

## **What Does God Require of Us?**

Byron C. Bangert

Not long ago my local daily newspaper carried an article with the following full, across-the-page, headline: “Food bank accepts donation of 2,500 pounds of chicken thighs.” The gift, as the article explained, was part of a 20-ton donation of chicken by Tyson Foods to the Indiana Poultry Association, which passed it along to a statewide network of food banks, which in turn would dole it out to the network’s nine member food banks. The gift was being touted as a wonderful thing, celebrated by local politicians, citizens, and food bank workers and volunteers. Presumably it would help alleviate the hunger experienced by the more than 600,000 Hoosiers who, according to the article, go to bed hungry every night.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the merits of this gift, I confess to be genuinely provoked by the amount of media exposure that it received. Twenty tons may sound like an enormous amount of food, but only if one does not do the math. We are talking about some 40,000 pounds of chicken thighs that surely cost Tyson Foods less than a dollar per pound.<sup>2</sup> What is there to celebrate about a gift worth less than \$40,000 in the face of 600,000 hungry Hoosiers? This works out to only about one ounce of chicken per hungry Hoosier, at a value of less than 7 cents apiece. One may be glad that Tyson officials saw fit to make this gift. We can only guess with what motives the gift was given, however, and we can be assured—quite contrary to the impression one might gather from the politicians and others who heralded this gift—that it did little to alleviate the problem of hunger in my state of Indiana. Consequently it is hard to see it as a very meaningful expression of giving.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I want to explore the question, What makes a gift meaningful and significant? More basically, since this chapter is part of a book on religious giving, I want to address the question, What is the place of giving in the religious life? Is giving a kind of

spiritual grace? Is it a virtue? Is it a moral obligation? How central is it to the vocation, or calling, of the religious person-- in my case, the Christian? In other words, what is the relationship of giving to life lived in faithfulness before God? In what follows I hope also to make a case that warrants my judgment that the gift described above hardly calls for celebration. The most meaningful gifts are those that spring from the depths of gratitude and love, that are responsive to the giver's sense of obligation as foremost a recipient, that are appropriate to the giver's resources and circumstance, and that promote justice as determined by the needs of individuals within their communities and society.

The giving of gifts, as any experienced person knows, is often problematic. This is so for many reasons, one of which is that people give gifts for all kinds of reasons, not all of them benevolent or meritorious. This is no less true for religious people than for people in general. Sometimes people give in order to exercise influence, power, or control. Sometimes they give out of guilt or shame. Sometimes they seek recognition or reward, or wish to curry favor. Gifts bear social as well as individual meaning. Gift-giving can be a highly complex form of human transaction and interaction.

Back in 1968 the National Council of Churches published a little book by Martin E. Carlson titled *Why People Give* that reflected very helpfully on a number of the various factors that motivate people to give.<sup>4</sup> Carlson's work is informed especially by psychology and psychiatry, and thus focuses in particular on individual psychological motivations, e.g., the human needs for safety, love, identity, commitment, and self-actualization. He notes in passing another classification of motives in terms of the human desires for new experience, security, response, and recognition.<sup>5</sup> But then he turns to the subject of Christian faith and motivation, and seeks to identify some normative grounds for giving. He describes five motivations for

giving that are characteristically (though not necessarily distinctively) Christian: gratitude, love, personal identification with God's purposes, obedience, and reward.<sup>6</sup> The important point here for my purposes is not whether Carlson's list is satisfactory, but rather that he found it necessary to identify several diverse kinds of motivation as basic even to a normative Christian view of giving. The fact is that people give for all kinds of reasons, and among all these reasons there are at least several that seem to be valid from within a Christian faith perspective.

Notwithstanding all this, it has been my experience that many religious people, and perhaps others as well, have a fairly particular notion of what constitutes the ideal or exemplary gift. The exemplary gift, in their view, is one given freely, joyously, almost spontaneously, and without any sense of obligation. It is a gift of charity, or love. It is given without calculation, without reserve, without ulterior motive or instrumental aim. It is the sort of gift that seems to be portrayed in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark by the woman who anoints Jesus with the jar of very costly ointment.<sup>7</sup>

As Mark tells the story, Jesus is with friends in Bethany when a woman enters the house and breaks open an alabaster jar of precious ointment, which she proceeds to pour over Jesus' head. Some of Jesus' companions view this as a profligate act, complaining that the ointment could have been sold for a substantial sum and the proceeds given to the poor. Jesus, however, defends the woman, stating that "she has performed a good service for me."<sup>8</sup> In some earlier English translations (KJV and RSV, e.g.), Jesus is reported to have called her act "a beautiful thing." Jesus further explains, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. . . (W)herever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."<sup>9</sup>

It is hard to imagine higher praise for a gift. That it comes from Jesus tends to lend it the

greatest possible authority for Christian teaching. But, someone may say, this is a gift given under the most extraordinary of circumstances, bestowed on the most extraordinary of individuals. Consequently, it can hardly serve as an example for our giving. Such a view is possible, but then we have to wonder why this story was told.

The more compelling view is that the story is told to counter certain conventional ideas about giving. In particular, the story challenges a merely utilitarian calculus for giving. Are we not inclined to question the extravagant gift? Do we not agree that selling the ointment and giving the proceeds to the poor would accomplish a greater good? Yet Jesus commends this gift. Moreover, he reminds those who have voiced objection, “you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish.”<sup>10</sup> In effect, Jesus chides, “You want to help the poor? Go ahead. What’s keeping you? You hardly need to wait till someone comes along with a valuable commodity before you begin. Meantime, don’t condemn this woman for her extravagant devotion.”

