Early Christianity, Mission, and the Survival of the Poor in the Graeco-Roman World

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Abstract
If the poor survived in the ancient world, it was primarily through networks of mutual support, in which kin, friends and neighbours helped each other through periods of crisis. Christians formed new, trustworthy networks, mostly among the poor, in which, despite limited resources, they supported one another as “siblings”. Importantly, these networks were open, and the spread of early Christianity was related to “the strength of weak ties”, where acts of benevolence, including care for the sick, formed bridges into pagan households. Christian theology supported this dynamic by the assurance of divine reciprocation and by situating believers’ benevolence within the generosity of God in Christ.

Keywords
early Christianity, mission, the poor, survival, the Roman world

Introduction
It is an enormous pleasure for me to join in congratulating our friend, Karl Olav Sandnes, on the occasion of his 65th birthday. Over several decades I have been privileged to get to know Karl Olav as a scholar of the New Testament and of early Christianity, and, along with so many others, I have learned much from him. The range and depth of his publications, beginning with his Paul, One of the Prophets?, reveals what an extraordinary scholar he is. In all his many books (surveyed elsewhere in this issue) one finds careful scholarship, fresh perspectives, and the creative use of interdisciplinary tools, not least in his several collaborative projects. The depth of his understanding of Paul, of early Christianity, and of the Graeco-Roman world is truly remarkable, and he has an unusual ability to approach old topics from...
new angles, unfailingly finding something new and interesting to say. But in all of that – and this is a precious phenomenon – one finds balanced, reasoned, and respectful argumentation, honouring those with whom he disagrees as well as those he supports. Some scholars make their names through polemics, caricature, and the swashbuckling dismissal of opponents. To the contrary, the generosity and confidence of Karl Olav’s faith shines through in the very manner of his work, and not only in its focus and content. We are all the grateful beneficiaries of that.

In this essay I want to outline how the poor in the Graeco-Roman world survived – if they did – and how we might place early Christian networks in and among the poor, on the assumption that most early Christians were poor themselves. My key thesis is that Christians kept their networks open, maintaining weak but important links with non-Christians, such that acts of benevolence, including healing, were both possible and effective in the spread and growth of the church. I will finish by touching briefly on the theology that sustained these practices and attitudes, although space does not permit exploration of the scriptural and Jewish matrix from which specifically Christian theologies of gift evolved.

1. The Poor and their Survival in the Roman World

What do we mean by “the poor”? The term is problematic: it is vague and elastic, easily stretched this way and that for rhetorical reasons. It is a relative term that should make us ask: poor in comparison with whom, and poor in relation to what? A recent attempt at precision regarding economic levels in the ancient world has been advanced by Steve Friesen, in collaboration with the classicist, Walter Scheidel. The wealth scales that they have produced are, of course, imprecise and the product of educated guesswork, and they would need to be filled out and balanced by reference to social networks. But I think the basic economic contours are right. Below the top, tiny percentage of the elite (totalling less than 3%), and below a middling section of the population that has enough wealth to be cushioned against immediate economic shocks (and they rightly insist that there is such a middling part of the spectrum), we find, at subsistence level (PS 6) and below (PS 7) altogether nearly 70% of the population.

“Subsistence level” is that level of income and nutrition necessary for survival. A key feature here is the unpredictability and insecurity of life, especially at the economic margin: survival is precarious for those in unstable work, in families ever vulnerable to illness and death, and in an economy prone to shocks that send food prices suddenly rocketing. As R.H. Tawney once said of Chinese farmers in the early 20th century, their position “is that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him.” In this situation, survival depends on networks of support, a social fabric that can sustain and lift you for a while, when the ripple comes through. These are the networks that connect a household, first and foremost, to their kin – who have a strong moral obligation to assist where they can – and beyond kin to friends and neighbours with whom they have built relationships of trust. We shall return to these networks in a moment, but suffice to say for now that their core characteristic is reciprocity: I am obliged to help you when you are in crisis (a sudden illness or a loss of work) on the understanding that you will

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help me when I am in crisis myself. Very many of the poor died prematurely of malnutrition or disease, but if the poor did survive in the ancient world, it was because of such webs of mutual support. Poverty, we might say, is defined not only by what you have to hand yourself, but also by the capacity and willingness of your network to support you in a time of a crisis.

