This essay considers Paul’s first-century “fundraising missive” in 2 Corinthians 8–9, focusing on 2 Corinthians 8:8–15. In it, Paul poses three hermeneutical puzzles around grace, equity, and participation that together establish the theological framework of his appeal and reveal the inner dynamics of the economy of God’s kingdom. The Holy Spirit invites us into participation in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which liberates us to be vulnerable enough to enter into the collective engagement that is inseparable from the common good. Within that community, the superabundance of God’s grace enables us to “finish doing” what we have started (2 Cor. 8:11)—what has been started in us—by living fully into the transformative economy of God, who promises to make all things new.

Like many people I know, I have a mailbox and email inbox overflowing with messages soliciting charitable donations to worthy causes at home and abroad. Some feature tragic photos of children in desperate situations. Others remind me that even my small donation—equivalent to “the cost of a cup of coffee”—can make a huge difference in a situation of dire need. Still others promise me a financial harvest if I “sow a seed” by sending a “love-gift” of a specified amount to support their ministry.

Compare these kinds of mailings to Paul’s first-century fundraising missive, comprising two chapters (8–9) in his second extant letter

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to the Corinthians. Paul uses no depictions or narrative vignettes to personalize the plight of the Christians in Jerusalem. He makes no attempt to help me get a handle on the magnitude of the problem by reducing it to sound bite-sized slogans. Yet he has no qualms about making an appeal to emotion: his first rhetorical gesture is to describe the dramatic generosity of the Macedonians, as if to shame the Corinthians into stepping up to the plate (2 Cor. 8:1–7). Neither does he hesitate, at the end of his solicitation, to promise divine favor and prosperity for those who give (2 Cor. 9:6–14).

Between the two passages, however, lies a pericope (2 Cor. 8:8–15) bearing little resemblance to the fundraising missives of today. In it, Paul poses three hermeneutical puzzles which together establish the theological framework for his financial appeal.

The first puzzle concerns Paul's linking of the *charis* (grace, gift) of our Lord Jesus Christ to the *charis* that is the collection of funds for the relief of Christians in Jerusalem. Why does Paul make this link, then seemingly undermine it by asserting that he does not want to beggar the Corinthians for the sake of the Jerusalemites? In the second puzzle, Paul calls for *isotēs* (equality) between the present abundance of the Corinthians and the need of the Jerusalemites. Yet he illustrates his point with a quotation from the Exodus narrative of the distribution of manna—a passage that, while describing a state of universal sufficiency, nevertheless seems to maintain, rather than level, wealth disparities. Thirdly, Paul's use of the Exodus text poses an "apparent logical difficulty" in that "the Exodus story neither commands nor narrates any sharing of goods among the people: the equality is imposed through God's miraculous dispensation."¹

In this essay, I consider these three puzzles and what they reveal about the economy of God into which Paul invited his Corinthian sisters and brothers, and into which, through Paul, the Holy Spirit invites us.

*The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ*

How does the *charis* of Christ relate to the *charis* of giving? Paul does not make the precise nature of the relation explicit in this

passage. What he does is remind the Corinthians that they know the *charis* of Christ, who, though being rich, for their sakes became poor, so that “by his poverty you would become rich” (8:9). Then, on that basis, Paul urges the Corinthians to finish what they have begun by following through on their desire to help (8:10–11), giving out of what they have (8:11).

Paul seems to be exhorting the Corinthians to imitate Christ, just as, in his first extant letter to the Corinthians, he urges them to imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16)—to be imitators of Paul, as Paul is himself an imitator of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). The waters become muddied, however, when, only a few verses later (2 Cor. 8:13), Paul clarifies that he does not mean for the Corinthians effectively to become poor in order to make the Jerusalemites rich—or even to relieve the latter’s need. Yet, does this less-than-perfect imitation not undermine the connection between the Christ event and the behavior of the Corinthians? Are the Corinthians to imitate Christ, but only as far as is comfortable or convenient?

