

Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010 391 pages.

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This is a groundbreaking investigation of the place that caring for the poor occupied in the early Christian movement. Bruce W. Longenecker believes that Paul the Apostle's exhortation to "remember the poor" (Gal. 3:10) has for too long been inaccurately exegeted and is in need of rethinking. He establishes a thick evidential base for its fundamental importance in Paul's thinking and hopes that it might also lead to "re-thinking the place of 'remembering the poor' among groups of Jesus-followers today, for those who think that the theological convictions and practices of the early Jesus-movement may continue to have some relevance in a world so very long ago."(x)

Based on a series of previous lectures and years of reflection on the subject, Longenecker calls for a fresh look at Pauline statements that directly and indirectly refer to caring for the poor. Appropriately, he begins by challenging the long-held position that minimizes the economic dimension of early Christianity as represented by Paul, arguing that in both academic and popular interpretations, the Apostle's emphasis on salvation all but ignores helping the poor. He admits that while it does not constitute the good news, neither is it "supplemental or peripheral" to it. Even when recent and contemporary writers survey the alleviation of poverty by ancient Christians and Jews, little or nothing is said about Paul. Longenecker is careful not to over-generalize by pointing out that while few would hold that poverty is of no consequence to Paul, they would excuse it as being inconsequential in the larger picture given that the Apostle had "bigger fish to fry." Either, they connect it exclusively to his fund-raising efforts for the poor saints in Jerusalem (Rom.15:26) or simply make broad claims that he, in fact, did care for the poor but they provide little argumentative basis. Longenecker's opening chapter discusses previous analyses that dismiss any essential place in Paul's theology for the alleviation of poverty. In doing so, he criticizes those who accuse Paul of misunderstanding a basic feature of Jesus' message, and preaching a different gospel.

The author thus proceeds to build the case that while the good news is not reducible to care for the poor only, it nevertheless is and was at the heart

of Paul's understanding of the "good news." He divides the work into two basic sections. First, he lays a foundation by examining the historical and theological contexts that Paul would have known in his approach to caring for the poor and second, he examines the place of the poor in both the Apostle's theology and in the communities he founded. The first one third of the book focuses specifically on the harsh economic realities of the ancient world with its advanced agrarian culture characterized by a privileged and powerful elite made wealthy at the expense of a disenfranchised majority peasant population and on the OT denunciation of "elite acquisitive manipulation" (29).

Since Paul ministered mainly in urban contexts, Longenecker's next step to outline the economic configuration of the urban population of the Greco-Roman world as a basis for interpreting the biblical data. He argues against the common notion that apart from Jewish tradition and practice, concern for the poor was virtually absent prior to Christianity (60). Pre-and non-Christian charitable initiatives did exist, albeit at a low level and arguably carried out with other than genuine humanitarian motivation. In doing so, the author intends to emphasize that too often historiography is done in stark outlines when "a realistic portrait involves introducing some grays among the black and white strokes in portraiture of the ancient world." (104)

The author then turns to the all-important historical background of concern for the poor in the Judeo-Christian theological tradition with Israel's deity on the side of justice and mercy, reflected obviously in the proclamation of Jesus especially in the Beatitudes, in his self-declared fulfillment of Isaiah 61, as well as in his ministry activities. Longenecker sees the same concern for the less privileged and disenfranchised following through in the early community of believers as it looks out for the well-being of its members, echoed especially in James where the poor hold a central place.

Chapters 6-9 exegete the place of the poor in Paul's theology and in the communities he founded. Longenecker is intent on showing that on this point Jesus and Paul are reading from the same script and that the latter stands within the great traditions of Judaism and the practices of the early Jesus movement. For Longenecker, it is not so much the number of situational letters but the "theological DNA" that points to a clear and uncompromising concern for the poor as integral to the life of those early communities. He includes a chapter that contrasts early patristic interpretations of Paul's words, "remember the

poor” with contemporary scholarship, making a compelling case that the current consensus needs to be abandoned in favor of a fresh interpretation. He then turns to providing an exegetical basis for interpreting the Galatian passage in line with what he perceives to be the earliest patristic paradigm as laid out in the previous chapter. Pushing the argument a step further, Longenecker seeks to show that in the rhetoric of Galatians, “remembrance of the poor seems to have been a prime attribute of the cruciform pattern of life” (219).

The remaining chapters of the book focus on the socio-economic status of those ancient Christian communities and attempts to reconstruct an economic profiling system within which Longenecker places the individuals named in Paul’s letters. His basic point is that Paul would have had differing expectations for members of the communities to which he ministered depending on their economic level, which would be congruent with his theology of the “Body of Christ.” Economic generosity was a symbol of, and a pointer to, a divine order that was at odds with but was now invading the structure of the world. For the author, early believers were “immersed in an overarching narrative about Israel’s deity.” (293) He wants to counter the de-emphasis on Christian economic engagement that has pervaded Pauline theology. Rather, he believes that “Paul interprets the economic engagements of such insignificant communities through a rich theological matrix” (297).

Longenecker’s final chapter summarizes his argument that although it was not his sole interest, the Apostle was genuinely concerned about the plight of the poor in urban communities, that groups of Jesus-followers were expected to care for those within their own group and if possible, beyond—a conviction shared with other sectors of the early Jesus-movement. These values reflected and were deeply embedded in Judaism. But for Paul, such efforts on behalf of the poor were above all both an “expression and embodiment” of the coming triumph of the deity of Israel who had made himself known in the Christ-event and through the Spirit had enlivened small groups of Jesus-followers. Those fledging efforts had laid the foundation for the unprecedented increase in care for the poor in the early centuries of the church.

The important contribution of this work is that it draws new attention to a neglected motif in Paul and attempts a radical re-interpretation of “remember the poor” by placing it in its literary, historical, and theological context. As

always, the problem with an approach of this nature is that no matter how much an author may issue disclaimers, the challenge of avoiding pulling the covers too far to one side of the bed inevitably arises. Agreed, it was not Paul's only concern, but the debate revolves around whether it was in any way his main concern. The case that Longenecker makes is weighty and compelling and if it can be seen for what it is within the larger matrix of Pauline theology, then a much needed balance is brought to reflection on Paul's writings that see more in him than doctrines to be neatly categorized. The reader is left with a refreshing take on Paul, not just as a theologian but also at least as a moderate social activist.