Those at the very bottom, below subsistence, we might call “the destitute”, in distinction from “the poor”. There was no clear terminological distinction in the ancient world (the Greeks words πείνης and πτωχός are often used interchangeably), but the distinctive feature of what I call “the destitute” is that their networks were broken, or had gone under as well. Beggars pleaded for aid from passers-by because they had no-one else left to ask; the homeless slept outside (under theatre arches), because they had no family support; and stray children were left to fend for themselves because they had been orphaned or abandoned by their impoverished parents and had no kin able or willing to foster them. Deprived of any safety net, the destitute, like Lazarus in Jesus’ parable, were not likely to survive for long (Luke 16.19–22).

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the vulnerabilities of the poor, and why their fortunes were so fluid. Fundamental here are fluctuations in unskilled or low-skilled labour: most work was impermanent, labour was over-supplied (think of the day-labourers in Jesus’s parable of the vineyard-workers, Matt 20.1–16), and the availability of work was dependent on wider economic forces. Without employment, there is no income, and without income, no food. Food prices could fluctuate because of the weather, the security of the grain supply, and the behaviour of the rich who hoarded grain; and when food shortages turned to famine, whole networks among the poor collapsed at the same time. Analysis of bones and teeth give us some sense of ancient nutrition; and from malnutrition, or diet of insufficient quality, all kinds of health dangers ensue. Premature or still-born children, stunted growth, skin conditions resulting from vitamin deficiency – all these are well documented from antiquity, as from equally poor environments today. It is impossible to quantitify, but one of the symptoms of poverty most noted in antiquity was the abandonment of unwanted infants: families who could not afford another mouth to feed were prone to leave babies in a public place, where they might die, or someone might pick them up to rear them as their slave. The poor were also disproportionately victims of crime, poor sanitation, accident, and injury; and since they were rarely able to afford medicines, they suffered from untreated infections that either killed them or left them permanently disabled, for instance, deaf or blind.

Illness, injury, unemployment, the death of family members – all these constituted major emergencies for the poor, but the everyday challenges of life on the margins also meant that

the poor needed small-scale benefits on a constant basis. It is often said that in the Graeco-
Roman world, no one cared about the poor. In the sense that there were no systems of state
support (except for rare and partial exceptions) and no sense of social responsibility among
the rich to maintain the poor, that is correct. But it is not the case that no one cared about the
poor, if you take account of the all-important fact that the poor cared for each other! These are
the everyday forms of assistance, sharing, and swapping that go under the radar of the elite
(who wrote most of our sources) and were never memorialised in inscriptions. Visiting and
aiding a sick relative, looking after a friend’s children, lending a small sum of money when a
brother couldn’t afford his rent, helping pay for a funeral, lending or making clothes – these
are the small-scale but essential favours that circulate in networks of reciprocity, sometimes
semi-formalised into what James Scott called “lower class communitarianism”. It is a basic
rule of gifts or benefits in the ancient world that all gifts invite and expect a return, and these
networks are sustained by generosity and the obligation to return a favour, at some future
time and in some other form. As has often been noticed, the poor are very generous, and this
is partly because, in social terms, they have to be so, in order to create or sustain the relations
from which they will receive help when the need arises. Ethnographic studies of the poor in
the modern world bear out the glimpses we get from our ancient sources. For instance, in
Carol Stack’s analysis of “swapping” in an African-American neighbourhood, she quotes an
informant, Ruby Banks: “Sometimes I don’t have a damned dime in my pocket, nor a crying
penny to get a box of diapers, milk, a loaf of bread. But you have to have help from every-
body and anybody, so don’t turn no one down when they come round for help”. You need
to give, because you also need to get. By the same token, if you give or lend, and there is no
return, that is the end of your friendship. In conditions of mutual dependence and economic
scarcity, you cannot afford to distribute favours that go to waste. If one thinks of concentric
circles of those on whom you can depend – immediate family in the inner circle, then friends,
then neighbours or work associates – one could speak here of a “radius of trust”: How far
out can you afford to give, or can you be trusted as a recipient who will return? Because they
have such a poor credit rating, one of the problems of the poor is that that radius is limited,
and generally includes only those as vulnerable as themselves.

