

Toward a Theology of Generosity

B Y A R T H U R M . S U T H E R L A N D

Americans long have wrestled with how God gives, the obligations of the rich toward the poor and the poor toward the rich, and how generosity shapes public life. Three recent books continue the struggle by surveying, probing, and depicting generosity as an orientation toward life.

The Institute of Transportation Engineers has a formula for calculating the timing of yellow traffic lights. The equation considers the speed of vehicles approaching the intersection, the deceleration rate, the effect of gravity, a road's vertical rise or drop, and the ratio between perception and reaction.

I tell you this because the length of a yellow light has a direct bearing upon my own generosity. All too often when I see a person with a sign asking for money at an intersection, I would honestly prefer the longest yellow light possible because if I can make it without having to stop for a red light or threatening an accident if I can't, I can avoid doing some hard work in theology, ethics, and social justice: should I give or not? ("Freely you have received, freely give"); how much should I give? ("God loves a cheerful giver"); what decision have the drivers around me made? ("What do ye more than others?"); are those really diabetic ulcers on her leg or dollar-store makeup? ("At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores").

Lest you think too quickly that I am introspective to a fault, or suckled by guilt and reared by shame, or merely a misanthrope, I invite to you consider another set of questions the next time you come to the stoplight in your hometown favored by the poor, the hungry, and the tired. What are differences between generosity and giving? Is my gift-giving structured as a free exchange or is it reciprocal? Am I acting on my own or is my giving

part of a communal response? What difference does it make if my giving is spontaneous or planned? What part of my identity does this gift reflect? If I lived with less, would I have more to give? What is the relationship between giving and forgiving?

Since John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," addressed to Puritans aboard the *Arabella* as she pitched toward Massachusetts, Americans have wrestled with how God gives, the obligations of the rich toward the poor and the poor toward the rich, and how generosity shapes public life. Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson in *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 280 pp., \$29.95) take up that dialogue once again, albeit with less theology than Winthrop. They are sociologists whose work emerges from the Science of Generosity Project, hosted by Notre Dame and funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Well-read pastors who are interested in the intersection of faith and culture are probably familiar with Smith's *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009), written with Pamela Snell [Herzog].

Smith and Davidson define generosity as "the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly" (p. 4). They see it as a "moral orientation to life" (p. 4). It is not equivalent to pure altruism since the generous person may indeed derive a benefit by giving to others. In fact, at the center of the book is a claim that generosity is a paradox: by giving ourselves away, we make progress toward flourishing. In saying this they do not romanticize poverty and do not claim that poverty is a good for what ails you. Rather, the key word for them is "grasping." The tighter the grip you have on what you own, the more likely you are to constrict your own aorta. Thus, throughout the book the emphasis is on the "practice" of generosity, on behaviors that involve "recurrent intention and attention" (p. 13).

They came to this conclusion through a national study of two thousand Americans in 2010, supplemented by extensive interviews with a group of forty. They even collected digital photographs of participant's homes so that they could compare what people said they did with the evidence the pictures revealed. The first chapter concludes that a person who gives money, who volunteers, who is generous with neighbors, friends, and others, and who places a value on generosity, is also a person with a positive assessment of their own wellbeing. The second chapter examines why generous people tend to rate their wellbeing as they do. They discuss nine causal mechanisms, and these include the way generosity increases positive emotions, the way our brains and bodies are chemically stimulated by an increase in serotonin levels, and the way generous people have a strong sense of personal agency – that is, they feel like they can do something even when they have little to do something with.

The third chapter mines their empirical data: how much do Americans actually give, who gives more, and what type of generosity do they practice?

The answers: 86.2% of Americans give away less than 2% of their income; if you make less than \$12,500, you are likely to give away twice as much on a percentage basis as someone who earns more than \$90,000; 34% had never performed the neighborly act of watching a neighbor's house while they are away; and 76.4% did not volunteer at all during the previous year. Not exactly what John Winthrop had in mind. While we don't give blood (88.5%),

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we do better when it comes to checking the organ donor box at the DMV (42.5%). I suppose death gets you over squeamishness.

Chapter four explores the lives of more miserly folks, not to condemn them, but rather to understand why they act in ways that are not in their own best interest. In a series of case studies, we are invited to hear "ungenerous" households express themselves. The Americans we meet are concerned about

the world, know "the good they ought to do" (James 4:17), and claim to be doing the best they can. The problem is that they are an anxious and fretful bunch, worried about the next day's dollar. Their axis of responsibility for others often leans from the X of "do no harm" toward the Y of "you better take care of yourself because nobody will do so for you." Chapter five gives us the antidote—the fresh air for this miasma of individualism. The authors depict a lifestyle of healthy generosity based on their interviews and tagging along with "thirty-one notably generous Americans." They contrast this to the "pathological altruism"—a determination to help others despite (or perhaps because of) a high cost in self-neglect—that plagued two individuals in their sample.



