

# Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 28 · Number 2 · April 2004

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



**PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS**



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# Charity and Stewardship: Biblical Foundations

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**KEYWORDS:** *Alms, Sabbath, poverty, fellowship, service, spirituality, missiology, sociology, justice*

ONE OF THE MANY different social services is charity. Today, the word 'charity' carries a negative tone since it refers to the people at the receiving end. One of the demerits of charity is that it makes people dependent and does not enable them to stand on their own feet. It makes them lose their dignity and respect. As I have pointed out elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, charity fails to address the cause of their poverty or misery but deals only with the resultant situation or its consequences. Charity is a temporary relief or help rather than an effort to develop self-esteem and justice. Although charity has its own limitations, it is helpful to people in dire

need, particularly in times of calamity and tragedy. Charity reveals the positive aspect of the need to share with the needy. It underlines the Christian concept of giving and stewardship.

## Charity in the Old Testament

Charitable service was not new to the Jews. The Old Testament insists on giving alms and taking care of widows, orphans, slaves, aliens and the poor (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:33-34; Dt. 26:12). Abraham and Lot expressed charity by extending hospitality to those who came to sojourn in the midst of them (Gen. 18:1-4; 19:1-3). Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel came forward to help the servant of Abraham by giving him water to drink (Gen. 24:15-21). Reuel, the priest of Midian, helped the fugitive Moses (Ex. 2:20-22). Special laws were created after the covenant at Sinai to strengthen charity towards needy members within and outside their community. These laws were further

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Jeyaraj, *Christian Ministry: Models of Ministry and Training* (Bangalore: TBT Publications, 2002), pp.133-138, 183-186.

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modified during the Settlement period to meet the growing needs of the poor.

The basis for charity in ancient Israel was the command to love one's neighbours. Charity laws in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy emphasize proper relationship between human beings. One of the important laws was the sabbatical year of land (Ex. 23:10-11). The land holders in Israel were asked to let their land lie fallow on the seventh year. The purpose was to enable the poor people in the land, particularly those without land, to have access to grain, fruit and vegetables grown on the land during the fallow year. They could gather their food from such land and did not need to starve to death.

The sabbatical year was not uniformly observed by all in one region. Each family calculated the sabbatical year for their own land and let the land lie fallow on the seventh year. Some scholars suggest that families could have apportioned their land into seven sections and allowed each section to lie fallow for a year, as they rotated and cultivated the rest of the six sections to meet their food supply. Whatever was the method of observing the fallowing year, the poor people were able to find some land left for their sake in one or another region and they moved to such places where they gathered their food and survived.

The law of the sabbatical year in respect of the land had sociological implications and served as a means of providing charity for the needy.<sup>2</sup> Exo-

dus 22:25-27 insists that the Israelites lend money to the poor without levying interest. This discouraged them from becoming creditors or demanding security pledges. If a poor person's cloak was taken on pledge or pawned, it should be returned before the sun went down in order to provide protection from the cold. Lending money to the needy was not regarded as giving of alms. The borrower had to try sincerely to return the money to the lender but most of the time, the poor debtor could not make it and the money lent to the poor was lost forever. This law of lending money without interest implies the risk of losing the money. Knowing this risk, families lent money and were prepared to lose it. However, they derived joy from helping the poor financially.

These two laws of social concern helped the poor, and committed the families in Israel to be charitable to individuals or families. The well-to-do families could either be charitable voluntarily or neglect the laws of social concern. In order to make it compulsory to provide charity to the poor, orphans and widows, the law of tithing was emphasized (Dt. 26:12). Part of the tithe went to the priests and Levites, and the rest went to the poor in their society. This mechanism which was integrated with their work and worship promoted charity. The Book of Proverbs instructed families to help their poor in the midst. The Psalms reflect the cry of the needy and call on the worshipper to be sensitive to people in distress and pain.

Prophets individually helped many families, particularly the families of widows irrespective of their socio-religious background. For example, Elijah helped the widow of Zarephath in the

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Jeyaraj, 'Land Ownership in the Pentateuch' (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), University of Sheffield, 1989.

region of Sidon through the miracle of providing flour and oil at the time of famine, saving the life of the widow and her son (1 Kings 17:8-16). Later Elisha saved the widow of a prophet in Israel and her two children, who were almost bonded into slavery by providing enough oil for sale to clear their debt (2 Kings 4:1-7). These miracles, I believe, were performed for the liberation of marginalized people from the powers of famine and debts. They were immediate relief measures.

