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A Compassionate Community: What did the Early Church teach that made Christians 'Lovers of the Poor'?

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Introduction

Recent scholarship has indicated the critical role that ministries of compassion had in church growth during the first five centuries. What has been lacking is an understanding of what the early church and Church Fathers taught that challenged the church to be compassionate. This article will look at the socioeconomic context(s) of the early church and then at the teaching of the church leaders on responding to the poor.

The first four centuries of the Christian era were times of significant church growth. It has always been assumed that this came about because of fervency in evangelism and church planting. While much of this may have been true, church historians such as Adolf von Harnack, in his monumental book *The Mission and the Expansion of Christianity*, have noted that the 'Gospel of Love and Charity' (*Evangelium der Liebe und Hilfeleistung*), was the main factor in the rise of the church.¹

But what were the teachings of the early church that motivated local congregations to be a people of compassion? There is biblical evidence and church history, especially the teachings of the early Church Fathers, which are indicative of the values and attitudes of the early church. There is also research on the social history of the late Roman Empire that shows the impact of the Christians on Roman society.

1. The Socioeconomics of the Roman Empire as the Context for the Teachings of the Early Church

While the social structures of ancient Rome have been studied extensively, there were no specific studies on poverty in the Roman Empire till 1989 when Cambridge Classics scholar C.R. Whittaker published a chapter

¹ Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, translated by J. Moffat (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 2005).

entitled 'The Poor' in a collection of studies published as *L'uomo Romano*.² Since then, Princeton historian Peter Brown's *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, published in 2002, has brought the discussion on the different attitudes towards poverty in ancient Rome to the forefront.³ Much has been written since then, building on previous studies on antiquity (not necessarily focusing on poverty) done by German classical scholar M. H. Bolkenstein and French historian and Byzantinist Evelyne Patlagean.

The ancient Roman Empire was a combination of agrarian rural communities and large urbanised areas, with a city at its centre. By the time Rome became an empire in the first century BC it was the first western city to have a million inhabitants.⁴ The Roman world was pre-industrial and its economy was mainly agricultural. Roman society had very short life expectancy (between 20 and 30 years), and nutritional deficiencies were widespread.⁵ Wealth had been determined by access to land. But this began to change from 8 BC onwards, with considerable urbanisation in Greece and Italy. Significant numbers were employed as artisans and in providing services. Many more were also employed as mercenary troops, infantry, and rowers.⁶

In the rural areas, able-bodied men could subsist by either growing their own food or gathering food from land not under cultivation. But in times of scarcity, many sold themselves or their children into slavery.⁷ Those who were not able-bodied or disabled, depended upon family and friends. When this support was exhausted, they moved away to places where they had no social support, and poverty then became structural.⁸

Various models of analysing the socioeconomic structure of society have been used. Theologian Bruce Longenecker adjusts Steven Friesen's non-binary economy of scale down to five levels and modifies the percentages at each level based on new research to describe Roman society:⁹

- Elites (imperial, regional or provincial, municipal) 3%
- Those with a moderate surplus 15%
- Those who are near subsistence level but stable 27%

² Cited in Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002).

⁴ Atkins and Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World*, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁷ Ambrose of Milan describes one such incident he witnessed, in his sermon, *On Naboth*. Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.135.

⁸ Atkins and Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World*, p. 5.

⁹ Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), p. 53.

- Those at subsistence level and sometimes dipping below it 30%
- Those consistently below subsistence level 25%

So, in effect, about 80% of the population in the Roman Empire lived near or at subsistence level or below. What such a scale does not indicate is the quantity of wealth that the 3% elite controlled. Peter Brown writes, 'Wealth had to be seen to be believed. What was seen at the top – notably, but not exclusively at Rome – was expected to border on the incredible.'¹⁰ Among the many examples he gives, he mentions the young heiress Melania the Younger who is said to have enjoyed, around the year AD 405, an annual income of around 1,660 pounds of gold.¹¹

In the Greco-Roman world, political status was more important than level of wealth. The critical distinction was between being a citizen or not. A citizen could be wealthy or poor. However, the poor who were not citizens were not thought of as a distinct social group. Citizens had economic benefits – such as landownership and political rights.¹² If some were occasionally poor, they were citizens who were perceived to be in danger of impoverishment, of coming down in the world, not because they were at the bottom of society.

