

2013 Stewardship and Generosity in the Church

This resolution was adopted by the delegates to the 128th Covenant Annual Meeting, June 2013.

A. Introduction

This resolution invites us as followers of Christ to live out our identity as generous stewards of God's material and spiritual gifts. It seeks to remind us that the good (and sometimes hard) news of Scripture is that we are dependent on God to sustain us and shape our understanding of wealth and possessions. It calls the church to be a formational community that counter-culturally embraces biblical stewardship and generosity as foundational to our life, faith, and witness.

B. The Biblical Foundation: A God of Abundance

The biblical story reveals a God of abundance who graciously invites us to be stewards of creation and reflect God's generous nature.

1) Creation reveals a God of abundant giving. The book of Genesis teaches us that God's intrinsic abundance overflowed in the act of creation. God created all things and declared them good (Genesis 1:31a). Human beings are created in God's image. We are called to be stewards of God's abundance by taking the role of caretakers, maintaining right relationships within creation, and depending on God's daily provision (Matthew 6:30-33). Stories such as the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1-7) remind us of God's generosity. Jesus's miracles of the feeding of the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21; John 6:1-14), the abundant catch of fish for the disciples (John 21:1-14), and turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) are all profound signs of the abundance of our giving God.

2) Sin distorts our understanding of God's abundance and our relationship to God's gifts. This distortion rejects God as the giver and sustainer of life and fosters a false sense of self-sufficiency. The story of manna in the desert reveals both God's care for us, and the human tendency to let fear lead us to hoard (Exodus 16). The Bible, as well as human history, witnesses to the destruction caused when humans reject their role as stewards (Genesis 3:17-19; Hosea 9:1-2; Joel 1:1-12), and live lives shaped instead by

greed, fear, and idolatry (Exodus 16:20; Romans 1:25). This fragments our relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation and leads to the devaluation of human beings made in the image of God. Injustice and oppression become normal when our relationships with God and each other become secondary to our relationship with things (Isaiah 3:13-15).

3) God begins to restore humanity's dependence on God's abundance. God called ancient Israel to be a light to the nations, a community committed to trust God with every aspect of life. Their central practice was keeping the rhythm of Sabbath—a call to cease from work one day each week in order to worship God, engage in community, and rest (Hebrews 4; Exodus 20:8-11). Sabbath reminds God's people that the work of redemption depends on God. Sabbath calls God's people to set aside the illusion that our labor sustains our lives and recognize God as the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17-18). Sabbath provides the means by which right relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation can be maintained. God also challenged the people to practice a more comprehensive Sabbath in God's call to the Year of Jubilee. Jubilee was intended to be a cyclical celebration that enabled the land to stay fruitful, released people from debt and slavery, protected people from unjust acquisition of property, and ensured that each person had access to the basic necessities of life (Leviticus 25). Jesus used the language of Jubilee to describe his ministry (Luke 4:14-21). Sabbath and Jubilee challenge us to live lives of stewardship, generosity, and justice as followers of Jesus.

4) God's abundance is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's abundance in the flesh, the very presence and fullness of God. Through the gift of Christ, the kingdom of God and its call to radical living powerfully break into our world. The Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus continually address our identity as stewards and challenge our assumptions about wealth and consumption: Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), the sower (Matthew 13:1-23), the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), the great banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-9), the vineyard and the tenants (Matthew 21:33-46), the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-30), the widow in the temple (Luke 21:1-4), and his meeting with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), to name a few. Jesus's death and

resurrection revealed the abundant life and power of God over sin, death, destruction, and false dependencies and freed humanity to live in right relationship with God, each other, and the rest of creation.

5) God calls the church to be a community of abundant generosity and stewardship. The church is Christ's body which reflects God's abundant grace and provision (Acts 1:8) and which looks forward to the final consummation of creation. The early church models an inclusive community of mutual dependence that crosses economic divides and provides care for those inside and outside the church: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 2:44-45, TNIV). The New Testament church also demonstrated Christ's teaching in its consistent call to care for the poor (Galatians 2:10; James 1:27) as a mark of the in-breaking kingdom of God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is emboldened to live a life of liberated stewardship as we await the coming of God's final kingdom.

