject has been changed. We then are no longer talking about Christian stewardship but only about our very fallible human methods for recording and evaluating the fruits of Christian stewardship. That is an important distinction to maintain, lest we slip into thinking that what Paul actually wrote was "It is required in stewards that a man conform to our annual projections and stated trends."

All that God requires of stewards, and all that we have the right to require, is faithfulness.

But that leaves us with one of the most challenging and important questions to confront the Christian steward:

### **Question #4—What is Faithfulness?**

The dictionaries define faithfulness with words like "reliability," "loyalty," "trustworthiness," and "adherence to one's words or promises." To get beyond the dictionaries to find a fuller answer, however, we need to ask a few more questions. Questions like:

**A) Faithfulness to whom?** Without question, our faithfulness as Christian stewards is owed, not merely to pastor or congregation or Synod or church, but above all, to God. Jesus regularly introduces His stewardship parables, for example, by announcing that they are illustrations of the kingdom of God, where naturally God is the Master. It only follows that, as God is the One who allows us a part in His plan, it is to God that we owe faithfulness in playing our part.

Paul acknowledges this in writing to the Corinthians about his οἰκονομία from God. He tells them:

*So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted (οἰκονομοῖ) with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust (οἰκονομοῖ) must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judge judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.  
(1 Co 4:1-4)*



Faithfulness to God, then, means faithfulness to His will, faithfulness in following God's plan. Jesus told His disciples:

*Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in His household, to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. (Mt 24:45,46)*

In other words, the faithful steward is the one who does what his master desires him to do. As Paul made clear to the Ephesians (as well as to the Corinthians - 1 Co 9:17 - and the Colossians - Col 1:25), being a faithful οἰκονομῶν under God means faithfully following God's οἰκονομία.

Since it is in His inspired Word that God makes His will and plan known to men, we have here a new dimension added to our need for careful study and continuing faithfulness to God's Word (Je 15:15; Jn 8:31; Ro 16:16; Col 3:16; 1 Pe 2:2). But, then...

**B) Faithfulness in what?** We tend to think of a steward's faithfulness only in terms of what he does. But, for Christian stewards, faithfulness must actually begin in what has been done for them. We might call it faithfulness in receiving.

This begins with recognizing in faith who is the Giver of all things. James writes: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. (Ja 1:17)* God above is the Source of all that we are and have. We would have nothing of which to be stewards, nothing with which to be faithful, if God did not supply it.

Faithful receiving then continues as we realize in faith why God gives all things. Jesus told His disciples: *(Your Father in heaven) causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Mt 5:45)* God gives His gifts objectively and impartially, out of His grace, without an eye to our own efforts or merits. Even God's greatest gift, His one and only Son, was sent because of God's love for the world.

As Christian stewards, we have reason to be especially aware and appreciative of this grace of God. Paul told the Ephesians: *(God) predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Christ Jesus, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace which He has freely given us in the one that He loves (Eph 1:4-6)*. God graciously gave us a Savior and He also gives us the grace to trust that Savior for our salvation (Eph 2:8,9). Hence, our faith and our faithfulness as Christian stewards begins and ends in God's grace.

Finally, faithfulness in receiving involves accepting in faith that God will continue supplying what we need. This is one of the biggest faith-hurdles the Christian steward must overcome. No matter how much of anything God may allow a person to have, the Old Adam can still conjure up the anxious fear that it may not be enough. So the steward withholds from God in order to provide for himself. But if we receive God's blessings faithfully, we will recognize, first, that what God desires is that we withhold nothing, surrender everything of ourselves to Him, so that He may provide for us. Then, second, we will recognize that God does just that. Near the end of his life, King David wrote: *I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread (Ps 37:25)*. When we rely on God's goodness and withhold nothing from His service, we may be confident that He who has so graciously provided for us in the past will continue His providence to us in the future, for: God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (2 Co 9:8)

Having learned to be faithful in *receiving* God's blessings, the Christian steward will be in a much better position to be faithful in the active phases of Christian stewardship, what Jesus' parables often picture as the *holding* and *investing* of God's blessings.

Because God's plan and our part in it involves much more than just our own individual wants and needs, or even just those of our family, our church, our Synod, we have far more reason to make the most of whatever

God provides us. This must mean not only employing all that God brings into our lives in keeping with His will but also doing so to be very best of our ability and to the extent of our opportunity. Turner Clinard writes in *Responding to God*:

Faithfulness at the level of holding, using and investing means primarily *honesty* and *dependability*. Some of us are not honest. When we take things that are gifts of God and act as though they are not, using them to our own pleasure or aggrandizement, we are being dishonest. Christian stewards will not do that because they have received faithfully; hence, they will use honestly, being moved by the grace of God and desiring only to please Him. Then, many who would like to be considered Christian stewards are not faithful because they are not dependable. ...If you have done less than your best, if you have used less than your full ability, if you have neglected opportunities, if you have not tried earnestly to discharge your responsibilities, you have not been faithful. You have not met Christ's requirement.<sup>9</sup>

It becomes evident that "faithfulness" for the Christian steward involves not only his actions but also his attitude and approach to the way he lives and conducts himself. The faithful steward acknowledges that all he is and has comes from God and he desires to use all he has accordingly. In all aspects of his day-to-day life and in the fullest sense of his Savior's words, he, first, desires and then seeks to *let (his) light shine before men, that they may see his good works and glorify his Father in heaven. (Mt 5:16)*

Because of sin, the faithful steward may at times fail or fall short of doing what he desires. (Ro 7:19) The second servant in the parable of minas (Lk 19) no doubt desired to earn ten minas like his fellow servant but, for reasons we are not told, he earned only five. But the king does not fault that servant for falling short of his fellow, for his desire to be faithful has its evidence in the fruits he did bear.

Though a faithful steward may fail in what he desires to do, he will not fail in his desire to do it. When the will fails, there unfaithfulness is the result. (Cf the unfaithful servants in Mt 25:24 and Lk 19:20) Unfaithfulness, then, is actually a failure of the will, not of deeds. And since, in Christian stewards, the will is guided and empowered by the Word, faithfulness in Christian stewards is actually a measure of the Spirit, not of substance.

That is why degree of faithfulness ought never be confused with degree of fruitfulness. A faithful Christian steward will certainly be a fruitful Christian steward. Jesus does promise: *He thic abides in me and I in him, the same will bring forth much fruit. (Jn 15:5)* But how much fruit may depend on many things outside the steward's own faithfulness.

