

# THE THEOLOGY OF STEWARDSHIP: Whole-Life Stewardship

BY REV. RICHARD GAHL



It was one of those “light bulb” moments. A neighboring pastor published a book about stewardship that the young pastor devoured. The opening paragraph made a bold statement: The traditional trio of tithing time, talents and treasure was unbiblical and counterproductive if it implied that after giving 10 percent to the Lord, the faithful were free to do what they wanted with the remaining 90 percent.

Perhaps the point might be phrased this way: Is stewardship the regular financial enlistment process for a congregation that results in estimates of giving that increase each year, or is stewardship the managing of all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes? Is stewardship just something to check off a list, or is it a matter of vocation? Solidly biblical definitions of stewardship may well be undermined by congregational practices that imply the opposite — practices that result in congregational members feeling as if they are being treated as “automated teller machines” or, even worse, that they have been mugged by a fundraiser.

Put another way, is Christian stewardship a part-time or a full-time matter? Is being a disciple of Jesus Christ an occasional activity, or is discipleship our vocation in the home, in the church and in society? The answers to these questions make a difference. There is an old tale about a conversation between two barnyard rivals for status. The subject was which one made the greatest contribution to the bacon-and-eggs breakfast. The chicken pointed out that the production of eggs was the critical factor for that important meal to start off the day. The muddy old pig had a differing opinion. To be sure, egg production was a daily matter for chickens. But the pig’s part of the meal required total commitment.

This essay endorses the position of total commitment, or whole-life stewardship: using what God has given us according to His purposes for us in our vocations in home, church and society.

## 1. Paul as Servant, Apostle and Steward

Paul is an excellent starting place to work through this “all of life” concept of stewardship. The student of Scripture recognizes that Paul uses a number of words to describe who he is and what he does. In 1 Corinthians, we find at least three words to describe his self-understanding in Christ. In 3:5, Paul defines both Apollos and himself as “servants,” the word is *diakonos* in Greek. This servant word is a technical term for one who is assigned or delegated a task by another. In 9:2, he is an “apostle,” one who is sent by God to

bring the message of salvation to others. While apostle is a term that usually refers to the Twelve, it also is used to describe Paul, Apollos, Timothy and others in the New Testament. Apostle has a missionary flavor; it carries with it the idea of an ambassador representing another. In this case, our Lord. In 4:1 and following, Paul asks the Corinthians to consider them (3:22: Paul, Apollos, Cephas) as “stewards,” those who are entrusted with the mysteries of God. Three words: servant (or deacon), apostle and steward. They have a common thrust. God has charged, commissioned and sent Paul and his coworkers to carry out His mission. A case can be made that these terms are almost interchangeable. Some years back, Douglas Hall made the observation that the people of God are stewards of God’s mission. Stewardship, then, is an all-encompassing word, not subject to our usual limitation of what is placed in the offering basket on Sundays. Andrew Lincoln contends in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* that the fourth Gospel was written as a mission-training manual. It begins with the Father sending the Son into the world as His agent to live among us so that we see our salvation. The Gospel ends with Jesus telling His followers, “As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.” These three words about God’s mission — servant, apostle and steward — are a full-time responsibility for the people of God. And for each of us, that means the callings (vocations) God has given us in home, church and society.

## 2. Living in Baptism

Another way to approach the concept of whole-life stewardship is to pick up the thread of Baptism and vocation that run together through the Scriptures. A group of stewardship leaders were charged by an LCMS convention to put together biblical principles for stewardship. The first principle was formulated in these words:

God’s stewards are stewards by virtue of their creation and their recreation in Holy Baptism. Therefore they belong to the Lord.

This statement was attempting to build on the giftedness of each individual at birth and the new dynamic that the Holy Spirit adds at Baptism. The Creator entrusts gifts so that the people of God are

able to accomplish His purposes. Paul's language in Romans 12 about giving our bodies as a living sacrifice, or response to God, connects everyday life to worship and service. This is what we are called to be and do. As such, it encompasses all of life. It knows no limitation to only certain aspects of daily living. Stewardship: A *Theological Perspective* introduces this new series of stewardship material and puts it this way:

Stewardship is but a synonym for the life of a Christian who is living rightly with all of his relationships: before God as well as before his fellow creatures. Stewardship is the Christian life and Christian life is stewardship. (p. 3)

In *Our Calling*, a classic essay on the relationship of the Christian faith and Christian living, Einar Billing writes:

My call is the form my life takes according as God Himself organizes for me through His forgiving grace. Life organized around the forgiveness of sins, that is Luther's idea of the call [vocation].

Our calling is the sum of all those tasks that God daily gives us along with the forgiveness of sins until the end of life.

Stewardship is a way of life with the cross at the center. The baptized people of God are called, gathered and enlightened people. When we welcome new members to this calling through Holy Baptism we say:

We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as (a) fellow member(s) of the body of Christ, (a) child(ren) of the same heavenly Father, to work with us in His kingdom. (*Lutheran Worship*, p. 204)

Another way to say this is that the life of the people of God means living in and from our Baptism. John Westerhoff reminds us that we must always begin with what God has made us to be: that is, with our being, who we really are by God's grace. Now this is dramatically different from many everyday conversations about vocation. So often we equate vocation as employment, a job. We work with vocational counselors. We even talk about church vocations — a calling to be professional church workers. This language has a way of undermining our common baptismal vocation to be the people of God where God has given us roles to play in home, church and society. Everyone has this holy calling to fulfill.