Boaz, the owner of the land instructed his workers to deliberately allow the grains to fall on the field so that Ruth, the widow, could gather them to prepare food. By this charitable action, Boaz saved the lives of Naomi and Ruth, the two widows and protected them from going into slavery or begging or prostitution (Ruth 3-4). David not only showed charity to Mephibosheth, the disabled son of Saul (2 Samuel 9) by providing him with food each day but also restored his rights and properties.<sup>3</sup>

These examples show that charity was practised by individuals, families and rulers in ancient Israel. Whether there was any organized unit or infrastructure or not responsible for charitable acts in different places in the land is a matter that needs separate research. It is possible, as some scholars believe, that Judaism in the post-exile period had a system of distribution of food to the poor. Religious communities like Essenes had their social service team in important cities, par-

ticularly in Jerusalem, and provided shelter and clothes to travellers.<sup>4</sup> There are some evidences of almsgiving to the poor by the Pharisees and Essenes in the New Testament and Rabbinical writings.

### Jesus, the church and charity

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount warns the hypocrites against publicizing their giving of alms in the synagogues and in the streets to gain praise from others, and taught that alms must be given in secret without expecting any reward (Mt. 6:1-4). This showed that Jesus accepted the practice of almsgiving. He asked the rich young man who desired to have eternal life to sell all his wealth and give the money to the poor (Mk. 10:17-22).

For Jesus, charity was not a matter of giving out of a state of plenty but involved the possibility of losing everything for the sake of the needy. This is a radical principle. According to Jesus there are no limitations in sharing resources with needy people. This teaching was unacceptable to the rich and hypocrites of his day. Jesus underlined this principle of charity when Zacchaeus confessed to returning his accumulated wealth four- or five-fold to the poor. Jesus knew that Zacchaeus would lose all his wealth if he returned it in multiples and acknowledged that action as real repentance, charity and justice and the evidence of true salvation of Zacchaeus' life (Lk. 19: 1-10).

3 J.B. Jeyaraj, '2 Samuel 9: Caring for the Disabled' *AJTR* (Jan-Dec. 1998), pp. 138-145.

4 E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE to 66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), pp. 230-234 and J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 126-134.

Disabled persons deserted by their families and marginalized by their religion and society sat on the way to Jerusalem or in front of the Temple to beg for alms from pilgrims to Jerusalem (Mt. 20:30; Acts 3:2). As a mark of their piety, the Jewish worshippers would normally give alms to these beggars. Peter's act of healing the lame man at the entrance of the Temple reveals the fact that the poor need liberation and a rightful place in the society more than they need charity. Some Christians tried to sell all their property and put the money in a common fund as was done in an 'ashram' community. The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) points out that such an experiment did not work out well and did not last for long.

### Fellowship and Service

The next chapter of Acts 6 depicts an emerging structure for charity in an organized manner in the early church. It began with the distribution of food to the widows in the churches. From the report of Luke, it is understood that the early *koinonia* cared for the widows. But with the constant increase in the number of converts from Judaism to Christianity the responsibility of taking care of the widows also increased. More and more widows joined the church and enjoyed the new fellowship. Many of them were so poor or not cared properly by their families that the church had to feed them and take care of their needs. The limited resources at their disposal naturally led the persons-in-charge to show favouritism and nepotism in the distribution of food. Since the persons-in-charge were predominantly Hebrew or

Aramaic-speaking Jews, they showed favouritism to the Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jewish widows, neglecting the Greek-speaking Jewish widows. Such discrimination was not good for true *koinonia* and *diakonia*.

The complaints about discrimination were taken in good spirit by the leaders of the assembly. The positive attitude of the leaders towards criticism urged them to analyze the reasons for the neglect in their service. These apostles realized the need for an organized group to raise resources and supervise the distribution of food. They understood that it was a time-consuming job. They consulted the whole community of disciples and shared their problems with them, mentioning their priority for preaching and teaching the word of God. They worked out a special arrangement to distribute food to the widows. This unit had seven men for the special service and was regarded as an official structure with the authority of the apostles and approval of the community.

The apostles defined the qualification for this task. These men had to be of good standing which meant filled with integrity, the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These were regarded by the apostles as the most important qualifications for charitable service. The selection was done by the community. It is worth noting that the apostles did not select their own candidates or appoint them at their own will. The decision-making power was given to the community. Authorization was given by the apostles by the laying on of hands. *Koinonia* and *diakonia* can be strengthened by listening to the problems and criticisms of the poor and making corporate decisions. Such a democratic

procedure is healthy for relief and development.

