

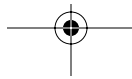
Chapter 1

Docking the *Ship*



ON JULY 29, 1996, BRITISH OLYMPIC SPRINTING CHAMPION LINFORD Christie walked off the track at the Atlanta Summer Olympic Games having failed to defend his 1992 gold medal Olympic title as the fastest man in the world. His failure did not come at the hands of a faster man, as the result of a stumble or because of illness or injury. After four years of tenacious preparation and a worldwide media frenzy in anticipation of the single greatest ten seconds in sports, Christie left the track having never gotten out of the starting blocks. He had done the unimaginable. At the greatest moment in his athletic career, with the world holding its breath and watching, Christie made a false start. Not once, but twice. An official's red card confirmed the incredible.

In a matter of a few moments Linford Christie was disqualified from the one event that defined him as an Olympian. All the speed, strength, training and mental preparation that led to that critical moment had been wasted. The hopes of the British people and the prospects of a new Olympic record were dashed. Christie would leave a broken man and a brilliant career would forever be remembered for that one infamous moment of failure. All because of a false start.





Avoiding a False Start

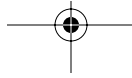
The history of the church's handling of issues regarding stewardship is laden with false starts. The task in this first chapter will be to negotiate our way around the land mines that have disabled so many other works on this subject. We will attempt to make a right start and build a theology of the steward on a sound theological foundation. We will move from the *who* question of theology to the *how* question of Christians ethics and discipleship, and we will see the damage caused whenever we switch this direction around. Therefore, this book is not only an attempt at a new and fresh understanding of the call to be stewards, it is a methodology for doing Christian ethics. In attempting to achieve both, how we start will determine where we will end up. As the history of Christian theology and ethics has proven all too well, everything depends upon making a right start.

Docking theShip

In order to assure that we make the right start, we must immediately change our language. For too long, attempts to undergird Christian tithing and fundraising with some sort of theology have employed the term *stewardship*. The problem that should be immediately apparent is that this focus indicates a classic false start. *Stewardship* is the practice, the work, the vocation of a steward. It is the "how-to," the ethical imperatives of the call to be a steward. The very term indicates that we can move past the whole discussion of what it means to *be a steward* and focus on the practice of *stewardship*. This is a false start.

A subtler form of this false start is seen in some of the better books on stewardship that seem genuinely to seek to ask the more fundamental and all-determining questions about being a steward. However, a close examination exposes a methodology that first lays out what a steward does and then attempts to support that view with an a posteriori analysis of the meaning of steward. This too is a false start.

This false start is also prevalent in the teaching and sermonizing on Christian giving. Sermons focus on the biblical support for the tithe, on the evils of money and materialism, and on exegeting and contextualizing the stories of the widow's mite, the rich young ruler, Paul's example of the Macedonian church and Jesus' commands on cheerful giving. Parishioners are challenged, pleaded with, reasoned with, cajoled, shamed and even threatened into practicing better stewardship. Denomi-



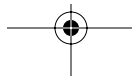


nations produce programs that organize campaigns, train solicitors and provide appeal letters all under the banner of better biblical stewardship. And books are written on stewardship that spend countless pages detailing all the Bible verses commanding us how and why to give, focusing us solely on the *practice* of stewardship.

In all of these ways while we have produced resources for understanding what stewardship looks like, we have failed to raise up stewards. The result is the continual need to develop new fundraising strategies and undertake innovative approaches and clever campaigns to balance the budget and further the work of the church. This must indicate that we are not preparing our people to be informed, committed, godly stewards. This false start assumes that unchanged hearts will follow the radical new ethics of the kingdom of God. It assumes that somehow repentance, conversion and the new life in Christ does not include a fundamental redemption of our attitudes toward possessions. And it assumes that the call to be people of the kingdom of God does not call us simultaneously to a radical new relationship with creation as well as with God and our neighbor. It assumes, falsely, that the call to be a steward is not the necessary prerequisite to the life of biblical stewardship. This is indeed a false start!

