

## SUPPORT OF THE MINISTRY AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Jeren Rowell, Nazarene Theological Seminary

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The Economics of Vocational Ministry: Living at the Crossroads of Affordability and Calling.”

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nazarene Theological Seminary is delighted to come alongside Northwest Nazarene University in helping to sponsor this year’s Wesley Conference on this important and timely subject. My assigned task is to set out for us some of the biblical and theological considerations to ground our conversation more deeply than the important, but pragmatic issues around how to fund our ministries. I do not mean to bifurcate the theological from the practical at all, but simply to put first things first.

I recognize that there are plenty of folks in this conference far more qualified to do this work, and this recognition is humbling. Nevertheless, I have thought about and wrestled with this subject across forty years of vocational ministry. During twenty-five years as a local church pastor, it was a *personal* question and a *pastoral* question. The personal question was partly that of survival. Can I follow the call of God into vocational ministry *and* take care of my family? That question, however, soon gave way to the more pertinent question that became explicit in our household conversations: “How shall we live as servants of the gospel in the midst of an acquisitive, consumeristic culture?” This practical question shaped our household as we made particular decisions not simply from practical necessity but from discipleship. Which brought the pastoral question quickly to center as we recognized the fairly profound influence that our economic decisions and practices as the parsonage family were making upon the discipleship of the congregation we had been called to shepherd. I have long argued that we who hold the sacred trust of the pastoral office should carry no expectation of keeping our people at arm’s length from our daily lives. I am not speaking of appropriate psychological and even physical boundaries. I am saying that “fencing off my life from view of the people is not a faithful way of being pastor. My people need not only to hear biblical and theological truth about holiness; they need to see how a serious Christian seeks to live it out by the grace of God.”<sup>1</sup> This means that what I *do* as a pastor matters and what I *don’t do* also matters. Where I go and where I don’t go matters. What I buy and what I don’t buy matters as part of teaching and modeling whole-life stewardship. It is why I remain convinced that there is no more essential and influential ministry than parish ministry.

Subsequently, a dozen years in the ministry of superintendency put me in touch with a different set of economic questions. Now, the question of my own family’s thriving took the back burner. (We generally pay our superintendents well, which is a whole other kettle of fish to be discussed, but I’ll leave that to braver souls!). Now I was sitting with local church boards several times each week and inevitably the conversations turned to economic viability and sustainability. Here is where I saw that God’s people approach this question from a vast array of experiences, perspectives, and attitudes. Which begs the question: “What is the *biblical* and *theological* grounding for us as we wrestle with these matters of mammon?”

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<sup>1</sup> Jeren Rowell, *Thinking, Listening, Being: A Wesleyan Pastoral Theology*. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2014), p. 88.

Now in these past three years, I am working from still another viewpoint as one who is charged both to assure the economic viability of a seminary and to help students prepare sufficiently for ministries that may struggle to care for them. So, in the midst of these complexities, how can we begin to organize our many thoughts about ministry economics in ways that can bring biblical imagination and theological coherence to the practical questions of revenue, expense, and affordability? I think this is not terribly difficult, actually, because we enjoy such a wealth of resources to guide our conferencing in these ways.

Since this is a Wesley Conference, we certainly ought to start right there. Thinking of John Wesley's advices regarding Christian stewardship, we usually point to the structure of his sermon, "The Use of Money"<sup>2</sup> where he elucidates the oft quoted, "gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can" rubric. This is helpful in itself, but we need to widen our view and discern the theological affirmations and commitments from which these advices spring. Wesley gives us this grounding when we consider the sermon as a whole alongside his Explanatory Notes on Luke 16, the text from which the sermon rises. What Wesley seems to be most interested in doing in that sermon is to place the practices of stewardship within a much larger and more robust theology of grace and response. More on this in a moment.

Walter Brueggemann picks up Wesley's rubric and fills it out helpfully in his new book, which I commend to us, *Materiality as Resistance: Five Elements for Moral Action in the Real World*.<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann calls the church to re-engage the materiality of *money, food, body, time, and place* as the very places where we are called to enact our faith, rather than places to be avoided or from which to be ascetically distanced. Regarding money and Wesley's well-known advice, Brueggemann points out that Wesley's seemingly simple frame: "gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can" in itself covers over a host of issues that need to be explored: *How much is enough to earn? How little is enough to give? How might one invest one's savings?*<sup>4</sup> Part of the continuing problem here is that although we love to quote Wesley's advice to one another, we rarely drill down on the details to share with one another and to hold each other accountable on how *we* are actually seeking to live out this way of stewardship. We have wholly adopted the world's etiquette of anonymity on personal finances, save for our not-so-subtle ways of demonstrating our capacity through the "building of our own barns" (Luke 12:18) of acquisition and success. Without anchoring these questions to authentic Christian community, Brueggemann argues, money becomes "valued instrumentally without reference to social context and without any awareness of either the gifts or the requirements of our social locations."<sup>5</sup> For example, while we may tend to hear "save all you can" as admonition to employ contemporary tools of wealth management, Brueggemann suggests that under Wesley's theological canopy, the movement to "save all you can" must include one's neighbor, noting what he calls the Bible's "quadrilateral of vulnerability" – widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor (Deut. 24:19-22). He even goes so far as to suggest, under the "give all you can" admonition, that taxes might be

