

Your money and your life: Good incarnational theology

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

No one knows more clearly or more uncomfortably the tensions of life lived between the gospel and economic necessity than a parish clergyperson whose text for the day is “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink . . . look at the birds of the air . . . the lilies of the field” and who must tomorrow present a reasonably balanced budget to the trustees for the next fiscal year. Trustees may roll their eyes at clergy naïveté about things of the world like money, and remind the clergyperson that something like 80 percent of some species of birds of the air die every winter because they don’t plan ahead. Who would have thought that ministers are watching the Dow Jones with as much despair and hope these days as everybody else? The Century joins the conversation with [Lillian Daniel’s review](#) of three books on the topic of money.

Many of us are heirs of a tradition that mitigated against open talk about money in the context of religion, particularly from the pulpit. And many of us have experienced the truth of Robert Wuthnow’s observation in *God and Mammon in America* that while modern Americans are quite willing to talk openly about the details of their sex lives, bodily ailments, even their own deaths—when it comes to money, a protective “cloud of secrecy” descends on the conversation. Wuthnow and others are urging clergy to lead their congregations to think creatively, thoughtfully and biblically about money and the role it plays in our lives.

Whether you agree with their content or not, these three books do just that. It is a matter of good incarnational theology, after all. Writes Douglas John Hall in *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*:

Stewardship must be understood first as descriptive of the being—the very life—of God’s people. Instead of conjuring up deeds of stewardship . . . financial campaigns and bazaars and garage sales aimed at making temporary stewards out of us: instead of cajoling and harping and

“bugging” people—we need to learn how to teach and preach the Gospel and interpret the Christian life as stewardship. The world is crying out for keepers and tenders of its wonderful, frail beauty, and God intends to send us out as stewards into this astonishing and unique creation.

Hall’s words are useful and relevant in the dead of winter as well as in stewardship season. As Lillian Daniel says, “Engaging money theologically should inevitably lead to practicing one’s faith differently.”