

The Crooked Staff of the Turf Shepherd

[or ownership vs. stewardship, a philosophical treatise in progress]

One of the most widespread errors marring the landscape of contemporary Christianity is the issue of ownership in ministry. If you listen to some leadership gurus, you will hear this distortion time and again. But at the core, this misconception leads into a dangerous pitfall—turf-shepherding. At the heart of the issue is control, and there is nothing new about it. It was the seductive bait dangled skillfully by the serpent in the Garden. As we are seeking to build a biblical culture, let us clarify the matter and state emphatically: as Christ-followers, ownership in the kingdom of God is not offered to us. Stewardship, on the other hand, is placed squarely on our shoulders. The difference is more than semantics, it is sovereignty.

It has always caused me to cringe a little when people refer to the church I serve as “your church.” It is not. Ownership has been clearly established in the New Testament: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:20)” If my body is not my own, how could I ever make the stretch that the body of Christ, or any part of it, belongs¹ to me? I didn’t redeem the church. Nor did I purchase stock in the kingdom of God.

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From a leadership perspective, I understand what people are trying to communicate when they talk of ownership, and agree that it makes sense in a secular setting. I’ve read enough leadership books, endured enough leadership classes, and attended enough leadership conferences to have these principles solidly drilled into my skull. The church is a volunteer organization. As a visionary, you have to get people to “buy in” to the vision. To attract and keep members and to grow your constituency, you must help them feel invested, see that there is benefit to their participation, give them ownership. But is that really the biblical picture? (An honest question.)

I know I’m venturing out onto a lonely limb here.. Though I’m not a prolific reader, I can’t recall reading any one else articulate the philosophy I’m trying to here (Although, I’m sure it has been done, for the wheel has been a’round for a while.) However, I know I’m taking the calculated risk of swimming against the stream, but being counted in the minority report is a risk I’m willing to venture if it rightly syncs me with the pulse of God.

I’m beginning to think we’ve horribly disfigured the message of Jesus into a high-fat, low-protein buffet. We’ve created a Cafeteria Christianity that invites consumers to take as they please and makes only mild reference to the core content of Jesus’ call. When Jesus calls a man or woman, he bids them *come and die*. I dare you to read his biographies in totality and draw any

¹ In English, the word “belong” may denote property subject to ownership, or mutual interdependence through association (my definitions.) I am, of course, in this context referring to the former and not the latter, for the latter definition can be clearly established in the biblical record.

other conclusion. He states, unequivocally, live beyond yourself. Unite yourself to a Tribe, a Movement, a Community that is bigger than you. Divest yourself. Embrace servanthood. Shoulder a cross. I've looked long and hard, and I've yet to find stock options to the kingdom offered in the New Testament.

Of course there are benefits; it would be foolish and ignorant to argue otherwise. But the benefits come not in finding yourself, but in losing yourself. Not in becoming first, but becoming small. Not in taking, but in giving. Not in controlling, but in joining. Heaven is offered to those who humble themselves, and expressly restricted to those who don't (Matthew 18:3-4.)

There are those—and we've all seen them—that under the guise of spiritual service are really only seeking the spotlight. Much of Christian television is a sordid example, but you will find them in your local church as well. Hungry for recognition, validation, and yes, control, they stake out their turf and pounce at any threatening movement. Any attempt to redirect or redecorate is met with stiff opposition. This couldn't be further from the portrait painted in the New Testament.

“This is *my* job. This is *my* giftedness. This is *my* talent. This is *my* ministry.”

No it's not. It is all to him, it is all from him, it is all through him, and it is all for him. (see Romans 11:36)

As a pastor, this truth is especially sobering. I recognize that I have been charged with a heavy responsibility, and to be quite frank, held to a higher accountability (James 3:1.) But it is not ownership I've been given, it is stewardship. Being an owner and being a steward are as different as being a king and being a slave. (Another word for steward is manager or trustee.)

“Now it is required that those who have been given a *trust* must prove faithful.” – 1 Cor. 4:2

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully *administering* God's grace in its various forms.” – 1 Pet. 4:10

“That's why it is important to remember that the Senior Pastor of a church is Jesus Christ.”

In each of these statements, the word “steward” was used in the older English translations. Unfortunately, the word has lost its prominence in the English language over the past few decades, and should be placed on a linguistic endangered species list. No where have I been able to find the word “owner” used in reference to the redeemed.

That's why it important to identify the Senior Pastor of a church as Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4.) Every other pastor is at most a junior pastor... even the lead pastor. This is not to suggest that there is not authority placed on my shoulders (see

1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Tim. 5:17; Hebrews 13:17) along with the stewardship the role bears, but even that authority is a trust and a gift, and can be taken from me anytime the King sees fit. Should he

choose that I would serve him better as a foot than as shoulder, who am I to argue with the Head? Should I cut off my nose to spite my face?

It is actually sort of liberating for me to operate in this reality. If it were my church, I would be responsible for meeting its needs, and I cannot. I am no one's messiah, no one's redeemer, nor do I have a need to be. I am a steward, responsible to the Owner to execute my role faithfully. So are you.

Understanding this, we can move beyond the unbiblical and unhealthy view that we own anything in the kingdom of God. We serve where he tells us to, when he tells us to, and how he tells us to, and we do so within the biblical construct he has so clearly outlined in his Instruction Manual. *It's not submission until it's difficult.*

The concept of ownership is fine for the corporate world, and may even fit well within civic organizations, but the Tribe of Jesus Christ is unlike any other union on Earth. There are sound principles from many disciplines (business, psychology, etc.) that may be brought to bear on the fleshing out of the church, but only in so far as they do not contradict scripture. But the church is not a democracy, it is a Kingdom. As such, all the turf belongs to him.



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