

The Key Role of Stewardship Ministry in the Church

The local church is the hope of the world!" I believe this with all my heart, especially in these challenging days when pressing social issues and tragic world events have made life difficult and precarious for so many.

But if the local church is to live out its redemptive potential, it must provide not only hope but practical help and biblical teaching that meet people at their points of need. One of the most critical needs today is helping people come to grips with their finances. For many, a majority of their waking hours are spent making money, worrying about money, fighting over money or trying to protect their money. The church risks marginalizing itself when it fails to address a topic of such magnitude.

In addition, if the church ignores the abundance of scriptural teaching about our relationship to money, it fails to prepare its people in a major discipleship area of life. I believe Ben Patterson was correct when he said, there is no such thing as being right with God and wrong with your money.

Unfortunately, as church leaders we often feel uncomfortable teaching on money. Let's take a look at how we can move toward addressing this overarching topic with integrity and power..

As we begin, let's remind ourselves that in and of itself, money is neutral. It's simply a medium of exchange. It can be used for great good or for great evil. However, to stop there would be incomplete.

But the fact that so much of Jesus' teaching was about our relationship to money and possessions suggest there is something unique about it. Why did he single out money as the one thing we could not serve and still serve God? Why did he indicate that the deceitfulness of riches chokes out God's Word in our lives and makes it unfruitful? Some authors suggest that it was because money has a spiritual force or power that attempts to draw our allegiance to itself and away from God. Jesus seemed to understand that more than any other thing; money had the power to reveal the true condition of a person's heart.

As leaders who wish to effectively teach from a biblical perspective, there are some things that would be helpful to understand about money and our relationship to it.

- **Understand that money is a powerful thing.** It can become the idol that makes it harder to enter the Kingdom than for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle ... or that can cause us to build bigger barns to store our surplus only to be labeled by God as "fools."

- **Understand that our culture assigns money god-like powers.** The culture says, “Money is all powerful, it makes things happen” (Perhaps true in some circles of influence but not in the truly important arenas of life.) The culture says, “Money provides ultimate security” (On paper my future may seem monetarily secure but earthly treasures are subject to rust, moths and thieves — not to mention economic downturns!)
- **Understand that the best way to break money’s hold is to be generous with it.** The act of giving money away in God honoring ways dramatically breaks the hold it can otherwise have on us — while blessing the receiver and providing the giver a joy found in no other way.
- **Understand that money and possessions are simply entrustments.** God is the owner, we are trustees. Trustees have the responsibility to use the resources entrusted to them in ways that the owner has designated, not in ways that satisfy the trustee’s whims.
- **Understand that sacrifice is often blessing in disguise.** Maybe Jim Elliott said it best, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Think of your own example of giving up something that seemed like a sacrifice at the time only to have it become, often unexpectedly, a blessing in disguise.

These understandings will allow us as leaders to relate to money to money and possessions in a God-honoring way while giving us freedom and joy in an area of life so often fraught with anxiety and bondage. From that place we can then lead our churches to tackle this challenge through ongoing stewardship ministry.

Four key principles to keep in mind when implementing stewardship ministry:

- 1. The objective of the ministry is life transformation, not increased giving.** Effective stewardship ministry is about heart change. I like to use the term, transformational stewardship in describing this principle. Although it’s true that an effective stewardship ministry will increase giving, increased giving is not the primary intent. The primary purpose of the ministry is to help the congregation live a God-honoring financial lifestyle and grow spiritually.
- 2. Senior leadership, staff and laity, must be on board and supportive of the ministry, helping to cast the vision.** They must also be committed to living out biblical financial principles in their own lives.
- 3. The ministry is for everyone, not just those in financial difficulty.** This needs to be communicated from day one. All of us are under the influence of incredibly persuasive messages in our culture that are diametrically opposed to biblical principles. Jesus said, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded”(Luke 12:48, NIV). Most Christians in North America have much, but few understand what is demanded of them from a biblical perspective.

4. Stewardship ministry must include three elements: teaching the “what and why”, training in the “how to”, and providing support and encouragement. Teaching takes place in the pulpit and in workshops and seminars. The workshops and seminars also provide the training necessary for the individual to take the teaching and apply it to their daily lives. Support and encouragement can come in a number of ways. Perhaps the most effective way is through trained volunteer counselors who provide ongoing assistance to individuals and families, making the transition from worldly to biblical ways of managing their resources.

If today’s church leadership will take up the challenge, I’m convinced the vision of the stewardship movement, of which I’m a part, “that every church and every believer would experience the spiritual, emotional and relational joy and freedom that results from practicing biblically based financial stewardship” can become a reality. May it so be!

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