

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 37 • Number 1 • January 2013

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

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Responsible Generosity

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KEY-WORDS: *Simple lifestyle, grace, poverty, private property, money, vocation.*

BEING GENEROUS IN a responsible way can be a challenge. Yet that is how the Christian is called to exercise generosity. The issue is not primarily about my feelings: it is about my *choices*. This raises a number of questions: why should I choose to be generous? How can I find the motivation and strength to be generous when I am tempted to keep everything I have for myself and overlook the needs of others? What should I actually do? This article tries to provide some answers with a focus on Christian social action, first by evoking some fundamental principles and then more specific ones on generosity in our present condition and on responsibility.

I A Response to Grace

Christian ethics is a response to the grace of salvation. Of course, there is a sense in which ethics is first of all grounded in creation and God's commandment. But if we come to the effective practice of what is pleasing to

God, we must emphasize the fact that, after the fall, when Christians begin to act responsibly, it is as a response to the grace they have received. In Christ, God has been and continues to be generous towards us. This is why we need to learn how to imitate him. This may be by generously forgiving those who have sinned against us, or by being concerned for the salvation of those who do not know the gospel, or by sharing with the poor first of all within the church and also in wider society. The grace of a generous God should be revealed in our daily lifestyle.

It is not enough to understand that there is a link between God's generosity and the choices we ought to make: we have to taste God's grace, come daily to the cross of Christ, and ask the Father to give us the Holy Spirit so that we will have something to offer to our neighbour and that we will be willing to share with him. It is only when we have heard our Lord saying: 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom' (Lk. 12:32),¹ that we are able to hear the next sentence about giving away our possessions: 'Sell your possessions

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NIV.

and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys (Lk. 12:33).’ The *logic* of grace (God has been generous, so I must be generous too) has to go hand in hand with the *experience* of grace (being touched by the generosity of God, I become generous myself).²

More precisely, I would suggest that we need to hear repeatedly the proclamation of justification by faith. This doctrine has been termed the *articulus stantis vel candantis ecclesiae* (i.e. the article of faith with which the church stands or falls). However, I wonder if it has the place it deserves in the preaching and teaching of most evangelical churches, in the hymns they sing, and in the lives of their members. Are we really able to connect this truth with our daily choices? Does the knowledge of the fact that we have been justified freely make any difference in the way we use our money or in the way we act towards the poor?

It is true that the juridical flavour of the theme of justification appeals little to the mentality of people in the West. It is more difficult to comprehend than notions such as ‘meaning’, ‘fulfilment’, ‘healing’ or ‘blessing’. Nevertheless it gives the answer to the deepest needs and fears of human beings: ‘The sting

of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law’ (1 Cor. 15:56). When the condemnation of law is removed there is nothing left to hinder us from loving God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves. Through the knowledge of our free and complete justification before the judgement seat of God, the Spirit overcomes little by little all the obstacles to our doing the will of God, including all the obstacles to our being generous in a responsible manner.

The practical knowledge of justification by faith is fragile. There is a very strong temptation to lose sight of it, to act ‘foolishly’ and ‘after beginning by means of the Spirit’ to go on ‘trying to finish by means of the flesh’ (Gal. 3:3). Unfortunately, the discussion of topics such as generosity, social responsibility, action against poverty and radical discipleship can reinforce the temptation if it is not handled properly. It is sometimes necessary to challenge Christians ‘prophetically’ about the nature of their lifestyles and to make them feel uncomfortable about their choices. But the result should be first of all that they be grounded more and more in the grace of God and that *this* leads them to change.

If evangelical Christians preach the importance of a culture of generosity and simple lifestyle without recalling again and again the message of grace and justification by faith, there is a huge risk that there will be more Christians feeling guilty for not being generous, but who will not become more generous anyway. Or (worse maybe) some will become involved with wrong motivations (self-righteously) and become judgmental towards those not as ‘radical’ as themselves.

2 See Elaine Storkey, ‘Integral Mission in the Ministry of Jesus: Luke 7:36-50 and 19:1-10’, in *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral mission and the poor*, edited by Tim Chester (Carlisle, Cumbria (UK) and Waynesboro (USA): Paternoster Press, 2002), 33-41 for a very profound meditation on how the experience of grace can have radical impact on socially excluded persons and foster action towards the poor.

