

Stewardship: Sign and Substance of the Christian Life as Taught in the New Testament

by
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Introduction

The scope of the New Testament understanding of stewardship far surpasses the contemporary interpretation and practice, which has been reduced to the practice of tithing one's income and appeals for the yearly church budget. The biblical view of stewardship is grounded in the nature of God as creator and redeemer, as protector of the oppressed, and as just administrator of creation itself.

Overview of the Biblical Teaching

From the beginning God delegated dominion over the earth to humankind, created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28).¹ The creation story in the first chapter of Genesis reveals God as creator and therefore owner of all creation and the human beings as stewards.² Two realities of this creation account undergird the New Testament concept of stewardship: that the steward overlooks the possessions of the creator/owner and that he performs his task in a manner responsive to the nature and desire of the creator/owner.³ Being created in the image of God is transformed for the Christian as part of God's new creation in Christ. The Christian's responsibility extends beyond the general aspect of dominion to the enlarged opportunity and duty to relate to the created world's longing to be set free with the coming of the kingdom (Rom. 8:19-22). The kingdom of God as revealed in the new covenant in Jesus Christ is based on the faithfulness, justice, righteousness, and compassion of God for the lowly and oppressed

(Luke 4:17-21). Jesus is the clear representation of how a Christian should use and care for the resources entrusted to him or her in a manner reflecting God's care for these resources.⁴

Defining the Terms

The Greek word *oikonomia* refers to the administration of a household, *oikonomos* to the administrator or manager of the household. Both terms are found in the papyri,⁵ but Paul seems to base his interpretation of stewardship on the contextualization of each within the Gospel parables.⁶ In Greek usage *oikonomos* could be translated "the one in charge" or steward. In the LXX the word is used to mean "a kind of chief slave who superintended the household and even the whole property of his master;...."⁷

Only in two New Testament parables is *oikonomos* used in the sense of stewardship of possession in a more secular sense (Luke 12:42; 16:1-4). In this ordinary use of the word the steward "exercises authority over what belongs to his master to insure order and harmony...." Implied therefore is the temporary nature of the task as a delegated responsibility under the owner/master.⁸ Elsewhere in the New Testament the term refers to the Christian responsibilities in more of a spiritual vein (for example, 1 Cor. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:10; and Titus 1:7) for the purpose of "the edification of the members [of the church] and for the proclamation" of the gospel.⁹

The term *oikonomia* refers primarily to household administration, but in the New Testament it can refer to "the office" of administration and the discharge of the office.¹⁰ Paul interprets the word to include the apostolic office as well as the management of spiritual gifts to "other office-bearers in the church" (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10).¹¹

The word also implies "plan of salvation," or "administration of salvation." Outside the New Testament it can speak of "measures by which one

¹William M. Swartley, "Biblical Sources of Stewardship," in *The Earth is the Lord's*, ed. Mary E. Jegen and Manno Bruno (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 22-23.

²Cullen I. K. Story, "The Nature of Paul's Stewardship," in *The Evangelical Quarterly* 48 (October-December 1976): 213.

³*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter TDNT), s.v. "*oikonomia*," 5:148; and s.v. "*oikonomos*" 5:151.

⁴*Ibid.*, 5:149.

⁵See Swartley, "Biblical Sources," 22; and Ben Dominguez, "Biblical Viewpoints: New Testament," in *The Human and the Holy*, ed. Emerito P. Nacpil and Douglas J. Elwood (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 82.

⁶*Ibid.*, 83.

⁷TDNT, s.v. "*oikonomia*," 5:151.

⁸Story, "Paul's Stewardship," 213.

¹Von Rad states that dominion does not define "image of God" but rather is its consequence, i.e., that for which man is capable of it...." See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 57-58.

