

# A culture of debt, a culture of thrift

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A growing number of American Christians—and even some secular groups—are beginning to believe John Wesley had the right idea: “Make all you can; save all you can; give all you can.”

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Hard work, thrift and philanthropy seem counter-cultural in a time and place where debt is pervasive, with individuals, families, companies and even the government borrowing increasing amounts of money.

Churches can offer American culture the gift of stewardship, [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#) Director Suzii Paynter said. Church leaders preach about wise stewardship of time, energy and resources. Through church-sponsored financial seminars, people learn how to get out of debt and stay that way. And some congregations take seriously the responsibility to model wise stewardship to the world.

A group of primarily African-American congregations in three Central Texas counties have formed [Texas Congregations United for Empowerment](#), an effort that brings together 6,000 church members to create better access to financial services, including loans from banks, for lower-income individuals and families.

While many people struggle in their attempts to describe stewardship and thrift, churches have a long history of living and promoting it, Paynter said.

“Stewardship is in our DNA,” she said. “It’s in our culture. It’s in our language.”

Taking chances and borrowing money is as much part of American culture as the Protestant work ethic, said David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values.

For example, two of the more prominent historical figures in the country are Ben Franklin and Daniel Boone, he noted. Franklin encouraged people to build wealth slowly and steadily. Boone was a risk-taker who became known for his adventures, but he also fled creditors.



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This dichotomy still can be seen in figures such as Warren Buffett—known for value-based investments and a lifestyle of personal frugality and philanthropy—and Donald Trump—known for his lavish lifestyle and his willingness to incur massive debt, he added.

“I like Daniel Boone, and every once in awhile I have a wink and smile with Donald Trump, but I think we need to shift toward Ben Franklin and Warren Buffett,” Blankenhorn said during the recent Christian Life Commission Conference in McAllen.

The “spend and debt” culture even has affected the government, said Stephen Reeves, CLC legislative specialist. Many state governments are betting on gambling as the path to increased revenue, forgetting its detrimental impact on citizens.

“The government itself becomes an addict,” Reeves said. “It becomes addicted to that revenue.”

Comparing it to “grandma’s famous elixir,” Blankenhorn said only a societal ethic of thrift can turn the nation back to its saving ways. Churches are key to that effort because they are the “custodians of the stewardship ethic.”

While many people turn to credit cards and payday lending companies for money, they didn’t always have to, said Tim Morstad, director of advocacy for [Texas AARP](#).

Savings and loan associations were a widespread movement that encouraged financial saving while investing in the lives of others. Credit unions have used a similar approach. In times of crises, many people turned to churches, which often found ways to help people.

“Before the last 20 years in Texas, people did have access to credit,” he said.

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**Ellis Orozco, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Richardson, talks about the spend and debt culture.**

Blankenhorn encouraged churches to be leaders in pushing the culture back to those days. Savings and loan associations have declined greatly. Many people chose not to turn to churches for help.

“Middle class and working class people are no longer surrounded by such institutions.”

Ellis Orozco, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Richardson](#), told participants at the CLC Conference the way Christians view their time and resources can set them apart practically from other people. People who use what God has given them wisely show others what life could be like if they followed biblical principles of living, he said. When Christians follow biblical teachings, it makes an impact on others.

“Everything belongs to God,” he said. “It is given to you, but will all return to him. It is given to you as a stewardship. To live as if it belongs to you is practical atheism.”