

KNOWING HOW TO HELP:
FORMING AN OUTREACH RELATIONSHIP

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WISCONSIN
MARCH 1, 2016

Abstract

Every pastor, staff minister, or church secretary knows the discomfort of answering the phone at church and being asked for money. When the phone rings and someone is asking for financial assistance, how should the church respond? This paper will attempt to answer that important question. Even though it is an important question, it's not a simple one to answer. In the physical realm, there are questions as to whether the church should actually provide monetary aid to the person who just happened to call that day. And if the church ought to, what is a good way to do so?

Of course, the church does not exist solely to meet a person's physical needs, but to help out with very real spiritual needs as well. Is the caller contacting the church to request a law/gospel presentation? Likely not, but it's a fantastic opportunity for the church to form a relationship with an individual seeking aid. The paper will conclude by analyzing Biblical and church-historical examples of churches that were able to develop constructive ways to provide both material and spiritual care, with the ultimate goal of providing churches with thoughtful and meaningful ways to reach those who seek aid.

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How Can the Church Help?

“Thanks so much, Jerry! I don’t know what I would have done without you. I am sure this will be the last time.” As Tony left his office, Jerry thought, *No, it won’t be the last time. You will be here again next month, and again the month after that...It will never end.*¹ Cynical? Possibly. Some would call it being a realist. In many ways, this challenge that Parkview Fellowship Church faced is the nightmare scenario for a socially-minded congregation. Churches want to give, but how can they know that their money will really make a difference in the people’s lives? That’s even selling the motivation short. As a part of sanctified living, Jesus commanded his disciples to “give to the needy.”² Of course, the follow-up question is, “Who are the needy?”

His life seemed to be an endless cycle of people like Tony, people who for a variety of reasons, *consistently* struggled to pay their electric bills, consistently needed help buying their groceries, and *never* seemed to change. Jerry felt like a human ATM machine, dispensing an endless stream of money to the same group of repeat “customers.” Jerry had begun to wonder if he was just enabling people like Tony, actually hurting them in the very process of trying to help them. *We’ve got to change what we are doing*, thought Jerry. *But how? Where do we begin?*³

That’s one side of the coin. Here’s another: A young pastoral intern was at church alone when the phone rang. He was annoyed. He didn’t like answering the phone, because it was usually someone asking for money, for gas or some other reason. And after hearing the rough situation described—a loss of employment, a sick child, a broken-down car—he always gave the same church-sponsored answer. “I’m sorry, we don’t have any programs to provide financial assistance.” On one occasion, feeling a bit like Peter at the temple,⁴ the intern offered, “I’m sorry, we don’t have any programs to help out, but you’re welcome to visit us on Sunday!” There was a short silence, before the man on the other end responded in accusation, “Why would I visit you if you won’t help me?” What a soul-searching moment!

Now, these two anecdotes don’t fully encapsulate the breadth of different scenarios a church might find itself in, but they’re a decent jumping-off point. On the one hand, a church that

¹ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 205.

² Luke 12:33 ESV.

³ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 206.

⁴ The account of Peter healing the lame beggar in the temple. “I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” Acts 3:6

has allocated resources to helping the needy wonders if its money and manpower is being wasted. On the other hand, a church that currently offers no aid is contemplating the wisdom of potentially expanding the scope of its ministry. The analysis doesn't necessarily come from a mean spirit. It's a practical question of managing resources, no different from managing an outreach budget or a pastor carefully planning out his week.

The Apostle Paul recognized the dilemma of balancing aid and resources, and gave some helpful guidelines in his first letter to Timothy. "No widow should be placed on the official support list unless she is at least 60 years old, has been the wife of one husband...If any believing woman has widows in her family, she should help them, and the church should not be burdened, so that it can help those who are genuinely widows."⁵ Widows in the ancient world were often in need. Women had fewer property rights and legal protections, and in the absence of family, widows were often reliant on acts of charity. Paul encouraged Timothy to provide aid to those who were "genuinely widows," while advising Timothy not to help those who could be supported by family. "Support widows who are genuinely widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must learn to practice godliness toward their own family first and to repay their parents, for this pleases God."⁶ It might sound harsh for Paul to actually advise Timothy to turn some needy people away, but that is what he is saying. But on the other hand, Paul also didn't tell Timothy to turn *everyone* away.

Believers are called by God to give, and to give generously. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states it strongly, "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."⁷ The early Christian leaders saw this not only as a commission for believers, but for the church as well. When Paul and Barnabas left to evangelize the Gentiles, they were encouraged not to forget to aid the poor. "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."⁸

⁵ 1 Timothy 5:9, 16 HCSB.

⁶ 1 Timothy 5:3-4 HCSB.

⁷ Matthew 5:42 ESV.

⁸ Galatians 2:9-10 NIV.

And yet at the same time the Christian Church has a Greater Commission, one to make disciples by baptizing and teaching.⁹ There is a place for the Church to give, and there is a place for the Church to preach, and evangelize. Jesus never intended that sanctified living should be segmented, so it is only natural that the Bible has a number of examples for consideration—historically, the Christian Church has combined material aid with spiritual outreach. As far as my intentions with this paper, by a study of the relevant past and the practical present, I will answer the pertinent question: “What should I do when someone calls my church and asks for money?” The church should view calls for financial assistance as potential ministry opportunities, and be prepared to turn a phone call into an outreach relationship.

Why Should I Give?

When fielding a call for financial assistance, option number one is always the simplest. “No, we can’t help you at this time.” Can’t, or won’t? Does the church have an obligation to help out people financially? As stated previously, the early church believed so. The Twelve Apostles knew that their God-given role was to preach the Word of God, but they also understood that the church had many needy people to care for. That situation is the primary impetus for the calling of the Seven, which added another branch onto the tree of the early church’s ministry.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.¹⁰

It would not have been right for the apostles to neglect the preaching of the Word. After all, preaching the gospel is the primary calling of the church. But it also would have been wrong

⁹ Matthew 28:19-20, paraphrase.

¹⁰ Acts 6:1-7 NIV.

to completely neglect the poor. It was such a worthwhile pursuit that they established seven men to take the “mercy ministry” of the early church. This sense of benevolence didn’t just confine itself to the church in Jerusalem. As the gospel message spread, so did a spirit of generosity.

When Paul and Barnabas were heading out on a missionary journey, they were urged by this same group of believers in Jerusalem to “continue to remember the poor.” Caring for the poor and needy was a hallmark of the early church. Consider, for instance, the testimony of Luke in Acts 4:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.¹¹

This group of believers was led to provide for one another not just because they were such generous people; their care and aid was a further act of God’s grace among them. It is a blessing that God would grant his people such a loving spirit among one another. Furthermore, Lenski points out that the original Greek text makes this connection between the Gospel and charity even more clear. “Here γὰρ brings evidence of the grace¹² that rested on them: not one in need of the necessities of life. There were many beggars among the Jews. We meet them constantly (3:2 is a sample). The believers had none. The model here given has been followed by the church since that time. Every congregation takes care of its poor and unfortunate.”¹³

These early Christians were not socialists when it came to ownership of property, but they never forgot that everything they owned had been given to them by God. Many of these believers were model examples of putting one’s neighbor first. Helen Rhee puts it well.