On the surface, Paul’s mitigation of imitation seems to imply that the juxtaposition of the act of Christ and the financial call to the Corinthians is in some way problematic. For imitators of Christ Jesus, the soteriological act of Christ appears to translate poorly into the financial realm. The Corinthians, Paul seems to say, must therefore compensate for this incompatibility of spheres, since full financial imitation of Christ would cause them undue harm.

Yet the link between Christ’s soteriological *charis* and the Corinthians’ financial *charis* becomes problematic only if we accept three assumptions. First, that Christ, by becoming poor, undertook a kenotic emptying in which he suffered poverty as a subtraction of riches. Second, that these riches, in the form of grace, function like a commodity good that can be transferred from Christ’s ownership to human beings. Christ would be losing his riches and becoming poor so that those riches could be given into our exclusive possession. In this scenario, the great soteriological exchange would remain the same basic system of winners and losers, haves and have-nots. All that would change are the names on either side of the balance sheet: Christ the winner would choose to become a loser, so that human beings the losers could be winners. The third, and most fundamental, assumption is that the system functions on a zero-sum basis, requiring winners and losers—an assumption that implies competitive relations between God and humankind, as well as among creatures.
If we suspend these assumptions, however, we open up fresh interpretive possibilities. In his study of this key passage, John Barclay asserts that

the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” does not consist in the fact that he was rich but ceased to be so (for a while), transferring his wealth to others, but that being rich, indeed because he was rich (in the life and self-giving love of God), he “became poor” (i.e., “loved me and gave himself for me,” Gal. 2:20), so that out of that self-giving (supremely on the cross) others might become “rich” (overflowing with grace, sufficient not just for themselves but for others, 2 Cor. 9:8, 11). It is this inexhaustible supply of divine “richness” (that gives without itself suffering depletion or loss) that is witnessed, embodied, and accessed in Christ.²

Barclay follows Kathryn Tanner, who modifies the traditional notion of *kenosis* by reading the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–8 through the lens of 2 Corinthians 8:9, thereby concluding that “it would not seem correct to say that the Word empties itself of its divinity in becoming a poor human being. . . . The Word instead becomes human by acquiring humanity—by adding something, so to speak, to its own store of possessions—and not by giving up its own divinity, giving it away.”³ If the soteriological act of Christ does not diminish Christ in any way, then the human act of giving, in imitation of Christ, need not diminish the Corinthian givers—certainly not to the point of beggaring them financially.

If the *charis* of Christ is not wealth being transferred from one owner to another, however, then what does Paul think it is? Barclay asserts: “It would be a mistake to read this as if ‘grace’ were a

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transferable property, as though Christ, by dispossessing himself of something, enabled it to be transferred into the possession of others.\textsuperscript{4} If one accepts that Christ did not have to lose his wealth in order to enable us to become rich, then that wealth cannot be the kind of thing that permits exclusive ownership, and thus it cannot be transferred in such a way that alienates the former owner when a new one gains possession. This sort of non-exclusive, yet genuine, ownership is precisely the kind of “non-competitive possession” that Tanner describes in her model of theological economy.\textsuperscript{5} It is non-competitive in the sense that one party’s ownership of the good does not preclude another party’s ownership of that same good. Christ has not lost his wealth; rather, by becoming so identified with us that he takes on our poverty, he has enabled us to participate in his wealth. This is the multivalent grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: both the self-giving act and the self that is given in that act.

In his more recent work on 2 Corinthians 8:9, Barclay provides an intriguing insight into the content of “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” and its connection to the grace of giving to which Paul calls the Corinthians. Based on his translation of \textit{ploúsios ōn} as causative (“because he was rich”) rather than, as is conventionally done, concessive (“although he was rich”),\textsuperscript{6} Barclay suggests that Paul’s reference here to the “wealth” of Christ points primarily to wealth as generosity, rather than wealth as the possession of goods, be they material or spiritual.\textsuperscript{7} This implies a more robustly paradoxical notion of Christ’s grace, since the “wealth” here is not Christ’s heavenly status, but rather his generosity, enabling a direct conceptual connection between Christ’s soteriological grace and the Corinthians’ financial giving: “On this reading one does not have to plot an ‘analogy’ between the effects of the Christ-event and the demands on the Corinthians: Christ has made them rich in precisely what is required of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Barclay, “Manna and the Circulation of Grace,” 420.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Tanner, \textit{Economy of Grace}, 76–82.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Barclay, “Because he was rich,” 339–342.
\end{itemize}
them here, rich in generosity and thus in generous contribution to the collection.”

