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Review: Responding and Summarizing

Craig L. Blomberg

By way of introduction, this essay reviews some of the highlights of each of the essays in this volume and reflects on a few of the questions that arise from them. Although I have written two medium-size works on riches/poverty and stewardship¹ and experienced at least a little bit of life in thirty-two countries, including a few very poor ones, and a few very poor neighbourhoods in other, more affluent countries overall, I have neither the track record of scholarship on these issues nor the extensive periods of time overseas, especially in contexts of extreme poverty, that many of the contributors to this volume have. So I hope my summary comments can prove at least a little useful.

Justin Thacker opens the volume with a contrast between what he deems to be individualistic and relational approaches to poverty, its solutions and even the image of God in humanity. As a counterbalance to analyses that treat only individuals and their plight, it is an excellent reminder of what is more commonly called systemic injustice and which often requires systemic solutions. I wonder, however, if the either-or mentality of the chapter is the most helpful, especially since it takes individuals to create relationships. Thacker begins with the account of a Ugandan widow named Charity who has been prevented from earning an adequate wage for her children and her because she will not sleep with her boss. Somehow, we in the West are implicated in this, and there is the hint that if we were less capitalistic and individualistic, the problem would be mitigated. Yet, as Thacker implicitly acknowledges, one solution is to replace the corrupt boss with a fair one, a legal issue that seems unrelated to the particular system of economics of the society, even as it has everything to do with cultural systems of morality and justice. Jesus's world more closely resembled this African context than modern Western ones; is there a lesson to be learned from the parable of the persistent widow that Jesus told (Lk. 18.1-8), both at the literal and spiritual levels, that might prove more effective than implicating former British colonial models (as if African tribal ones were less hierarchical) or re-defining the image of God?

Lynn Cohick and Katie Harrison look at poverty and its causes, first in the ancient Mediterranean world of the New Testament (NT) and then today. Cohick identifies

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999); Craig L. Blomberg, *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

four main causes in antiquity: disease and malnutrition, the inability to work to earn enough money, injustices that allowed only those in power to benefit from government policies or behaviour and the clash of Roman ideologies with those of Rome's subjugated peoples. She is most interested in the latter two causes of poverty and develops them at greater length. For me, most significant, however, is her contrast between the data of Classical Studies and archaeological investigations and the theories of the social scientific disciplines where they are applied to the first-century Roman Empire. Against the social scientific analysis that extrapolates from empires in the ancient world in general, Cohick observes that the actual data and primary sources available to us suggest a much more economically diversified population than we are otherwise led to believe. Especially in more urban contexts, while there were certainly plenty of 'dirt poor' people, there was also a definable middle class – at least to the extent that they had enough surplus to survive one year of drought or bad harvests. We must not envision Jesus and the Twelve, or his first followers around the empire, as coming from the most destitute of circumstances, as in some forms of liberation theology, but reflecting a broader cross section of socio-economic strata.

Harrison highlights how broken relationships invariably stand behind the plight of the homeless and the most destitute of our world today, leaving people without the support systems of family, neighbourhoods or, at times, even social services. Natural disasters and governmental corruption also produce a lot of problems. She rightly stresses that government and the private business sector have their responsibilities towards meeting the needs of the poor; the problem should not be left entirely to the church and para-church movements, who come nowhere close to having the resources to meet the world's huge needs. Indeed, what people in all three communities do is crucial; more study needs to determine which community accomplishes which tasks the best. Then we might come closer to meeting some of the UN goals for the elimination of poverty in our world.

In passing, both authors raise questions for me as they distinguish between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty means the inability to access resources to maintain even the most minimum of decent standards of living with respect to having shelter, food, clothing, clean water, medicine and the like. Relative poverty occurs when the disparity becomes too great between what one individual or group of people have and the standard of living of the most well-off in a given society. Harrison, in particular, believes we have an obligation to meet the needs of those who live in relative poverty as well as absolute poverty, but this raises some troubling questions. As technology and access to it increases, even the relatively poor can live comparatively comfortable lives. Are we really expected to work so that all these people can then become what now is called the middle class?

