Introduction

Why this book?

One website states that 291,920 titles are published in the United States annually—more than 5,600 a week. 1 With so much to assimilate and so many from which to choose, why this book? Simply put, it needs to be written, and not because I am the one writing it. If this particular subject has been covered in this particular way, I've somehow missed it.

A recent visit to my local Christian bookstore’s theology section revealed no books directly related to this subject. Some of the general theology books had no references to money, finances or stewardship, either in the table of contents or the index. The area of the store labeled Finances had plenty of books related to budgeting, debt elimination or investing as a Christian, but no books on the relationship between missional living and finances.

This should not be so.

Over the last decade or so, a thriving conversation has erupted around the concept of missional. It is a very important idea relating to how followers of Christ are to live in the world. Reams of pages have been written—not to estimate the number of 1s and 0s flung into cyberspace—exploring how Christians should relate to culture, what it means to be the church in a community, noting the difference between mission and missions, the nature of the gospel, ecclesiology, missiology, and on and on. It seems that almost every worthwhile connection has been made; many being profitably argued and others batted around ad infinitum.

One area that seems to have been explored to a lesser degree is how missional living relates to the financial responsibility of Christ’s followers. Usually called stewardship, this sometimes overlooked and often loathed “money talk” is the bane of Christians in the West who spend an inordinate amount of time trying to justify purchases of excess clothing, housing, transportation, gaming, media, food, and other trinkets or toys. Yet, when Jesus wanted to draw a clear distinction between those who vie with God for our allegiance, one to whom we might submit the leading of our lives,
He did not picture God opposed to ambitions, positions, or expressions, but possessions. He warned, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24, NASB). Driscoll and Breshears rightfully note, “Money and wealth and possessions are among the greatest idols of our culture, and there is simply no way to be a disciple of Jesus apart from learning to worship God with stewardship.” Driscoll, Stewardship, p. 18.

In Understanding Christian Theology, Swindoll and Zuck assert that the development of stewardship in the believer is an evidence of sanctification (growing in Christ’s likeness).

The context of twenty-first century American life places us into a time when money is spent in astonishing ways. An August 2007 article on businessweek.com, relates:

If there’s still any doubt whether the pampering of pets is getting out of hand, the debate should be settled once and for all by Neuticles, a patented testicular implant that sells for up to $919 a pair. The idea, says inventor Gregg A. Miller, is to ‘let people restore their pets to anatomical preciseness’ after neutering, thereby allowing them to retain their natural look and self-esteem. ‘People thought I was crazy when I started 13 years ago,’ says the Oak Grove (Mo.) entrepreneur. But he has since sold more than 240,000 pairs (a few of which went on prairie dogs, water buffalo, and monkeys). ‘Neutering is creepy. But with Neuticles, it’s like nothing has changed.’ Nothing, except there’s a fake body part where a real one used to be.

Yes. You read that right. Nearly one thousand dollars to give animals fake parts to help their self-esteem. There is humor in this book, but that part is not a joke. Authors Diane Brady and Christopher Palmeri also report that Americans, as of 2006, spend forty-one billion dollars annually on buying, feeding and caring for pets, more than the GDP of over one hundred countries in the world.

It does not seem we have come very far since Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were mocked for air conditioning their dog’s house, unless “in the wrong direction” is taken into account. More than a quarter-million sets of Neuticles proves that little is too extravagant for our pooches and kitties anymore. If only one year’s worth of pet expenses were used, say, to install deep water wells in Africa, at thirty thousand dollars each, around 1.4 billion wells could be built across that continent—more than one well for
every man, woman and child. If only the $229 million spent on faux-testicles had been used on African well projects, more than seven thousand deep water wells could have been dug. I just cannot imagine a scale where those disparities will ever balance.

Missional giving makes a financial priority of those things that are priorities in the kingdom of God: evangelism, justice, helping the poor, showing mercy, meeting needs, providing a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name. Or some cash. Or cash from selling a car. Or a jet ski. Missional giving recognizes that all possessions entrusted to God’s children are entrusted for the singular purpose of fulfilling God’s plan. Missional giving approaches finances with the presupposition that Paul was telling the truth when he wrote, “My God shall supply all of your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19; NKJV). Missional giving does not recognize a dichotomy between God’s money and my money. Instead, it forces the realization that all money and possessions belong to God and His children are channels through which Kingdom work is financed.

The proper understanding of finances means that the priorities of God’s people related to money and possessions should be the same priorities that God has for the Kingdom. The use of money is not a separate reality from the gospel. On the contrary, our use of money and possessions is a direct reflection of our understanding of and love for the gospel and the Savior it reveals. If the gospel (“the Good News”) is the story of God’s redemptive activity through Jesus Christ of all things lost in the Fall, then everything under our management is usable for the embodiment and expansion of the gospel. If we keep money and possessions under a separate section of our lives it is tantamount to lording over that area ourselves rather than yielding lordship to Christ. To maintain this control of our finances is like divorcing ourselves from God. We cannot, no matter how much we try, serve both God and mammon.

As managers of God’s possessions, our responsibility is to handle “our” stuff just as God would if He were on earth; this is the substance of Jesus’ parables. With this in mind, I would offer this definition: Missional giving is the financial strategy of the missionary manager, purposefully utilizing all the money and possessions God has entrusted to him or her according to His priorities and viewing all financial activity as integral with God’s kingdom.

Exploring these concepts is why this book exists.
Notes:

5. Ibid.
7. The Neuticles website states that more than $229,750,000 been spent on Neuticles through July 2010.
The Generous Soul. “He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord… - Proverbs 19. When Christians refuse to be generous to the poor, they bring dishonor to the name of Christ. Christ’s generosity extends to all of us even though we cannot give back. Is this not the essence of the Gospel? A Generous Soul. Sunset Shimmer stared at the trowel in her hand. She looked up at Vice-principal Luna. “You can’t be serious.” “I can assure you I am,” said Luna, crossing her arms behind her back. “Does the punishment not fit the crime?” “You’re right. I can almost see how the three of us can rebuild part of the school,” Sunset smirked. “Have I not told you of my amazing bricklaying ability?” Luna’s eyes narrowed. The Generous Soul takes a look at money and possessions from the position that the missionary mandate given to all Content Christians are inundated with books and larger-than-life personalities all positioned as experts on God’s will regarding finances. Countering the health-and-wealth attitude are those who abhor any suggestion of financial well-being for a life of poverty, and the middle ground is dominated by financially passive churchgoers with little motivation toward radical giving.