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Paul the Economist?
Economic Principles in Pauline Literature with the Jerusalem Collection as a Test Case

Kar Yong Lim

I Introduction

In an essay published in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* in 2013, I lamented that in the studies on Pauline theology, ethics, and mission, it was often assumed that the apostle did not address issues regarding wealth and poverty comprehensively in his letters. As a result, one could not expect to find the treatment of economic issues or caring for the poor featured or discussed by the interpreters of Paul. In trying to correct this assumption, I examined Paul's understanding of generosity in alleviating the economic hardship of the poor as a concrete expression of his gospel.[1]

However, since the publication of that essay, there has been a surge in the interest in exploring ancient economic dimensions in engagement with the apostle Paul and early Christianity. This resulted in a number of studies that focus on Paul's view of money, inequality, and charity in the Greco-Roman world.[2]

Armed with a better understanding of ancient economy, I aim to extend the discussion I first mooted in my 2013 essay by exploring Paul's view of economic principles gleaned from his writing by paying close attention to the major collection project for the Jerusalem saints.

II Ancient Economy at a Glance

Recent studies in ancient economy shed interesting insights on our understanding of inequality and income distribution in the Roman Empire. In an illuminating study, Walter Scheidel and Steven Friesen attempt to reconstruct the size of Roman economy and income distribution based on available

1 See my 'Generosity from Pauline Perspective: Insight from Paul's Letters to the Corinthians', *ERT* 37 (2013): 20–33.

2 For example, Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); David J. Downs, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016); Steven J. Friesen, Sarah A. James, and Daniel N. Schowalter, eds., *Corinth in Contrast: Studies in Inequality* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); and Verlyn D. Verbrugge and Keith R. Krell, *Paul & Money: A Biblical and Theological Analysis of the Apostle's Teachings and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

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ancient data and models constructed by others.[3]

They estimate that the 'Roman Empire generated a total income approaching the equivalent of 50 million tons of wheat or close to 20 billion sesterces per year.'[4] This estimate represented the performance of the Roman economy that 'approached the ceiling of what was feasible for ancient and medieval economies', and peaked in the mid-second century CE.[5] Based on the Geary-Khamis dollars (a hypothetical currency value that had the same purchasing power based on the USD in 1990), Scheidel and Friesen calculate the per capita GDP of the Roman Empire and estimate it to be approximately $700.[6]

Scheidel and Friesen then proceed to measure income distribution in the Roman Empire by dividing up the population into two separate categories of elite and non-elite groupings.[7] The elite group, which included the senatorial cohort, equestrian order, civic notables, and other wealthy people, comprised only about 1.2-1.7% of the population of 70 million at the peak of the Roman Empire. This minority group of population controlled an estimated 15 to 30% of the total income.

The non-elite group (comprising at least 97% of the population) were categorised according to two other subgroups comprising those with surplus income above the subsistence level and those living at or below subsistence level.

The upper level group, also labelled as the economically 'middling' non-elite groups, enjoyed surplus income between 1.7 to 10 times above the subsistence level. This group of the non-elites comprised only about 7 to 13% of the population and enjoyed 15 to 25% of the total income. The lower level group who were living at or below subsistence level were the large majority of the population, comprising about 84 to 90%. This group earned about 50% of the total income, with at least 10-22% of them living at starvation level.

Apart from the population, Scheidel and Friesen also assess that the state and local governments contributed a small share of the overall income of not much more than 5%.

In short, it is likely that the top 10% of the population controlled approximately 50% of the income, leaving not much more than half of the income for the remaining population.

Based on this computation, Scheidel and Friesen are able to calculate the Gini coefficient of income inequality on the Roman Empire. The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 denotes perfect equal-

3 Walter Scheidel and Steven Friesen, 'The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire,' *Journal of Roman Studies* 31 (2009): 61-91.

