

Stewardship, Sustainability and Soliciting in the Economy of God: A Biblical Studies Perspective

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As ministry leaders, we face many challenges today. We are entrusted with the *stewardship* of the human and financial resources of the organizations we serve and are expected to manage them faithfully before God and man. Our governing boards exhort us to attain financial *sustainability* so that day-to-day operations not only survive, but thrive year-after-year. Meanwhile, everyone involved feels a sense of responsibility to ensure adequate resources; thus, the function of *soliciting* both service and support often seems to dominate planning and strategy discussions both on the administrative and board levels. Addressing these complex issues—*stewardship*, *sustainability*, and *soliciting*—calls for fresh insight rooted in practical wisdom and biblical knowledge.

A quick web search reveals a wide range of advice for “what works” *practically*; however, few ideas surface on “what God’s Word teaches” *biblically* on these topics. A closer look shows that most people view the challenges of *stewardship*, *sustainability* and *soliciting* through the framework of the economy of this world using the lens of human thinking. This study will fill a void by exploring these issues through an alternative economic framework and a different lens. The aim of this paper is to examine *stewardship*, *sustainability* and *soliciting* using the framework of God’s economy through the lens of biblical texts. In so doing we will locate practical insights in these three areas for leadership faithfulness and ministry fruitfulness.

The Economy of this World and the Economy of God

If we pick up a red-letter edition of the New Testament we need not read far to find economic principles of Jesus that make no sense in the economy of this world. Consider four examples, one from each Gospel. First, we will look at Matthew 6:25-33 (all Scriptures RSV unless otherwise noted).

²⁵ Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Jesus instructs disciples to be free of worry regarding even basic necessities, which the “Gentiles” or “pagans” seek. Disciples are to trust God for daily bread and all else. Most people in the world today would consider this a crazy way to live. So, do we live this way?

Next, let us appraise Jesus’ instructions to the rich man in Mark 10:13-31. Jesus calls him to go, sell everything, and give to the poor. Because most people cannot imagine that Jesus expects people to let go of money, many have argued that this command only applied to the rich man. But does the text say that?

¹³ And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not

receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them. ¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: `Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." ²¹ And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²² At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. ²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." ²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many that are first will be last, and the last first.

It appears Jesus has subverted the world's structures where the rich expected to be first and the children last. Now all are equal before God, and Jesus tells the rich man to let go of the money and accoutrements that shaped his identity in antiquity. Do these instructions apply to the rich today?¹ Andrew Clarke suggests they do.² Based on the use of the term **λυπούμενος**, translated "sorrowful" in the Markan narrative, he posits we have mistaken the rich man's sorrow for rejection. Elsewhere in Mark, sorrowful characters such as Herod (6:26) and Jesus (14:34) carried out the work before them, despite being full of sorrow. So what are the implications for us today if the rich man did not miss the kingdom, but rather left with work to do? Might we have work to do too?

Next, we evaluate the seemingly nonsensical command in Luke 6:30. *Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again.* A.R. Hands, Jouette Bassler, and others say this generosity is the opposite of what people with wealth were instructed to do in antiquity.³ So what was Jesus trying to tell them? And what are the implications for us today?

Lastly, in John's Gospel, Jesus, the doer of unfathomable good works, makes this proclamation in John 14:12: *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father.* Not only does Jesus call for counter-cultural works, He proclaims that our deeds will exceed His own. How can this be?

In reviewing these texts, an alternative frame of reference comes in view. Jesus' teachings on handling money and doing good deeds do not make sense in light of the economy of this world because they reflect the thinking of a "Kingdom" economy. This alternative economy is rooted in abundance not scarcity. It also appears in Paul's writings with the term, **οἰκονομῖαν θεοῦ**, that is, the "economy of God" (1 Timothy 1:4).

¹ Websites such as www.globalrichlist.com show how a salary rates compare globally. Check it out. You may find you are rich.

² Andrew D. Clarke, "Do not judge who is worthy and unworthy: Clement's warning not to speculate about the Rich Young Man's response." *JSNT* 31. 4 (2009). Jesus is not condemning but sympathetic to the rich man. He is sympathetic because he knows how hard it is to let go of riches: He became poor so we might become rich. Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9. I am thankful to learn this, as I am the rich man today.

