



STEWARDSHIP AS PASTORAL CARE IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

There isn't a person in this world that has not been impacted by this pandemic. Like every aspect of society, the Church has been drastically impacted by this outbreak. Just a couple of weeks ago, some congregations felt the strain of being encouraged not to shake hands. Now, in most locations, in order to comply with standing public health orders, no more than 10 of the faithful can assemble in a confined space, all while maintaining social distancing. This stark new world has shaken the most veteran sheepdog of the Great Shepherd Jesus Christ.

Yet, our Lord has managed to use mysterious ways His wonders to perform. In less than a week, nearly every congregation has found creative ways to continue the central task of the Church: preaching Christ Crucified and Risen! Pastors and saints of all ages have learned about Facebook Live, YouTube, Zoom and many other computer platforms. Just this last week I was able to lead two classes of saints in an initial study of Philippians on Zoom. It was attended by more than a dozen octogenarians using iPad and laptops for the first time in their lives! And God's people were blessed! In addition, pastors and elders have found ways to make sure the Christ's sheep are still feasting on Christ's body and blood at God's altar, just in groups of less than 10! This is indeed a time for innovation that is faithful to Scripture and Confessions! God is leading His people in new directions for His glory!

Our Lord leads! It is true in the innovation in delivery of the Gospel. This also needs to be remembered when the pastor and lay leaders sit down to their Zoom-based Church Council meetings. These meetings will likely be held to address the

anticipation that a lack of public worship will also equate to a lack of public stewardship for the sake of the Gospel. A crisis like the coronavirus has brought into full view a reality that has only been whispered over the last few years. There are many congregations that were teetering on brink of viability. The temptation will exist for the local congregation to adopt austerity measures to address the assumed crisis. This is driven by the great sin of the modern Church: institutional survival!

Look Beyond Survival

It is not faithful stewardship to make institutional survival the goal during this time of challenge. Pastors and congregational leaders who wring their hands at moments like this are missing the larger picture: it is our Lord who has brought us to this situation, and He is the One who will be leading us through. The local church exists for the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. In other words, it exists for the Shepherd, not institutional trappings the sheep have grown attached to. Stewardship in this time of crisis needs to be focused on continuing the work of the Gospel in the community. The work of the Church is necessarily done differently

at this time, but the mission is the same. As the Lord has loved Christian stewards in Jesus Christ and provided for their needs of supporting this body and life, now more than ever they need to be shown the call to respond to the opportunities to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The floodgates of heaven have not been stopped by this outbreak. Yet, if conversation in our congregations about resources for ministry implies that those floodgates are closed, the Gospel is obscured!

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Lead with the Gospel

What does the pastor and steward-leader need to do? Start with the Gospel! The sheepdog is called to herd the Shepherd's sheep! Get them to the Gospel. Get the Gospel to them! Preach. Commune as you are able. Write. Be bold in this process. Remind them that the congregation is not a reservoir of reserves to be hoarded and released sparingly. It is a river of the Lord's goodness that flows through individual Christians to the community for the sake of delivering the Gospel. Our Lord provides! He is providing now so that the congregation will be in a stronger position to be the hands and feet of Jesus after this outbreak!

Here are a couple of recent examples. Pastor Brady Finnern has had members calling to reassure him that they not only will be giving, but giving even more during this time. My own congregation had this happen in the last 24 hours. A member called who had just received a severance notice from a local employer. They were already planning to make an additional gift over time in the plate as a demonstration of stewardship to their children. But they decided to give it as a one-time gift. The gift was almost to the dollar what was needed to close the gap between the current General Fund balance and the amount of our next payroll. The family didn't know the amount we needed. God provides!

Sobering Realities

There is a grim reality in this outbreak. Some saints entrusted to our care will not make it through. We know what needs to be done for them and their families. We proclaim the Resurrection. The Church is not free from this grim reality either. Before this outbreak some congregations had the pre-existing condition of financial stress. There is a likelihood that many of these congregations may not endure. What shall we do for them? Well, we don't regard a faithful saint as a failure when they die. Neither

should we look at congregations that close as failures either. The life of these congregations needs to be celebrated because of their life of faithful preaching throughout their histories. Their resources are actually their legacies – the results of God's grace at work in their midst over the years – and these should be shared with other congregations so that the Gospel may advance. God provides generously for us all, so we support the pastors and other church workers in these congregations as best we can. Survival isn't the goal. The Gospel is!

The One Thing Needful

Pastors, remember that stewardship is a matter of pastoral care. There will be families that are hard-hit by the impact of this crisis. They will need physical and spiritual support. But most of all they need the Gospel! They don't need handwringing and austerity. Give them full 200 proof Gospel! Remind them of the graciousness of God in the face of their own giving patterns which may have faltered over time. His grace continues to flow freely and extravagantly even amid social distancing! It will continue beyond this outbreak. It will even go all the way until that glorious day when Christ returns and we will find that new creation, free of any of the darkness that surrounds us now. This darkness is scary. But Christ Jesus is the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. So now more than ever sheepdogs need to get near the Shepherd! Listen to His voice yourself, then speak His consoling, healing Word to the souls entrusted to you. This is what the sheep need most. Jesus will lead us through!

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