



Beyond Abundance: Is Stewardship Ethical?

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Words have power. Words have power because they go beyond mere persuasion. They are not simply market-tested phrases advertisers invoke to persuade us to make a purchase or donation. No, words and images have the power, dare say the gospel power, to shape our moral imaginations: how we see the world and engage with others in community, relationship, and in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

That is also the potential power of stewardship language for the church. Not market-tested language that makes giving go up, but language that reframes our imaginations to respond to the realities around us. What are the words that we use? Where do they come from and what is their context? How have we used them for our purposes and why?

Too often, stewardship has become shorthand for raising the budget, fundraising, and managing church finances. The framing for many pastors is that stewardship is the work we have to do in order to do the work we feel called to do. Douglas John Hall, the preeminent theologian of stewardship a generation ago, claimed:

The language we employ, especially around money and resources, is often freighted with implications and must be carefully used. Beyond simply thinking about what is needed to “keep the doors open,” Christians need to think very carefully about the words and concepts surrounding the use of the things that God has given us.

The term stewardship has a decidedly distasteful connotation. It at once conjures up the horrors of every-person visitations, building projects, financial campaigns, and the seemingly incessant harping of the churches for more money. Ministers cringe at the mention of Stewardship Sundays: must they really lower themselves to the status of fundraiser once more?¹

Hall's description resonates with how many have come to understand stewardship, but he goes too far in belittling and even denigrating fundraising. In cooperation with the Association of Lutheran Development Executives (ALDE), the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy surveyed over four hundred faith-based fundraisers and interviewed dozens on why they engage in their profession. An overwhelming majority responded that they see their work as a vocation—an expression of their faith. Their faith commitment served as an essential aspect of how they made meaning in their work. The care in which they undertook their work and cultivated relationships with donors became a form of ministry as they helped individuals and families discern how generosity became a vital aspect of faith formation and discipleship.²

We hear the same message from hundreds of pastors that we work with each year as they are converted to a new way of seeing.³ If many begin with the mindset that Douglas John Hall articulated, they leave understanding the work of cultivating generosity as important work. While our stewardship language has often stymied the pastoral imagination to move beyond bottom-line budgets and capital campaigns, we also know it is essential to the work of ministry. Most often the difference is all in how we reimagine stewardship, fundraising, and generosity. Our language can inhibit or enhance the cultivation, expansion, and deepening of our moral imaginations.

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For several generations, our stewardship language compelled people to give out of a sense of obligation and duty. Yet, our stewardship language must change with the generations. While stewardship language is biblical, theological, and

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (New York: Friendship Press, 1982), 6.

² Thomas Jeavons, David Patrick King, and Thad Austin, "Fundraising as Profession and Vocation: An Inquiry about Faith and the Practice of Fundraising," 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y89p4qxr>.

³ See Executive Certificate in Religious Fundraising (ECRF), "Meeting the Growing Needs of Leaders in Religious Institutions," Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, <https://tinyurl.com/ydc7w8bg>.

layered with meaning, too often it has fallen victim to jargon that obscured the real power of the theological and biblical language.

Perhaps one of the phrases that has resonated over the past decade has been a preference for the language of abundance. As Walter Brueggemann and others have so ably demonstrated, this language has tremendous power in outlining an overarching biblical narrative of God's relationship with Israel, God's saving work through Jesus Christ, the subsequent birth of the church, and her ongoing work in the world. The contrast of abundance versus scarcity highlights the difference between the way in which Christians see themselves in the world and the ways in which the world measures success and values. And how often these can appear as competing goods within each of us—the real struggle is knowing how to live a life of discipleship.⁴

But too often we lose the power of our language as we have abstracted it from its original, rooted context. Through our abstractions, we have domesticated our theology and extracted any real sense of money-talk from our stewardship appeals. Stewardship, generosity, abundance can be beautiful metaphors that often lead us to avoid *talking about money*. With our ongoing fear of talking about money in church, we've cleverly figured out how to fundraise in the church while mentioning money as little as possible.