### 3. Sacred vs. Secular

The world at-large does not view matters this way. The whole distinction of sacred and secular, our continual temptation to compartmentalize life, a consumer culture, the idolatry of money and a false understanding of the providence of God are but a few ways the world tries to undermine God's gift of vocation.

Divorcing Sunday's worship from Monday's work shows up in many ways. It is as if we are saying: Sunday is sacred time, Monday is secular time. I worship my Lord on Sunday, but I attend to everyday matters the rest of the week. This is another version of God gets His 10 percent of my time on Sunday morning, and the other 90 percent is mine. For the record, two hours on Sunday morning is not 10

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percent of a 148-hour week. Getting to 10 percent would require another 12.8 hours of church work. Few very involved church leaders get even close to that kind of investment in time.

The truth is that the time we spend in church on Sunday as well as the gifts we give in the offering plate are firstfruits — acknowledgments of who owns the whole harvest. God has a use for our whole selves in our various vocations in church, home and society.

Another way to describe this phenomenon is to reframe sacred/secular into a series of compartments. This is when an individual arranges life into a series of boxes. Box #1 is work. Box #2 could be family. Box #3 is leisure. Then there is the box for church and faith. And there could be a whole series of other compartments for life. But all of these boxes belong to God. Our whole life is His gift — more than that, it is His calling to us. He has roles for us to play, work for us to do, a purpose for our whole life that cannot be compartmentalized away.

A standard Gospel reading for Reformation is John 8:31–36. Who hasn't been thrilled to hear again and again: "The truth will set you free. ... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." The chains of righteousness earned by works have been broken and we are gifted with salvation. We are free indeed. Generally the observance of Reformation falls into the middle of a stewardship emphasis for many Christian congregations gearing up for a new church year or calendar year. Luke Timothy Johnson makes a powerful connection between our captivity to money and possessions from which the Gospel sets us free:

If the security given by things (no matter whether material or spiritual) is all we have as a god, then we have *no choice* but to cling to what we possess. We cannot detach ourselves from our possessions because they are for us the source of our identity and worth.

To be identified or controlled by the things we have is actually a form of idolatry. They are our gods, and we are then possessed by our possessions. This can take multiple forms, from bank accounts to houses, from employment to social status. The parable of the great banquet in Luke 14 indicates that the master's anger was not aroused because those who were first invited but refused to come had possessions, but that they had allowed these possessions to become so entangling that they could not respond even to this special invitation.

On the other hand, if we are able to acknowledge that our life comes at every moment from God, that we are held out of nothingness

as a gift from Him, that our identity and worth are established not by what we can seize, but by what has been given to us in grace, then we need not define ourselves by what we own (materially or spiritually). We are freed for the first time from the tyranny of possessing.

Now as servants gifted by the living God with house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle and all our goods (Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed), we are free to be managers or stewards of material things without being possessed by them. Then as recovering materialists, daily being reshaped by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be free indeed!

Richard Towner describes the problem as the "gospel of materialism":

This worship of material wealth in our culture takes on an insidious form that imitates Christianity. There is a gospel, the "good news," of materialism. "Things bring happiness." Materialism has a liturgy called consumerism, which is performed in temples of worship called shopping malls. The deity of materialism — called money — has been imbued with godlike characteristics. It is deemed omnipotent — "Give enough of that stuff and I'll be powerful enough to make it happen!" It promises ultimate security — a promise that can only rightfully be made by God Himself.

A historic way to describe the idolatry of materialism is with the word "greed." This connects with covetousness in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. Desiring a new car with all the bells and whistles is not necessarily greed or coveting. However, when it becomes excessive self-concern and self-aggrandizement at the expense of the duties God has given us in our vocations in home, church and society, then the line has been crossed. When we value our own comfort, demand our own rights, seek our own satisfaction and privilege above that of the neighbor, we have missed the mark. In so doing we have isolated ourselves from our neighbors and destroyed the very fabric of community. We have set aside God's gift of our calling, which is always a vocation of service, and placed ourselves at the center. The great commandment calls us to love God with our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are challenged to come out of our self-centered, self-focused, self-indulgent lifestyles to love God and our neighbor with exuberance and abundance.

#### 4. *The Providence of God*

The Sacred Scriptures are filled with references to the care of God for His creation. A partial listing of those texts would include Job 37; Psalms 103, 104 and 145; Matthew 6 and 10; and Amos 5. He sends rain on the just and the unjust. He simply cares for the creatures of His creation. He provides for them. Luther's explanation of the First Article is filled with a list of God's faithful providence and concludes: "For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him." We trust God to care for us according to His promises. We believe He has the best in mind for us.

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Or as Luther says in his explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us today our daily bread. ... God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving."