While early Christians in general hardly denied the legitimacy of private property, they considered it a share of the common creation that was intended for the common use and the common good; all material goods (which were never a substitute for spiritual goods

¹¹ Acts 4:32-35 NIV. The HCSB and ESV include a break at the end of verse 33. The HCSB reads, “And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them.” The ESV reads, “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” In both these versions the connection between God’s grace and the believers’ charity is somewhat separated, but the immediate inclusion of γὰρ (the English word “for”) in the Greek of v. 34 shows that the charity is directly connected to the Grace of God.

¹² See previous footnote.

¹³ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 189.

and virtues but could be vehicles of spiritual goods) are God’s gracious gifts intended for sustenance and sufficiency...human possession of earthly goods is good when it fulfills God’s creative purpose—sufficient provision of one’s needs and the needs of others.¹⁴

As the young Christian church continue to grow, the believers continued to care for each other’s needs. When the disciples in the early church found that some of their brothers in other areas were in need, they organized a collection.

And one of [the prophets] named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.¹⁵

As Paul went out and traveled, he often kept finances in mind. To avoid becoming a burden to the believers in Thessalonica, he, Silas and Timothy all found work to support themselves.¹⁶ Not only did Paul remember the poor, but he urged others to do so as well. As he said to the Church in Rome, “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need.”¹⁷ Paul also provided opportunities for the believers to help out their brothers and sisters in faith. On multiple occasions he collected offerings for the needy, as he records in Romans 15.

For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.¹⁸

Luke and Paul were not the only New Testament authors to stress the importance of charity among believers. John and James both considered the concept of a believer who, being

¹⁴ Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 193.

¹⁵ Acts 11:28-30 ESV.

¹⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2:9. It is quite possible, even likely, that they worked in manual labor. After all, Acts 18:3 shows that Paul had some level of expertise working as a tentmaker. Consider also his command from Ephesians 4:28: “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, *doing something useful with their own hands*, that they may have something to share with those in need. (NIV, emphasis added).

¹⁷ Romans 12:13 NIV.

¹⁸ Romans 15:26-29 NIV. For more information on the various collections that Paul took, see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1, 9:2, 9:13.

fully able, was unwilling to help out a fellow Christian in need. James reacted harshly against such a thought.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.¹⁹

As James saw it, not only did believers have an obligation to help the needy among them, but a refusal to do so cast serious doubt on the nature of one’s “faith.” Obligation might seem like a strong word, but James saw no wiggle room on this concept. Perhaps more than any other epistle writer, James emphasizes sanctified living, especially when it came to acts of charity.

John sides with James on this argument, stating the matter even more strongly than James has already put it. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”²⁰

John echoes the same concern that James has: believers who are able to help one another will naturally do so. If they do not, they must not really understand the love of God. But John makes the application even more direct, pointing out that the Christian’s act of giving up of himself is directly connected to Christ giving up himself. When believers give charitably, they’re not merely pointing to the love of God as an abstract concept. Rather, believers actively put the love of Christ into practice by laying down their lives as Christ laid down his.²¹

Jesus’ parable of the Sheep and the Goats from Matthew 25:31-46 makes a similar point; believers help those in need. In this parable, all sorts of negative states are listed, and righteous people come to the aid of people in all these situations: hunger, thirst, as a stranger, in need of clothing, sick, and in prison. These people that the righteous help are not necessarily known to

¹⁹ James 2:14-17 NIV.

²⁰ 1 John 3:16-18 NIV.

²¹ Jesus gave up his life; Christians should also be willing to give up their lives for one another if necessary. Here, John is making an application of the concept of self-sacrifice. In this context, John points out that even as believers are ready to lay down their lives in an ultimate sense, they should be prepared to “lay down their lives” by giving up their own comfort of living—forgoing material possessions that they previously enjoyed—that others may live.

them, but Jesus considers them to be his family. To quote the King: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”²²

Now, not only do believers have an obligation to care for fellow believers, but for family members as well. Note Paul’s letter to Timothy regarding the care of widows.²³ God’s children have a duty to provide for one another—and not just in a crisis, either. Parents provided for their children’s wellbeing. As Paul comments in 2 Corinthians 12, “For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.”²⁴ Solomon also considers preparation for the future of one’s family to be a significant part of godly living. “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, / but the sinner’s wealth is laid up for the righteous.”²⁵ Jesus also spoke about the necessity of caring for one’s parents when he condemned the Pharisees in Mark 7. Jesus even went so far as to condemn the Pharisees for teaching that one might avoid one’s obligation to parents by promising the money to God instead. Failure to provide for one’s parents is a direct sin against the fourth commandment.

[Jesus] continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”²⁶

So, to wrap up this whole line of thinking, the Biblical authors make it clear that believers care for the needy in their midst. The church often took on such ventures. The church didn’t automatically take on every possible obligation, however; family took on the role of “first responders” when it came to providing for the elderly and needy. When someone contacts a

²² Matthew 25:40 ESV.

²³ Support widows who are genuinely widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must learn to practice godliness toward their own family first and to repay their parents, for this pleases God. If any believing woman has widows in her family, she should help them, and the church should not be burdened, so that it can help those who are genuinely widows. 1 Timothy 5:3-4, 16 HCSB. While the early church cared for the needy, the first responsibility was placed on the immediate family.

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:14b ESV. For a similar comment from Solomon, see Proverbs 19:14.

²⁵ Proverbs 13:22

²⁶ Mark 7:9-13 NIV.

church in search of aid, the church should do everything it can to help out, provided that the person is a member of that church and has no immediate family who can help out.

What about Nonmembers?

However—and here is the major point of contention—many people who call churches asking for money are not members. Churches ought to help their own members; that much is clear. Depending on the size of a church, it may receive tens to hundreds of calls for gas money, diaper money, or rent money over the course of a year. If the church's obligation is to help nonmembers, then a line must be drawn to the extent of the help offered, or perhaps the type of help that is available. This might lead to all sorts of difficult conversations, trying to determine whether or not someone is really in need, and even to the extent of deciding which of several people in need will be given from a limited amount of aid.

If a church has a designated amount of money to distribute to the needy each month, it may have to decide between helping a larger group of people a little or helping a few people a lot. This sort of scenario could become a nightmare for a church council to deal with, especially when appeals from members for needy non-member friends may come in. But all of these potential issues are hardly worth mentioning if the church has no obligation to care for nonmembers.

As David Valleskey points out, one of the reasons that God gives possessions to individual Christians is that so they can support the needy.