²Cf. 1 Chron. 29:11. All references are to the NASB version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

³A. R. Fagan, *What the Bible Says About Stewardship* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1976), 4-6.

can secure the help of the heavenly powers."¹²

New Testament Teachings on Stewardship

As noted previously, the word stewardship tends to invoke the thought of money in general and tithing in particular. Any other connotation is relegated to a secondary position. Perhaps the strong identification of stewardship with money evolved because money is more easily measured than spiritual qualities. Also true is the fact that Jesus spoke a great deal about one's use of and attitude toward money. Indeed, the Bible clearly presents material possessions as an issue of great importance in one's relationship to God. The use of money can reveal some very basic moral issues (Matthew 5 and 6; Luke 16:13). Being a steward of God's resources touches every aspect of the Christian life, including one's use of material resources. The most common understanding of stewardship can then serve as a starting point in a survey of the New Testament teachings about stewardship.

Tithing

The Old Testament requirement of giving a tenth of one's possessions serves as the basis for Christian understanding and practice.¹³ Tithing itself is mentioned only a few times in the New Testament and is a minor part of the total New Testament teaching in regard to stewardship.

While recognizing "that the normative significance of tithing must be considered within the context of the ceremonial law,"¹⁴ clearly tithing is an aspect of the greater principle of divine ownership of all things created and the resulting obligation on one's possessions (Ps. 50:10-12). Even within the Old Testament, tithing was only a part "of the whole system of obligatory contributions required of Israel."¹⁵

Is the tithe obligatory for the Christian? The question, perhaps, is not the right question. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisee's tithing practices forms only a small part of Jesus' teaching about giving

(Matt. 23:23). This criticism does however reveal that a legalistic approach to giving misses the mark, because tithing then can be seen as a completion of a duty which allows ignoring the larger demands of stewardship. Conversely, a legalistic approach can lead to a sense of bribing God in order to be blessed financially (a common misconception).¹⁶ With regard to the latter, although material blessings are God's gift, the New Testament "emphasis has shifted from the particularistic to the universalistic, from the material to the spiritual, both in its demands and its promises."¹⁷

The Teachings of Jesus

Concerning Material Possessions

Appropriate relationship to and use of material possessions was an obvious theme in the teachings of Jesus. His admonition in Matthew 6:25-33 shows that material possessions are to be secondary in the life of the Christian. More seemingly radical (to the modern Christian) is Jesus' occasional demand for renunciation of possessions. (See Luke 18:22, 24-25; 14:25-27, 33; Matt. 19:21; 6:20; Mark 10:23-25; Matt. 10:37-38; cf. Phil. 3:7; Heb. 11:26.) Attempts to spiritualize these demands in an effort to soften them can do great damage to the truth expressed that loyalty to God cannot be compromised; and that material things have inherent danger. Jesus did not require of everyone the relinquishment of possessions, but his demands on one's use of possessions were predominantly tied to the issues of justice, compassion, and responsibility.¹⁸ In a culture that deifies both materialism and technology as primary sources of security and hope for the future, these demands are shocking and offensive. Conrad Boerma draws attention to the fact that "within the context of the covenant, material concerns are never made light of or spiritualized." Westerners differentiate between human relationships and relationships with God. The Bible does not so clearly separate the two, but rather holds them "closely together, and according to Jesus, they are even the same thing."¹⁹

Stewardship in the Parables

The Parable of the Unjust Steward. The parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16:1-13 is perhaps the

¹²TDNT, s.v. "oikonomia," 5:152.

¹³Mosaic law concerning the tithe includes the following: (1) a description of tithe as a tenth of crops, produce, and of herd and flock (Lev. 27:30-33); (2) naming of the recipients, i.e., the Levites and Aaron (Num. 18:21-32); and (3) the possibility of other tithes.

¹⁴Pieter A. Verhoef, "Tithing—A Hermeneutical Consideration," in *The Law and the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), 116.

¹⁵Ibid., 123. Also, Fagan notes that the Old Testament mentions several tithes (and offerings), which "accumulatively...amounted to about twenty-five percent." See Fagan *Bible Says*, 50.

¹⁶Ibid., 49.

¹⁷Verhoef, "Tithing," 127.

¹⁸Luke Johnson, *Sharing Possessions Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 13.