In this false start the church is really only following the world. We are a society in search of quick solutions. We want solutions on the *how-to* level rather than the more fundamental *who* level. Tell us *how* to lose weight, not that *we must change* who we are—that is, our habits, our lifestyle and our attitudes. That is the hard work that our society holds in such disdain. And so the solution to obesity is sought in pills, in electroshock belts that burn fat while we watch TV, in blitz-diets and even in prayer. We want ten minutes a day on an Aerobisizer II Deluxe Gliding Absflexing Weight Machine to undo twenty-three hours and fifty minutes of overeating and laziness. We want to fix things. We want formulas that tell us what do to but never mention who we must *become* in order to accomplish what we want.

So we start at the end. Starting with the *how* questions in Christian ethics is akin to the person who sits down toward the end of a movie and asks, “Why did she say that?” “What did all that mean?” or “How come they did that?” Aside from the strong urge to physically assault someone like this, it is clear quite quickly that by missing the start, the ending will make little sense. If one gives in to the further temptation to try to figure it





out anyway, it will become apparent that the answers to the *why, what* and *how* questions vary radically with the answers from those who have watched the entire movie. Imagine the absurdity of the “drop-in” movie watcher arguing over the meaning of the dialogue or the direction of the plot with those who have watched the film from the beginning. Yet that is exactly what we do when we seek to find unity on the pressing issues of our day without first seeking unity on the foundations from which those pressing issues have emerged!

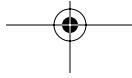
The ethics that result from the overemphasis on *doing* and the absence of *being* have beleaguered the church in its teaching of biblical stewardship. Robert Wuthnow spells this out in uncompromising clarity in speaking of the status of the average churchgoer:

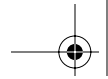
We pray that things will go well for us, we hear sermons counseling us to work hard and to be good stewards, and many of us give lip service to the idea that greed is sin or that God is concerned about the poor. For millions of us, faith nudges our attitudes and our economic behavior in one direction or another. It does so, however, in ways that are seldom as powerful as religious leaders would like and that do little to challenge the status quo. Religion is thus an ambiguous presence in our society. It sends mixed signals about our work, telling us to work hard but not too hard. It counsels us to be diligent with our money but seldom instructs us in how to be diligent. It raises our anxieties about money and discourages us from talking openly about them. It warns us against the excessive materialism that pervades our society but offers little to keep us from the temptations of materialism. Feeling ambivalent about the role of faith, we therefore go about our lives pretty much the same as those who have no faith at all.¹

To avoid this lethal land mine, we must set aside all discussion of *stewardship* and discipline ourselves to start at the beginning, on the call to be stewards. By setting aside the imperatives of the vocation of the steward until its proper place—at the end—we can free this study from the tentacles that bind so many other noble efforts, and we can focus our attention on the *who* question—the heart of all Christian ethics. If we will be true to the call to begin at the beginning, we can be prepared to talk about the practical imperatives of stewardship in a truly informed theological way.

The dichotomy between the question of *what* we should do—Christian ethics—and *who* we are—Christian theology—has a long and sad history in the church. For too long we have divided our theology and ethics in

¹Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 5.





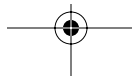
our formal studies and in our more topical writings. In seminary we have separate disciplines and faculties for “systematic theology” and “practical theology”—as if systematic theology is not practical (which is too often the case by the way it is presented), and practical theology has no systematic basis. Both disciplines suffer if the study of the practice of Christian ministry is not built on a sound theological base. Brunner reminds us, “The attempt to make a clear-cut distinction between dogmatics and ethics from the point of view that one is concerned with Divine and the other with human action spoils both dogmatics and ethics.”² Such a division between dogmatics and ethics causes us to lose our focus and creates a weak and impotent ethic. Speaking of our ethical responsibilities with respect to the poor, Ron Sider remarks, “Our problem is not primarily one of ethics. It is not that we have failed to live what our teachers have taught. It is that our theology itself has been unbiblical.”³ Our call then is to build the right theology of the steward upon which we can develop a credible ethic of stewardship. That is the order we must discipline ourselves to maintain if we are to make a right start.