New Testament scholars have been over-fascinated by the occurrence of vertical relations
of gift, between benefactors and ordinary citizens, or patrons and clients. But what sustained
the poor in their everyday lives were horizontal networks of reciprocity: in fluctuating con-
tions, they hoped that someone in their network of kin, friends, and neighbours would be
able to lend a hand, on the understanding that they would do the same in return when able to
do so. If they survived at all, it was because of their resilience and because of the effectiveness
and breadth of these networks. Of course, a shockingly high percentage did not survive, but
were lost in early childhood, or died of disease or injury at a premature age.

8. On ancient euergetism, see Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin, 1990). Although the poor might sometimes be included in civic benefits to citizens, only the food-dole in Rome can be evidenced as a state-sponsored measure that had any consistent economic effect.
2. Early Christianity among the Poor
How do we fit early Christianity (of the first three centuries) into this context? Most Christians of the pre-Constantine era were themselves poor, from among that 70% at the bottom of the social pyramid. Our evidence is, of course, fragmentary, and it is the wealthy, literate converts who stand out, as notable converts and authors of literature. Early Christianity clearly benefited from wealthy sponsors, especially in Rome and Alexandria, and I do not mean to suggest that it spread only among the poor. But the early Christian texts have almost nothing good (and quite a lot bad) to say about wealth. The general presumption is that the rich are unlikely to want to join the church, and thereby cut their valuable ties to the pagan world (“how hard it is for those who have money to enter the Kingdom of God”, Mark 10.23). Or, if they show interest in the Christian faith, they will soon drift away, as the thorns and thistles of their material investments stifle their faith (Mark 4.18–19 and parallels; cf. 1 Tim 6.9–10). One can understand why: Early Christianity had high expectations of wealth-sharing in a community that adopted the ethos of a family, and the rich could retain their wealth only if they distanced themselves from these demanding poor believers. A lot of Christian sources presume that believers are craftsmen or artisans of some sort, working with their hands, as Ephesians puts it, so as to have enough, in good times, to give to those in need (Eph 4.28; 1 Thess 4.9–11; Didache 12.3–4). Celsus, the pagan critic of Christianity, speaks disparagingly of Christian “workers in wool and leather, and washerwomen”, and looks down with elite snobbery on Christians as hailing from the uneducated and gullible poor (apud Origen, Contra Celsum 3.55). It is impossible to explain the exponential growth of early Christianity unless we presume that it grew in number strongly among the urban poor.

There are many features of early Christian life that make best sense if we locate them among networks of the relatively poor. Take fasting, for example. There developed among early Christians a habit of fasting with the purpose that from the money or food that was saved by fasting, believers will have something to give to those with nothing. Thus, Hermas urges Christians to “taste nothing but bread and water on the day you fast. Then estimate the cost of the food you would have eaten on that day, and give that amount to a widow or orphan, or someone in need” (Hermas, Sim. V.3). (Widows and orphans are, of course, those who have lost vital network links, and thus very likely to be destitute.) Aristides, the Christian apologist of the second century, indicates something similar: “When there is one among them [the Christians] needy or poor, and they do not have surplus resources, they fast for two or three days, in order to supply to the poor their lack of food” (15.9). As the Gospel of Thomas puts it, “Blessed are those who hunger, so that they may fill the belly of the one who desires” (69.2). What is striking here is the assumption that the Christians in view will have no reserves with which to feed others, and will have spare food or cash only if they go without food themselves. These are Christians living on the margin and showing precisely the kind of generous sharing that goes on in networks among the poor to this day.

In these networks, the same people could be at one time givers, and at another receivers, as their circumstances changed. In the Didache, from the end of the first century, believers are urged: “do not be one who reaches out your hands to receive, but draws them back from giving” (4.5).12 In the same text it is clear that their generosity is real, but necessarily limited

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12. See Denise Kimber Buell, “‘Be not one who stretches out his hands to receive, but shuts them when it comes to giving.’ When Both Donors and Recipients are Poor”, in Susan. R. Holman (ed.). Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2008), 37–47.
by the resources at their command. Hospitality is to be offered to travelling Christians, a significant service for a newcomer: help him as much as you can. “He should not stay with you more than two or three days, if need be. If he wants to remain with you and is a craftsman, let him work and eat. If he doesn’t have a trade, use your foresight to determine how he as a Christian might live among you without being idle” (12.2–5). This is a community that does what it can, but cannot afford spongers: two or three days is a maximum stay. Even apostles and prophets should not stay more than a day, or at a pinch two: if he stays three days, says the Didache, he is clearly a false prophet (11.5). “Help as much as you can”: such instructions display a sensitivity to the fact that many Christians had little to contribute.