4 Scheidel and Friesen, 'The Size of the Economy,' 62.

5 Scheidel and Friesen, 'The Size of the Economy,' 74.

6 Scheidel and Friesen, 'The Size of the Economy,' 74.

7 The method employed in Scheidel and Friesen's work is a marked improvement from Steven J. Friesien's earlier proposal using a seven-level poverty scale to measure income distribution in Pauline communities. See his 'Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus,' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26 (2004): 323-361, and the critique offered by Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 44-53.

ity and 1 denotes maximum inequality.

Scheidel and Friesen compute the Gini coefficient of the Roman Empire to be in the region of 0.42-0.44, 'falling right in the middle of a broad historical range'.[8] This suggests that some measures of inequality existed in the Roman Empire with at least 10-22% of the population living at starvation level who required some form of assistance for basic survival.[9]

This group of extreme poor had often been ignored by the Greco-Roman society.[10] In addition, the general attitude to the helpless poor was almost hostile, as argued by Roman Garrison.[11] This probably explained why charity and caring for the poor were largely non-existent. The elites and those belonging to the 'middling' group of non-elites never saw helping the poor as their obligation. Even if charitable acts existed, they were often extended to those of equal status or those belonging in the same voluntary associations of guilds within the same locality.[12]

III Paul the Economist

1. 'Remember the poor' everywhere: Galatians 2:10 once more

Paul was most likely aware of the economic inequality and the neglect of the poor in the Greco-Roman world. As argued by Verbrugge and Krell, Paul's concern for the poor was deeply rooted in his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and their subsequent traditions.[13] His Pharisaic background certainly influenced how he viewed the poor, and how he was obligated by the Law of Moses to care for them.

This probably explained why he carried out acts of mercy towards the poor, as evident in Acts and his letters. According to Acts 11:27-30, the prophet Agabus arrived in Antioch and prophesied that there would be a severe famine 'over all the world' (Acts 11:28) during the reign of Claudius (most likely 45-47CE). As a result, presumably under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas, the Christ-followers in Antioch made a monetary contribution according to their means. This collection was delivered by Paul and Barnabas to the believers in Judea.

That the collection was made suggests that there was a certain amount of wealth among some of the Christ-followers in Antioch. Moreover, Antioch was Paul's base for the most part of his apostolic career and it was from this city that he launched all three of his Gentile missionary journeys. It is not inconceivable that the Antioch church also provided financial support for Paul's mission activities. This ex-

8 Scheidel and Friesen, 'The Size of the Economy', 84-86.

9 For further discussion, see Justin J. Meggit, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) and Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 43-53.

10 See Deborah E. Watson, 'Paul's Collection in the Light of Motivation and Mechanisms for Aid to the Poor in the First-Century World', PhD dissertation, University of Durham, 2006, 14-55.

11 Roman Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity*, JSNTSup 77 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 38-45.

12 For further discussion, see Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 60-107, and Lim, 'Generosity from Pauline Perspective', 25-26.

13 Verbrugge and Krell, *Paul & Money*, 119.

ample gives us a glimpse of the income inequality in the Roman Empire.

Elsewhere in Acts 20:35, in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, Paul sets himself as an example for them to emulate: 'In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."'[14] Since Acts 20:33-35 deals with economic issues, the exhortation to 'support the weak' must be read within the framework of Paul's deep concern for those who were financially 'weak'. Here, we see Paul grounds the basis for supporting the needs of the poor on the command he received from Christ himself.

In Galatians 6:10, Paul exhorts the Galatians to 'work for the good of all', an expression that Longenecker believes would have included 'charitable works for the needy and poor'.[15] Paul also gives instructions to the Thessalonians believers to 'help the weak (*asthenēs*)' (1 Thess 5:14), which most likely referred to those who were economically weak.[16] Turning to Romans 12:13, we see Paul's appeal to the Roman believers: 'Contribute to the needs of the saints.' This would have included those at the bottom of the social-economic hierarchy.

