

11 Eternal Truths of Fundraising

Reflections on how fundraising was conducted in the early church

Presented by Philip Hunt at the Christian Management Australia Conference, Sydney, 8th June 2011

As we look around our modern offices, it is hard to see jobs which are common with the early church. The Bible talks about elders, evangelists, stewards; it doesn't mention accounts clerks, customer service staff, webpage designers. Although might feel that Matthew or Judas were the biblical forerunners of present-day taxation officers and book-keepers.

But there are some tasks for which there is a very clear biblical mandate. These include preaching the good news, healing the sick, and (perhaps surprisingly) fundraising.

We find from Paul's letters that fundraising was included among the many tasks he considered appropriate for his great missionary calling. As Paul was concluding his great letter to the Christians in Rome, he outlined his travel plans and says:

Romans 15:25 Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there.

26 For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

27 They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

28 So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.

We don't know what the problem was in Jerusalem. But whatever it was, it needed money to fix it. In that regard, at least, it sounds like the kind of problems with which we are pretty familiar today.

As Paul, this great preacher and leader, travelled on his missions he proclaimed a number of messages. It is quite clear that one of those messages was to urge Christians to put their faith into practice. One way they could do this was to give to the poor and needy. So, Paul talked about the poor in Jerusalem, and asked for money.

That process should sound familiar to anyone in the fundraising business. Challenging Christians to do as they say, to put their money where their mouth is. Communicating the needs of the poor. Asking for money. That's fundraising.

Now we don't have an example of Paul's actual appeal. We don't know how he appealed for funds in the first place. There is no direct mail appeal letter included in the New Testament, for instance. But two things do come close. They are in the letters Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. The first is a set of instructions to donors. The second is a reminder letter to an unfinancial sponsor.

Eternal Truth 1: SUGGEST A SIMPLE METHOD FOR GIVING

1 Corinthians 16:1 Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.

2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with their income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

3 Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

4 If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.

Often as we organize our fundraising campaigns we issue sets of instructions which look remarkably like this. Paul gives specific instructions on how the money is to be raised. The Corinthians are to put aside some money every Sunday.

He also gives a guideline concerning how much to give - each in keeping with his or her earnings. Paul expects that big earners will be large donors.

Also Paul tells them how to remit their funds. He will authorize collectors in consultation with the donors who will transport the funds to Jerusalem.

Eternal Truth 2: PRAISE THE GENEROUS DONOR

Eternal Truth 3: DESCRIBE THE NEED WITH HONESTY AND POWER

It seems that the Corinthians must have made a promise and reneged. They had pledged to give to the poor in Jerusalem, but they had failed to fulfil that pledge. So Paul writes them a reminder letter. It takes up two whole chapters of his second letter to the Corinthians and is similar in many ways to letters I have seen written by modernday fundraisers to unfinancial donors.

Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 8:1 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,

4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

The first thing to notice is that, as Paul introduces his reminder letter, there is not a word about the Corinthians themselves. We might expect the letter to read like a demand notice.

"Unless you pay up in 14 days we shall take legal action."

No. This is not Paul's way. Instead of reminding the Corinthians about their pledge, he talks about someone else altogether. He praises the Macedonians for being such good donors. His tactic is very clear. His praise of the Macedonians sets a standard by which the Corinthians may judge their own performance.

Is it right to praise good donors? Surely when Jesus said, "Let your giving be in secret" he meant that we should not make a big show of our giving.

Does this mean that we should not give special attention and praise to large donors? From Paul's actions we can say that the answer is that it is OK to praise our good donors.

There is a big difference between World Vision praising its good donors and the donors praising themselves. There is a big difference between Paul saying how wonderful the Macedonians are, and the Macedonians saying it themselves.

The Macedonians did not issue press releases publicising their generosity. They gave secretly and without seeking glory. But Paul praised their giving in such a way that their generosity has become part of history. Even today, nearly two thousand years later, we still read Paul's praise to a good donor.

