

THE STEWARDSHIP OF THE GRACE OF GOD

BY JAMES FITE

When surveying lists of recent Christian bestsellers, it would seem that the word *stewardship* in its modern usage is mostly an euphemism for reaching for the checkbook to either open it or protect it. A few of these titles go deeper, equating stewardship to the prudent management of time and other limited resources. These popular concepts, however, could not be further afield from Paul's usage of the term *stewardship*, especially when he connects it with the phrase *the grace of God* as in Ephesians 3:2.

The word *grace*, when used in a religious context, commonly connotes God's unmerited favor, a concept that is far short of the New Testament's revelation concerning grace. Hence, a more complete understanding of the term *grace* is also required in order to see, in the light of God's Word, the real significance and present application of Paul's phrase *the stewardship of the grace of God*.

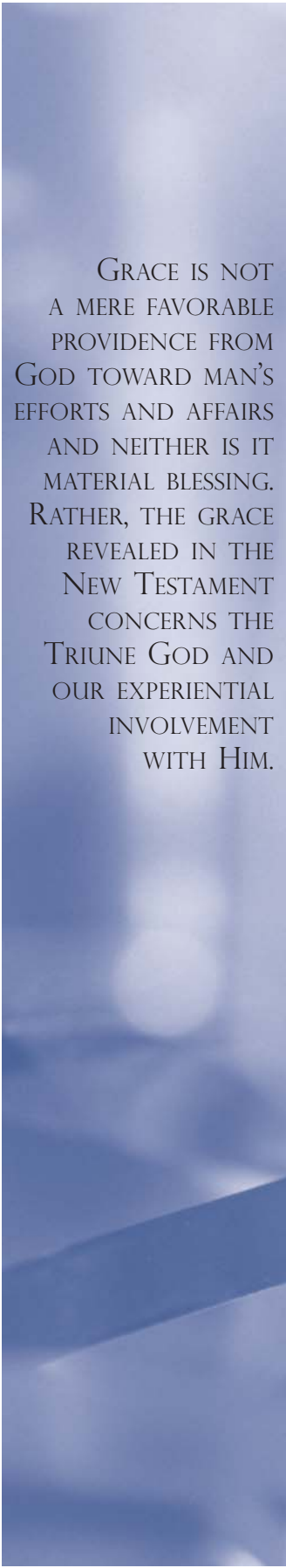
The Context of Ephesians 3:2

In verses 2 and 3 Paul connects the stewardship (οἰκονομίαν) given to him with the mystery being made known to him. Verse 4 indicates that this mystery is "of Christ." According to verse 6, the mystery of Christ made known to Paul is that "in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise through the gospel." Hence, the mystery of Christ relates to the church as the Body of Christ, which Body comprises the Jews and the Gentiles (cf. 2:14-16). In verse 7 of chapter 3 Paul mentions again "the grace of God," saying that he became a minister of the gospel "according to the gift of the grace of God."

This second mention of the grace of God refers to a gift given to Paul that enabled him to announce "the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel" to the Gentiles and to enlighten all to see the "economy [οἰκονομία] of the mystery" (vv. 8-9). Paul continues in verses 10 and 11, speaking of the wisdom of God, the church, and God's eternal purpose. Hence, the stewardship of the grace of God in verse 2 issues in the accomplishing of God's eternal purpose—the universal display of His multifarious wisdom "through the church" in verse 10.

The Grace of God

Grace is a particular and oft-used word in the New Testament (mentioned over one hundred thirty times). More than a third of these references are found in the introduction and conclusion of each Epistle. Except for James and Jude, the Epistles and Revelation open with a greeting of grace and/or conclude with a commendation of grace. Many New Testament readers may simply overlook these references, considering



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them a mere formality that was customary at the time of writing. However, no word of the Bible, God's Word, should be considered as superfluous. Grace is a core and fundamental New Testament theme.

The particular phrase *the grace of God* occurs over twenty times in the New Testament.¹ An additional reference in Acts suggests an equivalence between the grace of God and the grace of the Lord (14:26; cf. 15:40). The grace of God can be seen, given, received, and known (11:23; 1 Cor. 1:4; 3:10; 2 Cor. 8:1; Col. 1:6). The grace of God is a realm that the believers can stand and continue in or fall from (1 Pet. 5:12; Acts 13:43; Heb. 12:15). Paul laid a foundation upon which others could build according to the grace of God, and he labored more abundantly by this grace (1 Cor. 3:10; 15:10). Furthermore, the grace of God is personified in that it can be commended to (Acts 15:40), nullified (Gal. 2:21), appear, and bring salvation (Titus 2:11). Ultimately, this abounding grace of God (Rom. 5:15) is the person of Christ Himself (1 Cor. 15:10; cf. Gal. 2:20). Hence, the gospel is the proclamation of this grace (Acts 20:24).

