

THE CHURCH AND STEWARDSHIP

Evan A. Fry, Radio Director
Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter Day Saints
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The doctrine of Christian stewardship is a comparatively new doctrine -- at least so far as its acceptance and declaration by Christian denominations is concerned -- though the essential principles of it are inherent in all the teachings of Christianity. Not a single creed, so far as I know, has ever mentioned stewardship. In my library I have two of the best books of Bible helps and commentary that money can buy, one dated 1897, and one 1927, and neither one even mentions stewardship. Of late years, many denominations have brought a new emphasis to this doctrine of stewardship; many books have been written about it; and many scriptural quotations have been found in support of it.

Latter Day Saints may say with a little pardonable pride, however, that stewardship has ALWAYS been a part of their doctrine. It was a part of the original doctrines of the church. It was stressed and taught and practiced well over a hundred years ago, and has been one of our essential items of belief ever since. May we quote somewhat at length from the prophetic writings of Joseph Smith, given on April 23, 1834:

"...A commandment I give unto you, that ye shall organize yourselves, and appoint every man his stewardship, that every man may give an account unto me of the stewardship which is appointed unto him; for it is expedient that I, the Lord, should make every man accountable, as stewards over earthly blessings, which I have made and prepared for my creatures. I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens, and builded the earth as a very handy work; and all things therein are mine; and it is my purpose to provide for my saints, for all things are mine; but it must needs be done in mine own way; and behold, this is the way that I, the Lord, have decreed to provide for my saints: that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low; for the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves. Therefore if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment."

The creator of anything has an inherent right to its ownership, use, and benefit, if he creates it out of his own materials and in his own territory or space. Recently I took some scrap lumber which has been around my place for a long time, finished some of it with a plane, and built a lawn bench. That bench is mine. No one else has any claim on it; I can do with it as I please. If a man builds a house, on his own land, with his own hands, out of materials that are his, the house is his. If anyone else wants to live in that house, he must render an accounting to the owner in the way of rent, or be evicted. The house is the property of the man who built it.

Similarly, when a man creates a poem, or a novel, or a play, or a song, his work is his, and his alone; and the government gives him the protection of a copyright. When a man creates a new invention or a new process, or a new machine, it is his -- and the government protects his rights in it with the patent law.

But if a man helps himself to some lumber out of a lumber yard, and builds a lawn bench, the bench is not his. If a man moves in on another man's land, cuts logs, and builds himself a house, the house does not belong to him, but to the owner of the land. Even if he builds the house with his own materials, and builds it on another's

land, it belongs to the owner of the land. It is a basic principle in law that every man has a right to the enjoyment and use of his own property, and especially of the things which are his by reason of the fact that he created them.

God created this world, out of his own materials. He set it down in his own territory of space. He stocked it with everything which man could ever need or use -- with plants, fruits, flowers, trees, animals, ores, minerals, varieties of climate, with changeable seasons, with lakes and rivers and oceans to regulate the climate, with rich soil and enough room for all. Men are temporary squatters on it -- here by God's sufferance. We say that we own this or that piece of land on which our homes, our factories, our oil wells, mines, and forests are located, but we are only interlopers, trespassers there. God is the owner; we are his stewards. He loans his property to us. It is our duty to use and administer that property as God would have it used, and not according to our own selfish interests and purposes.

The essential facts of Christianity may be summed up, as Jesus summed them up, in two things -- the universal fatherhood of God, and the corollary universal brotherhood of man. God is no respecter of persons. He does not love one man above another, or favor one above another. Jesus' life was one long sermon stressing the inherent worth of the individual, whatever his rank or race or position in life. His recipe for greatness was that the man who would be great should become the servant of all --- not of one church, or one nation, or one racial group, but of ALL. But as men have administered the wealth of the world, we have done things far differently. The few are favored; the needs of many are ignored. As an old Yankee proverb phrases it, "Them as has, gits; them as has not, loses." But Christian stewardship is a recognition of God's ownership of all wealth -- a recognition of his love for ALL men, and an administration of wealth in keeping with that theory of ownership, and that professed love for all men equally.

There are several implications to this theory of stewardship. If the world and all its wealth belong to God, and are loaned to men for their use, it is also true that our lives are a stewardship, our talents are a stewardship, our allotted time on this earth is a stewardship. The good and faithful steward, then, will produce or create wealth, or give service, to the limit of his capacity. A lazy loafer, a man who produced only a fraction of his potentialities would be a slothful and an unprofitable steward. As society is organized today, men produce only what they can sell. Before the war, eight to ten million men were unemployed, and even those who worked had to curtail production because people could not afford to buy. The Wage and Hour Administrator tells us that during 1942 there were still seven million people who received wages of less than 40¢ an hour, or approximately \$18.00 per week. Do you think they were producing to the limit of their capacity?

