

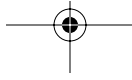
Introduction

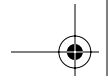
When people read my curriculum vitae, they usually look confused and ask something like, “What does a fundraiser do with a Ph.D. in theology?” Or they ask the converse, “What does a theologian do with fifteen years of fundraising experience?” Good questions. The odd combination that marks my spiritual journey has brought me to this book out of a love for my profession and a deep desire to help undergird it with sound theology.

Research and experience has brought me to the conclusion that the church has lost its passion for stewardship and that theologians have not provided a compelling theology to help the church regain it. To some extent, the whole discussion of godly stewardship has been taken off the table in most churches and ministries. Pastors do not like to preach about it, nor do parishioners like to hear about it; few people write about it, and even less read about it. An effective wedge has been driven between the spiritual and the material. We do not talk about religion at social gatherings and we do not talk about money in the church.

The results of this deepening gulf are found in the rise of ineffective and un-Christian fundraising practices that have led to the growing number of financially strapped churches and ministries. The continuing fear and consequent disaffection by churches to the whole subject of stewardship has opened the door for the stranglehold that materialism and consumerism now have on God’s people. Studies continue to show that the spending practices of self-professing, born-again Christians vary little from those who claim no role for religion in their lives.¹

¹George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word, 1997). See chap. 1, especially pp. 4-6.

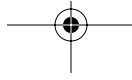


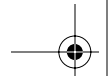


The place to begin to turn the tide is in the education of our pastors, lay leaders and ministry professionals. It must happen in our seminaries, in trustee- and deacon-training sessions, in para-church development departments, in home Bible study groups and in the pastor's study. It must start with a reeducated and transformed Christian leadership. It must be built on a sound and compelling theology, and it must return the concept of the godly steward to the daily vocabulary of Christian life and worship. The purpose of this book is to start us in this direction by providing us with a *theology of the steward*.

There is a second and equally compelling reason for this study. The Christian life is to stand out in the world, marked by the attributes of peace, purpose, wholeness, fruitfulness and joy. Jesus promised us that in him we may have "life in all its fullness." That is, in Christ we may know the life of freedom and joy for which we were created and redeemed. However, for an increasing number of Christians today, that full and joyous life is being strangled by the trials and temptations of daily life. It is my contention that the loss of a theology of the steward has not only damaged our ministries, it has robbed us of the rich, full and fruitful life that God intends for us. For so many reasons that we will discuss in this book, the Christian life has been stripped of these kingdom characteristics, replacing them with just as much anxiety, stress, despair, frustration, depression and fear as is known by those in the world around us. The thesis of this book is that by reclaiming the central motif of the steward, and building it on a sound theological and biblical base, we will be freed and empowered to live as joyous children in the kingdom of God. For that reason, the subtitle of this book is *A Theology of Life in All Its Fullness*. That is the life God desires for us. That is the life for which Christ died. That is the life that will shine like a light set on a hill, drawing to it all who are lost. That is the life lived by stewards in the kingdom of the triune God of grace.

This "life in all its fullness" is not some new prosperity gospel, nor does it come from a naive disregard for the evil in the world nor from a theology of escapism. It comes from a theology of the steward that calls us into the most intense engagement with the lostness and brokenness of our age. It comes through sacrifice, selflessness, giving and compassion, but it comes through a radical reinterpretation of what each of these means in light of our understanding of who God is and who we are as stewards in his kingdom. For this reason, the full, rich and abundant life





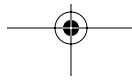
in Christ *is* the life of the steward in the kingdom of God. That is why a theology of the steward is the foundation for recapturing for every Christian that “life in all its fullness.” That is the purpose of this book.

The Steward as Christian Ethic

The theology of the steward belongs to the field of Christian ethics. This simple statement introduces us to a terrain within Christian theology that is both imbued with opportunities and littered with land mines. The opportunities that lay before us are the possibilities for a study of the steward that is uniquely and truly Christian. Such an ethic will be characterized by our participation in Christ, the Christian life as joyous response, embracing the radical new values of the kingdom of God and a return to evangelical obedience all within the context of Christian ethics as doxology (worship and praise).

In the study of Christian ethics where you start determines where you will end up. For the Christian, our ethics are our responses to the command of the God who has saved us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, they are both freely given and an act of obedience to the commands of the gracious God who calls us into a new life in Christ. As response our ethics are wholly dependent upon what comes before. They are conditioned by that which calls us to response. The first critical distinction we must make in this study is that for the Christian, what motivates our response is not *what* but *who*. We are not motivated by guilt, by altruism, by seeking after a greater good, by pressure to conform to standards of acceptable behavior, nor by a set of biblical or ecclesiastical rules. Christian ethics is nothing less than the study of doxology! It is our freely given yet directly commanded act. Therefore it unfolds in our life as both our obligation and our only possibility.

