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The Early Church, the Roman State and Ancient Civil Society: Whose Responsibility Are the Poor?

Christopher M. Hays

Introduction

John the Baptist was, in some senses, Jesus's 'opening act'. He roamed the desert in his camel-skin toga, munching on locusts, in order to preach repentance in preparation for the Messiah. He told people to express their repentance by offering their second tunic to the bare-chested, and by sharing their food with the hungry (Lk. 3.11). Small surprise, then, that the Jesus movement that grew out of John's ministry also was concerned for the economically vulnerable.

Jesus endorsed almsgiving,¹ and counselled divestiture to that end;² people opened their homes and tables to the poor,³ and to empty-pocketed itinerant preachers;⁴ well-to-do women disciples took care of Jesus and the Twelve,⁵ since they had abandoned stable jobs.⁶ The Jerusalem Church set up a programme to feed local widows.⁷ Paul sometimes got bankrolled by a church he planted,⁸ but most of the time he worked a 'nine to five' job to take care of himself, his travelling companions and the indigent around him.⁹ Paul even helped organize a couple of big international aid packages, for example, from the church in Antioch,¹⁰ or the churches around the Aegean Sea.¹¹

¹ Mt. 6.19-21//Lk. 12.33-34; cf. Acts 20.35; 1 Thess. 4.9-11; 5.14; Eph. 4.28.

² Mk 10.21//Mt. 19.21//Lk. 18.22; Lk. 12.33; 14.33.

³ Lk. 14.15-24.

⁴ Mt. 10.9-11; Mk 6.8-11; Lk. 9.3-5; 10.4-7.

⁵ Lk. 8.1-3.

⁶ Mt. 4.22; 9.9//Mk 1.20; 2.14//Lk. 5.11, 27-28.

⁷ Acts 6.1-7.

⁸ 2 Cor. 11.8-9; Phil. 1.5-7; 4.14-19. Julien M. Ogereau, 'Paul's *κοινωνία* with the Philippians: *Societas* as a Missionary Funding Strategy', *NTS* 60 (2014): 360-78 shows that the *κοιν-* language was typical of financial partnerships, and argues that Paul and the Philippians were partners in a *societas unius rei*, 'a partnership towards a particular, profitable or non-profitable, objective' (376-78). The church provided the money and Paul provided the skills and effort.

⁹ Acts 20.34-35; 1 Cor. 4.12; 9.4-12; 2 Cor. 11.8-9; 1 Thess. 2.9; cf. Eph. 4.28.

¹⁰ Acts 11.27-30.

¹¹ Rom. 15.25-26; 1 Cor. 16.1-3; 2 Cor. 8-9. This practice continued in subsequent centuries. For example, in the third century the church in Rome was known for its 'custom' (*ἔθος ethos*; Eusebius,

This much, we know. But when we talk about early Christian ‘charity’, we might tend to think of it as something that the church did in isolation from the power structures of its day. This chapter will examine to what degree that is actually the case. It will first ask how the ancient ‘powers’, that is, civil society and the Roman government, engaged with poverty, and then in that light, it will assess how the Early Church interacted with the methods of the powers. It will become readily clear that the church did not fob responsibility for the poor off on civil society or the state. Rather, the church variously resisted, redirected, cooperated with and led the powers because the church of the poor knew that all its members are agents of God’s kingdom.

The church, the poor and the powers 1: Civil society

We begin our discussion of poverty and the powers by looking at ‘civil society’. Civil society is often conceived in terms of organizations: Scouts, Tearfund, labour unions, universities, lawn-bowling clubs. So I will begin by introducing the closest ancient equivalent to a civic organization, before touching on early Christianity’s engagements with three key expressions of civic munificence: banqueting, benefaction and patronage.

Voluntary associations

The best ancient Roman equivalent for the modern civic organization is the *collegium*, the ‘voluntary association’. The reason for the vague English translation of *collegium* is that voluntary associations are notoriously slippery to define. Ancient *collegia* are sometimes categorized as occupational, cultic, or domestic, which is to say some were dedicated to a given profession (weavers, woodcutters, fullers, fishermen), or to a particular deity (Zeus, Dionysus, Aphrodite), and some were composed of members of an aristocratic household.¹² Still, this neat division is a bit misleading, because almost all *collegia*, even if not dedicated to a specific deity, all had a religious component.¹³

Collegia were basically ancient clubs, predominantly populated by the non-elite (freedmen, slaves, the poor and foreigners¹⁴), although they did include some wealthier members (and thus *collegia* helped mediate between the masses and the elite).¹⁵ The association’s community life centred around a communal meal (i.e. they would dine together regularly),¹⁶ even if their stated *raison d’être* was religious or professional.

Hist. eccl. 4.23.9) of sending financial support to cities around the Mediterranean, even as far away as Syria and Arabia (*Hist. eccl.* 4.23.9; 7.5.2).

¹² Markus Öhler, ‘Cultic Meals in Associations and the Early Christian Eucharist’, *EC* 5 (2014): 475–502, here 477.

¹³ John S. Kloppenborg, ‘*Collegia* and *Thiasoi*: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership’, in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (London: Routledge, 1996), 16–30, here 18–19.

¹⁴ Kloppenborg, ‘*Collegia*’, 16–17, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ Öhler, ‘Cultic Meals’, 476, 480–1.

And, while they certainly were not charitable organizations, the *collegia* would look out their members. For example, *collegia* would frequently provide for members' burial expenses;¹⁷ some required members to post bail for one another.¹⁸ They were funded by annual dues from their members,¹⁹ on top of which the more-affluent members regularly infuse *collegia* with cash to help out members who could not pay their dues and sometimes provide the groups with facilities for their meetings.²⁰

So why are *collegia* relevant to our discussion of the Early Church? After all, the church was not a big voluntary association. Organizationally speaking, churches had analogies to a few different institutions, such as the philosophical school or the household, and there is no doubt that in the earliest years and in churches with larger Jewish populations, the *synagogue*, not the *collegium*, was the church's closest organizational analogy. However, the more Christianity moved west, and the more predominantly gentile it became in composition, the more local churches would have appeared to be *collegia*.²¹ As we will see the ensuing pages, lots of church activities would have looked like *collegial* activities as well. Christians had regular banquets; so did *collegia*. Christians acted as patrons and benefactors to their church communities; so did members of *collegia*. So, when members of local Christian communities engaged in practices like banqueting, benefaction and patronage, they would have looked a lot like collegial expressions of civic munificence. What is interesting, then, is the fact that Christians departed from collegial custom by applying these practices of civic munificence *to the poor*. Allow me to unpack this idea with a few case-studies.

