



CARIBBEAN BRETHREN ASSEMBLIES CONFERENCE 2017
Cascadia Hotel, # 67, Ariapita Road, St. Ann's, Port of Spain, Trinidad.

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PRACTISING STEWARDSHIP

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Meaning of stewardship

To begin, it would be well to be clear about the meaning of 'stewardship' in the title which I have been given. I suppose that when we say 'steward' in the modern world, the thought that immediately comes to mind is the young men and women who look after us on an aeroplane or a ship. The English word has a wide variety of meanings, but the one meant in my title is, according to one of my dictionaries:

A person employed to manage the property or affairs of another ... (esp. the paid manager of a large estate or household)

Those familiar with Scottish terminology would call this a 'factor'. The factor was a person of great importance to the tenants of a great Scottish estate, but he needed always to remember that, whatever his power, he was not a member of the family. That's a thought that is not irrelevant to our subject because Christian leaders particularly do sometimes succumb to the temptation to become big-headed and autocratic, and treat their fellow Christians badly. They need to remember, however, that they are no more than servants (chief servants perhaps) and have to give an account to their master in due course.

The biblical concept of stewardship

The word as such does not appear extensively in Scripture, apart from fairly frequent use in the story of Joseph to describe office-bearers in the royal household in Egypt. Where it does occur in the apostolic letters it is closely related to church leadership and the exercise of ministry, as we shall see.

Creation

But the concept that human beings are stewards/factors of God's work is there from the very outset of creation. It is not too much to say that humans were created as stewards, to be responsible to God for creation.

- Humans were created as **responsible** for God's creation: 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' (Gen. 1: 26)
- Humans were created to **work and take care** of God's creation: 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.' (Gen. 2: 15) (We should note that it entailed immense freedom: 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of



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the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.' (Gen. 2: 16, 17)

- Humans were created **accountable to God** for their lives and for creation: 'Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"' (Gen. 3: 8, 9), and a serious appraisal conversation followed, with drastic consequences.

Stewardship entails responsibility for things, it entails work and care for things, and it entails accountability for things.

And note that in this seminal story, the man and the woman tried to evade their accountability, by covering up and hiding in the trees. Too often our Christian stewardship is evaded by the same means, and also by denial, by pretence (remember Ananias and Sapphira, who pretended that their stewardship was more virtuous than it was—Acts 5: 1–11), and by absenting ourselves from our responsibilities when it suits us.

The parables of Jesus

Ideas of stewardship and the accountability of servants (stewardship and servanthood are closely related—a steward is a senior servant, and he should not forget it) were familiar to the people of Jesus' day, and run through quite a number of his parables. We can think of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18: 21–35), the shrewd manager (Lk. 16: 1–15), and perhaps even that of the tenants who killed finally the owner's son (Lk. 20: 9–19). But the most obvious is that of the talents (Mt. 25: 14–30). There, the owner goes on a journey (the Lord has returned to glory, from which he will return, among other things to judge our performance as stewards and servants). He gives varying sums of money for his servants to manage—in modern parlance, believers are all investment managers with varying portfolios to manage (we have varying spiritual gifts and varying amounts and depth of spiritual gifts). The servant with five talents produced five more; the servant with two talents, two more. The one who was accountable for having received one talent produced nothing. His argument was that he was afraid to do anything else, perhaps losing it altogether. But the master clear about the motivation: 'You wicked, lazy servant!' (Mt. 25: 26); 'that worthless servant' (v. 30). He was too idle to do the work needed to produce more; he could at least have lent it to a bank.

Apostolic usage

This metaphor of accountability for the character and quality of service for God is continued by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3. He says, 'by the grace God has given me [spiritual gifts, which he refers to later in the letter (ch. 12) are *charismata*, things of *charis*—grace of God],



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I laid a foundation as an expert builder ... each one should be careful how he builds ... If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.' (1 Cor. 3: 10–15)

Our work for God is going to be put to the most exacting test by the Lord himself ultimately. Whether it survives depends on the quality of what we have built by the grace of God. (Certainly, what has been built in the power of the flesh will not survive.) What's the quality of your recent work for Christ? You are made in the image of God: so you have the ability to judge for yourself as to the quality of your work, and whether it will survive the testing of God.