Barclay acknowledges both his own reading and the standard interpretation as feasible, and I am inclined to leave room for multiple levels of meaning in Paul’s notion of Christ’s “wealth,” so that it may refer both to the wealth of Christ’s divine status—kenotically and salvifically joined to our humanity—and the riches of generosity which acquire poverty in the act of exercising wealth. As layered forms of “wealth,” we see the wealth of Christ’s generosity as an expression of the wealth of Christ’s divine self and his self-giving love. For, according to Barclay, “Paul is less interested here in what Christ gave up than in what he gave out, a momentum of generosity that is not tied solely to one form of giving (giving away) but could be expressed in a variety of forms (including sharing and mutual participation).” The key point, under either or both readings, is that “the chief effect of the Christ-event is the transformation of the Corinthians into grace-formed givers, as the momentum of charis is carried forward into the world.”

Participation, then, becomes a critical component of this non-competitive form of wealth. The Corinthian Christians have already received the saving grace of Christ, which contains Christ’s own wealth. But the Corinthians are not simply called to imitate Christ’s example from afar, to mimic Christ’s sacrifice or Christ’s generosity to the extent that their human limitations permit. “The Christ event is here not just as an exemplum to be imitated by human observers,” since they lack the resources or will to do so, independent of God. The Corinthians have, in fact, already demonstrated the impossibility of this by their failure, thus far, to follow through on their impulse to give for the needs of the Christians in Jerusalem. Rather, as Frances Young and David Ford explain, Paul invokes the grace of Christ as “both a celebration of God’s grace and an invitation to the Corinthians

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8 Barclay, “Because he was rich,” 343.
9 Barclay, “Because he was rich,” 332.
10 Barclay implies this connection in “Because he was rich,” 339–341.
11 Barclay, “Because he was rich,” 341.
12 Barclay, “Because he was rich,” 343.
13 Barclay, “Manna and the Circulation of Grace,” 421.
to recognize afresh what they are part of and to draw the practical consequences."  

Thus, Paul's call to generous giving is not undergirded by any independently human obligation to the needy or any mutual survival pact among creatures. Rather, it is a natural, practical result of participating in the very life of Christ, of living fully in the theological realm into which Christ has drawn believers. This realm is what Young and Ford call "the economy of God," and Tanner calls theological economy, or the economy of grace. This economy is utterly theocentric. The Christ event—above all, the "central, generative exchange of Christ's sufferings and death"—is its founding and sustaining act.

That economy, which involves participation in "God's own life," is "the identification of a divine momentum in which believers are caught up, and by which they are empowered to be, in turn, richly self-sharing with others." It is a transformative participation, not unrelated to the dynamic Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord . . . , are being transformed into the same image." The grace of Christ is, thus, not only the foundational basis of the entire theological framework within which we must consider Paul's financial appeal. It is also the ontological basis for every act of charis—financial or otherwise—that takes place within its context. According to N. A. Dahl, "Paul never looks at an individual's relationship to money in isolation. References to money are always part of a total context." When we participate in the economy of God, our actions—including our attitudes toward and use of money—reflect that participation, taking on the character of the Spirit of Christ who pervades the whole and indwells each believer.

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15 For a discussion of the "mutually constitutive" character of theology and social practice in Paul's writings on charis, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 439–442.
19 Barclay, "Manna and the Circulation of Grace," 421.
When Paul writes about equity in 2 Corinthians 8:13–14, and then refers in verse 15 to the story of the distribution of manna, he seems to be advocating wealth redistribution to minimize income inequality. Paul seems to be advising the Corinthians to give enough money to bring the Jerusalemites up to their economic level, but not so much as to bring the Corinthians themselves down financially to the point of affliction.