Banqueting

One standard feature of early Christian worship, of the meetings of voluntary associations and of Jewish and Hellenistic social life, more broadly, was the community meal, the banquet. The banquet was an important venue for social manoeuvring (and, indeed, drama) in the Mediterranean world, and it was not initially conceived of as a mechanism by which to care for the needy. Christians, however, *transformed* ancient banquets into mechanisms by which to care for the vulnerable, and did so well aware of the sociocultural ramifications of that decision.

¹⁷ Earlier scholarship tended to see these clubs as existing primarily to take care of funeral expenses, but Kloppenborg suggests that in the first century, even though many *collegia* took care of burial expenses, they were not defined as existing for that purpose. Rather, he argues that the existence of the category of the funerary association, *collegium tenuiorum*, emerges during the reign of Hadrian. Kloppenborg, 'Collegia', 20–23.

¹⁸ John S. Kloppenborg, 'Membership Practices in Pauline Christ Groups', *EC* 4 (2013): 183–215, here 200.

¹⁹ For details, see F. Sokolowski, 'Fees and Taxes in the Greek Cults', *HTR* 47 (1954): 153–64.

²⁰ For epigraphic evidence, see Richard Ascough, 'Benefactions Gone Wrong: The "Sin" of Ananias and Sapphira in Context', in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 91–110, here notes 15–17; Markus Öhler, 'Die Jerusalemer Urgemeinde im Spiegel des antiken Vereinswesens', *NTS* 51 (2005): 393–415, here 405–6.

²¹ Wayne O. McCready, 'Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations', in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (London: Routledge, 1996), 59–73, here 62 (cf. 69–70).

Consider Luke 14. As Jesus sits in a conventional banquet setting, he criticizes the guests jockeying for seats of honour (vv. 7–11).²² He has no time for the way banquets served as a venue for status-mongering (vv. 12–14) and tells his host that, on the occasion of planning his next banquet, instead of inviting the sort of people who could scratch the host's back in the future, he should 'invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (v. 13). The poor and handicapped were not typical guests at a banquet, and association with them certainly would not help the host's social standing. But they were the sorts of people to whom Jesus dedicated his attention (Lk. 4.18; 7.22; 14.21)²³ and, frankly, they were the sorts of people who really needed a good meal.

The banquet was not, historically, about feeding the hungry. That was a Christian innovation. Jesus took an institution that was about status maintenance and he turned it into practice that was about care for the poor (in line with what John the Baptist taught; Lk. 3.11). Thus, in Luke's laudatory depiction of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2, he underscores the fact that 'Day by day . . . they broke bread at home and ate their food²⁴ with glad and generous hearts' (Acts 2.46). While commensality certainly demonstrated and contributed to social unity within the church,²⁵ it was also very much about providing for those who did not have enough to eat. By eating together daily or weekly, the disciples would significantly ameliorate the financial burdens of the impoverished in the community, since food is the primary expense of a poor person.

It was not easy for the church to turn the banquet into the sort of communal meal that would care for the poor and honour Christ. First Corinthians 11 reveals that the socio-economic differences between believers could mar the celebration of the Lord's Supper. (The Lord's Supper remained a full communal meal for some decades, before being pared down to our modern wafers and thimbles of grape juice.) In Corinth, the meal's bread and wine were probably provided by richer Christians.²⁶ That was a good thing, as far as it went, but Paul still criticized them 'because when you come together it is not for the better, but for the worse' (1 Cor. 11.17).

For when the time comes to eat, each of you [devours/goes ahead with] your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? . . . So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, [receive/wait for] one another. If you are hungry, eat at

²² Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for the same behaviour in Lk. 11.43 and in 20.46, but we know that this was not just a Jewish phenomenon; it also happened in voluntary associations that big donors got the best seats and special privileges during meals; Öhler, 'Cultic Meals', 480.

²³ For more detail, see Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character*, WUNT 2/275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 130.

²⁴ The expression 'sharing food' (μεταλαμβάνον τροφῆς *metalambanon trophēs*) denotes the consumption of a real meal, not merely a symbolic rite; Andreas Lindemann, 'The Beginnings of Christian Life in Jerusalem according to the Summaries in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–16)', in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. Julian V. Hills (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 202–17, here 208.

²⁵ Santos Yao, 'Dismantling Social Barriers through Table Fellowship: Acts 2:42–47', in *Mission in Acts*, ed. William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel F. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 29–36, here 29–32.

²⁶ This makes sense of why, per v. 14, the Corinthians expected that Paul would praise them.

home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. (1 Cor. 11.21-22, 33-34 NRSV, adapted)²⁷

It remains a bit unclear what precisely the Corinthians did to earn Paul's ire, but two explanations seem especially plausible.²⁸ The first possibility is that the rich may simply have begun their meals before the poor arrived and therefore eaten more than their fair share.²⁹ The second possibility is that the rich actually supplied themselves with superior fare, while extending only bread and wine to the poorer members of the community.³⁰ By either reconstruction, the outcome of this supposedly communal meal was that 'one goes hungry and another becomes drunk' (11.21).

