

OUR VOCATION IS STEWARDSHIP

As a parish pastor these last twenty-three years I have neglected preaching on stewardship. Don't let this surprise you for the more my parishioners know me the more they see how I lack and need to be filled-up in Christ (Col 2:10). I preached on stewardship when it appeared in the pericopel system. Even then I hesitated laboring under the mistaken notion that preaching on stewardship was self-serving; and pastors can't do that! Also, quite honestly, I had been turned off by the many legalistic stewardship sermons preached by our evangelical friends, "Tithe this amount and God will give you...." I am ashamed to say how many such sermons I have preached!

It was with a little reluctance and low expectations that I accepted Minnesota North District President, Rev. Fondow's nomination that I be one of two pastors representing our district at the "2014 National Stewardship Conference," held in St. Louis, Tuesday, May 27 – Wednesday, May 28th. Thankfully and joyously I can state that I was proven wrong.

To those already in the "know" what I am about to say regarding stewardship and the conference will be old-hat. But to hear it said again might be beneficial since repetition is the basis of learning. I will let the reader be the judge.

The Conference opened Tuesday morning with an exegetical study of 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9 by Synodical President Harrison. From the Greek Harrison connected stewardship to the fellowship we intimately have in the Lord's Supper.

"For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part [*koinwnian*] in the relief of the saints" (1 Cor 8:3-4).

There is a close connection between the fellowship created through stewardship and that which exists in Holy Communion. So close is this fellowship the Spirit led St. Paul to use the same word for stewardship used for Communion, "*koinwnian*" (*koinonia*), translated in ESV as "taking part." St. Paul infers this fellowship elsewhere when he wrote: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10).

The topic of stewardship is often misunderstood as a transactional relationship of the law: I'll do this and God will respond in such-and-such a manner. This pragmatic approach exemplifies the seepage of a law driven theology mixed with fear into the life of the church. The gift of Baptism rightly replaces the transactional law approach. In Baptism we are privileged to have a relational approach before our Father in heaven who tenderly invites us to ask of Him all things as dear children ask their dear father (Intro to L.P.) who gives us all things by grace (5th Petition).

The Coordinator for the LCMS Stewardship Ministry, Rev. Heath Curtis emphasized that stewardship is simply the life of the Christian; as expressed in Luther's Table of Duties. This is

sanctification in the narrow sense where we die to self and put on the image of Christ. Stewardship becomes clear around the topic of ownership. Who owns what? All that we have is on loan from Jesus! What we work at and keep ultimately belongs to God. The LCMS Definition of Stewardship says; “Christian stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God’s family, the church, in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.”

Assistant Coordinator for LCMS Stewardship Ministry, Rev. Nathan Meador opened my eyes as well. Should I distort the gift of finances or material possessions I am saying I own such gifts. Rather, in humility and faith I would acknowledge God has graciously loaned me and my neighbor such gifts to make life enjoyable and pleasant and to be in service to those in need. To put it succinctly; when I cease to be a steward of what Jesus has given me I am engaged in theft, claiming to own what is not mine.

God owns the “what” of our lives. Through this conference I have clearly come to understand that preaching stewardship is to be no different from preaching the law on topics such as church attendance, marriage, lying, coveting, etc. We freely and readily counter the prevailing culture when we apply God’s law to these aforementioned topics and so why would any of us omit preaching on stewardship?

In the sermon there is to be preaching “of” the law which in essence says you are a miserable sinner and apart from Christ your destiny is hellfire. The Gospel points to Jesus who suffered hell for us. Luther says it nicely;

All the prophets saw ... Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. ... He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood.¹

Rev. Curtis emphasized how there should be preaching “about” the law—how as a guide the law leads us by the power of the Gospel to perform good works. From our Lutheran *Confessions* we learn the third use of the Law is to be a fixed rule whereby Christians may regulate and direct their whole life.² So, we are encouraged to preach “about” the law as a wonderful guide showing us how we are to live in our baptismal freedom before God. Scaer says:

The phrase *lex semper accusat* taken out of context can cause confusion. The law always accuses in the area of justification, but the law functions in other areas. Before the Fall, the law did not accuse. In the state of glorification, the law will not accuse. For the redeemed child of God, the law does not accuse but presents to him the way on which a loving Father guides His children.³

¹Martin Luther, “Galatians,” (1535), *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 26:277

²McCain, P. T. (Ed.). (2005). *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (p. 486). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

³David Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?” in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in*

It was a most pleasant a conference where no “cookie cutter” formulas were offered. Each parish is different as the preaching of law and gospel leads us to Christ and the life of sanctification. We begin to imitate God in his generosity as we live out our vocations of stewardship in the world. Rev. Meador stated the goal of stewardship as he used the three Articles of the Creed; Stewardship is a Third Article response to the Second Article redefinition of who we are in relationship to God using First Article gifts.⁴

Stewardship is not to be severed from our Baptism where we pursue what is called the “scarcity model”—having to pay bills, looking at the budget and pursuing a pragmatic approach. Instead we are to look at all the gifts Christ has given us in our baptism. Our tithe is to be determined by looking at the First Article gifts Jesus has given us and not by looking at the budget or the latest project.

It was emphasized that our tithe is not be based on the recent budget, project, or expenditures of the parish. That is a law approach which fits well with the business world. Instead we are to approach stewardship from a Christ-centered approach where we look at the tremendous outpouring of gifts with which Jesus has blessed us. From this abundance we make our tithe irrespective of budge, projects, and mercantile expenditures. We determine our tithe in relation to Jesus and all he so generously bestows. And, as we tithe and serve our neighbor we want to rightly reflect who Jesus is; a most generous joyous giver of gifts. In our sanctification we are freed to live in the image of Christ imitating Jesus.

Our districts will be blessed to hear more from Curtis and Meador as they implement a baptismal approach to the vocation of stewardship. I encourage any interested to peruse the *Stewardship Ministry* resources at: <<<http://www.lcms.org/stewardship>>>. I am very thankful to President Fondow for having recommended me to represent the MNN District and for Pastors Curtis and Meador for their work faithful Christ-centered approach to the topic of Stewardship.

In Christ,

- *Pastor Weber*

Biblical Lutheran Perspective (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 248, n. 49.

⁴ I believe I accurately recorded this!