

The Early Church's Approach to the Poor in Society and Its Significance to the Church's Social Engagement Today

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This paper focuses on the early Christian's¹ approach to the poor and reviews how their approach to the poor influenced the society and made differences there. The early Christian practice to the poor was very attractive to help the people in the society. First, this paper briefly grasps the economic situation in the early Roman Empire and the expansion of Christian population in the empire. Second, this paper reviews the theological background of the Christian practice for the poor and their typical practices in the society, especially in the urban environment and at the time of disasters. Then, this paper attempts to articulate the significant points for Christian social engagement today.

1. ECONOMIC SITUATION IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

The Roman Empire maintained its domination of the Mediterranean world through judicial institutions, legislative systems, property ownership, control of labor, and brute force. Like most societies, the empire developed mechanisms for maintaining multifaceted inequality and promoted justifications that made the inequity seem normal or at least inevitable.²

In the economic facets of the Roman system of inequality, there are three fundamental ideas to keep in mind. First, the Roman imperial economy was pre-industrial. The vast majority of people lived in rural areas or in small towns, with only about ten to fifteen percent of the population in big cities of ten thousand people or more. This means that most of the population worked in agriculture (about eighty to ninety percent) and that large-scale commercial or manufacturing activity was rare.³

Second, there was no middle class in the Roman Empire. Since the economy was mainly agricultural, wealth was based on the ownership of land. Most land was controlled by a limited number of wealthy, elite families. These families earned rent

1 In this paper the early church and early Christians mean that the churches and Christians were in the period between after the primitive church in Jerusalem and before the establishment of Christendom.

2 Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 125.

3 Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will?: Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, edited by Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 19.

and produce from the farmers and/or slaves who actually worked at the land. With their wealth and status, these families were able to control regional governance, which allowed them to earn profit from taxation and from governmental policies. These families also controlled the public religion.⁴

Third, inequality was widespread both in rural and urban areas. Friesen developed a poverty scale that provides seven categories for describing economic resources as seen below. Super-wealthy elites (categories 1–3) made up less than three percent of the total imperial population. On the other hand, ninety percent of the total population was near and under subsistence level.

Poverty Scale (PS) for a Large City in the Roman Empire⁵

Percent of Population	Poverty Scale Categories
0.04%	PS1. Imperial elites: imperial dynasty, Roman senatorial families, a few retainers, local royalty, a few freed persons.
1%	PS 2. Regional or provincial elites: equestrian families, provincial officials, some retainers, some decurial families, some freed persons, some retired military officers.
1.76%	PS 3. Municipal elites: most decurial families, wealthy men and women who do not hold offices, some freed persons, some retainers, some veterans, some merchants.
7%	PS 4. Moderate surplus resources: some merchants, some traders, some freed persons, some artisans, and military veterans
22%	PS 5. Stable near subsistence level: many merchants and traders, regular wage earners, artisans, large shop owners, freed persons, some farm families.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 20. In rural areas poverty was even worse.

40%	PS 6. At subsistence level: small farm families, laborers, artisans, wage earners, most merchants and traders, small shop owners.
28%	PS 7. Below subsistence level: some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners.

Annual Income Needed For a Family of Four⁶

For wealth in Rome (PS 3)	25,000 – 150,000 denarii
For modest prosperity in Rome (PS 4)	5,000 denarii
For subsistence in Rome (PS 5-6)	900 – 1,000 denarii
For subsistence in a city (PS 5-6)	600 – 700 denarii
For subsistence in the country (PS 5-6)	250 – 300 denarii

In the early Roman Empire financial resources were likely the most influential factor in determining one’s place in the social economy. Other factors were gender, ethnicity, family lineage (common or noble), legal status (slave, freed, or freeborn), occupation, and education. Patronage relationships were important in one’s economic survival because a patron gave one access to restricted resources that were unavailable. In times of crisis, a patron could mean the difference between life and death.⁷

2. GROWING CHRISTIAN POPULATION AND THE ATTRACTIONS

As the Book of Acts in the New Testament reported, in the early Roman Empire period Christianity was rapidly growing. Although it is difficult to

6 Ibid. Categories from the poverty scale are in parentheses.
7 For further discussion of these issues, see Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-André Turcotte, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2002).

articulate the number of Christians in this Early Church, it is estimated as seen below that there were a thousand Christians in the year 40, about 7,500 in the year 100, about 217,000 in the year 200, and six million Christians at the beginning of the fourth century. Christianity grew at the rate of forty percent per decade. About ten percent of the empire's population was Christian by the time of Constantine.⁸

Christian Growth Projected at Forty Percent per Decade⁹

Year	Number of Christians	Percent of Population
40	1,000	0.0017
50	1,400	0.0023
100	7,530	0.0126
150	40,490	0.07
200	217,795	0.36
250	1,171,356	1.9
300	6,299,832	10.5
350	33,882,008	56.5

This growth is impressive if we consider the social situation of the early Christians. Despite the scorn of the powerful and persecutions, the early Christian movement was growing. This implies something was deeply attractive to the society.