Put sharply, we can make a huge dent in absolute poverty; one study suggests that we have moved from having 1.9 billion people beneath the UN poverty line to 900 million in the world in the last twenty-five years. However, if Christians think they have the responsibility to address relative poverty, then we could one day face a situation in which most of the people in our world live above the poverty line but are still considered relatively poor compared to the richest individuals. We could face the 'guilt trip' caused by the suggestions that the wealthy have to divest themselves of their

resources *simply* because they have 'too much' rather than because others also have 'too little' (borrowing the terms from 2 Cor. 8.13-15). We need much more Christian reflection and instruction on the kinds of personal lifestyles, economic investments and governmental policies that help meet basic human needs without squelching the human desire to improve one's own situation and create new wealth, some of which can then be shared – and we must resist the temptation to continually redefine basic human needs.

Bruce Longenecker and John Coleby each address benefaction. Longenecker's central point contrasts the macro-scale benefaction seen in the Graeco-Roman world with what was at most a micro-scale equivalent within pre-Constantinian Christianity. Even if early Christians came from a diversity of socio-economic brackets, none that we know of represented the wealthiest of the well-to-do, the kind of people who had the resources to underwrite major building projects or meet the basic needs of the poor in an entire community. We can draw a direct line, however, Longenecker argues, between the micro-scale efforts of the first Christians and the larger undertakings of post-Constantinian Christianity. Indeed, the notion of helping large numbers of poor people, apart from the corn dole in Rome just for citizens, seems to have been a quite distinctive contribution of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Even pagan writers in the second and third centuries commended the efforts of Christians to care for their own and for the needy who were not believers, when most pagans refused to do so.

Coleby follows this overview of the ancient Mediterranean world with an array of fascinating statistics about generosity in the UK today. Given the probably overstated rhetoric in many circles about the demise of the church in Britain, the relative health of the benefaction of its people was encouraging indeed. The statistics show generosity in both Christian and non-Christian sectors of society, including government giving in foreign aid, while recognizing that Christians are, understandably, responsible for giving to distinctively Christian causes.

Both papers reflect briefly on the question of motivation, which raises a host of interesting questions. Since ancient benefaction was geared to create a certain sense of indebtedness among the people helped, how should Christian benefaction operate? Is it appropriate to realize one's indebtedness only to God as benefactor but not to fellow human beings? Is motivation for earthly giving by the hope of heavenly treasure any more noble than if we think we will receive recompense in this life? A theme to add in both essays is discussion of Christian benefaction or stewardship motivated simply by one's gratitude for all that God in Christ has done for us that we could never have deserved. Giving out of gratitude is arguably the most central and/or distinctively Christian motive. Have our appeals for benefaction too quickly followed worldly models?

Closely related to benefaction is patronage. Steve Walton and Helen Hekel lead us through consideration of this topic in antiquity and today. Wealthy patrons in the ancient Graeco-Roman world gathered around themselves an entourage of 'clients', who greeted them every morning, waited on them in various ways, worked odd jobs for them and received enough sustenance to stay alive when full-time or self-sustaining work was not available. They accompanied them in public, singing their praises, and supported them in the ancient equivalent of political campaigns. Reciprocity was the

key glue of patron-client relationships. One can understand, therefore, why Paul, even after vigorously arguing for the responsibility of Christians to help meet their leaders' material needs, refused to accept money for ministry whenever he sensed it might come with strings attached. He would place himself under no one who might attempt to limit what he could do, where he could go or what he would say in preaching the gospel and winning as many for Christ as possible. Walton walks us through Paul's tightrope act in Philippians, as Paul wanted to express his heartfelt appreciation for the financial gift they sent him without wording it in any way that would suggest he recognized that he owed them something in return.

Hekel's treatment of patronage today is more narrative and personal, and raises important questions about ways in which Christians attempt to help the poor today resemble ancient systems of patronage. We are becoming more aware than ever of what one writer has dubbed 'toxic charity'.² It is not enough to meet short-term needs, while setting up mechanisms of aid that merely 'enable' those we help (in the psychological sense of that term), and creating dependence on the helpers in the long term. Given humanity's inherent sense of entitlement, it becomes far too easy to rely on others, whether for foreign aid or welfare at home, rather than working to become self-sustaining. On the other hand, Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ and his understanding of the gifts of the Spirit³ also means that we are created to rely on each other; those with the gift of 'giving' need people who are willing to receive their gifts.

