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Collection in the Early Church

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INTRODUCTION

The Old and New Testaments place a great deal of emphasis on giving. In fact, there are more verses related to giving than any other subject on money. There are commands, practical suggestions, examples and exhortations concerning this facet of stewardship. Everywhere in the Bible covetousness and greed are condemned, and generosity and charity are encouraged. The saying of Jesus Christ is quoted in [Acts 20:35](#), 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

The specific campaign that Paul led to collect funds to relieve the poverty of the Jerusalem church is commonly called 'collection for the saints'. On the surface the general notion of the collection is quite simple, but the question of Paul's purpose raises some complex issues.

In today's church hardly any worship service take place without a collection of money. This seems to have been implicit even in the early church. Justin Martyr from the middle of the second century remarks that 'each member who is well-to-do and willing gives as he pleases, and the amount is deposited with the presiding minister'.¹ Later John Wesley said: 'Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.'²; each of these reflects the attitude towards stewardship of finance within the church at the time. Similarly based on the biblical teaching, churches today place emphasis on teaching their members to give for the work of God. But it cannot be regarded as an essential ingredient of Christian worship.

In this paper I do not intend to deal with the Old Testament data which relate to 'tithes and offerings' in the Levitical, monarchial and post-exilic periods of the nation's history,

¹ 1. Quoted by Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. 80.

² 2. Quoted by Boyd M. McKeown, *Stewardship in Methodism* (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, n.d.), p. 26.

or the cultural and historical background of the New Testament allusions to money.³ However, we will briefly study the collection from a Pauline perspective. A study of the Pauline collection involves not only portions of all four of Paul's major epistles, but also considerable segments of Acts and its background. Then, we need to study the places and people involved in the project. Finally, an attempt will be made to assess the theological significance and the impact which collection had on the later life of the church.

TERMINOLOGY OF 'COLLECTION'

Paul calls the collection a 'fellowship' (κοινωνία, [Rom. 15:26](#)), 'service' (διακονία, [Rom. 15:25](#), [31](#); [2 Cor. 8:20](#); [9:1](#), [12](#), [13](#)), 'gift' (χάρις, [1 Cor. 16:3](#); [2 Cor. 8:6](#), [7](#), [19](#)), 'generous gift' (ευλογία, [2 Cor. 9:5](#)), 'collection' (λογεῖα, [1 Cor. 6:1](#)), 'liberal gift' (αδροπες, [2 Cor. 8:20](#)) 'grace' (χάρις, [2 Cor. 8:9](#)) and 'service that you perform' (ἡ διακονία πης [2 Cor. 9:12](#)). [2 Cor. 8:4](#) uses three terms at once: 'they urgently pleaded with us for the *privilege* (χάρις) of *sharing* in this *service* to the saints'.⁴

THE BACKGROUND OF COLLECTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Within the sphere of Judaism contemporary with the early church, several contributory practices were prevalent which were directly in the background of Paul's collection. Paul appropriated certain aspects from these practices that are discernible in the external elements of the collection. There is also revealed a striking correlation in the underlying symbolic significance. However, Paul borrowed most heavily for the organization of his collection from the Jewish Temple tax. This is evident both in the external elements and in the symbolic significance which that tax bore for dispersed Judaism. It was because the symbolism of the Temple tax corresponded so precisely with the hopes for the unity of the church with which Paul had invested his project that he was led to borrow and use so many other aspects of that tax.⁵

Acts chapter [21](#) tells of Paul's last journey to Jerusalem and his reception there. Most strikingly, Luke says nothing of the *collection* which Paul had been making for the church in Jerusalem. Even in [Acts 24:17](#) the word 'collection' is avoided, and without Paul's letters we would hardly recognize the allusion here—indeed the allusion in [Acts 21:26](#) may be only to his act of piety. Yet Paul was most anxious that the churches of his Gentile converts should send contributions to the mother church in Jerusalem ([Rom. 15:25–32](#); [1 Cor. 16:1–4](#); [2 Cor. 8–9](#)). Luke does mention seven delegates from the churches ([Acts 20:4f.](#)), but he fails to mention why they travelled with Paul—namely, to deliver the collection. This was obviously Paul's chief concern in going to Jerusalem, but Luke fails to mention

³ 3. For this study, see 'Money' in J.D. Douglas (ed.), [NBD](#) (London, 1962) and F.W. Madden, *Coins of the Jews* (London, 1881). For a detailed study of the New Testament teaching concerning money, see Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, pp. 80–86.