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<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume VI, (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House reprint, Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, London, 1872/1978), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Materiality as Resistance: Five Elements for Moral Action in the Real World*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

seen as participation in the common good rather than as “pernicious intrusion into one’s monetized freedom.”<sup>6</sup> He is not saying that all taxes are good, some clearly are not, but that there may be in rightly constructed taxation a way of participation in that which helps to secure the flourishing of communities. Could it be that this way of thinking of “give all you can” could even reframe the Nazarene conversation around apportionments? Additionally, we need to consider the saving of creation itself as a proper response-ability to the grace of life in God’s good and beautiful world. The point Brueggemann is making is a robust reading of Wesley’s economic orientation: “Mature materiality summons us to a radical relocation of the self that includes a departure from the usual assumptions of our society concerning money.”<sup>7</sup>

These reflections point us to the larger Wesleyan theological framework for understanding economics, to which I earlier alluded. I want to draw now on the recent work of Gregory Van Buskirk, a United Methodist lay theologian, who offers a poignant article on this subject in the current issue of *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, a project of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre, for which, by the way, NTS and NNU are partnering institutions. Dr. Van Buskirk’s article, “Stewardship and Response: The Moral-Theological Heart of John Wesley’s Economics,” argues that Wesley’s understanding of economics and especially his practices of stewardship are “a species of his moral theology of stewardship and response.”<sup>8</sup> Drawing heavily upon the work of our friend, Dr. Randy Maddox, and the idea of grace as response-ability, Van Buskirk sets out to reframe our understanding of Wesley’s economics from any narrow and purely pragmatic reading, to recognize that Wesley’s economic reflections are inexorably united to “a soteriology of grace, response, and perfection in holy love.”<sup>9</sup>

Wesley frames the questions of stewardship in terms of *prudence*, by which he seems to mean the capacity to acquire wealth and to manage wealth. However, he contrasts *worldly* prudence and *Christian* prudence. Worldly prudence, he maintains in a 1759 letter to James Lowther, “pursues worldly ends – riches, honour (sic), ease, or pleasure ...” We might quickly assume we are off the hook, then, for our prudence is for the sake of the gospel, right? Not so fast. Wesley goes on, “... or pursues Christian ends on *worldly maxims* or by *worldly means*.”<sup>10</sup> The key word for Wesley that defines worldly prudence is *more*; as in more for more’s sake. As in the Lord’s story of the rich fool in Luke 12 where a man’s foolish response to abundant harvest is simply to build bigger barns. In contrast, the key word for Christian prudence, perhaps not surprisingly, is *holiness*. This is not mere piety for its own sake and certainly would not suffer any manner of idleness, but Wesley connects it to the notion of “usefulness in every kind and degree.”<sup>11</sup> It is social holiness, relational holiness, the “the love of God ... shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost”<sup>12</sup> which moves us toward the other in self-giving, actionable love. However, Wesley is quick to keep clear that this idea of “usefulness” is all God’s doing: “The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Van Buskirk, “Stewardship and Response” in *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2020), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 5:5, KJV.

help that is done upon the earth, God doeth it himself,”<sup>13</sup> he writes to Lowther. And he notes, this work of God is often accomplished through means that the world would judge as weak. In other words, the very nature of the gospel moves us into a completely different frame of reference for assessing things like viability, sustainability, return-on-investment, affordability, and similar notions of economic vitality. “Living at the crossroads of affordability and calling” cannot be simply about data gathered from balance sheets, profit and loss statements, and investment reports, as important and helpful as these kinds of tools may be. As Greg Van Buskirk notes, the crossroad we should seek for a Wesleyan way of engaging these matters is a challenging but potentially rewarding combination: “an economics of stewardship, an affective-responsive moral psychology [Christian *habitus*], and the Christological content of perfection” which combine to shape “the entirety of Wesley’s moral theology, not just his economics.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, grace and response is the organizing ethos for Wesley’s teaching and practices of economic stewardship, especially the central idea that all things properly belong to God.