It is important to see here that Jesus does not in any way denigrate giving to the poor! This text is commonly misappropriated in the service of an attitude of nonchalance toward the lot of the needy. Nothing could be further from the mark. If anything, the text contains a rebuke to those who think that poor relief is somebody else’s responsibility, to be paid for by somebody else’s largesse. The text is not celebrating one form of giving at the expense of another. The extravagant gift does not preclude the gift that is practically useful or morally and socially responsible. Nonetheless, there does seem to be something special if not exceptional about this particular extravagant gift. In the history of the Christian Church, this text surely has served to sanction acts of full-hearted religious devotion.

Should this text be central to our understanding of religious giving? Yes and no. The

truth and power of the text, it seems to me, lie in the fact that it presents us with an act of giving that arouses our aspirations. Here is a gift that is costly, generous, personal, and uncalculating, given in a transparent act of love and devotion. At least it is possible to read these qualities into the woman's gift. Thus we are presented with a vision of true beauty, an act of graciousness like unto which we might hope to aspire. The story evokes from us some sense of that purity of heart that is the wellspring of all true giving. The true gift, we see in this light, is an expression of unselfish love. No matter their magnitude, our gifts are meager and impoverished if they lack this quality of love. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."<sup>11</sup>

In terms of its presumed motivation, and what it suggests about the character or virtue of the giver, then, the woman's gift of precious ointment is exemplary. It is suggestive of a dimension of grace and spirit in human existence that transcends the economic materialism governing our daily existence. It reminds us that human beings cannot live "by bread alone." Or, as a former President of Costa Rica famously put it, "Why have tractors without violins?"<sup>12</sup> (It may be taken as a given that human beings must have bread, and that we would not want violins without tractors.) Indeed, the woman's gift requires us to recognize that the good cannot be reduced to any calculus, not even a moral calculus. This gift transcends any moral measure.

On the other hand, it is all too easy to exploit the story of the woman's gift in ignoble ways. If the story is employed to suggest that the proper devotion of religious adherents may require them to give up their most precious possessions without regard for their future needs or those of their families, then we have a problem. In many third-world countries and communities one can find magnificent houses of worship, funded by the labor and resources of the general

population, surrounded by grinding poverty. One must question whether the gifts of religious devotion that built and continue to maintain such edifices are truly commendable. To be sure, such houses of worship often provide a focal center of hope for people whose daily lives seem hopelessly grim. But surely, also, one can imagine that, by shifting significant resources away from dominant religious institutions to people on the margins, a different distribution of economic and social power would result that could elevate the lives of the general population at little if any spiritual cost.<sup>13</sup>

The story of the woman with the precious ointment evokes an awareness of those qualities of the human spirit that are most gracious and ennobling. It tells us something about those motivational qualities of our giving that are most to be cherished. It invites us to behold and celebrate a dimension of goodness beyond the moral measure. But insofar as we seek moral guidance regarding what sorts of gifts we should give, under what circumstances, and to whom, it has little to say. The highest form of giving may be the loving, generous, joyous, uncalculating offering of ourselves and our substance in relation to another, but when, where, how, and to whom should such offering be made? Or does it matter?

Does it appear that I am attributing too much influence to this idealized view of giving as a kind of unconditional virtue? What concerns me is the widespread tendency to celebrate a highly romanticized, and thus distorted, version of the exemplary act of giving. Let us recall that only a few years ago we could readily find bumper stickers on cars throughout our nation inviting us to “Commit random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” The saying was discussed in books, newspapers, and magazines, and a foundation was even established called “The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation.” The idea had clearly captured the public imagination. And the idea that came across was that one could do something especially

felicitous and virtuous for another quite apart from any obligation, calculation, or planning. One did not even need any personal knowledge of the recipient, nor did one need to envision a continuing relationship with the recipient. In fact, the absence of any particular personal connection to the recipient was judged to make the presumably helpful and/or favorable action all the more virtuous. Presumably committing a random or senseless act of a kindly or beautiful sort could only spring from the goodness of one's heart.

It is not my intent to disparage the random act of kindness. I share the sense that there is something virtuous about the realized capacity to engage in actions that may enrich the lives of others irrespective of any claims those persons may have upon oneself, and irrespective of any relational benefits that may accrue to oneself because of such actions. In terms of its virtuous character, the random act of kindness is surely to be celebrated over the guilt-ridden overture, the strategically calculated effort to gain personal advantage, the gratuitous show of power, or the gift with strings attached. But it must be observed that we do not have in the random or spontaneous act of generosity an adequate set of criteria for all the sorts of giving that may be commended as contributions to the lives of others. We must also think about the giving of gifts in the context of our on-going relationships with other persons and groups, and in view of the circumstances in which giving may occur and the consequences that may result.

To this point I have suggested that one reason we find the random act of kindness, and the "beautiful thing" done by the woman with the costly ointment, especially appealing lies in the character of the motivation behind such actions. As a matter of fact, however, we have at best a rather thin account of motivation in such actions. It appears that the woman with the precious jar of ointment acted out of love and devotion, but that is our surmise only because we behold Jesus' commendation of her. As for the random expression of generosity or kindness,

who knows what may prompt such a spontaneous act? Virtually by definition such actions are viewed as “senseless” or “random,” therefore not subject to any account based on antecedent events.