And it is justified praise, because these donors are really something special. Paul writes "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us..." (8:4). Do you have such donors?

When I worked for World Vision we would read or hear every day about hunger and poverty. And, it was easy for us to forget how deeply moving the plight of the poor is. We saw so many pictures of emaciated children that we could comfortably sit at our desks, eating our lunches, while poring over the latest pictures of dying children in food relief camps in Africa. Familiarity with suffering builds a thick skin. It's a way of surviving.

But most people have not been numbed by the perpetual horror in the same way that many of us had. If you went with a World Vision representative to any meeting and sat with the audience while a World Vision video was being shown, you would hear the gasps of horror as the images of starving children appear on the screen. Personally, I always found such empathy deeply moving. I was usually glad that the lights were out for fear that my own emotions were too transparent.

This was the situation Paul discovered in Macedonia. Doubtless, Paul had told the story of the poor in Jerusalem more than once. Yet, the Macedonians were hearing it freshly. It struck an empathetic chord.

Paul did not need to nag them. He did not need to plead, nor to beg. On the contrary, the Macedonians begged Paul to take their gifts.

Why were the Macedonians so responsive, while the Corinthians were not? I think Paul gives us a clue in the second verse - "their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are very poor."

Firstly, the Macedonians knew the joy of Christian living. Secondly, they were poor. Here is an essential difference between the Macedonians and the Corinthians. The Macedonians were poor: the Corinthians were rich.

Time and again, as we presented a picture of the poor to the newly rich people of Hong Kong and Singapore we heard the comment "We know what that is like". People who have known poverty, don't need it to be explained to them. They know what it is like. They want to help.

I don't recall any research done within World Vision which revealed that World Vision supporters are rich. Most can speak of experiencing real hardship. They know what it is like to fall on hard times. We don't need to plead or beg. They will respond with enthusiasm.

Eternal Truth 4: TALK RESPONSIBILITY, LEAVE GUILT TO GOD

So Paul tells the Corinthians about these excellent donors then asks the Corinthians to fulfil their promise.

2 Corinthians 8:6 So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

How do you suppose the Corinthians felt? They had failed to keep their promise. It was a promise to a special and greatly revered friend.

I suppose they felt guilty.

Is it right to make donors feel guilty? Perhaps we should be cautious about criticising the giving of others. We do not know everybody's circumstances. As I look around Australia, or visit the USA or Britain, everyone looks fabulously wealthy to someone who has seen the Third World. Here, in Australia, everyone has cars and even parking spaces! Everyone seems to own spacious private home.

But we know that real financial problems do exist with many people who live in triple-fronted brick veneer houses, and who have twin garages with late model motor cars. And we know that lots of people, even in a rich country like Australia, have nowhere to sleep tonight.

Let us take notice that Paul does not criticise the Corinthians personally. He does not say "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves".

Instead, he puts the facts as objectively as he can. If their consciences make them feel guilty, then this is God's Spirit working within them. God can use such feelings to urge them to respond.

It is possible that they have perfectly good and just reasons for not keeping their promise. In that case, their consciences will not be troubled. They will be able to explain to Paul. They will be happy for the fine work of the Macedonians.

We cannot say to donors that they MUST give. Nor should we tell them that they should be ashamed to be rich while others are poor. Rather, we should show the very real and factual contrasts which characterise our world. The contrast between rich and poor. The contrast between well-fed and hungry. Then, like Paul, we may trust God and the way He made human nature to do the rest.

Eternal Truth 5: GIVE GOOD REASONS TO GIVE

Paul has given the Corinthians an example of a good donor by describing the Macedonians. Now he goes on to outline the reasons why the Corinthians should also be good donors.

YOU ARE RICH

2 Corinthians 8:7 But just as you excel in everything -- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us -- see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

These Corinthians have everything. Much faith. Many good preachers. Scholars galore. Enthusiasm. Love for Paul himself. After all this flattery you get the feeling they would be ready to say yes to anything!

