

# Beyond the Offering Plate

*A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*

Adam J. Copeland, editor

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JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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*First edition*

Published by Westminster John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Book design by Sharon Adams*

*Cover design by Mark Abrams*

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Copeland, Adam J., 1983- editor.

Title: Beyond the offering plate : a holistic approach to stewardship / Adam J. Copeland, editor.

Description: Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, [2017] |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017005497 (print) | LCCN 2017021346 (ebook) | ISBN 9781611648119 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664262358 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian stewardship. | Christian giving.

Classification: LCC BV772 (ebook) | LCC BV772 .B49 2017 (print) | DDC 248/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017005497>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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## Foreword

**I**n the congregations and seminaries I have known, talk about stewardship relies on a set of affirmations with which theologians, church leaders, and congregants typically agree. Stewardship is not just about money. Everything that we are and have belongs to God, not to us. Returning to God some of the gifts we have received is a crucial expression of our faith. Together as church, we know these things to be true.

Often, however, these and similar affirmations seem to float above the actual life of the church. They can remain abstract and distant from the real concerns of cash-strapped Christian congregations and their costly mission of love and service to a hurting world. Come Stewardship Sunday, anxiety is in the air, in spite of the upbeat theme and encouraging talks prepared by each year's lay leaders. In the pews, there are questions. How much should I give? How much are they giving? Will we as a body raise enough to meet local and mission needs? Okay, this is not just about money, and everything is God's, and giving expresses my faith. But still.

Adam Copeland has gathered a group of thoughtful authors who bring stewardship down to earth and into play in many domains of everyday life. In their chapters, an abstract

theology of gifts and giving, which too often remains at the level of ideals, becomes an engaged practical theology that takes shape within the often messy lives of persons and communities. When the insights in this book begin to reshape church leaders' understanding of stewardship and to take hold in congregations, there will still be questions in the pews, one of which will still be "how much money should I give?" Beyond this, however, Christians will also need to ask: "How is the work I do part of my stewardship of God's gifts?" "How does caring for beautiful, vulnerable human bodies—my own and those of others—express my trust in God's love for this material, broken, and promise-filled world?" "How am I, and how are we as a congregation, located within this world's hierarchies of privilege, and how shall we steward the opportunities of this location on behalf of justice and peace?" Indeed, the questions we need to ask will abound, depending not on distant ideals but on the actual contours of faithful living in each place of ministry and life.

In fact, the people in our congregations already steward God's gifts across many domains of living—including in their relationships with others, their work, and, yes, their finances. Yet many long to do so more faithfully, and all need language well suited to exploring the questions at stake in the wise use of all that God has made and entrusted, temporarily, to our care. Today's Christians urgently need to have sustained conversations about stewarding their gifts—all their gifts—in response to God's grace. This book's expansion of the reach and meaning of talk about stewardship will greatly enrich these conversations.

—Dorothy C. Bass,  
director emerita of the Valparaiso Project  
on the Education and Formation of People in Faith

## Introduction

I'm sorry. Those words often accompany stewardship conversations in many congregations today. Pastors explain, "I'm sorry for the awkwardness of needing to raise my own salary, but it's again time for our annual stewardship campaign." Treasurers announce, "I'm sorry to share that we are behind on our budget." Members say—or, at least, think—"I'm sorry we have to talk about money, and in church of all places!" I have a few theories concerning the roots of these rampant stewardship apologies.

First, let's admit upfront that talking about money in public makes many of us uncomfortable. It's a great irony that, in a country in which conspicuous consumption reigns and pursuit of the almighty dollar spurs our work and (supposed) worth, we actually prefer to avoid money conversations in public. Think I'm wrong? With how many people have you discussed your annual salary? How many friends know how much you gave to charity last year? What members of your family know your true financial condition? Since we so rarely address money in public settings, it makes sense that money talk in church makes many of us a bit uncomfortable. And so church leaders, out of their desire not to ruffle too many feathers, approach stewardship apologetically.

