

“DEPENDENT STEWARDSHIP”
A THEOLOGICAL MODEL FOR RESULTS-BASED LIVING & LEADING
by John K. Hopper

Mention the idea of church growth or ministry record-keeping in some circles, and you are likely to get plenty of raised eye brows, if not a load of hate mail. Perhaps because of the heavy emphasis on results in society as a whole, huge swaths of evangelicalism bristle at any orientation towards results in the church. But can the pendulum swing too far? Can we rightfully eliminate results from our understanding of the church and how it should work?

Although some would deny it, it seems to me that the very flow of the Scriptural canon suggests that God is interested in results. His actions are not random or haphazard, but rather are moving towards his eternal purpose of gaining glory for himself. Whether it be creating a world that declares his glory (Psalm 19:1-4), establishing a people that is to gain him glory (Isaiah 48:9-11), providing salvation in order to expand his glory (12:27), or gathering his chosen ones to sing of his glory (Revelation 7:10), God is about getting glory for himself from Genesis to Revelation. His satisfaction with nothing less leads me to the conclusion that at least in regards to His own glory God is purpose driven and results conscious.

While not everything that God pursues and does is rightfully ours to pursue, it has long been recognized that the pursuit of God's glory is not only God's chief aim, but is to be humankind's chief aim as well. This seems to be why the Psalms call us to God-focused praise (Psalm 96:7-8), the prophets' cry to for God's people to glorify Him (Jeremiah 13:16, Isaiah 42:12), and Jesus' Himself pursued of the Father's glory (John 8:50). Perhaps the clearest indication that God's glory is to be the pursuit of the common believer is Paul's words to the Corinthians: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). In other words, Paul presents God's glory as the ultimate measure of the believer's actions. Thus, at

least in regards to gaining glory for God, it must be recognized that men and women are called to results.

“Dependent Stewardship”

In that God has called believers to glorify him, some have suggested that Christians should see themselves as stewards of the process of glorifying God. The "stewardship" paradigm has its biblical basis in passages like Luke 16:1-13 (The Parable of the Shrewd Steward), Matthew 25:14-30 (The Parable of the Talents), and 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 (wherein Paul describes himself as a servant of Christ who has been entrusted with the secret things of God). These passages do well in conveying the idea that just as a steward is expected to actively and faithfully pursue the aims of his master so too God expects the believer to actively and faithfully pursue God's glory. Furthermore, they make certain the reader understands that similar to the manner in which an earthly steward will be held accountable to his master, so also a believer is accountable for the extent to which God's glory is achieved. The stewardship paradigm explains Paul's willingness to "become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Becoming all things to all men was no small task and required Paul to live in ways that were clearly foreign to his Judaic upbringing. But the effort to do so was justified and called for because Paul believed that as a steward of God's grace, and must apply that grace to seeing the salvation of others. To not aim for this God-glorifying result would be to the trust committed to him unfulfilled (9:17).

The stewardship paradigm, however, has its short comings. To say so is not to denigrate the authority of Scripture, but rather to recognize that Scripture often uses word pictures to describe only specific facets of multi-faceted theological

concepts. The most important short-coming of the paradigm of stewardship is the suggestion that God has fully delegated the responsibility of gaining glory for himself and has in some way "left town." This is the picture painted particularly in the Parable of the Talents and can lead one to conclude that God has left it up to the believer to gain glory for the Master. Paul roundly criticizes such a perspective in his letter to the Galatians and calls the churches in the region to a pursuit of God's glory that relies on the ever working, ever present Spirit of God and not on human effort (Galatians 3:1-5).

In light of the short-comings of the stewardship paradigm, I believe it is important to balance its instruction with Scripture's picture of the "clay pot" or "fruitful branch." In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul explains that the light of God's glory is contained in his mortal body, or "jar of clay," and is revealed to a watching world as Paul lays down the right to his own life. In other words, Paul recognized that his part in achieving the desired result of glorifying God was not so much to do great things for God, as it was to make himself wholly available to the ways in which the Holy Spirit wanted to use him. This same understanding is expressed by Jesus in his "fruitful branch" analogy of John 15:4-5. There Jesus explains that apart from complete dependence on him (and by implication on the Holy Spirit that would come after him) there is no hope of producing anything that God will value.

By coupling the stewardship concepts of active and accountable pursuit of the master's agenda with the "clay pot" or "fruitful branch" concepts of availability and dependence, I believe an accurate and important picture emerges of the divine-human partnership of achieving God-glorifying results. This picture (which I will refer to as "dependent stewardship") allows us to see that the effort which believers are called to is not an independent effort to further the glory of God, but rather an effort to place oneself at the complete disposal of the Holy Spirit so as to be guided and empowered into measurable God-glorifying living.