All this raises the interesting question of whether there are acceptable and unacceptable forms of patronage today or whether Christians should eschew all forms of patronage. Jonathan Marshall's recent work, *Jesus, Patrons and Benefactors: Roman Palestine and the Gospel of Luke*, defends the thesis that early Christianity practised no form of patronage, only benefaction.⁴ Benefactors, Marshall argues, were characterized by generosity, often giving lavish gifts, sometimes unexpectedly, perhaps to entire communities, in ways that no one could ever pay back. Patrons, on the other hand, entered into more formal relationships, providing the necessities of life to others, who were expected to reciprocate with definable forms of support for the patrons. Marshall limits his analysis to Luke, so it would be good to ask, even if he is correct, whether or not other NT writers take different tacks.

John Barclay broadens the conversation to gifts more generally. Central to his discussion is the observation that a gift was meant to establish a relationship, even at times a friendship. Unlike today, where we usually assume that calling someone a 'friend' means treating them like a peer, friends were not always equals in the ancient world. Certain kinds of gifts could establish friendship, with conventional forms of response understood. An anonymous gift would have been virtually oxymoronic: How could you establish a relationship if you did not know who provided the gift? Barclay applies these concepts to 2 Corinthians 8–9 and Paul's fundraising efforts among the wealthier Corinthians to aid the most impoverished in the church in Judaea.

² Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

³ See 1 Cor. 12.12–31 and Eph. 4.11–13 for both metaphors used together.

⁴ Jonathan Marshall, *Jesus, Patrons, and Benefactors: Roman Palestine and the Gospel of Luke*, WUNT 2/259 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

A long-distance relationship was difficult, as was accountability for proper use of gifts. Corinthian interest in this project has clearly waned, so Paul focuses on its importance for the Corinthians rather than trying to highlight the Judeans' need. Second Corinthians 8.13-15 proves particularly important as Paul stresses that the Corinthians may find themselves in a position needing help, whether material or spiritual, from the 'mother church' in Jerusalem. The key term *isôtēs*, used twice in these verses, is usually translated 'equality', but is better understood as a fair balance. It is neither possible nor desirable that all enjoy the identical economic standing, but there is something called 'too much' as long as some have 'too little'. Paul does not call on the rich and poor to trade places but for people to give out of their surplus. We might add, however, that we need to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves about how much is surplus.

Virginia Luckett is the one practitioner who does not quite address the identical topic as the biblical scholar preceding her. Instead, her title was 'Engaging with Poverty in the Early Church and Today'. As a fundraiser for a charity, she clearly deals with gifts, at least from the perspective of one who makes regular appeals for money for Christian para-church ministry. She describes some of the best success stories around the world of those who have used micro-loans to become self-sustaining and help entire neighbourhoods or small communities. She strongly defends the need for the existence of the para-church organization as the bridge between the church and the world in areas where specialized expertise is required that many churches will not be able to develop on their own. Nevertheless, she also insists that para-church ministries do as much as possible with the aid and under the guidance of the local church in communities they try to help.

These descriptions of ancient and modern gift-giving raise, but leave largely unanswered, a variety of questions about specific methods. Is it appropriate to promise rewards for giving to motivate greater generosity? I think, especially in the American context, of the tradition of 'naming gifts' – large donations that ensure that one's name will be attached to a certain building or charitable endeavour – or the more modest practice of simply publishing the names of all those who give above various levels. There is no doubt that the methods work, but should Christians use them? One institution I was involved with thought that the way to avoid improper motivation was to put donors' names on buildings only after they gave large gifts and without telling them ahead of time they were going to do so. However, most people seeing donors' names on those buildings will assume the more standard practice was followed and then wonder about their motivation – a perception not lost on the donors who were actually rather upset that their names had been used in this fashion!

Myrto Theochauros offers the only exegesis of the Old Testament in this collection by showing in detail how Ezekiel defines the primal sin as economic injustice, the accumulation of wealth by unjust means, especially with its picture of the unholy king of Tyre and his aspirations. This imagery forms part of the background for Revelation 18, in which the merchants of the world lament their inability to pursue their trade any longer. If one combines the picture of Revelation 18 with the imagery of chapter 17, one discovers John's vision as depicting the evil empire of the last days as the most powerful political, (ir-)religious and economic force in its day. Reflecting on possible parallels in our day does not require one to leave the world of the powerful Western

multinational corporations, even if partial parallels can be found in the increasing power of China, Russia or the oil-rich Islamic nations.

