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The Economic Ethics of the Apostolic Fathers

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This article explores how the early church's evolving social position and social responsibility affected Christian views of resources, almsgiving and charity, and administration of charity. From the first to second centuries, Christian views of wealth became more positive due to the church's rising social responsibility for the poor, where almsgiving and charity were elevated and seen as redemptive, and the institutionalized class of "holy poor" helped to administer charity. These developments in the second century constitute a significant trajectory from the pessimistic views of wealth in the apostolic era to the Church's political and economic power in the Middle Ages.

Introduction

This article began with curiosity about some of the intriguing economic teachings I have come across in the Apostolic Fathers, especially when comparing them in light of economic teachings in the New Testament.[1] Upon concluding the research, I came to understand these second century texts as falling in a transitional period of the church as it institutionalized beyond the apostolic era but had not yet approached anything like the post-Constantinian era. This article will explore the way that the evolving social position and social responsibility of the church affected Christian views of resources, of almsgiving and charity, and of the evolving ways that such charity needed to be administered. But first, we must begin with just a few notes on the historical situation of the church and the imperial economy.

The economy was largely agrarian, but by the second century, urbanization was drawing both tradesmen and the poor to the cities. Being pre-industrial, there was little innovation, capital accumulation, and spreading of wealth, which led to little social mobility. Social status was determined mostly by birth and law rather than education and achievements, and any mobility must have been facilitated from above. At the top of this stratified society were the elite, wealthy, and politically powerful who owned most of the property. They were expected to patronize clients and to contribute to public goods (arts, games, etc.).[2] According to Bruce Longenecker's estimation, about 82 percent of those in the Empire lived at or near subsistence level.[3] So, a large class of those in the Empire (those with and without citizenship) were perpetually dependent on patronage and almsgiving, with little hope of upward mobility.

The Empire held the public responsibility for addressing the needs of the poor. Being prior to the age of Constantine, the church was not yet elevated to a favored social position, nor did it bear systemic or culturally expected economic responsibility in society. The emperor and the elites were responsible for economic care of Roman citizens. But it was in fact only *citizens*, not the poor in general. According to Peter Brown, it was primarily Christians who addressed the needs of the poor non-citizens. "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."[4] The Church (alongside Jewish brothers and sisters) saw the gap in economic aid and felt mandated to address it. With the Empire serving needy Roman citizens, the church picked up the responsibility for poor non-citizens, or what came to be viewed as a general class of "poor" to which Rome was blind.

With this minimal groundwork, we will survey three themes of economic ethics in the Apostolic Fathers. First: general views of wealth, work, and business. Second: ideas about putting wealth to work in the realm of almsgiving. Third: the evolving identity of the "poor" as two distinct groups: the "economic poor" and the "holy poor." While these three themes will not give a comprehensive view of economic ethics in the second century, or even in the Apostolic Fathers, they do subsume most of the other topics that one finds mentioned sporadically throughout the documents.

Wealth, Work, and "Excessive Business"

In a society filled with so many economically impoverished people, many of whom were not citizens and therefore not in Rome's purview, church leaders felt a burden to address these needs. But to do so required means, so wealth came to be seen as a gift from God to be used for the good of the poor. Phrases such as the following are common: "you make rich and make poor" (*1 Clem.* 59.3); "the Father wants something *from his own gifts* to be given to everyone" (*Did*. 1.5); "the Master made you rich" (*Herm. Mand.* 2.4). In the late second century, Clement of Alexandria argued that God divinely appoints who will be wealthy, and that such wealth is a tool that can be used rightly or wrongly.[5] Those who divest themselves of all wealth, he argues, do not lose their innate desire for money, and have now added to it a desire to regain their wealth. On the other hand, he claims, "how much more beneficial the opposite case, for a man, through owning possessions, both keeps himself from being in distress about money and also gives assistance to those he ought to help!"[6]

Arguably, this rather positive outlook on wealth differs from the apostolic era, when wealth was viewed rather suspiciously. Jesus had warned that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven (Mark 10:25). In the Sermon on the Plain, he pronounces a woe on the rich (Luke 6:24).[7] The New Testament consistently warns against the temptations that wealth brings (e.g., Luke 16:13; 1 Tim. 6:10; Heb. 13:5). Although Jesus and the apostles did not condemn wealth in itself, they were conscious that it has an alluring power to steer one away from God: "you cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24). Wealth was also a temptation to take advantage of others rather than seeking their best interest. That is why the variety of words that refer to the "rich" were not primarily economic terms, but more so sociopolitical terms.[8] Those who were wealthy could be condemned simply as "the rich" because in the ancient Roman economy, wealth was the dominant means to power and oppression of the lower classes. Given this rather pessimistic view of wealth and the effect it threatens to have on one's moral compass, it is surprising to find such positive views of wealth in the second century. Indeed, Clement of Alexandria is anything but pessimistic, arguing that wealth is a tool that ought to be sought in order to have abundance to use for charity. I believe this brighter outlook on wealth in the second century was a direct outgrowth of the church's increasing role in caring for the general poor of society.

