

Ownership and stewardship

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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My family did some major remodeling of our house over the last three or four years. I think we are finally done. A friend asked me if it was a wise investment: would we ever see the market value of the place exceed what we put into it?

No, it's unlikely that the market value of the house will ever surpass what we've spent on it, but, as I said to my friend, we don't really own it anyway, we're just stewards of it for a time. Several people owned it before us, and many will own it after us. In the meantime, we have invested in making it a wonderful home for us, and hopefully for those who follow us. He looked at me, mouth open, and an uncomprehending look in his eyes.

The whole idea of ownership gets muddled in so many ways. I understand the legal meaning of ownership: deeds, bills of sale, rights of owners, "sanctity" of private property, and all that. The legal meaning of ownership is important. It defines boundaries that make an orderly and secure society possible. Thou shalt not steal makes little sense if we don't have a mutual, and legally binding, understanding of what is mine and what is yours. But I also understand that our possessions come and go through our hands, there is little permanence to them. In my adult years I have owned six houses, a dozen cars, all kinds of clothing, equipment and gear, and let us not forget food, and "personal effects." They come, they go.

It took years for me to understand that, in exchange for money, I can acquire the exclusive use of something for a period of time of my choosing (with certain stipulations and limitations). After that, if it was a durable product, it will pass into the hands of another. That's not a reassuring thought for some people. Several acquaintances cannot bear to part with anything they own. Basements and garages are filled with possessions of little practical value. Off-site storage units are packed. Except for consumables, they have in their possession almost everything they have ever bought.

A few others are proud that their farm, ranch, or business has been in their family for generations, which is not bad in itself, but becomes a terrible burden when it comes time to recognize that it will not continue that way. No one has a permanent right to anything.

Consider this portion of Psalm 49: "When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they named lands their own. Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish. Such is the fate of the foolhardy, the end of those who are pleased with their lot."

We are all simply stewards of what we have, and that implies its own set of responsibilities and burdens. A steward knows that he or she is not the absolute and permanent owner of that which has been put into her or his hands. It is held in trust. A steward is in charge of it, can use it as deemed best, can transfer ownership to others, but in the end is accountable to whom? Future generations for starters. I have certain moral obligations to the next owner of the house I live in now. I have other obligations to my children and grandchildren, the community I live in, my neighbors, and so on. We all have that kind of moral obligation whether we recognize it or not, and whether we are good stewards or lousy ones. That's true for all of us, but for those of us who claim to be Christian, the greater accountability is to God, and it is God who will demand the accounting.

Therein lies the rub for Christians. We get skittish about the idea that what we have acquired by the sweat of our own brows might actually belong to God and not to us. No matter how hard we have worked for the things we own, or how much we think we deserve them, we must ask, Have we owned them in a way that honors God's gifts to us and God's presence in our lives? Have we owned them in a way that honors those around us, and especially the poor, oppressed, and those in great need? Have we owned things in ways that will contribute to the well-being of generations to come? We don't much like to be confronted by questions like these. They are theologically challenging and politically uncomfortable. True enough, but not sufficient grounds to avoid them.

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