

PART THREE
THE GOSPEL



STEWARDSHIP
MAXIMIZING GOD'S BLESSINGS FOR HIS GLORY
& OUR BENEFIT

It only takes a single generation for a church to die. That's about 20 years. Listen to this research from a conservative branch of the Presbyterian Church.

As part of the research work that I've been doing, I've tracked down various churches that are mentioned in biographical sketches or represented in various events. Just today, for example, I tried to find information about Point Breeze Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh (where Harold Ockenga ministered); Central Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga (where Wilbur Cousar pastored); United Presbyterian Church in Wheeling, WV (where John Reed Miller served for a time) and Central Presbyterian Church in Jackson (where R. E. Hough pastored). What do these congregations have in common? They were all thriving, large, significant churches, pastored by conservative, talented men: and they no longer exist today.

It would only take a generation for a church to show signs of decay: perhaps a poor pastoral choice; a failure to continue to preach God's Word faithfully; a transition in the church's understanding of mission; an inability to see and adapt to the neighborhood around it. It is enough to cause us as pastors to get our knees and to beg God to continue to grant mercy to our congregations and to grant them mercy in the generations after us.¹

In short, churches die because they fail to properly steward the gospel. The gospel is slowly changed. The gospel is slowly watered down. The gospel is stripped of its true power. And then the church either flat out dies like the churches described here or else it slip into an undetermined period of life support-kept alive only by a few dollars still pumped into its decaying body.

Out of all of the messages in this series on stewardship, this is the most important area of stewardship. Unless we are good stewards of this area, all of the other areas will fall. This is the foundation.

The key passage for this message is from 1 Corinthians 4.

1 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

I quoted verse two last week. *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.* faithfulness would apply to all areas of stewardship but in its context, this is specifically referring to stewardship of the gospel. We are *servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.* Now don't get tripped up by the word mysteries. We have talked about this word before. In Paul's language, a mystery is a truth that had been hidden but has now been revealed. These two passages explain it clearly.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things (Ephesians 3:8-9).

I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints (Colossians 1:25-26).

There's our word 'stewardship' again! "The stewardship from God." sine God owns everything, of course all stewardship is from God. In both cases, the "mystery" is that salvation is equally given to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The is was mostly hidden until after the death and resurrection of Christ. It was hidden but largely through Paul's ministry, was plainly revealed. The mystery is that the gospel is for the whole world and the only hope of the whole world. It was hidden but starting with Paul, was meant to be shared with all people.

- to bring to light for everyone
- to make the word of God fully known

So that is the meaning of the word mystery. Now let's get back to our original text in 1 Corinthians. *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.* To be a steward of the mysteries of God is the same thing as being a steward of the gospel. Do you see that now? Paul described himself this way but it now applies to every believer. Is it our job?

- "to bring (the gospel) to light for everyone"
- "to make the word of God fully known"

Indeed it is, so that means every believer is steward of the gospel. Before we talk about exactly how to steward the gospel, there's one more thing I want to draw out. God not only owns all of creation and allows us to have dominion over it but we must not forget that he owns us as well. Jesus owns us by creation and by redemption. We were literally purchased by his precious blood. This is also why the Bible calls us "slaves of Christ." For one man to own another is reprehensible but for Jesus to own us is glorious. He owns us because he created us and because he bought us with his blood.

Romans 6:22-But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

1 Peter 1:18-19-knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

*Revelation 5:9-And they sang a new song, saying,
"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,*

Acts 20:28-Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

1 Cor 6:19-20-Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

This last verse really draws out our definition of stewardship. "Maximizing God's blessings for his glory and our benefit." Since you were bought with a price, since you are a slave of Christ and since you are stewarding all that he has given you, especially the gospel, then glorify God in your body and in your life.

How do you steward the gospel? Do we have to be a church planter and missionary like Paul? Every believer is a steward of the gospel and since the gospel is the most important thing that we are to steward, we better know what we are doing.

1. We steward the gospel by guarding sound doctrine.

Where does the gospel come from? The Sunday School answer to that question is God but specifically it comes from the revealed word of God in the Scriptures. That was Paul's point in Colossians 1- *to make the word of God fully known*. The gospel is at the center of the message of Scripture but the gospel is also intertwined with the rest of Scripture. In other words, the gospel is a part of the rest of sound doctrine. You will never have a true gospel when it is swimming in a sea of false teaching and bad theology.