From a sociocultural perspective, it is important to appreciate that common pagan practice legitimated the provision of the rich with both larger portions (per the first possibility) and better fare (per the second). In *collegia*, for example, all members paid regular dues to cover the costs of meals, but club officers had to make larger contributions³¹ and therefore received larger portions. For example, the rules of a rather run-of-the-mill *collegium* in Lanuvium state (32 km south of Rome) that 'any member who has administered the office of the *quinquennalis*³² honestly shall receive a share and a half of everything as a mark of honour'.³³ Thus, if the rich in Corinth provided the food for the Lord's Supper and tired of waiting around for poorer members to show up, they may have thought it justifiable to get a head start on dinner, even if they ended up with more booze and bread than the latecomers, who had not contributed anything to the meal anyway.

Similarly, classical literature reveals that hosts at banquets frequently provided better fare for their VIP guests and shabbier repast for the less-distinguished attendees. Consider the complaint from the incomparable Roman satirist, Martial, after his host, one Pontius, snubbed him at a banquet:

Since I am asked to dinner, . . . why is not the same dinner served to me as to you?
You take oysters fattened in the Lucrine lake, I suck a mussel through a hole in a

²⁷ The reconstruction of the conflict relates to the translation of two key verbs: *προλαμβάνει* *prolambanei* (v. 21) and *ἐκδέχεται* *ekdecheste* (v. 33). If the conflict stems from the rich starting to eat before all the poor have arrived, then *προλαμβάνει* *prolambanei* (v. 21) is translated 'to take before, go ahead with' and *ἐκδέχεται* *ekdecheste* is translated 'wait for', in the sense that the rich should wait for the poor to arrive before tucking in (so Barry D. Smith, 'The Problem with the Observance of the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian Church', *BBR* 20 (2010): 517–44, esp. 536–39). If the conflict results from differing fare for rich and poor, then *προλαμβάνει* *prolambanei* (v. 21) is translated 'to devour', and *ἐκδέχεται* *ekdecheste* should be translated as 'receive', so that v. 33 exhorts the rich believers to include the poorer believers in all the dishes of the meal (so Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 567–68; Bruce W. Winter, 'The Lord's Supper at Corinth: An Alternative Reconstruction', *RTR* 37 (1978): 73–82, here 76–80).

²⁸ For a more detailed adjudication of the five major positions, see Smith, 'Problem', 517–44.

²⁹ Smith, 'Problem', 521, 542–3.

³⁰ See, e.g., Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, GNS (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1983), 167–69; Öhler, 'Cultic Meals', 498; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, trans. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 155–9; Winter, 'Lord's Supper', 73–82.

³¹ Markus Öhler, 'Die Jerusalemer Urgemeinde im Spiegel des antiken Vereinswesens', *NTS* 51 (2005): 393–415, here 408.

³² This seems to have been a leadership role with a five-year tenure.

³³ *CIL* XIV 2112; translation from Theissen, *Social Setting*, 154.

shell; you get mushrooms, I take hog funguses . . . Golden with fat, a turtledove gorges you with its bloated rump; there is set before me a magpie that has died in its cage. (Martial, *Epig.* 3.60; see also Pliny, *Ep.* 2.6)

Whichever reconstruction is more probable in the case of Corinth – that the rich gobbled up a disproportionate share of the food because they started before the poor arrived, or that the rich provided themselves with superior dishes – this differential treatment was perfectly in keeping with societal norms. The rich Corinthians even felt good about themselves for what they were doing (1 Cor. 11.17), because they *were* following Jesus's teachings about including the riff-raff in their banquets.³⁴ But Paul resists social convention, and tells the Corinthians to ensure that the poor and the rich are equal participants in the supper (11.33).³⁵

Banqueting, thus, provides a clear example of how early Christians took a staple convention of civil society, which was not originally about charity, and transformed it into a mechanism of caring for the poor, even though doing so required the subversion of significant cultural suppositions.

This may seem a bit historically quaint at first blush. Most middle-class people worry about eating too much, rather than too little, such that the idea of meal-sharing might seem irrelevant as a means of caring for the poor. But regular hunger remains part of the lives of millions in the North Atlantic region³⁶ and, indeed, of hundreds of millions in the Majority World. In response to this reality, the Biblical Seminary of Colombia (the seminary at which I teach) has a program called the *Plan Tio* (the Uncle Plan), in which professors adopt a couple of students who are not getting three square meals a day; professors invite their 'nieces/nephews' to weekly meals in their homes and then subsidize the students' major daily meal on all the other days. Students were going hungry, and so the seminary, an organization of civil society, implemented a systematic but voluntary form of commensality.

Benefaction

Let us explore the way the New Testament (NT) appropriates another mainstay of ancient civic activism: benefaction (sometimes called 'euergetism').³⁷ On the positive side, some texts encourage Christians to be proactive in benefaction. First Peter, for example, is written to Christians in the context of local hostility and ostracism, and it advises readers to make the government an ally by engaging in community benefaction.³⁸

³⁴ Theissen, *Social Setting*, 162.

³⁵ The practice of wealthier members providing food for the community meals continued in the second and third centuries, as we see in the writing of Justin Martyr (*1 Apol.* 67.1: οἱ ἔχοντες τοῖς λειπομένοις πᾶσιν ἐπικουροῦμεν 'Those of us who have [the means] supply those who lack' [my translation]).

³⁶ World Hunger Education Services, 'Hunger in America: 2015 United States Hunger and Poverty Facts' (http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/us_hunger_facts.htm, accessed May 2016).

³⁷ See further the discussion in Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 58–63.