II A response to our Vocation as People and as Christians

If the grace of God in Christ applied by the Spirit and the message of justification by faith provide us with motivation and strength to be generous in a responsible manner, we also need to reflect on the foundation of generosity and on the theological framework in which we can inscribe it.

The creation narrative teaches that when God created man and woman, he gave them the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it. Talking about 'stewardship' can shed light on human vocation. We have the responsibility of using creation's resources for the glory of God and the good of others. We can enjoy these resources – because God is a generous God – but we must be careful not to waste or destroy what fundamentally belongs to God and can be useful for the common good.

The fall has been followed by many dreadful consequences. Among them are suffering and poverty. It is true that some specialists tell us that there are enough resources to feed everyone on the planet, but it is more difficult now to enjoy them—firstly because the environment is not what it was when God created the earth: 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil will you eat food from it...' (Gen. 3:17b-18a) and secondly, the human heart has become hard. Selfishness, abuse of power and social injustice have become the source of much poverty. As long as we live in a fallen world we should expect to have the poor with us and / or be poor ourselves.

After having pronounced the death-sentence because of sin, God shows sinners that he has not forsaken us. He

has a plan of salvation that will be fulfilled in Jesus; the seed of the woman that will crush the serpent's head. Life continues after the sentence of death!

The fall and redemption create a new context for our lives, but do not change our vocation to act as stewards of God's resources. Developing a simple lifestyle to enable generosity is all the more necessary if we are to respond to our vocation as humans in a context where it is more difficult to meet the needs of everyone. It is also a means of responding to the grace of God who has a hope for humankind and to bear witness to it. It is acting responsibly as a human-being and a Christian.

III Some principles on generosity

To apply the biblical teaching on generosity, it might be important to underline certain principles. These would be especially relevant to Christians living in the West.

1. Christians as foreigners and exiles

The apostle Peter, in his first epistle, calls his readers both 'God's elect' and 'exiles scattered' (1 Pet. 1:1); 'foreigners and exiles' (1 Pet. 2:11). Although it has been argued that his readers might have been literally strangers in Asia Minor, it seems more probable that his use of this vocabulary is metaphorical and applies to all Christians as Christians.³ As Abraham, the father of all believers, confessed himself to be

³ See Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), Appendix A: 'Resident aliens' – literal or figurative, 227-229.

a foreigner and stranger, despite being in the Promised Land (Gen. 23:4), the Christian is a foreigner and exile on earth, despite possessing the promise to inherit the world (cf. Rom. 4:13).

What strikes the observer of the western evangelical microcosm is that Christians seem to be very much at home in the world. It would be hard to describe them as 'foreigners and exiles'. They have much in common with their non-Christian neighbours in terms of how they envision a successful life. The distinction between 'already' and 'not yet', although theoretically received, is being replaced in a number of ways by the requirement to obtain everything now.

Rediscovering the two sides of Peter's description (elect/exiles) appears to me to be a prerequisite to the exercise of generosity for western Christians. It may seem strange but sound evangelical social doctrine and social involvement – with the culture of generosity and giving that they presuppose – depend on the acceptance of the fact that Christians are strangers in society and cannot be completely part of it.

Our identity is not determined by what we possess or by the way in which we match society's standards of success. We are God's elect and exiles on earth. An exile does not get entangled with many material possessions. He is travelling and may be obliged to move quickly. Being elected for a great purpose, you do not have to pay too much attention to what the world deems important. The consequence is that we are free to be generous!

Recognizing that we are strangers in the world may open our eyes to the necessity to show solidarity to our 'fellow strangers' (the needs of our broth-

ers and sisters in Christ). It may also give us the will to share with those among whom we live in wider society by generously supporting the evangelization of the world and Christian social action. We want to be a blessing for those who are not yet part of the people of God. (See below the section on poverty for more on this.)

Once again: it is not sufficient to rediscover the theme of the Christian as a stranger if we do not ponder the doctrine of election at the same time. The theme of God's choice is not a popular one because it hurts the natural desire of the sinful heart to be autonomous. Nevertheless, it is itself the foundation of the doctrine of justification by faith (cf. Rom. 8:29-30) and a doctrine of grace. Without it, the Christian life is weakened.

If more Christians were to understand correctly what it means to be elected 'to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood' (1 Pet. 1:2), this would certainly further a culture of generosity and who knows if this would not benefit many poor people in the world. Being truly really generous requires that we integrate the full breadth of the Bible's teaching on grace, including election.

