Coleby, John. "Response to Bruce Longenecker." *Poverty in the Early Church and Today: A Conversation*. Ed. Walton Steve and Swithinbank Hannah. London: T&T Clark, 2019. 63–64. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567677747.ch-008>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 01:53 UTC.

Copyright © Steve Walton, Hannah Swithinbank and contributors 2019. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Response to Bruce Longenecker

John Coleby

It is clear from Bruce Longenecker's paper that benefaction in the Early Church goes through two phases, pre- and post-Constantine. In the former, benefaction is at the micro level, where members of the Christian community provide for poor people, especially the widow and orphan. In the latter, benefaction is more institutionally focused, illustrated by the provision of hospitals and refuges and services. As Bruce points out, once the Roman Empire became Christianized, the wealth of the community was reflected in bigger gestures and gifts to benefit the whole community. Some of the motivation for giving reflects Graeco-Roman eugertism of rich benefactors, who are expected to give to civic projects in return for political influence and enhanced personal status.

In contemporary benefaction/philanthropy, nothing much has changed. The super-wealthy make their point and are asked to the policy table of governments and the United Nations. The church opens hospitals and schools in its name, and secular benefactors give their names to university departments, for example, the Cass Business School, London, and the Saïd Business School, Oxford. Many of the wealthiest families have their own charitable foundations, such as the Waites Foundation and Sainsbury's Trust in London. Giving at this level perpetuates the visibility and influence of such families and groups. However, in Christian communities and other faith communities, the micro level of benefaction, in direct support of human dignity and solidarity, is still very powerful. For example, the London Catholic communities collect for, work in and manage – as well as campaign against – hunger. Recent traumatic incidents see an outpouring of generosity in money and in kind. The Grenfell Tower appeal is a good example.

There are most definitely overlaps between early and contemporary Christian benefaction. In the UK and the United States, the Catholic communities were relatively poor until the mid-twentieth century. They were largely migrant working-class communities who developed and educated themselves, thus developing wealth which could then be put at the disposal of big projects, such as church- and school-building, but at the same time providing for less well-off and destitute people in the community – the modern widow and orphan. This is where Christian giving comes into its own, through the provision of outreach projects, combating loneliness, hunger,

employment training and shelter. As Christian communities, we still do these things because of the deeply held imperative to 'step forward in love'. In my view, this is not exclusively altruistic or sacrificial but rather is based on the biblical axiom of 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19.18; Mk 12.31). This is reflected in the comments often expressed by volunteers: 'I am giving something back', or 'I get as much out of my volunteering as I give.'

So the question of motivation is a complicated one. In contemporary giving, Breeze has identified that people believe charitable giving should be and is directed to meet the needs of people considered poor;¹ yet, when scrutinized, people's giving behaviour does not necessarily reflect this. I suspect Christians are no less susceptible to such inconsistencies and there are competing voices for who is needier and, therefore, where funds should be directed. Yet, recognition, status and legacy and social expectation as well as duty all have a dimension in the act of benefaction.

¹ Beth Breeze, 'How Donors Choose Charities: The Role of Personal Taste and Experiences in Giving Decisions', *Voluntary Sector Review* 4.2 (2013): 165–83 (www.researchgate.net/publication/272147122, accessed February 2018).