

Preaching for Whole Life Stewardship¹

Al Tizon

Challenging the Global Dream

Lord, help us to remember that all that we have is yours. We commit not just what has been collected in these [offering] plates, but also what we've collected in our bank accounts, our homes, and our properties to your purposes and to your glory. Amen.

This simple prayer, dedicating the tithes and offerings of the people of God, contains necessary elements toward an accurate understanding of biblical stewardship.

Stewardship is not a popular subject. As Scott Rodin quips, “Pastors do not like to preach about it, nor do parishioners like to hear about it; few people write about it and even less read about it.”² Its unpopularity has to do with the unfortunate fact that people, of which Christians are no exception, believe that their wealth is theirs to do with it what they deem best for their lives. The pursuit of the good life of upward mobility, comfort, security and luxury has spread well beyond the western nations and affected many Asian countries as well and many have been culturally conditioned to believe that this domain belongs privately to each person or church, and that they have the right to do whatever they please with their hard earned wealth. In America, where I live and serve, this is known as pursuing the “American Dream.”

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²R. Scott Rodin, *Stewards in the Kingdom: A Theology of Life in All Its Fullness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 9.

This article is written with a specific audience in mind—ministers who primarily serve and preach to Christians and churches with means, wherever they might be, because the American Dream has now become the “Global Dream.”³ Now more than ever, the church around the world, especially those blessed with abundance, needs a fresh and powerful sense of authentic, biblical stewardship. And a certain type of preaching—missional preaching—has an integral part to play in this.

Biblical stewardship not only challenges the privatization of wealth that fortifies the Dream; it challenges the Dream itself by way of the gospel. It threatens what people (again, Christians are no exception) have been taught to be their basic inalienable right, their sense of entitlement. As Christians, it is difficult to be confronted with the possibility that perhaps in the virtually sub-conscious pursuit of the Dream, we have become greedy, materialistic, and consumerist; that perhaps we have taken the culture’s cues and have chosen mammon over God (Matt. 6:24). Such thoughts—which get at the heart of biblical stewardship—prick, disturb, and anger good Christian people. So most ministers steer clear of the subject; either that or they reduce stewardship to the management of the church budget and its facilities.

Missional preachers, however, understand and teach biblical stewardship, helping God’s people to view and use resources available to them for the advancement of the kingdom. By doing so, the church takes on the Global Dream. For example in America, mega-church pastor David Platt has called not just his congregation but the American church as a whole to take the radical implications of the gospel seriously, to be part of what he calls “the Radical Experiment,” which reflects the essence of biblical stewardship. In prophetic fashion, Platt challenges God’s people (himself included):

I dare you to test the claims contained in the gospel, maybe in a way you have never done before. I invite you to see if radical obedience to the commands of Christ is more meaningful, more fulfilling, and more gratifying than the American [Global] Dream. And I guarantee that if you complete this experiment, you will possess an insatiable desire

³F. Albert Tizon, “Revisiting the Mustard Seed: The Filipino Evangelical Church in the Age of Globalization,” *Phronesis* 6/1 (1999), 3ff.

to spend the rest of your life in radical abandonment to Christ for his glory in all the world.⁴

Such preaching at The Church at Brook Hills—Platt’s congregation in Birmingham, Alabama USA—has taken its members into a wonderfully new and radical direction. From blindly embracing the church growth theology of the mega-church, which can be viewed as “the American Church Dream,” to praying for the needs of the world and sacrificing what they have in the service of the spiritually and materially poor, the Church at Brook Hills has begun to practice biblical stewardship.⁵

From Coins to Creation: Whole Life Stewardship

Biblical stewardship is whole life stewardship.⁶ Far from its common reduction to staying in the black in the church’s annual budget, stewardship entails all that has been given to us, from the earth’s abundant resources to spiritual and material blessings to our relationships to even life itself. “Nothing is left outside the realm of stewardship,” claims pastor-teacher Bedru Hussein, “We are completely God’s, including what we are and what we have.”⁷

Hussein’s words point to the essence of whole life stewardship—namely, that nothing ultimately belongs to us, but in fact belongs to God, the Creator and Redeemer of all things. To be a steward then is to be entrusted by God to care for, manage, and cultivate all that is God’s. This includes everything, from our financial holdings to the environment and everything in between. From coins to creation, we have been called to be good stewards as an integral part of authentic

⁴David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 184.

