

A Vision for Stewardship in the Church Community

Adapted from a presentation by Gary Miller

Vision is essential in challenging times like we live in when truth is relative, and technology and materialism press in. Vision means looking beyond where you are and looking to where you are going and where you should be.

We need church leaders who do more than just analyze how their decisions appear to others. We need visionary leaders who have clear goals for their churches and who prayerfully seek a path forward for their people.

Let's look at five areas where Biblical stewardship connects with the need for vision in our church communities.

The purpose of a church community

Churches are groups of people called to work together while following Jesus. Does your church have a clear vision of where you want to go and what you are trying to accomplish? If so, does it align with God's vision? What does God want your church to achieve?

Church life isn't easy. Sometimes when people work together, the result is conflict. Think of all the energy that goes into your church: the events, meetings, and disagreements that need to be worked through. In the New Testament church, we see deacons ordained to deal with a conflict that arose. The church was brand new, and already there was murmuring.¹ With so much potential

for disagreement, why not let everyone worship God at home rather than bringing them together and creating this conflict and busyness?

One obvious reason is that humans are relational. We need support and exhortation from each other, and we find joy in our church communities. But there is something we often forget. Jesus said that the church is to be a public demonstration to the world around us.² Just prior to His death, in a heartfelt prayer to His heavenly Father, Jesus prayed that we would be one as He and the Father are one (John 17:21-23). Love for each other is a high calling to publicly demonstrate God's love to the world. Seekers observe how we interact and notice when we care for each other.

If I would ask your non-Anabaptist neighbors about your church, what would they say? Would they say unity and caring for one another are what's important to you? Would they say your church's priorities align with Jesus' teachings?

God's love motivates us to be unified as a church and to care for one another and those in our local communities. In this, we fulfill the purpose of a church community.

Onlookers also notice our financial choices and how our businesses operate and interact with the public.

¹ Acts 6:1-7

² John 13:35

We need to encourage business owners to use their businesses as resources for the kingdom of God. Are wealthy businessmen in our churches held accountable for the use of their finances? Anabaptist businesses are a powerful tool to influence those around us for either the good or the bad.

The Master-steward relationship

I once did construction work for a wealthy man who owned several estates. The owner traveled a lot, so he hired a steward to oversee the construction work. We would ask the steward any questions we had, such as what color paint to use or how the owner would want this or that built. The steward knew the mind of his employer well enough that he could make decisions for him.

A steward is someone who manages resources that are not his own. He has the power to make decisions, but he is not the owner. The steward I worked with illustrates our relationship with God. God is the owner of all.³ We are only stewards of what He has given us. Our responsibility is to study and know the mind of our Master. While we would all agree that God owns all things, do we live like stewards or like owners? What do your choices reveal? Do your decisions reflect the mind of God?

Search your heart when you read scriptures that deal with possessions and wealth.⁴ Do these passages sound restrictive? Or do you see these passages as relief from a burden? Jesus wants us to rest in Him. Stewardship frees us from the burden that an owner carries. Jesus tells us that we are much more valuable in God's sight than the birds God cares for.⁵ Rather than being restrictive, God's ownership releases us from anxiety! God cares about us! Our first priority must be to "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

³ Psalm 50:10-12

⁴ Matthew 6:19; Luke 18:22

⁵ Matthew 6:26-30

We all like return on investment. When you plant one kernel of corn, you expect to see more than one come back. I believe God gave us this desire but remember that God also wants a return on His investment in us, whether that is material gifts, abilities, time, or money. Paul reminded the Corinthians that everything they have is from God: "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Think about the different gifts in your congregation. Are they being used effectively? One of the roles of a leader is not only to use his own gifts effectively, but also to seek out and encourage gifts in others. God wants us as leaders to be investors as well. You could say that God takes risks in His investments, and He wants us to take risks in our investment in others.

Jesus said that our giving or investing in God's kingdom should be done anonymously.⁶ This takes faith to believe that God sees and will reward us in some way.⁷ Faith inspires

us to invest in His kingdom, regardless of the personal, temporal benefit.

