

The Deacon

Biblical Foundations for Today's
Ministry of Mercy

Cornelis Van Dam



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The Deacon

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Preface

It is a tremendous privilege to mature as a Christian within a godly home and under the tutelage of an inspiring pastor. In God's providence, I have been blessed with being raised in a Reformed church that was shepherded by the late Rev. Gilbert Van Dooren. He also taught me the diaconological subjects in seminary. Van Dooren understood what it meant to take care of the needy in the fullest sense of the term and gave leadership in showing the riches of the diaconal office. He embodied the meaning of *diakonia*, as the service of love to God's people in Christ's name. It is therefore in his memory that this book is dedicated.

My ten years in the pastoral ministry (1971–1981) have been of great benefit in understanding some of the important dynamics and issues facing the deacons as they seek to provide for the needs of the congregation in their care. While this book is not designed as a practical diaconal manual, the material it covers has many practical implications and consequences for both deacons and members of the congregation. I am thankful for all the feedback I have received from deacons while serving Reformed congregations. More recently the following experienced deacons from the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed Church in Burlington, Ontario, participated in composing the Questions for Study and Reflection found in the back of this book: Brian Kalte, the late Bruce Hartman, Peter Sikkema, and Peter John Vandyk, as well as Rev. Gijsbertus Nederveen. These questions are intended to facilitate and encourage discussion on all aspects of the office of deacon.

Many people stimulated my thinking on the office of deacon, and I am grateful to all of them. It would be hazardous for me to list them by name, lest some be overlooked. Those who have made specific contributions are noted in the appropriate places in this study.

An unpayable debt of gratitude is owed to my dear wife, Joanne, who is a constant encouragement during the long process of research and writing and contributed materially with her aptitude for proofreading.

I am grateful for the interest of Joel R. Beeke and Reformation Heritage Books in this project. It has been a pleasure to work with its director of publications, Jay Collier, as well as Annette Gysen, manuscript editor. Above all, I am grateful to the Lord God who has enabled me to complete this project. *Soli Deo gloria!*

Introduction

God's gift of the office of deacon and the blessings associated with it may not always be fully appreciated, especially in congregations that are financially prosperous and do not have many materially poor in their midst. However, as this book hopes to demonstrate, the importance of the diaconate goes far beyond simply providing for material needs. In order to get a proper understanding of the significance of this office, we must consider it within the context of the entire Bible.

While the term "deacon" has different meanings in various Christian faith communities, this book deals with the diaconal office as Reformed and Presbyterian churches have historically understood it in the light of Scripture. Stated briefly, deacons are those charged with the ministry of mercy to show the love of Christ by providing for the poor and afflicted.

Once we get beyond this bare-bones description, however, questions arise: What is the biblical basis for this office? Why is the diaconal office conceived of so differently, for example, in the Roman Catholic Church? What are deacons supposed to do, and how do they go about exercising their responsibilities? How should the poor in less developed parts of the world benefit from Western deacons? Is the diaconal office open to women? A larger question is whether government, welfare agencies, and insurance plans have made the office redundant in the Western world. Is this office absolutely necessary for the well-being of the church? Those familiar with the life of Christ's church know that these and related issues affect the most practical aspects of experiencing the communion of saints.

This study seeks answers to these and similar questions from the fullness of Scripture. It soon becomes evident that in Old Testament times there were no deacons—a situation that requires some explanation. The New Testament does speak of deacons. It is, however, striking that the Greek term for deacons, *diakonos*, means “servant,” and the related verb simply means “to serve.” In other words, the term, as such, does not necessarily indicate a special office. In order to determine what the specific office of deacon entailed, we need to move beyond the general meaning of the terms and investigate the New Testament context.

Since the early Christian church had the Old Testament as their Scripture, we do well to begin there and to examine how that part of God’s Word informs us of the principles of helping the poor and needy. Indeed, these divine principles are still authoritative for us today, are consequently relevant for ministering to the poor, and thus reward careful study.