When we study Jesus' parables that relate to the activity of stewards, we consistently find that praise is given by the master not for the amount of new income, not for the quantity of fruits, but for the proven desire to be faithful in the use of what has been given. Even when quantity of fruit is spoken of as a "requirement," as in Luke 12:47,48 (*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded... etc.*), still the steward's faithfulness is not being judged by any specific amount of fruits but only by adherence to the master's will (12:43) and in proportion to what has been received (12:48). So, let it never be said that requiring "faithfulness" is God's way of demanding results.

What, then, is faithfulness?

- 1) **Faithfulness is God-first-ness**—It makes God and His will for our lives our pre-eminent concern.
- 2) **Faithfulness is grace-awareness**—It recognizes that all we have comes from God because of His love, not our merit. Above all, it sees God's saving love in Christ Jesus and seeks to reflect that love in living. (1 in 4:19)
- 3) **Faithfulness is honesty, especially self-honesty**—It acknowledges every gift that God has given and seeks to employ each fully and righteously. (Ja 1:17)
- 4) **Faithfulness is consistency**—It involves not a succession of occasional "special efforts" but rather is committed to a continuous, day-by-day pattern of using God's blessings to serve God's plan.

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<sup>9</sup> Clinard, p.36.

5) **Faithfulness is desire**—It is, first and foremost, the attitude of the faith-filled heart that is directed by God’s Word to follow God’s will. (2 Co 8:12)

6) **Faithfulness is fruitfulness**—It is impossible for faithful Christian stewardship not to be fruitful. It will always be so, not always by human standards but always in God’s eyes, and not because of the effort put forth by the steward but because of the blessing promised by God upon all who employ His gifts according to His will. (Jn 15:5)

God’s requirement of faithfulness, then, is both very comforting and very challenging for the Christian steward. It is comforting because it assures the steward that God does not compare him with anyone else or expect him to match anyone else’s level of performance. As God has given each steward his own individual and personal part in His plan, so God views each steward individually and personally, with the desire only that he do his very best with all that God gives him. (2 Co 8:12)

“Faithfulness” is also very challenging, however, because it calls upon the steward to employ every blessing God gives in a God-pleasing and God-serving way (1 Co 10:31; Ro 12:1). That is a wide-ranging and far-reaching requirement, especially when we consider:

### **Question #5—Of What are We Christian Stewards?**

In surveying and summarizing the objects of our Christian stewardship, many of us still appreciate the convenient short-hand of the “3 T’s:” time, talent and treasure. There is always the danger, of course, that short-hand may become too short or too simple. We dare not forget or fail to communicate that Christian stewardship touches every aspect of our lives, not just those that begin with the letter “T.” Even such intangibles as our relationships with other people, opportunities that God places before us, situations into which He leads us, even thoughts and ideas He allows to occur to us, are all objects of our Christian stewardship.

If we can employ the 3-T outline to communicate the comprehensive character of Christian stewardship, then by all means let’s use it. But let us be very careful that we do not sacrifice completeness for the sake of convenience.

Also, let us be careful that in practical application our people are not perceiving that outline as: TIME, TALENTS, **TREASURE**. How we use our money and material possessions is indeed an element of our Christian stewardship but it is not nearly the most important.

Perhaps, to aid in preserving the proper perspective, we might add a fourth “T” to our 3-T outline; “T” for Truth, meaning the Word of God. Then let us make sure that the way our people view the outline is: **TRUTH**, TIME, TALENT, TREASURE. For, in our Christian lives, our stewardship of God’s revealed Word ought assuredly to be our first and greatest concern.

Just as Paul knew from Christ’s direct call that preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles was the specific part in God’s plan the Lord intended Paul to fill, so all believers may know that the faithful use of God’s Word is directly involved in their part in God’s plan. For all believers have a direct commission from God to that effect: *(God) has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as if God were making His appeal through us.* (2 Co 5:19,20)

God has put His Gospel into our hands and into our hearts, that we might use it and share it... use it to edify ourselves within His household of faith, and share it to up-build God’s household by drawing others to faith. That role falls to every believer, to every Christian steward, for Jesus said to all: *Go! And make disciples of all nations...* (Mt 28:20)

We speak often about the critical importance of the work of evangelism. See how the whole concept of evangelism is personalized for our people when, presented as an aspect of their Christian stewardship, their personal part in God’s great plan. Harvey Potthoff writes:

Evangelism is transformed in the light of stewardship. Too often, so-called evangelism is little more than institutional promotion or public relations, a technique for increasing church membership. ...To see the Christian life in terms of stewardship is to move into a deepened view of evangelism. Evangelism is

a reaching out to share what has been received as a precious gift of new life. It is to witness and to invite. It is to go forth to identify with persons where they are... It is to invite persons into a new life and into the fellowship of that new life.<sup>10</sup>

But we can go one step further. If evangelism is personalized by relating it as an aspect of stewardship, consider how stewardship is dynamized when we present it with an evangelical rather than an economic orientation. Waldo Werning, one of the most powerful and prolific writers on the matter of Christian stewardship, addresses the stewardship of the Gospel and relates it directly to the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers:

Chosen of God and precious, we Christians are “an holy priesthood... to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Christ Jesus, ...to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

God has set us apart for a holy task and has given us priestly pulpits from which we present the Good News of His mercy and love to others. The Christian’s home is his pulpit, so is his place of work, so are his recreational activities and his social contacts. In one way or another, the Christian effects everyone with whom he comes into contact.

The Christian’s pulpit is filled by providing the Word of Christ: by a mother teaching her children a Sunday School lesson, a father conducting the family devotion, a child studying the school lessons well, a neighbor showing her love toward an unfortunate person, a working man giving honest labor every day, a homemaker showing a pleasant attitude in all her work, a couple planning together to build their home on Christ, a loyal citizen influencing his government and his political party to make a constructive impact, a businessman’s performing his work honestly and giving full measure, a church member working to advance Christ’s kingdom, a family showing kindness to those who experience violence and inequities, and a shut-in’s prayer for the Spirit’s blessing upon all those priests in their many positions throughout the world.

The life of a church is not only what takes place on Sunday morning, and stewardship is not only what is done in church programs. The church is not brought out of the world one morning a week with a hope of sterilizing members for another week of contamination. 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 of 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, in their total lives.