A proper theology of work

Our culture's perspective of work has changed. Manual labor tends to be looked at as something to avoid. Some seem to feel that physical labor is almost unspiritual; they want to do something more spiritual than manual labor.

Greek philosophers taught that the more spiritual you become, the less physical work you do. Aristotle wrote that a man who is becoming close to God is a man who sits and thinks deep thoughts. He believed that some men were destined to be slaves and laborers, but those who became more like God wouldn't get involved in physical labor. Philosophers tended to wrongly separate physical work from God.

How does God view work? After God created the world,

⁶ Matthew 6:1-4

⁷ Luke 12:33

the Bible says that “God ended his work which he had made; and rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made” (Genesis 2:2). God Himself is a worker. In fact, He came to us in two different ways—first as a gardener and then as a carpenter. We are created in His image; therefore, God expects us to work.

Even when it is not physical work, God wants us to accomplish something. Adam would not have been more spiritual had he sat back and done nothing. We also have the example of Bezaleel using his work skills in helping to build the tabernacle.⁸ Would it have been more spiritual for him to sit and think spiritual thoughts? No. God wanted Bezaleel to use his God-given gifts and abilities to accomplish His will.

Work well done is a witness to the world. Paul told the church at Corinth that whatever they do should be done to the glory of God, including ordinary tasks like eating and drinking.⁹ How do you do that? How do you glorify God by building a house, planting corn, or operating a business?

God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden and commanded him to cultivate and keep it.¹⁰ After the Fall, work became more difficult.¹¹ But even though the earth had been cursed, everything is redeemable, and we are to be involved in that redemption process.

The nature of work is to create order out of chaos. When God created the world, He took nothing and created raw materials. The material He created had no order until He created something orderly and beautiful out of the chaos.¹² This is the essence of what we do in our occupations. When you remodel a house, you’re transforming something old into something better. When you repair machinery, you return it to working order. When you turn a bare field into a productive field of corn, you’re creating production out of barrenness. We should demonstrate redemption in everything we do. We need

to teach our people that to work is to demonstrate God’s character.

Sometimes we react to Jesus’ teachings, thinking that God wants us all to be poor. But God doesn’t rejoice in poverty and starvation. Jesus fed the hungry when He was on the earth. He healed those with medical needs. God desires human flourishing.

At the same time, God doesn’t want us to be workaholics. He taught His people to stop their work and rest every seventh day. This was an act of trust and a reminder that God was in control. There is a time to engage in work, and there is a time to withdraw and rest. When we stop and rest, we demonstrate our trust that God will provide for our needs.

Laborers together with God

Ponder this reality: God, the Creator of the universe, wants us to be laborers together with Him.¹³ Can you comprehend that? Is there anything more amazing than to be called to work with the omnipotent God? This is a humbling thought!

But what does that look like? What does it mean?

It means that our work has a purpose. We are doing more than just building that house, milking the cows, or fixing that car. We are working with God in some way. Let’s dig a little deeper into this.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “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” (2 Corinthians 5:15). Everything about our lives must be dedicated to God. We cannot live a split life where we live part of our

lives for God and the other part of our lives for ourselves. *All* of our life is to be His. This is the only proper response to God for what He has done for us. God extended His grace to us, and we should not receive that grace in vain.¹⁴ God wants to use us to do things for Him in this world.

When someone asks us to partner with them, the first thing we need to find out is what they are trying to

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⁸ Exodus 31:1-5

⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:31

¹⁰ Genesis 2:15

¹¹ Genesis 3:17-19

¹² Genesis 1:31

¹³ 1 Corinthians 3:9

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 6:1

accomplish. Since God is asking us to partner with Him, we need to find out what He is attempting to achieve and what He expects from us. As we look at history, we see two things God expects from His partnership with man:

To declare the glory of God.¹⁵ Everything in nature is designed to reveal something about God. Most of us don't spend enough time discovering what God is attempting to teach us in nature. Look at the diversity in plant and animal life, and you see God's creativity. The more we observe nature, the more we see characteristics of God. Plants and animals demonstrate God's character because that is what they were created to do. They bring glory to God.

We also have been created to point others to God. Everything we do should point people to Him. We declare God's glory by being Christlike in how we relate to our customers and neighbors. Our lives should tell onlookers something about God.

