

# Generosity

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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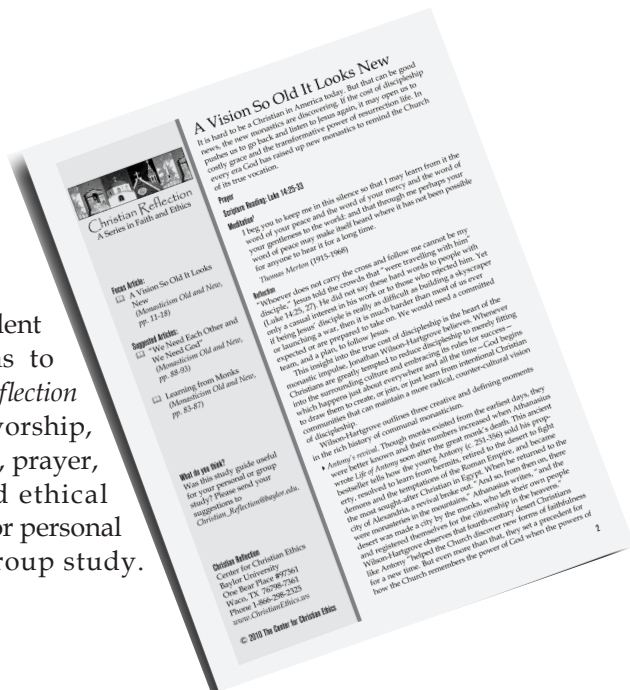
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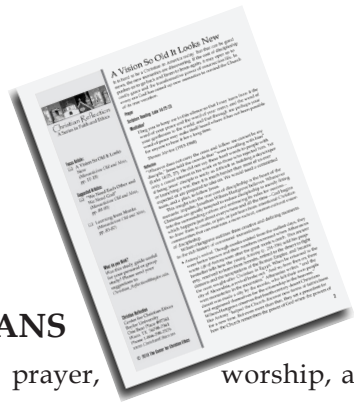




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worship, and

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Generosity names not merely something we do, but an admirable quality of character, something we are. Undergirding the character of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the world, and this understanding inspires genuinely generous activity.

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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Since generosity echoes God's love, practicing it in our lives and congregations is essential. Our contributors explore the distinctive features of Christian generosity, its central role in discipleship, and why its practice is so difficult in a consumerist culture.

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If generosity is “a lifestyle in which we share all that we have, are, and ever will become as a demonstration of God’s love and a response to God’s grace,” as Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd have suggested, then practicing generosity in our lives and congregations is essential. In this issue our contributors explore the distinctive features of Christian generosity, its central role in our discipleship, and why its practice has become so difficult for us in a consumerist culture.

In *Generosity of Spirit* (p. 11), Doug Henry explains how “Christian generosity’s special ways of thinking and acting stand in contrast with ancient alternatives” of patronage and *quid pro quo* reciprocity. A truly generous spirit flows from the vision that “we inhabit a world of good and perfect gifts” which is “created and sustained by One who is not distant but near and among us.” However, such a spirit is often impeded today by the opposing perspectives of presumption and despair – which are believing we can control our happiness, or giving up on it. Either view can make us grasping of objects and resentful of others.

Scripture is replete with accounts of God’s generosity and of the human open-handedness that it may inspire. Allen Walworth highlights two of these stories in *Unlikely Champions: A Widow’s Might* (p. 78). He identifies both the widow of Zarephath who sustains the exiled prophet Elijah and the widow whom Jesus observes giving her modest income to the Temple offering as “champions of the human spirit,” for on “their faithfulness the world turns,



and the kingdom of God advances." Kelly Liebengood agrees that "the Bible has quite a lot to say about God's expectations regarding how and for whom we use our resources," but notes that many scholars and not a few Christians complain that the Apostle Paul "does not appear to say much of anything on the matter, certainly not enough to promote any kind of meaningful action." In *Paul's Expectations of Generosity* (p. 19), Liebengood outlines a more charitable reading of the apostle's stance. He credits Paul with reminding us that "genuine love and generosity require us not only to give to those in need, but also to make a place for them in our gatherings," "generosity is enabled as we share in the life of God," and we are called to "pattern our lives, personal and communal, in such a way that they bear witness to God's own hospitality and generosity."

Answering the call to generosity is no easier today than it was in biblical times, and for much the same reason: it is so countercultural. Jason Coker's *Subversive Generosity* (p. 29) shows how generosity is a defining feature of God's reign, which once "stood against Roman systems of oppression that damaged human dignity" and now "can critique global capitalism by envisioning a future where human dignity is more important than profit." He fears that too many Christians are "uncritically submerged in the profit-driven system of capitalism" and do not embrace "the human dignity-driven system of God's reign." Richard Stearns seconds this prophetic warning in *Time to Tithe* (p. 73). In western culture, Stearns observes, "the chief competitor to dependence on God is money – what it can buy and what it symbolizes. We need to give generously in order to inoculate ourselves from the diseases of materialism and consumerism. Unfortunately, we are not getting our vaccination shots."

More evidence for Coker's thesis emerges in Patricia Snell Herzog's discovery that most American Christians "admit that our giving behavior does not match our personal or our religion's ideal of what it should be, yet we are oddly content with this." In *Solving the Riddle of Comfortable Guilt* (p. 37), she suggests some remedies: "What could indirectly encourage generous giving is helping people to feel in communion with others, to be aware of others' needs and act on their behalf, and to better see the abundance in their own lives, perhaps even by helping them to calculate it." She also recommends that we foster a new culture of giving in our congregations. Ruben Swint offers practical guidance for this in *How Congregations (and Their Members) Differ on Generosity* (p. 44). Among his insights is this: we must "become multilingual in the language of 'stewardship' and 'generosity.' ... While mature congregational members have lived lives of faithful stewardship and consider tithing to be the norm of Christian giving, younger congregational members do not warm to the practice of stewardship and tithing as they do to living a generous life."

Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise's *In This Old House* (p. 68) provides a winsome portrait of a generous life. They commend "hospitality [as] a

species of generosity, a making room and giving space to others in your own place, or in your attention, or in conversation." Images of a generous life can be found in Christian art through the ages. In *Imperial Gifts* (p. 52), Heidi Hornik reviews the famous mosaics *Emperor Justinian and His Attendants* and *Empress Theodora and Her Attendants* that commemorate the patronage of these Byzantine leaders to the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. Then, in *Stopping to Help* (p. 56), Hornik examines one of the most significant images of generosity in Christian painting, Jacopo Bassano's *The Good Samaritan* (on the cover). "The artist assisted the efforts of relief for the sick and poor in his day," she notes. He painted images such as this one to recall Christians to more scriptural ways of living and to critique the church of his day for its failure to care for the disadvantaged in society.

The liturgy (p. 62) by Sharon Kirkpatrick Felton invites us "to worship the God who is the very definition of generosity, and who calls each of us to be generous as well," even as we "confess that such generosity is difficult for us because it runs counter to our culture of abundance." It incorporates Anthony Carl's new hymn, "All Who Thirst" (p. 59), with a tune by him and Kurt Kaiser. The hymn traces our generosity back to God's, proclaiming: "All who thirst, come to the waters, / all who have a need or care. / Come and taste the Lord's great goodness. / Find your soul's abundance there."

Believing that "most of us wish to be more generous," Jo-Ann Brandt, in *Generosity in the Bible* (p. 82), recommends four recent books—Craig L. Blomberg's *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship*, Bruce W. Longenecker's *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, Mark Allan Powell's *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life*, and Timothy Keller's *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*—"that not only demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon, but also provide practical advice about how we can turn our well-meaning intent into action."

In *Toward a Theology of Generosity* (p. 88), Arthur Sutherland notes that "Since John Winthrop's 1630 sermon 'A Model of Christian Charity,' addressed to Puritans aboard the *Arabella* as she pitched toward Massachusetts, Americans have wrestled with how God gives, the obligations of the rich toward the poor and the poor toward the rich, and how generosity shapes public life." He examines three books—Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson's *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*, Mark Scandrette's *Free: Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most*, and Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*—that keep our struggle with those issues alive. He is especially taken with the latter work. "Miroslav Volf wants our giving to imitate God's," Sutherland writes. "The problem is that while God's gifts are pure, ours are stained by selfishness, pride, and sloth. Overcoming this, or at least recognizing it earlier and clearer, is the Christian's task." ✚

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# Generosity of Spirit

BY DOUGLAS V. HENRY

Generosity names not merely something we *do*, but an admirable quality of character, something we *are*. Undergirding the character of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the world, and this understanding inspires genuinely generous activity.

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What exactly counts as generosity? Should generosity be an ordinary Christian's aim? Or is generosity a distinctive gift that some have and others don't? Where is generosity at work in daily activities? How do we become generous? Does it matter?

Answers to these questions might seem straightforward. Generosity is giving others something extra beyond what they are due. Ordinary Christians should be generous, relative to their means. Rounding up a server's tip at the local steakhouse, holding open the door for someone whose hands are full, and waiting patiently for a late-arriving friend exemplify routine acts of generosity. We become generous the same way we become good in other ways: through sound habits and healthy self-critical adjustments. And, generosity matters because "to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 22:48).

Such answers are useful and right so far as they go. Yet they do not go far enough. By too neatly defining generosity and its demands upon us, we miss what is most essential about it and imperil our progress toward Christ-likeness.

Instead of thinking of generosity merely as something we *do*, Christians rightly understand generosity as an admirable quality of character, as something we *are*. A generous person naturally engages in acts of generosity. But in important ways generous activity is secondary. Undergirding the character

of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the whole world, and it is this understanding that inspires genuinely generous activity. Speaking of *generosity of spirit* thus helps enlarge our imagination of what generosity entails; of the breadth of its influence in our minds, thoughts, and words; and of the worshipful trust in God signified through the actions it prompts. If we would be generous followers of Christ, we must first "have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16b) and "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). In order to give as Jesus gives, we need generosity of spirit or, if you will, a spirituality of generosity.

### ANCIENT LEGACIES

Christian generosity's special ways of thinking and acting stand in contrast with ancient alternatives.

First-century Romans, for instance, regarded generosity as a virtue especially well-suited to powerful, rich benefactors. Indeed, the Latin adjective *generosus* refers to one's birth or origins; the term is adapted from a Greek word, *genesis*, meaning *beginning*. To be generous in the pagan world therefore entailed making good on one's promising beginning within a well-born noble family. Roman generosity simultaneously expressed and extended an honor appropriate to high status. It did more than that, however. It also exacted obligations from beneficiaries. Someone on the receiving end of a highborn Roman's generosity was bound not only to return thanks or give honor, but to support his or her benefactor. Such support could take the form of preferential business arrangements, promoting a patron for political office, advocating for favorable laws, or championing a benefactor's civic status. Generosity thus underwrote patron-client relationships marked by intractable *quid pro quo* reciprocity. Getting a favor meant returning a favor. For these reasons, generosity was a virtue limited to an elite segment of the population. Ordinary folk, without either high birth or wealth, possessed neither the status nor the resources necessary for generosity. In the Roman world of Jesus, Peter, Paul, Mary, and Martha, generosity was the exclusive domain of the rich and powerful. Cynicism about others' generosity, along with despair in the absence of the riches or standing to get ahead, were common.

Many features of first-century Roman generosity borrow from a Greek legacy. Aristotle's ethical writings especially influenced later thinking about generosity. Although he distinguishes between everyday generosity (giving within ordinary means to others) and *magnificence* (generosity on a grand scale that requires substantial wealth), Aristotle emphasizes the connection of both to a virtue he calls *megalopsychia*—literally, greatness of soul, or what we in English name *magnanimity*. Aristotle reserves magnanimity for elite men (not women!) of noble birth whose superiority is unmistakable, both to themselves and others. In Greek culture four centuries before Christ,

the magnanimous man justifiably looked down on those inferior to him, even as the poor and weak were supposed to look up to and admire him. Generosity comes easily to Aristotle's magnanimous man because he is self-sufficient and therefore without want. At the same time, he disdains the honor others pay him, for it, too, is something he does not need even though he deserves it. Obviously, the birth and bearing of such a man rule out the possibility of humility. Nobility, pride, and self-satisfaction accompany his acts of generosity.<sup>1</sup>

With Greek and Roman forms of generosity in mind, the New Testament offers instructions about generosity that early Christians must have heard counterculturally. Perhaps for similar reasons, but possibly also for new reasons, twenty-first-century Christians need biblical resources to support a generosity of spirit that is absent in our own age.

### **BIBLICAL LESSONS**

The truth is that not only in the New Testament, but from the beginning to the end of the Bible, we read of God's generous and good gifts.

At the outset of Genesis, God speaks the cosmos into being, lavishes upon it a divinely bestowed goodness, and pronounces blessing upon all of creation. Moreover, the Lord's plenitudinous generosity toward humankind is explicit: "See, I have *given* you *every* plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and *every* tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (Genesis 1:29).

With the full implications of Genesis 1 in mind, theologians identify the generous character of God's creation in at least two ways. First, creation is *ex nihilo*, literally "out of nothing." Nothing had to exist. Put positively, everything that exists is and only is as a result of God's supererogatory, generous act of creation. Second, theologians speak of *creatio continuo*, the doctrine of continuing creation. Here, they

have in mind God's ongoing attention to and engagement with the created order. The Lord not only created but also renews and sustains, day by day and minute by minute, everything in the cosmos. As Cecil Alexander's great hymn says, "All things bright and beautiful, / all creatures great and small, / all things wise and wonderful, / the Lord God made them all."<sup>2</sup> And having made such things, the Lord lovingly attends to them, even the birds of

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the air and the lilies of the field, so that we, the very bearers of God's image, should not be anxious about the meeting of our own daily needs (Matthew 6:25-34).

In the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of John, the Lord announces a new heaven and a new earth. In the midst of this sumptuously rich place of abundance, not once but twice an invitation is issued: "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (Revelation 21:6b); "And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (Revelation 22:17b). What God generously creates and freely gives in love, the Lord also generously recreates at the end of days, when everything is made new.

Between its beginning and end, Scripture emphasizes the divine generosity of spirit that animates salvation history. God's covenant with Abraham, for example, is marked by generosity, not only in the promise of a good home and bountiful descendants, but also in its anticipation that in Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Similarly, the commandments and laws given to Moses, far from a dour and strict moral miserliness on God's part, constitute a lovingly provided, generous-spirited help for flourishing human life. Prophets, priests, and kings – the "offices" given to Israel to help ensure its wellbeing – constitute another evidence of divine generosity, even though the women and men who filled these offices often fell short of God's generous wisdom, holiness, and power. Nowhere does God's supererogatory generosity find greater fulfillment than in the self-gift of Christ Jesus. As the Apostle Paul writes, "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Through each act in the drama of God's providential presence with Israel – covenant, law, kingship, prophetic witness, messianic ministry, and more – the Lord shows what generosity of spirit and deed looks like.

When the apostles instruct the faithful in matters of generosity we must remember, then, that they do so with great insight into the "divine economy" expressed over the sweep of salvation history. The word *economy* (from the Greek *oikonomikos*, literally the "custom of the house") identifies all those things concerned with household affairs – that is, with stewardship of one's home and one's dependents. The "divine economy" thus identifies and names the ways in which God's "household" operates. Reflecting upon God's household economics helps clarify a radically different outlook and paradigm at work than that held by most people in our world. God's household is not based on scant resources, fist-clenching possessiveness, reluctantly expressed mercy, or resentful envy of others. Indeed, quite the opposite. Plenitudinous bounty, open-armed hospitality, ready words of welcome, and joyful delight in sharing mark the divine economy. Knowing that we Christians share in an abundance originating in God, James there-



fore proclaims “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). And understanding the gladness with which Christ beckons all to his banquet table, Paul enjoins, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

If we inhabit a world of good and perfect gifts, if we live in a world created and sustained by One who is not distant but near and among us, and if ours is a world stamped from beginning to end by divine generosity, then it stands to reason that we ought to “risk” a generosity of spirit commensurate to that reality!

### CONTEMPORARY LIES

It does not always appear that our world is of that sort. Indeed, we live in times marked by wretched, widespread failures of generosity. It’s not merely that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, although that is true. Recent studies show that “on current trends the richest 1% would own more than 50% of the world’s wealth by 2016.”<sup>3</sup> Yet deeper than the data, and ultimately explanatory of it, lies an underlying spiritual crisis. Two distorted and indeed ultimately tragic views impede generosity of spirit: *presumption* and *despair*.

Where generosity of spirit is lacking, presumption sometimes is at work.

The presumptuous seek security against vulnerability through cleverness and control. By possessing things and exercising power through them, the presumptuous imagine that they can protect themselves from loss. Whether or not they sometimes, or perhaps even regularly, respond to others’ needs misses the point. The issue is that presumptuous people inhabit a world not of gifts, but rather of objects to own, possess, or sequester

for their private use. In a world of disenchanting objects over which to exercise domination, “me” and “mine” loom larger than “we” and “ours.” Competitive relations overshadow cooperative interdependence. The presumptuous build bulwarks to secure their own interests, thinking little about bridges of hospitality across which those with needs might be welcomed. They may invite beneficiaries into their bulwarks, but they stand ready to bar the gates

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if resources grow scarce. And at the false heart of presumption lies the belief that we can fashion a personal heaven of our own making instead of receiving with gladness a shared beatitude promised by God.