³ For further reading on giving in the NT world, see: A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1968) and Jouette M. Bassler, *God & Mammon: Asking for Money in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

From the perspective of the economy of this world, the greatest need is money. It represents the force or power the world believes is required to make everything happen. Solomon depicts this vividly in Ecclesiastes 10:19: *Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything*. Though it promises to answer every problem, one can never have enough of it (Ecclesiastes 5:10). For instance, someone once asked John D. Rockefeller, one of the richest men in the world in his time: “How much money is enough.” What was his answer? “Just a little bit more.” Money is the answer to everything in the economy of this world!

Alternatively, Jesus teaches that money is not the answer to everything; God is! This explains why He would say that His followers cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13) and that loving money, a.k.a. greed, is idolatry (Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5). In God’s economy, followers of Jesus must instead seek God first, as He is the One who provides all things richly (1 Timothy 6:17). In this economy, *stewardship* entails faithfully using God’s resources and depending on His abundant provision rather than hoarding for financial security or in an attempt to ensure sustainability. The latter behavior demonstrates disobedience and a lack of trust in God. For Jesus’ followers, though they live *in* the world, they must live differently *from* the world. “In God’s economy, He gives that we might give, and thus we can never forget that what we give has already been given to us.”⁴ This way of life reflects service to God and dependence upon Him and not money.

Sustainability in this framework is rooted in God’s generosity not man’s capacity. God’s people can give and minister from an abundance perspective because of His divine beneficence toward them. “God’s appeal for unlimited generosity from His people has been preceded from His side by a limitless love, a love so intent upon a response that He has empowered us to respond through the gift of His own Holy Spirit.”⁵ When instructing the Corinthians to take up a collection for the Jews suffering from famine in Jerusalem, Paul urges them to sow generously because their generosity is rooted in God’s ability to provide everything they need to be generous on all occasions. Paul explains this in 2 Corinthians 9:8. *And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work*. Do we hear such authoritative directives to give and minister from an abundance perspective today? Might they be rare because few Christian leaders themselves are living according to this framework?

This leads to the topic of *soliciting* in God’s economy. There is no biblical support for soliciting people for money *per se*. Why not? To do so proclaims the insufficiency of God. To say that anything but God is needed is idolatrous thinking. We do, however, see Jesus deconstructing the thinking of the disciples from seeing challenges through the economy of this world framework to viewing them through the lens of God’s economy. For instance, in the feeding of the 5,000 the disciples reveal how they thought the needs of the people would be met: money. They calculated that a year’s wages were needed to nourish the crowd. Jesus instead showed them that God could provide it.⁶ They thought they needed money; Jesus showed them otherwise!

Rather than *soliciting* for gifts, Jesus and NT writers *instruct* God’s church on what to do with riches. Even regarding the support for the Jerusalem saints, Paul does not *ask* the Corinthians to give; he *directs* them to

⁴ Kelly Kopic, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 126.

⁵ Brennan Manning *The Furious Longing of God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009) 120.

⁶ This is the only miracle recorded in all four synoptic Gospels: Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13.

take up a voluntary collection (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). God’s people are taught to enjoy and share resources with those who have less than enough and with the ministry of God’s leaders (Galatians 6:6). Why instruct rather than ask? Life is not found in money (Luke 12:13-21); it is only found by letting go of riches (1 Timothy 6:17-19). In talking about giving, rather than use OT terms like “tithe,” the word commonly used in the NT is *κοινωνία*, which means, “sharing” or “participating.”⁷ From willing hearts (2 Corinthians 8:12), God’s people are instructed to share the resources God has provided to bless all people, especially fellow believers (Galatians 6:9-10).

