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Stewardship and the Divine Gift Economy

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the Gospel of John, Jesus gathers his disciples to instruct them in what is known as his “farewell discourse.” This address begins with a new commandment that his disciples should love one another and the related observation that such a display of love will give evidence to the world that they are indeed his followers (Jn 13:34-35). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus also compares his followers to a city on a hill, whose light (good works) everyone will see and as a result turn and glorify God (Matt 5:14-16). Likewise, in Romans 2:24 Jesus’ remarks are echoed by Paul who rebukes those whose behavior causes others to blaspheme God. What should be noticed here is that the underlying thread uniting these passages is that it is our lives, and not just our preaching, proclamation and words, that witness to who God is, what He has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ.

Now while this is an admittedly odd way to approach the topic of stewardship, its relevance will become clear as I proceed. So to commence, let us ponder a few questions. Suppose you had more than you could ask or imagine. In that situation, how generous would you be? Now ask yourself, what is preventing you from being that generous now? After all, as the writer of Ephesians reminds us, we worship one whose power is at work within us, a power that is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20). So if this true and if we believe it, what is stopping us from giving?

I begin this treatment of stewardship in this manner because all that follows is not really about church programs and practices, although that is our starting point. Rather, it is about character. It is about our character individually as well as that of our communities. It is about how our identity does or does not witness to the generosity of God, who, we claim with our mouths at least, gives more abundantly than we can ask or imagine through Christ.

II. WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN AND IF WE TALK ABOUT STEWARDSHIP

Consider what often passes for stewardship in the church. What do we typically see and hear in mainline churches about stewardship? It is almost humorous the number of times I ask this question in church settings and am met with silence. That is actually an appropriate response insofar as many churches have opted to say little or nothing about stewardship in church, instead just sending a letter in the mail to members soliciting funds.

This silence is defended on the grounds that it is a deliberate effort to differentiate the congregation in question from what are perceived as the off-putting tactics of “high-pressure” churches. Or it is a response to what has been called “the backlash against tithing,” a trend where people are more bold in claiming that their money is theirs and asserting the freedom to do with it what they want.

This approach frequently results in contributions that are flat or declining. I would think that this result would be unsurprising, but I have listened to congregational reports where finance chairs share their surprise at precipitous declines in giving after a year of not asking.

At the risk of jumping the gun a bit, allow me to contrast this with a very different kind of surprise. Another pastor shared with me not too long ago, “We’re doing pretty good here. Folks are kind of excited; we’ve been talking about giving, and God’s giving to us and guess what? Our giving has increased so much so that we’re actually talking about new ministries. I think folks are a little shocked at themselves. For so long they have been moaning about money, it will be interesting to see if they know what to do with it, now that we have it.”¹

A second approach to stewardship, and one that is much more popular than the first, involves the establishing of campaigns that focus on lay persons giving brief moralizing testimonies about giving to the church. These often adopt the tone of “it does not hurt so bad. If I managed to give a little more, so can you. Besides, look at all that you get for it,” accompanied by a litany of church programs and services.

¹Personal correspondence with the author.

This last part, “Look at what you get for it,” is particularly conspicuous and noteworthy. It is as if we will not give unless we get something in return. Fish Fries, craft sales, peanut sales, peach sales, apple sales, bazaars, raffles, and on and on. A few years ago, in the wake of some terrible disaster in Africa, my church decided to collect money for disaster relief. So what did we do? We held a bake sale. Apparently it is not sufficient to lift up the suffering and need of our sisters and brothers. That will not move us to give. Just hearing of their plight will not loosen the purse strings; but if you throw a pound cake into the deal, well, then people are quick to pitch in \$5 or whatever change they have in their pockets. Similarly, a twist on this “give and you will get” appeared in a letter I received from a local church. It declared, “The stock market has been way up. Don’t forget there are tax advantages to donating appreciated stock instead of cash. You may be able to exclude capital gain income and get a charitable contribution deduction.”

