

Gifts from God – Gifts for God: A Theology of Christian Stewardship

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Christian stewardship begins and ends with God. It starts with the principle that everything we have comes from God. God is revealed in the Bible as one who gives. The picture of God presented in the first chapter of Genesis is a picture of God the creator. It is also a picture of a giving God: God is the giver of life in its many forms, the giver of space and time, the giver of power to humankind. As people, we are accountable to God for the way we use his gifts.

While life in this world is God's primary gift, God is also revealed throughout the Bible as the giver of love. Much of the Old Testament is concerned with a wayward people who ignore their loving God. The New Testament is about a God who comes in the person of Jesus to reconcile wayward humankind to himself. The supreme act of love is God submitting to death on a cross. As people, created by God and loved by God, how do we respond to God's gifts of life and love?

Within the life of the Church, this response has usually been measured in terms of our giving of time, talent and money for the work of the Church. For many years in the Church of Scotland, one of the questions asked of those who wished to become communicant members was this:

Do you promise to give a fitting proportion of your time, talent and money for the Church's work in the world?

From the outset the giving of time, talent and money has an important place. It is also clear from the question that our giving has a purpose – to enable the work of the Church. Although giving is emphasised in the above question, in most denominations the teaching of Christian giving seems to be addressed only in a minority of congregations.

The Bible provides a wealth of material to assist our understanding of Christian giving. When we think about giving our time, we usually think about giving time to support some activity – some aspect of the life of the Church. Giving our time for the good of a wider community is commended in the Bible. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10.25-37*) tells of a priest and a Levite who did not give time to help the injured man. The Samaritan is good because he stops and gives a considerable amount of his time to care for the injured man. The giving of time to care for others or to reach out in other ways with the message of the gospel is an important aspect of Christian stewardship.

However, there is another side to the giving of time. The verses which follow the Parable of the Good Samaritan tell of Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany (*Luke 10.38-42*). Martha is busy being the attentive hostess. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, hanging on his every word. Jesus shocks Martha by praising Mary. We are reminded that there needs to be time when we stop doing, so that we might focus all our attention on God and his word for us. If we are to be effective disciples of Jesus, servants of God, we need to give some of our time to being with God and receiving from God. The worship of the Church should not be presented as another activity in which we engage, but as 'time out' from the busyness of life – time for God.

Two of the gospels record Jesus' Parable of the Talents (*Matthew 25.14-30 and Luke 19. 11-27*). In each of these gospel passages the importance of using what God has given is emphasised. The different nature of our individual talents is the focus of two passages in Paul's Letters (*Romans 12.3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12.1-31*). In these passages Paul refers to our different roles within the body of Christ, depending on the gifts or talents which we have been given.

The giving of talent is a challenge to the giver and to the Church which receives the gift. We need to be honest in our identification of our talents: we need to know our strengths and our weaknesses, recognising that each of us has some strengths. The Church needs to use gifts of talent in an appropriate way. It has often been the case that our talents have been made to fit the structure of the Church. It should be the other way round. The life of the Church should be shaped around the talent that is given. If we take seriously the biblical teaching that our talents are gifts from God, then the life of the Church, the mission of the Church, should be shaped around these God-given resources.

Many opportunities for effective mission must have been lost by the Church when talent was inappropriately used, either by being forced to fit an existing structure or through a lack of vision which could not see beyond the existing structure.

Any mention of the word 'stewardship' tends to lead people in the Church to think about money. The Bible is full of references to money and possessions. There is a considerable amount of teaching about the giving of money. Sometimes this is presented in a very narrow way, as if tithing was the only biblical model of giving. In the Old Testament there are a number of references to giving a tithe of income to maintain the holy places and the priesthood (e.g. *Leviticus 27. 30-32; Numbers 18. 21-29; Malachi 3.8-12*). The Old Testament also teaches that giving to God should be from the first fruits of income (*Deuteronomy 26.1-11*). These Old Testament models emphasise the priority and generosity that ought to be characteristics of our giving of money to God.

As is often the case, the New Testament gives us more demanding teaching. Sharing is a key concept in many passages. Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool (*Luke 12.13-21*)

criticises all who are unwilling to share their wealth. The book of Acts presents two pictures of the Early Church where the believers shared all their material possessions (*Acts 2.37-47 and 4.32-37*). Paul teaches the importance of wealthier Christians supporting the poorer congregations in the early days of the Church (*1 Corinthians 16.1-4; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9*).

The other emphasis in New Testament teaching is that giving should be sacrificial, a step beyond generous. Jesus' encounter with the rich young man (*Luke 18.18-25*), his words about the widow's offering (*Luke 21.1-4*), and Paul's commendation of the Macedonian Christians (*2 Corinthians 8.1-15*) all focus our attention on the sacrificial nature of true Christian giving – an appropriate response to God's sacrificial giving in the life and death of Jesus.

Before leaving the biblical models for giving, it is worth returning to the first chapter of Genesis where we read that God created humankind *in his image* (Genesis 1: 27). This suggests that a giving God intended people to be giving people. In other words, we must be willing to give to be the people God intended us to be – to be fully human. All the biblical models of giving are presented as being a response to the giving of God. They are also presented as being for a purpose – enabling the worship, mission and service of the believing community.

When the Church today teaches and promotes Christian stewardship in terms of the giving of money, it is important that this giving has a positive purpose. Often the giving of money is presented as a practical, mechanical matter – something that will balance the accounts or prevent a future deficit. Sometimes extra money is used to build up reserves: this strategy may be at odds with Jesus' Parable of the Talents. It is important that the Christian giving of money is directly linked to a sharing of the gospel through the worship, mission and service of the Church.

Making this direct link is a fundamental part of teaching Christian giving. Maintaining and developing buildings has to be seen in terms of funding resources for sharing the gospel. Church buildings are holy places set apart from the busyness of the world, and centres for outreach and service within our communities. Paying clergy and other staff is not just about salaries, expenses and pensions. It is about investing in people who lead worship, preach God's word, care for those who are most in need, help people of all ages grow in their faith, and be points of contact between the Church and the world through chaplaincy in education, healthcare, industry and commerce.

Giving money to enable the sharing of the gospel must extend beyond the local Church and its immediate community. If the Church's spending is all within its own community, the Church itself might well be criticised for being selfish and unwilling to share. The local Church has a part to play in the national and international mission of the Church. This is organised in different ways in different denominations, but it is always there. Sometimes the poorest congregations in this country are the most generous givers when

it comes to supporting partnerships with the Church in some of the world's poorest countries. Experience of poverty leads to a greater understanding, sympathy and generosity to others who are poor.

The Christian giving of time, talent and money to God for the work of the Church has to be seen within the greater context of the stewardship of creation – how we care for God's world, how we use the resources provided by God's world, how we ensure the availability of these resources for future generations. The stewardship of creation is about ecology, conservation, pollution, food, water, coal, oil and gas. We live in a world, God's world, where a minority control most of the resources, and the majority lack the basic necessities for life. We live in a world, God's world, where the present population is exhausting so many of the resources that there will be real problems for future generations. These are fundamental issues for any Christian understanding of the stewardship of creation.

While the mission of the Church is still about leading people to Jesus and helping them to become disciples, it is also about providing a Christian voice in relation to the major social, moral, scientific and political issues facing today's world. As society in many places becomes more secular or the prevailing voice of faith is not a Christian voice, it is increasingly important that a Christian voice is heard.

Christian stewardship is a response to the gifts of God – a response that enables the work of God in his world.