

Protagonist Corner

Money and Mission: Getting and Spending and the Reign of God

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The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers
William Wordsworth, "The World Is too Much with Us"

Douglas Hall's article in this journal, "Stewardship as a Missional Discipline," makes the salient point that stewardship is most substantively construed not as a means to mission but as a "vital dimension of its end." In particular, he argues forcefully for a theology of stewardship as entrée to a basic missional question: "What *are* people for?" In sum, he makes a convincing case that the Bible construes the steward as accountable to Another—ruling out mastery—and as responsible to others—ruling out passivity.

In turning the discussion of stewardship in this direction, Hall rightly transcends the over concentration on stewardship as an issue of money given (at its best) for the sake of the mission of the church. Historically that emphasis has sadly, even tragically, limited the power of the biblical image. What is more, it has limited the living witness of a church empowered by such a biblical image, as Hall adroitly reminds us. But it would be a mistake to assume that issues of money in relation to mission are only pertinent in this secondary and frequently misleading manner.

In fact, money and mission are bound together precisely in relation to the fundamental missional question that Hall addresses: What are people for? I argue that in North American culture there is exorbitant pressure for people to answer that question in terms of money. This does not mean that we define our humanity by money in the crassest terms imaginable, say merely by the size of our income or the total of our investment portfolio. Of course we are tempted to such self-definitions, but the truly formative temptations are subtler and more difficult to see.

They have to do with the way in which our attention to life is massively diverted from the accountable and responsible end of neighborly mutuality and respect by the incessant drive of money. It is more than a little ironic that in the midst of perhaps the most broadly affluent society in human history, we are likely the most entrapped of all people, entrapped by the need for (more) money. Important arguments can be mounted for distinguishing between "needs" and "desires" in this respect. But either way, the demand for money in our lives governs. And it governs in a concrete way that precludes our living as stewards, accountable to Another and responsible to one another.

Robert Wuthnow's *The Crisis in the Church: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* provides one measure of this entrapment. Conducting research specifically among church members of middle class North America, he describes the pressures under which they live in telling fashion: "...pressures of working harder to make ends meet, worries about retaining one's job, lack of time for one's self and one's family, marital strains associated with two-career households, and the incessant demands of advertis-

ing and the marketplace.”¹ He notes as well that the core middle class expectation of encouraging people to want more and to make more money not only contributes to heightened anxiety on the part of many North Americans, but it sweeps most church members along with it. “Virtually all church members (82 percent) admit to wishing they had more money. A substantial minority (43 percent) actually say that making a lot of money is a very important source of their personal identity. And nearly three-fourths (71 percent) say this about living a comfortable life.”²

The problem with stewardship programs in the church is not that they talk too much about money. It is rather that they tend to talk about money in a way that simply adds another (presumably more noble) item to the money demands already distorting, distracting, and diverting church members from living as stewards, accountable to God and responsible to one another. Wuthnow’s evidence supports this estimate of how churchly stewardship enterprises address the money question. “Fewer than one church member in five says he or she has thought a lot during the past year about the Bible’s teaching concerning money or how to relate their faith more directly to their personal finances.”³ Apparently, when money talk is heard in the church, it has little to do with stewardship or mission in the way that Hall interrelates them.

This reading of the situation is further supported by the same body of research that shows how neighborly mutuality and respect is undermined by the money demands people experience. On the one hand, middle class North Americans enjoy enormous resources and feel that there is much to be improved about the society and world. But on the other hand, they feel overburdened with too much work and too many bills.⁴ The summation by a forty-six year-old single mother who is a community education specialist is representative. “I may appear very self-serving and very self-centered, but I don’t have a lot of time. And I need to take care of my son, and I need to take care of myself before I can do a whole lot with other people.”⁵

Thus, I argue that until the church learns to talk about money in a new and more discerning way, its mission of justice and righteousness, of neighborly mutuality and respect, of stewardly accountability and responsibility will be crippled. But obviously the way money needs to be talked about sets us all on a new and steep learning curve. Before addressing money as an issue of how much church members should give to the church—even to its mission—there is a prior issue of how the incessant money demands of our culture shape us as human beings and deflect us as servants of God.

In concrete terms, this can mean stewardship programs that do not focus simply on what we give to the church, but upon all the ways spend our money for food, shelter, clothing, taxes, education, leisure, debt service, savings, and investments. The point of such a broadened focus is not merely to move more money out of these categories and into the “giving” category. It is, rather, to begin to fathom the pervasive and incessant ways money obligations lure us away from genuine life as stewards, accountable to God and responsible to neighbors.

In turn, this approach will prompt a more comprehensive stewardship effort to help us confront not only how we spend, but how we get money. For the constant pressure of money obligations in our setting is part of a vicious circle that has on its other side an equally constant pressure of money acquisition. It is perhaps the fundamental task of stewardship in the church in the North American setting to develop a panoply of strategies to break this vicious circle. For example, the now unquestioned reliance on dual income families in our culture proceeds in a vacuum of

thoughtful reflection on what this is doing to us as human beings.

Of course to intervene on one side of the vicious circle or another is not possible without some point of leverage. And that is where the biblical image of steward as Douglas Hall develops it—as a comprehensive representation of the purpose and way for human being—can do its important work. The steward who is accountable to God and responsible to neighbors is an image of human being that has potency by the power of God’s Spirit for actually producing changes in the way we live. It calls us to pause amidst the incessant pressures of money obligations and the concomitant pressures of money acquisition to ask what our lives are for and how our “chief end” might more fully be part of the practice of our daily lives.

Thus might stewardship programs that talk about money result in not merely increased financial means for mission, but also in human lives imbued with generosity toward neighbors and accountability to the generous God. Such a reckoning with money is indispensable in our context for a reckoning with mission.

Notes

¹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Church: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

² Ibid., 64.

³ Ibid., 65.

⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁵ Ibid., 67.