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‘Do Good to All’ (Gal. 6.10): Assets, Capital and Benefaction in Early Christianity

Bruce W. Longenecker

Introduction

Did benefaction arise within early Christianity? If so, what might it have looked like in relation to other forms of financial initiatives within the Graeco-Roman world? In approaching these basic questions, I want to propose that benefaction is evident within early Christianity, although much of it did not look too much like the kinds of benefaction that commanded the most attention in the Graeco-Roman world. This is true in several respects: the form it took, its motivational structures, its resource base and its primary targets. This essay explores these features of benefaction in early Christianity.

Benefaction in the Graeco-Roman world and in early Christianity

Benefaction, like most things, came in a variety of shapes and sizes in the Graeco-Roman world. For this reason, nothing more than a very basic overview can be offered here. But with that said, and generally speaking, the type of benefaction that really mattered in the Graeco-Roman world was civic euergetism – that is, the initiatives that benefitted urban centres, being funded usually by those who controlled enormous resources. These initiatives, involving vast sums of money, could include paying for the erection or renovation of temples, bathing complexes, statues to deities and members of the imperial family; or the underwriting of spectacles, such as gladiatorial competitions and theatrical performances; and so on. Initiatives at this end of the spectrum involved expenditures that (generally speaking) only the wealthiest elite could afford. The price tag was extremely high; those eligible to pay were extremely few.

The health of ancient urban centres was not utterly reliant on elite initiatives. Although the point is debated, a strong case has been made that taxation was generally

a reliable income stream for urban development in the Graeco-Roman world.¹ But however we adjudicate that issue, there is no dispute that the civic infrastructure was significantly enhanced by initiatives of civic euergetism undertaken by elite benefactors.

In an ideal world, the system of civic benefaction was to be characterized by economic balance. The elite accessed significant income streams and were expected to combine them into a much larger collection of resources for public use through sizable donations that strengthened the fabric of civic life. The old French adage *noblesse oblige* captures the sentiment of things pretty well – those who have deep pockets are expected to undertake initiatives on behalf of their communities. It is against this very general background, elaborated further below, that we can begin to consider the issue of benefaction in Christianity in the pre-Constantinian period.

We see none of this macro-scale benefaction being carried out by Christians in the earliest centuries of the Common Era. This is not to be heard as a criticism. It is simply a reflection of the fact that not many Christians were among the economically privileged in those centuries (e.g. 1 Cor. 1.26). There is some truth to Paul Veyne's description of things when he writes:

Paganism was aware of the poor man only in his most commonplace shape, that of the beggar encountered in the street . . . [It] had abandoned without much remorse the starving, the old and the sick . . . All this changed with the coming of Christianity, in which almsgiving resulted from the new ethical religiosity . . . Old people's homes, orphanages, hospitals and so on are institutions that appear only with the Christian epoch.²

Institutions of this kind, however, are primarily post-Constantinian phenomena, arising in the aftermath of the Christianizing of the empire in the fourth century and beyond. At that point, the super-elite had motivation to join the Christian church, and their huge slush funds were put to good use (as noted by Veyne in the quotation above).³ But this was not characteristic of Christianity prior to the Constantinian revolution. In the first three centuries of the Common Era, if our focus is on macro-level beneficence (i.e. things required of politicians, who were predominately drawn from circles of the elite), Christian initiatives will be (almost?) absent from our inventory.

This is not to suggest that generosity was absent from Christian identity during those centuries. In fact, judging from certain strands of evidence, generosity was precisely the character trait that frequently marked out Christian communities. We could trudge our way through various New Testament (NT) passages to illustrate the point. Having done that elsewhere,⁴ I will only cite here a brief passage or two from beyond the NT to make the point.

¹ On this, see especially Hertha Schwarz, *Soll oder Haben? Die Finanzwirtschaft kleinasiatischer Städte in der römischen Kaiserzeit am Beispiel von Bithynien, Lykien und Ephesos (29 v. Chr.–284 n. Chr.)* (Bonn: Habelt, 2001).

² Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin, 1990), 31 and 33. For similar estimates, see Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Graeco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 63–64.

³ See, e.g., Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Waltham: Brandeis, 2001).

⁴ See Longenecker, *Remember*, 140–56.

At some point between 125 and 140 CE, the philosopher Aristides of Athens had this to say about Christians (*Apology* 15):

They love one another. They do not neglect widows. Orphans they rescue from those who are cruel to them. Every one of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing. If they see a travelling stranger they bring him under their roof. They rejoice over him as a real brother, for they do not call one another brothers after the flesh, but they know they are brothers in the Spirit and in God . . . If one of them sees that one of their poor must leave this world, he provides for his burial as well as he can. And if they hear that one of them is imprisoned or oppressed by their opponents for the sake of their Christ's name, all of them take care of all his needs. If possible they set him free. If anyone among them is poor or comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast two or three days for him. In this way they can supply the poor man with the food he needs.

The rhetoric is so effusive that we might imagine Aristides (himself a Christian) to have exaggerated his case about Christian beneficence. But our scepticism must be tempered by other data. For instance, Lucian of Samosata, a critic of Christianity, had this to say about Christians (*Peregrinus* 13):

The earnestness with which the people of this religion [i.e., Christianity] help one another in their need is incredible. They spare themselves nothing to this end. Apparently their first law-maker [Jesus] has put it into their heads that they all somehow ought to be regarded as brothers and sisters.

Lucian's depiction of Christians differs from Aristides's in its extent (i.e. it is shorter than Aristides) but not in its content. Evidently, Christians were engaging in noticeable (or, as Lucian calls them, 'incredible') beneficence initiatives and, consequently, were known to be doing so.

Three things need to be noted. First, the kinds of beneficence that we see in early Christianity are, generally speaking, of a very low-grade type. In Aristides's examples, for instance, it involves attending to widows, rescuing orphans, resourcing those who have nothing, extending hospitality, paying for burials, caring for the imprisoned and oppressed, and fasting to build up a small pot of assistance money. NT examples could be brought alongside to demonstrate similar low-grade forms of beneficent initiative.⁵ In the discourse of the apostle Paul, these small gestures for others, carried out by ordinary people in small, simple and relatively insignificant ways, are discussed in terms like 'remember the poor' (Gal. 2.10), 'bear one another's burdens . . . [and] work for the good of all' (Gal. 6.2, 10), 'pursue the good' for the benefit of others (1 Thess. 5.15), be known for 'your generosity in sharing with . . . all' (2 Cor. 9.13) – or, in later epistles, 'share with the needy' (Eph. 4.28) and 'devote yourself to

⁵ In this regard, Phoebe, whom Paul identifies as 'a benefactor of many and of myself as well' (Rom. 16.2), would probably have been relatively exceptional among the majority of early Jesus-followers.

good works in order to meet urgent needs' (Tit. 3.14). Notions of benefaction are probably in play to one extent or another in these exhortations. That is significant, since such minute gestures of beneficence almost runs against the grain of the term 'benefaction', at least as it was employed in ordinary parlance within the Graeco-Roman world. If elite benefaction was broadly civic in focus, forms of beneficence among Christian communities in the pre-Constantinian period seem to have targeted a much narrower subset within that civic focus – that is, the destitute. (Benefaction of a more widespread and pronounced kind was generally an unworkable form of benefaction for Christians in the pre-Constantinian world.)⁶ What we are seeing in the early Jesus movement and beyond is the reframing of benefaction so that it applies to the smallest gestures of the ordinary, the underprivileged and even the poor. Here, the narratives of the socially insignificant are being placed front and centre.

Second, we can probably draw a straight line from Aristides's characterization of Christians in a pre-Constantinian context to Veyne's characterization of institutions of care 'that appear only with the Christian [post-Constantinian] epoch'. When the super wealthy began to populate a religion whose character had been shaped by three centuries of caring for the poor, the combination of care and super-wealth resulted in the creation of forms of care provision never before evidenced.