A closer reading reveals that Paul is not writing about financial equality between the Corinthians and the Jerusalemites, but about matching up the abundance or surplus of the former and the need of the latter. Paul is seeking universal sufficiency, not necessarily quantitative equality. In absolute terms, some may have more (“the one who had much”) and some, less (“the one who had little”). Nevertheless, everyone in the system has enough—no one has too much or too little.

A critical point here is the dynamic nature of the context Paul is outlining. As Barclay explains, “This is how Paul reads Exodus 16:18: not as an equal apportionment of shares, but as a redistribution of surplus, which is not unidirectional (always the same one with too much, giving to make up the lack of the other) but bilateral.”22 Paul assumes that abundance and need are fluid states. At the present moment, the Corinthians are in a state of surplus, so their surplus should go for the Jerusalemites’ need. When the tables turn, however, the Jerusalemites’ abundance will be for the Corinthians’ need.

One distinguishing characteristic of this economy is the fact that people participate in the system not primarily to profit from it as individuals, but to share in the building up of one another and of the entire community. Barclay notes that the goal of these reciprocal, dynamic relationships

is not order or unity in a static sense but the project, or process, of mutual enhancement or enrichment. . . . What is in view here is a continuing project in which each party seeks to draw out the potential of the other, and both are committed to the construction of a community that is perpetually being remade and further developed. Neither party can flourish

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22 Barclay, “Manna and the Circulation of Grace,” 423.
without the presence and contribution of the other; they are bound together by webs of need and of gift.\(^{23}\)

This is certainly an effective model for a financial collective, as long as one trusts the integrity of all the financial players concerned. If this is all there is to it, however, then it is not yet a theological economy. It is simply low-tech insurance, a pooling of resources to minimize risk and seek collective goals of community enhancement. One needs no economy of God for this to be viable. Moreover, even if the Christ event had initiated the formation of the Christian community by virtue of the grace of Christ, it could have faded into the etiological background as a founding myth no longer driving the system.

Yet Paul is pressing the Corinthians beyond a conventional financial collective, and his reference to the Macedonians earlier in 2 Corinthians 8 begins to make more sense if we look at it as a symbol of what is radically new about this economy of God. With the Macedonian illustration, Paul is not presenting a case study to provide financial formulae for giving, nor an example to intimidate the Corinthians into competing themselves into poverty. Rather, the Macedonians’ willingness to give, even beyond what is financially comfortable for them, is a witness to the power of God transforming them into the image of the One who gives freely without expectation of reward. According to Young and Ford, “The Macedonians’ trust in God, as they give despite their poverty, is the most graphic illustration of what happens when prudent worldly economics meets the gospel of this God and his paradoxical combining of vulnerability with abundance.”\(^{24}\)

What distinguishes Paul’s system from a conventional humanitarian financial collective is precisely this “paradoxical combining of vulnerability with abundance.” This is not a contract of mutual benefit in which the parties involved fulfill their part in the expectation of receiving their contracted rewards. Freedom in Christ enables believers to make themselves vulnerable to one another in deeply interdependent relations, knowing that God’s provision undergirds the whole.

The Christ event also sets the tone: “In the face of what this God gives, calculations of reciprocity are pointless: one simply gives freely in the spirit of the God who does likewise.”\(^{25}\) This establishes a “dy-

\(^{23}\) Barclay, “Manna and the Circulation of Grace,” 425.

\(^{24}\) Young and Ford, Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians, 178–179.

\(^{25}\) Young and Ford, Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians, 178.
dynamic mutuality”—not merely as insurance against possible future needs, but out of the condition of genuine liberty into which the Christ event draws us—“expressed in the imagery of sharing, generosity, free communication and the flow of grace, life, joy, prayer and material goods.”

