

Reflections For Preaching on Stewardship In A Time of Economic Retrenchment

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As I wrestled with this article, I realized that I had been escaping some of the anxiety attached to the complex of issues surrounding stewardship by a too-easy reliance on the “old pro” who heads the staff on which I work. This assumption is too much like our tendency to delegate Stewardship to “the experts”, to the experienced and the prominent, and (for some lay persons) to “the professional staff”. No, all that is bad theology and a cop-out. So I committed myself to do the best I could. After all, I thought I meant it when I last preached on “Stewardship as a Means of Grace.”

A TIME OF ECONOMIC RETRENCHMENT OR ECONOMIC ANXIETY?

“Retrenchment” is real, but to many preachers and church members in America today “Economic Anxiety”¹ is a more existential issue. Precisely here is a challenging point for the preacher. Sermons must address this anxiety; yet too much psychological and social analysis may be a trap for those charged with proclaiming the gospel of grace and judgment. For some of us it is easier to read ten books on the subject than to write one really helpful sermon! But the helpful sermon is what is really needed.

I attended the “One Mission Conference” in Montreat, N.C., last summer. To my relief and inspiration the Conference addressed the current issues of Mission and Stewardship; but my missionary and minister friends were *not* weighed down with worry about economic retrenchment. The tone of a platform speech on “Is the Earth Still the Lord’s?” was prophetic and positive rather than foreboding and negative.

Nevertheless, the economic issues related to the mission of the church were first in prominence on the agenda:

How does God want the church today to deal with Stewardship as the foundation of Mission?

What about “Reagonomics”, new awareness of limits, and the current national politics of budget-cuts of programs for the poor both at home and abroad?

How will we deal with these complex issues in the local church, where the global issues attract less interest than the effect of inflation on the Every Member Canvas?

It may sound too crude, but somebody (us!) has to ask how this mountain-top inspiration "will preach" in Charleston, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles. A wise elder-friend from another state, who is as dedicated and enlightened a Christian leader as I have ever met, brought me back down to earth: "Like it or not," he said, "when capitalism is questioned or attacked, most Presbyterians won't listen to anything else that is said." From the mountain-top to the trenches! What a familiar experience for us!

When I spoke of my "let-down" experience to Dr. Jorge Lara-Braud, he nodded with understanding. Yet he preached with authentic and prophetic accents, and with the stirring rhetoric of a liberation theologian called to preach the Word. And I am glad, for his message strikes home. The poor of the Lord demand a hearing and have a gospel for witness. The Isaiah passage that Jesus read at Nazareth (Luke 4:18.19) is a mandate for ministry in Kansas City and Raleigh as much as in Indonesia, Korea, and Zaire. And "good news to the poor, release to the captives," is a living and controversial issue in the world today.

Such events are bound to have relevance to Stewardship preaching and the mission of the church. Nevertheless, the dilemma of pluralism is real. Christians do minister in different contexts and with persons of radically different economic and political views. *So what then is the current context for preaching on Stewardship?* I have just suggested two key elements of the context:

- 1) the actual world situation of God's people, and
- 2) the feelings, opinions, and beliefs of the congregations to whom we preach.

I will now refer to a third context: the personal situation of the preacher himself/herself. Much has been said recently about "traveling light" and the need for us to raise our consciousness about our life-styles, particularly in economic terms. By world standards I am "rich"; by comparison with some in our churches I am less rich. That is somewhat confusing to me when I hear the rhetoric of liberation theology; therefore I can understand why many Presbyterians are also confused. If one preaches, for example, on Jesus's Parable of "Dives and Lazarus", with whom does the preacher identify and with whom does she imply the congregation should identify?

In my view, most of us cannot honestly identify with Lazarus. Neither can we honestly identify with "the rich man". Rightly or wrongly we just do not see ourselves as "rich oppressors" of Lazarus.³ That is why I cannot "preach liberation theology", where I am, without dishonest pretending. I would further suggest that most American Presbyterians today are in the same situation. As *I see it*, most of us have to preach on Mission and Stewardship from a different perspective—unless we wish to engage in a non-productive "guilt-trip".

Let me support this contention by one interesting-and-funny event at this summer's conference. Dr. Lara-Braud had just preached the gospel of liberation, which accurately pointed out the world-wide effects of our capitalistic system. An economist, Professor James Weaver, responded with both agreement and disagreement. He added some qualifications to the effect that capitalism even now is having some excellent benefits for the poor as well as the

rich in Brazil, Korea, Taiwan, etc. Dr. Weaver said that even the “trickle-down” theory of economic growth had some validity in practice and that development by multi-national corporations was in some areas (he could name them) better than no development at all! Furthermore, Dr. Weaver contended that the so-called “dependency theory”, which holds that some parts of the world are poor *because* other parts are rich, is an economic oversimplification that the facts do not support.

