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The Steward Leader [Interview with Scott Rodin]

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INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT RODIN **THE STEWARD LEADER**

Scott Rodin has been in not-for-profit leadership and consulting for 25 years. He is President of Kingdom Life Publishing, Partner and Executive VP of Strategic Alliances, and Director of OneAccord NFP. Dr. Rodin has served as counsel to over 100 organizations across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, including colleges, seminaries, schools, churches, parachurch ministries, and other not-for-profit organizations. He has extensive experience in the areas of leadership, fundraising, strategic planning, and board development.

Dr. Rodin is a Fellow of the Engstrom Institute, and is the past President of the Christian Stewardship Association, a 1,000-member nationwide association of development professionals and ministry leaders. Prior to this he served for five years as President of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where he also taught theology and ethics. Dr. Rodin holds a Master of Theology and a Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Books by Dr. Rodin include The Steward Leader (InterVarsity Press, 2010), The Four Gifts of the King (Kingdom Life Publishing, 2009), The Seven Deadly Sins of Christian Fundraising (Kingdom Life Publishing, 2007), Abundant Life (Steward Publishing, 2004), Stewards in the Kingdom, (InterVarsity Press, 2000), and Evil and Theodicy on the Theology of Karl Barth, (Peter Lang, 1995).

In July 2013, Scott Rodin was one of the keynote speakers at the Andrews University Leadership Conference. At that time, several JACL editors interviewed him about his work with the concept of the Steward Leader (adapted from <http://open.biola.edu/authors/scott-rodin>).

JACL editors (JA): Let's start with your idea of "steward leaders." Could you summarize your thinking about this leadership approach?

Scott Rodin (SR): I believe we are godly stewards first. We live in relationship to God, self, our neighbor, and creation as we undergo a daily transformation by the Holy Spirit. And sometimes in all of that, we are called to lead. So I want to stay focused on who God is. When we understand who God is, it's easier to think about who we are as steward leaders.

JA: The emphasis is subtle and seems to move us away from a trait approach to leadership. Today, when you mentioned the traits or the steps, I had a hard time remaining seated. I thought about the 15 or 20 or whatever laws of leadership—the prescriptive checklist approaches.

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It's a lot easier to think about lists than to think about relationships that I actually have to define and make myself. I can't just memorize something and pretend to do it. There is a deep sort of expectation with the steward leader.

SR: Yes, in my book I talk about the difference between anointing and appointing. It seems to me we have followed the business model of doing careful searches, checking credentials, giving psychological tests, and having rigorous interviews. Then once we have hired someone we anoint them and ask God to bless them. But the biblical evidence suggests that God uses the opposite order. Remember David? Samuel anointed him before he was appointed king. Anointing is critical for Christian leaders. It requires complete submission of your life in service to God and God only. With that commitment come God's presence and power. And isn't that what every Christian leader wants and needs?

JA: For sure! And is that really one difference between your work on steward leader and Peter Block's book on stewardship?

SR: Well, his work was over 20 years ago—in the 90s. I enjoyed reading his book.

JA: I think his idea was that we are stewards for the next generation, for the institution, for the community and the country. The subtitle of his book was “Choosing Service Over Self-Interest.” So his emphasis was on letting go of self-interest in favor of a distribution of power. But I like the way you’re emphasizing that God is the owner. We can’t be stewards until we recognize who the owner is!

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SR: Yes, and that’s why I spend quite a bit of time in the book developing what I call the three foundations for the steward leader: leading in the image of God, the freedom of the steward leader, and the distinctiveness of the steward leader. The first two try to systematically explain who God is and how we relate to Him. The third shows more how the steward leader concept is different from other leadership theories.

JA: I really liked that about your presentation. You show the uniqueness of the Christian perspective. We have a different starting point and that changes everything. But you are very much aware of the literature—servant leadership, authentic leadership, and so on.

SR: We have to be very familiar with the literature that is out there—the prevailing philosophies that are driving leadership studies today—and be able to talk about the distinctions between them. Otherwise we are not going to be credible. One challenge in working with a highly regarded publisher like InterVarsity is that they want a certain amount of rigor, which is fine—the literature review, and contextual type of work like this. But it makes it a little bit more difficult sometimes for a pastor or somebody else who is picking up the book to read it. They wonder why we have a whole chapter here on all these leadership theories. If someone is not interested, they can just pass it by. But I felt like we do have to be part of the larger dialogue.

JA: Yes, especially when we’re taking language and words and putting different meaning on it. So pretty soon our concept of transformation

gets all messed up because of someone else's concept of transformation. And that's why, then, when we come up with a new word like "steward leader," it gives us an opportunity to shape it in the way we want to as Christians.

SR: Before it gets usurped.

JA: Yes, before it gets usurped again. Someone will take it over and make it into something that we never intended.