In another instance, in the midst of soliciting funds for the youth program, a youth pastor at my church once declared in a sermon that studies show 80% of youth abandon the faith during college. He went on to point out that in this church, only 50% do. “That’s a 30% return above average,” he boasted. “Wouldn’t you like to have a money market account that returned 30% above average market return?” And with this, he exhorted us to invest in the youth program.

The third popular approach to stewardship involves “Gift and Talent” inventories. These are questionnaires regarding your gifts and talents and how you might be willing to use them for the church. Are you musically inclined? Maybe you can join the choir. Are you handy? Maybe you can volunteer for a Saturday work day at the church. Do you like children? Maybe you can teach a Sunday school class. Do you have spare time during the week? Maybe you can take sermon tapes to shut-ins. Oh, and when you unfold this questionnaire completely, what falls out? A pledge card.

1. God’s Cut

The glaring point to see here is that stewardship today means money. Yes, we try to ask for money in such a way that at least nods to the idea that stewardship is not just about money, that it is about much more than money; that it includes “prayers, presence, gifts, and service” or “time, talents, and treasure.” But in the end, when we talk about stewardship, we are talking chiefly about money.

More specifically, we are talking about giving money to the church. I mean, when was the last time you heard a stewardship campaign in a church that said “give money to the Women’s Shelter or Christian Peacemaker Teams or Habitat for Humanity?” The gift and talent inventories are pretty clear on this point – what can you do for the church?

So for the most part, when we talk about stewardship, we are talking about giving money to the church. (Note that we talk about *giving*. Few questions are asked about how that money was *acquired*.) And how do we tend to talk about giving? Usually we speak in terms of what we owe God or what is God's cut. We tend to talk about stewardship as if all that we have is ours, and stewardship is a matter of determining what God's "cut" is. The presupposition of the conversation is that all that I am and all that I have is fundamentally mine, and that I am free to decide how to use and dispose of what is mine – as long as I give back to God an appropriate share. Thus God is cast as a sort of cosmic IRS agent.

It is worth unpacking this presupposition for a moment. The classical theological locus for discussing stewardship is Genesis 1:26-31. For many of us today, Genesis 1 appears to suggest that the earth is fundamentally ours. God gave us dominion, which is understood by many to mean that all that is, is basically for our enjoyment, pleasure, and use. We are fundamentally owners. We own what we have and it is ours to do with as we please. So long as we give God his cut.

And what is God's cut? It is usually pegged "ideally" at a tithe of 10%. Of course, in many churches it is commonly accepted that this is not really possible; we do not really expect people to tithe. So we rarely even talk about tithing (after all, we are not members of those legalistic "high-pressure" churches). Instead we adjust God's cut in a variety of ways – sometimes calculating the tithe after taxes (net instead of gross) or on what we consider "disposable income," or we settle on giving \$50 more than last year – and we end up giving, if the studies can be trusted, about 2 or 3% of our income.²

2. Stewardship and the Universal Destination of Created Goods

Now upon further reflection, we quickly discover that these notions which relegate stewardship to our dominion over creation or God's cut of our resources are extremely foreign to much of the Christian tradition. The fact is that much of the Christian tradition has followed Judaism in interpreting humanity's God-given dominion as a matter of caretaking, not ownership. We are caretakers of that which is not ours. We are caretakers, charged with tilling and keeping creation for the Creator. Nothing is ultimately ours. All that we have and all that we are still belongs to the Creator. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it," (Ps 24:1).

This is to say, all that we have and all that we are has a social mortgage or function. There is a "universal destination of material goods"

²Meir Tamari notes that in Judaism, contributions are driven by need. Our obligation is to satisfy our neighbor's need. The limitation of 1/10 or 1/5 is permitted only where giving threatens to impoverish the giver, and even then, 1/10 is frowned upon as miserly. This is one area, among many, where Christians suffer for having lost their connection with the Jews. See Meir Tamari, *The Challenge of Wealth* (North Vale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995).

in the words of John Paul II.³ All that we have and all that we are is meant to serve the common good, which, ultimately, is our *summum bonum*, communion in the Trinity (see 1 Cor 12:7). As John Chrysostom, one of the great preachers of the early church, reminds us:

