

Stewardship

God's Creation Mandate

We believe the universe and everything in it belong to God the Creator. God has entrusted the care of the earth to all people, who are responsible for managing its resources. Good stewardship uses the earth's abundance to meet human need, but resists the unjust exploitation of the earth and its peoples. All God's gifts are to be received with thanksgiving and used responsibly.

Responsible Living

To confess Jesus as Lord transforms values. Jesus warns that we cannot serve both God and wealth. Preoccupation with money and possessions, self-indulgent living, and eagerness to accumulate wealth for personal advantage are not in keeping with the teaching of Scripture.

Generous Giving

The Bible teaches cheerful, sacrificial, and proportional giving through the church in grateful response to God's goodness. Christians do not claim any of their possessions as their own, but manage all their resources, including money, time, abilities, and influence, in generous ways that give glory to God. They do not despise the poor but practice mutual aid within the church and share what they have with others in need. God's people seek to embrace a lifestyle of simplicity and contentment.

Genesis 1:28; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Psalm 24:1; 115:16; Proverbs 14:31; Amos 6:4-7; Malachi 3:6-10; Matthew 6:19-34; 25:14-30; Luke 6:38; 12:13-21; Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 1 Corinthians 4:7; 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 6:7; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19; James 2:1-7, 15-16; 5:1-6; 1 John 3:16-18; Jude 11.

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COMMENTARY

Stewards are persons who hold something of value in trust for another through care and management, and who give an account to an owner. In the widest sense, humanity has a stewardship responsibility for Earth. Moreover, the church is distinct from all other human agencies in that it holds in trust the treasure of the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:1). In the narrowest sense, each individual is accountable as a steward of God's gifts.

Stewardship of the Earth

Divine Concern for Creation:

Christians are obviously included in the "creation mandate" which calls for humans to "have dominion over the earth" as illustrated in the Garden of Eden by Adam, who was mandated to till the ground and guard it (Genesis 1:28-31; 2:15). God, the undisputed maker and possessor of all (Genesis 1:1; 14:19; Psalm 24:1) has compassion for the land and its creatures and cares for all His creation (Jonah 4:11; Psalm 104:10-30; 36:6; Joel 2:22). The prophets envision a time of harmony between humans and animals (Isaiah 11:1-10; cf. 65:25; 35:1-7, 9; Hosea 2:18). God's salvation plan also includes the eventual creation of a new earth (Isaiah 65:17; Romans 8:20-22).

Human Responsibility for Creation:

To be a steward of the earth means to manage well such natural resources as water and forests, and to tend plants and animals with the same compassion God shows. Examples from biblical law substantiate this. Bird nests are not to be destroyed (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). Animals are to be cared for (Deuteronomy 25:4; Proverbs 12:10). Limits are put on the use of trees for war (Deuteronomy 20:19). The ground, which produces what creatures need, is not to be exploited—a teaching made clear in the provision that the land be left fallow every seventh year and also during the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25).

Morality and the Environment:

There is a strong link between the moral life of a people and the condition of the natural world. Humanity's violence brought the Noachic flood (Genesis 6-9). Havoc on the earth will be the consequence of human evil (Hosea 4:1-3). Jeremiah paints a scene not unlike a nuclear winter, an outcome, as

the larger context makes clear, due to human wrongdoing (Jeremiah 4:23-26). It is in large part because of human greed that land becomes a desert due to deforestation, soil deteriorates with overuse of chemicals, fish and birds die from water pollution. The conclusion follows, positively stated, that the earth will be helped by unselfish, compassionate, and responsible living by its human inhabitants.

Responsible Living

Realigned Perspectives:

Responsible living includes a full acknowledgment that life, time, abilities, opportunities, and material goods are from God. God is the source and rightful owner of all (Psalm 24:1). He is the origin of human life (Genesis 2:7; 21-23), and gives the gift of procreation whereby human beings come to life (Ruth 4:13; 1 Samuel 1:27). God gives the power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18; 1 Chronicles 29:12), as well as abilities such as craftsmanship (Bezalel and Oholiab in Exodus 36:1) and insight (Solomon in 1 Kings 3:10-12). The land is repeatedly designated as “gift” or “given by God” to Israel. Deuteronomy alone has 30 such statements (e.g. 5:31; 9:6; 26:9). It was God to whom patriarchs such as Abraham and Isaac and Job owed their material prosperity (Job 42:10). God is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

God’s generous gift-giving calls for the human response of thanksgiving to the Giver. Believers are warned against an attitude of arrogance (1 Timothy 6:17-19). The successful and well-to-do are to resist the temptation to boast (Deuteronomy 8:11-17). The attitude instead is to be one of gratitude. Moreover, since God’s gifts are in the nature of “trusts,” humans are accountable for the way these gifts are managed and used.

Managing God’s Gifts:

All God’s gifts—abilities, wealth, time, the environment—are to be managed well. The gifts of life and its pleasures are to be enjoyed (1 Timothy 6:17). Neither Old nor New Testament censures the rich for being rich, but both give ample instructions on the use of wealth and warn against temptations that come with wealth.

