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David C. Norrington

Fund-raising: The Methods used in the Early Church compared with those used in English Churches Today

*Mr Norrington will already be known to readers for his readiness to pose provoking questions to conventional Christian ways of doing things (see his book *To Preach or Not to Preach*). Here he raises some exegetical questions about the use of the collection plate.*

Introduction

In many Christian communities, financial issues absorb a disproportionate amount of time and energy; and the methods used to raise money frequently owe little or nothing to biblical practice. In what follows, we shall examine biblical practices and principles and their development in the early church before going on to see what is happening in the church today. Let us begin with the methods of Jesus.

A The Collection of Alms in the Ministry of Jesus

Nowhere in Jesus' mission do we find anything resembling directly solicited collections. We read of no contributions from those who came to hear Jesus on a casual basis. Some may have contributed and, if offered, such alms may have been accepted. But the primary need of Jesus' hearers was to receive. They had not yet graduated to the level of giving back although they were still encouraged to help the poor (Mt. 5:42 and perhaps Lk. 6:38). The disciples, however, may have been under instructions not to accept alms (Mt. 10:9) but the precise extent of this prohibition is unclear¹ although, since alms would often be in kind rather than in money,² they would have been akin to hospitality (Mt. 12:2; Acts 28:7-10).² Jesus refused offers of assistance

¹ A. B. Bruce, *Matthew*, EGT (London, 1905), I, 160; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC (Grand Rapids, 1984), VIII, 245.

² D. E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (New York, 1986), 65f, 179.

only when they were false or restricted his purposes (Mt. 4:9, 8:19–22; Mk. 15:23; Jn. 6:15) and he made no charge for miracles performed, unlike many pagan wonder-workers.³

Jesus' needs were met on occasion by those who offered hospitality (Lk. 7:36, 11:37, 14:1)—for Jewish teachers were sometimes invited into homes to give instruction and receive hospitality in return especially if they had just taken part in the synagogue services.⁴ Others were sometimes *asked* by Jesus to help but here the requests seem to have been related to Jesus' strategy for their conversion (Lk. 5:3, 19:5; Jn. 4:7 and possibly Jn. 6:9) and he probably knew them as his own from the beginning (Mt. 11:21–23; Jn. 1:47, 2:24f, 6:64).⁵ It appears that Jesus took little from those who were to remain permanently outside the Kingdom with the possible exception of occasional hospitality. The only personal exception may be the boy with the lunch (Jn. 6:9). Whether he was converted or not, the meal was surrendered voluntarily and repaid almost immediately with interest (cf. Jn. 6:11–13). Occasionally, alms and hospitality were accepted from what were commonly regarded as corrupt sources—the anointing by the woman at the Pharisee's house (Lk. 7:36–39) and accepting hospitality from Zacchaeus the tax farmer (Lk. 19:1–10). But here, salvation had entered both lives before the offering of alms which thus rendered the gifts acceptable.

Usually, Jesus' needs were met by his followers as an expression of their love for him and, apparently, with little solicitation. This is typical of the Jewish approach, in which teachers and their disciples were seen as particularly worthy objects of charity.⁶ Offerings might include food, money and services and might include the offering of life itself from truly devoted servants (Mk. 1:29, 2:15; Lk. 8:1–3, 22:8–12; Jn. 18:1 cf. Euseb. *HE* 7:22:7).

When debatable financial issues arose, such as payment of the temple tax (Mt. 17:24–27), Jesus acted with generous consideration for all those involved without necessarily falling back on his rights.⁷

The disciples going out on mission were instructed to be generous (Mt. 10:5–15; Lk. 10:1–11 and perhaps Acts 20:35). They would receive

³ A. Oepke, *TDNT*, III, 208; H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden, 1965), 197.

⁴ J. Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality—Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, 1985), 17; E. Lohse, *TDNT*, VII, 16, 21.

⁵ B. B. Warfield, *DCG*, 1608–612, 48; G. Friedrich, *TDNT*, VI, 844f; D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (London, 1979), 60–63.

⁶ E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1979), I, 627f; S. T. Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (New York, 1987), 188; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London, 1969), 113.

⁷ J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London, 1970), 256–258; cf. W. Horbury, 'The Temple Tax' in E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (eds.), *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge, 1984), 274, 282–286.

hospitality from the worthy (Mt. 10:11)—presumably the pious and godly, those most likely to accept the gospel and least likely to hamper its advance, particularly as a result of a bad reputation in the eyes of their fellows.⁸ Hospitality was willingly offered to travellers, especially those who brought blessing with them and was very much a part of Semitic culture. With the appearance of numerous large towns and villages in the Herodian period, the nomadic concept of hospitality had, to some extent, given way to the use of inns but Jesus favoured traditional forms of support and hospitality.⁹ As the mission progressed in the wider world, a network of Christian homes provided hospitality for Christian travellers.¹⁰ But in the short-term, Jesus' instructions to the disciples relating to travel could not be applied far outside Palestine.

Jesus and his disciples avoided begging. Although alms giving in Judaism was regarded as meritorious, within limits, and was a major route to prestige,¹¹ begging was generally despised (*Sir.* 40:28–30; *Lk.* 16:3; *Jos. Ant.* 17:214).¹²

It is unclear whether personal giving should have been anonymous or not. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount might seem to favour anonymity (Mt. 6:1–4). The Rabbis considered the best way of giving to be when the donor and recipient remained unknown to one another. Otherwise, alms were best given in private.¹³

As far as we know, Jesus and his disciples were not subject to any criticism in the realm of finance during his earthly ministry. They were thus free to act without the constraints which criticism might impose although the aim was not merely to avoid criticism but to encourage others to give glory to God in all areas including finance (Mt. 5:16).

⁸ For what constitutes 'worthy' in this context see G. G. Cohen, *Biblical Separation Defended* (Phillipsburg, 1966), 1–8 cf. D. J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, 1978), 336–340, 377f. For the view that ἀξιῶς here probably contains no moral implications see D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, 245; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Leicester/Grand Rapids, 1985), 180f.

⁹ *HJP*, II, 55; J. R. Murray, *DCG*, I, 827f.

¹⁰ A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, ²1983), 67f.

¹¹ R. Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity* (Sheffield, 1993), 52–59; R. A. Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology* (Edinburgh/London, 1961), 128f; C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* (London, ²1927), II, 40–43, 94; J. D. M. Derrett, *Jesus' Audience* (London, 1973), 42, 173.