Paul does not shrink from genuine compliments . Maybe we think this is just manipulative flattery, but this is not shallow. This is an inventory of real gifts that the Corinthian Christians have demonstrated. Coming directly after the Macedonians it puts the Corinthians into a wider context. How do they compare?

Here is something we should never be afraid of. Let us not shrink from reminding people of all the good things they have and how that contrasts with the rest of mankind. Furthermore, if people have good virtues or have made great accomplishments let us not be so coy as to avoid acknowledging these good things.

IT PROVES YOU CARE

2 Corinthians 8:8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

We say we care, but a big gift shows we care. How do we find out if a person's love is real and genuine? Watch what they do. Their actions will verify or deny their words.

The Living Bible adds a gloss to this verse which may not be a good translation, but I like the idea it holds. "I am not saying you must do it, but others are eager for it."

A big gift from the Corinthians would be good public relations. So many people rationalise their own failure to give by pointing to the rich people who also do not give. They justify their own unresponsiveness by pointing at rich companies which do not help the poor and rich

churches which ignore the needy. People who are blessed with riches should give a lead and set an example with their giving.

JESUS DID IT

2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that there is no greater example of giving from the richness of one's possessions than the example of our Lord himself. Christ gave everything He had, for the poorest and most needy among us. Given His example, should we do less?

Eternal Truth 4 (Revisited): REMIND DONORS OF THEIR PROMISES

*2 Corinthians 8:10 And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.
11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.*

It is always easy to be enthusiastic at the beginning of a new venture. Enthusiasm is high. But as that first flush of excitement fades into the routine of getting the job done, people lose their commitment. It seems that this is what happened to the Corinthians. Paul reminds them that when the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Eternal Truth 6: SUGGEST A GIVING STANDARD BASED ON CAPACITY

*2 Corinthians 8:12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.
13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.
14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,
15 as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

The numbers on a cheque do not measure the generosity of the donor's heart. One day when Jesus was at the temple he saw many rich men giving large amounts. But he also noticed one old widow who gave just a few cents. Jesus said, "This poor woman has given more than all the rest combined. For they have given a little of what they didn't need, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has."

Do we judge the value of donors by the numbers we record on their giving history? Of course, numbers are important. Large gifts are important. They indicate a larger capacity to give and an ability to make a big impact on the needs of the poor. We should be glad and especially

grateful to have large donors. Furthermore, I believe it is right to give large donors a different kind of treatment to smaller donors. But this is only because they are in a different category, not because they are superior.

Eternal Truth 7: HAVE A SIMPLE RESPONSE MECHANISM

Every direct mail practitioner knows that each letter must include a response mechanism. I used to call these 'YES Cards' because in the days when I was writing direct mail copy I would always insist that the artist's design include the prominent display of the word "YES"¹. I wanted to be sure that people knew what we wanted them to do!

Paul has a "YES" card and a reply paid envelope all rolled up into one person - Titus.

2 Corinthians 8:16 I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you.

17 For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative.

18 And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel.

19 What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.

20 We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift.

21 For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of all.

22 In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you.

Eternal Truth 8: EXPLAIN HOW WELL ADMINISTERED THE GIFT WILL BE

Paul went to a lot of trouble to avoid suspicion. In all, he was sending three people, all tested and trusted servants, to accompany the money to Jerusalem.

He realised that when one is entrusted with someone else's money it is not sufficient just to BE honest. One must LOOK honest as well.

There is very little doubt that the Corinthians would trust Paul. Paul was their spiritual father. They loved and revered him. If Paul said he would deliver the money to Jerusalem, it is unlikely that they would have wanted further reassurances.

