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Remembering the poor: Pauline perspectives on poverty¹

ABSTRACT

The Pauline letters are not a textbook for economic theory and practice, offering no ready-made and final answers for addressing poverty, ancient or modern. At the same time, in addressing poverty in concrete terms and in particular social locations, Paul's considerable concern for the socio-economical situation of the communities that he addressed becomes apparent. For Paul poverty is not disconnected from other matters in the community such as righteousness and fellowship. These matters can easily be observed in Paul's motivation of the collection for the church in Jerusalem. Some implications of Paul's treatment of poverty for theological thinking in this regard are briefly explored.

1. INTRODUCTION

Christians often use the Bible when reflecting on issues such as poverty, particularly when its spread in our own country and around us on the African continent is so rampant and its effects so far-reaching. However, when reading Paul, caution should be exercised both in understanding his perspectives on (what we today would call) the economy, according to the sensibilities of first-century economic views, and to consider them as part of a larger complex of ideas. A good case in point was Paul's concern for the collection for the Jerusalem church, and the material wants of the community. The primary purpose of the collection was clearly the attempt to relieve what appears to have been a situation of desperate poverty in the Jerusalem church.

Paul's comments regarding the collection can provide a launching pad for theological reflection on poverty that ultimately goes beyond material altruism, however important it clearly is in South Africa.² On the one hand, it is tragic if unavoidable that Pobee's (1993:397) characterisation of African identity should include a reference to Africa's bondage in "the grip of a culture of poverty"; on the other hand, Paul urges active financial help to the poor, as charity. Such assistance should never become a "conscience tranquilizer" (Johnson 1989:26), requiring

1 For a more extensive discussion of Paul's economic vision against the global context, see Punt (2000a; 2000b).

2 And it is an urgent task for theology; cf Éla (1994:137) "While people wallow in misery, we are centering our reflection and action on religious rites and customs!"; Hays (1996:468) "imaginative obedience to God will require of us a sharing of possessions far more radical than the church has ordinarily supposed". Nürnberger (1994:41-58) makes a number of useful remarks on the need to devise a sound economic vision for SA, and the role the church can play in an economic restructuring process. Dickinson (1983:127-147) sees theological and ethical reflection on these issues as one of the ways in which the church shows solidarity with the poor.

rather careful consideration towards faithful stewardship (North 1974:221). Otherwise charity can become the “instrument of sin”, humiliating the recipient, and widening the chasm between unequals (Nürnberg 1978:168). As it will become clear, Paul’s appeal for generous giving is in fact matched by his broader concerns for the well-being of the community and all within it.

2. ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN JERUSALEM³

Paul’s insistence on the need for churches to contribute to the alleviation of the poverty of the Jerusalem community stands in stark contrast to his disavowal of personal support. His emphasis on the collection confirms his own commitment to and the early church’s concern for the marginalised in the community, including widows and orphans, the poor, the sick and elderly. “I suspect that the continual remembrance of the poor for which Paul expressed such resolve was not incidental to his theology, and that the scars he bore on his body were the measure of his commitment to that vision” (Elliott 1994:90). Further, Paul’s insistence that those who could should work, enabled not only their own independence but also provided relief to those in need (Jones 1984:224-225). Paul’s preoccupation with a “collection”⁴ for the church in Jerusalem, which is not limited to two chapters in his second letter to the Corinthian church,⁵ requires further investigation.⁶

The most elaborate treatment of the collection is found in 2 Cor 8 and 9, and Paul’s insistence on it goes further to include general concerns about generosity (2 Cor 8:12; 9:5-11), equality (2 Cor 8:13-15) and the prudent management of the funds (2 Cor 8:18-21) (McKnight 1993:143). “The principles of representation, vicarious action, reciprocity, and shared destiny are tightly connected to the concept of a collection for Jerusalem and its conveyance” (Georgi 1992:82).

2.1 Not spiritualising wealth and poverty

As Paul never treated wealth and poverty as abstract topics in his letters, the temptation to spiritualise his references to these matters⁷ is typically balanced by the argument that Paul was

3 Not that the collection was solely about alleviating poverty or Christian charity. It also related to the credibility of Paul’s apostolic mission and the legitimacy of the Gentile mission (Gal 2:1-10), the recognition of the priority of Israel in God’s redemptive plan (Rom 15:27), the goodwill of Christian communities (2 Cor 8-9), and the need to trust in God to supply in their needs if they were to give generously (2 Cor 9) McKnight (1993:144). The collection might also have become Paul’s task as part of an apostolic work arrangement (Everts 1993:297).