¹² G. Theissen considers these traditional means of support to be 'begging indeed: begging of a high order' (*The First Followers of Jesus* (London, 1978), 14). This, however, seems to be a judgment passed with little reference to the first century Semitic context. The point is discussed further in J. M. Bassler, *God and Mammon: Asking for Money in the New Testament* (Nashville, 1991), 43–45.

¹³ U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1990), 357f; R. Posner, *Enc Jud*, V, 342f; G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge, 1927), II, 167; J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 1925), 385.

B The Collection of Alms in Acts and the Epistles of Paul¹⁴*a. Pauline Principles*

Paul insisted that the essentials of the Gospel should not be trimmed, no matter how offensive unbelievers might find it but he was equally insistent that secondary matters should not become barriers between God and people (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 10:23–33). In the area of finance, Paul expected much from his fellow Christians and this involved several principles all based on the nature of the gospel and love for his converts (2 Cor. 11:11; 12:14f).

1. Paul emphasized mutual aid and sharing and encouraged Christians to be generous (Rom. 12:8, 13; 1 Cor. 16:1f; 2 Cor. 8:14; Gal. 6:6–10). He often relied on that generosity himself (Acts 16:15, 18:7; Rom. 15:24, 16:1f; 1 Cor. 16:6, 11; Phil. 4:14–19; Phm. 22). Although Paul considered that he had a right to financial support from those to whom he ministered and, on occasion, directly requested assistance of various kinds for himself and others, he also maintained the right to decline support and would rather work to support himself if, by doing otherwise, he might cause financial hardship, weaken the faith of others, diminish his own freedom or encourage false views on the nature of Christian giving and the importance of earning a living (1 Cor. 9:1–23; 2 Cor. 11:1–9, 12:13–18; 1 Thes. 2:9; 2 Thes. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:17f).¹⁵ And he would work even at a job which meant stepping down socially.¹⁶ It appears that Paul did not generally request material assistance from any group of Christians whilst he was still working with them but might accept it after he had moved on. Gifts would then be from a distance and usually donated by the Christian community as a whole (Phil. 4:10–20). Donations made by any church in which Paul was currently working and living would probably be more personal and from specific individuals which could create problems—as at Corinth. When Paul did accept alms, it was in the context of mutual trust and understanding.¹⁷

¹⁴ I take all thirteen epistles in the New Testament from Romans to Philemon to be by Paul.

¹⁵ Paul did not endorse the concept of 'living by faith' when applied specifically to the supply of material needs. See the discussion in H. H. Rowdon, 'The Concept of "Living By Faith"' in A. Billington et al (eds.), *Mission and Meaning: Essays Presented to Peter Cotterell* (Carlisle, 1995), 339–356.

¹⁶ E. A. Judge, 'The Social Identity of the First Christians: A Question of Method in Religious History', *JRH* 11.2, 1980, 213f.

¹⁷ J. M. Everts, 'Financial Support', *DPL*, 296f, 299; J. M. Bassler, *God and Mammon*, 78f, 85f; B. Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Philadelphia, 1978), 91f; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford, 1996), 306f.

G. W. Peterman has recently shown that there are three types of material aid mentioned in the epistles of Paul which he might have received:

- a. Substantial support by a congregation whilst working with that same congregation—the support due to Paul as an apostle—similar to patronage and more than ordinary hospitality because it may have involved financial support.
 - b. Travel assistance (1 Cor. 16:6; 2 Cor. 1:16).
 - c. Mission support (Phil. 4:16). Peterman notes that Paul ‘rejected the first, asked for the second, and gladly received the third’.¹⁸
2. In Jewish and Graeco-Roman society, friendships between those of equal and those of different social status or rank were established and maintained by the regular exchange of gifts, services and favours.¹⁹ When benefits were received, the benefactor was owed gratitude and an appropriate return and could call upon this to be repaid at any time—rather like a debt. We can see something of this at work in Paul’s epistles, for example, in his dealings with Philemon (17–22) and with his fellow workers (Rom. 16:1–4; Phil. 2:30). Although Paul accepted the general principle of reciprocity, to some extent, he did not take on social obligations which might hinder the furtherance of the gospel (2 Cor. 11:7–15); and some of his dealings transcend the conventional notion of reciprocity (Phil. 4:14–19).²⁰
 3. Paul encouraged giving by introducing a competitive spirit when discussing the collection from the Corinthian Church (2 Cor. 8:1–7). This was very much in line with Graeco-Roman rhetorical conventions but less so with Jewish thought or the teaching and practice of Jesus although Paul generally followed Jewish practice rather than Graeco-Roman practice. Paul thus emphasized the customs current in the world of his readers and showed himself sensitive to social factors but without compromising principle.²¹

Pressure was further applied by reminding potential defaulters of

¹⁸ G. W. Peterman, *Giving and Receiving in Paul’s Epistles* (London University PhD Thesis, 1993), 180–183.

¹⁹ J. D. M. Derrett, *Jesus’ Audience*, 38–42; idem, *Law*, 231–238; G. W. Peterman, *Giving*, 61f; P. Garnsey and R. Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (London, 1987), 148–156.

²⁰ P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians*, WUNT (Tübingen, 1987), 142; G. W. Peterman, *Giving*, 164f, 192, 214; G. D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, 1995), 444–455.

²¹ H. D. Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9* (Philadelphia, 1985), 42; B. Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle/Grand Rapids, 1995), 411f; S. E. Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids, 1995), 78f; D. R. Register, *Concerning Giving and Receiving* (Sheffield University M. Phil. Thesis, 1990), 123f, 138, 165, 175.

the promises they had made (2 Cor. 9:1–5). Rich Christians were to be given special instruction in the use of their wealth (1 Tim. 6:17–19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:20–22).²²

4. Paul followed the teaching and example of Jesus and wished to offer the gospel without charge (Mt. 10:8; 1 Cor. 9:18). Paul may also have been influenced by Rabbinic thinking in which the Torah should be taught free of charge wherever possible.²³ Consequently, he did not generally accept alms from non-Christians aside from possibly accepting hospitality from Jews and God-fearers when visiting unevangelized areas (Acts 16:14f, 17:1–6). There is also the exception of the unusual circumstances of his entertainment in Malta (Acts 28:1–10).²⁴ If the Asiarchs at Ephesus were non-Christians, then Paul had non-Christian friends (Acts 19:31) but there is no indication that he asked for or accepted alms of any kind from them or from any other non-Christians, aside from the cases already mentioned.²⁵ Given that begging was held in low esteem in

²² Giving instruction to the rich on the use of their money is common in the U.S.A. (W. Pohl, 'Ministry to Deep-Pocket Donors' in R. L. Bergstrom et al, *Mastering Church Finances* (Portland, 1992), 87–97; J. E. Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock* (Grand Rapids, 1986), 453).

