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SECOND EDITION

Firstfruits

A hand holding a sheaf of wheat against a blue sky and a golden field. The hand is in the lower left, holding the base of a golden wheat sheaf that fans out towards the right. The background is a clear blue sky with light clouds and a golden field in the distance.

a stewardship guide
for church leaders

ROBERT C. HEERSPINK

Second Edition

Firstfruits

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SPEAKING OF MONEY . . .

When I first became a local church pastor, there was one topic that intimidated me. It wasn't biblical authority. It wasn't abortion. It wasn't sex. It was money. I was afraid to talk about money. And my congregation encouraged that fear. The message in my first pastorate came through loud and clear: "We aren't very wealthy around here. So if there isn't much money for ministry, it's not our fault. Our giving is as good as it's going to get."

I bought into that deception. So I preached on the Lord's Prayer. I walked the congregation through the book of Amos. I tackled the book of Revelation. But on money and financial stewardship I had little to say. Talk of money was confined to the once-a-year "Woe is us, we are undone" speech, which I delivered each fall. In effect, I said, "We are behind in our church budget, but if we all do our share, we can be back in the black by year's end."

In other words, I copped out.

I was a pastor for ten years before I discovered even the basic truths about financial stewardship and the role the church plays in teaching and encouraging solid stewardship in the congregation.

It's now been almost two decades since I made that discovery. Thanks to the efforts of Barnabas Foundation, I turned the corner on stewardship back in 1990. Leaders at Barnabas Foundation invited me to field test some stewardship materials for churches and pastors. In the process, I learned and helped my congregation to learn. Our stewardship journey was under way.

Zeroing In

Through the years, I've found that *stewardship* can be a slippery word. In its broader definition, it's sometimes described as concern for time, talents, treasure, and trees. That's a comprehensive list. In a brief study like this one, though, we'll have little time to discuss spiritual gifts (time and talents) or ecology (trees). So we'll zero in on one aspect of stewardship: our treasure.

How do we as church leaders inspire kingdom citizens to live out their faith through their use of finances? And, more to the point for church leaders, how do we cultivate in our congregations a spirit of grateful giving as part of a lifestyle of stewardship?

God has always wanted an ongoing, thankful response from his people. When the Lord blessed the Israelites with a harvest, they were to give back the best of their firstfruits (the first pickings of their crops) by bringing them to the house of the Lord (Ex. 23:16, 19). These were given to God as an offering. Some of it was burned on the altar of sacrifice, and the rest was distributed to the priests who served in the temple (Lev. 2:14-16; Num. 18:12). In this way the people celebrated the Lord's rich blessings and provided for the needs of a full-time priesthood (assigned by God to Aaron and his ancestral family, the Levites—Num. 18). The commitment of God's people bringing back to God the first and the best of his gifts has given rise to the title of this book.

Presently I serve as director of Back to God Ministries International, a multi-language media ministry. But in my 26 years as a parish pastor, I think I got to know the church pretty well. I came to appreciate the audience to whom I speak in this book: various leaders in church ministries—faithful deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word.

They care deeply about the people they serve. They invest untold hours doing their best for Christ's church. But often they're at a loss when it comes to leading their church members in money matters.

Setting Our Course

I hope this material will help church leaders and others avoid the mistakes I made. This book contains insights I've gained over the years by leading stewardship seminars and working with the stewardship committees of the congregations I served.

We'll start off by exposing some of the myths about congregational stewardship and exploring the biblical framework of thankful giving. The goal? To help clarify our understanding of stewardship so that we're talking the same language. After all, how can we teach stewardship to others if we don't understand its biblical principles?

Then we'll consider together how stewardship fits in with youth and discipleship, and we'll begin applying the Bible's teachings on stewardship by investigating what is called a "stewardship sermon." In other words, how do we preach stewardship themes with integrity and conviction for the good of all members?

Next we'll explore some concrete changes we can make in our congregational lives that will help to develop the "mind of stewardship" in our churches. This material will be helpful to pastors, elders, deacons, and members of stewardship committees as they empower their church members to become firstfruits congregations.

We'll do all this in a series of Discoveries that can be used in a group setting or by individuals. A council, consistory, or deacons' board, for example, can deal with this material in as few as two sessions, if they like—studying the biblical framework of stewardship in Discoveries 1-11 and focusing on the encouragement and development of stewardship in a congregation in Discoveries 12-27.