If you were given the Mona Lisa, would you store it in your garage? Of course not. It is far too valuable to store so carelessly. In the same way, the precious gospel can never be stored carelessly in a "garage" of bad theology. It simply won't last.

Paul was a church planter but once those churches were established, he spent a great deal of time guarding sound doctrine in those churches. My summary statement is that it only takes a single generation for a church to die, but that's not quite right. Some of the churches started by Paul took less than ten years before false teaching had infiltrated the church.

I am certainly committed to guarding sound doctrine, but that's not enough. I won't always be here. Our elders won't always be here. This stewardship of sound doctrine must be a part of the very essence of this church, of its people, of its future. One help in this pursuit is the fact that we

are part of a healthy denomination. Before I even heard the name of Viroqua, the first leaders of this church sought out our denomination as a source of help and protection for the fledgling church. Each of them had been a part of independent churches that had gone astray. Individual Christians need accountability and so do churches. Denominations are not perfect and our certainly is no exception, but it is a source of accountability and support for us, and we should be thankful for them.

But the rest is in your hands. We just went finished the largest church membership class in our history. In the class we spent the majority of our time going over sound doctrine together. I was encouraged by the level of discussion, especially in such a large group. That doesn't always happen well in large groups. We need to know that our members are committed to guarding sound doctrine but to do so, they must know sound doctrine. That's my job but it's also your job.

I got an email this week from someone in the church and one of the questions was this: "Do you have a favorite place to look (online) for biblical questions/answers?" I love that. Digging. Searching. This person looks for answers but does not depend on anything he reads because he knows that the world wide web is a smorgasbord of heresy. But I love the process of looking for truth. Are you seeking truth? How much did you gig into Scripture on your own this week? Are you mostly depending on me for your teaching? If so, We won't last a single generation. You see, that's not just unhealthy for you, it's unhealthy for us. What you do affects all of us.

2. We steward the gospel by keeping the gospel at the center.

This sounds like the first principle, so how is it different from it? Let me allow Dr. Don Carson to explain the meaning. In this quote he uses the example of Mennonites but you could insert any Christian group in their place.

One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments.

The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments.

The following generation denied the gospel: the "entailments" became everything.

Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.

. . . What is it in the Christian faith that excites you? . . . Today there are endless subgroups of confessing Christians who invest enormous quantities of time and energy in one issue or another: abortion, pornography, home schooling, women's ordination (for or against), economic justice, a certain style of worship, the defense of a particular Bible version. Not for a moment am I suggesting we should not think about such matters or throw our weight behind some of them. But when such matters devour most of our time and passion, each of us must ask: In what fashion am I confessing the centrality of the gospel?²

Do you see what he is saying here? It's so easy to get caught up in the entailments of the gospel. I had a pastor friend tell me that racial reconciliation is the gospel. I respectfully disagree with

him. Racial reconciliation is not the gospel. Two weeks ago we had a missionary family with us who is headed to Thailand to fight against sex trafficking. You and I have very little idea what horrors are experienced by girls and boys throughout the world. I was shocked to learn from them that boys are taken and abused just as often as girls. I had assumed that it would have been 95% girls and young women. This family did not say or even imply that fighting sex trafficking was the gospel. But like Carson said, when you get caught up in helping people and fighting evil, eventually that's all you see.

How do you think all of the soup kitchens in America's cities got started? Almost 100% of them were borne out of pure gospel ministry. They fed people and also gave them the gospel. Some of them did not always do it right or have the right mixture of both, but they were evangelical based ministries. By the way, do you know what the word evangelical means? It comes from the Greek word--guess-gospel. eu-angelion = good message or good news. That's the gospel. So to even call yourself an evangelical Christian is to say that you are a gospel-centered Christian.

So these soup kitchens and homeless shelters were gospel driven attempts to help with poverty-stricken, sin-laden men and women. Some, like the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago are still gospel-centered, but most are no longer gospel centered.

3. We steward the gospel by healthy leadership.

Behind most good stewardship and most bad stewardship you will almost always find good leadership and bad leadership. If sound doctrine and the gospel are to be properly guarded and stewarded, then healthy leadership must be a vital part of the equation.