We have an ambassadorship that covers the social, political and economic areas of our lives as well as the spiritual. The Scriptures do not teach that church tasks are sacred while every day tasks are non-sacred; we have an all-embracing purpose for our lives, a unity of the spiritual and the material. As a Christian, you are never allowed to step out of your personal pulpit. You either preach for Christ or against Christ. There is no point where you may allow yourself to follow your own sinful nature, not even for a fling of several hours or for continuing a little habit that offends Christ. The Christian life—the stewardship life—is to be a consistent proclamation of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

I have underlined that last sentence because in it, I think, we find the answer to Question #5: Of What Are We Christian Stewards? We are Christian stewards of each and every moment of our Christian lives!

When we come to see how Christian stewardship lays claim to a believer’s entire life, however, we must recognize how much greater that makes our tasks, as pastors, of leading not only ourselves but also our people toward the practice of true Christian stewardship.

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<sup>10</sup> Harvey H. Potthoff, “The Mission of the Church,” from *Theological Perspectives for Stewardship*, Edw. Briggs (ed.), General Board, UMC, (1969), p.123.

<sup>11</sup> Waldo J. Werning, *Christian Stewards Confronted and Committed*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), p.65,66.

We cannot be satisfied with relegating stewardship to a single Sunday or a single season of the year. Nor can we be content to address our concerns only to a few areas of the stewardship life, for example, those that directly relate to the church. We need to talk to people where they live and touch their hearts with a message that will transform their entire lives.

The question is, do we have a tool in our clerical tool chest with a long enough reach to do that job? And the answer is, yes, we certainly do! But to know what that tool is and to know how to use it, we first have to know the answer to:

### **Question #6—What Motivates Christian Steward?**

Perhaps we ought to begin by defining what we mean by “motivation.” Webster says that a *motive* is “something that causes a person to act; a stimulus to action; an inner urge that prompts a person to act with a sense of purpose.” When we talk about “motivating” people, then, we are speaking not only of getting them to do things but of giving them a reason for doing things.

Scripture does not often speak directly about the reason(s) for Christian stewardship, but when it does its words are very revealing.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians to defend his stewardship of the Word and to commend to them their own, the reason he gave them for this Gospel stewardship was *Christ's love* compels us. (2 Co 5:14) When, a few chapters later, he gives thanks for the Corinthians' stewardship of treasure in their anticipated support for the offering to Jerusalem, the reason for Paul's thanksgiving, he says, is *because of the a surpassing grace God has given you* (2 Co 9:14) in leading the Corinthians so generously to share of their means. In writing to the Romans about whole-life stewardship, the reason Paul offered them for making themselves living sacrifices, assuming their parts in God's plan, was in view of *God's mercy* (Ro 12:1).

The common denominator in these three references is GOD. In each case, Paul builds his entire appeal upon what God has done. Not once does the apostle appeal to human reason or human emotions; not once does he resort to extolling human plans and programs; even when dealing with a case of human need, in the offering for Jerusalem, Paul relates the need only briefly and by way of background information in explaining the opportunity being presented for the Corinthian Christians to respond to GOD... God's mercy, God's love, God's grace.

When we stop to think of it, of course, Paul's approach makes perfect sense. He was addressing believers, Christians, individuals who were direct beneficiaries of God's grace. By his own Gospel preaching Paul had led these people to a personal awareness and appreciation of their Saviors sacrificial love. And they were Gentiles; not the “chosen people” but “a branch grafted on.” They knew very well about the surprising abundance of God's mercy. So, Paul knew these people were ready to respond to such a message.

What is instructive, however, is to find that Paul's message to these Gospel-motivated Christians was “God's mercy, God's love, God's grace” ...and nothing more!

On the one hand, Paul did not take the Gospel in the hearts of these believers for granted. He did not assume that, because they had heard the Gospel before and had been led by it to believe in the Savior, they now were fully motivated so that all Paul had to do was approach them with an out-stretched hand and an up-turned palm and they would respond. Paul rehearsed once again the reason for their responding: God's mercy, God's love, God's grace.

Then, on the other hand, Paul was content to make that alone the substance of his appeal. He did not fear that his simple message of God's grace in Christ might have grown too stale or familiar. He did not feel that he had to supplement it with extended explanations or enhance it with a lot of frills and flourishes.

Paul was willing to rely alone on the motivational power of: God's mercy, God's love, God's grace.

Why? Not because Paul was too lazy to come up with a more elaborate stewardship program. Not because he was a gambler who liked to put all his motivational eggs in one basket. Not because Paul lacked the imagination to think of any other reasons for his readers to respond.

Rather, it was because that simple message of what God has done for unworthy sinners in Christ Jesus is the only proper and possible motivation for true Christian stewardship!

Christian stewardship is a response to God's grace. More than that, it is a response of God's grace at work in the Christian. Christian stewardship is the fruit of Christian faith, faith which is itself the gift of God's grace (Eph 2:8,9). That gift is given by the dynamic power of the Gospel, which is the Means of God's grace. (Ro 1:16) And Christian stewardship is guided by the Holy Spirit, who comes to us as the blessing of God's grace. Hence, we must see that the entire motivation for Christian stewardship hinges upon the grace of God—both what God's grace has done for the sinner in Christ and what God's grace will do in the sinner for Christ! "According to Scripture, the only motive for good works (a.k.a. Christian stewardship-MPM) is the pure grace of God which we have experienced in Christ Jesus."<sup>12</sup>

That, admittedly, is a bold statement. But it is one that is more than amply borne out in Scripture. For example, consider how the motivating power of God's grace threads its way not only into the three Pauline references we sited earlier but all through his epistles:

In his epistles, Paul shows how to apply the Gospel as encouragement for the stewardship life. He says: "I beseech you by the *mercies of God* (what a resource!)... present your bodies a living sacrifice. ...I say, through *the grace given to me...*" (Ro 12:1-3). He urges: "You are *bought with a price*; therefore, glorify God..." (1 Co 6:20). He beseeches: "We are His *workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus to do good works..." (Eph 2:10); he points out: "*Since you are risen with Christ...* seek those things which are above"(Col 3:1); He promises: "(you) ...*will have eternal life*, therefore...let us do good..." (Ga 6:10).

The true stewardship life is a living commentary on Paul's "therefore's." This word usually marks the transition from the telling of God's redemptive act to the living of the life of active stewardship. All exhortations of the epistles are addressed to those who are baptized, to the regenerate ones, to the new man, to the *Christian*...<sup>13</sup>

...that is, to the recipient and beneficiary of God's saving grace.

We might also consider in this connection Scripture's recurring emphasis on the need for Christian stewardship to be a willing response.