So, any relief provided to the poor during times of crisis was based on political status. Those who were citizens received benefits from the Emperor or the wealthy, while non-citizens were excluded. For example, the great grain distribution of AD 58 because of a looming food scarcity was restricted to only the citizens. Moses Finlay, a Classics scholar at Cambridge, observes that the State was only concerned for the poor in Rome, where the poor had become a political force as a result of the grain distribution.¹³

The assassination of Emperor Severus Alexander in AD 235 precipitated not only a political crisis that split the Empire into three, but also an economic collapse which reached its peak by the end of the third century, when the currency no longer had any value. This was followed by the forced displacement of the Goths in AD 376 and the Battle of Adrianople (modern day Turkey) in AD 378, resulting in significant suffering.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, as poverty increased in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, the cities were unable to absorb the poor, who were mainly migrants and not citizens. Peter Brown writes:

The existing structures of the city and the civic model that had been associated with them collapsed under the sheer weight of a desolate human surplus, as the

¹⁰ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 16.

¹¹ 753 kilograms of gold. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² Atkins and Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

cities filled with persons who were palpably “poor”. They could not be treated as citizens, neither could they be ignored....¹⁴

It was only the Christians who responded to the needs of the poor who were primarily non-Roman citizens. Brown writes about these Christians:

They [lay and clerical alike] were themselves, agents of change. To put it bluntly: In a sense, it was the Christian bishops who invented the poor. They rose to leadership in late Roman society by bringing the poor into ever-sharper focus.¹⁵

2. The Practices and Impact of the Early Church

The earliest communities that followed Christ did not have to be told to be compassionate to the poor and marginalised. They merely did what they had seen Christ do and taught. They healed the sick and the crippled (Acts 3.1-10; 5.12-16). They made sure that no one among them was in need (Acts 4.32-36). They ensured that the most vulnerable in their communities were properly taken care of (Acts 6.1-7). They taught that the only sure sign of religion that God the Father accepted as pure and faultless (i.e. faith) was if the widows and orphans were taken care of (James 1.27). They said that one was saved by grace through faith and created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Ephesians 2.8-10). Ministering to the poor was just as important as having proper theology and missiology (Galatians 2.1-10).¹⁶ Their preaching of justification by faith was to be complemented by their demonstrating the reality of the Kingdom of God (Ephesians 2.8-10).

As the church grew beyond Palestine, they continued the practices and traditions that they had been taught. Dionysius of Corinth, around AD 170 attested to the generosity of the church in Rome, and wrote in his letter to the church about the practice of charity in Rome. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, quotes that letter in his writings:

From the beginning you had the custom of helping all of the brethren in many sorts of ways and sending support to many congregations in all cities. Through these gifts which you have been sending all along...you have eased the poverty of the needy.¹⁷

Eusebius was then to add how the church in Rome had also helped churches in all Syria and Arabia. German theologian and New Testament scholar Peter Lampe writes, ‘Eusebius can report no other Christian community with a similar economic engagement not only for “their own needy” but for many other Mediterranean cities as well.’¹⁸

¹⁴ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ See Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor* for an extensive discussion of Galatians 2.10.

¹⁷ Quoted in Peter Lampe, *Paul to Valentinus: Christians in Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 101. From the writings of Eusebius.

¹⁸ Lampe, *Paul to Valentinus*, p. 101.