For our money is the Lord's, however we may have gathered it. If we provide for those in need, we shall obtain great plenty. This is why God has allowed you to have more: not for you to waste on prostitutes, drink, or fancy food, expensive clothes, and all the other kinds of indolence, but for you to distribute to those in need. . . . [T]he rich man is a kind of steward of the money which is owed for distribution to the poor. He is directed to distribute it to his fellow servants who are in want. So if he spends more on himself than his need requires, he will pay the harshest penalty hereafter. For his own goods are not his own, but belong to his fellow servants... For you have obtained more than others have, and you have received it, not to spend it on yourself, but to become a good steward for others as well.⁴

The Christian tradition has long held that what God has supplied is supplied for meeting all of our needs including those of our near and distant neighbors (2 Cor 9:8-10).

Now at this juncture, we need to pause for a moment. While we are promised that God supplies to meet needs, we must ask what a need is as well as how to distinguish a need from a want? For example, is a cell-phone a need or a want? How about indoor plumbing? How about more than two changes of clothes? At different times – in some cases not even that long ago – all of these would have been wants, not needs.⁵

My point is that identifying needs requires a reference point, a standard. And in the Christian tradition, that reference point is the common good. Needs are determined in relation to the good that is shared by all. And what is that good? It is communion. Our highest good, the good for which all were created, is the communion of all in the Lord.

This means that when we talk of using material goods to meet needs, we do not mean simply the bare necessities required to sustain biological life (e.g., food, water, shelter). Nor do we mean helping people become self-sustaining and independent, a sentiment captured so well in the popular saying, "Give a person a fish and they eat for a day. Teach them to fish and they eat for a lifetime."

What is wrong with that saying? God does not give us goods so that we can be independent and self-sufficient. As St. Thomas Aquinas, among others, notes, there is a reason that we are not created the same,

³See the papal social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, 4:30-31.

⁴ John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 49-50.

⁵See Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American* (NY: Harper, 1999).

with identical endowments physically or geographically. Our differences, including both our deficiencies and our excesses, are meant to draw us together. God gives to us in a manner that is meant to draw us into communion. So differences are an impetus to share in building up the common good (See 1 Cor 12:12, ff).

If we return then to our previously mentioned proverb of self-reliance, we discover that only teaching people to fish does not necessarily draw them into communion any more than merely giving a few dollars or a meal to a homeless person does. Indeed, such acts can actually be an effort to keep people at a distance. All that we have is given for the sake of meeting needs – not just bare necessities but non-material needs too, like friendship, affection, and community. All that we are and all that we have is given for the sake of fostering the communion of all in union with our Creator.

Therefore, stewardship is first and foremost about the proper use of material goods and gifts (including our bodies and our time) so that they nurture right relations, communion – between persons (near and distant neighbors, poor, etc.) and between persons and God. All that we have and are is for the sake of nurturing communion.

What God has given us then is not intended solely for our *private* good. Indeed, as the great theologian St. Augustine argued, sin can be defined in terms of the pursuit of one's own private good instead of the common good.⁶ Likewise, Ambrose defined greed as *usurpatio*: to take what is common for oneself. And Aquinas can argue that the failure to use private property to meet the needs of others constitutes theft:

Whatever certain people have in superabundance is due, by natural law, to the purpose of succoring the poor. For this reason Ambrose says . . . “It is the hungry man’s bread that you withhold, the naked man’s cloak that you store away, the money that you bury in the earth is the price of the poor man’s ransom and freedom.” . . . each one is entrusted with the stewardship of his own things, so that out of them he may come to the aid of those who are in need. Nevertheless, if the need be so manifest and urgent . . . then it is lawful for a man to succor his own need by means of another’s property, by taking it either openly or secretly: nor is this properly speaking theft or robbery.⁷

⁶Augustine, *On Free Will*, II.53; See also 1 Corinthians. 12:7. Note that the common good rightly understood does not entail sacrificing personal goods. In the Christian tradition, the two do not compete, but instead are complimentary. The common good includes the person's good. This is in contrast to many modern ethics that pit the individual against the common good, and basically argue that we must pick one or the other (e.g., egoism vs altruism).

⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), II.II., 66.7.

Now it is important here that we be careful and discerning. This is not an argument for the abolition of private property in favor of some kind of communism. On the contrary, the Christian tradition has long supported the practice of private property. But the longstanding Christian practice of private property is very different from the libertarian or laissez-faire notions common today.⁸ That we recognize private property does not mean that individuals can do with that private property whatever they want. Rather, private property is simply a means of serving the common good.

Again Aquinas is helpful insofar as he notes that private property is useful because it aids in caring for the common good. It is a way of ensuring that some things are not neglected because everyone assumes someone else will take care of them. Private property is sort of like assigning particular responsibilities for the common good. Consider, for example, a bike that was intended for the use of members of a small college campus. It would be unsurprising to find that bike left out in the weather because everyone thought someone else was going to care for it. Private property is a kind of delegation of responsibility for caring for and making use of resources for the sake of the whole.

III. STEWARDSHIP AND DISCIPLESHIP: STEWARDSHIP AS DISCIPLESHIP

To summarize all of this, we might say that stewardship is not first and foremost about money, but about our time, our talents, our relationships, and our gifts as well as all that we possess. *All* of our resources – 100% of them – are God’s and are to be used in accord with his purpose, namely the expansion of communion.

Put a little differently, stewardship is a way of life; it is synonymous with discipleship, and as such is not properly confined to one month a year. Indeed, to think of a stewardship campaign is perhaps to undermine the Gospel. No responsible and conscientious church leader would suggest to a congregation that “We are going to focus on discipleship only from October through November.”

Moreover, the focus is not narrowly defined in terms of the institutional church. All that we have and all that we do is to glorify God and serve the common good. That does not mean everything goes to the church. It means that everything we have and are is rightly used only when it serves the ministry of building up communion.

⁸Note that whereas we tend to see “private property” as a right, the Christian tradition has long associated private property with temptation, viewing it as a peril, a danger. See Sondra Ely Wheeler, *Wealth and Peril and Obligation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995); and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

This is one way that common understandings of stewardship actually do us a disservice. By tending to reduce stewardship primarily to money and then by tying offering to the institutional church so tightly, the commonplace understanding of stewardship hinders our ability to see *all* of our life and resources as properly devoted to the ministry of fostering communion in Christ. (Not incidentally, the same criticism could be leveled against the way “ministry” is frequently too narrowly tied to doing things at/for/with the church campus. More space would be required to elaborate on the connection between stewardship and the vocations of all Christians.)

I wonder if the church is afraid to give itself away. Faced with a widespread precipitous decline in church participation, church leaders understandably feel compelled to focus on stewardship as church support. But I suspect that if the church more freely gave itself away, it would discover the gift of joy and find that God has given and continues to give all that it needs. It cannot give away more than God can provide. Even if in this time between the times, this provision looks like resurrection.

1. Who Gives and How Much?

We should note as well that stewardship is not limited to a particular age (young and old included), nor to a particular income – no income, limited income (students), or fixed income (elderly). After all, discipleship is not limited by age, ability, or income. Recall Jesus’ account of the widow’s mite (Mk 12:41). Or consider as well the exhortation of 1 Peter 4:10: “As good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (see also 1 Cor 4:1).

But what about a poor congregation or the poor within a congregation? How do they give? How / should / can the poor give? Perhaps in-kind. As 1 Peter says, serve with whatever gifts you have. I am reminded of the example of poor Indian Christians who tithed by simply setting aside a handful of rice each time they prepared rice or Christians all around the world who give of what they have when what they have is not cash. As per Jesus and widow's mite, the desire of poor to give is good. They serve as witness to non-poor.

