

Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society

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This volume contains papers from the 2005 conference, *Wealth and Poverty in Early Christianity*, held at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. The essays focus on the New Testament and the church fathers, though the two closing contributions address the relationships between patristic thought and contemporary micro-finance (Patitsas, “St. Basil’s Philanthropic Program and Modern Microlending Strategies . . .”) and Catholic social teaching (Matz, “The Use of Patristic Socioethical Texts in Catholic Social Thought”). The emphasis is on the intellectual analysis of poverty and wealth rather than their economic or social implications, but there are exceptions such as Serfass’s “Wine for Widows: Papyrological Evidence for Christian Charity in Late Antique Egypt.” Above all, the volume attests to the thorough *lack* of any uniform early Christian approach, attitude, or position on questions of poverty and wealth. While the general New Testament concern for the poor is evident, explanations of and responses to poverty vary widely as do the assessments of wealth and the wealthy.

It is first good to recall, as Friesen reminds us in “Injustice or God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” that the social structure of the ancient world was far different from ours: The economic system was preindustrial, and there was no middle class. Some eighty percent of the population was near or below subsistence level; both urban and rural culture was riddled with poverty. Poverty was a constant presence in ways that are alien to the modern, developed world.

The early Christian world directed a new attentiveness to this poverty. The Greco-Roman ideal of civic philanthropy—for example, building programs or public entertainment—was transformed into a Christian emphasis on charity to the poor (Constantelos, “The Hellenic Background and Nature of Patristic Philanthropy in the Early Byzantine Era”), but a tension ensued between giving to the voluntary poor (i.e., poverty undertaken from a spiritual motive) and giving to the involuntary poor (Mayer, “Poverty and Generosity toward the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom”).

This newfound interest in the poor did not produce a homogeneous response to the key questions of poverty and wealth. *Why is there poverty?* Possibly it has a human source: In the *Revelation of John*, poverty has global causes rooted in the political structure of the imperial system, or, following the *Letter of James*, we must blame the greed and exploitation of the local elite. Alternately, God may be accountable: The *Shepherd of Hermas* presents poverty as an integral part of the divine plan (Friesen).

How should the poor behave? Some urge the poor to fight to gain relief from their condition, but if poverty is part of God’s plan, would it not be better to tolerate one’s position and embrace poverty, perhaps relying on the generosity of the wealthy (Hasselhoof, “James 2:2–7 in Early Christian Thought”)? The poor and the wealthy could be in a symbiotic relationship: the wealthy providing material support and the poor prayer and opportunities for displaying generosity (Buell, “Be not one who stretches out hands to

receive but shuts them when it comes to giving ...”). Similarly, the poor and rich are foils in Holman’s “Rich and Poor in Sophronius of Jerusalem’s *Miracles of Saints Cyrus and John*.” Finally, the poor could be moral exemplars, such as widows for Chrysostom (Walsh, “Wealthy and Impoverished Widows in the Writings of St. John Chrysostom”).

Questions of wealth evoke similar disputes. *Is wealth evil?* Among the fathers, Chrysostom is perhaps the most severe critic of both wealth (Brändle, “This Sweetest Passage ...”) and Cardman, “Poverty and Wealth as Theater: John Chrysostom’s Homilies on Lazarus and the Rich Man”) and trade (Laiou, “Trade, Profit, and Salvation in the Late Patristic and the Byzantine Period”). For him, accumulating wealth invariably involves injustice because earth’s resources are a common (*koinon*) gift to which all have rights. Clement of Alexandria, by contrast, holds a more optimistic attitude: The rich have an important communal role and social obligations; wealth *per se* is morally neutral and can be an instrument of good (van den Hoek, “Widening the Eye of the Needle: Wealth and Poverty in the Works of Clement of Alexandria”). Clement, for example, takes the biblical exhortation to give away one’s wealth metaphorically as a command to rid the soul of desire. Evagrius Ponticus agrees with the neutrality of material objects, but possessions are nonetheless fraught with risk. It is not the possessions themselves but the thoughts and anxiety that they engender that distract the monk from spiritual activity (Brakke, “Care for the Poor, Fear of Poverty, and Love of Money ...”).

How should the rich behave? Should they honor the gospel command to give away their wealth instantly or retain it for the longer-term care of the poor? While the former has spiritual appeal, the continuing patronage of the wealthy was essential to early Christian communities (Moore, “Wealth, Poverty, and the Value of the Person ...”). *Should the Church have wealth?* Chrysostom and most others placed the needs of the poor above liturgical grandeur but nonetheless administered a church of great wealth and magnificence. The resolution seems rooted in the harmony of physical and spiritual senses: opulence could represent the divine and witness the value of the liturgy (Siecinski, “Gilding the Lily: A Patristic Defense of Liturgical Splendor”). Correspondingly, monastic wealth was held in stewardship (Caner, “Wealth, Stewardship, and Charitable ‘Blessings’ in Early Byzantine Monasticism”).

While few thought wealth inherently evil, the danger of wealth might be its psychological effects or unjust acquisition. Some would gladly give up the wealth of the Church, while others saw it as closely linked to the Church’s duty. Poverty could result from human social or moral injustice, or be an essential part of God’s plan. The poor might be immoral or just unlucky. Alleviating poverty was central to the mission of the Church, or, perhaps, a hopeless and vain attempt to alter the divine order. In sum, early Christian attitudes toward poverty and wealth are as conflicted as those of today. Like the poor themselves, controversy about poverty and wealth will always be with us.

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