Paul continues the thought at the beginning of chapter 4, which I cite in the RSV for the sake of the words used:

This is how one should regard us, as servants [attendants] of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.'

We can see that this business of being an accountable servant of Christ is a very serious one, and that both motive and quality of outcome matter (it is all too easy to do God's work for the wrong motive, including honour among and adulation by others and self-satisfaction, self-indulgence, psychological bolstering, and so on).

To Titus, Paul used the language of stewardship specifically in respect of eldership. Again, I quote from the RSV: 'For a bishop [*episkōpos*—overseer, 'elder' in v. 5], as God's steward [*oikomonos*¹—household manager], must be blameless; [etc.]' (Tit. 1: 7 - 9) Peter employs the same word, but applies it to all believers in the use of their spiritual gifts:

Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each

¹ Souter's lexicon (OUP 1916) offers '(a) a steward (commonly a superior slave of tried character, who looked after the accounts of a household []); ...' The word was also used of the trustee of a young person's property until they reached the age at which they could be responsible for it themselves.



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has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace; whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; ... (1 Pet. 4: 8–11a & b)

From all this, it is clear that that just as human beings were appointed as stewards of the first creation, so they are appointed stewards of the new creation in Christ, that they are required to use the spiritual gifts that God has given them in the gospel and to build up the church, and that they and their work will be seriously judged by God with respect to their stewardship in due course. God supplies the means: the question is, do we have the will, the application, the good motives, the faith, to use those means with the geometrical progression that God clearly intends?

Practising stewardship

The title that I was assigned for this address wisely, however, raised not only the meaning of Christian stewardship, but more particularly how it should be put into practice. Let me therefore discuss some facets of practising stewardship; I do so bearing in mind the close relationship between stewardship and servanthood—as already noted, in biblical times the steward was by definition a servant, even a slave.

Essentially, the question is, what does good stewardship require in the Christian?

Prioritization of the Kingdom

I suggest, first, that practising good stewardship in the whole Christian life will flow from full surrender of the life to Christ, sacrificing our bodies to God (which is our spiritual worship,

our reasonable service (Rom. 12: 1)), being transformed in our minds (Rom. 12: 2), and taking up our cross daily (Mt.16: 24–27). As the apostle Paul put it to Timothy, using the metaphor not of household but military service: 'Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him.' (2 Tim. 2: 3, 4) Same is true of the good steward: his or her aim is to satisfy their master, to maximise the interests of the family that employs them. In fact, Paul knew that he had no need to say it to Timothy: for he had told the Philippians of Timothy: 'I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.' This remains true of Christians: there are many Christians who look out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. The good steward prioritizes the interests of Jesus Christ and his church. What we do through our bodies follows from what we think to be important. Many Christians squander and waste their gifts, bury the talent in the ground, because their priorities are wrong.

Commitment and self-sacrifice

Implicit in prioritizing the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour is personal commitment and willingness to sacrifice oneself and one's own interests for it.



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Here, again, we need to follow the example of our Lord. To accomplish the will of the Father, he sacrificed all for us, for our salvation. Indeed, he went to an early death for us. We should be prepared to go to an early death for him. The tragedy is that humans curtail their lives for the sake of all sorts of passing pleasures, but are considered mad and fanatical if they sacrifice their lives for the sake of their Saviour. The apostle encouraged us to share in Christ's sufferings that we might share in his resurrection (Phil. 3: 10, 11)

We need to follow the example of the apostles. If they had not been prepared to make sacrifices, in many cases ultimately of their lives in martyrdom, the church would never have been started, it would never have got to where it did a mere 300 years after Pentecost. Paul spoke of pouring himself out as a libation on the sacrifice of the Philippian Christians (Phil. 2: 17, 18). Such was his stewardship of his life for the sake of the interests of his master, that he was prepared to endure incredible sufferings for the sake of his Master and his Kingdom—see, particularly, 2 Cor. 1: 8–11 & 11: 23–43. So often as Christians, we are not prepared to tolerate minor inconvenience to our lives for the sake of the Kingdom.

