

Notes on Giving in the New Testament

23 June 1986, revised 1 June 2005

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These notes present a synopsis of some of the major ideas discussed in the adult SS class of WIBC on 1, 8, and 15 June 1986. We observed that the primary recipients of charitable gifts in the NT are believers, whose need may result either from their labor in itinerant ministry, or from impoverishing circumstances, and that both the individual and the church play a role in the process of giving. This paper develops these ideas in four sections:

1. Believers vs. unbelievers as recipients;
2. A biblical case study of giving to an itinerant;
3. A biblical case study of giving to the impoverished;
4. Some observations about individual and assembly responsibilities.

1 Who Receives the Bounty?

The cases that we will examine in the next two sections show that itinerant workers and people without other means of support are eligible for charity. Itinerant workers will be believers, but how about the impoverished? Several texts give guidance on this issue.

2 Cor. 9:13.--The poor saints in Jerusalem, when they receive the gift from the gentile churches, will “glorify God ... for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all.” Jerusalem is not alone in enjoying their bounty. The AV’s “all men” is interpretive; the phrase might mean “all churches” or “all believers.”

Gal. 6:10.--The context discusses the importance of material and other gifts to those who teach (v.6) and the value of investing one’s material resources in spiritual rather than carnal pursuits (vv. 7-9; compare the use of “sowing” as a metaphor for giving in 2 Cor. 9:6,10). In v. 10, Paul enlarges the principle: “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” Giving is to two groups: a larger “all,” and a smaller group, “the household of faith.” Clearly, some in the “all” are not in “the household of faith,” and so are unsaved. Yet the focus is on the believers.

Deut. 15:1-11.--Emphasizes the difference between “thy brother,” to whom charity is due, and “a foreigner,” with whom everything is on a business basis.

Deut. 14:29.--In describing charity to the classic trio of needy people, “the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow,” Moses qualifies them as those “who are within thy gates.” I do not know of any OT injunctions to send material aid to impoverished foreigners in their own lands. It is the stranger who dwells with Israel who is entitled to help.

The principle seems to be that charity is focused on the needy people of God, but that unbelievers who associate closely with them may legitimately share in the bounty. It is as though the gift “overflows” from the believers to those around them.

This “overflow” effect from God’s people to unbelievers around them has a parallel in another area. The language of Gal. 6:10 is repeated almost exactly in 1 Tim. 4:10: God is “the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” God’s salvation is intended for and focused on the believer, yet some benefits overflow to unbelievers who are associated with the gospel. For example, obedience to God’s law brings physical health (Exod. 15:26), because it means operating the human machine according to the designer’s specifications. An unbeliever who attends church and tries to follow the ethical

instructions that he hears preached from the Bible will have a healthier life than someone who is dissolute. The churchgoer enjoys some of the physical benefits of God's salvation, though he may reject the far more important offer of spiritual salvation.

In Section 4 below, we will see reason to think that charity should often flow from assembly to assembly, rather than from individual to individual. The pattern of Gal. 6:10 suggests that a receiving assembly should not scruple to share the bounty it receives with needy unbelievers who have associated themselves with it, and that a sending assembly should not expect such discrimination. (However, see comments below on qualifying recipients.)

2 Case I: Giving to an Itinerant

An itinerant worker is one whose ministry requires him to move from place to place. The most common example is the missionary, involved in planting new churches and moving among the churches he has established to help them during their early years. This itinerant lifestyle often prevents the worker from holding a regular job. The NT shows examples of churches offering support to such workers, including Cephas (1 Cor. 9:5), Paul (Phil. 4:10-19), and others (3 John 5,6). We have the most data for Paul, so it is helpful to survey his practice as a case study.

Acts 18:1-3.--Paul practices his craft as a tentmaker in order to raise money for his expenses.

Acts 20:33-35.--Paul does this in order to furnish an example to local elders, who are to be self-supporting so far as possible. "You" in v. 35 refers to the Ephesian elders to whom he is speaking (vv. 17, 28).

1 Cor. 9.--The entire chapter defends Paul's right *as an itinerant* to support. Note the emphasis (vv. 1,2) on the rights of the apostle, "one sent forth" (the NT word for "missionary"). It also explains that he foregoes this right as much as he is able to avoid unnecessary hindrance to the gospel (vv. 19-23), and as an expression of his devotion to the Lord (vv. 15-18).

1 Thes. 2:9; 2 Thes. 3:7-9.--Paul supports himself among the Thessalonians to show them by example that they should take responsibility for their own material needs.

Philippians.--The entire book is a response by Paul to a church that had sent him repeated material gifts.

