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## Almsgiving in Early Christian Catechesis

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## *Almsgiving in Early Christian Catechesis*

*Ben Vanderhyde*

To say simply that almsgiving was a part of early Christian catechesis would not say much that is new to the Lutheran church today. Our own catechism includes this idea in its explanation of the 5th commandment: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.” It is not so much significant that the Apostolic Fathers taught almsgiving but how they did so. Almsgiving played such a central role in the life of the early church that it came to be one of the distinguishing features of the Christian community. This was not an accident. Such giving stemmed from their understanding of the Christian duty to care for the poor and needy as a non-negotiable aspect of Christian life and godliness.

Almsgiving is the most common gloss of *eleemosune*, a word related to the verb *ἐλεέω*, to have mercy. We might also translate *ἐλεημοσύνη* as “gift of mercy” or perhaps “charitable giving,” but generally “almsgiving” is the accepted translation. Today, the term “almsgiving” evokes an image of coins being placed into the hands of a beggar, but in second-temple Judaism as well as in the early church, the word encompassed many more merciful activities than this alone. For instance, Sirach 3:14 refers to the care that is given to an aging parent as *ἐλεημοσύνη*, that is, the bestowal of mercy. In *On Work and Alms*, Cyprian ties almsgiving to Isaiah 58:7,<sup>1</sup> in which Isaiah is exhorting the people to true spiritual fasting: “Is [this fasting] not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” Thus, when encountered in the Apostolic Fathers, almsgiving is not to be understood as a mere transaction. The term accesses a host of interrelated expressions of mercy and compassion. In this paper, however, I will retain the gloss of “almsgiving” since it accurately describes the fact that works of mercy generally require money.

The Apostolic Fathers demonstrate the centrality of almsgiving to the spiritual life of the church. They offer a glimpse into how Jesus’s rigorous instructions about care for the poor and needy became imprinted upon the early

Christian mindset and communal sense of responsibility. These Christian leaders lived and taught in the church which the apostles left behind. It was a crucial period in the history of Christianity, in which the church was just beginning to be recognized by the world as something distinct from Judaism and paganism, a new faith, a new way of life.

As they taught almsgiving as part of the “core curriculum” of Christianity, moreover, the Apostolic Fathers were teaching Christians to lift up their hearts. They were teaching them to know fully the infinite love of God and to imitate that love for those in need. They were teaching them to be generous in light of the infinite heavenly wealth stored up for them in heaven. They were teaching them to give alms in repentant expectation of the return of Christ. Each of these aspects of almsgiving ties this essential practice to the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

### **Divine Philanthropy in the *Epistle to Diognetus***

Almsgiving features centrally in the portrayal of the Christian faith given by the mid-to-late second century *Epistle to Diognetus*. Diognetus was a pagan who was interested in Christianity but had a lot of questions. His Christian friend wrote him a letter answering his questions and explaining to him the basics of Christianity. He begins,

Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that you are extremely interested in learning about the religion of the Christians and are asking very clear and careful questions about them—specifically, what God they believe in and how they worship him ... ; what is the nature of the heartfelt love they have for one another; and why this new race or way of life has come into the world we live in now and not before—I gladly welcome this interest of yours, and I ask God, who empowers us both to speak and to listen, that I may be enabled to speak in such a way that you will derive the greatest possible benefit from listening, and that you may listen in such a way that the speaker will have no regrets.<sup>2</sup>

Chief among Diognetus’s observations of these Christians is that their community is marked by a peculiar love. Diognetus’s Christian friend is more than happy to answer these questions and explain the basics of the faith, including this Christian love and care for the needy which is so central to their life together. He explains what it is that produces such compassion among the church’s members:

If this faith is what you too long for, then first of all you must acquire full knowledge of the Father. For God loved humanity...



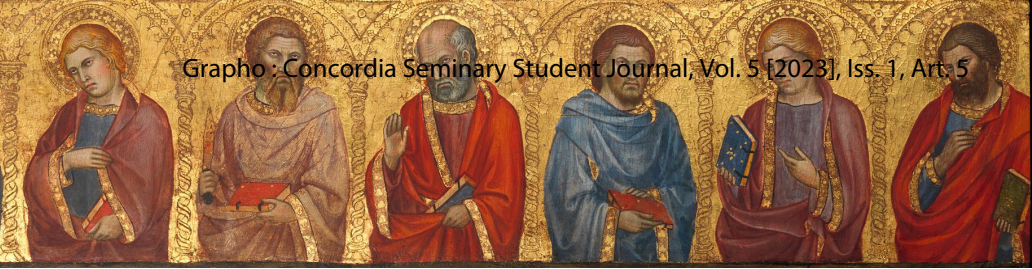
And when you have acquired this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled, or how will you love the one who so loved you first? By loving him you will be an imitator of his goodness. And do not be surprised that a person can become an imitator of God; one can, if God is willing. For happiness is not a matter of lording it over one's neighbors, or desiring to have more than weaker people, or possessing wealth and using force against one's inferiors. No one is able to imitate God in these matters; on the contrary, these things are alien to his greatness. But one who takes up a neighbor's burden, one who wishes to benefit someone who is worse off in something in which one is oneself better off, one who provides to those in need things that one has received from God, and thus becomes a god to those who receive them—this one is an imitator of God.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, if Diognetus wants to become a Christian, he will need to come to know God's love for humanity — God's divine *philanthropy* — in Christ. Knowing God's love will change Diognetus; he will become an imitator of that philanthropy. As he comes to love God, he will come to love his people as well, not in self-aggrandizement but in self-emptying through the bestowal of mercy on those in need.<sup>4</sup> If Diognetus learns the love of God and becomes a Christian, then he too will bear the mark of that peculiar love distinguishing Christians from all others.