The most important evidence that we have concerning Paul's deep concern for the poor is from Galatians 2:8-10:

> 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 covered by what is commonly known as the Jerusalem Council (see also Acts 15:1-36). From the account in Acts, we see that a letter was sent to the Gentiles at the end of the Council to exhort them 'to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality' (Acts 15:29).

Interestingly, nothing was said about remembering the poor according to the account in Acts. Because of this, it is not surprising that Paul's mention of remembering the poor in Galatians 2:10 is often treated as a peripheral issue compared to the main issues concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles and the rite of circumcision debated in the Council. In light of this, 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.[17] Likewise, Larry Hurtado also states that this phrase, 'remember the poor',

14 All Scriptures citations are taken from the NRSV.

15 Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 142.

16 BDAG, s.v., defines one of the usages of *asthenēs* as those who are 'economically weak, poor'.

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

is often thought to be 'of no real significance, and only serves to give an unimportant detail of the agreement with Jerusalem'.[18]

This line of argument fails to do justice to Paul's concern for the poor, as we have seen thus far from Acts and his letters. If remembering the poor is indeed an 'additional request' or 'unrelated' or 'of no real significance', it is 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). It seems strange that in recounting the events of the Jerusalem council, Paul chose to include this particular request to remember the poor, and further emphasised that this is something that he was eager to do all along.

It has generally been accepted in New Testament scholarship that 'the poor' mentioned in Galatians 2:10 referred 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 refers to the poor in Jerusalem.

J. Loius 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'.[19] Richard Horsley also makes the 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.[20]

This line of argument receives overwhelming support from a number of commentators, including Ben Witherington,[21] Richard Longenecker[22] and James Dunn.[23]

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' specifically and narrowly referred to those in the Jerusalem church, then it is understandable that Paul's collection project is a direct result from the command received from the Pillars of Jerusalem.

However, this consensus has been recently and rightfully challenged by Bruce Longenecker. According to

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.[24] By assessing data from various patristic writers such as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius and Aphrahat, Longenecker concludes that, at least until the middle of the fourth century, 'the poor' in Galatians 2:10 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 this interpretation changed, as testified to by Ephrem, Jerome, and John Chrysostom where 'the poor' takes on a technical term and has been since then referred to narrowly as 'the poor in Jerusalem'.[25]

If Longenecker is correct in his interpretation that the phrase, 'remember the poor', does not have geographical restriction, it opens up fresh perspectives in reading Paul's concern for the poor—that caring for the poor is without geographical restriction, and that the Jerusalem collection constitutes one of the examples in which Paul establishes his care for the poor. In other words, Paul was eager to remember the poor not only in Jerusalem but also in the local congregations that he established throughout the Mediterranean basin. This means also that Paul desired to help not only his fellow Jews, but also the Gentiles. This is significant, as helping the poor transcends not only geographical but also ethnic boundaries.

It is also interesting to note that a century after the time of Paul, there is a legend that depicts the apostle as someone who had deep concern for the poor. According to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a rich lady by the name of Tryphaena left 'much apparel and gold' for Paul 'for the ministry of the poor' (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* II.47). This narrative is notable in that it highlights that Paul, even a century after his death, is remembered as someone through whom the resources of the rich could be used to channel help to the poor.

2. The Jerusalem collection

Organising a major relief fund for the poor in Jerusalem was no easy task for Paul.[26] This massive project took at least a number of years and covered churches from the regions of Macedonia and Achaia (Rom 15:25-28), and possibly Asia Minor and Galatia as well. We do not have any information on how the collection was carried out in all these regions except from the church in Corinth (see 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9).

In 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, Paul lays down his instructions to the Corinthians for the collection. They were to set aside a sum of money on a weekly basis so that on his next visit, the con-

24 Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 159.

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

26 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); 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); and Verbrugge and Krell, *Paul & Money*, 107–201.

tribution would be ready for dispatch to Jerusalem. However, these instructions were either ignored by the Corinthians, or were not properly followed through. The collection stalled.

