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## The Secret of God's Plan

Harry G. Coiner

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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**The Secret of God's Plan  
HARRY G. COINER**

**The Christ-Figure in Contemporary Literature  
DONALD L. DEFFNER**

**Homiletics**

**Theological Observer**

**Book Review**

**VOL. XXXIV**

***May 1963***

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Coiner: The Secret of God's Plan

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# The Secret of God's Plan<sup>1</sup>

## Guidelines for a Theology of Stewardship

By HARRY G. COINER

A restive search is going on today, and almost everyone is engaged in it. The search is for meaning in life, for significance, for purpose. Captured by a meaningless job and caged inside four walls with a TV set for companionship, modern man feels trapped. We need not extend the picture except to suggest that a disintegrating anguish takes possession of people when suddenly they realize that life is empty and sterile, completely lacking in meaning for them. One single devastating question keeps begging for an answer: Why live? The author of Ecclesiastes struggled with this question long ago and wrote: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. . . . So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair." (1:14; 2:20)

It is not unrealistic to say that the scientific view of the world and of human existence which has fastened itself on modern man accounts for much of his dilemma. At least, such a view pervades the particular milieu of our time and aggravates the meaninglessness of the existence of natural man. This is true because science shows us only phenomena, a universal and unfeeling chain of facts and events without beginning or end, without origin or goal. Whether it rains or the sun shines, whether we are miserable or happy, whether we are

sick or well—these are only matters of physical, chemical, or psychological reactions which unfold entirely without significance. Man's only guide is the practical opportunity of a course of action suggested by scientific knowledge.

Standing over against this "accidental" view of man and the world is the Christian view that this is God's world and that all of life is His gift. The Christian believes that God's intervention in human history gives present and eternal significance to every circumstance of life. He knows that without God's intervention history has no final purpose. Everything in the world is neutral—perhaps pleasant or unpleasant—but nevertheless meaningless. Because of God's intervention, nothing can be neutral for any man, and his actions at every moment help forward God's purpose or work against it. Since this is God's world and we are His creatures, everything that happens to us is an event in which He speaks to us in judgment or in mercy. Therefore the search for meaning in life must begin with what God has done and is still doing over against His creation. The apostle Paul affirms that all of human life and the world which contains it is centered in Christ according to God's plan, His *οικονομία*.<sup>2</sup> This is the mystery of His

<sup>1</sup> The word "secret" is a proper meaning of *μυστήριον* in Eph. 1:9. The word "plan" is a proper meaning of *οικονομίαν* in Eph. 1:10. The title of this discussion is based on Eph. 1:9, 10.

<sup>2</sup> The term is a combination of *οίκος*, a house, and *νέμω*, manage. In Eph. 1:10 and 3:9 the term means the arrangement or administration of God. The special meaning here is that God is the Master of a great household, and He is wisely administering His rule over it, and this He is doing through the person of His Son.



will which has been made known to those whose eyes have been opened by God to the truth.

For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph. 1: 9, 10)

Here God is the great Householder, the prime *Οἰκονόμος*. He is working out His *οἰκονομία* in and through His chosen and redeemed people. This is the secret that He has made known to His people. Regardless of the other meanings and applications of the term *οἰκονομία* in the New Testament, here we are at the heart of the matter — that God wills to work out His plan for the fullness of time in the people whom He has brought to faith in His creating, redeeming, and sanctifying activity toward men.

In the plan that God is working out through Christ in His people, Christian stewardship obtains its highest meaning and strongest theological foundation. That is to say, the responsible activity of God's people must always be related, as St. Paul, for example, relates it, to God's active and gracious purposes for His people and through them for the world.<sup>3</sup> Only when men believe in God can they perceive meaning in human existence and live above despair to the glory of God. This discussion therefore will be in the nature of a call to faith. It will begin with the basic relationship which God has established be-

<sup>3</sup> For additional details see Otto Michel, *οἰκονόμος* and *οἰκονομία* in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, V (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954), 151—155.

tween Himself and His people, move from that point to the nature of the response which God's people make in faith, and endeavor finally to suggest what the practical applications are in the stewardship life of the church.

May we note at once how St. Paul employs language at a high level to describe for us the structure of God's *οἰκονομία*?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. . . . In Him, according to the purpose of Him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of His glory. . . . For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 1:3-6, 11, 12; 2:10)

#### I. THE SECRET REVEALED: GOD HAS A REDEEMED PEOPLE

When God called Abraham and gave him the promise that in his seed all families of the earth would be blessed, His plan began to unfold. God's gracious purpose was to bless all the inhabitants of the earth, and He called one who was to be the father of the people through whom He would bless all peoples of the earth. "I will bless thee . . . and thou shalt be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). The promise of the same blessing was given to Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:14). As-



surance is given again in Gen. 35:10-12 and 46:2-4. At every step the initiative rests with God as He calls men and as they respond in faith.