In the NT, asking is directed heavenward. People are urged to ask God for what they need in the name of Jesus (John 14:11-14). Sometimes He grants their requests and sometimes He does not. To the woman at the well, Jesus says that if she knew who He was, she would ask for living water (John 4:10). Luke notes that the Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:13). James teaches that those who lack wisdom should ask God for it, because He gives generously (James 1:5-8). Paul repeatedly asked God to remove his thorn but God chose not to (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). These and other NT examples of asking require faith because we as the askers seek support from God whom we cannot see. Ironically, we discover that *soliciting* or asking in the NT is directed to God, not toward people. God’s people are taught to ask God to provide. We see this in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:11) and other texts (Matthew 7:7-11; John 15:7, *et al*).

The Economy of this World and the Economy of God – Summary Chart

This chart depicts the vivid contrasts between the economy of this world and the economy of God as explored thus far in this paper in relation to *stewardship*, *sustainability*, and *soliciting*.⁸

	Economy of this World	Economy of God
Stewardship	People are instructed to use resources they think they own following cultural norms or worldly financial instructions.	Stewards are instructed to use God’s resources according to the radically generous Kingdom teachings of Jesus.
Sustainability	Resources are scarce. Supply is limited to man’s capacity; as a result, they are hoarded and stored up for personal use.	Resources are abundant. Supply is rooted in God’s unlimited beneficence; thus, they are to be enjoyed and freely shared with all.
Soliciting	Asking people for resources shows faith in them as the source. Leaders do all they can to secure support from people.	Asking God for resources shows faith in Him as the Source. Leaders call for participation with God in His work.

What are the implications of these findings for life and leadership? To answer that question, we must more deeply scrutinize *stewardship*, *sustainability*, and *soliciting* in light of the economy of God.

Stewardship in the Economy of God: The Charge to Faithfulness

Our stewardship journey is everything that happens between the day each of us says, “I believe,” and the day we hear the words from our Lord Jesus Christ, “Well done!” The charge to faithfulness each step of the way is explicit in the NT. Because space does not permit an exhaustive exploration of NT teachings on stewardship, we will consider the themes of the three parables of Matthew 25 that explain the *stewardship* we are called to exhibit while awaiting our Lord’s return.

⁷ BAGD, 438-439. Cf. Acts 2:42-47, 4:32; Philippians 1:3-5; Romans 15:25-27; 2 Corinthians 9:13; 1 Timothy 6:18.

⁸ For further research on this topic, see also: Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of God*, John Reumann, *Stewardship and the Economy of God* and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*.

First, the parable of the ten maidens reminds us to be prepared because our Lord could return anytime (Matthew 25:1-13). The parable of the talents teaches us to be found putting God's resources to work rather than hoarding them in fear while our Master tarries (25:14-30). The parable of the sheep and the goats portrays the counter-cultural, Christ-like deeds authentic followers of Jesus should be found doing in anticipation of eternal judgment (25:31-46). We derive at least three implications from these teachings that shape how Christian leaders must model and teach faithful *stewardship*.

First, God's people must obey Jesus' instructions during a limited timeframe. At this juncture I will share from my life, not to draw attention to myself, but to share what I am learning. For years I taught biblical stewardship principles but lived them out in the framework of the economy of this world. As a result, aspects of my life were inconsistent with the instructions of Jesus. For example, I was storing up treasures on earth because that is what the world said to do. My culture *and* many in the church taught that such financial saving was good stewardship, though Jesus says not to hoard. James 5:1-3 also helped reshape my thinking.

¹ Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days.

I was guilty of laying up treasure in the last days. After confessing this sin, my wife and I liquidated our financial accounts. We have found that Jesus' desire is not to bankrupt us, but to show us that He can be trusted to supply our needs through either the provision of work or the generous sharing of His people. While waiting our Lord's return, which could be anytime, we desire to be found obeying his instructions, which are for our good.

Second, resources must be put to use according to the means of the steward. Interestingly, in the parable of the talents, Jesus celebrates those who put God's resources to work, whether many or few. When this happens, fruitfulness results. On the contrary, those who hoard in fear, revealing their lack of obedience, have strayed from the path to fruitfulness. This relates to the resources God has put in our stewardship personally and in organizational settings professionally. Our own disobedience in this regard may contribute to personal or professional struggles and a lack of fruitfulness. Ironically, the boy with the five loaves and two fish offers a beautiful picture of what happens when God's people freely put to use what they do have (John 6:9). Jesus multiplies it in a manner that brings God glory. Elsewhere, Jesus states that our faithfulness may be rewarded with increased capacity, that is, if we are faithful with little, He may provide more for us to steward (Luke 16:10-15). It must be noted, however, that excessive wealth is not necessarily a mark of a faithful steward, as the parable of the rich fool reveals (Luke 12:13-21).