²³ S. Safari, 'Education and the Study of the Torah', *Compendia* 1.2, 956f; *HJP*, II, 328f; B. T. Viviano, *Study as Worship: Aboth and the New Testament* (Leiden, 1978), 92–95 (on m *Aboth* 4:5).

²⁴ The early Christians used inns but not often (Tert. *Apol.* 42:2 cf. *Acts of Jn.* 60f) for they were usually poorly furnished, disreputable and dangerous (L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London, 1974), 197–218; L. Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire* (London, 1908), I, 289–293; W. M. Ramsay, *HDB*, (Extra vol.), 393f; J. P. B. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (London, 1974), 152–154, 215f, 227f). Pagan temples and gymnasia sometimes provided lodgings or served as restaurants (W. D. Gray, 'The Rôle Played by the Classical Temple in Secular Life', *Classical Journal* 38, 1942–3, 325–330) and these may have been used in the early days (1 Cor. 8:10). Ultimately, however, Paul's teaching (1 Cor. 8:10, 10:18–33) probably resulted in the substantial avoidance of pagan holy sites by Christians (Tert. *Apol.* 15:7; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 8:4; R. P. C. Hanson, 'The Transformation of Pagan Temples into Churches in the Early Christian Centuries', *JSS* 23, 1978, 257–260) except when under the influence of false teaching (cf. Rev. 2:15, 20). Where Christian hospitality was unavailable, the only options were: accepting Jewish hospitality (in private homes or synagogues: W. Schrage, *TDNT*, VII, 826; A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (London, 1927), 440 but cf. H. C. Kee, 'Defining the First-Century CE Synagogue', *NTS*, 41, 1995, 481–500), hiring lodgings (Acts 28:30; L. Casson, *Travel*, 204) or sleeping in the open air (this may be referred to at Mk. 8:1–3 and 2 Cor. 11:27).

²⁵ The precise identification of Asiarchs is problematic. The term, as used in the present context, may indicate simply 'the wealthy and influential men in the province' (so J. M. I. West, *Asiarchs* (Oxford University B. Litt. Thesis, 1975), 13) or it may suggest direct connections with local government or pagan religion (so A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (London, 1963, 89f; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester/Grand Rapids, 1990), 418). On the Asiarchs' attitude to Christianity see J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh, 1857 repr. 1980), II, 210f; F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, 418.

the Graeco-Roman world,²⁶ we should expect Paul to avoid it, particularly as he also disliked begging (2 Thes. 3:6–12).

Paul's example of supporting himself by secular work may have been the subject of some criticism but it continued and this practice was followed by a number of Christian leaders up to the fourth century and even later.²⁷

5. Paul's work received extensive criticism and he took these criticisms seriously (2 Cor. 8:16–23, 9:3–5, 12:16; 1 Thes. 2:5). In financial matters, Paul made sure that alms were handled with a view to keeping criticism to a minimum, in Christian and non-Christian circles alike (2 Cor. 8:20f cf. 1 Cor. 10:32f. See also 1 Pet. 2:12–15, 3:1f,16 and m *Shek.* 5:2).²⁸ Even so, criticism persisted, not least because, on occasion, Paul declined assistance. The Corinthian Christians, perhaps particularly those of some wealth and power, complained that, although Paul accepted hospitality and travel assistance from them (1 Cor. 16:6; 2 Cor. 1:16),²⁹ he declined other gifts (perhaps even a salary)—whereas most teachers of the age would have accepted them in similar circumstances.³⁰ Such a refusal could be interpreted as an unfriendly act but giving may have been regarded by the Corinthians as imposing obligations on the recipient, resulting in increased prestige for the giver and social dependence for the recipient who became a client in a patron-client relationship.³¹ The Corinthians might have realised that in the light of God's mercy extended to human kind, all are in the position of being his clients and all are required to be unfailingly generous to others. But such an attitude would require a radical

²⁶ A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (London, 1968), 63–66; J. M. Bassler, *God and Mammon*, 18–29.

²⁷ G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1982), 42–46; L. Vischer, 'The Ministry and a Secular Occupation' in D. M. Paton (ed.), *New Forms of Ministry* (London, 1965), 36–54. On paid 'officials' in the early church see J. A. Kirk, 'Did "Officials" in the New Testament Church Receive a Salary?', *Exp T* 84, 1973, 105–108; P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth*, 218f; R. M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (London, 1978), 135, 139–141; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dalls, 1990), 278f. According to Eusebius, Montanus appointed collectors of money and provided salaries for his missionaries (*HE* 5:18:2 cf. 5:28:10 with Loeb note 1).

²⁸ J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London, 1959), 303.

²⁹ On the kind of assistance suggested in 1 Cor. 16:6 and 2 Cor. 1:16 see G. W. Peterman, *Giving*, 181; P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth*, 221; G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 819; cf. A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh, 1914), 388.

³⁰ P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth*, 225, 231, 246. Refusing gifts from one's brethren amongst God's people has Old Testament precedent (Ex. 36:4–7; 2 Sa. 24:24).

³¹ P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth*, 231–233, 242–246; J. K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (Sheffield, 1992), 108–110; G. W. Peterman, *Giving*, 192, B. Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 419.

rethinking of Graeco-Roman notions of reciprocity and patron-client relationships.³² For Paul, this was not the only financial issue requiring delicate handling. Paul may have wished to avoid being classed with the sophists and others who often charged for their teaching.³³ He might also have wished to avoid being too closely identified with one of the factional groups at Corinth.³⁴ Whatever the explanation, Paul was in a dilemma. To refuse alms would have given offence and yet Paul had no desire to create greater difficulties in the long run by sustaining pagan standards of morality, so he stood firm and tried to raise the Corinthians to the level of thinking in a Christian way about finance. Note that where offence was given, it was on a question of principle with the aim, so characteristic of all Paul's epistles and one of his greatest desires, that all should become mature in the faith. Paul, like Jesus, was fully prepared to cut across social convention whenever Christian truth demanded it, even if few understood his intentions.³⁵ Paul's attitudes to rhetoric, social status and patronage, honour and shame provide further examples.³⁶

b. Alms Collecting in 3 John

In 3 Jn. 7 we find Jesus' custom of refusing to take gifts from those outside the church applied in a missionary context. The explanation for John's prohibition is to be found in a desire to present the gospel freely, as Jesus did (Mt. 10:8) and to avoid being classed with various pagan teachers and priests, many of whom were happy to relieve their followers of money—although not wrong in itself, this desire for money frequently dominated their work and outlook.

