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STEWARDS AND 'CAREHOLDERS'. A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

To be a master? A king? A global player? A CEO? A guide? A pathfinder? A steward? A shareholder? A 'careholder'? What is the vision of responsible leadership which guides us and should guide us? Let us look at the biblical vision and Jesus' practice of stewardship. It is not an outdated concept, but highly relevant and feasible for the leaders of today and tomorrow.

Leaders have a specific responsibility.¹ But in order to find out, what responsible leadership means, we ask: What does responsible life as such mean? To act as leader is only a specific form of acting as human being. This leads us straight to the fundamental question of anthropology: What are we? What should human beings become? What is our role and mandate in human relations and in relations with the nonhuman creation?

Power is the ability to decide on one's own authority and to impose this decision on others. This classical definition of power from the famous sociologist Max Weber describes the mainstream understanding of leadership today: a leader is a master with the power to decide, direct and dominate. Not only as teachers or directors, but also as parents or as masters of our own free time. Most human beings want – in that sense – to be masters because nobody likes to be dependent on or 'manipulated' by others.

The same understanding is included in the vision to be a king. 'The consumer is king' means: he or she can decide independently what to buy or not to buy. The king seems to be responsible to nobody but himself. A modern expression for kingship in today's business world is 'global player.' Two top managers of (Swiss) companies, one from the nutrition sector and the other from the banking sector, told me independently from each other, that they are convinced that in future, only 'about ten big global players' will dominate the global market in their respective sector. They stated that they intend to be and remain one of them. They mainly think in categories of power and manipulation. World development is seen as a game and the aim is to define the rules of the game as global players and to influence

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them in their favour. That is the modern misunderstanding of *Dominium terrae* (to rule the world; to subdue it, Genesis 1,28). The word 'global players' underlines this world-view, like a 'religion of the market', which at the same time destroys the competition of the market through the monopoly of the big players.

This understanding of 'kings' and 'masters' is a model of dominion which is always accompanied by the other side of the coin: the people as 'servants'. It is a model of hierarchy which often leads to oppression, exploitation and humiliation.

The Judeo-Christian faith is based on a totally different world view of the role of humans on earth and of leadership: The 'good king', the 'good shepherd', to be a 'guest on earth', the 'good servant' and the 'steward' — are biblical anthropological models relevant for responsible leadership. Let us look at two of them, the good manager and the guest.

1. **Biblical Model: The Good Manager**

The New Testament model of responsible leadership which impresses me most is the one of the good manager. Its clearest expression is found in Luke 12:42-48:

42 Who then is the faithful and wise steward,² whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. 44 Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. 45 But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, 46 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful. ... 48 Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.

The Greek word in this text for 'steward' is *oikonomos*, the 'economist'! *Oikos* means the house and the household. The *oikonomos* is housekeeper who keeps the house in order. It is the administrator and manager who cares for the economy of the household and for all people living and working in this community. It is the first servant. There are four characteristics in the text which distinguish the responsible and the irresponsible manager.

1. The good manager recognises that he is not the proprietor of the house or the shareholder of the company but responsible to maintain and develop it in the name of the owner. The bad manager

behaves as if he is the owner and sees the house or company as his own property.

2. The faithful steward cares for the people under his responsibility! He gives food, salary and social security at the proper time (v. 42). But the bad leader violates and exploits the people he should be responsible for (v. 45).
3. The good leader represents a solid work ethic. He works hard for the well-being of his collaborators and therefore serves as a good example. The irresponsible leader does not work, is corrupt, drunken (that means he is greedy and hooked on all kind of things). His exploitation and slavery is an expression that he regards not only the household but also human beings as his personal property.
4. The wise servant acts in a responsible way at every moment of his life because he knows that the 'master' could come and control every time. Business ethics and response to God are fully integrated in the daily life. But the stupid manager believes that no control will happen, that he can win every court case by bribing the judges, that it is enough to go to church and start to pray just at the end of life in order to be saved.