¹⁹Conrad Boerma, *The Rich, The Poor—And the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 44.

most obscure and problematic of all Jesus' parables.²⁰ The parable does teach certain basic truths concerning stewardship, as well as the biblical understanding of one's use and connection to material things and their effect on one's relationship to God. Aside from the difficulties, certain characteristics of a good steward, of which faithfulness is primary (vs. 10), emerge (cf. Matt. 25:21-23; Luke 19:17). The steward (*oikonomos*) was placed in charge of an estate "to relieve the owner of routine management." Thus, the position was one of delegated (and temporary) authority, overseeing the possessions of the owner. The steward in the parable was charged with abusing his position of trust and of wasting his master's goods.²¹

Verses 10-13 provide a collection of sayings that further develop the motif of the faithfulness of stewardship and the motif of mammon, which also "is linked with the idea of service to a master."²² Both motifs are now explicitly enlarged to embrace the faithfulness of the disciples. For example, in matters of trust, "all opportunities of this world are tests of character, and by his behaviour in small matters a man shows whether or not he is fit for larger responsibility." Thus, one's use of worldly wealth shows his or her fitness in being "trusted with real wealth, the wealth of the heavenly kingdom."²³ The use of *pistos* (faithful) in verse eleven "indicates that even such material wealth is regarded as something of which men are the stewards and not the owners."²⁴ One's true identity and loyalties find their expression in what a person does with small things (and which he also likewise does with large things). His faithfulness or his dishonesty appears throughout—in his ordinary life or in his spiritual life.²⁵ "Life is a unity."²⁶

²⁰Space prohibits dealing with the difficulties of the passage. In this study therefore the general consensus of scholars will be presented as to the meaning and basic assumptions of Jesus concerning material possessions. For a full discussion of the problems of the parable, see I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 614-24; G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, Pelican New Testament Commentaries (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963), 185-89; Marcus Barth, "The Dishonest Steward and His Lord: Reflections on Luke 16:1-13," in *From Faith to Faith*, ed. Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1979), 65-73; Dominguez, "Biblical Viewpoints," 83-88; and Donald Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (March 1963): 15-30.

²¹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 47.

²²Marshall, *Luke*, 622.

²³Caird, *Luke*, 188.

²⁴Marshall, *Luke*, 623. Cf. 1 Chron. 29:14.

²⁵Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951), 417.

²⁶Morris, *Luke*, 249.

Verse thirteen indicates the pretense of attempting to serve God and mammon (riches), for it is impossible to function well at either with divided loyalties. Trying to serve both reveals "a lie in [one's] existence;" and if the community of believers tries to serve both, the lie in their existence will be their demise.²⁷

The Parable of the Watchful Steward. The faithfulness of a steward is once again addressed in Luke 12:35-48 within the context of spiritual preparation for the coming of the Son of Man and judgment that is couched in a series of warnings. A Christian steward's preparation and alert readiness for action must be like that of "loyal servants keeping an all-night vigil in case their master should return early; they want to be sure that the decisive moment does not catch them napping...."²⁸ Peter's question in verse forty-one concerning the recipients of the message²⁹ elicited an indirect response from Jesus that "draws attention to the responsibility of all servants."³⁰

The steward (referred to as a *doulos* in vs. 43) entrusted with overseeing his master's servants was found faithful if he had been diligent and true in his task. A disloyal steward who misused his master's trust would have been found unworthy and duly punished. Comfortable in God's protective care in this life and filled with hope for the coming kingdom, Christians are to guard against "the temptations of the world to laziness, self-indulgence and self-assertion...." Loyalty in their tasks serves as preparation for his coming. Punishment is administered to wrong-doers, but also to those who neglect doing right. Therefore, the Christian is warned to seek to know God's will and do it (cf. James 4:17).³¹

The Teachings of Paul

The Apostle Paul in his life and ministry is a sterling example of stewardship in its primary meaning as trust. He took very seriously the claims of stewardship (1 Cor. 16:2), but enlarged the concept to include both his apostleship (1 Cor. 9:17), other Christians and their gifts, and the whole realm of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1f).

²⁷Boerma, *The Rich*, 44.

²⁸Caird, *Luke*, 165.

²⁹Generally speaking, judgment is meted out according to "a person's knowledge of the master's will, and those who have the greater responsibility and privileges will face the sterner judgment." See Marshall, *Luke*, 533.