Third, faithful stewardship of God's resources should imitate Christ and may conflict with cultural norms. We should look like Jesus in how we use God's resources regardless of what others are doing. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, authentic disciples care for the weak and despised, that is, hungry, thirsty, sick, and naked people as well as prisoners. In antiquity, these people are labeled as undeserving of care. Jesus, on the contrary, stops to care for and even touch such people viewed as unclean and undeserving of care; in so doing, He demonstrates that God's love and grace is for everyone. God's people must be found extending the same counter-cultural love and grace to all.

To conclude this section on *stewardship* in the economy of God, we note that, as stewards, we are charged to be faithful over a limited timeframe, to use the resources God provides in keeping with His instructions, and to imitate Christ's example regardless of what the culture dictates. Dan Burke sums this aptly.

“If I have learned anything in this life it is this, the world offers us NOTHING. Christ offers us EVERYTHING. My peace comes from knowing and loving Christ and living within that love. My peace comes from knowing that the King of the Universe created me, is redeeming me, and will succeed in this task such that when I see him in the end, He will say, "Well done." My confidence comes from nothing other than knowing that He is in control even when the world seems completely mad.”⁹

Sustainability in the Economy of God: The Criteria for Fruitfulness

Before considering *sustainability* in the economy of God today, let us see how it may have been understood in the NT world. Interestingly, our Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), not man, serves as the Sustainer of all things. Paul's states this in Colossians 2:17. *[Christ] is before all things, and in Him all things hold together*. Christ sustained all things back then and still sustains everything today! So what is the role of God's leaders in sustaining God's work? For insight we will turn to Luke's Acts of the Apostles because it records the works or the “acts” of the Early Church leaders. Three insights emerge in Acts linked to *sustainability* in the economy of God for us today. We will codify them as the criteria for fruitfulness

First, God's leaders follow the instructions of Jesus. In Acts 2, God's people are depicted as faithfully following Jesus in community. They abide in the teaching given first to the Apostles, they proclaim his death and resurrection through the breaking of bread, and they continue faithfully in prayer. Also, they share their resources with one another so that each person has enough. Notice the simple secret to their sustainability: obedience. They abide in the truth, share the good news with others, and show they value people over possessions. And, as a result, the church explodes, and thousands are added to their number (Acts 2:41).

Second, God's leaders do not try to control God's work; they faithfully administrate it. With ministry growth, God's leaders in Acts could have been tempted to think they caused it and could control it. By Acts 6, we see that so many had joined the community of faith that, as a result, more leaders were needed to ensure that the ministry of prayer and the Word along with the daily food distributions were handled fairly. Thus, leaders full of faith and the Holy Spirit were appointed to administrate these activities. Notice the text does not say that more money was needed. This is a significant point! Why? The role of God's leaders in *sustainability* is not to try to control growth by playing the role of provider, but simply by faithful administrating what God provides.

Third, God's leaders may endure persecution and suffering as part of God's plan for the sustainability and expansion of His work. The persecution in Acts 7 in Jerusalem actually helped move the gospel to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. On Paul's missionary travels he faced opposition in places like Lystra (Acts 14) and Ephesus (Acts 19), which, ironically, helped contributed to the *sustainability* and expansion of God's church to other places. God's leaders must persevere through trials, trusting that God is working out His plan.

At this point, perhaps a digression is necessary because of what the term *sustainability* connotes in the modern setting. It is common for us as leaders or board members of churches and non-profit organizations to

⁹ Dan Burke in RCSD email entitled “Christ the King - Source of Peace” on 24 November 2012.

think it is our role to provide for the ministry we serve. According to the biblical texts, that is God’s job. Furthermore, is it not our role to serve as sustainers of the ministries we serve! That is God’s job too. No wonder we get so stressed when we try to do it. This may explain why ministries that shift from depending on God to depending on financial reserves for *sustainability* often appear to experience mission drift. Many American colleges and universities illustrate this point.