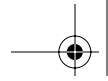
Stewards in the Kingdom of the Triune God of Grace

Throughout this book we shall use the phrase “stewards in the kingdom of the triune God of grace,” which will provide us with the process under which this study must be taken if it is to avoid a false start. To unpack that process we must understand that Christian ethics is the study of the imperatives of the Christian life (how we should live) that by definition follow from the indicatives of the Christian faith (what we believe). That is the order that must be maintained! Everything we say and do as Christians depends on this ordering, and once this process gets out of order, our ethics cease being Christian. As such they lose all authority and influence. They become nothing more than directionless discussions of various opinions and testimonies of individual experiences. They become as relative as the situational ethics of the world around us. God’s command on our lives as his redeemed people are then reduced to a shopping list of do’s and don’ts that can be heeded or ignored depending on one’s context, history and biblical interpretation. The distinction between church and world becomes blurred to insignificance. The church becomes pallid

²Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942), p. 84.

³Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word, 1997), p. 64.



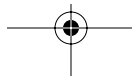


and ineffective. And our witness as light in a world of darkness illuminates a path that leads to nowhere. What is perhaps worse is that each individual Christian life, and therefore the collective witness of the community of believers, loses its vitality, its power, its zeal and its joy. When we lose our direction through such a flawed approach to the ethical concerns of our day, our people are left to struggle on their own with only a future hope of escape from a life lived in no qualitatively different way than their secular neighbor. The “life in all its fullness” promised us by Jesus is replaced by a life lived in all its freneticness, stress and anxiety. This is what is at stake in choosing how we are to study Christian ethics.

The process offered in the phrase “stewards in the kingdom of the triune God of grace” is to be read backwards. Our end goal is to build a credible Christian ethic of the theology of the steward from which we can then speak of our response of *stewardship*. To reach this point we must first understand fully what it means to be a steward. We know we are called to be stewards, but we cannot begin at this call. By definition, a steward is under the command of one who owns the resources that are to be stewarded. *Steward* is a title of a servant, one hired to undertake this activity on behalf of the owner. Therefore, we must move the ethical question back one step and ask, “Whose steward are we? To whom do we owe allegiance in our work?”

The answer we find is shaped by our status as *children in the kingdom of God*. When we examine the life of the Christian in Scripture, it is marked at every point by its membership in the kingdom of God. We are first and foremost God’s children and people of his kingdom. Our call to be stewards then is a call that originates solely from our status as children of the kingdom of God. Our being as stewards is inseparable from our being as children of the kingdom of God. Therefore, if we are to understand what it means to be a steward, we must move the ethical question back to the question of what it means to be a child in the kingdom of God.

But we cannot start here either. For this kingdom is defined by the God who has established it and called us into it. It is *this* God’s kingdom, and we are *this* God’s children. Therefore, the ethical question of living as a steward must move back another step, to the *who* question. Who is this God in whose kingdom we live, whose children we are and to whom we are to be stewards? This is the question that must undergird every Christian ethic, and if you have reached this question, you have almost assuredly avoided a false start. Knowing the God in whose kingdom we live as

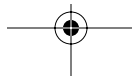


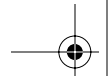


his children is the basis of all Christian ethics. Yet how many discussions on major ethical issues in the church, how many sermons on “how you should live,” and how many “how-to” books on every aspect of “godly living” begin here? Indeed, how many books on stewardship begin at the beginning with a thorough treatment of the doctrine of God and how that understanding of who God is informs us of who we are, which leads us to the answers of the focus of this study, “How then should we live as stewards?” Any treatment of Christian ethics that does not start here starts falsely and will end almost certainly with an uneven and ineffectual ethic. Yet as we see in the phrase, we have not yet captured the whole of the proper starting point. We still stand the chance of falling victim to a false start if we do not press this discussion back one final step.

