

“Stewardship; Then and Now
Scripture: Luke 8:1-3 & 1 Corinthians 9:7-17

From the very beginning the Christian church has had bills to pay. The stewardship program of the church began with Jesus. I believe the New Testament lays down some principles for the stewardship program of the church today. I think all of you as a congregation, but in particular the elders, need to pay close attention to these principals when it comes to deciding how money shall be spent.

One principal is that people who have experienced the healing and redeeming power of Christ give willingly, generously, and joyfully to support the teaching and healing ministry of the church. They don't have to be encouraged to pledge because they already tithe to the Lord. They take it for granted that a tenth of their income should be dedicated to the Lord's work. They are amazed, in fact, that God lets them have the other 90%. They know that they can never repay the debt of love they owe. They give not only their tithes. They give themselves and they give cheerfully.

Have you ever wondered how Jesus and his disciples supported themselves and they travelled through the towns and villages of Palestine? Where did they get money for food and clothing? Who paid their traveling expenses and utilities? Who supplied them with a manse to live in? Did they have an annual stewardship campaign? Did they go around once a year to get the disciples to sign pledge cards? Did they draw up a water-tight budge which prohibited them in the Christian Education Ministry when the budget was used up before the end of the year? Luke tells us that the expenses of the mission of Jesus and his disciples were paid by a number of women, all of whom had one thing in common. They had been cured by Jesus.

First mentioned is Mary Magdalene. Luke says that seven demons had gone out from her. Jesus had cast out seven demons from her. Whatever you believe about demon possession, at the very least, this shows that Jesus rescued her from a terrible life and a hopeless fate. Jesus transformed her life. She became a new person with new life and hope. Mary became a devoted follower of her Savior. When all others had fled in fear Mary stood by the cross at the crucifixion of Jesus. With two other women she discovered the empty tomb on the first East morning. She was

among the very first to see the Risen Christ after that terrible Friday. I have always especially liked Mary Magdalene. In fact my youngest sister's name is Mary Magdalene. This woman who was once demon possessed now supported the ministry of Jesus.

We don't know much about Joanna and Susanna. They were nobodies in the New Testament. Luke also mentions that they had also experienced the healing power of Christ in their lives. These three women and many others paid Jesus' traveling expenses, utilities, and all the other costs of his mission.

There were no urgent pleas for money. These women freely gave because their lives had been changed by the ministry of Jesus. The same is true today. You who have really experienced the healing and redeeming power of Christ in your lives are probably the ones who give most generously and most joyfully to the work of Christ's church. You probably give, not only to the church, but to a number of other Christian organizations. You know what Christ has done for you through the church and you want the same for others.

A good stewardship program, then, is a product, above all, of good evangelism. If a man or woman knows Christ and has experienced his healing and redeeming love her or she will give joyfully and generously so that others can know Christ. That's one of the foremost principles of a good stewardship campaign.

A second principal of New Testament stewardship is the ministry of teaching and preaching the gospel should take priority over everything else in the church. Paul says in verse 14 of our Scripture lesson from his first letter to the Corinthian Christians, "...the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel." The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel. They shouldn't have to moonlight. This is what the Lord Jesus commanded according to the apostle Paul. Paul is referring to the command of Christ found several times in the Gospels. Not long after Jesus chose the 12 disciples he sent them out to preach, teach, and heal. And he said to them, "Take nothing...no food, no extra clothing, no money, no nothing." They were to take no

resources of their own to support themselves. Jesus also told them not to use their powers of healing to raise money for themselves. He told them to heal people for free.

How then did they support themselves? How did they live? Jesus told them to find people in the town who were sympathetic to their ministry, stay with them, and depend upon them for all their needs, so they could give themselves full time to preaching, teaching, and healing. So they would not have to worry about the needs of this life. Jesus said to them, "The laborer is worthy of his wages." If they could find no one on the village to support them Jesus commanded them to shake the dust off their feet and leave. The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel.

