



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Subversive Generosity
(*Generosity*, pp. 29-36)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Stopping to Help
(*Generosity*, pp. 56-58)

📖 Imperial Gifts
(*Generosity*, pp. 52-55)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Subversive Generosity

God's reign, founded on God's subversive generosity, stands opposed to Roman oppression in the New Testament. Today it provides the moral vision to see through the distortions of consumerism and gives an alternative way to understand our obligations to one another and to God.

Prayer

Almighty God, we confess that generosity is difficult for us because it runs counter to our culture of abundance.

But it is your heart and your command that we love you with all that we have.

Transform us so that we love our neighbors and care for them even as we love and care for ourselves.

Transform us so that our first instinct is to share with others what has been so freely given to us.

Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

Meditation[†]

How we understand the role of generosity in our lives – and in the Christian communities in which we do life together – perhaps says more about our faith and our understanding of the gospel than any other single aspect of our faith.

Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd

Reflection

Generosity that is altruistic – where the giver expects nothing in return from the recipient – is both a “guiding characteristic of God” and a “distinguishing mark of God’s reign,” Jason Coker observes. And it is “subversive.” For any community that practices such generosity must step away from the ways of the surrounding culture. That was true of Christians in the Roman Empire and of those who would resist consumerist ways today.

God’s radical generosity pervades Scripture, but it is most unmistakable in the gift of his Son (John 3:16). To embrace God’s reign through Jesus Christ is to welcome this divine generosity: in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “But first seek God’s reign and its justice, and all these things *will be given* to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Jesus displayed extravagant generosity through his life and death, and he explicitly taught it to his followers through his parables (for example, Luke 10:25-37).

As the disciples embraced Jesus’ way, they shared resources with one another (Acts 2:44-47). But such generosity must be heartfelt; the apostles sternly warn against faking it (5:1-11).

In this way, Jesus’ followers subverted Roman social practices of patronage, which showed “partiality to the wealthy (cf. James 2:1-8)” and kindled “the desire to keep one’s possessions for oneself (Acts 5:1-11).” Coker explains, “A community that held everything in common and respected the dignity of every person was fundamentally different and contradictory to Roman social practices based on a hierarchy of humanity.”

The generosity of God’s reign is still subversive today, calling us “to continually correct and regulate our complexly disordered human



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structures.” It stands in opposition to the profit-obsessed global capitalism that “is not centered in any single nation and its primary and overriding motive is profit,” Coker suggests. “God’s reign can critique global capitalism by envisioning a future where human dignity is more important than profit.”

Such generosity also “turns cultural consumerism, a key product of capitalism, on its head,” he notes. “Consumerism promotes retail therapy, the idea that we can buy our way to happiness. This ‘therapy’ is obviously based on *receiving* rather than *giving*, and thus stands in opposition to the New Testament concept of ‘shared possessions.’”

Coker concludes, “The Christian ideal of generosity is grounded in God’s gracious act in the Incarnation, the birth, death, and resurrection of God’s Son, which is the height of sacrificial self-giving. This sort of generosity that characterizes God’s reign was subversive in its origin in Roman imperialism and continues to be subversive wherever human dignity is jeopardized due to greed and selfishness.”

Study Questions

1. How was practicing the generosity of God’s reign truly subversive of Roman society in the first-century?
2. Jason Coker notes that such generosity would be subversive today. What current practices would it call into question?
3. Discuss how the generosity of God’s reign is exemplified by the Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable (Luke 10:25-37). How is this depicted in Jacopo Bassano’s *The Good Samaritan*?
4. How do you read the famous mosaics *Emperor Justinian and His Attendants* and *Empress Theodora and Her Attendants* in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy? Do they exemplify (and commend) Roman patronage or subversive generosity?

Departing Hymn: “Come, Kingdom of Our God”

Come, kingdom of our God,
sweet reign of light and love!
Shed peace and hope and joy abroad,
and wisdom from above.

O’er all our spirits first
extend your healing reign;
there raise and quench the sacred thirst
that never pains again.

Come, kingdom of our God,
and make the broad earth thine!
Stretch o’er her lands and isles the rod
that flowers with grace divine.

Soon may all tribes be blest
with fruit from life’s glad tree;
and in its shade like brothers rest,
sons of one family.

John Johns (1837)

Suggested Tunes: FESTAL SONG or ST. THOMAS (Williams)

† Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd, *Contagious Generosity: Creating a Culture of Giving in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 17.