Third, even the ordinary was taken notice of, in a fashion comparable to the notice given to the grand forms of benefaction. This is embedded within Lucian's comments (noted above), which suggests that care for the needy was one of the distinctive identity markers of Christian communities in the second century. The same is evident two centuries later. Seeking to extricate Christianity from the post-Constantinian empire, the pagan emperor Julian (332–363 CE; emperor 360–363) nonetheless testified to the respectability of Christian social action. Noting the way in which the poor were 'neglected and overlooked' by pagan sectors of society and the way that Christians (and Jews) 'devoted themselves to benevolence', Julian also took note of the way that 'the impious Galileans [i.e., Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well', not least since 'everyone can see that our people lack aid from us' (*Ep.* 22.430D).⁷ In Julian and Lucian we find two of Christianity's earliest critics testifying that micro-level care for the needy was a distinguishing feature of Christian communities and was being noticed.⁸ Crudely speaking, the moral assets of Christian communities were being turned into social capital.⁹

⁶ See, e.g., Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Graeco-Roman World*, WUNT 2/337 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

⁷ See also the fifth-century Christian historian Sozomen, *Hist.* 5.16.5. See further P. Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1976), 75; D. Ayerst and A. S. T. Fischer, *Records of Christianity, Vol. I: The Church in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 179–81.

⁸ Classical scholars remind us that the elite literature from the early imperial period regularly demonstrate 'a general lack of understanding of the realities of conjunctural [or structural] poverty'.

⁹ Perhaps the author of 1 Peter would have been pleased about this. In a context of difficult relationships with non-Christians, that author thought that if Christians were 'eager to do good' (3.13) within their society, that would deflect some potential criticism against them.

Motivating benefaction in the Graeco-Roman world and early Christianity

With the huge expenses of civic euergetism in view, the twenty-first-century observer might be inclined to ask, Why would people have undertaken such hugely expensive initiatives? The answer is simple: because the elite were enmeshed within the unending quest to maintain and increase their social status. The Roman orator and philosopher Cicero (106–43 BCE) attributed the motivation to 'the lure of honour' (*Off.* 1.44). Approximately a century later, Dio Chrysostom (40–115 CE) noted that public benefactors give of their resources 'in the pursuit of crowns and precedence and purple robes' (*2 Tars.* 29). His contemporary Pliny the Younger (61–113 CE) said much the same when he spoke of 'the boast of their good deed' as motivating elite benefaction (*Ep.* 1.8.15). The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50 CE or so) depicted the motivational structures that embedded civic benefaction in this way:

Those who are said to bestow benefits sell rather than give; and those who seem to us to receive them [i.e., those benefits] in truth buy [them]. The givers are seeking commendation or honour as their return and look for their benefits to be repaid, and so under the false name of a gift, they in truth carry out a sale. (*Cher.* 122–23)

The primary currency of the Graeco-Roman world was not money per se, but status. More precious than gold, public honour was the most coveted social commodity, and it drove the system of benefaction throughout the Graeco-Roman world. As Philo observed (as noted above), capturing social capital was integral to the whole process of elite benefaction. The social honour that came with these sizeable initiatives of benefaction was so significant that others further down on the scale of economic security seem often to have sought to imitate the civic euergetism of the grand elite, setting up smaller-scale initiatives of their own in order to reap some of the status benefits that came with those initiatives.¹⁰

In the ideal scenario, a balanced benefaction fostered healthy relationality between the elite and their civic beneficiaries. The reality, however, was much different much of the time. There were a hundred and one variations on a theme in this regard, but the popular adage that 'power corrupts' captures the sense that accruing social esteem