Ellie Hughes offers the most sophisticated and insightful of the practical theology papers with her discussion of poverty and dehumanization today. Precisely because government-originated social services must limit the time and expense spent on any individual person or family, they are not able to do what the church or para-church can – walking with people throughout life. Long-term relationships are the key to getting people back on their feet, or on their feet for the first time. No one is meant to have to go it alone through life, especially not those whose lives are broken through whatever combination of poor choices and adverse circumstances. When functioning properly, para-church organizations should hand people over to a healthy local church as soon as possible, since their resources are finite as well. However, at least para-church ministries have the potential for more holistic and integrated care than government-sponsored services can provide, above all, in intertwining the spiritual and the material.

The one unanswered question from Hughes's paper is the issue of priority. Mt. 25.31-46 is almost certainly not about helping all poor people indiscriminately, despite a recent history of misinterpretation in this direction. Both 'the least' and 'brothers' are terms used in Matthew without exception, when not referring to literal size or biological siblings, for spiritual kin. The parable of the sheep and the goats is about the world's response to *Christian* poor in a culture in which welcoming the messenger meant welcoming the message.⁵ Gal. 6.10 captures the Christian's priority: we must do good to all people but especially to those of the household of faith. If we help unbelievers as much as believers, we lose the incentive for people to become Christians because of the unique community created by those filled with the Holy Spirit. If we help only Christians, we tempt people to become believers for all the wrong motives or, worse, to pretend to come to faith simply for the sake of the material help they can receive.

Fiona Gregson and Hannah Swithinbank address the debate about deserving and undeserving poor. The NT certainly gives examples of undeserving recipients of God's grace, most notably the hungry enemy that believers are to feed (Rom. 12.20). That said, it also asks believers to establish boundaries – the widows to be enrolled on the list of those receiving church support must not be those whose families are in position to care for them (1 Tim. 5.4-16), and the idle who are unwilling to work in Thessalonica should not be given help in getting something to eat (1 Thess. 5.10). In most of the calls to help the poor, no restrictions enable us to limit our giving to those who are more deserving. Like Barclay, Gregson uses 2 Corinthians 8-9 for her most extensive example. However, she does not discuss the most commonly mentioned reason for Paul's making the collection such a priority – his desire to unite Jewish and Gentile wings of the church, given the false rumours being spread about him and his antinomianism.

⁵ See further Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd edn (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 396-403, and the literature there cited.

Swithinbank observes that charitable givers regularly operate with the concept of the 'undeserving poor'. She properly reminds us that, theologically speaking, we could probably all be said to deserve poverty or, better put, that none of us deserves the good life. Finite resources will always lead to differentiation of distribution along some lines. We all know at least a few who, in some fashion, take advantage of any system that is set up. We often do not realize that some are hurt by the system intended to help them. Legislation can create such disparities. The line at which taxes jump from one bracket to the next encourages those who might make just enough more to move up to the new bracket to stay below the dividing line so that their net income does not actually go down. The single mother with a chance to get off welfare often discovers that the job will not pay enough to make up for the childcare and transportation costs she now has to be able to afford. Overall, Swithinbank stresses that in her experience, there are almost always reasons like this, even if at times less obvious, for why people remain on the dole. So these kinds of inequities could be abolished if we had the will to do so. The 'bottom line' is that we are all *unworthy* of being offered love and freedom offered by Christ – but he offers them anyway, and, therefore, so should we.

Christopher Hays turns to the topic of how the church has engaged the society and the state both creatively and critically in helping the poor. The 'powers', a term in Scripture with a pejorative connotation and even a hint of the demonic, can be helpful. They still remain under God's sovereignty, and fallen humans in positions of power remain created in God's image. But they often get in the way and sometimes become exceedingly corrupt. The poor are, in fact, part of the answer to the powers' problems. If the powers will pay attention to them, they will recognize the need to engage them, to temper their heavy handedness and, on occasion, to become weaker and more vulnerable like them. Romans 13 is not the only chapter in Scripture relevant to how Christians should view the government; sometimes the picture of Revelation 13 is more relevant. Given both models, the church should avoid so withdrawing from society that it is no longer relevant and can no longer speak to the powers. On the other hand, it dare not become so enmeshed with them that it cannot address them prophetically when it is necessary.

