

1 Cor. 16:1-4 The Effects of the Gospel, part 1: Generous Giving
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1-13-13

I botched the end of the sermon. What I meant to say was something like this:

“In these verses, Paul says to the Corinthians, ‘I have a project and I want you to be a part of it. That’s what the collection is all about.’ Now God says to all of us, ‘I have a project – a huge, global project, of filling the whole cosmos with my kingdom-- and I want you to be a part of it! That’s what the offering is all about.’”

Much more can be said about money in general and the offertory in particular. A few additional thoughts are set forth here.

Jim Jordan has written some helpful material on the offering in his essay “The Offertory” in *Rite Reasons* No. 97. In particular, Jordan points out that the offertory is not just a response of gratitude for what Jesus has done for us, “but is also offered in union with Him as he worships the Father. That is, our worship as a whole becomes an Offertory in union with Jesus.” If we overlook the importance of the offertory, it is because “our worship is not missional. We do not see ourselves as priests bringing God the world during the liturgy...” Recovering a full understanding of union with Christ is essential to recovering our understanding of the liturgical offertory.

In terms of the Levitical sequence, the offertory corresponds to the tribute offering (sometimes mislabeled the “grain offering”). The word used in Leviticus is used for tribute paid to a king. The tribute offering was always a grain/bread offering, not an animal offering. It represented man and his labor acting on the creation; in the tribute offering, the fruits of man’s dominion are given to the Lord in a representative way. It’s also important to note that the tribute offering never shows up on its own. It’s always offered on top of the sin offering and ascension offering. This reminds us that God does not receive our works in themselves apart from Christ, but only through his blood sacrifice. Yes, we offer God sacrifices, but those sacrifices are based on the foundational, once and for all propitiatory sacrifice of Christ.

A good example of gifts-in-kind being included in the offertory is found here: <http://www.perumission.org/kilo-de-amor>. Wes Baker writes:

In New Testament times, after the sermon, the deacons would take up a collection of money and of whatever might be useful for the poor – clothing, food, etc. As everything was put on the table, the minister would

separate out some bread and wine, and they would eat the Lord's Supper. In this way, some of the collection was shared amidst the congregation, but it was mostly for the poor. The deacons would collect whatever was left, and then distribute this throughout the week. This practice is mentioned frequently by many church fathers and is in the background of passages like Acts 2:42-46 and 6:17.

The eating of the Lord's Supper, from the earliest days, was set in the context of the collection. In the directory for public worship, there are instructions for the collection for the poor. The assembly assumes that if the Lord's Supper will be eaten, there will be a collection for the poor; we, the body of believers, are receiving a gift, and thus we respond in giving a gift to Jesus' "least ones" (Matt. 25).

As we are out knocking on doors, meeting people, getting to know them, and praying for them, we will often find a family with no food. At this point, the pastor can ask the deacons to build a relationship with this family, and get them some dietary staples from the weekly collection of the kilo de amor. Woe to us if we minister not as our Lord ministered.

I know that we live in a very needy context. And virtually everyone in our churches is poor. But no matter how poor you are, there is always someone who has more of a need than you do. Scripture says do "not appear before the Lord empty-handed," even if you can only bring a single grain of rice or a single bean (Deut. 16:16-17).

Through this practice we are taking very seriously Jesus' words in Matthew 25: "Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'" (37-40).

The offertory holds together *leitourgia* and *diakonia* -- liturgy and service, worship and mercy ministry. (See *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today* by Elsie Ann McKee, especially ch. 2.) The offertory is a sign that we cannot be receivers without becoming givers.

Will Willimon on the importance of the offertory (paraphrased):

Each Sunday's offering is meant to be a revolutionary, countercultural, and prophetic act for the church. There are few more inflammatory and potentially disruptive acts than when the pastor stands and announces to the congregation that it is now time for the offering. Here embodied

before the congregation on Sunday is...the demand that we give God what is rightly God's, that we show that our money is where our hearts belong to God, that by God's grace we are able to feel the needs of someone other than ourselves, that we are being transformed from takers into givers, and that we give material, visible, monetary testimony to the Resurrection. (*Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, 84).

Billy Graham once said, "Give me 5 minutes with someone's checkbook and I'll you where their heart is."

