

Stewardship as a Missional Discipline

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There are essentially only two ways in which it would be possible to approach the topic assigned me by the editors of this valuable journal: we could think of stewardship as a *means* to Christian mission, or we could develop the biblical metaphor of the steward as a manner of speaking about the *nature and substance* of the Christian mission. It will be my aim in what follows to explore the *second* of these possibilities, as I have done—in differing ways—in my three longer studies of the theology of stewardship.¹

In taking such an approach, one is conscious of attempting something unconventional in the realm of stewardship praxis. For by all accounts the position that has dominated throughout ecclesiastical history, and more particularly the history of Protestant Christianity in North America, has been the first alternative above. So well-worn is that path, so interminably traversed in the polity and preaching of all our denominations, that, were I to follow it here, I should have little to say on the subject that has not already been said thousands of times, and the reader would (quite rightly) become bored after half a page. Sheer vanity, if nothing nobler, is enough to deter me from such an undertaking.

In my opinion, the greatest barrier to any *interesting* deployment of the concept of stewardship by Christians lies in the deadening habit of restricting our use of this ancient office and symbol, in the churches, to the sphere of *means*. We urge upon one another the stewardship of “time, talents and (above all) treasures” *in order that* something else (the church’s mission) may go forward. No one can dispute the fact that this instrumentalistic view of stewardship has, in the past, produced some impressive results. The faithful stewarding of their energies and resources on the part of generations of committed Christian people has enabled North American churches (which, unlike the established churches of the European motherlands, could not depend upon public funding) to engage in forms of worldwide mission that are often as justifiable on humanitarian grounds as on specifically religious grounds—though not, I suspect, as often as we should like to think.²

The question that must be asked, however, is, What have we had to ignore and trivialize in order to promote such a strictly utilitarian view of this important scriptural theme? Certainly, generations of Christian laity gripped by the discipline of tithing and service have facilitated the mission of the church, as it has been variously conceived; but is stewardship, biblically and theologically understood, best or even adequately implemented by the notion and habit of giving one’s possessions and energies to the church to the end that it may pursue its mission? Leaving aside for the moment the knotty problem whether it is any longer possible to instill in today’s and tomorrow’s Christians the kind of philanthropic sensitivity that fueled previous generations of Christian ‘givers,’ is it not possible that in treating stewardship so exclusively as means to Christian mission we have badly truncated both our theology of stewardship *and* mission?

What if the mission itself requires something like the biblical metaphor of the steward if it is to be grasped imaginatively and engaged in faithfully? What if at least

part of what is intended by the overall theme of these issues —“North America as Mission Field” — demands of us that we take up this metaphor and incorporate it into our theology of mission as such? What if stewardship, instead of being just the *means* of our mission, were a vital dimension of its *end* — that is, an indispensable aspect of what Christian mission actually *is*?

With such questions in mind, let us reflect briefly on the great question that they evoke:

I. What is our Christian Mission?

One answer — the one widely presupposed by our progenitors in whom stewardship-as-means became the hallmark of serious Christian commitment — is that the mission of the Christian faith is the propagation of the Christian message throughout the inhabited earth, to the end that all persons and peoples might feel the claims of Christ and the whole world become Christian. The nineteenth century, perhaps the greatest period of Christian missionary activity, saw a certain flowering of this ideal, and our own century, the twentieth, was hailed by many as “The Christian Century,” a theme that was concretized in the naming of a certain journal!

Individuals and whole denominations inspired by such a prospect were among the greatest advocates and initiators of stewardship theory and practice. One cultivated tithing, often to the point of denying self and family, in order that “foreign missions” and (usually with less enthusiasm) “home missions” could be undertaken by one’s denomination. I am myself old enough to remember and (with part of myself) admire the power of this claim upon past generations of Protestants. There can be no doubt, I think, that this claim gave countless “ordinary Christians” both a sense of personal participation in Christian work and a perspective on the world and its welfare that transcended self and the well-being of one’s immediate circle of concern. In an era of increasing individualism and self-interest — our own — one knows that this kind of enthusiasm was by no means all bad.

