

## *Economia*: A Short History of Stewardship Theology and Practice

Although there are only a few places where “steward” is used in the New Testament, the impact of these passages has lasted throughout the Church’s history. The story of this concept’s growth and development comprises the pages of this chapter.<sup>1</sup>

Depending on the translation, there are between eighteen and twenty-three instances in the New Testament where *economia* or *economos* appear. “Steward” can also be translated from a less frequent term, *epitropos*, whose meaning approximates *economos*. Leonard Sweet advocates that both terms be more accurately translated as “trustee,” a term he believes is better understood by postmodern minds.<sup>2</sup>

The history of stewardship—an Anglo-Saxon approximation of the original Greek term *economia*—carries with it the notion that God’s original and continuing providence runs through all of history. New Testament theologian John Reumann calls this “God’s working towards a goal”—which includes, but is not limited to God’s continuous line of redemption.<sup>3</sup>

### Back to the Beginnings

No Hebrew words capture the Greek terms *economia* or *economos*. There is no exact equivalent for “stewardship” or “steward” in Hebrew. When it appears in the Septuagint, the concept is transliterated from the Greek into Hebrew letters.<sup>4</sup>

Still, some of the stewardship-related themes in the Old Testament connect to New Testament–era understandings of the term:

- God’s directive to the first humans—essentially to care for the natural world—lies at the heart of psalms that extol the wonders of nature and the God who creates them.

- Isaiah compared God to an insistent gardener.<sup>5</sup>
- In economic matters, the prophets railed against unjust business practices.<sup>6</sup>
- The tithe was instituted to support the functions of the Old Testament Temple.<sup>7</sup>

In their faithful service to rulers, biblical heroes such as Joseph, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Esther may exemplify some of the characteristics of New Testament stewards, but in a limited way. Joseph comes the closest. He was in charge of Potiphar's entire household and later functioned in the same way while in prison. But when he assumed a steward-like role for the entire country of Egypt, he eventually foreclosed on landowners suffering during the seven years of famine, turning them into landless sharecroppers who were forced to give 20 percent of their crop earnings back to the Pharaoh (Gen. 47:13–26). Nehemiah was only a sometimes wine-steward for King Cyrus. Esther and Daniel behaved like stewards, but undertook their roles primarily within political spheres. Moses was a kind of steward, in the sense that he was constantly serving the will of God.

God's people before Christ lived through a catastrophic history. It was filled with unjust economic systems, captivities, oppressions, and occupations—at the hands of despotic rulers, Babylonians, Persians, the Hasmonean priest-kings, and finally the Romans. That continuous chaotic social order may have precluded the development of an enduring stewardship theology.

## Jesus and Stewards

Jesus's view of stewards was shaped by his cultural context. In the decades before Jesus's birth, the ancient Greek role of steward had been corrupted by a socioeconomic system that was enforced by the iron fist of Roman rule. The near oppression of the Temple cult's taxation added to the weight of a dysfunctional economy.<sup>8</sup>

In first-century Palestine, "stewards" were middlemen who prospered in an unjust economic system. Exorbitant interest rates on agricultural loans benefited the wealthy elite, increasing their incomes and adding to their land holdings because of inevitable foreclosures. As agents of these injustices, stewards were despised by the people among whom Jesus ministered.

This is why the parables and other teachings of Jesus that deal with economic matters—for example, the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25<sup>9</sup>—can be read more accurately as Jesus's exposure of the injustices perpetrated by the haves on the have-nots of his time. This may also be the major reason

why “steward” appears only twice in Jesus’s narratives, in both cases describing a negative role.<sup>10</sup>

It seems clear that Jesus disapproved of the role of a steward in his semi-monetized society—one harmful to illiterate farmers whose land was being stolen by the super rich. This context also helps explain Jesus’s thoughts about money, economics, and even the Temple—all of them connected to a socio-political system that oppressed people who were poor.