Knowing the God in whose kingdom we live as his children requires one additional and all-important move. Our knowledge of God is only true knowledge, effectual knowledge, “sufficient” as Karl Barth rightly defines it, if it is knowledge that has been revealed to us. It is not a human knowledge dreamed up from our own philosophies, fabricated from a selection of our individual experiences or constructed from the reasonableness of the “human come of age.” The Christian faith is distinctly a revealed faith. Therefore, the only truly Christian ethic is the ethic built on a Christocentric epistemology; that is, a Christ-centered way of knowing who our God is and who we are as his children. If the only God we know is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, then we must let this God and no other direct our ethics. What we find in this Christ-centered way of knowing is that the Son came to reveal to us the Father and to establish his kingdom filled with the Holy Spirit. The God revealed to us in Christ is known to us in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The God of the kingdom in which we live as children is the triune God revealed to us in Christ—and no other. We are children in the kingdom of the triune God. That is the truth of our being. That is the reality of our existence. It all begins with knowing God with certainty as the triune God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Finally, it is not enough to understand this God only as the triune God. The very fact that he has chosen to reveal himself to us, to come to us in Jesus Christ, to die for us and to call us his children in Christ, reveals something even greater about this triune God. It reveals to us that this God is *for us*. This is the God we can call Abba, Father. This God is our creator, sustainer, redeemer and friend. And by this knowledge of who our cre-





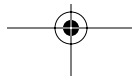
ator God is, we come to a real knowledge of who we are. It is here and only here that our knowledge of ourselves has validity. This self-knowledge is as Christocentric as our knowledge of God. Therefore, the real *who* question that abides at the heart of all valid Christian ethics is the dual question, “Who is this God we know in Jesus Christ?” and “Who are we, as children of this God?” From the answers to these two questions will emerge a powerful, effectual Christian ethic.

The answers will also have a distinguishing mark. They will testify that this is the God of grace. It is only by grace that we have knowledge of God. It is only by grace that we know God as Father, Jesus as Savior and Spirit as Comforter. It is only by grace that we know ourselves as created for relationship with this God, as redeemed by the precious blood of this Savior, and as participants in the life of God and mission of God’s people through the movement of this Spirit. And our lives as children in the kingdom of this God must reflect that grace in every ethical act and decision.

This is the right start we must make. We must dock the *ship* that would want us to look at the imperatives of the faith before the indicatives of grace. We must ask what it means that we are stewards in the kingdom of the triune God of grace. We must begin at the beginning, and that leads us to ask first the epistemological question, “Who is this God, and how do we know?” It leads us to the starting point for every Christian ethic, every Christian doctrine, every Christian creed, and every attempt to know and understand ourselves and our world as Christians. It leads us to Jesus Christ.

Ask the Epistemological Question

In teaching theology classes at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary I am constantly trying to provide students with the tools they will need as pastors to interpret the issues of the day in truly Christian terms and make the results usable for the laity. To that end we spend a great deal of time learning the process of “thinking theologically” and applying our thinking through the use of test cases as we develop our own personal theological positions. The recurring theme I press home at every possible opportunity is the importance of understanding the way in which we can know anything of certain about God. This theme is critical for theological reflection as theology is the study (*logia*) of God (*theos*). This casts the theological enterprise in a wholly distinctive light in comparison to the other *logia* in aca-





demia. There is a clear subject-object dichotomy in the fields of *bio-logia*, *zoo-logia*, *psyche-logia*, *physio-logia*, *socio-logia* and so forth. In these fields the subject, namely the investigator, (therefore, the “ist”—*biologist*, *zoologist*, *psychologist*, etc.) stands over against the object of inquiry: life, animals, the mind, etc. The investigator seeks objectivity, a detachment that will allow for unbiased investigation. From this investigation, conclusions can be drawn from theory, hypothesis and experimentation. In the process it is crucial that the object remain object and the subject remain subject. This is the basis for all good scientific investigation.⁴

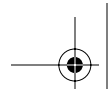
What happens though when we deal with *theo-logia*? The roles of subject-object become rearranged, for we as theologians are both and at once subject and object. It is God who stands over against us. And therefore, the focus of our study is always subject and never only object. We have no place where we can stand over against God and gain a detached, objective perspective. God is not available to us for our occasional probing, experimentation and investigation. And most problematic, he is not knowable through human cognition, sensation or even imagination. Scripture testifies that it is sin that prohibits us from having a natural knowledge of God. Sin has made it impossible for us to know God in and of ourselves. We may know some things *about* God from creation, and we can speculate on what God might be like based on experience and reason, but we are wholly prohibited from direct, reliable knowledge of God by the brokenness of our sin and sinful world. How then do we properly carry out our work of studying God?