SR: They will. I'm waiting for someone on the non-faith based side to pick it up and say, "Maybe here is another methodology to help us be more successful as leaders. So let's see if we can't list the traits of what it means to be a steward leader without all that religious language." I expect that may happen at some point.

JA: It may already be happening, because we do have people enrolled in our programs who aren't Christians. So how can we hope they would relate to the concept of steward leadership?

Outside of faith, while you can do some things yourself—you can change your perspective, you can change your attitudes—you can't change your heart; you can't change your sinful nature.

SR: It's difficult. I think it's one of those things where you can go so far before the journey becomes quite difficult. I've found that the constant debate with "steward" resonates even across a lot of different faith traditions. There is language in a number of different religions that indicates an understanding of generosity and not living as though we are owners. It's even possible to talk about the idea of "steward" in the secular community. The problem becomes the inner transformation. Outside of faith, while you can do some things yourself—you can change your perspective, you can change your attitudes—you can't change your heart; you can't change your sinful nature. So somebody

could say, “I really do want to be a steward of my job.” Nobody likes bondage—hopefully when I talk about bondage, everyone is saying, “Yeah, we all feel it.” We put those chains on ourselves. Everybody would like to get rid of those. If there is something I can do from a non-faith-based standpoint, they could at least tell me their perspective, the way they go about things. I think I can feel a little bit of that freedom. But it would only go so far.

JA: That’s right.

SR: And then it stops, because without the Holy Spirit, there is no transformation. So hopefully, if nothing else, it would open people to the Gospel.

“How should we be measuring success in the kingdom of God?”

JA: I think your comments this morning about the seminary students getting through seminary and saying, “You know, it was the driest part of my life spiritually!” really highlights why we need to be intentional about your first trajectory—stewards of our relationship with our Creator God.

I think the same thing can be said for leadership programs. So how do we protect our programs from getting depleted of the whole spiritual side of who I am as a Christian and what that means for me as a Christian leader?

SR: I believe the best strategy is to help write resources and curriculum so that seminary professors who really care about this can weave it into the courses that are already there. And so you now have stewardship woven into New Testament studies, and Old Testament studies, and church history, and practical theology.

JA: Isn’t that a better way anyway?

SR: I think it is.

JA: The same thing happened to me in leadership development. I offered a class in leadership development as an optional course. At first

I had eight students who sort of discovered it and squeezed it in. And then it grew, and then people came to me and said, “This has so many students that it competes too much with the core curriculum, because we already have a leadership class.” Well, what was the leadership class? How to basically follow policy, and how to do the standard things that ministers do, but really never thinking about the more fundamental questions. So it’s an interesting tension and struggle.

JA: Can I change the conversation slightly? When somebody coming from a more traditional viewpoint looks at the steward leader concepts, they will wonder, What’s the outgrowth of them? What results will follow? Maybe that is a preoccupation in American clergy, and it certainly is a preoccupation with leadership literature. I mean, that is what leadership is all about—effectiveness. Have you wrestled with that?

SR: Yes, and it’s an important topic. The question is, “If I really live out this life of a steward leader, is it going to help my organization? I think the more important point is how we as American Christians measure success. If we measure success based on a Western/North American model of growth and expansion, of things getting bigger and better and faster, then I’m not sure that the concept of steward leader will ever make sense. And frankly I hope it won’t.

To what degree have we allowed worldly values to become Kingdom goals?

I think it needs to force us back to ask the question, “How should we be measuring success in the kingdom of God?” I don’t find anywhere in Scripture that says that growth and expansion are God’s way of measuring success. And so to what degree have we allowed worldly values to become Kingdom goals? What would happen if we asked the question, “What is God’s ultimate purpose and measurement of success for my organization?” And of course we would start with things like faithfulness, like personal transformation, like community—a lot of the things that come out of the steward leader model. And then I think steward leadership fits in perfectly to bring about that sort of success in an organization.

Now I don't think that means that other standards are not important. I think organizations will do well by all measurements if everybody is a steward leader. But all other standards must be secondary to the call to be faithful stewards and steward leaders.

What a steward leader does is upset the apple cart enough so that people are left wondering if we measured success wrongly. Maybe we

I think there must be metrics. I think there can be methodology built on best practices of people who are living out steward leadership.

need to rethink about what an outcome really is, and what our ultimate outcomes are in Kingdom terms. I believe the steward leader is best equipped to bring about Kingdom outcomes in any organization or ministry. But they are not necessarily going to look like the world's standard of success.

JA: Kingdom outcomes, where the Kingdom of God is within you. And then you measure Kingdom outcomes? How would you do that?

SR: Well, as they are lived out, I would say, as they are faithfully lived out. But it always has to be an inside out process. We must be on guard for how quickly we will take Kingdom outcomes and turn them into a list of things that we need to check off to make sure that they serve our outcomes. It's our tendency to want to do that.

