STEWARDSHIP OF TIME (VOLUNTEERISM)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

Christian stewardship represents a deep level of personal accountability to God as well as God's creation in all of its fullness and glory. Taking that concept as a point of departure, it must be recognized that stewardship is much more than tithes and offerings on any given Sunday. Within the history and heritage of African American Christians, the expression of stewardship has been viewed as an act of worship that certainly takes expression in the act of generous giving and personal thanksgiving that is too often defined as the giving of monetary gifts. This is frequently acknowledged in the countless musical renditions of, "All things come of Thee, O Lord," and of "Thine Own Have We Given Thee" that congregations across the country sing during offering time. More than a doxology that is sung in order to accompany the donation of dollars, these melodious words are an affirmation that Christian giving, worship, and witness must both advocate and teach what Christian social ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas calls an "ethic of primary responsibility." This school of ethical thought and practice calls for a form of stewardship that

demands that each of us present our bodies as "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is [our] reasonable service (Romans 12:1)." As such, being a living sacrifice means nothing less than giving up that commodity which most humans deem as priceless and limited, namely, one's time.

The most important dimension of stewardship of time as an ethic of primary responsibility, is the way it causes people to meaningfully reflect upon how they spend their time in service to others. For example, the rapper Jay-Z resoundingly criticized the Bush administration's utter failure to meet the needs of the citizens of New Orleans and surrounding areas in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation in his song, "Minority Report." In that selfsame song, however, Jay-Z reflects upon his own personal failure in that he did not volunteer to assist during the hurricanes; he offered money instead of himself:

> Silly rappers, 'cause we got a couple Porsches
>
> MTV stopped by to film our fortresses
>
> We forget the unfortunate.
>
> Sure, I ponied up a [million dollars] but I didn't give my time
>
> So in reality I didn't give a dime, or a damn,
>
> I just put my monies in the hands
>
> of the same people that left my people stranded
>
> Nothin' but a bandit, left my folks abandoned.
>
> … money we gave just a band aid
>
> Can't say we better off than we was before…[1]

Although typically known for lyrics glorifying drugs, sex, and violence, Jay-Z spoke out against the sort of shallow self-centeredness that he has helped perpetuate through his music. By searching his own soul for what truly would have been the best response to the disaster, Jay-Z realized that while donating a million dollars to relief efforts for Gulf Coast victims surely is a sizable gift in the eyes of the world, he openly admits that his conscience tells him what he (and all of us) ought to know: spending time on a volunteer basis helping someone in need often does more than just giving money.

II. A Recent Shining Moment in Black Volunteerism

Being stewards of our time effectively challenges African American Christians to regard their time, and activities spent in the service of God, as resources as precious and important as monetary or material gifts. As it has been historically practiced within the black church tradition, reasonable service is an expectation of any and all black church congregants. They tithe their time through sharing the wealth of all of their resources (talents, wisdom, and industriousness). Most importantly, the stewardship of time is essential for the upkeep of the Church and flourishing of God's people here on earth. By way of illustration, I recall that in the devastating wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in late 2005 how numerous black churches, especially here

in Texas, relearned the spirit of volunteerism in a mighty way. Just a few hours removed from the parts of the Gulf Coast that had been ravaged by the storms, many black churches mobilized quickly to rescue families, friends, and strangers alike when more official systems of support such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the American Red Cross failed in their relief efforts.[2]

Moreover, I personally remember working in conjunction with local churches to form an impromptu phone network in order to get displaced women, men, and children connected with generous folks in the Dallas-Fort Worth area willing to serve as host families indefinitely. In the midst of great despair and devastation, the efforts of black folk banding together constructively, in a time of crisis without expectation of payment or praise proved to be a shining moment in the recent history of the black church.

III. Church Work vs. the Work of the Church

Within the life of the African American church, volunteerism can be defined as contributing one's time or skills for charitable, social, educational, or other worthwhile purposes in one's community (however broadly or narrowly that concept may be defined). Most significantly, the notion of volunteerism depends upon action done of one's free will without regard for compensation. Furthermore, volunteerism demonstrates the willingness of people to work on behalf of others solely for the sake of doing the right thing for those who could be blessed by the effort.

