

The Future of Stewardship

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The theological bases for stewardship have been as diverse as its practices.

Theologically, stewardship has shifted from a call to possess land and give thanks to God, to the Church's right to oversee the governments of the world, to the divine right of kings, to noblesse oblige, and finally in the last century, arriving at a tithe of ten percent as the norm for Christian giving.

Jesus teaches about stewardship as well. He is clear that the economy that the religious leaders have created is flawed and in need of reform. He says that when the poor give, they give more out of the little that they have than the rich do when they make a large gift. The poor make a proportionally larger gift.

Jesus offers a particular theology. He tells those who follow him that everything is God's. God is the creator of all things, the maker of all things, and the one who oversees all things. Jesus offers a radical vision of people who are directly in relationship with God because of God's love. He teaches that their care for one another and the community in which they live is essential to the health of their relationship with God. He tells those who will listen that they are to make use of the wealth they have, to multiply it, and to be generous and honest with it. Jesus teaches us that the stewardship question we are supposed to ask is not about what to do with all the stuff that God has given us. It isn't my stuff. It isn't your stuff. Instead, Jesus tells us to question ourselves about what we are going to do with all of God's stuff, with God's world, and with God's resources. This was a much more important concept. So important that it is the theme of giving throughout the New Testament epistles and the early church. The early Church fathers do not mention the biblical tithe. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, two Radical Orthodox theologians, assert: "Creation has no autonomous existence. Creation does not stand alongside God as another focus of being or existence, neither does it lie 'outside' God. When God creates the universe, there is not one 'thing' (God) and then, suddenly, two 'things' (God + creation)."* Their argument is that modern theology and philosophy has incorrectly separated creation from God and in so doing has created a false disconnect. When applied to stewardship we can easily see how it has undermined our understanding of the world and our work in it. How we go about the stewardship of creation is intimately tied to God. We are called as part of the creation to restore it - to reconcile it.

Making a tithe pledge to support a church is no longer sufficient for Christians navigating the world in which they find themselves. The world is in ecological crisis. Governments fail to provide for the wellbeing of all their citizens. There is gulf growing between the rich and the poor. These forces, and the anxiety people carry with them about their financial future, has shifted the contemporary stewardship conversation. It now focuses upon individuals, their place within their community, their relationships with others, and most of all their relationships with the world around them. Mix these social forces together and the future of Church stewardship begins to emerge. Stewardship will be for the future Church a discussion dependent upon the

health of connection, and its focus will be much broader than support of a building and a priest - it will be about nothing less than transforming the world.

Connection is an essential ingredient to any discussion the future Church will have about stewardship. Scott Bader-Saye believes that affection is the key to this discussion because people no longer want to simply give money.** People long to give and receive affection and this desire to be connected leads them to want to be a meaningful part of the lives of others across the social boundaries of rich and poor. No longer will there be anonymous philanthropy-the point is not just the money but the connection of real people one to another, bound together in bonds of affection, working for the betterment of lives and communities.

The future Church, living Christian communities, will thrive only if they are intimately connected to the communities that surround them. The nonprofits, nongovernmental organizations, and churches that survive in the next twenty to forty years will be entities committed to improving the intrinsic value of their community and those who live therein. To do this, Christian communities will have to have considerable connections with people and their civic context. Christians and their communities will have an accountable and conscientious bond with the world around them. They will have to have affection for the people and communities in which they find themselves.

Christian communities must understand that they do not inhabit a world apart from the world around them. Stewardship conversations of the future will understand that we exist in a particular place, that we belong to it, that we are called to not destroy the things that God has made. Future stewardship will speak about our unique place within the kingdom and our responsibility to be answerable to God about what we did with it. The future Church will have affection for the society and be inextricably connected to it. This will be an ecological, economic, and social understanding. As we find our community and are rooted within it we will also find there neighbors, friends, loved ones, and strangers "with whom we share our place.

The future Church and its Christian communities must grasp one essential stewardship ingredient of the future-stewardship is not about church economy, it is about relationships. Christian community has one purpose and one purpose only, and it is not an economic one. The purpose of Christian community is to connect people to God and to connect people with people. Stewardship is about the health and vitality of the relationships Christians have.

All organizations are trying to figure out the new relationship economy-so they can capitalize upon it! This is not our purpose. Our purpose is to seek to have a conversation about stewardship that helps people connect their giving with their values and to their belief in a God who cares and who helps people connect to one another.

Stewardship conversations in the future will not tell the members what we are doing and then invite them to give to a budget. Instead, they will look for giving partners who understand the mutuality involved in stewardship. God is looking for partners, and as partners we are to work together for the mutual building up of God's creation and God's community.

*John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.50.

**** Scott Bader-Saye, "Bonds of Affection: The Transformational Possibilities of a Platitude," The Conference, Diocese of Texas, 2014.**

Adapted from [A Generous Community: Being the Church in a New Missionary Age](#).