An equally corrosive threat to generosity of spirit arises in the form of cynicism or despair. The despairing—beaten down by seemingly endless strings of failure, frustrated beyond their ability at every turn, and held back from a fulfillment they cannot find—simply give up. Having abandoned the prospect of their own satisfaction in life, they similarly dismiss the possibilities for nurturing others' happiness. Again, whether or not they occasionally extend help to those in need misses the point. Like the presumptuous, those who despair see a world of things to be controlled. While the presumptuous appear to master the world, the despairing experience misery instead of mastery in a world of objects beyond their control. For them, confidence falters and cynicism creeps in. Lacking what's rightfully "mine" and resenting the better fortune of "them," the one who despairs thus sees himself standing outside the safe haven that he might have built "if only."

The despairing and the presumptuous represent mirror images of each other, and both of them distort the gracious, gift-laden divine economy of the triune God.

## **DIVINE LARGESSE**

Recall that the divine economy is measured in gifts lovingly shared rather than objects greedily clutched. In that kind of world—the *real* world that Christians discern and embrace—neither presumption nor despair make sense. What does make sense is a Christian generosity of spirit that aspires to the greatness for which God made us. Such generosity of spirit, unlike Aristotle's magnanimity, has room for a proper humility grounded in awareness of what the Lord has done for us.

Christian generosity of spirit provides help to anyone tempted to despairing forms of envy. It reminds us that we bear the image of God, an inalienable gift the value of which is beyond measure. Because this greatness of soul is a gift we share with others in a divinely superintended cosmos, all of which is underwritten by God's generous provision, we need not be anxious or jealous. Inasmuch as our lives are gifts imbued with God's lavish love, we have no cause for despair at what we do not have. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31). In God's good, gift-laden world, we are free to see others not as adversaries or as competitors for scarce resources, but as brothers and sisters trusting confidently in God's gracious provision.

Likewise, Christians known for generosity of spirit evince a humility that leaves no room for presumption. For while we know ourselves to be made in the image of God, we know the *imago Dei* is a status given to us



rather than something achieved by our own doing. Although we are animated by the breath of God, and therefore fearfully and wonderfully made, we remember that we are dust of the earth and therefore something humble as well. Whereas the presumptuous want to get what is theirs, giving to others only when it is convenient and clinging possessively to what is theirs when sharing proves inconvenient, the humble never imagine in the first place that what is theirs is truly and only theirs. Abiding in a world characterized by grace, gift, plenitude, and providence, the meek anticipate the blessedness Christ promises, “for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

Generosity of spirit bears resources for resisting the miserly and envious tendencies engendered by presumption and despair, respectively. Generous-spirited Christians remember *what* we are. We are beings “crowned with glory and honor,” yet “a little lower than the heavenly beings” (Psalm 8:5, ESV).<sup>4</sup> Those with generosity of spirit also know *where* we are: in a lovingly ordered cosmos that is created, sustained, and redeemed by a Lord who loves us and abides with us. When we cultivate a spirituality of generosity governed by truths such as these, so that we grasp who and where we truly are, then doing generous things becomes far more likely.

What does true generosity entail? How wide is its influence in our minds, thoughts, and words? In which ways might the actions prompted by generosity of spirit signal our worshipful trust in God?

In returning to questions raised above, consider a final way of being in the world that definitively orients Christian responses.

When all is said and done, the followers of Jesus ought to give generously because they delight in the *hope* made possible through Christ. In Dante’s splendid way of putting it, hope is a “certain expectation of a future glory” that grows out of the salvation given to us in Christ.<sup>5</sup> If our hope ultimately rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises

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**If our hope rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises of our gracious God, then we can share gladly with those in need. We are not preoccupied with possessing things but with being possessed by generosity of spirit.**

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of our gracious God, then we can share gladly and liberally with those in need. Hope-filled Christians are not preoccupied with possessing things but with being possessed by generosity of spirit. Through hope in Christ we are freed from the presumption and despair accompanying a world of objects oriented around me, myself, and I. Through that same hope we are freed to give generously. And when we do so, we can rejoice in a divine economy in

which “it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38, ESV).

## NOTES

1 Aristotle draws these distinctions in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4:1-3.

2 The hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful” by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895) appeared in her collection *Hymns for Little Children* (1848).

3 Larry Elliott and Ed Pilkington, “New Oxfam report says half of global wealth held by the 1%” *The Guardian* (January 19, 2015), [www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jan/19/global-wealth-oxfam-inequality-davos-economic-summit-switzerland](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jan/19/global-wealth-oxfam-inequality-davos-economic-summit-switzerland) (accessed June 30, 2015).

4 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

5 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 25.67-68.

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### **DOUGLAS V. HENRY**

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# Paul's Expectations of Generosity

BY KELLY D. LIEBENGODD

**True generosity requires us to give to those in need and make a place for them in our gatherings. Such generosity, Paul reminds us, is enabled by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit.**

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**G**rowing public interest in the alleviation of poverty is reminding many in the Church that the Bible has quite a lot to say about God's expectations regarding how and for whom we use our resources. For example, central to the Pentateuch's vision of the good life are instructions concerning social justice, economics, and care for the poor and vulnerable of society.<sup>1</sup> In the prophetic materials, the people of Israel are criticized for failing to use their power and resources to benefit orphans, widows, and the vulnerable of society—that is, for failing to uphold the vision of the good life found in the Pentateuch.<sup>2</sup> Social justice, economics, and concern for the poor are common themes in the wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus, the Book of Acts, the Epistle of James, and the Book of Revelation.<sup>3</sup> But what about Paul, the apostle who has written almost half of the New Testament?<sup>4</sup> What does he have to contribute to the witness of Scripture about how God expects us to use our material resources?

Many biblical scholars and not a few Christians are rather critical of the apostle because he does not appear to say much of anything on the matter, certainly not enough to promote any kind of meaningful action.<sup>5</sup> To add insult to injury, some of Paul's writings can be interpreted as supporting the oft-heard mantra for self-reliance and social responsibility, "God helps those who help themselves." A case in point is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, where Paul warns his readers to keep away from people who are living in idleness.

In addition, he orders the idle to work hard (day and night) in order to earn their own living so that they will not be a burden to others. He even goes so far as to say that those who refuse to work should be refused food. And he roots all of this instruction in the way of life that he and his companions passed down to the Thessalonians when they were visiting (“we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it”; 2 Thessalonians 3:8).

But is this a charitable reading of Paul? Is it really the case, as many have suggested, that Paul has nothing meaningful to contribute to the larger picture of what the Scriptures teach us about the place of social justice, poverty, and generosity in God’s economy?

### **“IDLENESS” AND UNCHARACTERISTIC GENEROSITY**

Let’s begin by revisiting 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 and attending to its social setting more closely: “idleness” is only made possible in a social context where people’s needs are being met by someone else. That is, idleness is dependent upon generosity. This might seem like an obvious observation, but it turns out to be a significant point when we locate the issue of idleness within the realities of the social world in which the Thessalonians lived.

In first-century Greco-Roman urban centers such as Thessalonica, there was no meaningful concern for the poor and needy, nor were there any mechanisms, or “safety nets,” for aiding those who found themselves in any sort of economic hardship. It is estimated that just over half of the population lived at or below subsistence levels in these urban centers.<sup>6</sup> Given their precarious circumstances, many of these people died prematurely from either malnutrition or some physical ailment that was precipitated by their dire conditions. Approximately another one quarter of the urban population lived with only modest reserves. Since these people were vulnerable to economic insecurity (in part because there was no economic safety net), they were unable or unwilling to extend generosity to others; if they did, they might fall into a condition of subsistence living from which there would be no way for them (and their families) to recover. As a result, approximately eighty percent of the population consistently experienced economic vulnerability and insecurity and were not in a position to offer any meaningful generosity to others. It was therefore incumbent upon the elites in these communities to provide resources that would enable the poor and vulnerable to emerge from their destitute financial circumstances and concomitant hardships; if there was to be any sort of safety net in urban centers, it would have to come from the minority that had managed to accumulate most of the material resources that were available.

Weather-beaten, ancient honorary inscriptions still bear witness to the common practices of generosity of the elite in Greco-Roman urban centers in the first century.<sup>7</sup> But it is important to underscore that the generosity that was practiced by and even expected of those who had reserves was blatantly self-serving. In the extremely competitive social construct of honor

and shame, extravagant giving (for civic monuments, public works projects such as theaters, roads, water systems, or public baths, opulent banquets, sponsorship of gladiator games, and so on) was for the dual purpose of enhancing one's status among those who mattered and for expanding one's economic opportunities.<sup>8</sup> The startling reality was that most of the material resources that were available in Greco-Roman urban centers were harvested or extracted by those living at or below subsistence levels, but distributed among the elite. "Trickledown economics" was not in operation in the world in which the New Testament was written; instead, most resources were channeled upward and then distributed among those who lived with substantial reserves and unshakeable economic security.

This social reality sheds considerable light on Paul's instruction in 2 Thessalonians 3. Some people were "idle" in the community of Jesus followers at Thessalonica precisely because they could assume that others in that community would provide for their needs. This, as we can now see, is an uncharacteristic presumption for anyone to make in a Greco-Roman urban center at that time. It thus becomes apparent that one of the primary characteristics of this particular community of Jesus followers in Thessalonica was uncharacteristic generosity towards those in need. And it appears that this uncharacteristic generosity was being abused by some.

When we read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 in its proper social setting, then, we see a community that has engaged in countercultural acts of generosity (and for a long enough time for some to abuse it). Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to continue to uphold the practice of caring for those who are *truly* in need by exhorting them to "not grow weary of doing good" (3:13, my translation). In Paul's mind, what is at stake is the unnecessary squandering of limited resources for those who are able to provide for themselves. But generosity is never taken off the table; it is a non-negotiable for the community of Jesus followers, even if it is being abused.

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**When Paul writes to the Thessalonian church, generosity is never taken off the table. It is a non-negotiable for the community of Jesus followers, even if it is being abused by the "idle" who are able to provide for themselves.**

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In a different Christian community, we see a similar scenario of abused uncharacteristic generosity. In 1 Timothy 5:3-16, Paul urges his readers to "honor widows who are really widows" (5:3). The basis for his admonishment is not simply that people should be self-sufficient and work hard, but rather that abuse of generosity takes away resources that can and should be appropriated to assist those who are truly in need (5:16). And as he did with the Thessalonians, Paul

once again upholds the fundamental practice of generosity within the community of Jesus followers by exhorting those with access to material resources, namely the minority rich, to channel those goods downward: "As for those who...are rich...do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" (6:17-18).

### **REDEFINING "GOOD WORKS"**

In considering Paul's vision of and instructions for generosity within the community of Jesus followers, it is important to understand what he means when he speaks of doing "good works" (2 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Timothy 6:17-18). Galatians 6 is instructive; there Paul, as he customarily does in his letters, alerts his readers with a double referential conjunction (*ara oun*) that what he is about to say encapsulates what he has been urging them to do thus far: "*Therefore, then*, whenever we have opportunity, let us work the good for all, and especially for those of the household of faith" (6:10, my translation). In this summarizing charge, Paul intimates that a community of Jesus followers ought to be characterized by the overarching ethic of "working/doing the good." As indicated in Galatians 6:6 ("Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher"), we know that Paul's concept of "the good" contains an economic dimension, the sharing of material resources. This sharing of material resources, Paul argues within the larger framework of the letter, is a natural extension of belonging to Jesus, who he poignantly describes at the beginning of the letter as the one "who gave himself for our sins to set us free from this present evil age" characterized by greed and selfish ambition (1:4).

When we follow Paul's larger argument in Galatians, we see that his primary concern is that the Galatian Christians be characterized not by the marks of the flesh (that is, by circumcision and works that bring self-enhancing glory and honor), but rather by generosity that is generated by the life-giving Spirit of the self-giving Jesus. Paul develops this by connecting the work of the Spirit with freedom, and freedom with the enabling to love one's neighbor. In the rather dense section of Galatians 5, Paul insists that the freedom given to the Jesus followers in Galatia by means of the Spirit is not for the purpose of self-indulgence; rather their freedom is redefined as it is reinvigorated by the life-giving Spirit: they have been set free in order to love their neighbors (5:13-14). Having made this point, Paul concludes his letter with the encapsulating charge to "bear one another's burdens" (6:2), to share their material goods (6:6), and to not grow weary in doing good (6:9).

The development of this theme of generosity to the poor in Paul's letter to the Galatians is even more substantial when we consider the recent work of New Testament scholar Bruce Longenecker. He has convincingly demonstrated that the phrase "remember the poor" in Galatians 2:10 is not an appeal for Gentile followers to send money to struggling Jesus followers in Jerusalem

(as it has been understood for many generations of biblical scholarship); instead it is an admonishment for Gentile followers of Jesus to exhibit the same kind of generosity within their own indigenous Gentile communities that has been characteristic among the first (Jewish) followers of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> If Longenecker is correct, then caring for the poor was to be a defining mark of the Jesus communities, wherever they were found, even in Gentile urban centers where generosity towards the poor was virtually non-existent. The context (Galatians 1:6-2:21) in which this charge to “remember the poor” is issued is equally illuminating for our purposes: Paul indicates that caring for the poor is behavior that is consistent with being faithful to the pattern of life that is generated from the truth of the gospel.

In light of the above discussion, it is important to underscore that for Paul “doing good” is not merely an appeal to generic acts of morality, but rather is a call to live generously, using one’s material resources to share with others in need. It is equally important to see that Paul has taken the well-known term “do/work the good,” which within its Greco-Roman cultural setting meant something akin to “use your material goods to publically benefit others who can in turn benefit you with honor,” and has reinterpreted the phrase by reorienting “the good” through the prism of Jesus’ self-giving life. Thus, whereas in the Greco-Roman urban centers “doing good works” was self-promoting and

ensured that resources continued to circulate almost exclusively among those who had no need, within the Pauline communities it took on a different meaning—namely, sharing your resources with those who can give you nothing (that is, honor or any other kind of reciprocity) in return: “Therefore, then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of *all*” (6:10, *italics mine*).

We see this term used in the same manner in the letter to Titus. There Paul concludes with the admonishment to “let people learn to devote themselves to *good works* in order to meet urgent needs” (Titus 3:14). Here it is clear that good works are those acts that are performed in order to provide material resources for those in want; it is also clear that generosity is expected of one who claims to be a follower of Jesus, and should be a characteristic pattern of life within the community of believers.

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**In Greco-Roman cities “doing good works” was self-promoting and ensured that resources circulated almost exclusively among those who had no need. In Paul’s churches it had a different meaning—namely, sharing your resources with those who can give you nothing.**

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## **GENEROSITY AND ASSOCIATING WITH THE “LOWLY”**

As we look at other ways in which Paul instructs his readers to orient their communal life around self-giving love and generosity, we learn that charitable giving is not enough to accomplish Paul's notion of generosity. Instead, Paul raises the bar. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14, he exhorts the community of Jesus followers to admonish the idle and to help the “weak,” a word that can indicate those in economically vulnerable positions.<sup>10</sup> And in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28, Paul appropriates the term “weak” to describe that portion of the church who were non-elites, which as we have already seen, implicates those approximately eighty percent who were economically vulnerable. It is significant to note that these brief references in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 1 Corinthians 1 indicate that the poor and vulnerable already had a place within the community of Jesus followers; they were not excluded from fellowship. We get a similar picture from Paul's letter to the Romans, where he admonishes Jesus followers to “contribute to the needs of the saints” in light of the mercies that God has shown to them (12:13). It is noteworthy that Paul takes generosity one step further, however, by exhorting Christian Romans to abandon their quest for self-promoting honor by associating with the “lowly,” that is with those who will not enhance their social status (12:16). For Paul, it is not enough to give generously; to extend the “genuine love” that is experienced in Jesus Christ, followers must also extend hospitality to those who can provide no form of reciprocity (12:9; see also Romans 15:7).

Embedded in his picture of what it looks like to “lead a life worthy of the calling” to which followers of Jesus have been called (Ephesians 4:1),<sup>11</sup> Paul instructs those who have been accustomed to stealing to instead work honestly with their own hands. For our purposes, it is important to note his basis for such an exhortation: hard, honest work is required “so that you will have something to share with the needy” (Ephesians 4:28). This short reference assumes first, that marginalized people (such as thieves) are part of the assembly, and second, that there are some within their midst who are needy. Once again Paul reveals that belonging to the community of Jesus followers, a community that has renounced the futile ways of the Gentiles (4:17), implies that one is actively participating in generosity towards those who are lacking material resources, and creating a space for those people in the gathering—because this new corporate body has been created in the likeness of God (4:24).

Our discussion of Paul's expectations regarding generosity and the way that he links those expectations with the gospel helps us better understand why he was so agitated by certain Corinthian followers of Jesus because of the manner in which they practiced the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). For Paul, to participate in the Lord's Supper (which at its core is a celebration of Jesus giving of himself for others; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) while failing to notice that some within the gathering were being neglected much



needed food and drink is to do so in an “unworthy manner” (11:27). In fact, he says that eating the Lord’s Supper in such a manner is to not participate in the meal at all (11:20). In response, Paul demands that those who had the luxury of arriving early to the Lord’s Supper (that is, the wealthier members who did not have to work) should wait for the others (that is, the day laborers and others who lived at a subsistence level) so that together they could truly embody what the meal is all about. To do otherwise is to fail to truly “remember” the Lord’s Supper and to provoke God’s judgment (11:30). To leave out the poor is to show contempt for the church of God and to humiliate those who have nothing (11:22). It is in this sense that Paul charges the Corinthians to “discern the body” – to look around and notice that their practice of the Lord’s Supper was creating divisions in the church along economic lines (11:29), something that was entirely antithetical to what this new community of Jesus followers was called to be.