One of the reasons that early churches developed common funds in which to pool these resources was that all these tiny contributions could do rather little on their own, but collected together could make a significant contribution to those who were overtaken by a crisis. Our first evidence for a common “money-chest” (τὸ κοινὸν) is in the letters of Ignatius (Polycarp 4.3), although the pooling of individual contributions begins as early as Paul’s collection for Jerusalem (1 Cor 16.1–3, or the Jerusalem pooling of Acts 2.44–45 and 4.32–37). But in Paul’s letters and elsewhere, our early Christian texts are at pains to insist that people should contribute what they can, and only as much as they can (1 Cor 16.2; 2 Cor 8.12–13; cf. Tertullian, Apology 39.5). There is no tithe here, as 10% would be punishingly high percentage for those on the margins of subsistence. “As much as you are able” allows everyone to feel themselves part of the common effort, while putting pressure on those with greater resources to contribute more. Once pooled, even tiny amounts can make a difference, and church leadership evolves partly because it becomes necessary to be clear who determines the distribution of the money collected (see 1 Tim 5.16 and the emerging role of the ἐπίσκοπος).

So, what were the patterns of early Christian giving among the poor? As tiny communities in a vast ocean of poverty, their giving circulated primarily amongst themselves. All those seemingly general comments in the New Testament about not getting tired of doing good works, bearing each other’s burdens, and supporting the weak (e.g. Gal 6.2, 9; 1 Thess 5.14; Rom 12.13) are about the routine sharing of goods and exchanging of services, which is how the poor survive. As Karl Olav has emphasised and illuminated, Christians called one another kin – brothers and sisters – and thereby laid great expectations on one another: to see your brother lacking the essentials of life and not to help out in any way (to close your heart, as 1 John 3.17 puts it) would be a moral outrage.13 But these Christian kinship relations were not natural: Christian networks crossed family and ethnic boundaries, creating new links that had not existed before, bonding people who would never otherwise have been in each other’s webs of reciprocity. The Jewish emphasis on care for “the poor” concerned the support networks that centred on the Jewish community, where regular synagogue meetings reinforced the extended ethnic bonds maintained through Jewish endogamy, and gentile “sympathisers” were brought within the orbit of the Jewish community. It now meant, as in Galatians 2.10, an ethic of mutual support within the Christian community, where Jewish and non-Jewish poor were linked by their common allegiance to Christ and networks formed along new lines of interaction and interconnection.14 But creating mean-

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13. Karl Olav Sandnes, A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994). For the connection between fictive kinship and material solidarity, see Timothy J. Murray, Restricted Generosity in the New Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 137–59. Lucian’s famous description of Christian support of Peregrinus includes the report that as ‘brothers of one another’, they made their resources into common property (De Morte Peregrini, 13).

14. I am not wholly persuaded by B. Longenecker’s argument that Gal 2.10 should be read as a general instruction
ingful networks of exchange across an ethnic boundary and across distance was, as Paul found, no easy task (2 Corinthians 8–9). One of the reasons that the New Testament epistles have to work so hard to instil a community ethic of patience, gentleness, love, and mutual care is that good reciprocity is hard enough in well-established networks, but is extremely difficult among those who were formerly strangers and have no previous history of trust. By the use of familial labels and the language of “oneness” and κοινωνία these new networks sought to establish a strong ethos of mutual responsibility. To the extent that this was operative, it must have been highly attractive to those who had lost their own networks, or for whom an additional network created another significant form of social insurance.