There are three major facets by which the early church attracted people.¹⁰ First, Christians' self-identity as "resident aliens" (*paroikoi*) was unique in the unsettled world of late antiquity. This was a familiar legal term, which many Christians from the First Epistle of Peter to the early centuries used to express their sense of identification with cultures in which they embodied new approaches and insights.¹¹ Christians brought news that was new for the people and new perspectives and possibilities. At the same time, they expressed these in a symbolic and social language that was familiar and that addressed people's questions and

⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

⁹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 7. Based on an estimated population of sixty million.

¹⁰ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 15-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

struggles. Christian worship likely helped the early Christians to shape their lives, character, and communities, so that they would be intriguingly vital.

Second, Christian beliefs and power were attractive.¹² Christian belief was an important element in early Christian growth because Christ had conquered death so that Christians need not to fear death, for they will rise from it.¹³ This belief encouraged them to withstand persecution. Divine power among the early Christians also attracted people. As Tertullian put it, the Christians were in “touch with the miraculous.”¹⁴ People who possessed gifts of healing were an accepted part of many Christian communities.¹⁵ Exorcism likely took a more important role. For people, the world was contested terrain in which demons persisted in exercising their power and many people felt themselves to be oppressed by spiritual forces and longed for liberation.¹⁶ As a result, liberation from demonic power was one of the chief benefits that the churches could offer to potential converts.¹⁷

Third, the Christians' behavior attracted people.¹⁸ The behavior of the Christians was the product of careful pre-baptismal catechizing by church leaders who attempted to apply the teaching of Christ to the lives of their congregation.¹⁹ Also, the early Christians' self-identity as “resident aliens” developed the Christians' lifestyle, and their social reality spread and transcended the Roman Empire.²⁰ Christian congregations expressed their reality by corresponding with other churches, by providing hospitality to travelers, and by supporting fellow Christians who were prisoners.²¹ The early Christian communities were marked by economic sharing and social care for the poor.²² The communities consisted of various ranges of social classes and were bound by love and rite into a brotherhood/sisterhood.

12 Ibid., 16.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Geoffrey J. Cuming ed., *Hippolytus: A Text for Students*, Second edition (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1987), 14. Cited in Kreider, 16.

16 Kreider, 17.

17 Everett Ferguson, *Demonology of the Early Christian World* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 129. Irenaeus mentioned: people who have been delivered by acts of miraculous power frequently both believe and join themselves to the church. Cited in Kreider, 17.

18 Kreider, 17.

19 Kreider, 18.

20 Kreider, 18-19.

21 Kreider, 19.

22 Ibid.

3. THE EARLY CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE POOR

As seen above, despite persecution and disadvantages in their social situation, the Christian population was growing because the early Church attracted people in the early Roman Empire. The greatest attractions were Christians' practices and behaviors. An essential part of Christian communities depended on their willingness to aid those in need and on the teachings of the Christian church about the right use of material goods. In this section, this paper reviews the early Christians' teachings and their practices in detail.

3-1 The Early Christian Teaching of the Poor

The early Christians lived as "resident aliens" in the early Roman Empire. This self-identity reflected their teachings. At the first century, the author of the *Didache* repeated the scriptural teachings that people are faced with two options: they can choose the way of life or way of death. The Christians who choose the way of life must first love God, and then his neighbor as themselves. In practice, if one has material possessions, one must freely give to those who are in need: "Give to anyone that asks, without looking for any repayment, for it is the Father's pleasure that we should share his gracious bounty with all men."²³ The point is not only that the things of earth belong to God, but also that he has made them available for use. Sharing material goods is to replace possessing the goods as a value for Christians.

A work of the early second century, Hermas, an Apostolic Father argues in his work *Shepherd of Hermas* how the rich can be saved and provides the main requirement to the rich – helping the poor. *Shepherd of Hermas* states: "assist widows, visit orphans and the poor, ransom God's servants, show hospitality, help oppressed debtors in their need."²⁴ Hermas insists that, since Christians are strangers in a strange land and not permanent residents of this world, they should not settle in like colonists and not increase wealth for the sake of being rich. Their priorities should be, "instead of fields, purchase afflicted souls, as each is able.

23 *Didache*, 1.1, 5. Quoted in William J. Walsh and John P. Langan, "Patristic Social Consciousness: The Church and the Poor," in *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, edited by John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 114.