C. Consumerism Threatens Generous Stewardship

Modern North American culture promotes harmful messages about wealth and possessions that directly compete with the biblical story. It is hard to be generous stewards in a culture that believes more is always better, we are what we own, and that security is found in possessions.

When we succumb to these beliefs, we develop harmful habits that interfere with our call to be generous stewards. These habits have led many to take on substantial consumer debt by purchasing unnecessary products, often with little thought for who made them, under what conditions, and at what cost to creation. These habits also promote a sense of entitlement that ensnares both rich and poor alike, fostering selfishness, greed, and fear, while many in our world struggle to access basics like clean water and daily food. Consumerism runs so deep that sometimes even humans are seen as commodities, evidenced by a pervasive human trafficking industry.

Christians are not immune from the influence of consumerism. We recognize many who would like to be financially generous are not able to

because of the weight of debt. We may also be tempted to approach God for our own selfish gain, treat prayer like an ATM, or view church as a marketplace where we pick and choose religious services that meet our desires. When we in the church fail to reorient our lives from these disordered relationships with wealth and possessions, we decrease our capacity to live counter-culturally, be radically generous, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed to a broken world.

D. Our Call: Stewardship and Generosity

God calls us to live as generous stewards in response to God's abundance and sustenance. Christ's life, death, and resurrection free us to see wealth and possessions differently, to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33). The Holy Spirit reminds us that our identity is secure because of our relationship with God in Christ, not from what we own and control (Romans 8:16).

God calls the church to be the primary formational community that shapes disciples for lives of stewardship and generosity. Whether we have much or little, we are all called to put our hope and trust in God, be content and thankful, and to give abundantly and cheerfully (Luke 12:16-21; 16:10-13; Philippians 4:11-13; 2 Corinthians 9:7). Scripture also contains a specific and emphatic call to those who have much: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19, TNIV).

The church is also called to be the place where we continually retell and hear the good news of God's grace and abundance. The church provides the context to confess that we all fail to live out our call to be generous stewards. We are each invited to participate in the learning community of the church in order to re-form and reframe our lives. We are salt and light

for a world that desperately needs a hope-filled alternative for how to view wealth and possessions.

E. Our Response

Living into our call to be stewards who depend on God's gracious giving and character is no doubt a lifelong journey. We commit ourselves to depend on God's abundant provisions to sustain us in our daily walk individually and together.

Therefore, be it RESOLVED that Covenant congregations and individuals endeavor to:

1. Encourage more open conversations about possessions, personal finances, and stewardship in order to break the taboos surrounding these issues as we submit all of life to Christ's lordship.
2. Teach stewardship and generosity to adults, youth, and children by using discipleship materials that address money and consumption; useful resources could include the Covenant Stewardship Starter Kit, the Covenant Stewardship web page, money management and estate planning services with Covenant Trust Company, and also materials that speak specifically to personal finances.
3. Engage in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, solitude, fasting, and reflection on Scripture, allowing space for the Holy Spirit to reform us, remind us about our identity, and ground us in God's providing character.
4. Practice Sabbath-keeping, affirming that keeping the Sabbath is a God-given antidote to the belief that our efforts alone protect and sustain our lives.
5. Create a culture of generosity in our congregations through tithing and the giving of our time, talents, and service so that the church becomes a radical example of sacrifice and self-giving to the world.
6. Intentionally create discussion around how we obey God's command of Jubilee in our present-day context, acknowledging the challenge of interpreting the contemporary implications of leaving land fallow, remitting debts, freeing slaves, and returning property.
7. Practice stewardship from a global perspective by becoming informed about global implications of production and consumption.

8. Intentionally include creation care as part of our stewardship, and investigate practices that help us reduce consumption personally and corporately, such as recycling, composting, eating and cooking only what we need, and limiting the use of unnecessary packaging in our purchases.
9. Become responsible consumers by understanding the true costs of the products we buy and supporting fair trade, local growers, and local businesses.
10. Intentionally live into the great heritage of generosity and stewardship that is ours as members and friends of the Evangelical Covenant Church.
11. Support global development efforts that help provide for all, such as micro-finance, women's empowerment, community development, equal access to education, food security, and access to clean water.
12. Support organizations that promote economic justice through holistic and biblical methods, such as Covenant World Relief, Paul Carlson Partnership, Covenant World Mission, World Vision, Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, Christian Community Development Association, and Opportunity International.