It would be pretty radical for a ministry to honestly ask the question, "What would be a Kingdom-oriented definition of success?" Then list that as their set of goals and manage and structure and lead everything toward that set of outcomes. You need a board of directors that would be willing to take on such a set of success measurements. That's how we are going to measure ourselves. But it might mean in some years that we get smaller. It might mean in some years that we do things that the world would look at you and say, "What? You guys are floundering over there."

But when they come closer they would see this incredible, rich community where people are being fulfilled in their jobs and witness is being borne to the world of what it looks like to be a God-honoring

institution and ministry. According to worldly standards some might say, “You guys aren’t successful because you’re not growing.” But in God’s economy, it is a faithful, prospering ministry ready to be used by Him however He best sees fit. That is a kingdom outcome.

JA: If we take the four trajectories in the steward leader model, the third one is “relationships with people.” Looking for their growth, and what God is doing in their lives. Would it be possible to define success in those terms? I think it would give us people priorities. And then I do think that methods and facilities and those other kinds of things would be working. Because we do know that there are more effective ways of doing certain kinds of things. The question that we also need to ask is, “How are we serving our students?” instead of asking, “How much are we producing?”

I think that is the wrong language. I think your model would force us to realize that if we are stewards, that means God is working with them, and we are not producing anything. But are we enhancing their growth to a point where they are becoming the people that they ought to be as steward leaders? And maybe there would be some metrics, in a different way.

In true leadership something miraculous happens. The Holy Spirit does something that is more than just me as a leader.

SR: I think there must be metrics. I think there can be methodology built on best practices of people who are living out steward leadership. A little of that came out in answering a question from the African-American lady asking about the problems she is having with an employee. We talked about putting into practice the responses that a steward leader would use in situations like that, such as transparency and sharing concern for the person, honesty and a desire to be used by God to bless others.

I think there is a set of questions that you could ask a person that would help them look at attitudes and actions to see if they are indicative of the heart of a steward leader. That’s methodological. We could all sit here and probably put 10 of them together pretty quickly. So yes,

I do think assessment both of an individual's performance—self-assessment—and of an organization could be created.

But you can't make such a list without considering the power of transformation. For instance, if you've defined the kind of student you want to see emerge from here, it is likely one of the characteristics is going to be the kind of community that students experience. So what does that mean for the way the faculty relate to one another? The way the faculty and administration relate to one another? Are you creating the culture that just naturally allows you to have that outcome?

JA: That leads to one of my questions. I think servant leadership really started out as a concept, steward leader is starting out as a concept. Where do you see it going research-wise, in terms of identifying some of these characteristics and actually making a survey that individuals can run around giving when they go to churches and universities?

SR: We have developed what we are calling the steward leadership initiative. And it is a fairly comprehensive program that is trying to take this to the next level. One of the outcomes we are seeking is to research every leadership program in the country; secular, business related, non-educational, and also all the doctoral. We would ask the questions—"Do you use the concept of a steward leader? Define steward leader. What resources do you use around steward leader?"—so we can get an idea of the lay of the land right now.

We'd also ask, "What books or resources are you using?" And it obviously opens the door for us to be able to offer, "Would you like to know more about it, or could we give you new materials?" We are doing an annual conference where we are commissioning academic papers to be written on the various aspects of the steward leader. We are going to hold our first one in conjunction with the Christian Leadership Alliance, at the national conference in Dallas next April. So we will have a whole day where we will have a series of papers presented. But the real core of it is an open class forum Web presence where we hope to get connected with anybody in the world who has taught on the steward leader, as well as those who have read the book. These people can share resources, or can themselves be resources. And also we want to set up a mentoring system. So if I'm an African pastor, and I've read the book, or I've talked to somebody, and I say, "This is what I want to do—help me do it," we can connect them with somebody who can set up a mentoring relationship. I've been to India and China in the last

three months. There's a hunger among Christian leaders to learn more about becoming a steward leader and also for teaching stewardship and Biblical generosity. The need and interest is just overwhelming. And we've got to step into this moment and respond.

JA: So you're trying to document how people are using the model in their programs now.

SR: Yes, that's the goal. We want to share your story of what you are doing so people can see it and hear it. My guess is that there are a lot of people around the world writing on something similar. They may not have even labeled it this way, but when they read it, they're going to say, "That's it! That's what we have been doing. That is what we have been teaching." We need to collect it together and build materials and resources that say, "This is what it looks like."

JA: Yes. Turning the model into a theory at some point.

SR: We are committed to doing this. And we've got international partners to work with us.

JA: Because otherwise it will just be another nice biblical sort of approach, and it will lose that really basic academic validation piece that would take it to another level.

