

GA-1732  
(Study Document)

STEWARDSHIP AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE AND ITS  
APPLICATIONS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

This study document was prepared in response to GA-1536 which authorized the Center for Faith and Giving to prepare a Study Document on Understanding Stewardship as a Spiritual Discipline.

Table of Contents

**A POINT OF ORIGIN AND DIRECTION .....1**

**THE BIBLICAL WITNESS AND THEOLOGICAL ASSERTIONS ABOUT STEWARDSHIP .....2**

Abundance and Care for the Earth.....2

Sabbath.....4

Stewardship as Loving Attention to Body and Mind.....6

Stewardship and the Gospel.....7

Stewardship and Resources, Money, and Possessions.....8

Stewardship and Generosity.....12

Stewardship and Judgment.....17

Stewardship and the Tithe.....20

Stewardship and the "Prosperity Gospel" .....22

Stewardship as Transformation.....24

**AFTER THOUGHTS: .....26**

**STATED ASSUMPTIONS: .....27**

**FOR CONSIDERATION: .....28**

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF STEWARDSHIP IN OUR TIME AND PLACE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY .....30**

**A Point of Origin and Direction**

This document is presented as a response to the charge of the General Assembly (GA 1536), meeting in 2015 at Columbus, Ohio, to offer for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) a study and reflection document on stewardship – specifically *understanding stewardship as a spiritual discipline and its practical applications for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

The Center for Faith and Giving, tasked with undertaking this responsibility, presents to the General Assembly, meeting July 8-12, 2017, at Indianapolis, IN, a biblical reflection, a series of theological assertions, and some recommendations for the church to consider, along with the commitment to establish and curate resources in the long-term for the continued in-depth study of stewardship.

This document serves as a broad examination of the biblical materials that relate to the topic of stewardship, with an intent that the church become conversant with these fundamental understandings. It further provides a theological perspective which is

44 intended to encourage dialogue and conversation within the church about what  
45 stewardship is, and what it means to be a steward as an individual, a community of  
46 faith, and a part of God’s wondrous creation.

47  
48 Assumptions are proposed regarding practical applications if the perspective of the  
49 document is followed to some of its potential conclusions. Suggestions as to how these  
50 assumption/conclusions might interface with the context of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are  
51 offered at the end of these pages. We recognize that not everyone will share the same  
52 conclusions/assumptions of the document. That is acceptable since unity of opinion on  
53 how to be a steward *in a singular way* is not the primary goal. Our objective is to better  
54 define what a steward *is* and thus to open a conversation. We trust that the church in  
55 its wisdom will discover what a steward *does* in the unique contexts in which individuals  
56 and communities of faith are located.

57  
58 The curation of resources is one important outcome of this assigned task and it is a  
59 logical culmination of our ongoing work given the following circumstances: 1) The sheer  
60 volume of the materials required for in-depth study cannot be contained in this type of  
61 document; 2) the changing nature of our context, requiring a more nimble ability to  
62 adjust to the contemporary social and political climate, which would appropriately dictate  
63 the tone and focus of such statements; and 3) the fact that in this age of easy access  
64 via electronic means, a more comprehensive and divergent mosaic of materials can be  
65 made available to a wider audience at little or no cost with unlimited access to those  
66 seeking the information.<sup>1</sup>

67 By the church receiving this document, it is commissioning the development of  
68 additional resources from a “Disciples” perspective on all aspects of stewardship for  
69 study and reflection into the next decade.

70

## 71 **The Biblical Witness and Theological Assertions about Stewardship**

72

73 *Biblical stewardship, broadly defined, is the intentional management of resources (all*  
74 *living things in and of the earth and their produce) on behalf of the rightful owner, who is*  
75 *God.*

76

77 ***Abundance and Care for the Earth:*** The biblical and theological grounding for  
78 stewardship is found first in the creation stories. The poem of Genesis 1 affirms God’s  
79 delight in all that springs from the Divine imagination. Each day the conclusion is the

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Faith and Giving envisions an access port via our website to videos, articles, essays, curriculum, an extensive bibliography, and a conduit to other collections of stewardship-related materials. In many respects, the Center for Faith and Giving website currently operates in this regard. However, this portal can serve as a central location where connections to stewardship-related ministries within the whole church can be identified and accessed. For example, pointed connections on the Center for Faith and Giving website to the Green Chalice ministry within Disciples Home Missions can list assets and materials for those who visit the CFG site seeking earth-stewardship-related resources. A mirror index on the CFG website of these materials within Green Chalice would allow for easier access and quicker discovery. By its very presence on the CFG site, it affirms holistic and a less fragmented view of stewardship.

80 same, “God saw that it was good.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, on the sixth day, it is not simply good, but it  
81 is “very good.”<sup>3</sup> This embrace of the material world by the God who is wholly “Other”  
82 sets the relational tone for all that follows. God and “the world” are inextricably linked.  
83 Going forward, the choices of one will in some way impact the other. This  
84 interrelatedness is a Divine prerogative – and choice will become a marker of the  
85 human creature created in God’s image, as well. This includes the choice to love God  
86 and practice obedience to God’s desires.

87

88 As the creation narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that there is an abundance within  
89 the Divine design. The text implies a wild array of living creatures (winged things that  
90 wing, creeping things that creep, swimming things that swim)<sup>4</sup>, and ample sustenance  
91 for all of these beings as God has “given every green plant for food.”<sup>5</sup>

92

93 Further evidence that this abundance is present and intended to be a permanent  
94 condition is contained within the first portion of the Divine command/promise to “be  
95 fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...”<sup>6</sup> The abundance of the earth is self-generating  
96 and perpetual. Plants have seeds and trees have seed within the fruit for a never-  
97 ending cycle of plants weighed heavy with grain and tree branches laden with produce.  
98 There is enough. The *needs* of creation are attended to by Divine providence.

99

100 Concepts of abundance and the well-being of “enough,” however, do not mean that the  
101 earth can be subject to mindless exploitation. There is no sense or endorsement within  
102 the text that every *want* can be sustained or must be satisfied. A choice is to be made  
103 for the management of resources. The second portion of the Divine command/promise  
104 is to “...subdue it [the earth]; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the  
105 birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>7</sup> Made in the  
106 image of God, the human beings are to rule in the earth in the same manner that God  
107 rules in the cosmos. God governs for the good and well-being of creation. Humans  
108 must exercise their designated power in the same manner. This is the goal of  
109 stewardship.

110

111 Stewardship, while not specifically stated in the Genesis poem, is strongly inferred. “And  
112 God said ‘Let there be...’”<sup>8</sup> as well as later biblical affirmations that “The earth is the  
113 Lord’s and all that is in it...”<sup>9</sup> remind us that we are the creation, not the Creator. The  
114 world, its produce and its inhabitants belong to God. Human beings, in exercising  
115 dominion, do so on behalf of God. Therefore, doing as God would do matters and is a  
116 form of obedience. We are stewards, not owners. Our own mortality affirms we are at  
117 best temporary tenants and shareholders of what we claim to possess. We are

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<sup>2</sup> Gen 1:4; Gen 1:10; Gen 1:12; Gen 1:18; Gen 1:21; Gen 1:25

<sup>3</sup> Gen 1:31

<sup>4</sup> Gen 1:20, 1:24

<sup>5</sup> Gen 1:29-30

<sup>6</sup> Gen 1:28a

<sup>7</sup> Gen 1:28b

<sup>8</sup> Gen 1:3

<sup>9</sup> Ps 24:1

118 accountable for the way we express and exercise our dominion. There are  
119 consequences for both good and poor stewardship.

120  
121 In the second creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25), the concept of the human being  
122 functioning as caretaker is again expressly stated. Genesis 2:15 states that “God took  
123 the human creature and put him in the garden of Eden to protect and serve it.”<sup>10</sup> The  
124 human has a vocation, and in fulfilling that labor of “tending,” the garden flourishes. Not  
125 only is this a stewardship function but it is also in the best interest of the garden’s  
126 inhabitants, including the human! There is a direct relationship between the health of  
127 the planet and the health of all living things which inhabit the earth. It was indeed  
128 paradise, but what made it so was the presence of God,<sup>11</sup> not the absence of work. To  
129 act as a steward is to fulfill a part of the human calling.

130  
131 **Sabbath:** The dual themes of abundance and relationship continue with the dawn of the  
132 seventh day: Sabbath. The very proclamation/observance of Sabbath is a way of  
133 stating that God has provided *enough*. Labor is only required for six days, yet there is  
134 provision for seven. This is abundance! The fear of scarcity and the anxiety of want  
135 can be laid to rest and need not drive or define our psyche.

136  
137 Sabbath also expresses the nature of the Divine/human relationship. It reminds us that  
138 we are the created, not the Creator. The world does not exist solely because of our  
139 frenetic activity. It exists because of the providential nature of God. God has  
140 commanded rest and built it into the fabric of creation. To do violence to this command  
141 is to deny God’s generosity and to risk a form of existential amnesia. We forget who we  
142 are (the creation) and Whose we are (the Creator).

143  
144 Several texts that pertain to Sabbath reinforce these themes. Exodus 16 is the story of  
145 the manna in the wilderness that further affirms abundance and provision. Not only is  
146 this the bread that God gives,<sup>12</sup> but each household has exactly what they need.<sup>13</sup> To  
147 hoard the manna (to keep it over for the next day, out of fear it would not appear or out  
148 of greed or sloth) would lead to its becoming wormy and vile<sup>14</sup> – except for the day  
149 before the Sabbath, when a double portion could be collected and would not spoil. The  
150 context of the story is set over against the wider wilderness-wandering theme of trust.  
151 Will Israel believe in the God of deliverance? As the Christian Church, we of course  
152 hear, echoes of Jesus’ prayer “give us this day our daily bread”<sup>15</sup> as we read about the  
153 manna. Do we believe God will provide?

154  
155 The record of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 affirms that Sabbath is kept  
156 because God rested and commanded creation to do the same.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that

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<sup>10</sup> Translation provided by Rev. Dr. Carol Johnston, Christian Theological Seminary.

<sup>11</sup> Gen 3:8

<sup>12</sup> Exod 16:15

<sup>13</sup> Exod 16:18

<sup>14</sup> Exod 16:20

<sup>15</sup> Matt 6:11;

<sup>16</sup> Exod 20:8-11

157 all the community is to rest – including servants, sojourners [the alien], and beasts of  
158 burden. This agency is extended even to the land in Leviticus 25, though the cycle of  
159 rest for the land is in years as opposed to days.<sup>17</sup> Everything needs rest. Provision will  
160 be made and rest can be taken. One part of creation is not to abrogate the rights of  
161 another on this issue.

162

163 An account of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 moves us to another  
164 consideration regarding the meaning of Divine and human relationship. Here, the  
165 reason for Sabbath keeping is the deliverance from Pharaoh's bondage and God  
166 breaking the yoke of slavery. We mention it here because it has at some level an  
167 *economic* significance, and stewardship is in part about money and economic systems.  
168 Some scholars believe that the Decalogue is, in point and fact, more about social-  
169 economic relationships than a moral code.<sup>18</sup> As to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, a few salient  
170 points follow.