Theology, properly done, is wholly dependent upon our understanding that the Christian faith is a revealed faith, and that revelation is a self-revelation of a God who desires us to know him, that we may know ourselves as his children. Therefore, true, reliable and sufficient knowledge of God is not impossible; indeed, it is the great gift of the grace of God.⁵ God has revealed himself to us through the incarnation. That is the truth

⁴It would be wrong to say that scientific investigation achieves its goal of detached objectivity. Michael Polanyi, in his attack on this presupposition, reminds us that “even the most strictly mechanized procedure leaves something to personal skill in the exercise of which an individual bias may enter” (Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* [London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1958], p. 16). For Polanyi, every act of knowing is an action that requires involvement on some level, mitigating against the absolute objectivity sought by the researcher. However, the subject-object classification does not break down in the way that we experience in the work of *theo-logia*.

⁵See the treatment of the first chapter of John in chapter two of this book. Or better yet, read





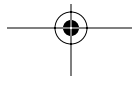
upon which our faith depends. In Jesus Christ we have the only direct, true and reliable knowledge of who our God is. That is the truth upon which all Christian theology depends. This self-revealing of God is our starting place for faith, theology and ethics. Again this is the only valid place where we as Christians can start. "Theology is a joyful intellectual task because the source of its task is the source of the profoundest joy."⁶ That is not a popular word to those in the church who wish to let experience, culture and reason share equally in revealing God to us, but it is the unshakable ground that cannot be yielded if we are to continue to be the church of Jesus Christ.

How we know God and how we can be certain we know is the stuff of epistemology. And epistemology simply must gain a greater place in our theology and our ethics today. So for my students, my rallying cry to them and to you is, "Ask the epistemological question!" By this I mean that every doctrine, creed and ethic has an epistemological base. And that base has already determined to a great degree the force and direction of the doctrine, creed and ethic. The discussions we must have around the issues that divide us inside and outside the church must begin and focus on the epistemological roots of each position. Let me illustrate.

One assignment I have for my class is to read a booklet put out by the Jehovah's Witnesses debunking the doctrine of the Trinity. The booklet carries the subtitle "Is Jesus Christ the Almighty God?" The booklet is well argued, thorough and historically fairly accurate. I ask my students to respond to a fictional parishioner who has been disturbed by the booklet. I ask them to read the pamphlet and respond at a lay level, indicating that they understand the core problem with the theology behind the pamphlet's prodigious use of Bible verses, history and Christian doctrine. What I am looking for is whether the students can ask the right questions. If they approach the Jehovah's Witnesses' challenge to the Trinity with a Bible-verse-by-Bible-verse exegetical attack, or if the students take on the Jehovah's Witnesses over their historical inaccuracy, their misunderstanding of church doctrine or their theological simplicity, the students demonstrate that they themselves have missed the point (and failed the exam!). Even worse, they will end up arguing over issues that cannot be resolved because these issues are

the entire book of John, looking and listening to the text as it speaks of how Jesus reveals to us the heart of the Father *with certainty!*

⁶Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1961), p. 377.



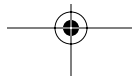


constructed on radically different epistemologies.

