

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Paul and Money: A Biblical and Theological Analysis of the Apostle's Teaching and Practices

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Verbrugge and Krell show how significant finances are in Paul's ministry by examining the many relationships and activities of financial value that appear in his letters. They exegete Scripture skillfully, interacting with other views thoroughly and fairly, and aim to help leaders and believers live faithful to the gospel. Verbrugge died soon after completing the book, and we may thank God that his earlier work on Paul's leadership style is now updated and joined with fresh scholarship in partnership with Krell.

Part 1 focuses on the apostle's work and financial policies. Chapter 1 seeks clues from Paul's upbringing to explain his refusing support from those he evangelized. Nonpriestly teachers of Torah, such as his teacher Gamaliel, could be paid. Followers supported Jesus: He sent disciples on mission, expecting others to support them, and Paul himself approved of other gospel workers' being supported (1 Cor. 9:3–12; 1 Tim. 5:17–18). Chapter 2 argues that Paul refused support from those he ministered among and instead embraced subsistence living and the low social status of manual labor (leatherworking) to fulfill his vocation as Christ's free apostle to the Gentiles. For Paul, that vocation required sharing in Christ's sufferings, ever mindful of his former violence toward Christians, while spreading the gospel without fee. Subsistence living exposed him to natural and social hardships that a greater income would have reduced (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9–13 and 2 Cor. 11–12). This policy accounts in large part for his conflicts with higher-status critics and rivals at Corinth. Yet, consistent with his policy, Paul accepts and even expects support from his

established churches to fund his mission elsewhere. The Macedonians, for example, send him gifts while he ministers away from them. Such gifts allow him to “occup[y] himself [exclusively] with the word” but only temporarily (Acts 18:5 ESV).

Paul’s Greco-Roman social world functioned for nearly all through forms of patronage, a system binding patrons (or benefactors) and clients (or recipients) in unequal yet reciprocal obligations and benefits that often bore financial value. Chapter 3 probes how Paul participates in this system. He approves of political patronage, by which wealthier believers benefit the public (Rom 13:3–4), and his accepting money for mission elsewhere exemplifies friendship patronage. Friendship patronage also accounts for Paul’s financial dealings with Philemon (promising to pay for losses Onesimus has caused; expecting Philemon to host Paul as a guest: Philem. 17, 22) and Lydia (to whose insistence that Paul’s team lodge in her home he submits after she has become a believer: Acts 16:2), on behalf of Phoebe (who has been his benefactor: Rom. 16:1–2), and with amanuenses (writing secretaries), who wrote his letters (and worked for fees but might waive them for friends: Rom. 16:22).

Part 2 focuses on Paul’s concern for the poor, shown through two gifts to impoverished believers in Judea: the famine relief of Acts 11 and “the collection,” dealt with mostly in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 and 2 Corinthians 8–9. Chapter 4 shows that Paul’s Jewish heritage and not the prodding of other apostles (cf. Gal 2:10) accounts for his concern. Chapter 5 surveys scholarship to discern what else prompts the collection. Was it charity? A tax assessed by the mother church? An eschatological fulfillment of prophecies, of gift-bearing Gentiles streaming to Jerusalem? Worship? An attempt to heal the growing rift between believing Jews and Gentiles? The authors advocate the last, which also carries Paul’s hope that believing Jews would reciprocate by embracing believing Gentiles as their equals in Christ.

A notable shift in the way Paul raised the collection fills chapter 6: According to 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, Paul told (*dietaxa*, “commanded”) churches in Galatia to contribute to the collection and wrote the Corinthians similarly and emphatically: “so you also are to do” using two imperatives. But the Corinthians did not comply as Paul wished, probably because during the year between the two letters, rivals and critics (some questioning Paul’s financial integrity) weakened his authority. Paul responds to criticisms throughout 2 Corinthians, but he devotes two full chapters to the collection (8–9), in which he changes the way he communicates: in them, the imperative occurs only once—“complete it” (*epitelesate*, 8:9), replaced instead with arguments aiming to persuade, not command.

Chapter 7 explores Paul’s rhetoric in 2 Corinthians 8–9. He uses the Macedonian example of joyful giving motivated at first by the example of the Corinthians themselves to fuel a Christianized rivalry (drawing on honor and shame) between the two. Ultimately, however, Paul invokes God’s grace communicated through the “unspeakable gift” of Christ to motivate the Corinthians to complete the process they had begun, joyfully and voluntarily, as the right response to the grace common to all believers—Macedonian, Corinthian, and Jewish—who must be unified and express reciprocal love among themselves. From Paul’s letters and the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8 traces the journeys of

the collection and Paul from Greece and Asia Minor to Jerusalem, where it is delivered successfully, only to have Paul snared in troubles that bring him finally to Rome.

Part 3 treats various other topics: Paul's advice to the Thessalonians regarding working as a part of credible witness, drawing on his own work ethic (chap. 9); Paul's correction of the snubbing of the poor by the richer at the community meal that preceded the Corinthians' participation in the Lord's Supper (chap. 10); direction from various Pauline letters regarding rich believers, regarding the integrity of spiritual leaders, including their finances, and regarding caring for truly needy believers, such as certain widows (chap. 11); and the apostle's teachings on civil government, taxes, and debt, with a reprise about his insistence that giving should be joyful and voluntary, without any mandate for tithing (chap. 12). The final chapter summarizes main points and elicits a dozen reasonable Pauline applications for contemporary believers and churches.

The book succeeds admirably in its aim of probing "everything [Paul] says and does in the NT concerning ... money" (23). It synthesizes an impressive range of specialized scholarship—all helpfully documented in generous notes, bibliography, and indices—and supports its claims well. Some will doubt key presuppositions (e.g., the genuineness of all Pauline letters and the historical accuracy of Acts) and quibble over specific claims (e.g., Verbrugge's insisting, against the majority commentary tradition, that verbs and verbals in 2 Corinthians 8–9, except for one, lack imperatival force; although Verbrugge's analysis persuades me and shows how Paul's leadership style varied as needed). Still, the book carries the central argument about Paul's reason for living at a subsistence level, although it leaves unexamined why apparently only Paul, among the original apostles, expresses apostolic sharing in Christ's suffering through refusing financial support. Along with the reasons this study offers, might another be Paul's viewing his apostleship as fundamentally unique? He alone among them had persecuted the church, viewed himself as the least and the one of untimely birth who worked harder than they (1 Cor. 15:8–10), and was pioneering the mission to Gentiles with the jealousy of a divine match-maker (2 Cor. 11:2), ready to defend his unique service against any rivals (2 Cor. 10:13–18). Then may his uniqueness complicate imitating his leadership, not only in financial policy but in other areas too?

This excellent study is long enough as it is, and it establishes the state of the question (certainly in English) for now and offers paths forward to study its many topics. Biblical scholars are its target audience: the authors display Greek often, which is usually translated. Transliteration and translation of all the Greek might help the wider readership that it merits to use it more easily. Leaders of all kinds of ecclesial bodies can glean from it a biblical understanding of finances and Christian ministry. Maybe others, too, will smile at the irony I could not overlook: The authors portray a Paul more like Roman Catholic religious than Paul-centered Reformation clergy, whose doctrinal sons they are.

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