## Charity and Spirituality in Paul

Christian stewardship as an integral aspect of spirituality gained more importance with the beginning of the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas. In his letters, Paul mentions various reasons for giving. The three major ones identified in his writings are the support of the Christian preacher/teacher, the missionary who brings the gospel and the poor people in the churches. From Gal. 6:6, 1 Cor. 9:11-14 and 1 Tim. 5:17-18, it is clear that those who received preaching and instruction in the Word of God had an obligation to share their goods with their preachers and teachers. The elders who ministered the Word of God had the right to receive their support from their congregations. Not only the preachers and teachers, but also the missionaries who brought the gospel to a particular city needed the support of the believers. The church at Philippi supported Paul while he was with them and later, sent their support while he went to preach the gospel to the nearby cities like Thessalonica and Corinth and later to Rome when imprisoned (Phil. 1:5; 4:14-18; 2 Cor. 11: 9). One of the very few churches which was in constant touch with the missionary Paul was the church at Philippi. Paul thanked God for the Philippians and called their relationship a 'partnership in the gospel'.

The major focus for the study of giving to the poor in the churches is found in 2 Corinthians chapter 8. Knowing

the need and suffering of the poor in Jerusalem, Paul urged the churches in Macedonia (Thessalonians and Philipians), Ephesus and Corinth to raise some money and send it regularly to the church in Jerusalem. Paul suggested a systematic way of giving in 1 Cor. 16:1-4, encouraging the Corinthians to set aside a sum of money on the first day of every week according to their income so that the help would be readily available. Thus they would not need to rush to collect the money at the last minute. The Corinthians followed this suggestion and sent the collection regularly to the poor in Jerusalem. However, they started showing slackness and irregularity, and so in urging them to keep up this good work, Paul made explicit the ideal model of the churches in Macedonia.

As we analyze this chapter (2 Cor. 8) more intensely, we notice three foundations in Paul's writing on Christian stewardship. I would like to call them the *theological*, *missiological* and *sociological* bases. They are all closely connected.

## Missiology

First of all, in highlighting the model of Macedonia as a challenge for the Corinthian church, Paul emphasized the *missiological* basis. The Thessalonians and Philipians gave themselves first to the Lord and then to the support of the poor in Jerusalem. According to Paul, by accepting the gospel and acknowledging Jesus Christ as their Saviour, they gave their lives to the Lord. Giving begins by surrendering one's life to the lordship of Christ and then it flows to help the lives of others. Surrendering to the gospel demands

practising the kingdom values of sharing and supporting. Giving one's life to Christ naturally leads to giving up one's possessions and life for others. Both are inter-linked. One without the other is meaningless.

The mission of proclamation of the gospel leads to the mission of sharing. A person can very easily contribute money and other resources without surrendering his or her life to Jesus. Such an act is basically humanitarian and done out of common concern, and it need not be based on the missiology Paul is talking about. To Paul, Christian stewardship is not based purely on secular humanism but on missiological, sociological and theological bases.

The Macedonians were not rich. They were living in poverty and facing persecution. Yet, they gave voluntarily beyond their means. They even pleaded that their gift for the poor people in the congregation of Jerusalem be accepted. Their experience of the gospel motivated them to give in spite of their poverty and affliction. Their sincerity and eagerness to give was the criteria for accepting their charity. Those who are in need and at the receiving end need to see the positive aspect of sincerity and eagerness on the part of the giver in order to accept their help. Paul's point was that if a poor church could share their money, then the rich Christians in Corinth could do much more. He challenged them to excel in giving also apart from their excellence in many other aspects. It is the test of one's love for God and for others.

### Theology

Paul states the *theological* basis for giving in 2 Cor. 8:8-9. Although the Lord

Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor for our sake and that is the theology of giving. Jesus Christ left everything to come and die on the cross that humanity could enjoy the richness of salvation. In stating this 'theology of God becoming poor', Paul mentioned that the 'Lord Jesus Christ' became poor. God in entirety, according to these verses, became poor not holding anything for himself. If God could become poor for our sake, then the Corinthians who received God's richness of forgiveness and eternal life had to show the same kind of love for others. Sharing their wealth with those in need proved their genuine love for God. Paul called it 'a ministry to the saints' in 2 Cor. 9:1. Although he spoke of help to the poor among the Christians in Jerusalem, Paul did not rule out the need to help the needy outside the church.