After the calling of Moses and the dramatic deliverance from Egypt, Israel's understanding of its covenant relationship with God as His chosen people was more fully developed and strengthened. Through Moses at Mount Sinai a covenant was made with Israel, an election not only to privilege but also to service, to further God's purposes for the nations. The words of God to Moses not only embody the prophetic understanding of the nature of His covenant with Israel, but they are crucial for the whole Biblical doctrine of the church.<sup>4</sup>

God chose Israel, not because they were more worthy than other nations, or because He had no interest in the others but

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 19:4-8 reads: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine, and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.' So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do.' And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord." (Cf. Deut. 7:11; Is. 45:4-6)

NOTE: The Exodus deliverance from Egypt was sheer grace, absolutely unmerited. In this act, God chose for Himself a people that they might choose Him. God's  $\text{רָצוֹן}$  reveals that sure love which will not let Israel go, the steady, persistent faithfulness of God though Israel be faithless and wayward. The response of the people was a response to grace, man's  $\text{רָצוֹן}$  for God's  $\text{רָצוֹן}$ . Cf. Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 136, 137.

because He had a concern for "all the earth." Israel was appointed to be "a kingdom of priests and an holy nation," that is, a people set apart to represent God to the needy world. Their responsibility was to trust God and obey Him and be His instrument to serve the world. God would maintain them as His "peculiar treasure" above all people (cf. Ex. 23:20—24:8).

But as time passed, Israel broke the covenant. They did not act like God's people; they failed to trust in God and obey Him. The voices of the prophets reminded "the people of God" of their high calling, pleaded with "the chosen ones" to be faithful in their covenant relation with their God, and warned "the elect" of the impending wrath of God's judgment. But for the most part, Israel remained faithless and disobedient (cf. the warnings in Amos 1 and 2, specifically in 3:2; 9:1; in Micah 3:9-12; Is. 1:2, 3; 30:1, 2).

The corruption of Israel became so complete that Jeremiah was forced to exclaim, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil" (13:23). Yahweh Himself announced that "though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My heart would not turn toward this people" (Jer. 15:1). Jeremiah was not even permitted to intercede for Israel anymore. The end had come! God's strange work had begun. His plan now called for a new start, a new people, the establishment of a new covenant, and the dispersal of the Israelites, but a few of whom survived. Thus God exposed the false presuppositions which most of the Israelites had fostered. He demonstrated that He was not confined to any city such as Zion or any symbol such as the ark or the temple. He



was not bound irrevocably to any nation such as the Jews or to any specific political or social system. He was, above all, a God of righteousness. Judgment had to precede salvation. Then the new beginning was an act of sheer grace, like a potter taking the rejected pieces of clay to start afresh (Jer. 18). From the fragments of Israel which remained after this explosion of divine wrath apparent in the fall of Jerusalem, God began to build His kingdom with new and richer promises of grace (Is. 42:1-9; 52:13; 53:12; 54:10; 55:3; Jer. 31:31-33; 32:40; Ezek. 16:60). The full import and significance of these oracles of grace is revealed in the advent of the Messianic King, Jesus Christ, who has established and ratified the new covenant of forgiving grace with His holy blood.<sup>5</sup>

With the coming of Christ, what all the ages had desired to see and hear moved into the human scene. He announced the decisive redeeming act of God and performed it (Luke 10:23, 24). The Suffering Servant pictured in Is. 53 established a new covenant in His blood shed for the remission of sins. This profound truth is given classical expression by St. Paul in Phil. 2: 5-11. The righteousness which the Law sought to create was fulfilled through the sacrificial obedience of the Servant. He announced that the kingdom of God had

<sup>5</sup> St. Paul in Rom. 9-11 seeks to explain this astonishing paradox that God had rejected the old Israel and was creating a new covenant people out of all the nations of the earth. He explains that God has not reversed the principle which has all along operated in Biblical history; indeed He has given us a signal demonstration of it in the coming of Christ and the building of His church. The significance of the congregation as the new place of God's presence after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple is the subject of a "Faith Forward" study by Martin H. Scharlemann which will appear shortly.

come into the world, and He summoned men to that kingdom. He called His disciples to be the nucleus of a new Israel and assured them that "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The New Testament affirms with one voice that those who have obeyed the call of Christ are His true church and heirs of all the promises given to Israel (e.g., Rom. 4:13-15; Gal. 3:9; Titus 3:7; James 2:5).

In Christ is manifested the *ultimate* intention of God with Israel and the world: He will bear God's judgment on human sin and open the way of salvation for all. With His resurrection a new age was begun, a new Ruler of the world was enthroned, and the proclamation of the risen Savior and the living Lord was set in motion to reach all nations. His enduring presence, promised in Matt. 28:20, would be His power in and through the Holy Spirit to enable the disciples to carry out their mission. He would make His way among men with life-giving power, would conquer resistance, and make the church a living and powerful witness to His life, death, and resurrection.

At Pentecost the apostle Peter proclaimed the fact of the new Israel and declared that Jesus had been vindicated as Israel's Messiah by His resurrection from the dead. God's covenant was reaching out anew in the latter days in the person of the great Prophet like Moses to mark and claim a chosen people. (Acts 3:22-26)

Though the call of God was still addressed primarily to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6; 15:24), it was God's purpose that the movement of "making disciples" should reach out toward all nations and peoples (Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8). The wild olive branch was now



grafted into the true olive tree of Israel so that it might bear fruit to God to the ends of the earth. St. Paul declares that the call of God was now addressed to Jews and Greeks (Rom. 1:16) and to all people everywhere (1 Tim. 2:4). The New Testament marks the transition from Israel bound together by blood relationship with Abraham to the people of God bound together by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ.

