

The Church's Call to Steward God's Mission in the World

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Although Christians across denominational lines often use stewardship language to describe our calling to live out God's mission in the world, what we mean theologically by "stewardship" varies greatly across religious traditions. Some think stewardship is tithing; others think it means volunteering or living a simple lifestyle. Still others identify stewardship with environmental conservation, social action of some kind or another, charitable giving, or making disciples through evangelism.

Each of these good and necessary activities points to an essential facet of stewardship, but each—on its own—falls shy of capturing the inspiring vision of biblical stewardship as a form of whole-life discipleship that embraces every legitimate vocation and calling to fulfill God's mission in the world. In this sense, holistic stewardship, transformational generosity, workplace ministry, business as mission, and the theology of work movement all share a common point of origin in the biblical view of mission as whole-life discipleship. In other words, the essence of stewardship is about finding your place—that is, all the dimensions of your many callings—in God's economy of all things (*oikonomia*).

Why We Get Stewardship Wrong

In recent years, however, this inspiring vision has suffered a setback. Why? I think there are two significant reasons. First, as a church, we have narrowly applied our understanding of stewardship mainly in the contexts of funding global missions and supporting programs in the local church.

Second, at the same time, we have upheld and reaffirmed—in priority and honor—the distinction between clerical vocations and ordinary vocations, which only serves to reinforce the age-old wall erected between sacred and secular callings. In this narrative, clerical vocations are the one, true trustee of God's mission in the world. Other callings may service God's mission, but only on the side, not as intrinsic or integral to their work.

Bigger Story

In the immediate aftermath of the First International Congress on World Evangelization, John Stott pinpointed the theological root cause of the problem. He discerned that the church seemed unable to satisfactorily integrate the Great Commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) with the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19).

God's mission, Stott urged in keeping with [Matthew 5:13-16](#), describes "everything the church is sent into the world to do. [It] embraces the church's double vocation of service to be 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world.'" The aim of the Lausanne movement, of which every local church can take note, is for the whole church to present the whole gospel to the whole world. As my friend Steven Garber summarizes, "Vocation (notice no distinction between clerical and ordinary) is integral, not accidental, to the *missio Dei*."

If we, as the church, truly embrace our gift nature, then I believe we will accept our stewardship responsibility to join with the Son in the power of the Spirit to fulfill the Father's purpose in creation and redemption. At its most basic level, biblical stewardship is holistic and missional, touching every area of life and employing every legitimate vocation in service to Jesus Christ, "the firstborn over all creation" and "the head of . . . the church" ([Col. 1:15-20](#)).

What Is Our Salvation Actually For?

This point brings me back to the thematic question of the entire film series of [For the Life of the World: Letters to Exiles](#). What is our salvation actually for?

Tim Keller reminds us of the cosmic hope of the gospel:

Redemption is much more than simply saving souls. It will ultimately entail the complete healing of creation, including social justice, the reunification of all humanity, and the end of physical decay and death ([Isa. 11:1-10](#)). But even now it means bringing the health and coherence of Christ's lordship back into every aspect of human life. The Christian church is to be a new society in which the world can see exhibited what family, business practices, race relations, and all of life can be under the kingship of Jesus Christ.

This is a holistic understanding of stewardship. This is what it means to make the kingdom of God visible and tangible to the world. When the church embodies its future hope, it cooperates with God's work of renewal in the world, enacting its responsibilities in such a way that social *shalom* is repaired and the message of salvation is preached.

If you want an imaginative rendering of what this church might look like, spend a few minutes watching [For the Life of the World: Letters to the Exiles, Episode 7: The Church](#). If you take us up on our offer of a free rental, you may learn some new terms like *prolepsis* and *anamnesis*, but I hope, too, you'll also see how the body of Christ—that is, the church—is given as a gift for the life of the world. This means that each of us is implicated. And implication makes this a stewardship responsibility.