

Wealth, Church, and the Transformation of Early Christian Worship

By Helen Rhee | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018

Material things exist to assist with life; surely they were not given as a provision for wickedness? They constitute a ransom for the soul; surely they were not provided as an occasion for your own destruction?

—Basil the Great, *Hom.* 7.7^[1]

What can we say, in this issue dedicated to poverty, about the use of wealth in the early church and its role in relation to early Christian worship? Reflected in this quote of Basil is a *general* attitude toward wealth in early Christian writings: that God created the material world, including material things and wealth, for sufficient provision of the needs of all humans through common use, enjoyment, and flourishing in their right relations toward God and one another. Material possessions and wealth in God’s creative intent are not intrinsically evil although through them their possessors may encounter a real and powerful temptation, danger, and a potential for wickedness and destruction.

Since the problem is the state of the human soul (e.g., greed), not wealth itself, wealth in turn can be a potent means of loving God and one’s neighbors through compassionate sharing and generous giving in imitation of God’s *philanthropia* (compassionate generosity). As such, by using earthly wealth toward the eternal purpose, one lays up heavenly treasures for oneself (Matt. 6.19–20). When patristic authors address or make references to wealth, they have in mind Christians who are *already in* the journey of Christian faith and yet must persevere to the end. Wealth then presents the faithful with a unique challenge and opportunity to demonstrate their spiritual state and persevere in their journey of salvation by eliminating vices (e.g., greed/avarice) and cultivating virtues (e.g., almsgiving and detachment), and thereby to *secure* their eternal salvation.

Accompanying this foundational theology, consistent in early Christian communities, was the practice of generous sharing (*koinonia*) and sacrificial giving to meet the needs of their own members. By the mid-second century, along with scripture readings, homily, congregational prayer and Eucharist, offerings for the needy were clearly part of the regular Sunday worship in Rome and slightly later in Carthage, as attested by Justin Martyr and Tertullian respectively.^[2] Worship and life belonged together. The early Christian communities operated the “common chests” (adopted from Jewish practices that were followed by Jesus and his disciples) from the voluntary offerings and donations of their members, especially the wealthier ones. Out of them the churches served and cared for the poor, widows, orphans, confessors, the sick, elderly slaves, ship-wrecked mariners, and other vulnerable people in their midst.^[3] By the turn of the third century, for average Christians, almsgiving became the most effective means of washing away their post-baptismal sins, second only to martyrdom.^[4] By the mid-third century, as the church grew as an institution with a developing hierarchy and administration to meet the spiritual and physical needs of growing members, it centralized its charitable ministries under clergy headed by the bishop, and it supported the clergy and the poor from the common chest. Bishop Cornelius’s famous account of the Roman church (c. 250 CE) supporting 154 clergy and 1,500 widows

and others in distress suggests a well-organized and broad-based community with substantial resources at its disposal.[5]

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Along with the episcopal centralization of almsgiving (offering) and its distribution, the institutional strength of the church manifested itself in its growing ownership and management of various properties that affected its worship. Throughout the third century, churches in major cities around the Mediterranean world, despite their illegal status, *de facto* owned cemeteries, altars, and buildings. Space dictates possibilities for worship and liturgy. Christians worshiped at cemeteries[6] and at remodeled house churches with an elongated assembly hall, interior baptistery, and a separate room for catechumens, such as the *domus ecclesiae* in Dura-Europos, Syria (c. 240 CE). Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (250 CE) mentions an elevated pulpit and separate seating arrangements between clergy/presbyters and laity, and between laymen and laywomen, the latter of which is also attested in a Syriac church manual *Didascalia*. By the time of the Great Persecution in the early fourth century, it is clear that church buildings resembling the basilical structure of formal elongated halls became well-identified by the general populace and government authorities, as Diocletian’s first edict included the razing of churches.[7] Moreover, churches owned various resources for liturgy such as gold and silver cups, lamps of gold, silver, or bronze, candles, and even libraries of sacred books. There were also resources for charity in storage rooms, such as men’s and women’s clothing, shoes, food, oil, and money.[8] One would imagine already formalized liturgies and worship spaces woven together with well-organized care of the poor and vulnerable, with significant ecclesial wealth and social prominence of Christians *before* the Constantinian “revolution.”

No longer merely serving the Christian poor with the offerings from the faithful (especially the wealthy), the churches were bound to serve the poor of the empire as a public service in return for public privileges.

The Emperor Constantine’s legalization of Christianity in 312 CE and his and subsequent pro-Christian imperial policies throughout the fourth century brought about a watershed in every aspect of the church and Christian worship. Constantine’s unprecedented imperial patronage of the church, including financial subsidy, tax exemption, and clerical exemption from compulsory public services,[9] along with “a system of gifts of food to churches, grain allowances to nuns, widows, and others in church services,”[10] was revolutionary in two specific areas pertinent to our topic. First, it exponentially increased the scale of the church’s charity and wealth and the impact that this had on Roman society as

a whole. No longer merely serving the Christian poor with the offerings from the faithful (especially the wealthy), the churches were bound to serve the poor of the empire as a public service in return for public privileges,^[11] now accountable to the imperial throne.

