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“Stewards of God’s Mysteries”: Stewarding as a Model for Congregational Ministry

ROLF A. JACOBSON

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.
Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

—1 Corinthians 4:1–2

PROBLEM: THE MEMBERSHIP OR OWNERSHIP MODEL OF CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

In recent years, the concern has grown that there may be a flaw with the model that governs how Americans construe congregational ministry. In American civil society, church affiliation is conceived as a matter of voluntary association; and it must be so conceived in our democratic system. But in the Christian church, church affiliation cannot be conceived only as a matter of voluntary association; it must also be conceived as a call from God, as a Spirit-given vocation, indeed as the work of God. So, the question goes, does our default model of congregational ministry concede too much to the cultural attitude of church membership as voluntary association?

Michael Foss is one voice that has eloquently criticized the basic model that has shaped how American Christians have thought about congregational ministry. Foss has described the default model of American congregations as the “member-

Are we members of our congregation or stewards of God’s mysteries? Our model for ministry makes all the difference.

ship model.” The membership model does have some biblical precedent, inasmuch as Paul spoke of the church as a body with many different members (1 Cor 12:12–31). And at one time, the membership model had a shiny edge to it, because it implied obligation and service: “Church membership was akin to good citizenship,” Foss writes, and “membership implied obligation.”¹

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But the positive contributions of this model were based on the assumption that people joining a congregation were already Christian believers and, in fact, that the culture was largely Christian. As society has changed in the last fifty years and a post-Christian culture has emerged, the model’s shiny coat has been rubbed away and the model now delivers more woe than weal. In today’s culture, the membership model leads people to construe the congregation as similar to a club that people join of their own free will *for the purpose of having their needs met*. So before people choose to join a congregation, they shop to see what programs are offered, whether worship meets their needs, and what services they will find. (And, it should be added, congregations that seek to do mission according to this model, without reimagining the model, become congregations that sell programs and seek to meet people’s needs.)

It should be obvious that the present use of this model of congregational ministry is a far cry from the notions of obligation, service, and calling of an earlier period. Foss writes:

The tragic flaw in the contemporary version of the membership model of the church lies in the focus of its ministry. In that model, ministry focuses on the *membership* of a particular congregation. With the member as the focal point, the role of the clergy is to meet the spiritual needs of the members, keep the members happy, and generally do ministry in ways that make as few waves as possible. If the members’ perceived needs are adequately met, if they are happy with the services provided by the professional staff, and if conflict is avoided or minimized, then the membership can be counted on to do their part.²

Another way of describing the membership model of congregational ministry might be to term it the “ownership model.” People—both the clergy and the laity—often tend to think about a congregation as “theirs.” Even the way we refer to congregations betrays this ownership model. Pastors will casually refer to “my congregation” or “my ministry”; likewise, the laity will speak of “our congregation” or “my congregation”—as if a congregation is either a possession that belongs to us or

¹Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 14, 15.

²*Ibid.*, 15–16.

a business that we corporately own. It is true, of course, that the use of the pronouns “my” and “our” can signal a positive sense of commitment and belonging. Yet, in the experience of many pastors and committed Christians, the language can also betray the sense that the congregation belongs to us and exists first and foremost to meet our needs. I was a part of one congregation, for example, whose building was used by the city as a polling place for elections. But when new carpet was laid, some members grew afraid that the voting machines would damage “our carpet,” so the council voted that “our building” no longer be made available to the city. Likewise, I did some work for a congregation that hosted an annual Christian concert. But the congregation’s business administrator grew alarmed at the heavy “outsider” traffic that the concert invited into “our building,” so the annual concert was eventually told there was no room in the inn. One can see that one problem lurking at the heart of the membership/ownership model is a non-evangelical “insider vs. outsider” dynamic. Foss has elegantly described the issue: “Another problem with the membership model is its tendency to define the congregation *exclusively* rather than *inclusively*. The membership model identifies who is in and who is out.”³

