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# A Reconsideration of Self-Support in Light of Paul's "Collection for the Saints" (1 Cor. 16:1)

by Gift Mtukwa

## Abstract

*Scholars have rightly recognized the importance of Paul's collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, and the fact that it is something to which he dedicated much of his time and energy. Paul's collections amongst the churches he planted partially reveal the economic relationships that existed among them. There is no doubt that "the collection for the saints" formed part of the glue that united various Christian congregations. This paper seeks to reconsider the call for the Church (particularly the African Church) to be self-supporting in light of "the collection for the saints". Since Paul did not write a treatise on money, we will derive his theology from his instructions to his fledgling churches to assist the poverty-stricken believers of Jerusalem (especially Rom. 15:25-32, 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9). The Roman Empire's economic systems will be described to help illuminate the subversive nature of Paul's practice in light of the region's dominant culture. It is anticipated that the Pauline approach can liberate the Church of Jesus Christ to use God's resources wherever they are and wherever they are needed for God's work. The study proposes that if Christian giving is properly done, it has the capacity to "equalize" our unequal world as resources will move from where they are to where they are most needed. Paul's approach can free the African church to be as missional as the Pauline newly founded church communities were.*

## Introduction

We will first look at calls for the church to become self-supporting and then discuss the difference between ancient and modern economies as a foundation for understanding the environment in which Pauline churches functioned. The paper will then discuss the economic relationships that existed amongst Pauline congregations in the Roman world. Then we will reappraise the principle of self-supporting churches and conclude with a call for mutualism as opposed to isolated self-reliance. The implications of Pauline collections will also be considered for the global church.

## Calls for Self-Support

As early as the beginning of Christian missions in Africa calls were made for the church in mission areas to move in the direction of independence. This perception of independence targeted three areas now commonly known as "the three-self principle of the Church". Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society made the first call for the church to be self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing in 1865. His vision was, "to establish in each

district and especially where there are separate languages, a self-supporting, self-governing, self-extending native Church".<sup>1</sup>

It was hoped that among the three selfs, self-supporting would be the first priority since, if that was achieved, the others would follow. According to Andrew Porter, "Local 'native' churches should strive to become self-financing; this would justify and make possible their self-government; once in control of their own affairs, the implementation of their own mission would enable them to be self-extending or self-propagating."<sup>2</sup> As important as self-governing and self-propagating are, this paper's primary concern is on self-supporting since it deals with material resources and finances.

### First Century Society and Economics

The issue of money, poverty and self-support in the Church cannot be discussed without delving into issues of economics in general and what it means to be poor. Support is usually needed where people are not able to support themselves. People living in abject poverty cannot meet their own needs and their neighbours' needs, never mind supporting the local mission.

Studies show the difference between ancient and modern economic systems.<sup>3</sup> Meggitt defines economics, especially from an ancient perspective, as "*that which has to do with the satisfaction of material wants*."<sup>4</sup> Here he agrees with Murray in accepting the "otherness" of economic life in the ancient world. Human interactions were quite important in making economic decisions.<sup>5</sup>

The word "economics", which comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, combines two words - *oikos* (household) and *nemein* (to regulate), that which has to do with the regulation of the household. In Meggitt's understanding, "Such an idea is in distinct contrast to the contemporary, asocial, concept of the market, in which, theoretically, economic decisions are determined solely by the economic criterion of the price mechanism."<sup>6</sup> In the first century many people were barely able to meet the "satisfaction of material wants", primarily because wealth was in the hands of the elites. According to Warren Carter:

Some 2 to 3 percent of the population possessed most of the empire's wealth. The overwhelming percentage of the empire's inhabitants lacked it and struggled constantly to sustain a subsistence-level existence. The struggle

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<sup>1</sup> A. N. Porter, *Religion Versus Empire: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 167.

<sup>2</sup> Porter, *Religion Versus Empire*, 168.

<sup>3</sup> R. Burling, "Maximization Theories and the Study of Economic Anthropology," in *Economic Anthropology: Readings in Theory and Analysis*, eds. E. E. LeClair and H. K. Schneider, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968, 168-187, esp. 168-179.