That it was, nevertheless, profoundly flawed; that it involved an inveterate cultural myopia, a naïve confusion of “Christian” and “Western”; that it ended, usually, in the uninformed devaluation and destruction of indigenous cultures and the wholesale trashing of other faiths; that, historically, it is inseparable from the paternalism that justified slavery, the exclusivism that begat racism and sexism, and the militarism that can still be found waging war on “the infidel”: all this — and more — has been too well and truly documented in our time to permit anyone to take only pleasure in the memory of that kind of missionary enthusiasm. Besides, the “others” who were always the objects of such mission, “foreign” missions³, are no longer those remote and faceless masses whom white Christian children were taught to conjure up and pity as they dropped their pennies into their “mite boxes.” They are our neighbors, our co-workers, the friends and playmates of our children — persons whose religious and moral preferences can only rarely, if at all, seem to us benighted and clearly inferior to our own.

In short, the strange twists of history and the global and multicultural character of our present-day society have taught most of us (at least, those of us who would be caught reading such an essay as this!) that Christian mission as it has regularly been conceived since the establishment of Christianity in the fourth century C.E. is virtually inseparable from the sheer expansionism of the successive imperial societies with

which the Christian religion has cohabited. Mission so conceived can no longer be deemed worthy of earnest stewardship understood as means. A responsible theology of stewardship begins with the recognition of this reality.

Suppose, then, that one defines Christian mission more *personally* and claims, with sincere evangelicals, that its object is not the enlargement of Christendom as such, but rather the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ among human beings clearly in need of personal salvation. One must grant, I think, that the evangelistic approach to mission does represent, at its best, an alternative to the religious imperialism that has colored so much of historic Christendom's allegedly "apostolic" activity — though it is not always "at its best," and often in fact becomes little more than another, less *overtly* political means by which powerful societies spread their culture and influence. Even at its best, however, the personalist, evangelical approach to the meaning of Christian mission leaves us with serious doubts. Is the saving of "souls" really what Jesus was after? While evangelicalism does greater justice to the biblical concern for individual life than do most orthodoxies, old and new, it leaves "the fate of the earth" in abeyance — when it is not tempted, with dispensationalism, to write the world off altogether.

At a *very deep level* of theological reflection one may perhaps claim that it is the calling of the 'Body of Christ' to bring human beings to the knowledge of Jesus as Christ; but such knowledge, which is always more than mere "knowledge," is certainly not be equated with the stylized profession of faith in Jesus Christ as "Lord and Savior" or the experience of being "born again." If North America in general, and the United States in particular,⁴ is to be regarded as "Mission Field," it is not only because there is so much divorce and violence and "unnatural" sex; it is also because there is so much religion! Considering the sociological and political realities, apparently being "born again" and professing Christ as one's personal "Lord and Saviour" does little to alter the ubiquitous racial bigotry, ethnocentrism, and plain old-fashioned greed of this success-driven society; on the contrary, the "values" of its dominant capitalist-consumerist orientation are more often confirmed than challenged.

Over against both expansionist and personalist conceptualizations of the missionary calling of the disciple community, the Scriptures set the provocative declaration of the advent of the kingdom, realm, or reign of God. This reality, this 'something new' (*novum*) that is revealed and exemplified by Jesus Christ in conspicuous continuity with Israel's prophets and law-givers, and furthered by the 'mysterious' and never-institutionally-confinable work of the divine Spirit, is contrasted with the pursuits, mores, and values of "this present age," the old that is "passing away." God's reign is not only radically distinguishable from "the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them" (Matt. 4:8); it represents for faith an entirely different possibility from what the wise of the world entertain as practicable under the conditions of existence. That does not mean that the vision of the kingdom is otherworldly or merely utopian. To the contrary, it is radically this-worldly. Jesus, I think, would have agreed with the Belgian poet Count Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) when he wrote: "It is well to have visions of a better life than that of every day, but it is the life of every day from which elements of a better life must come."⁵ Jesus' marvelous awareness of and involvement in the "everyday life" of his time and place should always be remembered when we are tempted to turn the "kingdom" for which he bade us pray into something out of this world! The worldly rootedness of the gospel has its ground in the love of the Creator

for the creation. The whole aim of the “costly grace,” that works itself out in the life, death and resurrection of the Son, is the Father’s/the Mother’s endless (and finally inexplicable) love for *this world*. Or, to state the same thing in the unforgettable way that St. John attributes to Jesus himself, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10).