This is just good business sense. Paul was not unfamiliar with the ways of business. Even in his day it was probably common to have separation of duties in many businesses where money

¹ This was in the days before Optus commandeered YES.

was involved. In our offices, we make sure that the person who dispenses the petty cash is not the same person who authorises petty cash payments. Then the person who authorises petty cash payments is not the same person who replenishes the petty cash. These duties are separated in most offices. We make these separations, not because we distrust the people involved, but so that any person, even the most suspicious and cynical, can look at our practices and see clearly that we are honest.

As the stewards of other people's gifts we must never be slow to offer information about how those gifts are being put to work. It ought to be our policy to give out even more information than people ask for - so that we shall not only BE honest, but so that we shall also give observable evidence of our honesty.

Eternal Truth 9: FULLY ENGAGED DONORS ARE FULLY RESPONSIBLE

Paul is not yet finished with the Corinthians on this topic.

2 Corinthians 9:1 There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints.

2 For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.

3 But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be.

4 For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we -- not to say anything about you -- would be ashamed of having been so confident.

5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

It is quite remarkable how strongly Paul continues to speak to the Corinthians. He really does not hold back. He speaks very plainly and with firm authority.

He tells them they must keep their promises. They must live up to their earlier enthusiasm. They must not cause Paul to lose face, not to mention their own loss of face (although Paul DOES mention it!).

Why can Paul write like this and get away with it? It is because he is held in such high regard by his readers. They will accept his plain speaking because they love and respect him so much. This is what "speaking the truth in love" means.

Few of us could write to our donors like this. They would be offended. But it is sad that we do not have the quality of relationship with our donors which permits us to write in this forthright manner. Donors should be part of our work, just as we ourselves feel. And they ought to feel personally responsible for supporting it. After all, they ARE responsible - without donors the work stops.

This is a special feature of the World Vision child sponsorship programme. We ask a donor to take a special and personal interest in one child, and also to accept responsibility for the relationship. Sponsors do feel responsible, and they do have a sense of their obligations. It is OK to remind sponsors of their obligations if they fail to give regularly, because you will discover that most do not take their responsibilities lightly.

Eternal Truth 10: HAVE A PROPER PLAN

It is encouraging to note that there is nothing *ad hoc* about Paul's fundraising.

He has a systematic method for fundraising. Like so many fundraising plans it involves bite-sized contributions over a period of time. Paul's method for the Corinthians is "a proportion every Sunday". This is just like \$1 an hour for 40 Hour Famine participants.

He has a communications plan. He gives examples of other donors to establish giving standards. You should notice that he used the example of the Corinthians to encourage the Macedonians. Now the boot is on the other foot and he is using the Macedonians as a standard for the Corinthians. He uses advance mail to communicate the plan before he arrives. He sends advance men into the field to develop the plan.

He has a response mechanism - Titus, the reply paid envelope!

He has a mind for public relations. Paul wants the gift to be given to "show that you give because you want to, not because you have to."

Actually, I enjoy the irony here. It is not hard to read between the lines. Paul is quite clearly thinking that the Corinthians do "have to", because of their obligation and promises. They have a moral obligation which amounts to an imperative.

Paul says "I don't want others to think that you did this because I put pressure on you." Yet he puts the pressure on anyway. And he puts it on hard!

It is important for us to realise that people who want to give, still need to be challenged and reminded to give.

Is there any doubt that the Corinthians wanted to give? I don't think so. It seems that the Corinthians were genuinely keen to make a large contribution to the needy in Judaea. Paul believes that they continue to have this desire. Yet they still need to be urged to give.

Quite often we receive letters which say things like "If you spent less money on these direct mail appeals you would have more to give to the poor." It is simply not true. If we spent less on direct mail, we would actually have less for the poor.

This is because people need to be reminded to give. We live busy lives in a busier world. We may have the most profound and genuine desire to share our good fortune with the starving in Africa, but we shall not be moved to write a cheque until we are reminded.