Middle class notions of giving, based on “disposable income,” may shame or silence the poor because they may not have disposable income. Here I am reminded of a congregation that capped off its autumn stewardship drive with an overhead projection of the largest amounts pledged (not by percentage). What does this do to poorer members? And what does it do to wealthy givers? Does it encourage within them a kind of contentment? How might we teach and form our congregations in ways that encourage and honor a richer, broader understanding of giving?

Beyond this we can ask, who is poor? Who is rich? I find that North Americans often deny being rich (even those with six-figure salaries) or

wanting to be rich. Instead, they say they only want to be “comfortable.” Or they blame God for their greed by calling it a “blessing.” John Wesley said if we have enough to meet our basic needs and those of our loved ones, we are rich. Luther said we should earn enough to support ourselves and help others. But he warns in this regard that flesh is a master of pretexts for greed.⁹ I think we could say, following Luther in a passage I will quote shortly, once you have Jesus, you are rich beyond your wildest dreams.

So, how much should we give? Everything. 100%. Everything we have and everything we are should be devoted to the Lord’s work. As Wesley notes, stewardship is not addressed with even a tithe, for then the question becomes, “What about the other 90%?”¹⁰

Should we give to the point of impoverishing ourselves? Yes, if Jesus tells you to “give all that you have to the poor.” Can we really be impoverished? We have Jesus. We have the church. We have the promise of the resurrection. We simply cannot give away more than God will provide. We cannot out-give God. And even if we were to go hungry, we should remember that we do not live by bread alone. Besides, we also know about fasting.

Indeed, the very fact that we have to ask “how much?” is an indicator that something is wrong. It is an indicator that we live at a distance from persons in need. For if we were living in solidarity, in relation with people who were poor, then the question would answer itself. Or rather the relationship would. How much would you give if the person you cared about most were in desperate need? The same holds for questions about luxuries and creature comforts. How much can you have without being embarrassed to offer hospitality to those in need?¹¹

In this regard, consider this “rule” from the Church of England that is rooted in the medieval Christian world, and that Wesley often cited: “Let our superfluities [luxuries] give way to our neighbor’s conveniences; (and who then will have any superfluities left?) our conveniences, to our neighbour’s necessities; our necessities, to his extremities.”

Note that this giving is not about self-sacrifice in the sense of loss. Christian giving is in a certain sense *not* about self-denial. Rather, Christian giving is about giving *of oneself* and one’s labor, time, etc. We do not lose ourselves but give ourselves. Granted, this may entail denial. After all both Scripture and tradition speak of denial, but that denial is not really a loss of self. Instead, what we are called to deny are the disordered desires that hinder our self from living as we were created to live for God and for others. Therefore, Christian giving all is not really a denial of the

⁹Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), 171-172, 180.

¹⁰See John Wesley’s sermon, “The Danger of Increasing Riches,” II., 8.

¹¹See Christopher Heurtz and Christine Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 85-86, 128, and *passim*.

self since we were created and redeemed to give. In offering and giving all, we are actually embracing our true “self” to the fullest. In the offering of Christ we receive our self as gift and in being joined to Christ, our life recovers its created form – living in the mode of donation, relentless giving for the sake of nurturing the communion of all in the Lord.

2. The Divine Gift Economy

Jesus tells us, “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”¹² Similarly, Paul reminds us, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor 4:7). In these passages we see the outline of the divine gift economy that underwrites the traditional notion of stewardship that I have summarized. God in his abundant grace has given us the gift of Christ, and as we are joined to Christ, our life is transfigured into a gift.

Likewise, through the waters of baptism and in receiving the eucharistic meal/communion that consumes us, we are empowered to give ourselves as a gift to others. We are enabled to live life in the form of donation. Interestingly enough, the closing prayer in the communion liturgy of my church reminds us of this:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery
in which you have *given* yourself to us.
Grant that we may go into the world
in the strength of your Spirit,
to *give* ourselves for others,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹³

In Christ, our life recovers its original form. In Christ, we live life in the mode of donation, gift, offering. In Christ, we are empowered to give ourselves – all that we are and all that we have – in love of God and service of our neighbor. In Christ, our life is so ordered economically that we reflect the divine economy of ceaseless generosity, of unending charity. The Christian life is a gift economy, with the Eucharist/Communion at the center of that economy; which is to say that stewardship is not one particular “time” in the church. Rather, it is enacted weekly in the liturgy as we behold and receive God’s prodigality, extravagance, generosity and then are sent forth to proclaim and witness to that generosity.