For a normative account of motivation in giving we need something like the ethics of gratitude that William F. May has proposed.<sup>14</sup> May notes that for Christians, as well as Jews, the treatment of God’s people at God’s hands becomes the basis for their subsequent treatment of others who find themselves in similar straits. For example, the story of God’s solicitude for the Hebrew slaves while they were “strangers” in Egypt is invoked in the scriptures of Israel to warrant special treatment for the “strangers” in their midst. In the New Testament the exhortation to love is predicated upon God’s prior love: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us . . . Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout the Bible God is portrayed as taking the initiative, extending solicitude, offering aid--to comfort and strengthen, deliver and bless, the people of God. From this religious perspective, says May, human giving needs to be put “in the context of a primordial receiving.”<sup>16</sup>

As recipients of God’s gifts, our first calling is to enjoyment and appreciation of God’s gifts of love, manifest in our relationships to all that exists and by the very fact of our existence. We are to recognize ourselves as those who have “freely received” the gift of life and all that sustains and enriches it. The true enjoyment and appreciation of what we have been given issues in gratitude and thanksgiving, expressed not only to God, but also to others, in acts that imitate the divine graciousness. Religious giving, at least within the Christian perspective, is fundamentally a form of thanks-giving.<sup>17</sup>

There is an important respect, therefore, in which religious giving is rooted in the sense



of obligation.<sup>18</sup> This sense of obligation impels us, less as a matter of duty than as a matter of opportunity, to extend to others the graciousness that has been extended to us. The feeling of being blessed is not peculiar to religious people. It is, however, a basically religious sensibility, an awareness of a gift unwittingly received. In Reformed theology it might be regarded as an evidence of prevenient grace. Many people who experience themselves as blessed feel a deep need to “make good” on the gifts they have received. To some extent this need may be understood as the need to discharge a great debt. The debt, though not intentionally incurred, is no less significant as an experienced reality that helps to motivate the desire to contribute to the lives of others. The sense of indebtedness is part and parcel of a desire to honor what one has been given, and not to let it dissolve into meaninglessness or insignificance. For many, it prompts the desire to make a contribution, to make a difference.

An insight of the philosopher, Charles Hartshorne, is relevant here. “Far from our valuing others only for their usefulness to ourselves,” Hartshorne observed, “it is in no small part for our usefulness to others that we value ourselves.”<sup>19</sup> To a very considerable extent, we find the meaning and purpose of our lives, their overall significance, precisely in the positive differences we are able to make in the lives of others. Often it is our contributions to others that confirm, honor, and shape the meaning of the gifts of which our senses of gratitude and indebtedness make us initially aware. This realization helps us to fathom the truth that we love because we have first been loved. What we have been given enables us to give. What we have been given empowers us to give. What we have been given motivates us to give. What we have been given also impels us to give. In a profoundly important sense, we need to give to others in order fully to realize the gifts given to ourselves.

I have stated that the sense of obligation is more a matter of opportunity than of duty.

Nonetheless, a sense of the imperative attaches to the sense of obligation. The imperative has to do, at the very least, with enacting the meaningfulness of the gift that has been received. One would not want what one has received to come to nought. Thus, the gifts we have received do impose a certain burden or demand upon us. With them, or with the awareness of them, comes a sense of responsibility. Although we may be able to do what we please with what has been given us, the economy of giving is such that our gifts will ultimately be diminished if we fail to employ them in ways that truly contribute to the lives of others. The greatness of these gifts is to be found in the sharing of them as fully as possible.<sup>20</sup>

My argument thus far is that a gift is meaningful when it is an expression of love that springs from the heart of gratitude for all that one has been given. To be meaningful a gift hardly needs to be employed in such a way that it accomplishes some measurable goal. There are gifts that lie beyond any moral measure. A meaningful gift, however, is never given in a vacuum, or simply as a spontaneous, random act, but always in a context of multiple relationships with various levels of felt obligation and envisioned possibility.

As I now turn from questions of motivation and character to questions of context, purpose, means, and effects, I wish to focus primarily on the *moral* dimension of giving.<sup>21</sup> The crux of my following argument can be expressed in these words attributed to Jesus: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”<sup>21</sup> There are two major points to be made regarding this maxim. The first is that gifts are not unencumbered. That is to say, contrary to much popular thinking, once having received a gift one is not *morally* free to do with that gift whatever one chooses. This does not mean that the giver retains the right to reclaim the gift, or to dictate how the gift is to be used. Rather, it means that in receiving a gift one also is placed under a certain obligation, if not to the giver directly, then to some other or others who

may benefit from one's appropriation of the gift. In a Christian context, this obligation is understood to arise in relation to God. However, it requires expression, first of all, in relation to the neighbor who is present and visible to us. As stated in I John, "We love because [God] first loved us. . . [T]hose who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."<sup>23</sup>

The second point is that a principle of justice inheres in the maxim. The more that one has received, the more that will be required. The degree of one's obligation with respect to the gifts one has received is a measure of the magnitude of the gifts themselves. Those who have been given little are hardly obliged to give as much as others in return. The principle of justice here seems to be one of elementary fairness and equitable distribution. The burdens or encumbrances that accompany gifts are distributed in proportion to the magnitude of what has been received.