24 *Mandates* 8:10. Quoted in Walsh and Langan, 115.

And visit widows and orphans, and do not neglect them. Spend your wealth and all your possessions on such fields and houses which you received from God. For the Master made you rich for this purpose that you might perform these ministries for him.”²⁵

These theological concepts - love, sharing our goods, the right use of wealth, God as the Creator and the Provider of the material world – were passed to later Christians – e.g. Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Lactantius.²⁶ The early Christians' teaching was likely different from the teaching and practice of heresies. In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch characterized heretics as those who “have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; of the bond, or of the free; of the hungry, or of the thirsty.”²⁷ Also, at the reign of Julian (360–363) – a pagan interlude in the empire after Constantine – Julian attempted to revive paganism by using the philanthropic practices of the despised Christians to develop charitable institutions. He wrote a letter to a pagan priest:

We ought then to share our money with all men, but more generously with the good, and with the helpless and poor so as to suffice for their need. And I will assert, even though it be paradoxical to say so, that it would be a pious act to share our clothes and food even with the wicked. For it is to the humanity in a man that we give, and not to his moral character. Hence I think that even those who are shut up in prison have a right to the same sort of care, since this kind of philanthropy will not hinder justice.²⁸

25 *Similitudes* 1. 8-9. Quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*, Third Edition (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), 205.

26 See Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 203-206 and Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (New York, Harper & Row, 1990), 92-144.

27 *Ad Smyrnaeans*, 6.2. Quoted in González, 101.

28 *Epistles*, 290D-291A. Quoted in Binger A. Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion: Essays on Early Christianity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 211.

As an example, Julian cited the Jews as well as Christians:

It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever had to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people [pagans] lack aid from us.²⁹

These references, both by a Christian and a pagan, are the fact that the early Christian teaching was more or less practiced by the Christians in their communities and the societies.

3-2 An Example of the Early Christian Practice to the Poor

How did the early Christians behave in a crisis, such as in severe epidemics? Two great epidemics struck the Roman Empire – in 165–180 and in 251–266. Mortality was high in many cities and rural areas. William H. McNeil estimated that from a quarter to a third of the population perished during the former epidemic. In the latter epidemic, at its height, five thousand people a day were reported to have died in the city of Rome alone.³⁰

In these epidemics, Christians offered an explanation and comfort when all other faiths were called into question. As Cyprian, bishop of Carthage wrote in 251:

Many of us are dying in this mortality, that is many of us are being freed from the world to the servant of God it is a salutary departure.... the just are dying with the unjust, ... The just are called to refreshment, the unjust are carried off to torture; protection is more quickly given to the faithful; punishment to the faithless How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, ... searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsman as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are

29 Ibid., 22. 430D. Quoted in Pearson, 211.

30 William H. McNeil, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 131.

trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown. ... [O]ur brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way; that as travelers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living with God.³¹

Also Dionysius of Alexandria wrote to address his members: "Other people would not think this a time for festival, far from being a time of distress, it is a time of unimaginable joy."³² Although the epidemics terrified the pagans, Christians almost welcomed them and accepted them as schooling and testing. Christian beliefs differed with pagan beliefs in their explanatory capacities. Christian beliefs made human history purposeful even in the face of what seemed mere caprice to pagans.³³ Moreover, Christian beliefs provided instructions for action.

During the second great epidemic, Dionysius wrote in an Easter letter around 260 that a substantial number of his presbyters, deacons, and laymen lost their lives while caring for others:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner; a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.³⁴

31 *Mortality*, 15-20. Quoted in Mcneil, 136-137 and Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 81.

32 *Festival Letters*, quoted in Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 82.

33 Rodney Stark, "Antioch As the Social Situation for Matthew's Gospel," in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, edited by David L. Bulch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 203.

34 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 82.

He also described how the pagans responded:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.³⁵

If we are to assess Dionysius' claims, it must be demonstrated that the Christians actually did minister to the sick while the pagans mostly did not. Large numbers of people died not directly from the disease, but from dehydration and lack of calories because they became too weak to obtain food and liquids. Modern medical experts estimate that conscientious nursing without any medications could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or even more.³⁶ Therefore, if the Christians nursed the sick, they would have had a far lower mortality rate than pagans.

As Stark argues, Christians revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless, impoverished, and strangers, Christians offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christians provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christians offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemic, fires and earthquakes, Christians offered effective nursing services.³⁷ Thus, the early Christians ministered as a transformative movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the Roman Empire.