The key is in the language of the title. The question I want students to ask the Jehovah's Witnesses is, "Who is the almighty God?" And further, "How do you know?" If there is disagreement on who God is and how we know for certain who God is, then every creed, doctrine and ethic will follow suit. For the Jehovah's Witnesses, the nature, will and work of God is not in any way dependent upon the revelatory work of Christ. Their epistemology is a priori to the work of Christ, stemming instead from select Old Testament interpretation, human reason, experience and a strong dose of Arianism⁷ that rears its ugly head in every century in one form or another. Therefore, for the Jehovah's Witnesses, the claims of Christ must be interpreted in a way to fit into the frame of the God whom they have already constructed from their anthropocentric (human-centered) epistemology. Simply put, if this is who God is (indivisible, unchangeable, unmovable, etc.) then Jesus Christ cannot be "the almighty God." So the claims of Jesus' deity and his revelation of the nature of God as Trinity must be rejected. From this false start they construct an entire theology based on fitting a deconstructed Jesus into this epistemologically flawed frame. The main problem between the Christian faith and the Jehovah's Witnesses' then is primarily epistemological, and that is the key to being able to talk with them about our faith. That is the tool I try to teach my students.

This important theological tool is critical for our discussion of the theology of the steward. As with all ethical questions of the faith, the framing of the questions is vital. The example can be further illustrated by the current divisions in many denominations over the issue of homosexuality. The false start being promoted by some in leadership is the focus on the unity of the church. Now this may seem strange to call Christian unity a false start, but such is the subtle deception of the enemy that would have us produce an ineffectual ethic on such a critical issue. The problem again is that unity is the ethical imperative that can only be the product of the indicatives of grace. That is, unity comes from a people who have been redeemed and changed and who find their unity in that common transformation. If there is a lack of unity evidenced by deep divisions over

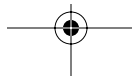
⁷Arianism follows the teaching of Arius, who held that the Son was not equal to the Father and therefore denied the Christian view of the Trinity. It set up a hierarchy within the God-head and subordinated the Son to the status of a created heavenly being that served God but was not equal to God nor coeternal with the Father.





major ethical issues, it likely stems from a lack of unity at the foundational level. The problem in many denominations is not the lack of unity, nor even the issues that seemingly have caused division. The problem is in the membership's multifarious understandings of the God they worship. Ethical divisions with the strength and passion evidenced in this debate can only be based on more fundamental differences in the perception of who God is and therefore who we are and what we are called to do. That is where the discussion must begin. To attempt to paste over these fundamental differences in the name of unity is to start falsely. It leaves us to seek after a false unity, a unity that must be conjured up, a unity to which people adhere because of guilt, peer pressure or the threat of denominational estrangement. It witnesses to a lack of understanding of unity in Christ as our response to the God who called us out of the world as his people. It is tearing up many denominations, eating at the heart of the church, and it is a false start that must be recognized by our leadership if we are to begin the arduous task of moving back and beginning at the beginning.

This same mistake can be seen over and over again in how the church handles other ethical divisions and divisive issues that confront us. We are forever making false starts. How can we discuss euthanasia, capital punishment, abortion or biomedical ethics without a thorough study of the meaning of life in light of who we are as the children of the kingdom of the God who was revealed to us in Jesus Christ? How can we rightly discuss issues of oppression, justice, racism and discrimination without a thorough study of what it means that all humanity is created for relationships, and therefore is created in the image of the trinitarian God revealed to us in Jesus Christ? How can we rightly discuss the problem of evil and suffering without a thorough study of the nature of God that points us to the heart of a loving Father revealed to us in Jesus Christ? How can we discuss the challenges of multiculturalism and pluralism rightly without a thorough study of the purpose of God the Creator to call all humanity to himself through the redemptive work of the Son that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ? How can we rightly discuss human sexuality and homosexuality without a thorough study of the command of God the Creator who made us male and female for relationships that reflect the glory of the trinitarian God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ? And how can we discuss money, ownership, giving and asking rightly without a thorough study of the meaning of creation, fall and redemption for those who are





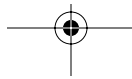
called as stewards and for creation itself, in light of our status as children in the kingdom of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ? All of these questions must be framed in thoroughly epistemological language. This is not a panacea for all that divides us, but it is a prerequisite for substantive dialogue that will have a chance to lead to consensus and the long sought after unity of the church.