John's principal concern was that nothing should be done which might cast doubt on the integrity of the gospel, even if it should mean hardship for God's people or, in the short-term, slow down missionary advance. Sacrificing short-term success for long-term principle is a normal biblical procedure and can be illustrated by the fact that alms

³² F. Young and D. F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*. (London, 1987), 179.

³³ R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Philadelphia, 1980), 52f; G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, 1981), 25–28; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Oxford, 1985), 101f.

³⁴ B. Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 417f.

³⁵ See my *To Preach or Not to Preach?* (Carlisle, 1996), 5, 50.

³⁶ B. W. Winter, 'The Entries and Ethics of Orators and Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:1–12)', *Tyn B* 44.1, 1993, 55–74; E. A. Judge, 'St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society', *Interchange*, 16, 1974, 195–198; *idem*, 'Cultural Conformity and Innovation in Paul: Some Clues from Contemporary Documents', *Tyn B* 35, 1984, 11–15; B. W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Carlisle/Grand Rapids, 1994), 42–60; B. Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 154f.

from corrupt or sometimes non-Christian sources were refused or returned both in the New Testament period and beyond (Acts 8:20; Tert. *De Praesc.* 30; *Ad Marc.* 4:4; *Apost. Const.* III:1:8, IV:1:6–8; *Didascalia* iv:5–10).³⁷

c. *Accepting Gifts from Those Outside the Covenant—an Old Testament Perspective*

There is a parallel to John's practice in the behaviour of Elisha, who declined to accept any gifts after healing the Gentile Naaman where such acceptance might distract attention from God as the real healer of his disease or be confused with payment for the blessing of God (2 Ki. 5:16). Naaman was under an obligation which could never be discharged. Elisha may also have wished to avoid being classed with the heathen priests of the day who gladly accepted rich rewards for their favours (Nu. 22:6–18).³⁸ When such a corrupt attitude arose amongst the religious leaders of God's people, it was condemned with all the vigour at the prophets' disposal (Je. 6:13; Mi. 3:11).

Declining gifts from those outside the Covenant seems to have been the usual practice amongst the people of Israel (Gn. 14:21–24; 1 Ki. 13:1–10; Ezr. 4:1–3 and probably 2 Ki. 8:7–14) but the taking of such gifts (of which there are numerous examples) was probably never regarded as an evil in itself (Gn. 41:39–45; Ex. 12:35; 1 Ki. 10:10f, 17:8–16; Ne. 2:1–9; Mt. 2:11; Jos. *War* 2:412; *Ant.* 16:14).³⁹ Acceptance or rejection was dependent upon circumstances (compare Gn. 41:39–45 with Dn. 5:17; and Ezr. 8:22 with Ne. 2:1–9) and, in general, gifts from corrupt sources were refused (Dt. 23:18 but cf. Ex. 3:21f, 11:2f, 12:35f).

³⁷ R. M. Grant, *Early Christianity*, 85; J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (Dublin, 1955, repr. 1986), 11, 19f. Money from a corrupt source is retained in Acts of Peter 30:1. This passage is discussed in M. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (London, 1974), 70.

³⁸ K. C. W. F. Bähr, *The Books of the Kings* (Part Second), (Lange's Commentary, Grand Rapids, 1960), III, 54; J. R. Lumby, *The Second Book of the Kings* (London, 1887), 54. But note the view of J. Gray that 2 Ki. 5:17 implies that Elisha would have bestowed a favour on Naaman by accepting the gift (*I and II Kings* (London, 1977), 507). Elisha's refusal of the gift is all the more impressive in that the incident occurred during a famine (2 Ki. 4:38, 7:1–4; T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Dallas, 1985), 66). In Israel, gifts were often brought to prophets for their services but were not always accepted (1 Sa. 9:7; 1 Ki. 14:3; 2 Ki. 4:42, 8:9).

³⁹ For further references from Josephus, with discussion, see J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, 342f.

d Tithing

There is no evidence in the New Testament that tithing was carried over from Judaism to the new community although some Jewish Christians may have continued the practice. There is, furthermore, little trace of it during the first few centuries of church life although views differ on its precise extent.⁴⁰ In the New Testament, the emphasis was on voluntary and generous giving according to ability, combined with a clear understanding of the purposes for which alms were required and without concern for acknowledgement or status (Acts 5:4; 2 Cor. 8:3, 9:5).⁴¹

e Collecting Alms In and For Jerusalem

The Jerusalem church collected alms from its members as they were needed (Acts 2:44f, 4:32–37, 6:1)⁴² without enlisting the aid of non-Christians.⁴³ Contributions were deposited with church 'officials' for the most part and then distributed although private giving would be present in the form of hospitality.⁴⁴ Beyond that, the mechanics of the operation are obscure and the Jerusalem experiment does not seem to have been copied precisely by other Christian communities until

⁴⁰ J. Sharpe, *DCA*, II, 1963f; E. Hatch, *The Growth of Church Institutions* (London, 1888), 101–107; G. Constable, *Monastic Tithes from their Origins to the Twelfth Century* (London, 1964), 19; L. Vischer, *Tithing in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, 1966), 9–13.

⁴¹ D. P. Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke—Acts* (Linz, 1983), 208f; J. L. González, *Faith and Wealth* (San Francisco, 1990), 82, 85; R. J. Banks, 'The Early Church as a Caring Community and Some Implications for Social Work Today', *Interchange* 30, 1982, 38–40; F. Clarke, 'Tithing? A New Covenant Look at an Old Covenant Practice', *Searching Together* 16.4, 1987, 1–7, 19.

