
Christian Giving*

James I. Cook

All discoveries of value are meant to be shared. The wonderful discovery I want to share is that every important thing the New Testament has to say about the place of giving in the Christian life is represented in chapters 8 and 9 of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. Indeed, so focused are these chapters on the single subject of giving, that some scholars have argued that they originally formed a separate letter, given over exclusively to that topic.

What prompted the content of these chapters, however, is the fact that at least once in his ministry, the Apostle became passionately involved in a major fund-raising effort. Its object was to offer concrete aid to "the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (see Rom. 15:25-28). We encounter reference to that same benevolent project at the end of First Corinthians, when after his classic witness to the Resurrection (and without missing a beat) Paul specifies that the way for this congregation to excel in the work of the Lord is to put aside "on the first day of every week" money for their gift to Jerusalem (see 1 Cor. 16:1-4)! It was only when the Corinthians failed to follow this instruction that Paul was forced to revisit, in great detail, the critical importance of Christian generosity. His words, then, were called out by a specific crisis in the life of one first-century Christian congregation, but in the providence of God, they continue to speak powerfully and helpfully to Christian congregations of every time and place. Practical limitations preclude touching on everything Paul has to say, but here are five fundamentals.

Christian giving has to do with grace.

It was the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia that enabled them—during a severe ordeal of affliction and in extreme poverty—to overflow in a wealth of generosity, and it was this same grace alone that would enable the church at Corinth to excel also in this generous undertaking. Now at first glance, it may seem the height of folly to begin an appeal for money by talking about the grace of God.

But Paul knew exactly what he was doing. If he was not fully aware that any invitation to give, like any call to sacrifice, runs absolutely counter to every natural human instinct, his experience with the Corinthians surely made it clear.

**From The Abingdon Guide to Funding Ministry, Vol. 2, ed. By Donald W. Joiner and Norma Wimberly, 1996, Abingdon Press. Used by permission.*

The Apostle's initial appeal had been greeted with a burst of enthusiasm. Now a year had passed, and their desire and eagerness to do something had not been matched by their action. Paul was fearful that when the time to present their gift arrived, both he and they would be humiliated by their lack of response.

It is only when Christians of any age come to confess, with Frederick Buechner, that "life is grace . . . the givenness of it, the fathomlessness of it, the endless possibilities of its becoming transparent to something extraordinary beyond itself," that they will be able to respond graciously, with gifts from open heart and hand. As Paul says, there is ultimately only one place to behold grace in all its splendor and experience it in all its power: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9 NIV)! Only after being overwhelmed by that great given can Christians begin to understand that giving is not primarily about money, but about grace.

Christian giving has to do with attitude.

Everyone knows that people may make gifts from a variety of motivations. They may do it out of a sense of duty, out of a desire for self-satisfaction, or out of a hunger for prestige. Such motivations are not completely bad, because at least, in each case, the gift is given. Far worse are gifts made against the giver's will, for involuntary giving is a contradiction in terms. The Apostle would have nothing to do with that contradiction.

Although Paul obviously had a strong desire that the Corinthians should give—and to give generously—his emphasis on grace guarded against any hint of compulsion. His fervent hope that they would be moved both by the grace of God granted to the Macedonians, and by the grace revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, was genuine. He therefore stated candidly that his appeal to them to excel in this generous undertaking, as in everything else, was not a command, but an offering of advice. As earnestly and eagerly as Paul sought their contribution, he wanted it to be prepared and presented as a voluntary gift, and not as an extortion. Clearly, this emphasis on attitude stemmed not from diplomacy but from theology: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind [literally, "as you have decided *in your heart*"], not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7).

Because "cheerful" translates the same Greek word that has given us "hilarity," someone has suggested that the phrase be translated, "for God loves a *hilarious* giver"! In any case, we may be confident that Paul's extensive training in both Hebrew and rabbinical studies would have taught him the vital connection between generosity and cheerfulness. "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so," says Deuteronomy 15:10a, and "When a man gives alms he should do it with a joyful heart," said the rabbis. Little wonder, then, that Paul underlined the importance of the giver's attitude, not only here to the Corinthians, but also to the Christians at Rome, urging the compassionate to exercise their gift "in cheerfulness" (Rom. 12:8).

