

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Incarnational Stewardship

In most congregations, December is a month where stewardship gets somewhat overwhelmed. The hectic pace of the month with the observance of Advent and the anticipation of the annual celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord makes a focus on just about anything else impossible. The drama of this month includes services to plan, music to learn, decorations to hang, sermons to prepare, a crush of people to anticipate and a search to see who will let us use their

newborn as Baby Jesus in the children's Christmas service. These are practical reasons why stewardship usually isn't on the horizon during the month of December. When you have so many other logistics to deal with, the thought of stewardship can be overshadowed in the same way that consumerism and retail therapy can overshadow the birth of Jesus!

But there also is a pragmatic reason why stewardship doesn't come to the

forefront during December. Many congregations had their annual discussion of stewardship earlier in the fall. They heard the sermons about being "consecrated stewards." They filled in their pledge cards. They have already started their new commitment after First Fruits Sunday. With the return of the more "relational-only" members of the congregation, pews and offering plates are fuller. For these reasons, many congregations don't even think it is necessary to talk about stewardship.



In this festival time of the church year, to allow stewardship to be overwhelmed or pragmatically ignored is a serious mistake. There may not be a need to make the intentional appeal for prayerful consideration of the stewardship of the individual during the seasons of Advent and Christmas, but there is a need for stewardship to be taught incarnationally!

But what does that mean? What does it mean for us to teach a biblical, confessional and incarnational stewardship?

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First, it means that stewardship in December is really no different than stewardship in July. If the church allows for logistics or pragmatism to crowd out faithful stewardship in December, it fails to faithfully teach stewardship to its people. The stewardship of the Gospel, the stewardship of our baptismal vocation that serves the Lord by serving others and even our financial stewardship, need to be taught clearly no matter what page of the calendar happens to be hanging in the church office or next to the phone in the kitchen at home.

This need for ongoing, intentional and incarnational stewardship education is not simply a pragmatic one. It is simply the Church teaching the clear call of the Holy Scriptures to the individual steward. Human beings were made to be stewards of creation. The first and second chapters of Genesis make that abundantly clear. Human beings were created by God to have dominion over creation (Gen. 1:28). The Lord placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to work and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15). There are only two things that have changed since the Lord bestowed upon us the vocation of steward of His creation.

The first event was the fall. The fall really serves as the first stewardship crisis. That crisis was created when those assigned the vocation of steward bought into the lie that they were actually the owners. By asserting a vocation that wasn't given to them, the fallen humans introduced the crisis of sin. With that sin of failed stewardship of God's com-

mand and God's creation, every relationship was destroyed. Separated from God, from creation and from one another, from that point on every human being would struggle with their place in creation. The vocation of steward, originally conveyed to humanity for the sake of service, over the millennia has proven to be a burden that kills.



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This hopeless state then leads to the second major event that has occurred since Adam was given the vocation of steward. That second event is the incarnation. The very Lord who gave man the task of working and keeping creation broke into that corrupted creation in order to do the work that would keep creation from death. This could not be done by remote control. Nothing less than the incarnation would be able to undo the damage to God's beautiful

and perfect creation, which was inflicted by unfaithful stewards. To save creation, the Lord of Creation needed to get into creation. Yet, as far-fetched as that sounds, this is exactly what the Lord does in the person and work of Baby Jesus. The incarnation serves as the beginning point of what the Creator would do to not only restore the fallen stewards but, in fact, restore the entire fallen creation (Rom. 8:18–23). The incarnation leads to the cross. The cross leads to the empty tomb. The empty tomb leads to the resurrection. The resurrection leads to Pentecost, where the Spirit is outpoured and the Gospel takes dead sinners and makes them alive in Christ. Those alive in Christ then are restored to that original purpose of stewardship.

The incarnation changes the trajectory of human history, present and future. The salvation that results changes our relationship with God. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, we are moved from the state of being thieving owners to being redeemed stewards by grace through faith. This grace, as undeserved as it is, then

calls us to a response. This response, limited and wholly disproportionate to the grace given, can only be shown within the creation. The redeemed stewards, in response to God's good gift of salvation incarnate in Jesus Christ, can only respond incarnationally. Stewardship, because it is in creation, is always incarnational. That is, we manage the creation in the flesh. The Lord who has given us such tremendous Second Article grace in Christ can only be re-

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sponded to by means of the First Article creation. God is fleshed in Christ. Our response of faith in Christ is fleshed in the way that we manage what He has entrusted to us.

This can be especially useful for us during this time of rampant consumerism. Wish lists and Santa’s lap feed the sinner/owner template. But this is not who we are as the redeemed of the Lord. We are those who are entrusted with that which belongs to another. That management then is not so much a testimony about the things managed but how we feel about the Owner of the things. The incarnation changes the way we look at the world and the things in it. Changed by Christ’s life, death and resurrection, we no longer see created things worth chasing after, especially if they can be instrumental in taking us away from the faith. Rather, we see created things as gifts from the Lord to be used for serving the Lord by serving our neighbor.

Incarnational stewardship is not preaching about the evils of “stuff.” It is never good to define something by what it is not. It is far more important to identify what this kind of incarnational steward-

ship is. It is a regular and intentional way of sharing with the people of God that all we have — especially the created things that we receive as gifts from God and one another — is only faithfully used when in service, not to ourselves, but to each other and, ultimately, for the Lord. This kind of stewardship is a concrete stewardship. It is tangible, visible and meaningful.

Incarnational stewardship looks to give rather than to receive. It is not about shiny bows, colorful paper or expensive things. It is about flesh and blood. It starts with the flesh of the God-man, Jesus Christ, swaddled in cloth and lying in a manger. But it goes much farther than that. It is a stewardship that looks to be the hands and feet of Jesus, the open eyes and ears of Jesus, to be nothing other than the flesh and blood of Jesus in a world that needs the Word in the flesh today more than ever.

What better time is there to teach this kind of stewardship than during the time of year that hinges on the incarnation? It is not about logistics. It is not about pragmatics. It is all about Jesus.