### **PARTICIPATING IN THE GENEROSITY OF GOD**

Paul’s collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26) is yet another window into the expectations he had for communities that claimed Jesus as their Lord. Gathering data from Romans 15:26-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, and 2 Corinthians 8-9, we learn that Paul dedicated about five years of his ministry to collect money from Gentile Jesus-followers in order to alleviate suffering due to extreme financial hardship in Jerusalem among some of the Jewish followers of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Much

could be said about this collection, but for our purposes I wish to underscore two foundational (and intricately related) motivations for generosity that we discover as we attend to Paul’s collection efforts. First, we see that Paul considers generosity (that is, the sharing of their goods with the saints in Jerusalem) to be an implication and obligation of the gospel: “you glorify God by

your *obedience* to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them” (2 Corinthians 9:13). As we have seen elsewhere, here according to Paul, the message of the gospel entails generosity towards those who cannot give in return. Second, generosity is rooted in and enabled by the transforming generosity of Jesus Christ: “you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he

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**Paul sees the Gentile believers’ generosity to the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem as proof they have been transformed by the Spirit of the self-giving Jesus Christ and are participants in the spiritual blessings of Israel’s one true God.**

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became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). It is on this basis that Paul exhorts the Corinthians to participate in the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. Paul regards generosity towards the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem as proof that Gentile followers of Jesus have indeed been transformed by the Spirit of the self-giving Jesus Christ, that they have indeed become participants in the spiritual blessings of Israel's one true God (Romans 15:26-27 and 8:1-17). As we have already seen, the Greco-Roman world was never known for its concern for the poor, nor was it ever characterized by generosity that did not entail reciprocity. The collection was a tangible indication that the God of Israel had transformed these Gentiles into the likeness of God's generous, self-giving image.

We conclude our survey of Paul's expectations for generosity by looking at a letter that is often left out of the discussion, his epistle to the Philippians. It is not always acknowledged that at its core the message of Philippians is a charge to continue in partnership with Paul and his gospel ministry (1:3-7), even if such a partnership might result in social alienation and other forms of suffering (1:12-30). For Paul, the partnership to which he calls the Philippians clearly involves financial giving: towards the end of the letter he commends the Philippians for their faithful giving to his ministry (4:15-16). And in the beginning of the letter he describes their partnership as the "good work" that God began among them — the good work of partnering with Paul and his mission (1:6). It is within this wider concern that Paul urges the Philippians to look not at their own interests, but rather the interests of others (2:4). And, as he has done in other letters, he anchors this appeal for generosity to the pattern of Jesus' life, "who did not use his unique and privileged status as something to exploit for his own benefit, but instead emptied himself in humiliating obedience that resulted in death" (2:6-8, my paraphrase). Paul's primary exhortation to the Philippians is that they would participate in that same kind of selflessness and generosity (2:1-4). And while Jesus is put forth as the paradigm for generosity, Paul also shows how he (1:12-18), Timothy (2:19-24), and Epaphroditus (2:25-30), each in his own way, have actively participated in Jesus' self-sacrificing, "seeking-the-interest-of-others" generosity for the sake of the partnership in the gospel.

## **CONCLUSION**

What does Paul have to contribute to our understanding of generosity? It turns out that his portion is quite substantial! Having sorted through the various letters that Paul wrote to disparate communities within the Mediterranean world of the first century, we see that Paul was quite consistent with other voices in Scripture in affirming, through his instruction and the patterns of life established in his churches, that God's people have been delivered *from* sin and this present age characterized by selfishness and greed *for* the sake of the life of the world; that to belong to God and his people entails being actively engaged in seeking the welfare of the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized of society.

While his contribution is consistent with other voices in Scripture, Paul also has some poignant points to add to the discussion. For example, he reminds us that genuine love and generosity require us not only to give to those in need, but also to make a place for them in our gatherings. He also reminds us that generosity is enabled as we share in the life of God – that it is generated by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit. And finally, we see that those who seek to be faithful followers of Jesus are not only called to give cognitive assent to certain propositions about what God has accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, but also required by the gospel to pattern their lives, personal and communal, in such a way that they bear witness to God's own hospitality and generosity.

## NOTES

1 See, for example, the specific laws regarding just treatment of the poor, the vulnerable, and the resident aliens (Exodus 22:16-23:9), the directions regarding the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25), and the summary of God's law (Deuteronomy 10:12-22). For a comprehensive study on wealth and poverty in the Pentateuch, see David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

2 Consider Isaiah's contrast between the faithlessness of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:21-23) and God's expectations for the city (Isaiah 42:6-9; 61:1-11), Amos's critique of the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 2:6-11; 8:4-14) and promise of its divine restoration to justice (Amos 9:11-15), Micah's denunciation of Judah (Micah 2:1-13; cf. 6:8), and Malachi's critique of the restored kingdom (Malachi 1:1-3:15).

3 For several examples from this literature, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

4 Several of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul are contested by some biblical scholars (e.g., Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, and Titus). For the sake of convenience, I will refer to Paul as the author for all the letters attributed to him in the New Testament. My arguments, however, do not depend upon Pauline authorship, and in some cases the point I am making becomes even stronger if the letters were written by someone who wished to carry on the foundational teachings of Paul after his death.

5 For a recent discussion on Paul's alleged disregard for the poor, see Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 1-16.

6 For a detailed analysis of the economic makeup of urban centers in the first-century Greco-Roman world, see Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 36-59.

7 Honorary inscriptions were usually stone monuments erected in prominent public spaces by wealthy patrons in order to make known their charitable acts for the people of the city.

8 In the social world of the first century, what we would call "right" and "wrong" was principally determined by whether a particular act was judged honorable by the group one esteemed or desired to join. (In this regard, it was similar to middle school social dynamics today.) In the Greco-Roman urban centers, honor was competitively sought as a commodity with limited availability.

9 See Longenecker's comprehensive development of the claim in *Remember the Poor*, 157-219.

10 Similarly, in Acts 20:35 the “weak” are those who are in need of economic support.

11 The dating of Paul’s letters and the activities of his three “missionary journeys” is complicated and contested. I am in basic agreement with Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 338-344.

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# Subversive Generosity

BY K. JASON COKER

**God's reign, founded on God's subversive generosity,  
opposes Roman oppression in the New Testament. Today  
it provides the moral vision to see through the distortions  
of consumerism and gives an alternative way to understand  
our obligations to one another and to God.**

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**I**n an economic system in which profit is the primary and overriding concern, any act of true generosity is subversive. For this reason, the vision of God's reign in the New Testament stands in stark contrast to the economic machine that is powering the modern world and creating a culture of consumerism that violates human dignity. God's reign, therefore, is not a system of reform for contemporary economic globalization; it is a counter-narrative to the dominant culture, just as it was when the original Christian prophets declared it in opposition to the Roman Empire.

In the New Testament, God's reign is the alternative governance founded on subversive generosity that stands opposed to Roman oppression. Today God's reign provides the moral vision to see through the distortions of consumerism. Its subversive generosity does not just correct capitalism from producing so much human and environmental waste, it offers an alternative way to systemically understand obligations to one another and to God.<sup>1</sup>

I will briefly summarize how generosity is a primary component of the New Testament concept of God's reign, and how that generosity opposed Roman socio-economic practices.<sup>2</sup> Then I will consider some implications of God's reign today. It will become clear that the reign of God and its founding principle of generosity do not fit within the modern capitalist/Marxist binary matrix. The reign of God and its subversive generosity provide a vision in which human beings are in harmony with God and each other—something neither capitalism nor Marxism has ever attempted, let alone achieved.

## GOD'S REIGN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The reign (*basileia*) of God is translated as the “kingdom of God” in most translations of the New Testament. The *basileia* of God would have been politically seditious in the Roman context; the concept is used throughout the New Testament as a rival realm that critiques the Roman Empire. The book of Revelation in particular sees the dismantling of the Roman Empire as the in-breaking of the kingdom or reign of God (see Revelation 18). This has caused some New Testament scholars to retranslate *basileia* as “empire” to emphasize its political nature and force.<sup>3</sup> I prefer “reign” for my translations below because it maintains the political dimensions of *basileia* and explains its implications for our modern moment: “reign” conveys that it is God who governs.

*Basileia* and its cognates occur over three hundred times throughout the New Testament, but most of these occurrences are in the Gospels and the Revelation. The reign of God is the subject of Jesus’s first proclamation in the Gospel of Mark, which is most likely the first canonical Gospel written: “The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). The reign of God is often the focus of Jesus’s parables. In Matthew 13 alone, Jesus compares the reign of God to soils (Matthew 13:18-23), good and bad seeds in a field (13:24-30), mustard seed (13:31-32), yeast (13:33), treasure (13:44), a pearl (13:45-46), and a net (13:47-50). The reign of God is detailed in the New Testament not so much in its spatial and temporal location, but as a reflection of its Ruler. The reign of God reflects the character of God, which is described as “holy” in the Model Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount:

Our Father in heaven,  
    holy be your name.  
Your reign come.  
    Your will be done,  
    on earth as it is in heaven.

*Matthew 6:9b-10*

God’s governing is better than Rome’s not just because it is a better system, but because God is the one who is governing. How God reigns is indicative of who God is, which requires us to explore the question: Who is God?

## GENEROSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

God displays many aspects in Scripture, but one guiding characteristic of God throughout the New Testament is generosity. God gives! In Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus we hear that iconic verse, “For God so loved the world that God *gave* God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in the Son may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In Jesus’s inaugural sermon in Matthew, Jesus tells the gathered crowd, “But first seek

God's reign and its justice, and all these things *will be given* to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). When Jesus initially foretells his death, he encourages the disciples to follow him in self-giving sacrifice:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they *give* in return for their life?

*Mark 8:34b-37* (cf. Matthew 16:24-26 and Luke 9:23-25)

Followers of Christ must exhibit the same self-giving sacrifice as Christ. This self-giving generosity is the quintessential difference between God's reign and the Roman Empire, which is why this generosity is so subversive.

The New Testament has much to say about the motivation and scope of subversive generosity that is a distinguishing mark of God's reign. There are many Greek words that translate as generosity in the New Testament, and all of them fall under the domains of *possession*, *transfer*, or *exchange*.<sup>4</sup> Generosity, at its most fundamental level, is exchange. Fifty-four specific words for generosity in the New Testament, which include many of the most theologically rich concepts in Scripture, are within the subdomain *give*.<sup>5</sup> The overarching meaning for this group of words

involves the *transfer* of some object or benefit from one person to another with the initiative resting with *the person who gives* and without incurring an obligation on the part of a receiver to reciprocate. Furthermore, the giving of such an object or benefit does not imply remuneration for a previous *exchange*....

[T]he focus is on the initiative and activity of the former possessor.<sup>6</sup>

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**Followers of Christ must exhibit the same self-giving sacrifice as Christ. This self-giving generosity is the quintessential difference between God's reign and the Roman Empire, which is why this generosity is so subversive.**

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The nature of this type of transfer, trade, and exchange is truly altruistic. The one who gives, the "former possessor," expects nothing in return. An expected return on the gift would not be generosity. Giving with an expected return would be an investment.



All of these words used to express generosity and the sheer number of times they are used throughout the New Testament create an overarching theme that characterizes both God and God's reign. Likewise, those who would follow Christ and live within God's reign must exemplify this defining characteristic. Scripture warns against those who would not be generous. The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) describes a couple who did not hold everything in common (*koinōnia*: fellowship, sharing possessions) with the larger community. When they withheld some of their profits from the group and lied about it, they were struck dead, presumably by God. The Letter of James condemns wealthy landowners for not paying their laborers fairly:

Come now, you wealthy people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth has rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who harvested your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the crises of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

*James 5:1-4*

The "woes" in Jesus's Sermon on the Plain echo James's condemnation: "Woe to you who are wealthy, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24-25). The selfishness of the wealthy in these passages stands in stark contrast to the generosity of God, God's people, and God's reign. Partiality toward the wealthy (cf. James 2:1-8) and the desire to keep one's possessions for oneself (Acts 5:1-11) may be exemplary of Roman social practices, particularly patronage, but they are antithetical to the defining characteristic of God's reign.<sup>7</sup> God's generosity opposed Roman selfishness, which is the primary reason for understanding generosity as subversive. A community that held everything in common and respected the dignity of every person was fundamentally different and contradictory to Roman social practices based on a hierarchy of humanity.

## **GOD'S REIGN AND GLOBALIZATION**

Unlike the economy of ancient Rome, the contemporary global economy is not centered in any single nation and its primary and overriding motive is profit.<sup>8</sup> While the proponents of capitalism call the rest of the world to fall in line and take their place in global production, they boldly proclaim that capitalism is the way to make the world better. In her biting critique of capitalism and its "new prophets," Nicole Aschoff shows how capitalism has softened its narrative in order to appeal to the masses; it has co-opted the



narrative of feminism, ecology, spirituality, and education.<sup>9</sup> These new forms of capitalism promise a new and better world and, in some cases, acknowledge that the problems that exist are due to capitalism gone awry. What is not stated among these “new prophets” is that economic globalization is removed from the democratic process. Multinational corporations that drive the global economy are not elected by the people of any nation and they have become so globally dominant that they possess more power than many sovereign nations, including some that have democratically elected officials.

At every level, but especially at the highest levels of these corporations, profit is the overriding motivation. John Mackey, creator of Whole Foods Market, and Bill Gates, cofounder of Microsoft, among others, want to leverage the profit motive for ecological, educational, and health purposes. Theirs is less a reform of capitalism and more a tweak of it. While they *may* be able to do good things for the world with their tweaks, critics like Aschoff are attempting to show how such stratagems do not live up to their promises and, in some cases, make things worse.<sup>10</sup> In proposing that we move “from a profit-driven to a human needs-driven society,” Aschoff calls us to think differently: “Instead of thinking about how to fix capitalism, we can start thinking about a different kind of society.”<sup>11</sup>

God’s reign has provided a vision of a “different kind of society” for millennia—a society based on generosity. Admittedly, the embodiment of God’s reign in human structures has never been fully realized. In fact, Christian history is full of terrible epochs motivated in part by greed and exploitation, like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and colonialism.<sup>12</sup>

God’s reign may function best as an oppositional call to continually correct and regulate our complexly disordered human structures. From its origin in first century Roman imperialism, that’s how God’s reign functioned. The subversive generosity of God’s reign stood against Roman systems of oppression that damaged human dignity. Similarly today, God’s reign can critique global capitalism by envisioning a future where human dignity is more important than profit.

For example, the generosity of God’s reign turns cultural consumerism, a key product of capitalism, on its head. Consumerism promotes retail therapy, the idea that we can buy our way to happiness. This “therapy” is obviously

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**Consumerism promotes retail therapy, the idea that we can buy our way to happiness. This stands in opposition to the generosity that characterizes God’s reign.**

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based on *receiving* rather than *giving*, and thus stands in opposition to the New Testament concept of “shared possessions.”

While capitalism’s primary and overriding motive is profit—based on human greed—recent empirical studies by the Science of Generosity Initia-

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tive at the University of Notre Dame have shown that generosity is as basic to human nature as greed is. As these researchers note in their cultural history of generosity, “For Christians, to be generous is to be conformed not just to Christ but also to the loving divine Parent, whose sacrificial self-gift into the world makes possible human fellowship in the divine life.”<sup>13</sup> This subversive generosity emphasizes the human capacity to *give* rather

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**The generosity of God’s reign calls us to stand against any system of greed and oppression. Rather than being uncritically submerged in the *profit*-driven system of capitalism, we need to emerge into the *human dignity*-driven system of God’s reign.**

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er than the human capacity to *take/receive*. Simply put, generosity is to give; profit is to take. When profit becomes the overriding motive, whether in capitalism or any other system, it must be antithetical to generosity and, therefore, antithetical to God and God’s reign.

## CONCLUSION

The Christian ideal of generosity is grounded in God’s gracious act in the Incarnation, the birth, death, and resurrection of God’s Son, which is the height of sacrificial self-giving. This sort of generosity that characterizes God’s reign was subversive in its origin in Roman imperialism and continues to be subversive wherever human dignity is jeopardized due to greed and selfishness.

It is contrary to any system that places profit above people, including those plans of economic globalization that seek to exploit labor and land. For instance, recent campaigns to commoditize education and vaccinations (as by the Gates Foundation), ecology (by John Mackey), spirituality (by Oprah Winfrey and Joel Osteen), and feminism (by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook) turn these vitally important aspects of humanity into markets that are profit driven. God’s reign is a better way forward.

Of course, when we are surrounded by capitalist structures, it is easy to accept them uncritically as essential to everything we do. But as Christians we must do better. To take one example, in many places the prison system has been privatized so that industries now depend on stricter laws and more prisoners to make a profit. Christians should resist this trend and stand

together for human dignity. Profiteering from prisoners is not indicative of generosity. Making prisoners commodities does not increase human dignity.

The subversive generosity of God's reign calls Christians to stand against every system of greed and oppression. Rather than being uncritically submerged in the *profit*-driven system of capitalism, Christians need to emerge into the *human dignity*-driven system of God's reign. This would be a much needed subversive generosity for the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1 I borrow the term "moral vision" from Richard Hays's *Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), which is probably the most exhaustive and popular contemporary attempt at an ethical reading of the New Testament. Hays's work is a true demonstration of his desire as a scholar and Christian to work through modern moral issues. Yet nowhere in the book does he systematically focus on a New Testament ethic of economics. It is not until his conclusion that he mentions economic ethics (pp. 464-468); there he describes his own economic and ecclesiastical position, but does not offer a sustained argument about one of the most important moral issues in modernity. For an extended focus on the issue of economic justice and the New Testament, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

2 The notion that "God's Empire" is oppositional to the Roman Empire is a common thread in recent New Testament studies, especially those that rely on postcolonial theory. Yet none of these works pay close attention to the role of generosity as a founding principle to God's reign. Here is a brief cross section of this literature: Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, IL: Chalice Press, 2000); Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of the Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008); Ingborg Mongstad-Kvammen, *Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Epistle of James: James 2:1-13 in Its Roman Imperial Context* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013); Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008); Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005); and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

3 See, for example, Richard A. Horsely, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 78; Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 37; and Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 5.

