

Money traps for Christians

In western countries, Christians have always been apprehensive about discussing personal finances. Some of the reasons for this may include:

- money is seen as being worldly and they believe they should be detached from it and its influence
- on a global scale, most western Christians are wealthy and feel some guilt about having such wealth
- Christians are embarrassed to talk about their wealth and income because it might be interpreted as skiting
- personal finances is a private matter and disclosure of detail uncommon

In general terms, Christians are conservative and hard working. They are reliable workers, good savers and accumulate wealth. In fact, they conform to middle class values which often fit comfortably with their denominational expressions of Christianity. However, there are points of conflict and challenge.

When viewed biblically, Christians are to give an honest day's work (Luke 10:7; 2Thes 3:10), to see their work as part of their worship (Col 3:23) and to be generous to others (2Cor 9:6-15). They are to acknowledge that their wealth is not theirs but God's (Deut 8:17-18; Luke 12:47-48) and they are stewards of what he has given them (1Tim 6:17-19).

Christians will often agree with the saying "you can't take it with you" and be amused by bumper stickers on expensive new cars saying "We're spending our children's inheritance", but many Christians still manage to accumulate considerable wealth and at this point new principles are engaged. Principles like:

- Good stewardship involves maximising investment opportunities (Mat 25:14-30)
- Being smart with money is commended (Luke 16:1-14)

The traps

While these principles have a Biblical base their interpretation can be the source of problems for Christians who, wanting to be both good stewards and generous, fall into a number of money traps. Some of these traps might include:

1. Asset rich, cash poor

When Christian giving for church, mission or other activities come knocking on the door of wallets the response can be "I have committed our giving". It's good to have a plan and to exercise giving in a systematic and responsible way. However, not all Christians have worked this through and found peace with God about the level of their giving. Some struggle to meet basic giving and are unable to respond to urgent needs and appeals and one reason may be that they have fallen into the asset rich and cash poor status. In such circumstances their wealth is tied up in property, including a family home with a demanding mortgage, fixed investments, additional superannuation and stock market choices that can only be realised when the market is favourable.

If Christians feel their giving is lagging or that they can not respond to God's call on their (his) resources because they are tied up in these ways, then there is something definitely wrong with the way wealth is being stored. This trap should be avoided as Christians are accountable to God for his resources and will have to

explain why they were so future (worldly) focused that they could not meet the current needs of his people and mission.

Some reflection on Ecclesiastes 5:10 might help to sort this matter out *Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.*

2. Maximising returns

Do I invest savings in a bank for 1 year at 4%, three years at 5% or five years at 6.5%? Should I buy into investments in other financial institutions at higher interest? Would it be better to put these funds into a property, even borrow part of the cost and then negatively gear the property? Will superannuation funds come good and make them a better long term investment? Which investment yields the best tax advantage?

These are all relevant questions, but higher interest is not the only consideration. High interest usually means higher risk or longer term. Outside the government's savings guarantee for bank deposits, other financial institutions carry increased risk in recessions and there will always be promises of high returns from new ventures seeking capital. Risk and return is a fundamental issue for financial management and Christians should realistically assess risk when trying to maximise returns. Shrewd financial management is good risk and return decisions, not maximising interest.

Intention is also an important factor. What is the purpose of the investment and what is the interest to be used for. Reinvestment, accumulating wealth, doesn't seem to fit well with a Christian perspective on being citizens of the Kingdom. Investment decisions will always cause anxiety for Christians and probably proportional to how much hold the funds have on them. Prayer, financial advice and clear Kingdom purposes will help alleviate this anxiety.

3. Ethical issues

Some Christians agonise over this matter and do not want to support companies that are involved in products or services that they believe are not consistent with God's character. This concern has become so great that Christians and others, especially those interested in environmental issues, have spawned a number of companies that engage in ethical investments to try and help people with these decisions. Although Christians have avenues to address these ethical concerns they may have little control over which companies their funds are invested in, for example, superannuation funds and companies, banks and other financial institutions lend to.