³⁰Morris, *Luke*, 218.

³¹Marshall, *Luke*, 532; and Morris, *Luke* 218-19.

Stewardship of Possessions

The New Testament has much to say about giving. Paul's dealing with the subject was grounded in his mission and in his belief in an egalitarian community of faith. In 1 Cor. 16:2 Paul set forth guidelines for the collection for the Jerusalem church which was in financial need. Paul asked the Corinthians to lay aside every week a proportionate (and substantial) amount of money in relation to their financial gain of the week.³² His appeal was based on personal example: he had relinquished a home, "a considerable fortune and secure prospects for the sake of the gospel...."³³ His request was also based on true need. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering and would not have been aided by Jews outside of Palestine. A poor witness to Christianity indeed would have been if the Jewish community had cared for its own but the Christian community had not. Famine and persecution had exacerbated the problem. Besides compassionately and simply meeting real needs, a gift from the predominately Gentile church at Corinth would have further promoted unity within the church.³⁴

Paul's second appeal for the Jerusalem collection is recorded in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where he presents the basis for the appeal. Swartley summarizes Paul's numerous considerations for giving:

- (1) it proves the genuineness of one's love (8:8, 24); (2) it is an expression of God's grace (8:1ff.); (3) it expresses the fruit of the Spirit (8:7-8); (4) it follows the example of Jesus Christ who "though he was rich... became poor" (8:9); (5) it is to be guided by the vision of equality (8:13-15); (6) it is to be done liberally (8:2) and cheerfully (9:7), with assurance that the Lord will multiply the giver's resources (9:8-10); and (7) it is a ministry that meets needs of others ("saints"—9:12-13).³⁵

Underlying Paul's appeal was his special concern for the needs of the Jerusalem Christians, who were extremely poor and who were possibly barred from work or education by the Jews.³⁶ Paul invested a great deal of himself and his time over a several

year period, collecting money from churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Macedonia, and elsewhere (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Rom. 15:22-28; and Col. 2:10).³⁷ His commitment to the task was so great that he willed to take the collection himself in spite of great personal risk in returning to Jerusalem (Acts 21:7-14; Rom. 15:31). Coupled with his concern for their need and the belief that the gift showed unity of Gentile and Jewish Christians, Paul saw the collection as vindication of his apostleship (stewardship).³⁸

Partnership in the ministry is another strong basis of Paul's appeal. Obedience to God results in glorifying God and meeting needs, which also results in mutual intercessory prayer.³⁹ According to Paul, the recognition that all resources are from God and that "our Christian work is not our own but is part of the Master's world-wide plan" enables appropriate giving with proper motivations.⁴⁰

Stewardship of Creation

Humankind's relationship to nature does not appear to be defined in the New Testament outside the responsibility of stewardship.⁴¹ Paul declares that both humanity and creation itself long for redemption (Rom. 8:19-23) and both have been reconciled through Jesus Christ (Col. 1:20). As steward, the Christian is "an agent of redemption through the church."⁴² And although humanity's relationship is not clearly defined, within the general parameters of dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28), it behooves the Christian to act wisely with respect to the created order. As members of the new covenant of God in Christ in whom all things consist (Col. 1:17) and "who exercises primacy in the new creation as well as the old...,"⁴³ Christians are spurred to relate appropriately to their master's work. God's purpose in Christ is "to bring the universe, fragmented by rebellion and sin, back together, to restore the primeval harmony that existed in the beginning."⁴⁴

Much of the motivation in the contemporary

³⁷Ronald J. Sider, "A Biblical Perspective on Stewardship," in *The Earth is the Lord's*, 15

³⁸Swartley, "Biblical Sources", 36.

³⁹See 2 Cor. 9:12-14.

⁴⁰Green, *To Corinth*, 100

⁴¹Chung Choon Kim, "Toward a Christian Theology of Man in Nature," in *The Human and the Holy*, 89.

⁴²Dominguez, "Biblical Viewpoints", 82.

⁴³F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 70.