This tells me that the minister should not feel that the congregation is doing him a favor for paying his salary or giving him a raise. He, of course, should get gratified that so many people in the congregation support his ministry. He should be humbled by the fact that the congregation puts up with his failings and weaknesses. But he has every reason to expect them to support him financially. He should not feel that the congregation is doing him a favor for paying him. He should have such a high view of the office of the ministry that he feels the congregation is privileged to support him in his office as a minister of the gospel.

This of course requires that the minister be faithful to Christ and to the word of God. He can't blame the congregation for failing to support him if he is not doing his job well because of negligence, or if he is unfaithful to the word of God, or if his lifestyle is scandalous, or if he doesn't care about the people, and if he is seeking only the benefits without the responsibilities of a minister of Christ.

But if people are responding to the Gospel, if people are being healed, if the dead in sins are being raised to newness of life through the preaching, teaching, and pastoral care of the minister, then the congregation has a responsibility to provide for his material needs. But we need to remember that not even Jesus himself could do mighty works in Nazareth because of the unbelief of the people.

The minister who faithfully carries out his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing knows that, despite his weaknesses, he is entitled to a salary comparable to the highest paid professional in the congregation. Of course few sincere ministers would want to live on such a high plain of living because of the scandal it would bring upon the gospel. But a faithful minister knows that he works every bit as hard as a doctor or lawyer or businessman as he ministers to the spiritual and physical ills of the people, and as he teaches them about God's love and judgment in Christ. He knows the value of his work far outweighs that of any other occupation or profession.

Nevertheless the apostle Paul didn't abuse his rights. In fact when he was in Corinth he refused to take any pay whatsoever. He didn't want the Corinthians to feel that they were doing him a favor by paying him. Now when Paul was in Philippi he willingly accepted the generous financial support of the Christians there. But not in Corinth. He boasted of the fact that he refused to take anything from them. He said, "I'd rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting." I am somewhat more nor less uncompromising than Paul.

But the teaching ministry of the church includes more than the minister. The congregation also has a responsibility to support all the education and evangelism programs of the church. The teaching and evangelistic ministries of the church should take priority over everything else.

If we really had to do without, think of some of the things we could get by without if we absolutely had to, and still be a Christian church. We could get along without a building, like the Amish, or like the early Christians we could meet in homes. Yet look at the priority most churches place on their buildings. If we really had to do without we could do without a paid sexton, treasurer, secretary, or organist. We should really be thankful that we have these luxuries at such a cheap price. All these people, if you added up the hours they work the church would be working far, far below minimum wages. And I really would hate to see what our church in Reedsville would look like without these people...but the disciples of Jesus in the first century usually did these things voluntarily, on a part time basis.

The churches that are dying and the churches that are going downhill are the churches who are putting too many other less important things ahead of evangelism and education. When financial

problems arise evangelism and education are the first programs to be cut in these churches. The Presbyterian Church can't expect to grow unless we support the Sunday school by attending it and giving money to buy the teaching materials. This holds true for the Good News Club which, I believe, Rev. Olson-Sawyer has started in the past year.

If we as Presbyterians support the evangelism and educational programs of the church with our time and money there is no reason on earth why our church, as a denomination, and your church here in Highland Park, and the church I serve in Reedsville, should not grow. There are churches all around us some of which are growing and some of which are dying. The difference between a growing and dying church often depends upon the importance a church places on evangelism and education. I have told my congregation on several occasions that if our church is unwilling or unable to support and encourage Christian education and evangelism that we ought to shut the doors right now and turn that beautiful sanctuary into a museum. But if we get our priorities straight, God will bless us and you, and both of us will grow.

Here then are two principals of stewardship. The first principal: Our desire to support the ministry of the church financially grows out of our relationship to Christ. If we have experiences the redeeming and healing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ we want to support the ministry of the church with our tithes.

The second principal: a congregation has a primary responsibility to support the teaching, preaching, and healing ministries of the church. Without these the church withers and dies. With them the church grows and flourishes.

Amen.