



Tearing Down the High Places

Over the last two decades The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has been seeking a “stewardship renaissance.” This renaissance is necessary. Why? During a very lengthy period in the middle of the 20th century many in the Synod drifted away from a willingness to teach stewardship from a biblical and confessional position. Stewardship became a taboo topic in many congregations. A generation of people — or more — was allowed to come of age in our congregations believing that stewardship was an intensely

personal matter that was “just between God and them.” As this developed, many pastors became fearful of being labeled as “always talking about money.” Others felt as though any preaching of stewardship would cause their brothers in the Office of Holy Ministry to view them as less than confessional. The demise was marked by an almost adversarial relationship of “us” versus “those” pastors. In this vacuum, stewardship in many segments of our Synod languished and withered on the vine because it was not being nourished by faithful preaching. It also was not

being faithfully practiced. Combine these issues with rising cost of benefits and the fact that many congregations increased the wages paid to church workers, and we can see the root of the spiritual and resulting financial woes that plague our congregations individually and the Synod as a whole.

This movement was not an uncontrolled downward death spiral. During those years the LCMS was led in the area of stewardship at the national level by faithful men of God. They stood in the breach and attempted, to the best of their ability, to answer the cries of the pastors and people of the LCMS for guidance and direction in the leading of stewardship in local congregations. In addition to this, there were always pastors who taught stewardship from a proper perspective. Congregations continued to carry on because there were many faithful stewards that had been catechized in previous eras that practiced faithful stewardship. But as the years passed and those previous generations of faithful stewards were reduced by age, infirmity and death,



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it became apparent that new stewards who knew the joy of serving the Lord with all of their life and life's resources were not stepping in or up. Each flow of stewardship renewal was greeted by an ebb that was just a little bit more pronounced. There are still many faithful pastors in pulpits and stewards in our congregations. However, they need help.

The stewardship trajectory of the LCMS is somewhat reminiscent of the pattern of the kings of Judah in the Old Testament. Solomon reigned over a kingdom that knew no equal when it came to splendor. But as Solomon's wisdom was corrupted by the worldly ways of his wives, it also opened the door to civil war and division after his death. The two resulting kingdoms had very different directions. Israel descended deeper and deeper into paganism until its people were carted off into dispersion by the Assyrians. Judah, on the other hand, ebbed and flowed. It had kings who strayed from faithfulness and led God's people astray. But they were followed by kings who walked in the ways of Yahweh. But very often, while the good kings of Judah were faithful, they did not translate that to the rest of the kingdom. Over and over in the book of Kings we hear this said about the "good" kings of Judah: "Yet the high places were not taken away, and the people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places." While the kings may have been personally faithful, they didn't go far enough in removing the opportunity for false pagan worship to take place in their land. Without that tearing down of the high places, the people gradually ebbed back into that which eventually led them to Babylon.

The same kind of thing takes place in LCMS stewardship. Good leaders, faithful pastors and consecrated lay members have practiced good stewardship over the years. They have taught and formed and led many to



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know what is good, right and salutary about stewardship. But they have allowed many of the “high places” to stand. If we don't tear down these high places, we will continue to lose ground.

Among the “high places” that need to come down is the one that makes stewardship a personal decision of the individual. Allowed to stand, this feeds the old Adam's idea that there are actually things in creation that belong to us. On this high place the individual steward asks the question, “What am I going to give of what is mine?” To answer this we must ask the question, “Just what is yours anyway?” The Scripture is clear — NOTHING is ours. We were not created to be owners. We were created, as Gen. 2 indicates, to be stewards and keepers and workers of God's kingdom. Although we are fallen, our Baptism restores us to this stewardship task. But the old Adam remains. If we allow this high place to stand, the human penchant to claim

ownership of that which is God's will rear its ugly head, and stewardship will continue to decline.

Another high place that must be torn down is the pastoral unwillingness to teach the whole counsel of God. Stewardship, while it can be unpleasant if confronting the sins of a congregation of poor stewards or the poor personal stewardship of the pastor, is part of God's Word. Pastors are called to this. The teaching of faithful stewardship is part of a faithful teaching of sanctification. Calling people to repentance and new life in the area of stewardship is just as much a part of the ministry as calling any wayward sinner to repentance. No pastor would be considered faithful if he didn't confront a known sin of adultery or false doctrine with an expert distinction of God's Law and Gospel. No pastor can be considered truly faithful if he is not calling God's people, and himself, to repentance in the area of stewardship.

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Yet another high place that must come down is the artificial distinction between time, talents and treasure. While these distinctions have been used over the years in the teaching of stewardship, they have allowed a false dichotomy to creep into stewardship. This “high place” allows people to overemphasize one area of stewardship at the expense of others. Years ago, people would give of their time rather than their money. Today, it is just the opposite. But the Lord is the owner of all time, all talent and all treasure. We are called by virtue of our Baptism to be stewards of ALL of life and life’s resources. It is correct to say that stewardship isn’t all about money. It is not correct to say that it doesn’t involve things financial. It is correct to say that time and talents are part of stewardship. But our teaching of stewardship cannot stand in the way of our people being the generous stewards the Lord has called them to be at the font, altar and pulpit.

One more high place that must come down is the concept that stewardship is a matter of institutional survival. While it is true the local congregation pays its bills with the money in the offering plate, the Church itself does not exist because God’s people are generous. The Church has allowed an unhealthy connection between the offering plate

and the budget to fester over the years. As a result, ministry that should be focused on the care of souls is now focused on the survival of the institution. Needing people in the pews to pay the bills overshadows faithful pastoral care. Getting new members to help pay for the expansion of ministry engulfs the congregation’s call to faithful evangelism. New ministries “paying their own way” gets in the way of a congregation seeing opportunities to serve the Lord by serving their neighbor. Cutting off the dead weight of nonpaying and nonparticipating members of the body replaces the seeking of wayward sheep. This high place must come down because it will not only poison our preaching of stewardship, it will kill a congregation’s ministry all together!

There is only one way for these high places to come down. God calls His Church to repentance. This repentance starts with the individual. When these high places come down in the hearts of the individual steward and pastor, only then can they come down in the congregation and Synod. This is the Lord’s work among us. It is not about a program or a binder. It is about God’s Law killing us and His Gospel making us new in Christ. This kind of renewal and repentance will happen. We have God’s Word on it!

