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Another Look at Christian Stewardship - Part One
What is a Christian Steward?

By Tal Davis

One of the most misunderstood and abused doctrines of the Christian faith is stewardship. Most people have totally mistaken perspectives on what stewardship actually is and how it is to be expressed by believers. The word often translated "steward" in the New Testament is the Greek term *oikonomos*. It literally means one who is a manager of someone else's property. In ancient times, a steward was often a trusted slave whom the master put in charge to manage his business, his household concerns, and often his other slaves. The steward actually owned nothing, including his own personhood and life. Everything he had, and everything he was, depended on his master's good graces and delegation of authority. Jesus several times used stewards as illustrations of humanity's relationship to God (see Matthew 24:44-46; 25:14-30; Luke 12:35-48; 16:1-13).

Oikonomos is also the Greek word from which is derived the English terms "economy" and "economics." That is entirely appropriate because an economy is how a society manages its goods and services for its people.

More important is the divine principle that a Christian steward is someone who has been entrusted by God Himself with a certain amount of material resources. The biblical basis of this doctrine is that God created the universe and is the actual owner of everything in it. As Scripture indicates:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

"The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, The world, and those who dwell in it." (Psalm 24:1)

He also specially created humanity. All people, whether they acknowledge it or not, are His possessions.

"God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Genesis 1: 27)

So, to sum up this introduction, Christians are to be good stewards, that is managers, of the material resources God has entrusted to them. He is the owner of all that exists and believers should never forget that truth. It is one of the most important spiritual concepts that a believer should know because, as Jesus asserted, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6: 21). Notice He did not say, "For where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." Jesus understood the psychological fact that people care a great deal about their material things. Given these truths, believers are expected to use and invest the resources they have been given in ways that are glorifying to God and beneficial to mankind.

Of course, not everyone has the same amount of resources available to them. Some people are wealthy and some are relatively poor. In any case, the principles of Christian stewardship are equally as applicable.

The problem, however, is that most believers have a distorted view of Christian stewardship. They think stewardship is essentially the same thing as giving donations to their church or other ministries. In fact, many think that is all there is to it. Actually, there are

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at least six aspects of Christian stewardship. Giving is important, but is only one of them. In this installment one we will look first at that principle and in the second part examine the other five.

GIVING. Many Christians assume that if they are giving regularly to their church, they are being good stewards. They are often taught (incorrectly) that the biblical expectation is for a believer to give a tithe (10%) of his or her income. Actually, however, the percentage of church members who actually follow that standard is very small. An old denominational survey statistic from the 1970s reported that, in those days, in most churches, about 20% of the members gave 80% of the income, 30% gave the other 20%, and 50% of the members gave virtually nothing. Doubtless, if that research was updated to the current generation, those numbers would be even worse.

Another major problem is that an enormous amount of sincere believers' gifts go to support ministries that are (at best) ethically and doctrinally questionable. It is disturbing when television preachers, many of whom are theologically unorthodox, ask their viewers to send donations to their ministries while promising miracle healings and financial windfalls. One such man (who is a proven fraud) gives away free pouches of "Miracle Water." Yet when the person receives the water she is then strongly encouraged to send in a generous donation. Other "Word of Faith" preachers and teachers tell their followers to send to them "seed offerings" as a tangible proof of their faith by which they can expect financial blessings in return.

There is no biblical basis for that teaching. Actually the ones getting the "blessings" are only the word-faith preachers themselves, many

of whom live in million dollar mansions and own private airplanes. One even owns his own island. In any case, nowhere in Scripture does it promise that if believers give money to support a church or any other ministry or person, God will automatically multiply their income or give them good health. So how should the Christian understand the stewardship principle of giving?

As we said, giving is the one principle that most people identify with stewardship. And certainly good stewardship includes giving to support the work of God's kingdom. Nothing is a more spiritually profitable habit for believers to develop than generously giving of their financial resources to support ministries that are legitimately doing God's work.

Of course, the starting point should be the local church. Churches necessarily depend on the regular donations of their members to operate their ministries, to pay their pastors and staff, and to maintain their buildings and grounds. Unfortunately, many churches have to resort to fund raising projects or housing day-cares in order meet their financial needs. While there is nothing wrong with a church sponsoring a day-care ministry or Christian school, it should not be the primary source for the congregation's income. That should come from its people.

In addition to their local congregation, Christians can give to parachurch ministries and ministers that work outside the purview of the local church. These would include missionaries and mission organizations, evangelistic ministries, Christian relief organizations, Christian schools, Christian universities, and evangelical theological seminaries. Nonetheless, good Christian stewards should make sure the donations they make are going to biblically sound and ethically managed causes. Worthy Christian ministries should be totally transparent about their financial

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practices and regularly be reviewed by independent auditing firms. If not, warning flags should fly.

But what about tithing? Giving ten percent of one's net income is a worthy goal for a good steward to set. However, Christians should not be legalistic about it. Despite what many people believe and are taught, nothing in Scripture mandates tithing or any other set level of giving. Nonetheless, giving very little or nothing to support one's church is poor stewardship and indicates a spiritual problem. On the other hand, some Christians assume that tithing regularly is all that is required of a Christian. Actually many people can and should give above that level. God does not own just ten percent of people's resources, He owns it all! Remember what the Lord Jesus said,

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (Matthew 12:48b).

Yes, giving is an important part of Christian stewardship – one that most professing Christians do not practice very well. That being said, the idea that stewardship is limited only to one's giving practices is erroneous. Christian stewardship is an all encompassing lifestyle that applies to just about every area of a believer's life. Giving or donating is only one important part of it. There are at least five other ways being a good steward should be expressed in a Christian's life. In the next installment, we will analyze those other five principles and see how they apply to one's life.

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