

GENEROSITY IN 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6–15 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORMED FAITH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

With the spread of ‘prosperity’ and ‘word of faith’ teachings within the Nigerian Christian milieu, the Reformed Church (for example, the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria) has become smeared with individualism and materialism. This has made the lifestyle of generosity an alternative forgone in the Church today, thus necessitating an investigation into the biblical approaches towards the rediscovery and recovery of the identity of generosity for the Church. This paper rests on an exegetical study of 2 Corinthians 9:6–15. Through this, it discovered the means by which Paul’s discourse on the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem could serve to challenge and motivate a lifestyle of altruistic generosity in the Church today. The work discovered that though generosity is a socioeconomic disposition aimed primarily at ameliorating the plight of the poor, it is, in essence, a defining feature of any Christian Church. Generosity also has significant theological, ecclesiological/ecumenical and ethical nexus within which its practice in the Church can be founded, articulated, motivated and embodied.

Keywords/phrases: Generosity, the poor, divine imperative, social command, reciprocity.

Introduction

Collett and Morrissey (2007) view generosity as ‘the disposition of freely giving one’s time, talents, and treasure to others’, and as such, ‘a unique variant of prosocial behaviour’ (p. 21). The use of the word, disposition, in the definition implies that generosity is not necessarily about the action as it is about the inherent nature, temperament or inclination of a person to be generous. In their separate works, Perriman (2003) and Gotsis and Dodd (2002) argue that generosity is a phenomenon that is conceptualized as almsgiving, which is defined by New World Encyclopedia (2012) as ‘the general practice of charitable giving to the poor’.

A closer look at the various Reformed denominations in Nigeria, particularly the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN), reveals that the Church has deviated in

its understanding of the practice of generosity as a defining identity of the body of Christ or any denomination thereof. The Church has become smeared with a rising degree of materialism and individualism, fuelled by prosperity gospel teachings. As such, both the Church and its members now care more about enriching themselves and less about the less-privileged in the Church and society than in the past. Thus, even when generosity is encouraged or practised in the Church, it is most times with ulterior motives. Fubara-Manuel (2007) underscores this when he writes that unfortunately, 'Christian giving has been reduced in its motive to a means of being enriched rather than an expression of gratitude to God for grace received and a means of sharing with the wider community of God's creation' (p. 15). It has even been alleged that in many cases church leaders now rather inadvertently impoverishes their members by numerous fundraising projects and strategies (Kalu, 2012). Therefore, through a hermeneutical study of 2 Corinthians 9:6–15, this paper aims to discover the biblical/theological persuasions that can challenge and encourage a lifestyle of altruistic generosity amongst Christians and across the denominations, both as a significant part of the life and calling of the Church, and as a means of helping to ameliorate the plight of the poor.

Overview of generosity in the New Testament

From all indications, the practice of generosity in the New Testament centres on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He exemplified the life of care for the poor and needy in such ways that it became the model for his disciples to follow.

Taylor (1990) says of Jesus' model of generosity:

This generosity showed little concern for the cost or the consequences to himself. He appears to have given away all that he had to give: exercising to the full his gifts of healing and teaching; offering support to those with few if any champions; making himself endlessly available to the crowds which sought him out; caring more about food for others than shelter for himself. (p. 16).

This was indeed the model of generosity Jesus left for his followers; and they did follow it. Of course, this lifestyle was not followed only by the immediate disciples of Jesus, but would become a significant feature of the church in later ages.

This is a point corroborated by Blomberg (2001) who comments that 'in a society without social security or welfare, voluntary charity and donations for the destitute formed a key part of ancient Jewish life and remained an important virtue enjoined upon the righteous' (p. 116). Marshall (2009) recognises the significant place of generosity among the early disciples. He notes that Luke's emphasis on almsgiving demonstrates the Evangelist's concern for helping the poor; a practice that becomes and is further displayed as community concern in Acts. By this pattern of communalism the Early Church community was able to eradicate poverty, for 'there was not a needy person among them' (Acts 4:34).