The most striking affirmation in the New Testament that the Christian community is now the true *λαὸς Θεοῦ* is found in 1 Peter 2:2-5, 9, 10.<sup>6</sup> Here the apostle uses the language of Ex. 19:4-6 and also passages in Isaiah and other Old Testament writings to affirm that the Christian church is called to be "a kingdom of priests" with power to become the light of the nations and thus to replace old Israel, the light that failed. Peter employs the richest words in his vocabulary to describe the new people of God as the possessors of the very life of Christ and the givers of this life to the world.<sup>7</sup> He would say, if we may

<sup>6</sup> One should note the marginal references to discover the rich Old Testament background of this following passage: "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. Come to Him, to that Living Stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

<sup>7</sup> Note how St. Paul repeats the same theme in Gal. 4:1-7; 2:20; Eph. 2:10-22; Phil. 2:15, 16; Titus 2:14.

paraphrase him, "God has brought you out of the faceless and nameless throng and 'ordained' you royal priests in your baptism and made of you 'a holy nation' to serve His purposes in the world. All the old titles of God's people now belong to you. Think of it! You have been brought out of darkness into His amazing light. Your best worship is to believe what God has done for you and to demonstrate His great goodness in your lives."

So the secret of God's *οἰκονομία* is revealed. God has acted in Christ, and men are being led into a new reality, the living body of Christ on earth. They become participants in Christ's own life and mission (Rom. 6:3-5, 11; 2 Cor. 5:17). God has made us what we are; He has laid His redemptive claims on us. He wills to work out His plan in and through those who believe. God's "divine economy" has as its ultimate goal

to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:9-11)

That God calls people to be His "destined and appointed" ones "who are to live for the praise of His glory" means that they exist not for themselves but for God and His world. The church is no mere association of people with similar religious interests who happen to get together. Life in the church certainly means something other than preoccupation with religious piety and moralism or even the desire to escape the world. God's *οἰκονομία* is a gracious activity which has a long history,



a history now being worked out as He calls people and transforms their lives and places them in His church to minister to one another and to the world.

**II. THE SECRET FURTHER REVEALED:  
GOD IS WORKING IN AND THROUGH  
HIS REDEEMED PEOPLE**

The full dimension of the act of God for men in the person and work of His Son is revealed in the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> Recorded here is the witness of those who had been on the scene and experienced in a quite personal way God's saving deed in Jesus Christ. Christ and His mighty works had signaled the breaking into the world of the power of the kingdom of God. This kingdom will move on to its inevitable triumph: the unconditional surrender of the mighty foe, the restoration of all creation under the divine domain (Acts 3:21), and the submission of all powers in heaven and earth to the name of Christ (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:10; Phil. 2:10). In the victorious army of that kingdom the church marches. Its task is not to produce the

<sup>8</sup> John Bright describes the extroverted concern in the New Testament pages: "Through the Old Testament the reader senses that the focus has been continually narrowed. It begins with the broad canvas of creation and tells of the dealings of God with the whole race of mankind (Gen. 1—11); then narrows to the people of Israel, whom God had called to be the special servants of His purpose; then still further to the search for a pure Remnant within Israel fit to be the vessels of the divine intention. At the center of the Bible's drama the focus has narrowed to one man: the Messiah, Christ. But from Christ the focus again turns outward—first to the new Israel which is His Church and then, through that Church, into the entire world. The Church is called to take up the destiny of the true Israel, Servant Israel, and become the missionary people of the Kingdom of God." *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953), pp. 232, 233.

victory or to bring in the Kingdom but to participate in the victory and to bear witness of a Kingdom already set up, a witness to what Christ has already done (Acts 1:8). J. B. Phillips translates Eph. 1:11:

And here is the staggering thing—that in all which will one day belong to Him we have been promised a share (since we were long ago destined for this by the One who achieves His purposes by His sovereign will), so that we, as the first to put our confidence in Christ, may bring praise to His glory!

The New Testament abounds with evidence that the church of Jesus Christ is a living community of faith in and through which God is working out His plan in the fullness of time. St. Paul has no doubt about God's purpose and intention. He declares that God "called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of His own purpose and the grace which He gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago" (2 Tim. 1:9). In faith in Christ the "called ones" accept the fact that the meaning of all existence is changed because God in mercy has made them participants in His act in Christ. (Note the nature of the participation that is ours in Holy Baptism, Rom. 6:3-5, 11; also the nature of our life, 2 Cor. 5:17.) In faith the "called ones" know that they are sons and heirs, possessors of the very life of Christ. Each one is a living organism indwelt by the Holy Spirit and joined to Christ, the Head of the body. Each member of the body is a member with every other, and all are givers of Christ's life to the world. (Note how St. Paul heaps up the evidence in Gal. 4:1-7; Col. 3:3; Eph. 4:4; Rom. 12:4, 5; 2 Cor. 5:18-20.) To the believers, Christ gives all the rights and powers of His king-



dom. "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). They are to go with the Gospel to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19,20). They are granted the right and duty to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or, "Your sins are retained" (Matt. 18:18-20; John 20:22,23). His disciples are to abide in Him, the Vine, and share His life so that they can bring forth fruit. (John 15:1-8)

This is the staggering and "unbelievable" mystery at the heart of the Christian community—God does the redemptive and restorative deed and creates the response which is the reception of it. That is to say, God redeems and calls His people, gives them new life by His Spirit through Word and sacrament, joins them to Christ and one another in the strong bond of fellowship of faith and love through the same means of grace, commits them to the new way of life and enables them to live it by virtue of the same gift of the Spirit. The mutual ministry of Word and sacrament nourishes and sustains the life of the Christian community in the forgiveness of sins and holds them steady in faith and hope as God works out in them and through them His gracious purposes. No longer self-righteously concerned about earning God's forgiveness with sacrificial works, the new men in Christ are set free from the bondage of sin, self-service, and self-preservation and made open in faith and prayer for the reception and transmission of the sacramental fruits of the Spirit.