Our possessions are also to be used for the support of the needy. This is one of the fruits of repentance. John the Baptist tells the crowd which has come out to the Jordan, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same” (Lk 3:11). We call the Samaritan of Jesus' parable “good” as we observe the way he cared for someone who could not care for himself (Lk 10:25–37). Jesus challenges the rich young ruler, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor” (Lk 18:22). To his disciples also he says, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys” (Lk 12:33).²⁷

Besides the aforementioned passages, Jesus spoke many times about caring for the needy. In the middle of his Sermon on the Mount, he tells his disciples not to give to the needy in a

²⁷ David J. Valleskey, “Stewardship of Possessions in the Gospels” (WLS Essay File, 1987), 1-2.

public, self-congratulating way, as they Pharisees do. The very way he words this command, “when you give to the needy,”²⁸ implies that giving to the needy is an ongoing activity in the lives of his people.²⁹ Jesus describes the type of charity that is God-pleasing in even greater detail when he dined at the house of a Pharisee.

Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”³⁰

Jesus had in mind that his followers would literally feed the poor and disabled. Jesus doesn’t give a certain interval of time to do so, nor does he say that one should entirely forget about entertaining friends. But to completely ignore this passage and to give it a figurative meaning would be to misunderstand it completely. Christians echo the concern that their Lord showed for the poor. In the same vein, the writer to the Hebrews urges his readers to show love for visitors. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.”³¹

When Jesus tells his disciples to care for the poor, he isn’t a hypocrite. After all, he gave up the greatest possession he or anyone else could give up—his life.³² John commented that Jesus gave up his life for his people, but he didn’t only give up his life for believers. Rather, he gave it up for the entire world.³³ Jesus even showed love to his enemies! Jesus didn’t offer some kind of segmented common grace/special grace, but paid for the sins of everyone. Jesus wants his followers to offer the same spirit of love to all people. The idea that a church might establish programs only to offer financial aid to members and not to anyone else doesn’t fit well with another portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own

²⁸ Matthew 6:2 ESV.

²⁹ Or, as Valleskey puts it, to “do alms.” Valleskey, “Stewardship of Possessions in the Gospels,” 5.

³⁰ Luke 14:12-14 NIV.

³¹ Hebrews 13:2a ESV.

³² 1 John 3:16.

³³ 1 John 2:2.

people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.³⁴

To be clear, God wants caring for believers to be one of the primary concerns of the church. Paul writes as much in Galatians 6:10: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, we must work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.”³⁵ But God has also made it known that he cares for all people, including the needy who are outside the church, and he wants the church to have the same concern.

So, to finally answer the question “Why should the church give?” or perhaps more bluntly, “Why should the church sacrifice some of its material blessings to give?” the church sacrifices in view of Christ’s sacrifice. Jesus demonstrated his love for others when he gave up his life, and the church does well to look for opportunities to also demonstrate love to others, even if sacrifice is involved. The entire question of who the church is obligated to help is really just that same question the expert in the law asked. “Who is my neighbor?”³⁶ Christ’s response in that story was much more artful than listing off a flurry of Old Testament proverbs³⁷—Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan showed that the right question should not be “Who is my neighbor?” but “To whom can I be a neighbor!?” To anyone in need of mercy.

Realistically, What Can I Do?

The church has a desire to help the poor. Few pastors would argue that point. Rather, it is the application that gets a little sticky. Quite simply, churches have a limited budget, and only a portion of that budget goes to need-based relief. Some churches may look at giving to the needy as just another item on the budget, one that hasn’t tended to bring in many members. Giving to the needy can especially feel like less of a wise investment when compared to Christmas and Easter outreach events or summer VBS programs. Jesus didn’t have much to say to his followers regarding balancing a church budget, but he did tell his disciples that they should give to the

³⁴ Matthew 5:43-48 NIV.

³⁵ HCSB.

³⁶ Luke 10:29 HCSB.

³⁷ Solomon, the wealthiest man in the Bible and possibly of all time, wrote numerous proverbs about caring for the needy. Cf. Proverbs 14:21, 14:31, 19:17, 22:9, 22:16, 28:27, 29:7.

poor, for in so doing they would gain treasures for themselves in heaven.³⁸ Churches ought to have room in the budget for caring for the needy.

When it comes to deciding on a specific avenue or avenues of giving, churches have to weigh competing interests on the local, national, and global levels. If a local church decided to donate a sum of money at Christmastime to a charity, no doubt it would receive numerous competing suggestions from the church members, and so a fairly popular program could end up divisive. Helen Rhee presents a laundry list of potential charitable options that offers choice to the point of overwhelming:

In terms of the recipients of our generosity, we might naturally include our family, neighbors, friends, church members, local and regional charities, etc.—people in a circle of our proximate relationships (our “neighbors” limited by time, place, and opportunities), but we must not stop there especially concerning the “universal destination of goods.” “Our neighbors” should also include the “strangers” who are more removed from us in terms of relationship or national boundaries, including not only the domestic poor and the victims of disaster (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) but also the global poor (e.g., Guatemalan day-laborers, HIV-positive orphans in Sudan, earthquake victims in Haiti) and the global victims of disaster (e.g., flood victims in Australia and tsunami/earthquake victims in Southeast Asia and Japan)... We could give to organizations that work for short-term relief for immediate and urgent needs (e.g., sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick in inner cities or disaster zones), to which the traditional charity organizations tend to respond, and/or for social change and development organizations that work toward long-term, structural, and institutional changes and policies for the betterment of the poor and the underprivileged (e.g., basic education and literacy, affordable housing, living wage campaign, judicial justice, micro-lending, asset-based community development, and health care programs).³⁹

There are many people who are in need and many worthy causes. Unfortunately, despite a congregation’s best intentions, there is only a limited amount of financial aid available. If a church gets a call from a community member in need of help, the question might be, “Is *this* caller the best use of our money?” And besides the issue of *who* to help, there are practical considerations regarding *how* to help.

For the sake of discussion, assume that the church has decided to help a certain solicitor in need of financial aid. At this point the issue morphs into considering how best to help the

³⁸ Luke 12:33. Jesus makes a very similar point in Luke 16:9.

³⁹ Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation*, 201. This is only a portion of her suggestions.

troubled soul on the other end of the phone. It is one thing to decide to hand out a monthly budgeted amount of dollars for aid, and it is quite another to maximize the potential of that money in the lives of those who receive it. Edward Meier succinctly describes the agonizing thought process an organization can go through.

How many of us don't get calls or taps on our door for handouts? If our congregation doesn't have a poor and needy fund, maybe it should start one: Anyway, if we can't give them cash, we can give them advice on where to get some help and/or a lift. The need for caution must also be noted. If they are given money, let's be sure it is going for food and not to support their habit! If they claim their booze is for warmth, give them an old blanket!⁴⁰

Those who are eager to help the destitute have the right idea in mind, but without any experiential knowledge and without proper planning, a charitable donation can be misused in several ways. Meier notes perhaps the most common complaint: the needy might use the cash for drugs or alcohol.

Back in the introduction to this paper, Jerry from Parkview Fellowship Church was dealing with a similar issue. The people he was interacting with were not struggling with substance abuse issues but rather seemed to be chronically poor money managers. At the same time, one of his associates from Parkview, Pastor Dan, was dealing with an apparently identical issue; the African villages that were sponsored by the church were wasting the church's money.