In encouraging Israel's stewardship of time, talent and treasure in the building of the tabernacle, no less than six times in a single chapter Moses states that everyone who is *willing* is to bring the Lord an offering (Ex 35). In preparing for the construction of the Great Temple, we hear that Israel rejoiced at the *willing* response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord (1 Ch 29:9). When Paul commended the stewardship of treasure to the Corinthian Christians he clearly and repeated emphasized that God desires only *willing* responses ( 2 Co 8:3,11,12; 9:2,7). When Peter urged faithful service to the Lord, he urged it not because you must but because you are *willing*, as God wants you to be (1 Pe 5:2 ). Rightly, Dr. Pieper tells us:

Only those works are acceptable in the sight of God which are done *willingly* from the love of God (Ps 110:3; 2 Co 8:3-4,12). ...Good works must not only conform to the divine Law but they must also flow from a willing spirit, that is, from the love of God. "Good works," according to the old paradox, "must not only be good but they must also be well done."<sup>14</sup>

Many motivations can succeed in compelling a man to act. But no motivation can force a man to be *willing* to act. Willingness is an attitude that must spring from a deeper condition of the human heart. Willingness in Christian stewardship is an attitude that springs from the heart-condition we call Christian faith, a condition created and sustained by God's grace.

As final evidence that grace alone must be the motivator for our part in God's plan, consider what Scripture has to say about those who pleased God by the way they played their part.

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), Vol. 111, p.48.

<sup>13</sup> Waldo J. Werning, *The Stewardship Call*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), p.60.

<sup>14</sup> Pieper, p.51.

In Genesis four, we hear how both Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. On the surface, their stewardship appears equal. Yet God was pleased by the actions of only one. Why? Hebrews 11:4 reveals: *By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did... faith, born of God's grace.*

In Mark 12 we hear the Lord commend the widow at the Temple for her tiny offering. Though much smaller than the offerings of the unbelieving Pharisees, her gift was also seen as being much better because, said Jesus: *...she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.* Her humble heart withheld nothing from God. Such unselfish humility in a sinful heart could only have been the product of God's grace.

In Acts 4 and 5, we are told of the very similar real estate transactions of Joseph (called Barnabbas) and of Ananias and Sapphira. Again, there was an outward similarity in stewardship. Yet we know that Ananias and Sapphira gave out of unbelieving pride and a desire for praise. Their gift was rejected. Barnabbas gave out of willingness from a believing heart because much grace was upon him (Ac 4:33). His gift was acceptable to God.

We could go on, but it becomes apparent that the stewardship response God desires is a *willing* response and a willing response is a grace-moved response. Without doubt, the Christian steward follows his part in God's plan *by grace alone!* That does not mean grace plus whatever methodological bric-a-brac man may choose to tack onto it. As our sainted Prof. Habeck illustrates, *alone* means alone:

In an age that makes much ado about planning and programming and organizing and systematizing, we are apt to ask, "Isn't there something that we can do to produce more spontaneous sanctification?" The answer is No. Our interference would only stifle spontaneity. We must plant and water. We must pasture God's sheep. Beyond that we can only watch and wait. Somewhere, sometime we may be permitted to see a rose that has burst into full bloom where we had not even suspected that there was a bud. This is the way of spontaneous sanctification.<sup>15</sup>

To motivate and activate the Christian stewards in our spiritual care, then, what we need is not a better system, not a more elaborate program, not a raft of new and colorful materials, not a dozen new mission anecdotes, but rather a fuller, clearer, more personal and pointed communication of the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus, which alone speaks both of and to the hearts of Christian stewards.

There is that element in each of us, of course, that desires something that will work "easier, faster, better." But if our aim is to motivate true Christian stewardship, there simply is nothing better. Writes Dr. Pieper:

If we then confine ourselves to persuading and urging Christians unto diligent and untiring giving for the Gospel by presenting to them the wonderful love of God in Christ, we are not employing impotent "generalities," but are urging upon our people the strong divine motives which will always awaken responsive love and fan it to a bright flame. The contemplation of the thorn-crowned head of the Savior (2 Co 8:9) will produce the right quality and the right quantity of their gifts for the Gospel.<sup>16</sup>

The searching question we each must ask of ourselves is whether we are truly as concerned with our stewardship message as we are with our stewardship methods. Are we the faithful stewards of God's Gospel of grace that we wish our people to be? I confess, myself, to having felt far too little pinch in this shoe that Rev. Schaefer offers us to try on:

I have bad days when I am puzzled not so much by the gospel we preach as by the perverse way the gospel manifests itself in our words and deeds. There are unhappy days when I ponder these melancholy words:

You are spiritual mechanics, agents of prefabricated and assembly-line products. All that remains of your sermons is a rehashing of the same old stuff. You add nothing new to what you once learned,

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<sup>15</sup> Irwin Habeck, "Spontaneous Sanctification," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4, (October, 1977), p.292.

<sup>16</sup> Pieper, p.51.

the same treadworn speeches and phrases Sunday after Sunday, year in, year out . . . You have already begun to make of your whole Christianity and Christian life a matter of form, inherited with no effort from the fathers . . . You preach the pure Word, you do not shy away from reproofing sin, and preach an unconditional Gospel. You uphold discipline and order in the parish. You hold pure against the lodge. You insist on confessional announcements and the parish school. You visit the sick, are punctual and conscientious in the exercise of your calling . . . Now you need only add “All these things have I kept from my youth. What lack I yet,” and you have the rich young ruler before you in life size . . . At conferences and Synod meetings you only rehash the dogmatical capital brought along from school . . . and in the pulpit ride the same empty phraseology, exhaust your reserves and get led up on your own scale thoughts, and bore your audiences, no less.

No, these words were not spoken by some unkind critic from the outside. They were spoken by Prof. August Pieper to the 1919 convention. I must admit that the words still trouble me. I search my own heart. I look around to see how it goes with my Synod. Has the process, which Pieper saw beginning, been completed in our generation unawares to us? O Lord, is it more true today?

It would be a tragedy if we who hold, under God, the pure gospel should lose both it and heaven by eighteen inches: the precise distance between our head and heart; if we should lose eternity because we are the reincarnation of the rich young ruler. In our stewardship of the gospel, my dear brothers in Christ, that is still worthy of our great concern, our ruthlessly honest introspection and reflection, and our fervent prayers!<sup>17</sup>

It is a constant battle we must fight within ourselves and within our ministries to give God’s free and faithful grace its rightful place in empowering our part in God’s plan. When we do, by the Spirit, succeed in letting grace be grace, however, when our preaching and teaching does allow the Gospel to work with the power God gives it, we will thus supply a secondary benefit for the stewards we seek to motivate. Not only will God’s grace then be able to work in them unobstructed, but also that message of grace will be for them a constant reminder of the purpose of God’s plan in which we and they, as Christian stewards, each have a part.