This brings us to consider the biblical grounding for this conversation. Everything we have said to this point regarding Wesley’s idea of stewardship sits on the essential foundation of God as Creator and Sustainer of all. Therefore, a proper biblical grounding will have the whole story of God firmly in view before we begin to launch into arranging particular texts into an argument for generosity or simplicity. It seems to me that one of our challenges at this point is our tendency to proof-text stewardship with a few powerful admonitions that in the hands of a desperate preacher can fairly become a club to beat one’s people into economic submission. That’s probably overstating it, but not by too much. I sure do not mean to suggest that we lack sufficient biblical resources. To the contrary, the catalogue of texts which speak to these issues is expansive and rich, including plenty of direct words from our Lord himself. I am simply wanting to make the point that our preaching and teaching from the Bible on matters of money and stewardship are best framed within the full arc of the gospel story, from creation to new creation. When we understand and proclaim the story of redemption as graced participation in the in-breaking reign of God in Christ Jesus, rather than simply as transactional insurance for a “better place,” then the notion of stewardship can become so much more than private decisions of money management but can become corporate doxology that brings all things under the lordship of Jesus Christ and offers them to God as “living sacrifice,” our “true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1). This is the point at which our preaching and teaching on stewardship may become most prophetic and dangerous in the midst of a people who have thoroughly adopted economic values of individualism and protectionism. Contemporary ideas of Christian stewardship are in desperate need of reformation from simply good personal financial practices (which is not a bad thing in itself) to a way of thinking and being as the redeemed and redeeming people of God who demonstrate in our life together in the world that God is working to bring freedom, healing, justice, and good news (Luke 4) to suffering creation and oppressed humanity.

Therefore, Genesis 1 and 2 and Revelation 21 and 22 become key texts for framing properly how we understand and articulate what it means to be faithful stewards of God’s good

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<sup>13</sup> Van Buskirk, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Van Buskirk, p. 1. Inserting a thought here based in James K. A. Smith’s adoption of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s use of the term, summarized as “way of being.”

and beautiful vision for the mutuality of life together in a way that accomplishes what the young church experienced when Luke says, “there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34). This is reflective, of course, of the kingdom ethic that Jesus describes in Matthew 25 when faithfulness to the reign of God involves works of mercy as means of stewarding God’s grace in the embodied presence of “the least of these” (Matt 25:40). The whole story of Israel is a compelling narrative of invitation to trust God for life itself, of failure to trust God in those ways, and of the consequences of trying to secure one’s own life on the ways and means of this world. And most centrally, the teaching of the Lord Jesus, anchored by the Sermon on the Mount, calls us to rediscover God’s invitation to complete trust and the displacement of worry through the *habitus* of living in a daily rhythm of “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11, NRSV). To put it simply, perhaps the needed approach to the Bible for the content of this discussion on the economic viability of ministry is less about the discovery of imperative nuggets and more about the good news of a risen Christ who is announcing, “I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5, NRSV).

More directly now to our point of focus in this conference, how might this sort of biblical and theological reflection guide us for our conversations around the economics of ministry? It’s one thing to have this conversation in the relative safety of a theology conference, but what does it sound like “on the ground?” Going back to my experiences in parish ministry, I know full well that pastors work in the dangerous intersection between the call of the gospel and the siren songs of this world. The strongest posture from which to teach and preach on stewardship in the local church is from a place of confidence in one’s own stewardship practices. The worst posture is from a position of frustration, anger, or manipulative intent to serve one’s own purpose. In other words, a wise pastor leads his or her congregation through robust proclamation of gospel that is being embodied in one’s own life and in the life of the congregation.

I do think many pastors need a much different mindset about money. Too many of us seem afraid or almost embarrassed to talk to our people about the stewardship of materiality, thus leaving them to fend for themselves against a world that is all-too anxious to make them consumers. I am intrigued by Henri Nouwen’s assertion in his little 2010 booklet entitled, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, that “if we come back from asking someone for money and we feel exhausted and somehow tainted by unspiritual activity, there is something wrong.”<sup>15</sup> Nouwen suggests there is a different way to think about this. “The question is not about how to get money. Rather, the question is about our relationship with money.”<sup>16</sup> In this regard, I do think we are generally well served by a posture of humility and gratitude, rather than a posture of entitlement or demand. It is rather sobering to recognize that as a servant of the church, nearly every dollar I have spent, saved, and given away came from the offering plate, because faithful laypersons have taken seriously the call to give tithes and offerings. I am humbled by this.