3. Mission: Open Networks and Weak Links

In order to draw new people into a network, there must be already some link – even if a weak link – between them and the Christian network. And here is, I think, an important feature about these early Christian communities: their inner intensity was combined with an in-principle openness to create new links with people presently outside their reciprocal circle. “Do good to all”, says Paul, “especially (note: not only) to the household of faith” (Gal 6.10). As usual, kinship or household language is used for the inner circle, but the radius of benevolence extends further out. “Do not return evil for evil, but always pursue the good to one another and to all” (1 Thess 5.15). In fact, as you will recall, there are specific gospel instructions about not limiting giving to the normal circles of reciprocity, to those with whom one is already engaged in mutual exchange: “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do that?” (Matthew 5.46–47). Luke has several variants of the same: if you love those who love you, if you do good (i.e. give benefits) to those who do good to you, if you lend to those from whom you are confident you will get it back, what’s special about that? (Luke 6.32–35). The same ethic, in multiple, fluid forms, runs through early Christian literature, from the Gospel of Thomas (95), to Justin Martyr (First Apology 15.10, 13), and to other apologists (e.g. Theophilus, Ad Autolycum 3.14). This is about extending networks, making small or large gestures of goodwill outside the circles of those you already know and trust.

Research by social scientists into networks and network links is important here. The links between people can be of varying strength, a function of several factors, some objectively measurable and some subjective: the length of time that people have known and trusted one another; the frequency of their interaction; the value they place on the benefits that pass between them; the emotional intensity of their interaction, etc. A social network analysis would draw thick or multi-stranded lines between those joined by strong links, and would demonstrate that those with strong links to one person are also likely to have some sort of link to one another. In such dense networks or clusters, everyone knows and interacts with everyone else, in links that continually reinforce one another.

In an important essay from 1973, called “The Strength of Weak Ties” – an essay much cited by social network theorists – Mark Granovetter demonstrated that comparatively weak ties that create bridges from one network to another can be extremely important for innova-
tion of all sorts: you are more likely to receive new ideas, new information, new influences, new work opportunities etc. through those with whom you have comparatively weak links than through those whom you already know well and have known for a long time.\textsuperscript{15} The strong links are the most essential for survival, as they are the most dependable; but a self-enclosed network of strong links (a clique) is less likely to grow or change than one that has, and even fosters, a wide range of weaker links. This thesis has been tried, tested, and refined over the decades since 1973, but it chimes with Rodney Stark’s observations about “open” networks in his analysis of the growth of early Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} I would argue that early Christianity fostered an ethos that, besides building strong internal ties of mutual support, actively encouraged weak links with those outside the “household of faith”, and that such links of benevolence were crucial in extending Christian influence among the poor, especially where they formed bridges into new networks previously untouched by Christianity.

We can see this in negative form in the strong Christian prohibition of returning evil for evil: to retaliate to harm by harming the other is to break what had become a tense relationship, to cut the link altogether. To refuse to retaliate and, even more, to give a benefit to your enemies, is to keep the link active, and to invite a reciprocal benefit. The striking instructions in the gospels of Matthew and Luke to love your enemies echo through early Christianity in numerous variants: “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Matt 5.38–45; Luke 6.27–29; Rom 12.14–21; 1 Pet 3.9; Aristides 15.5; Athenagoras 11). The early Christians recognised that these were what they called “beautiful and great sayings” (2 Clement 13.3), but they sometimes made explicit what I think was implicit in them all: the purpose of loving your enemies was to make them your friends. As the Didache puts it: “you should love those who hate you, and then you will have no enemy” (1.5; cf. Aristides 15.5). Here, again, the law of reciprocity is at work: If you are generous in services or goods to those who are hostile to you, you will put them under an obligation to make some return to you. According to Jesus’s saying, if someone sues you for your shirt (which he thinks is his by right), not only don’t curse and resist him, but let him have your cloak as well (Matt 5.40). That (the cloak) he would have to recognise as a gift, not a due; and then, when you have given him your cloak, you have opened the possibility of a gift-exchange, a friendship. He may not respond well, and may reject your gestures of kindness. That is a risk that you have to take, and may reject your generosity of the church is part and parcel of its mission: its benevolence invites relationship, and it is constantly seeking to make weak ties stronger by drawing these connections, and the further networks to which they give access, into the strongly bonded community of the church.