⁴⁴Malcolm O. Tolbert, *Colossians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, *The Layman's Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadmans Press, 1980), 45.

³²William F. Orr and James A. Walther, *1 Corinthians*, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1976), 356.

³³Michael Green, *To Corinth with Love* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 99.

³⁴Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, rev. ed., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 231-32.

³⁵Swartley condenses these concepts from Holmes Ralston, *Stewardship in the New Testament Church. A Study in the Teachings of St Paul Concerning Christian Stewardship* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1946), 70-73. See Swartley, "Biblical Sources", 36.

³⁶Green, *To Corinth*, 99.

environmental movement in relation to ecology, especially as presented in certain feminist theologians, is based on the primacy of the creation of the earth itself, on an equal basis with humankind. In extreme cases the earth itself is elevated to a primary position of deity. However, in terms of humanity's abuse of the creation, the issue is the appropriate stewardship of what has been entrusted to the appointed stewards. Perhaps the growing concerns of the environmentalists result from the practice of the western world, whose understanding of stewardship has led to the adoption of an aggressive posture of domination and exploitation. To be counted as "faithful" stewards of the creation, an important issue to remember is that the creation was intended for the blessing and good of all people, not merely those in the west.⁴⁵

Stewardship of Spiritual Realities

Paul viewed his apostleship as a trust of stewardship from God (1 Cor. 9:17), just as he viewed the stewardship of all who proclaim the gospel (1 Cor. 4:1). He was obligated to preach because of his position of responsibility before God.⁴⁶ Again, a rudimentary requirement of stewardship is faithfulness to the task (cf. Luke 12:42; 16:10f; Matt. 25:21-23).⁴⁷ Paul's radical conversion and call to apostleship undergirded "the strong sense of stewardship which he had toward the gospel." In those issues where that stewardship was threatened by his opponents, Paul appealed to his instruction as *kata kurion*, "according to the Lord."⁴⁸

This stewardship was not limited to Paul but was shared among other apostles (1 Cor. 4:12) and other office-bearers (bishops/overseers) in the church (Titus 1:7).⁴⁹ Paul uses *oikonomos* "as a description of proper service in the church...."⁵⁰ Paul asserts that the apostles were made servants of Christ and stewards of the "mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). Trustworthy execution of the task is their one requirement as a responsibility to God

and not to man.⁵¹ "The leader has no independent position, nor is he to be honored apart from Christ."⁵² Nor does the judgment of ministers belong to any other than God.⁵³ The "mysteries of God" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:4) as used in the New Testament usually refer to that which "has formerly been kept hidden in the purpose of God but has now been disclosed."⁵⁴ Specifically, the term refers to salvation in Christ, including justice, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and eschatological consummation.⁵⁵ The redemption of all creation (Rom. 8:21), the presence of Christ in the midst of his church (Col. 1:27), the plan of God in Christ, the spiritual union of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:32) are expanded meanings of the term in the New Testament.⁵⁶

Paul's understanding of himself and other Christians as stewards indicate the responsibility of the steward in wisely handling those significant offices, spiritual gifts, and secrets of God in a trustworthy manner, remembering that the offices, gifts, and mysteries belong to God. The steward must be alert to the danger of forgetting her status as *doulos* and the temporary nature and privilege of her task.

The Messianic Mission of Christ: Implications for Christian Stewardship

Mary's Hymn: Preview of the Mission (Luke 1:46-55)

Luke's gospel most clearly wrestles with issues involved with the use of material resources;⁵⁷ indeed, twenty percent of his gospel focuses on possessions.⁵⁸ Luke's special concern rests on "those who are materially poor, as revealed in the beginning of his gospel with the impressive Magnificat...." The hymn is similar to the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10), but there is a difference in tone.⁵⁹

Mary's song of praise to God regarding her con-

⁴⁵See Bernard W. Anderson, "Human Dominion of Nature," in *Biblical Studies in Contemporary Thought*, ed. Miriam Ward (Somerville, MA: Greeno, Hadden & Co., 1975), 27-45.

⁴⁶Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 135.

