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Generosity from Pauline Perspective: Insights from Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

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I A Neglected Theme?

When exploring the economic dimensions of the early Christ-movement, there appears to be a clear lack of engagement with the apostle Paul. It has often been assumed that Paul does not address issues regarding wealth and poverty extensively in his letters. Thus, his treatment of economic issues and caring for the poor is rarely featured and discussed by the interpreters of Paul.

This can be seen in many of the major works on Paul's theology and ethics. Topics that are typically included are Paul's views on Christology, soteriology, anthropology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, law, eschatology, and related themes, but do not include any real interaction with Paul's view on generosity, giving, or even poverty. For example, in James Dunn's excellent

work on *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, nothing is mentioned of Paul's care for the poor.¹

If there is any significant mention of Paul's economic view, it is often narrowly discussed in relation to the collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem by referring to Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; and 2 Corinthians 8-9.² Even if this relief project for the poor is used as an example of Paul's charity, David Downs notes,

1 James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Similar examples can be seen in the works of Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Robert L. Reymond, *Paul: Missionary Theologian* (Fearn: Mentor, 2000); and Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

2 See the discussion in Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 312-18, under the heading, 'The Cruciform Grace of Generosity'.

'Given that the collection for Jerusalem seems to have been a one-time charitable donation, we should not overstate the extent to which ... charity was "of the essence" in the Pauline churches'.³ In some instances, when 2 Corinthians 8-9 is mentioned, instead of focusing on the collection for Jerusalem, its discussion is often directed to Paul's Christology by way of reference to 2 Corinthians 8:9: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich'.⁴

Studies in Pauline ethics do not fare any better, although there is some brief mention of Paul's economic view. Richard Burridge's *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, has only about six pages discussing Paul's view on money and poverty.⁵ Richard Hays's ground-breaking work on *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, makes reference to material possession only as part of the concluding remarks of the book.⁶

In terms of Pauline mission, it has been assumed that Paul was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and

that his primary concern was to establish congregations throughout the Mediterranean basin. This urgency of the Pauline mission has often been thought to be fuelled by his understanding of the imminent eschatological hope of the final triumph of Christ. As a result, Paul's primary task is the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the world before the return of Christ, and there is less concern with the poor. Leslie J. Hoppe is representative of this view when he writes:

Paul's attitude toward the poor was probably colored by his expectations regarding the imminent return of Christ. The apostle's belief that Christ's return was near made dealing with socioeconomic problems at any great length unnecessary.⁷

Based on this brief survey, it appears that there is hardly any significant feature to suggest that the poor are of special significance in Paul's theology, ethics and mission. Therefore, it is not surprising if one were to conclude that Paul has an underdeveloped concern for the poor. However, nothing can be further from the truth. As I will argue in this essay, Paul's understanding of generosity in alleviating the economic hardship of the poor is not only the heart of his gospel but is rooted in the story of Jesus itself.

I will begin by examining the phrase, 'remember the poor' in Galatians 2:10 as the primary concern of Paul in his mission, and that 'the poor' is not limited to any geographical restriction. Then I will consider two

3 David J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem in Its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts*, WUNT 2:248 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008), 110.

4 See Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 290-92.

5 Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 131-36.

6 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 464-68.

7 Leslie J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 158.

passages from Paul's Corinthian correspondence, namely 2 Corinthians 8-9 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, in examining Paul's understanding of generosity that is closely associated with caring for the poor. I will argue that Paul's understanding of generosity is not limited to monetary giving but also to providing for the very basic material needs of the poor.

II Paul's Concern for the Poor

1. 'Remember the Poor': Galatians 2:10

That Paul clearly has deep concern for the poor is evident from Galatians 2:8-10:⁸

For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to *remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along* (emphasis mine).

In Galatians 2:1-10, Paul summarises the main issues which were decided in what is commonly known as the Jerusalem Council (see also Acts 15:1-36). From the account in Acts in which a letter was sent from the Council to the Gentiles subsequent to the

Jerusalem meeting, there was no mention about remembering the poor, only to exhort the Gentiles 'to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality' (Acts 15:29).

