



## Keep it Simple

James E. Read, Ph.D.

What in the world was going on in downtown Seattle at the beginning of December?

Of all the explanations, one that sticks with me is a charge made against President Clinton. He had spoken to the World Trade Organization conference delegates about protecting workers as a condition of negotiating international trade agreements. Without getting into partisan politics, I must admit it sounded good to me. So I was taken aback when representatives from some so-called developing nations accused him of “ethical imperialism”!

Apparently they felt that the priorities of the West (embodied in the person of the President of the United States) were being foisted on the rest of the world in the guise of moral principle. Our values were being forced down their throats, they intimated. As far as they were concerned, there was more to the stories of “child labor” etc. than we were seeing.

Whether they were right or not in this case, I realized how readily I looked at the issues just from my position of relative privilege, and ignored the genuine difficulty of establishing equitable trade relations between high-tech and low-tech economies.

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Salvation Army.*

203-290 VAUGHAN STREET • WINNIPEG, MANITOBA • CANADA R3B 2N8 • PHONE: (204) 957-2412 • FAX: (204) 957-2418  
EMAIL: ETHICS\_CENTRE@CAN.SALVATIONARMY.ORG

It was one more instance of the all-too-human desire for ethical simplicity. Wanting one basic principle that we could all learn in kindergarten that would solve all life's difficulties.

I had already been pondering that tendency recently as I reviewed Douglas Hall's book, *The Steward*, for another publication. Hall argues for stewardship as the primary image of Christian existence. He wants us to embrace the "stewardship of all believers," each of us "stewarding" all aspects of all of our lives and all of the world's resources.

The truth in Hall's argument is that the stewardship idea illuminates many contemporary moral issues. It's helpful in approaching current battles over school curricula for example. A stewardship model of parenting says that our children are entrusted to us, that we have an obligation to raise them well, and that we are accountable for the job we do in raising them; but we are also trusted to exercise our judgement in determining what constitutes a good education. So when it comes to decisions regarding what's taught in school, a stewardship model would neither freeze parents out of the process nor leave it entirely in their hands.

Stewardship also helps us think about our relationship with nature. One philosophy says that the world is just raw material waiting to be turned into property, and once we lay claim to a part of it as our possession we can do as we wish with it. Thinking of the earth as a trust over which humans are stewards yields a different environmental ethic. As Wendell Berry writes, "Stewardship is the responsible care of property belonging to another. And by this the Bible does not mean an absentee landlord, but one living on the property, profoundly and intimately involved in its being and its health."

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Salvation Army.*

In short, stewardship is a key element of biblically sound ethics. But is it the *only* element? I don't think so.

A steward is inherently an accountant, one who keeps books, records and performance measurements. Stewards are very practical people. Results count to them. But there are some areas of life that ought to be exempt from outcome measurement.

I was guest on a TV show today. "Selling baby body parts" was the topic for discussion. Certain businesses are under Congressional investigation on charges that they are "harvesting" fetal organs and other tissues at abortion clinics and then selling them profitably to medical researchers. To suggest that what they are doing is ethical because it's being good stewards of what would otherwise go to waste is offensive.

Marriage is another example. Has spending the past 27 years as husband to Laurie been good stewardship? I rankle at even putting the question like that! Thankfully, our marriage has a purpose but it doesn't have performance measures. (Or when it does, that's when love falters.)

In the midst of this very practical, goal-oriented world, there needs to be another set of values to supplement those of the steward. And one of those is the value of uncalculating love.

Some days I think it would be convenient if everything boiled down to one easy ethical principle. But that's not life. There are real ethical dilemmas, and people really feel torn by them.

That doesn't mean that everything is relative. Or that ethics has only questions, no answers. But it does mean that getting to answers often takes patience, humility and

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Salvation Army.*

203-290 VAUGHAN STREET • WINNIPEG, MANITOBA • CANADA R3B 2N8 • PHONE: (204) 957-2412 • FAX: (204) 957-2418  
EMAIL: ETHICS\_CENTRE@CAN.SALVATIONARMY.ORG

respect for others. It takes moral courage to face ambiguity, and trust in the God who says he has many things yet to teach us.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century these are virtues to cultivate.

PS to the readers of my previous column: Ceanray (pronounced "shen-ray") Destiny Harris-Read was born December 11<sup>th</sup>. On her schedule, not anybody else's!

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Salvation Army.*

203-290 VAUGHAN STREET • WINNIPEG, MANITOBA • CANADA R3B 2N8 • PHONE: (204) 957-2412 • FAX: (204) 957-2418  
EMAIL: ETHICS\_CENTRE@CAN.SALVATIONARMY.ORG