Working through abstractions is regrettable on several levels. First, these abstractions allow clergy and laity to avoid our real fears of addressing the taboo of money. Second, it deprives the church of some of its greatest assets in confronting issues of justice in our world where business practices, questions of privilege, and social ethics are completely wrapped up in economic issues. If we don't want to talk about money personally, it is rarely any easier to address these pressing issues more broadly in our society. The result, often, is a disconnect between the private and the public where we live bifurcated lives between church on Sunday and our work during the week.

This is what Reinhold Niebuhr saw in 1930 when he wrote a piece for the *Christian Century* entitled, "Is Stewardship Ethical?" As the story goes, the young Niebuhr had made a name for himself as a Lutheran pastor who had just taken a post at Union Theological Seminary deeply engaged in social issues: pacifism, labor, and economic challenges. Faced with a deadline for submitting his regular *Christian Century* piece, Niebuhr decided to write on stewardship ethics: "did the churches have anything important to say about the ethical character of the entire western civilization?"⁵

Is stewardship ethical? In examining the question, Niebuhr shone a light on how the church talked or didn't talk about money. It's easy for us to think that stewardship has just always been, but the ways in which we have come to understand stewardship are really a newer innovation in the life of the church. Of course, Jesus

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century* 116, no. 10 (March 24, 1999): 342–47.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," *Christian Century* 47 (April 30, 1930): 555–57.

addressed money and possessions as much or more than any other topic during his ministry. And undoubtedly it is a common theme in Paul's letters. But in a post-Constantinian church in the West, while there was lots of talk of Christian charity, the church was taken care of through the state and other forms of private philanthropy. The same was basically true in America—pew rentals made up the largest part of fundraising for Christian churches until the late nineteenth century. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century did denominations begin to make the case for Christians to tithe to the church out of a sense of duty and commitment. And the language of stewardship only really came into this context between the world wars. Like today, American society was undergoing drastic changes: widespread urbanization, immigration, and increasing tribalism.

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In the midst of these great transitions, denominations developed a language of stewardship to sustain the growth of American churches. The development of stewardship always emerged out of what was happening within church and culture at the time, but nonetheless, the practice of stewardship often seemed siloed from the pressing issues of the day. And so Niebuhr asked, "Is this stewardship ethical?"

Niebuhr was skeptical that conventional stewardship language could speak to current moral complexities. He called out the church as too easily satisfied—too quick to praise the virtue of the philanthropic gifts made by those with concentrated wealth and power. He claimed that "the apparently voluntary nature of a gift does not necessarily make it a truly ethical act." We have avoided the ethical question. How did "your man of power and privilege," Niebuhr asked, "make his money?" How does he treat his workers? This too is a stewardship question and required what Niebuhr called a depth and range of ethical imagination. Of course, as a Christian realist, Niebuhr admitted that Protestant teachings on giving are full of mixed motives, but he challenged the Protestant churches to see stewardship as an ethical issue—personal, communal, global.⁶

Yet the churches largely ignored him. Niebuhr went on to become the most recognizable public theologian of the twentieth century, and stewardship principles and techniques went on just as they had before. Scholars in their ivory towers and grass-roots advocates on the ground fought for labor, tax reform, civil rights, but they didn't see this as the work of stewardship ministry. At the same time, churches entered the most prosperous period of post-World War II institutional building and public prestige, but they rarely saw their fundraising campaigns as an ethical issue.

⁶ Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?," 555–57.

In 1958, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*, ranked as one of the top one hundred most-influential books of the twentieth century. He argued that the US was becoming wealthy in the private sector but remained poor in the public sector, lacking social and physical infrastructure and perpetuating income disparities. The growth between the haves and have-nots continued—education, leisure, and technology grew, and Americans began to move toward a service economy.⁷

By the 1970s, both as a response to this new affluence as well as in response to a new set of moral crises, a renewed theological ethic of stewardship emerged. Christian social ethicist Max Stackhouse summarized the work of the National Council of Churches' Commission on Stewardship. Just like Douglas John Hall and Reinhold Niebuhr, he pointed to the temptation to see stewardship as the menial task of raising the budget: "In our reactions against seeing stewardship only as fund-raising, we must not be tempted to ignore the reality of economics and money. . . . Stewardship is the Christian way of speaking of responsible economics."⁸ And the 1970s—like the 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression—were an interesting test case. There was the end of Vietnam, the resignation of a sitting president, the growth of corporations yet the financial pinch of an ongoing energy crisis.