One of them spoke up. "Dan, we love you, but something has to change. We have been writing checks to pay for short-term teams for years, but the people in those African villages are just as poor as they were before we started going over there. We have dug wells, built latrines, handed out used clothing, and donated to their new church building, but they just keep asking us to send more teams and more money for more projects. If anything, they seem more dependent on us than ever before. This is bad stewardship of the money we are donating to this church. Something has to change! We've had enough."⁴¹

Besides the suspicions about the misuse of money, many people have a more damning allegation: the poor aren't really all that poor. A 2013 news report by the Huffington Post uncovered a Kentucky man who pretended to suffer from mental and physical disabilities in order to be a more successful panhandler—and his act worked. The man earned a self-estimated

⁴⁰ Edward P. Meier, "The Nature of True Faith: An Exegesis of James 2" (WLS Essay File, 1978), 7-8.

⁴¹ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 206.

60,000 to 100,000 dollars a year doing so.⁴² To anyone who wants to truly help the poor, such stories are discouraging. But this Kentucky man is not the only one who is gaming the system, as Randy Alcorn reports.

General and undiscerning distributions to the poor are catastrophic. Often the “professionally poor” receive the goods while the true poor, those who want to work but can’t, or who do work but can’t make enough money to provide, are hesitant to take handouts. I have seen a man choose not to work for a year and receive unemployment benefits that are twice as much as another man who works forty hours a week. Worse yet, I have seen the same man change over that one-year period and grow accustomed to not having to work to live. That was ten years ago, and he has not had a job since. He still lives off the misguided “help” of others. Meanwhile he has lost both his self-respect and his family.⁴³

Poverty can come from laziness. Solomon warned that a man who would not work would soon find himself impoverished.⁴⁴ For a nation like as reliant on agriculture as ancient Israel was, this was especially true. Nowadays, some people who are fully capable of working but refuse to do so are propped up by either government welfare or the financial support of well-meaning but misguided donors. Ultimately, helping someone who refuses to work for himself is harmful, not only to that individual’s growth as a responsible citizen but also because it wastes valuable resources that could be better spent on the truly needy.

Alcorn focuses mainly on the harm done to the individual:

We are not obligated to rescue a lazy person from his poverty. Indeed, we make a serious error if we try to do so. Every act of provision to the lazy person removes his incentives to be responsible for himself and makes him more dependent on others. Paul commanded the Thessalonian church to stop taking care of the lazy and reminded them of the rule he issued when present with them—“If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). The point is not to let people starve—the point is that faced with starvation they will be motivated to work and support themselves as God intends. “The laborer’s appetite works for him; his hunger urges him on.” (Prov. 16:26).⁴⁵

Helping the poor is messy. Budgets and round numbers and giving campaigns are attractive, but the sifting of facts is something that takes a bit more effort. It requires meeting the needy in person and understanding their lives and their situations. One person in need might be

⁴² Eleanor Goldberg, *Gary Thompson, Kentucky Beggar Who Fakes Having A Disability, Earns \$100,000 A Year*, (Huffington Post, 2013) [published online].

⁴³ Alcorn 257. Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989), 257.

⁴⁴ See Proverbs 10:4; Proverbs 16:26; Proverbs 20:4, 30-34; Ecclesiastes 4:5.

⁴⁵ Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, 256.

helped by a loving refusal to simply hand out cash on the spot. In a direr situation, money or medical aid may be exactly what is necessary.

True, a church could simply pick a charity or three, write a check, and then send it off to those organizations. There are people in need all over the world. But in light of the Bible's many comments about helping those near, both in relation and proximity, how could a church completely ignore the needy in its own community?

If a church really wants to help the poor *and* make the best use of the gifts it has at its disposal, it will seek to form relationships with those people who are soliciting for money. Really, a church can't afford not to. When considering the various ways money may be misspent—on alcohol or drug use, in wasteful spending, on frauds or on the lazy, a church owes it both to its community and to its members to ensure that funds are distributed wisely.

This is not necessarily the work of a pastor! In fact, it probably should not be. Pastors may play a role in helping out with a church's programs to help the poor—perhaps organizing a food drive or a “Toys for Tots” campaign—but a pastor's primary job is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Anything that gets in the way of that mission would actually hinder the church.

To again quote the Apostles, when they dealt with such a situation, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”⁴⁶

If (or when) the job becomes too much for a pastor, then have the elders take over, appoint a committee, or solicit people who are looking to become more involved in the work of the church. This could be a potential landing spot for women who are feeling disenfranchised when it comes to serving in ministry. People might be more excited about volunteering in church when they're not just signing up for the annual church cleanup day.

And really, without the effort of a dedicated group of individuals, making a meaningful difference in the lives of the needy would be difficult. Who knows whether Sammy is trustworthy enough to receive cash, or if it would be more helpful to him to deliver a bag of

⁴⁶ Acts 6:2-4 NIV.

canned goods every month? Would it be more helpful to help Theresa find subsidized childcare or for her to find a second job? And who really could use this money and who just wants it? None of these questions can be answered without a lot of legwork and personal interest and care.

The very concept of such a program is probably laughable to many pastors. Who could be in charge of this? Who is willing to donate the time? And furthermore, where is this large budget or well-stocked pantry from which to give? For some churches, such a program is completely infeasible, and donating to WELS Home and World Missions is all that will fit in the budget this year, and next year, and for the foreseeable future. Maybe handing out a couple \$10 gas cards a month is all that the level of congregational giving can allow. Granted. Churches have fixed costs—staff, heating and cooling, general maintenance, print materials, internet costs, etc. Failing to put a substantial amount in the budget for need-based relief won't prevent a church from having a pastor, but failing to pay synod code for their staff just might. But when a church has decided “we can't do anything at this time,” it shouldn't forget at least to revisit that thought, especially given the good examples of believers in the Old⁴⁷ and New⁴⁸ Testaments—believers who gave despite their own sometimes humble means.

Even should a pastor be unable to offer any sort of financial aid, or even be unable to suggest an avenue for relief—if he is new to the area and completely unaware of a local food bank or homeless shelter—the very least he can do is to use that brief phone call as an opportunity to preach the gospel. Of course, saying as much is easier said than done.

Preaching to the Disinterested

Now, there are exceptions, but more likely than not, the caller did not call to hear about their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and whether or not they thought about where they're going when they die. The caller might be doing a circuit of all the churches and relief organizations in the area. But that's not really an excuse not to have a brief chat about Jesus. A man doesn't decide against asking out a pretty girl solely because “he was just buying milk at the store, so it would seem disingenuous to stop and chat.” A woman trying to get her fledgling storefront off

⁴⁷ Exodus 36:2-7.

⁴⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

the ground won't shoo away customers who accidentally walked into the wrong door. She's trying to make sales! She wants people to know about her product, even if they just happened to stumble in. How much more should a pastor or church secretary or whoever is answering that phone be ready, because a church is really "selling" the greatest, most actually life-changing product out there—the gospel.