Chapters 1 and 2 therefore consider the Old Testament background that is relevant for the diaconal office and seek answers to questions such as, Who exactly were the poor, and how were they to be provided for? What set God’s people apart from the pagan nations that surrounded them with respect to caring for the poor? Only when we have a clear understanding of the Old Testament heritage can we begin to appreciate New Testament developments.

Chapter 3 examines Christ’s life of service, including to the poor and downtrodden, and His teaching about helping the needy. Chapter 4 shows how the Savior’s principles were put into practice after the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers at Pentecost and seven men were ordained to care for the needy widows. Chapter 5 deals with the requirements for the office of deacon and the relationship the deacon has to the elder. What Scripture says about female deacons is covered in chapter 6.

Only after having first consulted authoritative Scripture are we in a position to judge how this office has fared in the history of the church. Chapters 7 and 8 record the good and bad developments of this office in the light of God’s Word. It is a remarkable testimony

to God's grace how He enabled the Reformation of the sixteenth century to recover the blessing of this office from the deformation it had undergone in the previous centuries.

On the basis of this legacy, chapter 9 explores ordination into the diaconal office, the length of service, and the deacon's relationship to the consistory or session of the church, taking into account the relevant highlights from Reformed and Presbyterian history. Chapters 10 and 11 cover the practical issues of how deacons are enabled to do their work and according to what principles and practices their work should be done in order to be most effective.

Chapter 12 deals with the issue of helping the poor who are outside the congregation, both locally and globally. The challenges are enormous, and this chapter endeavors to uncover the relevant biblical principles and apply them to today. Although we wish that the problem of poverty could be solved once and for all, the poor will always be with us in the present age (Matt. 26:11). We need the coming renewal of all things for poverty and hardship to be eradicated. Yet there are God-given blessings in having the poor to minister to. The final chapter shows how these blessings impact all involved.

The back of the book contains questions for group study and reflection. They are meant primarily for deacons, but also those who are not office-bearers will profit from them. They will help members of the congregation realize their responsibilities with respect to the poor, as well as some of the challenges and implications of the office, and enable them to pray more meaningfully for the deacons who labor in their midst.

Although the office of deacon is often undervalued and perceived to be of little importance, Scripture shows that this is far from the truth. It is a tremendous gift of God, and a church neglects this office to its detriment. May this book be a contribution to realizing that reality, and may it be an encouragement for all deacons who wrestle with what God requires of them in this high and privileged calling.

PART ONE

The Old Testament Background

The Poor in Israel

Ancient Israel is in some respects close to us, and in other ways distant. The people of God today live in completely different political and economic circumstances from their counterparts of old. However, in one important area there is similarity and continuity: as the Lord Jesus indicated, the poor will always be with us (Matt. 26:11). And they are, both in the free West and especially in the developing world.

The Old Testament gives valuable insights into the hard reality of poverty and its accompanying miseries. We must attempt to place ourselves in the sandals of those who suffered much so that we have a greater appreciation for those suffering today, as well as for the solutions the Lord prescribed. Understanding the Lord's concern for the poor and His expectation that His people Israel take care of them is of great help in grasping the basic biblical principles that should apply today. Such an understanding should also impact any discussion about the office of deacon. In order to come to this understanding, this chapter discusses the poor whom God singled out and specific legislation affecting them, as well as God's law and its purpose within the ancient Near Eastern context.

Identifying the Poor

The Old Testament has an extensive vocabulary for describing the poor. For our purposes, three major categories of Hebrew terms are

important. These all come down to us in English with the translation “poor” or something similar.

The first and most obvious category is the materially poor (*‘ebyon*). They lacked the basic necessities to exist. They were destitute, vulnerable, and without any hope unless they received help from others. The Lord promised that these poor would not be in Israel if God’s people would only keep His commands (Deut. 15:4–5).

A second category of the poor is the powerless (*dal*) who have experienced a sharp reduction or loss of their prosperity and social status (Ex. 23:3). As such, they were the opposite of the rich (Ex. 30:15; Prov. 10:15) and therefore were allowed to present less costly sacrifices (Lev. 14:21–22). For these people, poverty and helplessness may have resulted because they had become physically or psychologically impaired (Ps. 82:3; Isa. 10:2).