4 It is called variously “fellowship” (*koinonia*), Rom 15:26; “service” (*diakōnia*), Rom 15:25,31; 2 Cor 8:20; 9:1,12,13; “gift” (*charis*), 1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 8:6,7,19; “generous gift” (*eulogia*), 2 Cor 9:5; “collection” (*logeia*), 1 Cor 16:1; “liberal gift” (*adrotēs*), 2 Cor 8:20; “service that you perform” (*hē diakōnia tes leitourgias*), 2 Cor 9:12 by Paul. In 2 Cor 8:4 three different terms are used in the same sentence to refer to it: gift or privilege (*charis*), sharing (*koinonia*), and service (*diakōnia*) (cf. Dahl 1977:37-38; McKnight 1993:143). Cf Georgi (1992:196-197 n1). For Paul’s personal sacrifice concerning the gathering and delivering the collection to Jerusalem, cf e.g Nürnberg (1978:164).

5 Cf also Rom 15:26-27; 1 Cor 16:1-4; Gal 2:10; and the allusion to it (cf McKnight 1993:143) in Gal 6:6-10. Trobisch (1994:55-96; especially:87) provocatively argues that Paul selected and edited Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians for publication or circulation for the specific purpose of the Jerusalem collection.

6 The discrepancy between the importance of the collection in Paul’s letters and the absence of its study by scholars is alarming (Georgi 1992:viii-ix).

7 Such spiritualising of references to wealth and poverty is also found in treatments of the Gospels (cf Birch and Rasmussen 1978:9).

relatively unconcerned with riches and even less with poverty.⁸ “Paul neither condemns wealth nor glorifies its renunciation” (Dahl 1977:22-23). In the words of Schrage, we learn that “[o]f course, alleviation of social problems is not the real purpose, but the communion of the body of Christ has an ethical and social dimension” (1988:232). Schmidt argues that Paul consistently spiritualises riches and wealth by using these and related terms to describe Christian spirituality and events related to it. Schmidt posits that very few people in the first century were poor in terms of no means of a livelihood, and that for Paul “poverty per se” was “not a concern”. The poor in Jerusalem might refer to a situation of “economic deprivation”, but then again it might be nothing more than “a self-designation of the Jews” who are “longing for the *spiritual* riches of salvation (1993:826, emphasis in original).

It is more accurate to note how integrally Paul sees financial matters to be related to spirituality. “Paul’s reflections on money are intimately related to central theological issues and interwoven with his life and the lives of his congregations” (Georgi 1992:109, 141). As a starting point, Paul never glorifies poverty or the lack of sufficient material resources. As much as Paul’s preference for sexual celibacy was driven by usefulness to the benefit of extending God’s reign on earth (1 Cor 7:32; cf 7:2-6), his often self-induced deprivation⁹ was perceived to be in direct service to the gospel (Phil 4:11). To *become* poor for the sake of others, Paul saw as “the powerful initiative of free love which is willing to go the whole way” (Nünberger 1978:166).

2.2 Purpose(s) of the collection

Paul considered the acts of freely giving to be of theological significance, as he frequently underlines in his use of the sowing/reaping metaphor (Everts 1993:299). One of the most important observations about the collection is its interconnectedness to and centrality within Pauline thought and practice, “a close relationship between the collection, its establishment, and its organizational structure, on the one hand, with Paul’s missionary thinking and strategy on the other” (Georgi 1992:19, with reference to Munck). The collection served the purpose of legitimising Paul’s mission to the Gentiles as illustrated by Galatians 2:10, while it established a vital link to the Jerusalem church and aimed at the unity of and equality within the body of Christ. A number of possible reasons for Paul’s insistence on and the importance of the collection can be mentioned.