As such, it is not surprising that Paul's mention of 'the poor' in Galatians 2:10 is often treated as peripheral and secondary to the main issues of inclusion of the Gentiles and the rite of circumcision debated in the meeting. Hans Dieter Betz describes the instruction to remember the poor as an 'additional request' and 'unrelated to the main points of the debate' in Jerusalem.⁹ Likewise, Larry Hurtado also states that this phrase, 'remember the poor', is often thought to be 'of no real significance, and serves only to give an unimportant detail of the agreement with Jerusalem'.¹⁰

This line of argument fails to do justice to what Paul is saying to the Galatians. If remembering the poor is indeed an 'additional request' or 'unrelated' or 'of no real significance', it is therefore very curious that in Galatians, Paul makes no mention of the major advice or instructions given by the 'pillars' of Jerusalem to the Gentiles such as abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality (see Acts 15:29). This raises the following questions: In light of the numerous details and debates about the Jerusalem meeting

⁹ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermenia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 101.

¹⁰ Larry Hurtado, 'The Jerusalem Collection and the Book of Galatians', *JSNT* 5 (1979): 46-62, quotation from 51.

⁸ Biblical quotations are from the *New International Version*.

that are missing in Galatians 2:1-10, why does Paul choose to include this one particular request to remember the poor? If remembering the poor is what Paul describes as something he is 'eager to do', who then are this group of people described as 'the poor'?

2. Who are the Poor in Galatians 2:10?

It has generally been accepted in New Testament scholarship that 'the poor' mentioned in Galatians 2:10 refer to the poor in Jerusalem. This is partly due to reading Romans 15:25-32 into Galatians 2:10. Romans 15:26 refers to Paul's contribution 'for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem'. As such, it is assumed that the phrase, 'remember the poor', in Galatians 2:10 naturally referred to the poor in Jerusalem.

J. Louis Martyn specifically indicates that by referring to the 'poor', 'the Jerusalem leaders refer to their own church, or to a circle of persons within that church'.¹¹ Richard Horsley also makes a similar point that the poor

meant those in the Jerusalem community who were literally poor, probably because they had no means of self-support. The limited resources they had pooled were hardly sufficient to sustain them long-range. Thus other nascent assemblies of Christ were to send economic assistance to the poor in Jerusalem.¹²

This line of argument receives overwhelming support from a number of commentators including Ben Witherington,¹³ Richard Longenecker¹⁴ and James Dunn.¹⁵

There is no doubt that 'the poor' in Galatians 2:10 would have included the poor in Jerusalem. But should the phrase 'remember the poor' be so narrowly defined in terms of geographical restrictions? If it is true that 'the poor' are specifically and narrowly those in the Jerusalem church, then it is understandable that Paul's collection project is a direct result from the command received from the leaders in Jerusalem. However, this consensus has been recently and rightfully challenged by Bruce Longenecker.

According to Longenecker, the understanding of 'the poor' as a reference to the believers in Jerusalem finds no support from the interpretation of Galatians 2:10 prior to the fourth century CE.¹⁶ By assessing data from various patristic writers such as Tertullian, Origen, Arthanasius and Aphrahat, Longenecker concludes that, at least until the middle of the fourth century, 'the poor' has no geographical restriction to believers in Jerusalem only. It included the poor within local congregations scattered throughout Judea and the Greco-Roman world. It is only by the middle of the fourth century that

¹¹ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 207.

¹² Richard A. Horsely, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 144.

¹³ Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 144.

¹⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 60.

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1993), 112.

¹⁶ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 159.

this interpretation changed as testified to by Ephrem, Jerome, and John Chrysostom where 'the poor' takes on a technical meaning and has been since then narrowly referred to as 'the poor in Jerusalem'.¹⁷

If Longenecker is right in his interpretation that the phrase 'remember the poor' does not have geographical restriction, it opens up fresh perspectives in reading of Paul's concern for the poor—that the Jerusalem collection constitutes one of the examples in which Paul establishes his care for the poor. In other words, Paul is eager to remember the poor not only in Jerusalem but also in the local congregations that he established throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Can this argument be further sustained? If so, why is Paul eager to remember the poor? Following this, we will examine two passages from Paul's Corinthian correspondence where Paul's eagerness to 'remember the poor' is rooted in his understanding of the generosity of Christ. This is subsequently demonstrated in the monetary collection from the Gentiles to the poor in Jerusalem in 2 Corinthians 8-9 and the rebuke of the wealthy in marginalising the poor within the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

III Paul's Jerusalem Collection

Organising a major relief fund for the poor in Jerusalem from the Corinthian congregation is no easy task for Paul.¹⁸

¹⁷ For further discussion, see Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 159-76.