The economy of God, responsive to the changing character of human experience, is dynamic, going beyond the static quality of individual, self-contained, non-theological economic transactions. Furthermore, the vibrancy and energy associated with the economy of God is a totalizing force. It resists compartmentalization. “God’s giving does not involve . . . some transfer of ‘goods,’ completed at receipt, but a dynamic that flows on into our giving, branching out into myriad acts of generosity and grace.”

Thus, the transformative power conveyed through participation in the economy of God cannot be limited to the salvation of souls, the redemption of bodies, the renovation of financial practices, or any other individual realm of human being and living. It pervades all.

Paul does not emphasize the pneumatological dimension of this economy in 2 Corinthians 8:8–15. However, the “dynamic mutuality” of the economy of God may imply the trinitarian work of the Holy Spirit, who draws believers into unity in Christ, mediating our relations with one another (“the fellowship [koinōnia] of the Holy Spirit,” 2 Cor. 13:13). The Holy Spirit is associated particularly with dynamic, transformative, responsive activity in the world. For example, the transformation of believers into the “image” of God is “the work of the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Yet it would be overly simplistic to attribute solely to the Spirit the dynamic element of the system, as if Christ were static. The fellowship that constitutes this international network of Christians—joined not only theoretically or in some abstractly spiritual sense, but

26 Young and Ford, Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians, 174–175.
27 Barclay, “Manna and the Circulation of Grace,” 421.
28 See Romans 8:11, where the Spirit is the life-giving, resurrecting agent who raised Christ Jesus from the dead and will also enliven our mortal bodies.
29 See the final benediction of 2 Corinthians: “The charis of the Lord Jesus Christ, the agapē of God, and the koinōnia of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (13:13).
in the embodied spirituality of practical mutual care and concern—is both the body of Christ on earth and a sign pointing to the eschatological redemption of all creation. Our participation in this fellowship is made possible by God, “who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 5:5), while the Spirit enables us to participate in the founding grace of Christ. As the self-giving of Christ has made us rich, so, in the Spirit, are we enabled to give ourselves to one another and make each other rich, without impoverishing ourselves.30

Manna and Participation

Paul goes on to compare the first-century Corinthians to the ancient Israelites, in a move that reveals the larger contours of the system into which Paul allows us a glimpse. I have shown how Paul links the charis of Christ and the charis of the Corinthians’ financial gift by virtue of the Corinthians’ participation in Christ and resulting transformation, by the Spirit, into the image of the Giver. I have also discussed the dynamic mutuality of the economy of God, in which universal sufficiency results from a deep interdependence that shares, rather than levels, resources.

The economy of God depicted here is neither static nor abstract, but concrete, contextual, and dynamic. Paul gives us not so much an indictment of income inequality per se, but a clear protest against the coexistence of poverty and excess wealth. Little does not always mean “lack,” just as much does not always mean “surplus.” But too little and too much are both problems that must be addressed, not necessarily with quantitatively-defined upper and lower income limits, but as the Spirit leads, once one has given oneself first to God, then to others, as the Macedonians demonstrate (2 Cor. 8:5).

According to Richard Hays, Paul uses the Exodus narrative as a cautionary tale: “Paul sees in this manna story an economicparable whose moral is that God provides for those who rely on him for their daily bread, taking no thought for the morrow.” Just as hoarding is “unnecessary and an affront to God, who is perfectly capable of providing abundantly for those who trust him,” so failing to share their surplus is inappropriate for the Corinthians.31 Paul develops this theme more extensively in 2 Corinthians 9:8–12.