There is nothing novel or radical about either of these points, but they are extraordinarily important to the claim I now wish to make. That claim is, in brief, that in biblical perspective we should understand ourselves as stewards of the gifts we receive. Moreover, the receipt of these gifts requires us to seek ways in which to deploy these gifts, in some proportionate measure to what we have received, on behalf of others. If we do so in a spirit of gratitude and generosity, so much the better. But we should do so nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

There are several further implications to be drawn from this way of framing the matter of our giving. First, giving as seen in this perspective is a matter of justice, not charity. It is only right that we do this. We are not talking here about acts of supererogation, but about a general obligation and requirement regarding the disposition of our resources. Second, because it is not transparently obvious that the language of "gift" and "giving" yields this understanding, we

need to add to our conventional notions of “gift” and “giving” the notions of “trust” and “entrustment.” Whatever we are given is a trust, entrusted to us. It is never permanent and absolute. It is always temporary and in some ways contingent. For one thing, none of us is immortal. All of us must eventually relinquish whatever we have been given, including life itself. But more basically, and in keeping with earlier comments about the nature of the gift itself, the full realization of whatever is given to us requires that it be shared. All that we have and all that we are is given to us in trust, not for safe-keeping, and not only for our own enjoyment and well-being, but also for investment (to continue the fiduciary language) in the lives and fortunes of others.<sup>25</sup>

One further elaboration is needed here to complete the basic argument. Giving as a matter of justice must be measured not only in proportion to the resources of the giver, but also in significant measure in accord with the needs of the recipients. It is difficult to state this point more precisely. I am not suggesting that we must place the needs of others above our own. Nor do I think we should aim at simple equality in the distribution of resources. No scheme of distributive justice can approach the meeting and fulfillment of all human needs. More is required than a simple redistribution of wealth. Insofar as our social, political, and economic arrangements are instrumental to the capacity of individual human beings (as well as groups of human beings) to flourish and to engage fully in the tasks of living in a democratic society, including active and meaningful participation in the political processes of civic governance, my claim is that those who lack this capacity stand in need. Meeting that need may require supplementation in the provision of food, housing, clothing, shelter, education, health care, transportation, child care, or other resources, as well as alteration in other material conditions and social circumstances of existence, in order for individuals and groups to attain that capacity.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the need to be addressed here is never simply a matter of providing physical resources to individuals of limited financial means. It is much more important that systemic changes be made to alter the political, social, and economic structures that create and maintain disadvantages in power, opportunity, and prospect for some persons due primarily to their life circumstances and largely irrespective of their innate abilities.<sup>26</sup> It is a requirement of justice that such changes be made for those in need. Moreover, the provision of justice for individuals in need must be based on the simple fact of need, not on any calculus of desert. Every human being has an intrinsic claim to the provisions necessary for human flourishing, and—in a democratic society—to the resources requisite for full engagement in civic life.<sup>27</sup>

As already noted, the biblical notion of stewardship, widely popularized these days in association with the environmental movement, serves as a primary category for interpreting the nature and meaning of religious giving in the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, in most Christian congregations, stewardship continues to be associated primarily with the raising or pledging of funds for the support of the facilities, program, staff, and mission of the congregation. However, most churches these days are also increasingly familiar with the notion of the stewardship of the earth and earth's resources. And most Christians, I believe, understand in at least a rudimentary way that stewardship is not exactly tantamount to ownership. Stewardship involves the care and use of resources that have been given to them as a trust, not as a permanent and enduring possession. The words to a familiar 19<sup>th</sup> century hymn by William H. Howe, found in many church hymnals, capture this dimension of stewardship quite well:

We give Thee but Thine own,  
Whate'er the gift may be;  
All that we have is Thine alone,  
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

The main challenge posed by the perspective presented here is not to enliven the notion of stewardship itself, then, but to conjoin this notion with that of justice and its demands. And with respect to the notion of justice, it is not the idea that more is demanded of those who have been given more that poses the real challenge. Rather, it is the idea that this is a matter of justice, not charity, and that justice further requires the meeting of human need irrespective of human desert.<sup>28</sup> Voluntaristic notions of charity continue to have wide currency among religious adherents when it comes to responding to those in our society who have unmet needs. Moreover, past social research surveys and other research suggest that actively religious people are more likely to come to the aid of those in need than are those who are not actively religious.<sup>29</sup> But there is often a parting of the ways among religious people regarding the requirements of love in the form of social justice.<sup>30</sup>

In a 1959 essay subtitled “The Ethics of Stewardship,” Joseph Fletcher wrote, “There is a rock-bottom difference between being stewards of wealth because it is God’s and we are acting on [God’s] behalf, on the one hand, and being stewards of wealth because it is *ours* and we are acting on behalf of our own charity.”<sup>31</sup> Fletcher’s statement implicitly accents the confusion that exists in the minds of some people regarding the meaning of stewardship as a non-ownership relationship. The central thrust of Fletcher’s statement, however, is the recognition that a biblical understanding of stewardship is incompatible with a purely voluntaristic notion of charity. As Fletcher went on to point out, the biblical doctrine of creation means that God is the only owner, and that God’s creation “is provided for [God’s] children on earth on a familial basis, intended for all and not just for some.”<sup>32</sup> That is to say, “We all have an inalienable equity in God’s patrimony, so that contributing to a community fund or paying taxes for social security is not *largesse* or *noblesse oblige* but simple, obligatory stewardship.”<sup>33</sup>

In agreement with Fletcher, I maintain that Christian stewardship is another way of speaking about Christian vocation.<sup>34</sup> Stewardship simply accents the fact that our calling to a life of faithfulness before God involves not only a life of fidelity and moral virtue, nor even a life of labor in accord with one's particular sense of vocation, but more basically a life that is invested in the promotion of the commonwealth that is the gift of Divine Providence. We are called to exercise stewardship with respect to all of our resources, all of our gifts, not just our labors and their rewards. Our time and our talents, as well as our treasures, are in some measure to be invested, shared, committed, for the sake of the greater and common good. This may be understood as a work of love, but it is not something to be done merely out of the goodness of our hearts. It is also a work of justice, and it is no less than what is required to honor all that we have been given.