A significant instance of the Early Church's concern for the care of the poor is the collection organised by Paul to help the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. Considering Paul's personal involvement in this project and how clearly he was consumed by it, it might be concluded that the collection represented Paul's spiritual persona as a Jew. Yet as Punt (2000) insightfully observes, his emphasis on the collection was not just his personal concern for the poor, but a demonstration of the early Church's concern for the care of those at the margins of society. Little wonder then Paul would acknowledge that the same thing he was eager to do—remembering the poor—was also what the leadership of the apostles asked of him and Barnabas (Gal. 2:10).

This, therefore, makes the collection a significant historical event that deserves critical study in the light of rethinking and rediscovering the practice of generosity for contemporary Christian spirituality. In this wise, 2 Corinthians 8–9 becomes pivotal in that it represents the most extensive discussion on the collection. Yet even though Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians generally deal with the issue of the collection for the Jerusalem saints, this paper concentrates on the subunit of 2 Corinthians 9:6–15. The reason is that, in the first instance, this subunit represents the climax of Paul's discourse on the collection for the needy in the Jerusalem Church. Second, in this subunit, while decisively challenging the Corinthians to generosity towards their poor brethren in Jerusalem, Paul underscores the theological foundations that should guide and motivate acts of charity. Third, this subunit also explores the anticipated and projected results of such generosity. Significantly these factors make a study on this unit apt and easy for application in dealing with the issues of generosity in contemporary Nigerian Christian milieu.

Hermeneutical study of generosity in 2 Corinthians 9:6–15

2 Corinthians 9:6–15 in context

The text falls within the historical context of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Christians suffered some kind of economic hardship and Paul involved the Gentile Church in ameliorating their plight, either as a direct response to the request of the pillars of the Church (Gal. 2:10) or simply of his own initiative.

While some try to see some other salient and spiritual purposes that drove Paul in the fundraising, Punt (2000) argues that there should be no spiritualizing of Paul's efforts in this direction, and maintains that its 'primary purpose was clearly the attempt to relieve what appeared to have been a situation of desperate poverty in the Jerusalem Church' (p. 470). Punt's position here is in order. It might not be disputed that Paul saw the situation as an opportunity to explore some other significant theological dimensions to the Jewish-Gentile Christian relationship. Yet the primary purpose remained to help some Jerusalem Christians who had suffered economic hardship.

The silence of the Bible on the cause of the poverty has left scholars nothing but intelligent guesses simply based on other inconclusive pieces of internal evidence and mostly extra-biblical pointers. McKnight (1993) catalogues scholars' supposed five causes of the poverty:

- (1) The relief of more and more widows (Acts 6:1–7);
- (2) the pilgrimages to Jerusalem of both the elderly and Galileans, who burdened the communities;
- (3) the potential problems arising from Jerusalem's early experimentation with communal life (Acts 4:32–5:11);
- (4) the economic hardships caused by famine (Acts 11:27–30);
- and (5) the personal stresses due to economic persecutions (cf. Jas 1:9; 2:6–7; 5:1–6). (p. 144).

McKnight (1993) further records that Paul started, during his second missionary journey, a fund-raising project towards relieving the poverty of the Christian community in Jerusalem. When Paul took this project to Corinth, the Corinthians responded with much enthusiasm (2 Cor. 8:10; 9:2). Unfortunately, a year later the project lapsed in Corinth. Scholars are of diverse views as to why the project stalled in Corinth. Whatever the reason, Paul now writes, encouraging them not only to resume, but actually to complete what they have begun the previous year (2 Cor. 8:11).

The text: 2 Cor. 9:6–15 (Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland (NA) 28, transliterated)

6 *Touto de, ho speirōn pheidomenōs pheidomenōs kai therisei, kai ho speirōn ep' eulogiais ep' eulogiais kai therisei.*

7 *hekastos kathos proērētai tē kardia, mē ek lupēs hē ex anankēs; hilaron gar dotēn agapa ho Theos.*

8 *dunatei de ho Theos pasan charin perisseusai eis humas, hina en panti pantote pasan autarkeian echontes perisseuēte eis pan ergon agathon,*

9 *kathōs gegraptai:*

eskorpsisen, edōken tois penēsini,

he dikaiosunē autou menei eis ton aiōna.