When Christ is truly the center and substance of our Christian stewardship, we can not forget that what we do as stewards is not just a service to the church, it is a service to the cause of the Gospel; it is not done just to show our love to our neighbor, but to show our neighbor the love of Christ in us; it is not done just to confirm our faithfulness but to confer our faith.

It is that kind of awareness that leads Christian stewards to act and to live, under grace, with the same eagerness and intensity of Peter and John when they declared: *We can not help speaking about (...acting on, ...living for) the things that we have seen and heard!* (Ac 4:20)

When we see what God’s grace is able to do in transforming selfish sinners into faithful stewards, the last thing we will wish to do is to set up any obstacles or impediments to grace. That concern is what leads us to ask:

### **Question #7—What Hinders Christian Stewards?**

The “works” within a Christian steward are a delicate mechanism; it takes very little to throw them out of proper balance. That is why we need to take great care to avoid stewardship means and methods that any upset or disturb the sensitive work the Spirit is doing.

There may, of course, be many personal and circumstantial forces that work against true stewardship in the life of the individual Christian. The purpose of this portion of the paper is not to treat of all of these, but rather to consider some ways in which we, as pastors or stewardship leaders, may inadvertently counteract the course of Christian stewardship in the lives of our members. In venturing into this area of discussion, I mean to

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<sup>17</sup> James Schaefer, “Stewards of the Mysteries of God,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 4, (October, 1977), p.292.



point no finger nor to make any accusations, other than toward myself. For these are certainly areas where I have found weakness in my own approach to Christian stewardship.

One way in which Christian stewards can surely be hindered is through the confusion of Law and Gospel in our stewardship messages.

There is no denying that the Law of God has a proper part to play in the message of Christian stewardship. The Law serves to uncover and expose the sins of laxness and selfishness that afflict the unfaithful steward. As well, the Law can serve to guide the faithful steward who seeks to know and do the will of his Lord.

Law, however, can and should never be used to motivate or activate Christian stewardship. To do so is not only to misuse the Law but also to deny God's grace, which is the only true stewardship motivator.

Yet, while we would never wish to devalue grace, it is true that when times are difficult the temptation is great to brandish the club of the Law. It can, at times, appear to be the most expeditious way to reverse a negative trend. But, in expounding his Thesis XXIII ("The Word of God is not rightly divided when the attempt is made ...by means of the commands of the Law rather than by the admonitions of the Gospel, to urge the regenerate to do good."), Walther writes:

The confounding of Law and Gospel occurs when ministers become aware that all their Gospel preaching is useless because gross sins of the flesh still occur among their hearers. ...These people come to church occasionally, but rarely to Communion, and refuse to contribute when a collection is taken up. Now, the preacher may come to the conclusion that he has preached too much Gospel to them and must adopt a different policy; he must hush the Gospel for a while and preach nothing but the Law, and conditions will improve. But he is mistaken; the people do not change, except they become very angry with their minister for not permitting them to do what they very much like to do. A collection is taken up which nets twenty cents when the minister expected twenty dollars. He resolves to give these people hell and damnation next Sunday. Possibly he may increase the collection by a few dollars, but the offering is worthless in the sight of God because it was made under coercion. ...Preachers who have succeeded in abolishing certain evils by the preaching of the Law should not think they have achieved anything great. Even the most corrupt congregation can be improved, however, by nothing else than the preaching of the Gospel in all its sweetness!<sup>18</sup>

Even worse than using the club of the Law in such a way, however, is to make a club out of the Gospel. Werning writes:

The final moments of the sermon present a great temptation for moralizing, for commingling Law and Gospel, for using the Gospel as a club to encourage good works. After twenty minutes of Gospel one might be tempted to recall that things are getting worse in the parish (Synod? - MPM) and stewardship is at a crisis level, so at this moment it may be stated with great indignation, "What's the matter, don't we appreciate the Gospel? The way we're acting, we don't even merit the preaching of the Word and salvation!" People might say after this that "the pastor really laid it on the line," but they will not be motivated.

Instead, the last minutes of the sermon should allow the minister to show what God's grace will do for the member today: to show the Gospel melting the coldest hearts; to show the power of God that will make the weakest one strong to do what is normally shied away from...<sup>19</sup>

...that is, to fulfill his part in God's plan!

The misuse of the Law and the abuse of the Gospel are both dangerous hindrances to Christian stewardship: "On the one hand they allow people the opportunity to act as stewards out of coercion, reluctance,

<sup>18</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. Dau, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1929), p.387-88.

<sup>19</sup> Werning, *Christian Stewards*, p.40.

pride and duty. With these works God is not well pleased. On the other hand, they can well lead our people to become angry with the Gospel when they are, in fact, angry with the Law.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the short-term “productiveness” of this confusion of Law and Gospel can cost a dear price in the long-term growth and maturing of Christian stewards.

A second manner in which we may hinder or frustrate Christian stewardship is by building our appeals to Christian stewards upon something other than the Gospel of God in Christ. An example of this is the stewardship approach that centers on the so-called “needs” of the church.

There are those who over-simplify the matter (of stewardship) by saying, “Tell the people what is needed, and they will give.” Financial problems can not be worked out financially any more than moral conflicts can be worked out morally. The solution does not lie in recounting current church work as though it had the motivating power of the Scriptures. The Acts of the Apostles is the Word, but modern acts of the church are not to take the place of the Word. In such a stewardship approach churches have surrendered some of the distinctive traits that mark them as the church (i.e. the clear and unqualified Gospel - MPM). So subtle is this invasion of moralism, pragmatism and humanism in stewardship that it is very difficult to be aware of the inconsistency of the situation.<sup>21</sup>

What further complicates the “inconsistencies” of need-oriented stewardship is that, on the one hand, we suggest that Christian stewardship is constant and life-filling. But then, as K. Kuntz observes:

The terrible limitation of giving to meet need rests in the fact that once a particular need is met, the giver has no larger motivation for his stewardship...

And further...