If Smith and Davidson are reporters, Mark Scandrette in *Free: Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$16.00) is a practitioner. Mark and Lisa Scandrette transplanted themselves from northern Minnesota to inner city San Francisco in 1998 in order to build an intentional Christian community. Before they left the coldest winter for the coldest summer, they had a series of fishnet-dropping encounters with discipleship that led them to quit college, get married, and give away most of their possessions, saying to themselves, "If we have

food and clothing, we will be content with these" (1 Timothy 6:8). Three children in six years did not persuade them that they needed a bigger salary, a bigger house, and a better relationship with the American mantra of more, more, faster, faster.

The book's strength is its step-by-step approach to examining one's life. Each chapter pokes a gentle hole into the bottom of our security bucket, releasing the stuff we have stuffed inside. If you don't like answering questions about how you use your time, about your purpose in life, or your contributions to the good of the world and the causes you care about, you won't like this book. Jesus spent much of his time promoting awareness, so they do the same by asking the reader to develop a clearer sense of what it means to align values to tasks. Written from what appears to be a broadly evangelical perspective, the basic theological directive in the book is best described as seeking the sweet spot between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Thus the book is not just about gaining financial freedom, learning frugality, eliminating spiritual distractions, or why driving a Prius will save the polar bears, although those ideas are ever present. They want you to reflect, discern, and then decide.

The weakness of the book is that we don't get enough about how they succeeded (or how they failed). My inner editor would have told them that the better book is a memoir, because I suspect they had an opportunity to tell of a life well lived. Narrated theology has the power to inspire. There are vignettes, but all the tables, charts, and review questions remind me that we are living out the kingdom of God in the age of PowerPoint. Still, *Free: Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most* is a logical choice for an adult forum on Sunday mornings. Many would gain from Scandrette's salt-of-the-earth point of view.



A narrated theology of generosity is exactly what Miroslav Volf gives us. A native of Croatia and active in international ecumenical dialog, he taught at Fuller Theological Seminary before moving to New Haven and founding the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. Already well known for *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (1996), the book under review in this article has rivaled it in success because *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, 256 pp., \$15.99) is elegantly written and every page is a piston of theological engagement with generosity.

At the start, the book takes us to a maternity ward so that we can witness the adoption of his son, moves to his encounter with a black-booted police officer irate over a missed traffic sign, and then skewers *Desperate Housewives* (all in the first three pages) so that we prepare ourselves to encounter the words of the remembered Jesus, "it is more blessed to give than to

receive" (Acts 20:35).

As a systematic theologian, Volf naturally petitions us to reexamine our doctrine of God. The structure of the book is chiasmic. Two parts are joined by a short middle so that God's giving is on one side and God's forgiving on the other. His discussion of God the Giver draws upon Dostoevsky, Luther, and Barth. Here Volf's doctrine of God calls into question popular images of God

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that limit our capacity to give. God the Giver obliges faith, gratitude, availability, and participation in the lives of others. The second chapter draws upon Natalie Davies' *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (2000) to draw out the different ways we take, get, and give: we can be coercive, just taking what we want; we can exchange one thing for another in order to get something back; or we can give what we don't owe to someone who has no claim

on it—and this would be generosity. In chapter three, Volf wants our giving to imitate God's. The problem is that while God's gifts are pure, ours are stained by selfishness, pride, and sloth. Overcoming this, or at least recognizing it earlier and more clearly, is the Christian's task.

Volf accomplishes the transition between giving and forgiving by means of an incredibly powerful story from 1957. It relives a small-town childhood in Croatia and involves his mother, his father, his nanny, and a soldier. If you cannot read this story and feel the urge to repent of your own sins, your fate awaits you.

The other side of the chiasm follows the same pattern, but now the insight is into God's forgiveness and our own. The discussion in chapter four is about how the need for forgiveness is ubiquitous. Moreover, our reliance upon punishment for those who do wrong fails so often because the punishment rarely fits the crime. He asks if we should really expect that executing Stalin once for the death of 20,000,000 people would bring us satisfaction. Stalin is dead, but the hurt still lingers. On the other hand, should we be punished for all of our wrongs, even the smaller ones? If so, our torment would be continuous. Once again Volf answers these questions by taking us back to the doctrine of God: God does not affirm the sinful world indiscriminately; God loves the world and does not punish it with unfettered justice. Chapters five and six ask how we should forgive and how we can forgive.



These are all very good books differing in method, scope, and theological content. None will serve you wrong, but pick up Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge* if you only have time for one.

I am going home now. It is way past six and this article was due hours ago. I know a shortcut that will make up a little time. It has fewer traffic lights and fewer homeless. But then once upon a time they didn't have traffic lights in between Jerusalem and Jericho either.



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