2. The question of money

Talking about generosity, simple lifestyle, social involvement, mission, etc., implies talking about money. It does not end with money, but it often *begins* here. It is not always easy to discuss this issue because the use of money can be considered a very personal matter. Money can be a kind of taboo subject. But it can also be, to some degree a kind of domestic idol.

Giving to the church or to mission agencies, taking care of our neighbour in need and alms-giving require that we put aside part of what we own to give it away. There is a lot more that we can do (and we should, for example, look carefully at what the Bible says about hospitality), but usually, being incapable of giving part of one's money is indicative of a problem somewhere. The solution to this problem... is to go back to the grace of God!

The Lausanne Movement has emphasised the issue of simple living. The Lausanne Covenant (1974) states in its ninth paragraph:

All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple life-style in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism.

This clause was a topic of discussion at the first Lausanne Conference. John Stott explained that 'perhaps no expression in the Covenant caused more anxious thought in would-be signatories at Lausanne than this'.⁴

In the years following the Congress, Tim Chester tells us that 'as John Stott met with Third World Christians he was asked by them whether Western Christians were really serious about the commitment they had made to simple lifestyle in the Lausanne Cov-

enant'.⁵ For this reason, a consultation was held in 1980 that issued a text called 'An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle'.⁶

The paragraph of the Commitment on personal lifestyle is particularly relevant for the topic of generosity. It puts things clearly by talking about money: 'We intend to re-examine our income and expenditure, in order to manage on less and give away more.' I once heard someone dismissing this statement as simplistic because it sounded as though the issue of living simply and justly was a question of spending less money. It was argued that sometimes the concern for justice would lead us to buy more costly items. Fair trade and concern for the environment may force us to spend more.

It can be answered that the Commitment is not dealing with the issue of spending more or less *per se*. The distinction is between what is necessary and what is superfluous, and the idea is that if we avoided superfluous expense, we could give more generously to both relief and evangelism.

Nevertheless, I think that there is something interesting in the criticism and that it should be heard. The issue of generosity is an issue of money and of giving (even 'sacrificially' as is often said today), but in what sense? There is a story in the Gospels about a widow who gave 'two very small copper coins,

⁴ John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary*, Lausanne Occasional Papers 3, <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lops/69-lop-3.html> accessed 3 Jul 2012.

⁵ Timothy Chester, *Awakening to a World of Need: The recovery of evangelical social concern* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 100-101.

⁶ The text has been published in *Lifestyle in the Eighties: An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle*, Ronald J. Sider, Editor (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 13-19.

worth only a few cents' and the Lord Jesus said that 'this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others', even those who gave 'large amounts' (Mk. 12:41-44).

This text is very well-known, but it faces us with a challenge: what is our primary end when promoting generosity among Christians? Is it that Christians be more generous or that the amount of money raised be higher? Of course we can normally expect both but the question of priority is important: in some circumstances we *could* have more generous Christians and less money raised. A significant issue at that point is the way we encourage Christians to be generous. If the communication and advertisement techniques that we use are exactly the same as those that are so closely linked to the consumerist mentality that we seek to challenge by talking about simple lifestyle, then we may have gone wrong somewhere in our priorities.

The Commitment on Simple Lifestyle is careful not to become legalistic in the way it envisions simple living but it gives some practical suggestions: 'We lay down no rules or regulations, for either ourselves or others. Yet we resolve to renounce waste and oppose extravagance in personal living, clothing and housing, travel and church building.' It goes so far as to suggest that Christians from the West receive help from Christians of the 'Third World' in 'evaluating our standard of spending', while recognizing that 'those of us who live in the Third World [...] too are exposed to the temptation to covetousness. So we need each other's understanding, encouragement and prayers.'

3. Concern for the poor

One of the main areas that is relevant to the topic of generosity is concern for the poor. As the development of a more systematized evangelical social doctrine is one of the challenges that face us at the beginning of the 21st century, it is right that we underline the issue of generosity and the poor. As western Christians living in more or less affluent circumstances, it is natural that we should think about our responsibility towards those living in abject poverty, even in countries far from us. Two biblical themes might receive more emphasis than they usually do in evangelical circles today.