Tim Keller on money:

Does this mean that no Christians should ever live in wealthier neighborhoods? No—if you make \$500,000 per year, it is right and important that you live in neighborhoods and move in circles with others who make your income. Why? We need Christians in every social class, every neighborhood, every circle! But Christians should always aim for the bottom end of their particular income bracket with regard to how much they spend their money on themselves. Is it possible, though, for a Christian to give away *too* much? Yes. Christians should keep enough a) that they can live a safe and healthy life, b) that they don't become a burden to others, and c) so that they can continue to do good. There are many people who have made or inherited a substantial fund of money. If they gave it all away immediately they might do less good in the long run than if they gave it away slowly, allowing it to continually grow new dividends and earnings.

In summary: if we can go beyond the tithe a) without hurting our health, b) without becoming a burden to others, c) without reneging on our financial obligations, and d) without undermining our ability to live and minister among those with whom we work—then we should give sacrificially beyond the tithe.

As the gospel takes root in our lives, it makes us generous. We begin to pattern our giving more and more after Jesus, who has given sacrificially to us. In 16:1-4, Paul is mobilizing to Corinthians to help in his work of famine relief. Just as we were hungry and Jesus has filled us (Mt. 5), so now we are called to give of our sustenance to meet the hungry in our world.

For Paul, this collection, which would be delivered to the church in Jerusalem, served two primary purposes:

- 1) First, it would serve a practical purpose of helping the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who have been suffering from famine and persecution.
- 2) Second, it would serve an eschatological purpose of building solidarity between Jewish and Gentile Christians who are being woven together into a new humanity in Christ.

In other words, the collection would be both an act of charity and catholicity. It was a way of caring for the needy and contributing to the unity of the church. This would be an offering of Gentiles, offered by Gentiles, to be received by Jews. In this way, it was a kind of material/Spiritual joint venture between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Rom. 15).

What exactly does Paul want them to do? His directions are very specific, perhaps surprisingly so! He wants them to gather funds each Lord's Day, the first day of the week, when they would gather for worship (cf. John 20, Acts 20:7). Paul wants each one to set something aside for this purpose. He doesn't just appeal to the wealthy, but to each member of the body. He wants their giving to be disciplined and habitual. He does not want any spontaneous or high pressure giving at the last minute when he arrives. He wants their giving to be deliberate and intentional, planned and purposeful. He will have nothing to with high-pressure, emotional manipulation when it comes to raising funds!

Paul wants the Corinthians to be involved not just in contributing funds, but also in delivering the funds. He says they should choose trustworthy men to serve as couriers. Paul himself has no interest in touching the money – and thus he can avoid any charge of being greedy, fraudulent, dishonest, or self-serving. Instead, he wants the money handled by men appointed by and approved by the Corinthian congregation.

It's worth noting here that Paul assumes the church has something of an institutional structure. He wants the church as an institution involved in the gathering up and administering of the collection. It is commonplace today for people to attack organized religion – but here we have organized religion at its finest! When it comes to handling money, organization is good!

We know from other portions of the NT that Paul did in fact accompany the money to Jerusalem, but he did so with a team of Gentile Christians from a variety of churches. Again, Paul specifies how the process should be carried out in a way that shows humility and honesty. He wants accountability, transparency, and integrity in the way money is handled so he insists on a "team" approach. This is certainly a valuable lesson for the church in our day. The way the church handles money should be above board and above reproach at all times.

Perhaps the most important thing to see about the collection is that Paul saw it as a spiritual act of worship. This is why Paul situates the collection on the first day of the week in the context of a worship service. Paul sees the collection of tithes and offerings as a public response to God's grace. In fact in 2 Cor. 9, when he talks at greater length and in greater depth about this collection, he calls it a

“divine service,” or a “liturgy.” He uses the same term to talk about this same collection in Rom. 15:27. For Paul, giving money to the church and to kingdom causes was not just as an act of love, but of worship. In the offertory, we demonstrate that we do not worship money, but worship God with our money. The offertory transforms Mammon from an idol into servant of the true God.

Because the church’s collection is an act of worship, the gifts are brought forward and presented to the Lord in prayer as a way of both *responding to* Christ’s sacrificial gift and *participating in* his sacrificial mission.