

Fund-Raising Activities in Relation to a Congregation's Stewardship Program

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If your mailbox is anything like mine, it periodically contains attractive, multi-colored brochures which promise that our church or organization can raise as much money as it needs. All we have to do is sell pens, lamps, candy, light bulbs, greeting cards, or whatever else happens to be a hot-selling item. How can we go wrong? Look at the guarantees: "New, easy, full 50% profit, no order taking, no risk, no investment, send no money." If you sort through your mail like I do, these "get rich quick" advertisements are quickly disposed of in the circular file. We wouldn't want things like that to get into the hands of the wrong people.

I think it's safe to say that we've all been asked questions like, "Pastor, why don't we have a bazaar and bingo like the Catholic church down the street?" Or people tell us: "When I was in the Methodist church, we made a lot of money from the annual turkey supper and pancake breakfast. I've noticed you don't have things like that. How come?" When those questions arise, are we able to give a concise answer? Is there a definitive answer in Scripture regarding fund-raising activities? Are there human arguments which speak for or against such activities? What is the effect of fund-raising activities on the congregation's stewardship program? This is not a new topic. The "big bucks" derived from bake sales and bazaars have been discussed already for decades. Even if we can't shed much new light on the subject, at least we hope to be better equipped to see the question from all sides and, in each case, make a decision which is in the best interest of God's Kingdom. Therefore we investigate: "Fund-raising activities in relation to a congregation's stewardship program."

What is Christian Stewardship?

The subject of fund-raising cannot be separated from Christian stewardship. If stewardship were nothing more than securing enough money to pay the church's bills, there would be no need to pursue this subject further. But Christian stewardship is so much more than that. It is the believer's new life, his response to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. St. Paul described it thus in II Cor. 5:14-17 "For the love of Christ constraineth us . . . and that he died for all, that they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold; all things are become new." Christian stewardship involves the whole Christian life and his relationship to God as the Apostle points out in Romans 12: 1: "I beseech 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.

Stewardship has very properly been defined as "the response of the whole person to God's act of love in Christ." We are God-pleasing stewards only when we properly use our time, talents, and treasures in His service. That thought is expressed in the beautiful but perhaps overworked, offering hymn "We give Thee but Thine own / Whate'er the gift may be; All that we have is Thine alone, / A trust; O Lord, from Thee." When Christians first give themselves to the

Lord, that devotion will be reflected in their offerings, their deeds of service, and their time schedules.

Let's take this proper understanding of stewardship and move from the individual, to the congregational, level. When the church's financial needs become demanding, the primary purpose of the church may become sidetracked. Thus the congregation may seem to be more concerned with the man who misses the budget than with the man who moved out on his wife. This shows a detached concept of Christian giving from the purpose of the church as a whole. On the other hand, many churches deem themselves successful when all bills are paid and there's a balance in the treasury. Meanwhile the needy, many local unchurched, and many without Christ all over the world are passed by; while it is felt the church had a successful "stewardship" program.

But as the author of *The Stewardship Call* clearly points out,

Christian stewardship does not consist in raising money only, but in raising people together with their money. . . money-raising is only part of a very broad picture - by itself it does much less for a congregation than most people think. It is apparent that St. Paul did not hesitate to gather money in the church, but his great stress was on motive, and his suggested method grew out of the motive. He showed that giving is a proposition of "hearts for God" rather than "purses for the church," of opening the heart through the Word rather than pinching the pocketbook through promotional pleas. As he gained the person by the preaching of the Gospel, Paul not only saw the purse included with the person but also other gifts as well. The heart of stewardship is the offering of the whole person.¹

The whole person will not offer himself unless he is properly motivated to do so.

What is the proper motivation for Christian Stewardship?

To put it simply our motivation for God-pleasing stewardship is the Gospel of salvation. The love of Christ constrains us to be good managers of all that has been entrusted to us. Our motivation for giving is rooted in the gracious acts of God: redemption, creation, preservation, regeneration, sanctification, etc. We love Him because He first loved us. We give ourselves because He first gave His Son.