⁵To learn about the Radical Experiment, see “A Radical Proposal,” <http://www.brookhills.org/media/series/the-radical-experiment-2010/> and “The Radical Experiment 2010,” <http://www.brookhills.org/media/series/the-radical-experiment-2010/> (accessed 23 November 2010).

⁶I first encountered the term “whole life stewardship” in the works of Tom Sine, which include *The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 243-252 and the earlier *Why Settle for More and Miss the Best?* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 142-150.

⁷Bedru Hussein and Lynn Miller, *Stewardship for All?* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 11.

Christian discipleship. What would happen if Christians truly believed that they have simply been entrusted with God's abundant wealth? What would happen if we truly believed that our homes, our cars, our clothes, our cash were in fact *not* ours, but God's? Internalizing this sense of God's ultimate ownership undergirds what it means to be a biblical steward.

Traits of a Biblical Steward

A Careful View of Wealth

Certain traits accompany biblical stewards. First, they develop a careful view of wealth; they do not automatically equate prosperity with good. Contrary to the claims of the prosperity gospel, one of the most insidious "Christian" versions of the Global Dream, wealth does not always indicate divine blessing. In fact, in light of Jesus' teaching that it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25), wealth might be a bad thing, a dangerous thing, a thing that impedes our salvation. Social ethicist Robert Franklin asserts that "the gospel of prosperity is a competitor to authentic Christianity. . ."⁸ Indeed, the insatiable pursuit of prosperity (which at the end of the day is nothing less than the love of money that Paul warns us against in 1 Tim. 6:10) can deceptively place us at odds with the gospel. To become rich as the pinnacle of success makes total sense in the secular utopia of the Global Dream, but in light of biblical stewardship where wealth might even be a liability, it makes no sense at all.

Furthermore, a careful view of wealth dispels the notion that the assets and possessions we do have can be used primarily for own personal ends (read: we can do anything we want with our money). As *entrusted* wealth, we would in fact be careful to use it at the very least for things not contrary to the kingdom of God, at best, for purposes that advance the kingdom's agenda. Tom Sine asks with prophetic hope, "Can you imagine the difference it might make if we in the Western church decided to steward all our resources in ways that intentionally

⁸Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 118.

seek to advance God's purposes first instead of prioritizing our own needs and wants?"⁹ This attitude flies in the face of viewing our wealth first and foremost as the means for personal advancement, comfort and recreation.

Kingdom Generosity

Such a careful view of wealth leads to a second trait of biblical stewards—namely, kingdom generosity. Which is positively ironic: in our cautious posture toward the prosperity that may come our way, our eyes begin to open to the vast needs around the world and as a result become lavishly generous. How can we become otherwise in light of the world's poor? According to *Global Issues*' "Poverty Facts and Stats:"

- At least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day.
- The poorest 40% of the world's population accounts for 5% of global income, while the richest 20% accounts for 75%.
- 22,000 children die each day due to poverty (UNICEF).
- Around 28% of all children in developing countries are estimated to be underweight or stunted. The two regions that account for the bulk of the deficit are South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.
- An estimated 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDs, with three million deaths in 2004.
- Some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation.¹⁰

As followers of Jesus become more aware of these needs, the desire to alleviate the suffering grows with it. And as biblical stewardship takes root—as we begin to see God's resources primarily to fulfill the agenda of the kingdom—we become a generous people, finding creative ways to give away our wealth (albeit wisely and carefully) such as "the graduated tithe" proposed by Ron Sider in his

⁹Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 247.

¹⁰"Poverty Facts and Stats," *Global Issues*. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats> (accessed 24 November 2010).

classic *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*¹¹ or the aforementioned “Radical Experiment” being “conducted” in and through the people of the Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham. The Advent Conspiracy, a movement that seeks to save Christmas from the spirit of greed, over-consumption and over-commercialization, is yet another model that has helped many Christians and churches to truly celebrate Jesus during the holidays by genuinely reaching out to the poor and the lonely.¹² In one form or another, authentic biblical stewards live out a kingdom generosity, giving abundantly toward the alleviation of the suffering of their hungry, thirsty, naked and homeless neighbors around the world; for “how does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (1 John 3:17).