Diligence

Implicit in the New Testament's view of stewardship and servanthood is diligence about the Master's business. One of the illusions that our age—particularly our celebrities—like to convey is that their success is all effortless, the product of their sheer natural ability. Achievement just happens, without thought, preparation, and the application of acquired expertise. (I should say that this is particularly a male affectation: women generally know better!)

But the facts of real life are different. There is very little that can be achieved in this life without hard graft and application. I have been watching with some anxiety my 18-year old grandson discover this: until recently in his courses, his natural intelligence was enough to enable him to work it out on the spot. But he is doing maths and physics and other hard sciences. Now he needs to work if he is going to get the hang of it. Successful sports people know this: they do not achieve moderate success, let alone the pinnacle, without hours and hours and hours of training and practice—their lives need to be consumed by it. I dare to suggest that this is true of Usain Bolt and Venus Williams, even though they give the impression that it is all effortless! And of course they need to be both supremely fit and thoroughly competent in their different disciplines.

Of course, we achieve nothing for the Kingdom without the presence of filling of the Holy Spirit; we achieve nothing in our own carnal strength. But, paradoxically, the New Testament is utterly clear that we are called to devote ourselves to the Kingdom and to use our spiritual gifts if the Kingdom is to be built. Note that the Lord in his parable said that the man who buried his talent in the ground was 'lazy' (Mt. 25: 26). Lazy Christians achieve little for the Kingdom.



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(Even as I have penned these paragraphs, I have attended a Partnership board meeting in which the Scripture read was Joshua 24, with its emphasis that God alone gave Joshua and the people the land, and yet they were to serve in order to achieve it. (Joshua 24: 11–24)

Quality work

Successful sports people need not only application and graft, but technique. Here, from the Christian point of view, we are in the area of the work of the Spirit, who enables us to achieve beyond what we imagine (Eph. 3: 20, 21). As we co-operate with the Holy Spirit, by making our time and energy available to him, he does that. Nevertheless, we need the right attitude: 'Do all to the glory of the Lord Jesus'; work not to please human masters, but to please the Lord; do it 'as unto the Lord' (Col. 3: 22–25). Sometimes, Christians are content with slap-dash work for the Lord, of a poor quality which they would never tolerate from themselves or others in their own businesses. The good and faithful steward will be commended for quality as well as quantity, at least to the extent that their spiritual gifts enable them to achieve quality—the Judge of all the earth who does what is right (Gen. 18: 25) will, we may assume, judge us by what we have been capable of when our work is finally put to the test.

Prioritization of the Kingdom in time

Implicit in what I have already argued is that our use of the time available to us is embraced in practising Christian stewardship. In our modern consumerist age, we readily understand that one of the most precious commodities is time, and we value our own time far more than that of other people. At least, I have observed that people are far readier to waste other people's time than their own—for example, by arriving late at meetings!

We prize our own time, and think carefully about how we are going to use it, and as fallen human beings we use our time on the things that we think most important to us. But the Kingdom of God is advanced, among other things, by the application and consumption of the time of believers in building that Kingdom: 'redeeming the time,' said the apostle, 'for the days are evil.' (Eph. 5: 16) 'Redeem' means to 'buy back', and the buying back is with our own time! We need to put ourselves out, to take the chances that we are given to extend the kingdom. This is not just a question of evangelism, though it certainly embraces that. But we are also called to fellowship with those who are believers (e.g., Acts 2: 42–46; 1 Cor. 11: 17–34)—this is central to the life and strength of the local church. That is not achieved without spending time—being church in the biblical sense is far more than attendance at formal meetings, arriving late and going as though shot from a gun at the end! Loving and caring for one another as the New Testament envisages demands time, both in collective meetings and in terms of pastoral care outside them.

Of course, this is not just a question of church meetings, or even the work of the church and other Christian organizations, causes and projects with which we are associated. When it comes to time, it is needed for household devotions (much



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neglected in the modern age, to the damage of our children's spiritual lives), and for our individual devotional lives—the time that needs to be spent in personal Bible meditation and study, and in personal prayer. Stewardship embraces this too.