“Jesus,” writes Jürgen Moltmann in one of his latest pieces, “did not bring a new religion into the world, but rather *new life*.”⁶ The reason neither the expansionist nor the personalist conceptions of Christian mission is acceptable—the reason beneath the reasons already given—is that they both fail to grasp the magnitude of God’s mission in Christ. Reducing the kingdom to the church and the new creation to personal spirituality, they end by trivializing God’s project of world transformation by offering a religious alternative to the world. But it is not ours to devise and define and initiate our mission; our mission is first *com*—mission (the abiding truth of the otherwise easily misunderstood ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28:16 f.). That is, “In its original theological sense, mission is *missio Dei*.”⁷

If this is so — if, instead of increasing the sphere of Christian power or saving souls, the disciple community is impelled by some emanation of God’s own passion to realize the “goodness” and *shalom* and promise of creation — then our missionary calling will not be conceivable in narrowly institutional or confessional terms but in the spirit of the life-giving labors of the triune God. Insofar as we are grasped by such a vision and reality, we shall have to become “stewards of life in the kingdom of death.”⁸

II. Stewardship and Human Renewal

We have been led by these reflections on the nature of our *mission* to introduce the symbol of stewardship, not as a means merely of achieving the mission, but as a vital component of what mission involves and is. In so doing, we have opened the way to rescuing this important biblical office and metaphor from its purely instrumentalistic connotation. Who are Christians and what is their calling? They are “stewards of the mysteries of God,” writes Paul (I Cor. 4:1). While those “mysteries” preclude reduction to any one theological insight, emphasis, or program, we may be sure as those who contemplate the cross that, at the very heart of them, there is the truly unfathomable love of God for this wayward and death-enticed planet. God’s *agape* transcends every explanation, every doctrine, every “theology of”; but its reality is the divine determination to instill life into the world at the very point of its resort to the attractions and resolutions of death. That is why the cross is and remains at the center of this gospel.

Those who are grasped by the magnitude of such an unconditional affirmation of life have no choice but to become stewards of the life that they themselves are being given. Once that is understood, there can be no going back to gimmicky, money-driven and merely ‘churchy’ ideas about stewardship. There is literally no end to the ‘applications’ to which a theology of stewardship lends itself when once it is liberated from church finances. It has pertinence for every area of Christian doctrine and practice—including church finances!⁹

In a special and very direct way, however, the biblical language of stewardship speaks today to the problems and possibilities of Christian anthropology. Anthropology (traditionally, the doctrine of Man) is not the cornerstone of Christian faith and

thought; in identifying the cross as our center and the mission as *God's*, we have acknowledged that. But what Christians have to say about humanity, and to humankind, is so inseparable from that divine Center that even notoriously non-liberal theologian Karl Barth insisted that we should not speak of "theology," really, but of "theo-anthropology."¹⁰ Since, precisely as *God's* mission, the mission of the Christian community is by definition a mission to human beings, moreover, the test of any theology of mission is its relevance to the realities of the human condition. I do not mean that theology should be a matter, simply, of providing immediately satisfying answers to human questions, nor that the mission of the church is to be determined by this or that worldly agenda. I do mean, however, that the *form* that Christian mission takes (not its content, but certainly its form!¹¹) must be shaped by the actual dilemmas, anxieties, and quests of the human community to which the disciple community is sent.¹²

And in the society for which this and other articles in this series are intended, two conspicuous realities—one (if you like) positive and the other negative—encourage some of us to believe that the language of stewardship, applied in particular to questions of human identity and vocation, constitutes one of the most evocative linguistic forms in which, today, our mission may articulate itself.