⁴² Note the iterative imperfects here which suggest repeated action. There is, therefore, no need to assume that all disciples sold up all their possessions at once (C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh, 1994), I, 169; Moulton, *Grammar*, III, 67; B. M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford, 1990), 244–249; and see further the discussion in B. Capper, 'The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods', *BAFCS*, IV, 337–341.

⁴³ The existence of Jewish poor relief in Jerusalem (from which the church might have benefitted) cannot be shown to have existed as early as this (D. P. Seccombe, 'Was There Organized Charity in Jerusalem Before the Christians?', *JTS* 29, 1978, 140–143; B. Capper, 'Palestinian Cultural Context', 351).

⁴⁴ Private giving is encouraged in early Christian writings: Mt. 5:42, 10:8; Lk. 6:30, 35; Acts 9:36; Eph. 4:28; Jas. 2:14–16; 1 Jn. 3:17; *Did.* 1:4–6, 4:8; *Barn.* 19:8; 2 *Clem.* 17:2; *Hermas Mand.* 2:4; *Sim.* 5:3:7; Aristides *Apol.* 15:7–9, 16:2; *Clem. Alex. Quis Dives* 13. Hospitality is also encouraged: Mt. 25:35, 40; Mk. 9:37; Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2, 5:10; Tit. 1:8; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9; *Did.* 11:1–6, 12:2; *Hermas Mand.* 8:10; Aristides *Apol.* 15:7; Tert. *Ad Ux.* 2:4 (E von Dobschütz, *Christian Life in the Primitive Church* (London, 1904), 300–302; G. Stählin, *TDNT*, V, 21–25; J. L. González, *Faith and Wealth*, 71–105).

the rise of monasticism⁴⁵ although the basic principle of mutual sharing was still widely encouraged and practised (2 Cor. 8:14; Phil. 4:10; *Did.* 4:8).

Relieving the poverty of the Jerusalem church necessitated contributions from numerous churches (Acts 11:27–30; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1–5, 9:1–5). Paul's instructions to the churches of Corinth and Galatia were to put donations aside on the first day of each week (1 Cor. 16:1f) but this was an occasional arrangement destined to end when the money was eventually taken to Jerusalem.⁴⁶ It had nothing to do with local needs. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Corinthian collection was part of an already existing collection scheme of any kind. In fact, there is no clear evidence for the existence of a common congregational fund for local needs in any New Testament Church.⁴⁷ Nor is it easy to identify financial officers in New Testament churches.⁴⁸

The alms designated for Jerusalem were, according to 1 Cor. 16:2, to be kept at home until required rather than deposited in weekly instalments with the host or treasurer at the regular meeting place of the church.⁴⁹ The reason for keeping alms at home is difficult to ascertain and, of the numerous explanations offered, none is entirely convincing.⁵⁰ Had the alms been kept at the meeting place (which would be a Christian home), it still could not be shown that the collection took place during Christian gatherings although this is commonly assumed and for several reasons:

i. Today, we automatically associate collections with church meetings.

⁴⁵ B. Capper, 'Palestinian Cultural Context', 326. The later situation at Pontus is not a parallel (cf. A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (London, ²1908), II 204f) notwithstanding the claims of D. J. Kyrtatas, *The Social Structure of the Early Christian Communities* (London, 1987), 40.

⁴⁶ There are no grounds for assuming that 2 Cor. 9:12 or Gal. 2:10 refers to a regular collection or that the collection for the Jerusalem church would be repeated (K. F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy* (London, 1966), 146). Relieving the poverty of the Jerusalem church may not have been the only reason for this collection. See S. McKnight, 'Collection for the Saints', *DPL*, 144–146; K. F. Nickle, *Collection*, 100–143.

⁴⁷ Some find a hint of such a fund in Rom. 12:8 where *μεταδίδους* is held to refer to the distribution of community alms (so E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London, 1980), 342). Against this see J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1965), II, 125f; J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (Dallas, 1988), 730.

⁴⁸ For an attempt to do so see N. A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis, 1977), 30.

⁴⁹ Most commentators take it this way cf. G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 813. For alternative views see E. E. Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Exeter/Grand Rapids, 1989), 94f, 138; L. Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Leicester/Grand Rapids, ²1985), 233.

⁵⁰ S. Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome, 1977), 93–95.

- ii. The collection was to occur on the first day of the week, presumably a day when all the Christians would meet together, although the precise reason for selecting this day is not clear. It may have been to highlight the solemnity of the collection and its special associations with the service of God and fellow believers, although other explanations are certainly possible.⁵¹
- iii. A collection is associated with Christian gatherings in the second century.

Even so, the case remains unproven and, furthermore, this collection appears to have been unique and it would, therefore, be inappropriate to draw general conclusions from it.

C Summary of New Testament Data

The collection of alms was, for the most part, confined to the people of God.

Love and generosity were emphasized, giving was voluntary and begging was virtually absent but pressure was applied to keep promises once made. All was to be done in a manner worthy of the gospel and in line with Graeco-Roman customs. Offence was given only on matters of high principle. New Testament practice involved great concern for both means and ends, great concern for both donor and recipient.

Collections appear to have been ad hoc arrangements lacking any clear connection with Christian gatherings.

D The Collection of Alms from the Close of the New Testament Period to the Fourth Century AD

Before AD 150, private giving was widely encouraged and may have been the principal source of gifts for distribution.⁵² There were also special occasional collections held at the behest of the bishop but these have no necessary connection with Christian gatherings.⁵³ Donations were supposedly voluntary (Justin 1 *Apol.* 67; Tert. *Apol.* 39:5) but, on occasion, pressure was applied. Such pressure was particularly common from the third century onwards.⁵⁴

Justin Martyr, writing mid-second century, mentions a collection in

⁵¹ W. Rordorf, *Sunday* (London, 1968), 195; R. T. Beckwith and W. Stott, *This is the Day* (London, 1978), 149 n17; D. R. De Lacey, 'The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus' in D. A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 185.

⁵² G. Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church* (Edinburgh, 1883), 88.

⁵³ A. Harnack, *Mission*, I, 157 n2 cf. 184.