The story shows in a very simple and convincing way the meaning of responsibility: it means to respond to somebody (the word 'responsibility' comes from 'response'): the manager to the owner, the Christian to God. A bad leader wants to be autonomous, that means 'independent' from all responsibility towards others except himself. And by that, as a drunken person, he even loses control over himself. He is controlled by his greed for mammon and power. The good steward is theonomous, that means he gets his responsibility, respect and dignity from his dependency from God. And the more responsible he acts the more responsibilities he gets and can manage (v. 48).

This responsible behaviour is a vision for everybody, but especially for leaders. This model is convincing because it is not only a theory but a model practiced by Jesus himself in his life as a 'serving king', offering his own life for the benefit and salvation of the whole community. He preached, healed, danced and laughed, constantly responding to the need of his 'clients' as his 'work ethics'. He served as a servant washing the feet of his disciples, he gave orientation and guidelines by his challenging parables, he shared food. He remained faithful to God whom he called father, even on the cross. The disciples of the resurrected Christ are invited to become such good stewards of God's gifts.

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2. **Biblical Model II: The Guest on Earth**

A second biblical model of responsible leadership and behaviour is God's invitation to humankind to live as guests in his house, which is the earth. This view is closely linked to the model of stewardship. It is meaningful for economic ethics as well as for environmental ethics.³

The message 'Bring the earth under your control' (Gen 1:28) in the younger of the two biblical Histories of creation written in the Babylonian exile 2500 years ago, is the biblical statement defining the relationship between man and the rest of creation that is still most known to the public. It is often misunderstood as an oppressive position of power and thus rejected. However, this *dominium terrae* is by no means an invitation to the unlimited exploitation of the earth. On the contrary, it means that we have a responsibility for our environment in the same way as a king should feel responsible towards his people or a good steward takes care of the goods that he has been entrusted with. The older biblical creation story in Genesis 2 shows God's generosity of allowing humanity to live on earth like in a fertile garden but combines it with the command 'to cultivate and to guard it,' or – in an other translation – 'to work it and take care of it.' (Gen 2:15).

God is the host and mankind is guest on earth. At the end of time and already in these times, God invites to the great banquet. He offers the abundant creation to his guests and lets them partake in the completion of creation. Mankind can only respond to this promise and this offer in the most appropriate way by showing joy, praise and thanks. At the same time, this offer represents the foundations of the ethical re-orientation: Because humanity has experienced God's promise it is possible to live on earth like a respectful guest. God himself is host. He is the one to prepare the banquet (Isa 25:6-8). The laid table is creation in perfection. And it is not up to the guest to choose his or her host, but the host invites his guests (John 15:16).

In the eschatological reconciliation, the mutual hospitality of all creatures becomes perfect: 'Wolves will be the guests of sheep' (Isa 11:6)! This means that to be God's guest and host of fellow-humans and fellow-creatures is a basic attitude including even the world of non-humans! To be a guest is also a model for leadership which leads to peace.

The eschatological direction of the image of mankind towards being guest in the New Testament has to be closely linked to the abundant comprehension of being guest on earth present in the Old Testament, being particularly influenced by the tradition of Exodus: 'My people went to live in Egypt as foreigners' (Isa 52:4). In the Old Testament, the concept of being a guest on earth develops into an anthro-

pologically essential property of being human: The people of Israel experienced in Egypt and for a second time in the Babylonian exile what it meant to be foreigners. The attitude – that one's own life as well as the earth and its resources are not our property but only a loan – is closely connected to this (1 Chron 29:1). In economic and ecological terms, psalm 24 is also significant: 'The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth and all who live on it are his' (Ps 24:1). Thus, humans have no right of disposal, but a right of use upon the resources of this earth.