Maybe that person out there on the phone was raised Baptist but hasn't gone to church in a while. Maybe they're an agnostic. It might be a former Catholic. But it's impossible to know without asking and trying to make a connection. Spiritual outreach is not an easy thing to do. That said, the Bible has a number of examples of people who found themselves in an opportunity to preach the gospel while going about their lives; these are a few stories of people who took the chance to speak up, and made a difference in the lives of the people they spoke to.

Philip, one of the Seven who had been chosen, was traveling along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He had been told to travel that way by the Holy Spirit, and then again commanded to approach a man in a chariot. The man in the chariot was an Ethiopian eunuch and was an important official to his queen, being in charge of her treasury. It just so happened that he was reading a passage from Isaiah that foretold the suffering of the Christ. And since Philip was a man full of wisdom⁴⁹ who knew the Scriptures, he was able to answer the man's softball of a question: "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"⁵⁰ From that point, Philip goes on to explain who Jesus was and why he came to earth. The eunuch even ends up being baptized! All this happened because Philip took the time to interrupt a man and ask, "Do you understand what you are reading?"⁵¹

Or maybe that's not the most powerful example. Philip was only traveling on that road because the Holy Spirit told him to, and Philip only walked up to the eunuch in the chariot because, again, the Holy Spirit gave him the order. And when Philip arrived, he didn't find a stubborn man; the man was looking for an interpretation of the Scriptures. But from another lens, that man in the chariot was doing some reading, and Philip happened to comment. In this case that's all it took. Who's to say that asking a caller why they would bother calling a church won't open similar lines of conversation?

⁴⁹ Acts 6:3.

⁵⁰ Acts 8:34 ESV.

⁵¹ Acts 8:30 ESV.

In John chapter 4, Jesus turns a request for water into a lesson on the person of the Christ. Jesus was sitting beside a well at a town in Samaria while his disciples had gone into the town to buy food. He notices a woman by the well, and the rest is history.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water. “Give Me a drink,” Jesus said to her, for His disciples had gone into town to buy food. “How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” she asked Him. For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus answered, “If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would ask Him, and He would give you living water.” “Sir,” said the woman, “You don’t even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do You get this ‘living water’? You aren’t greater than our father Jacob, are You? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and livestock.” Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again—ever! In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up within him for eternal life.” “Sir,” the woman said to Him, “give me this water so I won’t get thirsty and come here to draw water.”⁵²

That woman was not looking for a spiritual conversation, even though that was really what her soul needed. It is to Jesus’ credit as an evangelist that, tired as he was, he continued to connect with people and to preach the gospel, even amidst varying circumstances. He wasn’t in a synagogue, and he wasn’t teaching from a boat or a hill. He was talking to one woman as he sat by a well. And he doesn’t even slow down after the disciples return, using similar language to teach them about the importance of preaching his gospel. Perhaps especially in this extraordinary situation—preaching to a woman, a Samaritan no less, they might understand the importance of gospel outreach to all people, even the unwilling.

Just then His disciples arrived, and they were amazed that He was talking with a woman. Yet no one said, “What do You want?” or “Why are You talking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar, went into town, and told the men, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could this be the Messiah?” They left the town and made their way to Him. In the meantime the disciples kept urging Him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But He said, “I have food to eat that you don’t know about.” The disciples said to one another, “Could someone have brought Him something to eat?” “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work,” Jesus told them. “Don’t you say, ‘There are still four more months, then comes the harvest’? Listen to what I’m telling you: Open your eyes and look at the fields, for they are ready for harvest.”⁵³

⁵² John 4:7-15 HCSB.

⁵³ John 4:27-35 HCSB.

Of course, there is also the example of Peter and John at the temple, who did the social equivalent of stopping at an intersection to briefly declare the power of Jesus to the homeless man sitting there with his cardboard sign. Then there's Paul, as recorded in Acts 17, teaching the people of Athens about the Unknown God. It doesn't have to take a huge effort to reach out to people and declare the truth of God and his love. It just takes a willing soul.

A brief gospel message is obviously better than none at all. But assume the best-case scenario: a church has managed to put together a program that will truly help the needy. Such a program is the goal, but it is not the only goal—as stated before, the main mission of every pastor and every church is to tell people about Jesus. Nowadays, aid for the needy is often seen as merely another government program. It will take effort to build a program that unites material aid with spiritual outreach; but historically, it is something that Christians have done very well.

Miraculous Healing and Gospel Preaching

Ever since Christ ascended into heaven, the church has been combining earthly and spiritual aid together, and the early Christian church in Jerusalem was no exception. The gospel-influenced attitude of the entire early church is captured well by the aforementioned account of Peter and John in the temple. In fact, it's one of the best examples in Scripture of spiritual help being given to someone who requested material assistance. Certainly, it's not just “spiritual help” or “financial aid” that Peter and John provide. It's a complete body and soul outreach program.

As Peter and John head to the temple for afternoon prayer, a man who has been lame from birth is being carried to the temple gate to beg. When he sees Peter and John entering the temple, he asks for money. Peter replies, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”⁵⁴ Peter reaches out his arm, pulls the man up, and the man is immediately able to walk. Really, it would be great if all ministry was this easy. Peter recognizes the man's need, gives the man not what he asks for but what he actually needs, and is able to do so while showing that the healing is done through the power of Jesus.

⁵⁴ Acts 3:6 ESV.

But that's not the end of the story. As a crowd has gathered in awe, Peter starts preaching to his newfound audience. "While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?"⁵⁵ From helping out one man who was unable to walk (albeit through the help of a miracle), Peter has the opportunity to preach a sermon including specific law, the message of the forgiveness of sins through faith, the promise of the resurrection, and a reminder that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of the prophets. As a result of this miracle and subsequent preaching, "Many who heard the message believed."⁵⁶

Remarkably, the story still wasn't over. The priests and the captain of the guard and the Sadducees were annoyed at this disturbance in the temple, so they threw Peter and John in jail overnight. The next day they asked the disciples what authority they had to perform such actions, and Peter takes the opportunity to preach another sermon, this time to the elders, teachers of the law, and even the Chief Priest himself. In the end, Peter and John walked away unscathed, amidst a flurry of toothless threats. "After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old."⁵⁷ And so a lot of good was caused by the right people paying attention to a person in need.

It's no surprise that Luke, a doctor, would take notice of a miraculous healing done by the apostles. He records a number of similarly miraculous healings by Jesus as well, including the centurion's servant,⁵⁸ the widow's son at Nain,⁵⁹ Jairus's daughter⁶⁰ and the sick woman,⁶¹ just to name a few. Perhaps none is so well known as the healing of the man who went through the roof.

⁵⁵ Acts 3:11-12 ESV.

⁵⁶ Acts 4:4 NIV.

⁵⁷ Acts 4:21-22 NIV.

⁵⁸ Luke 7:1-10.

⁵⁹ Luke 7:11-17.