171

172 First, the weekly observance of the Sabbath is a regular reminder of God's powerful act  
173 of deliverance (not simply a reminder of the Divine rest on the seventh day of creation).  
174 Slaves do not get a day off and the freedom they enjoy comes not from their own  
175 strength, but from God's "mighty outstretched hand."<sup>19</sup> Second, the reason the slaves  
176 labored under Pharaoh was to create bricks for supply cities – Pharaoh's hedge against  
177 the unreliable gods of Egypt who produce with inconsistent abundance. Third, the  
178 relationship between Israel and Egypt is *economic* (cheap labor enforced by the  
179 hegemony of Egypt's military). Pharaoh is anxious about brick tallies, and Israel's  
180 relationship to the ruler of the Nile is based solely on their ability to produce building  
181 materials.

182

183 God's deliverance of Israel however, is not related to what Israel can produce. It is a  
184 choice by God, having heard the cries of their oppression, to deliver them, not for what  
185 economic value Israel may possess, but rather for their intrinsic worth to God as a part  
186 of the creation. God does not deliver the people of Israel to create a new labor force.

187

188 This distinction is significant. God's covenant will be based on relationship, not an  
189 economic contract, which will thus impact the relationships among the people  
190 themselves. Take, for example, the command to honor mother and father.<sup>20</sup> In a social  
191 system that values life for its quality and quantity of *production*, honoring aging parents  
192 who cannot contribute to the production schedule becomes problematic. In fact, the  
193 entire second tablet of the law is about what makes human community possible and the  
194 character of those relationships. Living peacefully with neighbor will include the  
195 command to not covet the neighbor's belongings. As it relates to stewardship, this will  
196 come to light when we consider financial and material goods below.

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<sup>17</sup> Lev 25:1-7

<sup>18</sup> For more see Walter Brueggemann: *Money and Possessions*, Interpretation; John Knox Press 2016. pp15-33.

<sup>19</sup> Exod 5:15

<sup>20</sup> For additional consideration of this idea, see *Sabbath As Resistance*, Walter Brueggemann, John Knox Press, 2014.

197  
198 **Stewardship as Loving Attention to Body and Mind:** Jewish thought understands not  
199 that we *have* a body, but that in fact we *are* a body. The bifurcation and separation of  
200 body from spirit comes late into the church's self-understanding and comprises only a  
201 narrow percentage of Second Testament thought. To love God with body, mind, and  
202 soul in harmony would have been familiar to Jesus as well as Paul. It is true that  
203 gnostic and ascetic movements grew alongside of and within the early church. We  
204 don't deny that there are believed benefits from suppressing the urges of the body  
205 [flesh] in favor of strengthening the spirit. At the same time, we affirm that God  
206 proclaimed on the sixth day that the material creation (including embodied human  
207 creatures) was "very good."

208  
209 This colors our perspective on the value not only of our own bodies, but on the entire  
210 created order itself. We might further appeal to the apocalyptic biblical literature that  
211 suggests that even the "new heaven and new earth"<sup>21</sup> will still in fact be material in  
212 nature, however perfect (not susceptible to corruption) it might be imagined. That  
213 "God's place is among mortals"<sup>22</sup> and that God will still "give water to the thirsty"<sup>23</sup>  
214 further suggests a realm that is not simply spiritual and disembodied, but still somehow  
215 physical in nature. That this form would continue in an eternal state validates and  
216 affirms material being.

217  
218 When Paul suggests in Romans "...to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and  
219 acceptable to God..."<sup>24</sup> we know that he has moral purity in mind (this ties to his  
220 understanding that the body and spirit are intimately related so that what we do with our  
221 body impacts our spirit). But, we can also infer that to offer the body as a sacrifice  
222 entails giving God the best of what we have to offer. A body broken down by abuse and  
223 poor health habits is far from the best "living sacrifice" we might produce! Such a body  
224 cannot manifest the full capacity of its offerings and deployment of its assets. Thus,  
225 failure to care for ourselves functions as a poor steward of a magnificent gift.

226  
227 The body should be honored. It contains the indwelling treasure of the gospel<sup>25</sup> and is a  
228 temple for the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Care for self, including rest (tied to Sabbath), renewal, and  
229 providing for the body's good health are tethered to stewardship. When issues of  
230 quality healthcare being available to all people arise, we can understand this as being  
231 related to stewardship. Bodily health concerns, as addressed by prophets, Jesus, and  
232 the apostles view healing as God's preference. Poor health separates one from the  
233 community, and the failure to treat curable disease denies a person desired wholeness.  
234 It follows that moving available resources in the direction of human wellness and  
235 wholeness is an aspect of faithful stewardship within the context of forming and  
236 sustaining community.

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<sup>21</sup>Rev 21:1

<sup>22</sup>Rev 21:3

<sup>23</sup>Rev 21:6

<sup>24</sup>Rom 12:1

<sup>25</sup>2 Cor 4:7

<sup>26</sup>1 Cor 6:19

237  
238 **Stewardship and the Gospel:** “You are stewards of the many-colored graces of  
239 God.”<sup>27</sup> When the author of 1 Peter makes this statement it resonates with the words of  
240 Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1 that we [the church] are “the stewards of God’s mysteries.”  
241 Here the Greek leaves no doubt. It is not an inference but it is direct: *oikonomos* is  
242 translated “steward.”

243  
244 We are stewards of the gospel. Those who follow Jesus, who have made a confession  
245 of faith, received the waters of baptism, and been given the gift of the Holy Spirit are  
246 stewards – caretakers of the Good News of God’s unending love for creation, a love  
247 that death itself cannot conquer.<sup>28</sup> That love is present at creation and is displayed  
248 most fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This is the church’s ultimate  
249 story, our most treasured of entrusted gifts, and it is ours to tell as faithful stewards.

250  
251 Stewardship and evangelism are related to each other. We have a light to shine and we  
252 must not put it under a bushel.<sup>29</sup> The simplicity of the task and the gravity of its  
253 importance appear mismatched. We must tell our story because it has the power to  
254 transform lives. Transformed lives have the power to change the world. Failure to be a  
255 steward of the gospel not only risks others not coming to know its power, but for the  
256 story (in the particular way that we, as the Disciples of Christ, know it) to not reach  
257 beyond this generation. It is not about our own survival, yet we acknowledge that  
258 something in the wider stream of Christian thought and witness will be lost without our  
259 tributary adding to its ever-flowing river.

260  
261 The Disciples of Christ tradition has long lifted the ministry of Andrew as “one who  
262 brings others to Christ”.<sup>30,31</sup> In story after story we learn that, despite Jesus’ urging to  
263 do otherwise, those who witness his power and are moved by his teachings are  
264 compelled to share the story of Jesus with others.<sup>32</sup> To encounter Christ is to encounter  
265 an experience worth sharing.

266  
267 Per the synoptic gospels, upon his ascension into heaven, Jesus gives the great  
268 commission to the disciples [the church] “to go into all the world and proclaim the good  
269 news”<sup>33</sup> – leaving it for us to do in his physical absence, as a steward would manage  
270 the household in the absence of the master. Prior to this, Jesus had also sent the  
271 disciples on a mission to proclaim the Realm of God.<sup>34</sup> In the record of the four  
272 evangelists, when Jesus is talking to the disciples, he is talking to us [the church].  
273 Sharing the gospel is not optional; it is our vocation as followers of Jesus.

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<sup>27</sup> 1 Pet 4:10, translation: Rev. Dr. Ronald J. Allen, Christian Theological Seminary

<sup>28</sup> Rom 8:38-39

<sup>29</sup> Matt 5:15

<sup>30</sup> John 1:41

<sup>31</sup> The cross of St. Andrew is emblazoned upon our chalice as a reminder of our Scottish Presbyterian roots; Andrew is the Patron Saint of Scotland.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 1:28; 1:45; 2:7; 5:20; 6:56; and 7:36-37 as examples.

<sup>33</sup> Matt 28:20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47

<sup>34</sup> Matt 10:7; Mk 6:12; Lk 9:2

274  
275 **Stewardship and Resources, Money, and Possessions:** We begin by noting that this  
276 relationship between ourselves and our possessions is often characterized in the bible  
277 as one of *choice*. “No one can serve two masters; for a slave, will either hate the one  
278 and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve  
279 both God and mammon [wealth].”<sup>35</sup> It is a clear-cut choice. Money makes a powerful  
280 servant but a lousy master. We get to pick, but we must also understand the  
281 consequences of our choice. If we choose the possession of money as our source of  
282 security and place of our ultimate loyalty, it will be like trying to collect water with a  
283 sieve. There will never be enough to protect the well-being of our soul and there will  
284 always be a desire for “just a little more,” and then “just this much more,” and so on, in a  
285 never-ending cycle. That which is less than the ultimate cannot ultimately satisfy.

286  
287 When you can give money away, you demonstrate your power over it. When you  
288 cannot, it displays its power over you. The three synoptic gospels each tell of a man  
289 (the composite picture of whom is a “rich, young ruler”) who presents himself before  
290 Jesus with a question – a query about that which most of us would wish to have a clear  
291 answer: “What must I do to inherit the Realm of God?”<sup>36</sup> Jesus begins by quoting the  
292 second tablet of the Law, the things that make human community possible. Jesus then,  
293 upon hearing the man’s reply that he “has done all these things,” presses him still  
294 further. “Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor so you will have treasure in  
295 heaven, then come and follow me.”<sup>37</sup>

296  
297 Jesus sets before the man a choice: Divest your money and place it toward the values  
298 of the Realm (taking care of the poor) and follow me, or stay with your stuff and miss  
299 what ultimately matters. This or that. The man goes away sad, for he had many  
300 possessions, or perhaps more accurately stated, his many possessions had him. He  
301 chose poorly, selecting his lifeless wealth over the Living God. The strength of the pull  
302 of our possessions should not be underestimated.