First, the teaching of the Scriptures, especially of the New Testament, should lead us to be particularly concerned for our fellow Christians who suffer from poverty. This might be a sensitive issue, especially for NGOs committed to help people irrespective of their religious affiliation. Nevertheless, we should be able to find a way of doing good to all people 'especially to those who belong to the family of believers' (Gal. 6:10). It might begin with our personal relationships within our own local church, as was the case in the first community of Jerusalem (Acts 2:45; 4:32-37).

We should also find ways to express Christian solidarity and generosity throughout the global body of Christ, as the apostle Paul did by organising a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. May I also suggest that Christian development agencies take more time to struggle with the question of special responsibility that the church has towards its own members and whether they could help it to assume it?

The second theme – that could help balance it with the first – would be the following: concern for the poor and generosity towards them is a duty imposed upon us on the basis of the common humanity we share with them. This is particularly true of those living in affluent circumstances. This teaching appears in several passages of Holy Scriptures, most notably in the Wisdom Literature. Job and Proverbs are especially noteworthy in this respect.

Part of the vindication that Job presents of his case amounts to this: he was generous towards the poor when he could be (Job 29:13-17; 31:16-23). The model of Job, far as it is from our conditions of life in the West today, seems to me to be of great interest for our reflection on social action. It presents us with the story of a rich man, living among his fellow citizens, doing good and being generous. Job is not an Israelite and does not live among the people of God. In this, his situation is similar to that of Christians today living in the world.

On the basis of what Job recounts, could we not imagine how he would have responded to the challenges of the situation of poor people in the developing world today? How would he have dealt with socio-political injustices towards the poor (see Job 29:17)? What would he have done with his wealth to relieve at least some of them (see Job 31:17)? Maybe the book of Job can provide us with precious tools to develop a culture of generosity among affluent Christians as they have to be present in the world today.

We live in the world as ‘foreigners and exiles’. And yet it does not mean that we are of a different nature from the people among whom we live. Per-

haps this is the most painful side of our present condition: we are strangers among our own). We are not a closed group, indifferent to the fate of those outside. We still have links with them. We share the same human nature.

Evangelical Christians have not always talked much about ‘nature’. The concept may have appeared to imply a sort of autonomy of nature. The will to underline the need of special revelation to understand aright what we should do in any area of life may have caused evangelical Christians to neglect or dismiss the concept of nature. But it is a fact that generosity and benevolence towards the poor is a value recognized as such among many non-Christians, even some of those unreached by the light of special revelation. They have learned it from natural revelation! The Wisdom Literature of the Bible can help us to value and give proper weight to the importance of human solidarity and apply it to the realm of international solidarity today.

III Some Principles on Living Responsibly

We should be generous in a responsible way. It means first of all that our generosity is a *response* to the grace of God, to our calling as humans and as Christians. But there are some principles about responsibility that need to be underlined today to avoid our discussion and practice of generosity being unbalanced.

1. The nature of responsibility

‘Responsibility’ is, by its very definition, a *relative* concept. We are responsible before someone, ultimately

before God. There is no such thing as 'absolute responsibility'. Talking about human beings as responsible beings reminds us that they are created by God. Responsibility is also a *concrete* concept: we are responsible to do the task assigned to us, not less, but not more. For example, we are commanded to love our neighbour, i.e. the one God places near us;⁷ we are not asked to love 'all men' if by 'all men' we mean all individuals belonging to the human race.

We are responsible before God: this means that our responsibility is a very serious matter and at the same time it implies that our responsibility is limited. It has the boundaries that God has given it. We should be very careful not to 'play God' and talk or act as if everything in the world could depend on us, our involvement and our generosity. We don't control much of the complex interweaving of human actions nor all the consequences of our decisions.

How does this apply more specifically to the issue of generosity? What God is requiring of us is not, first of all, that we change the world through our generous giving. True, what we do can make a far greater difference than we sometimes imagine. But our task is to love our neighbour. This means that most of us will get involved in the life of one or two or ten or maybe a few more people. We will have to love them with all the costs implied in terms of time, money and self-giving. We will not become some kind of 'superheroes' through our simple lifestyle and sacri-

ficial giving. If we have to become 'heroes' it will be, like the title of one of Tim Chester's books, 'ordinary heroes', heroes in the daily routine.

2. The value of private property

In a discussion about being generous in a responsible way, it is important to emphasize the value of private property as a foundation to well-orientated generosity. It is interesting to note that several classical Protestant confessions of faith have felt the need to underline this principle. For example, the 38th of the Church of England's Articles of Religion states:

The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.