In the New Testament the grace of God is neither material blessing nor a mere bestowal of unmerited favor. Rather, grace is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ as the very manifestation of God Himself (cf. John 1:14, 17). That the grace is *of* God indicates that God is the source of the grace. Furthermore, *of God* also connotes that the constituent of grace is God Himself. The grace of God is not merely an objective gift for us to receive but a subjective supply for our experience and enjoyment.

Grace is not a mere favorable providence from God toward man's efforts and affairs and neither is it material blessing. Rather, the grace revealed in the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament, concerns the Triune God and our experiential involvement with Him. The Father is the God of all grace (1 Pet. 5:10), and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29; cf. Zech. 12:10). When Jesus Christ came as the incarnate Word, He was full of grace and was the coming of grace (John 1:14, 16-17). The coming of grace was the coming of a person; hence, grace is a person, Christ Himself. The concluding blessing of 2 Corinthians juxtaposes the grace of Christ with the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (13:14), further indicating that grace is not merely a pillar of doctrinal theology but the personal experience and enjoyment of the Triune God in the Son. Simply put, grace is God in Christ as the Spirit received, enjoyed, and experienced. This biblical concept of grace is foundational to our apprehending Paul's term *the stewardship of the grace of God*.

Stewards and Stewardship

The word οἰκονομία, anglicized as *economy*, appears at least nine times in the New Testament.² The word has the sense of the conduct and function in what is often an official office. In Ephesians 3:2 this word is translated "dispensation" (KJV), "administration" (Darby), "stewardship" (NASB), "commission" (NRSV), or "ordering" (BBD). One of the older English versions translates it as "ministracion" (Tyndale), and a recent version interestingly and aptly translates this word as "responsibility to distribute" (CEB).

There are ten verses that use the related word οἰκονόμος, which refers to the person who fills the office or carries out the administrative function.³ The King James Version for the most part translates this word as "steward"; the exceptions are in Romans 16:23, where it is translated "chamberlain," and Galatians 4:2, where the plural form is translated "governors." Strong's suggests that the Greek word derives from *oikos* ("house") and *nomos* ("law"), hence, "house-law."

The English word *steward* has historically carried the sense of serving in a household,

usually in the capacity of overseeing the household finances and especially the provision and distribution of food. Even in modern usage, the association of the word *steward* with food has continued (e.g., stewards and stewardesses on ships, trains, and airplanes). Similarly, the word *stewardship* continues to connote responsible management and oversight (e.g., of institutional and personal assets and resources).

The Lord's parable in Luke 16:1-13 is perhaps the New Testament portion that best illustrates both the function of the office (stewardship) and the person carrying out the responsibilities of that office (steward). The central figure in the parable is an unrighteous steward of a rich man. The steward refers to the rich man as "my master" (v. 3). Verse 13 refers to the steward as a "household servant." This steward, who has been accused of squandering the rich man's possessions, is called by his master to give account of his stewardship (vv. 1-2). In this context *stewardship* refers to the function being carried out in order to account for, distribute, preserve, and grow the rich man's financial assets and food resources, whereas *steward* refers to the person who is responsible for carrying out this management function.

In the parable the steward, for his self-preservation, prudently settles at a discount the debts of oil and wheat that were owed by debtors to his master (vv. 6-7). This steward is considered prudent in the sense that he made the way for others to receive him after being dismissed from his position. The Lord in His application of the parable referred to "unrighteous mammon" (v. 11, cf. v. 13) as being in opposition to God. In other words, the oil and wine, which were unrighteously, yet prudently for his own interest, used by the steward are analogous to mammon, which is unrighteous but can be used prudently by the Lord's disciples for God's interest. Those disciples who use unrighteous mammon prudently in this age will have friends who will receive them "into the eternal tabernacles" in the coming age (v. 9). In this parable the oil and wine have an equivalence to capital, a currency of exchange. The rich man's servant, who manages the rich man's resources and capital, is thus a steward, and his official function is his stewardship.