Earlier in the second century, Aristides, the Athenian philosopher who became a Christian writer, described the social consciousness of the Christians. In his *Apology*, which he addressed to Emperor Hadrian, Aristides writes about the moral quality of the lives of the Christians (Apology 15):

They have the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself graven upon their hearts...they despise not the widow, nor oppress the orphan; and he that has, gives ungrudgingly for the maintenance of him who has not. If they see a stranger, they take him under their roof, and rejoice over him as a brother; for they call themselves brethren not after the flesh but after the spirit. And they are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Christ; for they observe His commands without swerving, and live holy and just lives, as the Lord God enjoined upon.¹⁹

Brown refers to the Christians in the Roman Empire (AD 300-600) providing for the needs of the poor as a revolution that impacted the social imagination of the times.²⁰ The notion of *euergesia* (good works) in classical culture as something that the wealthy did was a civic virtue and contributed to the general well-being of society. They gave to institutions like the city or the temple, but not necessarily to the poor. Some poor did benefit through the services that were funded this way. But the poor were never the focus. It was the Christians, and particularly the bishops, who were expected to be 'lovers of the poor', a category that comprised those who were poor (extreme poverty) and those who lived under the threat of poverty (transitional poverty).²¹

This ministry of compassion and charity had a significant influence on the social values of the society. Old Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann, highlights the growing appreciation of the

legitimacy of the cry of the poor [that] created a social awareness that the powerful were obligated to provide justice and protection for the poor. Through the work of the bishops the poor were given a voice that created 'an advocacy revolution'....²²

Brown refers to this change within the attitudes of the wealthy as being from patronage to *humanitas*.²³

The concept of the love of the poor, therefore, did not naturally grow out of the Greek and Roman ideals of benefactors helping their city. Christian and Jewish charity was not just another form of charity and generosity being practised among other forms – it was a completely new

¹⁹ Aristides, 'The Apology of Aristides', *Early Church Fathers – Additional Texts* (2003) <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/artistides_02_trans.htm> [accessed 23 June 2013]

²⁰ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 1.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, 'How the Early Church Practiced Charity', *The Christian Century*, June (2003), 30-31.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²³ Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 58.

departure from existing values and practice. Brown writes, 'It gained symbolic weight far out of proportion to its actual extent and efficacy.'²⁴ However, Brown clarifies, 'Classical benefactors were not necessarily more hard-hearted. They simply looked out on society and saw, above all, cities and citizens, while Jews and Christians had come to see, rather, rich and poor.'²⁵

It would be only appropriate to acknowledge that there was charity in Roman society, mainly in the form of alms giving. There were also examples of the extreme wealthy such as the senator Petronius Probus, who used his enormous wealth to bestow gifts to 'countless throngs of men' to ensure he held his followers.²⁶

M. H. Bolkenstein states that it was only in the early Roman Empire, around the late first century AD, that people saw the poor as being less morally corrupted and the giving of monetary relief to the poor as a virtue.²⁷ Bolkenstein states that this change was the result of what he called 'eastern influences', which caused priority to be given to the poor in the Greco-Roman world as it was in ancient Israel. He quotes Seneca in *Letters to Lucilius* (95.51) who says that the minimum moral demand on any man was to give a coin to the beggar and a crust to the starving.²⁸ Others disagree; Brown places this change at around late antiquity with the conversion of Constantine in AD 312 and as a result of the charitable programmes of the church leadership. Evelyne Patlagean states that it was due to the massive change in the structure of society in late antiquity and the major demographic changes that were taking place.²⁹

The impact of the charitable practices of the early church was evidently noticeable. The Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate, while on his way to the Persian frontier in AD 362 was appalled by the giving habits of his fellow pagans, when compared with the charitable deeds he had seen among the Jews and Christians. Writing to Arsacius, the pagan high priest of Galatia, Julian states,

For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us [that is from the pagan priesthood].³⁰

Earlier in the second century, the Greek rhetorician and satirist, Lucian of Samosata (AD 125-180), who was not a follower of Christ, wrote what he

²⁴ Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁷ Atkins and Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World*, pp. 2-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Quoted in Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 2.

saw in the Christians (Peregrinus 13), ‘They despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property...’³¹

3. The Teachings of the Early Church

It is evident that compassion and charity shown by early Christians had a significant impact on society and played a vital part in the witness of the churches. But what were the church leaders teaching and preaching that motivated Christians to be a compassionate people? The following review of the teachings of some of the early Church Fathers will address only the first four centuries, the formative period when the theology and practices of the church were being established.³² It is also recognised that some of the writings of the early Church Fathers are transcribed sermons. Recognising the genre of the particular text will help provide perspective on the content of the sermon as to whether hyperbole is involved in making a specific point.