The *positive* reality to which I refer is the fact, which I cannot document in any fullness here but have elaborated at considerable length in the previously mentioned stewardship studies and elsewhere, that the metaphor of the steward has acquired in our historical moment a widespread and richly nuanced coinage. Like *logos* at the time of John of Patmos or "justification" in the Age of Reformation, stewardship today has become a concept and language that transcends the concerns of specific groups and functions as a common form of discourse to which all may have access who have the good of the commonweal at heart. Though, historically, this language derives in particular from the Judeo-Christian tradition, it has acquired in our time a symbolic status incorporating yet transcending its origins in ancient cultures. Just as the *logos*-theologians of the Patristic period took advantage of that then-popular cliché, Christians today are able to draw upon stewardship in their search for apologetic relevance. The fact is, many Christians have at last begun to break loose from the instrumentalist, church-centered deployment of stewardship largely because the world (ecologists, economists, philosophers, and many others) has discovered, practically on its own, how suggestive this language is for purposes quite transcending the language of the marketplace and the survival of institutions—namely, the preservation of life itself. Thus, as it has often done before, the world has taught the church to recognize something of the depth and power of the symbols that lie dormant and unexplored in our own tradition.

To this positive reality in our apologetic situation, there corresponds a *negative*: As a civilization, and especially as nations regarded and regarding themselves as the cutting edge of western civilization and leaders of the 'free and developed' world, we North Americans are vastly confused about the identity and meaning of human being, both personally and corporately understood. If we are indeed a "mission field," and one that is truly "white for harvest," it is at least as much on account of our confusion about *ourselves* as it is about our lostness in relation to God. In a real sense, our great need for 'gospel'—for liberation and renewal—is most visible in the pathos and failure of our *self*-understanding. It is perhaps the case that our much-advertised interest in

God, our religion, is the easy and often incredibly shallow thing that it is because its real purpose is to help us to conceal from ourselves the nakedness and chaos of our operative assumptions about humanity.

To be concrete: we are torn between two mutually contradictory yet strangely interwoven images of human being and meaning. Historically, as the most precocious offspring of western modernity, we are the inheritors of a highly positive and optimistic answer to the question, "What is Man?" Man, said the architects of modernity (and the gender-specific terminology is not accidental!) is the "the measure of all things," the "maker of history," the Lord and possessor of nature." To be sure, such claims as these were made over against the backdrop of a "religious," indeed a "Christian" history that too consistently denigrated and minimized the worth of human beings. Yet the displacement of that ancient image of "fallen" humanity by one from which the limits and evils of humankind were virtually expunged did not serve our species well. Thomas Hobbes boasted that to the new, rational man nature "is no mystery, for she worketh by motion and geometry We (humans) can chart these motions." And he urged his readers to "Feel then as if you lived in a world which can be measured, weighted and mastered and confront it *with audacity*."¹³ But after two centuries of confronting the natural order "with audacity" we have begun to know that, being *part* of the natural order, we have been hoisted by our own petard.

In short, the idea of mastery by which our whole experiment in civilization has been driven (and driven is the right word!) has turned out to be both an illusory and a dangerous conception of human being, and one that simply does not hold for thinking people today with anything like the credibility that it could assume in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We have even begun, some of us, to see through the latest version of the mastery-through-knowledge image of our species, the so-called communications revolution. What is the point of all that information if we lack the *wisdom* to distinguish meaningful from meaningless data, truth from opinion, life-giving from death-dealing facts?

In our disillusionment with modernity (which seems to be the only commonly held assumption of postmoderns), we are tempted to succumb to an equally degrading and deceptive conception of ourselves. The Prometheanism of the modern image of the human gives way to new versions of the myth of Sisyphus, the classical world's mythic personification of human purposelessness. For ambition and zest for living (the theme that filled the children's books and adult films of the first half of this century) we have substituted 'coolness'; instead of heroism we cultivate the stance of the spectator; the quest for excellence, though still the rhetorical boast of the universities, has been none-too-silently displaced by the acquisition of "skills"—technical know-how that may secure us a living without requiring of us any great movement of the intellect or struggle of the spirit. Under the spell of the ideology of mastery we invented clever machines to relieve us of drudgery; now we sit helplessly, unprotestingly, while the machines displace us and we join, in greater and greater numbers, the ranks of the underemployed, unemployed, and unemployable.