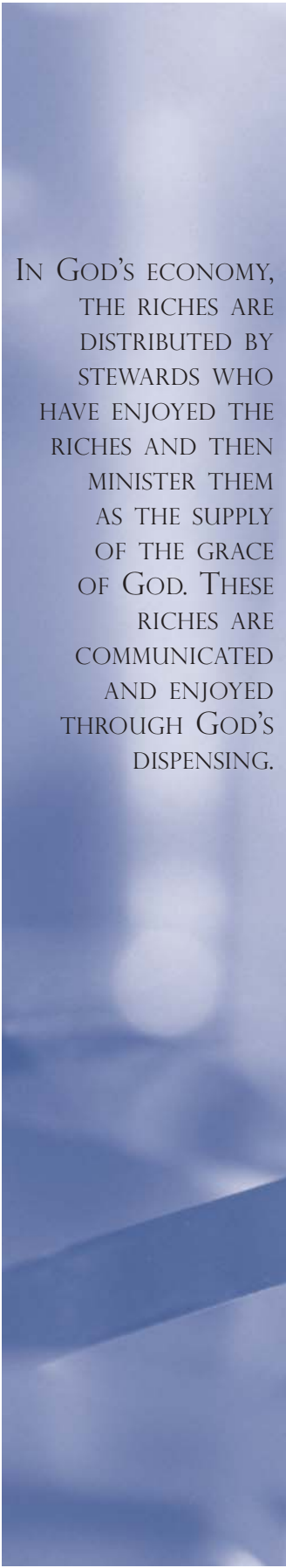
Joseph in the Old Testament is perhaps the best positive illustration of a person who functions as a steward in an official capacity. He was not explicitly called a steward, but in function he oversaw an entire country's economy. Based on his interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, Joseph was appointed and entrusted by Pharaoh to manage the major part of Egypt's supply chain of food (Gen. 41:40-41). This function included the oversight of food production, food purchase, and the storage of excess supply during the seven years of plenty (vv. 47-49). During the seven years of famine that followed, this function involved the sales and distribution of the food inventory.

At the end of this second period Joseph owned (on behalf of Pharaoh) all the money, all the cattle, all the land, and even the souls of all the Egyptians (vv. 53-57; 47:14-21). He so faithfully and successfully managed the riches and resources of Pharaoh over a period of fourteen years that he could ultimately provide the people not only with the food they needed but also with seed, the investment, for the beginning of a new economic cycle (v. 23). Joseph may also be considered one of the first macro-economists on record to both advocate and institute a flat national income tax (v. 24). Thus, Joseph illustrates the quintessential "practical economist"—a faithful steward.

Stewardship in the Context of God's Economy

Let us consider other usages of *stewardship* in the New Testament. The Recovery Version translates οἰκονομία as "stewardship" not only in Ephesians 3:2 but also in 1 Corinthians 9:17 and Colossians 1:25; however, it anglicizes this term as "economy" in Ephesians 1:10; 3:9; and 1 Timothy 1:4. In 1 Corinthians 9:17 Paul considers himself the person who is responsible to carry out a certain responsibility; he is "entrusted

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with a stewardship" related to the gospel, that is, to "present the gospel without charge" (v. 18). Similarly, in Colossians 1:25 he states that he is a serving one, a deacon, a minister, carrying out the responsibility of completing the word of God "according to the stewardship of God." In both instances Paul is referring to himself as a person who functions within the constraints and boundaries of a household administration; hence, we can say that he has been entrusted with a stewardship, a household dispensation.

In Ephesians 1:10 *oikonomia* is used in relation to God's will, good pleasure, purpose, and plan to head up all things in Christ; in this context the word refers not to man's stewardship but to God's plan, arrangement, and administration; hence, to "the economy of the fullness of the times." Likewise, this word in 3:9 is referring to something hidden in God that needs to be seen and carried out—the economy of the mystery. First Timothy 1:4 also refers to God's plan and dispensation, that is, to the economy that is of God's initiation and carried out in the realm of faith.

The Divine Economy in Contrast to the Human Economy

God's economy is in faith. Faith is elsewhere defined as something unseen (Heb. 11:1, cf. v. 7); thus, God's economy may be considered as the "invisible hand" that works, guides, facilitates, constrains, and limits all things toward the accomplishment of His eternal purpose (cf. 2 Cor. 4:18; 5:7).