Jesus condemns selfishness but not all self-interest. Wealth is to be used as an investment to “store up *for yourselves* treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:20, emphasis added). One cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:24). Intent on seeking first the kingdom of God, Christians will order their finances according to that priority (Matthew 6:19-21, 33). Every spending decision, it has been said, is a spiritual decision.

A repeated exhortation is for people to be mindful of the poor. God

expresses a preferential outlook toward the poor. The prophets have sharp words for those who exploit the poor (Isaiah 3:15; Amos 2:6-7). The poor are not to be shunned but helped (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Proverbs 17:5; 19:17; cf. Ephesians 4:28). The early church cared for the poor and took offerings for them (Acts 6:1-7). Believers are admonished not to neglect the poor (James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:16-18).

Counsel on Wealth:

Amos strikes hard at the rich, noting their penchant for lavish expenditures for furniture, food, entertainment, and cosmetics. Luxurious living becomes wrong where there is an unconcern for the “ruin of Joseph”; in other words, inattention to the physical or spiritual impoverishment of others (Amos 6:4-7). The “urge to splurge” should be curbed. Instead of “conspicuous consumption,” Christians should be known by “compassionate concern.”

Materialism is the eagerness to have and to hold possessions and the preoccupation with money for self-advantage. Materialism, according to Jesus, is both foolish and sinful (Luke 12:13-24). A third of Jesus’ parables deal with economics; in these, Jesus insists on accountability and warns against selfishness which utilizes abilities and money only for enhancement of the self to the exclusion of others. Paul warns against the love of money (1 Timothy 6:6-10). Contentment is urged, as is simplicity of life (Philippians 4:11; 1 Timothy 6:8).

Covetousness is prohibited (Exodus 20:17) and strong warnings are given against grasping and greed (Luke 12:15; Jude 11). Israel at Kadesh Barnea, when trying stubbornly to grasp the promised land, was denied it (Numbers 14). Elijah the prophet severely reprimanded King Ahab for wanting to seize Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21). Gehazi coveted...and lost! (2 Kings 5:20-27). Grasping is a twin to coveting. The seriousness of coveting, accompanied in this instance by deceit, is demonstrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

Generous Giving

Motivations:

Teaching about generous financial giving is concentrated in 2 Corinthians 8-9 where Paul lists reasons for generosity. First, generosity follows the self-giving model of Jesus (8:9). Second, our contributions bring good to the lives of others, through which God is glorified (9:12-14). Third, generosity brings large benefits to the contributors (9:6, 14; also Luke 6:38; Galatians 6:7). Fourth, giving follows the example of others who model spiritual maturity (8:1-5). Fifth, giving helps achieve the goal of equality (8:14). Sixth, generosity is the tangible response of gratitude to God (9:15). It is sinfully

self-serving and contrary to kingdom living to be tight-fisted or so attached to things (cars, properties, money, stocks, homes, expensive vacations) that finances are unavailable for God's kingdom ministry. It has been well said: "We are voting for God's rule when we give."

Guidelines:

Paul urged regular, systematic, and proportional financial contributions (1 Corinthians 16:1; cf. Deuteronomy 16:17). The tithe represents a standard (Matthew 23:23; Numbers 18:26; Malachi 3:10), but Christian giving goes beyond the tithe (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Luke 21:2-4). In the words of another: "Tithing is not God's plan for raising money, but his plan for raising his children." Generosity is the antidote to the sin of covetousness. Christian giving calls for administrative prompting and planning (2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5). With many noble causes competing for a Christian's generosity, the believer will rely on prayer and the Spirit's guidance in money-matter decisions. The principle of storehouse tithing, interpreted as supporting financially the agencies of the local church and the denomination, is sensible and sound (Malachi 3:6-10). For the Christian, giving should not be burdensome. The believer has good reason to give cheerfully, with joy, even exuberance.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

Christian stewardship is the faithful, wise, and responsible management of God's created order. The focus of this article is on the stewardship of the earth's resources and of personal resources.

Stewardship of the Earth

God has given humans the responsibility to be stewards of creation. Good management involves both protecting the earth from destructive exploitation and developing resources for the good of humankind. The church can provide helpful information and teaching that will enable its members to discern how best to manage the potential of the earth without damaging the environment.

Raising consciousness toward environmental concerns can be achieved through various activities. Encouraging recycling through special drives or community activism, for example, has both practical and symbolic value. Taking care to conserve water and energy also furthers participation in environmentally friendly practices. Using recycled materials and avoiding use of products that damage the environment can both raise awareness and help protect the earth. Periodic encouragement of such activities by the congregation is consistent with the creation mandate to rule over the earth.

Although Mennonite Brethren have become increasingly urban, we continue to have a large number of our people engaged in agriculture. Farmers are often faced with the conflict between using chemicals to increase productivity and avoiding the use of chemicals to protect the environment. Instead of avoiding the issue, the church that takes seriously its role in stewardship of the earth will create forums in which these difficult questions can be addressed.