"What are people for?" demands one of the living sages of our context.¹⁴ Officially, rhetorically, pedagogically, we are still taught to consider ourselves masters; but our inner suspicions, instructed by daily evidence of the ruinations of the nature we are supposed to be mastering and the chaos of the history we are supposed to be making, incline more and more of us to conclude that, in reality, we are slaves:

slaves to techniques, systems, economic structures, and constellations of authority that were put in place by an ideology that overestimated human capacity for sovereignty and underestimated human propensity to . . . sin: sin in both senses of the classical Christian conception of it, both pride and sloth—especially, today, the latter.

What *are* people for? It is not possible, I think, to come much nearer to *the* salvific question to which Christian mission today must address itself than this. At least that is where the mission must start. Who are we, what is our purpose, what is our vocation? Whoever starts there will soon have to get into all the rest of what Christians profess, and whoever does *not* start there will end by offering “all the rest” mostly as a way of deflecting and repressing the anthropological dilemma that is the primary reality of our apologetic situation.

What *are* people for? When one turns to the theology of stewardship for an entrée to this basic missionary question, one discovers very soon that one has landed into the thick of the dilemma. For the symbol of the steward not only responds to both prongs of the anthropological problem (human *identity*/human *vocation*), but it confronts both of the conflicting *imago hominii* (images of the human) in question in the most direct and engaging way.

For if one answers the question of human being and calling along the lines of this symbol (to be human is to be steward of God’s creation, of its life, its future), one immediately takes on both the Promethean and the Sisyphean image of the human: (1) the human creature is certainly not sovereign — *maitre et possesseur de la nature* (Descartes). That is a ludicrous and dangerously misleading notion, and one whose folly and danger has been amply and horrendously demonstrated by the societies of the West that were enticed by it for the past three centuries. Not mastery but stewardship answerable to the mastery of Another: that is the condition and calling of the human. And even humanist ecologists and others, who are not willing or able to call upon religious language to establish this position — who cannot critique the pretensions of human mastery by pointing to the sovereignty of *God*, as Christians do— are able to make *something like* the same point by basing human answerability upon such non-theistic grounds as the “rights” of other species, or the consequences to us all if the resources of earth are squandered and its processes tampered with, or the claims of future generations upon the same planetary resources as we enjoy. Christians who present their claims in the language of stewardship must, of course, base them on the core of their own theological and scriptural tradition; but because this language has, as we said, achieved a wider coinage today, Christians who deploy their own resources with imagination will not find themselves alone in their critique of technocratic mastery and their pleas for human renewal on the stewardship model.

If ‘the steward’ is not the master and possessor (“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”); if from the perspective of this biblical office and metaphor the pretensions of mastery are of the essence of sin, sin as *pride*, it is equally true that the anthropological symbol of stewardship confronts head on the other, contradictory *imago hominis* by which disillusioned moderns are enticed: Sisyphus, withdrawal, passivity, *ennui*. The steward in biblical literature is *accountable* — answerable to Another; therefore, mastery is ruled out. But the steward in this literature is also *responsible*; therefore, passivity is ruled out. The “life” that Jesus Christ died to renew is served neither by masters nor slaves, neither by manipulation nor detachment. Human renewal — or, to use the conventional language, salvation — involved purging

us as much of our proclivity to withdraw from the responsibility of which we are capable (sloth) as of the arrogant autonomy that imagines itself accountable to no one (pride, *hubris*). Master narratives of the human that accentuate the sterling endowments of our species and boast of its distance from all other forms of life, but do not say clearly that these endowments and this distance are *for the service of the others* must be flatly rejected, especially when they claim to be Christian, which they frequently do! Similarly, master narratives of the human that bemoan the ordinariness and mediocrity of the human or wallow in human fallenness and lostness, but do not say clearly that this distortedness is not the last word about humanity, must also be rejected, especially when they purport to be Christian. The kind of technocratic mastery that modernity enucleated and North America so naively imbibed is revealed to be a lie, but so is the moral passivity and fragmentation that postmodernity courts and that North Americans knowingly, or just as blind followers of trends, are wont to embrace in their flight from Prometheanism. “The steward” is an antidote and alternative to both “the master” and “the slave.”