Prioritization of the Kingdom in mental energy

I have already touched on the importance of prioritizing the work of the Kingdom. But there is another practical aspect of it that is important. In our approach to church life, with biblical warrant, we do not make a distinction between clergy and laity, between full-time or part-time Christian service and others' Christian service. We regard it as a positive advantage, as it is, that some or all of the leaders of local churches have jobs in the 'real' world (as I did myself for many years, so I know what I am talking about on this point) and so have a practical pastoral understanding of life in that 'real' world.

This poses the challenge not only of how, in our personal stewardship, time is to be allocated between the work of the Kingdom, our own personal calling in the 'real' world, and our families (there is no implicit prioritization in the order in which I mention them). There is also the question of our mental prioritization between them, their ordering in terms of the mental energy that we devote to each of them—that is, what matters to us most among them. I suggest that home and family and the Kingdom have to be delicately balanced, and it is not always easy—in balancing the two we need a great deal of help and grace from the Lord. But our work comes a definite third in our mental priorities, even if we spend most time there and even if we always have to ensure that, precisely because we are believers, those to whom we have contracted our time are fully satisfied by the quality of what we do there: we have to be good stewards in the workplace as well as in the church (it was precisely in that context that the apostle said that we work as those serving the Lord, not as men-pleasers (Col. 3: 23)).

This said, practising Christian stewardship calls us to passion and striving for the Kingdom. We shall of course do the work to the best of our ability, even when the circumstances and perhaps the attitudes of fellow believers mean that we find it difficult to summon enthusiasm for it. But in normal circumstances, we should serve with zeal and passion for that to which God has called us.

Purity of motive

In his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot, the Christian playwright of last century, puts into the mouth of Archbishop Thomas à Becket (the former buddy of King Henry II, of the twelfth century—the play is about the murder of Thomas in Canterbury Cathedral by four knights either at the behest of Henry II or as a result of careless speech by him ('who will rid me of this pestilential priest', or words to that effect) the following words in response to the third tempter: 'this last is greatest sin: to do the right thing for the wrong reason'.

In practising Christian stewardship, it is easy to do the right thing for the wrong reason—for our motives to be impure and thereby for our service to be polluted. The



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temptation is greatest in respect of the exercise of public spiritual gift, responsibility, and leadership, though we can be secretly inordinately proud of our service for God. A considerable proportion of Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees was for precisely this: that their service was performed publicly 'before men', precisely to attract approval, adulation and praise (see, e.g., Mt. 6: 1–18). Our stewardship can be marred by the same kind of false motive.

Stewardship of money

Many Christians in our time automatically think that when the term, Christian 'stewardship', is used it applies exclusively to money and giving. I have left the matter until now, precisely in order to emphasize that the concept of stewardship goes far beyond our use of money. But it does certainly include it. In fact, it is not the least of the areas in which we need to practise stewardship in a biblical way.

A paternal aunt of my wife was married for thirty years or more to a Strict Baptist pastor. A proportion of those years was spent serving in two different Strict Baptist congregations in Suffolk. My wife's aunt used to say quite often and quite vehemently, 'The SB's in Suffolk will never experience blessing from God until they learn to give.'

I fear that the same can often be so among those of Brethren background, notwithstanding that many among them 'live by faith' in the manner that Anthony Norris Groves and George Müller encouraged and exemplified, and notwithstanding that we have many organizations which look to us in faith for the finance they need to do the work to which the Lord has called them.

Of course, I must be careful in treating this subject in the Caribbean, especially as a representative, as it were of the former colonial power! From affluent Europe, I must beware of hypocrisy. I have done some checking up too. I am aware that, while economic growth rates in the Caribbean were fairly respectable before the financial crisis of 2008, they have been variable and weak since then in many countries in the area. At constant 2010 prices, national income for the small Caribbean states has been more or less static at about \$(international PPP)14,000 per capita since the world financial crisis of 2008 (between 1990 and 2007 it grew very nicely from \$9000 to \$14,500 in 2007).² And I am aware that the fall in the world oil price since mid-2014 has been disastrous for Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, and GDP fell last year by 10% in both countries. I am aware too that remittances from abroad remain important across the Caribbean. So all in all, these remain difficult times financially in this part of the world.

² See the World Bank figures at <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&type=metadata&series=NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD> (accessed on 12.7.2017) which gives details of the basis of the figures.