¹⁰ There are a number of instances in which groups undertook initiatives of benefaction by pooling their money. Jews in Smyrna, for instance, were known to have done this in the early second century (*CIJ* 742; see E. Leigh Gibson, 'Jews in the Inscriptions of Smyrna', *JJS* 56 (2005): 66–79; more broadly, Tessa Rajak, 'Jews as Benefactors', in *Studies on the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, ed. Benjamin Isaac and Aharon Oppenheimer (Tel Aviv: Ramot, 1996), 17–38. Gestures of civic benefaction could at times even be initiated by slaves – some of the more fortunate slaves, no doubt, but slaves nonetheless. These benefactions could take the form of collectively donating the base of a statue to a local temple (*CIL* 10.824 and 10.826), enhancing public devotion to the Roman deities (*CIL* 10.888; 10.890; 10.901; 10.902) or serving as caretakers of the neighbourhood deity cult whose shrines stood at the intersections of urban streets to protect the local residents from an influx of evil (*CIL* 4.60; 4.7425; 4.7855). Sometimes the non-elite were able to add fairly insignificant amounts of money to elite initiatives of benefaction, being recognized on inscriptions as a consequence.

often went hand in hand with being complicit, in what we today would think of as abuses of human rights.¹¹

This is not the place to overview the voices of protest against this system, voices found on occasion within the literature of the Graeco-Roman world.¹² But we can make a gesture to those voices of protest by calling again on the Jewish philosopher Philo to make the point (*Decalogue* 2.4):

Cities are full of countless evils, both acts of impiety towards God and wrongdoing between man and man. For everything is debased, the genuine overpowered by the spurious, the true by the false . . . so too in cities there arises that most insidious of foes, pride, admired and worshipped by some who add dignity to vain ideas by means of gold crowns and purple robes and a great establishment of servants and cars, on which these so-called blissful and happy people ride aloft, drawn sometimes by mules and horses, sometimes by men, who bear the heavy burden on their shoulders, yet suffer in soul rather than in body under the weight of extravagant arrogance.

Christians, too, raised their voice against the economic system that prioritized the interests of the elite. Pride of place goes to the fiery Apocalypse of John, or Revelation. Within his symbol-rich narrative, the author of Revelation decries the religious, military and economic structures that combined in an all-encompassing system that he deemed to be engulfing the whole world. This system, which Walter Wink insightfully labels ‘the Domination System’, is attributed by the author of Revelation to the corrupting power of the Satan within God’s world.¹³

The system is one that the kings and merchants of this world engorged themselves on, being filthy rich because of ‘the power of [the system’s] luxury’ (Rev. 18.3).¹⁴ But telling in this regard is the inventory of the resources contributing to the luxuries of the Domination System, an inventory that the author constructs in Rev. 18.12–13. The

¹¹ For examples of the poor being resources for elite advancement, see Longenecker, *Remember*, 19–35. One interesting example is the plundering of possessions. As Peter Garnsey notes, the plundering of possessions was carried out legally through official confiscation, whereby those deemed to stand opposed to the expansion of Roman power had their possessions striped from them and given to those favorably disposed to the Roman project (Peter Garnsey, ‘Peasants in Ancient Roman Society’, in his *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91–106). Examples of this are evident in the material record (e.g. the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum; see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Herculaneum: Past and Future* [London: Frances Lincoln/Los Alto, CA: Packard Humanities Institute, 2011], 115) and the literary record, even in the NT itself (see Heb. 10.32–34).

¹² On this, see Bruce W. Longenecker, ‘Peace, Security, and Prosperity: Advertisement and Reality in the Early Roman Empire’, in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 15–46.

¹³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 87–104.

¹⁴ It is interesting to observe that in Petronius’s novel *Satyricon*, one character complains that the civic aediles, ‘who play “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”, are in league with the bakers’ (*Satyricon* 44). The point is simply that the bakers are conscripted to support the power aspirations of the elite by regaling the local populace with bribery bread in the name of the elite. Compare the less sinister inscription from Pompeii: ‘I beg you to elect Gaius Julius Polybius as aedile; he brings good bread [to the people]’ (*CIL* 4.429).