Conclusion

As I have already remarked, no one idea, metaphor, or doctrinal theme can contain the fullness of the gospel that is the *raison de'être* of the mission to which disciples of Jesus Christ are bidden by the very grace that makes of them disciples. The disciple community must always search for a language, a form, into which that gospel may in some partial expression of itself be poured. We almost invariably employ the term ‘gospel’ with the definite article — ‘the gospel.’ But this is very misleading, in fact, because the church is always under necessity of discovering and articulating its message; and that message cannot be an unchangeable, static thing, because it is about the living truth of God’s life-giving love, and it is addressed to human beings who are conditions by time and place.

I have proposed here (and more fully elsewhere) that stewardship — or better, the symbol of ‘the steward’ — is one evocative and provocative linguistic form with which Christians may engage their context, especially this North American context. It is not the only language in which that engagement needs to occur, and it must not be hardened into “eternal truth.” But it is all the same a highly suggestive and, where it is deployed with imagination, gripping language, one that is indigenous to our tradition, accessible to ordinary people, respectable and interesting to the circles of some of our period’s best observers, and (this being a journal for preachers, let me accentuate) *extraordinarily communicable in sermon and Christian teaching*.

The thing by which this symbol is chiefly handicapped, I have argued, is its unfortunate reduction, in congregational and denominational life, to the techniques and devices we have designed in “free” Protestantism to keep our *churches* solvent and afloat. But this symbol has the potential to keep *the world* afloat — or at least to help do so. There is no greater challenge facing preachers, I think, than to overcome this unfortunate captivity of stewardship to ecclesiastical self-preservation and to open congregations to its capacities for helping to preserve God’s beloved world. And that, I think, is what should be meant by “Stewardship as a Missional Discipline.”

Notes

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Steward A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, revised ed (Grand Rapids William B Eerdmans, 1990),), *Imagina God Dominion as Stewardship* (Eerdmans, 1986), *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* (Eerdmans, 1985) All published in conjunction with Friendship Press, New York See also my article on 'Stewardship' in the *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992)

² I have just re-read James A Michener's epic novel *Hawaii* (New York Bantam Book, 1959) Even if Michener's account of the Congregational mission to Hawaii is incomplete, biased, and typically twentieth century in many ways, it is too close to the historical data we can derive from countless other sources to allow contemporary Christians to generalize too easily about the benefits of their missionary work

³ Wasn't part of the reason "foreign missions" had the greater appeal because those 'fields' were far enough away that they could seem 'greener'—i.e. that we could romanticize both their reality and our own heroism without having to confront the distressing negativities and human ordinariness of both?

⁴ As a Canadian, I am not excluding Canada as a "mission field," but only single out the United States in this context because, of the two countries, it is *by far* the more religious

⁵ Curiously enough, I found this statement on an etching by the famous Canadian painter, Tom Thomson (ca 1908) See Joan Murray *Northern Lights Masterpieces of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven* (Toronto Key Porter Books, 1994)

⁶ Miroslav Volf, ed, *A Passion for God's Reign* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 61

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ See note 1

⁹ For the elaboration of this claim, see Chapter I, part 5, of *The Steward A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, also pp 41-49

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* Translated by Grover Foley (New York Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963)

¹¹ I draw here on Paul Tillich's distinction in his "method of correlation" (See e.g. *Systematic Theology*, Vol I (Chicago University Press, 1951), 59 f

¹² This is the fundamental assumption of "contextual theology" as I have understood and attempted to develop it in my main work, the three-volume study subtitled *Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Fortress Press)

¹³ Quoted in Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Garden City, N Y Doubleday-Anchor, 1953) 95-96

¹⁴ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco North Point Press, 1990) 123ff