2.2.1 Charity for the poor

A very common understanding of the collection sees it as typical Christian charity, an important element in both Jewish and Christian piety (Everts 1993:299), and aimed at addressing poverty in the early church as “an act of social welfare in an economic emergency” (Schrage 1988:231). This ties in with Paul’s insistence on showing compassion (Rom 12:13; 1 Cor 13; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 5:6,14; 6:10), which should be seen in the broader context of Jewish insistence on deeds of mercy

8 Reasons offered for Paul’s perceived disinterestedness would typically range from his eschatological-apocalyptic concern (e.g. Schrage 1988:231; however, cf the warnings of e.g. Georgi 1991:102, Nünberger 1978:170), through the argument that early Christians were structurally prisoners of the system(s) of the time, to claims that Paul’s attention were to (individual) spiritual matters. However, Elliott’s rereadings of Paul, and Romans in particular (1994:93-230; 1997:371-89; cf Georgi 1991:81-104).

9 However, Paul’s “purely altruistic motives” has to be compared to his emphasis on “honour” or “fame”, “reward” or “benefit”, “glory” or “crown, although “the reward he receives and hopes for is identical with the success of the Gospel he preaches” (Nünberger 1978:169-170).

(e.g. Ex 23:11, Deut 14:28-29; 24:19-22), Jesus' teachings (e.g. Mt 6:2-4; 11:2-6; Lk 6:20-21), and the earliest church's community life (e.g. Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37; 6:1-7). The call for compassion is representative of the love of God, as found by the Gentiles in Christ (2 Cor 8:8-9,19; 9:12-15). Poverty will be alleviated in the church by creating "equality"¹⁰ (2 Cor 8:13-14) (McKnight 1993:145). In short, Paul's argument is that generous giving is "a sign of grace (*charis*) and a ministry (*diakōnia*) of the church" (Everts 1993:299). Contributions to the collection will demonstrate the genuine love of the Corinthian Christians as they will be imitating the love of Christ (2 Cor 8:1-15).

2.2.2 Unity of the church

Going beyond concern for the poor, Paul's motives with the collection are argued to include his emphasis on unity within the church, attempting to unite the Gentile Christians in the Diaspora and Jewish Christians in Judea. In line with Rom 9-11, Paul's insistence on unity concerned the "singularity of the gospel, the organic unity of the church, and the temporal priority of the Jewish people in God's redemptive plan". The exhortation to give voluntarily (1 Cor 16:1; 2 Cor 8:3,8,11-12; 9:1-5) and generously (2 Cor 8:2-4; 9:6-15) will ensure that the spiritual debt to the "mother church" (Acts 24:17) is acknowledged (Rom 15:27) (McKnight 1993:145; cf. Georgi 1992:19, referring to Franklin). Similarly, Dahl argues that the alleviation of economic need in the Jerusalem community was not "the element which weighed most heavily on Paul, but that the gift proves the reality of the love which binds all Christians together"¹¹ (1977:31). Moreover, the gift was in response to the apostolic agreement which required Paul to "remember¹² the poor" (Gal 2:10). When Paul refers to the collection as *charis* (1 Cor 16:3),¹³ the notion of reciprocity is once again present. A gift is bestowed but with a sense of obligation towards the one receiving it, and in order to advance close association with a view towards further cooperation and mutual benefits in the future (Georgi 1992:54).

2.2.3 Alternative Jewish initiation rites

The collection can be interpreted as the Gentile equivalent and in lieu of Jewish sacrifices and circumcision in particular. The monetary and other gifts to the Jerusalem community indicated Gentile association with and fidelity to the covenant with Abraham (e.g. Sir 29:12, 40:24; Tob 4:10-11, 12:9, 14:11; Ac 10:2,35). The collected money and gifts would acknowledge Gentile commitment to Israel and the Law, and acknowledge Jewish salvation-historical privilege¹⁴

10 Georgi notes that *isotēs* (equity or equality) was closely linked to – finding its causative basis in – *dikaïosunē* (righteousness) in both Greek and Hellenistic thought (1992:85,89). *Isotēs* occurs twice in 2 Cor 8:13-14 and nowhere else in the Pauline documents (Georgi 1992:84-85).

11 And this unity went beyond geographical distance and personal unfamiliarity, ethnic and cultural barriers between Jewish and "Gentile" Christians, tensions regarding the status of apostles (e.g. Gal 2:6; 1 Cor 2; 2 Cor 11), sincere theological disagreements and conflicts (e.g. Gal 2:11ff; 2 Cor 10ff; Phil 3) (cf. Nürnberger 1978:163).