⁵⁴ A. Harnack, *Mission*, I, 151; H. Feldman, *Some Aspects of the Christian Reaction to the Tradition of Classical Munificence with particular Reference to the Works of John Chrysostom and Libanius* (Oxford University D. Phil. Thesis, 1980), 143f, 231.

connection with Christian gatherings and a common fund (1 *Apol.* 67:14). This is partially confirmed by Tertullian (*Apol.* 39:5), writing around AD 200, where he mentions a monthly collection.⁵⁵ Both of these were for local needs and are, therefore, different from the collection for the church at Jerusalem. There are more hints of collections in this period. In the *Didache* (AD 40–150?) alms were to be given to the prophets or the poor (13:3–7 cf. 14:1–3).⁵⁶ Clement of Rome (AD 70–140) makes an obscure reference to what may be an alms collection (1 *Clem.* 44:4).⁵⁷ Ignatius, writing at the beginning of the second century, speaks of a common fund (*Ign Pol.* 4:3). There may have been a common fund administered by the Christians at Philippi at about the same time⁵⁸ and, generally, in the second century, the church of Rome was renowned for its generosity (Euseb. *HE* 4:23:10). There is a reference in the Shepherd of Hermas (AD 80–180) to the mismanagement of funds by διάκονοι (*Sim.* 9:26:2).⁵⁹ All these examples may suggest some kind of system of collecting alms but no details are given and no clear connection with Christian gatherings can be established. References to possible financial irregularities amongst church leaders are common in this period but some may refer to financial dealings which had no connection with church funds.⁶⁰

In the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (first half of the third century) various gifts were available for good works (5, 6, 24, 28, 30) and were given to the bishop who acted as trustee (cf. 3). The picture is similar

⁵⁵ G. Uhlhorn suggests that the limitation of one collection per month may have been a legal requirement if the church ranked as a collegium (*Christian Charity*, 141f). Against this, Tertullian's reference to the financial practice of the church need not be determinative. He may just have been drawing a parallel between church practice and that of the collegia, as he drew parallels elsewhere but even here he points out the difference as well. See further M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London, 1994), 182–186; R. L. Wilken, 'Collegia, Philosophical Schools and Theology' in S. Benko and J. J. O'Rourke (eds.), *Early Church History* (London, 1972), 279–291; A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny* (London, 1968), 779f; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, 1981), 325f; W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (London/New Haven, 1983), 77–80.

⁵⁶ On the dating of the *Didache* see J. Draper, 'The Jesus Tradition in the *Didache*' in D. Wenham (ed.), *Gospel Perspectives: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (Sheffield, 1984), V, 269–271; C. N. Jefford, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Leiden, 1989), 3–18.

⁵⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Part I S. Clement of Rome* (London, 2nd 1890), II, 135.

⁵⁸ Polycarp *Phil.* 11, but the reference is obscure (W. Telfer, *The Office of a Bishop* (London, 1962), 67 n2).

⁵⁹ On the dating of the Shepherd of Hermas see H. O. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius* (Waterloo, 1991), 55–58; J. B. Lightfoot, J. R. Harmer and M. W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Leicester, 2nd 1989), 191.

⁶⁰ L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Beginnings of Western Christendom* (London, 1948), 333.

in the contemporaneous *Didascalia* (ii:27).⁶¹ Giving alms to the bishop or his appointee seems to have been standard practice from the time of Justin onwards.⁶² Several consequences followed from this: it helped to consolidate power in the hands of the bishops and the organized church;⁶³ charitable giving became less personal in character;⁶⁴ and church collections came to be regarded as a superior way of distributing alms when compared with private giving—although this view was not held consistently throughout the early centuries.⁶⁵ Furthermore, from the end of the first century onwards, the Jewish doctrine of merit influenced the Christian approach to alms giving (*Did.* 4:5f; 1 *Clem.* 50:5; 2 *Clem.* 16:4; Polycarp *Phil.* 10:2; *Clem. Alex. Strom.* 2:15; Cyprian *De op et el.* 1–6, 20; *Acts of Thomas* 19). In short, the church became increasingly influenced, in both the theory and practice of alms giving, by the surrounding Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture.⁶⁶

There is nothing to compel us to assume that a collection was originally regarded as vital, either as an integral part of Christian meetings or otherwise. This follows from the near silence of the non-biblical sources prior to about AD 150 and the variation in later sources, coupled with their substantial differences from New Testament practice. For example, from the time of Constantine, gifts to the church included bequests (often substantial), state subsidies and various exemptions. Other methods, familiar to us, were also apparently not used. For example, the alms dish arrived on the scene much later. It is known in England from the fourteenth century and became common after the Reformation. The alms chest was used in England appreciably earlier and was common from the days of the crusades.⁶⁷

⁶¹ References are to: G. J. Cumming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students* (Bramcote, 1976); S. Brock and M. Vasey, *The Liturgical Portions of the Didascalia* (Bramcote, 1982) and R. H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford, 1929).

⁶² W. Telfer, *Office of a Bishop*, 158–186. We have this procedure, in germ, in the New Testament period (Acts 4:34f, 5:1f, 6:1–3; and perhaps 1 Tim. 3:8; 1 Pet. 5:2; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (London, 1976), 201).

⁶³ H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, II, *The Founding of the Church Universal* (London, 1961), 229; W. R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia, 1985), 269; J. L. González, *Faith and Wealth*, 133f.

⁶⁴ E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching and the Christian Churches* (London, 1931), I, 136f. By the time of John Chrysostom there was also a more spiritual emphasis in alms giving (H. Feldman, *Aspects*, 164).

⁶⁵ A. Harnack, *Mission*, I, 157; H. Feldman, *Aspects*, 137f.

⁶⁶ H. Feldman, *Aspects*, 126, 153, 157–165; L. Wm. Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire* (New York, 1980), 54–63, 103, 108–114, 195–199; B. Ramsey, 'Almsgiving in the Latin Church: The Late Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries', *TS* 43, 1982, 241–259.

⁶⁷ A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, II (Oxford, 1964), 895–899; E. Venables, *DCA*, II, 1443f; C. E. Pocknee in J. G. Davies (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London, 1986), 5f; C. Oman, *English Church Plate 597–1830* (London, 1957, 88).

Just how alms were collected before AD 200 varied and precise details seem beyond recovery. There is, however, consistent silence in all these sources regarding support from non-Christians, combined with a strong desire to present the gospel free of charge (Justin *Dial.* 58:1; Iren. *Haer.* II:32:4) and we may assume that those outside the church were seldom approached for assistance of any kind.