4 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, second edition (New York: United Bible Society, 1989), 558.

5 *Ibid.*, 566-572. The most theologically important words are *charis* (grace), *koinōnia/koinōneō* (fellowship or shared possessions), *dikaïosunē* (justice, righteousness, or to give to those in need as an act of mercy), and *diakonia* (ministry, deacon ministry, money given to help someone in need, contribution, help, support).

6 *Ibid.*, 566. Italics added.

7 See K. Jason Coker, *James in Postcolonial Perspective: The Letter as Nativist Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 114-132.

8 The term “globalization” is often applied not only to the economy but also to culture, politics, and ecology. For the purposes of this essay, I am focusing primarily on the economic definition of globalization. For more on this terminology, see Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [2003]).

9 Nicole Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015). While Aschoff is decidedly biased, she helpfully reveals the new hegemony of unfettered capitalism, which acknowledges that things are wrong with the world but proclaims it can make them better. However, many of the problems in the world are the product of capitalism. Reformed capitalism, for Aschoff, cannot be the answer to the most pressing issues of the modern world, including feminism, ecology, education, and so on.

10 Ibid., 107-143. Aschoff especially criticizes the Gates Foundation’s work in education.

11 Ibid., 146, 150.

12 For the narrative of how Christianity and God’s reign were co-opted by capitalism, see Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig, “Gods and Profits: How Capitalism and Christianity Aligned in Modern America” *New Republic* (April 20, 2015), [www.newrepublic.com/article/121564/gods-and-profits-how-capitalism-and-christianity-aligned-america](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121564/gods-and-profits-how-capitalism-and-christianity-aligned-america) (accessed July 15, 2015).

13 “What Is Generosity?” *Science of Generosity: Exploring an Essential Human Virtue* website, <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/more-about-the-initiative/what-is-generosity/> (accessed July 15, 2015).

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# Solving the Riddle of Comfortable Guilt

BY PATRICIA SNELL HERZOG

Most of us admit that our giving behavior does not match our personal or our religion's ideal of what it should be. Yet we are oddly content with this. Why do we have this comfortable guilt, and how can we change our habits to be rid of it?

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American Christians who regularly attend church earn around two trillion dollars in income annually, yet, on average, they give less than one percent of their annual earnings to charitable or religious causes. One in five of them gives nothing at all. Why? How is it that Christians, living in a nation characterized by abundance and a religiously-infused context that calls people to support charitable and religious causes, contribute such a relatively low annual amount? This is the riddle we set out to solve when Christian Smith, Michael Emerson, and I embarked on the research we summarized in *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*.<sup>1</sup> What we found is humorously captured in a bumper sticker that reads "Don't let the car fool you. My treasure is in heaven."

After interviewing numerous pastors and parishioners around the country, I came to describe this phenomenon as *comfortable guilt*. This concept, simple on the surface of things, is actually somewhat complex. I unpack it in this article in order to help us better understand ourselves and those whom we serve in American congregations.

Let's begin with what comfortable guilt is not: it is not selfishness. In more than ten years of studying American giving, I have come across only a few people who appear to be acting rather selfishly, with no desire to give of their resources to others. These people do exist, but they are few and do not make a dent in explaining the general trends.

Rather, what I have heard — from the most-religiously-devote, more-than-weekly attender to the will-set-foot-in-a-church-over-their-dead-body atheist — is an overwhelming consensus that giving away resources through money, time, or other actions is highly desirable. When asked if giving to charitable or religious causes is important, the nearly ubiquitous response is a resounding, “Yes.” In fact, people have never reported to me that they think giving is not a good activity in which to partake. They may have never given a dime in their life, or perhaps donated only a dime to the common bell-ringer around the holidays, but nevertheless they still say that people *should* give. They almost universally report that they personally would like to give. However, they often quickly provide explanations for why they do not give at the moment, or why their current giving is less than they think it should be.

My colleague Brandon Vaidyanathan and I set out to investigate this rather strange occurrence in an article entitled, “Motivations for and Obstacles to Religious Financial Giving.”<sup>2</sup> As part of a broader study, we were able to build relationships with a handful of churches and gain access to their financial records. These congregations allowed us to sample their parishioners for interviews based on their church financial giving records. We then selected people for interviews regarding their giving behaviors, especially their financial giving to their church. What we found was an incredible disconnect between their actual, tallied financial contributions to the church and their verbal descriptions to us of those contributions.

The majority of people we spoke to told us that giving is part of what it means to be Christian, that people of faith are called to see what they have as an abundance of resources to be shared toward the benefit of others. Some said they saw giving as an obligation because the money is not actually theirs, but belongs to God. Many discussed a religious tithe. Some saw it as an obligation to give ten percent of their annual income. Others described it not as a requirement to give a specific fixed amount but as a general rule that some sort of percentage or regular giving should characterize Christians. A handful even went so far as to say that ten percent was merely the baseline that must be given to the church, and that additional funds could be contributed beyond that to support other charitable causes. A few quite conscientious Christians even mulled over with us their thoughts regarding the importance of calculating the percentage based on pre-tax earnings to be sure they did not “cheat” the tithe.

Yet, with a couple exceptions, nearly no one in our sample gave anywhere near to the expectation they described. Since even a few more percentage points of giving by the hundreds of thousands of Christians in the United States would equate to more than one hundred billion dollars a year in funds available to support religious and charitable causes, we sought to understand why this “slippage” happens. What we found was that people identify a variety of motivations to give and a variety of obstacles to their

desired giving. Some do not have the resources. Very many do have the resources but think they do not, taking their regular monthly expenditures to be fixed costs and believing they do not have enough remaining discretionary income to give away. Others have what we call “giving illiteracy,” which is similar to financial illiteracy more generally.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from those explanations, however, the most interesting one is this notion of comfortable guilt. It also seems to be the most challenging obstacle to overcome if you are a pastor, financial officer, or fundraiser interested in generating increased funds from potential givers, or if you are an individual giver interested in understanding and adjusting your own giving habits. Most American Christians think they should be giving more than they do, but they are not uncomfortable enough about it to change their giving. The classic social psychological notion of dissonance appears not to apply in this case. According to that idea, when people become aware of a gap between their expectations for themselves and their actual behavior, they generally become uncomfortable and do one of two things: change their behavior to match their ideal, or change their ideal to match their behavior. But for some reason, when it comes to financial giving, most American Christians appear to bypass this social psychological law of human nature to let the dissonance linger. They do not seem to be concerned about closing their giving gap.

American Christians appear to be, on the whole, quite comfortable with the knowledge that their giving behavior does not match their personal or their religion’s ideal of what giving should be. Indeed, interviewees are articulate about their comfortable guilt, making statements such as: “I suppose I could cut down my own needs to have more money to give, but I don’t feel guilty about that.” Others said, “There might be a slight amount of guilt, because like I said, you can always give more. But that wouldn’t keep me up at night.” Perhaps in the single two most inspiring quotes for my naming of the concept, one interviewee reported: “It’s not really uncomfortable. It’s just, ‘Darn, I wish I could give more. I wish I could.’” And another said: “I’m comfortable, but then I’m not comfortable.” Comfortable, but also not comfortable; or guilty, but also not guilty: this is what it means to have comfortable guilt.

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**The social psychological notion of dissonance appears not to apply to American Christians’ concern that they should be giving more than they do. They neither change their behavior to match their ideal, nor change their ideal to match their behavior.**

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Based on this research-informed knowledge, what can pastors do to help cure their parishioners of comfortable guilt? How can parishioners change their habits in order to be rid of it? While my research investigations do not answer these questions directly, I proceed in what follows to offer a few suggestions. I warn you that these ideas are untested; they might turn out to be counter-factual fallacies that presume doing the opposite of observed behaviors will have the opposite effect (though that is itself an empirically testable hypothesis that my research has not explored). But with this caveat in mind, let's move beyond merely naming the problem and think together about how to solve it. My grain-of-salt-with-a-pinch-of-sugar approach is to conjecture about what might be helpful given the differences I have observed between those who have comfortable guilt and those who do not. What I can point to is a combination of social psychological tendencies, practices of giving that help to actualize intended ideals, more or less giving-supportive relationships, and organizational processes that foster different giving cultures.

The first suggestion is to *foster a giving orientation*. In a forthcoming book, I and my colleague Heather Price review the tremendous variations in giving behaviors and then investigate numerous explanations for the variations.<sup>4</sup> Some of the factors that shape giving patterns—such as social demographics, economic resources, and other mostly fixed attributes—are relatively unchangeable. But aside from those, there are three sorts of explanations that givers or fundraisers could potentially influence. The first has to do with personal and social orientations to giving. Continuing with the social psychological approach embedded in the notion of comfortable guilt, we find that people who give greater financial amounts of money to charitable causes have some things in common that may help to undermine their comfortable guilt. They generally evidence higher levels of social responsibility, greater degree of holding a prosperity outlook, more social solidarity, and lower tendency to acquisition seeking. That is to say, they feel personally compelled to act on behalf of others, tend to see abundance instead of scarcity, tend to think as “we” instead of “I,” and are not continually focused on their next purchase for themselves.

An implication of these findings is that efforts to develop these characteristics in ourselves and others might contribute to greater giving. If givers have these qualities and non-givers do not, then non-givers may become givers and low givers may increase their giving if these social psychological orientations are fostered in them. Of course, that is easier said than done. However, I think an important “take-away” is to understand that helping ourselves or others to become greater givers does not necessarily begin with the economic transaction. While talk of money certainly has its place, what could indirectly encourage generous giving is helping people to feel in com-



munion with others, to be aware of others' needs and act on their behalf, and to better see the abundance in their own lives, perhaps even by helping them to calculate it. In short, giving may come more readily from those who do not treat contributions as an isolated event outside the bounds of their everyday reality and instead have an integrated, holistic approach to their Christian orientation that fosters a generous lifestyle.

Another suggestion for overcoming comfortable guilt is *to offer a web of support for giving*. We find that not all support systems are created equal. The Americans who are surrounded by parents, spouses, friends, and communities that regularly give tend to be greater givers themselves. Other people voice personal desires to give, but are not surrounded by a web of givers. We think of this as the former people having support systems that "grease the wheels" of giving, making their ideal more likely to be a reality. But the others experience in their affiliations some "friction" for acting out their inclination to give.<sup>5</sup>

One implication of this finding is that people should share more about their giving activities. This does not mean that everyone should go around talking to others about their financial giving. In fact, my research shows that could easily be construed as bragging and disgust people rather than inspire them. Nevertheless, it is overwhelmingly clear that the average American does not live in a giving-supportive culture. People in the United States are private about their giving—both in their talking about it and their doing it; thus, few people have access to the kinds of giving activities that others around them are actually doing.

One perplexing aspect of this recommendation, in my view, is the complicated implications for church "offering plates" going online. As an online giver myself, I hardly think preventing the wave of current and future e-giving is a justifiable response to this dilemma. At the same time, I was struck in conducting this investigation how many Americans' only access to information about the giving activities in their support networks occurred during childhood when they observed their parents putting money into church offering plates. Many said their parents never spoke to them about it, but that every week they saw that hand go into the pocket and put something in the plate.

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**What could indirectly encourage generous giving is helping people to feel in communion with others, to be aware of others' needs and act on their behalf, and to better see the abundance in their own lives, perhaps even by helping them to calculate it.**

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Often, that experience alone appears to be the seed that grew into a lifetime of giving. So, how will future generations learn from their parents' giving if it is entirely online and there is no physical modeling?

Conducting this research has made me more aware of how I model giving behavior to my children. I have continued my online giving (to support the practice approach to giving described below), but I now bring to church some small change for my children to put into the collection. This encourages them to participate in the offering each week, until they are older and have their own money to contribute. It is this sort of informal, non-verbal, regular exposure to a giving behavior that appears to be the critical bedrock to becoming a lifetime giver.

The third potential remedy to comfortable guilt, *forming a giving habitus*, draws on the work of a great cultural sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>6</sup> One of the many insights Bourdieu infused into contemporary sociology is the notion of *habitus*. Often people act in certain ways because they are imprinted with a habit to do those actions unconsciously, without drawing upon their limited supplies of attention. Without such a habit in place, the ever-inundating stimulation of modern living can get in the way of having the cognitive resources to attend to carrying out desired behaviors.

Let's apply this to giving. One reason people may have comfortable guilt about giving less than they think they should is that they are easily distracted and do not carry out their giving plan, since it was never formed into a habit. For example, we hear people say, "I should go to the gym more, but I don't." This same mechanism can help to explain significant differences in giving. In our forthcoming book we explore the approaches that Americans have to their giving as regular, intentional, or spontaneous, impulsive. We find four discernable giver types – Habitual, Planned, Selective, and Impulsive – as well as a fifth group of people who have no discernable pattern. When comparing a variety of their giving behaviors, we find that Habitual and Planned givers consistently give more to religious and charitable causes than do Selective and Impulsive givers. A potential implication of this finding, though with the same caveats noted above, is that it could be possible to become a giver, to give greater amounts, or to help others in giving, by moving giving activity from the level of conscious, attention-needing behavior to imprinted behavior, either planned or habitual, and otherwise operating in the background.<sup>7</sup>

Another layer of remedies for comfortable guilt drawn from our research pertains to organizational cultures that are more and less successful in inspiring giving behaviors. Ruben Swint has drawn out implications from our work in this area.<sup>8</sup> Suffice it for now to acknowledge that Americans are all-too-isolated in their giving activities, and creating an organizational culture of giving is a way to potentially implement several of these remedies simultaneously.

In addition to the suggestions above, there are more possibilities that we might explore to improve giving. With the relative lack of support that Americans have to actualize their giving, the numerous “slippages” between what people think they should do and what they actually do, and the prevalent ability of many religious Americans to sit quite comfortably with their giving guilt, there is much work to be done to facilitate a more regular actualization of a generous orientation.

## NOTES

1 Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, with Patricia Snell, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2 Brandon Vaidyanathan and Patricia Snell, “Motivations for and Obstacles to Religious Financial Giving,” *Sociology of Religion*, 72:2 (2011), 189-214.

3 Illiteracy regarding finances is increasingly widespread. Any restaurant server or taxi cab driver knows the relative lack of percentage-calculating ability present in the general public. Hence, the new approach is to have credit machines provide examples of actual dollar amounts associated with a range of percentage options.

4 Patricia Snell Herzog and Heather Price, *American Generosity: Who Gives & Why?* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2016).

5 It is important to remember these findings are based entirely on how our research participants describe what others in their support systems are doing. They could be wrong. But if our participants do not know that people around them are giving, then how could these others' activities affect their own giving behavior?

6 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

7 In Herzog and Price, *American Generosity*, we explore these five types of givers in more detail and apply our conclusions specifically for religious leaders.

8 See Ruben Swint, “How Congregations (and Their Members) Differ on Generosity,” *Generosity*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 57 (Waco, TX: The Institute for Faith and Learning, 2015), 44-51.



### **PATRICIA SNELL HERZOG**

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# How Congregations (and Their Members) Differ on Generosity

BY RUBEN SWINT

Not every church member responds to the same message about giving. Not every congregation's culture supports the same approach to developing faithful stewards, or generous givers. What variables in congregational life foster giving differences in members and congregations?

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I consulted with a large neighborhood congregation to change their giving culture from “pledging the budget” to “growing in generosity.” The stewardship team and I had two goals: to involve young adults in the annual fall stewardship emphasis, and to relieve the senior pastor from making phone calls near the end of the emphasis to ask members to increase their pledge so the budget would be funded in full for the next year.

Recruiting, training, and empowering young adults to develop the annual stewardship theme and process proved the easiest change to make. Rather than adopt a ready-made program for stewardship promotion, these young adults used their creativity, time, and energy to revitalize a staid exercise into one that reflected how they and their peers wanted to be engaged in the annual stewardship emphasis.

The word “budget” was not mentioned at all; rather, the phrase “annual ministry plan” was referred to often. “Stewardship” was mentioned some, but more often the word was “generous” or “generosity.” Members were asked to complete a card titled, “My Personal Plan for Giving.” As you may guess, “pledge” was not mentioned either. The stewardship emphasis utilized a Sunday afternoon picnic to receive the cards rather than a pledge walk down the center aisle during Sunday morning worship.

At the end of my time with this congregation, two things were crystal clear. Decades of pledging a budget would not be overcome by a few years of targeted changes. The church's bylaws still required the annual formation of a "budget pledging committee." The metric of success was still "Did we pledge the budget 100%?" And the senior pastor could not change from what he had always known to a new paradigm with different language and activity. As I exited from my consulting role, I told the team, "I think you will need to be multi-lingual — 'stewardship' and 'generosity' — for a while." When I left, the senior pastor was still making his phone calls.

"Culture will trump vision very time." I read that somewhere and I did not fully appreciate its meaning until I worked with the congregation described above. I am amused these days to read marketing material from church fundraising companies who offer to help congregations create a culture of generosity. Depending on the culture already in place and the willingness of senior leadership to change, culture change can take a long time.



This year I attended a meeting to discuss a congregation's annual giving. One of the participants was an octogenarian who expressed the view that the answer to the church's funding needs was an emphasis on tithing, by which he meant giving ten percent of one's gross income to the church, gross income being the only valid way to determine one's tithe. Another member stated that because her career was in the nonprofit world, her tithe included what she gave to the church plus what she gave to the organization she was serving. Still another participant stated that tithing and institutional support were not very motivating for their 30s-something age cohort, who would respond better to appeals to help hurting people.