Fletcher criticized the "petty moralism" of the small-scale, private, individualistic, voluntaristic ethics of charity. He argued for a macro-ethics appropriate for a large-scale, highly organized society. He recognized that the needs of today's modern society exist on such a massive scale that they can hardly be met even by the combined efforts of individual givers. The politically controversial "faith-based initiatives" approach to solving social problems, touted by the Bush II administration, would have been seen by him as hopelessly inadequate. Government spending and taxation policies will have to become primary means through which Christians exercise their stewardship if anything significant is to be accomplished. Stewardship, he wrote,

cannot remain a private, small-scale, individualistic affair – in the form of purely voluntary and private "tithing" or anything of the kind. Post-modern man (sic) is going to have to exercise his stewardship, his social use of wealth, in forms that fit the way he gets it – i.e., in social planning and public welfare, in corporate or community giving. In a way this will be returning from modern individualistic attitudes and mores to the essentially social or corporate character of stewardship at its biblical sources in the Old Testament – when it was a "role" assigned to and accepted by the whole covenant-community of Israel, and not a private or individual election.<sup>35</sup>

I discovered Fletcher's essay on stewardship, delivered as an address to a National Council of Churches conference on stewardship in 1959, while engaged in research for this chapter. In over twenty-five years as a parish minister, I cannot recall ever having encountered it among all the materials and resources customarily provided to parish ministers to inform and enhance their stewardship endeavors. His ideas apparently have yet to take the Church by storm. Yet I believe he was fundamentally correct. I will not attempt a critique of what I take to be some minor failings in his essay, but I do want to highlight two claims he makes that remain especially challenging if not problematic for our thinking about stewardship today. These are claims beyond what I have already identified as the notion that stewardship is a matter of justice, not charity. In so doing I want to be clear that the claims I am discussing are challenging chiefly because they meet with so much resistance in our individualistic culture, not because they are somehow at odds with an authentic appropriation of Christian scripture and tradition.

The first claim is that stewardship has to do with what is simply obligatory. I have also made this claim, but it needs further attention. Customarily, stewardship has been associated with giving, for example, the giving of time, talents, and treasure. Giving seems to be a basically voluntary activity. Many people resist the notion that anyone else, even God, has a rightful claim on their resources. They may feel a general sense of obligation to give out of their abundance, but that sense of obligation is seldom tied to particular claims upon them. Must we abandon the notion of giving if we are to move to a notion of stewardship as the obligatory deployment of one's resources? I do not think so.<sup>36</sup>

With reference to any particular situation one may speak both of what God requires and of what individual human beings choose or will to do. The language of requirement is the language of divine purpose and possibility, not the language of coercion. God does not, and in



my view cannot, force us to be good stewards. Our failures to do what God requires are truly failures to realize the highest possibilities presented to us and to all of God's creation in a particular context or situation. We consistently choose less than what is possible, which is to say, less than is required to realize the fullest potential of the commonwealth of God. In this sense we really do fail on our obligations, obligations that often can be rather clearly identified, but that hardly means that we are thereby cast outside the realm of divine providence or grace. We simply fall short in our actions, including our giving. We do not measure up to our divine calling.

The second claim made by Fletcher is tied to his claims about taxation and the corporate distribution of resources. Taxation is typically understood to be quite involuntary, and enforced by coercive measures. Many of us doubtless view some uses of our taxes as anything but good stewardship. In my view, the largest single portion of my federal income taxes, which goes for something called "national defense," is badly misspent. We would not want to make the mistake of asserting that all taxes are good, or that the payment of all taxes is an act of faithful stewardship. But Fletcher does not make that mistake, either.

Rather, Fletcher's point is that, as a matter of stewardship, Christians should be engaged in the creation of tax policy, and should regard the payment of taxes as a means for addressing the social welfare and social justice needs of the greater commonwealth. He was insufficiently cautious in noting the pitfalls of democratic decision-making, and the inevitable failings and unseemly compromises of actual tax policies. Nonetheless, he was right to claim that in a democratic society it is possible and desirable to have a much more positive view of taxation than we do, and that it is crucial for Christians to recognize that in the setting and implementation of tax policies and practices they have a means of exercising stewardship over

the resources with which they have been individually and corporately entrusted. One might at least realistically hope that if most Christians had this more favorable view of taxation, their influence would result in actual reformation and improvement of governmental taxation and spending policies and practices. Moreover, insofar as democracy affords us the possibility of determining how and for what purposes we are to be taxed, there is clearly a voluntary dimension to taxation. Taxes in a democracy are not primarily forms of wealth expropriation. They are an imperfectly but nonetheless corporately agreed upon means of pooling and sharing of material resources for the benefit of all. Moreover, appropriately structured, and conjoined with strategic social policies, including but hardly limited to both fiscal and monetary policies, taxes can aid significantly in the long-term redistribution of power and wealth. For Christians they should be seen as a price we agree to pay for the sake of the common good.<sup>37</sup>

In my state of Indiana, some 600,000 residents are said to go to bed hungry every night. That is an integral feature of the context in which I and my fellow Christians in this state must begin our thinking about Christian giving and Christian stewardship.<sup>38</sup> If 20 tons of chicken thighs will hardly make a difference in this situation, then my limited material resources will prove next to insignificant. Yet I am not prepared to say that only the Bill Gateses and Warren Buffetts of this world have what it takes to exercise meaningful stewardship in the face of such large-scale need. Indeed, even the Gates Foundation recognizes that it lacks the resources to be more than “a drop in the bucket compared to what’s needed” in this world, where such disparities exist in our worldly estates. As recently noted by the Foundation’s chief executive officer, “It’s essential that other people and organizations, *especially governments*, get involved in addressing inequity. . . [W]e recognize that we have a shared responsibility to create a world where every person –no matter where they were born– has the opportunity to live a healthy,

productive life, and that's what we're going to keep driving toward."<sup>39</sup>