Strategies for Generous Living

Jesus' message regarding money is that it is a means for living, not an end in itself. A closer look at Jesus' life and message can open the way for a fulfilling life lived for God. The focus must be that of 1 Peter 3:15: "Simply concentrate on being completely devoted to Christ" (Phillips).

Strong forces are at work to distract us from Christ. We are not likely to take steps toward solving a problem if we do not recognize a problem. Scripture points out our bent toward greed and the eventual impoverishment

to which it leads. Personal stock-taking is a healthy and necessary exercise. As part of such a check, we might gather data. We might keep a weekly time log involving the following areas (and others as appropriate):

Time used to earn/spend money

Time used for personal care (sleep, exercise, etc.)

Time used for relaxation/entertainment

Time with family/friends/neighbours

Time in church-related activities

Time spent ministering/volunteering

Time with God

Such an audit may not evaluate the quality of time expended in each instance, but it is a beginning. The overall profile begins to take shape. Where we spend our time is a strong indicator of our stewardship values.

Prioritizing Kingdom Interests

To live as a Christian is to learn to live as fits the reign of God. While it is Christian to work to make a living, what becomes problematic is becoming so absorbed in making money that spiritual interests are crowded out. In establishing our lifestyle, we make choices that exhibit our priorities. A lifestyle includes choices about housing, furnishings, clothing, luxuries, entertainment, investments and savings, and giving. Such decisions are made with a set of priorities in mind.

We are constantly exercising priorities. For example, we may settle for purchasing a small used car because for us the decor of the home or a high-quality entertainment centre is more important than mode of transportation. Others may choose to live in cramped living quarters with minimal comforts if by so doing they can indulge their yearnings for sightseeing and travel.

Inject into these equations a devotion to Jesus and his kingdom, and the prioritizing process takes on complexity. For example, will any of the above priorities shift to using one's travel money to spend time as a counsellor at a Christian camp, or to volunteer for short-term missions or relief work? Would one spend less on eating out and more on hospitality to international students?

Success and wealth are high priorities for many North American Christians. Jeremiah the prophet called for a priority higher than either of these. “Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 NRSV). To know God, which means to live in dynamic connection with God, is a value higher than wealth or success.

For a believer, greatest value is attached to Christ and his kingdom. Ideally, a Christian should want more than anything in the world to see God’s justice and righteousness prevail and kingdom causes succeed. Christians decide that their time and resources need to be committed to the kingdom. The implication is straightforward: money and time are shifted from other areas of life to kingdom work. If \$500 is given toward a need or ministry, that \$500 will not be available for investment in stocks or purchase of a bigger, better refrigerator.

Stewardship Assumptions

The concept of stewardship turns on several assumptions, each of which plays itself out practically in our lifestyle. One basic assumption touches on ownership. In Western cultures, individuals own things. In some cultures, the group owns and shares things. In places where Baal was worshipped, the king owned the land. Christians say all belongs to God. A fitting response is thankful contentment (Philippians 4:11-12). If God is owner, I have strong reason to be thankful both for what is termed a little and what is termed a lot. A lifestyle of excessive consumerism is fueled by discontent. A further implication of seeing properties as God’s gift is that we are blessed in order to be a blessing. Like other gifts of God, material abundance is to be used for the benefit of others (James 2:14-17; Matthew 10:8).

A second assumption involving stewardship is management. Management includes attention to creative production and oversight of finances and income. Every Christian is a manager of assets in the interest of the owner, God. An appropriate amount is retained for the livelihood of the manager, but the object is to enhance the owner’s gains. One objective of money management is to place the resources in secure investments. Jesus teaches that the most secure investment is the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:19-34).

A third assumption in exercising stewardship is accountability. Christians should exercise social responsibility in making their investments. One’s gifts are not a private affair. There is a public dimension to the exercise of stewardship. Jesus warns of an end-time audit (Matthew 25:14-46). The

church can offer accountability groups to its members that will allow for discernment in both specific investments and general lifestyle issues.

Legalism and individualism stand as dangers at the extremes. Rules cannot be easily standardized. In some cases, expenditures involving costly goods or properties may be a praiseworthy use of resources, while in other circumstances such expenditures would be detrimental or even deplorable.

Practical Hints for Effective Stewardship

Following are a number of suggestions that can help focus efforts toward effective stewardship for God's kingdom and the simplifying of one's lifestyle in an age of materialism and consumerism:

Establish a mission statement with respect to your money. Consider what ideals, income level, standard of living, investment, savings, and retirement issues are important to you and consistent with God's rule in your life.

Acquire possessions according to criteria of usefulness rather than status. Cars and clothing, for example, call for excessive outlays if status is a major criterion. If usefulness is the criterion, expenditures are almost certainly less.

Cultivate the habit of generosity. Experience the freedom that comes from giving things away.

Make matters of investments and larger expenditures the subject of prayer and counsel. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Don't neglect the guidance of individuals in the community of faith.

Refuse to accept the propaganda of advertising and consumerism. It has been observed that "Contradicting the present is the central evangelical task in our time." Be wary of seduction by today's endless ads and sales pitches that promise happiness and fulfillment through acquiring more and having more. Remain in control of your expenditures.

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