But there is another side to this theory. If every man is doing his best -- producing to his peak capacity -- he should receive in return all that he needs to keep himself and his family at the peak of efficiency. There is enough in the world to guarantee every man a comfortable living many times over, if we could work out some way to utilize man and machine power to capacity, and distribute it equally on the basis of need. A social Service report of the New York East Conference of the Methodist Church gives some very interesting figures. In 1929, our peak boom year, 62 per cent of city families spent less than a dollar a day for food. One third of the homes in towns and cities, and 80 per cent of village homes, had no sanitation and no running water. Fifty per cent of the people never had the services of a doctor, and 75 per cent never saw a dentist. Nearly nineteen and a half million workers received less than a thousand dollars a year, but at the other end of the scale,

one per cent of our population received twenty per cent of the total national income. It is small wonder that our economic system became more and more shaky, and wound up with a crashing depression whose reverberations have not yet died out, and probably will not die out for a hundred years.

If a father left an estate to several sons, and one son got there first, and with his superior strength and cunning drove the others away, refusing them their share, he would be an undutiful son and an unjust steward over his father's property. If later that one son demanded that his brothers support him in luxurious idleness, because he was lucky and strong and rich, and they were poor, he would still be an unjust steward and a shame to his father's memory. Yet that is just the way we operate the economic systems of the world today, making hollow mockery by labelling ourselves and the ethics by which we live, "Christian."

Stewardship, and the equality which it will bring about, do not mean communism, or socialism, or all things common. Every man is to be a steward over his own property, with his right to that property established in law. No man is entitled to take away the property of another without due process of law. But a good and faithful steward will always administer his property as if it belonged to God --as he admits that it does. As the administrator of what is not in last analysis his, he will use it to relieve poverty, to establish other men in stewardships where they can be self-supporting. He will use it to establish justice instead of charity. Carry this thought to its logical conclusion, and the meaning and wisdom of the phrase, "the poor shall be exalted in that the rich are made low" will become apparent. Stewardship must always be a voluntary act. It does not mean that Christian people are going to confiscate property and redistribute it, but that the steward of it will voluntarily change his method of administering and distributing it to accord with God's purposes.

Any man who takes more than his rightful share of this world's goods, ignoring his brother's need, is guilty of one of the grossest crimes against a God and a Christ who love all men equally, who have provided enough for all, but who have left it up to man to have dominion over the earth and to devise means for equitable distribution of wealth. If any man takes of this abundance, and uses it selfishly, with no admission of stewardship, then like the rich man who refused Lazarus the crumbs from his table, he shall lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment.

The same thing is true of nations, which take more than their share of the world's wealth, and refuse to impart it to the poor and needy. Unless such nations repent, they too must suffer. "It is not given that one man (or one nation) should possess that which is above another; wherefore the whole world lieth in sin." When one man, or one nation helps itself to God's property without accounting for it to him, that man or nation is ungrateful, dishonest, disobedient, wicked.

Some men of wealth have taken the attitude that they are stewards over their property, and that they can take care of millions or billions better than the common people. Perhaps some rich men can. But such control of wealth is undemocratic. It gives common men no right to say how their share of the world's wealth shall be used. It establishes an aristocracy of wealth. And a recent study of charitable giving among the wealthy, based on income tax reports, shows that even if we include the well known philanthropists and foundations, the giving of the large incomes in the United States is less than three per cent. Is this a demonstration of Christian stewardship?

A state administered stewardship program, towards which we are at present drifting, could be socialistic, bureaucratic, political, corrupt. Stewardship cannot be the anything, nor can we allow it to become the political football, of men who are sinful,

unregenerate, still essentially selfish and grasping and lustful for power. The church must furnish the organization for the practical application of stewardship -- an organization composed of genuinely regenerated, religiously motivated, intensively trained men and women of unquestioned moral and spiritual integrity, or else stewardship will become only another way of exploiting the masses for the benefit of the few. The church is the only institution which can thus change and fashion and train men in Christian attitudes and ideals. The church is the only institution which can offer men and women the cleansing, healing, forgiving power of Jesus Christ, and his example of sacrificial living in service to others. A genuine stewardship will do much to break down barriers of class, of race, of economic distinction, and establish true brotherhood among the people of the world.