The large crowd applauded with relief — much to the embarrassment of Dr. Weaver, who then had to explain that he was not attacking Dr. Lara-Braud or his critique. Was the applause revealing of what most Presbyterians feel? I think so. Professor Weaver had to explain that he could not identify the gospel of Jesus Christ with *either* capitalism *or* socialism, and he went on to describe *why* this is the case. *My point about the context of Stewardship preaching is that we must do our own Biblical study and theological reflection, however difficult that is, rather than just repeat slogans from others.*

It is my impression that most dedicated and conscientious American Presbyterians *are* hearing the voices of the Third World, the minorities, the feminists, and the missionaries. But they honestly don't feel personally responsible for all the problems, nor do they feel very “wealthy”. And if we try to indict them with statistics about world poverty and the evils of capitalism (perhaps secretly assuming that since we live on preachers' salaries and therefore are not “rich”, *we* are “not guilty”), that alone is not responsible preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III

YANKELOVICH'S *NEW RULES*: A CURRENT BACKGROUND RESOURCE FOR STEWARDSHIP PREACHING

As one trained in theology it pains me that one of the most relevant new books for our purposes, in my opinion, was written by a non-theologian, a pollster and social analyst: *New Rules: Searching for Self-fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* by Daniel Yankelovich.² He provides, however, only the questions and not the answers or the sermons! A brief summary of the issues in this book may be helpful:

1) Until the 1960's most Americans were thrifty and productive believers in the work-ethic of self-denial and delayed gratification. The Great Depression of the 1930's taught us that economic well-being is not an automatic “entitlement”. Obviously, this willingness for self-sacrifice for the future is related to the so-called “Protestant work-ethic.”

Yankelovich contends (with many economists) that the quarter-century after World War II in the United States was a time of truly *exceptional* prosperity and economic growth for a whole society (exceptions were minorities, etc). It was therefore natural to assume that hard-work and sacrifice always pay off, that growth in the GNP will continue, *and* that a compassionate nation can and should provide for the disadvantaged, the aged, the unemployed, etc. — *without* (and this is important) significant sacrifice of standard of living

on the part of tax-paying citizens.

Obviously, the church and its mission enterprises benefited in many ways from this prosperity. Even, or especially, says Yankelovich, the efforts of many churches to support progress in economic and civil rights and welfare programs were strengthened by the fact that "surplus funds" were available — and people gave generously until the government began to give even more generously. While there were many theological critiques of the shallowness and seductiveness of this "materialism", many of us (*mea culpa*) assumed that God was blessing America with abundance. All we had to do was to work for civil and economic rights for the poor, show how racism was un-Biblical, and use the opportunities for greater mission in the church.

2) Then, in the 1960's, not only university students but, gradually, *also* about 80% (Yankelovich, based on polls and analysis) of the American people began to *assume* economic prosperity and to turn instead to a search for Self-Fulfillment and a better Quality of Life. Surely, some made fun of the "far-out" groups, but the new movements did seem to be directed away from materialism and toward various sorts of spiritual values. The surprising contention in all this is Yankelovich's claim that by the late 1970's 80% of the American people were moving in that direction.

3) Then came the economic crunch and "retrenchment" of the mid-seventies and today. This recent economic change, says Yankelovich, was very hard to believe and bad news indeed! But we are all familiar to a greater or lesser degree with the present *consequences*. I will lift out only *one* of Yankelovich's issues, which seems particularly important for Stewardship preaching today: the collision course between the quests for self-fulfillment and the current economic retrenchment. *This* is the conflict that Yankelovich thinks the American people have not yet fully confronted.

Consider this possibility: if "Reagonomics" or "supply-side" does *not* produce a significantly larger "economic pie" (and it certainly will not for a while), then many serious moral questions will arise for us all.

Yankelovich observes that "something is amiss in the Giving-Getting Compact in America." In other words, more and more people feel that they are having to *give too much* and are *getting too little* for their sacrifices.

IV

THE CHALLENGE OF PREACHING ON STEWARDSHIP IN A CLIMATE OF BOTH SELF-FULFILLMENT SEEKING AND ECONOMIC LIMITS

Most preachers are quite familiar with the current Self-Fulfillment Ethic. It might better be called a "Gospel:"

Hear the goods news: The chief end of life is to fulfil your greatest potential and find a creative new life-style. If you are now frustrated, your greatest enemy is fear of changing your circumstances, your job, your spouse, or anything! If you will only get your head straight, you too can find the good life, financial sufficiency, a happy marriage with maximum

freedom, good health, and that sense of satisfaction you now lack. Thus, you must learn to avoid any forms of family life, work, and lifestyle that ensnare you and deprive you of your rightful freedom.

