

## Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World

**Bruce W. Longenecker**

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Who cared for the poor in the first-century Greco-Roman world? Those with little or no income might benefit from patronage or periodic charitable initiatives by the wealthy but could not rely on a state-provided economic safety net. It is generally agreed that the spread of the Christian faith over major parts of the Roman Empire in the next few centuries spurred and augmented private charitable measures for the needy. It seems reasonable then to look to the New Testament for connections between the gospel of Jesus Christ and caring for the poor. Certainly from a reading of the Synoptic Gospels, it is evident that Jesus makes bringing “good news to the poor” a key part of his ministry. Yet, there is doubt that the apostle Paul strikes the same note for those identified with the newly emerging Christian faith. A significant number of New Testament scholars conclude that Paul’s epistles at best make concern for the poor a peripheral matter.

Bruce Longenecker will not suffer such a claim. In *Remember the Poor*, he contends that Paul was “uncompromising in promoting care for the poor as integral to the theology and practice engendered within Jesus-groups” (140). Longenecker devotes several chapters to the role of care for the poor in the theological interests of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In Galatians 2:9–10, Paul speaks of his meeting in Jerusalem in the late 40s AD with James, Peter, and John, and writes that they “gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.” Longenecker seeks to show that this charge is not fulfilled merely by the collection Paul undertook among the Gentiles “for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem” (Rom. 15:26), a measure often seen as motivated to bring Gentile Christians toward greater unity with Jewish Christians. Instead, we should understand this collection as “a single application of the more general principle of caring for the poor” (187), which is an essential element in Paul’s core message for those in the nascent Christian communities.

Following a placement of the thesis in the context of modern scholarly discussion in chapter 1, Longenecker’s work offers four chapters in the first section, “The Poor in Their Ancient Places,” which explore the historical context of Paul’s teaching; that is, the nature and extent of poverty and efforts to alleviate poverty in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Longenecker also takes up the manner in which Judeo-Christian theological traditions respond to widespread poverty.

Longenecker is quite helpful in demonstrating the nature and degree of economic imbalance in advanced agrarian societies of the first century without painting a simplistic picture. Chapter 2 describes “an administrative and economic infrastructure” tilted in favor of an elite group who exercised economic power over peasant farmers and “retainers”

who insured that resources flowed to those at the top in return for receiving a portion of the economic benefits. While these two groups manipulated the means of resource distribution by the “plundering of land rights” through “official confiscation,” the majority of the nonelite labored manually to generate “some form of agricultural extraction” (23). In chapter 3, Longenecker sets forth an “economy scale” (ES) of social strata in the Greco-Roman world. Imperial elites, provincial officials, municipal senators, and some retainers and freed persons constituted roughly 3 percent of the population and earned 15–30 percent of the income (ES1–ES3 levels). A moderate surplus was earned by merchants, artisans, and other freed persons who made up a middling group (ES4 level) of 15 percent of the population. Longenecker postulates that the family of Jesus was at the bottom end of this group (117). At the ES5 level were artisans, merchants, wage owners, and some farmers who had a stable income yet hovered near subsistence (27 percent of the population). Operating at the subsistence level (ES6) were many small farmers and manual laborers (30 percent of the population). Other farmers, orphans, beggars, and widows largely made up the needy who lived below the subsistence level (ES7) at 25 percent of the population. Longenecker provides a nuanced, cogent case for his scale (essentially identifying the poor as those at ES6–ES7).

Longenecker demonstrates in chapter 4 the recognizable presence of charitable initiatives for the poor in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Yet, it is the early Jesus movement, grounded in the Jewish theological tradition of care for the poor, that is especially notable for the degree of its beneficence. As shown in chapter 5, while clearly identifying himself with God’s passion for addressing economic injustice toward the poor, Jesus also breaks new ground in pronouncing blessings to the poor. James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem community of Jewish followers of Jesus in the mid-first century, extends the primacy of care for the poor and teaches that “one could not be an economically well-off follower of Jesus without caring for the poor and needy” (129).