Was it ever true that every church member responded to the same message about giving? Was it ever true that every congregation's culture supported the same approach to developing faithful stewards, or generous givers? I think neither was ever completely true. If we have four Gospels portraying the good news in particular contexts and paradigms, then we have different gospels of good giving alive in members and their congregations.

What are the variables at work in congregational life to foster these giving differences in members and congregations? Here are seven that come to my mind. What would you add?

The first variable is how the church's leaders speak about money and giving. Do they speak as the *institution* that needs funding to pay its bills? Do they speak as the *community* that seeks to meet the desires of its members, participants, and prospects? Or, do the leaders speak as the *movement* that intends to change the world by bringing God's kingdom to earth? These are very different identities and they provoke different responses to their giving appeals. The poorest appeal is to meet the needs of the institution;

the strongest appeal is to offer solutions to the needs of people.

Another variable involves the members' different sources of income, which can influence how they talk about and manage money in the church. Members who are employed in education, healthcare, and social service agencies use the language of fairness or equality. For example, they may say "Members should give their fair share" and "The budget categories should be supported equally." Egalitarianism is a strong value that these members bring to church culture. Entrepreneurs are experienced in venture ministry: "Let's try this new ministry for a few years and see if it can grow and have an impact." Small business owners are intent on managing costs, for that is how small businesses survive. Corporate executives want to know the bottom line; they can tolerate one or two years of budget deficits, but then it will be time to take the axe to the budget categories.

The variable which is most commonly known in church life is the generational differences among members. Some congregations have four distinct and active generational cohorts. Each generation responds to the previous generation. Each generation's perspective is formed by what the most people in that generation experienced. People with different life experiences have difficulty viewing life, church, and giving the same way.

Members have different motivations for giving in their congregations. Ken Callahan explains five key motivations in his excellent book, *Giving and Stewardship in an Effective Congregation*: commitment, challenge, community, compassion, and reasonableness.<sup>1</sup> Staff members and lay leaders who plan the annual stewardship emphasis naturally respond to the motivations of commitment and challenge. Many members in the twenty-percent core leadership group also resonate with these two motivations. But, about seventy percent of the members will respond better to one of the other three motivations: community, compassion, or reasonableness. Might this explain why the annual stewardship message seems to fall on deaf ears?

In *The New Context for Ministry*, Lyle Schaller charts how American society has changed in recent years and in the process has reshaped Protestant church culture.<sup>2</sup> Two of his conclusions are especially relevant to how members think about giving: competition has replaced cooperation, and customer satisfaction has replaced inherited institutional loyalty. The successful nonprofits and congregations do not assume they have people's loyalty; they take the initiative and ask for money. This is a difficult shift, because in my experience just saying the word "money" in many congregations is frightening and exhausting for staff and lay leaders. They should be asking for money for both current projects and for the future: the big income stream that too few churches are addressing is bequests.

Do you remember the TV show "90210?" It chronicled the changes in a family's teenagers when they relocated from Kansas to the Beverly Hills, California, zip code.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly the median income levels in the zip codes where most of a congregation's members reside will affect the capacity of

members to give. Higher median incomes should translate into higher per capita giving. If it doesn't, then some other organization in the area is doing a better job of asking the members to give. However, it is important to remember that numerous surveys show that members in lower median income households give proportionately better than members in higher median income households.

A seventh variable is demographic changes in the neighborhoods served by the congregation. Often not mentioned as a determinant of a congregation's growth in giving, demographic changes are powerful determinants of a congregation's growth or decline in giving. Church staff and lay leaders should know not only the median income from their members' zip codes but also the growth potential in those and potential members' zip codes.



How can we lead church members toward generous giving with all of these differences in member motivations and behavior and in congregational identities and capacities? One of my favorite movie lines is by the character Melvin Udall in *As Good as It Gets*: "I'm drowning here, and you're describing the water!" So in the spirit of responding to Melvin's lament, let me throw out some life savers to aid us in leading members toward generosity in a time of acute, and even polarizing, differences.

First, we must properly define "stewardship" in the context of God's kingdom breaking into the world. Jesus' vision of God's reign is a central principle of Christian stew-

ardship. Jesus was the faithful steward who aligned his life and ministry with the kingdom of God, a reality to be experienced now and eternally. Ultimately, stewardship is all we do with all we have to accomplish our God-given mission, individually and together in congregations. Christian stewards are kingdom-bringers who align their lives and minis-

tries with God's intentions for God's world. At least once a quarter, we should teach, write, or preach on our stewardship in its biblical context of the kingdom of God.

We must disciple believers to grow their generosity, which is a kingdom behavior. A faithful disciple gives time, skill, money, and influence to bring the good news of God's kingdom to more people. I encourage you to champion

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**We must disciple believers to grow their generosity, which is a kingdom behavior. A faithful disciple gives time, skill, money, and influence to bring the good news of God's kingdom to more people.**

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the following Giving Path. It runs parallel with a Christian's spiritual journey, such that progress along the Giving Path reflects progress in a person's spiritual journey, and vice versa. Invite people to step onto the Giving Path with any percentage of their income.

Step one is to give something.

Step two is to plan what to give for a year.

Step three is to give regularly throughout the year.

Step four is to increase giving each year.

Step five is to begin to give a tithe.

Step six is to encourage others to tithe.

Step seven is to give beyond the tithe.

Each year encourage people to take steps along the Giving Path by increasing the percentage of their income that they will give. Communicate your personal plan for giving each year and invite people to walk the path with you.

A third suggestion is to communicate more regularly and effectively your congregation's ministry outcomes and mission successes. Many church newsletters, blogs, and social media pages feature elaborate, forward-looking calendars that encourage members to register for special events and attend regular programs, activities, and meetings. These media are misused, however, if they do not also regularly and visually report on the outcomes of ministries and missions that members volunteered for, gave to, and prayed about. Each newsletter, blog entry, or social media post is an opportunity to demonstrate the church's "stewardship" of the tithes and offerings it receives. We should distribute articles with photographs or other visual elements that report on the great ministry that is being done because of the generosity of the congregation's members and participants.

In your communications, become multilingual in the language of "stewardship" and "generosity." After a century of good use, "stewardship" has become more connected to pledging a church's budget. In the push to make their budget each year (which I call "the annual hunt for a green October"), congregations study stewardship texts and hear stewardship sermons and testimonies seeking budget support results. While mature congregational members have lived lives of faithful stewardship and consider tithing to be the norm of Christian giving, younger congregational members do not warm to the practice of stewardship and tithing as they do to living a generous life. Martin Marty has observed that generosity, unlike stewardship, has no limits. Further, he says, "It's not that you've got to be generous, but you get to be. It's not haranguing or threatening. It's liberation!"<sup>4</sup> Generosity can lead younger members into faithful stewardship and tithing. It is best, therefore, to use words from both languages on a regular basis: stewardship and generosity, budget and ministry plan, commitment card and my personal plan for giving, income and contributions, expenses and costs, church needs and church solutions, and budget deficits and ministry successes.



It is important to create giving experiences for the members of your congregation. Information alone does not change behavior; repeated actions change behavior patterns. So, choose one of the following experiences and implement it in your congregation.

Create a weekend *Day of Generosity* to gift your community with hands-on activities. Members contribute time, skills, and relationship connections as they do a generous project for the community. Aim volunteer enlistment toward members who are less involved or not otherwise engaged in the life of the congregation.

Designate a *Week of Generosity* and assign to each day of the week a specific area in which to practice generosity: family, work, local neighborhood, during daily commute, in prayer, in volunteering, and so on. Distribute a generosity card for members to keep a record of each day's experience.

You may want to first conduct a day or a week of generosity and evaluate those efforts before attempting a *Month of Generosity*. Which month? Why not choose January for a strong beginning to the New Year and with an emphasis on new behaviors? Invite everyone to tithe during the first month of the year.

A *Year of Living Generously* would be the ultimate generosity growth experience, with great impact on discipleship and evangelism. Your congregation could become known throughout your community as generous people.

Another suggestion is to vary the opportunities for making financial gifts. For example, create additional special offerings. Many people feel that extra offerings will defeat the intent of a unified budget. However, special offerings usually result in larger total giving. You might request a two-dollar offering for some project that is over and above the regular tithes and offerings that support your annual ministry plan, or budget. The offering should be focused on helping people, and be consistent with your shared mission as a faith community. Why two dollars? Two dollars is something everybody can give: senior adults, middle and young adults, youth, and even children. The threshold is low so that everyone can participate. The minimum offering is two dollars and the maximum offering is what people decide to give. Some people will give more than two dollars. That is fine; just don't ask for more than two dollars. When the process is complete, remember to provide a report to the congregation of the good that was done with their two dollars.

Create opportunities for major gifts. Churches that are in capital campaigns will have a strategy of asking for major gifts that are very large; \$100,000 and larger are not unusual. But most churches are not in a campaign and they could benefit from a major gift or two. Therefore, plan a major gifts emphasis for items usually in the annual ministry plan, or budget,

that are larger and can be targeted for special giving. Develop a list of special projects. Include items such as equipment, computers, mission trip or mission project, building repair, vehicles, new staff subsidy, outreach campaign, or anything that enables the church to accomplish its God-given mission.

Promote bequest giving from the estates of church members. Eighty per-

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**Be grateful for what a congregation has and is receiving. In addition to celebrating its financial giving, rejoice in the volunteer hours, functional facilities, creative ministries, supportive relationships, time spent in prayer, and faithful participation.**

---

cent of all gifts from estates are simple bequests in simple wills. Bequests are easy to talk about and to promote. Members can be encouraged to tithe their accumulated assets in their estates, to make the church a beneficiary of their will as if the church were another heir, or to provide for the continuation of their annual offerings by giving a sum equal to twenty times what they give annually. I encourage you to complete your will by adding a bequest for the church you serve. Communicate your bequest plan with the

congregation. Encourage members to share their faith with the future by completing their will with a bequest to their church. When your church receives a bequest, be sure to announce it and to celebrate the whole life of stewardship the bequest represents.

Celebrate the generosity of members. Do not diminish the value of the contributions they are giving because the amounts do not equal a budget number. Rather, acknowledge that faithful giving is continuing from many members and perhaps other members have increased their giving to help during a challenging time. Demonstrate sincere gratitude for what a congregation already has and is receiving. In addition to publicly celebrating the congregation's financial giving, rejoice in the thousands of volunteer hours, attractive and functional facilities, creative ministries, strong and supportive relationships, time spent in prayer, and faithful participation. These "assets" contribute significantly to the ongoing mission of the church. Include in these celebrations gratitude for God's grace and abundance that enable the church to have more than enough for every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8). Celebrate privately as well. Reach out to faithful and generous givers with a personal thank you delivered in a note, or in a personal visit, or in small group meetings in members' homes. Thank people for their contributions. Explain in specific ways how their generosity is providing for vital and sustained ministry. Tell stories of changed lives that occur because of the generous ministry of their church.

Finally, congregations should develop multiple income streams. Funding ministry today and in the future will require some additional sources of income besides the giving from the congregation's members. Consider applying for grants, which are awards from endowment funds held at public and private foundations. Grants are similar to major gifts in that they are limited in duration and specific use. As with major gifts, they require time, relationship building, and personal involvement in asking. Consider forming partnerships in response to the scale of need and opportunity to minister today that often is larger than any one congregation. Churches and nonprofits partnering together can share the costs of ministry and have a larger impact. Providing space for rent to organizations whose missions are compatible with the church's mission can become a reliable source of income. Parking lots and garages are commonly leased by downtown churches during the week. The churches will normally pay unrelated business income tax on the income they receive. I encourage you to investigate possibilities for another regular source of income for your congregation.

Which of these actions creates energy and excitement for you? Who else needs to be brought on board to accomplish the actions? What other resources do you need in order to take action? How will you know when you have been successful? Behavior changes behavior. When will you begin?

## NOTES

1 Kennon L. Callahan, *Giving and Stewardship in an Effective Congregation: A Guide for Every Member* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

2 Lyle E. Schaller, *The New Context for Ministry: The Impact of the New Economy on Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).

3 90210 (Sachs/Judah Productions and CBS Television Studios) aired on CW Television Network in 2008-2013. It was a remake the long-running series *Beverly Hills, 90210* (90201 Productions, et al.) that aired on Fox Television Network in 1990-2000.

4 Martin Marty, "Let Your Light So Shine: The Power of Witness in Nurturing Generosity," speech to The Episcopal Network for Stewardship (TENS), April 12, 2008. Quoted in Ben Wood, "Nurture generosity, Martin Marty tells TENS annual conference," (May 1, 2008), [www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/nurture-generosity-martin-marty-tells-tens-annual-conference](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/nurture-generosity-martin-marty-tells-tens-annual-conference) (accessed July 27, 2015).



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The procession in these mosaics symbolizes not only the congregation's offering of the bread and wine for consecration but also Justinian and Theodora's generosity to the city of Ravenna.

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# Imperial Gifts

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The Emperor Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565, and his wife, the Empress Theodora, enabled the spread of the Eastern Church to its most Western point on the Italian peninsula. Their generous gifts established the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. The two mosaics discussed here honor and commemorate their achievements.

One mosaic shows Emperor Justinian carrying a gold paten while the mosaic on the opposite wall of the apse depicts Empress Theodora holding a gold chalice as they prepare to enter the church. The regents are about to participate in the offertory procession during the liturgical celebration. The paten and chalice, which hold the Eucharistic bread and wine that refer to Christ's sacrifice, will be placed on the altar, between the two mosaics, by the priest. Officials, local clergy, and ladies-in-waiting accompany them. This procession is symbolic not only of the congregation offering the bread and wine for consecration but also of the generosity of Justinian and Theodora to the city of Ravenna and the Byzantine Empire under their reign.

Under the patronage of Justinian, Constantinople became the artistic as well as political capital of the Eastern Empire. The Byzantine art that developed there grew from Early Christian styles. Because Constantinople was frequently ravaged by war over the centuries, much of this artwork has been destroyed. Consequently, the greatest number of surviving Byzantine monuments and mosaics is in Ravenna, which had become the capital of the Western Empire in the fifth century. Though the city fell to Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths (475–526), it was retaken for Justinian in 540. Ravenna then became the stronghold of Byzantine rule in Italy.

The church of San Vitale is an octagonal structure with a circular core and ambulatory. Like many Eastern churches, it is a domed, centrally-planned building. Large windows could be placed on each level of the building due to a new type of lighter vaulting that used hollow tubes. The altar, which is in the center of the apse, is flanked by these lavish and well-preserved Byzantine mosaics of Justinian and Theodora.

The large mosaic panels were probably created by an imperial workshop. The characteristics of the Imperial Byzantine style include tall, slim figures that have small feet and almond-shaped faces with exceptionally large eyes. This is a dramatic change from the squat figures with large heads found in

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EMPRESS THEODORA AND HER ATTENDANTS (547). Mosaic on the south wall of the apse, 8 1/2' x 12'. San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Photo: Album / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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the Late Roman styles. The bodies are elongated and flat. The striated drapery gives no indication of the body shapes beneath them. The tesserae, cut pieces of painted glass, are placed within black silhouettes to create the mosaic. The background is gold leaf and implies a regal, heavenly realm, while the green ground reminds us the patrons are part of an earthly dimension as well.

The Empress and Emperor, although they appear to be participating in the liturgy, were actually thousands of miles away. Theodora was notoriously beautiful and self-confident. She had been a famous performer from a lower class of society before she captivated Justinian's eye while he was a young man.<sup>1</sup> Known for her charming personality, quick-wit, and excellent memory, the Empress appears self-confident in the mosaic. She is dressed in a purple imperial robe, which is a reminder of her speech to the people of Constantinople when she said she was willing to face death in a purple shroud rather than leave their city.<sup>2</sup> In a poststructuralist study of the panels, Charles Barber has maintained that "The privileging of the male as the performer of a public role is underlined in [Theodora's] panel by the way in which the male actors are showing the way into the darkened doorway to the female actors."<sup>3</sup>

Byzantine iconography is often subtle and appropriate. For example, the procession of the three Magi can be seen on the embroidery at the bottom of

Theodora's gown. Their bringing of gifts to the Christ Child is a natural association with the royal couple bringing gifts to the people of Ravenna. Twelve men to parallel Christ's twelve apostles accompany Justinian.<sup>4</sup> The Chi Rho symbol (an early Christogram based on the first two Greek letters of *Kristos*) on the shield recalls Constantine, emperor from 306 to 337, who received a vision during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Rome to rule by this symbol. Constantine became the first Christian emperor and the victory in Rome ultimately led to his leaving Rome and founding Constantinople, the court to which Justinian was heir.<sup>5</sup> The Archbishop Maximian holds a jewel-incrusted cross and the man behind him appears to be a wealthy banker, Julianus Argentarius, who oversaw the financing and building of the church of San Vitale.<sup>6</sup>

Whether we interpret the mosaics of Justinian and Theodora as imperial propaganda, a grateful portrayal of their beneficence, or a poststructuralist encoded meaning, their existence clearly marks the extension of the Eastern Christian Church onto Italian soil and into the city of Ravenna.

## NOTES

1 Christina Giltzow, "Comparison between 'The Alexander Mosaic' in Pompeii and 'The Justinian and Attendants Mosaic' in Ravenna, Italy" (master's thesis, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2010), 48.

2 Ibid., 57.

3 Charles Barber, "The Imperial Panels at San Vitale: A Reconsideration," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, XIV (1990), 35.

4 Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1987), 80.

5 Penelope J. E. Davies, et al., eds., *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition*, eighth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004) 257.

6 Irina Andreescu-Treadgold and Warren Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale," *The Art Bulletin*, 79:4 (December, 1997), 712.