10 *ho de epichorēgōn sporon tō speironti kai arton eis brōsin chorēgēsei kai plēthunei ton sporon humōn kai auxēsei ta genēmata tēs dikaiosunēs humōn.*

11 *en panti ploutizomenoi eis pasan haplotēta, hētis katergazetai di' hēmōn eucharistian tō Theō;*

12 *hoti hē diakonia tēs leitourgias tautēs ou monon estin prosanaplērousa ta husterēmata tōn hagiōn, alla kai perisseuoussa dia pollōn eucharistiōn tō Theō.*

13 *dia tēs dokimēs tēs diakonias tautēs doxazontes ton Theon epi tē hupotagē tēs homologias humōn eis to euangelion tou Christou kai haplotēti tēs koinōnias eis autous kai eis pantas,*

14 *kai autōn deēsei huper humōn epipothountōn humas dia tēn huperballousan charin tou Theou eph' humin.*

15 *Charis tō Theō epi tē anekdiēgētō autou dōrea.*

A personal working translation of 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (NA28 text)

6 And this, the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

7 Just as each has purposed in the heart, not out of sadness or out of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.

8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, in order that in everything always having all sufficiency you may abound unto every good work,

9 as it is written:

He scattered, he gave to the poor,
his righteousness remains into the age.

10 And the one who supplies seed to the one who sows and bread for food will supply and will multiply your seed and will increase the fruit of your righteousness.

11 In everything being enriched unto all generosity, which works through us thanksgiving to God.

12 Because the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but also abounds by many thanks to God.

13 By the test of this ministry they while glorifying God upon the subjection of your confession for the gospel of Christ and generosity of the fellowship to them and to all

14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God on you.

15 Thanks to God on his indescribable gift!

Analysis of 2 Corinthians 9:6–15

The similitude between generosity and bountiful sowing(v. 6)

Paul has been encouraging the Corinthians to complete what they have begun the previous year, presenting the Macedonians as models. Yet as if reticent to openly request them to give, he at this point, rather employs a maxim: *ho speirōnpheidomenōspheidomenōs kai therisei, kai ho speirōn ep' eulogiais ep' eulogiais kai therisei* (The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully).

The phrase, *ho speirōn*(formed from the root verb *speirō*, 'to sow') is a participle introduced by the definite article *ho*. This makes the participle a substantive, thus: 'The one sowing' or 'The one who sows'. Paul uses it in this maxim together with *therisō* (to reap or to gather a harvest). This way he metaphorically illustrates that the generosity he expects of the Corinthians is capable of yielding fruits for the giver—in accordance with the manner of giving—sparingly(*phaidomenōs*) or bountifully(*ep' eulogiais*). Consequently, just as in agriculture those who sow bountifully reap bountifully, so also in this collection, those who give bountifully would likewise reap bountifully.

Thus generous giving is like generous sowing and would, therefore, yield generous harvest for the giver.

The place of free-will and joy in generosity (v. 7)

Although Paul certainly wants the Corinthians to give generously, he does not desire them to do so against their will. Thus, he admonishes that they should give just as they have decided in their hearts—sparingly or bountifully. The word, *proērētai* is a keyword in this verse. According to Balz and Schneider (1993), it means to ‘choose for oneself, prefer’ (p. 151). It, therefore, refers to one deliberately choosing. Belleville (1996) believes—and rightly so—that Paul’s emphasis here is that giving is an individual matter and so should be privately decided in the giver’s own heart.

Secondly, he cautions that in giving generously they are to do so cheerfully, not grudgingly (*eklupēs*) or out of compulsion (*ex anankēs*). As Thrall (2004) observes, *eklupēs* and *ex anankēs* are simply two ways by which Paul makes the same point: that giving under compulsion amounts to grudging giving, without joy.