303  
304 The nature and clarity of the decision are reminiscent of the first two of the great  
305 commandments: You shall have no other gods before God; and, you shall not create an  
306 image or worship anything that is “in the heaven above, on the earth beneath, or that is  
307 in the water under the earth.”<sup>38</sup> The First Testament reminds us in an oft-repeated  
308 mantra that our things cannot save us. When Joshua prepares the people of Israel to  
309 cross over the Jordan and enter the land of promise, he reminds the people of the  
310 power of God that has been displayed on their behalf, and demands that they make a  
311 choice: Will they serve God or will they wander after foreign gods?<sup>39</sup>

312

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<sup>35</sup> Matt 6:24

<sup>36</sup> Matt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30

<sup>37</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>38</sup> Exod 20:4

<sup>39</sup> Josh 24



313 When in need, Israel has (a least part of the time!) chosen to trust God; and God has  
314 (all the time) been the trustworthy provider in the desert wilderness. Now, when they  
315 are to enter a land flowing with milk and honey, will they remember the source of their  
316 abundance? Prosperity is as great a threat to the faithful handling of our possessions  
317 as is being in want. When times are good, are we as generous as we might be? Are  
318 we still aware of the ultimate source of our abundance? Or, do we think it is because of  
319 our own hard work or other good fortune? Do we become more judgmental about those  
320 who do not share in prosperity, perhaps believing them to be lazy? The warnings  
321 (particularly in Deuteronomy 8) pertaining to the risk of unfaithfulness in the midst of  
322 plenty are aimed at precisely this fact. Don't forget the true source of your provision.  
323

324 Those things that would lure us away from true discipleship are rarely easily identified  
325 as such. Temptation is often subtler in its appearance. Consider the choice placed  
326 before our primordial ancestors and the nature of its presentation! "The serpent was  
327 more crafty [subtle] than any other creatures..."<sup>40</sup> Even the choice in the garden itself is  
328 a quest *for more than* what was deemed to be enough – to be *more than* human (eat  
329 the fruit and become like God). A choice was made to live in the world on our own  
330 terms instead of on God's terms, the consequences of which were/are harsh and  
331 damaging to all the *relationships* in the creation. Stewardship is about rightful ownership  
332 (it is all God's) and thus "rightful place" (we are entrusted with its care as *managers*) in  
333 the created order. It is also about contentment with "enough" in contrast to the  
334 insatiable desire for more.  
335

336 This acquisitiveness is a human condition which can undermine our trust in God, our  
337 relationships with one another, and the faithful stewardship of our resources. It's  
338 connections to the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> commandments are obvious (the prohibitions  
339 against adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting). To take or desire that which does not  
340 belong to us, as opposed to being content with what we have, makes living in human  
341 community impossible. To take more than we need at the expense of another or to  
342 abuse the truth for our personal gain does violence to the neighbor and denies God's  
343 provision and abundance, which is for the whole of creation. To be in fear that what we  
344 have will be lost due to the actions of another creates defensive postures, relationships  
345 shadowed by mistrust, and self-justification for hoarding.  
346

347 Jesus says, "Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and  
348 where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,  
349 where neither moth or rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For  
350 where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>41</sup> Despite wanting to believe that  
351 our money will naturally flow toward the ventures of the heart and the spirit, Jesus says  
352 something quite different. It is more than a mere suggestion that the condition of our  
353 heart can be seen in the ledger of our debit card statement. Find your money and you  
354 will find your heart. Your checkbook (and the church budget, for that matter) is a  
355 theological document.

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<sup>40</sup> Gen 3:1

<sup>41</sup> Matt 6:19-21

356  
357 Are we investing in the values of the Realm of God (storing treasures in heaven), or are  
358 we engaged in something else? Have we been generous toward those things that lead  
359 to justice, wholeness, and hope, or have we been seeking more “stuff” because our  
360 current possessions have failed to truly satisfy us?

361  
362 This question of acquisitiveness is not solely for the individual. It can apply to our  
363 institutions, as well. To steward well the resources entrusted to us as communities of  
364 faith should include an examination of our property, our “reserve” funds, and all our  
365 assets (physical, human, and spiritual) that we hold in common trust. Are they all  
366 employed well in service to the mission to which God has called us? Are we clear on  
367 what that mission is? The human existential questions of “Who am I?” and “What am I  
368 to do?” are meaningful for organizations as well as individuals. They are the perpetual  
369 questions of a church that understands itself to be reformed and ever-reforming, thus  
370 seeking to know God afresh in this time and place.

371  
372 We noted that the relationship with our material goods, especially our money, is  
373 presented as a choice. Wealth and resources are themselves treated as value-neutral in  
374 most biblical passages that pertain to them. The real issue of concern is, what is our  
375 relationship with these things? In what ways do we define them or allow them to define  
376 us? The author of 1 Timothy reminds us that “the *love* of money is the root of all kinds  
377 of evil.”<sup>42</sup> When our desire is for money and material things in and of themselves, we  
378 risk potential damage to ourselves and others. Most of us need little imagination to  
379 connect this truth to the devastation left in the wake of those (both individuals and  
380 corporations) whose only pursuit in life has been the acquisition of more. Such desire  
381 can fragment relationships and exploit resources, both human and natural.

382  
383 Luke’s gospel reminds us of a farmer whose land produced in immense abundance, so  
384 much so that his current barns could not hold all that the fields had produced. In a  
385 conversation he has only with himself (absent of others or accountability to God), he  
386 plans to raze his old barns, build new ones adequate for the task, and “eat, drink, and  
387 be merry for the rest of his days.”<sup>43</sup> As Jesus tells the story, it concludes with “But God  
388 said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And all those  
389 things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up  
390 treasures for themselves, but whose lives are not rich toward God.”

391  
392 We would note here that conversations about legacy are important for individuals and  
393 congregations. Have we made provisions for that moment when our own lives (or the  
394 sustainable life of our institutions) will “be required of us?” Understanding our  
395 stewardship is “whole life” in nature would suggest that conversations about everything  
396 from organ donation and the way we approach a funeral (especially cost), to being  
397 intentional about leaving planned gifts for organizations that have changed our lives or  
398 the lives of others, should be important. Other non-profits have not been afraid to ask

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<sup>42</sup> 1 Tim 6:10

<sup>43</sup> Luke 12:13-21

399 their donors and supporters to consider making a gift (perhaps the most generous gift a  
400 person will ever make) at the end of life; shouldn't the church be willing to ask for the  
401 same consideration?

402  
403 Instead of flowing freely into a community for the benefit of all, wealth can become  
404 concentrated among a few, and thus its blessings of assuring enough for others can be  
405 withheld at the expense of those others. Money was not originally intended to be a  
406 commodity, but rather a temporary medium of exchange.<sup>44</sup> Eric Law reminds us that  
407 "when we lost sight of the original purpose of money and decided to accumulate it as a  
408 commodity, rather than keeping it moving as medium of exchange, we created  
409 economic problems."<sup>45</sup>

410  
411 We see at the beginning of this century how this becomes a concern for the practice of  
412 stewardship and its impact at global level. It was reported in January 2017 that eight  
413 individuals had amassed a combined wealth greater than the total resources of 50% of  
414 the planet's population!<sup>46</sup> This staggering figure suggests a problem both in the  
415 management of resources for the greater good and for the flow of money in the wake of  
416 global poverty. It is true that several individuals of this "gang of eight" are generous with  
417 their wealth and have invested in programs that are designed to help those in desperate  
418 need. However, it is not unfair to ask, when so many go without basic essentials for life,  
419 "How many billions of dollars do you need after the first billion?" The concentration of  
420 wealth among such a few, while permitted in supply-side and free-market economic  
421 systems, appears contrary to all acceptable biblical models. How much is enough?

422  
423 At issue is not solely that some are wealthy and some are not. The concern is the  
424 sanctioned systemic process whereby money is transferred to a concentrated few at the  
425 expense of others through suppressed wages, which harm the very people who  
426 produce the goods and services. It is further exacerbated when, due to insufficient  
427 earnings, people are forced into indebtedness to purchase necessary goods for  
428 survival. When lenders are unscrupulous, the rates of interest too high, or the terms of  
429 loans unreasonable, the cycle is virtually unbreakable, and even more money flows  
430 from the many to the few. Welcome the new Pharaoh! The practice of the empire in  
431 the ancient world achieved this through taxes, indentured servitude, and outright  
432 government-sanctioned theft. The prophets railed against the nation of Israel when it  
433 imitated this behavior, seeing it as a violation of the laws God had set in place, and the  
434 prophets believed that such actions contributed to the downfall and subsequent exile of  
435 Israel.<sup>47</sup>

436

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<sup>44</sup> Dr. Eric Law, *Holy Currencies*; Chalice Press, St. Louis, MO. 2013 p. 133ff

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> Reported by Oxfam and CBS Evening News on January 17, 2017. Bill Gates, \$75 billion; Amancio Ortega, \$67 billion; Warren Buffett, \$60.8 billion; Carlos Slim Helu, \$50 billion; Jeff Bezos, \$45.2 billion; Mark Zuckerberg, \$44.6 billion; Larry Ellison, \$43.6 billion; Michael Bloomberg, \$40 billion. This is said to equal the economic power of 3.6 billion *people*, or roughly *one half* of the world's population.

<sup>47</sup> Amos 2:6-7; 5:10-12; 6:3-7, 12; 8:4-6; IS 2:1-11; Micah 2:1-5; 6:9-15

437 That said, the church also has an obligation to be in ministry with the wealthy and to  
438 tend to their spiritual needs, rather than to dismiss them as evil or worthy only of  
439 condemnation. While scholars within the church have clearly pointed to God's  
440 preferential option for the poor,<sup>48</sup> that is not meant to counter the well-being of the rich.  
441 Jesus says that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the  
442 rich to enter the Realm of God."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it is incumbent on the church to educate  
443 the wealthy on their responsibilities toward those in need and their opportunities to lift-  
444 up the human dignity of each child of God. Naming the dangers of wealth and its: 1)  
445 ability to insulate one from the suffering of another, and 2) the reliance on money  
446 instead of God, is part of our vocation in proclaiming the whole gospel.

447  
448 To suggest that God loves the poor more than the rich would be to deny both God's  
449 love and God's grace to each individual person. Rich and poor alike and together have  
450 both spiritual and physical needs to which the church has equal responsibilities. At the  
451 same time, we acknowledge that to the one to whom much has been given, much is  
452 expected.<sup>50</sup> Those who have wealth are often concerned about how it should be used.  
453 They are also aware of how it can label or identify them in confining ways uniquely  
454 similar to how the lack of money defines and limits the identity of those who are poor.

455  
456 **Stewardship and Generosity:** The model upheld for the people of God is one of  
457 sharing resources. Both Testaments leave little doubt that economic protections for the  
458 poor and the vulnerable are not to be ignored. These prescriptions include laws that  
459 pertain to gleaning,<sup>51</sup> to what may be held as collateral,<sup>52</sup> the charging of interest,<sup>53</sup> the  
460 fair payment of wages,<sup>54</sup> the canceling of debts,<sup>55</sup> and generosity toward the poor  
461 (which include the widow, the orphan, *and* the alien/sojourner).<sup>56</sup>  
462

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<sup>48</sup> Catholic Encyclicals dating back to 1891 *Rerum Novarum* take up the cause of the poor. Most recently Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* links the suffering of the poor to the environment devastation we have unleashed upon the earth and its impact on the impoverished who suffer from its effects on their land (climate change) and within their bodies (pollution). All of this is within a sound condemnation for unbridled consumerism and its effect on both spiritual and physical wellbeing. Disciples should note in our own history in this area of concern that includes **GA 8735** "Economic Systems – Their Impact on the Third World – A Beginning Study" which contains a section on Christian Affirmations: *The Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes special concern for the poor* and further states *A Christian will require any economic system to give and account of how it will improve the lot of the poor.* (Paragraph 39)

<sup>49</sup> Matt 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25

<sup>50</sup> Luke 12:48

<sup>51</sup> Deut 24:19-22; Lev 19:9-10

<sup>52</sup> Deut 24:6, 10-13

<sup>53</sup> Deut 15:1-3; Deut 23:19-20. Also, see Lev 25:35-37 and Exod 22:25.