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restrictions, this image  
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print version of  
*Christian Reflection*.

**Jacopo Bassano assisted efforts of relief for the sick and poor. His artwork reflects the ethical emphasis prominent in the history of interpretation of Christ's parable.**

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# Stopping to Help

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The parable of the Good Samaritan, here depicted by the Italian Mannerist painter Jacopo Bassano, beautifully illustrates generosity and support of one person for another devoid of prejudice. The artist chose this theme, in the cultural context of Catholic Venice in the sixteenth century, in order to take the church of his day to task for failing in its obligations to care for the sick and needy in the society.

The parable, which is recounted only in the Gospel of Luke, was told by Jesus to instruct a lawyer who was testing him (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus responded to the lawyer's opening question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" with questions of his own, "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" After giving "the right answer" that you should love God and your neighbor (combining Deuteronomy 6:5 with Leviticus 19:18), the lawyer, seeking to "justify himself," asked Jesus one more question: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with this story.

Most of us learn the parable of the Good Samaritan from a young age, for it is a gem of masterful storytelling that can illustrate a simple message (being kind to your neighbor) suitable for children. But when we rehear the parable as adults, fully aware of the ongoing Palestinian and Israeli conflicts of our era, the events in the Gospel story become more complicated. We wonder if a Jewish lawyer could have regarded the Samaritan (like a modern day Palestinian) as a model of kindness as he traveled through Judea, and are amazed the Jewish innkeeper would even trust him.

Bassano recreates the moment that the Samaritan lifts the traveler who was stripped and beaten by robbers on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and prepares to put him on his donkey. The animal is visible on the right side of the painting. The lighter color of the saddle allows its outline to be found in this darkened area. To the right of the Samaritan's foot are the flasks from which oil and wine were poured on the traveler's wounds. The body of the traveler is positioned on an elevated rock that enables the Samaritan to get behind him to hold him up. The bandages, applied earlier by the Samaritan, are already red with blood that has soaked into them.

Two other figures are visible on the left side of the painting. According to the narrative, they are a priest and a Levite who have seen the traveler but passed by him on the other side of the road. The second man, the Levite,

holds two sticks and appears to be reading. This detail is not mentioned in the Gospel text, but presumably it was introduced in the iconography to accentuate the contrast between the Levite's ostentatious, but actually superficial, religiosity on the one hand and the Samaritan's exemplary brotherly love on the other. Bassano employs this motif more emphatically than his northern colleagues. Lost in his book only a few steps from the spot where the helpless victim lies, the Levite walks to the background while the Samaritan, in the foreground, leans in the opposite direction.<sup>1</sup>

Both of the passersby wear dark clothing. In contrast, the Samaritan wears a rose-colored garment with a flask attached to his waist. The distant city has been identified as the artist's home town of Bassano. It was a walled-city at the base of the Monte Grappa that is clearly defined and visible against the aquamarine of the landscape.

Jacopo Bassano was a simple man by the standards of his contemporaries. Yet his interpreting biblical texts and recreating them into pictorial statements gave him the power to voice his opinions (without words) at a time of lively religious and social debate. His "readings" call for a return to a way of life more in line with the scriptural stories. The artist assisted the efforts of relief for the sick and poor in his day. He encouraged a generous and genuine rapport between people. Like his life, his artwork reflects the ethical emphasis so prominent in the history of interpretation of Christ's parable and is an inspirational model for the Church's mission today.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

1 Bernard Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public: Moralizing Pictures in an Age of Reform, ca. 1535-1600* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 48-49.

2 For a more detailed study of the art and theology of this painting, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance Painting*, volume 2 (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 82-109.

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# All Who Thirst

BY ANTHONY CARL

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All who thirst, come to the waters,  
all who have a need or care.  
Come and taste the Lord's great goodness.  
Find your soul's abundance there.

Call to God, who by his favor,  
sent his only Son to share  
words of life and love transforming.  
Find your soul's abundance there.

Sing to God, oh sing his praises,  
ev'ry perfect gift declare.  
Sing to God of endless mercies.  
Find your soul's abundance there.

Praise the Lord, who in our silence  
heals our hearts through quiet prayer.  
Hear his Spirit gently calling.  
Find your soul's abundance there.

# All Who Thirst

ANTHONY CARL

ANTHONY CARL &amp; KURT KAISER

1. All who thirst, come to the wa - ters,  
 2. Call to God, who by his fa - vor  
 3. Sing to God, oh sing his prais - es,  
 4. Praise the Lord, who in our si - lence

all who have a need or care.  
 sent his on - ly Son to share  
 ev' - ry per - fect gift de - clare.  
 heals our hearts through qui - et prayer.

Come and taste the Lord's great good - ness.  
 words of life and love trans - form - ing.  
 Sing to God of end - less mer - cies.  
 Hear his spir - it gent - ly call - ing.

The image shows a musical score for a four-part vocal setting. It consists of two staves: a treble staff at the top and a bass staff at the bottom. Both staves are in the key of D major, indicated by two sharps (F# and C#). The treble staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The bass staff begins with a bass clef and a key signature of two sharps. The melody is written in a simple, homophonic style. The lyrics are printed below the treble staff, aligned with the notes. The lyrics are: 'Find your soul's a - bun - dance there.' This line is repeated four times, once for each voice part. The first three lines are for the soprano, alto, and tenor parts, and the fourth line is for the bass part. The music ends with a double bar line.

Find your soul's a - bun - dance there.  
Find your soul's a - bun - dance there.  
Find your soul's a - bun - dance there.  
Find your soul's a - bun - dance there.

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Tune: ALL WHO THIRST  
8.7.8.7.

# Worship Service

BY SHARON KIRKPATRICK FELTON

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*(As congregants enter the worship space, they receive notecards to be used during the offering.)*

## *Call to Worship: 2 Corinthians 8:1-4*

*(After the leader reads the scripture passage and says “generosity,” predetermined congregants from various locations around the room say aloud, one at a time, the italicized definitions and synonyms.)*

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.

Generosity:

*the quality of being kind,  
plentiful,  
abundant,  
lavish,  
not selfish,  
willing to share,  
generous in spirit.*

Come now to worship the God  
who is the very definition of generosity,  
and who calls each of us to be generous as well.



*Invocation*

God of all good things,  
we invite you to be present today  
to receive our worship,  
to find our hearts' desires pleasing to you,  
and to watch as we live out your example of  
abundant love and grace.

Open our hearts  
to fresh ways of serving you and your world.  
Open our minds  
to new ways of sharing all that you have given to us.  
Open our souls  
so that we may be filled with your overflowing love.  
Amen.

*Hymn*

"Lord, Teach to Us Your Way of Loving"

Lord, teach to us your way of loving,  
which is the first lesson of all.  
O Christ, who loved the little children,  
how sweet and tender is your call!

Lord, help us hear it and then give you  
the love you ask of us today.  
O Christ, help us love one another,  
for this most earnestly we pray.

Lord, teach to us your way of giving,  
for this is clearly the next thing:  
our love ought always to be showing  
what fruit and offerings it can bring.

*The Church School Hymnal* (1900), alt.  
Tune: SPIRITUS VITAE

*Children's Moment<sup>1</sup>*

*Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:9-14*

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

*Prayer of Confession*

God, within our culture of abundance,  
we have more of everything than we really need.  
We rent buildings to store our excess.  
We believe that we need more and more of everything  
in order to be satisfied and happy.  
Forgive us for our selfishness,  
our gluttony of things,  
and our wastefulness.

Forgive us for claiming to be your church in the world,  
but failing to share what we have with the world.

You have given us all that we need,  
and yet we desire more.

Forgive us for failing to recognize that what we have is yours  
and is given to us to share with others.

Instill in us the sense of community that the early church had,  
where members shared all that they had  
and distributed it to all who had need  
so that no one lacked for anything (Acts 4:32-34).

You are the God of generosity.

You gave all of yourself through Christ Jesus  
so that we could have life.

Forgive us for not following your example.

Continue to call us to a life of generosity.

Show us daily how we may meet the needs of others  
and be good stewards of all that you have given.

Open our hearts and minds and hands  
so that we may give to all who have need.

We confess that such generosity is difficult for us  
because it runs counter to our culture of abundance.  
But it is your heart and your command  
that we love you with all that we have.  
Transform us  
so that we love our neighbors and care for them  
even as we love and care for ourselves.  
Transform us  
so that our first instinct is to share with others  
what has been so freely given to us.  
Amen.

### *Hymn*

“My Life Is Thine, Lord Jesus” (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

My life is thine, Lord Jesus,  
bought with thy blood divine,  
and giv’n to thee with gladness,  
no longer mine, but thine.  
My heart is thine, my Savior,  
not part, but all thine own;  
oh, it is sweet to know that there  
thou hast thy royal throne!

My house is thine, Lord Jesus,  
and all that I possess;  
use it for whate’er thou wilt,  
thou comest but to bless.  
The gold that came from thee, Lord,  
to thee belongeth still;  
oh, may I always faithfully  
my stewardship fulfill!

Yea, everything is thine, Lord,  
let this my portion be —  
that I have nothing of my own,  
and yet have all in thee.  
And make my life, Lord Jesus,  
brightly for thee to shine:  
that word and deed, that look and tone,  
may witness I am thine.

*Jane Woodfall (1902)*

*Suggested Tunes:* ST. THEODUPH or KING’S LYNN

*Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 6:17-19*

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

*Sermon<sup>2</sup>**Offering*

During this time of offering, take a few moments to write on the notecard you received when you came into worship. Identify something that you are ready to offer back to God.

Perhaps you have spiritual gifts you have been waiting to use, or possessions of time, talent, or finances you need to share. How has God called you to be generous?

As we sing through the hymn “All Who Thirst” to celebrate God’s abundant generosity, come forward to place your offering on the table. We all have something to give. The question is, are you ready?

*Hymn*

“All Who Thirst”

All who thirst, come to the waters,  
all who have a need or care.  
Come and taste the Lord’s great goodness.  
Find your soul’s abundance there.

Call to God, who by his favor,  
sent his only Son to share  
words of life and love transforming.  
Find your soul’s abundance there.

Sing to God, oh sing his praises,  
ev’ry perfect gift declare.  
Sing to God of endless mercies.  
Find your soul’s abundance there.

Praise the Lord, who in our silence  
heals our hearts through quiet prayer.  
Hear his Spirit gently calling.  
Find your soul's abundance there.

*Anthony Carl (2015)*

*Tune: ALL WHO THIRST, Anthony Carl and Kurt Kaiser (2015)*  
(pp. 59-61 of this volume)

### *Benediction*

We come before you, God, as a body of believers who are ready to give back to you what you have so generously given to us. We are ready to give selflessly to our neighbors and our world so that they might come to know you.

God, these are the offerings of our community. *(The worship leader, with discretion, reads a few of the slips of paper placed on the table.)*

Receive these offerings, Lord, and many others like them. Bless them, multiply them, and use them to grow your kingdom here on earth.

Send us out from this place to be people of generosity in a land crying for your hope and compassion. Help us to take your abundance of love and grace and to pour it through our lives into our neighborhoods, our city, our country, and the world. Amen.

### **NOTES**

1 Read the children a story about generosity. Among the popular children's books, I recommend Marcus Pfister, *The Rainbow Fish* (New York: North-South Books, 1992) and Jon J. Muth, *Stone Soup* (New York: Scholastic, 2003).

2 For background on the scripture passages in this worship service, see Kelly D. Liebengood, "Paul's Expectations of Generosity," *Generosity*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 57 (Waco, TX: The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University, 2015), 19-28.



**SHARON KIRKPATRICK FELTON**

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# In This Old House

BY JONATHAN AND ELIZABETH SANDS WISE

While generosity typically involves donating money or goods, it includes giving less material things. In this way, hospitality is a species of generosity, a making room and giving space to others in your own place, or in your attention, or in conversation.

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In today's housing market, our house passes for a modest, "starter" home. It's a small bungalow, and most visitors are surprised to find four bedrooms and two bathrooms squeezed under its dormered roof. Living in an older neighborhood, we have big, sturdy trees out front, and most of the neighboring houses' original homeowners have passed away. Young families like ours have moved in, or the houses have become rentals.

Built in the fifties, these houses require a lot of work. We renovated our bathrooms, moving their walls and re-plumbing their fixtures; mudded cracked plaster, sanded, and mudded some more; planed doors so they would shut in their frames, raised and repainted kitchen cabinets, and stripped the mantle. While re-sanding the hardwood floors on our hands and knees—our very first task, even before we moved in our furniture—we paused mid-task and asked one another, "How many feet will walk across this floor over the years? How many people will we welcome in?"

*Our front door is usually open, though often the glass outer door remains locked to keep toddlers inside. Whether expecting company or not, we try to welcome every visitor, neighbor, and friend at the front door, to jump into comfortable conversations that ease them gently into our home. We have no entryway, but a braided rug covered with scattered shoes encourages a laid-back atmosphere. Young visitors typically kick their shoes off, too.*

We try to practice hospitality through a generosity of physical and figurative space. We do not merely invite others into our home when we open that

glass door, we invite them to be present in our lives. Friends come for a meal, neighbors for playtime on our swings or sandbox, college students for a Crockpot of chili and a theology reading group, and church friends for a Sabbath potluck. Some people stay a few minutes, some a few hours. Family comes in from out of state and stays for a few days now and then. But as we open our home to those who cross our paths—as we say to them, *yes, you are welcome here with us*—we’ve discovered more and more friends in periods of transition, friends whose days in our home turn into weeks and then into months.

In the last five years we’ve had seven housemates. A friend asked us recently how it is that we find people to live with us. We responded, “We don’t find them. They find us.”

*After guests-turned-friends enter our living room, we invite them to sit in the circle of chairs and sofas, facing one another. In the center is a paint-splattered child’s desk, serving as a coffee table. We have no television here. We have not invited them into our space to be amused or distracted by some outside source, but to be part of a conversation, to be welcomed, to be paid attention to. It is here that the guest, the other, becomes part of our circle.*

In the living room, so often scattered with toys and blocks and stacks of library books, we share stories about our living: our hopes and regrets, jokes we have heard, struggles we are having with work or church or family, experiences we have enjoyed or wish we could have, our joys and our sorrows. Sometimes, with different housemates, we have shared times of communal prayer in the evenings, sitting around a candle or two. When we host large potlucks that overflow the dining room but cannot be in the yard, then people perch around the circle and on additional chairs with plates on their knees and drinks on the floor, and when the drinks spill, we mop them up and forget all about where that new stain came from.

*Our house was built on a typical 1950s plan: separate rooms, not large open spaces, but all connected in a big circle. Heading to the left from the living room, guests pass through the dining room, then into the small, L-shaped kitchen, which leads into a short hallway that connects two downstairs bedrooms and a bathroom, and then back into the living room. The dining room holds our well-used table—it has a lot of scratches, but it is a heavy, hardwood table with two extra wings that snap onto each end. The kitchen is short on counter space or standing room, especially for folks like us who cook from scratch, preserve seasonal produce, and bake bread and cookies and pies. We spend a lot of time in this tiny space, and, inevitably, so do our guests, gathering and standing and dancing around one another on the decades-old green linoleum floor as food is prepared and served.*

We know people when we share our table with them, whether it is a potluck dinner for thirty, or simply our standard Friday-night homemade



pizza. As we bless this meal together, we recognize that we do not sustain ourselves, but are sustained by God, by the bounty of God's earth, and by the work of a community of people that has brought this food to our table. And we remember that there are too many people who do not share the blessings of good food, loving community, and meaningful labor. May our

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**All hospitality is hard, but we have found that the hardest is when we move beyond inviting others into our space and instead invite them to make our space their space.**

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generosity, we pray, make us part of the solution for those who lack these essential and God-ordained goods. Because it is one of our three-year-old's favorite songs, we usually conclude our prayer with the Doxology.

After dinner we all clean up together, carrying the plates to the kitchen sink. We lack a mechanical dishwasher, so that task is carried

out by one of us, or often by a guest. It can be another instance of generosity, odd but genuine, to allow our houseguests to serve us as well — by washing dishes, even when they do it poorly, or by putting dishes away, even when they put them in the wrong place.

With housemates who live with us for a while, we try to share communal meals on set nights each week. These are a priority, not bumped easily for the myriad meetings, events, or offers that may come up. Then we can speak of the mundane mysteries of our lives that, shared together, mold us into a community. We take turns cooking meals, allowing them to share their palates with us, and likewise take turns cleaning up. We have lost some non-stick pots to metal implements, dishes to slippery hands, and spoons to whatever mysterious place they go, but we have gained far more than we have lost in these exchanges.

Putting leftovers into a shared refrigerator can be like playing a game of Tetris. Not getting frustrated about misplaced food getting spoiled is a lesson of community. And patience with less-than-adventurous eaters has been a must. We've introduced friends to tofu and hummus, homemade granola bars, using Greek yogurt as sour cream, and to Pennsylvania staples like pickled beets, baked oatmeal, and pouring milk over pie and cake.

*Until this year, our long-term housemates always slept in the rooms on the main floor and used what is now our main bathroom. Our bedrooms were in the larger, dormered rooms upstairs, at the top of a stairwell most guests didn't realize existed. Hidden discreetly behind a latched door off the living room, the stairwell led to the detritus of daily life typically unseen by visitors or friends. When we lived upstairs, we hid our mess better.*

Living in community has made life messy and teaches us regularly how selfish we are. It is easy to bristle when the front door gets left unlocked overnight, or to be annoyed when an extra laptop or coffee cup is sitting around in common spaces, but then we see that our own laptops, our own water glasses, and our children's toys are littered throughout the house: a life of hospitality reminds us to check the mirror for sties in our eyes before opening our mouths.