### Sociology

Paul was not satisfied with the mere act of generosity to the poor, just to console their conscience. His *sociological* basis is stated in 2 Cor. 8:13-14: '... 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'. It was a tremendous challenge and radicalized the giving to use the phrase 'fair balance'. He contrasts the 'abundance of having' with the 'need of the people' and proposes a *fair balance* between possession and distribution of wealth. I do not like to push Paul's idea of fair balance too much to mean Christian communism or socialism. I think, Paul was aware that the accumulation of wealth and earnings would go on but

he desired that those who accumulated wealth share with the needy.

In sharing, two things happen. The accumulated possession in the hands of the rich is reduced and the needy rise to the stage of having resources. This flow of abundance from the rich to the poor should continue to create at least a 'fair balance' if not 'equal balance'. Achieving economic and social equality demands more than charitable giving. Charity can only offset the situation of accumulation and narrow down the gap between the rich and poor to a certain extent. For Paul, this sociological challenge, is linked to the 'theology of God becoming poor' and the missiological basis of 'partnership in the gospel'. Christian charity should work towards fair balance and not stop with a token or symbolic ritual of alms-giving.

The charity model challenges both the 'giver' and the 'receiver' in the Christian context. As has been mentioned above, sincerity, eagerness and willingness are expected on the side of the giver. Furthermore, the giver is expected to give according to his or her ability and even beyond his or her means, realizing the love of God and the benefits of the gospel. The receiver need not feel ashamed to accept the gift or the generosity of the giving because it has theological, missiological and sociological implications. When the status of the needy changes to one of abundance, they are expected to follow the same principle of eagerness and willingness in giving to others. It is only when the 'giver' and the 'receiver' commit themselves to the theological, missiological and sociological bases, that the model of charity or Christian stewardship becomes more meaningful and significant.

## Charity in practice

The charitable service of individuals and institutions in contemporary society needs attention. In my country, out of sympathy, love and concern, some individuals give some money to the beggars who roam the streets and sitting in front of the churches, bus and railway stations. Most of these beggars are either lepers or deserted women with children or children who ran away from homes. They ask for some money to buy food or medicine. Giving some money to these people does not meet all their needs. Some criticize these poor people, believing they make a lot of money through begging. Cartoons and jokes are written in magazines to ridicule them. Whatever the suspicions about these victims may be, helping them with money is not wrong unless their misuse of alms to buy drugs, alcohol or tickets of gambling, is obvious.

There is the need to be sensitive to poverty. The helplessness of the needy as they look to us for assistance should touch our mind and heart. By giving a few paise or rupees we are not encouraging them to continue begging but trying to quench their thirst and hunger temporarily. However, some Christian families have a systematic and well-planned pattern of charitable service. Having been acquainted closely with individuals or families in poverty and knowing their needs clearly, these Christians help poor children to get educated by paying their school fees, buying school uniforms and books. Regular help is given to buy medicines for some poor families. Annual financial assistance is provided to clear part of their debts. Adopting the poor, understanding their difficulties and



sharing resources with them is a good way of fulfilling charitable service.

### Problems of Institutional Charity

Christian institutions such as churches, schools, colleges, hospitals and orphanages are involved in charity. They run several programmes such as Sunday lunches for the poor, free medical check-up, provision of free shelter and food and scholarships for studies. These acts express their concern and commitment for the poor. However, two major problems have risen in the past few decades with regard to institutional charity.

One is the tendency to commercialize institutions due to increasing requests for help and the lack of funds to meet all the requests. Schools, colleges, hospitals and even orphanages have started charging those who seek help in spite of the subsidizing of the cost of operation by well wishers. The donations are not proportionate to the demand. Because of this commercialization the poor are unable to have access to certain services. Only those

who can afford to pay some money can have access to the services of these institutions. Some institutions which started as charitable services have now become fully commercial and serve the rich and the middle class. The poor are gradually excluded.

Another problem is the lack of volunteers to work in these institutions as service to the poor. Many Christians see these institutions as avenues for employment rather than volunteer service for honorariums or low salaries. Some teachers employed in our schools are doing extra tuition outside class hours and run coaching centres at home for earning more money rather than giving their time to coach poor students. The increased cost of living, loans and debts and indifferent attitude towards the needy is affecting individual and institutional charitable service.

In view of these problems, biblical teaching on Christian stewardship and a deliberate effort to retain the vision of Christian charity and its practical outworking are needed today. Christian life and ministry cannot ignore charity and justice.

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