¹²See Matt 5:42; and cf., Deut 15:11; Matt 19:21; Mk 10:21; and Lk 18:22.

¹³“Word and Table: Service I,” in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 10.

In other words, stewardship is a matter of living in accord with the recognition that once we have Jesus, we have received everything, and from that point on we are free to live simply for others, to live as a gift. Martin Luther captures this as well as anyone in the Christian tradition when he writes of the freedom of a Christian:

A man [sic] does not live for himself alone in this mortal body . . . , but he lives also for all men on earth; rather he lives only for others and not for himself. . . . Therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor. . . . This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work, to acquire, and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need.¹⁴

As I like to summarize this, once we have received Jesus, stick a fork in us. We are done. From that point on, our lives become a surplus to be spent, used up entirely in service to our neighbors.¹⁵ In Christ, we receive God's prodigality, extravagance, and generosity, thus now being sanctified to live out God's generosity toward others. Stewardship is a matter of living as a gift. Think about it this way. We are created in the image of God. And what is God? He is eternal, ceaseless, relentless generosity.

So the question is not, "How much should we give? What is God's cut?" but rather, "How does the Body of Christ live so that its life is one continuous offering?" "How does our life – our use of all that we are and all that we have – reflect God's unceasing generosity?" "Does the way we are tilling and keeping, using and giving serve the common good – the communion of all in the good?" Of course this includes sustaining the important ministries of the institutional church but stewardship is so much more. All that we have and all that we are is given by God for the sake of renewing communion in Christ.

3. Desert, Dependency, and Community

This account of stewardship and the universal destination of material goods as well as how they are part and parcel of the divine gift economy raise lots of concerns. Two issues that are frequently raised in both secular and ecclesial discourse are those of *desert* and *dependency*.

Yet in the account just given, nothing has been said about desert. Why? Because questions of desert have no place in the practice of

¹⁴Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 364-365.

¹⁵For a powerful musical rendition of this, listen to John Tirro's song, "Use Me Up."

Christian giving for the simple reason that God gave to us while we were yet undeserving. In the same way, we are to give, even to the undeserving. Our giving to the undeserving is a witness to the God who gives as such. In this regard, we should recall Paul's rationale for contributing to the needs of the saints: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich," (2 Cor 8:9; see also 1 Cor 4:7-8 and Matt 10:8).

This is the teaching of the Christian tradition.¹⁶ The vast majority of its heritage permits no discussion of desert, for it recognizes that such a distinction is a counter-witness to the Gospel, to the One who reaches out to us, as undeserving as we are. John Chrysostom notes that even laziness and feigned disability do not disqualify a beggar from assistance.¹⁷ He says, "We show mercy on him not because of his virtue but because of his misfortune, in order that we ourselves may receive from the Master his great mercy." John Calvin is also worth quoting at length on this point. He writes:

The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it. But Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love. . . . Therefore, whoever be the man that is presented to you as needing your assistance, you have no ground for declining to give it to him. Say he is a stranger. . . . Say that he is unworthy of your least exertion on his account; but the image of God, by which he is recommended to you, is worthy of yourself and all your exertions. But if he not only merits no good, but has provoked you by injury and mischief, still this is no good reason why you should not embrace him in love, and visit him with offices of love. . . . In this way only we attain to what is not to say difficult but altogether against nature, (Mt. 5:44; 6:14; 18:35; Luke 17:3) to love those that hate us, render good for evil, and blessing for cursing, remembering that we are not to reflect on the wickedness of men, but look to the

¹⁶See Brian Tierney *Medieval Poor Law* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1959); idem., *Church Law and Constitutional Thought in the Middle Ages* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979), 360-73; and Boniface Ramsey, "Almsgiving in the Latin Church: The Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982), 230-237. While the tradition did not want to enable vice or abet fraud, even the willfully idle were to be aided in extreme need and benefit of doubt given to all when resources were abundant.

