

Paul and the Collection for the Poor in Jerusalem

Key Passages

I Corinthians 16:1-4

2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15

Romans 15:25-32

Part of the agreement reached at the summit in Jerusalem concerning Paul's mission to the Gentiles was that he would organise a collection from his Gentile congregations to donate to the believers in Christ in Jerusalem. Paul refers to this ongoing activity at several points in his letters (e.g., I Cor. 16:1-4). Here Paul tells the Corinthians that they must do what he has already informed the Galatians to do: to lay aside on a weekly basis some offering for the collection project, so that there will be no need to seek the money when Paul actually arrives. When Paul comes to collect the money, the Corinthians will send chosen representatives to go with it to Jerusalem. Paul himself will probably also go with them.

Paul writes at greater length in 2 Corinthians 8-9 about the taking up of the collection. Here he commends the Macedonian believers for their generous and sacrificial giving, probably intending to influence the Corinthians to follow this good example. Even more significantly, he takes Christ himself as a model: 'Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). As Paul is about to travel to Jerusalem on his third visit there, he writes in Romans 15:25-32 of his anxiety for the reception of the collection in Jerusalem and for his own safety.

A project that was agreed at the very important meeting in Jerusalem must have been of the most exceptional significance. It took up several years of Paul's life and eventually led to his being arrested in Jerusalem and finally being brought as a prisoner to Rome. Paul refers to the taking up of the collection as *diakonia* ('ministry' or 'ministering', see 2 Cor. 9:1; Rom. 15:25). A modern equivalent to this Greek word might be 'service' or 'serving'. Paul regards this giving as evidence of God's grace at work in the congregation – as their response to God's generosity to them in salvation.

What is the meaning of this collection for Paul and the church of his day? It must have been very significant, otherwise he would not have used such models to encourage it, nor allowed it to take up so much of his time.

First, the collection should be viewed as an offering for all the believers in the church in Jerusalem. It is likely that they were all actually very poor. However, in addition to the economic reference, the term 'saints' – as Paul calls them – has a scriptural and theological association. It refers to the humble poor who trusted only in God and waited expectantly for his coming deliverance. The title 'the poor' must have been chosen early in the life of the church as a self-definition by the earliest believers in Jerusalem.

Secondly, the collection should be seen as a sharing in salvation by both Jews and Gentiles. In 2 Corinthians Paul speaks of it as *koinonia*, literally a 'fellowship'. Just as the Gentiles are sharing in the spiritual heritage of the Jews, so also must the Jews be allowed a share in the material blessings of the Gentiles (Rom. 15:27). The collection is therefore a symbol of the unity and oneness of the Jewish and Gentile branches of the church; for Paul it must have been a top priority for this to be visibly and tangibly expressed.

Thirdly, the collection was voluntary. Although Paul, as his correspondence with the Corinthians makes clear, desperately desires all his churches to participate, and possibly even the Roman church he had not yet visited, nevertheless he stressed that the gifts had to be freely offered. The Macedonians 'were pleased' (that is, volunteered) 'to offer a contribution' (2 Cor. 8:3; Rom. 15:26). By this reference, Paul intends to refer to all his churches in the Roman province of Macedonia (=modern northern Greece, Macedonia, and southern Albania). Likewise, by Achaia (Rom. 15:26) Paul denotes the bulk of modern Greece, including his churches in that region, founded at Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. The vast extent of the geographical area included here corresponds to, and symbolizes, something of the significance of the collection in Paul's life and thought.

Finally, if the collection was received in Jerusalem, it would be an indication that the Jerusalem believers also recognized the validity of Paul's Gentile mission and their fellowship with Gentile believers in Christ. For Paul this was of paramount importance, and this was why he took up the collection throughout his churches and brought it with official representatives to Jerusalem. Sadly, the evidence suggests that, because of political sensitivities, it was rejected and false rumours led to Paul's arrest.