

# Generosity in the Bible

BY JO-ANN A. BRANT

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**W**hen we read the many scriptural admonitions to be generous with resources, such as this,

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

*Deuteronomy 15:7-8*

most of us, I suspect, pause to reflect upon those occasions when we have met a request with a no rather than a yes. Most of us wish to be generous. The four volumes reviewed here not only demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon, they also provide practical advice about how to turn our well-meaning intent into action. While I recommend all of them, let me describe each so you can be informed stewards of your expenditure of time and money.

Craig L. Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, in *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013, 272 pp., \$24.99) presents the most comprehensive coverage of the Bible's treatment of wealth and what we ought to do with it. His work is a solid distillation of biblical scholarship framed for a broad and interested readership. The first chapter presents the reader with challenging

and disturbing facts about Christian giving or the lack thereof. In the next five chapters of the book, Blomberg demonstrates that familiar passages about possessions and money are constitutive of an ethic that is part of the fabric of God's kingdom, rather than something good to do but not necessary to participation in God's redemption. He walks a careful path between two missteps: on the one side, the simple equation of our wealth with God's approval (the temptation of a prosperity gospel) and, on the other, proclaiming justification by works. He affirms God's promise of prosperity and places goodness or sin within the arena of what we do with our surplus. Attention to relevant passages in the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation reveals how the first Christians read the Old Testament and prioritized Jesus Christ's teachings on giving. Blomberg also explores various models for approaching biblical principles of tithing, offering, and payment of taxes.

In the last three chapters Blomberg applies biblical teaching to three levels of stewardship: the individual disciple, the government, and the local church. Each chapter begins with a case study, which Blomberg resolves at the conclusion of the chapter. When addressing individuals, he does not chastise his readers for self-indulgence but rather reminds them of what brings true happiness and suggests a method of trimming rather than asceticism. At the same time, he warns the Western reader that what we consider to be necessities can become barriers to true fellowship in Christ within the worldwide Church. In his chapter on government, still holding firm to his mainstream evangelical views about homosexuality and abortion, Blomberg does not hesitate to challenge the habits of American evangelicals to limit issues of social justice to matters related to the family. He challenges his reader to not conflate a political economic system with Christian values, but to recognize that the call to care for the poor transcends our political ideologies. When addressing church stewardship, he focuses upon a more creative use and attitude toward the line item in the church budget devoted to facilities and a more generous understanding of a congregation's ministries.

Blomberg's language and arguments will be meaningful and accessible to students in a college or seminary classroom, to leaders within the church, and to lay readers. I strongly recommend that this be treated as required reading by pastors and church leaders, ranging from board elders to those holding the highest posts in their denomination.



Bruce W. Longenecker is Professor of Religion and W. W. Melton Chair at Baylor University. His *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010, 400 pp., \$25.00) is the most scholarly work in this collection insofar as it strives to make an original contribution to scholarship. Longenecker puts forward the thesis that the Jerusalem Council's admonition to Paul to "remember the poor" (Galatians

2:10) is not a reference to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-26 and 1 Corinthians 16:1). Instead, their counsel is deeply rooted in their understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. While the Jerusalem leadership is prepared to let go of circumcision as a marker of a true relationship with God, generosity to the poor is a must.

The rigor of Longenecker's argument should not deter a more casual

reader. The volume provides a captivating picture of the world of patronage into which the early church entered. This includes a description of the generous treatment of the poor within Jewish societies in contrast to an ancient world that was generally not so giving. The section on Jewish tradition should be mandatory reading for all pastors who are tempted to use a picture of stingy Jews as a way of framing Jesus' call to generosity.

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Longenecker's description of the charitable activities of the early church makes it clear that caring for the poor was a mark of Jesus' true followers. In a final section, he deals with Paul's rhetorical construction of his communities' economic level, by which the Apostle redefines both what it means to be wealthy and the status of the poor. One piece of advice: readers will want to bookmark pages 44-45 in which Longenecker presents his short hand for economic levels.

Whether one accepts Longenecker's conclusion about Galatians 2:10 or not, he demonstrates that if we wish to identify with the faith of the early church, we cannot draw a distinction between theology and an ethic of giving. While this book belongs on the shelves of Pauline scholars and students, I would not limit its readership to them. Nevertheless, for readers just entering the discussion of the place of generosity to the poor, this may not be the volume with which to begin.