Commenting on this, W. H. Griffith Thomas aptly remarks: 'Property as the fruit of industry is involved in the very notion of society as it exists by natural law, *and if Christians have nothing of their own there can be no place for bounty and no necessity for liberality.*'⁸

To foster a culture of generosity among Christians, it is necessary to respect everyone's individual private property and the fact that everyone has to make his own choices before God as to how and how much he will give. It is not legitimate for a community to try

⁷ 'Near' can be read literally and metaphorically. God may link me (and in this sense make me near) to somebody living very far from me.

⁸ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Vine Books Ltd, 1930, Sixth Edition Revised 1978), 481, italics mine.

to force its members to be generous or to attempt to control their use of their possessions. Neither the church nor wider society should dare do this.

These remarks may seem hardly necessary for those who think that Christians today need rather to be exhorted to be oriented towards community, sharing and renouncing their possessions. On the other hand it is my belief that current criticisms made of individualism (as relevant as they may be) often fail to give proper value to each individual person, to individual salvation, individual choices and individual responsibility. Professor Henri Blocher wrote: 'Scripture recognizes the individual's ultimate value that forbids considering him as being simply part of a bigger whole.'⁹ There will soon be a great need to learn again the value of the individual.

We have to find a way of talking about generosity, simple lifestyle, sharing with the poor, etc. that profoundly respects each individual's choices by avoiding putting too much pressure on them and/or trying to manipulate them through communication techniques (for example those that are easily used when addressing a crowd). Encouraging people to be generous, even reminding them of biblical imperatives, by no means entails blurring the distinction between what is mine and what is yours. If, in the first Christian community 'no one claimed that any of

their possessions was their own' (Acts 4:32), it was by choice and Peter's words to Ananias (and the rest of the New Testament) make it very clear.

In this respect, it is necessary to guard ourselves against the temptation to suspect property as such, money as such, material goods as such. It is an ever-recurring temptation that amounts to locating the problem of humankind in *things* rather than in human beings' *hearts*.

It has become common to remind Christians that God is the owner of everything and that there is no absolute right to private property.¹⁰ The latter thesis might need clarification.

What does it mean to talk about 'absolute' right? Before God we have no absolute right and it is probably best to avoid using the right vocabulary at all when talking about our relationship with God: 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised' (Job 1:21). This exclamation gives the right attitude before God as far as our property is concerned.

But when we come to our relationships with our fellow human beings, what can be meant by denying an 'absolute right' to private property? It could be that our right to *acquire* new properties can be limited. Or that we cannot use all conceivable means to *protect* our property or to *claim* what we are entitled to receive.¹¹ To use the lan-

⁹ Henri Blocher, 'L'Individu menacé', in *Ichthus*, 2, April 1970, 9. Translation mine. The French text reads: 'L'Écriture reconnaît à l'individu une valeur dernière, qui interdit de le considérer comme un simple élément d'un tout plus vaste.' (The text is in bold characters.)

¹⁰ See for example Howard Peskett and Vijnath Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission: The glory of Christ in all time and space*, The Bible Speaks Today (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 46.

¹¹ See for example the condemnation on those who 'who add house to house and join

guage of the Roman Catholic Church's social doctrine, we must keep together the right of private property and the principle of the universal destination of goods.¹² In this sense, it is right to say that there is no absolute right to private property.

Nevertheless, this expression can also be used in more problematic ways to make a distinction between 'absolute rights' and 'relative rights' or to suggest that the commandment not to steal would not always be binding, or to imply that what belongs to me also, in a sense, belongs to you, or that the State can, with sovereign power, put limits on private property. Suffice it to say here that the Bible does not seem to encourage the idea that even poverty can justify theft. In the context of a comparison with another matter it mentions the fact that 'people do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving. Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house' (Prov. 6:30-31). This practice is not criticized. Private property is a serious matter.

For these reasons, I think it would be better to denounce the abuses of the right to private property rather than to speak of the right to private property as not being absolute. This would make clear that there is no problem in private property as such. Our generos-

ity towards the poor should even be orientated to their having access to private property in such a way that they will be able to support themselves and their family and, of their own property, be generous themselves. This could be a way of implementing the affirmation of the Global Generosity Network:

... it is incumbent upon every Christian to exercise generosity toward individuals and efforts in ways that foster dignity and promote personal responsibility.