Did Christians extend benevolence beyond the circle of the church? The apostate emperor Julian certainly thought so, drawing on his former experience of Christianity to note how “the Galileans” care not only for their own poor, but for “ours” as well (Letter to Arsacius). Tertullian notes in passing how the gift of alms or some other benefit to a pagan would prompt them to call down on you the blessing of their gods (De Idololatria 22): he discusses


this as a problem of Christian involvement in idolatry, and not as an apologetic boast, so
this scenario of Christian generosity to non-Christians seems likely to be realistic. Tertullian
speaks also of Christians fostering pagan children – and exorcising them of the demons pre-
sumed to inhabit them (De Idololatria 11) – and of making the sign of the cross while praying
for pagans who suffer from a scorpion sting (Scorpiace 1). The command to “do good to all”
was not totally ignored.

The care and healing of the sick is, I think, one of the best examples of this dynamic.
If working adults got sick, the family finances suddenly collapsed, and the people we are
talking about are those who have no financial reserves. If children got sick, someone had to
look after them (and thereby lose work). Medicines, charms, and sacrifices for healing were
all expensive remedies. The gospel stories, the book of Acts, and the many further apoc-
ryphal Acts (Acts of Thomas; Acts of John, etc.) are full of stories of remarkable Christian
healings, which were not just demonstrations of power, but massively beneficial acts with
economic implications. To heal a man with a disabled hand (Matt 12.9–14) was, as Jerome
points out, to enable him to work and no longer have to “beg for food in shame” (Commen-
tary on Matthew 12.13). The same benefit was operative in less spectacular forms of care for
the sick, nursing them back to health, which may indeed have been the most common form
of healing among early Christians. That impetus is found right across early Christianity,
climaxing in the way that Christians became famous in caring for plague victims in North
Africa in the third century. According to his biographer, Cyprian specifically urged his con-
gregation to do something more than the ordinary, and to cherish more than their own
people. In fact, one of the reasons why widows became so important in early Christian-
ity is not just because they received support, but because they became themselves agents of
prayer, attending to the sick from house to house, and much in demand not only by Chris-
tians but by non-Christians as well. As pure prayer-warriors and carers, with access to the
female quarters of homes, they became perhaps the most effective missionaries in the early
church. As they cared in the name of Jesus, and especially if their patients got better as a
result of their prayers, those healed would want to reciprocate in friendship to the church
they represented, and to know more about the powerful Saviour called Jesus. And when an
individual is healed, as we can see from John 9, their whole larger network – their family and
neighbours – are brought into contact with the factor that had caused the healing.

4. The Motivating Theology

What drove this urge towards outward-moving generosity, even at risk of rejection and
waste? To give across a strong bond is hardly risky: one can be confident of getting your
kindness, your gift, or your loan returned. To give across weak links, beyond the normal
radius of trust, is hazardous: your loan may not be repaid; the recipient of a kind gesture may
be ungrateful and never reciprocate; you may be taken for a ride. Early Christian texts are
explicit about this risk: The Didache wonders if you should check out first if the person who
asks for aid really needs it, but decides that you should give anyway, and leave them answer-
able to God if you have been conned (1.5–6). And this gesture of looking to God reflects

17. Pontius, Life and Passion of Cyprian, 9.
18. This becomes clear particularly in the Apostolic Constitutions and in the Syriac Didascalia Apostolarum. See
Jens-Uwe Krause, Witwen und Waisen im römischen Reich, 4: Witwen und Waisen in frühen Christentum (Stuttgart:
F. Steiner, 1995).
a major theological motif in early Christian literature: the notion of divine reciprocation. Luke is particularly fond of this: Don’t invite to your meals friends and relatives who can and will repay. Rather, invite the poor, the lame, the disabled, and the blind: They will not be able to repay, but you are blessed nonetheless (or all the more) because it will be repaid to you in the resurrection of the righteous (14.12–14). Note that this is not what we think of when we talk of a wholly disinterested gift, or a gift with no return; there should and will be a return, only not now, and not from a human source. This is an ethical motif, derived from the Jewish tradition, that can extend generosity beyond the normal circles where no reciprocity is likely or even possible: It can go all the way down to the very bottom of the social pyramid, to destitute beggars, whom no-one would invite into their houses for a meal. They can’t reciprocate, but God will. Reciprocity is not refused, but outsourced (to God) and deferred (to a future time).

