

Editorial

The current financial crises of Europe, Paul's collection for Jerusalem and good stewardship

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For several years now the European media have been dominated by financial themes. First there was the crisis of the financial markets and in its wake the discussion of the validity of capitalism and neo-liberalism and of whether and how markets and banks might and should be regulated. Now – with many other financial issues – the crises in Greece and Spain – and who knows who is next, feature in the headlines. Some of the figures that appear on the evening news are beyond what most of us can even imagine. I am glad that my son does not ask me how many zeros the various sums actually have to them! It is increasingly becoming clear that some in Europe have lived far beyond their means and are close to crashing; many others have done the same and may get away with a black eye. The spending habits of governments of all kinds have been far from what sustainable and responsible stewardship would look like. And, mind you, all this happened and happens not in parts of the world on which we, as civilised and responsible post-colonial Europeans, look down and from where we expect such behaviour.

On my regular visits to South Africa, my colleagues have expressed their amazement at the developments in Europe and have asked pertinent questions. (It is time that we become more hesitant with the generous dispensation of good advice to others!) It is of little comfort in all this mess that some other parts of the world have not done much better with public spending and have amassed debts beyond anything that seems repayable. It is worrying that such living and spending beyond means (so far often associated with governments where small elites line their own pockets at the detriment of the rest of the population!) also appears in democratic societies. It remains to be seen what lasting effects these huge national debts and the measures needed to overcome them will

have on our European societies. Will democracy prove to be strong enough to deal with the causes and consequences of such deficits? Will governments be bold enough (and have enough integrity) to face the issues, and their people willing to follow them? Again, the recent developments in Greece come to mind.

Many have analysed the causes and course of the current crisis and have dared predictions. I am not competent to add another financial analysis and scenario. My concerns are different: my impression is that so far the churches of Europe and their theologians have added little to what others have said already. Is there a distinct Christian perspective on all this and what it might look like? What do the developments of the last few years mean for theology? Is it due to humility that we dare not raise our voice in view of the complexities at hand? I could live with that, or at least with some of that.

What has become of the prophetic voice of God's people? The prophets of the Old Testament addressed economic issues from God's perspective. The trenchant social criticism of Amos and Micah quickly comes to mind. Much has been written on this which need not be repeated here. It seems that some of the discussions of the past century, of the Gospel and social responsibility and the insights of liberation theology, deserve a new lease of life and may provide inspiration to address the issues at hand. Let me share two of many feasible and necessary reflections.

a. The mere combination of Greece and money strikes me as a New Testament scholar: during much of his ministry that is well documented in the Book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament, the apostle Paul was busy with his collection for the saints of the church in Jerusalem.¹ There was an agreement early on that Paul should remember the poor there (Gal 2:10: 'that we

remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do'; the agreement was probably made during the famine relief visit recorded in Acts 11:27–30). The next reference to the collection appears in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4: Paul instructs the Corinthians to be well prepared when he arrives so that the money can be sent on to Jerusalem. The most detailed reference to the collection appears in 2 Corinthians 8–9. We need not repeat or analyse the whole of Paul's argument. Particular noteworthy in the present situation is Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 8:13–15:

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written: 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little' [Exod 16:18].

For Paul, there was to be a *fair* balance (*isotēs*), solidarity between the well-to-do and then affluent churches of ancient Macedonia and Achaia and the poor in Jerusalem. And for Paul this was not to be a one-way street: he specifically states that at some point the then needy Corinthians may benefit from the abundance which others have so that there may be a fair balance between these Christians. As a scriptural warrant for this exchange and balance, Paul refers to Israel's experience during the desert wandering where God saw to it that all of his people had what they *needed*, regardless of what they had actually gathered (Exod 16:13–36). Apparently both, having too much and having too little, is a problem.

Is Paul's collection, with the Christians of ancient Greece as "sponsors" of poor Christians, a mere and curious reversal of today's situation? Obviously the chronologically next and last mention of the collection in Romans adds a salvation historical perspective to the collection that requires hermeneutical reflection: the Gentile Christians 'owe it to the saints at Jerusalem, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things' (Romans 15:27). Paul speaks of a wide solidarity among *churches* that were linked through a number of translocal connections (including Paul himself), not of states as we know them. Yet, these observations should not prevent reflection. Should we start with the Christians and churches of Europe? Are those who have done better in the

crises of the past (and have some abundance – at least in comparison to others!) ready to share with those worst affected? How affluent need some Christians be and how poor others before Paul's ideal of material balance 'kicks in'? How will we as Christians in Europe deal with what seem to be fair, critical assessments of the practices of other states and the causes of their current crises and with the prejudices or feelings of anger or superiority current in their own national contexts? Are we ready to share resources as academic institutions in Europe dedicated to training the next generation of Christian leaders of this continent? For Paul, abundance is not only to be enjoyed but to be shared. That it was far from easy to get the predominantly Gentile Christian congregations of Greece to share their resources with Jerusalem is also evident in Paul's references to the collection. He had to draw on all his apostolic authority and rhetorical skill to nudge the ancient Greek Christians into solidarity.

