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Raising Funds in One Place, Giving to Another: Gift Distribution Today

Virginia Luckett

Introduction

In the previous essay, John Barclay discussed the ways in which Paul encouraged churches in Greece and Rome to give to fellow believers a great distance from them; in Jerusalem, a city that few of them would have visited or – before coming to faith – had much commonality. The purpose of this paper is to think about modern giving and benefaction, in the light of 2 Corinthians 8–9. It is a modern-day contextual approach, which draws on the passage as if readers were the first hearers of Paul's message, being asked to think about those living in poverty today.

The passages from 2 Corinthians 8–9 that form the basis of Professor Barclay's contribution are good ones to be looking at, because they have great relevance to those fundraising for church and development work internationally. I have great joy and privilege of being a fundraiser for Tearfund. We aim to inspire Christians and churches in the UK to join with us in the mission and vision of Tearfund – to mobilize local churches all over the world to alleviate global poverty. So much of what Paul describes and which Professor Barclay has unpacked, in practical terms, is our experience of fundraising now, in the present day here in the UK for often unseen and quite hard-to-know churches and partners overseas.

In fact, it is so much my world that I am basing my contribution on this passage of Scripture too, but I will be taking the liberty of giving it a bit of a modern-day twist. So, as you read this passage again, imagine yourselves as one of the first hearers of this letter – not from Paul, but from a charity like Tearfund – but in the present day:

Now, brothers and sisters, good reader, we, Tearfund want you to know about the grace that God has given the Ugandan and Peruvian churches, so many churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify, because I have seen with my own eyes that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations. (2 Cor. 8.1-5)

The extraordinary generosity of people in poverty

The primary way we in Tearfund do our long-term, life-transforming developmental work of teaching people to help themselves out of poverty is through Bible stories. That should not come as a surprise because in Heb. 4.12 we are told, 'The word of God is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword.' It was Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century church reformer, who said, 'The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.' We know from our own experience that the Bible is unlike any other book because it is the living words of God; when you wrestle with its meaning, you are changed. We also know that belief is a driver of behaviour, so if your work involves facilitating behaviour change, then it is important to engage people's beliefs.

So let me now take you to Uganda, to meet Betty. Betty lives in rural Uganda; she attends a village church that is part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, one of Tearfund's partners. She is living in close to absolute poverty with an income of around a dollar a day. She lives in a small mud hut that she and her husband built with their own hands. She has a pit latrine, which is basically a hole in the ground, to use as a toilet, and which she has been taught to dig by the church. She has to walk miles to collect water, there is no electricity, very little fuel, her food is totally dependent on successful harvests and the changing climate is affecting that. Life, by anyone's standards, is extremely hard for Betty and to add to her struggles, she is grieving because she is recently bereaved; her mother died about six months ago. She is a woman who appears to have *nothing to give* and is in desperate need to receive.

She was at her church and she heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand (Mt. 14.14-21), a very familiar story to many. After the teaching from the pastor, who is also one the Tearfund-trained facilitators working in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, they had a discussion under the community tree. They discussed what this story might mean for them. They marvelled at how Jesus took the loaves and fishes and fed so many people; they sympathized with the disciples and how they struggled to have faith and to trust God to provide. They recognized that Jesus only took a small thing, what was in his hands, and multiplied it up; they remembered how many other stories they had heard from the Bible that also communicated that God often takes very small things, given with a faithful heart, and multiplies them up. They discussed what 'loaves and fishes' they might have – what they might have in their hands – however small, that they could offer to God and use creatively to bring something of God's kingdom here on earth.

After the discussion, Betty went home – and when she woke the next morning she said, 'Husband, I think I have a "loaves and fishes" under our bed.' She got down on her knees and she took out a small box from under their small truckle bed and revealed what was inside: a single item – a ball of wool. This ball of wool was precious to Betty, as it was the only thing her mother had left her when she died.

Despite the way that she treasured the wool, Betty said to her husband, 'I am going to sell it and use it for God's kingdom here in our village.' With the few coins she made from selling the ball of wool she was able to buy some cassava seeds, which she planted

and nurtured. When the cassava had grown she had enough to feed her family and to save for seeds. She planted again, and in the second year and she was able to grow enough cassava to feed her family *and* to give to some to her neighbours. The year after that, she was able to grow enough to feed her family and neighbours *and* some to sell. With the money she made from selling the spare cassava, she bought a cow, which now provides milk for her family and the village. Betty, the woman who had nothing, used her 'loaves and fishes' – the ball of wool her mother left her – offered it to God and used her God-given entrepreneurial creativity to help feed her whole village.

This amazing truth is deeply challenging to us all, because Betty had learnt something that not many of us grasp: she had become convinced of something so deep down that, despite having nothing, *she was able to give*. Indeed, she was able to give to the work of the kingdom in a way that many of those of us in the West, in our heart of hearts, would regard as foolhardy and beyond expectations.