inventory comprises more than two dozen entries. Towards the top are entries that we might well expect to see in the most highly prized position: gold, silver, jewels and pearls. Towards the middle of the inventory reside the entries appropriate to middling-level resources: costly wood, bronze, iron and marble. Almost at the bottom of the inventory appear the much more common resources of the empire: olive oil, flour, wheat, cattle and sheep. But it is the last entry that is most interesting, as well as most difficult to interpret. We do not need to debate whether the Greek phrase (*sōmatōn, kai psychas anthrōpōn*) is best rendered 'slaves – and human lives' (NRSV), or 'slaves, that is human beings', or 'human beings sold as slaves' (NIV 1984 and 2011) or 'slaves and souls of men' (Douay-Rheims). The point is that the author's list of commodities is meant to be shocking to healthy Judaeo-Christian sensitivities. In the Domination System, insecure human lives are not regarded as valued creatures of the sovereign creator. Instead, insecure human lives are captured as hostages within a system of economic exchange that benefits the elite who have managed the system to their own benefit. Human beings are simply cogs in the wheelhouse of elite domination, in which benefaction plays a central role. The author of Revelation admits that the Domination System looks splendid and impressive.¹⁵ But behind it and undergirding it, even invisibly and unperceptively, is the ultimate anti-God power, the power of the Satan (compare the narrative movement from Revelation 12 to Revelation 13–14).

There is tragedy in all of this, from the author's point of view. Economic structures are managed by the elite, for whom the powerless are simply assets in their economic capital. People are being viewed in terms of an inverted scale of worth. But more than tragedy is involved here. Ultimately, there is idolatry – worship directed to something other than its only worthy recipient. The idolatrous tragedy and the tragic idolatry of it all is not simply that human lives are improperly placed on a skewed scale of worth; it is the skewed scale of worth itself is deemed to be a Satanic construct. In a race to capture value, worth, honour and capital, the whole world has come under the beguiling sway of a satanic deceit, thereby becoming complicit in the valuing of human life according to its placement in the system that oversees the commoditization of assets. This, the Johannine author contends, is not how the sovereign deity assesses worth. Social Darwinism, in which the fittest survive by feeding off of the resources of the insecure, is the system of the Satan. For this reason, a heavenly voice urges Christians to remove themselves from the Domination System: 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins' (Rev. 18.4).

Whereas Revelation is one of the most countercultural voices in the Christian canon, a much different ethos emerges from the Lukan Gospel, with its generally 'positive, robust, world-affirming character' (although its prophetic voice should not be overlooked).¹⁶ But despite their differences in posture, both are in agreement that Christian moral identity is averse to the Domination System. So, with its message of

¹⁵ See Rev. 17.6, where *ethaumasa* should probably be translated 'filled with amazement'.

¹⁶ Richard Hays depicts in the following fashion: 'The church is not a defensive community withdrawing from an evil world; instead, it acts boldly on the stage of public affairs, commending the gospel in reasoned terms to all persons of goodwill and expecting an open-minded response', in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 134.

'good news to the poor' glorious articulated by Jesus (Lk. 4.18), the Lukan Gospel makes this aversion evident in notable fashion, and specifically with regard to benefaction:

A dispute also arose among them [Jesus's disciples] as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader [must become] like one who serves.' (Lk. 22.24-26; cf. Mk 10.42-44)

Why does Luke depict Jesus as challenging the benefaction system, as managed by the 'kings of the gentiles' and 'those in authority'? Notice that Jesus does not simply call for a restoration or reformation of the benefaction system. He does not simply exhort benefactors to be good-hearted people. Instead, in a short soundbite, he challenges the very structures supporting the benefaction system of the Graeco-Roman world. His clipped challenge may derive from a recognition of the abusive injustices of that system – a system that fed all-pervasive structures whereby the wealthy extracted resources from the reserves of others in order to enhance their social capital.¹⁷ But Jesus does not simply decry the injustices; instead, he 'goes for the jugular' of the system itself, undermining its notions of worth and value that pervade the structures propping up the kingdoms of this world.

