Baptist Basics

BAPTISTS TOGETHER

7 Stewardship

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Jesus told a parable about a man who wanted to go on a journey. He summoned three servants together and gave one of them five talents (a unit of currency), another two and the third, just one, in the expectation that they would make a profit out of what he had entrusted to them. The ones who had five and two talents managed to double their investment. But the third was afraid of losing what he had, so he dug a hole and put it in the ground. When the master returned he called them all to account. Those who had put the talents to good use were commended and rewarded with larger responsibilities. But the one who had done nothing was rebuked as a 'wicked and lazy servant' and thrown into 'the outer darkness' (Matthew 25:14-30).

The idea of stewardship

This parable introduces us to the idea of stewardship. Everything we have has been given to us by God. We are not all given the same amount, and we do not all have the same ability. In that sense there is a diversity of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4). But we are all equally expected to do something useful with what we have, however much or little. We are not to be lazy. In fact, not being bothered enough to do anything at all, is as much a form of sin as active wrongdoing. Human beings in general, and Christians in particular, are expected to make something out of their lives. We are stewards of what we have been given. In the fullness of time there is to be a reckoning and each person will be held to account for what they have made of themselves and what has been given to them. It would be good to have something to show for our lives.

Since Christians are conscious of living as those accountable to God and do so with a sense of profound gratitude, the idea of being stewards should shape our whole approach to the world, the church and our own lives and possessions. This can be worked out in various ways.

The earth is the Lord's

'The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it, for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it on the rivers' (Psalm 24:1). The earth does not belong to human beings. It belongs, quite simply, to God, and it does so because God is its originator and sustainer. God has created human beings as the most developed form of life and has made them in the divine image. An aspect of that image is that they resemble God in having dominion over the created sphere. They also have the right to draw their means of sustenance from the creation (Genesis 1:27-30). In that sense they are also dependent on the world about them. But 'dominion' is not the same as 'exploitation'. If the way humans exercise dominion is truly in the image of God, it will not exploit, but rather nurture and sustain the well-being of the whole created sphere, animal, vegetable and mineral. It will respect and honour the integrity of creation at the same time as it draws from that creation to sustain and develop its own life. This is often called 'sustainable development'.

It ought to be clear then that Christians should follow the Bible's teaching in seeing themselves as stewards of the creation realm. This is all the more so since the New Testament claims that the world has been created through Christ. 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one

thing came into being' (John 1:3; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-4). As the creation is Christ's, care for the creation is part of Christian discipleship, born of our desire to please him. Humans can use the creation, but not in a way that threatens the well-being and survival of the environment. Christians are called to be ecologically responsible. This is the duty they owe to God as stewards of what he has given us. But at the same time they have to make something out of the creation that has been entrusted to them, through the creation of wealth, the development of culture and the nurture of the environment, so that they can offer this back to God as an act of worship. This kind of stewardship is very much on the agenda in a world where human beings have acquired the ability to destroy their world, and themselves with it.

Stewardship of gifts

The word 'talent' has passed into the English language as a way of speaking of human gifts, skills and abilities. All humans are endowed with natural abilities and learn to shape these into talents that enrich the rest of us. We are all differently gifted, and some are more gifted than others. But we are called to be fruitful and to make good use of what is given. Likewise, the New Testament speaks of 'gifts of the Spirit'. There are at least three lists of spiritual gifts given in the New Testament, and none of them is identical.

In Romans 12:6-8 the list includes prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing and leading, all gifts necessary to the community life of the church.

In Ephesians 4:7-13 the gifts of Christ are seen as those of people who he calls to exercise leadership functions within the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

In 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 the gifts listed include the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues.

These gifts range from experiences which are highly intuitive (speaking in tongues or prophecy), abilities which are largely rational (teaching, leading) and qualities which are partly circumstantial (for instance contributing – some people just have more money than others). What Paul is really trying to stress is that whatever form the activity of the Spirit takes, it is a gift and not

something to boast about. It is also to be used for the common good of the church (1 Corinthians 12:7) and for 'building up' believers (1 Corinthians 14:26).