⁴ 4. S. McKnight, 'Collection for the Saints', in Hawthorne, G.F., Martin, P.R., & Reid, D.G. (eds.), [Dictionary of Paul and His Letters](#), (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), p. 143.

⁵ 5. For a detailed study of the analogies to Paul's collection in contemporary Judaism including the Qumran community see Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy* (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 74 & 99.

that too. Paul apparently feared that the Jerusalem church might refuse to accept the collection ([Rom. 15:30f.](#)).⁶

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul he gives directions on how the money is to be collected ([16:1-4](#)); in his second epistle two chapters are devoted to exhorting them to liberality (chaps. [8](#) and [9](#)). Writing to the Philippians he compliments them on their financial aid ([4:15f](#)). Finally, in Acts, at his trial before Felix, Paul is represented as saying that the purpose of his visit to Jerusalem, during which he was arrested, was to bring alms and offerings ([24:17](#); cf. [11:29](#)).

PLACES AND PEOPLE INVOLVED IN PAUL'S COLLECTION

From both the book of Acts and Paul's letters we can discern the magnitude of Paul's campaign. It seems that Paul was able to derive both funds and sponsors from all his churches. Thus he had the following funds or people representing his missionary efforts:

From the Galatian region ([1 Cor. 16:1](#)) we hear of Derbe ([Acts 20:4](#)) and Lystra ([Acts 20:4](#)); from Macedonia ([2 Cor. 8:1-5](#); [9:2, 4](#)) we hear of Berea ([Acts 20:4](#)), Thessalonica ([Acts 20:4](#)) and Philippi (cf. [Acts 16:16](#); [20:6](#)); from Achaia we hear of Corinth ([Rom. 15:26](#); [1 Cor. 16:1-4](#)); from Mysia and Lydia we hear of Ephesus ([Acts 20:4](#)) and perhaps Troas ([Acts 20:5-6](#)); it is possible that funds came from Tyre ([Acts 21:3-4](#)), Ptolemais ([Acts 21:7](#)), and from both Cyprus and Caesarea ([Acts 21:16](#)). It is even possible that funds were collected from Rome (cf. [Rom. 12:13](#); [15:26](#) with [2 Cor. 8:4](#); [9:13](#); and [Rom. 1:13](#) with [2 Cor. 9:6-10](#)). It is very difficult to believe that there was any similar project at that time in the northern Mediterranean to Paul's collection for the saints.⁷ Hurtado detects an allusion to the collection in [Gal. 6:6-10](#).⁸

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COLLECTION

Scholars have debated vigorously the precise purpose of Paul's campaign to collect funds for the saints in Jerusalem. The traditional viewpoint, for example, has been that Paul wanted to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem (cf. [Gal. 6:10](#)) as a demonstration of the love of God that the Gentiles had found in Christ ([2 Cor. 8:8-9, 19](#); [9:12-15](#)).⁹ Paul believed that concern for the poor was a direct and necessary expression of the Christian faith.

There are a few that contend that the collection itself was seen as almsgiving on the part of the Diaspora Gentile church and, as such, was seen as a substitute action for their sacrifices and circumcision ([Sir. 29:12](#); [40:24](#); [Tob. 4:10-11](#); [12:9](#); [14:11](#); [Acts 10:2, 35](#)).¹⁰

Another purpose observed is the concern of Paul for Israel's unbelief in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Paul believed that the salvation of the Gentiles would result in the conversion of Israel ([Rom. 11:11-24](#); cf. [11:9-11](#)). Some scholars assert that the collection fits into this scheme: the presentation by Paul and his retinue of Gentile sponsors of the funds to the Jerusalem churches would provoke the nation of Israel to believe in the Messiah, for they would see in that act the fulfilment of the promise that the Gentiles would bring gifts

⁶ 6. James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 256-257.

⁷ 7. Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection*, p. 68,69.

⁸ 8. L.W. Hurtado, 'The Jerusalem Collection and the Book of Galatians', *JSNT* Vol.5 (1979), pp. 46-62.

⁹ 9. S. McKnight, *Dictionary of Paul*, p. 145.