Two documents are of significance during the first century. The first is the *Didache*, the oldest surviving written catechism from the late first century,³³ variations of which were probably used widely in the Jesus groups and churches. In the midst of teachings about what it means to be a disciple of Christ and a community of Jesus followers, the *Didache* teaches generosity and charity:

1.5 Give to everyone who asks of you, and do not demand it back; for the Father wants something from his own free gifts to be given to all. Blessed is he who gives according to the commandment, for he is guiltless;

4.8 You shall not turn away from him who is actually in need, but share with your brother in all things and not say things are your own, for if you are partners in what is imperishable, how much more so in perishable things?

15.4 And your prayers and almsgiving and all your deeds, do as you find it in the Gospel of our Lord.

In 1.5, the wording is almost identical to those of Jesus in Matthew 5.42 and Luke 6.30. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of spirituality are interconnected (verses 4.8 and 15.4 of the *Didache*). Response to the Good News of Jesus Christ obligated them to both worship God and be compassionate to the poor.

³¹ Lucian of Samosata, ‘The Passing of Peregrinus’ (2001) <<http://www.tertullian.org/rpcarse/lucian/peregrinus.htm>>. Alternative translation, ‘Christians despise all possessions and share them mutually’ [accessed 15 June 2013]

³² The review in this chapter has not covered all the relevant Church Fathers such as Cyprian, Augustine, and St Bede, among others.

³³ Also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, it was probably written between AD 70-90, though recent studies indicate that it could be as early as the 50s.

The second document of significance from the first century is attributed by some to Clement of Rome,³⁴ one of the earliest Apostolic Fathers of the Church and the Bishop of Rome from AD 92-99. His *First Epistle to the Corinthian Church* is one of the oldest extant Christian documents outside the New Testament and was read in churches along with other Epistles, some of which were later included in the New Testament canon. In Chapter 33 he exhorts the Corinthians to not give up the practice of good works and love, as God Himself is an example of good works.³⁵ God is the model of how they should live, thus demonstrating to non-believers who God is. Then writing specifically about the poor and being charitable (Chapter 38), Clement states what should be the nature of the relationship between the rich and the poor:

Let the strong take care of the weak; let the weak respect the strong. Let the rich man minister to the poor man; let the poor man give thanks to God that he gave him one through whom his need might be satisfied.³⁶

Clement of Rome highlights the social responsibility of the rich and for the poor to recognise that it is God who uses the rich to respond to the needs of the poor. While God could provide for the poor miraculously, He chooses human agency instead to be instruments of His compassion. However, the poor were to respect the rich for their generosity, while acknowledging God as the source of their provisions. The implication of this was that the poor were not to be indebted to or subjugated by the rich because of the assistance they received.

This tradition of generosity towards the poor would continue beyond the first century and the teachings of the Apostles. Polycarp (AD 69-155) was the Bishop of Smyrna and a friend of Ignatius. Both had together been students of the Apostle John. Polycarp writes:

When you can do good, defer it not, because “alms deliver from death”. Be all of you subject one to another “having your conduct blameless among the Gentiles,” that ye may both receive praise for your good works, and the Lord may not be blasphemed through you. (Chapter 10)³⁷

Polycarp clearly identifies that the giving of alms and helping the poor was a powerful witness to the Gentiles, the assumption being that it was something that was so different from what the Gentiles were used to seeing or practising. This confirms what Peter Brown wrote, that through the acts

³⁴ Modern scholarship has questioned the authorship of the *First Epistle to the Corinthian Church*. The letter is anonymous and does not include the name of Clement of Rome, but its style suggests that there was a single author. It was not incorporated into the New Testament canon but is part of the Apostolic Fathers collection.

³⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Christian Ethereal Library (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1885), p. 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

of compassion towards the poor who were not Roman citizens, Christians highlighted the existence of the poor in Roman society, who up to that point had been 'invisible'. By helping these poor, the early church redefined the understanding and practice of charity in Roman society.

Longenecker and Lampe have shown that the Jesus groups were a socioeconomic mix, with most members being either lower middle class or poor, and only some in extreme poverty. The groups also included some wealthy and influential members of society. What is evident from these three very early documents is that compassion and a concern for the poor (especially those in the Jesus groups) were a fundamental part of what it means to be a follower of Christ and a people of God.

The *Didache* and the writings of Clement of Rome and Polycarp are also significant because of their late first-century, early second-century dates and the fact that the writers had a direct connection with the first Apostles. These documents, in effect, establish the connection and continuity between the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles with the later Church Fathers.

For Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), who was an early Christian apologist, the qualities of justice and philanthropy were critical because of the social structure of the Christian community in the middle of the second century. He specifically describes the Christians at the bottom of the social ladder as including the illiterate and those with simple and unrefined language (*First Apology* Chapter 60), the strangers in the Christian community, and the needy who included the orphans, the widows, and the imprisoned Christians (*First Apology* Chapters 13, 14, 15, 67). A fund had been set up for them, which was filled up every Sunday at the worship service, and food was provided to them (*First Apology* Chapters 31, 67).³⁸

Justin Martyr continues the refrain on compassion for the poor from the teachings of Jesus, the Apostles, and the emerging church when he writes in Chapter 15, 'We, who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need.'³⁹ He does not condemn the wealthy for being rich. However, he seeks to transform their understanding of wealth. Rather than seeing the acquisition of wealth only for personal gain, he challenges them to use their wealth for the common good.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* is a literary work dated either from the first or second century, with the consensus being that it is from around AD 160. Some early Church Fathers, including Irenaeus, considered it as a canonical book. It was one of the most popular books among the churches in the second

³⁸ Lampe, *Paul to Valentinus: Christians in Rome in the First Two Centuries*, p. 100.

³⁹ Schaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, p. 219.

and third centuries and therefore was quite influential.⁴⁰ In the midst of the visions, parables, and commandments, it teaches that the widows and orphans were to be taken care of by the Christian community through assistance provided by the deacons. The *Commandment Second* stated:

Practice goodness; and from the rewards of your labors, which God gives you, give to all the needy in simplicity, not hesitating as to whom you are to give or not to give. Give to all, for God wishes His gifts to be shared amongst all... This service, then, if accomplished in simplicity, is glorious with God. He, therefore, who thus ministers in simplicity, will live to God.⁴¹

The writer urges that charity should not be complicated in trying to decide who is worthy of assistance, but in simplicity to help all in need, because that is God's desire.

The understanding that wealth and material blessings were from God and not just a result of hard work, was a common understanding among all the church leaders who wrote and preached about generosity and compassion. While they did not condemn the wealthy for being rich, they believed that these blessings were not for individual gain but for the common good. Being generous and compassionate was an indication of being surrendered to God and not worshipping the idol of money. This is seen in the teachings of the preachers and theologians below.

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215), a theologian, writes extensively about wealth, poverty, and charity in *Who Is the Rich Man That Will Be Saved?* He does not condemn wealth but warns against loving riches and not being totally surrendered to God. He exhorts the rich to give to those in need:

He [Jesus] bids Zacchaeus and Matthew, the rich tax-gathers, entertain Him hospitably. And He does not bid them part with their property, but, applying the just and removing the unjust judgment, He subjoins, "To-day salvation has come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham." He so praises the use of property as to enjoin, along with this addition, the giving a share of it, to give drink to the thirsty, bread to the hungry, to take the houseless in, and clothe the naked. (XII)⁴²

Irenaeus (AD 130-202), the Bishop of Lyon in Gaul, was one of the great theologians of the early church. He had been a disciple of Polycarp. Writing around AD 180 in probably his most important work, *Against Heresies* (Book 4, Chapter 13), he calls for a radical lifestyle, one of generosity and forgiveness:

Instead of the tithes, which the law commanded, the Lord said to divide everything we have with the poor. And he said to love not only our neighbors but also our

⁴⁰ Lampe, *Paul to Valentinus*, p. 98.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴² Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Second Century, Vol. II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001 [1885]), p. 861.

enemies, and to be givers and sharers not only with the good but also to be liberal givers toward those who take away our possessions.⁴³

Tertullian (AD 160-220), a Christian author and theologian from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa, writes (in *The Apology of Tertullian*, Chapter 39) about the lifestyle of the Christian and how the church should collect money and provide for those in need:

All here is a free-will offering, and all these collections are deposited in a common bank for charitable uses...for feeding the poor and burying the dead, and providing for girls and boys who have neither parent nor provisions left to support them, for relieving old people worn out in the service of the saints, or those who have suffered by shipwreck, or are condemned to the mines, or islands, or prisons, only for the faith of Christ... But we Christians look upon ourselves as one body, informed as it were by one soul; and being thus incorporated by love, we can never dispute what we are to bestow upon our own members. Accordingly, among us all things are in common.⁴⁴

John Chrysostom⁴⁵ (AD 347-407), the Archbishop of Constantinople, was a prolific expositor of the Bible. He preached extensively on the issues of wealth and the social responsibility that the rich had towards the poor. He writes, 'The rich are in possession of the goods of the poor, even if they have acquired them honestly or inherited them legally.'⁴⁶ He adds, 'Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours but theirs.'⁴⁷ In *I Corinthians: Homily 10:3* he says, 'All the wealth of the world belongs to you and to the others in common, as the sun, air, earth, and all the rest...Do not say "I am using what belongs to me." You are using what belongs to others.'⁴⁸ One's intimacy with God can be affected by the lack of compassion and charity. Chrysostom writes, 'When you are weary of praying and do not receive, consider how often you have heard a poor man calling, and have not listened to him.'⁴⁹

Basil of Caesarea (AD 330-379), sometimes also referred to as Basil the Great, was the Greek bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, Asia Minor. As a priest, he was known for his work among the poor and those who were underprivileged. In AD 368, when a severe drought hit Asia Minor, the result of which was exacerbated by the greed of some who held back some of the available grain in order to inflate prices, he preached a sermon

⁴³ Schaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, p. 690.

⁴⁴ Tertullian, *The Apology of Tertullian for the Christians*, Translated (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1889), pp. 110-111.

⁴⁵ *Chrysostomos* meant 'golden mouth', as he was known for his eloquence in preaching.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Walsh and Langan, 'Patristic Social Consciousness', in *The Faith That Does Justice*, ed. by John Haughey (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 129.

⁴⁷ Quoted in United States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), #2446.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Walsh and Langan, 'Patristic Social Consciousness', p. 129.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Donald Haggerty, *Contemplative Provocations* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2013), Chapter 11.

entitled *To the Rich (Homily VII)* which was based on Matthew 19.16-22, where the rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. In *Homily VIII*, where he addresses the issue of the drought and famine, and bases the text of his sermon on Amos 3.8, he states that the national disaster affecting the region can be traced to national sin, especially the neglect of the poor.⁵⁰

Basil's ministry involved caring for the poor and the ill, and he organised soup kitchens during the famine that followed the drought. The gates of Caesarea were overcrowded because of the assistance that he provided. Basil gave away his own personal family inheritance so that the poor could be helped. He built a large complex outside Caesarea called the Basiliad, which included a hospice, a hospital, and a poor-house. Not only was he involved in acts of compassion; he was also concerned about justice. Some of his letters indicate that he worked to reform prostitutes and thieves, and he criticised public officials who failed in their duty to administer justice.