We can trust the providence of God — His ongoing care for us and His whole creation. We don't tempt God — we don't listen to TV evangelists who tell us to send in the whole paycheck in a "step of faith." But we do know that following God's directives for supporting His work in the Church with generous, firstfruits giving will be a blessing to us, not a curse.

#### 5. *Forming Generous People Across the Life Cycle*

We only know what it means to be God's child by looking at God's Son. From here we see who our God is, who we are, the One into whose image we are to be transformed.

R. Scott Rodin points church leaders to the ongoing responsibility of being agents for transforming the faithful into the image of Christ. While the Holy Spirit is always the agent of this transformation, the church through Word and Sacrament is the setting for the Spirit's gracious work. Let it be clearly understood that forming generous people for whole-life stewardship is not a once-and-done activity or emphasis in the church. It needs to be a continual focus for parish leadership — teaching, mentoring and encouraging God's people in creative ways. To make of the formation of stewards a once-and-done activity is to shortchange Law and Gospel responsibilities.

Whole-life stewardship goes against the grain of modern consumer-based culture. The mantra of the consumer is: What's in it for me? What do I get for my money? Is this the value I seek? Money has become the means for getting everything we want and in the words of a bumper sticker: "He who dies with the most toys wins!" Martin Sandel illustrates how far down the road we have gone with a money-pays-for-everything attitude. In Orange County, Calif., should you be sentenced to a jail term in the local lock-up, it is possible to upgrade your cell for \$80 per night. In that way, money will keep you from being associated with the wrong kind of people. During the summer of 2012, newspapers reported a shortage of aisle seats on flights, which made it difficult for families to sit together while traveling. It seems that other travelers were paying extra to get these seats so that they could make a mad dash out of the plane upon landing.

Consumerism has been an up-hill battle since the time of the New Testament. Consider the example of James and John, sons of Zebedee,

in Mark 10. Immediately following Jesus' third Passion prediction (these predictions occur in the aftermath of the Transfiguration in Mark 9 — i.e., a short period of time), James and John make their almost brazen request: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mark 10:35). Talk about a what's-in-it-for-me moment! Whatever we ask! When Jesus asks for clarification, we learn James and John have the desire to have prominent places in the coming Kingdom, one at the right hand and the other at the left. No wonder the rest of the disciples were indignant! Jesus had to do some remedial instructing of the Twelve on the point of humility. It was obvious they did not understand the significance of the three announcements of His coming suffering and death in Jerusalem. The cornerstone of that teaching is Mark 10:44–45: "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Note well that Jesus' serving, the Greek word *diakonia* from the beginning of this study, is further explained by the critical explanation "gave His life as a ransom for many." That's what it meant for Jesus to serve: total commitment. For further study, see Philippians 2 with its introductory exhortation — "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (v. 5) — and other passages about having the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16, for example).

Our assignment as church leaders is whole-life stewardship across the changing landscapes and changes of life. Worship, preaching, Sunday school and Bible classes, pastoral counseling and confirmation instruction are all important venues for equipping the people of God to be about His purposes. There are a number of other articles in this new series of stewardship resources that deal with specific ages and life stages. Work through them carefully as you consider all of life and life's stages in your planning for growing Christian stewards.

Mark Allen Powell states the significance and challenge of this responsibility this way:

Stewardship means belonging to God. It means allowing God to rule our lives, putting God in charge of everything, our time and our money. I can understand why that might sound threatening — surrendering control does not come easily to any of us.

## 6. A Whole-Life Stewardship Reading of Ephesians 4

Whole-life stewardship is a theme that runs through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Eph. 1:7–10 we learn that God made "known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (The word "plan" is the steward word.) In chapter 2, we are told that He made us alive together in Christ (v. 5) and that we are created for good works "which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (v. 10). The Spirit is building people together as "a dwelling place for God" (v. 22). In chapter 3, Paul tells the Ephesians that he had a stewardship responsibility to bring the grace of God to them (v. 2)

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and was a "minister" (*diakonos*) (v. 7) so that they might be filled with "all the fullness of God" (v. 19). These themes come together in chapter 4:

"I ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (v. 1) and "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3). "Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (v. 7), and various leaders also are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry [*diakonia*], for building up the body of Christ" (v. 12) "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (v. 13). "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (v. 15), who, "when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (v. 16). "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do" (v. 17), for "that is not the way you learned Christ!" (v. 20). So "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt" (v. 22) and "be renewed" (v. 23). "Put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (v. 24), and "speak the truth ... for we are members of one another" (v. 25). "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor ... with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (v. 28). "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (v. 32). "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:1–2).

God has a plan for the salvation of the world that He is implementing through the Church. The Church is a gifted community of believers whose everyday lives (vocations in church, home and society) have been transformed by the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's purposes. This community of believers is putting on Christ, growing in imitation of Him who gave Himself for us. This transformation even takes the thief in the midst of the community who is now repurposed from taking from others for himself to working with his hands so that he can share with others. All of life and life's resources for God's purposes — this is whole-life stewardship.

## Resources for Further Study

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- › Jeavons, Thomas H., and Rebekah Burch Basinger. *Growing Giver's Hearts: Treating Fundraising as Ministry*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.
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