## Paul and Stewards

The overwhelming majority of our understanding about stewardship comes from Paul. Educated in Greco-Roman cultural traditions—and also schooled as a Pharisee—Paul was familiar with the understanding and practice of stewardship. He was likely to see the steward less as a despicable agent of oppression, and more as an admired functionary in the economic life of Roman society.<sup>11</sup>

He appropriated this secular role into a theological image that emphasized God’s ownership of all that exists. He further developed this thought into something useful for understanding a life of faith. For example, Paul thought of himself as a steward “of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1–2) and as a “servant” (or minister) of the *economia* of God (Col. 1:25). He understood the matter of trustworthiness in the life of stewards (1 Cor. 4:2). He considered bishops or overseers as stewards (Titus 1:7).

An important side note before we proceed further: Taken together, the relatively small collection of New Testament references to stewards and stewardship does not warrant the consideration of stewardship as a major New Testament theme, not for the Gospel writers or for Paul. *Grace, covenant, love, or redemption* are examples of more strongly rooted doctrinal pillars that also extend back into the Old Testament.

## The Economy of God

Paul’s use of *economia* and *economos* rested on a foundation of long-standing economic, political, and religious constructs. A significant portion of first-century Christians would have been familiar with this knowledge and practice.<sup>12</sup>

At its root, *economia* started with the household (*oikos*), the essential core of economic life in Greco-Roman times. In Greek antiquity, small households and large estates were managed by rules that were carried out largely by a spouse or a trusted slave. In that part of Paul’s cultural context, *economia* was essentially the “art and science of household management.”

The household could also include small businesses or enterprises. (Recall, for example, Paul’s colleagues, Lydia and Priscilla and Aquilla.) By extension, the city/state (*polis*) could benefit from an “economy”—a way of managing larger-scale matters. Thus the term could also apply to the work of military leaders and administrators in civil society. *Economia* also described administrative matters within cults and temples.<sup>13</sup>

In an even broader use of the term, *economia* also referred to the order of things—more literally, “arrangements”—in matters as diverse as writing, history, oration, ethics, architecture, or even one’s last will and testament. For example, at the beginning of his Gospel, Luke proposes “an orderly account” of Jesus’s life (Luke 1:3). It was a logical extension of these uses of the term to think of the entire universe as being organized, most likely by the gods. It made sense to early Greek philosophers that the order of the natural world was a sign of the original and continuing creation, ordering, and management of the gods. That’s why the Stoics thought of Zeus as administrator of the universe.<sup>14</sup>

This train of thought led early Christian writers to think of *economia* in its broadest sense—as it applied to God’s ordering, God’s will, or God’s plan to reconcile the world to God’s self. Thus the concept of “God’s economy” was derived.

In this book, “God’s will” embodies the larger and more encompassing understandings of *economia*, centering on God’s desire to save the world through Jesus Christ. In other manifestations, “God’s will” can also be seen in Scripture and the creeds—God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Echoes of God’s will can be seen in the Lord’s Prayer. God works continually to combat evil. God’s intention is to love and forgive unconditionally. God wants people to live peacefully, purposefully, patiently. This greater plan of God wraps the entire cosmos into continuing purposes and possibilities.

God’s *economia* (plan, ordering, arrangement) becomes the guiding principle by which God’s people could know God and carry out God’s will for the world. In this framework, God is considered as Owner, but also as “administrator” of all that exists.

Thus we can see that God’s arrangements extend beyond mere “household rules.” (That earlier translation of *ekonomos* is derived from the mistaken notion that *oikos* referred only to a small household, where rules would perhaps be necessary for a spouse or slave.) Because of the term’s broad use in the secular world of the New Testament, we cannot confine *economia*—and by derivation, *ekonomos*—to this simple meaning.

## The Anglo-Saxon Gloss

The history of stewardship thought and practice did not proceed to our times directly from Greco-Roman or early Christian understandings. Along the way were centuries during which the entire concept was not considered that important. Larger ecclesiological and societal matters pressed for the attention of lay and clergy alike. (Plagues, empire-building, crusades, and enlightenments come to mind as examples.) Mechanisms for funding the Church's ministries were intertwined with the complex relationships between Church and state.