There are a number of reasons why this happened. One of them could be the deteriorating relationship between the Corinthians and Paul after the writing of 1 Corinthians. Another reason could be the presence of the 'super apostles' mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11 who sought to undermine his apostolic authority among the Corinthians.

In order to exhort the Corinthians to complete what they had earlier set up to do in helping the poor (2 Cor 8:11), Paul addressed the issues surrounding the collection at some length in 2 Corinthians 8–9. There are a number of economic principles at work according to Paul's instructions in these two chapters.

a) The principle of grace and generosity

Paul's primary motivation in urging the Corinthians to complete the collection is rooted in the example of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul appealed 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.'

The standard reading of 2 Corinthians 8:9, as reflected in the NRSV, is to take the juxtaposition of opposites: the Christological movement from wealth to poverty ('though he was rich he became poor'), and the anthropological movement from poverty to wealth through Christ ('you through his poverty might become rich').

The Christological movement from wealth to poverty has often been interpreted by a large majority of commentators in an allegorical or spiritual sense—the wealth of Jesus is generally read as the quality of his heavenly, pre-existent status as God, and his becoming poor referred to his incarnation or taking on the human form.[27] The paradoxical anthropological movement from poverty to richness is often interpreted as believers' benefits of salvation or spiritual enrichment.[28]

These Christological and soteriological readings are by no means impossible. However, we should note that 2 Corinthians 8:9 is directly related to the context in which Paul is urgently appealing to the Corinthians to complete the contribution to the Jerusalem collection. As Barclay notes, since 'wealth' is read as spiritual benefits, possessed, renounced, and gained, the application to the appeal for financial contribution requires a shift from the metaphorical to the literal domain: what Christ has done in giving up his wealth for others, so the Corinthians must now do in giving up their material possessions for the Jerusalem saints.[29]

However, this direct and parallel application has its problems, as highlighted by Furnish, where the call is to

27 For example, see Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 579; and Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed, WBC 40 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). 40–41.

28 For example, see Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 578–79 and Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, AB (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 417.

29 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 337.

ensure that Jerusalem believers have sufficiency (2 Cor 8:15) and not riches, and that the Corinthians are not called to do what Christ did in giving up everything until they become poor. Furnish acknowledges the awkwardness in this reading:

> Paul is not presenting Christ's act of grace as an example for the Corinthians to emulate. If that were the case he ought to urge them to become 'poor' for the sake of others as Christ did, but this he specifically does not ask them to do … The admonition implicit in this statement is not 'Do what Christ did,' or even 'Do for others what Christ has done for you.' It is, rather, 'Do what is appropriate to your status as those who have been enriched by the grace of Christ.'[30]

In light of this, Barclay questions if a closer parallel between a Christological statement in an economic metaphor which matches its financial context that governs the behaviour of believers could be possible.[31] He proposes reading the participial phrase, *plousios ōn*, in 2 Corinthians 8:9 as causal, rendering a nuanced reading as 'because he was rich he became poor'.[32] This reading carries the meaning that 'it was precisely because of his wealth, and as an expression of it, that Christ made himself poor. Here, then, "wealth" means not what Christ possessed, but, with a different and paradoxical sense, *the "wealth" of his generosity*'.[33]

Barclay further justifies his reading by tracing Paul's flow of thought in 2 Corinthians 8 where the notion of generosity is clearly highlighted. Paul described the Macedonians' giving as the result of overflowing of the wealth of their generosity in 2 Corinthians 8:2 ('overflowed in a wealth of generosity'). This same language of abundance is seen also in Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to give generously in 2 Corinthians 8:7 ('we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking'), 2 Corinthians 9:8 ('so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work') and 2 Corinthians 9:11 ('You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity').

