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Mere Beneficence? (Work Station Two)

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Gary B. Swanson

In 1982, William Trogdon authored a best-selling book entitled *Blue Highways: Journey Into America*. Under the pen name “William Least Heat Moon,” an interesting story in itself that reflects his Native American heritage, Trogdon recounted his 13,000-mile expedition of self-discovery in a beaten-up white van named *Ghost Dancing*.

On his odyssey, he drove only the back roads and byways—the “blue highways” in his travel atlas—and avoided as best he could the broad superhighways and large cities of the United States. “Life doesn’t happen along the interstates,” he wrote. “It’s against the law.”ⁱ

The book depicts Trogdon’s serendipitous encounters with various interesting people—real people—in the cafes and diners, gas stations, and country stores of rural America. The characters he met along the way are colorful: a cowboy, a maple syrup farmer, a prostitute, a boat builder, and many more—in-

MERE BENEFACTANCE?

cluding a Seventh-day Adventist hitchhiker.

One day, he picked up this representative of the

Adventist faith a few miles north of Moscow, Idaho, describing him in stark terms: “The crosswind pulled his gray beard at a right angle to his face so that he looked like Curry’s painting of John Brown standing before the Kansas tornado.”ⁱⁱ

Trogdon’s chance encounter with the itinerant Adventist makes up only two chapters of his book. During that short time, the hitchhiker described with luminous passion his intention to go to serve as a missionary in Central America. He was on his way there, by as circuitous a route as Trogdon’s, sharing God’s love with anyone who would listen along the way. By the time their paths diverge and the hitchhiker gets out of the van near Kalispell, Montana, the author has heard the man’s life story and expresses admiration for his “simplicity, sparseness, courage, directness, trust, and ‘charity’ in Paul’s sense.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It's interesting that in his own unique list of fruits of the spirit, Trogdon settled on the apostle Paul's usage of the word *charity* to describe our brother in the faith, the hitchhiker. Though it appears in a book that is otherwise devoid of explicit scriptural allusion, it suggests a somewhat unexpected familiarity with Scripture in someone who, on the surface, shows no apparent espousal of Christianity. But his awareness of the connotations of Paul's use of *charity* calls for a re-examination of that particular word for those who call themselves Christians.

Most obvious, of course, is the recognition that *charity*, like so many other words in everyday discourse, has become bloated into a caricature of its earlier meanings. Today it is used most frequently to denote some kind of benevolent organization or practice in which is emphasized the support of worthy causes of many kinds. It brings to mind the work of the American Lung Association, the National Endowment for the Arts, the United Fund, and others.

This definition of *charity* is one valid—and positive—expression of human response to the needs of others. But charity—benevolence—can be reduced to nothing more than a perfunctory tax that is paid to fulfill some kind of fuzzy desire to “do something good.”

It's tempting, sometimes, to suspect that this is what is going on when celebrities become spokespersons for certain causes. Thinking cynically, we can almost hear their promoters saying something like, “You need to select a charity to promote. This will be good for your image!”

But, to be fair, this kind of thinking can be a temptation for anyone. Just write and send a check or slip a couple of extra dollar bills into the mittens of the homeless person for the warm, fuzzy sense of well-being that it can bring to the donor. Sometimes testimonies are shared in which someone says, “helping the unfortunate makes me feel good inside.”

As Trogdon implies, however, “‘charity’ in Paul's sense” suggests much more than mere beneficence. The word appears nine times in the King James Version of 1 Corinthians 13, each instance building on the previous reference to a final summary in verse 13: “[T]he greatest of these is charity.”

In most other versions and paraphrases of 1 Corinthians 13, the word *charity*, however, is translated into the word *love*.

It has been observed many times over that love is the central theme for many—too many—of the songs that have ever been written. It has been at the heart of the best, and the worst, poetry. But the writing of 1

Corinthians 13, inspired by the ultimate authority on love Himself, is widely recognized as the very essence of the subject.

And, in the short while they spent together on the road across part of Montana, Trogdon clearly sensed an unmistakable quality in the hitchhiker's life, a deep caring for the salvation of others.

"We have an abundance of sermonizing," Ellen White has written. "What is most needed . . . is love for perishing souls, that love which comes in rich currents from the throne of God. True Christianity diffuses love through the whole being. It touches every vital part, the brain, the heart, the helping hand, the feet, enabling men to stand firmly where God requires them to stand, so that they will not make crooked paths for their feet, lest the lame be turned out of the way. The burning, consuming love of Christ for perishing souls is the life of the whole system of Christianity."^{iv}

So, recognizing this kind of love for perishing souls in the hitchhiker's life, why didn't Trogdon simply say he admired his "simplicity, spareness, courage, directness, trust, and [love]"?

The most immediate explanation is probably that the traveling author may have been most familiar with the King James Version of the Bible. This is, after all, the traditional source from which, until very recently, the English-reading culture has drawn most of its understanding of Scripture.

Maybe it is also because he recognized that in everyday street language, the word *love* has become an even more exaggerated caricature of its earlier meaning than has the word *charity*. Maybe it is because his use of certain words is an intentional choice to travel the blue highways of language as well as geography, to avoid the smooth, multilane, interstate highways of superficial usage and the way they separate us with cyclone fences and noise-reducing walls from the land in which we travel.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways: Journey Into America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), p. 9.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ^{iv} Ellen G. White, *The Southern Review* (January 15, 1901).