A third type of poor is the afflicted and oppressed (*‘anaw* and *‘ani*), who were intimidated and exploited by the rich (Prov. 31:9; Isa. 3:14). Also, they could be the pious who were unfairly treated by the wicked (Ps. 10:2; Isa. 14:32). In short, they were the victimized who were bowed down and lowly, with people taking advantage of their humble circumstances (Job 24:4; Ps. 37:14; Isa. 32:7). God had commanded that these disadvantaged people not be afflicted (Ex. 22:22–23), so such situations were contrary to His will. The original Hebrew term used for “afflicting” covers all manner of oppressing and humiliating people, including every kind of cold or contemptuous treatment.¹ These people were therefore not to be mistreated judicially (Deut. 24:17; Jer. 7:5–7). The Lord was their protector (Pss. 68:5; 146:9).

Thus there were the materially poor, the powerless, and the afflicted. But we must not imagine that these were three completely separate categories of Israelites. These words are often used as synonyms and can refer to the same people viewed from different

1. The word used is *‘anah*. See, e.g., Paul Wegner, “6700 *‘nh* II,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:449–52.

perspectives. The specific nuances of the different Hebrew terms for “poor” are difficult to articulate in English. It is important to appreciate this diversity. When the Lord expressed concern for the needy and commanded His people to take care of them, He did not have in view only their material needs, although these were certainly included (e.g., Deut. 14:29; 24:19–21). God’s care for the poor, however, went beyond the purely physical aspects of poverty. He included the disadvantaged, the downtrodden, and the helpless.

This broad understanding of who is poor has implications for us today. It indicates that we should not conceive of the poor in our midst too narrowly. To appreciate as fully as possible what being poor, powerless, and afflicted entailed in ancient Israel, we need to picture the primary manifestations of poverty within Israelite society.

Manifestations of Poverty in Israel

The Lord safeguarded the interests of the poor in different ways and gave detailed directions on how an Israelite was to respond to their varied needs.

The Peasant Farmer and the Landless Poor

These people were not totally destitute. Although they suffered economically, they were expected to offer sacrifices, but they were permitted to offer less valuable animals (Lev. 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:21). They were required, however, to give the same amount of atonement money as the rich, since all were of equal value to the Lord (Ex. 30:15). When the rich tried to take advantage of the poor, the Lord severely condemned them (Amos 5:11). Especially in the days of Jeroboam II (782–753 BC), small landowners were often reduced to poverty by the wealthy. God warned Israel of His wrath through Amos (2:6–7; cf. 8:4–6) and Isaiah (26:5–6) and promised restoration of the poor (Isa. 29:19–20).

The landless poor (Ex. 23:11; Lev. 19:10; 23:22; cf. Jer. 39:10), who were day laborers, were especially vulnerable because they were completely dependent on others for their livelihood. They could

easily be exploited and taken advantage of (Ps. 37:14; Isa. 32:7). God therefore protected these people in the short term by requiring such measures as the prompt daily payment of their wages, interest-free loans, and returning by sundown a poor person's cloak that had been submitted for a pledge so that he could sleep under it (Ex. 22:25–27; Deut. 24:10–15). Also, the needy could gather what grew of itself when the fields were left fallow every seventh year; they could harvest leftover grapes; and they could glean from harvested fields (Ex. 23:11; Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22). For the long term, God provided the law of the remission of debt every seven years for a creditor's fellow impoverished Israelite (Deut. 15:1–11)² and a Year of Jubilee every fiftieth year so that the land could be returned to the original owner (Leviticus 25).