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But there is danger in automatically assuming that therefore the lion's share of funding for Christian work in the Caribbean must come from the USA, Canada, and the UK. Even in difficult times, we need to ask ourselves whether our situation is not similar to that of the remnant who had returned to Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon. Immediately on their return, they laid the foundation stone of a replacement temple. But then for 20 years, they did nothing. They explained this in a religious way, going so far as to imply that their inaction was the will of God: 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.' (Haggai 1: 2) How often Christians say, 'The time's not yet ripe' for some work for God, when we ought just to be getting on with it with the resources that we have? In the case of the building of the second temple, the problem was not with God's will, but theirs: 'Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"' (Haggai 1: 3) They were prepared to spend on themselves and their own houses, but not on God's house. Indeed, when they returned from Babylon, the Median ruler, Cyrus, ensured that they came with substantial grants to rebuild the temple (because the Median approach was to foster all local religions, to ensure that the gods were happy). Is it possible that grant funds had been diverted to build their paneled houses? Today, sometimes God's work struggles because we are not prepared to find the money for it. (I am not necessarily thinking of the money for church buildings, but that to fund workers, organisations and projects. I have noticed over the years, for example, how full-time workers living by faith among the Brethren struggle financially—as I have said on one or two occasions in the Caribbean, they cannot live on air!)

In this context, we should remember that, though the exiles did bring resources back with them from Babylon, and in the next century when Ezra, and subsequently Nehemiah, returned to help the work of restoration they also brought funds with them, God through Haggai was expecting them to find the funds themselves in 520 BC. Bear in mind, too, that there was a time in the 17th and 18th centuries when the church was much poorer in the UK and the USA than it is now, and there was no one outside those countries to whom the churches could look for funds: there was no stream of aid or relief and development funds: what they did, they had to fund themselves.

I can only ask the question: are you practising financial stewardship in the way that you should in the West Indies? Bear in mind that the principle of the New Testament is not tithing (10%), but extravagant generosity after the fashion of God's grace to us (2 Cor. 8: 6–15), that is, well beyond the level of tithing. However, if you are not tithing at least, perhaps you had better start there!

Stewardship of creation

In much of what I have said, I have focussed on the obligations of the stewards of the new creation in Christ Jesus. But as human beings still in this first creation, we should not treat our obligations in the old creation as abrogated. We are still stewards of the old creation, and our duty is to work it and take care of it as creatures made in the image of the Creator. We may have been excluded from the



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garden. But one implication of even of the Old Covenant was that, if there was obedience to it, the land would flow with milk and honey. This side of the cross,

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice [I take it that the apostle is referring to the curse of the ground as a result of the sin of our first parents], but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Rom. 8: 19–21)

I take it that this vision will be fulfilled in all that follows from the return of Christ. But we are now sons of God, and we anticipate to some degree the freedom that we shall then enjoy. In Christ, we are able to fulfill the stewardship of creation in ways that our fallen forebears were not able to do.

This means that our Christian stewardship how we care for this present creation, as individuals, in our families, in our businesses, in our workplaces, in our churches still matters. Does your church adorn its location, not only in your Christian living but also practically in the environment where your buildings are located?

Practising good Christian stewardship in a consumeristic, narcissistic age

The subject of Christian stewardship, with the servanthood that it entails, is counter-cultural. We live in the age in which the consumer is king, in which we as individual consumers must get what we want. We live in an age in which self-fulfillment is all. What could be more narcissistic than the selfie, properly so called! (Narcissus was a figure in Greek mythology who was so entranced by his own beauty as he looked at his image in the pool that he looked and looked until he eventually died, having lost the will to live.) Our age focusses on the self, and as Christians we are not conscious of just how much we are entranced by the culture in which we are found. But at the heart of both stewardship and service is the idea of acting on behalf of the other, and ignoring one's own interests. Good Christian stewardship therefore presents a special challenge for us in this generation, and special grace is required from God in order to develop the Christian character to meet it. There is a reward in facing it and overcoming: 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness. (Mt. 25: 21 & 23) But note the reward is not leisure: it is to be given still more responsibility, within the confidence of the Master!