<sup>54</sup> Deut 24:17-18; James 5:4

<sup>55</sup> Deut 15:1-11; see also Lev 25:10

<sup>56</sup> Deut 14:28-29; Deut 26:12. In addition, the following texts (among others) emphasize the importance of giving to the poor: Prov 19:17; Prov 22:9; 14:21; Prov 21:13; Is 58:7-8; Heb 12:16; Matt 5:42; 1 Tim 5:8; Luke 3:11; Jas 1:27

463 Concern for the poor is stated most emphatically in Deuteronomy and the appeal to  
464 "...not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather  
465 open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ... Give  
466 liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will  
467 bless you, your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be  
468 some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and  
469 needy neighbor in your land.'"<sup>57</sup>

470

471 The faithful keeping of these laws will have its own economic impact on the people, for  
472 God promises that if the commandments are kept, there will be life and prosperity. For  
473 Israel, and the land it is about to occupy, failure to do so will result in the blessing of  
474 God being removed, which will end in death and alienation.<sup>58</sup> The ideal behavior for the  
475 church to aspire is one where all things are held in common, so that there is no need  
476 within the community.<sup>59</sup> This is not to be understood as an imposed economic system  
477 (such as socialism), but rather a way of living that is truly egalitarian in nature, brought  
478 about through the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ. Further, within the church,  
479 there is to be no partiality shown between the rich and the poor, for to do so is to  
480 commit a sin.<sup>60</sup> In fact, to fail to address the needs of the neighbor is to be in  
481 possession of a faith that is dead.<sup>61</sup>

482

483 Such a way of being in the world is an outgrowth of discipleship flowing from the people  
484 outward, rather than imposed by authority or compulsion. The Jerusalem offering and  
485 Paul's appeal for its collection is one model of this behavior within the Second  
486 Testament. There is a need among the "saints" in Jerusalem, and Paul has agreed to  
487 seek financial assistance from the gentile churches in Asia Minor and Greece.<sup>62</sup> We first  
488 learn of this offering at the end of the First Epistle to the Corinthians,<sup>63</sup> as Paul instructs  
489 the church gathered there to prepare for his coming. He encourages the Corinthians to  
490 approach this offering with intentionality and discipline. Each week they are to set aside  
491 something, so that when he arrives they will have the gift ready. That this gift is being  
492 received over time suggests it is indeed a generous offering to meet a substantial need.  
493 The idea that an offering is given with thought and preparation is worth noting as we  
494 consider our own approach to such an act in our own congregations. Indeed, taking  
495 time to be prepared both to make and to receive the offering is worthy of our best  
496 efforts.

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<sup>57</sup> Deut 15:7-8, 10-11; This text is also restated by Jesus in Matt 5:42.

<sup>58</sup> Deut 30:15-20

<sup>59</sup> Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37

<sup>60</sup> James 2:1-10

<sup>61</sup> James 2:14-16

<sup>62</sup> It is not completely clear if this offering is specifically for the poor in Jerusalem proper, or if this offering is to be received by the Jerusalem church which will serve as a clearing house for the distribution of this money. If it is the latter, one could argue the idea of a common mission fund, such as Disciples Mission Fund, has its origin in scripture. Either way, the idea of a disciplined and intentional offering for those beyond the immediate context of the local community yet done in partnership with other communities of faith is compelling for the Christian Church which understands its mission to be "From our doorsteps to the end of the earth".

<sup>63</sup> 1 Cor 16:1-2

497  
498 In Second Corinthians (chapters 8 & 9) we learn the details of Paul's case for support of  
499 the Jerusalem saints. It is important to note that Paul does not use guilt, though he  
500 certainly appeals to the Corinthians' sense of pride by encouraging them "not to be  
501 outdone" by the churches of Macedonia!<sup>64</sup> While remarking that the Corinthians have  
502 excelled in many things, he now wants them to excel in generosity. He does not want  
503 them to give beyond their means, but he does expect them to give liberally. There is a  
504 call to a careful examination of conscience and an honest appraisal of individual  
505 capacity. Paul suggests a balance between the Corinthian's abundance and the need  
506 in Jerusalem, with the possibility of a reciprocity in the future. Paul refers to the story  
507 we explored above in Exodus 16 regarding the manna in the wilderness. "The one who  
508 had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."<sup>65</sup>  
509 Abundance has not come at the expense of another. In this case, the one who has  
510 given to the one who has not, so that *all* have "enough" and *no one* goes without.

511  
512 That this gift should be generous is made clear in Paul's reference to Jesus Christ, "who  
513 though he was rich became poor for our sake."<sup>66</sup> This further affirms the idea that the  
514 gift itself is meaningful and offered with thought. Generosity looks like Jesus. It is not  
515 without cost or sacrifice. As disciples, we, too, are called to give with liberality. To sow  
516 sparingly is to reap sparingly, cautions Paul, so we are to sow bountifully with an  
517 expectation to reap bountifully. And here, Paul sets the giving as an act of the will – a  
518 choice. We are to give without reluctance or compulsion for God loves a cheerful  
519 giver!<sup>67</sup> Your discovery that you have something to give should bring thanksgiving –  
520 you have enough *and then some!* That what you give will make a difference in the  
521 world on behalf of the Realm of God – what could be more satisfying? Knowing that  
522 someone will eat a meal, have warm safe place to stay, be comforted or be made well –  
523 it does stir deep joy from within us!

524  
525 There is confidence in giving because God provides, says Paul. You can give believing  
526 that, if sometime you have a need, God will provide for you in the same way that you  
527 are providing for others. This giving is based on God's trustworthiness, and when the  
528 gift is given there is a sense of doxology. "You will be enriched in every way for your  
529 great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us."<sup>68</sup> In the  
530 thanksgiving of those who receive the gift, God is praised. In an age of full basements  
531 and storage units that we never visit but that we cling to because we might need that  
532 stuff someday, we are assured that we can let it go and we will be okay. God does  
533 provide, whether it is a ram in the thicket or the unexpected kindness of a good  
534 Samaritan. We can trust the future when we live on God's terms of a community that  
535 shares and practices generosity.

536

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<sup>64</sup> He will later stake his own reputation on their ability to practice generosity along with their pride. 2 Cor 9:3-5

<sup>65</sup> Exod 16:18

<sup>66</sup> 2 Cor 8:9

<sup>67</sup> 2 Cor 9:7

<sup>68</sup> 2 Cor 9:11

537 Paul sees the work of generosity as an extension of the gospel proclamation and a  
538 manifestation of God's grace. The economic partnership (*koinonia*) being forged on  
539 behalf of the Jerusalem saints by disparate people and cultures affirms a unity in Christ  
540 transcendent of those differences (what could be more different than Corinth and  
541 Jerusalem in the first century CE!).

542  
543 For Paul, the manifestation of generosity is a fruit of the spirit.<sup>69</sup> It is part of the  
544 evidence that an individual is alive in the faith. Extravagant generosity is a Spiritual gift  
545 which contributes to the benefit of the whole body of Christ.<sup>70</sup> Contributing to the needs  
546 of the saints is among one of many virtues Paul encourages as a mark of the faithful  
547 disciple.<sup>71</sup> This is true for the church in every age.

548  
549 Generosity is celebrated in a host of ways in the biblical witness. Joseph of Cyprus, who  
550 was also known as Barnabas, is reported to have sold a piece of property and given the  
551 entire proceeds to the early church. He is named as one among many who, under the  
552 influence of the Holy Spirit, sold land and houses and laid the gifts at the feet of the  
553 apostles, the result of which was "that there was not a needy person among them."<sup>72</sup>  
554 The generosity of the community sustained the community and it propelled the witness  
555 of the gospel.

556  
557 The Book of Acts also tells the resurrection story of the disciple Tabitha.<sup>73</sup> That she  
558 was "dedicated to good works and acts of charity" should not escape our notice. When  
559 Tabitha dies, it creates a crisis in the church at Joppa and the apostle Peter is  
560 summoned with urgency. Peter arrives to find the grieving widows, whom Tabitha had  
561 helped in her lifetime, gathered around her lifeless body, now prepared for burial. They  
562 display the garments she had woven for them, as she was a lifeline in a culture that had  
563 no direct support for the vulnerable, save their own families or the generosity of others.  
564 The story reaches its climax as Peter, after having everyone leave the room, prays and  
565 then looks at the body of Tabitha and says, "Tabitha get up" – and she does!

566  
567 As careful readers of scripture, we know that Luke (the author of Acts) wants to make it  
568 clear that while Jesus has physically left the building (ascended into heaven), his life-  
569 giving power remains present via the Holy Spirit. But beyond that, we also see an  
570 intentional affirmation of the vocation of charitable work. It could have been anyone  
571 who died and whose being raised to life proclaimed the power of Jesus at work in the  
572 apostles – but it was not just anyone. It was Tabitha, one whose life was dedicated to  
573 helping others, reminding the church that we cannot be the church without this same  
574 work. Generosity is life-giving.

575

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<sup>69</sup> Gal 5:22

<sup>70</sup> Rom 12:8

<sup>71</sup> Rom 12:12

<sup>72</sup> Acts 4:34-37

<sup>73</sup> Acts 9:36-43

576 Recent studies have shown that generosity increases happiness, health, and a sense of  
577 purpose in those who practice it. There is a correlation between generous behavior and  
578 a personal sense of well-being, according research conducted by Christian Smith and  
579 Hilary Davidson.<sup>74</sup> They point out the truth found in the proverb, “One man gives freely,  
580 yet gains even more; another withholds unduly but ends up impoverished.”<sup>75</sup> Generosity  
581 is good for you.

582

583 To look at Jesus is to see generosity incarnate. From the soaring prose of John 1 to the  
584 magnificent hymn of Philipians 2, the Second Testament affirms that to see Jesus is to  
585 in some way catch a glimpse of God. The nature of God is abundance and generosity,  
586 and that is on display in the ministry of Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, there is always  
587 enough. The gospels present a ministry of Jesus that has enough power to overcome  
588 illness, enough grace to overcome alienation, enough compassion to provide comfort,  
589 and enough love to overcome death itself. If we believe this to be true and we believe  
590 that Jesus is still present in the church, this should lower our anxiety about having  
591 enough resources to do the mission we have been called by God to do.

592

593 In the Gospel of John, there is a familiar story of Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.  
594 We recognize that all stories in this gospel have layers of meaning and that, primarily,  
595 the changing of water into wine is a miracle meant to reveal the Divine character of  
596 Jesus and to point toward his glorification in death and resurrection. However, one  
597 cannot dismiss the volume of the wine produced! It is more than enough for the  
598 situation at hand – it is an abundance beyond what is necessary.

599

600 All four evangelists record the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Here, in the  
601 face of need, Jesus provides more than what is required so that there are baskets full of  
602 left-overs. What is important here for the church to recognize, beyond the provision  
603 itself, is that Jesus, when confronted about the need for food, looks at the disciples<sup>76</sup>  
604 and says “You give them something to eat.”<sup>77</sup> While there are many aspects of this  
605 story that can be lifted up, we choose two: 1) Jesus expects the disciples [and thus, the  
606 church] to accomplish fulfilling the need at hand; 2) when the disciples place into the  
607 hands of Jesus what resources they have (however insufficient they may appear), it  
608 becomes more than enough. Generosity and abundance. A Divine human partnership  
609 that changes the world.