To seek to sustain ministry through human means not only demonstrates disobedience to Jesus’ teachings, it reflects the desire to supplant God’s role. This surfaces a larger issue of control. For example, the dominant non-profit board governance model today expects administrative leaders to control outcomes. As leaders we can control our behavior, but only God can dictate specific outcomes. What if boards instead held leaders accountable to faithful administration, encouraged them through suffering, and supported their work through their own participation, rather than expect them to deliver results only God can control? Might our ministries multiply in growth like the Early Church in Acts? Or must we remain content with 5% annual growth goals?

In this section on *sustainability* in the economy of God, Acts reveals criteria for fruitfulness: obedience, faithful administration, and perseverance. These are actions of God’s people that may lead to sustained fruitfulness. This excerpt from George Mueller’s journal offers a fitting conclusion to this discussion and suggests that leading from this perspective exalts the living God as the One who sustains the work of ministry.

“It is quite true that my heart was affected by the deplorable physical condition in which I saw destitute Orphans before I began to care for them; but a higher motive by far actuated me than merely seeking to benefit their health... It is further true, that I had a desire to benefit the Orphans by seeking to educate them; but I aimed at far more than this...Further, when I began the Orphan work, I aimed at the salvation of the children...Yet even this was not the primary object I had in view; but in carrying on this work, simply through the instrumentality of prayer and faith, without applying to any human being for help, my great desire was that it might be seen now, in the nineteenth century, God is still the living God, and that now, as well as thousands of years ago, He listens to the prayers of His children and helps those who trust in Him.”¹⁰

Soliciting in the Economy of God: The Call for Fellowship

Soliciting in the economy of this world is asking people for money. It sounds like this: “Dear Name, God has done a great work here, but \$10,000 is needed immediately for the ministry to continue. Please give.” Asking in the economy of God looks different: disciples ask God to meet needs in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-13). This starts with our need for salvation and extends to everything else as Paul writes in Romans 8:32: *[God] who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?* We must redefine *soliciting* using the NT framework of the economy of God.

Let us consider the phrase, “the call for fellowship,” because it captures the role of NT leaders in communicating this amazing truth: the Triune God, our Provider and Sustainer, invites us to fellowship with Him through prayer, to work with Him through service, and to proclaim His beneficence through sharing! Leaders invite God’s people into *κοινωνία*, “fellowship,” “to participate,” or “to have a share in” God’s work through voluntary, cheerful giving (2 Corinthians 9:7). In this framework, God’s leaders instruct God’s people to support

¹⁰ George Mueller in *Ten Years After: A Sequel to the Autobiography of George Mueller* comp. G. Fred. Bergin (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1909), 11, as quoted in *Money for Ministry* ed. Wesley K. Willmer (SP Publications, 1989), 224.

spiritual leaders (Galatians 6:6), to care for those in the faith community, and to bless those in need according to their ability (Galatians 6:9-10; 2 Corinthians 8:11). They do not ask because there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. When giving flows freely, God, rather than human benefactors, gets all the glory when needs are met.

Practically speaking, rather than *soliciting* or asking people for money, which demonstrates misplaced dependence on people, leaders ask God to supply needs with specific petitions, while simply inviting people to participate in God's work. This leads to questions, such as this: Should we be specific in communicating ministry needs? Sure. It would not be inconsistent with NT teaching, as long as the purpose of your sharing is not just to get money *per se*, but to expand God's kingdom and bring God glory. For example, consider the feeding of the 5000 again. We have a grasp of the size of the need because all four Gospels note it. The lesson here may be to cease thinking money is the solution ministry needs, but to declare the size of the need, to offer what we have to God, and ask him to bring Himself glory by providing and sustaining the work.