Mark Allan Powell, the Robert and Phyllis Leatherman Professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, has made it a habit not to stop at his success as a biblical scholar but to apply his research to spiritual formation. In *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006, 204 pp., \$15.00), he takes what

scholars know about the place of generosity in Scripture and speaks directly to the believer's mind, body, and soul. I must admit, as I read Blomberg's and Longenecker's overviews of biblical teaching and accounts of early Judaism and Christianity, I felt a bit arrogant as a member of the Mennonite tradition for whom the passages they review serve as part of our canon within the canon. I asked myself, "How is it that all Christians do not know this?" As I read Powell's book, I found myself asking myself, "How can I more truly live generously?"

Powell's concern is broader than giving to the poor. This is both the book's strength and its weakness. His work is designed to promote a spirit of giving, but he does not provide a biblical ethic for prioritizing who should be the recipients of our generosity or a purpose for giving beyond our own spiritual health. In the opening chapter, Powell describes the primary purpose of offerings and sacrifices as acts of worship; the good to which our offerings can be put is presented as an afterthought. While I resist this ordering, I was inspired by his arguments in the first half of the book for treating giving as worship, an expression of love, and a spiritual discipline. The second half of the book looks beyond giving to the broader picture of our finances, including how we acquire, regard, manage, and spend our money. Powell makes "God-pleasing" the governing principle.

Powell has designed this book for adult study groups by delineating a distinct focus for each chapter and providing pointed questions that should prompt lively discussion and application to our lives.



Timothy Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, a congregation of five thousand regular attendees, approaches the subject of generosity as a justice issue in *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010, 272 pp., \$15.00). Like Blomberg and Longenecker, he sees biblical doctrine and care for the poor inextricably linked. But his volume stands out from the others described above in a number of ways. His is what academics sometimes call disparagingly a popular book. While Keller does present sound argumentation, he does not write for an audience that demands a high burden of proof. He leaves that to scholars such as Craig Blomberg to whom he acknowledges a debt. To a large extent, Keller consumes scholarship and offers it in more digestible pieces for a lay audience by organizing it not as an argument but as reflections on specific questions such as "Why should we do Justice?" and "Should Christians work together for justice in society with members of other religions or no religion?" He scatters enough anecdotes to illustrate his thoughts to awaken the imagination of his readers to an application to their own experiences and to new possibilities for their own expression of faith.

As a piece of popular theology, this book lends itself to a group book

study, but its lack of scholarly rigor might also make it a controversial choice. Keller seeks to prevent two tendencies: the first is when concerns for social justice lose their grounding in theology, and the second, when convictions about the gift of grace become excuses for ignoring social justice. He presents us with a picture of God as the defender of the poor and a definition of justice as a right relationship. He then asks whether our relationship with

God can be sound if we do not care passionately about those things to which God is devoted. To make his case, he draws from the work of a wide range of theologians from Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century Massachusetts Congregationalist pastor, to Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian founder of liberation theology, without regard for broader ideological or theological dimensions of their thought. Midway through the book, he turns

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to the doctrine of justification by faith, informed by the work of Miroslav Volf, to refute the notion that working for social justice signifies a belief in justification by works. His presentation is swift and dramatic, but it obscures the rigor and complexity of Volf's account of redemption. While Keller's frequent brief summaries of the most significant contributions to the philosophy and theology of justice might inspire a few of his readers to dig deeper by reading the works he cites, he might also leave his readers overwhelmed or, worse, underwhelmed by their contributions.

Another distinguishing feature of this volume is the breadth of audience for which Keller writes. He directs his work to youth who are devoting their early career to a life of service and to young evangelicals, both in years and heart, who have come to include social justice within their understanding of the mission of the Church. He responds to two forms of suspicion that linger inside and outside evangelicalism, respectively: the first sees the pursuit of social justice as a distraction from the task of saving souls, and the second sees Christianity itself as a cause of social injustice. While those who are guided by these suspicions probably will not read this book, those who seek to help others flourish as God intends will find biblical teachings and theological language with which to engage with their detractors and to participate as Christians in the larger discussion of equity in our society.



By the end of reading these four volumes, I became a bit uncomfortable about the fact that three were written by people who share my professional status and probably fall into my tax bracket, and the fourth by a pastor whose Manhattan congregation meets on a very expensive piece of real estate. While their roles as biblical scholars and pastors are not to be dismissed, something tells me that lessons to the wealthy – that is, anyone who has surplus of the order that Powell describes – ought to be delivered by those with far fewer means who live generously. On the other hand, these volumes urge us to practice forms of generosity that may lead us to work side by side with people of all socio-economic backgrounds in contexts where we can experience the truth of what they teach.

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