SR: I think your comment on experiential-based foundation is critical. We need to reach pastors and dialogue over this. So if you pray for that, I would really appreciate it, because we are close to a couple of funding sources to be able to do this. And then I think this will take off.

JA: I really understand fundamentally, and I really embrace what I get from this. I see the value of it. I think from my heart it's something that I have been seeking for our program. We have been talking—when the transformation takes place in our people, it's almost a miracle. And we look at each other and say, "Oh my! What happened?! How did that happen?" And then some wise sage says, "It was the Holy Spirit." And we say, "Wow! Can we do that again?!"

SR: Put it in the curriculum. The Holy Spirit will talk to you in the third semester, right before these two tests. Wouldn't that be great? (laughter)

JA: I want to ask you about the last trajectory—stewardship of the Creation. For me it was a refreshing thing to read from an evangelical author that we have a responsibility to take care of this earth. Could you say something about where that came from, how that emerged for you, and how it became a primary part of the steward leader?

SR: I'd be happy to. I was raised in a mainline evangelical family that loved the outdoors. I grew up hunting and fishing in Wyoming with my Dad. Yellowstone Park was an idyllic place for a little boy growing up. I love the outdoors.

But I also grew up in a family that bought into the entire right wing conservative view of environmentalism and Creation. So they were the people that if you ask them, "Should we care for God's Creation?" they would say, "Absolutely!" And if you say, "Should we take care of the environment?" they would say, "No, that's what those liberal people do." I grew up thinking Greenpeace was the personification of evil on the earth.

I got older, had kids, and was developing this stewardship theology. I was looking at these four spheres: God, self, others, and the earth, and I kind of got stuck on the fourth one. I realized I was giving Creation care some lip service. I was still carrying a lot of that old stuff with me. My friends at the Evangelical Environmental Network (of which I now chair the board) shared some readings with me and challenged my thinking. Finally, I just had to admit that it didn't make sense to try to separate the two.

I joke with people that I sat down with my Mom and Dad one day and came out of the closet. I said, "Mom and Dad, I'm an environmentalist. I can't do this anymore. We have to be passionate as Christians. And my value system just dramatically changed." And that was only six or seven years ago. It was a very recent transition for me. And for the first time I felt there was a consistent line all the way through my theology. I looked at the arguments on the other side and every single one of them was driven by economics and fear. When you put Kingdom values into it, it's an absolute no-brainer! And even the eschatological arguments are just not valid. You would never buy the argument that "your body is going to decay anyway so why are you brushing your teeth? Why are you doing anything to care for your body, because it will soon vanish?" We don't buy the argument for our bodies, and we shouldn't for the creation either. What we need is courageous leadership.

JA: I always ask myself, “What is it that we are doing, that people are so desperately embracing?” It’s almost revival. I do know that we do this, and we do that. In my mind it doesn’t add up to what I see in the room. I can only say. “Wow! What You have done.”

SR: Absolutely. When we start with the idea of God being Leader with a capital “L,” then all we really do is steward the responsibilities of leading under that umbrella. In one section I talk about a type of leadership that is a miracle. It’s bigger than me. In true leadership something miraculous happens. The Holy Spirit does something that is more than just me as a leader. In essence it’s as though we are saying, “The capital ‘L’ Leader is the one that was followed, and I was just a tool in the way.”

JA: I think we are saying that people need to be in a space where they are experiencing this, either as a leader themselves, or as the recipient of someone else’s leadership. And only then can you really sort of get it, because before that we have all these other story lines that are playing in our head.

JA: Reading Blackaby first helped me be ready for the steward model and the emphasis on God and our relationship to Him. Blackaby introduces the concept that we are leaders under God.

JA: Do you have any final thoughts for us?

SR: Well, “Thank you!” would be the biggest word that I would have. There are few things richer for me than to be able to talk about this and dialogue with people who really understand and embrace it and challenge it and think it through and look at all the difference facets. I think I really mostly appreciate this continued encouragement about “What do we do with it?” because we’ve got to do something with it. And we can easily develop a curriculum for D.Min., a curriculum for Ph.D. and more. I would covet your prayers as we discern the next steps. And also I would appreciate any input, any partnership that we could have with Andrews to develop this further. I do think we’re kindred spirits when it comes to this topic. And we’ve got to give it away.

Our prayer when we put together the steward leadership initiative was that it would quickly become something bigger than we could deal with. We just want it to go. We want to let other people grab control

and do stuff with it, as long as it doesn't deviate from solid theological core. We always have to be watching for that. There is so much going on in our world right now that is so disconnected, and if we can connect all the dots out there for people who are thinking and leading like this, I think we will develop a powerful core that can transform the work of the Kingdom. So we are excited about it. But we need partners, and prayer.

JA: Thank you. You've been very generous with your time.