Even the Renaissance's dawning did not reveal any great need or opportunity for Church leaders to take hold of stewardship as an important feature of ecclesiastical life. Never rising to the status of key doctrine or creedal linchpin, stewardship lay dormant in the Church for centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Lest you forget the premise of this book, *economia* still maintained relative importance—or at least interest—in the secular world of Western societies. The underlying fundamentals of stewardship—the ordering and management of civil and economic affairs—remained important to rulers, merchants, and other societal leaders.

During the Middle Ages, *economia* was transplanted into the orderly maintenance and governance of European castle life. As early as the thirteenth century, the term *stigwaerden* appeared in Anglo-Saxon references. Gradually morphing toward its present linguistic form, the *stigwaerden* became the *stywarden*. The work of this individual was named by his title: warden or keeper of the sty, which was the repository of the ruler's meat supply.

Over time, faithful stywardens were invited to tend to matters in the Great Hall—where management of the castle and its holdings took place. Now “stewards,” these individuals became critical components of the economic and (later) political well-being of the castle.

It made sense, then, for the translators of the King James Version to render *economos* as *steward*. Both individuals dealt with the affairs of a larger economic unit. Both were originally of low estate—slave and peasant. Both shouldered responsibilities when owners or rulers were absent. Both carried out their duties within the general framework of the larger plan or wishes of the owner or ruler. And both were highly regarded because of their trustworthiness.

The shift from *economos/economia* to *steward/stewardship* now took on a distinctly Anglo-Saxon character. The subsequent assimilation of “stewardship” into English paved the way for stewardship to undergird the funding of

Church enterprises, especially global missions. Thus, a linguistic gloss took on presumed substance.

## A More Recent History

Stewardship came out of hiding in nineteenth-century North America, when two important ecclesiastical matters needed attention. First, the mechanisms for providing sustenance to an increasingly professional clergy were woefully inadequate. Secondly, the emerging passion for sending missionaries to “foreign lands” became a central feature of a stewardship great awakening that swept the United States.<sup>16</sup>

In their reading and study of Scripture, devout lay leaders found solace, encouragement, and strategies for addressing these funding problems. Looking for a term or ideal that could gather together biblical teachings, stories, and concepts in one place, they came upon “stewardship” as a suitable way to express their views about godly living. Some examples: In 1832, Congregational minister Leonard Bacon was preaching sermons about the “the right use of property on Christian principles.” The Old School Presbyterians were advocating for “the use and management of talents, time and substance.” Chicago businessman Thomas Kane “rediscovered the tithe,” and by 1890 had published and distributed millions of pamphlets on tithing.<sup>17</sup>

It was at this juncture in history that stewardship emphases were narrowed. Ideals such as generosity, gratitude, abundance, and tithing became important touchstones for an emerging body of practice that supported stewardship primarily as mission-funding. The presence of these themes in Scripture seemed to warrant gathering them together into a stewardship theology.

Sometimes called “biblical stewardship principles,” the majority of these concepts still concentrated on church funding and support. Waxing and waning during subsequent generations of thought, stewardship now became a revised standard version of the original concepts found in Scripture and secular society.

In more recent church history, some theologians and stewardship leaders have attempted to retain the larger scope and meaning of original stewardship theology. Matters such as creation care, parenting, simple living, social justice, supportive relationships, and life purpose are now included in the conversation. The work of Ron Vallet, Robert Wuthnow, Douglas John Hall, Leonard Sweet, Gary Moore, Walter Brueggeman, and Tony Campolo come to mind.

## Limiting Side Effects

The outcomes of the gradual shift toward a concentrated, targeted focus for stewardship—the financial sustainability of the Church as locus of ministry—were positive. The reach of religious enterprises into the world would never have happened without this effort. For example, think of hospitals, social service agencies, or relief and development organizations. Congregations and denominations—and their related enterprises—grew and prospered, sustained by the generous financial support of committed members. Another enduring result: For decades, church members have consistently ranked as the most generous donors across all forms of philanthropic giving.