Luther states that it is through His Spirit-transformed people that God can most effectively speak and act, work and fight, tear down and rebuild as He rules His world.<sup>9</sup> The Christian reenacts the

pattern of Christ's voluntary self-giving as he also takes his neighbors and their needs upon himself as his own "cross" (1 Peter 3:21) and so offers "to give myself to be, as it were, a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered Himself to me."<sup>10</sup>

The service of the Christian in God's plan is to be directed first to those who believe, to the "household of faith," as opportunity affords and in keeping with the gifts he has received (Gal. 6:10; 1 Cor. 12:4-6). No member of the church can look upon another one and say, "I have no need of you, I have no responsibility toward you," because every member of the body of Christ has been given some gift of grace which he is to contribute "for the common good" and "to make bodily increase and growth in love." The great chapters in the New Testament which reveal how the church is built by God affirm that each member, or "lively stone," in the structure has been given life to share with all the others; that each is to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit both to keep his own life going and to make a contribution to all the others (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). The strong are to bear the infirmities of the weak and please their neighbor for his good and edification as Christ pleased not Himself. (Rom. 15:1-3)

The immature Christian will tend to use the church, enjoy the fellowship, and accept the blessings it affords with little or no thought of his responsibility to others. Such an attitude is the concern of the post-Communion prayer: "Strengthen us . . . in faith towards Thee and in fervent love toward one another." The mature Christian will see his membership in the church as involving him not only in a fellowship of

<sup>9</sup> WA 31 I, 436, 7 ff. (1532).

<sup>10</sup> WA 7, 66, 3 (1520).



privilege but also in a fellowship of responsibility. In his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* Luther emphasizes the responsibilities of the Christian as a priest of God and states that to teach, to intercede, and to sacrifice is the whole life of a Christian in relation to his neighbor.<sup>11</sup>

The service of the Christian in God's plan is to be directed also to the world. The mystery of God's power and love, hidden for the ages, is to be made known openly that all men may see "what is the plan" and be restored and reconciled in Christ to God. (Col. 1:24-29; Eph. 3:9)

A phrase from the pen of Richard R. Caemmerer aptly describes the church's task of world-directed ministry: "to call with the same call by which they have been called." Christians are to call to the world, "Be reconciled to God (He has sent redemption), and take your place in the reconciled community (you have been redeemed)," because God has called them to be His agents, or ministers, of reconciliation. The *nature* of the church as the reconciled community is inseparable from the *function* of the church as the agent, or minister, of reconciliation. The church is never a closed organization; it always reaches beyond itself because being reconciled to God eventuates in the ministry of reconciliation to the world. When the church is *reconciled people reconciling people* it finds its life and true meaning.

That God has elected His people to be His agents of reconciliation is a claim made not *by* the church but *on* the church by its Lord. This claim is to be accepted humbly and fearfully by the Christian church. God has elected His people to

service (διακονία), or, as it might also be said, our Lord calls all of His followers servants (διδάκονοι; cf. Matt. 23:11; Mark 9:35; John 12:26). The life of the believer is for St. Paul the actual invasion of the total personality by the Servant Lord, who calls to His service and gives the life to render it. The apostle is therefore forced, it would seem, to create for this work of God in him a quite personal vocabulary. "To me to live is Christ," he said (Phil. 1:21). "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). A totally new life of service is opened to the believer. When God forgives, He changes the person's situation with respect to Himself. God's work *for* us and *in* us makes it possible for us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (John 15:5; Matt. 7:17, 18; Phil. 2:13). The new life springing up in the believer embraces his thoughts, motives, and actions, in fact, every aspect and sphere of his being, and he wants to offer all of his life to God because the love of Christ has control (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). Our best work is to believe what God tells us is true about our being a reconciled people, justified by His blood, that He has given us the ministry of reconciliation (διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς), the message of reconciliation (λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς) to bear to all the world.<sup>12</sup>

We are to believe that God's Word works in His church and activates the service of His people in a manner beyond all human insight and expectation. The

<sup>11</sup> *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), II, 324, 325; cf. 335, 336; 342, 343. WA 7, 25, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Walter J. Bartling, "A Ministry to Ministers," *CTM*, XXXIII (June 1962), 326—328.



impact of the living Christ on the world through the leavenlike permeation of His people is so vast and widespread, takes such varied forms, and is supported and promoted by such wonderful acts of God's providence that the most mature Christian can only weakly and hesitantly sketch its outlines. Yet it is necessary for the church to believe that God is working out His strength through the weakness of men. How shall they be the people through whom God keeps on working out His plan in His church to the end of time?