But why is it important that the Corinthians do not give grudgingly or out of compulsion? Simply, ‘for God loves a cheerful giver’ (*hilaron gar dotēnagapa ho theos*). So it could be said that for Paul, generosity has more to do with the attitude of the giver—of joy—than with the volume of the funds given. In other words, Paul expects the Corinthians to give bountifully. More than that, he also expects them to give with joy which could only be possible if they would give as they freely decided in their hearts.

God as the ultimate source of generosity (vv. 8–11)

As Matera (2003) submits, Paul now assures ‘the Corinthians that God, who gives the seed, will provide them with the means to sustain their generosity’ (p. 6). His emphasis here is that God is the ultimate source of all generosity, whereby he supplies to those who give so that they can always have enough to give to others, and not necessarily so that they would hoard wealth. Thus, the Corinthians could be assured that as they make up their mind to give, God would definitely supply to them. And God will provide them the means because he is continuously able (*dunatei*) to provide all grace (*pasancharin*). This would naturally lead the giver to a sense of having all self-sufficiency (*pasanautarkeianechontes*) which Paul recognises as crucial to leading a life of generosity.

It is needful to differentiate Paul’s notion of the word *autarkeia* from its Stoic philosophical connotations, which were prevalent in the Greco-Roman world. Kittel (1964) comments that for Cynic and Stoic philosophers it denotes one who exercises self-sufficiency ‘in relation to his own inner possibility and who thus becomes an independent man sufficient to himself and in need of none else’

(p. 466). For Paul *autarkeia* means much more than that in the context of 2 Corinthians 8–9.

First, while for the Stoic *autarkeia* is a virtuous end in itself, Thrall (2004) believes that for Paul, its purpose is to enable one to assist those in need; 'it is something which facilitates relationship with others, not withdrawal from them' (p. 579). Second, Harris (2005) observes that for Paul, *autarkeia* is not really self-sufficiency but 'God-sufficiency', in that it does not, as is the case with the Stoic' idea, rely on one's own inner resources apart from any outside help. It is rather 'a total dependence on God's unlimited ability to create the desire to give and to supply the resources to give' (p. 638). Consequently, Thrall (2004) summarises it to imply that 'the Corinthians will have a sufficient income, a sufficient livelihood, sufficient material goods to enable them to share with others, and, in particular, to contribute generously to the collection' (p. 579). Thus, if the Corinthians build their generosity on trust in the all-sufficiency that is in God, God will provide them with the wherewithal to lead a life of generosity towards the poor.

The purpose and results of the generosity (vv. 12–15)

Paul refers to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem as *hēleitourgia* which could mean the ministry or the service. Kittel (1964) elucidates that in classical Greek it was used to refer to the public service rendered by wealthy citizens, whereas it indicated religious service or freewill service in Jewish and *Koine* usage. It is, therefore, in this sense of freewill service that Paul uses it here, once again reiterating the point of verse 7, that each must give not under compulsion.

Paul maintains that the main purpose of this freewill service is to supply the wants (*husterēmata*) of the Jerusalem saints. However, this 'wants' of the Jerusalem saints does not imply abject poverty; they only lacked in some respects and the Gentile churches were to fill them up by adding to what they (the Jerusalem saints) already had. This is suggested by the word *prosanaplērousa* (translated 'supply'), which according to Rogers and Rogers (1998) speaks, in this context, of filling up by adding to.

Also the collection has far-reaching effects beyond economic lines. The overriding result will be the praise of God by both the Corinthians and the beneficiaries of their generosity. Belleville's (1996) submission is succinct and apt: that while the primary goal of the collection is to relieve want, the critical aim is to bring honour to God.

Exegetical conclusions

In the first place, the discourse on the collection for the Jerusalem saints reveals that the primary aim for a lifestyle of generosity is to help ameliorate the plight of those who suffer socioeconomic hardships. However, it further reveals some significant implications in the context of the Gentiles' act of generosity.

