

STEWARDSHIP AND THE GOSPEL

On the surface, Seventh-day Adventist churches seem to be uncomplicated financial institutions. Members give money to pay salaries, support the mission work of the church, keep the buildings in repair and pay for church operation. Beneath the surface, however, the financial operations of our congregations, and especially the larger churches like Sligo, are quite complex.

The local church is unique among money-handling institutions. Offerings, endowments, bequests, tithe forwarding to the various conferences, mission programs, building funds, deferred-giving programs, every-member solicitations, tax-free status, hunger relief drives, community services collections, volunteered time and expertise, along with other aspects of the local church's financial life, provide each congregation with a set of problems and opportunities unlike those found anywhere else.

That is why, on the one hand, local churches will survive when other community institutions do not; but, on the other hand, it is also why when churches do die, financial problems are often the leading causes of death.

When a local congregation is finding it difficult to finance itself, it must decide on appropriate strategies to solve its problem. And that begins with a congregation's theological understanding of money.

Many churches behave as if money is *filthy lucre*. The minister stays as far away from any contaminating contact with raising or managing money. In a recent survey conducted among non-Adventist lay church leaders, two out of five said that the pastor should remain largely inactive in seeking funds for the church. Finding such so-called "secular" concerns offensive, some churches even refuse to discuss the church's financial needs in worship services.

Other congregations have a different theological understanding of money. One church recently heard a sermon entitled, "Our Church Needs Money." (You must admit that my titles are not nearly as blatant as that.) The sermon explained how financial contributions enhance the ministries that that congregation had decided were its faithful response to the imperatives of the gospel.

And it is the theme of that sermon that becomes critical when we speak about stewardship. Stewardship originally was an idea that arose in the church because there had been an outcry for greater accountability for the administration of funds in the 19th century. It did not at all refer to the *obligation* members supposedly had to support the church. In fact, some have argued that not even Jesus obligates us to be stewards, only to be *like* stewards. On this view, money given to the church does not derive its importance from the fact it is given by stewards so much as the fact that it is the money that makes possible the many acts of ministry the church performs! In other words, while the condition of the givers is important, it is not crucial. What is crucial is the way the money is used.

Therefore, congregations that look upon finances not simply as an obligation to give but as a way of achieving their goals, find the needed money much more readily. What is unfortunate at Sligo is the fact that members of the staff see the money achieving the church's goals in ways the membership often does not.

This was one of the reasons Moses' appeal to the Israelites after the Exodus elicited such an

STEWARDSHIP AND THE GOSPEL

overwhelming response. He asked them to give for the building of a sanctuary to God. So much was given that he had to tell them to stop giving! They had a clear goal and saw their wealth as a way of achieving that goal. The early church had a similar experience. They wanted to make sure that none of the new Christians who had lost their jobs because they confessed Christ would be in want. The funds flowed with no appeals necessary week after week.

As you can see, these are quite different approaches. One focuses on the giver's attitudes and obligations; the other focuses on the goals of the ministries of the church. They may appear to be antithetical, but they are not. They can be joined. And they are joined at the point of love. The ministries of the church are love's response to human need. *If we love one another, and if we love God, we will feel it is both a duty (or obligation if you prefer) and a privilege to give for each other and for God.* In a sense, the resources we have—which are possible only because God makes us intelligent and resourceful the way He does—are to relieve suffering and bring happiness, *even to God.* For God knows both pain and joy in the pain and joy of His children.

It would be nice if God did not depend on us for the support of His work. Why not leave our money for us to use on ourselves, and let God provide what is needed for His work through some miracle. Only a few minutes reflection on that kind of plan would reveal its potential for making us even more incredibly selfish than we already are. But any economic miracle would break a pattern of God's action that we have seen. Let me be more specific.

One of the things about God that most puzzles us in the 20th century is God's absence and silence—His passivity. He not only seems unwilling to defend the Jews against the Nazis but any of us against horrendous natural disasters like earthquakes or hurricanes. When He who has all power does not defend his most helpless creatures, when children can die of Leukemia or be raped and murdered by sexual deviants, where is God? He does not lift a finger to defend them (or so it seems).

Equally perplexing, if not more so, is the fact that God has failed to provide for His own defense against the attacks upon Him. Even during the life of Jesus, this pattern emerges. He does not defend himself, even when they take him away to crucify him. He will not unleash His divine power to overwhelm the opposition. He does not even *speak* in his own defense when his cause is threatened. When he needed them most, His miracles were little in evidence. His posture was, to say the least, non-defensive. It goes without saying that if He had wanted to, either as the incarnate Jesus or as the invisible God, God could have been a great deal more explicit and a lot less mysterious than He has been.

A corollary of this problem is our dilemma of living in an incredibly complex world in which crucial decisions must be made by us as His followers. Why can't he be more clear about the positions he wants us to adopt? Why can't we know His will in every case of abortion or euthanasia or policy or theology? Why do we have to *guess* so much? Granted, a lot of people, including Jerry Falwell, seem to be certain about the will of God in every particular, including economic sanctions against South Africa. But most of us are not so privileged. We live with God's silence.

Paradoxical as it may seem, there is a divine message in this silence, in this lack of a defense of God by God. It is that *if there is to be a defense of God we humans must provide it.* For the time being, what is divine seems to depend for its protection on what is merely human. So many of us come to God

seeking His defense and protection, and discover a religion in which God's actions require us to defend Him. Therefore, *"To seek God, to be a follower, means to be ready to defend God at any time and place where divinity comes under attack."* We are left, then, with the responsibility of deciding where God is under attack and how we will defend Him. We must take up the battle in our own way. The test of our faith, then, is that God has left for us to do what *He Himself will not do at this time in history*. "This is what 'faith' or 'faithful action' really involves." It seems to me that this indicates strongly that there is a certain gentleness to God, an unwillingness to use force at almost any cost to Himself.

"Well," you are now asking, "what does all this have to do with stewardship?"

It has this to do with stewardship. Just as God will not defend Himself when He is attacked, He will not perform a miracle to support His work. Adventist or Christian expeditions to find sunken treasure have no greater chance of succeeding than anyone else's even if it means a half-billion dollars to the church treasury. Oil will not be found on Adventist property with any statistically greater average than anywhere else. Stocks in which the church invests will not make more money than stocks atheists buy. In short, even though the cattle and the gold on a thousand hills belong to Him, God is not going to give it to us in direct appropriations. If we are not prudent, He *will* let academies and colleges close, conference trust funds go belly up and Adventist credit unions go bankrupt. He does not seem to lift one finger to help.

Which puts it squarely back in our laps. If there is to be a financially secure work of God on Earth we must pay for it with our own hard-earned money. God has left for us to do what He Himself will not do at this particular time in history. That is what 'faith' and 'faithful action' involves! This means that every cent we give to God makes a real difference in what happens. It is not true that one way or another God will make up the difference any more than it is true that if we do not take precautions against flooding in New Orleans, God will prevent the flood when the time comes. No way. That's not how it is, folks, and the sooner we realize it, the better.

Still, it would be wrong to think that God wants us to experience stress over the needs of His work, or even over our personal needs. While God has decided to *need* our financial support, do not make the mistake of thinking that if most of us decided to stop giving to the cause of God, God's plan of salvation would be dead in the water. We may delay His plan by our unfaithfulness; some people may even lose their salvation because of it. (I don't know that, but many think so.) No matter what we do, God will see His purposes accomplished. The only difference is that with our cooperation His purposes are realized more quickly and more universally.

Jesus' attitude towards material goods and financial security reflects God's attitude. From the human point of view, especially in our capitalist society, Jesus' relationship to money borders on the irresponsible. He seemed to have no bank account to draw on, no regular salary, no livelihood—he was an itinerant preacher who somehow had enough to eat and a roof over his head. Not one of us in this room would allow any daughter of ours to marry a 30 year old man who operated the way He did. He urged us not to worry about tomorrow, that each day had enough problems and that God knew what we needed and we should trust Him. This is not to say we should not work hard and be frugal, only that after we have done our conscientious best, we ought not to worry. We are to be free of the "worry" of money, not free of money. We are to learn to live with what we have and not be consumed by a passion for more. We are to share what we have with those who have not. We are not to find our

STEWARDSHIP AND THE GOSPEL

security in material possessions but in the love of God for us. Preoccupation with material goods lessens our sense of need for Him. That is why Jesus says you cannot serve God and mammon.

We are helped to achieve this freedom with money if we focus on the *good* our money can do. Focusing simply on our obligation to give turns a joy into a duty. This is one reason why people like to give to *specific* projects. They like to see the good the money does. They want to know the pleasure of seeing a young person who wants a Christian education get a Christian education. They want to see children's faces glow with anticipation in a vacation Bible school program, or share that special moment when someone whose life has been in disarray walks into the baptistery to start life anew. Were we to focus on the *good* our money can do, like Jesus, we will endure any sacrifice for the "joy that is set before us." It is not hard to give \$100.00 to a starving family or make tuition payments for a specific young woman who works after school and studies faithfully. One does not need a strong sense of obligation to pay the electric bills for the worship service if one can hear a personal testimony about the spiritual importance of that service to each worshipper. An Adventist does not need Malachi 3 to pay tithe when he sees the tens of thousands of illiterate people who now read, the sick and dying who now enjoy good health, the spiritually dead who are now alive in Christ Jesus.

That is the only point of the money, the only point of the buildings, the only point of anything we do in Christ's name. *People alone* matter. While this may not be proper exegesis of Malachi, I am convinced that in the overall Biblical picture, what Malachi is really saying is this: "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse that there may be people in my house, saith the Lord of Hosts." And so we feel no shame to tell you about the needs of the church and to ask you for a commitment. We do it for each other, for the community and for Jesus. "Inasmuch as ye have done it for the least of these, ye have done it for me."