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Stepping Stones of the Steward

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and tracing the roots and progress of the depreciation of speech to the point where "talk is cheap" (ch. 2), Tostengard presents the theological, biblical, and interpretive resources the church has (ch. 3), and therewith illumines the acts of worship and preaching (ch. 4). Tostengard has the ability to sum up large movements and periods concisely (e.g., a history of language development and usage in ch. 2; the law and gospel dialectic in ch. 4) and to say things simply but forcefully. Of special interest to the lay person is the story of the depreciation of language and the theological valuation of language (e.g., the prophetic utterance "was God acting in history", i.e., speech is act). Worshippers and worship leaders will appreciate the discussions of prayer, silence, and sacraments. Preachers will be drawn to the discussion of textual interpretation (the text is a living oral word and a communication event, and therefore the old diad "what it meant" and "what it means" is a deadly reduction of the text to an "it") and sermon structures and the dialectic dynamic of law and gospel.

Having moved from an oral culture through the print culture into an electronic culture, it may be that the simultaneity and immediacy of media communication are helping us recover something of the power of speech again. However that may be, our God is the God who speaks, and whose Word is an incarnate Word: the speech of God is authentic and true human speech.

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Stepping Stones of the Steward

Ronald E. Vallet

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185 pp.

In the midst of declining memberships and shrinking financial offerings, there are many in the Christian Church who think of "stewardship" as the program for raising money or the means to increased voluntarism through the annual every member visit. Ronald Vallet, who is currently Executive Director of the Commission on Stewardship of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.—a position he has held for a number of years—was raised in a church tradition in which he was taught that "tithing was a requirement". Needless to say, this legalistic perspective and approach has had an impact on the author. "During my teen years, I learned the word 'stewardship' and was taught that God wanted not only 10% of my income, but also the giving of my time and talent. This was presented as a requirement as well" (1).

In this timely and exciting study text, Vallet challenges a “restricted definition and practice of stewardship”. He states: “the concept of stewardship as purely functional or as a means to an end is coming under increasingly sharp attack by theologians” (3). Vallet argues that each Christian is called to be a “steward”. “In the Bible, the steward is depicted as a person who is given the responsibility of managing something belonging to someone else. The steward is thus responsible to the owner. At the same time, the steward is not simply a passive caretaker of what has been entrusted to him or her. The steward is a full representative of the owner.” In concert with John Westerhoff, Vallet believes that “stewardship is nothing less than a complete life-style, a total accountability and responsibility before God” (4).

In this text, the author uses the metaphor of “steward” in its wholistic biblical sense to develop what he calls significant “stepping stones of the steward”. “My explorations of the dimensions of what it means to be a Christian steward has been enriched in two ways: (1) through study of the parables of Jesus and other stories and (2) by conceiving the life of a Christian as a journey” (6).

Vallet explores fourteen parables searching the particular parable’s contextual meanings both in its own setting and in our own day from the inter-related perspectives of “steward” and “journey”. Throughout the processes of studying the parables, he notes: “In some ways, the parable interprets us more than we interpret the parable. The parable questions us, provokes us, and sheds light on us” (7).

Within and through his provocative explorations of Jesus’ parables (nine as recorded in Matthew and five from Luke), Vallet gives proclamation to his central theses about stewardship. “God’s most basic characteristic is love. St. Augustine says, ‘God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us’...In your journey as a steward, the starting point is your recognition of the reality of God’s love” (22). This remarkable love calls forth a grateful and a loving response to God and to others in all of life.

Structurally, the author has organized the selected parables into: Part I—Gaining A Sense of Purpose [Luke 15:11–32; Luke 15:1–10; Matthew 13:1–9; Luke 7:31–35]; Part II—Using Resources and Taking Risks [Luke 11:1–10; Luke 14:25–35; Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 12:13–21; Matthew 13:44–45]; Part III—Reaching Out [Luke 10:25–37; Matthew 20:1–16; Matthew 21:33–41]; Part IV—Reality and Growth [Luke 16:1–8; Luke 5:34–38]. Each chapter is concluded with a series of helpful questions entitled: “Questions and Suggestions for Individual Reflection and Action”. The questions put forward are designed to help the reader explore personal life/faith journey in order to connect life experiences, theological convictions and growth in stewardship. At the end of the text, there is a set of study guides designed to encourage small-group study of the steward’s journey. Adaptable to adult and youth church-school classes, boards and committees, planning groups and stewardship task-forces, this book can also be used as a primary resource in conference and retreat settings. Vallet’s insights will be useful

to pastors and laypersons seeking to explore stewardship creatively and through a biblical focus on some of Jesus' parables.

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