³⁸ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 101; W. C. van Unnik, 'The Teaching of Good Works in 1 Peter', *NTS* 1 (1954): 92–110, here 99; Bruce Winter,

For the Lord's sake submit to every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good (ἀγαθοποιῶν *agathopoion*). For it is God's will that by doing good (ἀγαθοποιούντας *agatharpoiontas*) you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. (1 Pet. 2.13-14 NRSV, adapted)

Rom. 13.3, likewise, encourages believers, 'Do what is good (τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποιεῖ),³⁹ and you will receive [the government's] approval.' The terminology (ἀγαθοποιέω, *agathapoieō*, etc.) utilized in both these texts frequently denotes, not just general do-goodery, but euergetism. So early Christians recognized the benefits that could accrue from benefaction.⁴⁰

But ancient benefaction was not an unproblematic phenomenon, from a Christian perspective; it could be (and often was) a tool of self-aggrandisement. Therefore, Luke subverts the culturally dominant conception of benefaction. It is not that Luke avoids the terminology of euergetism. Quite the contrary – Luke describes God as a benefactor (ἀγαθοῦργῶν *agathourgōn*; Acts 14.17) who works through his brokers,⁴¹ Jesus (who is called εὐεργετῶν *euergetōn*, a benefactor, Acts 10.38) and the apostles (who perform εὐεργεσία *euergesia*, a benefaction, Acts 4.9).⁴²

Nonetheless, the deeds Luke describes with the benefaction language (e.g. healing and good harvests) are not actually *financial* benefactions; what Peter calls a benefaction in Acts 4.9, healing the blind man, is actually done *instead* of giving him money (Acts 3.6). On the flip side, when Barnabas gives the proceeds of the sale of his field to the apostles (4.36-37), he has effectively engaged in a benefaction to his *collegium*. But Luke does *not* use benefaction terminology to describe that donation; instead, he employs language that highlights the unity of the Jerusalem believers, in spite of their differing economic statuses.⁴³

In other words, Luke calls miracles 'benefactions', even though his culture would not normally understand miracles in those terms, and he describes benefactions as evidence of Christian unity, even though pagans saw benefactions as ways to highlight one's superior status! In fact, the only time Luke speaks of benefaction in a normal, pecuniary fashion is when he *decries* it. 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors (εὐεργέται *euergetai*). *But not so with you*; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader

Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 34–5, 38–9.

³⁹ Epigraphic evidence indicates that this is benefaction language: Winter, *Seek*, 34–5.

⁴⁰ Indeed, we see that, even when the government turned on Christians in later years, the Christian reputation for benefaction could work in their favour. The *Acts of Phileas* tell of a rich bishop (Phileas) who was so well known for his generosity that even when his episcopal status made him a target for state-persecution, the judge urged him to recant so that he could continue to be a benefactor to Alexandria (*Acts Phil.* 11.9–12.1).

⁴¹ K. C. Hanson, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 71.

⁴² Halvor Moxnes, 'Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts', in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 241–68, here 257–61.

⁴³ For details, see Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 200–209.

like one who serves' (Lk. 22.25-26). Why did Luke do this? Because, however important Luke knew benefaction to be, he did not want the care of the poor to undermine the unity and equality of the church.

In sum, early Christians did benefit from what Graeco-Roman society called benefaction. But Luke recognized the shadow side of benefaction, the way in which it cultivated grandiose delusions amongst benefactors. Benefaction was a useful convention of ancient civil society, but not one Christians took on uncritically.

Patronage

Moving on to a third convention, patronage, we can see the NT authors' views were similarly variegated. On the positive side, patronage supported the spread of Christianity. For example, Paul explicitly says that Phoebe, a 'deacon of the church in Cenchreae', 'was a patron of many, even of me myself (προστάτις πολλῶν ἐγενήθη καὶ ἐμοῦ αὐτοῦ)' (Rom. 16.1-2, my translation). This indicates she was likely a woman of means who offered aid and hospitality to Christians travelling through the port city in which she lived.⁴⁴ Lydia – who was a merchant in purple cloth, head of her own household and Paul's convert in Philippi – seems, likewise, to have become a patron of Paul, hosting him while he was in Philippi (Acts 16.14-16) and perhaps being one of his key financial supporters as he ministered in Corinth and Thessalonica (2 Cor. 11.8-9; Phil 1.5-7; 4.14-19).⁴⁵ So also the hosts of the early house churches, like Nympha (Col. 4.15) or Philemon (1-2),⁴⁶ should probably be thought of as patrons of their local ecclesial *collegia* as well.

On the more critical side, the Church sometimes reconstrued the concept of patronage. Consider the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk. 16.1-13). The parable describes how a steward, in the eleventh hour of his employment in one great house, writes off 500 denarii of the debts some affluent merchants owe to his current boss, in hopes of securing himself another white-collar job upon dismissal from his current post. In other words, the steward gets himself a new patron.⁴⁷

Luke tells his readers to imitate the steward's example by using their mundane wealth wisely in order to receive true wealth in the future (16.11). This is conceptually the same as telling disciples to give alms and thereby secure treasure in heaven (Lk. 12.32-34). Thus, when Jesus applies the parable by saying, 'Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes' (16.9), he is teaching that one makes 'friends' (φίλους *philous*) with the poor by giving one's earthly wealth, so that, after one dies, the poor welcome one into heaven.

⁴⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* 9–16, WBC 38B (Dallas: Word, 1998), 888–9; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 916; TDNT 6:703.

⁴⁵ The same can probably also be said of Gaius (Rom. 16.23).

⁴⁶ Edward Adams has corrected the thesis that the vast majority of Christian churches met in believers' homes, though he affirms that something along the lines of traditional reconstructions is likely in the cases cited here. Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?*, LNTS 450 (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 18–21, 44.

⁴⁷ For detail, see Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 140–2.

What does this have to do with patronage? The logic of the parable becomes clear when one realizes that the title 'friend' (*amicus*, φίλος *philos*) was a common euphemism⁴⁸ used between patrons and clients, since being called a *cliens* ('client') could be distasteful to a client of status or ambition.⁴⁹ This small historical insight illuminates Lk. 16.9. Normally in Graeco-Roman society, patrons cultivate clients through favours, such as financial gifts; by this logic, Jesus's instructions to give money to the poor would cast the giver as the patron and the poor recipient as the client, even though they refer to each other with the euphemism 'friend'. But, in 16.9, Luke makes it clear that it is the recipient friend who welcomes the giver into 'eternal homes', extending celestial hospitality. As the 'heavenly host', the friend who received the gift of earthly wealth becomes the eschatological *patron* of the formerly affluent donor friend.