In his blistering *Sermon to the Rich*, Basil challenges the rich about their attitude towards wealth:

Which things, tell me, are yours? Whence have you brought your goods into life? You are like one occupying a place in a theatre, who should prohibit others from entering, treating that as his own which was designed for the common use of all. Such are the rich... If each one would take that which is sufficient for his needs, leaving what is superfluous to those in distress, no one would be rich, no one poor... The rich man is a thief.⁵¹

He then bluntly states, 'You have not shown mercy, you shall not receive mercy; you've not opened your home, you shall be evicted from the kingdom. You haven't given of your bread; neither shall you receive eternal life.'⁵² Their lives were to be evidence of their faith. If their actions did not reflect their faith, then there were questions as to whether they were truly part of the Kingdom of God. So, his exhortation to the wealthy in *Homily VI* is based on Luke 12.18:

Come then; dispose of thy wealth in various directions. 'Be generous and liberal in thy expenditure on the poor.' Let it be said of thee, 'He hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor; his righteousness endureth forever.' Do not press heavily on necessity and sell for great prices. Do not wait for a famine before thou openest thy barns. 'He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.' Watch not for a time of want for gold's sake — for public scarcity to promote thy private profit.⁵³

⁵⁰ Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol.8* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001 [1885]), pp. 110-111.

⁵¹ Peter Gilbert, 'St. Basil's Sermon to the Rich', *De Unione Ecclesiarum*, 2008, <<http://bekkos.wordpress.com/st-basilis-sermon-to-the-rich/>> [accessed 12 October 2013]

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol.8*, p. 99.

Ambrose (AD 339-397), Bishop of Milan, was one of the most influential persons of his time and was a contemporary of Jerome and Augustine. His sermon *On Naboth* is a passionate commitment to alleviating the misery of the poor. Ambrose practised what he preached: at the time of his ordination, he gave away all his property to the church and to the poor, after seeing to it that his sister Marcellina was provided for. Some years later, as we know from his own account in the treatise *On the Duties of Ministers* (2.28.136–43), he melted down the sacred vessels of the Church at Milan in order to ransom captives. For this, the Arians, who were only too happy to find something to accuse him of, blamed him, but he defended himself by asserting that ‘the Church has gold not for keeping but for disbursing and for aiding those in need’.⁵⁴

On Naboth is the clearest exposition of Ambrose’s theology on the wealthy and charity. In it, he compares the wealthy to King Ahab and the rich fool, and he rebukes their heartlessness towards the poor. He develops three key ideas:

- The earth and its resources are the common property of all mankind;
- Charity and almsgiving benefits both the rich and the poor;
- Greed destroys not only those towards whom it is directed, but also those who harbour it.

Boniface Ramsey, a biographer of Ambrose, writes, ‘These ideas were commonplace in Christian antiquity, but rarely did other Western Fathers promote them as vigorously as did Ambrose in this writing.’⁵⁵

In *On Naboth* (1.2) he starts by challenging the rich about the fleeting nature of all wealth and possessions. ‘Nature, which begets everyone poor, knows no wealthy, for we are not born with clothing or begotten with gold and silver.’⁵⁶ In probably one of the best descriptions in literature of the depths of misery that poverty inflicts on a person, Ambrose then tells of an incident, which he witnessed when a poor man was threatened with imprisonment because he had not been able to repay his debts. In order to delay his punishment so that he could find someone to help him, he has the option of selling one of his sons into slavery. He then describes the torment. Ambrose wrote (5.21), ‘But the damage inflicted by poverty and the obligations of a father’s love for his family were in conflict, with hunger demanding the sale and nature urging its duties.’ Finally, he ends his sermon by saying (12:53):

It is not anything of yours that you are bestowing on the poor; rather, you are giving back something of his. For you alone are usurping what was given in

⁵⁴ Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 38.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

common for the use of all...Hence Scripture says to you: Incline your soul to the poor, give back what is owed, and answer him with peaceable words in gentleness. (Sirach. 4:8)⁵⁷

Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 329-389 or 390) was the Archbishop of Constantinople and was a classically trained orator and philosopher. One of Gregory's most moving orations, *On the Love of the Poor*, is an appeal to a Christian congregation to notice the destitute (especially the homeless victims of an outbreak of leprosy) in their own city and to open their homes to them in compassion. It was probably delivered in Caesarea during the years AD 369-371. Like the two biblical homilies of Gregory of Nyssa dealing with the same theme, it seems to form part of a campaign to win public support for the efforts of Basil of Caesarea to organise relief for the poor and sick, a project that culminated in the opening of a new hostel for the homeless just outside Caesarea during the early years of Basil's work there as bishop (AD 370-379).⁵⁸