<sup>4</sup> Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 4.

was cyclic. They knew times when there was enough (or even a little surplus) and frequent times when there was too little.<sup>7</sup>

Simply put, the means of production was owned by the elites, and those who depended on them for their material wants were the non-elites. Carter goes on to observe:

Elites controlled the production, distribution (trade), and consumption of its products. That is, the economy was embedded in and reflected the hierarchical and oligarchical socio-political structures of the empire ... . The ruling few gained considerable wealth, enjoyed lavish lifestyles, and consumed much of the production. The majority's hard manual work sustained the excessive lifestyles of the few. That is, economic structures were exploitative and unjust.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that 97% of the population were non-elites who depended on the 3% for their survival meant that the Roman Empire had many poor people. Many of these had been reduced to poverty by the economic system that favoured only the elite. Meggitt notes the difference in contemporary definition of poverty and ancient definitions. In the modern world poverty has to do with "relative deprivation", and in the ancient world it had to do with "absolute deprivation". He goes to note that, "It is present where the basic essentials necessary for supporting human life are not taken for granted but are continuous sources of anxiety."<sup>9</sup> The poor are defined by Garnsey as, "those living at or near subsistence level, whose prime concern it is to obtain the minimum food, shelter, and clothing necessary to sustain life, whose lives are dominated by the struggle for physical survival".<sup>10</sup>

The involvement of "the powers that be" in determining the distribution of material resources was enormous. Following Max Weber who has termed this "political capitalism", Meggitt asserts that, "In the absence of market mechanisms, wealth could not be accrued by autonomous entrepreneurial activity: *profit-making was in the hands of the élite, the aristocracy* (the Senators, Equestrians and Decurions) and the pseudo-aristocracy, those arriviste groups such as the *Augustales*."<sup>11</sup> The result was that without political power, the poor could expect only abject poverty.<sup>12</sup>

In the first century Roman Empire wealth was transferred from the non-elite to the elite mainly through, "Taxes, tributes, and rents, usually paid in goods...".<sup>13</sup> Michael Smith identifies different types of exchanges, mainly

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<sup>7</sup> Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 14.

reciprocal exchange, market exchange, unequal exchange (which included rent) and other exchanges that are based on coercion, as ways in which wealth transfer took place.<sup>14</sup> All these mechanisms ensured that wealth remained in the hands of the few while the majority stayed poor. It is in this context that Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to, “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed ...” (ESV Romans 13:6-7). Paul agrees with Jesus in giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

We can conclude that there is a considerable difference between the economic systems of the ancient world and those of the modern world. This background gives us an appreciation of the environment in which the apostle Paul operated. Even though there was a small number of Christians who had means, the majority of scholars are in agreement that most Christians were among the non-elite. Given that most Christians were in the lower strata of society, the question is, *how did they deal with their plight?*

### **Paul’s “Collection for the Saints” – Sharing of Resources**

Scholars have wrestled with the question of the social status of Pauline churches. Were they mostly poor? Meggitt argues convincingly that, “*Paul and the Pauline churches shared in this general experience of deprivation and subsistence. Neither the apostle nor any members of the congregations he addresses in his epistles escaped from the harsh existence that typified life in the Roman Empire for the non-elite.*”<sup>15</sup> Even though Meggitt may indulge in a little hyperbole in describing the economic status of Pauline Christians, he does capture the fact that most were poor.<sup>16</sup> If Pauline Christians shared in the general situation of people in the Roman Empire, then how did they cope? What kind of economic relationships did they develop and for what purpose?

Several options have been suggested: self-sufficiency, almsgiving, hospitality and mutualism.<sup>17</sup> The term “self-sufficiency” is translated from the Greek word *αὐτάρκεια*, which appears only thrice in the Pauline corpus: 1 Timothy 6:6, 2 Corinthians 9:8 and Philippians 4:11.<sup>18</sup> Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:6, “But godliness with contentment is great gain,” (*Ἔστιν δὲ πορισμὸς μέγας ἢ εὐσέβεια μετὰ αὐταρκείας*). Here *αὐταρκείας* (contentment) is linked with *εὐσέβεια* (godliness). Certainly the contentment (*αὐταρκείας*) of the Christian is not like that of a Stoic who relies on himself instead of on God. F. Danker, commenting on its appearance in 2 Corinthians 9:8 (“And God is able to make

<sup>14</sup> Michael E. Smith, “The Archaeology of Ancient State Economies” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, No. 1, (October 2004): 73-102.