Second, behind that hesitancy to discuss money in public is a related discomfort with our relationship to money. Money is essential to our economic system. Jesus talked about it often. And yet, we don't quite know what to do with it, how to approach it, or what to feel about it. Many pastors I work with hesitate when asked to describe a theology of money. Remarkably few have had the opportunity to ponder money with any theological sophistication. Given this reality among many church leaders, it's no wonder that congregation members may sense uneasiness on the part of clergy when money comes up in church. Many pastors themselves feel anxious, out of their depth, or even shame around the topic of money.

Third, and perhaps most important, I believe our apologetic approach to financial stewardship has to do with a deep longing for more (substance, not money). We know that speaking about money once a year during the annual campaign reflects too thin a theology. The typical approach to stewardship in congregations leaves us unsatisfied. Talking about stewardship once a year, and only in terms of financial stewardship, is like sitting down to a four-course meal, but leaving after only a few bites of the appetizer. Even if those few bites are delicious, a hunger remains.

For these reasons and more, the church needs stronger, wiser, and more creative ministry that addresses financial stewardship. I am very fortunate to regularly teach a course at Luther Seminary titled, "Money and the Mission of the Church." Though the course is offered as an elective, it is usually oversubscribed. Students know that Christian public leadership today requires savvy with financial stewardship, so they enroll in large numbers. While very few students discern a call to ordained ministry because of money, they appreciate the value of stewardship leadership. Even so, we end every semester with more questions than answers. It turns out that mastering financial stewardship is a life's work and fails to fit on a single semester's syllabus.

Most of those who preach or talk about stewardship focus only on money-related aspects of the term. Too often, I have counted myself among these ranks, introducing a presentation

with a statement along these lines: “Of course, stewardship is much broader than money. Stewardship is holistic, and importantly expands beyond finances. But since my time is limited today, I’m going to focus on the topic of money and financial stewardship.” The financial aspect of stewardship is plenty complicated by itself, so it’s difficult to range beyond money, especially when congregations seek to meet—or raise—their budgets. This book finally takes up the invitation to broaden the stewardship conversation beyond money alone.

Just as there is a hunger in congregations for richer, more honest conversation related to money, there exists also a large opening for claiming the fullness of stewardship. A friend recently alerted me to an acquaintance’s Facebook status. Clicking over, I found the following in her Facebook status:

Every once in a while, I discover that a word has kind of been hijacked. This happened to the words “orthodox” and “evangelical.” When people hear either word, they have a narrow, specific meaning that pops to mind, and that meaning usually doesn’t work for me. “Stewardship” has had the same fate.

This grand word with sweeping implications for lives of living in communion with all creation, caring for the gifts God has given us . . . we have decided it really mostly applies to our money.

What a total bummer.

A bummer indeed. This book exists to fill that void.

In Jody Shipka’s groundbreaking book, *Toward a Composition Made Whole* (2011), she argues that the field of writing studies and composition had too long emphasized written text on a static page, when in fact meaning-making and writing have to do with varied visual, aural, and multimedia forms. I have created this book resting upon the assertion that the church’s approach to stewardship, too, must be broadened. Sound financial stewardship is deepened by a holistic stewardship.

Given the financial realities in many congregations, some may worry that taking time away from discussions related to stewardship of money will distract from the important, needed money-focused stewardship study. I contend, however, that making the stewardship conversation whole in fact enriches, deepens, and supports financial stewardship. In solidarity with many stewardship authors, I agree that the goal of stewardship ministry is not ultimately raising the budget, nor even necessarily related to finances. Stewardship ministry, like all good practical theology, affirms our broad call to love God and neighbor. All too often, however, stewardship becomes aligned narrowly with fundraising. What good is an annual stewardship campaign that raises the budget but fails to build rich faith in Christ? If stewardship means only money, it means so little as to be nearly worthless.

