

On Being Stewards

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Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required . . . (St. Luke 12:48)

An Alternative to Power

The events of our contemporary global village, and the attitudes behind these events, all add up to one obvious and even, it seems to me, crystal-clear conclusion: *an alternative to the way of power must be found*. For a few decades now (a very short time in the history of the planet!) the world has been basing its existence on a precarious “balance of power,” so called. Each crisis—and there have been many of them since World War II—has strained this arrangement, sometimes to the breaking point. The nations nervously congratulate one another on having made it through one crisis after another, and the people who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo keep telling us that this balancing-act between the superpowers is the only way of maintaining peace. But we know, when we are honest with ourselves, that such an arrangement is full of flaws—temporary at best, dangerous always. For it does not belong to the way of power to share power with others. The powerful will bargain only as long as there is something in it for them! Power seeks its own aggrandizement just as surely as water seeks its own level. As soon as it sees some way of eliminating the competition it will leap at the opportunity. The impasse at Reykjavik clarifies this flawed and, I would say, this obsolete character of the way of power once more. I do not intend in this context to place blame on either side in the debate. The fault has to be located, in the first place, where it truly belongs: namely, with the assumption—no the *presumption*—which is held by the leadership of both so-called superpowers that the way of power is the only way the human race can proceed.

It is the urgent task of *all* Christians in our crisis-prone and future-shocked world to explore as seriously and vigorously as possible their alternative to the way of power. But Christians in North America have, I think, a particularly demanding role to play in this search for an alternative to the way of power. For we live within (or, in the case of Canadians, on the edge of) one of the superpowers whose attitudes and actions will make all the difference for this world, today and tomorrow.

Our situation is complicated by this fact. Because, of course, we are not only Christians; we are also Americans or Canadians. We feel a certain deep patriotism, a commitment to our own nation and way of life. Many of our fellow Christians on this continent seem to have no problem with this. They simply assume that being an American or a Canadian, and being Christian, are part of the same thing. So they are able to embrace the way of power without any qualms—and many of them even seem ready to go all the way with the

extreme form of this philosophy, I mean the so-called *Rambomania* that characterizes certain social strata of this continent.

A new book by an American woman named A.G. Mojtabai is entitled, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas*.¹ Mrs. Mojtabai went to live in Amarillo in 1982. Amarillo is the site of "the final assembly plant for all United States nuclear weapons."² For a long time Mrs. Mojtabai wondered why the citizens of Amarillo could accept with "equanimity" the fact that they were living cheek to jowl with the weapons of doom. Then she began to notice the prevalence, in that city, of a form of Christianity which not only provided people with the "blessed assurance" that nothing untoward would ever happen to them, but (for significant numbers of them) promised that the approaching end of the world would usher in "the Rapture," in which they could have a personal share. So Christianity not only insulated many good citizens of Amarillo from any anxiety over what was being prepared for in their midst, but it actually gave to many others a sense of exhilaration and purpose.

When, as Christians of another persuasion, we try to distinguish our way from the way of power, we often find ourselves in confrontation, therefore, not only with many of our fellow North Americans but also with many avowed Christians. In a real sense, Christianity is on trial in our society. Is it a faith which can live amicably with the way of power in a world that is daily threatened by those who pursue that way? Is it even, perhaps, a faith which cultivates and honours those who are most adept at the way of power and mastery? Is Christianity in fact *the cult* behind the culture that depends upon power? Or, on the contrary, is there both a critique of power in our faith, and an alternative to the way of power?

I am one of those who say that there *is* a critique of power in Christian faith. I believe it to be central. I believe it to be what the Christian Gospel is all about. The Gospel is not about getting power but about getting love, and I have never been able to find any common ground between the search for power and the way of love.

Stewardship: Love Made Explicit

But the Gospel not only criticizes the way of power. It offers us an *alternative* to that way. The alternative is real. It is not just an ideal. And it is applicable to whole societies, and not just to individuals.

What can we call this alternative?