<sup>15</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> While there were a few elites among the believers in Paul’s churches, most of the people giving towards Paul’s collection for the saints were non-elites.

<sup>17</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 155.

<sup>18</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 156.

all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work”), asserts that αὐτάρκεια, “refers, in this context to the *material* self-sufficiency of the Corinthians.”<sup>19</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 9:8 *self-sufficiency* focuses more on contentment than on self-reliance. Tasker, commenting on “self-sufficiency” in Philippians 4:11 in connection to 2 Corinthians 9:8, says, “Here the apostle states that the believer by divine grace is rendered self-sufficient and competent to meet the demands made on his generosity, so that he *may abound in every good work*, i.e. be able to perform it.”<sup>20</sup> Furnish asserts, “Paul does not mean having enough resources to be independent of other people. Paul means having enough resources to be able to help other people, to be able to affirm one’s community with others by contributing to those in need.”<sup>21</sup>

It is important to consider the context in which αὐτάρκεια appears in 2 Corinthians - giving to the saints in Jerusalem. According to Gerhard Kittel, “Enough means not only a sufficiency for oneself but what can also be given to one’s brothers. The Christian αὐτὸς [self] cannot be considered in isolation. His αὐτ-άρκεια [self-sufficiency] arises only when the ἄλλος [other] has a share in it.”<sup>22</sup> Meggitt notes that given the few occasions in which αὐτάρκεια appears in the Pauline corpus, it is not a major theme in Pauline Christian economic behaviour.<sup>23</sup> Almsgiving and hospitality were recommended for the Pauline Christians, but were still not by any means the primary economic relationship among them. We could say these forms of economic sharing might be found on the spectrum between αὐτάρκεια and mutualism.<sup>24</sup>

### Paul and Mutual Interdependence

Following Meggitt, mutualism is the most important relationship that is seen among Pauline churches. Meggitt defines mutualism as, “the implicit or explicit belief that *individual and collective well-being is attainable above all by mutual interdependence*.”<sup>25</sup> Collective wellbeing is what separates modern mutualism from the kind practiced and advocated by the apostle Paul. Meggitt summarises the essence of the Pauline “collection for the saints”,

Paul emphasises that *all the* members of the churches were contributors as, indeed, were *all the* communities (we hear of no exceptions) ... It was not

<sup>19</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *II Corinthians*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 140.

<sup>20</sup> R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 127.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible Commentary, Vol. 32A, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 447.

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard Kittel, “αὐτάρκεια, αὐτάρκης” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (eds. Gerhard Kittel, G.W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 467.

<sup>23</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 157.



intended to be the work of a few wealthy members or congregations. And it was premised on the assumption of *mutual interdependence*. It was not a one-off act of charity. *The material assistance given was understood as something that would, in time, be returned, when the situation was reversed.*<sup>26</sup>

This act of mutualism in Paul is actually a redistribution of resources. All the resources belong to God and those who have them do so because of his grace. Carter notes the contrasts between Paul's redistribution of wealth and that of the Roman Empire, when he observes:

Four contrasts with Rome's taxing practices are immediately evident in Paul's collection: (1) the flow of resources from Macedonia and Achaia to Judea counters the flow of resources from the provinces to Rome; (2) the collection is a willing contribution rather than coerced taxation; (3) it is not given by non-elites to support extravagant lifestyles; and (4) the intent is to relieve suffering rather than cause it.<sup>27</sup>

Richard Horsley describes Rome's economic system as one that moved resources "vertically" from the "have-nots" to the "haves" who were higher up "the ladder" thus exacerbating the poverty of the poorest. Paul's approach is diametrically opposed to that of Rome in that he "organized a horizontal movement of resources from one subject people to another."<sup>28</sup> The concern here again is wellbeing. The people of God cannot be comfortable when they know that their brothers and sisters are suffering.

Meggitt sees mutualism as a survival strategy, but in Paul mutualism is more than this. It is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. If in the process people are able to cope or survive, well and good, but the ultimate concern is to do the Christian thing by sharing resources knowing that, "Your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, *that there may be fairness*" (2 Cor. 8:14 ESV, emphasis mine). As to whether there would be a situation in which the tables were turned, Ralph Martin cites Harris who says, "It was not inconceivable for the Jerusalem Christians some-day to become the donors of financial aid and the Corinthian Christians the recipients."<sup>29</sup> This possibility exonerates Paul of the potential accusation of creating dependency.