The Widows and Orphans

A widow was without her husband's physical and economic protection and thus became vulnerable to being mistreated and exploited. This state of affairs is reflected in the frequent mention of widows with other vulnerable segments of Israelite society—namely, orphans, strangers, and Levites (e.g., Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 26:12–13). A widow with no sons or grown-up children had basically two options.³ First, if she had no sons, an unmarried brother-in-law could marry her (the so-called levirate marriage). The first son to be born would be reckoned as heir of the deceased's property, and he would continue the line of the deceased. However, such a brother-in-law could refuse to cooperate (Deut. 25:5–10; cf. Gen. 38:8–9),

2. Whether the remission of debt in the seventh year meant canceling the debt altogether or simply deferring payment for a year is a contested point. See, e.g., for the former and probably most likely position, David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 280; and, for the latter, Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 147–48, 167–73.

3. A widow could move in with an older child's family. See Ruth 1:3–5; 2 Sam. 14:5–7; and Hans Eberhard von Waldow, "Social Responsibility and Social Structure in Early Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970): 187.

and the option of more distant relatives fulfilling this duty was possible (Ruth 4:5–6). Second, she could return to her father's house, where she might wait for a levirate marriage to a brother of her late husband who was too young at that point (Lev. 22:13; cf. Gen. 38:11 and Ruth 1:8, 11).⁴

In exceptional cases, a widow could be wealthy and support her fatherless children, now considered orphans, on her own.⁵ It was much more likely that the weak position of the widow was reflected in the dire plight of the orphans (see 2 Sam. 14:5–7; 2 Kings 4:1–7; Lam. 5:3). As long as family ties were strong, it could be expected that widows and orphans would be cared for through a levirate marriage or by the widow's returning to her father's house. However, with the coming of more centralized government and the development of great economic prosperity, the widow was apparently often left out in the cold. The loud protests of the prophets about the mistreatment of the widows and orphans show that their position was vulnerable (Isa. 1:17, 23; 10:2; Jer. 7:6–7; 22:3–5; Ezek. 22:7; Zech. 7:8–14; Mal. 3:5).⁶

The Lord, however, provided for the needs of the widows and the orphans in His law. God warned Israel not to afflict them, and, if they did, His wrath would burn against them, and He would make their wives widows and their children fatherless (Ex. 22:21–24). Orphans were to be treated justly, and the widow's garment was not to be taken in pledge (Deut. 24:17). Widows and orphans were to share in the festivities of the tithe of the produce every third year, along with the Levite and the sojourner (Deut.

4. It is even possible that if she did not remarry (and had no children) that she would eventually lose her husband's property to his family. See E. Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws: With Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944), 241–42.

5. It is virtually impossible to isolate a case in the Old Testament where a child has lost both parents. An orphan is one without a father.

6. The issue of a widow's right to the land of her husband (see Ruth 4:3; 2 Kings 8:1–6) is debated. See, e.g., the discussions in Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 202–15; and Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, 241–42.

14:28–29; 26:12–13). They were likewise entitled to share in the celebrations of the Feast of Weeks (Deut. 16:11) and the Feast of Booths (Deut. 16:14). In all likelihood they were included with the poor when it came to the privilege of gleaning the edges and corners of the field (Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22) and receiving the produce of the Sabbath year (Ex. 23:10–11). The Lord reminded His people that He was the protector and sustainer of widows and orphans (Pss. 68:5; 146:9).

The Sojourners

When Israel left Egypt, “a mixed multitude went up with them also” (Ex. 12:38; cf. Num. 11:4). This multitude would have been non-Israelites who took advantage of the confusion to leave plague-ravaged Egypt in hope of a better life with Israel. Because these people were of a different origin, they would have been known as sojourners and strangers. They formed an important part of the mosaic of Israelite society. Later in Canaan more people of diverse backgrounds would become residents within the Israelite nation such as Doeg the Edomite (1 Sam. 21:7), Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11) and Zelek the Ammonite (2 Sam. 23:37). These too would be reckoned as sojourners. A sojourner (*ger*) was therefore someone who had settled and established himself in Israel but who did not really belong there because he had no blood ties. In this sense, Abraham in Canaan (Gen. 23:4), Israel in Egypt (Ex. 22:21), and Elimelech with his family in Moab (Ruth 1:1) were strangers and sojourners because they too lived among a people with whom they had no kinship.

