When we equate Christian Stewardship with church fund raising we verge on blasphemy.

The Biblical teaching on our stewardship relationship to God and creation ought to be our key to life, our blueprint for life on this planet. Instead we have trivialised the word and the concept and for most modern Christians stewardship means little more than offering envelopes and money in the collection plate. To appreciate what we have lost we must, once again, go back to the Bible.

The Bible begins with some very basic assumptions. It assumes that God is the Lord of Creation; the author and sustainer of all things. Everything that is and everything that ever will be belongs to God.

It tells us that men and women have been created to live in a special relationship with God and that he has chosen to share with us his ownership of the created order.

It tells us that, since the beginning of time, men and women have lived uncomfortably with this relationship; that we invariably choose to reverse the natural order and to assert that we - not God - are the owners and Lords of Creation. That, says the Bible, is our eternal problem; the source of all our sin.

The Bible uses many different pictures and images to illustrate these basic assumptions about God and our relationship to God but one of the most enduring and powerful is that of the steward.

The word stewardship occurs just 30 times in the Bible but the stewardship principle is basic to both Old Testament teaching and to the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus used the word in just two of his parables - the parable of the Wise and Foolish Servants (see Luke 12:42-48) and the parable of the Unrighteous Steward (see Luke 16:1-18). But the image of the steward runs through many of his other parables: Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31); the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21); the Unfaithful Servants (Mark 12:1-9; Matthew 21:33-44; Luke 20:9-19); the Unprofitable Servant (Luke 17:7-10); the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-35); the Obedient and Disobedient Sons (Matthew 21:28-32); and The Talents (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-26).

Nearly all of these parables involve the same three elements: an owner or landlord, a tenant and the owner’s property. The owner, while retaining ownership of the property, entrusts it to the tenant and the tenant is responsible for the care and management of the property until the owner claims it back. The critical point of the parables is that the tenant is ultimately accountable to the owner for the care and management - the stewardship - of the property.

The important thing to remember is that everything, ultimately, belongs to God. Everything and everybody belongs to him. We bring nothing into this world and we take nothing out yet most of us are like the rich fool. We spend our lives hoarding and accumulating things and relationships as though our salvation depended on it. Those stewardship parables are as true today as they were 2000 years ago.

Real happiness and true freedom consists in affirming with King David that ‘Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you’; that there is nothing, nothing, nothing, that God hasn’t given us and that we did nothing to deserve any of it.

All our gifts - our possessions our families our friends and life itself - are gifts from a God who loves us.

Our response to this bountiful and overflowing providence must be one of thanksgiving by offering to God that which already belongs to Him. We have nothing else to give. We can only offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, for service in God’s Church and God’s world.

So what has money got to do with it?

Like it or not, money is important. In western society money assigns status, it defines success and it is used as a measure of a person’s worth. Our governments are elected according to how much of it they promise to put in our pockets and it is cited as the major contributing factor in 75% of all marriage breakdowns. Most of us need more of it and most of us, if we are honest, have a very good idea of just how much of it we
need in order to do the things we really want to do. In our society money is important. Mention money and you will have everybody’s undivided attention.

Jesus knew this. Many people would have us believe that Jesus talked most about ‘spiritual’ things like love and peace and forgiveness but an examination of the Gospels shows that simply isn’t true. The fact is that Jesus talked most about wealth and possessions. One sixth of his recorded words, one third of his parables were concerned with this one subject, and for a very good reason.

Jesus understood, better than most, our ancient love affair with material possessions. When the rich young man came to him asking what he must do to inherit eternal life Jesus didn’t tell him to say his prayers or to study the scriptures. He knew that for that young man the basic spiritual problem was his attachment to ‘his’ possessions. He told him to sell his possessions and to give the money to the poor. That story has been voted - at least by Christians in the western world - as one of the most uncomfortable in the New Testament.

Jesus was not against material wealth and possessions. Indeed it is recorded that he enjoyed the good life enough to attract the criticism of the Pharisees. What Jesus decried was our human tendency to put our trust in the gift rather than in the giver.

So how do we overcome this ancient love affair? We do it by learning to give. And for Christians in our society that usually means learning to give our money.

Christian Giving

Simply stated, the Bible says two things about Christian Giving. It says that our level of giving should relate to our level of income; that we should give thankfully according to how we are blessed. And it says that our giving will involve tithing a carefully and prayerfully thought out proportion of our income to God, through the Church and the charities we choose to support.

Many Christians assume that the tithe equals ten percent and that ten percent should be the Christian norm. They argue that ten percent was the Old Testament standard and that Christians can hardly do less. But the biblical teaching is not as simple as they would have us believe.

It is true that, in Old Testament times, tithes of all agricultural products were given to honour God as owner of the land and the giver of the produce, to support the temple and priesthood and to provide for widows and orphans. But scholars have shown that Old Testament tithing practices were not necessarily tied to ten percent. Depending on how they were calculated the agricultural tithes could total either twenty percent or twenty three percent of a tither’s total income. And there was no tithe at all on artisans, tradesmen, fishermen and Jews living outside Palestine.

The New Testament is similarly vague. Nowhere does it contain a specific instruction about how much a Christian should give. The tithe is mentioned just three times in the New Testament - in Matthew 23:23, Luke 18:12 and Hebrews 7:1-10 - and in each case the reference to the tithe is quite incidental to main point of the passage. In New Testament times there were twelve regularly prescribed tithes and offerings which, when added to the Roman tax, would have totalled nearly forty percent of a strict tither’s income.

So it is not historically accurate to assume that devout Jews gave exactly ten percent, that Jesus as a devout Jew gave ten percent, and that Christians should therefore do the same.

What Jesus did teach was something far more radical. He went back to the basics and taught the original Biblical principle; that God is the Owner and Lord of Creation, that we are stewards who hold the created order in trust, and that our freedom, fulfillment and happiness depends on our willing acceptance of that basic truth.

So how much should a Christian give? The Bible - and therefore the Anglican Church - gives no specific answer to that question but it does say that the first Christians gave generously and sacrificially and St Paul instructed them to give according to their means; ‘On the first day of each week, each of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income...’ (1 Corinthians 16:2). The Bible tells us to tithe; to give generously, sacrificially and proportionately according to our means. Then it leaves it up to us.

Think about it

There are two areas of life in which we find out how much we trust God – in how we give and how we die. Practicing the first helps us to get ready for the second.
- Ethicist Sondra Ely Wheeler

The man who dies rich dies disgraced.
- Andrew Carnegie