3. Living in keeping with one's station in life

In the first 'social' encyclical (*Rerum Novarum*, 1891), Pope Leo XIII, after stressing the right to private property and the duty to use one's property by sharing with those in need, makes a very insightful comment:

True, no one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs and those of his household; nor even to give away what is reasonably required to keep up becomingly his condition in life, 'for no one ought to live other than becomingly'.¹³

The idea of living 'becomingly' requires further thinking. The quote at the end of the text mentioned is from St. Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologiae*, the Angelic Doctor states

field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land' (Is. 5:8) or restriction on the action of the owner of a loan (Deut. 24:10) or on protecting oneself against theft (Ex. 22:2, but see verse 1).

¹² The Roman Catholic Church clearly subordinates the right of private property to the principle of the universal destination of goods.

¹³ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html, accessed 5 Jul 2012. On the Vatican's website the paragraph is number 22. In the French edition that I usually consult, the number is 453.

that 'a thing is necessary in two ways'.¹⁴ This twofold kind of necessity can help us with the distinction between what is necessary and what is superfluous: a thing may be necessary 'first, because without it something is impossible'. So, for example, eating is necessary because without it life is impossible. 'Secondly, a thing is said to be necessary, if a man cannot without it live in keeping with his social station, as regards either himself or those of whom he has charge.'

St. Thomas' text can provide guidance as to how we ought to exercise generosity, although we should accept the context of his discussion, i.e. the (thoroughly unbiblical) distinction between precept and counsel.¹⁵ Consider the following:

- The faithful, in the Holy Scriptures, seem to have lived according to their social station either as ordinary people, poor, slave or as rich or even kings. There are some exceptions to this such as John the Baptist who might not have lived 'becomingly'. He did it out of a special calling. Rather than introducing the distinction between 'precept' and 'counsel', we should, with professor August Lecerf (in a study on Calvinism and Capitalism), speak of a virtual renouncement to everything

that must become a real renouncement as soon as God demands it.¹⁶ The implied reference is to 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

- The idea of living with what is necessary in St. Thomas' second sense (and giving the rest) surely implies that we renounce all waste, prodigality and that we be generous. It may also imply that we be much more cautious about becoming entangled in debts than is usually the case in the present western culture.
- St. Thomas comments very wisely on the second kind of necessity:

The 'necessary' considered thus is not an invariable quantity, for one might add much more to a man's property, and yet not go beyond what he needs in this way, or one might take much from him, and he would still have sufficient for the decencies of life in keeping with his own position.

If this is true, it means that there is space for considerable variation between different individuals or for the same person at different times. We would always have the challenge to become *more* generous (because 'one might take much from him, and he would still have sufficient for the decencies of life in keeping with his own position') without feeling guilty for not being as generous as we possibly could (because it is right to 'live in keeping with one's station').

I am well aware that some will find these propositions disappointing and not radical enough. I would argue that

¹⁴ My quotes are all from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qu. 32, art. 6. I use the English translation found on http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS_Q32_A6.html, accessed 5 July 2012.

¹⁵ St. Thomas thinks that it is 'wrong' (except in certain very definite circumstances) to give alms out of the necessary in the first sense, and that it is a matter of counsel but not of precept to do it in the second sense.

¹⁶ Cf. Auguste Lecerf, 'Calvinisme et capitalisme', in *Études calvinistes* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1999, 1st edition 1949), 99-106.

they follow from an understanding of our responsibility as being real but limited, and of private property as being a positive thing before the face of God who both 'richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment' and wants us 'to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share' (1 Tim. 6: 17-18). If seriously taken to heart, it would in fact foster a real culture of generosity among Christians. But it would be a generosity exercised in a responsible and realistic manner, not some utopia wherein we ourselves build the Kingdom of God on earth. Our generosity is important. But not everything depends on it. Everything depends on *God's* generosity! *Sola Gratia* once again, and this way *Soli Deo Gloria!*

The anonymous epistle to Diognetus (2nd century) beautifully expresses the distinguishing style of life of Christians, what it is and what it is not:¹⁷

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. [...] But, inhabiting

Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners.

As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. [...] They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. [...]

In this way, we would engage in a simple lifestyle as a response to the grace of God. In this way we would become increasingly generous. And the church, missions, our neighbour in general and the poor in particular would certainly benefit from it.

¹⁷ *Epistle to Diognetus*, ch. V., <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.iii.ii.v.html>, accessed 9 July 2012.