Using modern terminology, one could say that most of the sojourners were like immigrants or refugees. They had left their original social setting and entered into a new, dependent relationship in a new social setting.⁷ Because they were non-Israelites, they

7. See Frank Antony Spina, “Israelites as *gērīm*, ‘Sojourners’ in Social and Historical Context,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M.

were not necessarily worshippers of the God of Israel.⁸ But the Lord was gracious to the sojourner. Because a sojourner had established himself for a period of time in the land among the Israelites, he was not called a foreigner, and he had certain rights and privileges. God wanted the sojourner to be treated fairly and like a native-born Israelite (Lev. 19:33–34). Such a person was often vulnerable and poor since he was usually someone's servant (Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 24:14, 17–21; Ezek. 22:29), although there were exceptions (Lev. 25:47). God decreed that the strangers who were economically disadvantaged were to be helped, just like the widow and orphan. They were to have the right to glean (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19–21), to receive food from the triennial tithe (Deut. 14:29; 26:12–13), and, as sojourners, they were allowed to eat a dead animal that had not been killed properly with the blood drained out of it (Deut. 14:21; cf. 12:16). Also, they could participate in the Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:10) and the joyous harvest feasts of Weeks and Booths (Deut. 16:11, 14). God strictly forbade the oppression of the sojourner (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33–34). Israelites had to pay them their wages on the same day and not pervert justice due to them (Deut. 24:14–15, 17–18; 27:19). Also, sojourners could save their lives by fleeing to a city of refuge in case of an accidental homicide (Num. 35:15). Besides these material benefits, God extended to the sojourner the privilege to become part of His chosen nation by receiving the sign and seal of the covenant—namely, circumcision—and, having done so, he was able to partake of the Passover (Ex. 12:48). Apparently, whether he was circumcised or not, the sojourner could sacrifice

O'Connor (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns for the American Schools of Oriental Research, 1983), 323–25; and Richard H. Hiers, *Justice and Compassion in Biblical Law* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 180n26. The 1984 New International Version (NIV) usually rendered *ger* as “alien” while the updated 2011 NIV translated it as “foreigner.”

8. “The *ger* must observe the prohibitive commandment not to worship other gods (Lev. 17:8–9), but he is not compelled to observe the performative commandment to worship Israel's God.” Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 399.

to the Lord (Lev. 17:8; Num. 15:14) but was not allowed to sacrifice to any other god (Ex. 22:20; Lev. 20:2) or revile the Lord (Num. 15:30).

It should be noted that since a sojourner or stranger can be defined as someone who had left his ancestral family setting and become a dependent in a new environment, an Israelite who moved or was forced to move from his original home to elsewhere in Canaan was, in essence, an immigrant. He could therefore be called a sojourner in his new dwelling place. Due to geographical distance, he had lost the support of his family. In Judges 17, for example, we read of a young Levite who had, at one point, left a Levitical city and had been sojourning as a stranger within the tribe of Judah in the non-Levitical town of Bethlehem. He left this place in search of another home, traveling north to Ephraim (Judg. 17:7–13). Another example is found in Judges 19:16, which tells of an old man from Ephraim who was sojourning in Gibeah in Benjamin, far from his family. Although the people in these examples were Israelites, they were strangers in a place outside their original social setting and family support network and were thus dependent on their new social setting for help, should it be needed. There is a similar example in the time of King Asa when people from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon, desirous to worship God according to His ordinances, sojourned in Judah (2 Chron. 15:9).

God's people were apparently not sensitive to the needs of the sojourner. The prophets warned against their mistreatment. Indeed, the oppression of the sojourner, along with the fatherless and widow, was one of the reasons for the exile (Jer. 7:6; 22:3–5; Ezek. 22:7, 29–31), but even after the return to the Promised Land, the warnings against the oppression of the sojourner, the fatherless, and the poor had to be sounded again (Zech. 7:10).