¹⁸ For a detailed historical treatment of Paul's collection, see Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul lays down his advice for the collection:

Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.

Paul's instructions to the Corinthians are clear. They were to set aside a sum of money on a weekly basis for the relief fund, so that on his next visit, the contribution would be ready to be despatched to Jerusalem. However, these instructions were ignored by the Corinthians, possibly due to the deteriorating relationship between the Corinthians and Paul. Paul's subsequent visit to the Corinthians after writing 1 Corinthians ended abruptly, resulting in a 'painful visit' alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:1-4.

The tension and conflict between Paul and the Corinthians further deepened, and this resulted in a 'letter of tears' that Paul apparently wrote after this 'painful visit'. The Corinthians seemed to have responded favourably to this letter in which their relationship with Paul was somewhat restored (see 2 Cor. 1:12-2:11; 7:2-16). So, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to resume the collection for the poor in Jerusalem by appealing to the example of the Macedonians and also Jesus Christ himself in 2 Corinthians 8-9.

Paul begins by emphasising the

example of the Macedonians who had generously contributed to the fund despite their extreme poverty. According to Paul, the Macedonians literally begged Paul to accept the monetary gift despite the fact that they themselves had greater need for the money (2 Cor. 8:1-5). This act of generosity was a result of the Macedonians giving 'themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to (Paul)' (2 Cor. 8:6).

Following this, Paul appeals to the paradigmatic grace of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). Drawing on the narrative of Jesus, Paul then challenges the Corinthians to finish the collection for the poor in Jerusalem by drawing on the principle of equality – the abundance that the Corinthians currently enjoyed would supply for the needs of the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:11-15).

To challenge the Corinthians further, Paul reiterates that both he and the Corinthians would be shamed if the Macedonians found out that the collection was left unfinished by the Corinthians (2 Cor. 9:1-5). Then Paul evokes an agrarian metaphor, suggesting that all giving to the Jerusalem collection was like sowing seed which would surely reap a harvest. Finally, Paul underscores that true generosity was also a direct result of the confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This generosity would also bring about thanksgiving and praise to God from the recipients of the collection (2 Cor. 9:6-15).

In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul's understanding of generosity and concern for

the poor come to the fore. There are many practical implications that can be drawn from these two chapters. Space does not permit me to enter into detailed discussion of all these implications, and as such, I will focus only on three particular aspects.

1. Generosity Grounded in the Story of Jesus

One of the most significant economic projects undertaken by Paul was the monetary collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem that he organised among the Gentile congregation he established. Paul seems to have spent a considerable amount of time, energy and resources in organising this collection for Jerusalem. This is evident from his comments about the project in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; and Romans 15:25-32.

Where does Paul receive the inspiration to organise such a major relief fund project? Is there any organised charity in Jerusalem or elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world during the New Testament times that Paul could have emulated?

Joachim Jeremias claims that there existed an organised system of public relief for the poor based on the Jewish institutions of *tamhuy* (daily distribution of food to the non-resident poor) and *quppah* (weekly distribution of food and clothing to the poor residents).¹⁹ Jeremias concludes that this system of arrangement 'served as a model for the primitive Church'.²⁰ However, this posi-

¹⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 126-34.

²⁰ Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 131.

tion has been challenged by David Secombe, based on Jeremias' doubtful use of sources as stipulated in the Mishnah and lack of positive evidence.²¹ The administration system described by Jeremias did not originate until later in the post-New Testament era.

Having said that, it does not mean that caring for the poor did not exist within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Evidence from Acts suggests that there was some form of charity drive to care for the poor, as seen in the appointment of the seven deacons to care for the Hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1-6). However, such charity activities were ad hoc rather than organised.