⁶⁰ Luke 8:49-56.

⁶¹ Luke 8:43-48.

In Luke chapter 5, Jesus is once again teaching his followers. Some men, having heard of the healing power of Jesus, bring their paralyzed friend to him, carrying him on a mat. But unable to enter the house where Jesus is staying due to the large crowd, the men tear apart the roof of the house and simply lower their friend through it. In view of the clear faith of the man's friends, Jesus forgives the paralyzed man's sins. Now, Jesus did this partly for the sake of the Pharisees, to confront their false belief that Jesus was a blasphemer. But he also did so for the benefit of everyone listening, and especially for the man and his friends. Jesus did heal the man, but he didn't let that man nor anyone else there leave that day without also witnessing Jesus' testimony that he truly had the power to forgive sins.⁶²

This is a recurring theme throughout the miraculous healings of Jesus: Jesus combines physical healing with the message that he is truly the Great Physician. He is able to heal both body and soul. As far as Jesus is concerned, these two roles are not separated in his ministry. Even on occasions where Jesus orders the people he healed not to spread the news of what happened,⁶³ there was no doubt in the mind of anyone who saw what happened that Jesus was the root cause of the healing. As Armin Schuetze puts it, "Jesus performed these works as a sign of who He was, to authenticate His ministry."⁶⁴ Jesus was concerned about the physical well-being of the Jewish people, without a doubt. But he was even more concerned about their spiritual health, and so he made sure that his healings pointed to him as more than just a healer—he is the Son of Man, the Messiah. In sum, miraculous healings in the Bible were not just considered acts of charity, but were intimately connected to the proclamation of the gospel.

The Old Testament Law and Charity

This expression of love was not limited to the early church. God's people had been caring for the poor and needy for thousands of years before Christ. This sort of caring wasn't just a

⁶² Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Luke 5:22-24 NIV. The answer to Jesus' question? Both things are impossible. No person is able to miraculously heal a paralyzed man nor able to forgive sins. No one except Jesus, that is.

⁶³ Mark 5:35-43, Mark 7:31-37, Mark 8:22-26.

⁶⁴ Armin W. Schuetze, "Scriptural Principles with Respect to the Church's Mission and Christian Welfare Work," (WLS Essay File), 5.

suggestion; it was built into the very structure of society. When God gave the Old Testament laws to Moses, he ensured that there would be laws to protect and care for the poor, the orphaned, the widows, and the outcasts of society. Now, there was no centralized government organizing taxes and welfare as exists in modern America. As Vonhoff puts it, there was “no state socialism”⁶⁵ – and yet that may be overstating the case. After all, God, as the head of the state, had set up the laws and commands that compelled the Israelites to care for one another. The sort of charity that God commanded for his people wasn’t financial aid for its own sake. It was a response to the blessings that God had given his people and was to be donated with that attitude in mind. Although it took a different form, God’s intent with charity in both the Old and New Testaments has a similar point of focus; it was both a response to and a beacon pointing toward God’s love.

For example, here is Deuteronomy 14:28-29:

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.⁶⁶

It is common knowledge that God commanded the Israelite people to give him a tithe of all their income. Conversely, far fewer people know about the tri-annual tithe for the poor that God established in Deuteronomy 14. But for those living in poverty in Israel, doubtlessly those people must have been grateful for this tithe. Assuming that everyone in Israel gave the full amount of the tithe, it would be enough food—if not for the entire three-year period—to last for a very long time. Now, all that being said, anyone who benefited from this special tithe would have an additional testimony of God’s careful providence for his people. As God’s people were donating from their storehouses, they were giving further recognition of the goodness that God had shown them.

If the tri-annual tithe was the ancient equivalent of welfare or food stamps, Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-11 describes Israel’s version of loan forgiveness.

At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require

⁶⁵ Heinz Vonhoff. *People Who Care: An Illustrated History of Human Compassion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 9.

⁶⁶ NIV.

payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.⁶⁷

Every seven years, Israelites would cancel the loans that others owed them. The size of the loan did not matter, nor even the timing. The possibility that someone might abuse the system was not reason to withhold a loan from a fellow countryman who was in need. Interestingly enough, the argument that many have against charity/giving to the poor is even addressed: "There will always be poor people in the land. *Therefore I command you* to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land."⁶⁸ God considers the presence of the needy as a wonderful opportunity to be generous. Yet he doesn't promote charity apart from the knowledge of the LORD. This is readily apparent by the recourse that God urges on those who were denied aid. If someone refuses to help out a neighbor in need, that neighbor could appeal to the LORD for justice, and they would find it. In other words, both the people who were able to take out loans with their neighbors and those who were refused recognized that the entire program had been set up by God for their welfare.

These were just some of the commands that God gave to his people to care for the needy. Now, the Israelites were not perfect. When they forgot that these commands were really mixing spiritual *and* material welfare, they began to shirk their duty. Of course, this necessarily follows. When people separate themselves from the knowledge of justification, their care for sanctified living also decreases. As Vonhoffs puts it,

Whenever the children of Israel forget God's kindness toward them, they also forget the commandment to love their neighbor. When they are disobedient (and they often are) this commandment is vitiated. But when they keep God's commandments in grateful

⁶⁷ NIV.

⁶⁸ Emphasis added.

obedience, they are blessed. And the blessing is contagious, spreading to neighboring peoples and to aliens and strangers. An illustration of this is the story of Ruth...⁶⁹

It is nearly impossible to discuss the concept of showing love by reaching out to “aliens and strangers” without thinking of the story of Ruth. Ruth entered the town of Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi, although both she and Naomi’s husbands had passed away. As a Moabitess and therefore a foreigner, Ruth was not especially welcome in the town, although some of the older heads still remembered Naomi. But she did have one recourse: gleaning. Gleaning, or the picking up of leftover crops from farmers’ fields, was a legally protected way for those in poverty to find sustenance. This was also one of the laws that God gave to Moses. “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.”⁷⁰

As Ruth went out to glean, she found herself in the field of Boaz. As she began to glean, not only was she allowed to follow directly behind the harvesters, but she was welcomed by the landowner himself. Boaz offered Ruth protection and water to drink, leading to this exchange:

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”⁷¹

In his acts of charity and kindness, Boaz not only offers Ruth much more than he was legally required to, but he also connects his actions to the LORD. Boaz is already a fine example of a God-fearing Israelite without even mentioning that he offered Ruth a free meal⁷² and told his workers to drop extra sheaves so that Ruth would have more to pick up.⁷³ All told, Ruth went home that day with about thirty pounds of barley, an impressive haul.⁷⁴ When Ruth returned

⁶⁹ Heinz Vonhoff, *People Who Care: An Illustrated History of Human Compassion*, 10.

⁷⁰ Leviticus 23:22 NIV.

⁷¹ Ruth 2:10-12 NIV.

⁷² Ruth 2:14.

⁷³ Ruth 2:16.