The Theology of the Steward

This study starts at the beginning and seeks to avoid the temptations to make a false start, that is, to talk about stewardship before developing a theology of the steward. We will work through the process laid out earlier, beginning with the epistemological question, constructing from there a doctrine of God, moving to an understanding of the kingdom of this God and who we are as children of this God in this kingdom, and finally asking what it means to be called to be stewards. Before we begin, we must be sure of our language and decide if a right start includes the use of the term *steward*.

Theologians, I am convinced, are professional term-creators. We are applauded for our ability to make up new words that supposedly better capture the true meaning of our brilliant insights and keen analysis. Conveniently, these terms also serve to keep the uninformed at arm's length, for we have created our own vocabulary that one must decipher to unlock the secrets of the theological enterprise. While some new terms have proven helpful, especially with the need to be gender inclusive, most are too indicative of arrogance and a certain pompousness that seems grossly out of place in a field in which we are called humbly before God in the attempt to speak about him. Therefore, I am reluctant to offer new terms for our study. Yet I believe we must also understand the limitations of the language we will adopt.

The term *steward* is misunderstood and even foreign in our society. We do not have any terms in our modern vocabulary that carry the richness of this term. *Caretaker* fails to capture the responsibility laid on the steward. *Manager* seems inadequate to describe the relationship between the owner and the steward. *Custodian* is too passive a term. *Agent* is too self-serving in our day. *Ambassador* is too political, and it lacks the servant aspect. *Warden* is too administrative and loses the sense of the personal. *Guardian* is too closely tied solely to parental responsibilities.





Vocationally, perhaps the director of a charitable foundation may be the closest image we have today as one to whom resources are entrusted for the purposes described by the rightful owner. However, even here there is a purely financial tone to the term. There is also a definite sense of distance between steward and owner that is antithetical to the biblical understanding of our vocation as stewards.

Without a clearly better term in our modern vernacular, we return again to the term *steward*. But before adopting it, we must look at the pros and cons of the term and see if we can accept it for our use in this study.

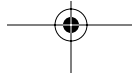
The negative images come almost solely from the church's use of the biblical symbol. Doug Hall points out that the term has historically described giving as the means to achieve the *real* mission of the church. Therefore, stewardship has no real value in and of itself but only in relationship to its ability to help the church achieve its goals.

So thoroughly is the term associated with church management and finances; so demeaned is it by the implicitly unfavorable comparison with the spiritual end (mission) for which it is only the means, that it will require a great deal of critical thought and work to bring the stewardship idea to the prominence that its biblical background warrants and the times demand.⁸

Because of the lack of sound teaching on stewardship, the image of the steward offered by the church has become blurred. Perhaps the primary understanding today of the term *steward* is one who shares one's own resources with others. Here the characteristic mark of the biblical steward—handling with integrity the resources of *another*—is completely lost. Being a godly steward has been reduced to nothing more than being a good investor or philanthropist or business owner. While these are all vestiges of what being a steward might look like, they miss the mark by staying in an “ownership frame” that is completely foreign to the biblical notion of *steward*. This is an image that will be hard to unseat in the church.

The image is further tarnished by its association with the purely financial aspect of its meaning. When the call to be a steward is equated only with one's finances, then the role can be fulfilled by tithing to the church,

⁸Douglas John Hall, *The Steward* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 13. He goes on to say, “It would not be an exaggeration, I think, even to say that stewardship has a distasteful connotation for the majority of churchfolk, including clergy.”





while our use of time, our relationships with others, our care for the environment and our care for ourselves remain our own concern detached from the “spiritual” part of our lives. This attitude, as we will see in chapter six, leads to the myth of the two kingdoms in which there is a kingdom of that which is “ours” side by side with the kingdom of God, or the spiritual things in our lives. To be a steward in this limited sense is to deal with our financial obligations in the spiritual realm, while leaving all else under the auspices of our own control in our worldly kingdom. This bifurcation of the role of the steward is prevalent in the church, and it poses a major challenge to the teaching of stewardship and the raising up of committed, godly stewards.

