

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Stewardship: Identity Leads to Activity

The single most frequent question that pastors and steward leaders get asked by people looking to grow in stewardship faithfulness can be boiled down to one sentiment: “What am I supposed to do as a steward?” This is understandable, because so much of what the church has considered and taught about stewardship is about activity. Percentage giving charts, challenges “to grow one step,” commitment cards that not only include pledged amounts of giving but include worship attendance, Bible class attendance and communion attendance, are all aspects of how the church has taught stewardship.

This makes pragmatic sense. Stewardship is a very difficult thing to measure in keeping with the Scriptures and the Confessions. Charts, percentages and commitments which point to activity are easy. They are the low-hanging fruit of steward leadership. They are easy to track. They make for good reporting. They present data that looks really good on an info graph.

The pragmatic approach?

But is the pragmatic way, which is also the easiest and slickest, actually the best and most faithful way to lead and measure stewardship? Perhaps not. Especially since it also appeals to the old Adam in the steward. That old Adam is on display in the words of the rich young ruler in the Gospels: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (MARK 10) Countless sermons have



been proclaimed highlighting the non sequitur relationship between doing and inheriting. One doesn't do anything to inherit other than outlive the one making the bequest. In the same way, to equate doing and stewardship is a bit of a non sequitur. One is not a steward based on what they do. The steward is a steward because of the purpose for which he or she was created by God.

Look at Genesis 1:26–28 to find the “words of institution” for the office of steward. The steward is to reflect the image of God toward the creation which God has

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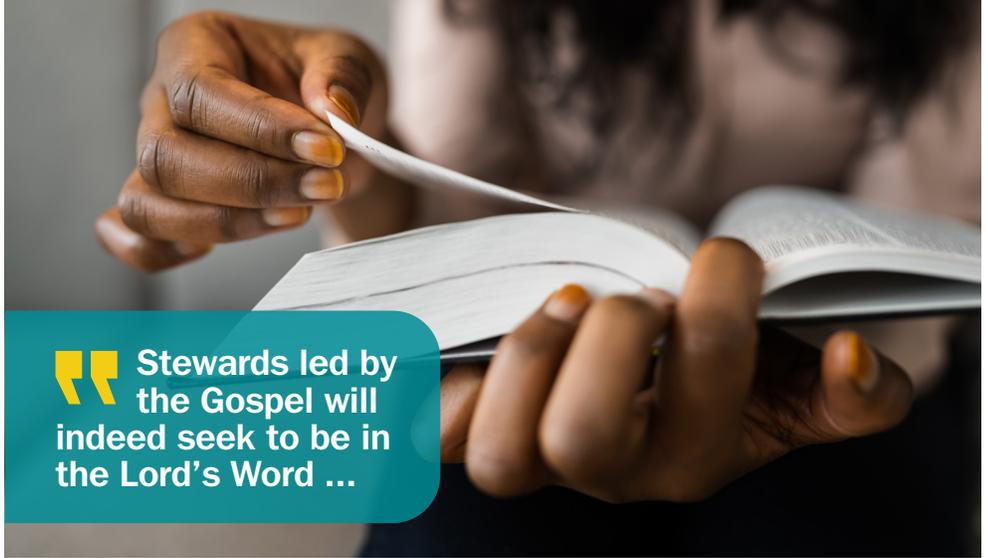
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entrusted to humanity. The purpose leads to activity. The activity doesn't define, it simply demonstrates the purpose.

St. Paul captures this idea in Romans 12: "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (ROM. 12:4-8).

If one reads over this quickly, a default reading could well lead to an activity-based understanding of stewardship. Prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, contributing, leading and mercy-showing certainly sound like activity! But here is where the context helps us understand that it is not activity but identity. Flip back to the start of the chapter and see that Paul points to the merciful activity of Jesus on behalf of the steward long before the activity of the steward. God acts in creation before the steward serves. Jesus acts in redemption before the redeemed steward serves.

The gift of identity

Starting a journey in the wrong place can never get you to the necessary destination. To start stewardship teaching with activity is to labor in the realm of the Law. The Law demands. It places burdens. Stewardship

under the Law is only a burden. But flip the stewardship script and see that faithful stewardship is only doing what the Lord has given the steward to do, and stewardship becomes a source of great joy! The steward simply does what the Lord has given them to do! The joy comes in living out purpose, not meriting or measuring. This stewardship focuses on serving the Lord and those who have been given to be served, not on the steward themselves.

Steward leaders, point the growing stewards under your care and leadership to the correct starting place. Point them to the stewardship of their souls undertaken by Jesus. The baptized steward has put on Christ. Living in this gifted identity points the steward outside themselves. They will not focus on what they do, but on how the Lord will work in and through them!

This does not mean that we should not do commitment cards. This is not intended to discourage stewards to grow, either in steps or wisdom. Stewards led by the Gospel will indeed seek to be in the Lord's Word, in His house and at His table. It is a call to teach stewardship with a true sense of freedom. This freedom comes from the mercy of Jesus Christ. This mercy calls the steward to live out the identity given to them freely and willingly and joyfully in Holy Baptism! The name of Jesus, when placed on a newly baptized steward, changes who they are. It will also by nature change what they do. But they do these things not to inherit anything. What they need has been given them: the mercy of Jesus! This kind of steward leadership and teaching will set stewards free!