...Giving to meet need is circumscribed by the ability of the donor to know the evident needs. In this sense, one’s stewardship is never greater than the image or perception of man. The result is to build a way of stewardship life which allows human knowledge to block the flow of mercy, love and kindness.<sup>22</sup>

The communication of general or specific needs may indeed serve an ancillary purpose in stewardship. “An understanding of the needs that require attention is necessary for intelligent, responsible stewardship. The Gospel motivates; but need serves as a guide as to where the Gospel motivation should result in action.”<sup>23</sup> But, finally, needs only help the steward to know *where* to give, never *why*.

Christian stewardship as a part of God’s plan, as a response to God’s grace, intrinsically implies that the steward will continue to respond, to play his part, whether or not a specific need exists. That makes grace a far superior and more dependable motivator for stewardship since man’s “needs” are constantly changing, but God’s grace is constant, changeless and eternal.

A closely-related stewardship hindrance is one that can crop up in stewardship programs that spotlight individual or institutional goals. We all are learning to work within an increasingly goal-oriented ministry. Organizationally, we have goals for membership, attendance, involvement in Sunday School, VBS and Bible Class, canvass and witness calls, new programs, and so on. Financially, we have budgets to fund, PBS commitments to honor, building funds to finance, loans to repay.

Setting these goals can serve a very useful purpose in channeling our efforts and those of our members, and in measuring progress and evaluating long-term performance. But the inclination is always there to begin honoring those goals for their own sakes, and using them as our lever to get people up and moving “because we

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<sup>20</sup> “An Analysis of *Reaching Out* in the Light of Scripture’s Principles of the Stewardship of Treasures,” J. Seifert & committee, Northern Conference – Michigan Dist. WELS, (February, 1983), p.28.

<sup>21</sup> Werning, *Christian Stewards*, p.128.

<sup>22</sup> Werning, *Christian Stewards*, p.128,129.

<sup>23</sup> Irwin Habeck & Armin Schuetze, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1974), p.225.

have a goal, we are committed!” Doing this may be effective in moving people to act, but not to act as Christian stewards. When human goals become our motivators, we have clouded or crowded out the one true stewardship motivation—God’s grace.

Confusion in motivation is created and the Gospel loses its centrality when artificial and arbitrary human devices are contrived to get action from people. Pleas to loyalty, cries of emergencies (often created because of laxness), and organizational claims have a detrimental effect when used as motivation. Under such conditions, the giving response will not be due primarily to God’s Word but to demands to meet human standards. We must not equate the Gospel with “duty,” and the achievement of institutional goals.

We need constantly to be on guard against too easily equating human goals with God’s will. God gives us work to do—His commission to preach the Gospel to all creation, for example. But God does not tell us when, where or how to carry on that work. Man makes decisions about how he will proceed in carrying out what God wants. But man’s decisions do not carry the same weight as God’s revealed will.

Hence, we will at times need to be willing to back away from our human goals, for the sake of God’s Word and the delicate mechanism of the Christian steward. And we may be confident in knowing that, by doing so, we are not forsaking God’s will but fulfilling it.

The final hindrance to Christian stewardship we wish to treat here is the stewardship appeal that addresses itself to the wrong part of the steward.

We realize that, as sinful human beings, stewards have sinful natures as well as regenerate Christian natures. True Christian stewardship is the activity of the believer’s New Man. His Old Adam has no part in God-pleasing stewardship.

Yet stewardship methodology that is common in some circles and that always threatens to intrude into our own recommends appeals that are actually addressed not to the Christian nature of the believing steward but to the carnal reason and emotions of his Old Adam. Some examples:

- 1. Appeals to a sense of duty or obligation:** “You belong to the church It is your duty to be involved in and supportive of its programs.” Without a doubt, church membership does also involve certain responsibilities. But presenting them as a motive for action is really only using the goad of guilt to prod someone to act.
- 2. Appeals to pride:** “If we don’t get some volunteers to take care of the church grounds, what are people going to think when they drive past?” This reasoning plays upon the members’ pride in their public image.
- 3. Appeals to fear:** “Increase your support now or we’ll have to cut this, limit that, cancel those things completely!” There is a fine line between relating the seriousness of a situation and using that situation as a motive. Such motivation, however, is often little more than spiritual extortion.
- 4. Appeals to peer pressure:** “Everyone else has done their part in this program. Surely, you won’t refuse to do yours.” The annual printed list of member offerings is another example of subtle peer motivation. However, if God declines to compare one man’s stewardship with another’s, how can man suspect that to do so to spur greater doing or giving is God-pleasing?
- 5. Appeals to personality:** Showing favoritism to the wealthier or more active members may serve to maintain their involvement but will do nothing to enhance their service to God’s plan, and may become an offense to those less richly blessed. (Jas 2:1f)
- 6. Appeals to emotion, sentiment, etc.:** We may spur people to support world missions with heart-warming and heart-rending mission anecdotes, but we will be doing little to motivate Christian stewardship. If those stories do not somehow serve the message of the Gospel, they are appealing only to human pity, not Christian love.

The trap in each of these appeals is that it often appears to work, it gets results. But they are not the results God wants. They do nothing to serve God's plan, nothing to up-build His spiritual household, nothing to honor Him. Often, they only seem to honor man for his ingenuity in manipulating his fellowman.

The joy of being guides for and workers with Christian stewards is that we have no need to employ such methods because, as we heard earlier, God has given us "a far mightier weapon" ...His full and unqualified Gospel. Armed with that weapon, we have all we need to inspire and empower each and every Christian steward to assume his own part in God's plan.

There are, of course, ways we can employ the Gospel God has given us to its best advantage. So, we ask our final question:

### **Question #8—What Assists Christian Stewardship?**

To us as pastors/stewardship leaders, God gives a four-fold task that might be summarized: *Motivate! Educate! Informate! and Activate!* (Yes, I know "informate" isn't a word, but I couldn't resist.)

*Motivation:* Simply put, this means bringing the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus into the lives of God's stewards. Yes, it is true that our people hear this message each week in our Bible Class and Sunday School, our Scripture readings and sermons (assuming they are in church). But let it not be assumed that, because they regularly hear the Gospel message, our people are all fully and properly motivated. To expect so is to expect that you could stick a rose bush into the Florida sand outside your house and have it grow and bloom simply since the sun shines on it every day and the rain hits it on occasion. It may be that sun and rain make roses grow, but to have a real chance to bloom that bush is going to need your personal attention.

Likewise, the stewards in our care require our regular, Gospel-centered, personal attention, so that the Gospel message will enter not just their ears but their hearts and their lives.