In Oration 14, *On the Love of the Poor*, Gregory identifies love and mercy as the basis for responding to the needs of the poor. In 14.5 he says:

And if, following the command of Paul and of Christ himself, we must suppose that love is the first and greatest of the commandments, the crowning point of the law and the prophets, I must conclude that love of the poor, and compassion and sympathy for our own flesh and blood, is its most excellent form.⁵⁹

Gregory then appeals to their common humanity to offer kindness to those suffering: 'We must open our hearts, then, to all the poor, to those suffering evil for any reason at all, according to the Scripture that commands us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep".' (14.6)⁶⁰ Gregory's message is a simple one; for the Christian, love for one's neighbour, especially those suffering and in need, is the most direct way of loving Christ.

4. Conclusion - The Teachings in Perspective

Many of the teachings of the Church Fathers in the first four centuries of the church addressed the issues of wealth, poverty, and social injustice in Roman society, since a significant number of people were marginalised and living in poverty. Within Roman society concern for the poor was not common. The considerable philanthropy that existed was focused on the benefit of the city and the temple. It was the church and its leaders, through their teaching and concern for the poor, that brought the issue of poverty into focus.

⁵⁷ Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 135.

⁵⁸ Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianus* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 75-76.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

In reviewing the teachings of the Church Fathers on the issues of wealth and poverty, it is evident that they continued to teach what Jesus and the Apostles had taught. Their theology emphasised that wealth was a blessing from God and not just the result of their labours. Oftentimes, teaching from the Old Testament, they criticised the wealthy for having gotten rich unjustly at the expense of the poor.⁶¹ Regardless, the wealthy had a social responsibility and their wealth was meant for the benefit of all, especially those in need, and not just for personal gain. While some of the Church Fathers challenged the wealthy to use part of their riches to meet the needs of the poor, others spoke about bringing all that they had into a common fund so that everyone could share equally, as was done in the early church in Act 4.32-35. Undergirding all this was the theological assumption that God uses the rich to provide for the poor and those on the margins of society, as Clement of Rome had written, 'let the poor man give thanks to God that he gave him one through whom his need might be satisfied'.⁶²

Many were concerned about the abuse of the poor and social injustice. Ambrose of Milan condemned the practice of selling children into slavery to pay off a family's debt. Many of the Church Fathers were also concerned about the unequal distribution of wealth. Ambrose led by example. He gave away his personal wealth to the church and the poor, and then later used the wealth of the church to meet the needs of the poor. Basil of Caesarea worked towards the rehabilitation of prostitutes and thieves, and criticised judges who failed to administer justice, especially for the poor. Injustice and a lack of concern often resulted in the neglect of the needs of those who lived on the margins of society. Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa not only preached about compassion for lepers, the poor, and the homeless, but they also provided relief and set up homes for those in need.

During the first two centuries, when the church comprised mainly the middle and lower classes of society, with a few who were wealthy, the focus of the teaching was on ensuring that resources were shared, and that those in extreme poverty were taken care of. By the third century, as more of the wealthy joined the church, the Church Fathers challenged their values and often shamed them to be generous and address the needs of the poor.

At a time when much theology was being formulated, the leaders of the early church believed that, while correct theology was important, compassion and social justice for the poor were equally central to the Christian faith. All the teachings emphasised that the only way one could

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion on injustice against the poor by the elite and wealthy as being the cause of poverty in the Old Testament, see Rupen Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God: Revealing the Hidden Kingdom* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016), 43-71.

⁶² Philip Schaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Christian Ethereal Library (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1885), p. 26.

demonstrate that they were true followers of Christ was if they showed mercy and compassion toward the poor. As Polycarp wrote, these acts of compassion would ensure that God's name would not be blasphemed and thus be a witness to the Gentiles about the nature and character of God.

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