Taking the context of patron-client relationships at Corinth, Lim Kar Yong writes, "By stressing the notion of reciprocity, Paul underscores the belief that no one should out give another in order to attain a higher status over the

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<sup>26</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 159.

<sup>27</sup> Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), 155.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 40, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1986), 266.

other, but should give out of a cheerful and willing heart.”<sup>30</sup> In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 Paul dispels any thought among the patrons<sup>31</sup> at Corinth that this is an opportunity for them to make people indebted to them as he calls on, “all to participate in accordance with their ability.”<sup>32</sup> The elite at Corinth might be tempted to increase their honour rating, so Paul dispels any misconceptions that could have developed. For Paul, giving is a matter of fairness:

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of *fairness* your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be *fairness*. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” (2 Cor. 8:13-15)

To support this idea, Paul draws on Israel’s experience with God’s manna distribution in the wilderness (2 Cor. 8:15, ESV). The word translated “fairness” is ἰσότης, which “means ‘equality, fair dealing’ and is linked with justice and righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) in Philo.”<sup>33</sup> It is possible that Paul is thinking about the inequality of his day as he writes to the Corinthians. He clearly understands that at the moment there is no fairness, however through their giving, a measure of ἰσότης (fairness) can be achieved.

But Israel’s experience of fairness or equality in the wilderness and the experience of equality in the NT church are very different. Harris observes:

“The equality that the people of God of old experienced in the wilderness was the result of a divine miracle and was enforced and inescapable. The equality to be experienced by the new people of God, on the other hand, would be the result of human initiative and would be voluntary and so not automatic.”<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that God’s economy is not run like human economies that create “haves” and “have-nots”. The people of God are to participate with God in actions that reverse the effects of economic systems that rob the “have-nots”.

Some scholars like Martin do not think that Paul has material blessings in view in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, but a number of prominent scholars, including Plummer, Hering, Windisch and Lietzmann, support the idea that Paul has in

<sup>30</sup> Lim Kar Yong, “Generosity from a Pauline Perspective: Insights from Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37, No. 1, (January 2013), 20-33.

<sup>31</sup> Patron-client relations are, “social relationships between individuals based on a strong element of inequality and difference in power. The basic structure of the relationship is an exchange of different and very unequal resources. A patron has social, economic, political resources that are needed by a client. In return, a client can give expressions of loyalty and honor that are useful for the patron.” Halvor Moxnes, “Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 242.

<sup>32</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: First Corinthians*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 285.

<sup>33</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, 266.

<sup>34</sup> Found in Yong, “Generosity from a Pauline Perspective”, 29.

mind that one day the Gentile churches may receive material blessings from the mother church.<sup>35</sup> Romans 15:27 is usually cited in support of an exchange of spiritual for material blessings.<sup>36</sup> In that case in Romans, Paul is saying that the spiritual blessings have already been received from the Jerusalem church, so this would square the exchange. But in Corinthians Paul makes it clear that the tables will be turned, and the mother church may be a blessing in the future, not the past. Therefore, material blessings are in view here.

This is also an unhealthy dualism where blessings are divided into spiritual and physical blessings. It is unlikely that one who lacks grace and is materially rich will be able to give to anyone in need, and the opposite is true - the one who is spiritually rich may not be able to do much for the poor. The Hebrew concept of *shalom* is relevant here. To have *shalom* is to be blessed, that is, to have well-being (not just spiritual but physical as well), to be at peace with oneself, others and God. In the words of James Dunn, "for Paul it was the character of grace that it should come to expression in generous action. Grace...had only been truly experienced when it produced gracious people."<sup>37</sup>

The issues of economy and the poor are pertinent to our understanding of the Pauline churches and Pauline Christians. Most of them, if not all, were among the non-elites, meaning they would have been considered poor in the Roman world. It is assumed in this paper that self-support is not just an issue of self-reliance in funding ministry, but also self-reliance in meeting everyday needs. In Paul's context the two were inseparable, meeting the needs of the poor was as much a part of ministry as starting new churches.