In place of the membership model, Foss has argued that congregations move to a focus on discipleship; that rather than tending to members’ needs, pastors should tend to Christ’s command to make disciples of all nations; that rather than seeking to have their needs met, Christians should strive to grow in discipleship. I commend Foss’s book for study and reflection. The emphasis on discipleship is salutary. But “discipleship” is not really a model for ministry—that is to say, it is not a “model” of what a congregation should be. “Discipleship” does not replace membership, rather it replaces “chaplaincy,” which is the type of ministry that the membership model implicitly leads pastors to do.⁴ Thus, discipleship is a description of the church’s ministry, not a model of how to think about a congregation and what it is. In what follows, I will argue for a different model of what a congregation is. The model is biblical. The model is also, I hope, one that will lead pastors and laypeople implicitly to a type of ministry that is about more than chaplaincy (although caring for people is an important part of Christian ministry), to a type of ministry that resonates more fully with the biblical view of ministry.

STEWARDSHIP AS A MODEL OF CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

In 1 Corinthians, when St. Paul was rummaging through the vocabulary of the faith searching for a metaphor that would aptly describe Christian ministry, he landed on the concept of *stewardship*: “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (4:1).⁵ In the ancient world, the word steward

³Ibid., 19.

⁴If one’s congregational model is membership, then the goal is meeting the needs of members and the type of ministry is chaplaincy or caretaking.

⁵In a similar vein, the author of 1 Peter writes, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (4:10).

(οἰκονόμος in Greek, עֶלְבֵּית אֲשֶׁר in Hebrew) described a person—normally a slave—who was placed in a position of responsibility over the property, possessions, or household of another person, to whom the household actually belonged. The concept thus offers promise as a model for Christian congregational identity and mission. According to St. Paul, a congregation—its building and grounds, its finances and assets, its people and programs, its mission and ministry—does not belong to us. Rather, each Christian congregation belongs to God. God is the owner. We are merely the stewards, the servants or slaves who have responsibility for the master’s household, for the master’s mission, for the master’s ministry. Again, to emphasize the point, a steward is a servant or a slave who has been placed in a position of (temporary?) responsibility over the household of another. Paul’s point, in part, was that the ministry of the church belongs neither to the members of a specific Christian community (in Paul’s case, not to the squabbling factions in the community at Corinth). Nor does the church’s ministry belong to competing members or factions of the clergy (in Paul’s case, not to Apollos or Cephas or Paul). As Roy Harrisville puts it, “There is no confusion of the roles of appointee and appointer, no contradiction” with what Paul had written earlier in his letter: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe...” (1 Cor 3:5). “The adjunct has a superior, the steward has a master—servants of Christ.”⁶

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One benefit of the concept of stewardship as a model for congregational ministry is that it is biblical. Stewards, stewardship, and concepts related to the idea of stewardship, such as dominion, are referred to throughout the Scriptures, particularly in passages discussing the responsibilities of God’s people.⁷ To reframe our understanding of congregations to be consistent with the idea of stewardship would be a move away from a primarily cultural metaphor (membership by voluntary association) toward a primarily biblical metaphor (communal stewardship of God’s mission and ministry). Moving away from a cultural metaphor to a more biblical metaphor would, in my judgment, be a step in the right direction.

A second benefit of rethinking congregational identity along the lines of stew-

⁶Roy A. Harrisville, *I Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 66.

⁷Of particular relevance are: Gen 1:28 (and related Old Testament passages such as Ps 8 that speak of the royal-like responsibility of the human to exercise responsible dominion over creation); Gen 2:15 (with its description of the work of humanity to till and keep the earth); Exod 20:8–11 (and other laws related to the Sabbath that see the Sabbath as a way in which God intrudes into life to give rest and release from bondage to those who toil); Luke 12:39–48; 16:1–15; Matt 24:45–25:30 (and other of Jesus’ parables in which he describes discipleship in the kingdom of God as a stewardship under God). These passages, in particular, inform the current study.

ardship would be that it would positively reframe those matters of money, time, and talents that we normally associate with the word stewardship. To be blunt, in the Bible, the concept of stewardship is not solely or even primarily concerned with wealth. If we start to reconceive the entirety of a congregation's identity through the lens of stewardship, then Christians might have a more established framework within which to grasp matters of wealth, time, and talent. Currently, some Christians think of financial giving as "dues" that we pay to keep up our membership and thus earn the right to the services of the church. Or, some people shrink away from stewardship because they associate it only with making pledges and writing checks. If most or even all of a congregation's identity were to be recast in the image of being called to be responsible for God's household, then the practice of offering time, talent, and wealth would not come out of left field every autumn, but might, one hopes, slide seamlessly into place in the minds of Christians.