We have found that the only *soliciting* or asking in the NT happens between people and God. God's leaders look to Him to solve problems rather than money. People are invited to fellowship or have a share in God's work through willingly sharing resources God has provided. Early Fathers such as Tertullian (155-230) testify that this became the reputation of Christians throughout the ancient world.

“Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession. But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See, they say, how they love one another.* One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another.”¹¹

Practical Application: Stewardship, Sustainability and Soliciting in the Economy of God

This study of *stewardship*, *sustainability*, and *soliciting* in the economy of God calls us to action, so let us conclude with seven practical suggestions for application for your life and leadership. These suggestions reflect my personal thoughts and statements from saints through the centuries who have inspired them.

1. Review NT teachings and repent as needed.

Does your life reflect conformity to the culture or to Christ? Perhaps start by reading the red-letters of Jesus in one of the Gospels and go to prayer. What is the Spirit saying to you? Related to money, William Wilberforce notes: “I continually find it necessary to guard against that natural love of wealth and grandeur which prompts us always when we come to apply our general doctrine to our own case, to claim an exception.”¹² Should the Spirit reveal the love of money in your life (as was case in mine, cf. 1 Timothy 6:10), start with repentance and chart a new course. Do not be intimidated by the word: “repent.” It means “to change directions.” I began this process

¹¹ Tertullian of Carthage, *The Apology*, XXXIX, 5b-7a, 11a, translated from Latin by S. Thelwall of Christ's College. *Italics mine.*

¹² Edward K. Rowell, ed. *1001 Quotes, Illustrations and Humorous Stories* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 178.

about four years ago with my wife. We have been humbled by our sin and found our confession and repentance met with God's love and grace. Billy Graham says: "If a person gets his attitude toward money straight, it will help straighten out almost any other area of his life."¹³ As God works in your life in a variety of areas, it will change how you lead in ministry settings and also impact those you serve.

2. Live and lead from a place of humble dependence on God.

Does your lifestyle reflect dependence on God, others, or yourself? Andrew Murray says: "It is because Christians do not know their own relation to God of absolute poverty and helplessness that they have no sense of the need of absolute and unceasing dependence, or the unspeakable blessedness of continual waiting on God."¹⁴ Depending on God through the ups and downs of life can be challenging. Think about adopting a rule of life or set of biblical statements to guard your heart and help you stay on track.¹⁵ George Mueller offers a great example for ministry leaders. These four statements summarize the rule that governed his orphanage work to ensure that he did not shift from serving God to money. He resolved: (1) to trust in God for daily provision; (2) to seek help from the Lord in prayer in times of need; (3) to never hoard funds but share them with God's poor (Luke 12:33); (4) to avoid all debt (taking Romans 13:8 literally).¹⁶ Might you map a similar list for your life and your ministry?

3. Take inventory and put to work the resources God has entrusted to you in order to be fruitful.

Your stewardship decisions are based on what you have, not what you do not have. When you take inventory of the material goods and spiritual gifts God has provided and put them to work aligned with His instructions, you will be found faithful and often fruitful. Our proclivity, however, is to master situations rather than steward resources and to focus too much on what we think we lack, such as, money. Adoniram Judson adds: "It is true that we may desire much more. But let us use what we have, and God will give us more."¹⁷ As each of us will have to give an account before God for the stewardship of our lives and leadership, put to use what God has given you.

4. Encourage people to participate with you in God's work through prayer, service, and sharing

In a recent assessment of a large ministry, the most common unsolicited complaints from constituents were "too much mail" and "do not agree with fundraising approach." Face-to-face interviews added this thought: "it seems like all the ministry wants is money." This prompts a question that we as ministry leaders must ask ourselves: Am I seeking to *acquire money* or *advance mission* through my communication? This moves us to the work we are supposed to be focused on: making disciples, that is, building a community of people living in the Kingdom. Henri Nouwen agrees: "I wonder how many churches and charitable organizations realize that community is one of the greatest gifts they have to offer."¹⁸ People want to connect. The explosive growth of social media shows this. Our personal communication and ministry messages should shift from trying to tell stories and proclaim needs to get money, to talking about God's work and inviting people to be a part of it in a variety of ways.

¹³ Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 107.