This change linked Christian identity even more closely to the church's care of the poor in Roman society, and the bishop consolidated his position as the "lover of the poor" and the "governor of the poor" *par excellence*.^[12] It did not prompt the development of any new theological base for the work that the church had been doing for centuries; but it highlighted the identification of the poor with Christ that was found in Matthew 25:31–45 in particular: in every poor person, Christ is fed, given to drink, and welcomed as a guest. As Ambrose had written: "Minister to a poor person and you have served Christ" (*De uiduis*. 9.54).

Second, Constantine's grandiose church building projects throughout the empire, particularly in Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, and the Holy Land, opened a new horizon for contextualizing and re-envisioning worship with a new sense of scale. For example, Christians worshipping at the basilicas of St. Peter's, St. Paul's, and St. John Lateran in Rome, the octagonal Golden Church in Antioch, and the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Constantinople, with its cruciform plan, found their liturgy transformed to fill the massive spaces of their churches, which now included colossal marble columns and capitals and gold-laid roofs.^[13] Constantine insisted that the church buildings should "surpass all others in beauty . . . for it is only fitting the most marvelous place in the world should be worthily decorated."^[14] Bishops of metropolitan cities, such as Ambrose of Milan and Pope Sixtus III of Rome, also became great patrons of grand basilicas and advocated decorating churches with biblical wall mosaics of great visual splendor. The combined imperial wealth and ecclesiastical/episcopal wealth created newly constructed sacred spaces which worshippers were led to identify with the heavenly Jerusalem of the Apocalypse, built of gold, pearls, and precious gems. This joint effort of church and state also incorporated aspects of Greco-Roman civic religion into Christian worship, such as sacred images and processions carrying relics, icons, and *palladia*.^[15] Wealthy laypeople, both ascetics and non-ascetics, increasingly chose to give gifts to build and adorn the churches for the ransom of their souls.^[16]

Can the church for and of the poor and the church of such gilded splendor be reconciled? Eusebius made clear that it was Constantine's love for Christ and his church that drove Constantine's costly projects. In words of Dominic Janes, "Adornment of churches was accepted as morally good, as one form of Christian gift; just as another was giving doles to the poor."^[17] In the newly contextualized (imperial) Christianity, these two forms of giving were both appropriate and valuable means to demonstrate the givers' love for God and their neighbors and to lay up heavenly treasures for their salvation. Furthermore, while church leaders regularly denounced jewels and ornaments worn and displayed by rich Christians as a form of self-glory, even ascetic bishops had no qualms about precious metals and exquisite decorations of the church, which they interpreted as revealing the inherent beauty and worth of Christian liturgy and space.

Finally, a deeper theological justification lies in the physicality of faith. Given God's creative intent, material things such as gold, silver, and icons can be used to communicate spiritual realities. According to John Chrysostom, the Old Testament Temple with its gold and jewels was a "type" for spiritual realities of the new covenant in Christ; its true significance was in the spiritual realities that each of the beautiful and radiant objects represented.^[18] The beautiful objects and actions of liturgy in a beautiful church serve as a type or representation of glorious spiritual realities as they lead the believers to "see one thing and believe another."^[19] In this the realities of salvation have indeed become concrete to the



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Antiquity.

[1] My translation.

[2] Justin Martyr, 1 *Apol.* 14; 67.6; Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.5.

[3] Cf. Justin Martyr, 1 *Apol.* 14; 67.6; Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.5; Cyprian, *Ep.* 2.2.2.

[4] Unlike martyrdom, however, almsgiving was repeatable.

[5] Eusebius, *HE* 6.43.2.

[6] E.g., Cyprian, *Ep.* 80.1.4; *Acts Cyprian* 1.7;

[7] H. Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 153; see Eusebius *HE* 8.1.5; 8.2.4; Lactantius, *Mort.* 12.

[8] Cf. P.Oxy. XXXIII, 2673, in Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 154.

[9] Constantine's imperial patronage of the church did not exceed what was expected of the imperial patronage of the Roman state religion.

[10] R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 49.

[11] Cf. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 31.

[12] Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 181; also Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 32, 45.

[13] Cf. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.36.

[14] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.31.

[15] J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 150

[16] On this topic, see P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western*

Christianity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[17] D. Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105.

[18] John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 3.4.

[19] A. E. Siecienski, "Gilding the Lily: A Patristic Defense of Liturgical Splendor," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (ed. S. R. Holman; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 218.

[20] Cf. *Ibid.*

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