Dave Hart lived through one of the worst violations of this principle I have ever heard. Dave moved his family to Corbin Kentucky to pastor a church that was linked to a new Christian medical clinic that had just started. A doctor friend of his had a years-long vision to start a medical clinic that would be an outreach to some of the poorest of the poor in Kentucky. The vision was to provide medical care to people who could not afford it and use that as a platform to share the gospel. This would require hiring a sufficient number of doctors so that not only would they have enough physicians to care for everyone, but also so that they could give each doctor more time with their patients to get to know them and share the gospel with them. It was a great vision. The clinic would be primarily doing the evangelizing and the church would be doing the discipleship. So as I said, Dave moved his family to this mission field to pastor this church. Dave and the physicians were very excited about this ministry vision.

The Hart family moved in April and the medical clinic officially opened in May. As the pastor, Dave was also on the governing board of the medical clinic. By the second board meeting in June, Dave already had major concerns. Because it was a non-profit, Dave's physician friend and the other doctors were not permitted to be on the board. So from that second meeting Dave realized that the other board members did not share the original vision. Dave discerned the difference between the two competing visions. The original vision was to use the medical clinic as a means to share the gospel. And by that, they meant the full gospel message. To use the apostle Paul's words, "to make the word of God fully known" and "to bring light to everyone." But the vision of the board members was that the medical care itself was to be the outreach

component. The board equated the gospel with healthcare. Healthcare was not a means to an end but the end itself.

Does that sound familiar? From the very foundation, the board members—except Dave, of course—had already moved to Don Carson's "second generation." All you need to do is substitute the players in Kentucky into Carson's illustration.

Dave and the physicians believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments (i.e. the medical clinic)

The board members assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments (the medical clinic)

The original board members did not understand the extent to which the gospel was to be central to it. The proper foundations were not laid from the beginning. Whoever chose the original board members did not properly screen them to make sure they fully understood and bought into the original, gospel-driven vision. Dave tried to warn his friend early on but they did not take Dave seriously. One year after they opened their doors, all of the doctors realized that the board had a totally different vision than they did. The board needed money so right from the start they sought out government subsidies, which apparently were quite abundant. And in so doing, they always labeled such money as "God's provision." They put a veneer of spirituality over an otherwise secular endeavor. One of Dave's take home lessons from this whole mess is that sometimes you need to say no to things that seem like common sense. To the board, common sense meant taking the government money, but there was huge strings attached to the money.

What ensued from there was four long years of a slow death. There was a great deal of hostility, and false accusations. Dave said the whole experience was "really nasty and tragic." And the entire tragedy happened due to poor selection of the leadership. They failed to steward the gospel through healthy leadership.

This is why our church has always placed a high value on good, Godly leadership and the ultimate purpose of such is to properly steward the gospel. So you can place a high value on choosing good leadership, but in a congregational church, who does the choosing? The members elect our elders. We know what can happen if they choose poorly. Just ask Dave Hart. This is the reason for having the membership process that we do. In some churches you can become a member by the mere raise of a hand. And then choosing leaders becomes nothing but a popularity contest. Therefore, the highest responsibility of being a member of a church is to select good leaders. It's not the only reason to become a member but even if it were, it would be reason enough to make that step.

This is also why the selection of our first associate pastor is really important. And if it's important for members to choose good elders, how much more important will it be to have a really good call committee. The call committee will be doing the leg work and heavy lifting in the process of selecting an associate pastor. As we do with choosing elders, we will be taking nominations for members of the call committee. It's not only a really important committee, it will

also be a hard working committee. There will be meetings, phone calls and research and the process could well take over a year.

The fourth and final way to steward the gospel is to actively share the gospel. What's the point of protecting the gospel if you don't share it? I'll talk more about this in a future message.

Eventually local churches, medical clinics and Christian ministries will all close their doors. Even churches started by the apostle Paul did not last. So this message is not just about protecting our church. it's about you stewarding the gospel by:

- Guarding sound doctrine
- Keeping the gospel at the center
- Choosing healthy leadership

Rich Maurer

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¹ <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2011/07/lessons-from-local-church-hist.php>

² D.A. Carson. Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing, 1996. Pgs. 22-28.