RAMIFICATIONS OF STEWARDSHIP AS A MODEL FOR MINISTRY

To conceive congregational ministry through the lens of stewardship will entail reemphasizing some traditional ways of thinking about congregations, reframing others, introducing some new ways, and finally rejecting a few others. In the venerable tradition of Reformation theology, I will present a series of theses exploring some of the prominent landmarks of the new terrain that might lie ahead of us.

1. God's mission and the means to sustain that mission belong to God and not to humans.

In the parables of the talents and of the faithful and unfaithful slaves (Matt 25:14–30; 24:45–51), Jesus employs the metaphor of the steward to describe life and discipleship in the kingdom of God. Like St. Paul, these "stewardship" parables point to the countercultural claim that all of the church—including the people, buildings, assets, and mission of Christian congregations—belong not to us but to God. The claim is countercultural because according to all observable evidence it is human beings who are at work in the church—preaching, teaching, caring for each other, evangelizing, working for justice, and so on. From the viewpoint of a secular human society, the building, the checking account and endowment balances, and the assets of a congregation belong to the members of that congregation. And yet, the witness of Scripture insists that this is not the case. The Bible witnesses that all of this is God's. It is God's mission; God is the one who is moving in, with, and under the actions of the church. From beginning to end, this is Scripture's witness. In the beginning, God created. In the end, God will re-create. In the here and now, God is the one who is at work justifying the ungodly, calling sinners into fellowship, sending out the forgiven to make disciples. It is God's building; they are God's assets. From the perspective of faith, even the people do not, properly speaking, belong to themselves. We, too, are not our own. We belong to God.

2. God calls the people of God to be stewards of God's mission.

One of the major negative impacts of the membership/ownership model of congregational ministry is that it encourages an inward focus for the congregation's ministry.⁸ When we construe a congregation after this model, the temptation is for the congregation to pay a pastor primarily to take care of its own people. The pastor becomes an internal caregiver for a community of people. This temptation to focus inward is already a human tendency, because we are by nature sinful and, in Luther's apt description, to be sinful is to be curved in on oneself. That temptation does not need to be abetted by a model of congregational identity that encourages an inward focus. The concept of stewardship encourages a focus on the work and mission of God by the very fact that a steward is not doing his or her own work—not meeting his or her own needs—but is serving the goals and purposes of the master. In Jesus' parable of the righteous and unrighteous stewards (Matt 24:45–51; Luke 16:1–15), the righteous steward is the one whom the returning owner finds doing the work the owner commanded. The unrighteous steward is the one whom the returning owner finds serving himself and his own desires, rather than doing the work that the owner had commanded him to do. None of this is to say that a pastor should not care for Christians in crisis or establish vital relationships with members. Rather it is to say that an outward focus that is shaped by the mission of God to bless and redeem all of creation is more faithful than an inward focus.

3. A congregation—both its clergy and lay members—is a group who together act as stewards of God's mission. The members of a congregation, corporately, are not members of an organization, but fellow stewards of God's mission in a particular place and time.