What about the Greco-Roman world? Bruce Longenecker critically assesses the perceptions of and attitudes to poverty in the Greco-Roman world and analyses the charitable initiatives in the Gentile world in his fascinating work, *Remember the Poor*.²² He comes to the conclusion that in the Greco-Roman world organised charity in caring for the poor was sporadic at best. Although concern for the poor was not entirely absent, it was mainly restricted to temporary support for members of one's own group or association, but hardly to those outside one's circles.

The system of patronage so engrained in the Greco-Roman conventions did not extend to those at the bottom of the poverty scale. Neither did the practice of hospitality. As such,

while it cannot be argued that charitable initiatives and some form of concern for the poor were entirely unknown in the Greco-Roman world, it was very limited. Therefore, if it cannot be convincingly proven that both the Jewish and Greco-Roman societies carried out any sustainable and organised charity for the general public, we need to look elsewhere for Paul's understanding of generosity and his rationale for carrying out the Jerusalem collection at such a magnitude.

Paul's understanding of generosity finds concrete expression in 2 Corinthians 8:9. In this passage, Paul evokes the example of Jesus as the ground of his appeal to the Corinthians for his monetary collection for Jerusalem, '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.' There have been debates as to whether Paul has in mind in this context the act of Christ voluntarily embracing human poverty, or the humiliating death of Christ by identifying with the spiritual poverty of fallen humanity, or the event of incarnation.²³ As I have argued elsewhere,²⁴ the story of Jesus in Paul's thought would constitute the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus in what Horrell

²¹ David Secombe, 'Was There Organized Charity in Jerusalem Before the Christians?', *JTS* 29 (1978): 140-43.

²² Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 60-107.

²³ See Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 578-580.

²⁴ Kar Yong Lim, 'The Sufferings of Christ are Abundant in Us': A Narrative Dynamics Investigation of Paul's Sufferings in 2 Corinthians, *LNTS* 399 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 151-55.

describes as 'one seamless act'.²⁵ Murray Harris is right in indicating that 'Christ's incarnation, life, and death-resurrection' is to be taken 'in a single glance as "becoming poor"'.²⁶ Thus, it is not necessary to limit it to a particular event in the life of Jesus, be it the incarnation or death.

In retelling the story of Jesus, Paul is attempting to inculcate in the Corinthians the kind of behaviour that he wishes them to emulate. Jesus himself is the model for generous giving. The 'self-lowering other-regard' paradigm reflected in 2 Corinthians 8:9, as suggested by Horrell, is paradigmatically demonstrated in the central story of Jesus himself, whose self-lowering takes the movement from one extreme to another: from being rich to being poor.²⁷

A similar pattern is also found in Philippians 2:5-11 where Jesus is said to have 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross' (Phil. 2:7-8). In this passage, the 'self-lowering other-regard' paradigm is reflected where the

movement from the form of God (and equality with God) to the form of slave is also exemplified.

This 'self-lowering other-regard' plot of the story of Christ becomes the lens through which Paul makes sense of his own understanding of generosity and concern for the poor. Clearly, Paul's notion of generosity is rooted in Christ, and it is one that is orientated towards others and not for any self-benefit. Recalling the story of Jesus as the supreme exemplar is to motivate the Corinthians to emulate Christ their master in his generosity in giving for the poor in Jerusalem and to look out for the interests of others.

2. Generosity resulting in Equality

The notion of having the interests of others in mind in giving generously is further developed in 2 Corinthians 8:12-15. Here, Paul comments about giving according to one's proportion by offering further remarks on the subject of equality:

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little' (2 Cor. 8:13-15).

The idea of equality is frequently explained in Hellenistic literature. Philo praises equality as the highest good²⁸

25 David G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 212, 237. So Thomas D. Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians*, AnBib 158 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 189.

26 Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 580.

27 Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*, 210. For a detailed treatment by Horrell, see 204-45. See also the discussion by Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 242-44 and Stegman, *Character of Jesus*, 188-96.