### III. THE FINAL SECRET: EVERYTHING SHALL BE BROUGHT TOGETHER IN CHRIST

The believer's relationship with God enables him to view the world with the eyes of a "new being," and therefore his view of the world is new. The believer responds to the love of God and plunges himself into the world as the proper place for the activity of faith.<sup>13</sup> The new life in Christ encompasses the totality of man's being. By faith man is enabled to surrender all of life to the will of God and bring every aspect of his life into trustful obedience to the lordship of Christ. The Christian is able to take the created world seriously as the object of God's love and the place in which God's judgment and salvation are being made manifest. In Christ this creation finds its fulfillment according to God's plan "to unite [*ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι*, "to bring together"] all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph. 1:10)

<sup>13</sup> Faith for St. Paul is the comprehensive term used to designate the life which is the creation of the whole response to the deeds and the commands of Christ (cf. Gal. 2:20; 5:6; Phil. 3:9). Luther describes faith as a "restless thing" which cannot but engage in works of love and obedience to God.

The prolog to the Gospel of St. John does not engage in idle speculation when it relates the coming of Christ in the flesh to the creation of the world. From now on the creation of the world cannot be understood apart from its redemption, because in Christ creation is to find its fulfillment. Christ is essentially connected with the creation; the creation belongs to Christ. Note how St. Paul declares that—

in Him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers: the whole universe has been created through Him and for Him. And He exists before everything, and all things are held together in Him. (Col. 1:16, 17 NEB)

God's call lays claim to a person's whole life both in the community of faith and in the world. The Christian is called to the obedience of faith in every human endeavor. In family duties and relationships, in friendship situations, in gainful occupations, in the activities of citizenship, and in the Christian congregation the Christian lives out his calling in faith and love (Eph. 5:22 ff.; Col. 3:1—4:6; 1 Tim. 2:1-8). The love of God provides the whole creation, including man as its climax, with eternal meaning and purpose. God rules everywhere, and His love extends over all of His creation (1 John 4:7-17). Everything God made is good and is meant to be gratefully used and enjoyed, not despised by those who believe in Him and know the truth (1 Tim. 4:1-4). Therefore all of life is sacred, and nothing in God's creation is profane or God-forsaken. The Christian refuses to concede that any sphere of God's creation is "secular" or "profane," and because all of life is God's, he sets out to live



his faith in service to others where God has placed him. Luther states that every Christian is called by God to obey His commands in relationship to the things and people that have been allotted to him. Talents and neighbors are given by God, not chosen by men. Christian obedience demands that the two be brought together in a spirit of loving service. "What is God's will *for me?*" is answered by asking, "What are my neighbor's needs *of me?*"<sup>14</sup>

What concrete form Christian faith will take in serving the neighbor one never knows ahead of time. Conformed to "the mind of Christ" in faith, the Christian gladly "becomes all things to all men" for the Gospel's sake (1 Cor. 2:16; 9:22). When God's will becomes man's will, love knows no law. Led by the counsel and moved by the power of the Holy Spirit, the new man in Christ "is not under the Law but under grace" (John 16:7-15; Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:18). He is free to serve in the "glorious liberty of the children of God" (1 Peter 2:16; Rom. 8:21). He gratefully and prayerfully lives out his liberty in love as he sees God's will for him. As he is edified and corrected in the church, he constantly responds in loving service to his neighbors. (Acts 15:28)

God works through what He gives, and His gifts determine what the tasks of the Christian shall be (1 Cor. 12:4-7). The Christian has been set free from all futile attempts to work out his own salvation and in this new freedom devotes his energies in disciplined service to the will of God. He does not invent his own good works or mechanically copy what may once have been God's calling for someone else at the expense of what the living God now

commands him to be doing in his own unique situation. Rather he is led by the Holy Spirit to want to do what God wants him to do in the midst of the ever-changing and fluctuating opportunities which God gives him for service to the neighbor and the general welfare of men. Wife and children, teacher and classmates, employer and workers are the particular children of God "at hand" whom the Christian is privileged to serve in Christ's name.<sup>15</sup> In cheerful service to his fellowmen in all vocations of life he reverently worships God. Thus he expresses his stewardship of the Gospel and all those other unique gifts and talents with which he has been entrusted. (Matt. 25:40)<sup>16</sup>

Every Christian can worship God at the "altar" of his plow or lathe, of her desk or kitchen stove.<sup>17</sup> The faithful take on their everyday responsibilities as the sum of all those tasks which God gives along with the forgiveness of sins until the end of life. Day by day the Christian has to discover the daily assignment out of his faith in the forgiveness of sins. He must find his work one day at a time even as he turns to God in repentance and faith each day. Christ taught us to pray for daily bread (all things that pertain to the support and wants of this present life) — and to do this each day — and to pray each day for the forgiveness of sins. Einar Billing describes the necessity of daily forgiveness when he says: "For we who have the 'world' not only around us but within us, can come into fellowship with God only by way of the forgiveness of sins."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> WA 6, 207, 4.

<sup>16</sup> WA 23, 358, 12 ff.

<sup>17</sup> WA 10 I, 1, 29, 16 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Einar Billing, *Our Calling* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1951), p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> WA 10 I, 1, 308.



The whole process of sanctification goes on between these two poles: the forgiveness of sins, which continually restores us to our calling, and our calling which continually drives us to the forgiveness of sins.

So God in mercy has brought all things together in Christ, even the everyday things of our existence, and has redeemed all of life. Restored to sonship in Christ, we may offer everything to Him in faith and bring all of life into trusting obedience to His lordship, for in Him all things cohere. "For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross." (Col. 1:19,20)

#### IV. THE CHURCH FACING ITS STEWARDSHIP TASK

What valid theological and practical applications may be drawn from the foregoing which will instruct and guide the church in her stewardship task today?