Paul speaks of himself and other Christian leaders as “stewards of God's mysteries.” First Peter likewise advises all Christians: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (4:10). The parables cited above and other similar passages cast the life of faith in the image of stewards—ones who are responsible for the household and work of another. It is not just the clergy who are stewards, but all of God's people. The laity share in the stewardship of God's mission that the entire congregation embodies communally. Corporately, lay and clergy together are the stewards of God's mission. The council of the congregation is the group of stewards who bear immediate supervisory responsibility for the stewarding of God's mission in a particular place and time; they are responsible for the entirety of the mission of the congregation. Each committee of the congregation is a small group of stewards who bear the responsibility for a particular facet of God's mission, be it worship, education, evangelism, justice, finance, or the like. The clergy bear responsibility for God's word and God's sacrament as well as other areas that a congregation might commit to

⁸See Foss, *Power Surge*, chap. 1.

them. But in each case—council, committee, and clergy—the work they do is not their own; it is God’s work. Imagine how different the monthly meeting of, say, the education committee might feel if at the start of every meeting the committee members reminded themselves that the work of the committee belongs to God, not themselves, and that they are merely the servants who have responsibility for that work. Imagine how such a monthly reminder might change the culture of church council meetings. Imagine, if you will, a congregation that came to understand God as the owner of the congregation and the members as mere stewards.

“imagine a congregation that came to understand God as the owner of the congregation and the members as mere stewards”

4. To join a congregation is to respond to God’s call—God’s call!—to join in God’s mission as a steward.

As already mentioned, Americans view church membership as voluntary association. We think of ourselves as freely choosing to affiliate ourselves or disaffiliate ourselves with a congregation, a denomination, with church. The consumerization of church culture has triumphed to such a degree that we even use the inelegant term “church shopping” to describe the process of searching out a church home. But when pastors and professional lay workers consider a new congregation, they use language such as “call,” “discern,” “serve,” “prayer,” and “God’s will.” If there is any integrity at all to the language that pastors and other lay workers use to describe the mysterious process of call—such as, “I am praying to discern whether God is calling me to serve at such-and-such a congregation”—then we should use the same language to describe the mysterious process by which laypeople find a new congregation. If we really believe in our hearts and minds what we confess on Sundays, then we should recast the new-member process as the prayerful process in which people discern whether they are being called to join a community of God’s stewards. Thus the consumerist stance of shopping for an organization in which your needs will be met might be replaced with a deeper, more biblical model in which church membership is more than voluntary association; it is a call from God. When I served as a parish pastor, one of my responsibilities was to coordinate outreach and new-member programs. I recall being embarrassed sometimes when I had to ask a visitor, “Do you want to join?” It felt wrong, almost as if I were serving as the membership director of some sort of spirituality club, rather than as a pastor of Christ’s church. Sometimes I felt as if I were supposed to be selling the virtues of the congregation, communicating to prospective members all of the wonderful programs that we had that would meet their needs (“...and over here, at no additional charge, next to our free child care, you’ll find our adult education...”). I now believe that a more faithful way to approach prospective members would have been to invite them to discern whether God was

calling them to become a fellow steward in our congregation's shared ministry, to pray with them about their response to God's call to become a fellow steward of God's mission.

5. God requires of stewards that they act and live in a trustworthy manner.

As St. Paul writes, "Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:2). The Greek word πιστός that occurs here can mean "faith," but in this context it clearly means "faithful" or "trustworthy." By "trustworthy," Paul is not here referring to the internal faith of the believer or to the state of the believer's heart (although believers by definition trust in God with heart, soul, and mind). Rather, Paul here means that the stewarding activities of Christians—dare one say leadership?—must conform to the will and ways of the true household owner. This is clearly the case in Jesus' parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30). In that parable, three servants are entrusted with different amounts of wealth—but all of them with significant wealth.⁹ The two stewards who put the owner's wealth to work, risking five and two talents respectively, each increased their master's wealth. They were commended: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things...enter into the joy of your master" (25:23). The word for trustworthy here, as in Paul, is πιστέ/πιστός. The third steward, who dared no action for fear of the master's judgment, was judged by the master as "wicked," "lazy," and "unworthy" (vv. 26, 30). The last of these words, "unworthy" (ἀχρεῖος), is an instructive word. In the New Testament it occurs only in this parable (occurring in both Matthew and Luke); in the Septuagint, it occurs only in 2 Sam 6:22 in the story of David's dancing as the ark is brought to Jerusalem. David's wife Michal scorns him and this word is used to describe Michal's attitude toward David.¹⁰ The point is that it is David's *action* or *behavior* that is at stake. Likewise, the third steward is found unworthy (unfaithful, untrustworthy) because of his lack of action. To be a steward of God's mission requires risk. It means investing the assets that God has entrusted us and putting them to work for the sake of that mission. God does not call us to be a faithful remnant—remember that Elijah (1 Kings 19) was dismissed from service when his vision of mission was reduced to the point where he viewed himself as the only faithful one left. That is not trustworthy or faithful stewardship of God's mission. Fidelity is not just about believing the right way; God also requires that we act faithfully in doing God's work.