Apart from mutualism being a way of living the Christian life, Paul also saw it as way to unify the Christian communities. In the words of Longenecker, It was a great act of kindness, comparable to that undertaken by the Antioch church much earlier. But more than this, Paul seems to have viewed it as a symbol of unity which would help his gentile converts realize their debt to the mother church at Jerusalem and give Jewish Christians an appreciation of the vitality of the faith existent in the Gentile churches."<sup>38</sup>

This is quite important given the issues between Jew and Gentile in the Pauline churches. Following the promise of God to Abraham to be a blessing to the nations, the Jewish people have already blessed the Gentiles by showing them the Messiah, so now the Gentiles are a blessing to the Jews. The metaphor of the church as a body is quite appropriate, one part of the body cannot be ailing and the other parts not be concerned.

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<sup>35</sup> As described in Martin, *2 Corinthians* in Word Biblical Commentary, 266.

<sup>36</sup> "For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings." (ESV, Romans 15:27)

<sup>37</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 707.

<sup>38</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 74.

In Paul Christian giving is critical because it is grounded in the Christian faith itself. Yong, citing 2 Corinthians 8:9, says Paul appeals to the example of Jesus' incarnation in calling the Corinthians to remember the poor.

In retelling the story of Jesus, Paul is attempting to inculcate in the Corinthians the kind of behaviour that he wishes them to emulate. Jesus himself is the model for generous giving. The 'self-lowering other-regard' paradigm reflected in 2 Corinthians 8:9, as suggested by Horrell, is paradigmatically demonstrated in the central story of Jesus himself, whose self-lowering takes the movement from one extreme to another: from being rich to being poor.<sup>39</sup>

The incarnated Christ is an example for the rich and well-to-do to follow, to empty themselves for the sake of the poor. In Gorman's words, God says to his people, "'You shall be cruciform for I am cruciform,' says the Lord." He explains that, "Cruciform holiness is inherently other-centred and communal".<sup>40</sup> To take another track is failing to be Christian. 1 Corinthians 9:13 makes it clear that for the Corinthians, "the collection for the saints" is nothing less than "the obedience of your confession in the gospel of Christ" (τῆ ὑποταγῆ τῆς ὁμολογίας ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ). For Dunn this is another way of saying, "the obedience of faith" (ὑπακοὴν πίστεως Rom. 1:5).<sup>41</sup>

Yong also asserts that Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper reveals his understanding of the economic relationships that ought to characterise the people of God. Paul's instructions are given at Corinth where, "close associates of the patrons would receive choice wine and food, and the most honoured seats in the dining area, whereas the patron's clients and those who are poor will receive lesser treatment and will most likely dine separately in the courtyard of the house."<sup>42</sup> Paul's counsel is that the rich should eat at home and also wait for the poor at the Lord's Table. This way the Lord's Table becomes a place of distribution of resources. "Unless the community embodies a concern for others, particularly the poor and less fortunate, rooted in the model of Jesus himself, it cannot proclaim the Lord's death."<sup>43</sup>

The above discussion has demonstrated that Paul was concerned about the inequality and suffering of people in his world. As a result he called on those churches who could help to offer their aid. This giving was not meant to burden the givers, for when circumstances change, the receivers could in turn be a blessing as well. In short, the apostle Paul was calling the churches to redistribute resources differently than the elites of the Roman Empire. For Paul even the Lord's Supper was an opportunity for redistribution of resources. Now

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<sup>39</sup> Yong, "Generosity from a Pauline Perspective", 20-33.

<sup>40</sup> Michael J. Gorman, "'You Shall be Cruciform for I Am Cruciform': Paul's Trinitarian Reconstruction of Holiness" in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament* (Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson, eds., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 163 and 164.

<sup>41</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 708.

<sup>42</sup> Yong, "Generosity from a Pauline Perspective", 31.

<sup>43</sup> Yong, "Generosity from a Pauline Perspective", 32.

we turn to reconsider self-support in light of Paul's "collection for the saints". We start by affirming the principle of self-support.