Holistic stewardship thinking and communication, when engaged well, meets people in practical, longed-for ways. Indeed, my close friends and relations live holistic stewardship daily by stewarding old houses and mortgages; by nurturing the boat motor back to life each summer; by becoming aware of the privilege of their education, faith, and/or skin color; by keeping and repairing marriage covenants; by caring for their pets; by voting in elections; by supporting worthy institutions; by feeding their bodies; by speaking the truth in love; by raising their children; and so much more. This book might be seen as a way into financial stewardship. And I do hope it is that. The book is also intended, however, as an expansion.

Like a fugue by J. S. Bach that begins with a short theme, then blossoms into rich, textured variations on that theme, my conception of stewardship includes money in its melodic theme. But by expanding the theme, the whole composition is richer and more beautiful. The theme alone is perfectly serviceable, reasonably pleasing, but it blooms to become an even more beautiful whole when played in full.

Definitions of stewardship tend to emphasize this broader view. I understand stewardship to be a lived theology founded on the claim that all resources begin with and belong to God.

Practicing stewardship reshapes how Christians manage all resources including “our” money, materials, and relationships. Stewardship is a lived concept, most often resulting in sharing that surprises, compassion that complicates, and love that inspires.

In too many places, I have seen the derivation of the word *steward* mistaken, so I seek to correct the record here by drawing upon the ever-dependable *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). From the Old English word, *stigward*, a steward was an official keeper of a house or some part of a house. The *OED* makes clear “there is no ground for the assumption that *stigward* originally meant ‘keeper of the pig-sties.’”<sup>1</sup> Though his formal title is Butler, the word’s actual origin reminds me of the care with which Mr. Carson, the butler in the hit television show *Downton Abbey*, goes about his work. Carson has a keen sense of respect for the great old house itself, and for its traditions, standards, and stories. Though his life is intimately tied to the house, Carson is clear never to confuse it as his own. He works to steward that which is not his, yet is certainly his responsibility to manage.

Though we may learn from the past, today we find ourselves far from the times of Old English and sprawling abbeys. Yet we have so much to steward. In the pages that follow, wise writers take up the invitation to envision new ways of stewarding the concerns of the present. Since money is (rightfully) unavoidable when it comes to stewardship, this collection includes a splendid chapter by David King exploring a robust theology of money and finances, as well as an invitation to generosity. Otherwise, the pages that follow expand the notion of stewardship beyond the usual suspects, while also inviting alternative entry points to more common topics. For example, every chapter addresses realities related to stewardship of God’s creation, including ourselves and our possessions, as well as our bodies, the institutions with which we associate, and the spaces we inhabit. I hope such an approach furthers exploration into the implications of holistic stewardship with the nonhuman members and elements of creation. Indeed, this collection serves as a sort of extended

invitation to the church, asking the question: what happens when we explore new, more holistic conceptions regarding “stewardship of \_\_\_\_\_”? Any published collection faces limits of space and expertise, so I embrace and invite further extensions of the field, reworked questions, and other approaches to help make stewardship whole.

These chapters also implicate the tendency in some circles to personalize stewardship in a manner that makes stewardship overly individualistic. In congregations, invitations to financial giving often embrace appeals to self-interest and personal choice. When taken to the extreme, this approach can result in the myopic notion that (financial) stewardship is only “between me and God.” Threaded through these pages rests a plea for a deep appreciation of the ways stewardship flourishes when understood as layered, interrelated, and interdependent. Whole stewardship concerns, not only how I manage my money, but how our financial system supports fair exchange of goods and services. Whole stewardship concerns, not only how I care for my body, but—by the nature of my embodied living with others—how I care for community and the bodies of my neighbors. Whole stewardship concerns, not only personal intellectual stimulation, but how I teach others, learn from others, and even what information is accessible to the public. Stewardship certainly calls for individual action, but such action must also be appreciative of the interdependent nature of life together.

It is my sincere hope that this book will become a resource for ministry of many sorts. To that end, several aids for readers are included. Reflection questions and ideas for application in congregations follow each chapter. A concluding chapter includes biblical texts and themes appropriate for preaching.

Adam J. Copeland  
Summer 2016

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