35 Ibid. This is similar with what Thucydides reported about the great epidemic that struck Athens in 431 B.C.E: "[The Victims] died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of any attention. ... The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets or flocking around the fountains in their desire for water. ... As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshiped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately." Quoted in Stark, "Antioch As the Social Situation for Matthew's Gospel," 202.

36 Stark, "Antioch As the Social Situation for Matthew's Gospel," 203.

37 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 161.

4. Significance of the Early Church's Approach for Today

As seen above, the early Roman Empire had an unequal economic system and ninety percent of the total population was near an under subsistence level. Despite the scorn of the powerful and persecutions, the early Christian movement was growing. Three major facets that attracted people to Christianity were the early Christians' self-identity as "resident aliens," Christian beliefs and spiritual power, and the Christians' behavior. In their approach to the poor, the early Christians succeeded in its theological concepts – love, sharing goods, the right use of wealth, God as the Creator and Provider of the material world – from generation to generation. Moreover, they actually ministered to the poor through nursing and caring for them. This early church movement was transformative and revitalized life in the empire.

This early church's approach to the poor in society provides at least five fundamental theological concepts for Christian social engagement today. First, God's (Christ's) reign that is against the power of the world is clearly shown. They had a strong self-identity as "resident aliens" that was unique in the unsettled world of late antiquity and brought new perspectives and possibilities in the reign of God. Also, the divine power shown among the early Christians – such as healing and exorcism represents God's reign and Christ's rule over all things.

Justice is another significant concept – such as their view of God and the practice of sharing. As *Didache* teaches, the things of the earth belong to God and God has made them available for use. This notion – God as the Creator and the Provider of the material world – encourages the early Christians to share their material goods with those in need. Then sharing goods became a value and ministry for them. As Hermas states, the early rich Christians were encouraged to redistribute their wealth and possessions to the vulnerable in the severely imbalanced social economy of the Roman Empire.

Love is linked with the love of God and the love of neighbor. The early Christians' lifestyle shows their love by providing hospitality to travelers, supporting imprisoned Christians, and caring for the poor. Their communities – consisting of various ranges of social classes – were bound by love and rite into a brotherhood/sisterhood. As seen in their teachings, the early Christians chose this way of life and so they first loved God and then their neighbors as themselves.

In practice, they freely gave to those who were in need without looking for any repayment, because it is God's pleasure that they should share his generosity with all people. Their love spread even to pagans and expanded to the point of losing their lives while they cared for others.

Well-being is another concept seen in the early church. Since the early Christians offered effective nursing service when they faced epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, they had a far lower mortality rate than others. This early Christian ministry was a transformative movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in their social contexts.

Friendship and companionship is also a major characteristic. The early Christians revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships that enabled them to cope with many urgent urban problems. They offered an immediate basis for attachment and brought a new and expanded view of family to society that was filled with the homeless and impoverished, and widows and orphans. In this sense, the early Christians provided a new basis for social solidarity.

In the early church's practices, there are at least three significant points for our social engagement today. First, it is important to keep our Christian identity as a "resident alien" steady. The Church has experienced a paradigm shift – from modernism to post-modernism. While the western churches have confronted post-Christendom, the churches in the third-world seem to find their identities in their context. At this point, a steady identity as "resident aliens" holds and strengthens the church in the complexity of values and the diversity of the world. In cross-cultural ministry and missions to the unreached areas where non-Christian religions dominate, it is crucial to hold this identity steady. Also, as "resident aliens," Christians could advocate and incarnate approaches to living that are both novel and comprehensive.

The early Christians integrated teaching/theology into practice – it is more holistic and there is no tension and separation between the word and the deed. In the early Roman Empire, the Christians actually practiced their beliefs. Therefore, their practice was so influential that even pagans realized what the Christians were doing, especially at the time of crisis – i.e. they cared for the poor, nursed the sick, and so on. Thus Julian, a pagan emperor, attempted to imitate the Christian practices for reviving paganism. For both of the western churches and the third-

world churches it is significant to practice their beliefs. This does not mean that the churches are involved in ministry to show off their own behaviors. Christians today have to dedicate themselves more to God and others and live out their belief.

The early Christians' behavior and practice were done in their daily life. They formed communities with their brothers and sisters in love and expressed their reality through economic sharing/giving and care for the poor. They practiced their gifts from God to meet people's needs. In this sense, their behavior and practice were not projects. They served where they were in their daily life. This attracted people in the Roman Empire. Also, there was no dichotomy between the clergy and laity, which the church has since confronted for long periods. By building networks in the love of God and ministering to their neighbors in need, the church (and each Christian) could encourage and support each other, and serve spiritually and physically in various parts of the society where each Christian lives. Thus more people would come to realize the love of God.

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