To reconcile the world to Him.¹⁶ This theme of reconciliation between God and man is interwoven throughout the Bible. God desires for all mankind to be reconciled with Him. If we are partnering with God, this should be a part of our daily lives. Relationships matter to God, and they should matter to us. We should endeavor to build relationships with customers and coworkers and draw them toward God.

Does the focus in your church and business line up with these two expectations? Does your work and use of resources demonstrate the glory of God? Are you involved in reconciling others to God? Honestly consider where you are as a leader. Are you fulfilling God's call on your life by caring for others? Does your congregation and your neighbors feel cared for? When your unbelieving neighbors face a personal crisis, would your door be the first one they would come to? How often do you invite a neighbor into your home for a meal?

We are called to be pilgrims in this world.¹⁷ A pilgrim

travels best when he travels light. When going on a backpacking trip, you take only what is necessary, so you are not weighted down with extras. Timothy reminds us that we brought nothing into the world, and we will take nothing with us when we leave.¹⁸ This world is not our home. We are only backpackers here.

This pilgrim mindset affects our choices, motives, and activities. Joseph accomplished much as a great leader in Egypt, but his heart was back in Canaan. Before he died, he requested that his people take his bones along with them when they return to their land. While we are to accomplish things on this earth, we must not let our hearts get attached to things here. This means saying "no" to affluent living and, instead, investing in the kingdom of God.

We can be guilty of using Scripture to defend our positions without being open to the truth of the Scripture. Let's encourage our people to dig for truth, discerning the subtle errors of nominal Christianity. While well-known people like Dave Ramsey have some good teaching, we need to be alert. One of Dave's quotes is, "Live like no one else, so some day you can live like no one else." Proverbs does say we should look to the ant who stores up for hard times. But Jesus balances it out by saying, "Lay not up

for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal" (Matthew 6:19). Jesus spoke often about the dangers of building wealth.

A popular preacher, Joel Osteen, authored a book entitled *Your Best Life Now*. How does that line up with Jesus' words in Matthew 19:29? ("And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or

mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.") Jesus taught that if we are willing to sacrifice in this life, we will experience the better life in eternity, not now.

Let's take inventory of our hearts. Jesus said that our hearts will be where our treasures are. Therefore, we can find out where our hearts are by observing where our

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¹⁵ Psalm 19:1a

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:18-19a

¹⁷ 1 Peter 2:11

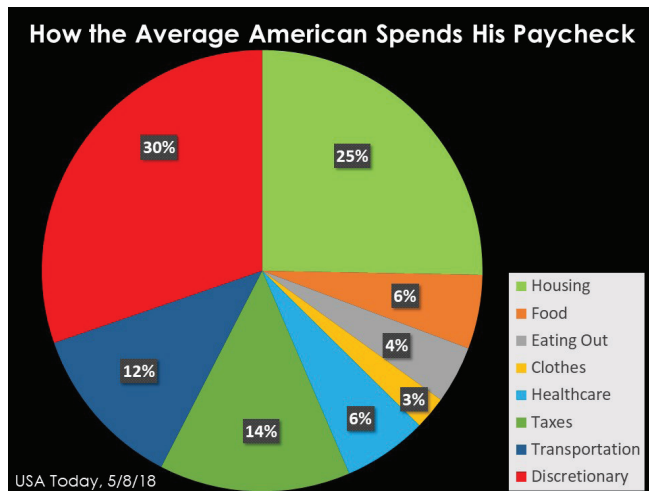
¹⁸ 1 Timothy 6:6-8

treasures are. Our daily choices reveal the location of our treasure.

All of us get 24 hours in a day. Statistics say the average American spends approximately nine of those hours on personal care, sleeping, and eating, and seven hours on required tasks, such as work. That leaves an average of eight hours per day that can be used for other things. This is called discretionary time because we choose what we do with this time.