Accordingly, despite their different postures regarding the character of Christian communities in relation to society, the Lukan Gospel and the Johannine Revelation mesh well together in their critique of the Domination System. The prophetic criticism voiced by heavenly deity of Revelation ('Come out of her, my people') reverberates with the voice of Jesus of Nazareth ('not so with you').

Critical exhortations of this kind are not sustained throughout the whole of the early Christian literature. At times, more accommodating models are advocated, seeking a positive interface between the Christian message and the surrounding culture. And some sympathy might be reserved for the early Christians who sought to work within the structures of society rather than to abandon them and set up small enclaves of alternative societies. Just as there are strengths in each modelling of Christian engagement with society, so too there are weaknesses in each. But standing over all models, it seems, is the revaluing of worth that lies at the heart of the Christian 'good news' and the concern that Christian initiatives reflect revaluation, in contrast

¹⁷ The author of 1 Timothy explores this theological terrain when speaking of those who strive to be rich as 'trapped by many senseless and harmful desires' (1 Tim. 6.9). Previous to this charge (in 6.5), an economic component is already in play when the author speaks of envy among those 'deprived of the truth who suppose that religion [*eusebeia*] is a way of making profit'. (The word *eusebeia* is used positively in 6.6, connoting 'piety' or 'godliness'. In 6.5, however, a positive characteristic [i.e. 'godliness'] is being abused, and consequently I translate it there as 'religion'.) A similar economic component is in play a sentence after his charge against those who strive to be rich, where he makes the famous claim that 'the love of money is the root of all evils' (6.10). In his assessment, covetousness permeates economic exchange. This is not to say that covetousness is wholly reducible to economic acquisitiveness. Nonetheless, economic acquisitiveness has a strong foothold as one form of covetousness.

to the value-laden initiatives that predominated within the benefaction system of the Graeco-Roman world.

Resourcing benefaction

We have seen that the types of benefaction often undertaken by pre-Constantinian Christian communities were much different from elite-based benefaction; moreover, the motivational basis was to be different from the norm, at least according to some canonical forms of Christian discourse. The reason why the motivational basis is to be different is articulated most clearly in the discourse of Paul. In his theological frame of reference, initiatives of beneficence on behalf of the destitute had little to do with people taking the initiative to act on behalf of others. For Paul, remembering the destitute is linked to what we might call 'Spiritful membering'. That is, in Paul's view of things, Christian giving emerges from spiritual gifting within Jesus-groups. This is why he lists generosity in his lists of the Spirit's work – both 'the fruit of the Spirit' which are given to all those in Christ (*agathōsunē* in Gal. 5.22, referencing 'generous goodness')¹⁸ and in a more concentrated form as a 'gift of the Spirit' given to some Jesus-followers in particular (Rom. 12.8; cf. 1 Cor. 12.28).¹⁹ Despite differences in concentration levels, generosity testifies to and enacts the inbreaking of right relationships as result of the Spirit's transforming presence within Jesus-groups.

In his best theological moments, Paul imagined the body of Christ to be the epitome of the abundant community, whose resources were supplied by an abundant Spirit, where all members had important contributions to make, regardless of their prosopographic profile, and where each incarnation of the body built its identity and mission around the indigenous resources brought to it by its mutually gifted members. In this way, Paul's vision has some overlap with what some today are calling ABCD – asset-based community development.²⁰ But for Paul, these were not simply community-resourced assets. They were theological capital, precisely because they were resourced by the Spirit of the self-giving Son of God. They spoke of the presence of God within the relatively unimpressive communities of Jesus-followers. Paul understood beneficent initiatives within Jesus-groups in terms much different from all other forms of benefaction of his day, not simply with regard to its type or motivation but also to its ultimate source, vibrantly active in ordinary communities of Jesus-devotion.

¹⁸ So, L&N 57.109: 'the act of generous giving, with the implication of its relationship to goodness – "to be generous, generosity".'

¹⁹ On the relationship between these two forms of Spirit enabling, see Longenecker, *Remember*, 281–7.

