

Man as God's Steward*

Nicolaas H. Gootjes
Professor Emeritus
Canadian Reformed Theological
Seminary

Christians often speak of man as a steward. This happens especially in connection with the task of man in managing his possessions and in his use of the earth. B. Goudzwaard is also part of this tradition. In his book *Capitalism and Progress*, he presents stewardship as the norm of economic practice. He works it out in this way: “Stewardship consists of taking care of this world as the possession of the Other. It requires maintaining everything that bears fruit and being ready to give account for this.”¹ When the second edition of this book is consulted, one notices a striking change.

In classical antiquity two distinct Greek words were used to describe human economic activity: *oikonomia* and *chrematistike*. *Oikonomia* (the origin of our word economics) designated the behavior of the steward whose task it was to manage the estate entrusted to him in such a way that it would continue to bear fruit and thus provide a living for everyone who lived and worked on it.

* Originally published in Dutch as “De mens als Gods rentmeester,” *Radix* 6 (1980): 20–26. It was subsequently translated by S. Carl Van Dam, minister of the Canadian Reformed Church in Grassie, Ontario, and published under the present title in *Teaching and Preaching the Word: Studies in Dogmatics and Homiletics*, ed. Cornelis Van Dam (Winnipeg: Premier, 2010), 249–55. Used with permission.

¹ B. Goudzwaard, *Kapitalisme en vooruitgang* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976), 231. See also 254.

Status Quaestionis

Central to this concept, therefore, was the maintenance of productive possessions on behalf of everyone involved.²

Here the relationship between man and God has disappeared, and Christian stewardship has been exchanged for an ideal from classical antiquity, an ideal with which Christians can agree. Therefore, it can be beneficial to reconsider the idea of stewardship as this lives among Christians.

Now it is striking that the image of man as steward has really only become influential recently. It only came to the fore in the twentieth century. This can be seen, for example, in the form for the ordination of deacons. The new form in the charge to the congregation says, “Be good stewards of all that the Lord has entrusted to you.”³ The form that was used before did not have this word. We see the same when we compare what has been written about the eighth commandment in the twentieth century with what was written before.

In the twentieth century, one can often see that the concept of stewardship has an important place in the explanation of Lord’s Day 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism.⁴ However, in the literature from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, no attention is given to this concept.⁵ I only know of one exception: H. Bastingius.⁶ When he comments on “all abuse or squandering of God’s gifts,” he notes that people need to be faithful stewards of the things of their Lord. This comment however is too brief to explain the spreading of the idea of stewardship.

² B. Goudzwaard, *Kapitalisme en vooruitgang*, 2nd ed. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1978), 255; see also 294. ET: *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*, trans. J. Van Nuis Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 211.

³ *Book of Praise*, rev. ed. (Winnipeg: Premier, 1998), 633.

⁴ J. W. Tunderman, *t Beginsel der eemvige vreugde*, 2 vols. (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1949), 2:182; B. Holwerda, *De dingen die ons van God geschonken zijn*, 4 vols. (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1955), 4:39; and H. Veldkamp, *Zondagskinderen*, 2 vols. (Franeker: Wever, [1948]), 2:234.

⁵ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:8.45–46; Z. Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 595–600; and G. Voetius, *Catechisatie over den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 2 vols. (Rotterdam: 1891) vol. 2.

⁶ H. Bastingius, *Verclaringe op den Catechisme der Christelicker Religie*, ed. F. L. Rutgers (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1891), 633–34.

It is possible that Bastingius' remark was an initial factor leading to the use of the steward concept in this context. Therefore, A. Kuyper was working on an explanation of the catechism when a reprinting of Bastingius' work was published, a reprinting taken care of by a friend and colleague of Kuyper, F. L. Rutgers. It is precisely Kuyper who in his treatment of the eighth commandment made the idea of the steward into a central concept.⁷ It seems likely that Kuyper found this idea in Bastingius. While Bastingius only mentions the idea very briefly, Kuyper expands it into an overarching concept, approaching many things from this angle: that one should not treat the other as a slave, how man should treat animals, how he should interact with the world, how he should use his body, and the use and misuse of money and possessions.

In my view, it is this explanation of Kuyper that has deeply influenced our thinking. This influence is felt not even so much in the outworking of these ideas but in the starting point—that God is the only owner of all things. Whoever possesses anything on earth is no more than a steward. Therefore man is not free to do with his possessions as he likes. He remains responsible to God.