God's grace as the motivational factor is found not only in Scriptural commands, but also in Scriptural examples. Peter urged the Christians of Asia Minor: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (I Peter 5:10). When Paul specifically mentioned the offering of money for the poor in Jerusalem, he introduced his appeal with the grace of Jesus who became poor that "we through His poverty might become rich" (II Cor. 8:9). What an appeal for generous giving!

We constantly encourage our people to grow in sanctification. An important part of that growth is growing in their lives as stewards. First we feed their faith with solid spiritual food and then challenge that faith to express itself in specific acts of stewardship such as service in His Church and proportionate giving. This is an ongoing process. It is a growing process - it cannot stop. My growing love for the Lord Jesus will seek new and better ways to serve Him. That is the only proper motivation for Christian stewardship.

¹ Werning, Waldo *The Stewardship Call*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 196 pp. 113-114.

Do fund-raising activities (carnivals, dinners, suppers) have that motivation?

Of course, this is a debatable question since we can't look into another person's heart. But I seriously doubt that these activities are sponsored as an expression of faith, nor are they always carried out to the glory of God. They are usually suggested because of a budget problem. So easily the dollar sign becomes more important than the cross. The goal of these activities is to put money into that church's treasury. No one is questioning the amount of time and effort required for a "successful" fund raiser. But I do question if this time and effort are properly motivated. If that proper motivation is lacking, the fund raising event should be eliminated. If there is proper motivation, that faith can express itself in a much more God-pleasing way.

Events sponsored for pure fund-raising are filled with potential problems for both the sponsors and for the patrons. Considering the number of hours spent, most such affairs are quite unprofitable. People donate the materials, do the work, and then pay for the things they buy, some of which they didn't really want. Couldn't that time be spent more profitably in service and witnessing tasks? How much fellowship is there for the people who sponsor sales and suppers? Not much that is Christian fellowship. It's usually of the opposite kind where feelings are hurt because of competition between the members. Friction may easily develop over a single point of administration. From my vicaring days, I recall a church which had an annual turkey supper. One of the most vicious arguments I've ever heard came from that church's ladies aid, and it centered around this question regarding the turkey supper: Should a woman, who has already spent many hours preparing and serving that supper, also be expected to pay \$2.50 for a ticket, when all she may receive is cold turkey and mashed potatoes? For some reason problems in working together show up more frequently at these affairs than in other aspects of church work. Should the church act as a merchant? Does this give offense to other merchants and restaurant owners in the community? Can the church really do mission work at fund raising affairs? By using fund raising activities, is the church admitting that her own people are not able or willing to support her?

What effect do church fund-raising events have on the people who patronize them? Is a person really giving when he buys something at a church affair? Hasn't he only received his money's worth? At times donations are received which would otherwise have been refused or not given freely as an offering. Money-raising schemes stir up a motivation for giving and serving which can exist without the power of Christian faith. People are "put on the spot" to contribute, or an appeal is made to their pride. Those are not proper motives for supporting the church's work. To the weak Christian and to the unbeliever the church sponsored fund-raisers may give a completely wrong impression of the church's function. These people will attend many *affairs* at the church (but not the services) and then walk away with the smug satisfaction that all is well between them and God because they have done their bit for Him by contributing to His Church. How would they know that the church is there to feed hungry souls, not hungry bodies?

Money-raising schemes are often a distinct hindrance to the development of proper Christian giving and the spiritual goals of the church. "It is necessary to 'raise' money only when Christians fail to give it."² People fail to give when they do not understand their role as Christian stewards in relation to the cross. They will not give freely as Christ has freely given. Money-raising activities are a giant step backwards because people are giving only when they immediately get something in return. Is that giving with a grateful heart? Urging people to bring their cake, pie, and needlework to sell at the church is hardly teaching genuine stewardship.

² *Ibid.*, p. 160

Instead why not encourage them to make their money outside the church and then bring that money as a freewill offering! Studies have shown that where fund-raising schemes increase, freewill offerings decrease and vice versa. The following statement was made in 1956: "Hence along with the steady increase of freewill offerings we have witnessed the gradual disappearance of sales and suppers, bazaars and lotteries."³ Perhaps this is the Lord's way of reminding us of the dangers involved in stomach stewardship.

