

So then, maybe we could encourage Paul to appeal to self-satisfaction. Knowing we have done something good for someone else can give us a warm inner glow. Never mind that such gifts, while commendable, are really a thinly disguised way of giving to ourselves; this is a proven way to raise money. Many people, when motivated by self-satisfaction, by giving to themselves really, become extra generous and their gift to the church might be larger than we anticipated. But no, this approach isn't all that good either; a warm inner glow only goes so far. So, we wouldn't want to advise Paul to go this way either.

Maybe, then, we would tell Paul to appeal to people's sense of prestige. Paul could create a stewardship program for those who "care enough to send the very best." I once visited a church that had a large leather book on the chancel steps. I looked at the opened page, and it read, "Members who have pledged \$2,000 or more to our church." The page wasn't blank, so this appeal to prestige seems to work; but this is not the right way to go either. Pride in giving can be good, but it can also be dangerous because prestige gifts advertise the glory of the giver, not the glory of God.

So maybe Paul had it right all along, wisely ignoring fundraising methods altogether and hammering home the theological theme he raised at the beginning. The world might make its appeals for funds on the basis of need, obligation, self-satisfaction, prestige, sympathy – on things people have done – but Paul focused his energy instead on what God has done.

Paul pitches this theme in the very first verse, when he says that he is writing to the Corinthians about the "service (or ministry) to the saints." The Greek word is *diakonia* (from which we get our word 'deacon'). Paul wasn't talking about fundraising and it had nothing to do with the Sunday morning offering plate; Paul was talking about ministering to others and rendering service in the name of God. Paul set the ministry to the poor within the context of service to God. The church must always keep service to God and ministry to others foremost in our prayers and actions, otherwise our congregation will degenerate into little more than another fundraising organization.

I once asked a young girl busily engaged in selling some trinkets to raise money for an organization, "What is the purpose of your organization?" She looked blankly at me for a moment. "Purpose?" Then, looking at the bag of goods she had grasped in her hand, she brightened and said, "We make money and then spend it!"

The church could be in danger of becoming such an organization should the perennial temptations to find better fundraising techniques ever overtake our calling to be faithful hearers and doers of God's Word. Fundraising has its place within our community. Money is needed to do good all over the world, and funds must be raised or good will not be done; but our purpose is not to raise money and spend it. Our purpose is to serve, to do ministry in God's name. At the core of things, we are gathered together as a community of God's people to preach Christ and minister in his name.

Later in the passage, Paul hoped the gift the Corinthians had promised would come "not as an exaction but as a willing gift." I think the word "exaction" is a good one. It sounds enough like the dentist's term "extraction" to make Paul's point even clearer. Paul wanted no part of an offering that was coerced out of people, an offering that required a good shot of novocaine so that people wouldn't holler quite as much as it was yanked out of them. Paul sought a willing gift, given in response to the gifts of God and to the needs of others.

So instead of trying to get Paul to adjust his methods to fit our ways of stewardship, perhaps we should pay attention to the ways Paul went about motivating the Corinthians to respond to God's gift of grace with their own ministering gifts.

First, Paul's appeal was **tactful**. While saying "there is really no need for me to write," he wrote anyway, just as pastors often say, "You'll remember the story about..." and then tell the story anyway since it is good to be reminded even of the things that are familiar. Response to God's grace is a constant need of God's people, and we need reminding.

Paul's appeal is also **positive**: "I know that you are willing to help. I boast about you to the people of Macedonia." Paul was confident in the strength that God could give to the Corinthians, just as I am confident of the strength that God is ready to give us. Our church is engaged in countless acts of wonderful ministry, and I boast to my colleagues in the ministry about this church all the time. It is a foundation upon which we can build, and God is ready to give the energy supplied in our response.

Moreover, Paul's appeal was **honest**. What Paul said about the Macedonians and the Corinthians was true. Knowing of the strengths of the other, each could be stimulated to renewed strength of purpose. The Macedonians were prepared to give in spite of their poverty. The Corinthians expressed their willingness to take part in the offering before anyone else. These were strengths worth building upon; and a little competition between

churches can be motivating! This approach was typical of Paul: he would not lift up weakness in order to criticize one church to another, but instead highlight a church's strengths to serve as an inspiration.

Finally, Paul's appeal is **direct**. Paul spoke to the heart of the matter, to people's basic commitment to Jesus Christ. He wasn't just preaching; he was "meddling," speaking to the core of our values, and nudging us to do more and do better.

In many churches, stewardship programming follows a predictable pattern: the committee is organized and meets regularly; assignments are made and carried out; budgets are developed; the ministry of the church is interpreted; sermons on stewardship are preached; challenges are extended.

This looks like a complete stewardship program, but one crucial element is missing. In some way, there must be a personal commitment. As someone notes, "To inform and nurture the people of God without confronting them with the cost of discipleship is to show ourselves poor stewards." This is no less the case in stewardship than it is in our decision to follow Jesus. At some point, someone has said to us, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" When we answer, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior," we accept everything that goes with the call to discipleship: service to others, worship of God, and giving to the church's ministries.

Paul's appeal called for faithful gifts, heartfelt gifts, not guilt-driven gifts. God accepts our gifts not as an exaction – or an extraction – on the basis of what we have to give, not on what we don't have. That is how it must be with our pledge commitment. The only really driving force comes from within, inasmuch as the love of Christ claims and directs us to serve others in the ministries God puts before us.

We are a people called to serve, called to respond to the gracious love of Christ with hearts, minds, hands, and yes, checkbooks open to the leading of Christ's Lordship. Let us give thanks and praise to God for this inexpressible gift.

#### Sources:

- William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 259.
- Clarence Cave, *Think Piece 2* (New York: United Presbyterian Support Agency, 1975), 67.
- Robert J. Elder, *Speaking of Stewardship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), 65-68.
- Mark Landfried, *This Service of Love* (Camp Hill, PA: Synod of the Trinity, 1978), 66-69.

# Not As An Exaction

**Sunday, September 28, 2014**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

## ***2 Corinthians 9:1-7***

Judged by contemporary standards, the Apostle Paul employed some strange fundraising methods. In our text, Paul encouraged the folks in Corinth to make an offering, to be diligent in stewardship, to do their best to give to the distressed saints in Jerusalem; but, curiously, he never said anything about the nature of their suffering. What sorts of deprivation were they experiencing? How great was their need? Paul missed a golden chance to highlight something that could have increased the response of the Corinthians.

This is certainly not the way we go about raising money for charitable causes today. If there is a disaster in the world, we see pictures on the news within hours. Everyone has been moved by the pictures on television of the distended bellies and ghastly living conditions of people in third-world countries. We depict the suffering as vividly as possible because television producers know that if people can see human suffering, they will be more compassionate and more generous. So if we were organizing Paul's appeal, we would encourage him to do things differently, to describe the suffering more vividly.

We might also urge Paul to appeal to people's sense of duty: since all the others are doing their share, the Corinthians should, too. Or Paul could play the institutional obligation card: "Your name is on the roll of this organization, so you should do your part." But, when you think about it, this sort of appeal portrays stewardship as dues paying, doing one's bit, being a loyal member of the local service club; and while some people may respond to this, in truth, not many people like this approach. It's hard to get enthusiastic about stewardship that presses obligation or duty.