So, let's go back to our fresh reading of 2 Cor. 8.8-9:

So I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others' like Betty. 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.

Jesus's generosity

The journey to become convinced of something deep down, as Betty was, can take a very long time. I've been a Christian for half of my life now and I still find it utterly amazing that Jesus, as it says in Phil. 2.6-8,

being in very nature God [meaning he *is* God], did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Our God became human: the one through whom all things were made became human. God with us.

I think it is only through my work with Tearfund that I have come to understand a something of the life lived by a person being born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago into circumstances that, we would say today, were impoverished. To be born into such poverty means you are born into a life of acute vulnerability. Jesus's family, with Joseph as a carpenter, were unlikely to experience the absolute poverty experienced by too many people around the world today – but they were not a part of the Roman, or even Jewish, 1 per cent.

About three years ago, I went to visit one of Tearfund's partners in a very isolated part of the Andes in Peru, where I met a wonderful couple, Muma Julia and her husband Fernando, who was a shepherd. They lived in a hut made of mud and straw,

on the side of mountain, at a high-enough altitude that those of us visiting had to take altitude sickness tablets. While the men went to look at the sheep, Muma Julia chatted with the women of the group about her life. One of the topics of discussion involved the way that she gave birth to her nine children, not all of whom survived, by hanging on to some leather straps that Fernando had tied to the roof of their hut so she could hang in a semi-squat upright position to cope with the labour and birth. She had no medical pain relief or assistance, just lavender tea and her husband, who – at least – knew something about helping sheep to give birth. It was a reminder to us of how many women still give birth and of how Mary might have given birth to Jesus.

The reality, that we in the West often fail to understand, is that the fact that both Jesus and Mary, his teenaged mother, actually survived the birth experience is quite extraordinary. Estimates of the infant mortality rate at that time of Jesus, suggest that a person had a 30–50 per cent chance of dying before reaching maturity.¹ At any time during Jesus's life, there might have been failed harvests and mass starvation, unexpected disease or injury or political unrest and war. Life, for the vast majority of the population, at the time of Jesus would have been brutal, painful and short. Nevertheless, this is where God chose to be with us.

Jesus's incarnation shows us how closely he aligns himself with the poor. It shows us that he chose a life of deep human intensity, raw, naked and utterly vulnerable – at the mercy of the Roman Empire and everything that it could throw against him. He truly made himself nothing, by taking on the likeness of a human, at that time, in that place. It shows us just through thinking about the life he would have led, which I can guess at through the countless stories I have heard and people I have met who are living in absolute poverty today, just how far he was prepared to go to save us. It shows me again, just how much he *loves*, when our God could have led any other life, but he chose life in a marginal corner of a great empire.

His life and example is one of deep generosity and sacrifice rooted in immense love, that self-emptying *kenosis* that would culminate in the Godhead's ultimate act of love and generosity, Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. The cross is an unrepeatable, a once-and-for-all act of redemption for the whole of creation, but so much of the hallmark of Jesus's life is his generosity. It is a generosity expressed in empathy, compassion and care. We see this in the way that he had compassion for people, how he gave of his time, care and love, how he prayed with and for people. One example that really sums this up is Mk 5.21–35, the story of the woman with bleeding. She was a woman with an illness that would have separated her from her community, and she had few resources left, having, as Mark says, 'spent all she had' (v. 26). It seems that she did not want to interrupt Jesus on his way to the house of the synagogue leader Jairus, and was happy to try her luck – to try to touch Jesus's clothes – and melt away in the crowd. Yet Jesus, feeling the effect of her touch stopped, sought her out, and affirmed her action and

¹ M. Bar-Ilan, 'Infant Mortality in the Land of Israel in Late Antiquity', in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*, ed. S. Fishbane and J. N. Lightstone (Montreal: Concordia University, 1990), 3–25.

her faith (v. 34), an acknowledgement that let the crowd know that he regarded her as someone acceptable, touchable and worth his time.

On some occasions, the moment was small, or taking place in passing: a drink of water at a well, a momentary pause in a journey to heal a person with leprosy or a man who was blind.² On other occasions, it was dramatic tremendous, lavish – and life-transforming, like the changing of water into wine at a wedding, saving a huge social drama or the feeding of five thousand people on a fairly remote hillside.³

Now, let's return to our updated letter, and think about what Jesus's example means for those of us who follow him.

Generosity encouraged

Because just remember this, good reader: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor. 9.6-7)

In my department at Tearfund, we put a good deal of effort and time into increasing our understanding of our supporters and potential supporters. This is in part because we really value our supporters, but also because we want to learn what might encourage them in their faith – and in their support of Tearfund.

