

## **LEARNING FROM HISTORY:** **THE ROOTS OF STEWARDSHIP**

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Basically, there are three roots to the stewardship movement. These are: church support, mission support, and a concern for Christian use of resources. These correspond to the three tasks which the Stewardship Council understands as the application of its mandate: financial development, mission interpretation, and stewardship education. This paper will attempt briefly to describe how these three elements combined to create the stewardship movement as we know it today. It will also try to learn from this history what can help the Church in the future.

The first of these three roots is "church support". It is, in a way, related to the development in North America of religious liberty. When tax support was no longer available, the churches needed to find ways of supporting their ministries. After long experiments in tithes, pew rentals, lotteries, subscriptions, and other methods, the churches eventually hit on the idea of systematic benevolence, or stewardship of giving. As Helge Brattgard put it:

When the emigrants from the various countries with state churches in Europe organized their churches in America, they immediately found themselves in a new and different situation. In view of the fact that they had to face the question of building the church on their own initiative, it was necessary for each member of the congregation to assume his responsibility for the church, something which had not been required of him in his homeland . . .<sup>i</sup>

The second root idea of stewardship is "mission support". This is evident in the emergence of what we now call the stewardship movement during two periods of mission fervor, the middle of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. We will trace these two movements and their aftermaths in this paper.

The third root idea of stewardship is "Christian use of resources". This concern is woven through the history of the stewardship movement and will be touched on as we come to it.

Out of the famous "Haystack Prayer Meeting" at Williams College in 1806, there grew the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (now the United Church Board for World Ministries), formed in 1812. This was the first of a number of North American foreign mission societies. They were poised to respond, in the 1840s, to the growing awareness of the world as a mission field, prompted by such events as the Crimean War, the opening of Japan, and the 1848 European revolutions. As the church historian, Dr. Abel Stevens, wrote at that time: "Everywhere does the Macedonian vision stand out on the boundaries of the nations, and beckon us."<sup>ii</sup>

This was a period of awakening to mission on this continent as well. For instance, the American Missionary Association, a response to the Amistad incident, was formed in 1846. "The Church Society of the West," later the Evangelical Synod, was formed in 1840.

As Harvey Calkins wrote of this mission zeal:

To but one other generation has there come such massing of the human appeal, and that was sixty years after. The decade from 1840 to 1850 and the decade from 1900 to 1910 are marvelously alike.<sup>iii</sup>

During this same period when the Christian churches were awakening to mission there also emerged, in North America and the British Isles, a stirring of dissatisfaction with the half-way measures which had been used to secure church support. With it came a desire for a theologically sound basis for "systematic benevolence". It was this which led to the development of the modern stewardship movement, including the belief that God is the owner of all and that we are to be stewards. It also included the suggestion of setting apart a definite portion of one's income for benevolent use.

As a result of this expansion of giving, new colleges were founded and support of the ministry rested on a solid base. Notably, gifts to missions increased dramatically. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1850 had an annual income of \$251,862. Within seven years that figure had increased to \$388,932. In eight more years it increased to \$534,763, this during a period when cooperating denominations were withdrawing from its support in order to establish their own work.<sup>iv</sup> There is, indeed, a real sense in which the "stewardship" revival of the 1840s and 1850s led to the spiritual awakening which occurred in America and the British Isles in 1858.

One of the things which led thoughtful Christian leaders in the nineteenth century to a concern for what we now call "stewardship" was the recognition of the material bounty America provided and a desire to counteract covetousness with generosity, social responsibility, and spiritual values. It was this to which Horace Bushnell referred when he talked of "Christianizing the money power."<sup>v</sup>

After the American Civil War, there were great demands for contributions to help with the reconstruction. Churches responded to this call in a generous way. In appealing for these gifts, however, the leadership of the churches allowed the earlier teaching about systematic benevolence to falter. As Harvey Calkins described it:

Thus it came about that the American churches, during the last third of the nineteenth century, pressed a winning campaign for immediate financial advance, but neglected to teach the primary ethics of property. ... The very skill and success of the great "money-raisers" of the last generation obscured the basal meaning of stewardship.<sup>vi</sup>

This early twentieth century Methodist mission and stewardship leader, Calkins, said: In such an atmosphere stewardship was stifled like an oak tree in a hothouse; for stewardship is a hardy growth; it requires stiff soil, a wide sky, and the years.<sup>vii</sup>

Churches returned to the use of stated "collections" and other special attractions, rather than the emphasis upon God's ownership and our responsibility. The movement for systematic benevolence languished.

The second great wave of mission enthusiasm, to which we referred earlier, began toward the end of the nineteenth century, focused under the leadership of the Congregational revivalist, Dwight L. Moody. As a result of summer student conferences which he and others gathered, there emerged the Student Volunteer Movement, organized at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts in 1886<sup>viii</sup> This was a remarkable movement, based on the slogan: "The evangelization of the world in this generation." By 1903 over 3000 youth had volunteered to go into the "mission field".<sup>ix</sup> In 1906 an anniversary observance of the original Haystack Prayer Meeting was held by the Student Volunteer Movement at Williamstown, Massachusetts where the first "Volunteer Band" had gathered. It brought delegations from all continents.<sup>x</sup>

Out of this Student Volunteer Movement and the vision it represented many things grew, including a revival of world missions, the first World Ecumenical Missionary Conference in London in 1890, and the modern Student Christian Movement. Out of the need to develop a solid support base for these many new missionaries, there developed both modern fund raising (including such methods as "the thermometer") and the theology of stewardship.