Let us not stifle the springs of gratitude and generosity. But let us be serious about what is required, long-term, if our well-intentioned efforts to share ourselves and our substance with others are really going to make much difference to those in greatest need. On the one hand, our thinking about the fundamental character of religious giving must be informed by an ethics of gratitude for all that we have been given. But on the other hand, our thinking about the moral pragmatics of giving—how much, and when and where, to whom, and under what conditions—must be shaped by an ethics of stewardship that takes into consideration all the resources, energies, skills, time, talents, and opportunities available to us for structuring our political, economic, and social relationships in new ways that afford to everyone whatever is needed to grow, develop, and flourish as individual human beings within our respective communities.

In short, we are called not simply to love one another, and thereby share ourselves with one another. Recognizing that love must be mediated by the various structures and relationships of our daily existence, we are also called to do justice. There is no real love that is without justice, and no true justice that is without love. Justice gives form to love in all our relationships. Social justice is the goal toward which we must aim if our love is to become effective and enduring in our larger social world. Social justice entails just social relationships, some measure of equality in opportunity, sufficient material resources for health and welfare, and effective mechanisms—including taxation—for the distribution of wealth and other resources consistent with the meeting of basic individual and social needs. Christian stewardship, therefore, is not primarily a matter of ecclesiastical economics.

We must give ourselves to the tasks of democratic citizenship, guided by Christian principles and social values, in concert with all who share a concern for individual human

dignity and the common good.<sup>40</sup> We must regard all our resources as gifts, entrusted to us, as means to help us attain the commonwealth of all God's creatures, not least but not exclusively our fellow human beings. Our stewardship must encompass the earth and all earth's inhabitants. But it must first encompass our social, economic, and political systems, all that we human beings have constructed to organize, manage, regularize, and control our engagements and exchanges with one another. We must endeavor to make these humanly created habitats conducive to the realization of the highest possibilities for human existence. And we must insist that the price for doing so, and for conserving our natural world, be paid, *in accordance with our means*, by us ourselves and our contemporaries, not by future generations.<sup>41</sup>

What does our God require of us? The answer has not changed all that much in over 2,500 years: "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."<sup>42</sup> We do justice when we accept and practice an ethics of stewardship with respect to all that we have and all that we are, for the sake of the common good. We love kindness when we celebrate and practice an ethics of gratitude and generosity, seeking in love to enact the meaningfulness of the gifts we have been given. We walk humbly with God when we acknowledge our ultimate indebtedness to God for all things and recognize how blessed we are to be able to contribute to the realization of the commonwealth of all creation.

## Endnotes

1. Bloomington *Herald-Times*, Bloomington, Indiana, May 4, 2006, A5
2. In my grocery shopping experience, one can frequently purchase a pound of Tyson chicken thighs on sale at retail cost at the local Kroger store for less than \$1.00 per pound.
3. Most likely the gift was a business decision, made by Tyson officials as a matter of public relations. Businesses that provide consumer products typically have economic motivations for enhancing their corporate images by making contributions that presumably serve to make them more attractive to the consumers they want to buy their products. Moreover, the free publicity that often attends such gifts serves as a form of advertising, and may be less costly than the outright purchase of advertising space. However, my claim about Tyson's gift has to do with its inadequacy to the need to alleviate hunger, irrespective of the motives for the gift.
4. Martin E. Carlson, *Why People Give* (New York: Council Press for Stewardship and Benevolence, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1968). In 1998 Robert F. Hartsook came up with "77 Reasons Why People Give" in *Fund Raising Management* 29, 10 (Dec 1998):18-19. His list was geared toward successful fund raising, however, and was little more than a list of tips for soliciting. He did not reflect substantively on the basic motives for giving, and failed to contemplate seriously any of the less admirable reasons why people make gifts of money. Nonetheless, his list helps to illustrate the fact that it is impossible to summarize neatly and succinctly the various reasons people have for giving.
5. *ibid.*, 46.
6. *ibid.*, 130-147.
7. Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9 (NRSV). Note, however, as Paula Dempsey points out in her essay in this volume, that this ostensibly spontaneous act of giving is not the sort of giving most strongly encouraged by U.S. religious organizations and denominations in their official statements on giving.
8. vs. 6; also Matt. 26:10
9. vss. 8, 9; cf. Matt. 26:12-13
10. vs. 7
11. I Corinthians 13:3. The idea of love as central to a Christian understanding of giving is more richly and fully developed by Ed Vacek in his essay in this volume.
12. Attributed to José Figueres Ferrer, in his inaugural speech in 1970. Though it lies beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate on the ethical perspective that informs my thinking, it may be helpful to note that implicit in my remarks here is an aesthetic ethics that is also theocentric, in that the ethical (i.e., the good, the right, the true, the beautiful, or that which is of intrinsic value) is understood not only to transcend the moral but also to lie beyond *human* measure.