The material can also be studied at a more leisurely pace, taking one or more Discoveries at a time. This book can also work well to provide the focus for a leadership retreat. Whatever the agenda or format, discussion questions after each Discovery can help everyone summarize, reflect, and consider how to apply stewardship teachings to their everyday living.

Facing the Challenge

It's time to put our fears behind us, to mention the unmentionable. We need to discover stewardship as a key issue that the church faces today. As I was entering the pastoral ministry almost thirty years ago, an astute pastor said to me, "The biggest challenge the church will face is not a matter of doctrine. The biggest challenge for the church is a matter most practical: How will we handle our wealth?" My years in ministry convinced me that this observation is true!

We need to deal courageously with our wealth. We need to focus on firstfruits living for our Lord today.

IS THIS MAKING ME UNEASY?

OK, confess—at least to yourself. When someone in your church started talking about stewardship, did you get a little nervous? When you learned you were going to study—and maybe help set up—a stewardship program for your church, did you break into a sweat? One of the first things we discover when we’re asked to serve on a stewardship project or committee is that it makes our blood run cold (at least for many of us).

One reason is that *stewardship* is one of the least understood words in our language. It conjures up pushy people twisting the arms of reluctant givers. We’re tired of people begging us for a buck. So why would we want to join the ranks of those tugging at people’s wallets? For many of us, *stewardship* is simply a covert way to speak about (here comes that nasty word) *fund-raising*.

I once collected all the junk mail solicitations that arrived in my mailbox over two weeks. The result was a stack of envelopes more than two inches thick. Did I take the time to read each letter carefully? Did I assess the pros and cons of each organization? Hardly!

When it seems people are constantly asking for money via junk mail, e-mail, and (still!) the telephone, is it any wonder that we feel overwhelmed when we hear about stewardship?

On the one hand, the needs of this world are so great—and we care about that. But, in comparison, our resources seem so meager. How much can we really help? No matter how much we give, we tend to have a gnawing sense of shame about what we keep. A friend once said to me, “Must I give away *everything* I have to find peace within myself?”

Church Leader Unease

If you are a deacon, you may be reading this book with some apprehension. Just a few months ago you may have been sitting in the pew, clueless about your church's budget and financial condition. But now, from your new perspective in the church's leadership, it may seem that the congregation's giving and the church's expenses are suddenly your responsibility. You're scratching your head, thinking, "How did this happen?" After all, you weren't appointed to be a fund-raiser for the congregation! What's a deacon to do?

Or let's say you're an elder. You may be feeling uneasy because concern about a budget shortfall has been escalating in your church leadership meetings for the past year. The deacons have pointedly asked the elders to "do something," saying that the congregation's giving is a sign of its spiritual health. So when someone has to make those tough calls to nongivers, it's *your* job! If you're feeling pressure like that, you may grouse to yourself, "How can I talk to people about their giving without making them so angry that they go looking for another church?" What's an elder to do?

If you're a pastor, you may be worried because the bills of the church keep flooding in. There isn't enough money to recarpet the nursery, let alone hire more staff for community outreach. Now the church leaders are clamoring for more preaching on the topic of giving. But every time the matter comes up, you feel defensive. It's not that you think giving is unimportant. It's just that you don't quite know how to approach the



We do give until it hurts. Haven't they ever heard of "low pain threshold"?

issue. You seriously believe the gospel is a gospel of grace. But appeals for greater stewardship seem to come across as legalism. Laying guilt trips on your congregation isn't your thing. What's a pastor to do?

Cutting Through the Haze

The place to start is by casting the light of truth on some stubborn stewardship myths. *Stewardship* may be a buzzword, but misinformation about stewardship abounds. In our next Discovery we'll take a look at four myths that get in the way of faithful stewardship efforts—and we'll replace them with some principal truths.

Reflect and Discuss

1. Define *stewardship*. How is stewardship different from fund-raising?
2. As a leader, are you responsible for some aspect of stewardship in the church? Explain.
3. As a leadership group, how would you rate your training for new elders, deacons, or others involved in stewardship? (Use a scale of 1-10, with 10 being “excellent.”)
4. Do you give concrete guidance to members about how much they should give to support the church and its ministries? Explain.