Having a genuine appreciation of work is essential to the understanding of stewardship of time as an aspect of Christian living. When trying to discern the difference between "church work" and "the work of the Church," it is important to remember the wisdom found in Ecclesiastes 3:1 which states, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." It is no exaggeration to say that there is so much that needs to be done by every black church in the nation. From the pulpit to the pew to the parking lot, every member of the church ought to be thinking of all the work that must be done in and outside of the church. On the one hand, "church work" entails the activities that allow a church to function on a daily basis so that the major events within the life of the church, especially Sunday worship service(s), go forth without a hitch.

On the other hand, doing the "work of the church" refers more directly to the efforts Christians are supposed to engage in as they reach out to take care of "the least of these" in the spirit of Matthew 25:34-40. Churches and their members can tithe back to their local communities in a variety of ways such as: soup kitchens; clothes closets; homeless shelters; substance abuse/prevention (aka "12-step" programs); mentoring/tutoring programs for schoolchildren; daycare and/or after school programs; back-to-school drives; visiting the sick and elderly; and prison ministries. What is fascinating in this regard is that although these are the types of activities that Jesus Christ mandated for all believers, sadly, too many churches view working on behalf of the "least of these" as EXTRA, or ancillary, to the reality of what it means to be a church rather than making it the central definition of being a representation of Christ in the world. These initiatives have to be considered of great importance, especially given the wide array of social problems that confront African Americans in this society on a daily basis.

IV. Redeeming the Time: Mentoring through Practical Wisdom

As a member of a local church's women's ministry, my wife Stacey was instrumental in creating a "Princess Overnight." An annual event, it is where young African American girls between the ages of 12 and 17 get special attention focused on their specific realities as they approach womanhood. Many different areas are covered, ranging from academic achievement to sexual intimacy. Hosting the "Princess Overnight" event as a "slumber party" with games, prepared gift baskets, and rap sessions during a weekend at a local hotel, my wife and the other members of the women's ministry served not only as chaperones, but also as role models and conversation partners for the girls who otherwise might not have the chance to talk about these range of issues at home or school. Moreover, the act of showering the young women with so much positive attention, and genuine signs of affection was so overwhelming that it led many of the mothers who were not members of the women's ministry to half-jokingly ask "if you are going to do all that, can we be princesses for a night?"

In looking at the "Princess Overnight" program as an example, the event was centered upon extolling the virtue of practical wisdom as the firm basis of African American experience, as well as being a crucial element for governing oneself according to a belief in the stewardship of time.

Ultimately the scriptural assurance, especially in the process of mentoring as a virtue, is that the soundest investment in terms of the stewardship of time that the black church tradition can make is in the development of its youth for the overall betterment of the community.

V. What can Happen if More Volunteer

As people of African descent who have transcended some of the ravages of slavery and segregation in our history, a present challenge for many churches is how to incorporate white-collar professionalism as well as blue-collar expertise into the church's outlook on Christian service. In other words, how can the time and talents of medical doctors, lawyers, computer technicians, engineers, and investment bankers be brought into play by the church in the same ways that the skills of carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers, seamstresses, and cooks have been in the not so distant past.

Second and more importantly, how does the black church tradition move into the future in a healthy, helpful fashion and yet break the perpetual cycle of burdening good, faithful workers. The reality that the majority of churchgoers can walk in and out of church Sunday after Sunday without wondering, "What have I done for God lately?" unfortunately results in asking a large amount of work from a small group of people, rather than a small amount of work from a large group of people. The levels of volunteerism can vary greatly from church to church. Where more volunteer more is achieved.

For instance, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois where Reverend Otis Moss III is the pastor is a type of *Zingalamaduni*, a Swahili term meaning "beehive of culture and activity," for the residents on the South Side of Chicago. Trinity's inclusive ministerial outreach

has marshaled its resources to address civil rights, poverty, education, grief counseling, health care, social injustice, HIV/AIDS care and prevention, and community development among other countless initiatives. This black church has a spirit of ministry and volunteerism that is needed to meet the contemporary social, economic, political, and cultural problems of the African American community while always embracing the loving, healing spiritual mission of the Christian tradition. As such, Trinity UCC serves as a beacon of hope in an unfortunately blighted community.