People WILL give because they want to - but usually only when they get letters like this one that Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Eternal Truth 11: DON'T TELL HOW MUCH TO GIVE: DO TELL HOW MUCH IS NEEDED

2 Corinthians 9:6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

7 Each one should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 8:12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

Here Paul has uncovered a very simple but important Eternal Truth for fundraisers. The Eternal Truth is this: Don't tell people how much they should give; do tell them how much is needed.

If we allow people to make up their own minds, they are more likely to give gladly.

By all means, let's tell people how much it costs:

\$20 to buy medicine for one child in a Cambodian Children's Hospital;

\$50 to buy provisions for one starving Ethiopian family for this month;

\$10,000,000 to do adequate hunger relief work in the Sudan.

We have a responsibility to the poor to effectively communicate what the needs are and how much money is required to meet those needs. But that does not give us the right to tell people how much they should give.

Of course, there are some restrictions to this Eternal Truth. If people want to sponsor a child it is going to cost them the monthly rate. If you want to be a sponsor that is what it costs. But if someone wants to give us \$10 or \$1 we cannot say that it is unworthy or too small. Too small for sponsorship perhaps, but not too small to be useful.

If we believe anything as Christian communicators we must believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to work in human hearts, even in human hearts which are not totally committed to Him. Therefore we should be committed to telling people what is needed. There is much which can be said about the real contrasts between the rich and the poor. Much to tell about the needs of the hungry. If we do our job of communicating well, we can be certain of a harvest of generous giving.

Bonus Eternal Truth: THE RESULTS OF GIVING ARE GOOD

2 Corinthians 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

9 As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, everyone will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

14 And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

In many places in our world it is considered good luck to give money to beggars. The idea is that the gods will be kind to you because of your generosity to the beggar. It does seem that Paul has this idea in mind here in verses 9-11, and it is not hard to find scriptural support for the idea that God does not let generosity go unrewarded.

But I don't think Paul is really stressing this idea here. He is not talking about a cause and effect relationship. For to do so would be to stress selfish reasons for being generous. Such selfishness does not sit well alongside the selflessness of the Cross.

Although it is true that generosity reaps its own rewarding harvest I think Paul is merely making an economic forecast about the future profitability of Corinthian enterprise. To say that the Corinthians will always have money to give, is a little like saying that the Westpac Bank will continue to make money. It is a very reasonable forecast. So, given the Corinthians' fine record in profit-making businesses, it is very likely that they will always have money to give.

Paul then goes on to stress two more important and worthy reasons why people should give.

Firstly, we should give for the simple reason that those in need are helped. This is a clear statement of justice. The needy need help, therefore we should give. It is such a clear Eternal Truth, yet frequently overlooked.

Secondly, it causes other people to give thanks and praise to God as they see our Christian faith proved through our giving. Our words are converted into actions. And our actions cause others to be thankful and praising.

In many development projects around the world it is this very process which leads people to Christ. When I worked for World vision the organisation was breaking Sri Lankan families free from money lenders. We helped lending cooperatives to form and the people started to sense a feeling of community as they took control of their own credit arrangement. Judy Hutchison, in charge of our evaluation team, reported that people started to learn and display behaviours which were Christian-like. Later an evangelist visited such a community and spoke to them about the good news of Christ. Many people saw the connection between the saving words of the gospel and the actions of generosity.

The generosity and selfless giving of donors is one of the most powerful witnesses to the reality of our faith.

Christians give in selfless and unrewarded ways. In many communities, hip-deep in corruption, this kind of giving is revolutionary. People soon ask "Why do you do this without seeking a reward?" We are able to echo the words of Paul in verse 14, "because of the surpassing grace God has given us."

If we think, even for a moment, about the immensity of God's generosity - generosity so great that we use the word "grace" to more adequately describe it - we can see that it is also the duty of all Christians to give.

In the light of this reflection, perhaps we can understand why Paul is so firm-in his advice to the Corinthians. If, like Paul, we "thank God for His indescribable gift", our own duty to give is immediately put into perspective.