1. Christian stewardship is an activity which must be understood and accepted in faith as an abiding principle that inheres in the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying activity of a gracious God. God has made us, redeemed, called, renewed, and empowered us to live to the praise of His glory and to carry out His holy purposes to bring salvation to men. This we confess in the Apostles' Creed. Luther's explanation of the three articles constitutes the basic foundation of our faith life in response to what the Triune God has done and is doing. Christ's giving of Himself *for* us and the work of the Holy Spirit *in* us have decisive meaning for our relationship to the Triune God and His purposes for His church and His world.

From the doctrine of creation we learn

to know God's sovereignty and derive our trusteeship and responsibility over against life's orders and all that we personally have received from the hand of God. The doctrine of redemption assures us that we are restored into the fellowship of God and that our union with Christ makes operative the dynamic power in our lives by which we are able to give our lives back to our Father in love and to do His will. From the doctrine of sanctification we learn that we are given both the gift of faith and the power to exercise our faith to draw upon what God gives that we may bear fruit in obedient and holy service.

The way in which people respond to the love of God in Christ is inevitably rooted in their understanding of what God has done for them in Christ and their commitment in faith to this redeeming act. Therefore the stewardship task is basically one of proclamation (the kerygmatic affirmation that the intention of God to redeem the world has been carried out) and teaching (the didactic process of applying that intention of God to its target in our time). People need to know *what* it is that God planned to do. They need to know that He is working out His plan *now*. Christians need to know that God is working out His plan in and through *them*. And Christians need to know that God's *οἰκονομία* of grace makes a personal claim on each one of them and becomes the determining factor in their continuing response in faith as they are instructed and enabled by the Word of God to give themselves to Him in consecrated service.

There are no shortcuts to Christian stewardship. Even those Christians who are working hard at being what they believe God wants them to be will admit that the



working out of the full task remains in "a state of becoming." No Christian will say that he is the steward that he ought to be. Informed and disciplined by the Word of God, the Christian discovers the nature and meaning of his calling, who he is, why he is here, how he exists, and what use is to be made of his life and the things of the world. On the one hand he is listening to the promises of God; on the other hand he is striving to give himself to God and his neighbor and to use the things of the world for God while letting them go lest he perish with them.

Sometimes strenuous efforts are made to stress stewardship with people who are slack in their worship and participation in Holy Communion, in their practice of prayer and Bible study, in the service they give to the church and society. Instead of taking the time to deal with the real problem, the church's needs often panic her to take rapid shortcuts to the use of secular motives, pulls, and pressures. Skill in organizing programs or appeals can never be a substitute for a solid and careful teaching job. By means of the Word comes commitment and the spiritual power to live for God. The people called of God need to be taught what their calling means by the same Word of God with which they were called.

2. The people of God must know that God calls consistently for their total life. Around His Son Jesus Christ God has gathered a company that has been given everything that He has to give in actuality and in promissory form. Now the people who belong to this company are called to organize their lives in a way that is consistent with that fact. St. Paul sums up for Christians the consequence of what God has done for them when he says: "I be-

sech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1). The rest of this chapter (with its list of first-century church jobs) suggests that Paul is using the language of sacrifice to describe the ordinary business of being a faithful church member. He says that all of life is our reasonable service to God. The full dimension of this *λατρεία* is both vertical and horizontal as Paul defines it in Rom. 12 (cf. also 1 John 3:17; Matt. 25:31-46). Christians are one body in Christ and individually members one of another. All are in the same household of God, where there are errands to run, functions to perform, and tasks to be done for the common good of all. The total life is involved in what Christians offer to God and in His name to others. Their bodies, minds, abilities, time, personalities, and property may be related consciously and consistently to those activities which edify the church and serve their neighbors. No area of the Christian's existence is excluded from God's "reasonable service." "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19,20). "So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31)

Our calling, then, is the sum of all those tasks and duties which we face every day in all relationships of life as we live each day in the forgiveness of sins. The total response of faith includes all areas of life: Home, citizenship, business and industry, science, art and education, physical health, mental capacity, time, opportunity, material possessions are from God to man and are to be offered to God in faith for the working out of God's purposes. Because the



Christian is a "new creation," he is able to live in the world and use his life and the things of the world for the glory of God and the service of men. Ruled by the Word of God, the Christian is able to use houses, money, food and drink, automobiles, clothing and shoes, and all the rest and yet not be ruled by them or swept away by affection for them (Col. 3:1-3; 1 Tim. 4:4,5). Luther notes that to be ruled by the Word of God leads to a repudiation of other rules of living. He says:

The church is the pupil of Christ, sitting at His feet and hearing His Word so that she may know how to pass judgment on everything, how to serve in one's calling, how to administer public offices, aye, also how to eat, drink, and sleep, that there may be no doubt about the proper conduct in any work of life but, surrounded on all sides by the Word of God, one may constantly walk in joy and in the light.<sup>19</sup>

3. The nature of the battle which the Christian fights needs to be understood, and the Christian needs to be sustained in his battle. Christian living and giving is not only called into being by what God does, but it is itself a continuation of God's own activity. Only by a living encounter with God's Word can man be saved and his neighbors served.