But this contraction of the original concepts may have created unintended consequences as well. Conflating the biblical witness about stewardship with fund-raising may have prohibited the development of a livelier and more realistic concept of the steward's role. When confined only to “giver,” the image of the biblical steward might discount other important tasks and functions. In the role of carrying out an absent owner's plan (*economia*), stewards may also have found it necessary to take, receive, plan, borrow, sell, save, reuse, invest, repair, manufacture, or collect. They might have sown, harvested, and learned efficiency, effectiveness, humility, and honesty. Stewards would have been accountable and even shrewd in their dealings. They would need to be wise and careful decision-makers. That's why, when you limit stewardship only to “giving,” you may be casting aside other worthwhile activities that could add to your personal and congregational mission.

Other possible side effects ripple out from a narrowed scope of stewardship.

The broader biblical witness for stewardship might have gotten lost. Other scriptural wisdom about God's *economia* could be overlooked. Bible stories and passages could be pressed into service as supposed foundations for “stewardship-as-giving” themes. Other stewardship-related scriptural themes—e.g., forgiving debt, contentment, the perils of riches, purposed living, or inequities in economic systems—might get short-shrift, or be ignored altogether.

The most widespread result of the single-minded application of “stewardship” only to church matters may also be the most damaging: diminished regard for any message with “stewardship” in its title. Repeated references to the same biblical stories and passages can result in a lack of attention among congregation members. Stewardship may not be all that interesting any more.

## After “Discipleship”

Presently, stewardship is deemed important because it is included under discipleship’s broad umbrella. Nested inside one’s self-identity as a disciple, there should also be the smaller identity of “steward.” Although discipleship theology and practice are currently pervasive throughout various manifestations of Christianity, that emphasis may also be ready for its own shifting: challenging “disciples” toward the maturity of stewards. Stewardship could be discipleship’s “what’s next.”<sup>18</sup>

Who is the disciple? Like the *ekonomos* (steward), the *mathetes* (learner/disciple) had secular origins that were easily applied to religious relationships. The term predated Jesus by centuries, denoting the followers of philosophers, wandering charismatics, rabbis, and even brigands. Socrates, Homer, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Plato lived and worked within teacher/learner relationships. Some Old Testament prophets may have had disciples—Elijah or Jeremiah are possible examples. The bandit-terrorist Zealots of Jesus’s time followed charismatic leaders.

Even after the teachers had died, their followers continued what they learned, forming fellowships of disciples who carried on the oral or written traditions of the now absent teacher. The personal allegiance and zeal of disciples was transferred to a body of knowledge or set of practices.

The scriptural concept of “disciple” may be as minimally supported as “steward.” Although there are 250+ occurrences of “disciple” in the New Testament, the vast majority are found in the Gospels—most commonly in Matthew. Of that number, the preponderance refer specifically to Jesus’s followers. The term is very rarely used in the epistles.

“Discipling” seldom occurs and “discipleship” is not found in the Greek New Testament. The uses of *mathetes* are usually literal in nature, and do not present any metaphorical ideals. German Catholic theologian Gerhard Lohfink is clear about the Gospel writers’ use of “discipleship”: “There is no such thing in the Gospels as abstract discipleship. It is not an idea or a purely inward disposition; it exists only as a concrete, visible, tangible event.”<sup>19</sup>

Over the past decade, some writers have begun to ask whether “disciple” should be used to denote the most desirable characteristics of Christians. While acknowledging the deep meanings and applicability of a disciple identity to Christian living, they suggest some difficulties with disciple-focused theology:

- The disciple is always a learner and a follower. Though always true metaphysically, this idea also allows for the possibility of stalled faith development.



