

Stewardship: Matching Belief with Action by Ron Nicola

Stewardship is a concept in which expressed belief is not always matched with commensurate action. The validity of this statement diminishes the quality of life of all Christians and cripples the Church's ability to fulfill its mission. This condition presents a genuine paradox which requires analysis, explanation, and remedy.

Individual definitions of stewardship may vary, but the concept always involves the proportional giving of time, talents, and resources to the protection and preservation of God's Kingdom here on earth. This notion is supported by Scripture and Tradition in the Orthodox Church, as well as in all other Christian faiths. Once an awareness of stewardship is established among the faithful, there is virtually no controversy concerning its validity as a cornerstone of the Church. Strangely enough, attempts to translate this belief into action produce confusion, disagreement, and hostility. In what proportion must time, talents and resources be given in order to fulfill the requirements of Christian Stewardship? Answering this question holds the key to solving the paradox of stewardship; action not being equal to belief.

The Bible's very first book establishes that man is the steward of God's earthly kingdom. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it," (Genesis 2:15). The effort involved in fulfilling this responsibility is the giving prescribed by stewardship. This giving, according to God's Words, must be done regularly, proportionally, and sacrificially. In Saint Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he explained that giving must be done in a right spirit. "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come," (I Cor. 16:2). "The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work," (II Cor. 9:6-8). The Old Testament reinforces the nature of Christian giving with these clear instructions. "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine," (Proverbs 3:9-10).

These scriptural passages leave no doubt about the kind of giving prescribed by Christian stewardship. The fact that it must be regular, proportional, and sacrificial is unquestionable. Why, then, do so many who profess belief fail to adhere to these teachings? Ignorance, fear, and lack of commitment are certainly part of the answer, but the message is so clear that no excuse carries any validity. This attempt to discuss the nature of Christian giving will focus on the offering of resources, since time and talents are generally given with less resistance. All three are important and will be mentioned, but somehow the offering of money to the Church and to God is seen in a different light than helping cook a church dinner, plant the church garden, or balance the church bank accounts. Money, that "most precious" of all possessions, is not parted with very easily. Christians are tested and challenged daily in the practice of their belief that our resources, time, and talents are not ours, but are gifts from God. Belief in this essential Christian teaching must be expressed by regular, proportional, and sacrificial giving.

In the fall of 1982, Dr. George Dibs, Co-Chairperson of the Antiochian Archdiocese Department of Stewardship, prepared a presentation called, "Stewardship of the Wealthy." His remarks were based upon five theological assumptions, and these as listed below, serve as a basis for this article.

1. Everything we have is a gift from God.
2. All material things are of God's creation.
3. The incarnation of God in Christ Jesus sanctified all matter, including man and his creations.
4. All earthly matter is ours by God's design.
5. All people are stewards of God's creations, which includes time, talents, and resources, as well as material goods.

Accepting the belief that all things material are of God's creation is an important first step toward practicing true Christian giving. A popular misconception exists in our churches that there are things secular and things spiritual, and the separation must always be maintained. This leads directly to the "upstairs/downstairs" mentality. The priest takes care of the church and the parish council takes care of the hall. I attended a parish meeting once and heard a sincere, dedicated church member say, "Father, this is a business meeting. Let us handle these affairs."

Nothing could be farther from the truth. There is no separation between secular and spiritual matters within the church. All the faithful, clergy and laity, have a responsibility to be concerned with both realms. In Psalm 24:1, we are reminded that, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein. . ." Furthermore, the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ forever united heaven and earth.

No one denies that the church has secular needs, not the least of which is money, as it is an institution in the modern world. There is no reason to believe that these needs are any different than any other aspect of church life. Our material possessions must be offered to God regularly and cheerfully. This is done in recognition of the fact that we are stewards of God's earthly kingdom, and all earthly things, financial resources included, are of God's creation.

The giving of time, talents, and resources must not only be done, it must be done in a right spirit. The scriptural passage cited earlier from Proverbs telling us to give of our first fruits. This means the Church must be a top priority in the lives of Christian people. The whole practice of pledge drives in local churches, for example, would be unnecessary if people believed and acted as prescribed in the Bible. In giving, we acknowledge our gifts from God. What we offer is a reflection of our commitment to God and His Word. To make this offering after all other obligations have been met is an indication that God is not a priority in our lives.