Based on this observation, Barclay concludes that 2 Corinthians 8–9 is saturated with the language of abundance and wealth, and 'people abound not in what they have but in what they give, and "wealth" consists not in possession but in generosity'.[34] As such, Barclay proposes the reading of 2 Corinthians 8:9 as follows:

> You know the *charis* of the Lord Jesus Christ, that in his wealth (that is, generosity) he became poor (a single term covering his incarnation, life and death), so that by his poverty (by all that is effected by 'the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me', Gal 2.20) you might become rich, in the same mo-

30 Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 418.

31 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 338.

32 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 339.

33 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 340, emphasis his.

34 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 340.

mentum of generous love.[35]

This reading, according to Barclay, provides a tight fit between the Christological and soteriological statements of 2 Corinthians 8:9, and the exhortation to the Corinthians to give generously. Christ has made the Corinthians rich in generosity and thus, they are to give generously to the Jerusalem collection.[36]

If Barclay is right in his reading, we see Paul using the metaphor of generosity to effect a change of behaviour in the Corinthians. The Corinthians were exhorted to see beyond themselves by having the poor in mind—the poor in Jerusalem who were beyond both their geographical and ethnic boundaries.

Drawing on the narrative of Jesus, Paul challenged the Corinthians to finish the collection for the poor in Jerusalem by drawing on the principle of generosity—the abundance that the Corinthians currently enjoyed would supply the needs of the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:11–15). To challenge the Corinthians further, Paul reiterated 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 evoked an agrarian metaphor, suggesting that all giving to the Jerusalem collection was like sowing seed that would reap a harvest. Finally, Paul underscored 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).

b) The principle of equality

Paul continues to ground his appeal for the collection on the notion of equality, or *isotēs*, in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15:

> I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance (*isotētos*) 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 (*isotētos*). As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'

According to Garland, the notion of equality is the 'principle undergirding the whole project' where it relates to justice and fairness.[37] Garland also further comments that in 2 Corinthians 8:13, Paul literally writes, 'but out of equality' (*all' ex isotētos*) the Corinthians should give generously. In other words, Paul was not talking about the purpose of giving so that it might create equality, but that the giving should be from equality.[38] The question of equality goes beyond giving according to one's means or one's possessions (2 Cor 8:11-12). Equality is rooted in the grace of the Macedonians who gave generously and Christ who gave himself completely for humanity.

L. L. Welborn has carried out a study on the notion of equality based

35 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 343.

36 Barclay, 'Because he was Rich he became Poor', 343.

37 David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 382. See also, Georgi, *Remembering the Poor*, 87.

38 Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 382.

on the Greek concepts of friendship, politics, and the *cosmos*.[39] Space does not permit me to review all the three contexts, and I will focus only on the context of friendship, which is most relevant for our purpose in this essay.

Within the context of friendship, Aristotle has much to say about equality. According to him, 'friendship is equality' and the true friend is 'equal and alike'.[40] However, Aristotle also recognised that not all friendships were between equals. There existed two sorts of equality: friendship between equals and friendship between unequals. For the former, Aristotle insisted that equality was measured in numerical sense according to the same standard. For the latter, such as friendship between a benefactor and a client, or a superior and an inferior, equality must be proportional, and this often benefitted the benefactor or the superior party.[41] The inferior friend was often required to give honour and respect to the superior friend in accordance with the friendship of unequals.

Let us now consider how equality works in Paul's community. Paul's instructions to the Corinthians were clear—that all, whether rich or poor, should give to the Jerusalem poor. However, for the collection to be successful, he would have expected the rich believers and those who at least enjoyed some form of surplus beyond the subsistence level to contribute more to the collection, while those poorer believers would contribute less. Believers of means like Crispus (Acts 19:8; 1 Cor 1:14), Gaius (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14), and Erastus (Rom 16:23) in the Corinthian community were expected to contribute a large portion to the collection compared to the large majority who lived at or below subsistence level.

As I have suggested earlier in this essay, the notion of those who were rich contributing to those who were poor beyond their social circles was alien in the Greco-Roman world. However, this notion had been set aside, and Paul now imposed on these richer Christ-followers the obligation to help the poor.