¹⁷John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 53. See also the extended discussion of interrogating those who ask for assistance in his *On Repentance and Almsgiving* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 1998), 146-149.

image of God in them, an image which, covering and obliterating their faults, should by its beauty and dignity allure us to love and embrace them.¹⁸

Granted, we ought to try and give in ways that are truly helpful, that truly contribute to the common good. But this sort of judgment is different from that of worthiness or desert. Here we might learn from our Jewish sisters and brothers who teach that we may not inquire as to desert, but we may consider “fraud.” Yet even here we must be careful. After all, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:7, “Why not be defrauded?” Moreover, when we give, we should give in a way that respects the dignity of the recipient. While we need not worry about a recipient’s pride – it is, after all, one of the seven deadly sins – we should not expect deference and submission.

This is the context for hearing Paul’s exhortation in 2 Thessalonians 3:10: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” Paul is not drawing a bright line between the deserving and undeserving poor, nor is he exhorting us to independence or giving voice to the mythical middle-class work-ethic or ideology of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” Rather, for Paul what is at issue is avoiding drawing unnecessarily from the community’s resources (2 Thess 3:8) so that those resources might go to their proper recipients – those who genuinely need them (cf., Eph 4:28).

Hence, even this apparent cold-hearted statement is about generosity – how the *community’s* life might be so ordered that it can maximally witness to Christ, the One who is maximally generous. Notice that the issue here is not *desert*, but need. Those who do not need assistance should not take it so as to deprive those who really do need it.¹⁹

This begins to shed light on the related matter of dependency. To begin with, what is wrong with dependency? Absolutely nothing. At the heart of the Christian faith is a huge claim of dependency. We are all dependent upon God for sustenance and redemption. The sick, the infirm, the elderly and the young are all rightly dependent. Likewise, the middle aged, middle class, and healthy are as well. We are all dependent on God for creating, sustaining, and redeeming our lives. We are all dependent on the one another as means of God’s sustaining and redeeming grace.

Thus dependency is not the issue; rather, the concern is community. What we desire when we give is to extend communion/community. And the reason is that because it is the outflow of the good news of the Gospel, which is Christ reconciling and drawing us back into communion. This is the point of our lives and ministry: to enjoy and

¹⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1959), III., 7.6.

¹⁹See Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 292.

extend the communion of all in the Lord (see 2 Cor 5:16-18). So we seek to give in ways that integrate people into the communion of gift and donation. By doing so, stewardship becomes focused upon welcoming people into the household, the communion of God, thereby reinforcing the priority of nurturing right relationships.

This is done, however, by giving to persons in such a way that enables them to participate in the circle of gift-exchange, not just as recipients but also as givers when possible. This is why there is great joy in giving (Acts 20:35). Likewise, in accord with this fact is that the highest degree of charity in Judaism is a matter of “strengthening the hand,” thereby enabling a person not to be independent and self-sustaining but to join in giving to others.²⁰ Implicit here is a critique of philanthropy and welfare that attempts to meet (some) needs without extending communion.²¹

Again, recall the passage just cited from Luther – we care for the body, etc., so that we can aid others. That is the point of our labors – not so that we might be winners in the economic horse race, beat the Jones’, retire at 40, or have that second home or yacht, but so that we might be able to participate together in communion with God’s generosity and goodness.

4. Divine Extravagance: The Heavenly Banquet

The traditional account of stewardship that I have presented does not preclude luxury and extravagance in the Christian life. One needs only to consider the Gospel story of Mary’s anointing Jesus with a perfume worth 300 denari. After Judas protests that it could be given to the poor, Jesus responds with a quote from Deuteronomy saying, “The poor you will have with you always” (Jn 12:1-7).