¹⁴ Andrew Murray, *Waiting on God in Walking with God: The Andrew Murray Trilogy* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2008), 10.

¹⁵ For example, consider the three verses that make up the rule of St. Francis of Assisi: Matthew 19:21a; Luke 9:3; Luke 9:23. For further reading, see: Steve Macchia, *Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation in the Well-Ordered Way* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012).

¹⁶ Adapted from Murray, Andrew. *George Mueller and the Secret of His Power in Prayer* (Portland: TPF 2002). See also Exhibit A.

¹⁷ Adoniram Judson, *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* vol. 1. (Boston: LLE, 1817), 99.

¹⁸ Henri Nouwen, *The Spirituality of Fundraising* (Richmond Hill, ONT: Estate of Henri Nouwen) 28.

5. Don't hoard seeking financial security or sustainability.

The world advises leaders to hoard money to secure the future and to use financial models to attain organizational sustainability. The global economic crisis reveals, however, that money is not reliable. Nowhere in Scripture are God's people instructed to save for security or sustainability. Psalm 49 says that money cannot save us, satisfy us, or give us the security we desire—only God can!¹⁹ When our trust is in God alone, with Jonathan Goforth our lives proclaim: “All the resources of the Godhead are at our disposal.”²⁰ Want security for your life and ministry? Exchange economic models! Trust God, give generously, live simply, and share the rest. Do not hoard it!

6. Avoid debt and show God's love.

The world says: get what you desire on credit. This view has led to great personal and organizational debt. Scripture warns that debt enslaves (Proverbs 22:7), urges us to owe only a debt of love to one another (Romans 13:8), and says we should count the cost before starting projects so we are sure to have the funds to finish (Luke 14:28-30). While this counsel sounds limiting, it is intended to set us and our ministries free to show God's love.

7. Model generous participation in the Lord's work, in reaching the lost, and touching the least

Leaders who want to rally participation in the Lord's work, in reaching the lost, and touching the least must model this behavior. Mother Teresa engaged the attention of the world and motivated many to join her in serving the poor by her example: “Who can outdo God in his generosity: if we poor human beings give Him everything and surrender our whole being to His service? He is sure to stand by us and with us, as everything in us will be His.”²¹

Conclusion: Stewardship, Sustainability and Soliciting in Economy of God

This paper offers a biblical studies perspective on *stewardship*, *sustainability* and *soliciting*. *Stewardship* is not about attaining results, but about the faithful management of God's resources. Stewards use what God provides in keeping with His instructions. *Sustainability* is not found in financial models or hoarding resources, for such acts require no faith and show reliance on money. Instead, leaders should consider obedience, faithful administration, and perseverance as the pathway to sustained fruitfulness. *Soliciting* is not about asking people for money, but about asking God for daily needs and all else. The former framework depends on you; the latter hopes in God. The study concludes by calling leaders to action and suggests seven ideas for life and leadership. Essentially, this paper reveals that navigating these issues in the economy of God requires one thing: faith. A.W. Tozer agrees.

“The man of pseudo faith will fight for his verbal creed but refuse flatly to allow himself to get into a predicament where his future must depend on that creed being true. He always provides himself with secondary ways of escape so he will have a way out if the roof caves in. What we need very badly these days is a company of Christians who are prepared to trust God as completely now as they know they must do at the last day.”²²

Brothers and sisters, join me! Let us comprise such a company for God's glory!

¹⁹ Some say Joseph in Egypt or the Ant in Proverbs saved for sustainability. Instead, they model generous sharing in community. As God blessed Egypt, Joseph shared the harvest, and when God provides food the ant gathers not for self but for the colony.

