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# The Dancing Steward: Exploring Christian Stewardship Lifestyles

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research using the appendix that takes up nearly half the book. Take, for instance, Ellingsen's observation that church social statements "... are determined more by denominational and confessional identification than by the context of a church body's theological or ethical perspective".

If the author's analysis is correct, then this book may potentially appeal to another group of readers. Besides the church historians and those concerned with the social gospel, this book may appeal to those who care about how future Christians will identify their similarities and differences, and in so doing shape the nature of their communities.

If you want a handy summary of your denomination's social statements over the past three decades, this book is for you. If you want to gain a global perspective on how church bodies have responded to certain social issues, this book will help. If you want a better grasp of the theological positions that inform and determine responses to social concerns, then this book can help you unravel that mystery too. If you fall into one of these groups, then you won't mind the fact that it reads more like a dictionary than a novel, and it may well become a valued reference tool.

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## **The Dancing Steward, Exploring Christian Stewardship Lifestyles**

Christopher Levan  
Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1993

*The Dancing Steward* seems an odd name for a book that is particularly directed to white, affluent, North-American men, although there is much food for thought even to those who do not fit this description.

Levan writes with an easy to read style in which anecdotes are interspersed with significant theological insights and biblical stories. The end of the chapters have sections for "Experiential Learning" and "Questions for Discussion" that have been designed not only for individual reflection but also in such a way that they may be employed as part of a group process.

Christopher Levan begins the book by painting a picture of celebrations that are a reflection of North-American prosperity and indulgence which have in some way trapped us so that we are unable to respond to the marginalized. The basic motivation for Levan writing the book is stated as, "Are you searching for an answer to the predicament of your affluence? After you've approached the third homeless person in as many blocks, do you ask 'What must I do?' It is in answer to that question that I have written this book" (p. 5).

His answer to this situation is to propose an ethic of relinquishment whereby we, the prosperous and powerful, let go or give up some of these things for the sake of the poor. Levan asserts that his ethic of relinquishment is basic to Christian Stewardship and is "in fact the primary issue facing affluent North American Christians. It is the very essence of our faith journey. I consider it the start of our theology of liberation" (p. 7).

This book is designed around three workshops. The first one provides the biblical basis, focusing upon how the consumer society has affected our sense of identity, which in turn makes it difficult to relinquish our possessiveness. In the second workshop "solidarity with the marginalized" is presented as a way to enable the "letting go" to happen. Both of these workshops have a dialogue within them between a couple of leaves on a tree, one of which refuses to "let go" in the autumn. These express poignantly some of the interpersonal dynamics and points of view connected with possessiveness, but at the same time these conversations are humorous and entertaining. These sections could easily be used to facilitate discussions on a subject that some would find difficult or perhaps even offensive.

Even while Levan is promoting an "ethic of relinquishment" he recognizes an inherent danger in the relationship between the powerful and the powerless in that those who have the power expect self-sacrifice from the poor and dependent. Therefore, this theology is directed toward the affluent and not as a message to further oppress the "have-nots". Levan addresses the issue of dualism and its distortions as well as the danger of "blind abdication" pursued in an effort to "let-go". What is needed is to "relinquish our possessive spirit, but in so doing we are not relieved of our responsibility to care for creation" (p. 87). The life of the dancing steward is not one lived in isolation but in solidarity, particularly with the dispossessed and those who labour with and for them, and in seeking greater justice within the systems of society.

The third workshop is entitled "The Mystery of Expectancy". Levan maintains that life lived in solidarity with the marginalized isn't sufficient by itself; rather it requires a sense of expectancy as well. This sense of expectancy is linked to the belief that we will be given enough through God's provision which calls for us to live out a trust in God's care for us so that we might be free to grow and to live in solidarity with others.

Toward the end of the book Levan includes a "vision list" to aid in considering possibilities for action in one's own life. But before doing that he warns that, "the point of the whole exercise of relinquishment and solidarity is empowerment of the dispossessed and not the enhancement of our own status or virtue" (p. 152).

Levan proposes that Christian Stewardship is like a dance that circles and changes as we move to the rhythm of discipleship, changing, adjusting, and growing while leaving behind that which would interfere with the invitation to follow Christ out into the world.

I found this book stimulating and insightful. Christopher Levan astutely analyses the acquisitive lifestyle and its effect upon the identity of

the powerful in North America. He aptly addresses how Christian Stewardship is a needed call to discipleship, especially in our society. I highly recommend this book.

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### **Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction**

J. Philip Wogaman

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993

xi + 340 pp. \$19.99 U.S.

A Senior Minister of Foundry United Methodist Church and Professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., J. Philip Wogaman has been an important voice in Protestant ethics. An author of books on Christian moral judgment and economic ethics, Wogaman now turns his attention to the legacy of Christian ethics, a legacy that is neither monolithic nor altogether positive. The conviction driving this work is compelling: "... if Christians are to accept the responsibilities of their own era, they need to know something of the mistakes as well as the insights and triumphs of Christian witness in previous generations" (p. ix).

Six tensions frame Wogaman's discussion of this ambiguous history. In the biblical legacy of Christian ethics as well as in its modern context, Wogaman finds tensions between revelation and reason, materialism and the life of the spirit, universalism and group identity, grace and law, love and force, status and equality. That Christians have made no better headway in resolving these tensions might discourage the reader interested in happy endings. But Wogaman offers these six tensions not as conflicts demanding resolution but rather as enduring compass markings in the rugged terrain of Christian discipleship.

Relying on primary texts, Wogaman traces the history of these tensions throughout the history of Christianity: early Christianity through St. Augustine, medieval Christianity, Reformation and Enlightenment, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalism and evangelicalism, and the twentieth century. Nor is Wogaman's primary focus Protestant ethics. Chapters on Catholic humanism and reformation in the sixteenth century and on papal social encyclicals, Vatican II, liberation theology, and ecumenical social ethics in the twentieth century enrich his text. Wogaman attends to contemporary questions throughout: war and peace, the status of women and slaves, the question of poverty, thus gleaned the wisdom of centuries past for present generations of Christians.

Wogaman's survey of the broad scope of Christian ethics is an impressive and important addition to the libraries of any student of the faith, lay,