- The self-identity of a disciple can lead to false comfort, dependency, or irresponsibility.
- Discipleship rests primarily on the real or imagined presence of the revered leader.
- When that person is absent, the disciples measure the relationship—with their former teacher and other disciples—only by obedience, being faithful students, or diligently following the principles set down by the leader/teacher.

Developmental psychologist Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and her husband, pastoral theologian James, summarize their concerns thusly: “Comfortable as a follower, and grateful for the luxury of having others make the final decision, the disciple may resist new invitations to leadership and greater responsibility.”<sup>20</sup>

The Whiteheads also suggest that “steward” might more fully describe a next phase in lifelong faith development.<sup>21</sup> They propose a stage theory that describes the maturing faith of believers: “No relationship” characterizes the first stage, with “child” following. At the next stage, a believer becomes a “disciple” and in the final manifestation of spiritual maturity, the believer becomes a steward. They offer this summary thought: “The central characteristic of stewardship is the ability to trust the authority of one’s own maturing convictions.”<sup>22</sup>

Spiritual director and social activist Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, former professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, apply Hagberg’s work relating stages of power to matters of stewardship. At later stages, stewards realize the power of personal transformation, embrace reflection, and cherish their abilities to influence and mentor others toward good. In some cases, they become the conscience of an organization and risk becoming “irregulars”—leaders whose inner vision sometimes sets them apart from others.<sup>23</sup>

How could disciple/steward relationships remain useful? Because stewards are mature disciples, “stewardship” does not require you to ignore or repudiate the strengths of being a disciple. Stewards emerge from the ranks of disciples, just as leaders emerge from among groups of followers.<sup>24</sup>

## Lively Stewardshifts

Let me suggest some possible changes in the ways you might proclaim or practice stewardship in your congregation. Some may fit your situation.

- *Keep at stewardship*: Throughout the year, your stewardship team can create and offer a variety of themes, programs, opportunities, or

challenges. You can also tie together yearlong stewardship-related themes—e.g., “Transformed to Transform”—with learning and fellowship opportunities.

- *Keep at fund-raising:* When it’s limited to only a short period of intense focus, mission-funding can get lost for the rest of the year. When extended into a continuing emphasis, fund-raising can inspire people’s vision and sense of purpose, both of them necessary components of missional identity.
- *Communicate with relevance:* If stewardship language has become deeply habituated and ritualized, think how you might gently critique, shape, or edit your congregation’s stewardship-related vocabulary so that the term can connect to a greater variety of life-related tasks and roles.
- *Repot your mission in stewardship soil:* If your congregation would benefit from a single, unifying identity, how might a more lively understanding of stewardship be helpful in transplanting evangelism, witness, or service efforts?
- *Talk about stewardship:* Most change begins with heartfelt conversations among people who respect and admire each other. Locate formal study of stewardship theology and practice within the informal setting of personal conversations. Lay leaders may be both teachers and learners.
- *Spend time in the Bible:* Reexamine time-honored stewardship Scriptures with more insistent, more contemporary interpretations. Pay close attention to the social and economic scene in which Jesus’s life and witness were located.
- *Conduct an audit:* Assess every aspect of your congregation’s stewardship teachings and practices, perhaps comparing them with members’ actual beliefs or behaviors. If it is thorough and honest, the audit will suggest what to do next.
- *Start with historical strengths:* Look for and celebrate your shared stewardship assets. For example, your congregation may have always responded to victims of natural disasters; you may have the deserved reputation of welcoming people; or you may be known as the place where families learn to navigate financial difficulties.

## It’s (Not) about You

The broad biblical and historical images of *economos* and *stywaerden* may be difficult to take into your life. Why could that be true? If you think of

yourself as an *ekonomos*, you assume enormous responsibility. You function with authority in the middle of ambiguity, making decisions about things you don't own. If you're a *stywaerden*, you deal with the mess and muck of unpleasant circumstances, perhaps in relative obscurity. Both roles require humility, honesty, and resolute determination to be faithful. Both are leaders. Either role entails risk, and compels continuing courage and hope. In both cases, the rewards may seem small.