28 Philo, *The Special Laws* IV, 165-66.

and devotes an extended discussion on the subject:

But the idea of equality is a necessary one, and so is that of equality in proportion, according to which a few things are looked upon as equal to many, and small things are equal to larger ones. And their proportionate equality, cities are accustomed to use at suitable times, when they command every citizen to contribute an equal share of his property, not equal in number, but in proportion to the value of his assessment, so that in some cases he who contributes a hundred drachmas will appear to have brought an equal sum with him who contributes a talent.²⁹

In 2 Corinthians 8:13-15, Paul makes it clear that he is not seeking for a role reversal of rich and poor, but equality or fairness. Paul recognises that there are extremes of wealth and poverty, and that this is not acceptable in the Christian community. Those who have surplus should contribute to those who have needs, according to the proportion that the individuals have, and not a fixed percentage for everyone. Closing the gap between the rich and poor in the body of Christ is needed to ensure that no one has any lack. The needs of the poor are to be met out of the surplus of others.

This is also the ideal of Christian partnership as presented in Acts 2:44-45: 'All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need' (see also Acts 4:36-37).

The basis for Paul's appeal is grounded in 2 Corinthians 8:14: 'At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality.' Here, Paul cautions the Corinthians that the tables might one day be reversed, and they would also hope for the Jerusalem saints to help alleviate their suffering.

By saying this, Paul is traversing sensitively through the intricacies of the Greco-Roman conventions. The protocol of gift giving in the Corinthians' culture dictates that the one who gives more generously than others will gain the superior status while others move down the rung in the social ladder. This explains why Paul makes it clear that the Corinthians' surplus will now meet the needs of the poor so that their needs may one day be met by the Jerusalem saints. By stressing the notion of reciprocity, Paul underscores the belief that no one should outgive another in order to attain a higher status over the other, but should give out of a cheerful and willing heart.

Following this, Paul quotes Exodus 16:18 which is a reference to the account of the experience of God's people in the wilderness (see Ex. 16:11-36). Manna is distributed according to each person's need, and this becomes for Paul a pattern for the distribution of material possessions. In the wilderness experience, trying to amass more than what one needs, hoarding it, or refusing to share is a futile waste of energy in which one ends up with a pile of rotten manna.

By using this Old Testament incident, Paul is showing the Corinthians that one can share with others and still have enough. Yet at the same time,

²⁹ Philo, *Who is the Heir of Divine Things?*, 141-206, quotation taken from 145.

Paul is also warning the Corinthians that as believers, they cannot do nothing and let the poor starve. God intends that there should be distribution of what others need to survive, so that inequalities are eliminated. As Harris points out:

the equality that the people of God of old experienced in the wilderness was the result of a divine miracle and was enforced and inescapable. The equality to be experienced by the new people of God, on the other hand, would be the result of human initiative and would be voluntary and so not automatic.³⁰

It is in this collection project that the narrative of the self-giving of Christ comes to the fore. Macedonian believers have demonstrated in their giving the attitude that Jesus had when he gave up his riches for others. What remains to be seen now is that the Corinthians too should give of themselves and their 'riches' to help the poor among the saints in Jerusalem so that there could be equality. No one has excessive surplus, and no one has a severe shortage.

3. Generosity as the Confession of the Gospel

As I have mentioned earlier, the collection for the poor in Jerusalem is a project that consumes much of Paul's time, energy and resources. The rationale for this initiative is grounded in the supreme exemplar of Jesus as highlighted in 2 Corinthians 8:9. The paradigm of 'self-lowering other-regard' is exemplified in the notion of equality

that Paul expounded in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.

Now we can turn our attention to explore how Paul's understanding of generosity is a direct result of the confession of the gospel. We will see that it is because of Paul's unflinching commitment to the gospel that he continued to channel his energies and the resources of his communities into this effort of alleviating the material destitution of a special needy group of people in Jerusalem.

In 2 Corinthians 9:13, Paul writes:

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

The 'obedience' that Paul refers to is the obedience in the working out of the gospel of Christ, a gospel that demands that believers should help to provide for the needs of those both inside and outside of the family of God.