⁴⁷Compare 1 Pet. 4:10-11 which "calls every Christian a recipient of the divine gift of grace and consequently a steward of the manifold grace of God." Officer-bearers particularly are stewards of grace. See TDNT, s.v., "oikonomia," 5:151.

⁴⁸Story, "Paul's Stewardship," 218.

⁴⁹Compare Peter's question to Jesus and Jesus' response in Luke 12:41. See J. Ramsey Michael, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 249.

⁵⁰Cf. Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7. See Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 160.

⁵¹R. St. John Parry, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 73.

⁵²Orr, *1 Corinthians*, 179.

⁵³Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 71.

⁵⁴Bruce, *Epistles*, 261.

⁵⁵Orr, *1 Corinthians*, 179; Parry, *First Epistle*, 75.

⁵⁶Bruce, *1 Corinthians*, 261; Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 54-55; Curtis Vaughn, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Lamplighter Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 25.

⁵⁷Boerma, *The Rich*, 38.

⁵⁸John F. Alexander, *Your Money or Your Life: A New Look at Jesus' View of Wealth and Power* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 46.

⁵⁹E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Century Bible (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1974), 75; and Morris, *Luke*, 75.

ception is an "outburst of praise...."⁶⁰ Typical of this type of hymn, "the expression of praise is followed by a statement giving the grounds for it."⁶¹ Mary's song expresses God's mercy and love to the lowly and a radical reversal of normal human values. The hungry will be filled and the lowly will be exalted (verse 52). The Greek word *tapeinoi* which translates "those of low degree" describes not only those who have no possessions but also those who are "oppressed by their fellow human beings" and in need of divine assistance.⁶² The entire song "is a rehearsal of God's equitable actions...."⁶³ God's "eschatological exaltation of the lowly" has begun with Mary. Her song celebrates God's work "in bringing that...reversal about already, or at least beginning to do so."⁶⁴

Mary anticipated God's mercy (*eleos*)⁶⁵ in a "messianic deliverance...whose meaning surpasses her comprehension."⁶⁶ Mary's prophecy of the heart of the messianic kingdom reveals the justice of God as basis for stewardship within the kingdom, which comes to fruition in a complete upheaval of values and expectations.⁶⁷ Mary's hymn announces a "cultural revolution" (verses 51-52), in which the lowly are exalted; a "political revolution" (verse 52), in which power is shared among the people; and an "economic revolution" (verse 53) which provided "food for the hungry and starving of the world."⁶⁸ These reversals are recognized as acts of God's judgment, always an aspect of God's salvation.⁶⁹ The Christian church has tended to spiritualize these reversals, to the exclusion of a literal interpretation. However, the messianic kingdom, as revealed in Jesus Christ, "should bring about a political and social revolution, bringing the ordinary life of mankind into line with the will of God."⁷⁰

Mary has usually been "regarded as the comforter of the disturbed when she is far more accurately the disturber of the comfortable," much like

her son.⁷¹ If Mary's hymn were the only clue to Christian stewardship, then giving only a tenth of one's income clearly falls short of New Testament standards and places stewardship within a legalistic framework much more narrow than the radical paradigm shift of the new covenant.

The Nature and Implications of Christ's Messianic Mission

Jesus Christ is the "visible likeness of the invisible God...superior to all things created. God's agent in creation, Christ became the means of reconciling the whole universe to himself. Indeed, through Christ the universe endures (Col. 1:15-17). Jesus' reflection of the Father's nature and work (John 5:19-20) forms the basis of the Christian view of stewardship. The church as the body of Christ in the world performs the work of Christ, according to his nature and example. Jesus clearly revealed the Father's concern for the proper use of resources, whether material or spiritual.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ ushered in the coming of the kingdom in which God became flesh and tabernacled among his people to reveal conclusively the character of the kingdom. His self-proclaimed messianic mission is recorded in Luke 4:17-21:

The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me
Because He anointed Me to preach the
gospel to the poor,
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the
captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are downtrodden,
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.⁷²

Jesus' statement following the reading sent shock waves throughout the synagogue in Nazareth as it does in the hearts of believers today. His original hearers were appalled by his effrontery in claiming to fulfill the passage (Isa. 61:1); current readers are unnerved by the implications of his

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Marshall, *Luke*, 82.

