

A theological dictionary: G is for generosity

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

Enter the term *generosity* into your theological dictionary. It is not yet there, at least not in the dictionaries on my shelf. Most reference books ungenerously skip from “Generation, Eternal” to “Genevan Catechism” or from “*Gaudium et Spes*” to “Genocide” without “Generosity” slipping in.

Don’t blame the authors. They need something with which to work, and the Hebrew and Greek words translated as “generosity” rarely appear in the biblical texts. Since theology (*theos+logos*) involves words or language about God, *generosity* has to be attached—as in “the generosity of God.”

After entering *generosity*, we might also let it challenge stewardship as an economic metaphor. *Stewardship* does make it into the dictionaries and concordances, and it is a useful term. There are just enough scriptural references to provide texts for Stewardship Sunday sermons. But many preachments on stewardship are attempts to pry “time, talents and treasure” (mainly “treasure”) from believers who are presumed to be stingy. And the thesaurus says that *stingy* is the opposite of *generous*.

I first became uneasy with the connotations of *stewardship* when Pope Paul VI spoke of being a steward of the “the deposit of faith.” A deposit is placed in a hole, as in the biblical parable. The term *deposit* also implies locks and walls—a deposit is something to be guarded, as in a bank’s vault. One got the impression, listening to Pope Paul, that he feared the deposit of doctrines and gifts would run out if the church took risks or dispensed them lavishly.

Father Andrew Greeley, reading the same parables on which the pope drew, spoke of the “passionately loving generosity of God.” God’s generosity must “appear bizarre to our careful, rational, human calculations,” he said, and may even seem “mad, lunatic, insane,” for the way it violates such calculations. Such upsetting is the point of the gospel parables.

The plot of the 66 canonical books in the Bible, for all its zigs and zags, shows the generosity of God. The first line in Genesis is “In the beginning God created” the

cosmos out of chaos—something God did not have to do but chose to do as a generous expression. The last line in Revelation is “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.” Say “Amen” to that as a propeller of continuing generosity. Of course, one must take the zigs seriously, as they appear in Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and too many stories of God’s judgment. But these do not counter the Bible’s witness to the character of God as generous all along the way, generous with Israel and generous through Jesus Christ.

Hans Dieter Betz says that 2 Corinthians 8:9 contains a “concise formulation of the christological and soteriological concept of grace.” Its economic reference to “the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich,” is, except for the infancy narratives, the only New Testament reference to Jesus being poor. I didn’t know that. The developed doctrine of the *paupertas Christi* came centuries later. This text calls for Corinthians to be generous not so much because Jesus was poor “but because, here as elsewhere, God is generous.”

Writes Betz: “If, as Paul expected, the readers accepted the example (exemplum) of Christ as authoritative for their own lives, then honor was due God.” Not as a tit-for-tat, but because God through Christ had imparted the generous spirit. Years after Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Luke gave a glimpse of believers in Acts 2:46-47. They “ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” To the extent that that picture is accurate and its projection as exemplum gets realized, it shows all one needs to know about individuals and the community then—and now.

Notre Dame scholar Randall C. Zachman has traced what he calls “the free self-giving of God” through the Reformed tradition, in such figures as Ulrich Zwingli, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth. He equates this self-giving with “the generosity of God,” and gives us good reason to discern witness to it through history. One hopes that it seeps out into the lives of Christian people until generosity gives stewardship a run for its money.