As Paul wraps up his extended discussion on the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, he puts forward a final test to the Corinthians. They must prove themselves obedient to the demands of the gospel during times of relative prosperity. If the Corinthians follow through their generosity with a commitment to and involvement in the Jerusalem relief fund, they will have passed the test. Their obedience will not only bring out relief for the poor, but will also bring glory to God from the recipients.

The willingness of the Corinthians to be a part of this project also means that the dividing lines of racial and

30 Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 594.

social classes have indeed been broken down in Christ. As part of their confession of the gospel of Christ, the generous gift that the Corinthians give constitutes a concrete gesture of love that speaks of the unity of the body of Christ. Indeed, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28).

For Paul, confession of the gospel cannot be merely mouthing some pious clichés or even a series of creeds. It should lead to actions that speak louder than words. The very confession that Jesus Christ is Lord should ignite within the Corinthians a generosity towards the poor in Jerusalem. This confession transcends any ethnic, national heritage, social classes and geographical boundaries and demonstrates that both Jews and Gentiles are partners together in the gospel.

It is through this confession, an expression of authentic love resulting in the generosity of the Gentiles believers, that the Jewish believers in Jerusalem will give praise and glory to God. It is evident that the gospel of Jesus Christ ultimately brings reconciliation to those who were once strangers and enemies.

IV Divisions at the Lord's Supper

In examining 2 Corinthians 8-9, we have seen how Paul's concern to remember the poor in Jerusalem is demonstrated through the collection of a relief fund. We now turn our attention to another passage to consider briefly Paul's instruction to remember the poor within his own congregation.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, divisions mark the celebration of

the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian congregation. Some wealthier members of the community arrived at the meal earlier, devouring the food and drink, and shaming those who are poor and could only arrive late, presumably at the end of the day's work. This can be seen in Paul's admonition:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! (1 Cor. 11:20-22).

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment (1 Cor. 11:33-34).

It is clear that Paul is rebuking the wealthy, those who go ahead without waiting for anybody else, those who get drunk, those who have homes to eat and drink in, and those who despise the church and humiliate those who have nothing. The works of Gerd Theissen and others have argued that these factions resulted from the practice of the Lord's Supper in a manner that is consistent with the practices and values of the Greco-Roman patronage system.³¹

³¹ See Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 145-74 and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd ed (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 178-85.

Within such a setting, close associates of the patrons would receive choice wine and food, and most honoured seats in the dining area, whereas the patron's clients and those who are poor will receive lesser treatment and will most likely dine separately in the courtyard of the house. Such behaviour is succinctly summarised by Theissen:

It can be assumed that the conflict over the Lord's Supper is a conflict between poor and rich Christians. The cause of this conflict was a particular habit of the rich. They took part in the congregational meal which they themselves had made possible, but they did so by themselves – possibly physically separated from the others and at their own table.³²

Theissen continues:

The core of the problem was that the wealthier Christians made it plain to all just how much the rest were dependent on them, dependent on the generosity of those who were better off. Differences in menu are a relatively timeless symbol of status and wealth, and those not so well off came face to face with their own social inferiority at a most basic level. It is made plain to them that they stand on the lower rungs of the social ladder.³³

The primary reason why Paul instructs the Corinthian church on proper observance of the Lord's Supper is the disregard for the poor shown by the wealthy Corinthians. Some in the congregation had food, and some did not. Paul refuses to commend the

Corinthians for this practice. It is unfortunate that in examining 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, much concentration has been placed on the history and theological meaning of the ritual;³⁴ the study of the possible layout of the house of the wealthy that hosted the meal;³⁵ and the study of social status³⁶ leading to the so called 'new consensus' among New Testament scholars that regarded Pauline communities as comprising a cross section of society or the rich and poor.

While these studies certainly enrich our understanding of the social world of Paul's congregation, it is unfortunate that focus on the poor in the reading of this text has been largely ignored. Richard Hays notes the irony that without the public humiliation of the poor in Corinth, we would probably have no idea how Paul instructed the congregation to observe the Lord's Supper.³⁷ It is only in recent years that this deficiency has been corrected in the works of Steven Friesen and others that rightly put the poor back into focus in the reading of this text.³⁸

³⁴ See Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 192-203.