12 Cf. Pathrapankal (1995:1005-1009) on *mnēmoneuein* (remembering) throughout the Bible as more than "a psychological exercise of calling to memory something of the past, but an act of mind and will, out of which a corresponding action follows".

13 The importance of seeing the collection as *charis* is intensified when it is realised that the Macedonian churches were probably equally adversely affected by poverty (2 Cor 8:2). Participation was seen by Paul as part of the *charismata*, all of which he took as being "by nature active" (:82). Georgi also refers to the connection between *charis* and *eulogeia* ("the confirmation or the establishment of a communal relationship, not just ... a prayerful wish or thanks", :93).

14 Although the Gentiles have become "the forerunners of liberated humanity, the witnesses to the Jews to the presence of God's eschatological salvation – not the other way round" (Georgi 1992:101).

(McKnight 1993:145-146). The collection was in the past interpreted also as the obligation of Gentiles which corresponded to the traditional Jewish temple tax¹⁵ (Holl, referred to in Georgi 1992:17).

2.2.4 Eschatological inspiration

In Romans 11:11-24 Paul holds that the conversion of the Jews to Jesus Christ as the messiah, was dependent on the salvation of the Gentiles. It is claimed that when the Gentile collection is brought to Jerusalem, the prophecy (Is 2:2-4; 60:6-7,11) will be fulfilled, resulting in an “eschatological provocation” aimed at stimulating Jewish belief in Jesus Christ (cf 2 Cor 9:10, alluding to Is 55:10; 2 Cor 9:11-12) (McKnight 1993:146; cf Georgi 1992:18). Paul himself, however, never explicitly mentions this as a reason for the collection.

Others argue that the notion of the “poor” in Jerusalem underwent some development in the Pauline letters. Early on the “poor” is an eschatological concept referring to God’s chosen if oppressed and marginalised people, “the future co-rulers of God”. However, by the time Paul wrote Romans, the “poor” has become a “sociological designation” and the self-understanding of the Jerusalem believers is no longer taken into account. The church’s importance is now redefined, in terms of “its relationship to the worldwide missionary activity and the worldwide church”.¹⁶ And in this way, the collection becomes both the confirmation and promise of the growing community of Christ (1992:33-34,114-121).

Another often heard suggestion is that possessions and money were in Paul’s eyes of little concern and trivial because of the nearness of the new age and because material concerns belong to the old age (e.g. Dahl 1977:24). However, although Paul expected the imminent and apocalyptic return of Christ “worldly” matters never ceased in importance for him but were recast in service to the dawning new age. Economic matters were not trivial for Paul, but were in fact like all other matters, contingent upon and therefore relative to the coming reign of God (cf Dahl 1977:25).¹⁷ In fact, his eschatological expectation served to intensify rather than trivialise Paul’s social concerns (cf Georgi 1992:102).¹⁸

To summarise: Paul’s purpose with the collection might have included various (elements) of these possibilities, to varying degrees. A more integrated explanation of Paul’s purpose with the collection allows one to perceive the interconnectedness of the “eschatological status of the Jerusalem congregation” and the need “to assist that congregation both morally and economically”, grounded in the belief of the unity of Christ’s body and in the hope of his impending return (Georgi 1992:42). As the collection gained a momentum of its own, it moved away from its “original contractual purpose” to a “paradigm for ecumenical communal exchange in the form of a financial communication”, “a demonstration of the interplay of divine gift and human gratitude” (Georgi 1992:152).

15 Georgi cautions that *logeia* in 1 Cor. 16:3 does not refer to “a tax” as Paul did not have a permanent injunction in mind (1992:53).

16 For the provocative nature of this step, and Paul’s awareness of the provocation, cf Georgi (1992:117-120).

17 Paul clearly did not subscribe to the radical denunciation of temporal economy as found in Apocalypticism (where state power and wealth, i.e. economic and political strength, meant corruption and sinfulness) or Gnosticism, or to the appreciation of “performance- and market-oriented society” as found in Jewish missionary wisdom (Georgi 1992:144, 214 n8-9).

