

10 assertions about possessions, faith, and the faithful use of possessions

BY LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

At a gathering of participants in the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers project in April 2014, Luke Timothy Johnson presented “Theological Reflections on Financing Theological Education.” His theological framework included 10 assertions about possessions, faith, and the faithful use of possessions. They are summarized here.



Three assertions about possessions

1. We can never stop having and disposing of possessions as long as we have bodies. Possessions involve us in the mysterious because they cut to the heart of our being as embodied spirits.
2. The ways in which we dispose of possessions express and reveal our stance toward the world. As the body is the primordial symbol of the self, in that the way in which we dispose of our body expresses the dispositions of our heart, so do possessions serve as symbols for our self-disposition in the world.
3. How we possess is an expression of who we are. Possessions are not merely physical. The claim of ownership can extend to every aspect of life. Friends, associates, accomplishments, degrees, books, articles, time, energy, space, reputation, even virtue, all can be grasped tightly to the self as ways of measuring the self.

Four assertions about faith

1. In the matter of possessions, the obedience of faith moves us from where we are to where God wants us to be. Faith in the fullest sense, in the biblical sense, is more than a set of beliefs. It is, rather, the living response of the whole person—mind, soul, heart, and body—to the living God. It involves belief, to be sure, but also trust and obedience and loyalty.
2. Faith never has a stopping place. Because the living God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, God both gifts us through creating us and calls us through creating everything else, calling us into trust and obedience. It involves all that we are and have.

3. The covenantal response of loyalty in the living God is necessarily articulated through the ways in which we share or don't share our possessions. Scripture as a whole places the human response of faith in the living God within the framework of covenant. The basic choice within Scripture is between, on one side, idolatry, whereby we worship the works of our own hands and, on the other side, faith in the living God. There is, in Scripture, no middle ground.
4. Idolatry is our natural tendency. We seek to secure our existence through our projects and possessions. God offers us the gift of freedom, of breaking out of that idolatrous pattern. Our open response to that gift is faith.

In articulating his 10 assertions, Johnson references Gabriel Marcel's distinction between the pragmatic and the mysterious. "Finances," he says, "are totally and properly the realm of problem solving. They demand pragmatic thinking. . . . But the faithful use of possessions brings us into the realm of the mysterious, which requires reflection on our being and our having. We want to do both tasks—the practical and the reflective—but we must avoid precipitously merging them."

Three assertions about the faithful use of possessions

1. Scripture is utterly clear on what faith **forbids** concerning possessions. One cannot acquire wealth at the expense of others.
2. Scripture is also utterly clear on what faith **requires** concerning possessions. It mandates sharing, although it is not at all decisive as to how we should share. This indecision reflects the open-endedness of faith itself and the faithful use of possessions. If faith is a response to the Other, then our giving is not to be determined by what we want to give but by what the Other needs. And because our sharing of possessions is an articulation of our faith in the living God through the call of others, there is no end to it.
3. The essential skill demanded for the faithful disposition of what we have is discernment—making choices. It is this skill that we can help nurture among our students and within our faculties. Such discernment links the individual responsibility of the student or the minister to the call of communities within which they serve.



*Luke Timothy Johnson is professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology of Emory University. His research concerns the literary, moral, and religious dimensions of the New Testament, and he has penned numerous scholarly articles and more than 25 books, including *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*.*

[View trailer](#)

[View Johnson's 28-minute presentation](#)

View below six clips from the Q&A session.



Sarah Drummond
*Dean of the Faculty and
 Vice President for Academic
 Affairs, Andover Newton
 Theological School*

Seminary debt impacts students most directly. They are the vulnerable ones who feel the impact throughout their lives, but the sources of the burden are diffuse, and institutions and systems often place blame on one another. Could you comment on this from a Biblical point of view? [View video clip.](#)



Katherine Smith
Assistant Dean for Admissions, Vocation, and Stewardship, Vanderbilt University Divinity School

How would you approach these conversations with faculty and students who represent two opposite ends of the spectrum—those who share a prosperity gospel and those who are operating out of an ethic of scarcity? [View video clip.](#)



Molly Marshall
*President, Central Baptist
 Theological Seminary*

Do you know of any seminaries that are practicing voluntary simplicity that has not been forced by financial retrenchment? [View video clip.](#)



David Greenhaw
*President, Eden Theological
 Seminary*

Could you reflect on the difficulty of discerning the needs of others with whom we might share our possessions that are efficacious but not paternalistic? [View video clip.](#)



Scott Cormode
Academic Dean, Fuller Theological Seminary

As we cultivate discernment in our students, how do we get them to listen to their narratives in ways that allow them to see God doing something new? [View video clip.](#)



Leah Gaskin Fitchue
*President, Payne Theological
 Seminary*

Please clarify the concept of “Otherness” as the core of community and how we might form community that includes the “invisible Other.” [View video clip.](#)