Christian giving has to do with trust.

Security is a natural, universal human priority. In most cultures, both ancient and modern, the degree of security experienced is in direct proportion to the amount of money in hand. Our own money may proclaim, "In God we trust," but a more honest motto probably would read, "In money we trust." Therefore, any call to give money away, rather than save it or invest it, collides head-on with what a church fund-raiser once labeled PBP, "pocketbook protection," or what I might call SLOT, "severe lack of trust"!

The Apostle initially addressed this distrust by an appeal to human prudence:

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 (2 Cor. 8:13-14).

That is, if the Corinthians met the needs of the Jerusalem saints in the present, the Jerusalem saints would meet the Corinthians' need in the future.

Paul countered this problem of distrust decisively with a bold proclamation of divine promise. He summoned his readers to trust in the goodness and providence of God! Again he invoked the theology of Deuteronomy 15:10: "*Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake*" (emphasis added). In re-aiming this ancient promise of God to the Corinthians, Paul combined allusions to Proverbs, Deuteronomy, Exodus, 1 Chronicles, Psalms, Malachi, Genesis, Isaiah, and Hosea, with words of his own:

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,

"He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity (2 Cor. 9:8-11a).

In other words, without any implication that Christians give in order to get, Paul's response to those who claimed they could not afford to give would be, "The truth is, you cannot afford not to give!"

Christian giving has to do with love.

Paul certainly thought so. Early in chapter 8, he told the Corinthians that his desire that they excel in this generous undertaking was his way of "testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others" (v. 8). It then turned out that the "others" they were being measured against was primarily the Lord Jesus Christ, whose generous act of giving himself for them, they well knew! At the end of the chapter, after alerting them to the impending visit of a Titus-led delegation to receive their generous gift, he concluded: "Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you" (v. 24).

Christians who know anything at all about the gospel will recognize the organic connection between love and giving. The heart of John 3:16, the classic golden text of all Christians—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"—can be summarized in six words: "God so *loved* that God *gave!*" In 1 John 3:17-18, we encounter the opposite side of the coin—namely, that the absence of giving can be explained only by the absence of love: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

And the same connection between love and giving runs like a golden thread through the great central section of the letter to the Romans, Paul's masterwork! At 5:8—"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us"—the act of giving is implicit. But at 8:32, it becomes explicit: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" That incomparable gift was the bedrock of Paul's unshakable conviction that nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate Christians from the love of God in Christ Jesus, their Lord!

Paul Scherer, one of the great preachers of his generation, was quite right when he said, "Love is a spendthrift, leaves its arithmetic at home, is always 'in the red.' And God is love (Rom. 8:32)."

Finally, Christian giving has to do with thanksgiving.

This is not thanksgiving sung by a single voice; this is thanksgiving performed by full chorus and orchestra! This is not thanksgiving for solo flute; this is thanksgiving expressed by cathedral organ, with all stops pulled, for this thanksgiving involves God, the givers, and the recipients. Great generosity produces, or creates, "thanksgiving to God through us;" Paul concluded, "for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God" (2 Cor. 9:11b-12). What Paul envisioned here was a kind of theological chain reaction: Christians exhibit great generosity; recipients offer thanksgiving to God; and God is glorified!

This would all be wonderful enough, simply on a mundane, practical level. But there are further profound spiritual results from Christian giving. The recipients of the gifts would also recognize that there was more going on than the meeting of their concrete needs, important as that was. They would perceive that the Corinthians' response belonged to their confession of trust in the gospel; it was a vivid demonstration that confession went beyond words, to a genuine act of obedience to that gospel. The recipients, therefore, would long for, and pray for the givers—not only out of gratitude for the gifts, but also because of the surpassing grace of God that had been given to their benefactors.

To read and reflect on 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 inevitably leads to the conclusion that Christian giving was a most needful and fitting subject for Paul's inspired eloquence. Much of the Apostle's theological insight, much of his clear grasp of the multiple blessings of Christian giving, were captured in the words placed on the lips of Jesus by James Russell Lowell in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*:

Not what we give, but we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three,
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me.

The ultimate goal of all Christian giving is that the grace of God be acknowledged by all people. Thus, Paul ended as he began: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Cor. 9:15).