### Affirmation of Self-Support

This discussion reveals Paul's approach to material resources, namely that they are to flow to the "have-nots". Self-support in the understanding of Henry Venn meant that local missions were to be financed by local resources. According to Zablon Nthamburi, Venn "was concerned about missionary paternalism and racism that seemed to colour their thinking on the building of a strong church. He wanted to save the young church from 'the over-powering weight of the mission machine'."<sup>44</sup> Nthamburi laments the paternalism in the mission church when he says, "There has also been a certain degree of paternalism with regard to the distribution of God's resources to the world-wide church. This has created the concept of 'receivers' and 'givers', with the latter taking all the decisions and exercising a certain amount of control."<sup>45</sup>

The All Africa Conference of Churches that met at Mombasa in 1991 linked the mission of the church to self-reliance:

The dependence of our communities has implications for the maturity of the people of God, especially in areas of theological discernment, finance, and personnel. Such continuing dependence distorts both the meaning and the nature of partner relationships which link us to the churches on other Continents...It is sinful to surrender our power, our thoughts and even our action initiatives to overseas partner churches. If we are to participate fully in the universality of the Church, we must mobilize our own resources and become conscious of who we are as Church in Africa.<sup>46</sup>

It is quite true that if resources are not locally generated, all the local church can think about is its own survival and not the *missio Dei*. Many times the donors have dictated what can and cannot be done with their resources. There has not been much of a difference between donor agencies like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, and mission-founded churches that are funded by foreign missionary agencies.

Paul's churches are an example for the African church since it was these young churches that were taking care of the mother church. Resources were not coming from the mother church to the newly founded churches. Paul's congregations were self-supporting in the sense that they were able to take care of their own needs and also support the needy. Certainly local missions need to be supported by local resources if those resources are available. Even to the African church Paul could say, "Be self-sufficient" (αὐτάρκεια) in a way that is predicated on the grace of God.

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<sup>44</sup> Zablon Nthamburi, *The Pilgrimage of the African Church: Towards the Twenty-First Century*, (Nairobi: Uzima Publishing House, 2000), 118.

<sup>45</sup> Nthamburi, *The Pilgrimage of the African Church*, 118.

<sup>46</sup> Nthamburi, *The Pilgrimage of the African Church*, 128.

## **Reconsideration of Self-Support in Light of Paul's Collections**

Certainly the African church needs to build strong and healthy congregations that are able to take care of their own needs, leadership, financial resources and mission. However receiving support is not necessarily a bad idea. If Paul's fledgling churches were the ones in need, Paul would not have prevented the mother church from helping them. The issue is not whether the church should receive support, but what ought to be the relationship between the giver and receiver? If the giver is going to behave like a patron and the receiver in turn acts like a client, certainly this is not Christian and the apostle Paul would be the first to oppose such giving.

If self-support is taken to mean isolated self-sufficiency the unfortunate result is that we rob the church of Jesus Christ of the opportunity to cooperate in the mission of the gospel. If the American church or European church exists on its own without any interaction with the African church or the Asian church, it means the unity that ought to characterize the universal church does not exist. Dunn, reflecting on Paul's "collection for the saints", says, "sharing and service are not limited to the local church or even to the churches of the region, but reach across the ocean to another church, one regarding which feelings were somewhat mixed. The interdependence of the body of Christ is not limited to relationships within individual congregations."<sup>47</sup>

As noble as self-reliance is, it is important to take into consideration the inconsistencies that must arise as noted by Edward Stewart who observed: Americans ... quite often extol the virtues of self-reliance; they think of themselves as self-reliant and are so perceived by others. At the same time they accept social security, borrow money, and in innumerable ways show willingness to depend on others to various extents ... . Cultural norms such as self-reliance have sometimes been called ideal values, those which a person strives for but does not expect to achieve.<sup>48</sup>

Even Nthamburi who advocates self-reliance or self-support notes that, Speaking of self-reliance is not the same as speaking of becoming independent. For no church can ever become independent. We must always depend on each other as we covet each other's fellowship. We are talking more of inter-dependence of equal partners who are striving to do God's will as we understand it to be. We, therefore, must strive to become self-reliant, not autonomous, in order to be able to make our contribution to the universal Church. For every Church everywhere must find ways in which it could make a fitting contribution to the universal Church.<sup>49</sup>

Unfortunately self-reliance is usually understood as becoming autonomous. In basic terms it is taken to mean becoming my own person,

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<sup>47</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 709.

<sup>48</sup> David E. Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Nthamburi, *The Pilgrimage of the African Church*, 129.

sufficient in myself and therefore needing nobody. This is self-reliance without need for others and also without need for God. In this sense of self-reliance, a person has no gift (*charisma*) for helping others that comes from God.