The second section, “The Poor in Pauline Places,” is made up of eight chapters that offer the core of Longenecker’s argument and address its implications. Initially Longenecker focuses on the place ascribed to the poor in both Paul’s theology and the early Christian communities he founded. Longenecker convincingly argues in chapter 6 that these sharing communities are a manifestation of a Pauline occupation with ministering to the needy. While Paul’s letters do not exhibit long excurses addressing the need to care for the poor, the apostle’s exhortations “to be generous and willing to share” (1 Tim. 6:18) and to “help the weak” (Acts 20:35) manifest his expectations for economic aid to the needy. Turning to early church fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Athanasius, Longenecker’s interpretive effort in chapter 7 examines their discussion of Galatians 2:10. These Patristic figures did not understand Paul to limit his charge to “remember the poor” to be geographically restricted to followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. Chapter 8 shows that such a “questionable interpretative framework” relies on a simplistic link to Paul’s collection for the poor in Jerusalem (discussed in Rom. 15:25–33 and 1 Cor. 16:1–4). Rather, Paul’s imperative to not forget the poor demonstrates his general concern that “Jewish traditions about caring for the poor might be abandoned in a mission to the pagan world.” Instead of circumcision

being “the common identity across all branches of Jesus-followers,” the “truth of the gospel” called all believers to minister to the poor (198–99). Indeed, Longenecker affirms in chapter 9 that such practices are part of a universal “rule of faith” (219) that Paul labors to show in his Galatian letter and that is consistent with the pattern of life required in the Hebrew Bible of the Lord’s Israelite followers.

In chapters 10 through 13, Longenecker provides a socioeconomic profile of the first urban Jesus-followers and the possible economic motivations for joining the community. For example, he posits that Erastus, Gaius, and Phoebe (named in Romans and 1 Corinthians) were at the ES4 level. At the same time, Longenecker observes that “the early Jesus-movement seems to have had little attraction among the elite of ES1 through ES3” (261). Here, he largely elaborates on the position initially expounded by Wayne Meeks (*The First Urban Christians*, Yale University Press, 1983) who affirmed that the early churches seemed to include a large number of individuals who were “status-inconsistent” (perhaps ES5 level). Longenecker also examines the relationship of care for the poor in Paul’s theology of the “Body of Christ” to the economic composition of the early churches. Across the various income levels represented within the Pauline communities, much as there was a dispersal of spiritual gifts, so each individual had “different economic responsibilities allocated to them” (281), including the typically two-thirds of the community who were at ES6–ES7 levels (295). The other third were to spurn the example of elite power leverage and follow instead the example exhibited by Jesus in welcoming the poor into fellowship as gifted members (290). Longenecker posits that Paul voluntarily dropped from an ES4 economic lifestyle to ES6 to make “himself economically more vulnerable” out of “a conviction that Israel’s sovereign deity was at work in Jesus-groups, where the needs of economically vulnerable people were expected to be met as divine grace flowed through the lives of Jesus-followers” (310).

*Remember the Poor* provides a significant contribution to our understanding of the measures addressing poverty in the early church and the theology undergirding this activity. Longenecker’s study is particularly helpful in its careful and extensive examination of the income strata and charitable measures of the Greco-Roman world, and in its illuminating discussion of the scriptural teachings on care for the poor. This volume also presents challenges in argumentation to those who are not New Testament scholars. They may struggle a bit with the details of the author’s exegesis of Galatians 2. Some readers, too, are likely to find many of the suggestions made about the economic profile of individuals in the early church to be too speculative. Yet, this valuable study offers, in the main, a convincing evaluation of Paul’s convictions about addressing the needs of the poor set in their historical-theological context. Social scientists, particularly economists, historians, and sociologists, as well as theologians and moral philosophers who desire a better understanding of the role of poverty in the economic life of the early church will be richly rewarded by an engagement with this fine work of scholarship.

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