

Practicing God's Divine Arithmetic

by Alan G. Newton, Executive Minister, ABC of Rochester/Genesee Region

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” (Luke 1:68)

This prayer came from the lips of an elderly priest expressing his hope that his people, especially the next generation, would be restored to God. Zechariah's day was not too unlike today, where the majority of people live as strangers to God. They go through their days with hardly a thought directed toward God. They do not know the ways of God. They do not know the heart desires of the living God.

Is it a wonder that we find ourselves in this current financial crisis? We have sought after the American dream rather than God's dreams. We have lived well beyond our means, seeking our hearts' desires, and have not stopped to ask what God's heart desires.

Helen Barrett Montgomery, educator, author, pastor, and first woman to serve as President of the Northern Baptist Convention, faced a similar financial crisis and demonstrated what it meant to follow after God's desires. She and her husband sold their home and most of their possessions but would not reduce their giving to their church. Her husband, Will, had taught her about God's Divine Arithmetic—"the only way to keep money, land, or talent or happiness was to give it away. We practiced God's arithmetic all our lives, in times of plenty, but especially in times of scarcity, and it was always a joy." Before her husband died they gave a trust of \$100,000 to Keuka College, which was a sizeable fortune in 1931. Upon her death \$450,000 was left to local, national and international Christian causes.



We will be tempted to cut back on our personal giving in this time of crisis. Churches will be tempted to cut back on outreach and mission giving. While it is critical that we cease to borrow on the future and scale back on unnecessary spending we must ask ourselves how we can be prudent yet faithful to God. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in Letters and Papers from Prison, *“the church is only the church when it exists for others.”*

A Litany on Stewardship

Leader: Blessed God, thank you for your abundance and faithfulness to us in times of plenty and in times of need. Your goodness and generosity overflow everywhere. How great is our God!

People: **With grateful hearts, we thank you.**

Leader: Through your grace, given to us in Jesus Christ, we respond to your goodness, mindful of our church's needs, but more from hearts of love so that you can accomplish your work through us in this world.

People: **We love you because you first loved us.**

Leader: We are living in days of great financial challenges and stress, and the economic foundations of many have been shaken. Give us the wisdom and courage to keep our eyes on our needs, not on our wants, and to measure our giving according to your purposes for our lives.

People: **Remind us that true gain comes from godliness with contentment.**

Leader: Your word calls us away from adapting ourselves to the way of this present age and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Teach us again to understand the blessings of giving, the perils of hoarding, and the joy of living as the generous people you have called us to become.

People: **Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Give us the grace to put these words into practice.**

Leader: We live not for ourselves but for you alone and to help others in need. Open our eyes, hearts and resources to respond to the opportunities to serve others as did Christ.

All: **We commit ourselves again to be good, wise and generous stewards of your gifts.**

A Stewardship Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you for your promise to be with us in every moment of our lives, both the joyful and the challenging. We pray for ourselves, our brothers and our sisters who are experiencing financial stress at this difficult time. Be with those who are facing job loss, with those who have to choose between food and medicine, and with those who are pressured by the possibility of foreclosure and bankruptcy. We thank you for the gifts and blessings you continually send us; give us eyes to see those blessings. We thank you for entrusting us with the responsibility of stewardship; give us courage to please you in the choices we make. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, the Christ. **Amen.**