The uses to which alms were put included hospitality, the care of the sick, orphans, widows, the aged, the shipwrecked, those in prisons and mines, those requiring burial, churches in need and, generally, those in poverty and distress. This included the building of orphanages, hospitals, hospices and almshouses.⁶⁸ All this was usually done within the confines of God's people—not surprisingly, for Christians saw themselves as members of one family. Even so, in both testaments, the love of God extends to all humanity⁶⁹ and such an attitude manifested itself in the early church with many benefactions to non-Christians (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 6:10; 1 Thes. 3:12, 5:15; Euseb. *HE* 7:22, 9:8; Pontius *Vita Cypriani* 9; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 43:63),⁷⁰ so much so that the church had a reputation for generosity beyond its boundaries.⁷¹

The running costs of the church as an institution were insignificant in the early days. There were probably paid workers early on although just when payment became sufficient for the recipient to live on is difficult to say (see below n27). In the third century and beyond, the church building programme began to absorb an increasingly large proportion of the available funds. The church thus emulated one of the distinctive features of Graeco-Roman religion—its high organizational costs (Tert. *Apol.* 42:8f).⁷²

⁶⁸ A. Harnack, *Mission*, I, 147–198.

⁶⁹ L. Morris, *Testaments of Love* (Grand Rapids, 1981), 79–81, 91, 172, 193–195, 207–224; J. Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament* (London, 1929), 201–204. Concern for the outsider is seen in: Mt. 5:16, 44, 46; Lk. 10:29–37; Jn. 3:16; Rom. 12:20; 1 Tim. 3:7, 6:1; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:12, 15, 3:1f, 16. Verses such as 1 Pet. 2:17; 1 Jn. 2:9, 3:14–17, 4:20 do not necessarily exclude loving those outside the church (J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, 1988), 130f; P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 103; S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Waco, 1984), 60, 190; I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, 1978), 131).

⁷⁰ A. Skevington Wood, 'Social Involvement in the Apostolic Church', *EQ* 42, 1970, 194–212; G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (1985), 106–115, 156; E. Yamauchi, 'How the Early Church Responded to Social Problems', *Christianity Today* 17, 24 November 1972, 6–8.

⁷¹ Julian, 'Epistle to Arsacius, High Priest of Galatia' (Loeb edition: W. C. Wright (ed.), *The Works of Emperor Julian* (Cambridge/London, 1923), III, 66–71; B. Ramsey, 'Almsgiving', 231f.

⁷² G. Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity*, 30–32; A. Deissmann, *Light*, 105, 154, 160, 284f; R. M. Grant, *Early Christianity*, 135; D. C. Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?*, 26–33.

E Church Methods Today Compared with Those of the Early Church

a Introduction

Many of the methods of fund-raising in use today in England were used during the middle ages but were not used in the early church.⁷³ Often these later methods come into direct conflict with the principles outlined above. This can be illustrated by examining one popular form of collecting which typifies current approaches and attitudes: the collection plate. There is no suggestion here that all churches use inappropriate fund-raising methods. Some churches, like some missionary societies, make no public requests for money. But most churches use the collection plate or a similar method.

b A Justification for the Collection Plate

This can be summarized as follows:

- 1 An offering is part of Christian worship. As W. Prior observes, an offering is 'symbolic of the offering of ourselves to God ... a reminder that all we are and have belong to God'.⁷⁴
- 2 Christians want to give and should have an opportunity to contribute to church funds and an opportunity to express gratitude to God for his many gifts.
- 3 Christians should support the church financially. Giving money to the local church is an expression of trust in its work and a desire to see it continue and prosper.⁷⁵
- 4 All giving is optional and private. No pressure is applied.
- 5 The use of a common treasury eliminates some of the temptations associated with personal giving.⁷⁶

c Issues Arising From the Use of the Collection Plate and Other Forms of Collecting

First, there is little in the New Testament to suggest any direct connection between worship in Christian gatherings and the collection of alms.

Second, with clerical encouragement, the collection plate is liable to consume a substantial proportion of the money which individual

⁷³ R. Mullin, *The Wealth of Christians* (Exeter, 1983), 156-171.

⁷⁴ W. Prior in R. G. Turnbull (ed.), *Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1967), 409a.

⁷⁵ P. Mickey, G. Gamble and P. Gilbert, *Pastoral Assertiveness: A New Model for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, 1978), 138.

⁷⁶ P. Masters, *Tithing: The Privilege of Christian Stewardship* (London, 1994), 19.

Christians have put aside for the work of God. Most Christians are less likely to seek out ways of distributing their money effectively and are thus denied the enrichment, maturity and mistakes which the use of God's gifts (spiritual gifts or skills) bring in their train.⁷⁷ Some Christians deride personal charitable giving on the grounds that it is 'inferior to that undertaken by the state because it could lead to pride'.⁷⁸ For similar reasons, other Christians prefer giving to be controlled by the local church rather than the individual Christian. The dangers of pride and other errors, however, are present in the exercise of all the gifts which God has given to his people. This can hardly be used as an excuse for abandoning any one of those gifts altogether. The solution lies in correct usage.

Third, as the New Testament shows, Christians have financial responsibilities to the church and its work. But giving to the church, the body of Christ, is not necessarily the same as giving to the organized church. In the New Testament, giving to the body of Christ suggests personal giving, freedom of choice, the assistance of friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, the sponsoring of individual and group enterprises. Today, the concept of giving to the organized church may involve precisely the same things but more often it suggests impersonal giving, pressurized giving, the support of a costly organization with its structures and functionaries, and Christian work which often bears only a passing resemblance to anything visible in the mission of the early church. The claim of the organized churches that they are entitled to a substantial proportion of available Christian funds (and from all members) is not self-vindicating and needs evaluation in the light of biblical principles. The Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the organized church are not the same.⁷⁹

Where there are costly church buildings and salaries to be paid, how income is spent is already determined to a large extent. But where New Testament patterns are followed, institutional costs are low and Christians individually or in groups can determine expenditure as they will—on their own individual or group projects or more distant enterprises, with members knowing how their own money is used. All this helps in the development of maturity.⁸⁰

Fourth, the plate is placed before *all* in the congregation and many feel expected to contribute although, in some churches, payment on

⁷⁷ E. F. Scott, *Man and Society in the New Testament* (New York, 1946), 109, 160; R. Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (1927, London, 1962), 59f, 154–156.

⁷⁸ This is the view of R. J. Sider summarized by H. Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, 1983), 244.

⁷⁹ On the dangers of identifying church structures with the Kingdom of God see D. B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, 1978), 189–191.