Contemporaneous sources such as Celsus, Justin, Pliny, and Tatian suggest that a sufficient number of Christians lived above subsistence level and could participate in charity.[9] House churches, of which many cities had more than one, were sponsored by wealthy patrons with homes that could hold around 20-40 people.[10] But even the poor could generate some surplus to give away.[11] The *Didache* warns not to take but then later refuse to give (4.5), which most likely refers to the poor who usually received, but sometimes were able to give. Sources mention ways that the poor would generate a small surplus to give away: fasting, imprisoning oneself, and enslaving oneself.[12]

A positive view of wealth should logically entail a positive view of work, which is one way of generating wealth. There are only a few explicit mentions of work in the main second-century sources, yet they are positive. The *Didache* taught that laboring with one's hands will give a "ransom for your sins" (4.6), a saying that is shared with the Epistle of Barnabas (19.10).[13] The *Didache* also taught that brothers traveling through the community should only be allowed to join permanently if they were willing to work (12.3), echoing Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). This positive attitude toward work contrasts with the typical view of Greek and Roman elites, who viewed work negatively as a distraction from a life of leisure and the development of virtue.[14] For Christians, work was a path *to* virtue rather than a distraction from it.

"Excessive work" or business, however, especially with the wrong motive, is spiritually dangerous. The Shepherd of Hermas decries excessive business throughout the document, mainly for two reasons.[15] First, it divides one's mind (*dipsuchia*) between God and money, and Jesus had warned that one cannot serve both masters (Luke 16:13). When persecution comes, they deny the Lord because of their "riches and business affairs" (*Herm. Vis.* 3.6.5–7). Those "who are involved in business a great deal also sin a great deal, since they are distracted by their business and do not serve their own Lord in anything" (53.5).[16] Second, getting ahead in this Roman economy meant currying favor with political figures or elite contacts.[17] In Hermas's words, the social climbers are "mixed up with business, and wealth, and heathen friendships" (*Herm. Mand.* 10.1.4). The result is that they become "distinguished among the heathen" and live pridefully among them, abandoning their faith and the Christian community (*Sim.* 8.9.1–3; cf. 8.8.1–2; 9.20.2; 9.26.3; *Vis.* 3.6.2–5). But even for Hermas, work is not all bad. "If people are engaged in just one business, they are able to serve the Lord, for their mind will not be corrupted and turned away from the Lord" (*Sim.* 4.47). Hermas exhorts believers to "Work at what is good" and then give to the poor (*Mand.* 2.4).

So, second-century church leaders felt an increasing burden to care for the poor that the Empire ignored. To address this need required wealth, so church leaders began to teach that excess resources were not inherently evil, but rather a tool to use to address social ills. Even the poor, who were usually in need themselves, could store up some meager means by which to contribute to the needs of the poor. This leads us to our second topic: views of almsgiving in the second century, including the effect that almsgiving has on the soul of the person.

Almsgiving in the Second Century

Wealth is a gift, but the rich cannot indulge themselves. To maintain this balanced message, second-century leaders emphasized almsgiving as supremely necessary and spiritually beneficial. Statements such as the following are pervasive: "support the poor" (*1 Clem.* 38.2); "give to everyone who asks you" (*Did.* 1.5; *Barn.* 19.11); "the one who provides to those in need" is an "imitator of God" (*Diogn*. 10.6).[18] The emphasis on almsgiving and aid stemmed, no doubt, from the New Testament and especially from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., Matt. 5:42; 6:21). And sources such as Aristides and Justin Martyr bear witness that Christians did heed this call. Aristides wrote that Christians "do not despise the widow, nor oppress the orphan; and he that has, gives ungrudgingly to support one who is in need. If they see a stranger, they take him under their roof, and rejoice over him as over a very brother.…"[19]

Calls to almsgiving were pervasive, but even the act itself was elevated in second-century sources. A key passage comes from *2 Clement* 16.4 (emphasis added):

> Almsgiving, therefore, is *good as repentance from sin*. Fasting is better than prayer, while *almsgiving is better than both*, and love covers a multitude of sins, while prayer arising from a good conscience delivers one from death. Blessed is everyone who is found full of these, for charitable giving *relieves the burden of sin*.