30 See Young and Ford, Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians, 175, for an account of the role of the Holy Spirit in Paul’s economy of God.
Yet there is further significance to this juxtaposition. Despite the apparent mismatch between the two stories, the same underlying narrative appears in both: Everyone does their best and gathers what they can, and God makes what we do sufficient. The relevant difference is not divine intervention (manna) versus human administration (Jerusalem relief efforts), but rather how God chooses to operate in each situation. In Christ, God opens up divine providence in such a way as to enable human beings to participate deeply in it. Previously, people were called to give alms to the poor and not to mistreat others. But just as, in Christ, there is no longer Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free, there is too no longer rich or poor. These categories are not eliminated; neither are their distinguishing characteristics leveled. Rather, the opposition between them becomes meaningless because all participate in the one Christ, all are mutually building one another up. No one is benefactor; no one is victim. All are fellow recipients of God’s grace and participants not only in Christ but in one another, in the fellowship of the Spirit.

Even the *omer*, mentioned in the Exodus narrative, is transformed by the touch of grace. Ordinarily, it represents a static measure. When Paul brings the manna distribution story into contact with the economy of God in Christ, however, the *omer* rises to symbolic status and gains dynamic flexibility: not a procrustean bed, but a figure of universal sufficiency. Some gathered more, some gathered less, but for all, what was gathered was neither too much nor too little.

This is not to say that the miracle in Exodus 16 is disenchanted in 2 Corinthians 8. What makes the redistribution of the manna seem miraculous, almost magical, is the narrative invisibility of the mechanism of redistribution. We read of comparatively low-key miracles, like the healing of Naaman the Leper (2 Kings 5), or even Jesus’ changing water into wine (John 2), in which the moment of miraculous transformation takes place quietly off-stage, with minimal fuss and no Technicolor or computer-generated special effects. But in 2 Corinthians 8, we see the mechanism of God’s action turned inside-out, making visible God’s non-reductive assumption of human agency into God’s divine agency.

So now, by virtue of circumstances, some may have much and some may have little. But by the operation of God’s grace through the human grace of dynamically sharing surplus, those who, at any point, have much will pour the overmuch into the system, and those who
have little will draw on the system’s surplus so that they do not have too little. The involvement of human agency does not dim the glory of God, nor reduce the gratitude owed to the Most High.

The sharing of goods—material and non-material—in the economy of grace is like the operation of a living body, with blood and oxygen flowing constantly. And just as Christ was revealed in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35)—the sacrament of his own body given for us—so our identity as participants individually and corporately in the mystical body of Christ is revealed in our giving.32

Although not quite analogous, God’s action in taking up human agency demonstrates the same character as Christ’s taking on human nature and flesh. In both cases, the divine action is free and gracious, intent on enriching and transforming creation, both givers and receivers alike. The Trinity’s action involves no divine self-diminishment, but rather opens up an invitation to all to partake of the economy of God and, thus, to share in Godself since, as Tanner notes, the gift God gives is “God’s own life.”33

(Kathryn) Tanner and Paul (the Tanner)

I have shown a number of details in Kathryn Tanner’s concept of an economy of grace which resonate with Paul’s economic vision. In fact, the contours of her entire model of Christian theological economy align very closely with Paul, despite the significant differences between the two projects. Tanner does not build her model explicitly on Paul, and refers to scripture only infrequently, even in the more thickly theological portions of Economy of Grace.34 She explains her methodological decision by pointing out the fact that while Christian scripture and tradition include much about finances and economy, the attention paid to these topics is “only piecemeal . . ., without any clear systematic connection among the various Christian pronouncements.

32 Note the traditional pairing of the offering for the poor and the eucharist in, for example, John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Mane Nobiscum Domine 28; Hung Pham, “John Paul II’s Concept of Solidarity with the Poor as a Eucharistic Dimension of the Christian Moral Life,” Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 2009; and Samuel Torvend, Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008).
33 Tanner, Economy of Grace, 64, 66, 67.
34 See Tanner, Economy of Grace, 79, 83.
Instead, she draws theology into conversation with economics.36

The scope of Tanner’s project is also broader than what Paul attempts in this pericope. Tanner outlines a Christian “economic vision for the whole of life.”37 Paul simply tries to convince his readers to give more generously.

