



Fundraising vs. Stewardship

Several times over the last few months, direct questions have been posed about the relationship between sound biblical stewardship and fundraising. The inquiries came not from any malice but from a sincere desire for individuals and congregations to be faithful in their practice of stewardship, not only of finances, but also of the Gospel and our ministry to one another.

The answer to this question is not as easy as it seems. This is in keeping with most other questions in ministry.

There is often an easy answer when sitting in theoretically driven settings, like a seminary classroom, a pastor's conference or even reading an online stewardship article. However, the practical application of the theory is not always as clean and painless as one might think. This is exacerbated by the fact that for the better part of the last century, fundraising has grown in prominence and the teaching of biblical stewardship has grown silent in many circles. Not all fundraising is bad. Bad teaching of Christian stewardship is never good. This is more than a matter

of theological theory or pragmatic decision making. As in all cases of sound practical theology, how to handle this is the art of applying the science (or in this case, theology).

The concrete reality is that the overuse and reliance upon fundraisers hinders the growth of and erodes sound biblical stewardship. The corporate stewardship of the congregation is the sum total of the individual stewardship of the members. When a local congregation falls into the death spiral of fundraiser after fundraiser, the focus is on the wrong issue. This is seeking a corporate solution to a crisis that, at its root, is individual. The fundraiser is a treatment for a symptom that completely ignores the underlying disorder. The symptoms are unpaid bills and deferred maintenance, unpaid benefits and salaries. The real disorder is individual stewardship that has lost its connection to the baptismal identity and the call to whole life stewardship that flows



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from the Holy Spirit's working through the Gospel.

Both the symptom and the disorder needs to be addressed. It really can't be an either/or discussion if a godly solution is to be discovered. To only address the symptom is like giving cough syrup to a lung cancer patient. For a time the medicine may mask the symptoms and thereby mask the underlying disease, but soon a time of reckoning comes when the symptom can no longer be masked and the disease is only worse, if not terminal. While this is true, it is often much easier and more economical to administer the treatment for the symptom. In the case of the symptom of stewardship being the lack of resources for funding the congregation's ministry, it is far easier to plan a dinner or have an auction as a stopgap measure to cover the greater issues facing a congregation. The fundraiser can be fun to do. It may even be a lucrative endeavor. However, like fool's gold, it also gives the false impression that things are getting better. The cough is gone for a moment so the cancer must be gone, right? Not hardly!

It is so much harder to address the root disease. That will require hard things to be done. In medicine that might include surgery, which is painful, radiation that burns and chemotherapy that causes its own sickness. This is the only way to bring true healing and delay mortality. In sound stewardship teaching there is the need for diagnosis. It calls the individual to look into the mirror of the Law and deal with the reality that there is something wrong. This is scary because it requires honesty first with God, with ourselves and then, ultimately, with our brothers and sisters in Christ in the congregation. But it is the only way that the underlying diseased stewardship can be addressed and healed.

When the congregation seeks to address the underlying stewardship disorder



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that exists in a congregation it can be very scary. It requires a pastor and the congregation to ask some very hard questions of themselves first and then of one another. This can lead many to conclusions that take people through the gamut of emotion. Anger comes when the Law of God hits and shows the individual steward is not where he or she should be. This anger, rather than being directed at the self for falling short, is often directed at the one who asks the question. Denial follows with discussion of how the offering of time and talents supplant the individual's call to financial stewardship. If the course is stayed and the Holy Spirit is allowed to do His work, then comes the repentance and the new life of freedom that results when the individual steward responds in faith to the work of the Holy Spirit in and through them for the sake of the kingdom.

This is neither a quick or easy process within the congregation. It is really more a matter of healing than fixing. Fixes are quick. Healing takes time. Because

corporate stewardship is the collection of the individual, there are so many moving parts that make the cure of sound teaching of biblical stewardship a much harder task. This is real work. It also takes time. Time is often a luxury that congregations don't have when the mortgage payment is due and worker benefit companies are calling for past due amounts. For this reason, many congregations default to symptom relief rather than disease cure in the area of stewardship. But relief is no cure. It simply a delay of the inevitable outcome if real, substantive, theological issues are not addressed.

Fundraising as a fix is not sound stewardship. But not all fundraising is bad. In fact, in many congregations, there are annual events that have a fundraising component that have become more fellowship building than fundraising. Just one of many examples of this can be found in the LCMS Southern Illinois District. Many congregations have been holding "sausage suppers" and "wurstmarts"

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for more than a half a century. Often started by one of the congregation’s auxiliaries, these events over the years have grown into gatherings that allow connection and reconnection within the congregation and community that just happen to raise funds. These are great events when used properly in the setting of congregational stewardship of relationship and service.

The best diagnostic for this “Stewardship vs. Fundraising” discussion becomes a question: Why is it done and who are we doing it for? If the effort that is being undertaken is for the sake of fixing a financial problem that should otherwise be taken care of by the faithful stewardship of God’s people, then it likely isn’t a godly thing. In these cases, it is the equivalent of asking your unbelieving neighbors to pay the way for Christian ministry. This isn’t a way to manage any household, let alone the household of the Lord. In essence, if we are doing the event for the benefit

of those doing the fundraising, then it should be re-evaluated, and perhaps even discontinued. However, if the event is focused on others as service, then there are likely merits that need to be encouraged and expanded. Scholarships for church-work students and the funding of mission work are just the tip of the iceberg of examples of this.

Fidelity and honesty are the key in this. Fidelity to God’s Word and the baptismal call to be faithful stewards is first and foremost. Stewardship is not a decision on our part. It is who we have been called to be. Honesty comes in to play as we carry out that stewardship. Is it time to be honest with ourselves as stewards? Yes! That honesty may well cause a re-evaluation of “traditional” fundraising efforts in the local congregation. However, a recommitment to sound biblical stewardship will always be both faithful and honest!