Apart from God's forgiveness, man chooses to keep God out of his life, he rejects the possibilities for which he was created, and he attempts to arrange his own world. Natural man rejects the situation in which he must live in love to his neighbors, and he regards as nonsense the principle that he who seeks his life loses it and that he who loses his life finds it. So setting out to remake the world after

his own ideals, he seeks to make himself the center of his world by exploiting all other persons and possibilities to his own advantage. Such striving for autonomy and a self-centered life is the essence of sin and man's deepest tragedy.

The Christian, even though forgiven, lives out his service to God and neighbor in the tension of his flesh (self-rule) against the Spirit (God-rule), a tension which exists as long as he lives (Gal. 5:16ff.). The old man which remains needs the Law to beat him down to repentance and drive him back to the forgiveness and graciousness of the cross of Christ (Gal. 3:24). Although the Christian is in Christ, he does not always respond to Christ's Lordship. He has been freed from the dominion of sin, but he still has to strive against sin in his life. And man himself is the battleground on which God and Satan are fighting for his eternal allegiance. This fact forces the Christian to "abide in Christ" (John 15:4 ff.) and in His church and, in obedience to His Spirit, to seek to know His will and to do what love requires. In this fight the Christian clings to the promises of God in the audacious trust that God is holding on to him. He lives his life in the turbulent peace and agonizing joy of daily rebirth as he struggles to become what God has already declared him to be. He must hear out the Law, which condemns his self-love and his desire to work his way into God's favor; yet he must just as consistently hear out the Gospel, which forgives and turns him to God with the power to live in the freedom of love as he subordinates himself in daily work to the needs of the whole community. Within the family circle it is necessary that there be a daily dying to self in order that the

<sup>19</sup> WA 42, 515, 1-5.



welfare of the family may flourish. In the church, too, and in every aspect of man's collective life, the Christian encounters the reality of the Cross.

Only when the grace of God takes the fallen, natural creature out of death into life can the stewardship of the Christian become an epiphany of God's glory. Then the acquisitive attitude of the natural man is transformed into the giving attitude of the redeemed man, and his giving is spontaneous and creative, loving and edifying. As Christians grow in the faith-grace relationship they will learn that their whole existence as God's people, together with the whole world, hangs on the thread of grace and that they live only by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. The obedience of faith will determine the way in which the Christian will offer sacrifices acceptable to God. This obedience will work itself out in the day-by-day battle which the Christian wages against the old man in him. The church stands by him in the fight through the ministry of Word and sacrament, which bring the new man to life and enable the Christian to surrender himself to God.

When the funds are not coming in and the budget is not being met in the church, several temptations arise. One is to condemn and exhort the misers by publishing a list of contributions; another is to seek to squeeze out a bigger flow of funds by some new and more clever fund-raising approach. The proper strategy is always to dig deeper and to use the Gospel, the *δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ*, God's dynamite, to blast open the way to the inexhaustible underground river of God's grace.

4. The church must affirm that Christian stewardship is a corporate action. We often

deplore the lack of cooperation among Christians and lament, "If only everybody would do what he could and ought! How much easier it would be!" Certainly this is true. What Christians need to learn is that their action is corporate because they are "corporate."

The new life in Christ is not a solo performance. It is true that each believer sustains a direct and personal relationship to God as real as if he were the only Christian in the world. But the exercise of personal faith in Christ paradoxically destroys individuality. By his baptism he is moved from a corporate involvement with sin and death to a corporate involvement with redemption and life. By faith he is identified with Christ and with all believers, and his life of faith thrusts him ultimately into commitments which are corporate. Christian discipleship is membership in a divinely ordained community, and the stewardship of the Christian is an action which becomes mutual and corporate because of the very nature of the church.

In the glow of Pentecost the Christians "were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). Belonging to one another took the very practical form of serving one another's needs. Economically, the communal life may not have been either successful or desirable. But the concern for others from which this structure developed is always a mark of the church when it is truly Christ's body. When Christians recognize that their earthly goods are God's gifts and, like the gifts of the Holy Spirit, are to be utilized for the good of the whole, their stewardship becomes the management of God's wealth for His family's benefit. We are not our own stewards in the sense that we are generous to our



neighbors out of our greater wisdom or wealth; we are God's stewards, acting for God and handling God's wealth to fulfill God's purposes.

By telling us that we shall be judged on the basis of our movement toward God's people, our Lord shows us that our relationship to our neighbor is precisely the place where our faithfulness to Him is to be exercised (Matt. 25:34-46). St. Paul says that we are to invest in one another's spiritual welfare (Gal. 6:1-10). In one of the great passages about Christian giving (2 Cor. 8 and 9), Paul asks the Corinthians to "get corporate" and to share in this work of giving with the Macedonians. And notice how he "incorporates" the giving action when he says:

Your gifts . . . will mean that *many will thank God*. For your giving does not end in meeting the wants of your fellow Christians. It also results in *an overflowing tide of thanksgiving to God*. Moreover, your very giving *proves the reality of your faith*, and that means that *men thank God that you practice the Gospel that you profess to believe in*, as well as for the actual gifts you make to them and to others. And yet further, *men will pray for you and feel drawn to you* because you have obviously received a generous measure of the grace of God. (2 Cor. 9:11-14 Phillips; italics ours)

The mutual stewardship of Christians joins at many points as they share their common life in the Gospel and their responsibility under the Gospel. For example, the gifts of one Christian must be joined with the gifts of many other Christians to plant the church in the remote corners of the world and to support the educational program that will supply the workers. Corporate action at one point in

the church makes possible many individual acts of Christian service at other points. What God gives the church to do is a corporate task, and what Christians in one congregation or a group of congregations or a synod are led by God to undertake becomes the corporate decision and the common objective of the church as Christians "provoke one another to good works" and join in "the fellowship of the ministering to saints."