⁷⁴ Ruth 2:17. Literally, “And it was about an ephah of barley.”

home, Naomi was amazed at her success. “The LORD bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.”⁷⁵

Naomi’s praise is well-placed. Boaz didn’t merely comply with the letter of God’s command—he actually went far beyond mere compliance—but he understood the spirit of the command. There is no doubt that Boaz was an exceptional man in Israel. His godliness was evident even by the way that he and his men greeted one another.⁷⁶ But his behavior offers a hopeful glimpse at the general care and concern that the Israelites had toward the needy in their own communities, and the way that they were able to connect their obedience to a proclamation of the goodness of the LORD. As Vonhoff sums it up, “The story of Ruth is evidence that in Israel concern is not bounded by nationality. Although the Chosen People are careful to avoid foreign influences, they are just as careful to be generous when it comes to helping others, including foreigners.”

One might contend that the charity of Boaz was not the action of the church per se, but because Boaz acted in compliance with the command of God, he was effectively acting as a part of the church. A similar scenario would be the example of an Israelite offering an individual sacrifice to God. It is the work of the church, even though his individual offering wouldn’t necessarily be credited to every member. For other modern examples, consider how the individual WELS congregations take some portion of credit for the work of World Missions, even though they might only have given a small portion of the offering for the gospel outreach that was performed. The kindness that Boaz showed was timeless, and it draws a number of comparisons from work done by the Christian church in the centuries after Christ.

The Church Historic and the Needy

The early church, like today’s church, could not rely on a theocratic government to ensure that the poor would be cared for. And even though miraculous healings seemed to be common, they were not the norm. As years went by, the early church was reliant on charitable benefactors, just like now. The giving spirit did not change over the years—only the nature of the

⁷⁵ Ruth 2:20 NIV.

⁷⁶ Ruth 2:4

gift. Uhlhorn recounts the spirit with which those early believers gave and the importance that they placed on giving, noting that the early Christians refused ill-gotten offerings, even if they were much needed.

The Jews gave tithes; Christians, as those who have obtained freedom, “gladly and freely give all that they have for the Lord’s service.” The Church indeed exhorts to giving, warns also and rebukes the sluggish, but she receives only perfectly free gifts. She takes only such as can be given with a good conscience. No unclean gift may be laid upon the Lord’s altar. Profit made from sinful occupations was not accepted as an oblation, neither were the oblations of impenitent sinners. The right of presenting oblations was a direct expression for being in the communion of the Church. Heretics and excommunicated persons could bring no oblation. “It is better to die of want, than to receive gifts from the ungodly and the wicked,” say the Apostolic [sic] Constitutions. If such gifts are received ignorantly and unintentionally, they should be used for fuel, for it is fitting that fire should consume the gifts of the ungodly. When Marcion, the well-known Gnostic, seceded from the Church, the 200 HS. which he had presented were returned to him.⁷⁷

Clearly the early believers placed a high importance on offerings. Placing a gift on the Lord’s altar was seen for the blessing to the giver that it truly is: an act of thankfulness and worship that is actually an expression of fellowship. In this understanding, the church was not willing to accept the money that belonged to the heretic Marcion.⁷⁸ This act of giving was an act of worship which united the believers together.

Amazingly, not only did the church highly value the gift, but the church considered both giving and receiving to be two sides of the same coin. By pointing first to Christ as the giver of property and all gifts, believers from all different economic levels were reminded that they all primarily relied on him. Furthermore, the acts of giving and receiving were simply different aspects of God’s continual care for his people.

Hereby were rich and poor in the first place brought into the right position towards each other. The rich gave what he gave to God, and the poor received what he received from God. Thus the temptation of the rich to exalt themselves above the poor, and the humiliation of the poor at being obliged to receive assistance from others, were removed, while at the same time discontent and murmuring, as well as insolent demands and presumptuous requests were done away with. The rich became conscious that he only gave back to God what he had first received. The poor became conscious, that the same God, who had imparted to himself a smaller measure of earthly goods, yet took care that

⁷⁷ Garhari Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church* (New York: Scribner, 1883), 148-149. (“HS.” is the abbreviated form of Sestertius, a roman coin. Its value was a quarter of a denarius.)

⁷⁸ This is similar to the judgment made by the Jews in regard to the thirty silver coins originally paid to Judas for the betrayal of Jesus. “The chief priests picked up the coins and said, “It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.” Matthew 27:6 NIV.

he should not suffer want. It was no longer a disgrace to be poor and to receive assistance from the church.⁷⁹

Now obviously, the early church was not some magic place where people perfectly understood Biblical teachings regarding caring for the needy. But there is no denying that those Christians had a willing spirit for charity. There is only time and space in this paper for a few stories of Christians through the ages, which is unfortunate; there must be thousands of worthwhile tales of individual believers who have given for others, tales that have been buried in the subsequent waves pounding on the collective shores of time. As Solomon pointed out, even a man who rescues a city can be forgotten to his descendants.⁸⁰ But the stories that do remain are instructive; a fine example is that of Cyprian and the plague.

In Carthage in the year 253 A.D., Christians are blamed for a plague that is decimating the city. For the Christians, matters go from bad to worse as unbelievers begin persecuting them amidst disease. Cyprian attempts to convince people to help the sick but is unsuccessful. Vonhoff describes the desperate scene:

Cyprian sees that universal disaster leads the unbelievers not to relief action but to crime; everywhere they are burning, robbing, and looting. Cyprian then does what he has been unable to challenge them to do. He gathers his people and calls upon them for the sake of Christ to include the unbelievers in their aid, the very unbelievers who so severely persecuted him. He himself leads his people into the houses of the diseased. He ministers to those in agony and comforts those who are dying. He does not ask whether the home is Christian or heathen. He asks only where the plague victims are, where to find those who are dying alone and forsaken. There he is needed, and there he goes. Before long he abandons this largely hit-or-miss approach and organizes a relief program in his parish. Everyone is put to work at a specific task where his talents will do the most good. Numbers of these volunteers succumb to the plague themselves; they end their service with the sacrifice of their own lives.⁸¹

As his community is being destroyed by disease, Cyprian acts. He rallies the troops, and a worthy group they are. It speaks to the character of his members that they would risk their own deaths for the sake of others. Cyprian and his group don't just act on behalf of the city of Carthage, either. As he hears about a number of people who have been taken captive by bandits

⁷⁹ Garhari Ulhhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 146-147.

⁸⁰ Ecclesiastes 9:13-16. The point of Solomon's story is reinforced by a failure to mention the name of this poor man who has saved the city, and even the name of the city affected. Perhaps Solomon has forgotten in his old age—or, more likely, he's just that clever of a writer.