Thinking particularly about how the pastoral office is funded, it seems to me that part of our struggle here is our wholesale adoption of commercial categories when dealing with money matters in the church. I noticed this in the process of overseeing the calling of pastors to

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

congregations, something I experienced more than 130 times across twelve years in all sized churches and all kinds of communities. Most congregations understand taking care of the pastor as a moral and spiritual obligation. However, when it comes to budgets, we seem to move quickly to categories of comparative compensation, negotiation, and contract. As we sometimes say, “the devil is in the details” and the devil is never more present than when we actually start doing the math around a board table relative to what it costs to have a pastor.

I want to suggest for our consideration in this conference that we have at our disposal an important resource for shaping the conversation on pastoral compensation much differently than we seem to be doing many times. The *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* provides us important signals as to how this conversation should proceed, but we tend to move directly to the details and bypass the theological grounding. Typically, we allow this conversation to be driven by paragraph 115 which outlines the process for the calling of a pastor. Matters of remuneration are detailed there very much in contractual terms, including who can and cannot be sued. Now please do not hear me say that these practical issues are inconsequential, that is not the case. We need significantly improved clarity in all personnel matters. We need fiduciary integrity both legally and ethically. However, we need to do these right things for solid theological reasons. Thankfully, our polity does give expression to these right reasons.

*The Covenant of Christian Conduct* sits just behind our *Church Constitution*. It includes all manner of directives and advices regarding the materiality of living our faith in this world. Paragraph 33 is titled *Christian Stewardship* and it is quite Wesleyan in framing a way of thinking about stewardship as response-ability to the grace of God as sole proprietor and God’s people as stewards of God’s good creation. One of the ideas articulated under this head is “Support of the Ministry” (Manual 33.3). Quoting Paul’s admonition in First Corinthians 9, the section gives us an essential foundation for this entire conversation:

The church is obligated to support its ministers, who have been called of God, and who, under the direction of the church, *have given themselves wholly* to the work of the ministry. We urge therefore that the members of the church voluntarily commit themselves to the task of supporting the ministry by gathering money weekly for this *holy business ...*<sup>17</sup>

This notion of “support of the ministry” seems to have capacity to carry this important dialogue in the right direction. This is about more than economics and affordability. It is about more than stretching thin budgets and simply accepting bi-vocational ministry as the way it has to be. The idea of support of the ministry is located within a moral theology of grace and response, where the pragmatic questions take proper place in service to the foundational question of what the Spirit means to do by continuing to assign women and men to the pastoral office; and this for the sake of a healthy and thriving body of Christ. If congregations and even denominations could reset the critical conversation of clergy compensation from distribution of shrinking resources to faithful, graced response to the work of the Spirit who gathers us as the

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<sup>17</sup> 2017-2021 *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*. (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), p. 60 (emphases mine).

body of Christ, perhaps support of the ministry could become more than question of affordability but a means of grace.

I do want to recognize that this frame can and should inform the discussion around bi-vocational ministry. It seems that conventional wisdom is accepting a bi-vocational ministry as simply the way it has to be done in many places. This is a complex matter and requires continued discernment and dialogue. However, I do want to claim that this part of the conversation must move beyond economics to the theological question of stewardship. I will assert that more often than not, the “necessity” of bi-vocational ministry is driven not by actual available resources but by poor financial decisions that leave congregations living under the oppressive consequences of sin. I know, we need to talk ...

Roughly half of the pastors in the USA/Canada region of the Church of the Nazarene report being bi-vocational in some iteration. There are some ministers of the gospel who choose co-vocationality as missional strategy. There are other ministers who are practically forced to bi-vocational models of one kind or another because of congregational debt or mismanagement, or perhaps because of personal debt or mismanagement. We should acknowledge the reality that much of this personal debt might be because of education, which is a sticky problem of its own. I do believe that a church that actually values an educated clergy will back up that value with sufficient resources. It is not really a matter of money, but a matter of theological vision and priority. Finally, there are some who are forced to bi-vocational ministry because congregations fail in their response-ability to be a means of grace through the faithful support of the ministry.

This is why the present conversation is so critical in the life of the church right now. The economics of vocational ministry is only secondarily about economics. It is first about faithful response (personal and corporate) to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, who by the Spirit keeps drawing out women and men from the life of the church, anointing them, preparing them, ordaining them, and sending them back to the church as servants of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to participate in the reconciling of the world to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). May the Lord help us in these hours, that we may be found faithful participants in God’s mission.