When the church is conceived of as an institutional structure, as an organization of boards and committees, as some sort of lofty superchurch abstraction, one's giving may easily become impersonal. Genuine stewardship translates any such impersonality into a vital reality of the community of those whom the Holy Spirit has united with Christ. The definitive issue in the life of a local church is not whether it is raising its budget or enlarging its membership rolls but whether its members have Christian concern for other people. The outward signs of success mean nothing if there is no inward desire for obedience to God and love for their fellowmen.

5. Does the principle of the tithe have any place in Christian giving today? The basic answer is: The principle of the Old Testament tithe is not to be applied legalistically in the life of the Christian as a rule for giving. As a practical aid to regularity in giving the tithe is useful, but tithing immediately assumes theological significance when the motives underlying the practice are examined. The question is not whether one tithes, it is always why he tithes.

When people ask how much they should give, the theology of the Gospel does not permit one to reply simply, "The Word



of God has the answer. You must give a tenth of your income." Jesus gave no command concerning the tithe. Save for one incidental remark, and that critical in nature (Matt. 23:23; cp. Luke 18:12), He made no reference to the tithe, and the Gospel which He proclaimed transcends the entire legalistic dealing with God on which the practice rested.

Mal. 3:10 has often been used in appeals for Christian stewardship. Here, it is claimed, God promises to bless the tither. The blessing is described in terms of the "fruits of your soil and your vine in the field" (v. 11). The tithe which Malachi mentions consists of "tithes and offerings" and the "whole tithe"—more than one tenth. If a Christian takes the verse literally, he can be a tither or even a 30-percent giver and still be a robber of God.

Tithing is "Biblical" in the sense that it is enjoined in the Old Testament, but so are remitting debts, leaving the ground fallow every seventh year, leaving grain in the field to be gleaned by the poor, and much else that was suitable stewardship for early Hebrew society.

Christians may use this ancient device as a helpful means for a steady expression of their faithfulness to God. It may be employed as a standard when specific amounts are being discussed. The practice may indeed serve to prepare the way and provide the opportunity for a wholehearted commitment to Christ. For Christians, however, 10 percent does not discharge the obligation of their giving to God because the remaining 90 percent does not belong to them to do with as they please. This, too, is God's. "How much should I give?" is an immature question much like Peter's when he asked, "How often should I forgive my brother?"

The joyful and exuberant giving of the Macedonian Christians was not the result of indoctrination in a coercive legal principle nor even a stress on "proportionate giving." They gave out of extreme poverty, even beyond their means, earnestly begging for the privilege to give because "first they gave themselves to the Lord" (2 Cor. 8:1-5). Tithing comes into its right Christian use when it is freely and joyfully practiced by Christians whose whole life is stewardship.

To be a Christian is giving oneself and one's possessions entirely into the service of God as an act of faith. If God has abundantly blessed a person with material resources, why should he give as little as a tenth—as if all the rest belonged to him? If, however, the pinch of poverty is real and not simply assumed on the basis of a false standard of values, may not God require that the family needs be met first even if less than a tenth is given? To exalt tithing as a fixed principle is to retreat before a God-given obligation to offer all that a Christian has to God's purposes. No specific amount or proportion is levied on those who live by grace. God only asks that the believer believe that his blessings are from God and respond in giving as God has prospered him (1 Cor. 16:2). The amount is whatever is "purposed in the heart." (2 Cor. 9:7)

#### SUMMARY

God's *οἰκονομία* is a supreme and gracious plan on His part, a divine purpose which antedates and underlies the foundation of the world. "He chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world. . . . He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will" (Eph. 1:4, 5).



He makes a personal claim on every believer to share His life and to become voluntarily engaged in His οἰκονομία in the fullness of time. Even the most modest service of the believer belongs to the οἰκονομία of God and is used by Him to advance His purpose in the world. By the power of Christ's victorious resurrection the believer rises into newness of life, tastes the power of the world to come, and becomes the channel for the release of the life of God among men. Christian stewards are men and women who have found in Christ the true Lord for every area of life and whose words and deeds witness to His lordship as their lives bear fruit in obedience and service.

The agency for fulfilling God's οἰκονομία is the church, the community of those whom the Holy Spirit has united with Christ. To the church has been committed "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18,19); it is God's purpose "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name among all nations" (Luke 24:47). In this ministry each believer has a place and, according to his gift (1 Cor. 12:11), a responsibility for advancing the redemptive purpose of God, which "Jesus began to do and to teach." (Acts 1:1)

The concept of Christian stewardship is transfigured when the light of eternity falls upon it—God is moving all history, with His people in it, toward the integration of all existence into a Christ-centered whole. We, too, shall share in the realization of God's οἰκονομία. Our present life is timed by God's own clock, His fixed times, the καιροί determined by God. For each of us there exists a divine καιρός of opportunity for advancing the purpose of God. Therefore we seize every opportunity

to "redeem the time" (Eph. 5:15,16) because we are already in the "end time" and every passing day brings God's οἰκονομία nearer its consummation. Note how the apostle Peter sums it up:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers. Above all hold unflinching your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:7-11)

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