18 Contra Hengel (1974:39-41) who argues for the “eschatological relativization of property” in Paul.

3. RIGHTEOUSNESS, FELLOWSHIP AND SHARING

Pauline statements on poverty and its alleviation as they emerge from his letters and the references to the collection in particular show that more than (Christian) charity is involved. “In the collection, a cycle of grace occurs in which money is the expression and means of a process that moves human hearts and draws people together” (Georgi 1992:152). It is interesting to note that Paul used *koinōnia*, often referring to fellowship, to express generosity or liberality in financial terms (2 Cor 8:4; Phil 1:5; Phlm 6). At times a tangible form of this generosity is signified by both noun and verb, in the sense of a gift, contribution (e.g. Phil 4:15; Gal 6:6) or the Jerusalem collection (cf. Rom 15:26) (O’Brien 1993:294). “In Paul’s understanding of money the spiritual and material aspects of giving and receiving are closely related ... Requests for money are rooted in partnership in the gospel; one gives out of thankfulness for the spiritual benefits received” (Everts 1993:299). And Paul listed generosity as a spiritual gift (Dahl 1977:30-31), emphasising the “giver’s attitude”, the joy and the love expressed in the gift. “Money becomes more than just money within the Christian church; it attains an almost sacramental significance: ‘A visible sign of an invisible grace’” Georgi (1992:82-83).¹⁹

Paul links the notion of the righteousness of God with the idea that true human compassion and generosity finds its origin in God²⁰ (2 Cor 9:5-15). “God’s righteousness is the origin of human righteousness, but the latter is allowed to reflect and represent the former in full”. With resourceful use of Psalm 111 the righteous one to whom Paul refers is not God, but the pious person, merciful and compassionate. Such righteousness²¹ is therefore not in the first place a quality, virtue or correct moral behaviour of a human being, but could also refer to some-one being “integrated into the sphere of divine righteousness” and therefore acting towards the community in accordance with God’s covenant with humanity. Righteousness forms the point of departure for the restructuring of “true community as a model society”, which becomes at the same time a more “reasonable” society – and the initiating model society is the church (Georgi 1992:98-99; 158-161). The Pauline bottom line is, human acts of compassion and generosity are not separate or independent from divine action.

With the collection, Paul is clearly addressing economic issues on more than the individual level. Without claiming that Paul introduced an economic system characterised by justice, or a system at all, his concerns reached beyond the confines of economic justice to individuals. “The idea that in Christianity only the right attitude counts, while structures do not matter, finds no support in the Bible! Paul is emphatic that attitudes alone carry no weight and he presses for formal institutionalised processes with concrete aims, and involving particular agents and carriers” (Nürnberger 1978:164). The importance of the community is underlined in Dahl’s comment (1977:24) that “Paul never looks at an individual’s relationship to money in isolation” as the factors in three crucial issues: eschatology, the church and his own situation as apostle.²² “Increase

19 Cf. Verhey (1983:119): “[I]t is also the case that generosity and hospitality are ‘nearly sacramental’ themselves (Phil 4:18), a material sign of a spiritual grace”. Cf. Dahl (1977:35).

20 “It is remarkable that Paul derives his exhortation to give freely from the very centre of his Gospel” (Nürnberger 1978:164); “The sharing initiated by the collection becomes the manifestation of the body of Christ” (Georgi 1992:153-154).

21 Whereas in the Hellenistic world equity and equality could become synonyms to righteousness and justice as the “basis and moving force of society”, for Paul righteousness is the basis of equality (Georgi 1992:154-155).

22 Yet, Paul emphasised the importance of rational thought: appealing to reason he urges the Corinthians on to show compassion and give generously (2 Cor 9:5-7).

of wealth for him [Paul] needs to be common wealth. ... The money involved becomes a social force, a gift from community to community. ... This sharing becomes a manifestation of the body of Christ" (Georgi 1992:153).²³