⁶²Johnson, *Shared Possessions*, 13.

⁶³Thomas E. Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 137.

⁶⁴David C. Mealand, *Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1980), 49.

⁶⁵Compassion toward the oppressed or lowly is the general understanding of *eleos*. The LXX uses it to translate *chesed*, adding to *eleos* the idea of faithfulness. See TDNT, "eleos," 2:483.

⁶⁶Ellis, *Luke*, 75.

⁶⁷Johnson, *Shared Possessions*, 13; Morris, *Luke*, 77.

⁶⁸Doris Donnelly, "Stewardship: The Feminine Perspective," in *The Earth is the Lord's*, 22-43; and Marshall, *Luke* 84.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Donnelly, "Stewardship," 68.

⁷²Luke's record appears "to emphasize that Jesus fulfills...the social righteousness of the jubilee year..." See Swartley, "Biblical Sources," 32. Yoder points out Luke's use of the theme of jubilee throughout the gospel: Luke 1:52-53, 3:22; 4:14; and 12:49-14:36. See John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 26-77. Manson echoes a common interpretation of the passage that indicates taking these terms "in [their] inward, spiritual sense... therefore, as inward repressions, neuroses, and other ills due to misdirection and failure of life's energies and purposes." See Manson, *Luke*, 41. Johnson argues that the "word 'poor' seems to bear its usual meaning of being without material goods." See Johnson, *Shared Possessions*, 14. For cautions against spiritualizing the material dimensions of the demands of the gospel, see Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Predicament of the Prosperous* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).

mission for their lives. To those who deny the material claims of Jesus, his response to John the Baptist's question of his messianic identity should prove enlightening. Jesus' answer is a repetition of the issues and qualities of the kingdom of Luke 4:18ff.:

And he answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them. (Luke 7:22)

Therefore, "the Old Testament vision of jubilean justice and the ethic of prophetic righteousness find fulfillment in Jesus' teachings and actions."⁷³ Luke recorded this event and Nazareth's response to it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Thus, Luke intended it "to be representative, indeed pro-grammatic, of all the events that follow in his gospel with respect to the person and message of Jesus."⁷⁴

One who follows Christ must engage in the demands of his mission. Jesus' relinquishment of his heavenly riches "for the sake of His disciples that 'through his [incarnate] poverty' they 'might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9, NIV)" serves as the example.⁷⁵ Jesus informed his disciples in John 14:10-12 that his work revealed the Father and that the disciples will do the same work also. Building on Jesus' response to John the Baptist in Luke 7:22, "the activity of Jesus ... may now, in a midrashically cumulative fashion [in Luke 9:2,6], be even more simply summarized by Luke—in the context of the sending out of the Twelve to a ministry that parallels that of Jesus...."⁷⁶ According to Acts 2, the kingdom has come (not yet fully consummated until his coming) and is surely present in the life of his church through the Holy Spirit. The immediate response of the Jerusalem church along with its evangelistic concern was its sharing with those in need (Acts 2:42-47).

What an incredible surprise that deity would condescend to become and share in humanity. How even more surprising that God's kingdom would be initiated in a stable and extended among the lowly and oppressed. Christ has entrusted the

furtherance of the kingdom to those he called out to be his church, which is a living, breathing embodiment of his continuing mission in the world.

That which motivates the contemporary Christian "is a vision of participation in [the world] as [living] parables of the kingdom which is to come" and indeed has already dawned.⁷⁷ Every act of Jesus in the lives of people gave hope of the kingdom. Thus, the church will have "little impact upon the world until [its] values" reflect Christ's "kingdom ethic."⁷⁸ Christ's kingdom is based on the value and dignity of persons.⁷⁹ Therefore the calling of the Christian is "to impact non-Christians with [his] lifestyle both personally and corporately."⁸⁰

"A radical biblical theology of the kingdom is a radical valuing of persons whatever may be the dominant valuing system of the culture."⁸¹ Jesus' inclusive compassion for all people and his directives to his followers to have the same compassion undergird the Christian understanding of stewardship. Jesus' multivalent teaching on stewardship and giving preclude easy formulaic approaches. However, responsible decisions concerning stewardship must be based on Christ's proclamation and demonstration of his mission of salvation, justice, and compassion.