³⁵ See Theissen, *Social Setting*, 145-68 and Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth*, 178-85.

³⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 51-73.

³⁷ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 203.

³⁸ Steven J. Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus', *JSNT* 26 (2004): 323-361; Justin J. Meggit, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); and Longenecker, *Remembering the Poor*.

³² See Theissen, *Social Setting*, 151.

³³ Theissen, *Social Setting*, 160.

From 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, it is clear that those who have food not only disregard the poor, but also refuse to share food with the poor. The refusal to share food with the poor violated Paul's understanding of the Lord's Supper. The hunger and humiliation experienced by the poor at Corinth is a clear denial of the character of what a Pauline community should look like. And most of all, it discredited the gospel that Paul preached. As such, Paul's assault on the social class structure of Roman society in which division between those who have the power to control their economic destinies and those who could not comes to the fore as is seen as he challenges the rich to wait for one another before the meal (1 Cor. 11:33).

To counter this unbecoming behaviour of the wealthy Corinthians, Paul reminds them that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is rooted in the narrative of Jesus' self-giving for the benefit of others. It is only when the Corinthians celebrate the Lord's Supper in a way in which the poor are not disadvantaged that they are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes – the self-giving death of Jesus for others. Paul also warns the Corinthians that judgement awaits those who eat and drink without discerning the body of believers (1 Cor. 11:27-34).

With this understanding, it seems to be the case that the celebration of the Lord's Supper together with a proper meal may not merely be a religious occasion, but also a means by which distribution of food to the poor is being practised.³⁹ If this is correct, then the celebration of Lord's Supper is a clear demonstration of how a community cares and provides for the poor so that

there can be equality in sharing the most basic means of survival—food. For the rich to wait for one another and to eat at home if they are hungry would ensure a proper redistribution of food and possibly be a strategy to offset poverty among the poor in Corinth.

Unless the community embodies a concern for others, particularly the poor and less fortunate, rooted in the model of Jesus himself, it cannot proclaim the Lord's death. In defending those who have nothing against those who have houses in which to eat, Paul is concerned not about the position or status of the person – but economic relationships in the body of Christ. There is no room for the exploitation and humiliation of the have-nots. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is oriented towards the economy of God – an economy that welcomes and embraces the poor to share in the abundant banquet of the table of the Lord. It reminds us of Jesus' Parable of the Great Banquet, where 'still there is room' for everyone (Lk. 14:15-24).

Interestingly, the implications of Paul's understanding of generosity in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 are similar to that in 2 Corinthians 8-9 as I have examined earlier. We have seen how generosity is grounded in the story of Jesus when Paul evokes the tradition of the institution of the Lord's Supper by referring to the giving up of Jesus for others. Generosity also results in equality where the wealthy are exhorted to wait for the poor in the celebration of the Lord's Supper so that every-

³⁹ See also the discussion in Suzanne Watts Henderson, "If Anyone Hungers...": An Integrated Reading of 1 Cor 11:17-34', *NTS* 48 (2002): 295-208.

one has the same share of food. Finally, it is when generosity is being practised in a way that meets the needs of the poor that the celebration of the Lord's Supper becomes a proclamation of the death of Jesus – the very confession of the gospel.

V Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Paul's understanding of generosity in remembering the poor is not only the heart of his gospel but it is rooted in the story of Jesus himself, in which the 'self-lowering other-regard' paradigm is visibly displayed. For Paul, the poor as mentioned in Galatians 2:10 do not have geographical restrictions – they are both the poor in Jerusalem and the poor in the local congregations that he

established in the Mediterranean basin.

Paul's understanding of generosity and his vision of the right of all to have a fair share so that no one has needs is timely today especially in many instances where the rich are getting richer, and the poor poorer. Christian generosity requires that a relative proportion of giving should be guided accordingly. The wealthier should be challenged to give more in terms of higher percentage, compared to those who are poorer so that the confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ can be authenticated through love in action.⁴⁰

40 A special word of thanks is due to Ruth Ng for her assistance in compiling the bibliographical references for this article.

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