Commitment to the Simple Life

Kingdom generosity is authenticated by a commitment to the simple life, a third trait of biblical stewards. Something is not quite right when people claim to be generous (or viewed by the world as generous) and yet live luxuriously. Such generosity may be sincere, but it falls short of the biblical call to give sacrificially (Mark 12:41-44). Indeed to be truly generous is to ask at some point regarding our lifestyles, “How much is enough?”¹³

Contrary to the stereotype of those who decry extravagance and materialism, the call to simplicity does not just come from the radical, hippie, leftist fringe. For example, the Lausanne Covenant, a document that has served as the statement of faith and purpose for hundreds of evangelical churches and organizations around the world, states, “Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a *simple lifestyle* in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism.”¹⁴ (Emphasis added)

¹¹Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Fifth edition (W Publishing Group, 2005), 187-190.

¹²To find out more about the Advent Conspiracy, go to “Advent Conspiracy,” <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/> (accessed 24 November 2010).

¹³Platt, *Radical*, 107-140.

¹⁴“Lausanne Covenant,” in John Stott, Ed. *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 33-34.

Biblical stewards know, however, that the call to simplicity ultimately comes from Scripture. Biblical principles that build its case include the equalization of wealth as seen in the Year of Jubilee when God commanded all properties to be restored to their original owners (stewards?) and all debts to be cancelled (Lev. 25:8-38), the prophetic warnings against compassionless luxury (Amos 4:1-3; Jas. 5:1-8), and sacrificial concern for the poor as a prerequisite for discipleship (Luke 18:18-25).¹⁵ Just like with kingdom generosity, the commitment to simplicity flows out of a biblically-grounded and heart-wrenching awareness that billions of people suffer from inadequate food supply, clean water, sturdy housing, security, and other realities of poverty. As the Lausanne Covenant states as the basis of the call to a simple lifestyle, “All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it.”¹⁶

A commitment to simplicity embodies a number of key missional values. First, it reflects God’s concern for the poor. By identifying with the poor by way of a simple lifestyle, we bear witness to the God of the poor. Second, it puts us in position to actually address human need by way of freed-up resources and freed-up time. Third, it frees us up to build community with one another. Rather than spending most of our time in the rat race in order to keep up with the Joneses, we free up space and time *from* the rat race in order to get to *know* the Joneses! And fourth, it challenges the idols of consumerism and materialism that so plague high society. Biblical stewards, who are committed to the simple life, bring gospel sanity to bear upon the out-of-control “lifestyles of the rich and famous” to which many people aspire.

The simple life looks differently from person to person and from church to church, so to sit in judgment against those who don’t practice simplicity according to one’s own rigid standards would violate the humility that accompanies simplicity. Popular American activist Shane Claiborne recalls a time when he flew to Toronto, Canada for a conference on simple living. Feeling pretty smug about how he and the rest of the folks at the Simple Way in Philadelphia were exemplifying the simple life, Claiborne ran into friend and then-editor of *Geez Magazine* Will Braun, who looked a little tired. When Claiborne

¹⁵For a more a just treatment of the biblical basis for simplicity, see Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco et al.: Harper & Row, 1981), 15-51.

¹⁶“Lausanne Covenant,” 33.

inquired about it, he discovered that Braun, an advocate of the de-motorizing of society, had just arrived from bicycling a thousand miles to get to the conference!¹⁷ For some, the commitment to simple living might mean doing less driving and more carpooling; for others like Braun it might mean championing the de-motorization of society altogether. For some, simple living might mean downsizing to a smaller place; for others, it might mean living in intentional community.¹⁸ For some, simple living might mean being mindful of their tendency to accumulate and thus buy less impulsively; for others, it might mean crusading against the proliferation of malls and the advertisement business, which preys upon the weaknesses and cravings of the populace.

Living out simplicity legalistically and judgmentally violates what Foster celebrates as “the freedom of simplicity.” However, while there is an absolute need to resist prescribing the simple life for others, and thus, perpetuate a new kind of legalism,¹⁹ biblical stewards are compelled to ask themselves and the church the following guiding question: “If we really care about the poor, how shall we then live?”