6. God will hold stewards accountable; God's stewards labor now trusting the one who will later hold us accountable.

One of the persistent notes that Jesus sounds in his parables of the stewards is that the master will return. In the parable of the foolish and righteous stewards,

⁹It is commonly said that one talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages for a common worker.

¹⁰In the Masoretic Text (and so it is understood in the NRSV), David says, "I will be *unworthy* in my own eyes." But in the Septuagint (and so it is—correctly, in my view—understood in the NIV), David says, "I will be *unworthy* in your eyes."

Jesus attributes the difference in the stewards' action to the attitude they hold about the master's return. "But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know" (Matt 24:48–50). In the parable of the talents, it is the *returning* master who both commends and judges. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians, Paul says that "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (4:2). The passive verb "found" (εὐρεθῆ) implies that someone other than the steward

"precisely because the ministry belongs to God and not us, ministry cannot be judged according to earthly standards"

will be the one determining the steward's trustworthiness; surely that person is Christ, who will judge the living and the dead. To rethink ministry in light of the biblical concept of stewardship is to emphasize that precisely because the ministry belongs to God and not us, ministry cannot be judged according to earthly standards. This means that pastors cannot evaluate their careers by measurements devised according to human calibrations. This means that Christians cannot judge their own lives or the lives of others by the yardsticks of worldly accomplishments. Rather, it means that all of the baptized serve in this world trusting that God is at work in and among us and that God will judge us, not we ourselves.¹¹ What distinguished the righteous from the unrighteous servant was first of all their attitudes toward the implied promise of the master to return. The righteous servant trusted that the master would return and managed the master's household knowing that it belonged to the master. The unrighteous servant did not trust in the master's return and acted as if the household were his own. In the parable of the talents, the third servant's attitude toward the master's return was one of fear. He was paralyzed by his fear of the master and thus lived and acted in fear. The other two servants, we are to presume, either had no such fear or overcame it. To be a steward of God is to live and manage the Lord's household in trusting faith that the Lord will return and that on that day, we will be forgiven and redeemed for Christ's sake. In the meantime, holding on to this promise, we are freed to serve, risk, and dare for the sake of God's mission.

GIFTS FOR STEWARDSHIP

One of my most dear teachers once said to me, "When the Lord calls a person to do a job, the Lord provides the gifts necessary to do the job." The Bible talks about both gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12–13) and fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–26).¹²

¹¹Paul makes the same point in the material that follows 1 Cor 4:1–2, writing, "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" (v. 3).

¹²See also 2 Pet 1:5–8 and Rom 8:9–11.

The call to be a steward of God works differently than the career counseling that men and women can receive from a guidance counselor or a career center. Secular career counseling tends to reason from “gifts” to “job.” You are to determine first which gifts you already have and then you are to discern which calling or career best suits you. In the Lord’s household, following the logic of the cross, career counseling works backwards. First God calls and then God supplies the gifts necessary. First God commissions for a task and then God provides spiritual gifts to help see that the task is accomplished. If we reason only from what gifts we already possess, then we believe in a God who works only in the past. But we should trust that God will continue to work in the future and we trust that God will provide the gifts necessary to accomplish what God intends. When we do, we can go to work as stewards of God’s household, trusting that the master’s mission will be fulfilled. This is not to say that inherent gifts are not important for the ministry of the baptized. Rather, it is to say this: God, the Lord of the household, has promised what is necessary for the tending and growing of God’s mission. Or, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). ⊕

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