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Response to Hannah Swithinbank

Fiona J. R. Gregson

Hannah Swithinbank's paper reminds us of the impact of the fall and grace on Christian approaches to giving. In one sense, the fact that all have sinned means that everyone is 'in it together'. Christians know that they all, in some way, fall short and do not deserve the grace they have received, and this should, in many ways, make it more difficult to point at someone else as 'undeserving'. The centrality of grace in the New Testament (NT), particularly as we saw in 2 Corinthians 8–9, encourages Christians, who have seen and received grace in God's actions and attitudes to them, to then show that same grace to others. Therefore, the question addressed in the NT is more about why Christians should give, rather than who should or should not receive.

I think the NT emphasis on receiving that we may give provides a contrast in emphasis from the current questions that Hannah highlights about deserving or not deserving, fair or not fair, contributing or not. With the question of contributing or not contributing, I find the NT encouragement for all to be involved in beneficial acts, when that would not necessarily be the cultural norm, interesting – while there is a focus on giving to those in need, everyone is also encouraged to be giving, and praised for doing so, even when they are poor (2 Cor. 8.2-3; Lk. 21.1-4). My experience as a parish minister is that it is often those who are in difficult and precarious financial situations who are very generous, perhaps as they empathize more acutely with the situations of those they are giving to and are more aware of their dependency at times on receiving and the everyday vulnerability that can lead to poverty.

Hannah noted the different forms of poverty that exist, and our discussion of the papers and the example of people who are idle (ἀτάκτοι *ataktōi*) in the Letters to the Thessalonians raise the question about what someone's key need is: it may be financial, or it may be some other form of practical, relationship or spiritual help. The most pressing need may not be money.

Hannah explores the tension between individual and societal responsibility for poverty. The NT points to societal/external causes of poverty and encourages both individual and collective actions of generosity to those in need. For example, the Macedonians are not blamed for their poverty, and their poverty may be related to their affliction (2 Cor. 8.2-3). The Antiochene believers decide (corporately) each according to ability (individually) to provide help to the believers in Judaea (Acts 11.29).

The other thing that occurred to me as we discussed the two papers is that some questions – around how those in need are helped and how both societal and individual action and responsibility are encouraged – are easier to address in a more local relational setting or community, where individuals are known, where particular needs can be responded to and where personal agency can be encouraged. However, action would still be required for structural societal change.