'I am a guest on earth for just a little while' (Ps 119:19) does not mean to long for the beyond while withdrawing from this world. This would not be responsible leadership but to escape responsibility. The invitation to be a guest on earth enables the guests to bare the burden of responsibility because they know that they must not bare the whole world on their shoulder but the light burden in joyful expectation of God's kingdom to come and in deep respect towards creation knowing that the guests cannot and must not possess it. Who behaves like a guest, leaves the guesthouse behind in good order for the next guests that will arrive after him/her.

The model of being a guest on earth lays also the foundation for a community oriented understanding of responsible leadership. Hospitality plays an eminent role in the gospel, especially in the gospel according to Luke. The community of guests around a table is the embodiment of hospitality and the anticipation of the eschatological reconciliation. The eucharistic community is an expression of God's hospitality and thus the visible banquet community of the guests that have been invited by God himself (1 Cor 10:16-18; Mark 14:22). The most important feature of the guests that are partaking in the banquet community is the sharing. Thus, the Eucharist turns into the starting point of the worldwide sharing among guests including fellow-beings and the environment.

The meaning of the model of the guest on earth for responsible leadership can be summarised as follows:

1. The guest is not the owner of the guesthouse but s/he is invited to use it for his/her well-being, joy and life in dignity. The *dominium terrae* (to rule over the earth) is replaced by the *servicium terrae*, serving the earth and all living beings on it.
2. Everything that has been created is placed at the guest's disposal, however, it cannot be possessed. Things which are on loan are treated with care, respect and sustainability. Every intervention into the 'goods on loan' is done with greatest caution and only on consultation with the host. Thus results a 'guest-economy'.

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3. In the same way as God is not only host but also guest himself (and foreigner! John 1:11; Matt 8:20) on this earth, man is not only guest but mandated by God to take over the tasks of a host. To be host thus also corresponds to the *diakonos* of the New Testament, who serves the guests unselfishly for example at the banquet community. Jesus as a leader understood himself as such a serving *diakonos*. There is a close connection between the duties of the host, of the steward and of the deacon towards his guests and the poor, who may claim particular respect and protection! The host protects his guests. Responsible leadership includes the responsibility to protect!

3. The Christian Vision: Stewards and 'Careholders'

The two models of the faithful steward and the thankful guest can also be summarised in the word 'careholder'. The shareholder holds shares and therefore possesses a part of a company in order to make profit out of his invested money. The responsible shareholder, in addition, cares for the well-being of the company and its workers. The responsible leader as a 'careholder' holds responsibility and cares for values, goods and for people who are entrusted to him or her.

Responsible behaviour and its virtues are first of all valid for all human beings. Leaders 'only' have a higher degree of responsibility to care than the 'ordinary' people. The stronger has more responsibilities than the weaker because he has more power, competences and means to decide and to act. The steward and 'careholder' can be characterised by six virtues:

To care: 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.' (Gen 2:15). The shareholder cultivates and conserves, transforms and protects and finds the right balance between the two. To care for others as for oneself is a direct expression of the commandment to love the other as oneself. To care does not primarily mean charity, but to care for a life in dignity of all, to strengthen justice and to develop technological skills and political mechanisms for the well-being of the individuals as well as the community (see Luke 12:42: to care for food). To care includes to be attentive, present, near to those for whom the leader has to care.

To protect: the steward is among others, the watchman who recognises coming dangers, who takes protecting measures in advance, who intervenes in order to avoid damage and who – if a problem or a catastrophe could not be avoided – helps to restore and to heal

the wounds. The good leader has an obligation to protect. That is valid for the leader as an individual as for institutional leaders such as a government or a multilateral institution like the UN.⁴

To guide: The steward is the pathfinder and shows the direction. He reminds the subordinate that they all together are not owners and to respond in their behaviour to the owner's – the Creator's – expectations. His or her guidance is based on values, filled with knowledge and know how. S/he has the skill to think ahead and to be in planning and vision always a step ahead of the others.

To order: To guide means also to bring an order and structure into unclear situations and confusing structures, to restructure where necessary in order to strengthen the strategy, the community, the efficiency and sustainability of the work and the orientation of the people entrusted.