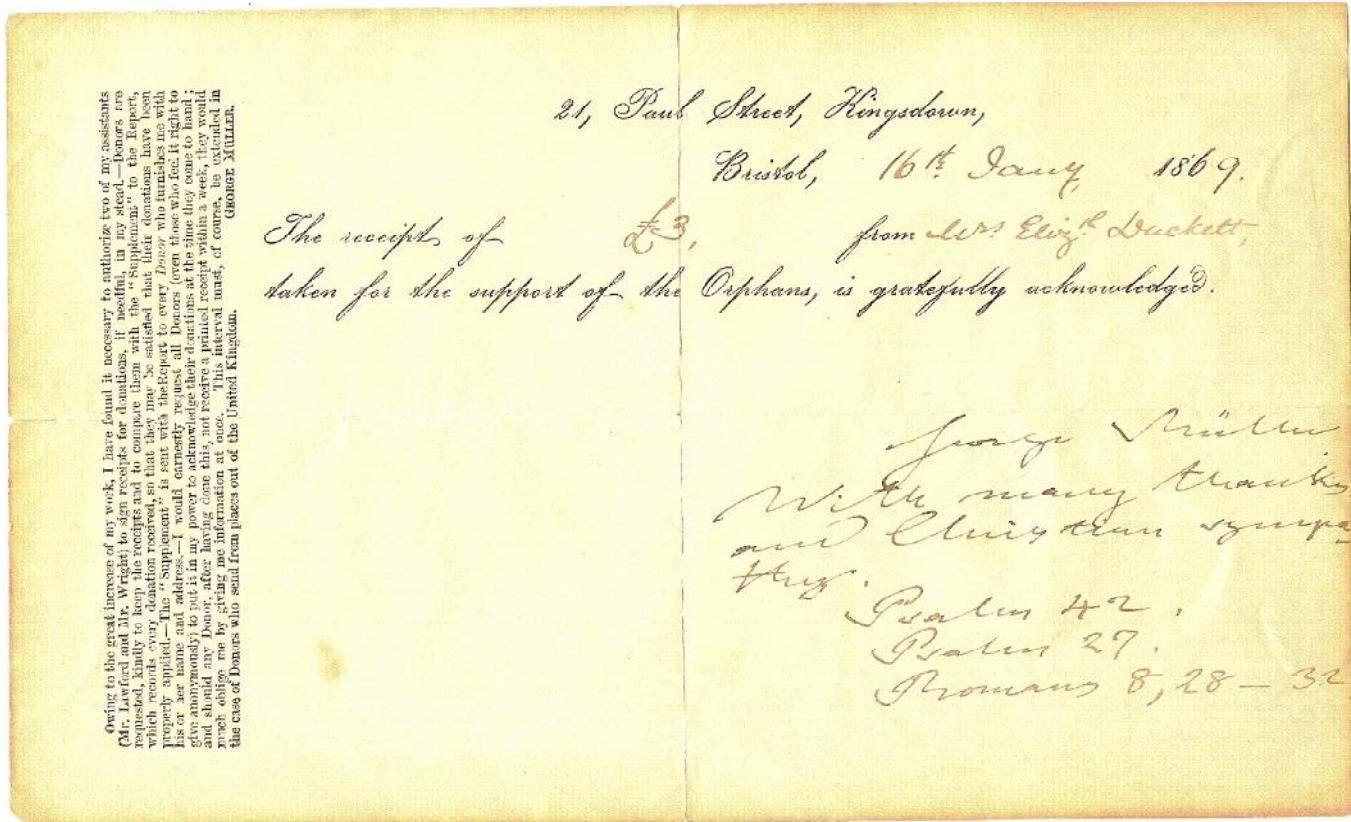
²⁰ Jonathan Goforth, (1850-1936), missionary, as recounted by his wife, Rosalind Goforth in *Climbing: Memories of a Missionary's Wife* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1940), 197.

²¹ Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 87.

²² A.W. Tozer in *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1955) 50.

Exhibit A

Attached you see a copy of a receipt hand-signed by George Mueller. It is not part of the argument of my paper, but included here to help readers see that Mueller lived and led from a framework of radical faith while engaging with people who financially supported the orphanage work in a manner more sophisticated than most envision. It fits with the flow of the argument of this paper that argues that leaders should put God's resources to work to accomplish God's work and engage others to participate with them while placing all hope in God for provision. Interesting are the Scriptures on his note. Check them out: Psalm 42, Psalm 27, and Romans 8:28-32. Rather than reveal their connection to his way of thinking, read them yourself and see what you think. Enjoy!



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