This all makes good sense from Luke's perspective, since he considers the poor to be the blessed heirs of the kingdom (Lk. 6.20; 16.19-25; 18.18-27), in contrast to the rich, whose entrance into eternal beatitude is only the slimmest of possibilities (Lk. 6.24; 12.13-21; 16.19-31), largely contingent upon their care of the poor (Lk. 12.33-34; 14.12-14; 18.22; 19.8-10). Thus, according to the Parable of the Unjust Steward, the rich who are patrons to the poor today will be clients of the poor in the life to come.⁵⁰

We have seen that early Christianity benefitted significantly from patronage as a mechanism of supporting its expansion. But the ideology of patronage, considering the poor inferior to the rich, ran contrary to the fundamental convictions of their faith. So Christians developed an eschatological vision in which the poor became the patrons of the rich, reflecting their abundance of true wealth.

Summary

To sum up the argument thus far, early Christian communities had many features in common with the practices and features of voluntary associations; like ancient *collegia*, churches were spaces for regular commensality, relationship across social classes, religious observance and mutual support. Christians recognized how patronage and benefaction could help support and expand their movement (thus the endorsement of benefaction in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, or the roles of Phoebe and Lydia in the ministry of Paul). They even saw how banqueting could be transformed into a space for commensality, feeding the hungry (Luke 14; Acts 2).

⁴⁸ The euphemism originally derives from the conventions of ritual/ideal friendship but came to be applied in the context of patron-client relations. While ritual friendship is an important idea for Luke, as seen in Acts 2.42-47; 4.32-35 (Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 50-53, 200-209), ritual friendship is probably not in view in the Parable of the Unjust Steward. Although it is possible to read the term 'friends' in the more egalitarian sense, the literary context suggests the patron-client nuance, since (1) the steward would not become an equal to the debtors he released, but an employed inferior and (2) this seems to extend the central Lukan motif of the eschatological inversion of fortunes, according to which the poor and marginalized are elevated while the rich and powerful are brought low (Lk. 1.51-55; 6.20-26; 14.7-24; 16.19-31; 18.14).

⁴⁹ For detail, see Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 53-4.

⁵⁰ The same idea gets developed in the Apostolic Fathers. In the Parable of the Vine and the Elm, the rich care for the poor so that the poor, who have 'pull' with God, will intercede on behalf of the rich (Herm. *Simil.* 2.5). Basically, the rich secure the poor as their patrons/brokers because, in the heavenly economy, the poor are the superiors of the rich, who can network on their behalf.

But the church also realized that civil structures and conventions came with baggage. They oftentimes fomented inequality, marginalized the poor and elevated the rich. So the church learned to be savvy in appropriating civil conventions, sometimes rejecting specific ideas (as Paul does in response to the unfair portions served at the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11) or transforming key terms (as in Acts 2 and 4), sometimes even inverting standard practices (as in Lk. 14.7-24 and 16.1-13). In brief, early Christians engaged robustly with civil society, they evaluated prudently and they revised unabashedly.

The Church, the poor and the powers 2: The state

Let us proceed to the subject of government. What can ancient history tell us about how the church and the *state* might interact on the subject of poverty? At first blush, the answer might appear to be 'not much', since in the first century, care for the needy was not, by and large, the responsibility of the government.

The paucity of centralized and systematic care for the poor by the state

First, it bears saying that the sort of distinction between religion and government one sees (theoretically!) endorsed in the United States did not exist in the first century. So, at least in regards to Judaism, one might surmise that the government did have an interest in caring for the needy; after all, the Old Testament has loads of legislation about providing for the impoverished (gleaning and reaping laws, Lev. 19.9-10; 23.22; second tithes for the poor, Deut. 14.28-29; debt remission in the sabbath years, Deut. 15.1-2; land restoration in the Jubilee years, Lev. 25.13, etc.). That surmise, however, would be erroneous.

First-century Judaea was part of the Roman Empire, but Rome devolved a fair amount of responsibility for regional governance to the seventy elders of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was, in the first place, a judicial and cultic body, and, at least in the post-Herodian decades, they also enjoyed some legislative powers (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.10.5 [20.251]).⁵¹ But their interactions with matters of economics and finances were basically confined to maintaining the operations of the Jerusalem cult. Since religious laws were part of their remit, we could imagine that a violation of, for example, the second tithe could be brought before them, but unfortunately there is no record of them ruling on matters of this sort (at least as far as the present author is aware). So, if

⁵¹ For a fulsome account of the Sanhedrin's functions see Sidney B. Hoenig, *The Great Sanhedrin: A Study of the Origin, Development, Composition and Functions of the Bet Din ha-Gadol during the Second Jewish Commonwealth* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1953), 85–104; cf. Emil Schürer, Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Martin Goodman, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC–AD 135)*, 4 vols, revised edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–86), vol. 2/1, 184–95; Graham H. Twelftree, 'Sanhedrin', in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin, 2nd edn (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 836–40, here 839.

there was a social welfare system in Judaea in the first century, the Sanhedrin did not run it.⁵²

The Roman *frumentatio publica*, the imperial ‘dole’, is perhaps one of the better first-century analogies to state-sponsored welfare. Any adult male citizen residing in the city of Rome could take part in the lottery to receive this regular imperial benefaction, which was available to about 20 per cent of the city’s population.⁵³ The dole was not, however, primarily about care for the poor.⁵⁴ Generally women and children are not on the lists; neither are non-citizens, foreigners, nor slaves,⁵⁵ and the very rich were just as eligible as the poorest male citizen. In other words, some needy, male, citizen plebs would have received the dole (as a matter of chance), but the most-marginalized people in Rome were excluded.⁵⁶

Outside the city of Rome, there is not much more that looks like systematic state-sponsored care for the needy.⁵⁷ The first-century geographer Strabo did comment that, on the island of Rhodes, there were liturgies to care for the needy:

[T]hey wish to take care of their multitude of poor people. Accordingly, the people are supplied with provision and the needy are supported by the well-to-do; and there are certain liturgies [λειτουργία *leitourgia*] that supply provisions so that at the same time the poor man receives his sustenance and the city does not run short of useful men, and in particular for the manning of the fleets. (Strabo, *Geogr.* 14.2.5)