The Strangers

The term for a stranger (*toshab*) is often used synonymously with that of the sojourner (*ger*; e.g., Lev. 25:6, 23; 1 Chron. 29:15; Ps. 39:12). What may have distinguished strangers is that they were

less integrated or assimilated into the social and religious life of Israel than were sojourners. The stranger was forbidden to eat of the Passover (Ex. 12:45). He was sometimes associated with the hired servant and slaves (Ex. 12:45; Lev. 22:10). Such an association would indicate that he was economically dependent. However, a stranger could become wealthy (Lev. 25:47).

The Foreigner

The foreigner (*zar* and *nokri*) was attached to his homeland and planned to return to it. He was not a permanent resident in Israel as were the sojourner and stranger. He had no close association with God's people. This meant that there was a certain detachment between the foreigner and the native Israelite, which is reflected in the legislation. Such a foreigner likely retained his own pagan faith and was forbidden to participate in the Passover (Ex. 12:43; cf. Ezek. 44:7–9). The status of the foreigner was reflected in his being economically at a disadvantage. If he (*nokri*) owed debts to an Israelite, he got no relief from making payments in the Sabbath year (Deut. 15:3). Also, he was charged interest on money owed to an Israelite (Deut. 23:20).

The Levite

Finally, members of the tribe of Levi were scattered throughout Israel as teachers of the law (see Deut. 33:10; 2 Chron. 17:7–9). The Levites had been set aside in the place of the firstborn for special service to God (Num. 3:40–51). Because the Lord was their inheritance (Deut. 10:9; 18:2), they had no landed property for their exclusive use like the other tribes, and they were to be supported by the tithes of Israel. Such tithes involved all the produce of the field (Num. 18:21–32).

In spite of their privileged status, Levites were, however, counted with the poor and needy who needed the special support of the community to survive. They were clearly vulnerable to the neglect and abuse of their rights. The Lord enjoined His people not to forget the Levites, but to have them share in their festivities

and offerings and chief festivals, along with the other poor in Israel (Deut. 12:12, 18, 19; 14:28–29; 16:11–14; 26:11–13).

God's Law in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

While it is beyond the scope of this book to go into much detail, it is instructive to note briefly the context of God's law in the ancient world, for it highlights two important motifs in the Lord's giving Israel the law He did. First, God's law showed much more legislative concern for the poor and needy than the laws of any of the nations around Israel. This is not to say that there was no consideration or sympathy for the needy elsewhere, but only in the Old Testament do we find systematic legal protection of the vulnerable, such as the resident foreigners, widows, and orphans. In the ancient world around Israel, the legal rights of such people, insofar as they existed, were limited.⁹ In other words, if God's law was obeyed, the vulnerable were far better off in Israel than anywhere else in the Middle East. This reality brings us to a second important motif.

By obeying God's law, Israel would be a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6). Prior to their entry into the Promised Land, the Lord had exhorted Israel through Moses to keep God's statutes and laws and do them: "For this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:6–8). God's law was to be an example to the world of, among other things, how to take care of the poor and needy, the strangers and sojourners. But for that to happen, Israel had to obey God and so fulfill their calling, which included being a blessing to

9. See, e.g., Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?*, 175–95, 311–13; Norbert Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 34–38.

the nations (Gen. 18:18). So care for the poor and needy had an important missionary aspect. Israel's obedience in providing for the poor and needy would be a vital factor in attracting the nations to the living God. Their obedience would make visible the mercy and love of God to the vulnerable and underprivileged.¹⁰

Summary and Conclusions

When the Lord instructed His people to take care of the poor, He was generous in indicating who the recipients of such help were to be. Support was to be given to a wide variety of needy. He did not identify just the materially poor as those requiring assistance; those who suffered from a loss of status in society or had a sudden calamity that impaired them physically or psychologically were to be aided also. Furthermore, those intimidated, exploited, and oppressed had a right to aid as well. Even sojourners, strangers, and foreigners were not to be neglected. If they needed assistance, God's people were duty bound to respond positively.

The principles embedded in God's generous provision in the past are normative for God's people today. We can never conceive of helping the needy too narrowly. However, to appreciate adequately what this truth implies, we need to ask why the Lord was so magnanimous in His provisions. Answering this question will enable us to better understand God's generosity and our obligations.

10. See on this missiological point, Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 378–80.