- 4:10-19 is the most explicit reference to their gift. Note:
 - It seems to be unsolicited. Paul emphasizes in vv. 11-13 that he is content with whatever the Lord supplies. One can hardly imagine a content man sending out requests for funds.
 - They are the only church to support him, at least during one phase of his ministry (v. 15).
 - They are not the "sending" church (Antioch).
 - They send at least three gifts: two while Paul is in Thessalonica, just weeks after the founding of the church in Philippi (v. 16, compare Acts 16-17), and one by the hand of Epaphroditus (v. 18) while he is in prison, probably in Rome (1:12-14; compare Acts 28:16).
- 1:5, "fellowship in the gospel." "Fellowship" often refers to sharing in material things, as in Acts 2:42 (compare the corresponding verses in the alternation, 44-45).
- 2:25. Epaphroditus, a "messenger" (lit. "apostle") of the church at Philippi, brought the gift to Paul. (No registered mail or electronic funds transfer in those days!)

Philemon 22.--Anticipating release from his first imprisonment at Rome, Paul writes to a friend in Colosse and asks for lodging when he arrives there. Compare 3 John 5,6, describing the charity of an individual toward itinerants who visit his area. Paul's entire letter is intensely personal. His request is from one friend to another, not from a missionary to his churches. It does not hide in the anonymity of a prayer letter, but is a personal, private appeal.

Paul's case shows clearly:

- the *right* of an itinerant to support;
- the *benefits* of an itinerant being self-supporting so far as possible;
- the *legitimacy* of unsolicited gifts from a church.

There is no record of Paul receiving gifts from a church while he was ministering there, and 1 Cor. 9 seems to be a policy statement against this practice (though it does acknowledge that in theory the practice is not wrong). There is also no precedent for a missionary, in his role as a missionary, soliciting support from potential contributors.

3 Case II: Giving to the Impoverished

An important part of Paul's ministry is coordinating a collection among the Gentile churches for the impoverished saints in Jerusalem. Nowhere are the churches overwhelmingly rich (1 Cor. 1:26; 2 Cor. 8:2), but ostracism from the Jewish community in Jerusalem probably makes life especially hard for the early Hebrew Christians.

Acts 2:42-47.--This passage is an alternation. Each of the four activities in v. 42 is amplified in the later verses: doctrine (43), fellowship (44-45), breaking of bread (46), and prayer, specifically of praise (47). Their fellowship is a community of goods, probably made necessary by unusually widespread poverty in the Jerusalem church. 1 Cor. 16:1 shows that it is not the universal practice of the first century churches.

Acts 4:34-5:11.--Details on how the church practices community of goods. People sell their lands and houses and deposit the money with the apostles (who in Jerusalem function much as elders do later among the gentile churches). Acts 2:46; 12:12 show that people still retain their dwellings, so the reference is probably to possessions beyond those needed for daily life. The example of Ananias and Sapphira shows that the sale and contribution is not obligatory (5:4), but a manifestation of the common love and commitment of the believers one toward another.

Acts 6:1-8.--Among the needy in Jerusalem are widows. All are Jewish, but some are Hellenistic Jews (the "Grecians" of v. 1, whose families remained in dispersion after the Babylonian captivity, and only recently returned to Jerusalem) and some are "Hebrews" (descendants of those who returned with Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah). Charges arise that the Hebrews are getting the lion's share of the support. The apostles invite the congregation to nominate a body of men to manage the distribution, subject to apostolic approval. Significantly, all the men selected have Greek names. They will be sensitive to the needs of the Hellenistic widows, group that claims to have been ignored.

Acts 11:27-30.--The prophet Agabus notifies the church at Antioch of a coming world-wide famine. He must also tell them something about the needs in Jerusalem, for Antioch realizes that Jerusalem will have a harder time in the famine than they will, and sends a gift. Each believer determines the amount of his contribution (v. 29). Barnabas and Saul convey the gift to the elders of the receiving church (v. 30), who presumably see to its distribution (perhaps through the group of men instituted in chapter 6). Incidentally, this passage shows that in the interval between Acts 6 and Acts 11:27-30 (over 14 years), the leadership of the Jerusalem church has moved from apostles to elders.

Gal. 2:10.--According to the South Galatia theory of the recipients of Galatians (which I accept), Gal. 2:1-10 is Paul's description of the trip recorded in Acts 11:27-30, carrying the gift from Antioch to Jerusalem. In the course of this visit, Paul and Barnabas meet with James, Peter, and John, and determine that the Antioch team will concentrate on evangelizing the gentiles, while the Jerusalem team will focus on Jewish outreach. The Jerusalem church requests that Paul and Barnabas remember the needs of the poor in Jerusalem (v. 10), and this suggestion meets with ready acceptance. For the rest of Paul's ministry, he conducts a fund-raising project for Jerusalem alongside his preaching and writing.

1 Cor. 16:1-4.--Paul's earliest preserved instructions to a gentile church on the subject of the collection for Jerusalem.

- The collection is "for the saints," v. 1, confirming our observations in the first section above.
- Galatia as well as Corinth is involved in this collection, v. 1.
- Giving is personal. "Let every one of you lay by himself in store," v. 2. The instruction is not for a central treasury (as in Acts 4), but for individuals to lay aside a proportion of their income periodically, holding it until Paul arrives. The motive is to avoid "gatherings" (plural), a last minute flurry of repeated collections pressuring people to scrape money out of their current week's budget. They will be able to give much more, and without as much fuss, if they make regular deposits to individual "storehouses." Such a pattern can easily be implemented today by means of a separate bank account into which a family gives, and from which they withdraw funds for giving as needed.
- "First day of the week," v. 2, recognizing giving as part of the believer's worship.
- v.3, the church should appoint a representative to accompany the gift, presumably to guarantee that there is no misappropriation of funds.