Thankfully, your stewardship does not start or end with you. What lies at the heart of this broad concept and role has remained true over its historical development: Stewardship starts and ends with God's will, God's ways, God's gifts.

## In Summary

As a stewardship leader, you live out God's economy in the places and times where you operate most effectively. You can strengthen your congregation's unique position to equip stewards for daily lives of worship, service, and grace. You continue a history that began eons ago; you stand on many shoulders.

The fisherman disciple Peter put all these matters into perspective when he wrote:

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 4:10–11)

Amen, indeed!

## Notes

1. God's plan has been described in the term *heilsgesichte*—salvation history—or what Reumann calls “God's arrangement to save us.” See Ephesians 3:9ff. John Reumann, *Stewardship and the Economy of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 32, 44.
2. Leonard Sweet, “Freely You Have Received, Freely Give: Toward a Post-Tithing, Post-Stewardship, Postmodern Theology of Receiving,” <http://www.leonardsweet.com>.
3. Reumann, *Stewardship*, 67ff.
4. Reumann, *Stewardship*, 16.

5. See especially the implications of God's stewardship of nature in Isaiah 55:6–11; 58:11; and 61:3b.
6. Amos 4 and 6 are good examples, as is Micah 2.
7. The practice of the tithe was likely adapted by Israel's priestly class from societies such as Babylonia, Persia, and Egypt. Leonard Sweet, "Freely You Have Received," 2–3.
8. The three tithes of Old Testament agrarian society may have disappeared by Jesus's time. But the religious elite in the Temple still maintained a healthy income through the Temple tax—based on the Atonement Offering of Exodus 30:11–16. Sweet, "Freely You Have Received," 3.
9. For a compelling exposition of this and other parables, see *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), by American Baptist New Testament scholar William R. Herzog II.
10. Luke 16 presents one such steward, a shrewd man who uses his wiles to please both his employer and his customers while still taking advantage of both. Luke 12:35–48 may seem to reflect on the wisdom of a faithful steward, but can also be interpreted as Jesus's critique and comparison of Jewish religious leadership. Herzog, *Parables*, 17.
11. One of Paul's converts, Erastus, sent greetings to Roman Christians from his position as treasurer (*economos*) of the city of Corinth (Rom. 16:23).
12. Reumann, *Stewardship*, 11–12.
13. To be historically accurate, the "households" of Old Testament times were not comparable with New Testament-era understandings of this socioeconomic term. Reumann, *Stewardship*, 12–13.
14. Reumann, *Stewardship*, 19, 30.
15. The larger idea of *economia* as God's "grand design" for human history also survived as the province of some theologians, philosophers, and other scholars. Reumann, *Stewardship*, 38ff.
16. See George Salstrand's *The Story of Stewardship in the United States of America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), for a detailed recounting of these matters.
17. Salstrand, as cited by Reumann, *Stewardship*, 53–54.
18. In whatever number, the "marks of discipleship" usually include some reference to generosity or participation in the funding of the Church. An example, "But (stewardship) is really a fundamental aspect of Christian discipleship. It is a way of discipleship embodying God's grace and love to people and a world in need." "Financial Stewardship," Ann L. Fritschel and Steve Oelschlager, *The Lutheran*, August 2014, 14.

19. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 73.
20. Evelyn Eaton and James Whitehead, *Seasons of Strength: New Visions of Adult Christian Maturing* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1995), 56.
21. See Whiteheads, *Seasons of Strength*, especially chapter 4: "A Vocation Matures: The Emergence of Stewardship."
22. Whiteheads, *Seasons of Strength*, 63.
23. For a fuller application of her stage theory applied to stewardship, see chapter 12, "Stages of Power and Stewardship," in Janet O. Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 2005).
24. "Disciples are still learning about the best of our heritage as believing people; stewards have matured to the point where they are able to—and need to—care for the worst of religious heritage. Stewards remain disciples, but carry with them the realization that they are responsible for what they do not own." Whiteheads, *Seasons of Strength*, 63.