

## Manuscripts Still Unread . . .

### A Research Primer on Our Stewardship Literature Base

by Scott M. Preissler, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Come tread with me upon paths yet untrod, and read with me those still unread manuscripts of God.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Most Christian leaders can point to a book or two on biblical stewardship they have read or have in their libraries. Few, however, have read deeply into this precious subject of Christianity. Fewer still would even recognize what stewardship subjects are ready resources to their leadership needs. With the great many of these literature resources “out of print,” in the words of Longfellow, a majority of stewardship literature resources over time have largely gone and continue to go “unread.” This is a critical issue in a time in America where we live to influence a culture that is largely materialistic and self-absorbed. 2010 will be remembered for a number of things, one of which was that 2010 was the sixth time in modern history where Americans lived with a negative savings rate. The American “depression” years were the last time Americans spent more on average than they earned.

#### How The Research Was Conducted:

The largest library on the subject of biblical stewardship can be found in Fort Worth, Texas, at the Center for Biblical Stewardship. The Center also holds the only collection of stewardship-related art and historic artifacts on church and parachurch giving. These resources were invaluable in conducting this summary

study for *Giving* magazine.

During the period of 2003 through 2011, this author used a literature research method known as content analysis<sup>1</sup> to examine the many subject themes in our present and past stewardship literature. I found that Protestant stewardship themes can be summarily organized into a distinct group of research topics:

- Stewardship biographies
- The personal side of giving—personal finance, debt prevention, time usage, and one’s spiritual calling in life
- Church-specific stewardship literature
- Stewardship education, teaching, and research resources
- Parachurch and missions stewardship thinking
- Economic sufficiency, the poor and marginalized, international relief, micro-enterprise, and ecological trusteeship
- Ethnic and cultural perspectives on stewardship
- Religious perspectives on raising funds, donor studies, and non-financial resource development
- Stewardship publishers
- Gender studies and contributions in stewardship literature

Today, only three basic classifications of stewardship literature have been developed by the Library of Congress (LOC). These LOC classification types do not often record works by independent authors or publishers, nor the large base

of literature this research found to be present before 1928.

#### Method:

Stewardship books from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faith traditions over the last 200 years were selected to study. This included all known or recorded current and lost literature in book form, to initiate a current literature base on the subject of religious stewardship. Sermons, papers, and pamphlets were not included. Content analysis is also a technique for literature categorization in both written and digitized formats. This categorization is carried out by observation and recording of patterns or repetitive themes.

The system followed a set of carefully repeated and layered recordings of data discovered about each book determined to deal with stewardship literature. Each book or bibliographic record was entered into EndNote bibliographic software. Following the entry, research, and re-entry of book and bibliographic listings, each listing was then checked in a layered recording system to determine whether that entry contained content information on subject areas.

#### Results:

Stewardship literature was found to be broad enough and interdisciplinary in nature to the point a literature base could be established.

#### Research Outcomes:

This research will assist graduate students, nonprofit researchers, developers of curriculums, and the many

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Interdisciplinary Descriptions of Topics	Number of Books	Percentage of Total
Personal Giving & Finance Resources	764	24.18%
Church Stewardship Resources	911	28.83%
Stewardship Education & Research	633	20.03%
Parachurch & Missions Stewardship	236	7.47%
Economic Sufficiency, the Poor, International Relief & Development, Ecological Trusteeship	243	7.69%
Ethnic, Female, & Cultural Perspectives	258	8.16%
Religious Perspectives on Raising Funds & Resources	115	3.64%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,160</b>	<b>100%</b>

religious education institutions or associations which provide education to Christian leaders today. Not all religious literature written about stewardship was or is ever submitted to the Library of Congress. Second, and as a result, all books not submitted to the Library of Congress do not receive an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) or International Standard Serial Number (ISSN).

Research as reported by Conway<sup>2</sup>, Harkins, and Waits points to stewardship practice as more of an exception than a rule in today's religious organizations and ministries. At the commencement of the twenty-first century, religious leaders do so without much of a basic twentieth century understanding of stewardship literature or writings.

For the last 80 years stewardship has increasingly become absent in religious synagogues, colleges and universities, and seminaries.<sup>3</sup> A recent study of pastors reported over 90 percent graduate without more than a topical mention of this key ingredient of training for leadership success.