610

611 There is also generosity that is offered in response to generosity received. While  
612 elements of the story are somewhat unclear relative to who she is or what her  
613 motivation might have been, all four gospels tell the story of a woman who anoints  
614 Jesus with a fragrant ointment. Details are lacking about number of things, but all four  
615 writers are certain that the value of the perfume is great – worth an entire year’s salary.

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<sup>74</sup> *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*, Christian Smith & Hilary Davidson, Oxford Press, 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Prov 11:24-25

<sup>76</sup> When Jesus addresses the disciples in the gospels, it is understood that he is likewise addressing the church.

<sup>77</sup> Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6: 5-15



616 The act appears to be out of gratitude. The gesture expresses *extravagant* generosity.  
617 It prompts a question to the reader – to what would you give a year’s salary and what  
618 could possibly motivate you do so? A serious reflection about the depth of our own  
619 gratitude for Jesus calls us to consider the nature of our own generosity. Grateful  
620 people are generous people. God’s people have a reason to be thankful!

621  
622 Gratitude is a part of our stewardship response, centered in the belief that all we have  
623 come to possess is, at its core, a gift. When Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to  
624 participate in the offering for the Jerusalem saints, he makes it clear that the gift they  
625 are giving is not one of obligation. At the same time, he underscores the reality that  
626 knowing all they have received from God in Jesus Christ, how could they be anything  
627 but generous? Throughout scripture, there is an urging to rejoice and give thanks to  
628 God. Whether it is the humble return of a cleansed leper,<sup>78</sup> the fresh obedience of a  
629 penitent sinner, or the saying of grace at the evening supper table, gratitude is the  
630 seedbed for generosity.

631  
632 A favorite story for many a stewardship sermon is that of the widow’s mite.<sup>79</sup> At face  
633 value, it is a tremendous story of generosity and faith, her giving two copper coins – all  
634 that she possessed – to the temple offering. Told in both the gospels of Mark and Luke,  
635 this story tells us that Jesus, who has been observing the gifts that people have been  
636 making to the temple treasury, sees her gift and calls attention to its true value. Her  
637 contribution was not out of what she could spare, but was all she had to secure her  
638 sustenance. Stated as such, it is indeed an extravagant offering which displays great  
639 trust in God to provide. The gifts of the wealthy, though considerably larger in amount,  
640 pale in comparison. Would, that however impractical it seems to us, we could give so  
641 freely!

642  
643 However, there is a caveat in reading that text with regard to its placement within each  
644 gospel. The passage which immediately precedes the story in both Mark and Luke  
645 warns about the religious class – those who love the trappings of piety and privilege.  
646 “They devour widow’s houses” Jesus says. “They will receive the greater  
647 condemnation.”<sup>80</sup> The church cannot prey upon the generous, nor can it ignore the  
648 needs of those in its midst by catering to the desires of the wealthy. While needing to  
649 encourage generosity among its members, it must also practice it on their behalf and in  
650 their best interest.

651  
652 ***Stewardship and Judgment:*** Stewardship-related themes are also to be found in  
653 stories about judgment, as our choices to act or not to act faithfully have consequences.  
654 In a story given to us only by Luke, we see the harsh punishment that awaits a rich man  
655 who has ignored the beggar at his gate.<sup>81</sup> It is a narrative of stark contrasts, as the  
656 wealthy one is dressed in purple (a sign of significant wealth) and who dines

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<sup>78</sup> Luke 17:15

<sup>79</sup> Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*

<sup>81</sup> Luke 16:19-31

657 sumptuously every day. The poor man (named Lazarus – which means “God helps”)  
658 sits at the gate begging for scraps off the table and is covered in sores which the dogs  
659 come and lick. It is unlikely that the rich man was unaware of Lazarus in his daily denial  
660 of the poor man’s plight.

661  
662 The nature of their situation is highlighted further when you consider that in the ancient  
663 world, the poor had bread, the middle class had bread and sauces/vegetables, the rich  
664 had bread and sauces and meats, and that the very wealthy had such an excess of  
665 bread they could use it like a napkin to cleans their hands. Lazarus desires what is  
666 essentially just the napkin of rich man to stave off his hunger!

667  
668 As Jesus tells the story, both men die, and in the afterlife, Lazarus is in the bosom of  
669 Abraham while the rich man is in Hades suffering torment. The great reversal, so  
670 prevalent in Luke, governs their fate in the afterlife. The rich man now seeks comfort  
671 from Lazarus, who is unable to provide it. In great concern for his five brothers left  
672 behind, the rich man appeals to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them of the fate they,  
673 too, will suffer if they do not change and consider the poor. Abraham responds that  
674 they have Moses and the prophets, and if they have not listened to them, why would  
675 they be convinced if someone returned from the dead?

676  
677 To reflect on this story is to wonder what their fate would have been (specifically the rich  
678 man) in the afterlife had there not been such an unmitigated disparity of their  
679 circumstances while in this life? If the rich man had extended generosity toward  
680 Lazarus, would his punishment have been so extreme? There is a change coming. For  
681 people who have *both* the “law and the prophets” and “one who has returned from the  
682 dead,” it would be hard to deny we have not be warned.

683  
684 In a word about the final judgment in Matthew’s gospel, we hear a story with a similar  
685 refrain. Known to many as the parable of the sheep and goats (or the Judgement of the  
686 Nations), the scene is set as the final reckoning and adjudication between those who  
687 will see the Realm of God and those who will not. The distinction between the fates is  
688 clear, once again affirming the power of choice related to our employment of resources,  
689 our compassion, and our sense of justice. “Come, you that are blessed by my Father,  
690 inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry  
691 and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a  
692 stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and  
693 you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”<sup>82</sup>

694  
695 Here, in what is the essentially the longest discourse in the Second Testament about  
696 the criteria that qualifies one for entrance into heaven, what matters most is seemingly  
697 not doctrine or right belief, but it is having assured the basic human needs for others.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Matt 25:34-37

<sup>83</sup> While there is some indication in the Greek that would suggest that this applies specifically to the community of the church, there is no stated restriction that would keep such a practice from being extended to the entire community. The tradition in Deuteronomy, as an example, includes all in who are in the land related to issues of justice, care for the poor, and Sabbath observance.

698 The failure to do so warrants eternal separation from God. “You that are accursed,  
699 depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was  
700 hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was  
701 a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick  
702 and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they will answer, ‘Lord when was it that we  
703 saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take  
704 care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one  
705 of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

706  
707 The text needs little commentary. Part of our stewardship is the care for one another. In  
708 seeing to the needs of the least of these, we bear evidence of and participate in the  
709 coming Realm that is both present and yet to be fulfilled.

710  
711 When it comes to judgment, we must also address the honesty and integrity of our  
712 approach to giving and being in community. Immediately following the magnanimous  
713 gift of Barnabas in Acts 4 comes the story in Chapter 5 of Ananias and Sapphira. They  
714 also make a gift from the sale of land; however, they conspire together to withhold a  
715 portion of the proceeds for themselves. When this is revealed by Peter, he tells  
716 Ananias that he [Ananias] was not compelled to sell the land or to give the entire  
717 proceeds from the sale to the community. Instead he [Ananias] has lied, claiming the gift  
718 to be more generous than it was, and by so doing has not lied only to the church but to  
719 God. Upon hearing this truth - Ananias falls down and dies! Further, when Sapphira  
720 shows up hours later and she is questioned, she too lies (not yet having learned of her  
721 husband’s fate) and she also falls down and dies!

722  
723 Hard as it might be to accept that God would strike down these two for lying about their  
724 gift, there is a deeper message here for the church to consider. The fact that they lied  
725 about the proceeds reveals that their entire heart was not dedicated to God. While  
726 saying otherwise, their actions demonstrate that they were not fully invested in the work  
727 of the Holy Spirit within the community. They simply were not “all in.” Faithful  
728 stewardship is about being “all in” on what God is doing in the world and being an agent  
729 of the Realm so that the world as we know it is transformed into the world as God  
730 desires it to be.

731  
732 Stewardship may be considered a life-and-death issue when we examine what is at  
733 stake regarding the impact of our whole-life discipline of practicing it, and the difference  
734 such a commitment makes to the world in which we live. When teaching discipleship –  
735 what it means to follow Jesus - we must be honest about what such a decision  
736 demands. “No one who has put their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the  
737 Kingdom of God.”<sup>84</sup> In the Book of Revelation there is a similar warning issued to the  
738 church at Laodicea: “I know your works; you are neither cold or hot. So because you  
739 are lukewarm I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”<sup>85</sup> To be a true disciple is to be  
740 truly committed.

---

<sup>84</sup> Luke 9:62

<sup>85</sup> Revelation 3:15-16 Here “cold or hot” is not so much a matter of enthusiasm as it is a level of commitment.

741

742 **Stewardship and the Tithe:** It may surprise the average person to know that the tithe  
743 (when compared to money in general) is seldom addressed in the Bible, aside from the  
744 instructions for its collection by the priests in Numbers and Leviticus. The first mention  
745 of the tithe is in Genesis 14 when, following a successful battle, Abram is blessed by  
746 King Melchizedek and Abram offers him 1/10 of everything.<sup>86</sup>

747

748 The most detailed discussions of the tithe are found in Deuteronomy, and it may not  
749 sound like what you thought you remembered! “Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your  
750 seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the  
751 place that he will choose as the dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your  
752 grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you  
753 may learn to fear the Lord your God always.”<sup>87</sup> This is a potluck supper celebration!  
754 The tithe is brought in and the people rejoice that earth has produced once again for  
755 their benefit.

756

757 Whether you have a little or a lot, you bring in 10% of what you do have and the entire  
758 community benefits. This serves as a reminder as to the source of the blessing. “So  
759 that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always” takes us back to the assertion in  
760 Genesis 1 that we are the created, not the Creator. This offering proclaims that God is  
761 the source of the abundance that sustains us. It has not come simply from our own  
762 endeavors, however good our farming and animal husbandry skills might be – it begins  
763 with God. We can plant the seed, but only God can make it grow!

764

765 The text goes on to speak of what to do if the journey is too far to take your produce.  
766 You can turn it into cash and when you arrive at the Temple, purchase whatever party  
767 supplies you want (including wine and strong drink!). The tithe is about gratitude and  
768 honoring God for what we have. And it is to be *shared* – shared within the community  
769 and with the priests (who do not have an allotment of land) and [every third year] with  
770 the sojourner [resident alien], the orphans and the widows. They [those in need] are to  
771 eat their fill – because there is plenty enough for all.

772

773 In Deuteronomy 26, the tithe is detailed again, and this time the focus is on the liturgy  
774 related to the making of the offering.<sup>88</sup> At the center of the liturgy is both God and the  
775 Land. When the gift is placed on the altar, the following statement is to be made: “A  
776 wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an  
777 alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When  
778 the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried  
779 to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction,  
780 our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and  
781 an outstretched arm, with terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and

---

<sup>86</sup> Gen 14:17-20

<sup>87</sup> Deut 14:22-24

<sup>88</sup> Deut 26:1-15

782 he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.  
783 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. <sup>89</sup>

784  
785 This liturgy is the rehearsal of Israel's salvation story. It acknowledges, at an even  
786 deeper level than the previous text, that God is the source of every blessing. It is not  
787 just what the land produces, but the fact that they are in the promised land itself. Their  
788 freedom to live in the land has happened by the providential action of God. It is a  
789 prayer of great thanksgiving, not unlike the moment of the Eucharist for the church,  
790 where the main actor is God and those Divine actions on our behalf are remembered  
791 with awe and gratitude. To apply this to the church, it would be like repeating our  
792 confession of faith when we make an offering. "I believe..." and so I respond. To make  
793 an offering is to worship God, and the ground of that worship is thanksgiving.

