

Thoughts on Stewardship

by Douglas Oldenburg

In recent months, I have been asked to speak on stewardship at conferences and in congregations. Of course, stewardship embraces the whole of life, but for the most part, I have been asked to speak on the stewardship of our money.

Research shows that in 1933, the depth of the Great Depression, Protestants were giving 3.3% of their income to the church. Sixty years later when Americans were over 200% richer (after taxes and inflation), Protestants were giving only 2.5% of their income.

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It is tempting to blame this decline in giving on feelings of alienation from denominational leadership, but research shows otherwise. I see the decline as our failure to communicate the gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ, to impress upon people that we are stewards of what God has given us, to inspire people with the exciting mission of the church, and to help people experience the joy of giving. I read the decline in giving largely as the church's capitulation to the values of our secular culture, and our failure to be counter-cultural.

HOW DO WE REVERSE THESE TRENDS?

First, pastors must be liberated from their own hang-ups and feel free to talk about money. The Bible is filled with references to material possessions, and financial issues are the source of great anxiety and conflict in many people's lives, yet some pastors avoid the subject. The pastoral dimensions of money issues are enormous, and we are failing in our role as pastors if we do not address them. Furthermore, it is our responsibility as pastors to ask people to give, not only because the church needs money for its mission, but also because people need to give in order to experience the highest joy in life. A layman once said to me in response to my meek apology for asking for another large gift, "Doug, never feel awkward asking for money. That's part of your job as my pastor--to encourage me to return to the Lord's work what He has given to me. My greatest joy comes from giving to worthy causes and knowing I am making a difference. You need to help me experience that joy."

Second, pastors and lay leaders need to give greater focus to stewardship in the life of our local congregations if we expect it to be a greater priority in people's lives.

Third, we need to be more targeted and specific about what we ask people to give. The challenge of the tithe needs to be renewed in our congregations.

Fourth, pastors and lay leaders need to promote planned giving, the “stewardship of accumulated possessions.” The largest transfer of wealth from one generation to another will occur in the next two decades in the United States--some \$13 trillion! Unless pastors and lay leaders challenge people to leave a portion of their estate to the church, we will miss a wonderful opportunity to strengthen our mission and witness.

Finally, seminaries must give greater focus in training pastors to both the theology and practice of stewardship in an affluent society. Columbia includes a component on stewardship in the “Practice of Ministry” course and many references are made to it in theology and Biblical courses, but more needs to be done, both in our regular curriculum and in continuing education.

God has given the community of Christians vast resources of wealth, far more than most. “To whom much is given, much will be required.”

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