It is our biblical mandate to live as stewards, recognizing God as provider and encouraging

individuals to live free from financial and accompanying spiritual bondage. To learn to live the way of the biblical steward is to increase discipleship depth and growth, to work into spiritual maturity, and on behalf of our Great Commission to effect Christian social change. Yet most denominations today can only offer outdated or limited resources to help people and their own leaders learn this type of biblical knowledge found well over 2,300 times in the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Its practice can revolutionize religious impact, mission advance, personal and family commitment.

In summary, over the last 30 years, stewardship research clearly reports:

- Seminaries, Christian and Catholic colleges, and Bible colleges don't consistently teach stewardship. When they do, it is limited to topical classes. In fact, only two comprehensive curriculum to degree programs are in development today
- Church and parachurch leaders don't choose to regularly speak on it
- Churches and synagogues don't regularly program for it
- Most of the 50+ NAE (National

Association of Evangelicals) denominations do not have comprehensive resources to encourage stewardship

- Ministry leaders have responded to research that they don't generally understand it
- Emerging Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders do not generally practice it

We are essentially entering the twentieth-first century without a twentieth century stewardship "mind" to fuel gains now occurring in both church and parachurch movements. Imagine what the church and parachurch could face in the twentieth-first century without a revival of these historic stewardship concepts.

Upon reading to determine the status of stewardship literature outside of the United States, this same problem is occurring. The logic behind the lack of international stewardship literature is: pastors can't preach if they don't study; pastors can't study if they don't have books; books on stewardship are scarce outside the United States and Great Britain; books on stewardship are virtually unavailable in international theological education.

The following maxims are true when it comes to literature from international theological training centers:

- Stewardship materials are crucial to developing in-country capacity for international theological centers to resource themselves
- When international theological centers are resourced with assets and financial gifts of support by their own alumni or other "national" benefactors, theological centers can better produce and retain leaders who will impact their own society

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and be a force for social change.

In essence, international theological schools are fast becoming less adept at creating or recording stewardship literature. International Christian leaders are replicating the stewardship silence so prevalent in our own first-world country. Certainly, a better understanding of stewardship and giving from one's own culture could set the stage for better understanding how to further resource our service and work overseas.

### Recommendations:

Recommendations and hopes for further outcomes include:

1. Renewing an awareness among Christian individuals about what faith traditions say and have said historically about giving, returning portions of giving and the tithe, and social concern.
2. Encouraging more and new reflective literature development from the perspectives of women, different cultural traditions, African-American and Hispanic perspectives, and international theological centers of influence and seminary/synagogue leadership training.
3. Filling the gaping stewardship voids in American and world church education.
4. Redeveloping and delivering curriculums which include stewardship values for faculty in religious higher education, synagogues, and seminaries.

In practice religious leaders belatedly have recognized that a great deal of their time is spent handling issues which require organizational and managerial, as well as theological skills. Sadly, religious educational institutions

and a majority of religious leadership literature has not clearly addressed nor met the needs to develop stewardship as a religious leadership skill. Early writings on religious stewardship, now uncovered, clearly indicate that lost historical stewardship literature did as much to bring out discussion and teaching of stewardship equated with leadership, as much as our "quickly out-of-print" stewardship books have today. The integration of stewardship literature with faith-based nonprofit leadership education must become a core competency in Christian seminary and higher education. Delivery systems already exist and include hundreds of religious colleges and universities, synagogues, and seminaries worldwide. Stewardship training must get on the "radar screen" in the curriculums of private, religious, secondary and higher education. Kingdom work will advance with measurable impact when stewardship education is equated with faith maturity development. When this intersection of stewardship education and values occurs, then a renewable "giving fuel" may be produced by God's people to advance faith work and compassionate social change worldwide.

A reintroduction of stewardship literature and website versions of "lost" and recirculating out-of-print stewardship literature could have international effects on Christian leaders in training. Recirculating these lost treasures could remind us again that stewardship is not what one does. Rather, stewardship defines who we are and "whose" we are. Until this service is performed we will continue to lack an ability to

review writings for perspectives to contrast to the unique stewardship questions of our present day.

### Notes

1. Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980).
2. Daniel Conway, Anita Rook, and Daniel Schipp, *The Reluctant Steward: A Report and Commentary on the Stewardship and Development Study* (Indianapolis: Saint Meinrad Seminary Press, 1992).
3. David P. Harkins, *Strengthening Financial Development in Theological Education* (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools, 1994).
4. Larry Burkett, *The Word on Finances: Topical Survey of Scriptures and Commentary*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).