Another example is Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco. Glide serves an average of 3,500 free meals every day; they serve breakfast, lunch and dinner! Glide also operates a free urgent care medical clinic, a major HIV-AIDS outreach project, and a free licensed child care program. It runs a major training and employment services program, adult computer education programs, a Crisis Center serving the homeless, and addiction recovery programs. Glide welcomes and affirms people of every race and color and ethnicity, religious belief and economic or social standing. Most of the work done through the programs at Glide is performed by volunteers. It has been a beacon of hope to persons in the San Francisco Bay Area for many years.

Yet another example is "Operation: Transformation," a direct action/outreach ministry by Friendship West Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. The purpose of "Operation: Transformation" is for church members to work in conjunction with the Dallas Police Department to reclaim and revitalize communities of color surrounding the church. Their efforts to combat crime in areas of South Dallas have been undertaken in a positive and productive manner rather than the alternating levels of either abuse of power or neglect of vital resources that affect too many poor communities of color at the hands of local authorities and elected officials.

We all know of churches who are shining examples of volunteerism. They feed those who are not members of their church. They help build homes working with groups such as Habitat for Humanity. They work with persons recently released from prison. They give scholarship assistance to children who are not members of the church. They serve as latch-key centers. They adopt troubled schools and the list goes on and on and on. However, there is so much more that must be done. It is plain to see that if every church's ordained and lay leadership emphasizes the perspective that we all must volunteer outside and inside of the church as part of our reasonable stewardship, then the chances of fulfilling God's will on earth becomes more feasible.

VI. Songs that Concern Stewardship (Volunteerism)

There are many songs that point us to our role as stewards who are to volunteer to make our churches, communities and the world a better place. One was penned by the R&B group Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, "Wake Up Everybody." Though from the secular world, it gained mass appeal across many music sectors because of its clear message that we all must do our part to bring about the change we have been waiting for. "May the Work I've Done Speak for Me" is an older hymn of the church that makes unequivocal the message that each of us has something to do that will become part of our legacy as we sojourn on earth. The final song, "What Shall I Render?" raises a profound stewardship question to which the only answer is worship through service.

Wake Up Everybody

Wake up everybody no more sleepin' in bed.
No more backward thinkin' time for thinkin' ahead.
The world has changed so very much
from what it used to be,
so there is so much hatred war an' poverty
Wake up all the teachers time to teach a new way
maybe then they'll listen to whatcha have to say
Cause they're the ones who's coming up and the world is in their hands
when you teach the children teach em' the very best you can.

Chorus
The world won't get no better if we just let it be.
The world won't get no better, we gotta change it yeah, just you and me.

Wake up all the doctors make the ol' people well
they're the ones who suffer an' who catch all the hell
but they don't have so very long before the Judgment Day
so won't cha make them happy before they pass away?

Wake up all the builders time to build a new land
I know we can do it if we all lend a hand
The only thing we have to do is put it in our mind
surely things will work out they do it every time.

Chorus.[3]

May the Work I've Done Speak for Me

May the works I've done speak for me.
May the works (I've done) speak for me.
When I'm resting in my grave,
there's nothing more to be said;
may the works (the works I've done)
let it speak for me, (for me).

Verse 2
May the life I live speak for me.
May the life (I live) speak for me.
When I'm resting in my grave,
there's nothing more to be said;
may the life (the life I live)
let it speak for me, (for me).

Bridge
The works I've done,

sometimes it seems so small,
it seems like I've done nothing at all.
Lord I'm (leaning) and depending on You,
if I do right You're gonna see me through;
may the works (the works I've done),
let it speak for me (for me).

Vamp
Speak for me,
speak for me.[4]

What Shall I Render?
What shall I render unto God for all His blessings?
What shall I render, what shall I give?

Verse 2
All I can render is my body and my soul.
That's all I can render, that's all I can give.

[Chorus]
God has everything.
Everything belongs to Him.

God has everything.
Everything belongs to Him.

What shall I render?
What shall I give?

What, shall I render
What shall I give?[5]

Notes

1. Jay-Z featuring Ne-Yo. "Minority Report." Kingdom Come. New York, NY: Sony Internationational/Roc-a-Fella, 2006.
2. For more details, see Dyson, Michael Eric. Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster. New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 2006.
3. Harold Melvin and The Blue Notes. "Wake Up Everybody." Wake Up Everybody: 15 Greatest Hits. UK: Remember Records, 1998.
4. Pugh, Sullivan S. "May the Work I've Done Speak for Me."
5. Douroux, Margaret Pleasant. "What Shall I Render."