This newer stewardship movement, like its predecessor, was partly motivated by a concern for the just sharing of resources. It numbered among its early supporters people like Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden. (Rauschenbusch later criticized the stewardship movement because he thought it did not take seriously the issue of accountability for the use of wealth.) As Harvey Calkins himself demonstrated, it was a movement concerned to rest everything in the ownership of God and in our responsibility as stewards to use all of God's creation well. The movement, then and later, sometimes tended to consider everything under the heading of "stewardship" and needed a focus on the stewardship of possessions.

Through such agencies as the YMCA, child of the Student Volunteer Movement, the American churches cooperated in aid during the First World War. After the war, church leaders, encouraged by support and cooperation, established the Interchurch World Movement of North America. As Mark Noll writes: Its grand scheme to raise nearly \$400 million for the relief of war-torn Europe and to advance social renewal in the States fell far short of reaching its goal.<sup>xi</sup>

The result of this "Interchurch debacle," as Robert Wood Lynn calls it, was considerable blame by denominational leaders for the stewardship leaders. Denominations once

again departed from the principles of sound theological stewardship education and returned to "fund raising."

Always there were stewardship leaders in the churches who kept the broader perspective. Among them was a layman, Clarence Stoughton, who said: "Stewardship is what I do after I have said I believe"<sup>xii</sup> as well as T. K. Thompson, Congregational minister and National Council of Churches Commission on Stewardship executive. It was under T.K. Thompson's leadership that the concept of stewardship as gratitude for God's gifts gained emphasis. Through this kind of leadership, the stewardship movement was again rebuilt.

In the 1980s the National Council of Churches Commission on Stewardship sponsored a series of Winter Event theological presentations, such as those by John Reumann, Max Stackhouse, and Douglas Meeks. Probably the most dramatic effect came from the relationship with a Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, who rediscovered stewardship as a basic theological motif and called the Churches to see a "worldly stewardship" as well as a "churchly stewardship". As a result of such thinking, the term "holistic stewardship" became widely used.

In response to a United Church of Christ concern to respond to God's voice in the needs of the world, the Norfolk General Synod adopted a Pronouncement on Christian Faith, Personal Stewardship, and Economic Sharing, which attempts to take seriously the stewardship of the individual, the stewardship of support for the Church, and the stewardship of resources for the needs of the world. It attempts to unite what Rauschenbusch saw to be separated: stewardship of possessions and accountability for our neighbor's need.

In the present time, the churches, for a variety of reasons, are facing serious financial demands in a time of numerical cut-backs and self-questioning. Again, the possibility confronts us that sound stewardship education may be swamped by an emphasis on immediate fund raising. If history is a good teacher, when the stewardship education and mission interpretation are overlooked, eventually the financial development goes too.

It is important that the fund raising of the Church be based on a sound understanding of the mission of the Church and on a solid grounding in the principles of personal discipleship and stewardship of resources. It seems clear that all three of the tasks we have spelled out are important: Unless we have a clear vision of the mission of the Church, we will not support it. Unless we have learned through the patient teaching of discipleship to live as stewards of what comes from God, we will not be serious or consistent in our giving. And unless we are asked, we are not likely to give.

Yet there is a need to narrow the focus of our concern. It is possible either to err in the direction of using "stewardship" as an all inclusive word, or to err in the direction of

using "stewardship" only as a code word for fund raising. A wise focus may be on the stewardship of possessions.

Perhaps Ann Weems put the issue most succinctly: "The stewardship question is not really how much will we give. The stewardship question is how we spend what we have been given."

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i. Helge Brattgard, God's Stewards: A Theological Study of the Principles and Practices of Stewardship (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), p. 2. See also G.A.E. Salstrand, The Story of Stewardship in the United States of America (Grand Rapids, 1956).

ii. Quoted in A Man and His Money, by Harvey Reeves Calkins (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1914), p. 105.

iii. ibid.

iv. Calkins, pp. 113f.

v. Cf. Horace Bushnell, From "How To Be a Christian in Trade" (1872), in Horace Bushnell: Selected Writings on Language, Religion, and American Culture, ed. David L. Smith (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 165f.

vi. Calkins, p. 123.

vii. Calkins, pp. 120f.

viii. Cf. Fred Field Goodsell, They Lived Their Faith (Boston: ABCFM, 1961), p. 99.

ix. This and much of the information that follows is to be found in a series of audio tapes on the history of stewardship, presented by the Reverend Dr. Robert Wood Lynn at the 1992 Winter Event of the Ecumenical Center for Stewardship Studies, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Copies of the tapes are available from the Ecumenical Center (ECSS), 1100 West 42nd Street, Suite 225, Indianapolis, IN 46208.

x. Goodsell, p. 99.

xi. Mark A. Noll, A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 309.

xii. Clarence Stoughton, Whatever You Do. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949.