In addition, Paul also explicitly used the example of the Macedonians, described as those in 'extreme poverty' (2 Cor 8:2), as those who gave generously, and even 'beyond their means' (2 Cor 8:3) to the Jerusalem collection. They even begged Paul for this privilege of sharing their generosity (2 Cor 8:3). Paul also referred to the Macedonians in Romans 15:26-27, where they

> have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed *they* owe *it to them*; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.

This rhetoric would have sounded shocking to the richer Christ-followers in Corinth in a number of ways. Firstly, how could those who lived in extreme poverty, presumably living at or below the level of subsistence who might need assistance for survival themselves, be extremely generous in giv-

39 L. L. Welborn, '"That There May be Equality": The Contexts and Consequences of a Pauline Ideal', *New Testament Studies* 59 (2013): 73-90.

40 Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 8.5.5; Pol. 3.16.

41 Aristotle *Eth. Nic* 7.9.5.

ing? If anything, this should move the Corinthians, who were better off materially, to greater generosity.

Secondly, Paul's language in Romans 15:26-27, claiming that the Gentiles owed their generosity to the Jerusalem poor reflects a language of reciprocity. Within the context of the Greco-Roman world, Welborn suggests that this language clearly placed the Corinthians as beneficiaries.[42] By the logic of inverse proportion, they were obliged to make a gift to the Jerusalem Christians based on the notion of equality.

Furthermore, Paul also designated the collection as a 'gift' or *charis* in 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 6, and this evoked the notion of reciprocity. He appealed also to the unequal status of the Corinthians who enjoyed abundance and compared it to the Jerusalem believers who suffered need. This inequality must be addressed (2 Cor 8:13-15).

This sort of argument would have been offensive to the Greco-Roman culture deeply rooted in the obligations between benefactors and clients and the superior and the inferior. Furthermore, Furnish argues that this giving by the Corinthians to the Jerusalem church did not place the obligation for the Jerusalem church to reciprocate in monetary contribution in the future.[43] The Jerusalem poor were placed in positions of superiority because they first gave the Corinthians spiritual blessings. Spiritual wealth now stood 'in proxy for material wealth so that Pau's congregations become the ones who owe the Jerusalem saints'.[44]

According to Welborn, this expectation of Paul based on equality would have appeared to be 'a dangerous attempt to reverse the established social relations of power within Greco-Roman friendship'.[45] The table had now been turned. The rich, always viewed as the benefactor, were now called to be the beneficiaries. The wealthy, out of equality, were now obliged to the poor. The Gentiles were now called upon to give to the Jews. Not only would this be completely unheard of in the Greco-Roman world, it also stood in sharp contrast to the economy of the Roman Empire where tribute was always given to the elites and superiors.

In light of this, Welborn suggests that 'Paul contributes to the tentative emergence of a new category of thought—economic'.[46] The goal of this new economic structure was to achieve an equality of possessions between persons of different classes—rich and poor, and ethnic groups—Jews and Gentiles, through voluntary redistribution of wealth.

c) The principle of sharing resources as a family

One interesting feature in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is the frequent use of sibling language. Out of the 12 times where *adelphos* (brother and sister) or *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters) appears in 2 Corinthians, seven are directly related

42 Welborn, 'That There May be Equality', 81.

43 Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 419-420.

44 B. J. Oropeza, *Exploring Second Corinthians: Death and Life, Hardship and Rivalry* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 518.

45 Welborn, 'That There May be Equality', 80.

46 Welborn, 'That There May be Equality', 88.

to the sharing of financial resources: six are found in 2 Corinthians 8–9 (see 2 Cor 8:1, 18, 22 [twice]; 9:3 and 5) and once in 2 Corinthians 11:9.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1, Paul appealed to the sibling imagery in emphasising the example of the Macedonians who had generously contributed to the fund: 'We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia.'