Liturgies were benefactions designed for the service of the community, which the city in varying degrees foisted upon its richer members. The Rhodian liturgies had at least the partial purpose of ensuring that the island did not run out of sailors and oarsmen

⁵² Rabbinic literature reveals that the Jewish communities maintained a community chest (קופה) and a ‘soup kitchen’ (תבנית) which helped provide for the needs of the poor (*m. Pe'ah* 8.7; *t. Pe'ah* 4.2–9; *b. Bat.* 8a–9a), but these institutions do not seem to have been in effect prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE; Brian J. Capper, ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context of the Earliest Christian Community of Goods’, in *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, BAFCS 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 323–56 (350–51); Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics*, 226; David Peter Seccombe, ‘Was There Organized Charity in Jerusalem before the Christians?’, *JTS* n.s. 29 (1978): 140–3, esp. 140–2. For an extended discussion of Jewish wealth ethics in the Old Testament and Second Temple periods, see Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics*, 25–49.

⁵³ Dio Chrysostom, 55.10.1; *Res Gestae* 3.15; Suetonius, *Aug.* 40.2; cf. 42.3.

⁵⁴ For further details, see Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics*, 60; Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 88–89.

⁵⁵ Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 238.

⁵⁶ The Roman Empire did also establish some alimentary schemes to support children in Italy, and while I am inclined to think that sentimental or humane considerations helped stimulate the establishment of these schemes, the public explanation for the schemes tended to focus on supporting a dwindling rural population of Italy or fortifying the ranks of the Roman military. For the history of the debate over the purposes of *alimentae*, see Jesper Carlsen, ‘Gli *alimenta* imperiali e privati in Italia: Ideologia ed economia’, in *Demografia, sistemi agrari, regimi alimentari nel mondo antico*, ed. Domenico Vera, Pragmateia (Bari: Edipuglia, 1999), 273–88 (274–8).

⁵⁷ The only Roman province with a dole was Egypt, during of the second and third centuries, but that dole too included only a sector of the local Hellenized elite. Garnsey, *Famine*, 263–6; Greg Woolf, ‘Food, Poverty, and Patronage: The Significance of the Epigraphy of the Roman Alimentary Schemes in Early Imperial Italy’, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 58 (1990): 197–228, here 213.

with which to populate their fleet (no small matter for a tiny island). We should not assume that the Rhodian practice was entirely unparalleled in the ancient world,⁵⁸ but it is telling that even the world-traveller Strabo considered the Rhodian liturgies to be a novelty. They are the exception that proves the rule.

Centralized and systematic care for the poor by the church and its impact on the state

So one finds minimal evidence of anything equivalent to state-sponsored welfare systems in the early Roman Empire. Christians, however, began to develop welfare structures quite early on, even without a government model to imitate. Acts 6 indicates that the apostles organized a regular distribution for widows in Jerusalem (vv. 1–7), and that practice spread and developed. In second-century Rome, Justin Martyr describes how

they who are well-to-do and willing give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need (*1 Apol.* 67.6; translation ANF)

By the mid-third century, the Roman community chest sustained 46 presbyters, 42 acolytes, over 1,500 widows and needy people, and 52 exorcists, readers and doorkeepers (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.43.11). The church also employed 14 deacons and subdeacons to administer this formidable welfare operation at the behest of the bishop (*Apos. Trad.* 8.3; 13).

In some degree, it seems that the church set out mechanisms and models for governments to fund and follow. For example, Constantine the Great became a major patron of the church's charitable efforts, radically increasing the Christians' resources for helping the poor.⁵⁹ In reaction, Constantine's son-in-law, Emperor Julian (generously nicknamed 'the Apostate'), established major subsidies of the pagan cult so that they would care for the poor, precisely in reaction to the Christian and Jewish examples. Julian instructed the high priest of Galatia,

30,000 modii of corn shall be assigned every year for the whole of Galatia, and 60,000 pints of wine. I order that one-fifth of this be used for the poor who serve the priests, and the remainder be distributed by us to strangers and beggars. For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the *impious Galilaeans* [*i.e. the Christians*] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us. (Julian, *Epistle 22* [Wright, LCL] my italics)

⁵⁸ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 85.

⁵⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (London: Penguin, 1986), 667–68; Justo González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 150–1.

In brief, Christians independently developed a rudimentary welfare system for their own co-religionists and thereby helped the Roman Empire to be more organized in care for the needy. Christians were not originally looking for the government to care for the poor.

Towards a more nuanced church-state engagement on economic justice: The analogy of criminal justice

This is not, however, a primer for some sort of Christian libertarianism. I do not want to argue from the NT's silence that secular governments should stay out of the welfare business. There are all sorts of marvellously God-honouring institutions that the NT never mentions simply because the relevant ideas (or types of political systems!) would not emerge for centuries (one thinks of national parks, state-funded universities, public radio, free motorways). In order to move beyond the NT's silence on government welfare, we can examine the church's view of the state's role in *criminal* justice and then extrapolate to the analogous issue of *economic* justice.

In the first place, there is a long Jewish and Christian tradition that affirms that God uses governments (even pagan ones) to fulfil his redemptive purposes.⁶⁰ NT authors are clear that getting justice for the innocent and punishing the guilty is something the government *should* do (Rom. 13.1-7), and they sometimes seem sanguine that the Roman government will do as it ought. The book of Acts, for example, often depicts the Roman authorities as defending the innocence of apostles.⁶¹ Rom. 13.1-7 affirms that the Roman government has been instituted by God for the purpose of rewarding good conduct and punishing evildoers, and for that reason encourages Christians to be diligent in paying their taxes (cf. 1 Tim. 2.1-2; 1 Pet. 2.13-14; Tit. 3.1).⁶²

This is not to be naïve about the reality that governments often dramatically abuse their power. Paul writes the Epistle to the Romans in the period before Nero started torching Christians to light his gardens.⁶³ Likewise, composing Acts in the 80s or early 90s CE, Luke is quite aware that the Romans decapitated Paul; his positive depiction of Roman governance is probably calculated to avoid the real possibility that Rome might become even more hostile to Christians. Still, caveats notwithstanding, the presence of these positive comments about pagan justice reveal the early Christian sentiment that it was *in principle* good and right for governments to be agents of criminal justice.