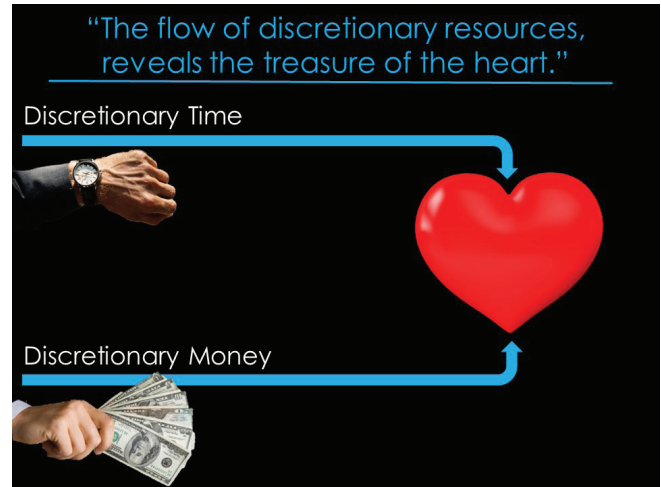
While the amount of discretionary time varies, we all have time outside of eating, sleeping, and working that we decide what we will do with. We need to think seriously about what we do with this time. What do we do when we have a day off from work? How we spend this time tells us where our hearts are.

How we spend our discretionary money also shows where our hearts are. Below is a chart depicting how the average American spends his paycheck:



Of course, these numbers will vary for each person. But it is significant that in America, about 30% of our income is used for discretionary things. We need to pay close attention to what is happening with this extra money. Why? Because it reveals what we love. It shows what we are passionate about. Or, like Jesus said, it shows where our hearts are.

The flow of our discretionary resources reveals the treasure of our hearts.



Where we invest our discretionary time and money reveals our hearts. Your resources might be going to hunting, fishing, traveling, reading, or collecting antiques. Or they might be going to the persecuted church or helping a neighbor. But follow the money, and you will find out what is in your heart.

When Jesus taught on wealth and possessions, His listeners were shocked by His view. At one point, they were astonished out of measure!¹⁹ If you were to stop in at your neighbors' house and talk to them about how you spend your resources, how would they respond? Would they be astonished out of measure? Leaders need to challenge their people to think about these things.

Church — God's risky public exhibit

God has chosen that His church be a public example of His kingdom. Unfortunately, this picture hasn't always been a pretty one. We will never get to the point where we feel we have attained in this area, but our communities should be on a journey to exhibit God's nature more and more perfectly.

Are you as a community seeking to get closer to God? Or do you simply tell yourselves that you're not as bad as others? A lady who had been raised in a Protestant group concluded that she was missing some vital doctrines and wanted to learn more. She began a journey of

¹⁹ Mark 10:23-26

seeking answers, and eventually arrived in an Anabaptist community that she felt was also on a journey to be closer to God. But after about two years, she realized her new church wasn't on a journey after all. Rather, they thought they had already arrived! She had gained doctrinal correctness but was concerned about the arrogant spirit in her Anabaptist congregation.

Churches can go bankrupt too. But it looks different than when a business goes under. When a business goes bankrupt, everyone knows it; it gets posted in the paper, and creditors often don't get paid. But when a church goes bankrupt, it happens silently. The auditorium may be full every Sunday, the treasury has money, and church life continues as normal. A bankrupt church goes through the motions, but something vital is missing. The passion and desire for God is gone.

Let's not become complacent in our need for God. Where do you go when facing a difficult decision either individually or as a community? It is the leader's role to call for collective fasts in the church, just as God's people have fasted collectively throughout history. How often does this happen in your church?

Church leaders, you have been given a certain amount of influence by virtue of your position. Are you a good steward of that influence? Are you warning your congregation about cultural pressures? Our youth need strong teaching on materialism. Can you be specific when teaching on these subjects? As a steward leader, you will be accountable for how you have used your position and influence.

Change is inevitable, and your congregation is going to change over time. Are you changing by default or by design? Are you prayerfully making change with purpose, or just allowing change to happen? Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." It is our responsibility as leaders to provide that vision.

You cannot expect to receive direction from God for your people if you aren't connected to Him. I encourage you to begin by pursuing God Himself. You won't hear from Him unless you are connected to the Vine and are able to hear His voice. Make fasting and prayer for your people a priority. As God gives you a vision for your people, have the courage to lead them prayerfully, patiently, and purposefully!

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