13. It is worth noting in this connection an essay by Addison G. Wright on the so-called “widow’s mites,” in which he argues, convincingly in my view, that this Gospel story (Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4) presents the widow’s gift to the maintenance of the Jerusalem temple as lamentable rather than praiseworthy. See “The Widow’s Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (April 1982): 256-265. The article may also be found on the web at <http://www.visionsofgiving.org/studywidowsmite.htm>. Further corroboration of this interpretation is provided by Sakari Häkkinen’s essay, “Two Coins Too Many: Reflections on the Widow’s Offering,” in *The Fourth R* 20:4 (July-August 2007): 9-12. I must therefore disagree with the conventional interpretation Ed Vacek gives to this passage when he writes, “The implication is that the widow is the one who made the truly deep gift of herself.” **[Page 89 in this volume.]**

14. *Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 224-225. See also “Images That Shape the Public Obligations of the Minister,” in James P. Wind, Russell Burck, Paul F. Camenisch, and Dennis P. McCann, editors, *Clergy Ethics in a Changing Society: Mapping the Terrain* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 54-83. For a most helpful, thorough, and succinct review of social science research on gratitude as a moral category see Michael E. McCullough, Robert A. Emmons, Shelley D. Kirkpatrick, and David B. Larson, “Is Gratitude a Moral Affect?,” *Psychological Bulletin* 127:2 (2001), 249-266.

15. I John 4:10-11

16. “Images That Shape the Public Obligations of the Minister,” 66

17. Catholic theologian Ed Vacek has more to say about giving as response to God and to God’s love in his essay in this volume, “A Theology of Philanthropy.” Since I largely agree with him, I consider his theology to be congruent with the best of Protestant theology. The most important point of theological agreement is that we both regard giving, in its ultimate context, as response to God, who is love and the ultimate giver of all good things.

18. My argument here bears strong affinity with that of Sondra Wheeler in her essay in this volume, “‘Freely Give’: The Paradox of Obligatory Generosity.” However, I would prefer to speak of the tension, or dialectical relationship, between generous giving and obligation rather than paradox. The characterization of the relationship as one of paradox suggests a degree of incoherence that I do not find experientially true. But the larger point is that we agree that the idea of giving cannot be adequately elaborated within a Christian theology without recourse to the idea of obligation. Ed Vacek also rightly notes that “Acts of philanthropy are obligatory yet voluntary” (in the sense of uncoerced), and that “Frequently, our obligation to give will feel like an opportunity rather than an obligation.” **[Pages 92 and 93 in this volume.]**

19. “Beyond Enlightened Self-Interest: A Metaphysics of Ethics,” *Ethics* 84:3 (April 1974): 205.

20. Jesus’ parable of the talents may be interpreted as a commentary on the need to venture ourselves and our gifts in the world. Nothing could be worse than to hoard what we have been given, for then no one benefits. Ultimately, the self-preoccupied attempt to preserve what we

have been given will leave us with nothing to show for ourselves at all. See Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27.

21. I have previously noted that our giving often transcends any human calculus. Here I am focusing on giving only insofar as it is regarded and intended as a moral activity, subject to assessment in terms of moral categories such that one can compare various forms of giving and make judgments regarding the moral superiority or inferiority of one form of giving with respect to another. In other words, I remain committed to the view that not all forms of giving are commensurable. I am seeking in the latter half of this essay to offer a critical and prescriptive perspective on giving within my own 21<sup>st</sup> century American context precisely insofar as it can be—and actually is—regarded as a moral undertaking.

22. Luke 12:48. Interestingly enough, Andrew Carnegie, America's greatest past philanthropist in terms of sheer dollars given, and America's greatest current philanthropists by the same measure, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, have all articulated their understanding of the obligations of their philanthropy in terms of this maxim. It is one of the two stated principles invoked by the Gates Foundation as a core value.

23. I John 4:19, 20

24. My point here is not that we can discount motivation and set aside the ethics of gratitude. Rather, I am simply and implicitly acknowledging the fact that no one spends 100% of his or her time infused with the spirit of gratitude and generosity, not even when engaged in acts of giving. Indeed, according to one study, only approximately 10% of American adults indicated that they experience the emotion of gratitude “regularly and often” (McCullough et. al., op. cit., 250). The lack of an immediate sense of gratitude hardly invalidates the meaningful gift, nor does it excuse the potential giver from engaging in acts of giving until the mood strikes.

25. In Jesus' parable of the talents, the steward who is given but one talent is chastised and divested of that talent, not because he failed to garner a return on his master's money, but because in self-preoccupation (expressed in terms of his unfounded fear of the consequences of possible failure) he made no attempt even to invest what he was given. He simply buried it in the ground for safe-keeping, thereby insuring that it would yield no return. It would have been better to have ventured and lost, than never to have ventured at all. See note 20 above.

The perspective and argument I am presenting here seem to be significantly at odds with the view of religious giving developed by Paul Schervish in his essay in this volume. While I heartily agree with Schervish that religious giving is not limited to “giving that goes to congregations or religiously run organizations,” and that such giving should be understood as emerging from “discerned reflection on ultimate origins and ultimate goals,” my conviction is that such a discernment process should lead to the awareness that all that one possesses has been given and must in some way be ventured or shared. Schervish's focus on philanthropy, viewed primarily as the giving of wealth, constricts his vision and tends to limit the discernment process to a financial accounting process in which distinctions are made to distinguish “a conservatively defined stream of present and future financial resources,” “a liberally defined stream of present and future expenditures to support” a desired standard of living, and “a stream of excess resources potentially available for philanthropy,” only the latter of which is understood to be

available for “charitable purposes” (**Page 129 in this volume**). Thus, despite his claim that the process of discernment can apply to all our choices, he really attends to the special circumstances of the wealthy and lacks an adequate phenomenology and ethics of giving applicable to the common lot of humanity.

26. Paula Dempsey’s observations in her essay in this volume on the structural or systemic causes of debt are relevant here. Debt is not simply a manifestation of poor personal financial management, but often the result of structural inequities and societal failures, e.g., inadequate educational services, lack of employment opportunities, deceptive lending and credit practices, and especially the absence of universally affordable health care services.