One of the approaches taken over the past decade is an occasional longitudinal survey, a piece of market research that reaches thousands of the general public in the UK. Through it, we have been able to track growth and decline in church size, regular church attendance and people's perception of Tearfund. From the insights it provides, we can learn more about what people know and understand about Tearfund and our fellow Christian development agencies, what motivates people to give and how to reach our target audience, both in terms of media and messaging.

For example, Figure 15.1 shows that regular church attendance was 6.3 million people in 2013 and that there was an underlying downward trend, meaning that by 2018, there could be just 5 million regular churchgoers. The regular churchgoers (those who attend once a month or more) are split up across the denominations (Figure 15.2).

As well as being identifiable by denomination, regular churchgoers can also be split up into 'tribes' that have particular theological beliefs, behaviours, styles and approaches to worship and liturgy. This can be seen in Figure 15.3, which also shows that the only tribe seeing ongoing growth are the charismatics.

We use the information we can draw from these surveys, along with other research and conversations, to develop our fundraising communications with the UK church. At the same time, one thing remains true as we seek to engage every tribe and denomination in the church: we are seeking to inspire *true generosity*. Such generosity

² E.g. Jn 4.7; Mt. 8.1-4; Lk. 17.11-19; Jn 9.1-7; Mk 10.46-52.

³ Jn 2.1-12; Mt. 14.13-21.

Base = UK Regular churchgoers: (N=1361 adults 16yrs plus) attending church at least once monthly, TAM 2013

Figure 15.1. UK church attendance, February 2005–February 2013

is a response rooted in a life giving stream of gratitude – gratitude towards a generous God who gives us everything. Henri Nouwen describes it in the following terms:

Asking people for money is giving them the opportunity to put their resources at the disposal of the kingdom. It's offering people the chance to invest what they have in the work of God. When Jesus fed five thousand people with only five loaves and two fishes, he showed us how God's love can multiply the effects of our generosity. God's kingdom is the place of abundance where every generous act overflows its original bounds and becomes part of the unbounded grace of God at work in the world.⁴

This is also the subject of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2016, *Dethroning Mammon*, which argues that learning to see correctly is a spiritual discipline through which we can remember the identity of things of that are of true value – which are not the things of mammon.⁵

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Spirituality of Fundraising* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Ministries and the Estate of Henri Nouwen, 2004), 25.

⁵ Justin Welby, *Dethroning Mammon* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016).

Denominations of UK Regular Churchgoers (6.3m)

Base: Regular churchgoers

Figure 15.2. Denominations of regular UK churchgoers

6.3 million attend church regularly: A drop of 18 per cent over 5 years

According to this trend there will be only 5 million regular churchgoers in 5 years' time.

Base = All UK adults (N=11,000 16yrs plus), TAM 2013.

Figure 15.3. Christian traditions of UK regular churchgoers

True generosity is about conversion: a conversion away from the worldly things that we place our hope and security in, however good and right they may appear to be – our families, our savings, our house, our job – that ultimately are not God. It is about denying the god Mammon the domination that it desires over our lives. This means stepping away from the false hope of security and abundance that tempts us to pursue our own gains at the expense of others', to work and earn to a point of exhaustion. Doing this involves cultivating deep prayer, including the prayer of a listening heart that hears God's compassion over the suffering in our world – suffering that he has called all Christians, and organizations like Tearfund, to help alleviate. From this root, becoming truly generous involves stepping bravely into a space of recognizing the *truth* of our lives – that we are totally dependent on God and trusting that God will indeed provide all that we need. This is what Betty did, as we saw at the beginning of this paper.

What an amazing vision Nouwen describes: every generous act becoming part of the unbounded grace of God at work in the world! This is what Betty, in her extreme poverty, understood as she gave away her excess cassava to her neighbours *before* selling it at the market, and this is what we need to understand as givers. This understanding and attitude challenges the distance gap between the giver in the minority world and the recipient in the majority world and can prevent it from becoming an empathy or relationship gap.

Conclusions

So let us return to 2 Corinthians one last time:

This service of giving that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others 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. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! Praise God! (2 Cor. 9.12-15)

In this essay, we have witnessed the extraordinary generosity of people living in poverty through the example of Betty, who gave up the last gift she had from her mother in order to serve her family and community, and who gave away the abundance of her second crop before selling it. We have also looked at Jesus's generosity, rooted in his love and compassion and expressed in his sharing of the human experience, living life on the margins of his world, and giving his time, energy and power to serve. Finally, we looked at encouraging generosity in the church in the UK to give to those living in poverty around the world. I suggest that while communications skills and messaging are hugely important in this work, without a deeper understanding of the existence of the roots of a deep generosity in a person's relationship with

God, fundraisers in Christian organizations will struggle to overcome the distance in geography and understanding that lies between rich and poor across the globe today. However, if we can follow Paul's example and recognize both the existence of this deeper generosity and encourage Christians to realize it, we may be able to bridge this gap.