794  
795 Here again, the inclusive nature of the gift and its recipients is repeated. "Then you,  
796 together with the Levites *and the aliens* who reside among you shall celebrate with all  
797 the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house."<sup>90</sup> There is enough  
798 for everyone to share because of God's abundance. Hospitality is extended beyond the  
799 normal boundaries of tribe and race because there is sufficient supply. This is not  
800 simply a nice thing to do, but a command of God.

801  
802 When the question is raised about the tithe and its value for the church, these  
803 understandings should not be overlooked. The tithe establishes a community norm that  
804 is viewed as obtainable by all. Church members often wonder what is an acceptable  
805 gift? "How much should I give as an offering?" The tithe sets a benchmark; it is a  
806 starting place.<sup>91</sup> The tithe, when understood as worship, creates a moment to  
807 remember the source of blessings, our own salvation history, and an opportunity to  
808 respond to the grace we have received.

809  
810 In some circles there is debate about whether a tithe should be made "on the net" or "on  
811 the gross." For Israel, there was only "the gross." However, if God's people would do  
812 either with faithfulness, there would be plenty of resources so as to make such a  
813 question moot! When the tithe is discussed, others want to maintain that we pay taxes  
814 that support many programs for the poor and thus "our share" should be adjusted  
815 accordingly. It is good to recall that beyond the tithe, which was done annually on the  
816 total produce of the land, that each male was to come with an offering [different from the  
817 tithe] three times a year. No one was to come empty-handed! This offering was made  
818 at the festival of unleavened bread, the festival of weeks, and the festival of booths.  
819 The size of the gift was determined as each was able to give based on how they had

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<sup>89</sup> Deut 26:5-10

<sup>90</sup> Deut 26:11

<sup>91</sup> We say a starting place because it is clear, that at least within ancient Israel, multiple offerings were made beyond the tithe. This would make the tithe "the floor" rather than the ceiling! At the same time, 10% may seem to great a sum for people not in the regular practice of giving. In such a case, the tithe becomes a "first goal" toward which one might grow, perhaps a percent or two at a time.

820 been blessed.<sup>92</sup> On top of this expectation was the practice of alms-giving.<sup>93</sup> These  
821 were gifts that did not count in either the tithe or the offerings, which suddenly makes  
822 10% instead of seeming like too much, look like a bargain! Generosity was/is expected  
823 of God's people.

824  
825 Is the tithe (which is viewed by some as "under the Law") required by the church (which  
826 views itself as living "under grace")? Nowhere does the Second Testament suggest that  
827 we are to do anything less in our giving than what was required prior to the arrival of  
828 Jesus. Paul advises in giving to the Jerusalem offering, each one should give according  
829 to how they have been blessed (reminiscent of the three annual offerings mentioned  
830 above), but nowhere do we read that this replaced the tithe. To consider the tithe "law"  
831 is to not fully appreciate its intention (provision for the entire community) or recorded  
832 practice (celebration and gratitude). We do not serve our cause well if we equate  
833 *expectations* with burdens, demands, or obligations. That in many congregations we  
834 have established low expectations regarding giving, worship attendance, education, or  
835 other forms of participation and investment may well be related to an experience of  
836 decline in those same communities of faith. While the tithe cannot be fully argued as  
837 being *required* of the church via Second Testament citation, the benefits of teaching the  
838 tithe seem to out-weigh any potential liabilities.<sup>94</sup>

839  
840 ***Stewardship and the "Prosperity Gospel"***: The tithe is also mentioned in the book of  
841 Malachi. Here the prophet, on behalf of God asks the question: "Would a man rob  
842 God?"<sup>95</sup> The prophet answers that indeed the people are robbing God by their failure to  
843 give the "whole tithe." The indictment is followed with this promise: "Bring the full tithe  
844 into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test,  
845 says the lord of hosts: see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour  
846 down for you an overflowing blessing."<sup>96</sup>

847  
848 We understand this to be a specific statement to address a particular situation. During  
849 a time of famine, the people (out of fear) withheld their full tithe offering, creating a self-  
850 imposed shortage in the very system that was designed to assure their sustenance. The  
851 problem (the presence of locusts) was not that God did not love them or care about  
852 them, but that they had failed to trust God, choosing instead to cling tightly to what they  
853 *individually* possessed. Rather than establishing a quid pro quo [give and you will get],  
854 the statement "test me" is a call to action to give the *full* tithe – the result of doing so will  
855 be that there will be enough for all of the people. Indeed, there will be an abundance so  
856 that no one is without. The "test" is to trust the *system God established* of the tithe,  
857 which, when faithfully practiced, assures provision for all.

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<sup>92</sup> Deut 16:16-17

<sup>93</sup> Alms giving is referred to in the deuterocanonical books of Tobit and Sirach, as well as being mentioned in Matthew, Luke, and Acts.

<sup>94</sup> For further reflection on the potential resources created by teaching and practicing the tithe, see *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*; Smith, Emerson, Snell. Oxford Press, 2008.

<sup>95</sup> Mal 3:8 (KJV)

<sup>96</sup> Mal 3:9-10

858  
859 However, this passage has been used by some to suggest that the “test” is to give in  
860 such a way so as to entice God into giving more to the giver as a reward for giving. By  
861 giving, the individual is assuring wealth and prosperity for themselves. We see this as a  
862 difficult rendering of the Malachi passage and challenge the church to explore whether  
863 such an understanding is appropriate. Given both the communal nature that pervades  
864 the biblical texts regarding blessing and salvation as well as the understanding that it is  
865 God’s nature to give without provocation or human endeavor, we find this approach  
866 fraught with difficulty.

867  
868 There has been a growing movement since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily  
869 within certain Evangelical and Pentecostal streams of Protestantism, which seeks to  
870 use this text as foundation for understanding giving as a way of getting more.<sup>97</sup> Best  
871 identified as “the gospel of wealth” or “the prosperity gospel,”<sup>98</sup> a key component of this  
872 theological position is that it is God’s will to be physically well and financially well-off.  
873 Further, proponents believe that such wellness and increase of wealth can be secured  
874 by strong faith (right belief), positive thinking/speech, and giving to religious causes.

875  
876 Poverty and illness are understood within this school of thought to be the result of sin  
877 and/or spiritual forces. Because of the cross, the belief is that there is no reason to be  
878 sick or poor. The Bible is viewed almost as a contract that implies if a person does  
879 certain things certain ways (such as to tithe), God *has to* bless that person with health  
880 and prosperity. While an over-simplification, the point becomes clear – within the  
881 prosperity gospel there is a quid pro quo: do this, then God *will do* that. Give and God  
882 will bless you with greater wealth. Giving in this belief system is not based on gratitude  
883 or response, but is motivated by a desire to increase personal [not communal] power or  
884 position.

885  
886 We would not dispute that to give is to be blessed! The very fact that one has  
887 something from which to give is a sign of God’s provision. Further we can affirm that it  
888 is the nature of God’s economy that in giving, we do intrinsically receive more than what  
889 we have offered. However, to suggest that God’s actions to bless are to be mandated  
890 based on our activities denies the very sovereignty of the Divine. We cannot accept a  
891 position that teaches a collection of “magic words” or finding the “exact formula” of  
892 dollars to be given to charity that will cause God to bless any individual at the expense  
893 or in place of another. Additionally, we take exception to the restriction of God’s blessing  
894 to be seen only in the physical act of healing or via the increase in material goods. The  
895 church should be suspicious of a belief system that seems to sanction the

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<sup>97</sup> Additional texts often cited include Luke 6:38; Luke 11:9; James 1:5, among others.

<sup>98</sup> It can also be named the “health and wealth gospel” or “gospel of success”. Earliest proponents can be traced back into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the more prominent purveyors of this ideology arose during the 1950s within the Pentecostal healing traditions. Oral Roberts, Rev. Ike, A.A. Allen, and Jim Bakker were key figures in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Joel Osteen, Bruce Wilkinson, Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Bishop Eddie Long, Joyce Meyer, and Creflo Dollar are among many names that have risen to prominent association with this theology. Leaders of this movement have even been the subject of a congressional investigation regarding a possible conflict between their lavish lifestyles and the organization’s tax exempt status.

896 acquisitiveness of the culture and which places achieving material success ahead of  
897 service to others.

898

899 It creates tremendous theological issues as to what exactly is the nature of a god who  
900 would personally see to it that one can live in a mansion and drive a Rolls Royce while  
901 the neighbor goes without shelter or food. We don't deny the reality that this happens,  
902 just the belief that God sanctions it to be so. It is inconsistent with the gospel and  
903 antithetical to the way the early church lived out its faith by seeing that no one among  
904 them had any need.

905

906 We affirm that our giving is a response to having already received. In much the same  
907 way that the author of 1 John states that "We love, because God first loved us,"<sup>99</sup> we  
908 give because God first gave to us. We understand our giving is not an attempt to  
909 manipulate God to act in our favor, but rather an acknowledgement that God has  
910 already acted in our favor [for the whole of creation], and we are grateful. Further, as  
911 disciples who hope to see the Realm of God break deeper into our world, we see our  
912 giving as an agent of change and transformation – a sign of the spirit of God at work  
913 within us.

914

915 That God desires wholeness for all of creation is a given. That the death and  
916 resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate testimony to God overcoming the power of death  
917 and conquering evil is unquestioned.<sup>100</sup> However, the Realm of God, while revealed, is  
918 not yet fully manifest among us. Powers contrary to the work and will of God still hold  
919 influence in individuals and within structures that abuse and misuse material and human  
920 resources. Systemic racism, for example, continues to oppress an entire class of  
921 people based on the color of their skin, denying opportunity and locking generations into  
922 crushing poverty and oppression. It is not for their own lack of faith that people of color  
923 suffer in this system. It is not because they fail to practice generosity that resources do  
924 not flow into their lives and neighborhoods. This is where the "gospel of wealth"  
925 ultimately fails and where a different understanding of what it means to be a steward is  
926 needed for not only the sake of the church, but the world. Stewardship is related to  
927 justice, as its faithful practice moves resources to promote and enable systemic  
928 changes toward that which affirms and secures human dignity.

929

930 ***Stewardship as Transformation:*** We affirm that it is God's good intention to bless the  
931 earth and all that is within it. God's desire is for all of creation to flourish and the human  
932 creatures have been entrusted with the responsibility to make it and keep it so. When  
933 we have failed at this task, God has held us accountable through the admonitions of the  
934 prophets – and those same prophetic voices have simultaneously continued to hold out  
935 a vision of how the world is supposed to be. The reward for living in the world on God's  
936 terms is the very blessing we desire and God seeks to bring us abundance. The  
937 consequences of choosing our own terms results in the brokenness and scarcity we  
938 fear most.