Subversive Generosity

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the generosity of God's reign was exemplified and taught by Jesus Christ.
2. To see how such generosity was subversive of patronage practices in the Roman Empire, and remains subversive of global capitalist and consumerist ideals today.
3. To critique two famous examples of Christian art that depict this generosity.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Come, Kingdom of Our God" locate one of the familiar tunes FESTAL SONG or ST. THOMAS (Williams) in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with an Observation

The Christian generosity that is a defining feature of God's kingdom stands in stark contrast to ancient Greco-Roman practices of giving. "First-century Romans regarded generosity as a virtue especially well-suited to powerful, rich benefactors," Doug Henry explains. "It exacted obligations from beneficiaries. Someone on the receiving end of a highborn Roman's generosity was bound not only to return thanks or give honor, but to support his or her benefactor. Such support could take the form of preferential business arrangements, promoting a patron for political office, advocating for favorable laws, or championing a benefactor's civic status. Generosity thus underwrote patron-client relationships marked by intractable *quid pro quo* reciprocity. Getting a favor meant returning a favor. For these reasons, generosity was a virtue limited to an elite segment of the population. Ordinary folk, without either high birth or wealth, possessed neither the status nor the resources necessary for generosity." (*Generosity*, p. 12)

Let's keep this context in mind as we explore Jason Coker's idea that the practices of Christian generosity were "subversive" of oppression in the Roman Empire, and they continue to be subversive of ways of life shaped by consumerism and profit-driven capitalism today.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:25-37 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The first two studies in this series, “Generosity of Spirit” and “Paul’s Expectations of Generosity,” contrasted Christian generosity to ancient Greco-Roman understandings of the virtue. This study builds on that insight by positing that the practice of Christian generosity remains subversive of economic and cultural ways today. To spotlight these contrasts (in both the first-century and now), Jason Coker describes the *basileia* of God – which is usually translated “kingdom of God” or “empire of God” – as the *reign* of God, for this better conveys that it is God who governs our communal life and the divine generosity that shapes our practices.

Study Questions

1. Review Doug Henry’s summary of patronage in the Roman Empire (in “Begin with an Observation”). Kelly Liebegood describes its effects this way: “The startling reality was that most of the material resources that were available in Greco-Roman urban centers were harvested or extracted by those living at or below subsistence levels, but distributed among the elite.” He explains that “the generosity that was practiced by and even expected of those who had reserves was blatantly self-serving. In the extremely competitive social construct of honor and shame, extravagant giving (for civic monuments, public works projects such as theaters, roads, water systems, or public baths, opulent banquets, sponsorship of gladiator games, and so on) was for the dual purpose of enhancing one’s status among those who mattered and for expanding one’s economic opportunities” (*Generosity*, pp. 20-21).
“God’s generosity opposed Roman selfishness,” Jason Coker notes. It called all persons to be generous (as their means would allow), did not favor the wealthy (as givers or receivers of gifts), and did not expect a return benefit. Members might consider how the Good Samaritan breaks the cultural norms of Roman patronage.
2. Jason Coker identifies two current practices significantly out of step with the sort of generosity that characterizes God’s reign. The first is the practice of capitalism when its “primary and overriding motive is profit – based on human greed.” In this case, profit is not a means to make opportunities for workers to create useful products or meet human needs, but is an end in itself that outweighs all other motives for work. Then profit-making becomes selfish, focuses on taking rather than giving, and is complacent or destructive of human dignity. The second is the practice of “retail therapy,” the consumerist idea that we can purchase enough things to make our lives happy.
Encourage members to discuss Coker’s two examples and to brainstorm specific examples of their own. Consider, for example, how we spend resources today – purchasing the latest products, buying access to the appropriate venues, making gifts to the attention-gathering charities, and so on – to establish our standing in the community. These seem to be modern forms of patronage.
3. Heidi Hornik explains that the artist “Jacopo Bassano was a simple man by the standards of his contemporaries,” but he created “readings” of Scripture through his paintings to encourage people to a more faithful way of life. Generosity was close to Bassano’s heart, for he regularly “assisted the efforts of relief for the sick and poor in his day.” In *The Good Samaritan*, Bassano uses lighting, clothing color, and composition to focus on the Samaritan’s helping the traveler (in contrast to the passing priest and Levite ignoring him). The costliness of the Samaritan’s care in time, resources, and effort is suggested by the blood-soaked bandages, the flasks of oil and wine, and physical effort to lifting the traveler. The traveler has nothing to repay the Samaritan’s provision.
4. Heidi Hornik writes, “The Emperor Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565, and his wife, the Empress Theodora, enabled the spread of the Eastern Church to its most Western point on the Italian peninsula. Their generous gifts established the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. The two mosaics discussed here honor and commemorate their achievements.” On the one hand, the images point to the wealthy patrons (and, thus, reward their financial gifts with public honor). On the other hand, the Emperor and Empress carry the emblems of the Eucharist, which point beyond them to the donation of God in Christ to establish salvation. In this way the images show them participating in worship with the gathered congregation and commending the congregants attention to God’s generosity.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.