27. In his landmark book, *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls developed the notion of primary goods as those goods to which all persons in democratic society have a justice claim. See *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 54-55, 78-81. The capabilities approach of economist Amartya Sen and social philosopher Martha Nussbaum represents a further development and modification of Rawlsian thought that explicitly recognizes that provision of the primary goods, or requisite capabilities for full human flourishing, is a matter of entitlement or justice, not charity. See, e.g., Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2006). For an explicitly religious statement of what social justice requires primarily in economic terms see United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (UCCSB, 1997). My intent here is not to elaborate a specific set of primary goods or requisite capabilities, the provision of which I regard as morally obligatory, but merely to indicate the scope and magnitude of the sphere of social justice.

28. In Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the laborers work varying amounts of time. At the end of the day, however, each receives the same amount – a living wage. The parable is typically given a spiritualized interpretation, but surely it is also a commentary on God’s intentions for all of God’s children to be adequately provided for whether or not, in the circumstances at hand, they have earned what is needed for their daily sustenance. See Matt. 20:1-15.

29. See, for example, the summary of recent research presented by Vassilis Saroglou, “Religion’s Role in Prosocial Behavior: Myth or Reality?” in *Psychology of Religion Newsletter*, American Psychological Association Division 36, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Spring 2006):1-8. See also Peer Scheepers and Manfred Te Grotenhuis, “Who Cares for the Poor in Europe?”, *European Sociological Review* 21:5 (December 2005): 453-465, and V. Hodgkinson and M. Weitzman, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1992).

30. My final revisions to this chapter were already completed when I discovered Donald E. Messer’s congenial essay, “More Than Random Acts of Kindness,” in which he endorses charity but also argues the need for social justice, claiming that these are not matters of “either/or” but of “both/and.” “We need to rethink certain religious practices and reappropriate biblical and theological imperatives related to social justice,” he claims, corroborating the observation he cites from journalist and social commentator Bill Moyers: “Charity is commendable; everyone



should be charitable. But justice aims to create a social order in which, if individuals choose not to be charitable, people still don't go hungry, unschooled or sick without care. Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice provides a place at the table." Messer's essay is in George McGovern, Bob Dole, and Donald E. Messer, *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 87-107. The specific citations are on pages 88-89.

31. "Wealth and Taxation: The Ethics of Stewardship," T. K. Thompson, editor, *Stewardship in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Association Press, 1960). I am, however, citing from page 5 of 10 of an on-line copy of the text found at <http://www.visionsofgiving.org/document.php?loc=3&cat=4&sub=19>.

32. *ibid.*

33. *ibid.*

34. I take Sondra Wheeler to be making a similar point when she writes, "formation for stewardship will be identical with spiritual formation generally." **[Page 111 in this volume.]**

35. *ibid.*, pages 7-8 of 10

36. On this point, as previously noted, I am in close accord with Sondra Wheeler in her essay in this volume.

37. Most public discussion and ethical debate about the justice of government economic policy focuses on fiscal policies. It is important to note that government monetary policies also exercise enormous influence over economic activity, for good and ill. For a helpful treatment of monetary policy in theological and ethical perspective, see John B. Cobb, Jr., and Herman E. Daly, "Afterword: Money, Debt, and Wealth," in *For the Common Good*, Second Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 407-442.

38. Other integral features could be summarized in terms of the general statistics regarding *state* and *national* poverty statistics, educational attainments, health care coverage, and other dimensions of material well-being. More poignantly, the statistics about *world* hunger, disease, poverty, and death would accent the fact that there is hardly anything ordinary about the experience of most Americans in the context of the prevailing global conditions for human existence. The disparities of wealth, power, and quality of life on the planet are well known, yet so overwhelming, that it may seem pointless to call attention to them. Nonetheless, if any other human being is potentially one's neighbor, then the fact is that most of our potential neighbors lack the basic necessities fully to realize their God-given capacities as human beings. We can hardly ignore this reality in our thinking about Christian giving as an expression of our calling to love God and neighbor.

39. Patty Stonesifer, in an interview titled “Evaluating the Gates Foundation: a Response From the CEO,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (March 22, 2007):52 (emphasis added.). Stonesifer’s view, which I share, runs counter to the claim made by Paul Schervish to the effect that current levels of wealth in the world are sufficient “to accomplish what the world has never been able to do before—to solve so many of its pressing needs for so many of its people.” **[Page 117 in this volume.]** It may be that current levels of wealth, if put at the disposal of the appropriate agencies, would be *financially* sufficient to meet the most pressing *material* needs of most people in the world today, but clearly other sorts of resources, as well as various sorts of systemic social, political, economic, and other structural changes are also necessary.

40. The latest available statistics continue to show a huge and growing income gap in the United States, with the incomes of the wealthiest growing the fastest. The latest tax data, based on 2005 figures, show that the top 1 percent of Americans, with average annual incomes well over \$1 million, now have the largest share of national income since 1928. Meanwhile, cuts in government services in recent years have had the most negative impact on those with low incomes. (See David Clay Johnston, “Income Gap is Widening, Data Shows,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2007.) The inequities that accompany this widening gap in incomes, and the corresponding and even more dramatic gap in wealth, are hardly to be remedied by traditional philanthropy. Only changes in taxation and social policy are likely to make much difference.

41. I am thus in basic agreement with Franklin Gamwell, who argues that all Christians who inhabit a liberal democratic society are under a general obligation to engage in political activity as part of their calling “to pursue the community of love and to act for justice as general emancipation”; see *Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

42. Micah 6:8