

## 1. PARTNERS IN GENEROSITY

In study 4, you might remember, we discussed the important biblical principle of faithfulness. We saw that God wants us to be faithful in paying what we owe in whatever area of life we owe it. This is the way the New Testament talks about giving to our local church. It is not optional or a matter of Christian freedom; we have a responsibility, as a matter of fairness, to support those who work among us in the gospel. However, there are two other important strands of the Bible's teaching on money (and especially giving) that we must now turn to in order to complete that discussion. They are transforming and liberating principles that go beyond the basic running costs of our local churches and beyond the obligation to pay what we owe. In the end, these two biblical attitudes make the "how much" question seem rather cheap. They are the principles of partnership and generosity.

### **Partnership**

One of the interesting facets of the New Testament's teaching on church growth is that it is not the churches that grow; it is the gospel. Because the gospel is a growing concern, we are partners in a big and growing business—a business that is not about making money or building empires, but about sharing the good news of the saving love of Christ. We are not only partners with the believers in our own congregation in this great work; we belong to a worldwide enterprise. To help us think more about this, let's look briefly at a New Testament example of this partnership in action in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

### **INVESTIGATE**

1. Read the following verses from Philippians and then describe the "partnership in the gospel" that Paul and the Philippians shared.

Philippians 1:3-7

Philippians 2:19-30

Philippians 4:10-20

- a. What things did they share?
- b. What sort of words (your own words) would you use to describe their relationship with each other?
- c. Is Philippians 4:10-20 talking about providing wages for the local pastor or about something else?
- d. Paul rejoiced to receive the Philippians' gift, but what was God's reaction?

This "partnership" principle can be an important corrective to our thinking about church and giving. Even if we are being faithful in meeting our responsibilities to our local church, it is easy for this to become a stale duty, a mere obligation, a requirement we fulfil. But if we pause to remember the partnership principle, it liberates us from this thinking. It lifts our eyes from what we owe (which is certainly important) to the profound fellowship that we share: the partnership in the gospel that encompasses not only our own local fellowship, but the whole great enterprise.

The partnership principle lifts our eyes beyond the immediate basic needs of our own congregation to other gospel opportunities that are on our doorstep, and to other gospel ministries further afield. Just as the Philippians expressed their partnership with Paul by supporting him financially, so we should look around us to see how we can put our money to use to support the dynamic growing movement of the gospel. It might be in expanding the work of our own congregation and the missionaries it supports, or supporting an overseas missionary; the possibilities are endless.

Let us now turn to our second important principle.

### **Generosity**

The "partnership in the gospel" (Phil 1:5) that Paul enjoyed with the Philippians was not limited to his "own" churches—that is, to churches he had founded. He had a strong sense of solidarity with his Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world. When the Christians in Judea were suffering due to a severe famine, Paul was instrumental in collecting money from throughout the Mediterranean to support them.

As he did so, we can learn some valuable lessons about giving and receiving.

### **INVESTIGATE**

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.

1. What practical principles should govern the Corinthians' giving?
2. What precautions does Paul take in the collection and administration of the money? Why do you think this is important? (Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:16-21, which concerns the same collection.)

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-15. Here Paul is again talking to the Corinthians about the collection that is to be taken to Jerusalem to help God's people there. 3. What motivations are there for giving?

4. How is our attitude to giving related to our understanding of the gospel?

5. How is the amount to be determined?

Éto your local congregation?

6. What is God's attitude toward giving?

Éfurther afield?

7. How does God bless those who give, and why?

É Think of some Christians with whom you are particularly in partnership. Write down some names and/or organizations and how you are expressing your partnership with them. Are you being generous?

### **Growing rich through generosity**

These marvellous verses in 2 Corinthians 8-9 are all the more marvellous because of their paradoxes: they speak of begging for the privilege of giving money away (which is not the kind of begging you normally see); they speak of one who became poor to make others rich through his poverty; and they speak of God repaying the generous giver with more riches so that he or she can give even more away. This last paradox is perhaps the most profound of all that the key to true riches is not to hoard wealth, or to spend it on our pleasures, but to give it away. God blesses the generous, cheerful giver by providing more resources and opportunities for giving. In becoming like Christ, who gave away the riches of heaven so that we might ultimately share in them, we receive far more than we ever give away.

É If someone complained that they felt lacking in generosity, what remedy would you suggest?

This paradox is also reflected in Proverbs. (It was one of the themes we didn't look at in study 3.) To quote some examples:

É It is not always easy to be a cheerful giver. Some find it even harder to be a cheerful receiver. Why is it sometimes difficult to accept gifts from others? What attitudes are behind this?

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched; and one who waters will himself be watered. The people curse him who holds back grain, but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it. (Prov 11:24-26)

É What opportunities can you see around you for being generous?

In 2 Corinthians, we see a generosity that is motivated and shaped by the sacrificial love of Christ. We see a spirit of partnership in the gospel that counts giving as joy and a privilege to be seized wherever possible. This is enough to transform our attitudes to money generally and giving in particular. If we understand the gospel of God's grace to us in Christ, it changes the whole way we look at money. Like everything else in life, money becomes an opportunity to imitate Christ to give that others might become rich.

É 2 Corinthians 9:7 urges each of us to decide in our hearts about our giving, not reluctantly or under compulsion. Have you done this? If not, consider the different areas in which you might give, make a decision (cheerfully!) and write it down.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

### **GIVE THANKS AND PRAY**

É How would you assess your own pattern of giving:

É Thank God for Jesus who although he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).

É Ask God to help you follow Jesus' example of cheerful and generous giving.

É Ask God to give you opportunities to partner other people in the gospel.