Eliciting another agrarian illustration, Werning writes:

The church needs to concern itself with intensive (stewardship) training, or as Jesus calls it in Luke 13:8: "digging and dunging." Men can stand under the fig tree and plead they need fruit, but only when they dig and dung and prune will there be an adequate motivation for response to the evident need. The "digging and dunging" task is the major responsibility of church leaders, while "fruit-picking" is incidental to the educational phase. God says: "Each tree is known by its own fruit" (Lk 6:44 RSV). God measures fruit by what He has given, not by what we might expect. In the parable, Jesus indicates that the duty of the churchman is to cultivate and fertilize, to be interested in the health of the member.<sup>24</sup>

The same Gospel-centered concern that we seek to communicate in our sermons and exhibit in our day-to-day "Seelsorge" must be equally evident in whatever stewardship programs or emphases we employ. For it to be absent, or ever to appear secondary, will be for us to deny in practice the very motivational force of the Gospel we seek on paper to inculcate.

There are two virtues in stewardship leaders (and in stewardship programs) that are indicative of such Gospel-centered concern, but that, perhaps you will agree, are too often lacking.

One of these is patience. Christian stewards will be fruitful stewards. God promises that. But He does not tell us when or to what degree they will bear fruit. Some steward-trees do not (perhaps can not) bear as much fruit as others. Some need more digging and dunging before they become fruitful to their full capacity.

But, perhaps because of zeal for the work or a desire to answer need or meet goals, or simply because of a lack of patience, the stewardship leader may be unwilling to wait for fruits to appear naturally or to do the long-term work necessary to cultivate them. So, the temptation is to blame the stewards for their unfaithfulness/unfruitfulness.

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<sup>24</sup> Werning, *Christian Stewards*, p.129.

But meager fruitfulness is not necessarily unfaithfulness. Jesus told His disciples: *(My Father) cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit (however much - MPM) He trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful. (Jn 15:12)* Our gracious God is willing to work patiently to nurture and cultivate every steward to full fruitfulness. We need to learn the patience to wait for God's Gospel to work (even if our needs, goals and programs must wait with us).

The second virtue valuable in the stewardship leader (and program) is respect, namely, for the fruits our stewards produce.

We recognize and we repeatedly tell our people that the fruits they produce, their faithful stewardship, is the result of God's grace at work in them through the Gospel. Their fruits are actually God's work not their own.

What impression must we give, then, if we turn about and tell them that their thoughtful, prayerful, faithful stewardship responses are not enough? They may, out of faith and in love for Christ, have done their best... but, sorry, their best now needs to be increased by so and so many more hours of service, by such and such added percentage of offerings, in order that we may do all we have planned.

If stewards have been unfaithful, they need to be admonished by God's Law for their unfaithfulness. But if and when they act faithfully in fulfilling their part in God's plan, that gracious work of God in them needs to be respected and encouraged, not frustrated by continued man-made demands.

If we are more willing to accept what God's grace accomplishes in Christian stewards, they will become more willing and free in their response to God's grace. If, on the other hand, we suggest to them that "responding to grace" may only be theological whitewash for doing the business of the church, then we can expect that their response will remain that of business people, not of Christian stewards.

There is, incidentally, a considerable fringe benefit for stewards and stewardship leaders in learning patience with and respect for fellow stewards and their fruits. It is the relief of having the burden of "results" removed from our shoulders, the peace of mind of knowing that God, in His own way and time, will bring the results He wishes.

There comes a time, after the Word of grace has been sown in hearts, watered with care, and the ground carefully cultivated, that we must step aside and say, "Dear Lord, we have tried to be faithful in our planting and cultivating. We have given Thy people Thy Word in sermons, in topics, and in our stewardship efforts. We have nurtured them with Thy promises. We have pointed to the coming harvest. We ask Thee, dear God, give the increase and make Thy people yield bounteously beyond our fondest expectations. Cause them to respond to Thy great salvation through Thy indwelling Spirit. Let them be the kind of people who wilt glorify Thee! In Jesus' name." Then we can hopefully say "Amen," go out for a day of fishing and rest, and go to sleep peacefully.<sup>25</sup>

**Education:** When the basic message of the Gospel fills stewards with a need to act, they then may require some assistance in knowing how to act. Here, an on-going program of sound stewardship education can be invaluable.

The main function of such a program will be to help the individual steward discern the part God has for him to play in His plan. Such a program may wish to begin by helping the steward to recognize his personal resources: talents, abilities, spiritual gifts, personal interests, life circumstances, family ties, material blessings... all of which are a part of the person's stewardship trust from God and may, at given times, be employed to serve God's plan.

The steward may then have need of being educated in how his resources can best be put to use: how his personal relationships may provide opportunities for Christian witnessing; how his work arrangements may offer openings for special service, or, negatively, may be inhibiting his stewardship of the Truth by conflicting

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<sup>25</sup> Werning, *Stewardship Call*, p.51.

with his use of the Means of Grace; how a “proportionate to blessings” approach may provide him with a clearer picture of his total stewardship response, and so on.

Above all, stewardship education ought to assist the steward in appreciating the part God is allowing the steward to play in His saving plan: his life-example as a light shining before men, leading them to glorify God; his faith witness as “Christ making His appeal through” the steward; his offerings to God not only as a single act of worship but as a collective and cumulative act of proclaiming the Gospel; his worship/fellowship as not only personally essential but reciprocally beneficial within the body of Christ; his entire role as Christian steward as being not only a blessing from God to him but also a blessing from God through him to all the church in up-building His household of faith.

Individual stewards often have trouble viewing themselves as anything more than a single, insignificant piece in a very big puzzle. Stewardship education needs to help stewards see God’s whole picture and the important part that each steward plays in it.

**Information:** Yes, there is a good and proper place for the heart-warming mission stories, for the colorful brochures and posters, even for the avalanche of figures and statistics that rumble down from the North Country. When properly employed, these things can all serve a very useful purpose in directing and channeling the eager efforts of motivated, educated stewards who need only to know where their stewardship response can best be used.

The epistles show that Paul was regularly telling the people about the progress and the problems of the church work he was doing. His stewardship and mission education program was one of reminding God’s people how God was blessing the work, or of indicating problems for which they needed to pray. “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel,” Paul says (Phil 1:12). He told them of evidences of God’s grace at work: “On arriving there, they gathered all the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.”(Ac 14:27)

People are benefited by mission information because it helps them understand the general need for greater mission activity. They should learn of the plight of the heathen and also of the ways the church is reaching them. They should hear the full truth of the mission situation in the world and of the unending task they face. People have a right to know what is happening with their offerings, how others are helped, and also how the church is failing to reach out.