2 Cor. 8-9.--A later, detailed exhortation to Corinth about their participation in the project. Note in particular the staff involved in the collection (vv. 16-23): Titus as Paul's representative (v. 17), a representative of the other churches who have already given (v. 19), another unnamed brother (v. 22) who like the first is a "messenger of the churches" (v. 23, literally "apostles of the churches"). We can surmise that one of these unnamed brothers represents the Macedonian churches that Paul holds up as an example in these chapters, while the other represents the Galatian churches mentioned in 1 Cor. 16:1. Presumably, Corinth's representative (1 Cor. 16:3) will join them when the group moves on from Corinth.

Rom. 15:25-31.--Paul reports that the gift, at least from Macedonia and Achaia (the district around Corinth), is on its way to Jerusalem. He asks for prayer that Jerusalem would accept the gift (v. 31), showing the need for considerable tact and sensitivity in such missions of mercy.

The entire project shows a scrupulous care on Paul's part for avoiding any offense in the management of funds. The various responsibilities of individuals and churches are interesting, and will be summarized in the next section.

4 Individual and Assembly Responsibilities

Now that we have examined two cases in some detail, we can identify some things that individuals do, and some things that the assembly does.

Individual Responsibilities

Find Opportunities.--In Acts 11:28, Agabus tells the church at Antioch about the need in Jerusalem. He foretells the coming of a worldwide famine, but the need for a gift apparently emerges from a more personal communication about the particular needs of the Jerusalem church.

Decide Amounts.--Individuals are always responsible for determining the amount of their own gift (Ananias and Sapphira; individual believers in 1 Cor. 16; Acts 11:29). The modern fund-raising tactic of targeting a donor for a specific amount of money or setting a goal for each individual does not seem consistent with these examples.

Gather Funds.--Individuals hold their funds until a particular need arises. In Corinth (1 Cor. 16), the need arises when Paul arrives to pick up their contribution and carry it to Jerusalem. When there is widespread poverty requiring a daily expenditure of funds for basic needs (as in Jerusalem in the early chapters of Acts), the need arises daily, and there is reason to practice community of goods.

Assist Missionaries.--Paul's request from Philemon and John's letter to Gaius (3 John 5,6; note the singular pronouns "thou," "thee") show that individuals may offer assistance to missionaries who come through their area. At least in the case of Philemon, this assistance is in the form of gifts in kind (lodging, and probably meals).

Assembly Responsibilities

Qualify Recipients.--Paul instructs the Thessalonians not to support people who are capable of earning their own way (2 Thes. 3:6-15). The instruction is to the church as a whole, and suggests that the church must decide such issues. A similar situation is found in 1 Tim. 5:3-16, laying down requirements for widows to receive aid from the church. Though Timothy is an individual, the letter deals with his responsibilities in planting churches, and in this section describes policies that should ultimately be administered by the assembly.

The first qualification for a widow to be supported is that she "trusts in God" (v. 5). How does this instruction line up with our observations about gifts overflowing to "strangers in the gate"? Verse 9 refers to a list of widows. Verses 11 and 12 condemn widows who join this group and later marry. Apparently, these widows are not just being supported, but also devote themselves to various works of mercy within the church. The sin of the younger women in remarrying is in abandoning this responsibility to which they have committed themselves. "Faith" in v. 12 probably refers to a promise or pledge that they have made. The conditions for entering this group are much more stringent than those for aid alone, since these women will be conducting a ministry on behalf of the church.

Giving the widows a ministry is consistent with the requirement to the Thessalonians that those capable of earning a living should not be on the dole. Women who can marry, should. Those who cannot are given something productive to occupy them. A parallel today would be to offer aid in the form of work around the house to a brother who is in need because (say) he has been laid off from his job.

Monitor Gifts.--Paul's repeated emphasis on representatives from the churches accompanying gifts shows how important it is for the assembly to guarantee that the funds are not diverted. In two separate cases (Phil. 2:25; 2 Cor. 8:23) the custodians are identified as "messengers" (literally "apostles") of the churches, confirming that they discharge this responsibility as the duly delegated representatives of the assemblies.

Distribute Gifts to Individuals.--In Acts 4, the apostles in Jerusalem distribute goods to each family according to need. In Acts 6, they arrange for a special group of men to handle distributions to the widows, on behalf of the church. In Acts 11, Antioch sends a gift to the Jerusalem elders, who

presumably will distribute it as needed. In Gal. 2:10, the leaders of the Jerusalem church arrange with Paul and Barnabas for the continuing collection for the poor, suggesting that when Paul finally brings the gift, it is funneled through the elders.