

STEWARDSHIP AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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Faith Seeking Understanding (Getting our Theology Right)

"In life and in death we belong to God." These sweeping words from the Brief Statement of Faith describe a very *Presbyterian* understanding, of human existence and of stewardship. We come from a long theological tradition called "Reformed", which has its focus on God's goodness and has an awareness that God is the initiator. We respond.

If there had to be just *one* word to describe Presbyterian Christians, it might be "Thanksgiving." We give because God gave to us; we love because God first loved us; our offerings and actions become sacrificial when we follow Christ who sacrificed for us. Theologian George Stroup once put it this way: *Others say, 'If you repent and believe, then God will bless you.'* *Presbyterians say, 'Since God has blessed us, therefore let us repent and believe and serve.'* The difference matters - because it speaks volumes about who God is, and what God's intentions are toward humankind.

So let's get it right. We give in response to grace already received.

- The real reason for Christian giving is not "to do our part, carry our share of the load", as well-intentioned as that may be.
- It is not to build up the institution of the church, as necessary as that is.
- Nor is it even to meet the crying needs of the world and the church - although it certainly does that (and we may especially intend that in special offerings or emergency collections) and is probably God's intended consequence of Christian offering.

We give because God is good. We give because God gave to us. All we have, every breath we draw, is gift. And in loving thankfulness to the One who loves us we respond in faith.

Stewardship as Spiritual Discipline

Christians give. It is part of the discipline of Christian life; it is a spiritual matter. As we mature in faith, (ideally) we become more practiced at integrating our lives. Among the spiritual disciplines of Christians are prayer, study of scripture, sharing in common fellowship, merciful service, sharing in common worship and sacraments, and so forth. Giving is one of those.

You would not say prayer was a regular spiritual discipline for you if only prayed occasionally. Nor would you claim that you were a student of scripture if you read the Bible only once in awhile (say . . . following along during Sunday morning worship). Nor can we say our stewardship, our giving, is a spiritual discipline if it consists of putting in the offering plate what ever is left over at the end of the month . . . if it is done unintentionally, without thought or understanding . . . if it is done apart from the Body of Christ, the community of faith . . . if it is done without prayer and thanksgiving to the Giver.

As a Spiritual Discipline our stewardship will bear certain marks and practices.

- § It will be regular and intentional. ("random dollar" giving is an insult to the Creator.)
- § It will be done informed by Scripture and the story of God's work in history.
- § It will be done in conversation with the community of faith. The family of Christ in the church will tell the story of what God is doing in the world today (mostly through the mission of the church, if we are faithful). They will sustain one another in good works and a life filled with God's abundance.
- § It will be done with prayer, in relationship with God.
- § It will be proportional. What portion of our resources will we set aside, regularly and with discipline, that are a holy sacrifice? So that we can say "all we have is God's"? The only two hard figures we have on this come from Scripture - one from the Old Testament, and one from the New. A couple of OT passages refer to the "tenth", and from there we get the idea of the Tithe. The important part is not the literal number, but the quality of our commitment, and that it is proportional - the "first-fruits", before you pay anything else, not what is left over. The New Testament figure is greater. You may recall the rich young ruler who had kept all the commandments, but came to Jesus asking what he must do to be saved. Jesus told him he lacked one thing. "Sell all you have and give to the poor, and then come, follow me." That figure is 100%. It is our all, our whole lives, dedicated to Christ - in all we do and every arena we are in. The point is this: what portion do we set aside and give to God (usually through the church) so that we are ever aware of whose we are? Then it becomes a discipline.

A Stewardship Development Program

Church leadership hoping to develop the stewardship life of their members will want to have their goals and purposes clear from the outset. And that goal is not to raise funds for the church. (There is a place for fundraising, but it is a different animal than the day-to-day faithfulness of regular stewardship.)

Here are the **goals**: To help our members grow spiritually, to help them grow closer to God and to be more closely bonded to the fellowship of the church. Church leaders are servant people, after the model of Christ. Hitting some abstract target misses the point. So does considering institutional life of the church apart from the deepest faith life of members of the Body.

The giver has a need to give. And given a consumer-driven and materialistic world, they may need more help with that than any other spiritual discipline. So a stewardship development program always consider the need of the giver to give, and how that giving deepens their life of faith.

The church that does that will have an intentional program that spans the years of our lives, and is probably cyclical. It would have a year-round stewardship program, and a seasonal emphasis on our stewardship that keeps it central in our lives.

A 3-year program for that seasonal emphasis might look like this:

Year One: Every Member Visitation, in the homes of church members.

Year Two: Small Group Meetings. (Alternatively, a phone campaign.)

Year Three: A fallow year, with a letter, church-wide dinner, and consecration Sunday.

Things to avoid. We have engaged in some practices over the years that actually interfere with the development of Christian stewardship in our members.

- § Talking about a pledge as if it were for the upcoming year. That makes it a transient thing and belies the commitment of a Christian life to God. We would be more accurate (and better serve our members) if we talked about a pledge as a lifetime commitment we make to God with our resources - a commitment that may change in its specifics (go up or down in amount) as the circumstances of a life change, but is in every other way constant.

- § Preparing a budget before the seasonal stewardship program. Budgets cause people to give to the budget instead of to God. They put a ceiling on the grace of God. The only budget stewardship visitors or church leaders should have in hand when they talk about Christian stewardship with church members is the current year budget. That is for answering legitimate questions about the Session's stewardship of what God has entrusted to it, and (even more importantly) telling Good News of what God is doing in the world through the life and mission of this congregation.

- § We are sometimes remiss in informing our members of what we are asking from them. We do them a disservice, and are not honest, if we ask them for proportionate giving and then continually surprise them with special offerings. Special offerings are good and important. And emergencies may happen and provide an opportunity for above-and-beyond giving. But otherwise, members should be told at the outset: This is the only such program we will conduct within the congregation this year except for _____.@ (Perhaps the One Great Hour of Sharing, Christmas Joy Offering, and Youth Group Car Wash, eg.) Then they can plan and be intentional in their faithfulness.

- § Thinking that stewardship is only about money. It is, of course, about all of our lives. And we concentrate on the financial angle of it because that is where we American have the greatest hang-ups and obstacles to faith. But it needs to be about more. IF you have as a part of your program a "Time and Talent" survey, follow up on receiving those offerings of time and talent. There is little more that can alienate a member from the fellowship of the church than ignoring that offering. Also, you may sometimes hear that "The only time the church visits me is when it wants money." Make sure that is not true. Make sure of that two ways: 1) find the times to be with one another in Christian fellowship, to visit and share on a more regular basis, and 2) make sure that our stewardship visits with church members are not *about money* so much as about helping the giver to develop giving, to grow in their spiritual life and their walk with Christ.