Stackhouse sought to collect stewardship sermons so that he might analyze their theology of giving, but he remarked almost no one responded. They either didn't preach on money or were too embarrassed to send in their best attempts. So instead, Stackhouse analyzed the language in hymnody. In Stackhouse's analysis of hymns, he found four themes: the bounty of creation, the celebration of good work, the call to self-sacrifice, and a response of thanksgiving. While sufficient, he remarked that there was very little corporate language—nothing about interpersonal relations, nothing about stewardship for society, and certainly nothing about the economic order. Instead, Stackhouse claimed, "our stewardship theology focuses on individuals and individual piety putting all the responsibility on the self and leaving the structure of both church and public order out of the picture." "Indeed," Stackhouse concluded, "these hymns seem to be used as fund-raising affirmations."⁹

Stackhouse went on to propose a "stewardship ethic" for the church, and like Niebuhr, our stewardship ministries have largely ignored it—following the same principles and techniques to raise budgets, fulfill capital campaigns, and support the work of the church.¹⁰ Perhaps, today we're in a similar time—where the issues of our day are leading us to consider the full scope of our theology and practice of stewardship. Like Niebuhr and the Great Depression and Stackhouse in the midst

⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

⁸ Max Stackhouse, "Toward a Stewardship Ethics," in *Teaching and Preaching Stewardship: An Anthology*, ed. Nordan C. Murphy (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1985), 87–111.

⁹ Stackhouse, "Toward a Stewardship Ethics," 87–111.

¹⁰ Max Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

of an unpopular war and a global energy crisis, we face our own challenges: an unprecedented refugee crisis in Syria, civil war in Yemen, mass starvation in South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria. And even closer to home, we are reflecting on Ferguson, Charlottesville, not to mention debates over health care and tax reform. Unlike the church's response in past decades, we may not have the luxury of ignoring theologians' critiques for the church can no longer simply go about it stewardship business as usual.

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These categories of scarcity and abundance are rich metaphors to address some of the pressing ethical issues of our time—if, and only if, we allow them to speak with the power that they carry and avoid the temptation to abstract them. What does abundance mean to those in our congregations that live comfortable lives in the suburbs? Whether we mean to or not, in our references to God's abundance, perhaps are we setting up our own mini-prosperity gospel—affirming the notion that God will provide for all our needs (and wants)—and the church only asks for a portion of the excess, what's left over?

I do not believe most churches intentionally preach prosperity, but perhaps in leaving much unsaid, this is the dominant narrative that many hear. Abundance is tricky because the way Scripture frames this notion is so countercultural to the message we are bombarded with each day. What does John 10:10 mean when Jesus claims, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly?" Clearly, he's not talking about stuff, and he's not talking about an easy life.

The same is true with scarcity. I don't think Jesus is asking us to go without, asking all of us to take vows of poverty, so where's the balance? What do these images mean for the way we live, work, and form our families in the faith? These are the ethical questions that people are asking us to help them answer. These are stewardship questions.

Sometimes it is hard to reclaim a metaphor that has taken off in popular imagination. If the language of scarcity and abundance has become so dominant in some stewardship circles, several voices have tried to intervene with new frameworks. One of those is Dr. Iva Carruthers, general secretary of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, who has articulated a "theology of sufficiency." From her perspective, language of abundance has often done damage. While the prosperity gospel may have brought extravagance on one side and empty promises on another, general notions of abundance have failed too. They have given false hope by ignoring the structural issues that keep many from real opportunities for education, good health, and a good job. If material scarcity is the overwhelming context in which you find yourself and your community, abundance does not seem possible or helpful. She goes on to say, for those who might achieve material success, they

often are forced with the real fact that abundance may mean leaving their community behind. Carruthers makes clear that scarcity-abundance language is not meant to be individualized. It's not for us to take stock of what we have or what we don't. It's certainly not for us to measure ourselves against one another. It is more about how we live as Christians within community and the world.