Appropriately, Stephen Timms, a Christian Member of Parliament, follows Hays with reflections on the powers from within the system. He perceives a trend over his years in government that what once were considered unacceptable failures are now often considered acceptable. The church should, therefore, press the powers on key issues. Like Coleby, he writes optimistically about the church in the UK. In the Greater London area, the church is growing significantly. Despite some continual downward trends in other parts of the country, Timms rejects the notion that it is in terminal decline in Britain. The conference where these essays were first presented was indicative of communication and cooperation across Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and evangelical (including Anglican) lines, which is occurring with encouraging frequency today. The Food Bank movement is an excellent, encouraging example that, even as recently as ten years ago, one would not have predicted that the churches would have been primarily responsible for. The church is actually shaming the current Conservative government, which refuses to own up to the extent of the needs in the UK, especially among those who are employed but with very low wages. The Jubilee

campaign from 2000 is a longer-term example, which received much of its support from the churches. No other institution could have achieved this in such a non-partisan fashion. Timms, likewise, raises the question of which sector is best equipped for which portion of ameliorating poverty. We kid ourselves if we think we do not need the church, the private business sector and the government all committed to the goals of helping the poor.

Francis Campbell concludes the collection by reflecting on the slogan of a 'preferential option' for the poor and Jesus's remark that 'the poor you will have with you always' (Mk 14.7 and parallels). He observes that the important part of Jesus's statement is that Mary anointed him for his burial as a one-off gift of lavish love. He could strengthen his point even more by observing that Jesus alludes to Deut. 15.11, which goes on to stress that we can and must help the poor any time we can. Campbell quotes Pope Francis's reminder that we are a poor church living for the poor, which he is trying to lead by example in some noticeably more modest ways than recent Popes have modelled. Christian institutions of higher education can create an ethos of Christian commitment and justice for the poor even without having a majority of its staff or students being Christians themselves, which is what he is seeking to fashion at St Mary's University, Twickenham. This can be successful as long as a current administration keeps this as a clear vision and keeps confirming that it is in fact being modelled and that people understand why it is being modelled. The danger, as with so many once Christian private colleges and universities, especially in the United States, is that successive administrations will not share the same vision and there will be insufficient mechanisms in place to preserve its outworking.

As one reflects on the breadth of topics covered in this volume, it is clear that others could have been broached. At the time of writing, the worldwide refugee crisis was clearly the biggest issue among those under the category of helping the poor, but perhaps an entirely separate volume is needed for addressing that huge issue. A second key issue involves the balance between evangelism and social action. A generation ago, evangelicals were barely beginning to rediscover social justice as part of the gospel, while Catholics at times barely had any awareness of the need to stress life-transforming personal faith in Jesus. Today, both groups have made noticeable progress toward a better balance. But among millennials, at least evangelical ones, it is arguable that concerns for justice have eclipsed the need for salvation. A message of trust in Christ without any concern for someone's physical circumstances rings hollow, but a commitment to eradicating poverty, however successful, that leaves people lost and alienated from Christ, still sends them to an eternity apart from God and all things good.

An encouraging development in this volume is the mix of presenters. Both Catholic and Protestant authors appear, and the Protestants represent Pentecostal, classic evangelical and more middle-of-the-road perspectives. There is also a good balance of men and women, and they are not divided along the lines of biblical versus practical theology, with two women writing as Old or New Testament scholars and two men writing as practitioners. Americans and Europeans are included, although they are all white. The next step would be to include people of colour from the Majority World in a comparable anthology. Were the organizers and editors to be particularly daring, they

could include poor people themselves, or at least those who have spent a significant portion of their lives in poverty. There *are* representatives of these communities with the education or experience to contribute to this kind of anthology with equally important perspectives. Meanwhile, the editors of this volume are to be commended for having organized an outstanding and collegial conference that included considerable audience input, and the audience did include at least a few representatives of these various underrepresented people groups. If all these dimensions cannot be reproduced in this published form of the proceedings, the papers at least are improved because of the opportunities their authors have had to revise them in light of the conference.