



# Preaching Why preaching matters

## Introduction

In any given year members of our congregations are confronted with thousands of highly professional adverts on TV, radio, bill boards and magazines promoting an ever more affluent lifestyle. The conflict between the Gospel and money that Jesus notes in his hard words about mammon creates a climate of spiritual formation. However, sermons on giving, let alone the wider management of money, are few and far between. When preached they are often resisted. One of the unhappy conclusions of American church commentator George Barna is that the majority of churchgoers think as consumers first and Christians second. In the sensitive areas of financial planning and decision making Christians are hardly to be distinguished from anyone else. Meanwhile many churches live at subsistence level and effective ministry and mission are constrained by poor giving levels, often masked by the sacrificial giving of a few. Giving the Widow's Mite is a godly thing only if we are on her income and giving with the widow's spirit.

## Giving and spirituality

Preaching has an important but not an isolated part to play in spiritual formation around money and possessions. Maturity in Christian giving is moving well beyond calculating how much to give on the basis of the budget needs of the church. Rather we should be asking how much of me, of my life, my lifestyle, my faith is expressed in what I give. The promise of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8) to repay any fraud four times over far exceeds the full restitution plus one fifth which the law required (Leviticus 6:2-5). Generosity always exceeds calculation.

Christian stewardship is much, much more than an appeal for funds or techniques to raise money to meet the church budget. The goal of stewardship is

not to obtain the gift but to nurture the giver. Our focus is first and foremost not on our *giving to a need but on our need to give*. Churches must communicate very real financial needs clearly. Churches must emphasise that our giving is focused on our ministry and mission, on making a difference in the lives of people and not simply on the survival of an institution. But above all we want people who give because they know the grace of God poured out to them in Christ. We want givers whose generosity proceeds from and is caught up in the generosity of God. If stewardship is narrowly (and wrongly) perceived as simply getting the money in then it will always be about methods, novel and familiar, of parting reluctant givers from their money. That is a soul destroying prospect for those called to build up the body of Christ. Giving is not a tip we offer to God for spiritual service rendered, not a tax on faith nor even a tithe but a gift that speaks of all I have received as gift from God.

## The new physics of philanthropy

The work of Paul Schervish, researcher and commentator on major gift philanthropy at Boston College in the USA offers some helpful insights into understanding the role of preaching in effective stewardship. Schervish argues that effective fundraising is the interplay of the *demand* side and the *supply* side of giving. We are all familiar with the demand side of giving, the compelling presentation of need, superbly modelled each year by Comic Relief. Such need touches our hearts and invites us to make a difference. It is right and proper that this is so. Schervish insists that fundraising also needs to acknowledge what he terms the "*supply side vectors*" of giving, by which he means the values, beliefs and aspirations of those who are able and willing to address that desperate need. The skill of mature fundraising is aligning need with philanthropic aspirations.

## Need and motivation

Christian stewardship reflects the same dynamic. The need is for the church to secure the resources necessary to maintain and expand parish ministry. Churches must learn how to communicate this need in a compelling way that excites people to give. As in fundraising, however, attention must be given to the supply side. We need to nurture in our givers a sense of gratitude to God, a sense that all we have is gift, a motivation to give because God has given everything to us in Jesus and a joyful obedience to the biblical obligation to share what we have received. If this is not modelled from the pulpit it will likely not happen in the home group, in spiritual direction nor on the finance committee.

## Giving in grace

Stewardship is born of the imperative of grace, that free and undeserved gift of God in creation, in Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Understood properly this imperative of grace is not a command to give but it is an invitation to give out of the generosity that has been shown to us. Grace does not demand a response but invites us to live graciously. So preaching about stewardship should share the characteristics of the grace from which it is born. There is no place for crude appeals for money, threats of non payment of bills, of church closures, of castigating people's greed. By contrast careful, sensitive and open texture preaching can open up a difficult and defensive topic by means of story, humour, example, testimony and teaching the imperative of grace. The aim is not to extract the gift but make connections for the giver between their finances and the gracious gift of God to them. It is from the shaping of hearts and minds that true Christian stewardship is born.

## Exploring the connections

In 2 Cor 8-9 Paul encourages the Corinthian church

to participate in a financial collection. He does this not by stressing the need of the poor in Jerusalem (though he never loses sight of that) but by appealing to the grace of God shown in the generosity of the Macedonian churches (v2) and in the life of Jesus (v9). The chapters contain five key points for preachers:

- **Connect the giver to the grace of God.** All that we are, all we possess is gift from God. We need to think about money like Christians not consumers. Stewardship is spirituality put into practice or it is nothing at all.
- **Connect the local church to the work of God in the community.** Paul challenged Corinth to participate in the Jerusalem collection as a test of the authenticity of their faith. People need a sense of participating in something that has life, purpose and energy. Some will emphasise God's purpose, others the effect of ministry in the community. Either way this is a primary motivation for giving.
- **Connect the giver to the blessings received.** Speculative giving to gain blessings is a consumerist distortion of the Gospel promise. But blessings do follow giving. Emphasise the benefits to givers of freedom, joy, renewed faith, deepened spirituality and an enhanced parish ministry.
- **Connect the giver to the financial need.** Preaching that attempts to bully the hearers into a monetary gift and preaching that moves the heart but does not translate into action are equal and opposite errors. Good stewardship preaching connects the specific financial need of the church to the response of the individual and the grace of God.
- **Connect the giver to the need for action.** In short - "ask". It is vital! Professional fundraisers know that and they know the temptation to avoid the issue! Preachers are no less tempted. Ask people to respond to the initiative, to return their response forms and pray for their church and its financial situation.