The challenge to every church member is to decide which gifts they have been given and how they might be put to good use in the service of the church and of the world. Every human ability becomes a spiritual gift when it is offered up to God and used by God for the benefit of the church and its mission. For this reason no-one should say 'I don't have any gifts'. This would be to deny both the gifts given to us in creation, which can then be offered up to God, and the teaching that 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Corinthians 12:7). God uses all those who have come to faith in Christ. Nobody should count themselves out for reasons of modesty or lack of self-esteem but should 'think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned' (Romans 12:3). Above all, it is important to avoid the sin that Jesus identified in his parable, that of laziness. Discipleship means actively following after Jesus and counting ourselves to be his servants. We are called to be good stewards of the gifts we have been given and to make full use of them for the good of the church and its mission.

The Baptist Union publishes a leaflet entitled *Discovering the Gifts of Church Members* that can be used to help discern and encourage the use of gifts. *(obtainable from the resource section of the BUGB website www.baptist.org.uk)*

Stewardship of wealth

How we use our money is a subject of great personal interest to all of us. It can also be one of the most exciting aspects of Christian discipleship. Jesus probably had more to say about the use and misuse of wealth than any other single topic. He warned, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' (Mark 10:23), and even, 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (Matthew 19:24). On one occasion he told a rich man to 'go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'. In response we read, 'he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions' (Mark 10:17-22).

What we do with our wealth is no less an emotive issue today and one that every Christian needs to address directly. Jesus, who himself lived a simple life among the relatively poor, may not address the words 'sell what you own' to all of us, and chaos might ensue if we did. But he does require us to take a radical view of our own wealth. His words show that owning wealth carries dangers and temptations with it. Money is even described as an alien god, Mammon, and a choice has to be made about serving it or serving God (Matthew 6:4). In fact it is called 'unrighteous Mammon' (or 'dishonest wealth' Luke 16:11), and this suggests that it inevitably pulls us in the wrong direction unless we resist it. The idea of stewardship helps here. We can resist the temptations of wealth by seeing it as something to use responsibly and for the good of God's kingdom. The following guidelines help at this point.

- *Live simply but make reasonable provision.* All of us are inclined to want more rather than less, but we should be happy to settle for enough. The apostle Paul wrote, 'I have learned to be content with whatever I have' (Philippians 4:11). At the same time it is a duty to take care of ourselves and our families (1 Timothy 3:5, 5:8). Many people have found that by first of all deciding what should be given away and setting this aside, perhaps also arranging banking orders to do this, they have no difficulty in living on what is left.

- *Give systematically and proportionately out of your income.* Paul commended the Corinthian Christians because 'they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means' (2 Corinthians 8:3). In the Old Testament the people of God were expected to give a tithe (a tenth) of their crops to God. No such precise commands are laid out in the New Testament, but out of gratitude to God we are encouraged to give a proportion of our income and a tenth or more is not a bad guide. The more we have the larger that proportion ought to be.

- *Learn the joy of generosity.* Paul wrote, 'Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work' (2 Corinthians 9:7-8). It is a

spiritual principle that those who learn to be givers will have much given back to them (Luke 6:37-38).

- *Make your assets count.* This takes thought. There are ways of increasing income and so having more money to give. Money which is given to charities including churches can be gift-aided in order for them to recover tax paid. Considerable assets can be released on death by writing Christian and charitable causes into a will. This should be part of a 'good death'. It is good stewardship of personal affairs and possessions and one that ensures we continue to do good even after we have died.

- *Take risks in giving.* It is good to give systematically. It is also good to give spontaneously as a way of affirming freedom from the 'love of money' that is a 'root of all kinds of evil' (1Timothy 6:10).

The joy of giving

The first call on our giving ought to be to the local congregation to which we belong. In particular there is a duty to support those we call to serve as ministers in the church (1 Timothy 5:17-18) and the ministries to which we believe we are called to exercise in our community. The church should also have a policy about sending money to support the wider Baptist family through the Baptist Union of Great Britain's Home Mission Fund and to other worthy causes of support. Part of the joy of giving is putting our money where our prayers are and knowing that we are playing a part in serving the kingdom of God throughout the world. Within the Baptist movement, the Home Mission Fund supports Baptist churches and other mission opportunities at home and BMS World Mission supports work in countries across the world.

Baptist Basics

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