Jesus instructed his followers to love God with their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love their neighbors as themselves (Mark 10:29:31). Inherent in the commandment to love is the basis for stewardship. To love God includes honoring him as a servant in relationship to the master. The New Testament conclusively teaches that loving one's neighbor requires action. Ignoring the need of a brother or sister when one has the capacity to fulfill the need exposes the absence of God's love (1 John 3:17-18) and "a fundamental denial of the new community in Christ (James 2:1-13)."⁸²

Conclusion

The Christian practice of stewardship must then grow out of one's submission to the creator and owner of all things. Possessions and gifts of God, both material and spiritual, are temporarily under the supervision of God's servants. Our relationship to possessions "is not a direct one, only indirect,

⁷³Swartley, "Biblical Sources," 33.

⁷⁴Robert B. Sloan, Jr., "The Favorable Year of the Lord: A Study of Jubilean Theology in the Gospel of Luke" (Th.D. diss., University of Basel, Switzerland, 1977), 28.

⁷⁵James Leo Garrett, Jr., "God's Loving-Giving Nature," in *Witnessing-Giving Life*, no ed. (Nashville: SBC Stewardship Commission, 1988), 63.

⁷⁶Sloan, "Favorable Year," 117.

⁷⁷Larry L. McSwain, "The Committed Christian in a Modern Society," in *Witness-Giving Life*, 188.

⁷⁸Ibid., 189.

⁷⁹Donnelly, "Stewardship," 64-65.

⁸⁰Gene A. Getz, *Real Prosperity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 13.

⁸¹McSwain, "Committed Christian," 189.

⁸²Boerma, *The Rich*, 6.

only through Christ, so that we are responsible to Him for whatever use we make of them. He has absolute claim over them."⁸³ Therefore, the criteria by which one determines appropriate usage must be the nature and character of God as most clearly revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. A thorough examination of programs, structures, and motives must therefore be undertaken by individuals and churches in light of the values and standards of Jesus' kingdom. There is an urgent need to allow the demands of the gospel, of Christ's mission in the world, to invade the structures of our churches and organizations. The religious community of the first century reacted against Jesus and his message because he threatened their systems. Today's Christian systems must be judged in light of the kingdom mission and must be appropriately revised when not in line with Christ's concern for the oppressed, the needy,⁸⁴ and indeed for all persons as valued equally by God.

Concern for those in need appears not to be a priority in modern society. World hunger and the situation of the homeless in America do not tend to hold integral places in church or denominational budgets. Today's Christians are "prone to hear and respond to the demands of the poor, the disinherited, and the desperate only when their cries pose a threat to our way of life."⁸⁵ According to the teachings of the New Testament, "Christians must not be slow in making up what others lack. This is an important facet of evangelism."⁸⁶ Christ's eschatological judgment will include evaluation of the Christian's response to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20, to his stewardship of spiritual gifts and time, and to his response to human need:

For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.... Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me. (Matt. 25:35-36, 40)

In those areas where neglect of one's stewardship causes pain, hunger, loneliness, or further oppression of the lowly, God's judgment is sure and the hope of the kingdom is precluded. Therefore, every appropriate act of Christian stewardship, whether in terms of the gospel, spiritual gifts, or possessions, as participation in Christ's kingdom, is then "a small demonstration of what the kingdom will bring ultimately."⁸⁷

⁸⁷McSwain, "Committed Christian," 189.

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⁸³Riginald H. Fuller and Brian K. Rice, *Christianity and the Affluent Society* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), 30; quoted in Garrett, "Loving-Giving Nature," 67.

⁸⁴John P. Newport, "Holy Spirit—Empowering for the Living of the Witnessing-Giving Life," in *Witness-Giving Life*, 86.

⁸⁵William L. Hendricks, *The Letters of John* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1970), 85.

⁸⁶Newport, "Holy Spirit—Empowering," 95.

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