The study of ethics must recognize its place in the process of the calling of the Christian and the Christian’s response. This process can be described in three acts. The first, and this will be the subject of much of our study, is that the Creator *acts*. God takes the initiative that is unmerited and merciful. God acts in the sending of the Son to speak a word to us that we could not hear on our own. He reveals himself, his grace, his loving intent and his righteousness to us and makes us capable by the Spirit to hear and see and understand. Therefore, the self-revelation of the Creator is the beginning point of all Christian ethics. We can go no further until we are absolutely certain who our God is. Without this understand-





ing, Christian ethics is impossible.

Second, in revealing himself to us in Jesus Christ, our Creator also reveals to us who we *really* are. Jesus Christ ushered in a new reality called the kingdom of God and called us into it as God's children. If this is who God is, then our understanding of who we are is radically changed at its most fundamental level. We have become something new. Our existence in this world is now defined in different terms. We are worshipers, disciples, neighbors. This too is determined solely by the Creator who acts, who speaks, who calls, who saves, who reveals and who commands. And that Creator also calls us, commands us and frees us to respond.

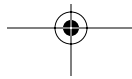
Only upon the foundation of these first two acts of God toward us and for us can the study of Christian ethics be built. John Calvin put it this way in speaking of true spiritual insight, "This spiritual insight consists chiefly in three things: (1) knowing God, (2) knowing his fatherly favor in our behalf, in which our salvation consists, and (3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law."² Only after understanding and acknowledging the first two acts of God can we begin to ask the questions of what "framing our life" looks like. Only here are we able to speak of *our* acts in response to God's great act for us. Only here can we begin to speak of worshiping, for we have become worshipers *in Christ*. Only here can we begin to speak of discipleship, for we have become disciples *in Christ*. And only here can we begin to talk about stewardship, for we have become stewards *in Christ*. The same is true for all of the categories that describe our response. What we are to do is wholly dependent upon whom we have become. And whom we have become is seen and known and understood solely in God's gracious actions toward us. Emil Brunner summed up Christian ethics as, "the science of human conduct as it is determined by Divine conduct."³ That divine conduct is the gracious act of God toward us in Jesus Christ, the unveiling of the heart of God that calls us into a life of free response.

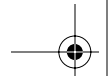
Because only conduct which takes place on the basis of this faith can be "good conduct," in the sense of the Christian ethic, therefore, the science of good conduct, of ethics, is possible only within that other science which speaks of the Divine act of revelation, that is, within dogmatics.⁴

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 277.

³Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942), p. 86.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 84.



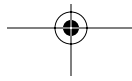


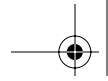
This is the only possible approach to Christian ethics if our ethics are not to drift aimlessly, to become stratified into either a grace-less list of do's and don'ts, or an equally dogmatic adherence to a tolerance of everything and a devotion to nothing. When ethics are cut loose from a doctrine of God, they can lead us into wrong notions of ethical behavior that are based more on the world's standards than anything remotely Christian.

The land mines strewn before us in this terrain of Christian ethics represent false starts that lead us to flawed conclusions and inevitably to counterfeit ethics. The most nefarious of these land mines is the temptation to begin the study or discussion of any Christian ethic at someplace other than at the beginning. This may seem obnoxiously obvious, but in practice it is the downfall of too many efforts in Christian ethics. Divisive denominational issues, "how to live the Christian life" topical books, sermons and even scholarly attempts at a truly theological approach to the ethical issues of our day, all start falsely when they start by asking, "How are we to live?" instead of asking, "Who are we in Christ?" and even more importantly, "Who is this God who has acted graciously toward us?" We too easily can become obsessed with "doing" over "being," and so we seek solutions that involve us only superficially but require no permanent change. The evidence of this obsession comes at the point where ethical discussions begin with a focus on the issues of *how*, *when*, *where* and *why*. That is, they focus on the third act, assuming everyone has started at the same place or that the starting place need play no role in the real issues that are here at the end of the process.

If a study of Christian ethics in any area is to avoid this significant land mine, it must begin at the beginning. It must not assume that everyone has started at the same place, and it must lay out the foundation upon which its conclusions will be built. The same must hold for those involved in debate and discussion on ethical issues. The discussion must begin at determining if there is common ground at the foundational level. Otherwise, there is no chance for consensus to be found in the implications that follow.

This book then is about making a right start and building a solid theological justification for placing the motif of the steward at the center of Christian life and worship. Its focus will be on *who* we are and *whose* we are before defining *how* we are to live. It attempts to put first things first and to champion the call to center all of our ethical discussions on the





reality of God for us in Jesus Christ. It will lead us to the full, joyous and meaningful life for which we were created, the life of the steward in God's kingdom.

The final chapter of this book is a theology of asking and giving. It is written for everyone who is responsible to raise money, for everyone who gives money to the work of God's kingdom, and for all Christian leaders who have to deal with issues of money and stewardship. I hope it will serve to inspire further dialogue and study in this important sphere of Christian mission. I also hope that it will raise the profile and highlight the crucial role that this most noble Christian ministry plays in the furthering of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