While information is not a motivation for giving and not a substitute for God’s Word, it is required so that the Christian and the congregation can determine how to divide their support between the great causes of the church locally and worldwide. ...Information is and ought to be a report to help them know how, rightly, to divide their gifts among various causes, not a motivation.<sup>26</sup>

Two watchwords for the use of information in stewardship are: **Accuracy** and **Accessibility**.

Information we give to stewards ought to be just as accurate as we can make it. This, not only because Christian stewards deserve true facts. Also, because getting the facts right takes more work. If we are not willing to do the work, if we are content to broadcast whatever out-dated or irrelevant bits of information we may be able to dredge from our dusty files, it may be a fair indication that we are using that information for something other than its true purpose... not to inform, but to pad our stewardship message or to elicit a certain stewardship response. That is not information. That is disinformation.

When, however, we have accurate information that is important enough to share, it ought also to be important enough to share in a clear, attractive, legible, accessible fashion. If we don’t value the information we wish to use highly enough to give it to people in a form they will want to and be able to understand and absorb, we can not blame them if they choose to remain uninformed.

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<sup>26</sup> Werning, *Christian Stewards*, p.133,134.

With the way technology has succeeded in making sophisticated methods of printing, reproduction, and audio and video communication simple and economical, we have every opportunity to give our information-sharing maximum effectiveness... and we have no excuse for not doing so.

**Activation:** If the motivational, educational and informational phases of our stewardship approach have been effective, the “activation” phase might well take care of itself.

The only assistance we may need to give in this area is to provide some opportunities for our stewards to act. Nothing is more frustrating than for people to be ready, willing and able to start getting things done and then have nothing for them to do.

Since Christian stewardship has been presented as a whole-life response to God’s grace, we need not expect that the church must provide all the outlets for stewardship expression. It would not even be right to do so since Christian stewards also need to develop their stewardship awareness and activity at home, in school, at work and at leisure. One hopes that within the educational phase stewards will have learned something about uncovering their own opportunities to be active in their stewardship.

But, so that church-oriented stewardship may yield its optimum fruits, it is worth being well-prepared to employ the responses of our stewards when they are offered.

Congregational opportunities to attend or to teach Bible Classes, Sunday School and VBS, as well as recommendations of worthwhile personal devotional and Bible study materials can assist members with their stewardship of the Truth. Clear and regular information on the work of the congregation and the Synod will aid them in directing their monetary gifts; occasional presentations on “proportionate giving,” “deferred giving,” and other Christian money management topics may open their eyes to opportunities in their stewardship of Treasure they may not have seen before.

Maintaining congregational “talent files” and “works-of-love boards,” organizing regular work days at the church or at the homes of shut-ins, becoming involved in Synodical or community service projects, as well as promoting the on-going tasks of congregational boards, committees and organizations all will offer ways of letting our stewards express themselves actively in their stewardship of Time and Talents.

At the same time, this stewardship activity within the circle of the church may also help to awaken stewards to possibilities for more active application of their Christian stewardship in all areas of their lives. It is often true the more active Christian stewards become, the more active they will become. Hence, it is well worth the added time and effort to involve our people actively in assuming their part in God’s plan.

One final aid to positive Christian stewardship is a present example of positive Christian stewardship.

It goes without saying that the pastor himself ought to be a good and faithful steward in all areas of his own life. This pastoral stewardship includes knowing when to say “Yes” and when to say “No,” knowing how much to give and how much not to give, knowing what to do and what to delegate and knowing how much time to spend at church in the office and how much at home with the family.

Because of the sin that also resides in parsonages, no pastor can expect to be the perfect steward. But at least his actions or life style ought not openly conflict with the stewardship message he carries.

Beyond the example of individual stewardship, however, is the need for sound and consistent corporate stewardship within the congregation. There may often be circumstances at home, at school, on the job or at leisure that contradict or frustrate Christian stewardship for our people. Circumstances within the congregation, however, ought never do so.

To avoid this, a congregation will need responsible leadership, sound preplanning, good organization, careful budgeting and, perhaps above all, flexibility that will allow for the often unpredictable maturing process of Christian stewards. When the congregation must sacrifice some of its own flexibility to work with some less flexible outside agents (banks, courts, etc.), safeguards need to be built into plans and programs to avoid situations where the congregation must repeatedly shove its stewardship principals to the sidelines in order to deal with recurring “crisis” conditions.

What holds true for our local congregations, moreover, ought also stand for our Synod. If we as pastors find it frustrating to be working patiently with Christian stewardship within our congregation, only to be

confronted with conflicting signals and periodic “emergency” conditions within the Synod at large, imagine the confusion and skepticism this engenders among our people!

Let it not be suggested, however, that the accountability for stewardship within congregation or Synod falls upon the leaders alone. The responsibility for corporate stewardship belongs to each member of the body. We all need to do what we are able, by prayer and personal action, to assist our leadership in directing the stewardship of the church along the most positive path possible.

Our faithful collective stewardship, then, will stand to the encouragement and assistance of faithful individual stewards and, ultimately, to the service and glory of God’s eternal plan.

Our eight questions are answered. Yet I suspect that, despite the bulk of this paper, it may be leaving some of you with a feeling of incompleteness. There are still many loose ends left untied or untrimmed. Many stewardship passages in Scripture not treated, many stewardship issues left untouched.

To a degree, this is by design. I did not want to make this paper unreasonably long (though I humbly thank you for bearing with me this far!); but neither did the topic allow me to limit my comments only to one or two aspects of stewardship. So, I chose to brush and bump over the tops of a number of issues, in much the same way that my golf drive brushes and bumps over the grass on the fairway. If I’ve awakened a few worms along the way, or even opened a few cans of them, very well. I hope these comments will serve to provoke both your thought and your discussion, if not your assent. What the matter of Christian stewardship needs and deserves more than anything else is an open forum among us—in convention essays, conference papers, circuit studies and bull sessions. We have many ways we still can go, many ways we still must grow in our Christian stewardship. We ourselves, our congregations, our Synod and the Kingdom can only be blessed by our commitment to doing so!

In closing, I would like to return once more to the letter to the Ephesians and end as Paul began. In his first chapter, Paul wrote:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ...In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.  
(Ephesians 1:3,11,12)*

There is no finer blessing, no greater joy than to be given a personal part in our Father’s precious plan of salvation. May the Word of God keep us ever-mindful of His grace that gave us our part and ever-eager, under grace, faithfully to fulfill it... to the praise of His glory!



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