Nevertheless, Paul does reveal aspects of the larger economic vision undergirding his emergency relief appeal in 2 Corinthians 8:8–15, and this economic vision aligns with all three major elements of Tanner’s model. The first element in Tanner’s model, unconditional giving,38 relates to the call for Corinthian giving to be founded upon Christ’s grace. As I have discussed above, Paul considers the grace of Christ Jesus to be the bedrock of Corinthian giving (2 Cor. 8:9). Moreover, Paul emphasizes elsewhere the importance of the voluntary nature of the gift (for example, 2 Cor. 9:7), but alludes to this theme in 2 Corinthians 8:8—“I do not say this as a command”—and with his references to their eagerness to give (2 Cor. 8:11–12).

The second element, universal giving, is not a theme Paul stresses here explicitly. Nevertheless, the fact that he calls the Corinthians to cross geographic boundaries and live into their interdependence with the Christians in Jerusalem does challenge geographic (Jerusalem/Corinth) as well as cultural-ethnic (Jew/Gentile) boundaries. If one applies the universalizing, boundary-shattering theology of this economic aesthetic to situations of need which may or may not relate specifically to Christians, then the body of Christ—the global community of Christians—would be called, in their agency, into the work of God to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sorrowful, and in every way attend to those in need to whom God sends them. Tanner’s third element, the formation of communities of mutual benefit or fulfillment, bears a striking resemblance to the mutual sharing depicted

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37 Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, x.
38 In accordance with Barclay’s taxonomy of “perfections of grace,” Tanner’s concept of unconditional giving corresponds here, strictly speaking, to unconditioned giving: primarily to the priority of the gift—since it is a response to God’s gift in Christ—and secondarily to its singularity—since the act of giving should come about as a spontaneous response of benevolence and not a required duty imposed by a command. See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 70–72. For an elucidation of the distinction between unconditional and unconditioned grace, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 492.
Reimagining Charitable Giving

As the Pauline resonances of Tanner’s systematization demonstrate, an entire Christian economic vision is contained in 2 Corinthians 8:8–15. Through Paul, God calls us, no less emphatically than do the letters and emails clamoring for our attention, to give generously. Yet Paul’s system is far more than a baptized version of standard altruism, with the addition of *deus ex machina* to provide an eschatological happy ending. The context and character of giving and receiving in the economy of God renders them radically different from prevailing models of philanthropy.

Though aimed at helping people in need, Paul’s system is theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Christ is the center, the foundation, and the goal of the entire economy. Although Paul marshals his rhetorical resources to persuade his readers, we find no fundraising formulae to extract, nor can we boil down the passage to a few memorable slogans. Paul’s exhortation is embedded in an intricate conceptual web corresponding to a theological reality without which the exhortation loses most of its significance. Rather than relying on a static view of the world system, Paul builds into his vision a nuanced understanding of changing human realities, a dynamic view of the possibilities for human beings who participate in the grace of God in Christ Jesus. The meaning of the economy of God is in the whole; it cannot be broken down and auctioned off in pieces. It invites complete participation—no half-measures or selective toe dipping will suffice.

This radical invitation compels me to reimagine with Paul what Christian giving and receiving could be, for it is all too easy to fall into the trap of radically anthropocentric perspectives, whether or not such exchanges are garbed in religious words. If Christian giving is truly from God, through God, and to God, then am I ready and willing to be transformed according to God’s deeper vision? Or do I delude myself into thinking money gives me authority to change the world around me, while I strive to insulate myself from the possibility of

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39 On Paul’s rhetorical word play in this passage, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 331–332.
transformation? Do I wish only to bring more people across to the sunny side of the line of need, without challenging the structural divides that create the shadows? Do I give out of guilt, or vanity, or a desire to confirm my assessment of myself as a generous person? Do I give for my peace of mind, for that warm fuzzy feeling in my heart, for the self-gratifying pleasure that comes from helping others? Do I give to receive a blessing from God, motivated by the potentially profitable return on investment?