This passage teaches the preeminence of almsgiving and its redemptive nature. Almsgiving is elevated above prayer and fasting, two other pillars of Judeo-Christian praxis. The reason may have been the increasing social responsibility that the church was taking on, as well as the need to balance the more recent positive view of wealth. Almsgiving is also redemptive in some way, being "good as repentance from sin" and relieving the "burden of sin." Polycarp likewise wrote that almsgiving "delivers one from death" (*Phil.* 10.2),[20] while Clement of Alexandria wrote that through almsgiving "you buy incorruption with money."[21] But in what ways, exactly, is it redemptive? First, almsgiving relieves the burden of the sins of avarice and covetousness, which are denounced throughout the Apostolic Fathers. Purging oneself of surplus wealth removes the temptation to hoard and idolize it.[22] Second, when the rich give, the poor provide effective prayers on behalf of their benefactors (*Herm. Sim.* 2.1.5; cf. *1 Clem.* 38.2).

Another way in which almsgiving is presented as redemptive is by associating it with the resurrection. For Ignatius, those who care financially for the poor and needy would "rise up" in the resurrection (*Smyrn.* 6.2–7.2). For Polycarp, avoiding avarice and other sins is a condition of future resurrection (*Phil.* 2.2). Stating the inverse, *Herm. Mand.* 12.2.1–2 asserts that covetousness leads God's people to death. So almsgiving provides some sort of assurance that one is on the path toward resurrection. The resurrection also incentivizes believers to part with some or all of their surplus goods now, because soon they will receive their great spiritual inheritance.[23] Interestingly, two second-century groups who denied the resurrection shirked from almsgiving and discouraged it. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus discourages his disciples from almsgiving because it would harm their spirits (*Gos. Thom*. 14:1–5).[24] Docetists, according to Ignatius, also discouraged the practice. He wrote, they "have no concern for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed …" (*Smyrn*. 6.2). So, it seems that the hope of the resurrection led orthodox leaders to invest in an embodied faith, one that addressed the concrete realities of the body such as hunger, clothing, and shelter. But groups that denied the resurrection of Christ or of humanity in general drew away from the concrete needs of the body.

In summary, almsgiving in the second century was promoted, elevated, and viewed as redemptive, especially insofar as it affirmed the concrete realities of the bodies that one day would participate in the resurrection.

Addressing the New Class of the "Holy Poor"

Almsgiving became more complicated in the second century because of the rise of a new class of poor, what Peter Brown dubbed the "holy poor," in distinction from the general mass of the economic poor.[25] During the second and third centuries, bishops were becoming overseers of collective funds to distribute to the economic poor. But these bishops themselves took on the role of "holy poor" and relied on monetary gifts themselves. The same was happening with itinerant teachers and ministers, and with monastics in the East. Certain Christians could escape the drudgery of real work (motivation aside) by entering the class of "holy poor" and living on the charity of others. Two factors giving rise to this category were Paul's claim to monetary support for apostles and elders (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:11; 1 Tim. 5:17), as well as the rising responsibility of the bishop in the Roman Empire to care for the poor that Rome ignored. Christian teaching started accounting for how resources related to this class, and how to use the economic ethics of the "holy poor" as a litmus test of their genuineness.

The most developed instructions from the Apostolic Fathers are found in the *Didache*. The first part of the document, called the Two Ways, advocates charity and almsgiving in an unconditional way, while also warning those who would take without being in real need (1.5). This warning in the first few lines of the document implies the presence of charlatans among those who sought aid. Givers, then, must be prudent; 1.6 cites an unknown proverb: "Let your alms sweat in your hands until you know to whom you should give." Still in the Two Ways section is the instruction to work, give, and "share everything with your brother" (4.5–8). It is possible that this traditional material could have developed within the context of leaders trying to address how to handle claims to financial support from the "holy poor."