I have already used the one word that is most centrally associated with the Christian alternative to the way of power. This is, of course, love. As our Lord assumed when he summarized the whole responsibility of the human creature in the two-pronged commandment to love, what ought to inform our lives as Christians; what ought to inform *the whole* of our lives; what ought to condition our every relationship—with God, with our own kind, and with every creature of God—is love.

But the trouble with love is that it has been greatly distorted. For many in our midst, love has been equated with sex, and promiscuous sex at that. For

many others it is so sentimentalized that it has no critical bite and no practical applicability. For nearly all of us, it is so personalized and individualized that we have a very hard time translating its meaning into *social* ethics.

It is for that reason that I have tried to develop this symbol of the steward. Not that stewardship is the only way of making love concrete and practical in our time. But it is one way—a very important one. What is more, it is one way in which we can speak, practically, about the meaning of Christian love and expect our contemporaries to understand. For this biblical metaphor of “the steward” is one that our contemporaries outside the faith have themselves newly discovered. It has, as we may say, coinage. It has become in the fullest sense, a symbol. It has “come of age.”

What is the meaning of this symbol when we compare and contrast it with the way of power? Why is the way of the steward an alternative to the way of power?

(1) *Participation*

In answer to this question I want to make three points. They are not the only points that could be made, but I think they are vital. The first is that the way of stewardship is the way of *participation*. The steward, as the Bible develops this metaphor, is a member of the community whom he or she serves. Joseph, for example, one of the figures in the Old Testament whose life illustrates and exemplifies the biblical meaning of stewardship, is both a member of the community of Israel and a member of the Pharaoh's household. In the course of time, Joseph is given special and even exalted *responsibility* for his fellow men and women, but he remains one of them even at the height of his powers. He is there, in the story, to serve a purpose much larger than himself: namely, the preservation of God's people, the preservation of the creation. What is important is not his own status, as a man of distinction in the empire of Pharaoh. We read the story wrongly if we imagine that it is primarily a story about Joseph and how he, the poor boy from across the tracks, succeeded! The story is about how God, through the ministrations of Joseph and others, was able to preserve God's people and God's earth. The steward is a participant in this process, not its instigator, not its chief designer, and not, finally, the one who is to benefit from it. The benefactors of God's work through Joseph are his brothers and father, their wives and children, the many generations to follow, more in number than the sands.

The way of stewardship is distinguished markedly from the way of power in this respect. Stewards know themselves to be participants in the general condition of the human race. The powerful, on the contrary, think themselves once-removed from the rest. Power, in other words, assumes a hierarchic conception of the world. At the top of the hierarchy are those who hold power. All others, beneath them, exist for their sake. Stewards *serve* the others; the powerful *use* others and think they are to be served *by* the others. Joseph, as we can see from the story, was clearly *tempted* by the way of power. He might have been happy, humanly speaking, to see his rise to power as a personal vindication and a final victory over his jealous brothers. But he resisted this

temptation in the long run, and saw his life for what it was: God's way of saving God's people—a corporate victory, a victory for life, and not just Joseph's personal victory.

The way of the steward is the way of participation in the general human condition. Stewardship is a way of making good our membership in the human race, of serving our fellow creatures, of deliberately participating in our creaturely state.

(2) *Trusteeship*

Secondly, the way of stewardship is the way of *tenancy or trusteeship*, as distinct from possession or ownership. I know that this is hard for many of us to accept, but there is an unavoidable polemic against possession in the symbol of the steward. Joseph did not own Egypt, or the grain of Egypt, or the people who harvested the grain. The truth is, Pharaoh didn't own any of this either, though Pharaoh could pretend to do so!

That is the pathetic thing about the way of power. It can seem to be in control because it can seem to *own* so much! But in the end what does this supposed ownership come to?

The story is told of a very rich but uneducated man who was buried in the famous cemetery of Hollywood, Forest Lawn. He wanted to demonstrate to all his friends that "you can take it with you," so he insisted that he should be buried sitting at the wheel of his Cadillac. And they say that as the crane operator lowered this strange sarcophagus into the immense grave that had been dug for it, he muttered to himself, "That's livin'!"