To serve: The responsible leader as steward sees himself or herself not as opposed to the subordinate, but as *primus inter pares*, as the first among equals, as the first servant. This anthropological unity and equality of the leader with his or her employees is fundamental even if the task and responsibilities are very different.

To share: The 'careholder'-steward shares the entrusted natural, material human and spiritual resources with the subordinate according to needs and performance. Since the manager is not owner, s/he cares for a just distribution of goods and fair access to services.

The word 'oikos' today is present in three dimensions: the *economy*, the *ecology* and the *ecumenism*. The responsible steward cares for the economy as the material basis of life in the household; s/he cares for the ecology as the environmental basis of life in the household; s/he also cares for ecumenism as the spiritual basis for life and its interreligious and intercultural community in the global household. S/he cares, protects, guides, orders, serves and shares on all three levels.

4. Responsible Stewardship is Concrete

These principles and virtues of responsible stewardship are the basis for more concrete guidelines in applied ethics of leadership. The Ghanaian theologian Emmanuel Asante developed an 'Ethics of Stewardship'⁵ for the stewardship of talents, of time, of wealth, of power, of sexuality, of poverty eradication etc. We concentrate on three examples:

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a) *Stewards in Managing Natural Resources*

A key challenge for responsible leadership is the management of resources:⁶ natural resources such as energy, water, air, soil and forests, material resources such as property of goods and services, financial resources such as capital or insurances, structural resources such as administrative control mechanisms or human resources such as personnel. Let us take oil, the fundamental energy resource, as an example. What is the behaviour of the responsible steward of oil (as producer, politician, consumer or scientist) who cares, protects, guides, orders, serves and shares this resource?

First the un-renewable energy sources have to be seen not as property⁷ but as a gift lent from God and given to today's but also to tomorrow's generations.

To care means to use it so carefully that something remains for future generations. Today's behaviour is not sustainable since we know that the oil reserves will be used between 2040 und 2060, that means within one to three generations.

To protect includes the protection of the interests of the indigenous population and the environment in a given area of exploitation of oil.

To guide includes information and education on careful use of oil resources and orientation on alternatives.

To order leads to involvement in an efficient management of the production and waste management of these resources and in a value-based energy policy.

To serve the responsible management of resources includes – among others – financial transparency, clear control mechanisms, anti-corruption programmes etc.

To share means fighting for fair distribution of energy resources in the perspective of poverty eradication strategies.

b) *Stewards in Managing Spiritual Resources*

Religious leaders have a special responsibility in the management of spiritual resources. Christian literature on leadership concentrates, often one-sided, on this dimension.⁸ Church leaders have to be faithful stewards in the management of natural resources, caring for God's creation, using material goods and church properties in a transparent way, managing church elections in a transparent way without buying votes or doing other corrupt practices.⁹ But a special responsibility is to manage spiritual resources. Spiritual stewardship is based on the same six values and virtues as stewardship in other fields knowing that spiritual leadership is a gift and talent to work with as God's 'careholder': to care, to protect, to guide, to order, to serve and to share.

To care for the faithful interpretation of the Holy Scripture and not to instrumentalise it for proper interests and ideologies; to care for those who fall into religious depression provoked or at least increased by religious pressure; to protect the spiritual weaker in a religious community in order not to exclude him/her; to guide the community in developing the prophetic sensitivity to distinguish between good and false prophets, good and bad spirits, life giving and life destroying forces; to develop church orders on the basis of business principles which include spiritual criteria; to serve not only one interest group in a parish or church institution but to strengthen the unity of the community; to share spiritual power by acknowledging that the Holy Spirit is present not only in church leaders but as well in lay persons.