*The two small bedrooms on the main floor now sleep our nuclear family. Our young daughters share one, and we squeeze into the other, along with a king-sized bed, and bookshelves, because it was supposed to be the library in our original house plans. It's messy and it's tight. The black and white bathroom between the bedrooms is shared with short-term visitors. Hooks keep towels out of the way; an old colander is full of bath toys. We used to wipe down the sink before company came, but now rarely remember. Even our personal space is now shared space, filled with children and housemates.*

All hospitality is hard, but we have found that the hardest is when we move beyond inviting others into our space and instead invite them to make our space their space. We have learned that we cling more tightly to our physical possessions than we thought we did. We may pride ourselves on our generosity, on our frugality, on our conviction that people matter more than worldly goods, but the anger we feel when a new gash appears on the hardwood floor we sanded ourselves puts us in our place. We are attached to our things.

We are more attached to our schedules, plans, and to-do lists. Housemates disrupt those things. We've learned over the years that there are days we will not be able to compose an article or grade papers because a conversation is more important. When we want alone time to unwind after the girls are in bed, it is tiring to say "yes" to community time. Living with non-family members has challenged us to be charitable, hospitable, and generous even when it is hard.

But living with friend-guests has also made life richer, quirkier, and, overall, more fun. Adam taught us it is possible to live simply: no bed frame, one pair of jeans, flip-flops preferable. Kays reminded us how old we were by making dinner for himself about the time we headed to bed. Angel's friendship encouraged us to be authentic and live faithfully to our convictions. Devin, or "Dobby," was the first person our preschooler nicknamed. Phillip soon learned to change a diaper. Because we had guests living with us before having our own children, our preschooler thinks it's normal to have other grown-ups in the house. And of the handful of adults our toddler allows to pick her up, Devin and Phillip make the cut.

Our first housemate, Adam, is now married, has finished seminary, and works full time in a church. We recently asked Adam if he had any thoughts

about what he learned while living in community with us, and his response reminded us about why we offer our space to our friends, why we open our home and our days as shared resources. "Living in community enriched my perspective on sharing space with others at a time in my life when I was learning what being independent meant for me," Adam said. "Living in community became my greatest opportunity to learn about hospitality: receiving it from you while also giving it to others alongside you."

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# Time to Tithe

BY RICHARD STEARNS

In our culture, the chief competitor to dependence on God is money—what it can buy and what it symbolizes. We need to give generously in order to inoculate ourselves from the virulent cultural diseases of materialism and consumerism. Unfortunately, we are not getting our vaccination shots.

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Few people are as faithful with their money as my friends Stu and Robin Phillips. After reading my book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, Stu felt God calling him to surrender his most precious possession.<sup>1</sup> He knew that meant selling his family's beautiful 14,000-acre Wyoming ranch.

The Phillips' ranch was where Robin practiced her painting, capturing rich landscapes onto her canvas. It was where Stu and his sons fished and tracked the herds of elk that roamed the pastures. The Phillips family had spent so much time on the ranch, it was so important to their lives together, that Stu immediately knew if God was asking him to give up his most precious possession, then that would mean selling the ranch and giving away the proceeds.

The sale went well—the state of Wyoming was an eager buyer—and Stu said he quickly made the emotional transition from grieving over his lost ranch to anticipating what God might be able to do when that money was put into ministry. Stu and his family became the poster children for joyful giving.

If there is one thing I have learned as president of World Vision, where I am often in the position of asking people to give generously to help others, it is that Stu and Robin are unusual. The rich and their money are not easily parted. And you don't need to own a 14,000-acre ranch to be rich. If you earn \$50,000 per year, you are richer than ninety-nine percent of the world.

So, if you are reading this, you are most likely rich and you have an obligation and responsibility to fully support the work of the kingdom.

But I've seen that when the wealthy and their money *are* separated, when the rich are willing to give up what they might claim for themselves, God does amazing things. Jesus' promise is true: "Give, and it will be given

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**God does not really need our money, but we need to give it. Our tithing demonstrates our reliance on God, and it is God's method of giving us the privilege of supporting and participating in God's work in the world.**

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to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (Luke 6:38a).

I feel it is part of my responsibility to encourage Christians to give—and even to encourage pastors to ask for a whole lot more of their church members. This is the wealthiest nation of Christians in the world, yet we are so unwilling to spare a portion of our wealth for God's

work. If giving is a reflection of the health of our spiritual life—and I believe it is—then American Christians are on life support. We need a generosity fix.

## **GIVING AND CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

We might be forgiven for paying so little attention to giving if the Bible had not paid so much attention to how we use our money. Scripture devotes twice as many verses to money as it does to faith and prayer combined. A full fifteen percent of Jesus' words in the Gospels are about money, more than he said about heaven and hell.

When we look at what Jesus said about money, we can see why he thought it was so important. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34). Jesus saw that our relationship to our money and our possessions indicates the quality of our spiritual lives. If you want to understand how someone behaves, their motives, and their priorities, you have to follow the money.

The Bible's basic expectation for our giving is the tithe, or ten percent. Leviticus states, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD" (Leviticus 27:30, NIV).<sup>2</sup> The tithe was to be from the "first fruits" of the harvest, which are reaped before the farmer knows that there will be enough harvest to go around. It suggests giving on faith. It was also the minimum expectation—other gifts and offerings were added on top.

God does not really need our money; we need to give it. Our tithing demonstrates our reliance on God, and it is God's method of giving humans

the privilege of supporting and participating in God's work in the world. In the Old Testament, God directed some of our giving to be used to support the physical work of the temple system. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul applies that approach to the new system:

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

*1 Corinthians 9:13-14*

A part of the tithe is to be given to those who serve God, but another part is for "the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows" (Deuteronomy 14:29). The church was supposed to use that money to provide for those in need. The book of Acts describes how the deacons were designated the task of "the daily distribution" (Acts 6:1-7). And then a remarkable thing happened: "The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples increased greatly" (6:7a)

Generous giving does more than pay for the operations of the church and the support of those in need. It also transforms those who practice it.

After the 1987 stock market collapse, one of Wall Street's worst days, I panicked over my lost investments. We had lost more than a third of our life's savings, including the money we had set aside for our children's college. I became obsessed, analyzing spreadsheets and calling in orders to sell our stocks and funds in the hopes of preventing more losses.

It was obvious to my wife, Renéé, that I had far more of my desires and dreams tied up in that money than I should have. She said, "Honey, this thing is consuming you in an unhealthy way. We have our marriage, our health, our friends, our children, and a good income. You need to let go of this and trust God."

She was right, but it was not easy to let go. So Renéé suggested something that seemed outrageous to me at the time. After we prayed together, she told me that we needed to write out some large checks to the ministries we supported. This was not easy for me to do, especially in the state I was in. But once it was all over I felt a wave of relief. We had broken the spell that money had cast over me.

You see, I think that giving is like an inoculation against the diseases of materialism and consumerism so prevalent in our culture. The chief competitor to our dependence on God is our money – what it can buy and what it symbolizes. We need to give generously in order to inoculate ourselves from the diseases that our culture and our possessions so easily infect us with. Giving it away helps us in the process of dying to self.

## HOW ARE WE DOING?

Unfortunately, we are not getting our necessary vaccination shots. Church-going Christians fare only a little better than the general population when it comes to giving. Only about 2.6 percent of church-going Christians tithe at ten percent or above. And it is not necessarily the wealthy who are practicing generosity.

But the fault is not simply that of individual Christians. Congregations are setting a poor example. Only about two percent of a church's budget typically goes to overseas ministries, including missions *and* humanitarian assistance. Roughly one percent is designated for direct assistance to individuals in need. In other words, less than three percent of a church's budget goes to helping people at home and abroad and to sharing the gospel overseas. As a percentage of their income, congregations provide less than half of one percent for people in poverty.

When God set up the tithe system, he did not want the priests keeping nearly all of the money for themselves.

This lack of giving is hurting churches and ministries. Giving to religious causes made up more than half of all charitable giving in the 1980s. Today, it has declined to less than a third. Americans gave almost \$115 billion to religion in 2014. That is a lot of money supporting 340,000 churches, million-dollar ministries, and much more. But if all those who claimed to be Christians actually tithed, churches and ministries would have roughly \$500 billion *more* to do the work of the kingdom. In other words, churches and ministries would be able to do five times more to serve people, disciple followers, and care for the less fortunate.

We could change the world overnight if only we practiced what God asks of us. It is estimated that \$65 billion per year would be enough to end extreme global poverty within a generation. The American church could do that all by itself—outdoing all the efforts of the U.S. State Department and the United Nations. That would provide clean water to the whole world, end extreme hunger, defeat malaria, give the world's children a basic education, and provide 250 million jobs. And the churches would have \$435 billion *left over every year!*

We could be doing tremendous things. We could triple the funding for Bible translation, sponsor hundreds of thousands of indigenous missionaries, and establish a thousand Christian schools to equip church leaders. That would cost less than \$6 billion, a tiny fraction of what might be available to the church if we would only tithe.

At first, giving generously feels scary. That was how I felt when Reneé and I wrote those checks right after the stock market collapse. Stu and Robin felt something similar when God seemed to be asking for their most precious possession. But quickly that fear turns to excitement and joy.

Here is how Malachi puts it when God challenges his people to “bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.” God challenges Israel to “test” him and

see what happens if they obey. “See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.... Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land” (Malachi 3:8-12, NIV).

That promise could be ours, too. But that blessing right now is trapped in our bank accounts just waiting to be withdrawn.

## NOTES

1 Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us? The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

2 Scripture passages marked “NIV” are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.



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# Unlikely Champions: A Widow's Might

BY ALLEN WALWORTH

Scripture tells many stories about unlikely generosity champions, men and women who play out their lives, often in obscurity, except for the watchful eye of the biblical narrator—and God. They are champions of the human spirit. Upon their faithfulness the world turns, and the kingdom of God advances.

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On April 11, 2009, an unknown, unemployed 47-year-old woman took the stage of the television talent show, *Britain's Got Talent*. She was, by even the most generous account, frumpy in appearance, awkward on stage, and the personification of nervous fear as she walked out to the small piece of tape marking her spot at center stage, facing a large cynical audience accustomed to beautiful young talent acts, and a trio of judges chaired by the infamously harsh critic, Simon Cowell. She was a most unappealing and unpromising contestant, if ever there was one. But as the muffled laughter died down, Susan Boyle opened her mouth, and out poured the haunting lyrics and beguiling melody of "I Dreamed a Dream," from *Les Misérables*. It was a powerful and confident voice that seemed incongruent with the body from which it sprang. She sang like an angel set free, a muse filling the room—and the hearts—of everyone there. And as she sang the audience was transformed from cynics to converts. They listened in stunned silence for a few seconds, and then burst forth into standing ovation throughout the rest of her song. Every eye was wide with wonder, and wet with inspiration. And in that moment, the dream that Susan Boyle dreamed... actually came true.

It is a great story. Rags to riches. Anonymous to YouTube sensation overnight. From “no prospects” to “no limits” in an instant. Don’t you love the Susan Boyle story, as much as her beautiful voice? It makes you wonder how many other heroes and champions are living right among us, lacking only their chance to show the world their hidden gifts. What great business ideas fail to be born for lack of adequate capital? What potential leaders remain in the back of the room because they cannot summon the courage and hope to keep trying after early defeats? What loving hearts stay locked up in loneliness rather than risk opening up after experiencing betrayal or bereavement? What great novel or music remains unwritten because the author cannot face another round of rejection slips? By the way, it is not insignificant that before her “discovery” on the brightly lit stage of *Britain’s Got Talent*, Susan Boyle found a loving, nonjudgmental place where she felt free to sing, her one sanctuary where she felt safe enough to find her voice, and let it soar – as a member of the church choir in her tiny village.

But sometimes the most important moments in the human story do not happen on center stage, and they are not captured on YouTube. Some of the greatest human stories are not played out in front of thousands of adoring fans, nor affirmed by thunderous applause. This might be the patient caregiver who tirelessly tends the physical and emotional needs of a single bed-fast patient or family member. It is the pastor who serves for a lifetime in a small village, preaching to less than ten people on Sundays, shepherding his or her tiny flock through the years with steady and faithful service in the name of Christ. Or the persons with meager resources who nonetheless open their hearts and their wallets to share with others even less fortunate than they are, or who drop in a single coin as the offering plate passes by in church—a tiny drop in a vast sea of need, infinitesimal compared to larger gifts from those who give much more, but who sacrifice much less. Yes, these are the silent, anonymous champions of the human spirit. Upon their faithfulness the world turns, and the kingdom of God advances.



Both the Old Testament and New Testament tell stories of unlikely generosity champions, men and women who play out their lives, often in obscurity, except for the watchful eye of the biblical narrator – and God. Just two examples to illustrate, from 1 Kings 17 and Mark 12: both were widows, both were heroes of faith and generosity who would have played their roles in anonymity, unknown and forgotten by history, were it not for the recording of their stories in the pages of Scripture.

Remember that in biblical times, widows were at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder. In a world where a woman’s status was tied to her father or to her husband, a widow was left with little opportunity for protection or provision. There were virtually no honorable or well-paying

jobs for single women in this economic system. There were no Social Security payments or 401K plans. As a result, widows were usually poor, marginalized, and vulnerable, to be used and abused by the more powerful men in society. So it is not an incidental detail that Scripture tells the story of two widows, women who were heroic champions of faith and upon whose generosity the biblical story advances. They offer generosity precisely where we would least expect to see it. They are both unlikely heroes, indeed.

The widow in the story from 1 Kings 17:10-16 was even more unlikely as a champion of Israel's faith tradition, because she was a Gentile. Elijah had fled Israel during the terrible drought, and the threat to his life, during the reign of the evil queen Jezebel. And so God provided for Elijah in unusual ways while he was in self-imposed exile from his homeland. Sometimes it was ravens that brought Elijah food. But in this instance, God provided for the prophet through the unlikely provision of a widow who was down to her last meal – literally. And yet Elijah approached this stranger, and invited this Gentile, this desperately poor woman, to share what little she had left with him, and to trust that if she did so, God would keep refilling her empty cupboard, day by day. Isn't it amazing that she said "yes" to that audacious request? But she did. And sure enough, each day for an entire year, as she emptied her flour jar for that day's meal, God would refill it by the next day.

Notice that God did not give her an entire year's worth of flour on the first day. It was more like the gift of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. God wanted her, and wants us, to learn to trust God for our daily bread, and our daily life. Of course, we would rather trust ourselves, our portfolios, and our own ingenuity, wouldn't we? But not this widow. She took the leap of faith, and expressed her trust through the extension of generosity, every single day, for an entire year.

No wonder Jesus told her story as an illustration in his first sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:25-26). She is a true hero, a model of faith and trust and generosity for us all – even if she is a most unlikely one.

And in Mark's Gospel, as the clock was winding down during Holy Week, while Jesus was watching people drop their offerings for the provision of the Temple, he pointed out the remarkable faith and generosity of an unnamed widow who waited patiently in line among the wealthier donors (Mark 12:41-44). When her time came, she dropped in two small copper coins, worth very little compared to the larger gifts offered by most of the others in that line. As far as we know, she did not even know Jesus was watching her. But Jesus knew that those two coins represented her entire net worth. It was all the money she had. What in this world, or perhaps, what *beyond* this world, would cause this poor widow to give everything she had left to an ordinary offering at the Temple? We don't know her story. We don't even know her name. But you can be sure there is a story there. Behind every great act of generosity is a story, even if only known to the giver and to God.

Well, Jesus noticed. Sobering thought, isn't it, that Jesus might always be watching the offering? Think about that next time the offering plates pass by!

Jesus said to his surprised disciples that her gift was the largest one given, because the way God does accounting is not by counting the number of dollars in the offering plate, but by comparing one's gift to the dollars still in one's wallet or portfolio. What inspired that widow to drop her first coin, much less her second coin? As Jesus said, "she gave her very life." It was the same thing Jesus would do later that week on the cross, making it two times in a single week that all heaven was hushed in awe at the sight of it.

Does the world always take notice of these heroes? No. But it does not matter. For they play out their roles for an audience of One. God notices. God remembers. The kingdom of God advances. And that is enough.

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# Generosity in the Bible

BY JO-ANN A. BRANT

Most of us wish to be more generous. The four books reviewed here not only demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon, they also provide practical advice about how we can turn our well-meaning intent into action.

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When we read the many scriptural admonitions to be generous with resources, such as this,

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

*Deuteronomy 15:7-8*

most of us, I suspect, pause to reflect upon those occasions when we have met a request with a no rather than a yes. Most of us wish to be generous. The four volumes reviewed here not only demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon, they also provide practical advice about how to turn our well-meaning intent into action. While I recommend all of them, let me describe each so you can be informed stewards of your expenditure of time and money.

Craig L. Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, in *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013, 272 pp., \$24.99) presents the most comprehensive coverage of the Bible's treatment of wealth and what we ought to do with it. His work is a solid distillation of biblical scholarship framed for a broad and interested readership. The first chapter presents the reader with challenging

and disturbing facts about Christian giving or the lack thereof. In the next five chapters of the book, Blomberg demonstrates that familiar passages about possessions and money are constitutive of an ethic that is part of the fabric of God's kingdom, rather than something good to do but not necessary to participation in God's redemption. He walks a careful path between two missteps: on the one side, the simple equation of our wealth with God's approval (the temptation of a prosperity gospel) and, on the other, proclaiming justification by works. He affirms God's promise of prosperity and places goodness or sin within the arena of what we do with our surplus. Attention to relevant passages in the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation reveals how the first Christians read the Old Testament and prioritized Jesus Christ's teachings on giving. Blomberg also explores various models for approaching biblical principles of tithing, offering, and payment of taxes.