⁶⁰ E.g. Isa. 45.1-4, 13; 1 Kgs 3.9-13; James R. Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology*, WUNT 273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 301.

⁶¹ Acts 18.12-17; 19.35-41; 23.16-35; 24.1-26; 25.14-22; 26.30-32; though see, e.g., 16.20-22. This is surely part of an apologetic agenda, to the effect that Christians should not be viewed as a threat by the Roman government, but the apparent plausibility of the strategy indicates that it was within the realm of reasonable possibility.

⁶² This is very much in keeping with Jewish tradition; see Prov. 8.15-16; Wis. 6.3; Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, 761.

⁶³ Furthermore, James Harrison has shown that even Paul's apparently account of Roman authority is both a subtle relativization of typical and far more lofty depictions of Roman power and, in its warning to 'fear' the government's 'wrath', probably functions as a 'hidden transcript' warning Christians against provoking Rome's ire; Harrison, *Paul*, 308-13.

Nonetheless, NT authors would shift their depictions of the government during seasons when the Rome perverted justice. Mark's Gospel, for example, was written during the Neronian persecution. So Mk 12.17 depicts Jesus being cagey about paying taxes – not opposing Roman rule (as one might have expected of a militant messianic claimant) but also not celebrating how those taxes would be put to good use in defending the Christians against pagan abuse, as Paul did in Rom. 13.6-7. On the contrary, Mark's Jesus warns that Christians will be tried before governors and kings and will indeed be executed (Mk 13.9-13). Similarly, during Domitian's persecution, the Apocalypse characterizes Rome as 'the mother of whores and of earth's abominations' (Rev. 17.5), who is 'drunk with the blood of the saints' (17.6).⁶⁴ Obviously, these are not periods in which Christians are sanguine about getting justice from the empire.

Sometimes, matters of economic and criminal justice intersected in the Early Church, as we can see in the story of the martyrdom of St Lawrence. In 258 CE, the prefect of Rome summoned the archdeacon Lawrence to surrender the church's treasures in order to supplement the government's dwindling coffers. Cheekily, Lawrence feigned agreement and asked leave to collect the church's wealth. Returning a couple days later, Lawrence paraded before the prefect a rag-tag assembly of beggars, widows and cripples, all of whom were supported by the Christian charitable bureaucracy (Prudentius, *Perist.* 2.173–72, 297–300); Lawrence then waxed eloquent about how the poor are jewels in the temple of God. The prefect was not amused and had Lawrence barbecued alive on a gridiron. This story is significant because we know that the Roman Church of this period possessed a formidable community chest and included many rich members (such as the senators who bore off Lawrence's body for burial; Prudentius, *Perist.* 2.489–492). But insofar as Lawrence was confident that the state was not acting as an agent of justice, he chose to die rather than to cooperate with the regime financially.

These brief investigations of economic and criminal justice clarify that the church has no grounds for fobbing the poor off on the state, even though Christians can cooperate with governments when their endeavours coincide with Christian commitments. Even Cyrus and Nero can be God's servants (Isa. 45.1-4, 13; Rom. 13.1-7). But, as the latter example suggests, God's imperial servant can quickly become a foe of justice, and so the church's efforts at cooperation should never be uncritical. Accordingly, when Rome becomes the Great Whore, then cooperation may need to turn to resistance on behalf of the poor, even carrying the gridiron of St Lawrence.

The church, the state and poverty in modern Colombia

The Church of Colombia has a complex history of trying to ameliorate poverty with and against the state. It was in 1968, in the city of Medellin, that the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) officially affirmed liberation theology's opposition

⁶⁴ Revelation 18 celebrates her foretold destruction, exulting in the way that would bring to the end her trade in fine goods (vv. 11–14) and the impact that would have on the merchants and seafarers (vv. 15–20). Apparently, the seer was not worried about the effect that the drop in GDP would have on the livelihood of the Christian populace!

to governmental and economic policies that reinforced poverty in Latin countries. In continuity with this ideological commitment, some church leaders – like Fr Camilo Torres Restrepo – ended up fomenting violent revolution.⁶⁵ Fr Torres was a priest, a sociologist (co-founder of Colombia's first faculty of sociology, at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia), and he became a guerrilla in the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army), which is the largest guerrilla group in Colombia. Killed in combat during his first engagement, Fr Torres has become a martyr of the ELN, which now is officially called the Unión Camilista-Ejército de Liberación Nacional; his name figures prominently in the hymn of the ELN:

Avancemos al combate, compañeros, que están vivas la conciencia y la razón de Camilo el Comandante guerrillero, con su ejemplo en la consigna NUPALOM [ni un paso atrás, liberación o muerte].⁶⁶

Let us advance to combat, comrades, for alive are the consciousness and the reason of Camilo, the guerrilla commander, with his example of the motto NUPALOM [not a step backwards; liberation or death]. (Author's translation)

In the wake of Torres, the ELN has been led by several Catholic priests (such as Fr Manuel Pérez Martínez) who, in varying degrees, continued to elaborate the group's ideology as a combination of liberation theology and Marxism.

This matrix of church/state/poverty issues has become poignant for us at our seminary in Medellín, as we engage with the humanitarian crisis of forced displacement. Just since 1998, over seven million Colombians have been dispossessed and impoverished by violence at the hands of the guerrillas, the drug cartels and the paramilitary groups. Over the past decades, the government's hands have not always been clean in these conflicts; even in their well-intentioned moments, Colombia's leaders have often exacerbated the poverty and suffering of the Colombian people. So, as our seminary seeks to mobilize the church in responding to the displacement crisis, we struggle with the question of how to cooperate with the government, while recognizing that, for some internally displaced persons (IDPs), the government has historically been part of the problem.