Ethical considerations also include taxation issues like income splitting, negatively geared property, trusts and others that are legal, but raise issues about tax avoidance as opposed to tax evasion. For the Christian it is important to remember that paying tax is an important contribution to the stability and running of the community in which they live. Excessive efforts to avoid tax seem inconsistent with the moral obligation of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's. All financial decisions have ethical implications and responsibilities to self, family, community and to God. While money might be morally neutral, decisions regarding its use are not.

4. Chasing the get rich quick illusion

The email from the Finance Minister of Nigeria offering a commission if funds can be temporarily deposited into your account is an offer too good to be true. All such

offers are exactly that: too good to be true. Whether a number in the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes or a financial opportunity yielding high immediate returns, don't go there. Let reason and not greed prevail. New get rich quick schemes emerge daily and are traps to be avoided.

5. Borrowing for wealth

During a period when the stock market is steadily rising with a rate of return greater than the interest charged on money, there is a temptation to borrow money and invest. When contemplating this action it should be remembered that stock markets fall and the cost of repaying borrowed money (interest) can become greater than the returns from the investments requiring some of the assets to be sold at lower market values. Just ask the Sydney Anglican Diocese about this. They borrowed money and invested it in established investment opportunities (nothing dodgy) and then when the crash occurred could not keep up the repayments being forced to cash in investments at low market prices to meet interest and principal payments. The result was a huge loss of millions of dollars.

Borrowing money to try and cash in on a rising stock market might simply be labelled as another form of gambling. There is no substantial generation of wealth but a paper value which some can turn into a profit. This is not a gamble Christians should be engaged in and hopefully not the church either.

At times we all have to borrow money. The purpose is usually for a house but it might be for a business or special needs. There is nothing wrong with borrowing money, but again purpose (intention) is a factor for Christians. The amount borrowed will reflect income and the capacity to repay at particular interest rates. High interest rates on credit cards make this a less attractive source of credit, but for many a common way of borrowing. Christians need to think carefully about borrowing money in any form and avoid high interest and repayments that drain the capacity to support God's work. Getting the right balance between consumption and savings will be different for each person but the use of credit for immediate gratification is one trap Christians should avoid if it will affect their giving to God's work.

6. Time

Christians have a busy life in service. If investments are made in a myriad of opportunities that require frequent buying and selling activities, then monitoring these investments becomes a priority. How does God view his people sitting down each day spending a considerable amount of time buying and selling to try and maximise profits? While some people are very good at this, investments can be handled differently and require less frequent activity to allow Christians time for other more direct ministries than the provision only of funds. This is another trap to be avoided.

Christian responses

Some reflections on how to avoid these traps could include:

- Keep reminding yourself that it's God's money
- Keep a range of investments that includes some liquid or easy to turn into cash assets that can be used to meet emerging or special circumstances for God's work

Having money and wealth calls for generous stewards, but in a world set upon by greed, Christian generosity is often overcome by excessively conservative stewardship. Such behaviours use principles that tie up wealth so that it is not

available for God's work and attempts to justify such decisions as producing more income in the future for Christian work. In the same way, if I had children at a school that was accumulating current funds and investing them for a future income stream that would not benefit my children, I would want to know why. Sometimes God asks this question of us and we need to have an answer from the heart, not from being smart with money.

Even in the parable of the shrewd manager, Luke 16, it is the inventiveness of the manager to secure his future that is commended not the actual methods and Jesus' point has little to do with shrewd money management - maximising returns and interest, but the attitude to money (including a loss) to secure other goals including future employment. He wants his followers to be this inventive with what he has given them. Then they will be seen to be *trustworthy with worldly wealth* and able to be trusted with *true riches*. For Jesus being smart with money is about the purposes it is used for and this could mean giving it all away, *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his own soul?* (Mark 8:36).

Similarly the parable of the talents (Matt 25) can be taken too literally. It is also not so much about money, but what Kingdom people do with the gifts (including money) that God gives them. Only the man who does nothing with the talents is condemned. Responsible risk taking can take many forms but *storing up for yourself treasures in heaven* (and that's not money) would seem an over riding principle (Matt 6:19)

These matters give Christians much to pray and to think about because Kingdom values and the values of this world are about different perspectives. In the subject of money, these values clash and cause each Christian to seek a pathway that honours God. It is a pathway that will be different for each person, but one which needs continuous reflection and reassessment to be sure that we are in touch with what God wants and not falling into worldly traps.