In the last three chapters Blomberg applies biblical teaching to three levels of stewardship: the individual disciple, the government, and the local church. Each chapter begins with a case study, which Blomberg resolves at the conclusion of the chapter. When addressing individuals, he does not chastise his readers for self-indulgence but rather reminds them of what brings true happiness and suggests a method of trimming rather than asceticism. At the same time, he warns the Western reader that what we consider to be necessities can become barriers to true fellowship in Christ within the worldwide Church. In his chapter on government, still holding firm to his mainstream evangelical views about homosexuality and abortion, Blomberg does not hesitate to challenge the habits of American evangelicals to limit issues of social justice to matters related to the family. He challenges his reader to not conflate a political economic system with Christian values, but to recognize that the call to care for the poor transcends our political ideologies. When addressing church stewardship, he focuses upon a more creative use and attitude toward the line item in the church budget devoted to facilities and a more generous understanding of a congregation's ministries.

Blomberg's language and arguments will be meaningful and accessible to students in a college or seminary classroom, to leaders within the church, and to lay readers. I strongly recommend that this be treated as required reading by pastors and church leaders, ranging from board elders to those holding the highest posts in their denomination.



Bruce W. Longenecker is Professor of Religion and W. W. Melton Chair at Baylor University. His *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010, 400 pp., \$25.00) is the most scholarly work in this collection insofar as it strives to make an original contribution to scholarship. Longenecker puts forward the thesis that the Jerusalem Council's admonition to Paul to "remember the poor" (Galatians

2:10) is not a reference to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-26 and 1 Corinthians 16:1). Instead, their counsel is deeply rooted in their understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. While the Jerusalem leadership is prepared to let go of circumcision as a marker of a true relationship with God, generosity to the poor is a must.

The rigor of Longenecker's argument should not deter a more casual

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**Bruce Longenecker depicts the generous treatment of the poor within Jewish societies in contrast to a world that was not so giving. This should be mandatory reading for anyone tempted to use a picture of stingy Jews to frame Jesus' call to generosity.**

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reader. The volume provides a captivating picture of the world of patronage into which the early church entered. This includes a description of the generous treatment of the poor within Jewish societies in contrast to an ancient world that was generally not so giving. The section on Jewish tradition should be mandatory reading for all pastors who are tempted to use a picture of stingy Jews as a way of framing Jesus' call to generosity.

Longenecker's description of the charitable activities of the early church makes it clear that caring for the poor was a mark of Jesus' true followers. In a final section, he deals with Paul's rhetorical construction of his communities' economic level, by which the Apostle redefines both what it means to be wealthy and the status of the poor. One piece of advice: readers will want to bookmark pages 44-45 in which Longenecker presents his short hand for economic levels.

Whether one accepts Longenecker's conclusion about Galatians 2:10 or not, he demonstrates that if we wish to identify with the faith of the early church, we cannot draw a distinction between theology and an ethic of giving. While this book belongs on the shelves of Pauline scholars and students, I would not limit its readership to them. Nevertheless, for readers just entering the discussion of the place of generosity to the poor, this may not be the volume with which to begin.



Mark Allan Powell, the Robert and Phyllis Leatherman Professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, has made it a habit not to stop at his success as a biblical scholar but to apply his research to spiritual formation. In *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006, 204 pp., \$15.00), he takes what



scholars know about the place of generosity in Scripture and speaks directly to the believer's mind, body, and soul. I must admit, as I read Blomberg's and Longenecker's overviews of biblical teaching and accounts of early Judaism and Christianity, I felt a bit arrogant as a member of the Mennonite tradition for whom the passages they review serve as part of our canon within the canon. I asked myself, "How is it that all Christians do not know this?" As I read Powell's book, I found myself asking myself, "How can I more truly live generously?"

Powell's concern is broader than giving to the poor. This is both the book's strength and its weakness. His work is designed to promote a spirit of giving, but he does not provide a biblical ethic for prioritizing who should be the recipients of our generosity or a purpose for giving beyond our own spiritual health. In the opening chapter, Powell describes the primary purpose of offerings and sacrifices as acts of worship; the good to which our offerings can be put is presented as an afterthought. While I resist this ordering, I was inspired by his arguments in the first half of the book for treating giving as worship, an expression of love, and a spiritual discipline. The second half of the book looks beyond giving to the broader picture of our finances, including how we acquire, regard, manage, and spend our money. Powell makes "God-pleasing" the governing principle.

Powell has designed this book for adult study groups by delineating a distinct focus for each chapter and providing pointed questions that should prompt lively discussion and application to our lives.



Timothy Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, a congregation of five thousand regular attendees, approaches the subject of generosity as a justice issue in *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010, 272 pp., \$15.00). Like Blomberg and Longenecker, he sees biblical doctrine and care for the poor inextricably linked. But his volume stands out from the others described above in a number of ways. His is what academics sometimes call disparagingly a popular book. While Keller does present sound argumentation, he does not write for an audience that demands a high burden of proof. He leaves that to scholars such as Craig Blomberg to whom he acknowledges a debt. To a large extent, Keller consumes scholarship and offers it in more digestible pieces for a lay audience by organizing it not as an argument but as reflections on specific questions such as "Why should we do Justice?" and "Should Christians work together for justice in society with members of other religions or no religion?" He scatters enough anecdotes to illustrate his thoughts to awaken the imagination of his readers to an application to their own experiences and to new possibilities for their own expression of faith.

As a piece of popular theology, this book lends itself to a group book



study, but its lack of scholarly rigor might also make it a controversial choice. Keller seeks to prevent two tendencies: the first is when concerns for social justice lose their grounding in theology, and the second, when convictions about the gift of grace become excuses for ignoring social justice. He presents us with a picture of God as the defender of the poor and a definition of justice as a right relationship. He then asks whether our relationship with

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**Timothy Keller responds to two forms of suspicion that linger inside and outside evangelicalism, respectively: that the pursuit of social justice is a distraction from the task of saving souls, and that Christianity is itself a cause of social injustice.**

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God can be sound if we do not care passionately about those things to which God is devoted. To make his case, he draws from the work of a wide range of theologians from Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century Massachusetts Congregationalist pastor, to Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian founder of liberation theology, without regard for broader ideological or theological dimensions of their thought. Midway through the book, he turns

to the doctrine of justification by faith, informed by the work of Miroslav Volf, to refute the notion that working for social justice signifies a belief in justification by works. His presentation is swift and dramatic, but it obscures the rigor and complexity of Volf's account of redemption. While Keller's frequent brief summaries of the most significant contributions to the philosophy and theology of justice might inspire a few of his readers to dig deeper by reading the works he cites, he might also leave his readers overwhelmed or, worse, underwhelmed by their contributions.

Another distinguishing feature of this volume is the breadth of audience for which Keller writes. He directs his work to youth who are devoting their early career to a life of service and to young evangelicals, both in years and heart, who have come to include social justice within their understanding of the mission of the Church. He responds to two forms of suspicion that linger inside and outside evangelicalism, respectively: the first sees the pursuit of social justice as a distraction from the task of saving souls, and the second sees Christianity itself as a cause of social injustice. While those who are guided by these suspicions probably will not read this book, those who seek to help others flourish as God intends will find biblical teachings and theological language with which to engage with their detractors and to participate as Christians in the larger discussion of equity in our society.



By the end of reading these four volumes, I became a bit uncomfortable about the fact that three were written by people who share my professional status and probably fall into my tax bracket, and the fourth by a pastor whose Manhattan congregation meets on a very expensive piece of real estate. While their roles as biblical scholars and pastors are not to be dismissed, something tells me that lessons to the wealthy — that is, anyone who has surplus of the order that Powell describes — ought to be delivered by those with far fewer means who live generously. On the other hand, these volumes urge us to practice forms of generosity that may lead us to work side by side with people of all socio-economic backgrounds in contexts where we can experience the truth of what they teach.

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# Toward a Theology of Generosity

BY ARTHUR M. SUTHERLAND

Americans long have wrestled with how God gives, the obligations of the rich toward the poor and the poor toward the rich, and how generosity shapes public life. Three recent books continue the struggle by surveying, probing, and depicting generosity as an orientation toward life.

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**T**he Institute of Transportation Engineers has a formula for calculating the timing of yellow traffic lights. The equation considers the speed of vehicles approaching the intersection, the deceleration rate, the effect of gravity, a road's vertical rise or drop, and the ratio between perception and reaction.

I tell you this because the length of a yellow light has a direct bearing upon my own generosity. All too often when I see a person with a sign asking for money at an intersection, I would honestly prefer the longest yellow light possible because if I can make it without having to stop for a red light or threatening an accident if I can't, I can avoid doing some hard work in theology, ethics, and social justice: should I give or not? ("Freely you have received, freely give"); how much should I give? ("God loves a cheerful giver"); what decision have the drivers around me made? ("What do ye more than others?"); are those really diabetic ulcers on her leg or dollar-store makeup? ("At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores").

Lest you think too quickly that I am introspective to a fault, or suckled by guilt and reared by shame, or merely a misanthrope, I invite to you consider another set of questions the next time you come to the stoplight in your hometown favored by the poor, the hungry, and the tired. What are differences between generosity and giving? Is my gift-giving structured as a free exchange or is it reciprocal? Am I acting on my own or is my giving

part of a communal response? What difference does it make if my giving is spontaneous or planned? What part of my identity does this gift reflect? If I lived with less, would I have more to give? What is the relationship between giving and forgiving?

Since John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," addressed to Puritans aboard the *Arabella* as she pitched toward Massachusetts, Americans have wrestled with how God gives, the obligations of the rich toward the poor and the poor toward the rich, and how generosity shapes public life. Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson in *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 280 pp., \$29.95) take up that dialogue once again, albeit with less theology than Winthrop. They are sociologists whose work emerges from the Science of Generosity Project, hosted by Notre Dame and funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Well-read pastors who are interested in the intersection of faith and culture are probably familiar with Smith's *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009), written with Pamela Snell [Herzog].

Smith and Davidson define generosity as "the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly" (p. 4). They see it as a "moral orientation to life" (p. 4). It is not equivalent to pure altruism since the generous person may indeed derive a benefit by giving to others. In fact, at the center of the book is a claim that generosity is a paradox: by giving ourselves away, we make progress toward flourishing. In saying this they do not romanticize poverty and do not claim that poverty is a good for what ails you. Rather, the key word for them is "grasping." The tighter the grip you have on what you own, the more likely you are to constrict your own aorta. Thus, throughout the book the emphasis is on the "practice" of generosity, on behaviors that involve "recurrent intention and attention" (p. 13).

They came to this conclusion through a national study of two thousand Americans in 2010, supplemented by extensive interviews with a group of forty. They even collected digital photographs of participant's homes so that they could compare what people said they did with the evidence the pictures revealed. The first chapter concludes that a person who gives money, who volunteers, who is generous with neighbors, friends, and others, and who places a value on generosity, is also a person with a positive assessment of their own wellbeing. The second chapter examines why generous people tend to rate their wellbeing as they do. They discuss nine causal mechanisms, and these include the way generosity increases positive emotions, the way our brains and bodies are chemically stimulated by an increase in serotonin levels, and the way generous people have a strong sense of personal agency—that is, they feel like they can do something even when they have little to do something with.

The third chapter mines their empirical data: how much do Americans actually give, who gives more, and what type of generosity do they practice?

The answers: 86.2% of Americans give away less than 2% of their income; if you make less than \$12,500, you are likely to give away twice as much on a percentage basis as someone who earns more than \$90,000; 34% had never performed the neighborly act of watching a neighbor's house while they are away; and 76.4% did not volunteer at all during the previous year. Not exactly what John Winthrop had in mind. While we don't give blood (88.5%),

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**86.2% of Americans give away less than 2% of their income; if you make less than \$12,500, you are likely to give away twice as much on a percentage basis as someone who earns more than \$90,000; and 76.4% did not volunteer at all during the previous year.**

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we do better when it comes to checking the organ donor box at the DMV (42.5%). I suppose death gets you over squeamishness.

Chapter four explores the lives of more miserly folks, not to condemn them, but rather to understand why they act in ways that are not in their own best interest. In a series of case studies, we are invited to hear "ungenerous" households express themselves. The Americans we meet are concerned about

the world, know "the good they ought to do" (James 4:17), and claim to be doing the best they can. The problem is that they are an anxious and fretful bunch, worried about the next day's dollar. Their axis of responsibility for others often leans from the X of "do no harm" toward the Y of "you better take care of yourself because nobody will do so for you." Chapter five gives us the antidote—the fresh air for this miasma of individualism. The authors depict a lifestyle of healthy generosity based on their interviews and tagging along with "thirty-one notably generous Americans." They contrast this to the "pathological altruism"—a determination to help others despite (or perhaps because of) a high cost in self-neglect—that plagued two individuals in their sample.



If Smith and Davidson are reporters, Mark Scandrette in *Free: Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$16.00) is a practitioner. Mark and Lisa Scandrette transplanted themselves from northern Minnesota to inner city San Francisco in 1998 in order to build an intentional Christian community. Before they left the coldest winter for the coldest summer, they had a series of fishnet-dropping encounters with discipleship that led them to quit college, get married, and give away most of their possessions, saying to themselves, "If we have

food and clothing, we will be content with these" (1 Timothy 6:8). Three children in six years did not persuade them that they needed a bigger salary, a bigger house, and a better relationship with the American mantra of more, more, faster, faster.

The book's strength is its step-by-step approach to examining one's life. Each chapter pokes a gentle hole into the bottom of our security bucket, releasing the stuff we have stuffed inside. If you don't like answering questions about how you use your time, about your purpose in life, or your contributions to the good of the world and the causes you care about, you won't like this book. Jesus spent much of his time promoting awareness, so they do the same by asking the reader to develop a clearer sense of what it means to align values to tasks. Written from what appears to be a broadly evangelical perspective, the basic theological directive in the book is best described as seeking the sweet spot between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Thus the book is not just about gaining financial freedom, learning frugality, eliminating spiritual distractions, or why driving a Prius will save the polar bears, although those ideas are ever present. They want you to reflect, discern, and then decide.

The weakness of the book is that we don't get enough about how they succeeded (or how they failed). My inner editor would have told them that the better book is a memoir, because I suspect they had an opportunity to tell of a life well lived. Narrated theology has the power to inspire. There are vignettes, but all the tables, charts, and review questions remind me that we are living out the kingdom of God in the age of PowerPoint. Still, *Free: Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most* is a logical choice for an adult forum on Sunday mornings. Many would gain from Scandrette's salt-of-the-earth point of view.



A narrated theology of generosity is exactly what Miroslav Volf gives us. A native of Croatia and active in international ecumenical dialog, he taught at Fuller Theological Seminary before moving to New Haven and founding the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. Already well known for *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (1996), the book under review in this article has rivaled it in success because *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, 256 pp., \$15.99) is elegantly written and every page is a piston of theological engagement with generosity.

At the start, the book takes us to a maternity ward so that we can witness the adoption of his son, moves to his encounter with a black-booted police officer irate over a missed traffic sign, and then skewers *Desperate Housewives* (all in the first three pages) so that we prepare ourselves to encounter the words of the remembered Jesus, "it is more blessed to give than to

receive" (Acts 20:35).

As a systematic theologian, Volf naturally petitions us to reexamine our doctrine of God. The structure of the book is chiasmic. Two parts are joined by a short middle so that God's giving is on one side and God's forgiving on the other. His discussion of God the Giver draws upon Dostoevsky, Luther, and Barth. Here Volf's doctrine of God calls into question popular images of God

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**Miroslav Volf wants our giving to imitate God's. The problem is that while God's gifts are pure, ours are stained by selfishness, pride, and sloth. Overcoming this, or at least recognizing it earlier and more clearly, is the Christian's task.**

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that limit our capacity to give. God the Giver obliges faith, gratitude, availability, and participation in the lives of others. The second chapter draws upon Natalie Davies' *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (2000) to draw out the different ways we take, get, and give: we can be coercive, just taking what we want; we can exchange one thing for another in order to get something back; or we can give what we don't owe to someone who has no claim

on it—and this would be generosity. In chapter three, Volf wants our giving to imitate God's. The problem is that while God's gifts are pure, ours are stained by selfishness, pride, and sloth. Overcoming this, or at least recognizing it earlier and more clearly, is the Christian's task.

Volf accomplishes the transition between giving and forgiving by means of an incredibly powerful story from 1957. It relives a small-town childhood in Croatia and involves his mother, his father, his nanny, and a soldier. If you cannot read this story and feel the urge to repent of your own sins, your fate awaits you.

The other side of the chiasm follows the same pattern, but now the insight is into God's forgiveness and our own. The discussion in chapter four is about how the need for forgiveness is ubiquitous. Moreover, our reliance upon punishment for those who do wrong fails so often because the punishment rarely fits the crime. He asks if we should really expect that executing Stalin once for the death of 20,000,000 people would bring us satisfaction. Stalin is dead, but the hurt still lingers. On the other hand, should we be punished for all of our wrongs, even the smaller ones? If so, our torment would be continuous. Once again Volf answers these questions by taking us back to the doctrine of God: God does not affirm the sinful world indiscriminately; God loves the world and does not punish it with unfettered justice. Chapters five and six ask how we should forgive and how we can forgive.



These are all very good books differing in method, scope, and theological content. None will serve you wrong, but pick up Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge* if you only have time for one.

I am going home now. It is way past six and this article was due hours ago. I know a shortcut that will make up a little time. It has fewer traffic lights and fewer homeless. But then once upon a time they didn't have traffic lights in between Jerusalem and Jericho either.

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