Ownership is one of the more pathetic illusions of fallen human beings. But the way of power depends upon maintaining it as if it were true. The "fool" of Jesus' parable—the one whose soul was going to be required of him that very night—had to believe that the "greater barns" he was planning to build would really guarantee his power over the future. Just as today whole nations believe that the greater the stores of weapons they stockpile the greater chances they will have of retaining their mastery . . .

If we are serious about being stewards, we shall have to question every claim to ownership—our own as well as that of others. Who really owns the land? the water? the sky? Are the minerals and gasses and liquids of the earth the exclusive right of those who through might or industry have laid claim to them? Who gave the British the right to Hong Kong in the first place? It was very hard—perhaps impossible—for Britain to let go of Hong Kong and its other colonies so long as it could imagine itself in terms of a great world power—an empire. But now that it can no longer play that role, it has become more realistic about the whole business of sovereignty and ownership.

Perhaps in our time we are given much. Foolishly, we get into the habit of thinking that it is simply ours, to do with as we choose. But a more realistic assessment of our situation as human creatures—the sort of assessment that is usually vouchsafed to us, alas, only through the loss of power and prestige—helps us to realize that our supposed ownership is only trusteeship. "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required . . ."

The way of the steward is the way of tenancy and trusteeship, not of possession.

(3) *Accountability*

Thirdly, stewardship means *accountability*. This, I think, is where the way of power and the way of love are most conspicuously different from one another. Power does not acknowledge its accountability to anyone or anything beyond itself. It is of course true that empires have always had their gods. Babylon had gods, so did Rome. And empires frequently, in their rhetoric, speak as if they were serving their gods. But in fact their gods are serving them. That is, they create their gods, in their own image, in the image of power; and they look for their gods to exercise power in such a way as to enhance their own imperial power. Perhaps this is why the gods of all the empires finally fail. Augustine in *The City of God* claims that this is why the gods of Rome failed: because Rome only looked to its gods to foster and enhance its own power. And our gods will fail too—the gods in whom we say we trust—if all that we want from them is more power.

If our God is really the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the father of Jesus Christ, then our God requires of us something much more demanding than the exercise of power. God requires of us love . . . and this translates into justice, into friendship for the earth, into peace. Isn't there something wrong when a society claims to be serving the Lord, namely the One who gave his life as a ransom for many, and then behaves as if its own preservation were the most important thing conceivable?

To be a steward is to be accountable. It is to be accountable to the One who alone is master of the universe. So it is to be accountable to our fellow human beings who are deprived of the means of life because we possess so many of these means. It is to be accountable to the generations to come, whose future depends upon our present behaviour. It is to be accountable, too, to the other species, whose welfare depends upon our sense of responsibility towards them.

Conclusion

Participation, not domination; trusteeship, not possession; accountability, not mastery; this is the way of stewardship.

I know, of course, what criticism can be levelled at such a way. It can be called idealistic and utopian. It can be dismissed as the basis for a social ethic. Perhaps, some will say, it can apply to individuals but hardly to whole societies.

To these criticisms I would only make two brief responses: first, when have we really tried the way of stewardship? And second, what are we going to do now that the way of power has shown up as an impasse, an impossibility?

Today, in the quest for finality of imperial power, it is possible for the race to destroy itself or to render the earth desolate. Will we become sufficiently

aware of this to make a final break with power? Will nations and superpowers learn to converse with one another on some other basis than the quest for supremacy? Will human beings and societies, especially in the First World, learn a new way of living with the natural universe before the rebellion of nature becomes complete?

The answer to these questions depends in some significant measure on what we Christians do with our own tradition. There in our tradition, tucked away in beautiful images and forgotten visions like that of stewardship, are cures for the illness of twentieth century civilization. We have been hiding these images and visions—even from ourselves. They can make an immense difference to the future.

For today stewardship is not only a luxury-assumption accessible to a few persons of good will. It describes a way of being in the world without which the world may not continue to be. It is, almost, a law of nature. Certainly it is the only course open to human and civilizational survival.

NOTES

¹ Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.

² "The Rapture and the Bomb," *New York Times Review*, June 8, 1986.