It is one thing for a 20-year-old student to live by such a false gospel; it is quite something else for 80% of the population to believe it. What happens when those hopes are devastated because the expectations are illusory? Any minister can describe the results!

How can we preach about "Stewardship as a Means of Grace" to those who are not only finding the "gospel of self-fulfillment" impossible but also are experiencing one or more of the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"? By this latter, I mean a breakdown of health, a death of a loved one, a job-failure or firing, a divorce, a retarded child — the list is almost endless.

Take, for example, a passage such as Psalm 90 and bring it into fruitful comparison and contrast with the pseudo-gospel of unrestricted self-fulfillment. No matter how many TV ads, best-selling paperbacks, and magazine articles proclaim it, a self-centered life and a God-centered life are not the same. Look, for example, at the lives of Calvin, John Knox, and Bonhoeffer. Can you imagine these purposeful, energetic Christians fretting about whether his life had reached its fullest potential of creative self-actualization?

Then address the current situation. Suppose a great many Presbyterians among others feel:

- a. a greater sense of need for fulfillment and a greatly lessened sense of duty to work out a sacrificial life-style, and
- b. a lack of confidence in the government's ability to control our economy, and
- c. an irritation and boredom with "programs to help the needy", and
- d. a broad drift to the "right" in politics and economics.

In this situation, it is not surprising that the slogan is: "Help only the 'truly needy.'"

What Biblical and theological resources will help us in the current situation? My impression is that the material of economic and ecological ethics is vast but that resources for preaching are far more limited. The Biblical scholar whose writings seem most relevant to me is Professor Walter Brueggemann in *Living Toward a Vision*, *The Prophetic Imagination*, and *The Land*.

Brueggemann shows how the Biblical themes for a.) Deliverance and Liberation for the captives (the Exodus-Sinai and Resurrection events and their traditions) and b.) Blessing, Stewardship, wise and responsible management themes (Creation, Wisdom Literature, Psalms) are both distinct and integrated in the Bible. Most helpful of all, he shows how the Old Testament prophets and Jesus put these together in a gospel of judgment and grace. Perhaps drawing upon the same body of scholarship, Profs. Larry Rasmussen and Bruce Birch have also stressed the same Biblical-theological approaches in *The Predicament of the Prosperous*.³ They contend that for the poor and disenfranchised a theology of empowerment and liberation is most needed. "For us, however, a theology and life-orientation of relinquishment is most faithful." (p. 164). For the "Prosperous" (who, I have argued, don't *feel* prosperous) the

"Biblical materials of wisdom and creation, justice and hope hold particular promise for altering the perceptions of American Christians." (*Ibid.*) Within this context of altered perception and *metanoia*, then, we can hear in a fresh way of deliverance from *our* captivity, sin, helplessness, and impotence.

This "good news" is helpful to those of us who have trouble honestly including ourselves among the captives and "the wretched of the earth." Presbyterians need to hear "Blessed are the poor in spirit" *as well as* "Blessed are the poor." Both are Biblical and perhaps Jesus actually said them both, rather than *Matthew* "spiritualizing" *Luke*. I suspect that the vast majority of Presbyterians, including preachers, need to hear good news as much as anyone; for the "Justice Church" is indeed inseparable from the "Salvation Church."

As a Biblical/theological theme the concept of "Blessing" has far more interpretative significance than perhaps many of us ever realized.⁴ I believe it to be a preaching-theme of crucial current usefulness. The Bible itself, as we have said, puts far more emphasis on the dialectic of redemption and blessing, liberation and stewardship than we have preached. An interesting clue is provided by Brueggemann in *Living Toward a Vision*:

Now my impression about me and about my professional colleagues is that we feel most comfortable with a theology of survival, which is oriented to an awaited intervention, which speaks of the awfulness of the present, the burdens of it, and the desperate promise of the new age. Perhaps that is because of our theological education or because of the socio-economic setting out of which the clergy come. Whatever the reasons, that is what we know best to speak about and it is the way we do our theology. (*Ibid.* 33).

Can this be why the preaching of liberation theology seems authentic coming from Lara-Braud or James Cone and somewhat artificial in Houston or Montgomery — at least in predominantly white, prosperous Presbyterian churches? It seems that we must strive to preach a wholistic gospel, including Stewardship, from our own context.

1. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Economic Anxiety and Christian Faith*, (Augsburg, 1981).

2. Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules*, New York: Random House, 1981.

3. Walter Brueggeman, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1976); *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978), and *The Land*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1977. cf. also the article by George Telford, "Prophetic Ministry Reconsidered", *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 1980. Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Predicament of the Prosperous*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1978, pp. 163 ff. and 99 ff.

4. Brueggeman, *Ibid.*