b. Another matter is good stewardship, which surfaces in the Bible time and again. The New Testament references usually speak of household managers in the literal sense (e.g. Luke 12:4; 16:1–8; Matt 24:45) or use the term metaphorically: believers are stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1), God's stewards (Tit 1:7) and stewards of God's varied grace (1 Pet 4:1; see also Eph 3:2). Something is entrusted to them for which they are responsible. Says T.M. Dorman: 'As a steward of God, the Christian is entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the gospel message and giving out that message to others faithfully and as directed by the Lord Jesus.'² God's people are called to be good stewards of the many gifts which God provides. Obviously we are called to stewardship over the Gospel and over spiritual gifts and blessings, but there is also stewardship regarding financial resources in personal and communal matters. How did we get the resources which we now have at our disposal and how do we employ them? What does responsible Christian stewardship look like in the present situation, personally and collectively? Is the question of what we can afford the only yardstick by which to take and measure our decisions?

But the call to stewardship also extends to other matters: how are we using our natural gifts, our time of life, our health, the natural resources of this planet, etc? And we need not look far (usually the nearest mirror does the job nicely!) to recognise that conversion and baptism do not automati-

cally turn us into good stewards of the manifold gifts of God. Due to its twofold use in the New Testament, the concept of stewardship serves to integrate both aspects ('managing' households, people, finances, the Gospel and natural and spiritual gifts). If understood more broadly, the notion of 'stewardship' could help us to develop a holistic *theology of responsible stewardship* (and live accordingly!) in a time when many in Europe, including some Christians, have lived and continue to live beyond our means, and that not only in financial matters.

When we as theologians reflect on the current crises, on how we are to get our money and how we are to use it responsibly (including the many other resources mentioned above), we can draw on a long and rich tradition of ethical reflection in the church. Some of that tradition merely needs to be re-discovered, re-stated and communicated in today's language. In other regards the current issues in Europe are an opportunity to re-think and to expand our ethical reflection in view of new challenges. In other fields of Christian theology and ethics new developments also provided the impetus to search for fresh answers and expand our reflection.

In the eighteenth century, Samuel Urlsperger (1685–1772), then pastor in my hometown of Augsburg, Germany, was involved in raising funds for Protestant refugees from Catholic Austria. In one of his sermons he shouted enthusiastically: '*Heraus, heraus, ihr Kreuzerlein, der Herr Jesus will mit euch reden!*' (Out, out, you little pennies, the Lord Jesus wants to talk to you!). Up to this day, the Lord Jesus himself wants to talk to our money and resources and use them for his purposes. Do we allow him to do so? May he talk to the Cents but not to the Euros, to the coins but not to the bank notes?

These reflections only serve to invite a discussion of the current European issues and problems from a *theological* perspective. The many Christians of Europe need to have a distinctly Christian perspective on these issues. Our socie-

ties at large could also do with all the good advice and orientation which they can get and even more so the people whose dealings with finances are to be determined by the Kingdom of God and not by Mammon. Who would be more called and equipped to do so than the *Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians* (www.FEET.org) and its journal, the *European Journal of Theology*? Let us put our resources in one basket and 'scratch' where people and our societies actually itch! Our efficient editor, Dr. Pieter Lalleman, would be more than happy to receive contributions on this subject (and obviously on other issues as well! p.lalleman@spurgeons.ac.uk). For now, enjoy the articles and reviews of the present issue of EJT. Please pass on to others what you found helpful, engage when you disagree and share your insights with us.

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Notes

- 1 See my survey in "Not the only Pebble on the Beach": The Significance and Function of Paul's References to Christians Other than the Addressees in 1 and 2 Corinthians', *Neotestamentica* 45 (2011) 331–357 and D.J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem and Its Chronological, Cultural and Cultic Contexts*. WUNT II.248 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008; see my review in *ETHL* 85 [2009] 517–521).
- 2 *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) IV, 618; also for a survey and the OT occurrences.

Erratum

The editor apologises to Svetlana Khobnya, author of the article 'God the Father in the Old Testament' in issue 20.2 (2011), for misspelling her surname.