When the faithful offer the first fruits of God's blessings, it must be done cheerfully, as was mentioned in II Corinthians. The Book of Matthew also guides Christians in their attitude toward giving. "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let

your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you, (Matt. 6:1-4).

The importance of giving in a true Christian spirit is reinforced by this assessment of giving offered by author John Steinbeck. He was discussing philanthropic endeavors when he made these observations. “Perhaps the most overrated virtue in our list of shoddy virtues is that of giving. Giving builds up the ego of the giver, makes him superior and higher and larger than the receiver. Nearly always, giving is a selfish pleasure, and in many cases is a downright destructive and evil thing. One has only to remember some of the wolfish financiers who spend two thirds of their lives clawing a fortune out of the guts of society and the latter third pushing it back. It is not enough to suppose that their philanthropy is a kind of frightened restitution, or that their natures change when they have enough. Such a nature never has enough and natures do not change that readily. I think that the impulse is the same in both cases. For giving can bring the same sense of superiority as getting does, and philanthropy may be another kind of spiritual avarice.” We are reminded by this statement to follow the words in Matthew and give with a humble heart. It is also crucial to realize that the giving of our time, talents, and resources to the Church is not the same as a charitable donation. All too often, this mistaken notion exists in the minds of well intentioned Christians. A gift to a charity is indeed an offering of something that belongs to us as individuals. What we do for the Church is return a portion of that which is God’s, and for which we are called upon to guard as His stewards.

Any discussion of giving eventually turns to the question of how much of our times, talents, and resources to offer. While the Church holds a position of top priority in the lives of all Christians, it is not their only responsibility. Family, career, and community involvements also must be taken into consideration. Orthodox Christians are given the burden of deciding how much to give, realizing their free will is also a gift from God.

“How much should I give to the church?” This common question would be much easier to answer if it were rephrased in accordance with Christian teachings. “How much have I been given?” The measure of this leads to a more appropriate decision as to the quantity of the gifts offered to the church. Even this, however, could be exceeded by a person who believes they have been blessed in great measure by God’s infinite goodness. The fact that so few people approach this level of giving requires that a different formula be applied.

When a Christian begins the process of reexamining their understanding of stewardship, it is important for them to begin working toward more desirable levels of giving in terms of time, talent, and resources. God is not impressed by the size of our gifts, but by its cost to the giver. In an article called, “Money and the Church,” Fr. James Worth, an Orthodox priest, suggests three possible formulas to guide the giving of financial resources.

1. Set aside a percentage of weekly income. The percentage should periodically be increased.
2. Offer one hour’s wage to the church every week.
3. Give one dollar per week for every \$1000 of annual income.

Notice that Fr. Worth speaks in terms of weekly contributions. This is to remind people that regular giving means weekly giving. The practice of paying a church pledge monthly, quarterly,

or annually reinforces the idea that the church is a simple obligation that is satisfied along with the rent, telephone bill, and donation to the March of Dimes. Orthodox Christians are called upon to attend Divine Liturgy weekly, and the offering collected during the service reinforces the idea that giving is very much a part of our spiritual commitment to the church. Those who automatically renew their two, five, or ten dollar per week pledge annually simply do not have the right attitude about stewardship. All have been blessed by God in different ways, so there can be no standard formula for giving. The offering of time, talents, and resources must be made with a proper understanding of what Christian stewardship requires. Once this is done, appropriate levels of giving will be achieved.

During the course of an Orthodox Burial Service, these words are spoken; “All mortal things are vanity and exist not after death. Riches endure not, neither doth glory accompany on the way: for when death cometh, all things vanish utterly. . .“ Fr. Worth referred to this passage in his article and went on to explain its relevance.

“The point here is that Christians should not refuse to give to the Church because of selfishness. Such an attitude is contrary to the spirit of Christianity and contrary to the vision of life as revealed by Christ.”

These observations serve to wipe away any excuse for improper giving according to the teachings of Christian stewardship. In the Summer, 1982, issue of *On the Up Beat*, an article on stewardship listed and refuted these often heard excuses.