This idea of Kuyper's forms the background of our thinking and speaking on the position of man as steward. This does not mean that before Kuyper no one ever spoke of man as a steward of his possessions. This idea can already be found in patristic writings in the first centuries after Christ.⁸ As a result of Kuyper's work, this idea has gained influence.

When we can accept this, light is shed on the difficulty of the biblical proof. Some have alleged that the idea of the steward does not have any support in scripture. It is true that the matter is difficult if we would only concentrate on the word *steward* in the Bible. The figure of the steward is not found often in scripture. In the Old Testament, there is a steward over the house of Joseph (Gen. 43:16). In the New Testament, a certain Erastus, the city's director of public works, is mentioned (Rom. 16:23).

There is also the dishonest manager who wasted the possessions of his master (Luke 16:1–8). Paul uses the image of a child who is subject to guardians and trustees until he grows up (Gal. 4:2). It is clear that these texts do not show that man is steward of God's possessions. In other texts, the office-bearers in particular

⁷ A. Kuyper, *E voto dordraceno*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1892–1895), 4:184. Kuyper first wrote this explanation of the catechism as articles in *De Heraut* from 1886 to 1894.

⁸ K. Bockmühl, *Umweltschutz-Lebenserhaltung*, cited in *Christelijk ethiek. Capita selecta*, 3 vols., ed. J. Douma (Kampen: Van de Berg, 1976), 1:32.

are referred to as stewards, but what has been entrusted to them is not gold or possessions (1 Cor. 4:1–2; Titus 1:7).

The steward image in Luke 12:42 can easily refer to not only the office-bearers and the apostles but to all Christians as well. However, this steward is put in charge of servants, not of possessions. Therefore, these texts do not help us. The one text that could be used in this connection is 1 Peter 4:10: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” Then it would need to be established that “grace in its various forms” also include money and possessions.

This explanation would fit well in the context, as this verse is between verse 9: “Offer hospitality to one another” and verse 11: “If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides.”⁹ It has become clear that it is not easy to base our steward concept on the way the idea of a steward is used in the Bible. If someone were to ask Kuyper for his biblical proof, he would not use any texts about stewards.

He worked with the general facts that God is the owner and that man is responsible to God. From Kuyper’s explanation, we get the impression that he is not working with an image of steward he received from the Bible but rather the one he received from his own time. That can also explain the differences that exist between the biblical and the Kuyperian concept of the steward. The picture that the Bible gives us of the steward is not uniform at all.¹⁰ He might be a free man (Rom. 16:23) or a slave (Luke 12:42). Kuyper imagines the steward to be a free man, one who even fights against slavery. In the Bible, the steward often manages the household, whereas for Kuyper the steward takes care of possessions. The background of Kuyper’s thoughts on the steward is the nineteenth-century reality rather than the multifaceted picture of the steward found in Scripture. Yet Kuyper’s view should not therefore be rejected as being without foundation. It is quite possible to use a picture from one’s own context to summarize or clarify a biblical idea. We are not limited to the illustrations the Bible uses. Therefore, we should not ask whether the idea of the steward finds support in the Bible’s speaking about the steward. The question is whether this idea can legitimize itself as a biblical one in view of what the whole of Scripture says.

⁹ Bigg holds that the money used to support people is one of the gifts Peter has in mind; see E. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1947), 218.

¹⁰ O. Michel, “*oikonomos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:149–51.

The answer to this question is not difficult to give. Both elements of this steward idea are completely scriptural. The one element is that God owns everything. That is established on the basis of the fact that God created the world. He does not abandon the world but provides for it day by day. That is why Psalm 24 can begin with the words, "The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (Ps. 24:1–2; cf. Pss. 50:12; 89:11–12; 95:34). This not only applies to the world itself but also to the regular things of daily life such as the meat that we eat (1 Cor. 10:25–26). In this connection, a text from the Jubilee law used by Kuyper as a motto is very striking: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev. 25:23).¹¹ The other element highlighted in the idea of the steward is that man only has the right to use possessions, not own them in an absolute sense.

This can also be clearly read in the Jubilee law:

You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops. (Lev. 25:15–16)

What is sold is actually not the land but the fruit of the harvest that grows on the land. Man is also not free to use his property as he pleases, for the Lord gives laws about the use of the land.¹² Kuyper can rightly also mention the texts from which it appears that the property in the congregation of Jerusalem was shared by all. For example: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32). It has been shown several times on the basis of Acts 5:2 that an early form of communism is not meant here. However it is evident that the Christians realize that they may not keep their money or possessions for themselves but rather that they have received them to use them in the service of the Lord in their situation.