Now, too much is frequently made of this passage – twisting it into an excuse for self-indulgence and neglect of the poor. Yet it should not need to be said that John is not refuting the clear teaching of Scripture and tradition on stewardship; instead he is making a christological point about Jesus’ death and the nature of the disciples’ fanatical devotion to him. (And his response is actually a rebuke of Judas’ selective concern for the poor, fueling the tradition’s suspicion that Judas’ statement was a veiled effort at gaining access to that money so he could steal it).

Nevertheless, is there not something here that suggests lavish appointments may be appropriate in honoring Christ? Of course. Yet at the same time, consider where we find Christ in this world. Recall Matthew 25:31-46 (or also 1 Cor 1:27). Christ is among the least and the

²⁰See Tamari, *The Challenge of Wealth*, 170.

²¹For a more developed critique of both philanthropy and welfare, see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

last, among the poor, outcast, and downtrodden. So we should be lavish in our giving to others as a form of devotion to Christ. Indeed, St. Augustine, reflecting on the passage from John, reminds us that giving to the poor is how we wipe the feet of Jesus.²²

Beyond this, however, there is a place for extravagance. And the model is, again, the Eucharist/Communion, that foretastes the heavenly banquet where all are welcomed, where every thirst is slaked and hunger is no more. In other words, extravagance that nurtures the communion of all in Christ is appropriate. Whereas extravagance that does not nurture communion, but reinforces division and ignores hardship and need, is condemned.²³

In this regard, we might make a distinction between what is beautiful and what is expensive. I have been in very simple -- some might say crude -- churches in impoverished communities in Central America. Yet they were as beautiful, lavish, and ornate as anything I have seen in the U.S. or in Europe. The reverence, devotion, and beauty they manifest with simple things and materials are striking.

I have also seen grand, ornate cathedrals that, for all of their expense, were ugly because they reflected neglect of the surrounding community. Or their ornamentation was not directed to the glory of God but to the glory of the giver or the one memorialized. Here, we might do well not to forget Irenaeus' observation that "the glory of God is the living human person,"²⁴ or the various OT prophets who remind us that what God really desires in the way of honor is obedience and care for the poor (cf., 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 58).

IV. CONCLUSION: STEWARDSHIP AND THE CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION

Having received the bounty of the divine gift economy, we are called to share those gifts, to give ourselves -- all that we have and all that we are -- for the sake of our neighbors, that they might join us in sharing the gift of communion with the Triune God.

Although it is not much remembered either in Christian history or in contemporary discussions of stewardship, it was the church's embodiment of this divine gift economy that gave rise to what has been called the Christian revolution.²⁵ This is the name given to the fundamental change that the birth and spread of Christianity effected in the Roman world and beyond. For whereas the practice of beneficence

²²See Augustine's *Tractate 50 on The Gospel of John*.

²³See Paul's warning to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

²⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4., 20.7.

²⁵Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis, 2001).

was not foreign to ancient Roman and Greek cultures, it was a beneficence specifically directed toward the city and its citizens. Furthermore, the precepts of classical morality considered mercy and unearned aid to be immoral and unjust.

Into this world came the good news of a merciful, generous God whose followers witnessed to that God by means of opening their hands and communities generously to their neighbors; and not just to their own, but beyond family, tribe and city to include the stranger and the poor. Indeed, it has been said that Christianity invented “the poor” in the sense that its work of mercy not only brought visibility and recognition to a population that previously was marginalized and ignored, but insisted as well that such persons be integrated into community.

The extent and effect of Christian stewardship, of the use of our resources to love and welcome others into community, were such that the pagan emperor Julian complained in 362 CE that the withering of the pagan faith was connected to Christianity's benevolence to strangers and care for the poor, even pagan poor.

So it is that Christian stewardship is but an expression of the love of which Christ spoke in his farewell discourse. In our generous, lavish efforts to extend communion by giving of all that we have and are, we witness to the world of the God who gives far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine.

Therefore, let us be lavish in our care for one another, for our neighbors near and far. Let this be the tenor of our lives; let this be the character of our communities. And so we will be thought of as stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1) and, seeing our generosity, people will be moved to give glory to God and join us in communion.