¹⁰ 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 146.

to Zion ([Is. 2:2-4](#); [60:6-7](#), [11](#); [Mic. 4:13](#)) and the eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentile Christians to Jerusalem. Thus the collection was for Paul an eschatological provocation of Israel; by it he hoped to convert Israel to faith in the Messiah.¹¹

The most remarkable feature of these accounts is that Paul twice refers to the collection as the *κοινωνία*, which is usually to be translated as *fellowship*. In [2 Cor. 9:13](#) he speaks of *the liberality of your κοινωνία* which the Revised Version (RV) renders *contribution*, and in [Rom. 15:26](#) he states that the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia have been good enough *to make a certain κοινωνία*, (RV—contribution) *for the poor*.¹²

Convinced that the gospel was for all mankind and that the Good News involved the message of the new creation whereby the disharmony and disunity of the old was gathered up into a new unity in Christ, Paul fought a good fight for the inclusion of the Gentiles within the scope of the gospel. The collection was a visible demonstration of the truth for which he was struggling. That the Gentile churches should contribute for the poor at Jerusalem was proof positive of the actuality of the *κοινωνία*, that Jew and Gentile were one in Christ. Paul was motivated to demonstrate to Jerusalem that, just as there was one Lord and one gospel, so there was one church.¹³ So writing to the Romans, he can say that the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia have made *a certain κοινωνία* for the poor among the saints that are at Jerusalem ([15:26](#)).

In Philippians he returns to the subject again. They have had fellowship with him in his afflictions; they have also had fellowship with him *in the matter of giving and receiving*. But these gifts redound to their benefit for they are the expression of the sacrificial life which they share with Christ, and so they will be replenished from the divine riches which are in Christ ([4:14-19](#)). Therefore, generous giving enriches the giver. So the collection is to be understood as an aspect of the self-giving which was revealed by Christ in the pattern of his life and which is to be embodied by the church in mission. Here we touch the Christological level, which is made patent in 2 Corinthians.

In 2 Corinthians chapters [8](#) and [9](#), Paul not only calls the contribution *κοινωνία* but also *χαρις* (grace). Since Christ himself was the supreme actualization of grace, to give the same title to the collection is to intimate that it is all-of-a-piece with Christ's saving act. The identity of life between Christ and his members, which characterizes the *κοινωνία*, means that the giving of money is an expression of his own self-giving ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)). This is not just an illustration of the need for charity but the very foundation of the *κοινωνία* of giving. Our response in gratitude to his self-impoverishment must be self-giving, for giving to others is giving to Christ who gave himself for us. Thus reciprocity between God and his people issues in reciprocity between people themselves—vertical and horizontal are bound together. Christians must therefore give with liberality, with simplicity, without ulterior motive, without thought of self ([2 Cor. 8:2](#)), having first given themselves to God in complete surrender to his will ([2 Cor. 8:5](#)). This ministry (*διακονία*) is an essential element of *κοινωνία*.

But the *κοινωνία* is an apostolic community, charged to participate in mission through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This mission involves not only the preaching of the Word, but also the witness of the life of the *κοινωνία*, which is or should be an embodiment of the

¹¹ 11. Ibid., p. 146.

¹² 12. Paul speaks of money from the Greek point of view. Logically money is money, but to a Hebrew of the Hebrews like Paul it is associated with an end that transcends it. It is not a question of what the money is as such but what it becomes in relation to its final reference, and that reference is to the building up of ἐκτίσις.

¹³ 13. S. McKnight, *Dictionary of Paul*, p. 145.

gospel it is called to proclaim. κοινωνία is therefore essentially related to mission and mission to κοινωνία—but so also is διακονία.

We understand this relatedness from the study of Jesus' own ministry. Modern New Testament scholarship refuses to draw a sharp dividing line between Jesus the healer and Jesus the teacher; his healing miracles were as much a proclamation of the gospel as the words that he uttered. But his miracles were directed towards people in their totality, in their actual situations. διακονία has precisely this aim, and is equally a preaching of the gospel. Hence κοινωνία, διακονία and mission are but different aspects of the same reality, and the collection of money, at a service, acts as a focal point for the understanding of this unity. The understanding of the collection in terms of mission is therefore basic to its meaning as expounded by Paul.¹⁴

Therefore, scholars have recognized that Paul's collection was motivated by more than providing aid for the poor, though that would have been motivation enough. McKnight affirms that we will be 'probably on the firmest ground if we recognize that Paul might have had more than one purpose in conducting the collection for the saints'.¹⁵

THE IMPACT OF THE COLLECTION

Neither Luke nor Paul tells of the results of the offering of the collection. However, Luke records the trip and the period during which the collection was handed over to the leaders. It seems that the collection was received with profound gratitude. [Acts 21:17–26](#) speaks of the church receiving them 'warmly'.