Creation Care

And fourthly, biblical stewards also demonstrate an acute appreciation for God’s creation and therefore “walk gently on the earth.”²⁰ The call to whole life stewardship necessarily extends to earth-keeping; perhaps it should even begin there, for the earth is what sustains all of life and the rest of God’s good gifts. Relationships, property, possessions, money: none of these things means anything if we had no earth on which to enjoy them! But more than a mere stage on which the divine-human drama is played out, earth itself is part of the drama. God’s smile upon completing creation in Gen. 1:25, thus

¹⁷Shane Claiborne in conversation with Tony Campolo, “Lifestyle” in *Simply Enough* DVD (Alternatives for Simple Living, 2007).

¹⁸See Sider, *Rich Christians*, 190-191. See also a short testimony of the Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco in Debbie Gish, “Creating a New Normal,” *Conspire* 2/3 (Summer 2010), 48-49.

¹⁹Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 112.

²⁰This is the title of an excellent book on life choices that reflect genuine care for creation by Lisa Graham McMinn and Megan Anna Neff, *Walking Gently on the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010).

validating creation as valuable in and of itself apart from humankind, begins a steady stream of scripture that affirms creation's leading role in the divine-human drama.

The earth is also part of the drama (and not just a stage) in that God made humankind out of it (Gen. 2:7), thus establishing the organic interdependence between the earth and humanity in their relationship with the Creator. Indeed, God, humanity and the earth are in covenant community together.²¹ Biblical stewards understand the integral connection between creation care and people care. "We are creatures of earth," explains sociologist Lisa Graham McMinn, "and so caring for earth is a way of caring for ourselves."²²

This understanding of interdependence between the earth and people challenges the notion that earth-care has no place on the agenda of the church's mission. In the face of humanity's spiritual lostness and abject poverty, how can we justify spending even a single penny or a single minute on caring for trees and animals and the like? Besides, God has sanctioned humanity to have dominion over the earth, to subdue it. Such notions come from our tendency to dichotomize and see things as radically separate; as if the way in which we care or don't care about the created order does not have implications for the way in which we practice or not practice evangelism and our work among the poor. The truth is the church serves a God bent on saving creation and everyone in it. Indeed, the reconciliation of all things includes healing relationships between people and God, between people and people, and between God, people and creation (Rom. 8: 18-25). Biblical stewards affirm this interdependence and understand that "the whole mission" must include the care of creation.

What does creation care look like? Like with simple living, this is not the time for legalistic prescriptions and a judgmental spirit; but rather the time to keep ourselves accountable by asking tough, countercultural, anti-Global Dream questions. On a personal level, do I recycle? Do I minimize the use of disposal goods? Do I turn lights and electrical appliances off when they are not in use? How would our

²¹Zac Niringiye, "In the Garden of Eden I: Creation and Community," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 5/1 (2010): 18-31. In this insightful article, Niringiye makes a compelling case from the Bible's creation narratives for the harmony between God, creation, and humankind. All of the articles in this particular journal issue actually affirm this harmony and calls Christians to earth stewardship.

²²McMinn and Neff, *Walking Gently*, 24.

homes fare in an environmental audit? On a more corporate level, do we care about issues such as climate change, global warming, deforestation, the mistreatment of animals, etc.? Do we support policies that promote the care of the environment? Biblical stewards ask themselves these kinds of questions and strive to “walk gently on the earth.”

Preaching for Whole Life Stewardship

The following four summary principles can help guide missional preachers in forming a church full of whole-life stewards.

Kingdom Dream Vs. Global Dream

First, we preach an alternative definition of the good life and urge our members to pursue the Kingdom Dream over and against the Global Dream. “The journey towards whole-life discipleship,” writes Sine, “begins when we struggle to translate the vision of God’s better future into a whole new understanding of what the good life is all about.”²³ Contrary to the stereotypical notion that to be Christian is to be out-of-touch with the real world and missing out on all the fun:

God does not call us to a life of self-imposed misery and asceticism, any more than He calls us to a life of more successful scrambling. We are called to a life that is much more festive, celebrative, and satisfying than anything the rat race can offer. God calls us to a good life that elevates relationships, celebration, worship, family, community, and service above the values of acquisition, individualism, and materialism.²⁴

As mentioned earlier, authentic biblical stewardship is not a popular subject precisely because it challenges what Sine calls the “the good life of the global mall.”²⁵ It offends people; it angers us, because the preacher is meddling into a domain that we believe belongs solely

²³Sine, *Why Settle for More*, 112.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 144.