But there is also a more direct theological rationale for the practice of generosity. Much early Christian preaching contained a particular emphasis on the generosity of God, and on Christians as both recipients of this grace and participants in its momentum. This could be grounded in a theology of creation: God gives rain and sunshine to all, without regard to their worth, and continues to give in benevolence even to the ungrateful (Luke 6.35). But early Christian theology generally gained a specifically Christological focus, recounting the massive act of generosity enacted in the Christ-event. They saw the coming of Christ as a huge, unconditioned act of goodwill on the part of God, offering salvation in this window of opportunity to people who had done nothing to deserve it. As this good news spread into the Gentile world, it was clear that there was plenty for God to forgive. The Gentiles who were invited into the church had had a lifetime of mistaken religion and, in Jewish terms, an appalling moral lifestyle; but nonetheless God’s goodness and grace reached even to them. Grace is a theme we associate with Paul, but it resonates right through early Christian literature, and drives to great lyrical heights the second century author of the Epistle to Diognetus:

for our unrighteous way of life came to fruition and it became perfectly clear that it could expect only punishment and death as its ultimate reward. But then, when the time arrived that God had planned to reveal at last his goodness and power – Oh, the supreme beneficence and goodness of God – he did not hate us, destroy us, or hold a grudge against us. But he was patient, he bore with us, and out of pity for us he took our sins upon himself … Oh the sweet exchange! Oh the unexpected acts of benevolence! (9.2–5).

This is what inspires the same author to describe as the ethos of the Christians: “they love everyone and are persecuted by all. They are impoverished and make many rich; they are reviled and they bless” (5.11–15). No doubt many failed to be half as generous as this suggests, but the good news that founded their communities formed a powerful impetus to attempt a generosity something like God’s.

In this theology, God (or more specifically Christ) is sometimes figured as the example to emulate, and sometimes as the source of the good things that cascade through Christians to others. Sometimes, as in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25.31–46), Christ is figured as the hidden object of the generosity of believers (a Christological form of the Jewish notion that in giving to the poor one gives to God), and sometimes as the one who guarantees a greater and more lasting return than the material things that one might give to those in need. From the sayings and parables of Jesus onwards, early Christian discourse is full of this language of reward, crown, harvest, or treasure in heaven, of friends gained and
houses made ready in the eternal, heavenly realm. Protestants have been uncomfortable with this language and have often tried to play it down, but it expresses the basic assumption of antiquity that every gift invites and expects a return. Theologically, we might want to re-express these metaphors in other terms. Christian generosity is both an outflow of, and a form of participation in the generous self-giving that is at the heart of God. Believers do not generate this themselves, but enter, as it were, into the stream of giving that cascades from God into the world. And in that participation they are themselves fulfilled – rewarded – at a level and in a form much deeper than the material rewards of this world. Being drawn into this divine reality, they become most truly what they were designed to be, co-participants in a web of gift that extends through them to others, and through others to them. The language of eschatology – of treasure in heaven – expresses, among other things, the otherness of this depth to which they enter; it is transcendent, of a kind and place greater than anything they can imagine. Thus, paradoxically, in giving to others believers are most fully enriched themselves, not in some simple *quid pro quo* and certainly not in the material terms of a prosperity gospel, but in the sense that they are fulfilled as loving creatures in the love that upholds, saves, and will redeem the world.

Karl Olav’s scholarship has always been meticulously academic and rigorously historical, but also, as I read it, attuned to theology, and offered in order to enhance both the understanding and the practice of the church. In that same spirit I offer these reflections in honour of an academic friend whose work has enriched and continues to enrich so many, both in academia and in the church. Exploring the role of the early Christians in the survival of the poor helps us to think about networks of generosity, and about how and why the Christian impulse has always been to go beyond what is comfortable towards risky, and costly, generosity. And it reminds us of what the early Christians took for granted in painfully blunt terms – that if Christians have material resources, and see their sisters and brothers in desperate need, and yet do nothing serious about it, they do not deserve the name Christian, and have no right to say that they abide in the love of God (1 John 3.16–17).

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