Paul's insistence on "equality" (*isotēs*) within the community (church) is a concept which, with its close relationship to righteousness (*dikaïosunē*, cf Van Wyk 1978:212), comes to stand next to *charis*.²⁴ *Isotēs* becomes a divine principle and is now the source of giving and receiving. This implies that "the principles of performance and achievement fall aside, and with them all comparing, measuring, and judging" (Georgi 1992:89). *Isotēs* is for Paul a divine force which makes humans equal,²⁵ from "equity (as divine potency of efficaciousness) to equality (as human experience, legal, social, and economic reality)" (Georgi 1992:155, summarising 2 Cor 8:13-14). Paul's emphasis is on the "all-encompassing movement of grace", through which righteousness and equality becomes possible, which is always to be found in its divine origin. "That means that poor Christians should not only be cared for while they *remain* poor, but their poverty must be *eradicated* with the eye on economic *equality* between Christians (cf Acts 4:32,34-35)" (Van Wyk 1978:212). And this movement extends beyond Christian communities: "Universal poverty and universal redemption are presupposed by Paul. Global equalization is in view" (Georgi 1992:156).

Georgi contends that for Paul the crucial economic issue of the collection was the "ability to respect the dignity and integrity of the poor, their gift and witness to society". The poor of Jerusalem are not regarded as "social and economic debris" but representative of the "spiritual things":²⁶ they represent the "main gift of that church to the rest of the churches" (1992:163-164). Coming perilously close to romanticising poverty in Paul's name by making poverty the cutting-edge of human life, Georgi contends that the poor "point to poverty as the basis for human and social existence", that the poor serve to remind and challenge others "who believe themselves to be removed from poverty" (1992:164).²⁷ However, Georgi is convincing in claiming that according to Paul "the call to invest in the poor ones represents the central, not the peripheral, concern for the market society that wants to be truly economical, a society that really desires to invest in the future". Because, the poor in biblical terms "are not the rear guard of the past but the *avant garde* of the future" (:165).

Yet, there is no "communistic ideal in Paul's letters, not even of a voluntary consumers' munism as an expression of love. He does however mention the ideal of economic equality" (Dahl 1977:30; Hengel 1974:35). Neither is the statement by Paul in 2 Cor 8:9 on Jesus putting

23 Paul's premise was the biblical prohibition of interest (cf. Ex 22:24, Lev 25:36-37).

24 Nürnberger (1978:167) contends that Paul derives the idea of equality from the Old Testament. Cf also Verhey (1983:120); González (1990:86) who notes that Paul's argument is corroborated by Ex 16:18 (manna, the eschatological symbol, but also illustrative of "equality, sharing, freedom from hoarding and dependence on God"); cf. Haan (1988:61-65). On the other hand, in the Greco-Roman world equality was sometimes frowned upon; cf Cicero who regarded it as a "terrible evil" (Schrage 1988:231).

25 And, of course, money was and still is the great equaliser (cf Georgi 1992:154-155).

26 "Paul's argument about the exchange of the fleshly against the spiritual is taken from the rules of religious competition, more precisely, from the rules of the religious market, a rather important sector in the wider Hellenistic market economy. ... Paul gives the poor ones higher market value" (Georgi 1992:163-164).

27 Georgi also refers to the "potential or gift" "that is in human not-having, not-possessing". However, he does qualify it by referring to the ability of the poor to "make do"; that the poor points to the "redemptive engagement of Christ"; and, that the poor "call up the not-yet of society", challenging "the sterility of a rich society". Therefore, he argues, a community that reaches out to the "hopeless cases" is "clearly the more risk conscious, the more courageous, imaginative, and inventive" (1992:164-165).

his wealth aside and taking up poverty, to be considered as a proof text for material ascetism.²⁸ “Poor” and “rich” here refer more probably to “the respective states of heavenly and earthly existence”, and the text refers to “that event in which the heavenly dimension of life became human”. In the end, Paul’s statement is a universal assertion about the salvation wrought by God (Georgi 1992:83).