An observation and postulate in the study of human economy is that the demand, which stems from human needs and desires, is unlimited, but the supply, which is the ability and capacity to meet this demand, is limited. In God's economy, conversely, the supply, the unsearchable riches of Christ, is unlimited, and it is humanity's capacity to receive, enjoy, and assimilate these riches that is limited. In a human economy, capital is needed for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

In God's economy, we may liken grace to the spiritual and divine capital that facilitates God's operation. God's operation takes place within His economy. The riches of Christ may be considered as the supply that meets the demand. In a human economy, products reach the location of consumption through intermediaries and through logistical operations that transport the goods and store them in distribution centers. In God's economy, the riches are distributed by stewards who themselves have enjoyed the riches and then minister them as the supply of the grace of God. Thus, these riches are communicated and enjoyed through God's dispensation and administration.

Stewardship and the Grace of God

Ephesians 3:2 begins with what could be considered a parenthetical section between verse 1, "I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus," and 4:1, "I, the prisoner in the Lord." In this insertion Paul describes the ministry that he received in the stewardship of the grace of God through the revelation of the mystery of Christ (3:2, 4). In this section Paul also prays for the church to experience the Christ whom he has ministered as a steward for the saints' enjoyment (vv. 14-21).


In verse 2 Paul says, "Indeed you have heard of the stewardship of the grace of God which was given to me for you, that by revelation the mystery was made known to me." Here he relates his stewardship to the grace of God. In verse 7 he again mentions the grace of God in the context of his becoming a minister according to the gift of this grace. This gift is the ability and function produced through the enjoyment of the grace of God.

Grace refers to the riches of Christ (v. 8), which God has given to us in Christ for us to gain and enjoy. Paul's ministry was to dispense the riches of Christ as grace to the believers for their enjoyment. The saints' enjoyment and experience of grace produce and build up the church. Grace implies the life of God, and the gift is the ability that comes out of the divine life. The grace of God is God Himself, especially as life. Because He is such, the believers can partake of and enjoy Him. The stewardship of the grace of God is for the dispensing of the grace of God to His chosen people.

Paul's ministry came out of this stewardship. Paul was a steward in God's house, ministering Christ as God's grace to God's household. As a steward appointed by God to supply His household and as an apostle sent by God, Paul announced the gospel. He announced not doctrines and teachings but the riches of Christ as the gospel. These riches of Christ are unsearchable and untraceable; nevertheless, they are for our enjoyment and experience.

God's economy is God working Himself as grace into redeemed and regenerated believers to bring them into the reality of the Body of Christ. This economy became Paul's stewardship. Paul is a pattern of an enjoyer of the riches of Christ as grace. This grace became his elemental constitution. He then ministered this grace, the grace of God, to the believers. This supply has come even to us today through the words that he wrote to the Ephesians. Paul was a faithful steward in the house of God, receiving the riches and then distributing them. The issue of such a dispensing is the church, the Body of Christ.

The Stewardship of the Grace of God Applied to Our Experience

We should take Paul as our pattern and carry out the same stewardship, the stewardship of the grace of God. Christians may labor to do many things for God, but is that labor a stewardship consistent with God's economy? Our living and work should be calibrated by God's economy in terms of both goal and process. First, we must examine our motive and goal: is our aim His glory in the built-up church? Second, in carrying out this stewardship, we must utilize the God-designated "capital"—the riches of His grace (1:7; 2:7). In this process of carrying out our stewardship, each steward receives and enjoys Christ in a personal, detailed, and specific way. The riches of Christ are what Christ is to us. For example, Christ is not only life; He is *our* life (John 11:25; Col. 3:4). He is not only the righteous One; He is righteousness to us (Acts 3:14; 1 Cor. 1:30). His riches also include what He has for us and what He accomplished, attained, and obtained for us. As a result of this enjoyment, His riches become our constitution and person to the extent that we express them. Then we, in turn, dispense these unsearchable riches for others to experience and enjoy. When we corporately enjoy the riches of the grace of God, we become His fullness (cf. John 1:16; Eph. 1:23; 3:19; 4:13). To Him be glory in the church! 

Notes

¹New Testament references to the grace of God include Luke 2:40; Acts 11:23; 13:43; 14:26; 20:24; Romans 5:1; 1 Corinthians 1:4; 15:10; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 6:1; 8:1; 9:14; Galatians 2:21; Ephesians 3:2, 7; Colossians 1:6; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9; 12:15; and 1 Peter 4:10; 5:12.

²New Testament references to οἰκονομία include Luke 16:2-4; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25; and 1 Timothy 1:4. The King James Version replaces this word in Ephesians 3:9 with *fellowship*.

³New Testament references to οἰκονόμος (lit., "house distributor") include Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; Galatians 4:2; Titus 1:7; and 1 Peter 4:10.

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