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<sup>99</sup> 1 John 4:19

<sup>100</sup> Col 1:20



939  
940 Our world is broken – but we also believe that it does not need to stay that way. We  
941 believe that in the power of Jesus Christ, the in-breaking of the Realm of God has  
942 begun and cannot be turned away by any power or principality. The question is, will we  
943 choose to be participants in its coming to fullness? That God is at work on behalf of the  
944 poor, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized is without exception. Luke proclaims,  
945 while Jesus *is still in the womb*, that through his ministry, “His [God’s] mercy is for those  
946 who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he  
947 has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the  
948 powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good  
949 things, and sent the rich away empty.”<sup>101</sup> The way things are is not the way they are  
950 supposed to be and - because of Jesus - they are not going to stay that way!

951  
952 God’s intention is going to be fulfilled. When John’s disciples come to Jesus with their  
953 inquiry on behalf of their imprisoned teacher, Jesus answers their question as to  
954 whether or not he [Jesus] is the one or should they look for another with a simple  
955 statement: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their  
956 sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the  
957 poor have good news preached to them.”<sup>102</sup> The transformation is not just a promise for  
958 some distant time – in the ministry of Jesus it is becoming reality now.

959  
960 In each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus commissions the disciples to do these same  
961 things.<sup>103</sup> John’s gospel tells us that Jesus promised his followers would “do even  
962 greater things.”<sup>104</sup> The work of the disciples, and thus the work of the church in any age,  
963 is the work of Jesus. By our actions, the Realm is further revealed and comes closer.  
964 The Books of Acts demonstrates the ideal vision of the church operating under the full  
965 influence of the Holy Spirit. A group that could best be described as fearing for their  
966 lives suddenly becomes emboldened by the Spirit on Pentecost, and they find their  
967 voices to proclaim the gospel (an act of stewardship). Those who hear and respond to  
968 the message, now powered by the Spirit, forge an egalitarian community in which the  
969 worship of God, the adherence to the apostles teaching, the breaking of bread, and  
970 prayer are the hallmarks of their new life together.

971  
972 The community demonstrates the presence of Jesus, both by the signs and wonders  
973 done by the apostles and by their “holding all things in common.” Most importantly, they  
974 share from their resources: ...they would sell their possessions and goods and  
975 distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time  
976 together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and  
977 generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by

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<sup>101</sup> Luke 1:50-53

<sup>102</sup> Luke 7:22-23

<sup>103</sup> Matt 10:5-15; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6

<sup>104</sup> John 14:12 We should note that this does not necessarily mean they would be more powerful than Jesus, but rather by the sheer multitude of “realm agents” turned loose by the multiplication of disciples, more [greater] work would be accomplished.

978 day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.<sup>105</sup>

979

980 This is a word of encouragement to the church as it pertains to stewardship. When the  
981 church proclaims the gospel and engages in sharing of its resources for the benefit of  
982 all, the church grows! In a time when the church is seeking to find its place in a shifting  
983 culture, reclaiming stewardship may be the best way to find our footing going forward.  
984 We can point people beyond the mere acquisitiveness of self-indulgence endorsed by  
985 our society to instead use their resources to transform not only their own lives, but the  
986 world in which they live.

987

988 **After Thoughts:**

989 Sources vary in their count, but most agree that the bible talks about money and related  
990 financial terms/issues about 2,300 times! Many Second Testament scholars suggest  
991 that Jesus talks about money (and uses related financial terms/issues/examples) over  
992 60% of the time. To say that this topic is important within the Canon is no doubt an  
993 understatement. To believe that we can cover this topic thoroughly in this document is  
994 wishful thinking. We have attempted however, to give broad coverage, spanning both  
995 Testaments, from which we can draw some solid conclusions and offer direction for the  
996 church.

997

998 Because of the sheer volume of texts that relate to this topic, it may seem odd that the  
999 church in the last 50 or more years has attempted to keep the conversation about  
1000 money and faith in separate, seemingly unrelated domains. Beyond that, in yet another  
1001 arena of taboo, the church has also intentionally segregated the necessary political  
1002 ramifications of these teachings and their raw, unsettling power as they interface with  
1003 empire and impact community.

1004

1005 Our faith tradition has long practiced a “confession of faith” in Jesus Christ that is an  
1006 intimate expression of our aspiration to be in a reconciled relationship with God, and  
1007 God’s provision in Jesus Christ to affect such a desire. We in no way dispute,  
1008 disparage, or disregard the nature of a personal relationship with Jesus! However, a  
1009 faith that is solely privatized is contrary to the actual biblical portrayal of faith as  
1010 practiced within community in both the First and Second Testament, and seems to be  
1011 the antitheses of the early church as described in the Book of Acts. Private faith must  
1012 still have public expression and significance beyond the individual.

1013

1014 The Christian faith of the contemporary Western world has, in some places, been  
1015 distilled to a very individual and personal experience, disconnected from communal  
1016 accountability, rendered devoid of any social welfare responsibility (which we might  
1017 refer to as the “common good”), and segregated from certain material aspects of life.  
1018 This is counter-intuitive to the practice of stewardship, which sees the individual as a  
1019 part of a larger network of relationships. For the Christian steward, the world is viewed  
1020 through the wide-angle lens of “the whole” and the tangible benefit of community.

1021

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<sup>105</sup> Acts 2:45-47

1022 The church should consider the value of reemphasizing the communal nature of the  
1023 faith that we share. We recall that in both Testaments, salvation and blessing generally  
1024 come not to individuals, but to communities. The prayer of Jesus repeated every  
1025 Sunday in most of our congregations makes this distinction. “Our Father...Give *us* this  
1026 day *our* daily bread...Forgive *us our* sins as we forgive those who sin against *us*...Lead  
1027 *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from evil.” The hope for the Realm to come and  
1028 the petitions for sustenance, faithfulness, and protection belong to the collective whole,  
1029 not just the individual. Whether it is the promise made to Abram that “...in you **all** the  
1030 families of the earth will be blessed”<sup>106</sup> or the cosmic Christological claim in Colossians  
1031 “...and through him [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether  
1032 on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross,”<sup>107</sup> the workings  
1033 of God benefit individuals by their association with/in/through communities.

1034  
1035 There may be substantial benefit for both the local congregation and the Christian  
1036 Church (Disciples of Christ) to think more clearly about ways to articulate and claim the  
1037 necessity of being “members of one another” for authentic discipleship and true  
1038 spirituality. As we see worship participation shrinking in the beginning of the century  
1039 and the definition of “regular” church attendance dropping from nearly four Sundays a  
1040 month to less than two Sundays a month, we are clearly at risk of being less connected  
1041 within congregations and across our covenantal relationships. Are there ways we can  
1042 encourage more interaction between members across our communities of faith?

1043  
1044 **Stated Assumptions:**

1045 Stewardship is a spiritual discipline, not a religious-sanctioned shorthand term for  
1046 fundraising. It is as essential to the process of faith development as study, worship,  
1047 prayer, and service to others. The biblical understanding of stewardship is that it  
1048 touches every aspect of our lives and is grounded in the abundant love and provision of  
1049 God.

1050  
1051 Stewardship is about choices, many but not all of which have financial implications and  
1052 a connection to our possessions. It is also about living in gratitude, understanding that  
1053 all we have come to possess, share, and know is ultimately a gift from beyond our own  
1054 individual capacity or agency. Stewardship embraces the concept that life itself is a gift  
1055 and measure of grace.

1056  
1057 Understanding oneself as a steward is fundamental to Christian discipleship,  
1058 indispensable to the creation of healthy communities, and necessary for fulfilling the  
1059 practical command to love both self and neighbor. Expressions of stewardship may be  
1060 found in the intentional care for creation, the observance of Sabbath, the loving  
1061 attention to our minds and bodies, the sharing of the gospel, and the appropriate  
1062 management of our material resources. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but  
1063 rather instructive and an entry point into deeper dialogue.

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1066 Gen 12:3  
1067 Col 1:20

1065 A church body that can only embrace a narrow view of stewardship as it relates to  
1066 funding budgets, maintaining church property, and the operation/survival of the  
1067 organization/institution will be self-focused, less able to freely share, and thus hindered  
1068 in its efforts to fully love the neighbor, welcome the stranger, advocate for (and share  
1069 with) the poor, and not as likely to break away from cultural norms that may diminish  
1070 others. Such a community is driven by the anxiety of scarcity, which often leads to  
1071 hoarding and withdrawal from the neighbor and the stranger for fear of not having  
1072 “enough” for itself. Its prophetic witness is moderated by the risk of alienating its  
1073 members [contributors], who may find varying levels of comfort in the current culture  
1074 and have investment (knowingly or unknowingly) in maintaining the status quo.  
1075

1076 In contrast, a church body that is committed to the holistic practice of stewardship will,  
1077 as a fruit of that devotion, not only be a careful manager of its resources, but also will be  
1078 a witness to justice, a builder of community with the neighbor, a gracious place of  
1079 welcome, an advocate for the poor and disenfranchised, and by nature, will find itself  
1080 opposed to culturally-imposed definitions that delineate any human being as something  
1081 less than a child of God. Such a corporate body acts with confidence in speaking truth  
1082 into the culture because it believes in the abundance and provision of God without the  
1083 fear of scarcity. It boldly lives out its mission and ministry.  
1084

1085 It should not surprise us to learn that many recent studies confirm that within the marks  
1086 of growing, healthy, and thriving religious communities the focus of ministry is directed  
1087 “outward,” *toward the neighborhood* and larger circle surrounding the congregation’s  
1088 context.<sup>108</sup> Likewise, one consistent characteristic of struggling communities of faith is  
1089 that their focus is almost entirely “inward” and self-serving (not necessarily with malice  
1090 or intent) within the literal walls of the specific congregation or organization *with an eye*  
1091 *toward survival*. We ignore this correlation at our own peril.  
1092

1093 It follows that churches and communities of faith who understand and live into a holistic  
1094 sense of stewardship, including the practice of confident generosity, are likely to have  
1095 resources for the mission that God has called them to perform. They will also have the  
1096 capacity to share resources (human and financial) with their covenantal partners across  
1097 all expressions of the church to jointly enact the larger vision that God has given all of  
1098 us: *To be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world*.  
1099

1100 **For Consideration:**

- 1101 1. We should not be afraid to have high expectations about what it means to be a  
1102 follower of Jesus Christ. The church must take seriously the study of holistic  
1103 stewardship and teaching stewardship as an act of discipleship to its leaders, its  
1104 members, and its affiliated partners.
- 1105 2. Pastors, elders, and elected officers should commit to growth in the personal  
1106 practice of generosity, to lead by example and with integrity.
- 1107 3. The church, in all its expressions, should engage in an audit of its practices as  
1108 they relate to environmental concerns. Consumption of energy, water, the use of

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<sup>108</sup> Barbara Lynn Fullerton, *Growing Generosity: Identity as Stewards in the United Church of Canada*, May 2009.