“There is a pervading but quiet heroism which characterises Paul’s attitude toward money; to use Paul’s words: ‘The love of Christ controls us’ (2 Cor. 5:14)” (Dahl 1977:36). Georgi adds that money does not, from Paul’s point of view, create but “it stimulates, facilitates, and sets in motion the process of thanksgiving”. Such growth is “in the context of the return of divine grace”, “in the context of shared righteousness, the mutual respect for equality and integrity”.²⁹ Money and market are creations of the community and should function as such: communal trust should back financial credit. “[T]he community has to remain above the market, all the more the international community above the international market. Accordingly, money and market have to remain expressions of the community’s basic right and its manifestation in communal laws”. This entails the equality of all, whether creditor or debtor (Georgi 1992:161-162).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Paul required his churches to be involved in alleviating poverty. How should the Christian church of today with its huge levels of affluence and riches, with its political-ideological power, and its ability to influence political decision-makers, with world-wide religious organisations to its disposal,³⁰ treat the growing global problem of poverty, especially in Africa? And how should it go about contributing to an alternative, positive economic dispensation? The inadequate sense of economic benefaction to the wider community too often found in churches as well as the market-economy of modern society will probably require of Christian churches, the majority of which have a colonial-missionary background, not to try and deal with the ideal of eradicating the poverty endemic to Africa, including South Africa, on their own. In South Africa poverty is largely synonymous with being black (Isichei 1995:3; cf Pato 1997:40), adding another complex dimension to any attempt to address poverty. Not only churches but the intended recipients of “financial loving-kindness” will not, in the absence of a benefaction-system which was well-developed in the first century, be able to replicate the material relationships and activities of the earliest Christian communities.

28 Paul never advocates ascetism as he appreciates all that exists as the gift of God, and which people ought to enjoy to the full. This freedom and its enjoyment should, however, never lead to the injury of a fellow-Christian (Nürnberger 1978:170). In the later Pauline tradition the goodness of the creation is emphasised by affirming God as creator of all; it follows that *ouden apoblēton meta eucaristias lambanomenon* (nothing is to be neglected if received with thanksgiving) (1 Tm 4:4). “It is not because food, clothes, and property are inherently evil that Christians today must lower their standard of living. It is because others are starving” (Sider 1977:113).

29 Money is never neutral, cold or indifferent. As intimate friend of the market, it easily becomes a law to itself and develops a life of its own. On the other hand, money is more than nominal value, buying and market power; it is also about social value and standing, social acceptability, and subjective feeling of value (Georgi 1992:161-162).

30 Of course some religious and church organisations have for many years been attending to poverty across the globe and projects such as Bread for the World and various others are active and operational. Cf also Sider (1977:193-195).

The above aside, Paul did not provide us with a blueprint for dealing with and eradicating poverty, and three things need to be noted in this regard. One, Paul's pastoral and ecclesiocentric hermeneutics was dynamic in nature and creative in style, characterised by freedom and he therefore required his followers to follow his style, and not necessarily his choices (e.g. Lategan 1990:318-328). And in the second place, Paul addressed the early Christians in their communities of faith, as a small minority in the first century, and at a time when most people had no say in political and economic matters on structural level (Hengel 1974:41). On the other hand and thirdly, Paul's letters are evidence that Paul's advice and encouragement were often challenging to the status quo, on religious, political, economic and cultural levels.³¹ To stay quiet about economics, about wealth, and about poverty in South Africa (and Africa at large) today, will be very un-Pauline. Using Pauline sentiments regarding poverty today will probably put more than one thorn in a wide body of flesh (2 Cor 12:7) – one's own included – but that will be quite Pauline!

While Paul never justifies or glorifies poverty, it is in fact reasonable to place Paul firmly in line with the biblical and reformed protestant³² notion that God is on the side of the poor (Van Wyk 1978:212), or to use the more contemporary phrase, has a preferential option for the poor.³³ The collection for Jerusalem was in the first place about charitable giving, but also went beyond it without minimising it. "The entire issue was a sharing of Christian fellowship and solidarity, and its message stands out as a permanent reminder to the church of all times and her theologians to commit themselves³⁴ to the task of liberating the people of God from all oppressive and dehumanizing structures in order to enable them to live a more human and dignified life" (Pathrapankal 1995:1017).

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31 In Georgi's words, "the church needs to begin to reflect on justification by Christ in its financial offices as well as in its pulpits" (1992:142).

32 E.g. "Calvin can also exhort the Christians not to long to be rich, while he strongly urges the rich to live in modesty and not to oppress the poor" (Van Wyk 1978:212).

33 poor".

34 Not that official or institutionalised religion has a good track record in this regard. Until now, it was more often folk religion or popular religion which challenged the hierarchical powers (Huizer 1993:69-70).

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