"Dependent Stewardship" & Eternal Consequences

As I have stated, I believe God is results-driven. That is, He is after His own glory and calls and equips the believer to do the same. This pursuit and attainment of glory is not just theoretical; it has lasting implications for those who chose or don't chose to pursue this God-given end. These implications are seen in both the Parable of the Talents as well as the analogy of the faithful branch. In the former example, those who pursue an increase in the master's wealth receive praise as well as further responsibility, while the one who does not is thrown outside "where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth" – a phrase Jesus equates with hell. In the latter example, the consequences awaiting those who do not "remain in the vine" is not much better, as they are said to be "picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned." This is a considerably different picture than the one who remains in the vine and produces much fruit. Thus, we must conclude that both in the stewardship and dependence aspects of the "dependent stewardship" theological model, there are significant consequences that await those who fail or succeed to live up to this divine call.

Those who argue against a results-oriented theology may look to the analogy of the vine and branch and say that the believer is only to remain in the vine and that any fruit (or results) that develop is the responsibility of God. In essence, they propose that we will not be judged by our God-glorifying results, but only by our so-called effort or desire to do so. While certainly God is the one who makes all things grow (1 Corinthians 3:7), this type of argument by its very nature suggests that there is the possibility that a believer could remain in God, but not produce fruit. Such a suggestion is completely foreign not only to John 15, but to the entire Scriptural canon. As James so forcefully argues, faith without accompanying works is dead (James 3:26). This is why we see in the Parable of the Talents that those who trusted in the true character of the master gave back more than what had been

entrusted to them, and also why the unfaithful servant received such harsh consequences even though he said he was looking out for the master's interests.

“Dependent Stewardship” & Biblical Results

Because there are eternal consequences associated with one's success in furthering the glory of God, there should be considerable interest on the part of the believer in discovering the relationship between one's faithfulness and biblical results. Certainly, one does not want to live in a way that has him thinking he is gaining glory for God, only to find in the end that he has traveled down the wrong path. Thus, if Scripture provides any means by which we can measure our progress in gaining glory for God, identification of these measures is imperative. Three such measures and their relationship to the believer's "dependent stewardship" are offered below.

The measure of the Spirit's fruit. When the Holy Spirit's God-glorifying activity is being expressed, we are told by Paul that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are present in the life of the believer (Galatians 5:22-23). Therefore, as a believer we can measure our dependence on the Holy Spirit in pursuing God's glory by examining the presence or absence of such fruit in our lives. The conclusion that these fruit are not expressed apart from the dependent stewardship of the believer is supported by Paul's direct call to the believer to live by the Spirit and not by the flesh (5:16), in order to see the Spirit's God-glorifying fruit produced.

The measure of saved souls. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus called the apostles to make disciples of people from all nations, as it is from a multi-national crowd that God ultimately seeks glory (Revelation 7:9-10). Furthermore, Jesus told his disciples that upon reception of the Holy Spirit they would become his witness around the world. From such statements, it is safe to suggest that one measure of whether or not we are properly pursuing the glory of God is the extent to which we are seeing people come to Christ as a result of our own efforts. That

such results are dependent upon a believer's faithful stewardship is consistent with Paul's willingness to "make [himself] a slave to everyone, (1 Corinthians 9:19), to "not run like a man running aimlessly" (9:26), and to beat his body (9:27). This strong language is all used to describe Paul's great effort to see as many people saved as possible (9:19,22) in order that he would not become disqualified from receiving a crown that would last forever (9:23,25,27).

The measure of caring for the poor. James writes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). Paul is encouraged by James, Peter, and John to remember the poor, something Paul said he was eager to do (Galatians 2:10). Jesus said to those who had helped the least among them that they were blessed and would have an eternal inheritance (Matthew 25:31-40). From passages like this it is possible to see that God seeks glory for Himself through the care of the poor, and that we can measure the extent to which we are adding to God's glory by examining our care for them.

Although what is offered above may not represent the only three measures of biblical fruit, the manner in which they are presented in Scripture makes it clear that the presence of such fruit is based upon the believer's "dependent stewardship." Furthermore, it is clear that those who produce such results will be duly rewarded, while those who do not will either be counted as cursed (Matthew 25:41) or as those who enter heaven, "but only as one who escaping through the flames" (1 Corinthians 3:15). As such, while God is himself in pursuit of his own glory and has provided believers his very life to make production of such glory possible through them, we must conclude that the believer has a God-given responsibility to examine her ways (Lamentations 3:40, 2 Corinthians 13:5) to see if she is producing God-glorifying fruit.

Questions for Discussion

- In your ministry context, do you find people are suspicious of a results-orientation? If so, in what ways are their concerns justified?
- What do you see as downfalls of concerning oneself with dependence and not stewardship?
- What do you see as downfalls of concerning oneself with stewardship and not dependence?
- Do you find that you live based on a theology that is tilted more towards dependence or stewardship?
- Other than the measures of fruit of the Spirit, saved souls, and care for the poor, can you think of other God-honoring measures of results?
- When was the last time you stepped back and assessed your own results in being part of God's plan to bring glory to Himself?

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