The line between exercising agency and practicing self-idolatry becomes tenuous as I short-circuit the economy of God, shining the light of glory back onto myself. All the while, without my noticing, my suffering sisters and brothers are fading quietly from the horizon of our shared humanity in the glow of my self-satisfaction for having done all I could. And “for Christ’s sake” becomes a tired liturgical tag, rather than the soul-deep expression of my life in nuce.

With the spotlight turned on the ego of the human giver, the possibility of a theological economy of mutuality and unconditional giving becomes difficult, if not impossible. When we fail to do the hard work of building humble solidarity, we exacerbate social divides and further deconstruct community. We too easily assume static notions of economic interaction, failing to take into serious account the shifting realities of life and the agency and responsibility of the poor as well as the rich. We rest in the conviction that the haves and have-nots will remain as they are unless the haves decide to change the situation.

Thus, many of us are shocked when formerly prosperous people lose their homes in natural and political disasters, for we see ourselves in them. And we scramble to conceal our lack of outrage when bad things happen to poor and downtrodden people. Such daily disasters, visited upon the strugglers and the stragglers, do not penetrate the cosmopolitan consciousness until the sheer number of people affected, or the peculiar sexiness of their narrative, earn them the status: newsworthy.

Our well-intentioned altruism, when lacking a genuine foundation in Christ, loses the essential connection of mutuality and vulnerability Paul assumes between giver and receiver. For, as praiseworthy as traditional humanitarian appeals to philanthropy may be, their success generally relies on their ability to make givers feel good about themselves—often a subtly elitist project that reinforces the very divisions between rich and poor it is trying ostensibly to diminish. The good accomplished in raising money to help those in need is tarnished by
the harm done to souls, as we latch onto any conceivable confirmation of our undergirding narratives of Lady Bountiful and her Poor Unfortunates. The poor who join the ranks of the wealthy in such a system are all too liable to take on the latter’s poverty of self-awareness even as they leave behind the cruel shackles of the deprivation they have endured.

Paul challenges us, as Christians and as the church, to an entirely different level of engagement in the world—not as philanthropists who use our economic power to rescue those less fortunate, or victims who depend on the goodwill of others for our survival, but together as beloved citizens of the kingdom of God, members of God’s household, and fellow participants in God’s economy. The “common good,” in this view, is more than a maximization of social utility, whether understood as the strict sum total of all individuals’ happiness or as an abstract notion of the collective benefit of the community. It is an inherent element of the concrete common life into which we are called in Christ, a dynamic outpouring and fulfillment of the complex network of porous and vulnerable selves, knit together and empowered by the Holy Spirit, imaging forth the glory of God.

On occasion, I have stumbled into that realm of “vulnerability with abundance.”40 There, I am actively, humbly engaged in the divinely graced flow of generosity and receptivity. There, the fullness I feel—whether giving or receiving—is the fullness of Mary-like obedience that fills my yes with the Ever-Yes (2 Cor. 1:19–20). There, the Spirit connects me in fellowship and single-hearted love with God and neighbor, giving me almost enough courage to confront the naked truth of my fragility without flinching. There, the blessings God grants me as I give are not motivations, but revelations of the character of God the giver, moving me to gratitude and wonder-struck worship. There, the joys are clean and freeing and so delightfully deep as to feel absolutely normal. There, I regard myself truly, with no self-referential aftertaste, for my form is full-fixed on the First and Fairest.

This radically reimagined economy is what Paul’s biblical vision represents. As modern readers of Paul’s letter to the first-century Corinthians, we too are included in the invitation to enter into that divine reality, to put on the whole economy of God. We, too, are called to participate in God’s distribution of manna until all are sufficiently provisioned. We, too, are led to acknowledge ourselves “as poor, yet

making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:10), regardless of our financial or socio-economic condition on any given day. The Holy Spirit invites us into participation in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, liberating us to be vulnerable enough to enter into the collective engagement that is inseparable from the common good. Within that fellowship, the superabundance of God’s grace enables us to “finish doing” what we have started (2 Cor. 8:11)—what has been started in us—by living fully into the transformative economy of God. “Thanks be to God for [this] indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15).