Theologically, the study reveals that God is the ultimate source of generosity. The implication is that no one can actually show generosity to another unless God has enabled such a one. Yet this does not negate the fact that while God grants the enablement unto generosity, leading a generous lifestyle is a necessary responsibility of the Christian. More so, God does not only enable, but also rewards, every act of generosity in accordance with how it is given—sparingly or bountifully.

Ecumenically, there is an emphasis on the oneness of the Church. Scholars are almost unanimous in the belief that for Paul the collection demonstrates and further engenders the unity of the Church. As Bruce (1993) clearly illustrates, Paul earnestly believes that the collection will reveal the ecclesiological unity between the Jews and the Gentiles in Christ.

Furthermore, there is an ethical orientation of generosity in the study. The service must be from self-will; no wonder it is called a *leitourgia*. There is no room for compulsion in requesting the Corinthians to contribute to the needs of the poor saints in Jerusalem. Davis (2012) summarises Paul's point most aptly: 'Accordingly, each person should feel free to decide in faith on the amount of a gift' (p. 1320). It is only in the context of giving freely without compulsion that the giver could give cheerfully; the kind of giver God loves.

Implications of generosity in 2 Corinthians 9:6–15 for contemporary Reformed spirituality in Nigeria

As Punt (2000) submits, 'Paul's comments regarding the collection provide a launching pad for theological reflection on poverty that ultimately goes beyond material altruism' (p. 484). Thus the study has revealed serious considerations that are significant in encouraging a lifestyle of generosity among Reformed Christians and churches in Nigeria.

First, the Church is challenged to recognize, as Grant (2009) does, that generosity is a divine imperative that Christians cannot afford to ignore, for the good of the church and society. No wonder Wright (2004) understands it, together with grace and gratitude, as not optional for Christians but the core of their calling.

Second, there is the need for Reformed Christians to recognise that God is the ultimate source of generosity, in that he is the one who gives so that humans can always have enough to give to others. This challenges Christians to abide by the Reformed ethos of humility, by acknowledging that if not for God's enabling grace, even those who give would not be able to do so. Therefore, there is no room for boasting whenever one does any act of generosity.

Third, understanding that generosity does not end in helping the poor, but most importantly brings praise to God ought to be a great motivation for the Reformed people. As they are taught in catechism class, 'The chief end of man is to glorify God'. Thus, since acts of generosity provoke praise to God, the

Reformed Christian in Nigeria ought to see it as a challenge to regularly engage in it.

There is also a challenge on the adequate understanding and right application of how God rewards acts of generosity. Although the passage clearly teaches that God rewards acts of generosity, Melick (1989) rightly observes that it, however, does not speak of 'seed-faith' as some have misinterpreted it. While seed-faith is motivated by greed to acquire wealth, true generosity is motivated by the desire to meet someone else's need and ultimately to glorify God. This is quite challenging for the Reformed churches in Nigeria, particularly the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria today where 'seed-sowing' has awfully become the order of the day.

The study on 2 Cor. 9:6–15 also challenges Reformed Christians to a lifestyle of generosity that demonstrates the understanding of the Church as one, whether as a denomination or across ecumenical boundaries (1 Cor. 12:12). So, in generosity the members express their identification with one another as one body, thereby embodying Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 12:26: 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it'. There is no room for individualism; the church is one!

It is, therefore, expected that Reformed churches could take the lead in demonstrating generosity ecumenically across denominational boundaries whereby one denomination identifies with those who suffer economic hardships or misfortune even in other churches. For instance, sometimes natural disasters occur in some parts of the country and some citizens are affected. In many cases those so affected run to any nearby church for succour. Even if none of such victims is identified as a member of that denomination, the church could extend an arm of fellowship to the particular denomination/congregation taking care of the victims by assisting materially and financially. In this context, the Emergency Relief department of the Presbyterian Community Services and Development (PCS&D) of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, for instance, is strongly challenged to step up its operations and actions across denominational ties.