1. “I can’t afford to give.” A person may genuinely believe this, but an evaluation of how their money is being spent would reveal many wasteful tendencies. It is also true that a review of how time and talents are allocated would reveal more opportunities for practicing what they believe. “And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature,” (Luke 8:14). Too much emphasis on things earthly is what leads to the “I can’t afford it” notion.

2. “I don’t like the way they spend my money!” The money offered to the church is not being given to support any particular cause, program or project. It is being returned to God in gratitude for the blessings He has bestowed upon the faithful. In addition, the notion of giving “my” money is wrong. People who have this attitude tend to believe they can exercise control over church affairs as a result of the dollars they contributed. The spirit of Christian stewardship which guides the financial gift, also leads to the giving of time and talents. It is in this spirit that church affairs and programs can be influenced.

3. “I’ll give later when I’m established.” Experience reveals that this type of procrastination leads no where. It is true that a person might give more when they are established, but the patterns of giving must be set early. When asked to exercise caution during the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King was heard to reply, “for the black man, wait always meant never.” The time to give is now!

4. “But I give in other ways.” Bravo to the person who gives in many ways, to many causes and organizations. This in no way, however, diminishes the need to give to the church according to

stewardship's teachings. Giving is not only money, but it is also not time and talents instead of money. No one is asked to give in ways they truly cannot afford or are not able, but copouts and excuses are not appropriate substitutes.

Any parish community which works together to achieve the goals of true Christian stewardship will find success. This will come in the form of renewed commitment by parishioners, resulting in the giving of more time, talents, and resources. Churches which find themselves in this position become free to pursue the true goals of an organization that is Christ centered.

Specifically, when members give freely of their financial resources, the church is relieved of the burden imposed by fund raising activities. To be sure, money making projects produce fellowship among those who labor, but imagine how fellowship and spiritual growth could flourish in an atmosphere where profit was not the primary concern. In any congregation, if the members gave in accordance with God's teachings, any project or program could be undertaken with success.

Again, overnight change is not being advocated, but gradual movement toward a desired goal is possible. A good place to start is by incorporating the belief that fund raising projects must be of secondary and diminishing importance to a parish. In a book called, *How to Have a Giving Church*, Bartlett and Margaret Hess explain clearly the danger of reliance on money making projects.

“In the church they (money making projects) stultify spiritual growth. Anything that stultifies spiritual growth stunts giving. Money-raising by schemes sacrifices long-term for short-term gains. Putting up with them is pennywise and pound foolish.” This point-of-view is reinforced by the following quotation from the Book of John. “And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade,’ “ (John 2:16).

The appeal of fund raising projects is an old, established thought in many churches. To advocate their elimination seems harsh. The qualities of fellowship and spirituality they contain should be preserved in activities that are planned without the pressures inherent in needing a \$1000.00 profit to balance the church budget. Any church project or goal, as routine as repairing the roof to as grand as building a social hall, gymnasium, or school can be accomplished in large part through the contributions of faithful members who are filled with the Holy Spirit. Activities as traditional as church bazaars can be modified to stress fellowship, spirituality, and community service rather than simply fund raising. The temptation to sponsor schemes as counter-productive to true Christian giving as bingo and other games of chance can be totally removed by a movement within the parish to give as prescribed in God's Holy Word.

Discussing the form and shape of stewardship in action represents the essence of this vital concept. Understanding its meaning is necessary, but translating this into deeds is the ultimate goal. God has made the way clear through biblical stories, parables, and teachings. To deny this direction by lack of action is to diminish the quality of our faith as Orthodox Christians. The challenge is great, but the rewards are ten-fold more magnificent. Changing attitudes and long established practices is not easy. Begin with small, manageable goals, but always progress

toward higher ideals. This approach is stated simply and clearly in the closing pages of *How to Have a Giving Church*.

“What we are trying to give you is not a mold into which any congregation can be poured. It’s a set of biblical principles to be adapted to your situation. Just open yourself up, and ask God to show you. Then pick the brains of all who come your way who might help you. We’ve found God sends along people and books to teach us lessons He wants us to learn. Keep loose. Keep flexible. Start. . . where you are.”

From *Word Magazine*

Publication of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

April 1983