The powers and the church of the powerful poor

Up to this point, I have emphasized how the Church engages constructively and critically with the powers in sharing responsibility for the poor. But now I want to flip my own premise, first, because the church and the poor are not strictly distinct entities and, secondly, because the poor are not powerless.

⁶⁵ For an incisive, and not wholly unsympathetic, commentary on the role of priests in the guerrilla conflict, see the recent article by the current Provincial Superior of the Jesuit Order, Francisco de Roux, 'Decisiones de guerra y paz', *El Tiempo*, 14 October 2015 (<http://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/decisiones-de-guerra-y-paz-francisco-de-roux-columna-el-tiempo/16403831>, accessed May 2016).

⁶⁶ Ejército de Liberación Nacional, *Himno* (1964) (<http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-16403831>, accessed May 2016).

One of the basic affirmations of Jesus's ministry is that the poor and marginalized are particularly valued by God. Jesus frames his preaching as good news for the poor (Lk. 4.18) and he calls the poor 'blessed' (Lk. 6.20: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'; cf. Jas 2.5; Rev. 2.9), affirming their value in a context which often thought that poverty belied one's dignity and integrity.⁶⁷ Jesus himself is construed as one who accepted penury voluntarily (Lk. 9.58: 'And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."'). And even today, in many contexts the church remains the assembly of the impoverished: for example, Africa has a population of nearly half a billion Christians (494,668,000) and they have an *average* income of 1.85 US dollars per day.⁶⁸ So, for theological and demographic reasons, when we say that the church has responsibility for the poor, we are affirming that the poor have responsibility for the poor.

But the NT does not simply construe the poor as beneficiaries of the kingdom; it affirms the *potency* of the poor as agents of God's mercy. John the Baptist elaborates an ethic of solidarity among the poor; sharing one of your two tunics (Lk. 3.10-11) is not an ethic aimed at the rich. Further, when Jesus discusses the widow's offering (Mk 12.41-44// Lk. 21.1-4), he celebrates that the greatest generosity was shown by the poor woman who gave '*out of her lack*' (my italics). Similarly, 2 Corinthians 8 lauds the munificence of the impoverished church of Macedonia:

For during a severe ordeal of affliction, *their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part*. . . . They voluntarily gave according to their means, and *even beyond their means*, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints (2 Cor. 8.2-4, NRSV, my italics)

Paul goes on to praise Jesus for becoming poor so that, by his poverty, the saints might become rich: 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Cor. 8.9).⁶⁹

The poor are also agents of *justice*, opposing the rich and powerful who often foment injustice. Jesus decries the exploitation and neglect of the powerful when he purified the Temple (Mk 11.15-19)⁷⁰ and when he excoriates the scribes who devour widows' houses (Mk 12.40//Lk. 20.47//Mt. 23.14).⁷¹ Additionally, on the heels of his

⁶⁷ See Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 27.

⁶⁸ Jonathan J. Bonk, 'Christian Finance, 1910-2010', in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 294-97.

⁶⁹ Indeed, Paul's arguments about the poor Macedonians and the poor Messiah serve the purpose of mobilizing the more-affluent Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 8.13-15).

⁷⁰ Some temple leaders employed bribery to gain power and resorted to thuggery to deprive poorer priests of their tithes; see Josephus, *Ant.* 20.8.8; 20.9.2; Richard Bauckham, 'Jesus' Demonstration in the Temple', in *Law and Religion: Essays on the Place of the Law in Israel and Early Christianity: by Members of the Ehrhardt Seminar of Manchester University*, ed. Barnabas Lindars (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1988), 72-89.

⁷¹ Scribes would oversee the inheritances of illiterate widows and would sometimes embezzle from those funds; J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Eating Up the Houses of Widows": Jesus's Comment on Lawyers?', *NovT* 14 (1972): 1-9.

denunciation of the Temple leadership,⁷² Jesus launches his disciples into positions of authority; menial fishermen like Peter are appointed to replace the den of thieves that is the temple elite (so Mk 11.23-25//Mt. 21.21-22). Thus, the NT reminds us that the powers are often the problem, not the solution. God's response to the powers who fleece the poor involves leadership by the marginal, who follow the peasant preacher that the powers crucified.

It is true that the church, civil society and the state have moral responsibilities towards the poor, but one of those responsibilities is to recognize that the poor are potent people who can collaborate with the powers in transforming their own situations of oppression. Indeed, the poor will be more effectively loved and served to the degree that we affirm that they are not only the beneficiaries of the kingdom of God but also its agents.

In practice, this is not intuitive to me; I still flatter myself by strapping on the White Man's Burden, and I need to be reminded that education and good intentions do not qualify me as a messiah, that I am not more valuable to the kingdom than those who have nowhere to lay their heads. That awareness needs to shape my social activism. Thus, as our seminary develops responses to the Colombian displacement crisis, we are partnering with IDPs as co-researchers and genuine collaborators. We want to affirm and encourage IDPs as agents of God's kingdom, fostering its presence (Lk. 17.21) even after they have been expelled from their homes by heinous violence.

Concluding synthesis

This essay examined how the ancient church engaged with the structures, practices and ideology of civil society and the state in seeking to care for the poor. We certainly witness positive ecclesial engagement, adopting structures and conventions from civil society and looking for the government to act as God's servant. Still, the church's engagement was reflective, critically analysing to how secular ideologies clash with Christian commitments, altering pagan practices for Christian ends. Moreover, the church nurtured the poor when the state did not care, and she resisted the powers when they became agents of corruption.

Still, describing how the church and the powers share responsibility for the poor is insufficient. To riff on Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which spoke of 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people', the church should be of the poor, led by the poor and for the poor. The poor are not just victims to be rescued by ecclesial, societal and governmental powers. They are powerful, and part of the answer to the powers' problems, for they are the body of the impecunious king who became poor that we might become rich.

⁷² The cursing and withering of the fig-tree in Mk 11.12-14, 20-25, which form an *inclusio* around Jesus's cleansing of the temple, symbolically depict the doom of the Jerusalem leaders for failing to 'bear fruit' (cf. Lk. 13.6-9); see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 339-41.