What does the Bible say specifically about fund-raisers?

Unfortunately very little. The incident from Jesus' life which does relate to the subject of fund raising is His cleansing of the temple. Apparently there were two such house cleanings, one near the beginning of His ministry (John 2:14-16) and another near the end (Luke 19:45-46). It seems conditions at the temple had reached an all-time low. In the outer court merchants kept sheep, oxen, and doves to be sold for sacrifices. Added to this confusion of the livestock and merchants were the business transactions of the bankers who changed the currency for those who carried foreign coins. Of course, all were there to make a nice profit. Instead of the temple being a House of prayer and worship, it was desecrated by noisy business transactions. No wonder Jesus cleansed the temple! His Father's house was not meant to be a marketplace where buying, selling, and bartering were carried on. I believe these words do apply to modern fund raising activities, but to what extent? What constitutes making His Father's house a "house of merchandise" ? One supper every year? Two bake sales? Three bazaars? This passage is clear in its meaning but more difficult in its application.

While the Bible does not support merchandising in the church, it does say a great deal about supporting the work of the church through offerings. There is the O. T. example of God announcing to Moses that the people are to build Him a sanctuary. God ordered "Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring me an offering, of every man that giveth it willingly with his heart ye shall take my offering." (Ex. 25:2) These were direct freewill offerings. They were not to set up a "sons of Israel" bazaar and then advertise that the proceeds would go to the church. In the NT our Lord encourages "Give, and it shall be given unto you." (Luke 6:38) The Apostle Paul certainly had direct giving in mind in his words to the Corinthians: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him." (I Cor. 16:1-2) Furthermore Paul cites the encouraging example of the Macedonians who, on their own, gathered a large gift to help the needy saints. (II Cor. 8:3-5). In Acts 9 is the heartwarming account of Dorcas who made clothing and gave it directly to the poor. There is no hint that she ever gave these articles to the church; who, in turn, put a price tag on them for a public bazaar, and the proceeds of which flowed into the church treasury. The Lord's work is to be supported by Christians who give, not by people who buy and sell in the name of the church. If people have something to sell, let them sell it apart from the church, and then bring the proceeds as part of their stewardship line. This is the Lord's way. Remember "giving is a gift from God by which God puts His people to work for Him and for which He empowers them with His Holy Spirit"⁴

Beware of Legalism!

³ Kantonen, T. A. *A Theology for Christian Stewardship*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1956, p.5.

⁴ Caemmerer, Richard *Feeding and Leading*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962, p. 52.

We can list many reasons why fund raising activities are unwise, and in some cases, totally wrong. However the warning about legalism is very much in place. To automatically condemn all such activities with no regard to motivation is legalism.

Lets also remember that many types of fund-raising activities are not as clear-cut as those outlined above. Permit me to list some of these for further discussion by the group.

- What about a church dinner held for the members only?
- What about a church dinner sponsored only by donations?
- How about a group of members who sponsor a garage sale (in the church's name) to give the proceeds to the church?
- What about the women's guild that sells greeting cards and Christian books for a profit?
- How about the Pioneers who sponsor a supper and craft sale?
- Is it proper per for the church to sponsor paper or aluminum drives?
- Should the youth group sponsor car washes, slave days, etc? Should they be for the public?
- How can a school's parent-teacher group raise money for it's projects?
- Should you sponsor a church benefit If AAL provides matching fund?

Conclusion

There will always be fund raising activities in various shapes and fonts. As we deal with them, let 's remember, first of all, that stewardship is our response to the profound love of God. May we help our members grow in their response of faith-produced gratitude. Do fund-raising activities help or hinder that response? As we are called upon to evaluate each specific case of fund-raising, that's the question that we together with our people, are dealing with. Pray the Holy Spirit bless our decisions!

Additional Resources

Froehlich, E.B. "The Abuse of Stewardship Practices" 1963

Schuetze, Armin and Habeck, Irwin *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974.

Wendland, J. "Study of John 2:15,16 May these words be applied to merchandizing in the church such as bazaars?", 1952.