In this way, it is certainly possible to base the concept of the steward on scripture even if this idea is colored by the nineteenth century. When we use this image, then we need to be aware of its strengths and weaknesses—as is the

¹¹ This thought can also be found elsewhere in the Bible; see R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. J. McHugh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 165.

¹² Some of these laws are mentioned in De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 165–66.

case with every image. Therefore, in conclusion, I will try to indicate what these strengths and weaknesses are.¹³

A Few Strengths

First, the steward is not free to use what has been entrusted to him in whatever way he pleases. He needs to manage it for as long as the owner has him in his service. In the same way, man cannot just use the world and everything in it, which has been entrusted to him, in any way he pleases. He needs to ensure that he uses his possessions well so that God can rejoice in how man uses them. He may not destroy what God has given him. Whoever realizes that he walks in God's world, works with God's tools, and cooks his food on God's stove will not do these things carelessly. It is clear that this will have consequences for how man uses energy and the environment.

Second, the steward does not receive detailed instructions. The owner has given him broad guidelines about how he wants things to be done, but the steward needs to work out the details as required. He has an independent position and much is left up to his own insight as long as he keeps in mind the interests of his employer. Therefore man in this world must manage God's possessions. He does not have a precise management plan detailing what percentage of his income or possessions he needs to give to certain causes. In this respect, we have more freedom than Israel did in the old dispensation, for they were required to give the tithe. Our responsibility is greater.

Third, the profit is not for the steward. The earnings from the property are for the owner, but the steward receives a salary paid by his employer. In this way, man is cared for by God for as long as God allows him to use this world. The result of his work on earth is not for himself but for God. It needs to serve the preservation of God's world and the furtherance of God's work in this world in family, church, and society.

Fourth, the steward is personally responsible. At regular intervals, he needs to give an account of his management. This also applies to us as those who manage God's gifts. God will ask us to give account at the end of our life. Also in this respect, whoever was faithful with little will be set over much, and whoever was unfaithful will be severely punished (Matt. 25:14–30). Just like the steward, man is personally responsible. He will not be able to shift the blame to others by say-

¹³ This is not about the application of the steward idea. For that, see what Kuyper wrote, something that is always worth reading in my view, as well as W. H. Velema, "Rentmeesterschap," in his *Kernpunten uit het Christelijk geloof* ('s Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1978), 84.

ing that others have also done wrong. Each person will need to give an account of what he did with what was entrusted to him.

The Image of the Steward Also Has Weaknesses

First, in this image, there is one steward for each property. When this is applied, then each person becomes a steward over that part of God's gifts that has been entrusted to him. This would result in separate larger and smaller sections all existing alongside each other. That is too simple for the way things are in this world. There are areas of life over which we cannot make decisions alone. There is also communal responsibility, and that aspect does not fit well in this image.

Second, in the image of the steward, personal responsibility is emphasized and each person is directly responsible to God for what he does. The fact that we also need to look out for each other is not really covered. Thus the idea of the steward can become a wall behind which man hides, saying, "What I do does not affect anyone else."

Third, the steward in this image is an important official. The application of this is that man has received an important place in this world. This is correct when we see the purpose for which man was created (Gen. 1:26–30; 2:15; Ps. 8). However it can also make man proud. Therefore, this image needs to be supplemented by another image: Man is no more than a slave of God. This keeps him small before his Lord.

Fourth, the steward idea sets us in a business context. Much emphasis is placed on working in God's world. That is not wrong as long as the business aspect does not become the only or decisive aspect of our work. For then the aspect of enjoyment does not receive its rightful place. It is also a joy to be able to work in God's world. Israel could celebrate a feast before the Lord when they saw the result of their work (e.g., Deut. 14:25-27). The fact that we have been placed on this world as stewards should not dampen our happiness in our work and its result.

Fifth, the steward image does not put any emphasis on the relationship between the steward and his fellow human beings. The same happens when this image is used for the life of man in this world. Goudzwaard is correct when he emphatically reminds us of the fact that we need to serve one another with what we have received. It is clear to the Christian that he needs to love his neighbor also in the way that he manages his possessions. The command to love your neighbor needs to be added to the steward concept.

At the same time, this second commandment should never be separated from the first and greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).