Finally, because the term is so associated with the finances in the church, it also carries the baggage of the myriad of negative images of the church’s involvement with money and fundraising. By putting the word *steward* in the title of this book, I was cautioned that many would see it as another attempt to get more money from people for the church. The very word smacks of tawdry fundraising schemes, heavy-handed techniques, poor stewardship sermons, guilt giving and ecclesiastical graft. It brings to mind the charge “the church only wants my money” and all the variants on that theme. Robert Wood Lynn laments that the term *stewardship*

has been used to describe all manner of different Christian concerns. But amidst all the popular new talk about stewardship, I don’t see anything in the stewardship teachings of the last twenty-five or thirty years that brings distinctively new and powerful meanings to the act of giving.⁹

This inertia, too, will be difficult to overcome in the church.

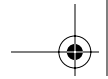
The positive reasons to use the term include its biblical foundation. While many terms are used in Scripture, the image of the steward emerges to take a special place in the teaching of Godly living as children in the kingdom of God. Hall also concludes, “The metaphor of the steward is conspicuously present in the biblical tradition, even though it has never been consistently or profoundly appropriated by evolving church doctrine.”¹⁰

The term is also rich in its ability to demonstrate its relational character. We have said that *steward* is a wholly relational term, and we will

⁹Robert Wood Lynn, “Faith and Money,” in *Inside Information*, spring 1997, p. 6.

¹⁰Hall, *Steward*, p. 76.





develop this idea on four levels. First, *the term immediately identifies the steward as one who is not the rightful owner of that which is to be stewarded.* Stewards are by definition not owners, but they have a relationship with the owner in order to be a faithful steward. This steward-owner relationship is of primary importance in a study of the theology of the steward.

Second, *the term denotes a relationship between the steward who cares for the resources of the owner and those for whom those resources are meant.* The biblical steward invested the resources in the lives of those to whom the owner was inclined. Therefore, there is a necessary relationship between the steward and the recipients of the resources being stewarded.

Third, *there is a relationship between the steward and the steward's own needs.* That is, while the resources are not owned by the steward, the steward is expected to live from the resources and in that way be a steward to himself or herself. There is a self-stewardship implied in the term.

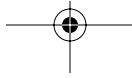
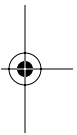
Fourth, *there is a relationship between the steward and the resources themselves.* Here issues of control, power, materialism, exploitation, waste, harvest and domination need to be discussed. Here the steward faces the temptation to act the part of the owner. Here is where the dark side of ownership is manifested, and stewardship is abandoned. The term *steward* carries the identification of one who draws clear lines between investing and exploitation, between management and control, between caretaking and domination, between use and waste. Here the term *steward* is most poignant and most challenging.

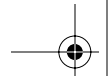
These four relationships will be key in our development of the theology of the steward, for while here they depict the positive relational aspects of the term, they will also be the foci of the effects of the fall, which brought brokenness to each. Van Dyke, Mahan, Sheldon and Brand pointed this out with clarity in speaking of the four great separations of sin and judgment,

First came a separation of humans from God. . . . Second the Fall created a separation of human beings from each other. . . . Third, each human became divided in and separated from the self. . . . Fourth humans were separated from creation.¹¹

Clearly the terms *steward* and *stewardship* can be both helpful and prob-

¹¹Fred Van Dyke, David Mahan, Joseph Sheldon and Raymond Brand, *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 69.





lematic to this study. We must recognize at the beginning that many may have trouble embracing the theology that will be presented because of their reaction to the terms used. However, it may be for these very reasons that we should cleave to these terms and seek to resurrect their proper meaning rather than create a new vocabulary. It is the harder way, but the term *steward* is too appropriate to abandon as useless. Instead we will attempt to recapture its meaning for the church by building a proper theology upon which it can stand. We will begin at the primary relationship of the steward—the relationship between the steward and the rightful owner of the resources to be stewarded. This is both the first and primary relationship, and as we have argued, it is the only proper starting point for a credible and valid Christian ethic. Therefore, we will begin this study with a doctrine of God based on a Christocentric epistemology. In other words, we will start with the *who* question.