The combination of the quotations in [2 Cor. 9:10a](#) (cf. [Isa. 55:10](#)) and [2 Cor. 9:10b](#) (cf. [Hos. 10:12](#)) exactly corresponds to Paul's conviction that the effectiveness of the Word of God among the Gentiles was of instrumental significance for the conversion of Israel. However, some scholars argue that the collection did not accomplish its purposes. The saints remained poor, the act of charity notwithstanding; the tension between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians continued; and the conversion of Israel never took place.¹⁶

Nickle, however, suggests that 'it had the desired effect of promoting a reconciliation which resulted in the formulation of the "Apostolic Decrees"¹⁷ as a guide for the maintenance of mixed fellowship at the liturgical meals of the community'.¹⁸ He further suggests that the impact of the collection on the later life of the church was immensely fruitful. Over the years Christians have turned to Paul again and again in guilt because of their disunity. They have found great hope in Pauline principles that once again the true nature of the one body of Christ may be manifested in the visible church. Thus, Paul's teachings are essential for the unity of the Body of Christ.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

¹⁴ 14. J.G. Davis, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 135–139.

¹⁵ 15. S. McKnight, *Dictionary of Paul*, p.146.

¹⁶ 16. Ibid.

¹⁷ 17. Nickle maintains that the 'Decrees' listed in [Acts 15](#) were first decided upon by Paul and the Jerusalem church only at the later meeting in [Acts 21](#) when Paul delivered his collection.

¹⁸ 18. Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection*, p. 73.

¹⁹ 19. Ibid., p. 156.

It is evident that Paul devoted a considerable amount of thought, time, and energy to fund raising. If the events which resulted in the launching of this project are taken into account, the time involved spanned the entire period of his known public ministry from Antioch to Rome. In fact, several have observed that the collection was the culminating act of Paul's apostolic ministry. Paul describes the collection as the 'fruit' and 'seal' of his ministry as he now prepares for a wider ministry to Spain ([Rom. 15:23-24, 28](#)). We may assume from this that the collection and its successful presentation in Jerusalem were together to be the crowning jewel of the first phase of his apostolic ministry (in fact, the only phase he actually completed!).

It is also evident from this paper that Paul's collection was not directly related to the worship of the early church. It was instigated to help provide the funds necessary to care for the poor ([Gal. 2:10](#)). In so far as the Jerusalem community continued to distribute succour at the time of the common meals ([Acts 2:44ff.; 6:1ff.](#)) which was accompanied by liturgical elements, his collection could be regarded as correlation to formal Christian worship. In his organization of the collection Paul recommended that money be set aside on the 'first day of the week' ([1 Cor. 16:2](#)), certainly a liturgical reference; but it was to be done at home and not during worship.

Our response to collection for the poor must be the direct and necessary expression of the Christian faith. For Paul, concern for the poor was one of the expressions of fellowship in Christ. If giving is merely to a church, a ministry or to a needy person, it is only charity. But if it is to the Lord, it becomes an expression of our faith. Christian charity today must be motivated not by sympathy or self-righteousness but by the love and concern for the poor portrayed in the ministry of Jesus. Giving with a proper attitude is very crucial ([1 Cor. 13:3](#)). The Lord has set the example of giving motivated by love ([Jn. 3:16](#)). According to Paul, giving is incumbent on each person. 'Let each one of you ...' ([1 Cor. 16:2](#)). It is the privilege and responsibility of every Christian, young and old, rich and poor. It is a personal matter in which every believer sustains a direct and individual responsibility to the Lord. Giving should be a deliberate, premeditated act. The supreme example of premeditated giving was set by our Saviour, 'who for the joy set before him endured the cross' ([Heb. 12:2](#)). Indeed, his sacrifice is a reminder that giving is at the very heart of the Christian faith. I believe it is time for us to recapture a Pauline theology of collection as a significant factor for the restoration of the unity of the church.

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Books Reviewed

Reviewed by W. Harold Fuller
Christina Maria

[*The Association of Evangelicals in Africa: Its History, Organization, Members, Projects, External Relations and Message*](#)