²⁵Sine, *New Conspirators*, 71ff.

to us. Furthermore, it makes us feel guilty for the lifestyles we live and the riches we enjoy; and heaven forbid if God's people start feeling guilty! If we preach whole life stewardship, members might leave and potential visitors might not visit. As such, church growth strategists would probably discourage us from preaching and teaching on it. It is true that missional preachers, who have been gripped by the vision of whole life stewardship, will not win any popularity contests anytime soon. But in light of the biblical truth of stewardship as set forth in this chapter, can we preach and teach anything less than the radical implications of the gospel upon our lives?

Relationships and Community: Investing in Human Resources

Second, we preach the priority of relationships, of community. Cultivating healthy relationships in family, church, and neighborhood is a stewardship issue in that we are investing in people, the greatest God-given resource. Many psychologists, sociologists and theologians alike have documented the consequences of the quest for "the good life," which include dehumanization, alienation, and loneliness, even if one makes it to the top of the heap.

What would happen if we measured wealth, not by our investments in finances and property, but by our investments in family, church, and neighborhood? We give mental assent to the notion that of all the earth's resources, human resources are the greatest, but I am not sure if we really believe it. What if we did? Missional preachers keep this question before the people, and with it lead them toward a greater, deeper experience of family, church, missional partnership, and human community.

Living with Global Poverty in View: Generosity and Simplicity

Third, we preach a lifestyle that has global poverty in view. Mark Labberton, President of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, shares a practice he used to employ when serving the First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, CA. He says in preparation for Sunday service, he would read the weekly update from a missionary family serving at-risk children in Cambodia. He would do this in order ". . . to be reminded of the realities of suffering in the world" and to lead Sunday morning

worship accordingly.²⁶ Such a practice can only lead to “dangerous worship” that cultivates an awareness of unimaginable poverty experienced by billions of people around the planet.

We preach lifestyles that reflect this awareness—namely, lifestyles of kingdom generosity and a commitment to the simple life. We preach sacrificial giving (where the tithe is only the beginning), such as what Platt urges his church as part of the Radical Experiment: “For one year,” he pleads, “sacrifice your money—every possible dollar—in order to spend your life radically on specific, urgent spiritual and physical need in the world.”²⁷ We preach not just sacrifice, but the joy of sacrifice. It *is* better to give than to receive! From the perspective of the Global Dream, this adage does not make sense at all; but through the eyes of the Kingdom Dream, “those who lose their life for [Jesus’] sake will find it” (Matt. 8:39).

We preach against materialism, consumerism and the rat race and preach the rewards of the simple life—the rewards of freedom from the power of mammon, as well as the freedom to give more time to cultivate relationships and engage in God’s mission. Missional preachers preach “the freedom of simplicity.” Coupled with kingdom generosity, preaching the simple life equips God’s people to take part in God’s transforming work among the lost and the poor of the world.

Living with Creation in View

And lastly, we preach a lifestyle that has God’s creation in view. We preach against the utilitarian view of creation. In this view, “God’s good creation is seen as nothing more than provision of the resources needed to achieve [the Global] Dream.”²⁸ Over and against this view, we preach a biblical steward’s view of creation, in which humanity is but a part—albeit a special part—of a greater ecological system created and set in motion by the God of the universe. The part that humanity plays is exactly that of stewarding the earth and everything in it. We preach being responsible with all that God has given us, including most fundamentally the earth that sustains us, and thus lead the redeemed in

²⁶Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 33-34.

²⁷Platt, *Radical*, 196.

²⁸Sine, *New Conspirators*, 80.

Christ into a harmonious relationship with God, each other, and the environment.

Missional preachers preach whole life stewardship, where perspectives on wealth align with the kingdom, where relationships and community are priority, where generosity and simplicity define our lives for the sake of the poor, and where our relationship with the earth becomes a part of our understanding of God's mission in the world. As we preach in this way week-in and week-out, God's call upon humanity in general and the church in particular to be whole life stewards for the sake of the redemption of creation and everyone in it will be heard clearly by all.

