

A Steward for the Master

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Johnson

To frame my discussion of evangelism and stewardship, I want to put it within a biblical context, that of Genesis 24, which provides a model for us as it records a story of God enlarging the size of his family.

“Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, ‘Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Caananites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.’ The servant said to him, ‘Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?’ Abraham said to him, ‘See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, ‘To your descendants I will give this land,’ he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there.’ So the servant of Abraham put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter. Then the servant took ten of his master’s camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. Genesis 24:1-10

Let me say from the outset that stewardship is about so much more than money. By definition, stewardship means the conducting, supervising, or managing of someone else’s something. In the English language, the word itself dates back to the 15th century but the concept has been part of the human experience since we were placed here on this earth by God, who put our first parents in the garden to “take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). It all belonged to God but God was entrusting its care to them and, by generational extension, to us.

Genesis 24:1 “Now Abraham was old ...”

I am glad that God is not finished with old things. I appreciate that although Abraham had some time under his belt, God still had something for him to do. Considering that the vast majority of our nearly 5500 ABC congregations are old(er), a few as old as nearly 400 years, I’m glad that God still has a work for each to do, with the expectation that each will do it according to sound stewardship principles.

Genesis 24:2 “Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house ...”

The sentence could be referring to the age of the servant or the servant who had been with Abraham the longest. I prefer the latter rendering because it implies that Abraham and Eliezer spent quality and quantity time together. This was the unseen and unmentioned but not unimportant foundational work. Proper stewardship, the care of someone else’s something, only occurs as we have spent time with the original owner of the ‘something’ so we know how they would want it taken care of. Abraham didn’t need to doubt what the servant would do, and the servant didn’t need to second guess himself. The master and the servant had spent time together; therefore the servant knew what to do and who to look for, as if the master himself was present in the actual experience.

Genesis 24:3 “and I will make you swear ...”

Obviously the context here is not referring to cursing, though improper stewardship may drive some people to that. Swearing here means to take an oath. We must see the care given to someone else's something as both a responsibility and also a privilege. It is an obligation that is expected of us inherent with being a servant to the master, but also one that the master asks us to accept for ourselves. The master places great trust and great expectation in the servant.

Genesis 24:4 “... and take a wife for my son Isaac.”

Pure and simple, this is evangelism as its very best. Evangelism is not about convicting, convincing, or converting anybody. That is solely the work of the Holy Spirit. Our role in evangelism is to merely extend the invitation to people outside the family of God to join it, by faith. This definition of evangelism plays out in the verses following where the servant says ‘but what if’ and Abraham tells him to merely offer the woman the opportunity, and leave it at that. Evangelism is not done to grow our church; growth will be a natural by-product of our efforts. Evangelism is about increasing the size of God's family. It is taking the words of Jesus literally when He said “my Dad's house is huge, so invite everyone you want!” (John 14:2; my paraphrase).

Genesis 24:10 “Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master ... and went to Mesopotamia ...”

Here, it is made clear that there is much more to being a steward than just taking care of monetary, material matters. Long before the servant took the master's resources, the servant took time to be with the master, time that led to some responsibility and action. Time here is presented not only in regard to the time the servant spent with the master on the front side of the command, but also the time the servant took out of his own life to make the five hundred mile, several month long trip on the back side of the command. This was not an overnight experience. Once the request - dare I say, obligation - came from the master, whatever else the servant had planned in his own life went on hold, or was completely discarded. The master's request now became the servant's priority and purpose.

In regard to material things, yes, the servant did take actual, physical property, but although the possession of items passed from Abraham to Eliezer, the ownership of those items did not. No matter what they were, no matter where they were, the items still belonged to the master. The servant was simply to use them to fulfill the master's plan, i.e. extend the invitation – do evangelism. Clearly, if we are going to do evangelism as presented here, it is going to cost us something: time, energy, will, and material possessions. And these are resources spent not only to invite others, but to assimilate them into fulfilled and fully functional members of the family. In the days of Abraham, these resources were camels and choice gifts; in our day and age, it would be money.

In 1990, the near equivalent of a generation ago, Win Arn said that 10% of every dollar a church received should be spent for evangelistic outreach.¹ Now, considering that more than two decades later the number of unchurched persons has grown significantly² making the United States the third largest unchurched nation in the world, shouldn't the percentage of expenditures grow proportionately as well? Yet studies repeatedly show that less, not more is being spent on evangelistic efforts to connect with people and connect people with Christ. The vast majority of

money spent today by U.S. churches is spent on just keeping the institution going, not enlarging its border. A recent survey of pastors showed that if their church received an unexpected financial windfall, they would use it to enhance or enlarge their facilities or increase the size of their staff.³ Reaching out to others was farther down on the list of priorities, clearly indicative of maintenance, not missional ministry. Arn's suggested 10% referred to 10% of what is received, not what is spent, though so many churches today are just making weekly budget or consistently falling short and even drawing down on long held reserves that the point is moot.

It should go without saying, but I will say it anyway: every church budget needs to include monies for existing outreach, as *well* as provide for new evangelistic ministries yet to be realized. Such resources would be used to connect the existing congregants with new people outside the church, and also to empower new people who are reached to connect with others outside the church, because no one knows more people outside the church than those who just came into the family. The monies should support activities that get the members of the master's family to go where folks are gathered who aren't yet members (Genesis 24:11). Money spent under the guise of evangelism is often used for activities designed to get people to come to us – such as traditional, annual revivals – instead of supporting efforts to go to them. To know the value, beyond the dollar amount, your church places on reaching others, see where this particular line item occurs in the budget, if there is a line item for evangelism at all. We often give evangelism little, or the leftovers, if there are any. If the only intent in connecting with people outside the church is to get people in the pews and proceeds in the plates, outsiders will see through that, as rightly they should. In such cases, people are seen as the means to keep the church going, instead of the church being the vehicle to share how they can join the family. Our motives must be pure.

We also need to note the emphasis the master places on the *one*. Effort and expense for just one person was worth it in the eyes of the master. Although the early church would be birthed by large scale, public gatherings, by the end of the Book of Acts it was individual encounters that brought people into the family of faith, one by one. The character of the person outside the family must also be noted. Rebekah was beautiful and upright on the inside (Genesis 24:16). This is not the stereotype of the person outside the family that the church often puts forth today, sinners, down and out, living bad lives – although there is a place in the family for these as well.

Remember, it's the Great Co-Mission, "co" meaning at least two. Eliezer's name means "God has helped". We are not expected to do evangelism on our own, but in partnership with God, who is the controlling partner and we the managing partner of God's resources. We and our church ought to be part of something bigger than ourselves, something that outlasts us and our generation and connects with subsequent generations, so that those who come behind us find us faithful ... faithful stewards, that is.

1. Arn, Win. *The Church Ratio Book*. (Monrovia, California: Church Growth, Inc, 1990).
2. www.baptistsites.net/revive/index.cfm?page=13
3. <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23274>

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