It is this 'ecumenical communal exchange' that challenges the Reformed faith in Nigeria the most. Any form of difficulty facing any member or denomination of the Christian church ought to be seen for what it truly is: a challenge to the church, the body of Christ. The call for generous lifestyle is a call to unite with others of the Christian faith to fight poverty. In Nigeria where there is much poverty and hardship, occasioned to a large extent by corrupt and oppressive leadership, the Reformed denominations ought to unite (even with other denominations), not only to speak against injustice and oppression but also to visibly identify with the affected persons, denominations or congregations. While the government has the civic responsibility for the welfare of the citizens, the Christian church has the theological and missional obligation to extend

God's love and care to the suffering in the world; and this demands an ecumenical communion amongst the denominations.

The study also challenges the Nigerian Reformed denominations to a lifestyle of generosity that cuts across their corporate structures. While there are very buoyant parishes, presbyteries and synods—in the case of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN)—there are those that are very poor with larger percentages of their membership living below poverty line. This study, therefore, tasks the Church to work towards ameliorating the plight of these poor members. As Paul engaged the Gentile mission at the moment to help in providing for the material need of the poor in Jerusalem, PCN is being challenged by this work to engage its richer parishes towards helping the members of poorer ones. The Church can establish scholarship funds for indigent members or run schools that are truly mission oriented, and not profit-making venture, as was the case in the days of the Western missionaries. Launching a twinning programme may also be in order, whereby a richer parish is made to adopt a poorer one in another location, thereby helping the adopted one meet up with its obligations especially in the areas of welfare of members. The Church could also establish exemption policy whereby very poor parishes are excluded from some financial demands towards the upkeep of the higher courts of the Church.

Furthermore, as Davis (2012) explains, Paul is concerned that 'each person should feel free to decide in faith on the amount of a gift' (p.1320). The emphasis is on the freedom of the giver to decide without undue external duress. This same concern has its rightful place in PCN today where preachers now employ all sorts of lies, gimmicks and other unethical means to persuade and pressurize people to give. Worshippers are told unverifiable testimonies to cajole them into giving their hard-earned resources to the 'work of God', even when there is no identifiable work of God to be done with the funds. In some cases, it has been observed that preachers even employed foul means and practices such as fake miracles and wonders to entice gullible worshippers to bring money. In the end, the worshippers give as they are cajoled into, not as they rather wish. The study challenges the Reformed Christian to acknowledge that the generosity God accepts is the one that is freely decided by the giver.

Conclusion

The study has revealed the biblical foundations for the practice of generosity. Therefore, one could say that even though generosity in itself is a prosocial act aimed at ameliorating the plight of the poor, for the Christian it is a matter of faith. It is a virtue that is biblically expected—even demanded—of Christians. In this wise, the study reveals that the Bible mandates the Church and Christians to be vessels of socioeconomic transformation in society, thereby positively

touching the lives of those who suffer deprivation of any sort. This makes it clear that the message of salvation the Church bears is expected to be one that is holistic, catering for both the spiritual and the physical needs of humans.

Moreover, while the primary aim of generosity is to help those who are hurting, its ultimate goal is to bring glory to God. It is in this light that it can be said that generosity is theocentric: originates from God, works in obedience to and partnership with God, enabled and sustained by God's grace, brings praise to God and is definitely rewarded by God. Meanwhile, it is necessary to note that the reward is not to be the motivating factor to acts of generosity.

The caution of Gardner (2007) in this regard is both timely, relevant and a fitting conclusion:

Receiving is the natural reward of practising this wonderful law of the kingdom. Any preaching that emphasizes giving to get is a pervasion of all that Jesus taught. He lived and modelled that we give of our resources and ourselves because we love and desire to bless others, not for personal gain. We give because we acknowledge God's ownership and lordship over all that we have and so that His kingdom can be advanced here on earth. (p. 84).

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