Paul also used sibling imagery to highlight the importance of the charge given to those who had been entrusted with the administration of the collection. Five times the word *adelphos* or *adelphoi* is used to describe Titus, along with other men, who were entrusted with carrying the collection with Paul to Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:18, 22 (2x); 9:3, 5). Paul also gave the credentials of these brothers. They were enthusiastic about the project, trustworthy, praised by others, proven in their service, and were representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ (2 Cor 8:16–9:5). Such superlative praise by Paul was to further reinforce the fact that these brothers were siblings full of integrity who could be trusted with the administration of finances. Any fear of fraud or doubt was completely removed with the use of sibling imagery.

To emphasise that siblings share resources with one another, Paul further recounted that it was the *adelphoi* from Macedonia who supplied monetary assistance to alleviate his financial needs so that he need not depend on the Corinthians for support (2 Cor 11:9).

Within the Greco-Roman setting, the image of siblings evoked physical and emotional security, care and belonging, and mutuality and respect that existed only within the familial and household kinship.[47] Family members must not be in conflict with one another, and wealthy members may not invoke privileges that society granted them over others who were of lower status.[48] In light of this, Paul's frequent use of sibling language clearly speaks of his vision that the Christ-followers should be a very close-knit group.

This fictive kinship language promoted egalitarian structures compared to other groups that were organizationally a reflection of the structured hierarchical first-century society. It also eliminated all social, economic, and ethnic boundaries established by Greco-Roman society among different groups of people that divided the Christian community, stunted its growth, and hindered its witness as an alternative assembly.

Paul was keenly aware of the need to provoke the Corinthian Christ-followers to think, and to move them to act in ways that reflected the values of the Mediterranean family in the context of reciprocity and sharing of resources among siblings. By calling the Macedonians *adelphoi*, Paul was challenging the Corinthians to reconsider their reluctance in completing the collection project for the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. He was also attempting to set an example before the Corinthians so that they could emulate the Macedonian *adelphoi* in their giving and sharing of resources with those who were in need in the family.

By doing so, Paul was creating a social identity for the Christ-followers

47 Plutarch, *Frat. amor.* 479A-D.

48 Plutarch, *Frat. amor.* 485C; 486F–487B.

that was radically different from the community that surrounded them. By using sibling metaphor, a new expectation was now imposed on the Corinthians Christ-followers. They could no longer view their Jerusalem poor brothers and sisters through the lenses of socio-economic status and ethnicity. On the contrary, they were to honour, encourage, and build up one another as brothers and sisters. Therefore, 'sibling' was a fitting metaphor to shape, guide, and rebuke the community towards honour, respect, and sharing of resources so that no one had need. It ultimately drove home the point that the Corinthians belonged together as one and within this family of Christ, blood was indeed thicker than water.

IV Conclusion

The economic principles undergirding Paul's concern with inequality of income distribution in the Roman Empire propelled him to remember the poor and carry out fundraising activities to alleviate their hardship. By examining Paul's major collection for the Jerusalem poor, we see three principles at work: the principle of grace and generosity, the principle of equality, and the principle of sharing resources as a family.

Collectively, these principles were revolutionary in nature as they went against the prevailing social and economic conventions of the Greco-Roman world. Paul used these principles to construct a new economic structure to achieve an equality of possessions between persons of different social classes—rich and poor; geographical locations—Judea and the Mediterranean world; and ethnic groups—Jews and Gentiles, through voluntary redistribution of wealth.

Paul's vision of the new economic structure has far-reaching implications today where we see the continuous rise of income inequality. The gap between the rich and poor is getting wider. As Christ-followers today, we are called to a lifestyle of generosity and good stewardship. Those of us who are wealthier should be challenged to give more in terms of higher percentage to the poor, compared to those who are poorer, so that everyone in the family has a fair share of resources. In this family, all barriers that serve to divide us—the social-economic, geographical and ethnic boundaries—are removed through Paul's economic principles.