Yet we must also be aware that in reclaiming this full theology of abundance, scarcity, and sufficiency, we are leading the church not only to celebration but to lament. Lament is an aspect of stewardship. Lamenting that the world is not as we would hope it might be. Asking for forgiveness for our own sins—what we have done and left undone—in working to make sure all of God's children have what they need. If we are to continue to employ metaphors of scarcity and abundance, we have to sit in lament before we move to challenge the church to get to work.

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New language helps in reconsidering our ethic of stewardship, but I think one of the biggest challenges that we still face is bringing our stewardship practices into conversation with theological questions. We must push back against the notion that stewardship is the work that we have to do in order to do the work we feel called to do. We must push back when pastors claim, "I didn't go to seminary to balance a budget." We must work to equip our leaders with the confidence that they can do this work well, to affirm the notion that this is an important part of ministry, and it is central to the faith lives of those entrusted to our care.

Scott Cormode, Hugh de Pree Professor of Leadership Development at Fuller Theological Seminary, often frames the first question of leadership: "What are the longings and losses of the human condition?" Then he asks, "What big lies do the people entrusted to your care believe?" Finally, he asks, "How together do we create a shared story of future hope?"¹¹ Again, these are stewardship questions. What do they mean for the way we live, work, and form our families in the faith? These are the ethical yet extremely practical questions that people are asking us to help them answer.

These questions too often point to the shortcomings of our stewardship ministries. On one hand, we have our stewardship vocabulary—practical theology that makes the case for what God calls us to do with our time, talent, and treasure. On the other hand, we have a stewardship theology that is expansive—looking at

¹¹ Scott Cormode, "Christian Innovation: How Do We Pursue Innovation When Our Credibility Depends on Continuity with the Past and Fidelity with Tradition?" (paper presented to Academy of Religious Leadership, April 2015).

topics like creation care, global development, economic systems. But often what's missing is the middle—making sense of stewardship in our daily lives. It's easy to live in the abstractions when waxing eloquently in a stewardship sermon on God's abundance or on the necessity of caring for creation, but what does that mean for people in the pews when they go to work or choose where to buy a house or consider how to pay for college? Beyond the abstractions, our ministries of stewardship must take Cormode's questions seriously to lead those in our communities through discerning their regard for and use of money in their daily lives. How can we provide new language that challenges the myth that our self-worth is equal to our net-worth?

There are plenty of theological resources that leads us to consider the ethics of stewardship. Yes, the stewardship of creation, the power structures inherent in particular economic systems, human rights and global development are essential to a theology of stewardship, but what does that mean for us? How do the questions help address the real deep longings and losses of the human condition—of those entrusted to our care?

The power of abundance language is not just in the creation of capital or accumulation of resources. It's the unique gospel proclamation that stewardship is not simply a redistribution of resources—taking from one to give to another. No, in fact, it's important to note that we all have something to give. A language of abundance calls us to attend to our particular gifts (the assets that each of us possess). This is the lesson of asset-based community development applied to stewardship. Most often we find what we have already set out to find, and such an approach points to the abundance God has already placed before us.

It is important to remember that stewardship is not a zero-sum game. Contrary to popular opinion, the gospel claims that once a gift is given, it is not simply consumed. In fact, the opposite is often the case: through the process of giving and receiving (in relationship), there is more than what there was before. It's the ongoing creation that God set into motion—a snowball effect. We can do more together than on our own. And our generosity grows through experience. Through community, we can fine tune a stewardship theology of sufficiency, an ethic that we can live out in the world. Is stewardship ethical? A strange question, but maybe one worth considering. ⊕

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