Don’t Confuse Christmas With Stewardship

Christmas and stewardship go together because of what the incarnation of Jesus accomplishes for us. But they should not be confused! Sometimes, the morphed traditions of Christmas can start to pose a challenge to stewardship. Then, left unchecked, those challenges to stewardship will cause challenges to the Gospel! Those challenges are subtle, but every bit as dangerous and perhaps even more insidious than one might imagine.

God’s gifts are not our gifts
The confusion stems from the word “gift.” Steward leaders, Christmas preachers and church members all use the word “gift.” But they really do not mean the same thing at all. Some of this is rooted in the sloppily imprecise nature of the English language, and the imprecise manner in which the word “gift” is used by all three groups. The people in the pews, when they hear the word “gift” at this time of the year, often slip into the cultural understanding — the pretty paper-wrapped boxes under the sparkling tree. Christmas preachers talk, rightly so, about the “gift” of salvation that is given in the Christ Child. All this while the steward leader is talking about the “gifts” that God has given His people for life in this world and service to the neighbor. Same word. Vastly different meanings.

Here is where the steward leader might be better off just dropping the language of “gift” altogether. It helps to end the confusion.

The Godhead was swaddled both in human flesh and swaddling clothes. In this precious gift, a fallen humanity received a Savior who is Christ the Lord! From those humble Bethlehem beginnings, Jesus would go on to accomplish the long-promised salvation humanity so desperately needed! This Gospel in the flesh at the manger would become the Gospel on the cross and the Gospel of the empty tomb. This gift was motivated by love. The Father loved His creation, and you, so much that He was willing to give His Son to ransom them! Gift and Gospel go together! So maybe Christmas and stewardship should go together!

There is perhaps not an obvious connection, at least immediately, between stewardship and Christmas. It is not likely that the images of angels and shepherds, stables and stars, Mary, Joseph and the Babe lying in the manger will conjure up immediate thoughts, or any thoughts for that matter, of stewardship! For most people, stewardship is stewardship and Christmas is Christmas. These two topics are worlds apart!

But should they be? After all, Christmas is about the greatest gift ever given, right? Our Lord Jesus Christ entered the world through the womb of the Virgin Mary.

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The word “gift” often entails the transfer of ownership. A husband gives a ring to his wife. The husband bought it. He gave it. But it is owned by the wife. A member of a congregation buys a Christmas gift for their pastor. They bought it. They wrapped it. They gave it. But the gift now belongs to the pastor. Once the gift is given, ownership is changed. To give a gift with the expectation of getting it back would be regarded as rude at best. Gifts are given!

But when steward leaders point God’s people into the Word of God to gain a better understanding of stewardship, the language of “gift” becomes increasingly problematic. As seen in the parables about talents and minas, there is no transfer of ownership from the Master to the servants. Even all the way back in the “ordination” of the office of steward (GEN. 1:26–28) there was no transfer of ownership. All creation belonged to the Lord who had spoken it into existence. It was no gift. It was, and still is, a trust!

Here is where the steward leader needs to seriously avoid the confusion of Christmas and stewardship. If the steward leader starts talking about the “gifts” God has given His people, there is a danger that the hearers will begin to think that they own what the Lord has given. The world backs this misunderstanding up as well. Your bank account is filled with your money, which you access with your computer so that you can pay for your house, your car, your kids, your vacation. … See the problem here? This is all ownership language. Ownership mentality is the death of stewardship faith. Confusion surrounding the language of “gift” may be highlighted during the Christmas season, but it has spread year-round into stewardship thinking. This language is foreign to the message of stewardship in the Scriptures.

Here is a solution. Steward leaders need to stop talking about “gifts.” We should use an English word that is far more precise when it comes to the task for which we as stewards have been created and redeemed. The better word: “trust”!

Trust does not carry with it the implication of ownership. Parents entrust their young children for a night to a babysitter so that they can enjoy a date night. This is a trust. The sitter doesn’t become the parent of the children. The sitter is entrusted with their care until the parents return. A faithful sitter gets paid, tipped and likely rehired. An unfaithful sitter is fired.

Here is where stewardship and Christmas are once again related. For the heart of both stewardship and Christmas is the Gospel! The Gospel and everything we have to support this body and life are not really gifts. They are trusts. A trust is to be used for the purposes of the Master. In fact, the Gospel is really the only thing we steward. All the things entrusted for this body and life are to be used for the purposes of the Gospel! All that we are and all that we do flow from the trust we have in our baptismal identity. Who we are defines what we do. Redeemed Christians, filled with the Gospel of Christmas (and Easter) are faithful stewards of the trust that is the Gospel — a trust for which we are accountable here in time and in eternity.

There is no greater trust than Jesus. This trust is celebrated and stewarded at Christmas!