c) Stewards in Responsible Use of Power

Power is a pejorative term for many, owing to the fact that it is often abused. Can power be used in responsible stewardship? According to Max Weber, power is the possibility of enforcing one's own will. As a capacity for the realisation and implementation of ethical values, power is positive; indeed, it is necessary. According to the theological definition of the World Council of Churches, power represents man's ability to participate in God's creation. This is not a question of as much power as possible, but about the power that is appropriate to the task and aims at every level of action. Ethically speaking, power and responsibility are inextricably two sides of the same coin. If you have no power, you cannot assume any responsibility, and if you exercise power without any responsibility, you will have to be divested of it because in such a case, the other fundamental values are in jeopardy. The more power one has the higher is his or her responsibility, as we quoted at the beginning: 'Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required.' (Luke 12:48)

The measure of responsibility must be adequate to the measure of power given to a person or institution, and vice versa. Responsibility that is not shared and limited will make people feel responsible for things they are unable to influence, and this is almost as destructive as undivided power. A worker without power cannot be made responsible for the failure of the company. It is irresponsible to demand responsibility from others without granting them the corresponding authority and power. Power is a talent in order to serve the community and especially the weaker in this community. The steward sees his or her power not as property but as a gift and loan to work with. Power is tamed by responsibility, reinvested in an authority that is above the holder of power, and thus placed at the service of humanity. In Christian faith power is given by God to serve. If it is abused God

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takes it away as seen in Old Testament biographies such as the king Saul. Power/responsibility must be fairly distributed and democratically limited and controlled lest they be abused. The dictator claims unlimited and uncontrolled power. The steward accepts and even promotes the sharing/limitation and the democratic control of his or her own power knowing that even the best human being is tempted to abuse power once s/he has it and that this can only be avoided by internal and external control of power.¹⁰

Conclusion

In summary, we have seen that the biblical Christian vision of responsible leadership is very clear and precise: The good manager behaves as steward, as 'careholder', as guest on earth, acting not as owner but on behalf of the owner. S/he cares, protects, guides, orders, serves and shares in the management of natural and spiritual resources, of power, of economic affairs as well as of the ecumenical community of denominations and religions in the service of peace.

NOTES

- ¹ Responsibility is a key value in ethics. See e.g. Simon, René, *Ethique de la responsabilité*, Paris: Cerf, 1993; Jonas, Hans, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984.
- ² The English New International Version translates *oikonomos* by 'manager'! In the modern business world the expression 'manager' – who is not the shareholder, but the head of the employees – is a precise translation and creates a direct bridge to business ethics. 'Steward' can be translated into French as *gestionnaire* or *mandataire*.
- ³ My view of environmental ethics is based on this anthropological vision of being a guest. See Stückelberger, Christoph, *Umwelt und Entwicklung*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1997, pp. 230-239 (see also the Chinese edition, a Korean edition is in preparation).
- ⁴ ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect. Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, Ottawa, Canada: ICISS, 2001.
- ⁵ Asante, Emmanuel, *Stewardship. Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*, Accra, Ghana: Wilas Press, 1999.
- ⁶ Jena, Purna Chandra, *Masters or Stewards. A Theological Reflection on Ecology and Environment*, Delhi/Nagpur: ISPCK/NCCI, 2003; Stückelberger, Christoph, *Umwelt und Entwicklung*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27ff.
- ⁷ For theological and ethical reflection on property, see works by Ulrich Duchrow.
- ⁸ Sanders, Oswald, *Spiritual Leadership. Principles of Excellence for Every Believer*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994 (1967 for the 1st edition. Over half a million of copies sold).
- ⁹ Reflections on responsible church leadership in fighting corruption with concrete proposals such as codes of conduct can be found in: Christoph, Stückelberger, *Continue Fighting Corruption. Experiences and Tasks of Churches, Mission Societies and Aid Agencies*, Berne: Bread for all, 2003. Can be found as pdf on the website www.christophstueckelberger.ch.
- ¹⁰ Stückelberger, Christoph, *Global Trade Ethics*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003, Chapter 3.10 (available also in French and Chinese).