1109 renewable resources, the practice of “reduce, reuse, and recycle,” and efforts to  
1110 tread more lightly upon the earth should be evaluated, and conservation  
1111 measures put into place. Congregations modeling such practices can then more  
1112 effectively teach their members to do the same.

- 1113 4. The church should be encouraged to reflect about the acquisitive nature of our  
1114 culture and the consequences of continuing to consume resources in ways that  
1115 are not sustainable, and, in some cases, harmful to the environment and our  
1116 brothers and sisters. How might we change our own expectations and behaviors  
1117 around what is “enough”? What is our prophetic responsibility to give voice to  
1118 this issue in this time and place?
- 1119 5. Congregations should commit to a practice of generosity, and consider  
1120 establishing a *minimum* goal of 10% of operational receipts to be invested  
1121 beyond the immediate needs of the congregation. If we are going to teach the  
1122 tithe, we must also practice it.
- 1123 6. Understanding that clarity of mission is essential to enlisting successful resource  
1124 support, congregations and related organizations are encouraged to establish or  
1125 reevaluate current plans for ministry to be certain they are still applicable to the  
1126 congregation’s capacity and context. People give their time and money to  
1127 organizations that they believe are making a difference and are responsible with  
1128 their finances.
- 1129 7. As a matter of achieving financial wellness (and creating an environment of  
1130 trust), congregations and related ministries of the church should invest in  
1131 understanding industry-agreed-upon standards for the handling of money and  
1132 financial resources. Known as “best practices,” issues of transparency, internal  
1133 controls, audits, the creation of budgets, and the published reporting of all assets,  
1134 liabilities, and fiscal policy should be followed and periodically reviewed  
1135 (regardless of the size of the congregation or its annual receipts/expenses!).
- 1136 8. Because money often creates anxiety that impacts individuals and family  
1137 systems, congregations should consider providing personal finance classes that  
1138 teach the effective management of money and increase the capacity to practice  
1139 generosity.
- 1140 9. The church should actively engage in teaching children, youth, and young adults  
1141 about the power, proper use, beneficial aspects, detrimental risks, and effective  
1142 management of money, as one portion of a deeper commitment to teaching  
1143 biblical stewardship as a critical part of the faith development curriculum. This is  
1144 a mission for the entire church, as the proper use of our resources (natural,  
1145 human, and economic) is essential to the long-term health and well-being of the  
1146 earth and all parts of God’s creation that call it home.
- 1147 10. Congregations might consider a year-round method to the stewardship  
1148 conversation. Rather than seeing the annual campaign as a three-week sprint  
1149 (and the only time the word stewardship is often mentioned), a more circumspect  
1150 approach that keeps all aspects of stewardship in play over time may prove to be  
1151 more effective.
- 1152 11. Communities of faith should consider the importance of having discussions with  
1153 members about the importance of having a will *and* the congregation should  
1154 have clear policies in place that would make receiving a testamentary gift a true

- 1155 blessing rather than a point of contention! Teaching stewardship, including  
1156 stewardship at the end of life, could make receiving such gifts the norm rather  
1157 than a surprise or rare occurrence. Such gifts can expand the ministry and  
1158 mission of the congregation or church-related institution well into the future. Until  
1159 Jesus comes again, there will always be a need for the gospel and its related  
1160 ministries of care and compassion.
- 1161 12. Congregations and other church-related organizations who hold assets should  
1162 consider their own legacy plans and have clear policies in place as to how their  
1163 mission and ministry will continue, should it become necessary to cease its  
1164 visible presence.
- 1165 13. Prayerful reflection is needed on what it means to be a covenantal partner in the  
1166 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), with attention to the financial support of  
1167 these common ministries we share that extend from our doorsteps to the ends of  
1168 the earth. What is the nature of our relationship and how do we support each  
1169 other so that our shared witness can reach its fullest expression?
- 1170 14. Mission and ministry priorities should drive financial decisions. Budgets should  
1171 serve the church, not the other way around. All organizational structures with  
1172 fiduciary responsibilities across the church should be encouraged to adopt this as  
1173 an operational policy and cultural practice.

### 1174 **Practical Applications of Stewardship in Our Time and Place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

1175 ***A Broad Perspective of Stewardship in Context:*** Recent shifts in the socio-political  
1176 spectrum draw attention to the need for holistic understandings of stewardship as the  
1177 church seeks to negotiate its way in this changing landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.  
1178 The rise of separatism in Western Europe, incursions by governments into the south  
1179 China Sea, and the trend toward a political climate of nationalism in the United States  
1180 all suggest global trends toward more isolating and greater privileged positions  
1181 (economic power) being sought by nation states in competition (rather than cooperation)  
1182 with each other. This ultimately undermines values witnessed to in both Testaments as  
1183 signs of the presence of the Realm of God because: a) it is contrary to the radical  
1184 welcome of hospitality (because nationalism raises the fear of the stranger from outside  
1185 our boundaries), and; b) the sharing of economic gain by the *whole community* is  
1186 abrogated due to a concentration of wealth to be controlled within a nation's  
1187 government and/or powerful elite.

1188  
1189  
1190 Historical perspective suggests that as nations become more parochial and less  
1191 cooperative across real and ideological boundaries regarding resources and the control  
1192 of economic factors, the risk of conflict is heightened. These circumstances often  
1193 marshal resources toward non-life-giving purposes and, in escalated conflict, lead to the  
1194 loss of life and damage to the environment. Whether the conflict is "cold" or develops  
1195 into a fully-waged war, such conditions usually impact the poor and the marginalized in  
1196 disproportionate ways.<sup>109</sup> *"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every*

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<sup>109</sup> *At the most basic level, resource allocation to the military/industrial complex in times of international conflict directs resources away from meeting basic social needs of the poor including nutrition support, health care, and housing. But it is not only the poor. This redistribution of economic priorities also impacts those things that enrich life for the mainstream of the country including parks and recreation, the arts, general infrastructure, investment in*

1197 *rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed,*  
1198 *those who are cold and are not clothed.”<sup>110</sup>*

1199  
1200 If biblical stewardship suggests (and we believe it does) an alternative reality relative to  
1201 the establishment of the beloved community, as well as the proper use of possessions  
1202 for the sharing of wealth generated by the earth’s resources *so that none are in need,*  
1203 then the church is necessarily an interested party with a needed voice in this context.

1204  
1205 ***A Specific Example of Engaging a Social-political Issue Based on Stewardship***

1206 ***Concerns:*** Potential impact to both the environment and the further overt concentration  
1207 of wealth within the United States exists, as evidenced by a subtle rule change to the  
1208 Congressional Budget that was passed with little public notice on January 3, 2017. The  
1209 rule relates to reporting the cost of transferring federal lands to local control. This  
1210 seemingly innocuous piece of procedural legislation, while not doing so directly, makes  
1211 it possible for future legislation that can place lands (currently held in the public trust as  
1212 a legacy for all United States citizens) for sale to developers and to industry, creating  
1213 privatized access and the potential for the land’s resources to be exploited for private  
1214 gain.<sup>111</sup> The church that is concerned about stewardship both as care for the earth and  
1215 as proper management of resources for the *common good* will be compelled to speak to  
1216 this issue. It is one example how streams of stewardship issues converge - in this case,  
1217 economic interests and care for the earth<sup>112</sup> - and how they have political implications.

1218  
1219 These are two simple ways that suggest practical applications regarding the relevance  
1220 of stewardship in this time and place. The number of examples that may be cited is  
1221 legion. We offer these in the broad and narrow sense as a starting place for a future  
1222 conversation within local, regional, and general expressions of the Christian Church  
1223 (Disciples of Christ).

1224  
1225 ***Final Comment:*** The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) seems to be uniquely fitted  
1226 for this time and place, especially as we seek to reach “the next generation.” Study  
1227 after study suggests that those who make up the generations we refer to as Millennials  
1228 and Gen X have been turned off by religions that they see as banal, bigoted, and  
1229 boring. Our method of reading scripture implies you don’t have to have bad science to  
1230 have good religion. Our assertion of the radical welcome of God at the Table speaks  
1231 boldly to a generation that wishes to rise above bigotry and the marginalization of  
1232 people based on what they believe are tired and irrelevant social classifications. Our  
1233 structure, as one that is covenantal, fits with generations seeking authentic relationships  
1234 over and against joining institutions. Our freedoms, as expressed in local autonomy give  
1235 rise to worship, spiritual formation, and mission that fit contexts in the unique

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*non-military research, and education. When the conflict becomes a war, those civilians caught in the wake of battle as” collateral damage” are left homeless, without basic resources, and become refugees, often at the mercy of foreign governments to provide aid and comfort.*

<sup>110</sup> Attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

<sup>111</sup> David Horsey, The Los Angeles Times, January 5, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> This is further exacerbated in a political context that seeks environmental deregulation in mining, forestry, and other heavy industry because it is perceived to increase cost and limit production.

1236 communities in which congregations are located. At our best, we can be relevant and  
1237 adaptive.

1238  
1239 The truth of the matter is that we should be growing in this century, and we assume one  
1240 of the reasons we are not doing so is the failure to effectively invite others into our story.  
1241 We are hiding our light under a bushel! Along with teaching the importance of faithful  
1242 financial generosity to sustain the Church's mission of reconciliation, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century  
1243 we must rediscover our evangelistic zeal and fully embrace what it means to be a  
1244 steward of the gospel. This seems particularly important in a time of deep cultural  
1245 division, which is where the church finds itself now when this document is presented for  
1246 consideration. We possess a great treasure of hope that calls people beyond anything  
1247 that might separate us from the truth that we belong to God and thus to one another.

1248  
1249 This vision of the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 55) is offered as a closing reflection:

1250 Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
1251 come to the waters;  
1252 and you that have no money,  
1253 come, buy and eat!  
1254 Come, buy wine and milk  
1255 without money and without price.

1256 <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
1257 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
1258 Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
1259 and delight yourselves in rich food.

1260 <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;  
1261 listen, so that you may live.  
1262 I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
1263 my steadfast, sure love for David.

1264 <sup>4</sup> See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
1265 a leader and commander for the peoples.

1266 <sup>5</sup> See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
1267 and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
1268 because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
1269 for he has glorified you.

1270 <sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
1271 call upon him while he is near;

1272 <sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way,  
1273 and the unrighteous their thoughts;

1274 let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,



1275 and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.  
1276 <sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
1277 nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
1278 <sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
1279 so are my ways higher than your ways  
1280 and my thoughts than your thoughts.  
1281 <sup>10</sup> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
1282 and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
1283 making it bring forth and sprout,  
1284 giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
1285 <sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
1286 it shall not return to me empty,  
1287 but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
1288 and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
1289 <sup>12</sup> For you shall go out in joy,  
1290 and be led back in peace;  
1291 the mountains and the hills before you  
1292 shall burst into song,  
1293 and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.  
1294 <sup>13</sup> Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
1295 instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
1296 and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
1297 for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.<sup>113</sup>

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1300  
1301 **The General Board recommends that the General Assembly**  
1302 **ISSUE GA-1732 for study by the Church.**  
1303 **(Discussion time: 12 minutes)**

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<sup>113</sup> This, and all scripture citations in this document, are from the NRSV @1989 National Council of Churches of Christ.