



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 15 [MB Confession of Faith]

Stewardship

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Christian stewardship is the faithful, wise, and responsible management of God's created order. The focus of this article is on the stewardship of the earth's resources and of personal resources.

Stewardship of the Earth

God has given humans the responsibility to be stewards of creation. Good management involves both protecting the earth from destructive exploitation and developing resources for the good of humankind. The church can provide helpful information and teaching that will enable its members to discern how best to manage the potential of the earth without damaging the environment.

Raising consciousness toward environmental concerns can be achieved through various activities. Encouraging recycling through special drives or community activism, for example, has both practical and symbolic value. Taking care to conserve water and energy also furthers participation in environmentally friendly practices. Using recycled materials and avoiding use of products that damage the environment can both raise awareness and help protect the earth. Periodic encouragement of such activities by the congregation is consistent with the creation mandate to rule over the earth.

Although Mennonite Brethren have become increasingly urban, we continue to have a large number of our people engaged in agriculture. Farmers are often faced with the conflict between using chemicals to increase productivity and avoiding the use of chemicals to protect the environment. Instead of avoiding the issue, the church that takes seriously its role in stewardship of the earth will create forums in which these difficult questions can be addressed.

Strategies for Generous Living

Jesus' message regarding money is that it is a means for living, not an end in itself. A closer look at Jesus' life and message can open the way for a fulfilling life lived for God. The focus must be that of 1 Peter 3:15: "Simply concentrate on being completely devoted to Christ" (Phillips).

Strong forces are at work to distract us from Christ. We are not likely to take steps toward solving a problem if we do not recognize a problem. Scripture points out our bent toward greed and the eventual impoverishment to which it leads. Personal stock-taking is a healthy and necessary exercise. As part of such a check we might gather data. We might keep a weekly time log involving the following areas (and others as appropriate):

- Time used to earn/spend money
- Time used for personal care (sleep, exercise, etc.)
- Time used for relaxation/entertainment
- Time with family/friends/neighbors
- Time in church-related activities
- Time spent ministering/volunteering
- Time with God

Such an audit may not evaluate the quality of time expended in each instance, but it is a beginning. The overall profile begins to take shape. Where we spend our time is a strong indicator of our stewardship values.



Prioritizing Kingdom Interests

To live as a Christian is to learn to live as fits the reign of God. While it is Christian to work to make a living, what becomes problematic is becoming so absorbed in making money that spiritual interests are crowded out. In establishing our lifestyle, we make choices that exhibit our priorities. A lifestyle includes choices about housing, furnishings, clothing, luxuries, entertainment, investments and savings, and giving. Such decisions are made with a set of priorities in mind.

We are constantly exercising priorities. For example, we may settle for purchasing a small used car because for us the decor of the home or a high-quality entertainment center is more important than mode of transportation. Others may choose to live in cramped living quarters with minimal comforts if by so doing they can indulge their yearnings for sightseeing and travel.

Inject into these equations a devotion to Jesus and his kingdom, and the prioritizing process takes on complexity. For example, will any of the above priorities shift to using one's travel money to spend time as a counselor at a Christian camp, or to volunteer for short-term missions or relief work? Would one spend less on eating out and more on hospitality to international students?

Success and wealth are high priorities for many North American Christians. Jeremiah the prophet called for a priority higher than either of these. "Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight" (Jer. 9:23-24 NRSV). To know God, which means to live in dynamic connection with God, is a value higher than wealth or success.

For a believer, greatest value is attached to Christ and his kingdom. Ideally, a Christian should want more than anything in the world to see God's justice and righteousness prevail and kingdom causes succeed. Christians decide that their time and resources need to be committed to the kingdom. The implication is straightforward: money and time are shifted from other areas of life to kingdom work. If \$500 is given toward a need or ministry, that \$500 will not be available for investment in stocks or purchase of a bigger, better refrigerator.

Stewardship Assumptions

The concept of stewardship turns on several assumptions, each of which plays itself out practically in our lifestyle. One basic assumption touches on ownership. In Western cultures, individuals own things. In some cultures, the group owns and shares things. In places where Baal was worshiped, the king owned the land. Christians say all belongs to God. A fitting response is thankful contentment (Phil. 4:11-12). If God is owner, I have strong reason to be thankful both for what is termed a little and what is termed a lot. A lifestyle of excessive consumerism is fueled by discontent. A further implication of seeing properties as God's gift is that we are blessed in order to be a blessing. Like other gifts of God, material abundance is to be used for the benefit of others (James 2:14-17; Matt. 10:8).

A second assumption involving stewardship is management. Management includes attention to creative production and oversight of finances and income. Every Christian is a manager of assets in the interest of the owner, God. An appropriate amount is retained for the livelihood of the manager, but the object is to enhance the owner's gains. One objective of money management is to place the resources in secure investments. Jesus teaches that the most secure investment is the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:19-34).

A third assumption in exercising stewardship is accountability. Christians should exercise social responsibility in making their investments. One's gifts are not a private affair. There is a public dimension to the exercise of stewardship. Jesus warns of an end-time audit (Matt. 25:14-46). The church can offer accountability groups to its members that will allow for discernment in both specific investments and general lifestyle issues.

Legalism and individualism stand as dangers at the extremes. Rules cannot be easily standardized. In some cases expenditures involving costly goods or properties may be a praiseworthy use of resources, while in other circumstances such expenditures would be detrimental or even deplorable.



Practical Hints for Effective Stewardship

Following are a number of suggestions that can help focus efforts toward effective stewardship for God's kingdom and the simplifying of one's lifestyle in an age of materialism and consumerism:

Establish a mission statement with respect to your money. Consider what ideals, income level, standard of living, investment, savings, and retirement issues are important to you and consistent with God's rule in your life.

Acquire possessions according to criteria of usefulness rather than status. Cars and clothing, for example, call for excessive outlays if status is a major criterion. If usefulness is the criterion, expenditures are almost certainly less.

Cultivate the habit of generosity. Experience the freedom that comes from giving things away.

Make matters of investments and larger expenditures the subject of prayer and counsel. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Don't neglect the guidance of individuals in the community of faith.

Refuse to accept the propaganda of advertising and consumerism. It has been observed that "Contradicting the present is the central evangelical task in our time." Be wary of seduction by today's endless ads and sales pitches that promise happiness and fulfillment through acquiring more and having more. Remain in control of your expenditures.

Bibliography

Portions of this article come from an unpublished article by Dr. Elmer A. Martens: "Money Matters, the Bible, and the Christian." Canadian Board of Faith and Life.

Block, Arthur. "The Christian and Materialism." (Unpublished paper).

Blue, Ron. *Generous Living: Contentment through Giving*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.

Campolo, Tony. "Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?" Pp. 147–158 in *Urban Mission: God's Concern for the City*. Ed. John Kyle. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: Harper, 1988.

_____. *Freedom of Simplicity*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1993.

Hein, Marvin. "Earth Abuse: Thoughts on Our Sin and God's Plan." *Christian Leader*. 52: 2 (Jan. 31, 1989): 4–6.

Kraybill, Donald B. *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990.

Rusbult, Richard E. *A Workbook on Biblical Stewardship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Dallas: Word, 1990.