⁸¹ Heinz Vonhoff, *People Who Care: An Illustrated History of Human Compassion*, 19-20.

in North Africa, Cyprian solicits funds from the already belabored church of Carthage, which manages to raise the necessary assets. When he sends the money to Numidia, he makes it clear that his and his congregation's actions are motivated by a recognition of the Love of Christ. "Cyprian's letter also makes clear mention of the dynamic for such action, the true source of the Christian's love of neighbor: 'Thus we must see Christ in our captive brethren and rescue him from the perils of captivity; for he rescued us from the perils of death.'"⁸²

Cyprian is not unique, either. Even Andreas Karlstadt (though he had some theological faults) had an interesting idea to help the needy and prevent beggars from roaming the streets: a common fund would accept money from a combination of secular and sacred sources, including endowments. Such an idea might work well in a modern setting, depending on the level of partnership and interconnectedness. Karlstadt seems to commend the idea despite his misgivings about the morality of some of his proposed donors.

A laudable way and means is at hand provided God would give his grant to accomplish such ways and means. And these means are undertaken: that one shall set up a common purse or chest, and therein include all the income of all the brotherhoods. Bear in mind that brotherhoods oppose divine glory and honor, that they make division in Christian unity, that they eat and drink like beasts, living as a fish in water and as a wall stands upon a rock. For they scorn all others, are full of slander, and have useless and devilish hopes.

Also the income from the parish endowments, when they are available through the renunciation or death of the priests, shall come into the above-mentioned chest to be lent by the council to everyone in the city. Consider that many endowments are founded and established on the Mass, for that is a devilish matter and against the nature of the holy sacrament. Consider also that there are too many priests who desire to serve neither God nor the neighbor, and will not even learn...

Also I would like to see that the income of the stony churches be devoted to the above-mentioned chest and brotherly help.⁸³

Karlstadt mentions that such efforts will only be accomplished should God also be acting. This is an important point, and one to make about this affair as a whole: God's ongoing grace is necessary for any human efforts to succeed. It is wise for believers to have God's will and word at the heart of their actions. Without Christ's compassion, Christians would have nothing to

⁸² Heinz Vonhoff, *People Who Care: An Illustrated History of Human Compassion*, 21.

⁸³ Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 191.

relate or share, aside from some cans of food and a “good luck.” Food is good, but it doesn’t feed the soul, and after all, “man shall not live on bread alone.”⁸⁴ One sad example of a lack of understanding of God’s will for the mission of the church comes from the practices of the ancient monasteries.

The key to the right understanding of monarchism, as well as the tone of Christian piety in general in this age, is found in the fact, already frequently touched on, that the leaven of Christianity never thoroughly penetrated the mass. A transformation of national life by the spirit of Christianity was never attained. Now it is a law of Christian life that if the leaven of the gospel cannot penetrate the national life, it will draw back. The more public life proves itself impenetrable with respect to the Christian spirit, the greater is the tendency to separation. And this was then also the case. Those who were in earnest about their Christian life, began to retire from association with the rest, whether entirely, by going into the desert or the monastery, or partially, by at least leading a more or less isolated life within the Church. Men despaired of pervading the whole mass with the leaven of the gospel, and were contented, that there should be individual saints and perfect Christians.⁸⁵

There is no right time to stop preaching the gospel. Even if things look difficult, even if people are only looking for a handout or don’t want to hear the Word—these are not excuses. The Word works. So the church ought to keep it! Even in the face of adversity, God’s people have for the last several thousand years found opportunity to preach the gospel—at the same time as being able to offer effective help for the needy. These efforts have taken all different forms, but one thing has not changed: the accompanying message that Jesus Christ came to take away sins forever. One day, pain and illness and disease will be no more. Until then, it is the church’s goal to help out those in need. Man does not live on bread alone, but hey, he’s gotta eat something.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Matthew 4:4 NIV.

⁸⁵ Garhari Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 340.

⁸⁶ Luke 6:20-21 NIV.

So, Now What?

How should the church answer that man or woman on the phone who asks if the church can help her out? The car is broken down and they could really use some help, so if you could... By now it's clear that there is no one right answer for that sort of scenario. There are some definite wrong answers. An unexplained no isn't great, for instance. And really, neither is, "I'm sorry, we don't have any programs to provide financial assistance." Maybe the person on the other end of the phone won't speak up, but I will. Why not? Why doesn't your church have any programs to help the needy? You don't have ANY?! No food bank, no Thanksgiving can drive, no coats for the kids around Christmas time? What about for members? You are not even prepared to help out your own people?

Scripture is pretty clear concerning the duty of Christians when it comes to helping out the needy. Jesus found occasion to feed 5,000. Surely a church could find opportunity to feed a couple. This is not all to say that a church must have a set dollar amount in the budget, or that a church without a certain number of programs is doing wrong. But a church that understands the love that Christ has shown to it will desire to express that love to others, and not only through the preaching of the gospel. But to say "We have no programs" and not to explain the reasoning or ever to revisit that decision is irresponsible.

When it comes to enacting a program, most churches might gravitate toward something simple like handing out small grocery store gift cards or having a solicitor pull weeds in the flower bed for twenty bucks, and there's nothing wrong with that. But if the church has resources and willing souls and the budget to do so, and especially if the church wants a more effective spiritual outreach to these people, it ought to find some people dedicated to that work. Forming a relationship with that person on the other end of the phone is the best way to reach out to them. Maybe it's just one or two people, but it should be a group of people who also have a strong grasp of God's Word—the church is not just in the business of handouts. The church exists to preach the gospel.

Even the pagan Greeks were charitable! "The ancient Greeks practices philanthropy as benevolence and humanitarianism as a natural bond of love for the common good...the term *philanthropia* was introduced as a theocentric concept by Aeschylus. The Divinity, or God, is

philanthropic toward humanity; humanity, in turn, should imitate the attributes of the Divinity.”⁸⁷ Without the gospel, the church becomes just another religion, just another “worthy cause.” Jesus wasn’t just a good guy who said some nice things. He is the Son of God who died to take away people’s sins.

The church does not want to fall into the trap of wasting its money on unworthy causes. What’s more, it’s entirely possible that handing out cash will actually be detrimental to those who take advantage of the “system.” Martin Luther himself even warned against frauds who claimed to be poor. And even while Luther warns against their influence, he still encourages one to do good to those who are actually in need.

Therefore every town and village should know and be acquainted with its own poor, listing them in a register so that they can help them. But foreign beggars ought not be tolerated without a letter or seal, for there is far too much roguery among them, as mentioned by this booklet. And if a town were aware of its poor, then such roguery would soon be discovered and forbidden. I myself in recent years have been fooled by these vagabonds and blabbermouths more than I wish to confess. Therefore, he who will be warned, be warned and do good to his neighbor according to Christian love, manner, and command. May God help us. Amen.⁸⁸

If a church truly has nothing to spare, then the pastor should at the very least attempt in some way to preach Christ. After all, that is his job, and he doesn’t just work on Sundays.

How will you answer that phone when it rings? “Sure, why don’t you stop by?” “Sorry to hear that. Do you mind if I pray with you over the phone?” “Let me make an appointment for you with our Relief Director?” “I’m sorry to hear that. You know, one time in Jesus’ ministry...” Any of these answers are fine, even good. But please, with the love of God in mind, please don’t just say no.

⁸⁷ Susan R. Holman, *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 191.

⁸⁸ Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*, 183.

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