On the other hand, as Christians we have to think about the disparities in our world, a world in which some people live on less than a dollar a day and others on more than fifteen hundred dollars a day. Could Christian giving be an answer to the inequality in our world today? I fear that when Christians insist on self-reliance or self-support we are maintaining the status quo. The Christian church should not allow a situation in which resources are concentrated in one area of the world while other areas are languishing in poverty in the name of self-reliance. Christian-giving is an answer to the redistribution of resources or rather “equalizing the world” in the thought of the apostle Paul, or “bringing the world to right” in the words of N.T. Wright.<sup>50</sup>

However Christian giving should not create dependency. It should free people to become who God created them to be. In Paul’s understanding it should create a situation in which the tables can be turned to allow for the giver to become the recipient. Certainly a life of perpetual receiving is not a dignified life. Christian giving should also not become a burden for the giver, as Paul instructed the Corinthians, “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened...” (ESV 1 Corinthians 8:13).

On the other hand, giving should not leave the receiver indebted to the giver. If it does, then it ceases to be Christian giving. Christian organizations and churches ought not to operate like secular organizations that make those who take their resources indebted to them. David Maranz explains the requirements of the West when they give resources,

In the West the one who provides the assets makes the determination as to how they will be used...If at any time before the funds are spent, the recipient or fund manager wishes to use them for another purpose, he or she must go back to the provider for prior approval of the changes. If permission is not given, the funds must be used for the originally designated purpose or returned to the provider.<sup>51</sup>

Such close control of the donated funds is diametrically opposed to the general thinking of most Africans, including African Christians receiving “donations” from Western mission agencies, churches or individuals. This kind of “strings-attached” giving strikes many Africans as paternalism, and a sign of distrust. Generally, the African ideal is that when a donor has given money, it no longer belongs to them. In other words they have given up any claims to controlling its use. But for a Western mission or church not to demand such controls is bad stewardship, and a charity in the West who is labelled “a bad steward” will have its sources of support dry up very quickly. Though not

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<sup>50</sup> N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 78.

<sup>51</sup> Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters*, 38.

usually recognized as such by both Western donors and African recipients, these opposing cultural ideals and practices are like the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. The resulting clashes create endless misunderstandings and damaged or destroyed relationships. It is almost impossible to over-estimate the importance of this fundamental cultural difference. Although a final solution is beyond the scope of this paper, I suggest that both givers and the recipients ought to be guided by God, in their giving as well as their utilizing of these resources. However this should not be taken as a licence by the recipients to avoid accountability in any form from those who provide financial or any other assistance. Both donors and recipients are ultimately accountable to God.

Let me ask my fellow Africans, “Could it be time for the African church to be a blessing to the mother churches?”<sup>52</sup> Whatever resources are in Africa must be harnessed for the global mission of the church. As the centre of Christianity keeps shifting to the global south, we in Africa must rethink how we train pastors and approach ministry. We must train ministers for the world and not just for the local churches. There is a world that is in need of the gospel. Self-support in Africa should free us not only to provide for our own requirements, but also to see where we can be a blessing. Only then could we see what Justo L. Gonzalez called, “missions from the ends of the Earth”.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

Paul’s “collection for the saints” came from mostly poor and mostly Gentile Christians living in the heart of the Roman Empire. The money collected was destined for a group of mostly Jewish non-elites at the Empire’s margins. In a world where most resources were funnelled to Rome, this was subversive. Paul was indeed redistributing resources from one part of the world to another part of the world. Could it be that when we insist on “self-sufficiency” we are maintaining the status quo, keeping resources where they are while keeping other parts of the world languishing in poverty? Paul’s collection for the saints can be a lesson for the twenty-first century church to redistribute resources in a world characterised by inequalities. Even as the African church becomes self-supporting, it needs to find ways to become a blessing to the mother churches in the Western world both culturally and spiritually. Paul did not solve all the problems of his society but he dared to try.

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<sup>52</sup> The mother church for Africa is mostly the European church and the North American church. Unfortunately most African pastors who find themselves in the West are able to attract to their congregations only their fellow Africans in the *Diaspora*, not indigenes.

<sup>53</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, Vol. 2, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985), 394.



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