²⁰ See the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (<https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed February 2018); John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012); Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).

Targeting benefaction in early Christianity

Were beneficent initiatives undertaken by Jesus-followers thought simply to benefit the impoverished located within Jesus-groups, or was there a broader concern? The letters of Paul provide important resources for addressing this question. From them, at least two important dimensions of this issue emerge: (1) Paul expected the focus of such initiatives to be within Jesus-groups and (2) Paul expected those initiatives to overspill beyond Jesus-groups, wherever and whenever possible.

There are two passages that bring both of these contentions together. In what is probably Paul's first extant letter, he exhorts his readers to 'do good to one another and to all' (1 Thess. 5.15), whereas he says the same in reverse order in what is probably his second extant letter: 'let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith' (Gal. 6.10). We might want to spend time trying to figure out the relation of these two passages, but two things seem most evident.

First, Paul expected a transformed vision of relationality to result in transformed patterns of practice within Jesus-groups empowered by a transforming Spirit; after all, it was in relational practices within Christian communities that Jesus-followers were to learn both that and how 'Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2.20; cf. 3.27; 4.19).²¹

Second, Paul expected those transformed patterns of practice to overspill beyond Jesus-groups; after all, the grace that was transforming them into 'reincarnations' of the self-giving Son was unmerited by them as well as by those beyond Jesus-groups (cf. 2 Cor. 9.13). All were unworthy of the gracious gift offered by God, who resourced generosity among Jesus-followers as a natural expression of that grace within their lives. At the level of worldview, trying to restrict the flow of generosity in any form or fashion would be like trying to join an AC electricity cable to a DC electricity cable.²² Unsurprisingly, then, as the Petrine author seems to have thought, when Christians 'do good' to those around them (1 Pet. 2.12, 20; 3.11, 16-17; 4.19), they are extending divine 'blessing' within their indigenous contexts as agents of 'the God of all grace' (1 Pet. 3.9; 5.10).

Conclusion

What we have seen regarding beneficent initiatives by pre-Constantinian Christians is a spotty, generalized portrait, not least because our resources for reconstruction

²¹ Part of discerning how 'Christ lives in me' involves adjudicating abuses of beneficence in Jesus-groups. Pauline texts indicate that beneficent initiatives toward the needy required monitoring, lest they be abused. This is evident in the Thessalonian letters regarding those who decided not to work in order to allow the Christian community to care for them and in 1 Timothy regarding which widows are the most deserving of corporate care. This required Jesus-groups to use a hefty dose of common sense about who should and should not be recipients of 'care-full' resources. If divine grace is not to be presumed upon, neither should the beneficence empowered by that grace to be presumed upon.

²² This is assumed in Paul's comments about 'the Lord's Supper' in 1 Cor. 11.17-34. The economic mismatch between the Corinthian practice and the Christian gospel's theology of divine grace has resulted (in Paul's view) in divine chastisement: 'For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died' (1 Cor. 11.30).

on-the-ground realities are themselves spotty.²³ This overview might also err on the side of freeze-framing the more ideal moments and foregrounding the more impressive soundbites of Christian discourse of that initial period in the process of Christian self-identification. Clearly, not all Christians were living out the gold standard of beneficence in all situations; they must often have been hampered either by situation or volition, or both. As a rule of thumb, the ideal must often have transcended the reality; the discourse must have outstripped the concrete realities.

With that said, however, we cannot dispute that even the opponents of Christianity conceded that Christians (and, in Julian's discourse, Jews as well) outstripped their pagan contemporaries in undertaking initiatives for those in need. Perhaps, then, the idealisms of Christian discourse helped to foster the imagination of Jesus-followers to see the world in new ways, to imagine their place in the world to have import and to act on that perception in ways that made small differences. It was in those small and occasional differences, those gestures of doing good to others, or (in Julian's words) those moments of 'devot[ing] themselves to benevolence', that pre-Constantinian Christians testified against the Domination System of social Darwinism.

²³ See, though, Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).