⁸⁰ New Testament patterns are explored in my *To Preach or Not to Preach?*

a monthly basis or by standing order is becoming more common and thus pressure to give, at any one time, is lessened but not eliminated.⁸¹ No-one is physically forced to give but for many it takes courage to let the plate pass by without contributing when many pairs of eyes are watching.⁸² As Bishop V. S. Azariah points out, it looks like an instance of indirect compulsion.⁸³ Some visitors, or even regular Christian attenders, can be shamed into giving. The weak and the poor are particularly vulnerable and the church has no duty to pressurize those least able to endure the trials of non-conformity.⁸⁴ The result is that in taking up the so-called 'free-will' offering, the offering is maximized and the free-will minimized. A prominently displayed collection plate passively waiting near the church door is only a marginal improvement. If Christians believe that visitors should pay on principle then they should say so clearly on the notice board outside the church building. If not, then let it be a free-will offering in reality not pretence.

Fifth, the church has ignored the New Testament example of seldom soliciting money, seldom taking and freely giving. As a result of its frequent high pressure appeals for money, the church is seen by many in the West as the world's greatest beggar. Instead of doing all in their power to destroy such a reputation, Christians reinforce it every week by passing round the plate. Not surprisingly, some non-Christians believe that one must pay to enter a church. The Sunday School collection is open to similar objections and teaches the child (often from a non-Christian background) by the clearest possible visual aid—'We want your money!' The small sums involved suggest payment is required on principle. There are even collections at evangelistic church services and campaigns. There is no Christian occasion, from the children's mission to the carol concert, which has not been used by God's people as an opportunity for fund-raising. Non-believers are expected to *pay* in order to hear the gospel. This inexcusable behaviour may not register with Christians as an example of avarice but many non-Christians see it differently and their acceptance of the gospel is made more difficult by a stumbling block of Christian creation.

Sixth, if a church shows an excessive interest in fund-raising rather

⁸¹ Alternative ways of giving money are outlined in M. Wilson, *Managing Your Money* (Leicester, 1994), 50–56.

⁸² The use of a bag instead of a plate may prevent the curious from noting amounts but is otherwise no improvement.

⁸³ *Christian Giving* (London, 1954), 47 cf. 87f.

⁸⁴ In nineteenth century England, some families may not have attended church because they could not afford pennies for the offering (D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 112; S. Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis* (London, 1976), 119).

than in the effective performance of its Christian duties, then it is already in decline.⁸⁵

The position of Christians in England today, in regard to criticism concerning fund-raising, is thus more akin to that of Paul than Jesus. But there is a difference. Paul was aware of the problem and went out of his way to minimize it, whereas Christians today frequently operate in complete indifference to the contrary opinions of those around them. But what if there were no criticism? In some countries, such as the USA, the methods used by the church for collecting money are similar to those used in England but they seem to provoke less hostility, except amongst European observers. Should the church there continue as before? No. The church has a nobler duty than to cash in on human ignorance as Paul clearly demonstrates in his treatment of the Corinthians.

d Is it appropriate for the present day church to use biblical practices and principles as a guide to methods of fund-raising?

The biblical principles and practices outlined above may seem clear enough and appropriate in a first century context. But can they be transposed across the centuries and applied effectively now? That the two situations are different is obvious but are the differences so great that the New Testament material would be inappropriate for today? I have argued elsewhere that other New Testament principles and practices should be or are lived out in Christian communities today; and that many churches follow non-biblical patterns of church life which were common in earlier ages and do so in buildings which have been used for similar purposes for centuries.⁸⁶

In the area of finance, some elements of the first century picture are foreign to us, for example, notions of hospitality, patronage, honour and shame. But much of the picture is familiar—so much so, that New Testament practice has been successfully applied with little adaptation both at home and on the mission field.⁸⁷ This success is founded on the abiding value of the underlying principles already outlined above.

Some may argue that current methods, like the collection plate, represent an enlightened interpretation of New Testament methods and are directly related to current ecclesiastical requirements. There are several objections to this view:

- i* The collection plate is hardly a new method specifically designed for the needs of the moment. It is rather one of our many ecclesi-

⁸⁵ A. L. McDonald, 'The Grand Inquisitor Lives—Idolatry in Organizations and Management' in O. Guinness and J. Seel (eds.), *No Good but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (Chicago, 1992), 147f.

⁸⁶ *To Preach or Not to Preach?*

⁸⁷ R. Allen, *Missionary Methods?*, 49–61.

- astical customs and the problems which arise from its use tend to be ignored or remain unrecognized.
- ii Many modern fund-raising methods cut directly across biblical principles because the emphasis is constantly placed upon increasing income as an end in itself with the givers cast in the rôle of means—an inversion of biblical principles. The high cost of running church buildings helps to reinforce this tendency.
 - iii Methods like the collection plate can easily alienate those on the fringes of church life. There is an ethical dimension in New Testament fund-raising which seems to be absent in many of our churches.

Should New Testament methods be seen as prescriptive? It is not my purpose to argue this point but rather that New Testament methods are effective and consistent with both the message which the church has to proclaim and the aim of building mature Christian communities.

e Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary Christian methods of collecting money help to distort the biblical balance between private and institutional giving; they help the church to turn in on itself and help to keep babes as babes.⁸⁸ No matter how worthy the ends, the means are unloving, unjust, contrary to the example and spirit of the New Testament and cause the name of God to be dishonoured.

Abstract

First, this article provides a description of methods of collecting alms used by Jesus, Paul and the early church up to the fourth century AD, together with an analysis of the biblical principles involved.

Second, there is a critical discussion of collecting money in England today, using the collection plate as a typical example of current practice. This is examined in the light of biblical principles and found wanting. Current methods, like the collection plate, bring the church and the gospel into disrepute. The time has come for the church to rethink its methods of collecting money.

⁸⁸ Some churches have used methods of collecting money which are perhaps even worse than those commonly used in England: V. S. Azariah, *Giving*, 46–48, 66, 71f, 86f; D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Carlisle/Grand Rapids, 1987), 121; R. Mullin, *Wealth*, 150–152, 159–162; J. F. MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, 1992), 16 47f, 198, 264–290; H. Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, 1993), 193–209, 349–352, 359; J. R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (London, ²1967), 348f; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, ³1971), 152–157; J. Godfrey, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1962), 324–328.