Later, the *Didache* instructs how to engage economically with itinerant apostles and prophets. First, if one teaches what is not in accord with the teaching in the *Didache*, then he is a false prophet (11.2). This would include all the teachings on money and work. Second, if he takes advantage of the church community's hospitality by staying more than two days in a host's home, he is a false prophet (11.3–5). Third, if he demands a meal in the Spirit and then eats it, he is a false prophet (11.9). Fourth, if a prophet demands money in the Spirit, he is a fraud. But if he commands believers to give the money to the poor, "let no one judge him" (11.12).[26] Fifth, if prophets settle in the community, they ought to receive the firstfruits of food and livestock, "for [the prophets] are your high priests. If there are no prophets, they should give this surplus to the poor" (13.4). If any of the "economic poor" wants to join the community, they may stay three days, but any longer requires working for their living (12.1–5). Other sources such as Lucian documented charlatans joining the "holy poor" to take money from generous Christians. Lucian wrote that if these frauds could deceive a Christian community, he would "quickly acquire sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk."[27] Celsus viewed Jesus and the apostles in this way.[28]

The economic ethics of the "holy poor" were also used as a criterion for holding official positions. Valens was ousted as a presbyter because he "fails to understand the office that was entrusted to him" (Polycarp, *Phil.* 11.1–2) and loved money. This may sound like Valens was indulging himself. But more likely he had joined the presbytery with false motives, seeking to escape the harder life of labor, or he was failing at his ecclesial duty to distribute funds effectively and honestly to the economic poor. Polycarp also required that presbyters and deacons be free from the love of money (*Phil.* 5.2), and that presbyters care for the poor and needy (*Phil.* 6.1). Polycarp in this context implies that avarice and failure to care for the poor are a mark of false brothers and hypocrites.

In summary, the new class of the "holy poor" complicated the call to almsgiving by becoming a class that both received support and distributed it. This class was scrutinized heavily for the way in which they solicited and received aid, and for their trustworthiness in distributing the funds appropriately. The economic ethics of the holy poor provided a litmus test for Christian communities to discern their genuineness. And since almsgiving had risen to a preeminent position in Christian praxis for many believers, it was a grave sin of the first order to take advantage of Christian charity or to prove derelict in one's duties to administer the common funds with integrity.

Conclusion

We have concluded that from the first century to the second, Christian views of wealth became more positive due to the church's rising social responsibility for the poor in general. Almsgiving was elevated to a preeminent place in praxis, and the rich were promised redemptive benefits for practicing charity faithfully. The church's increasing role in caring for the poor generated a more institutionalized class of "holy poor" that collected and administered common funds. These developments in the second century provide part of a significant trajectory from the pessimistic views of wealth in the apostolic era to the Church's political and economic power in the Middle Ages.

Only a few words are possible on how these conclusions help us think better about ancient economic ethics and their application for today. First, the economic teachings of each era of the church were inevitably affected by the political and social situation of that era. These teachings must be understood within their own contexts before any attempt is made to apply those teachings to today's political and economic systems. Second, this descriptive, historical work is a necessary precursor to any sort of normative work to claim ancient economic ethics as our own. For example, should wealth be viewed pessimistically or positively? We must first understand why each group viewed wealth in such a way; then we can ask ourselves whether our situation is closer to one group or the other; then we can ask if their viewpoint would be effective in our situation. In the case of a view of wealth, the social situation of the church is perhaps stronger today than it was in the second century (although weaker than it was in the Middle Ages), so we may have good reason to view wealth positively as a tool to be used for the good of the poor. Yet we can also heed the warnings of the first-century mindset, that riches often come at the expense of the poor and can be used to ignore or even exploit them.

Notes

1. I want to thank the Acton Institute for providing a research grant to fund the papers in this symposium, including my own. I also thank Sarah Hurlin for her research assistance and Jacob Cerone for his insightful assistance on some perplexing passages in the Apostolic Fathers. Finally, I thank my fellow participants and researchers who participated in this symposium. I learned much from their papers and also benefitted greatly from their further discussion and dialogue on the topic.

2. For this general picture of the economy, see Abigail Graham and Antony Kamm, *The Romans: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 145–76; D. F. Watson, "Roman Social Classes," in *DNTB*, 999–1002; John E. Staumbaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 63–126; K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 63–130.

3. Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 53.

4. Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures (London: University Press of New England, 2002), 9. John Taylor makes the same point, citing further sources, in his essay in this symposium.

5. Clement of Alexandria, *Salvation of the Rich* 14 in *ANF* 2:595.

6. Clement of Alexandria, *Salvation of the Rich* 13, my translation.

7. According to Carolyn Osiek, a blessing bestowed on the "rich" cannot be found prior to the Shepherd of Hermas in the second century. Carolyn Osiek, *Rich and Poor in the Shepherd of Hermas: An Exegetical-Social Investigation* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1983), 88.

8. Todd A. Scacewater, "The Dynamic and Righteous Use of Wealth in James 5:1–6," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 20, no. 2 (2017): 229–31.

9. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.55; Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume II: Books 8–10, Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 59:291; Justin, *Second Apology* 10; Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 32. See further evidence in Osiek, *Rich and Poor*, 91–111.

10. Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 62–228.

11. See Denise Kimber Buell, "'Be not one who stretches out hands to receive but shuts them when it comes to giving': Envisioning Christian Charity When Both Donors and Recipients are Poor," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 37–47.

12. *Herm. Sim.* 5.3.7; *1 Clem.* 55.2; *Did.* 13.3–7.

13. My translation of the Greek *ean echēs dia tōn cheirōn sou dōseis lytrōsin hamartiōn sou*.

14. Plato, *Republic* 6.495d–e; Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1278a; Cicero, *On Duty* 1.150. Although, Cato lauded farmers and traders (*On Agriculture*, preface).

15. The word translated "business" throughout the *Shepherd of Hermas* is in some cases *pragmateia*, "activity, occupation," or *praxis*, "activity, function, undertaking (in the sense of ordinary life business)." But *Shepherd* connects this excessive activity to becoming wealthy, so it does seem to refer at least partially to business in the economic sense.

16. Cf. Osiek, *Rich and Poor*, 50.

17. See Osiek, *Rich and Poor*, 121–26; Helen Rhee, "A Patristic View of Wealth and Possessions," *Ex Auditu* 27 (2011): 71.

18. See further: *Did*. 4.5–8; 15.4; *Herm. Mand.* 2.4–6; *Sim*. 5.3.5–7. As David J. Downs observes correctly, "The practice of [*eleēmosynē*], or merciful care for the needy, was widely advocated in nascent Christianity, no doubt an indication that early Christ-followers were shaped by Jewish scriptural traditions that emphasize God's special concern for the poor and the responsibility of God's people to show mercy to those in need." David J. Downs, "Almsgiving and Competing Soteriologies in Second-Century Christianity," *Religions* 9, no. 7 (2018): 2.

19. *Apol*. 15, in *Christianity in the First and Second Centuries: Essential Readings*, ed. Kevin Douglas Hill, Patristic Essentials (Dallas: Fontes, 2022), 186. See also Justin, *First Apology* 15, 67. On five types of Christian charity in the third century, see Rhee, "A Patristic View of Wealth and Possessions," 66.

20. Polycarp may be drawing specifically from Tobit 4:10–11: "For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness. Indeed, almsgiving, for all who practice it, is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High" (NRSV). This subject is treated fully in Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

21. Clement of Alexandria, *The Rich Man's Salvation* 32, trans. G. W. Butterworth, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), 92:339.

22. The vice of avarice (from Greek *philarguria*, "love of money"), along with its companion covetousness (*pleonexia*), are both denounced by Paul in the New Testament as, respectively, the "root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10) and "idolatry" (Col. 3:5). The connection between greed and avarice on the one hand and idolatry and evil on the other is continued throughout the Apostolic Fathers and the later Fathers as well. Simple prohibitions of avarice are common (*2 Clem.* 4.3; *Did*. 3.5; Polycarp, *Phil*.

4.3, 6.1; cf. Origen, *Hom. Ex.* 8.5), sometimes with a prohibition against covetousness accompanying it (*Did*. 2.6; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2.2). Covetousness is also targeted in general vice lists (*Did*. 5.1; *1 Clem.* 35.5; *Barn*. 20.1; Polycarp, *Phil*. 2.2; *Herm. Mand.* 6.2.5; 8.5). Almsgiving was a spiritual defense against avarice and covetousness.

23. Later sources in the following centuries continued to extoll almsgiving, such as Cyprian's *On Works and Alms*. According to Rhee, "In the fourth century and onward this 'redemptive almsgiving' would be one of the most consistent and traditional elements in the sermons and teachings of the church leaders." Rhee, "A Patristic View of Wealth and Possessions," 55.]

24. David Downs attributes this to a wider critique of Jewish practices throughout the *Gospel of Thomas*, including polemics against the scribes and Pharisees, disparagements of Israel's prophetic traditions, spiritualization of circumcision, and the rejection of dietary laws. Downs, "Almsgiving and Competing Soteriologies," 4.

25. Peter Brown, *Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 1–35.

26. This phrase, which occurs also in 11.11, could mean either that he is a true prophet, or that the prophet may or may not be true, but the action is consistent enough with a true prophet to leave him alone.

27. Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 11–13, quote from 13.

28. Origen, *Cont. Cels.* 1.28, 62.