The *Epistle to Diognetus* shows us how a second-century Christian viewed the task of catechizing a pagan. It is a beautiful letter, an apologia of the Christian faith extending far beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, these quotations sufficiently demonstrate that an account of the Christian faith in the early days of the church would have been incomplete without the subject of almsgiving.

### Almsgiving and the “Two Ways”

One of the most conspicuous aspects of catechesis among the Apostolic Fathers is their common employment of the “two ways” motif. This was a useful pedagogical device for distinguishing the Christian Way from all others. There is a way of life and a way of death, a way of light and a way of darkness. This bears sharp resemblance to Paul's life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit (Romans 8) and Jesus's narrow way leading to life and broad way leading to death (Matthew 7:13–14).



The full title of the *Didache* is "The teachings of the Lord to the Gentiles by the twelve Apostles."

These similarities are more than coincidence. The “two ways” motif can be traced all the way back to Moses, who said to Israel at the close of his final sermon:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... the Lord your God will bless you.... But if your heart turns away ... you shall surely perish. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live. (Deut 30:15–19)

The Apostolic Fathers employed this “two ways” motif to make a sharp distinction between paganism and Christianity. Anyone who entered the faith would need to change directions, to do an about face, and to follow in a new track. But this catechesis was not for initiates only. Pagan culture was invasive, permeating public life. Therefore, even mature Christians needed to be reminded that they belonged to a holy nation, a way of life that was set apart. All Christians needed to be called to repentance, and to remember and keep the purity of their baptisms.

The *Didache* is one of the earliest and most thorough examples of this kind of catechesis. It begins with a lengthy tract of moral instruction that was supposed to be learned before baptism. The *Didache* begins, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.” Then follows an extensive catalogue of things to do and things to avoid, pertaining to the way of life and the way of death.

Now this is the way of life: First, you shall love God, who made you. Second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself; but whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another. [...] If someone gives you a blow on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well and you will be perfect. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles; if someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic also; if someone takes from you what belongs to you, do not demand it back, for you cannot do so.

Here the “two ways” teaching turns to the subject of alms.

Give to everyone who asks you [Luke 6:30; Matt 5:42], and do not demand it back, for the Father wants something from his own gifts to be given to everyone [Matt 5:45; Luke 6:35]. Blessed is the one who gives according to the command, for such a person is innocent. Woe to the one who receives: if, on the one hand, someone who is in need receives, this person is innocent, but the one who does not have need will have to explain why and for what purpose he received, and upon being imprisoned will be interrogated about what he has done, and will not be released from there until he has repaid every last cent. But it has also been said concerning this: “Let your gift sweat in your hands until you know to whom to give it.”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly many of the teachings of the “way of life” are taken from sayings of Jesus. Important for our purposes is this one: “Give to everyone who asks you, and do not demand it back, for the Father wants something from his own gifts to be given to everyone.”<sup>6</sup> The first part of this line corresponds word for word with Jesus’s teaching in Luke 6:30 and Matthew 5:42, “Give to the one who asks.” The second part corresponds sense for sense with Jesus’s theological justification for giving to the one who asks. Jesus says in Matthew 5:45, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust,” and this same idea is present in Luke 6:35, which states that “he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” The *Didache* rightly interprets Jesus’s words in the Sermon on the Mount (Sermon on the Plain in Luke) as teaching that Christians should imitate God’s providential generosity by giving to those who ask for it. God’s care for his creatures does not depend on a thorough investigation of their character or worthiness.<sup>7</sup> He makes it rain and shine for the good and the bad equally. Both the *Didache* and the *Epistle to Diognetus* teach that Christians are to imitate God’s love for humanity by caring for the poor and needy. That is how Christians can become “gods” to their neighbors, as the *Epistle to Diognetus* puts it, because they are extensions of God’s providential care for his creatures. The *Didache* puts this in terms of gift-giving. God generously doles out his gifts, and wants Christians to acknowledge his generosity and goodness, and then imitate it, extending His gifts towards others.

The *Didache* goes on to address other subjects of catechesis, focusing especially on the Ten Commandments. But the teaching of the way of life returns to the subject of almsgiving with the following instructions:

Do not be one who stretches out the hands to receive but withdraws them when it comes to giving. If you earn something by working with your hands, you shall give a ransom for your sins. You shall



not hesitate to give, nor shall you grumble when giving, for you will know who is the good paymaster of the reward. You shall not turn away from someone in need, but shall share everything with your brother or sister, and do not claim that anything is your own. For if you are sharers in what is imperishable, how much more so in perishable things!<sup>8</sup>

The final line of this quotation captures a beautiful image for the kind of unity and fellowship that is supposed to be at play in the body of Christ. Christians share in the promised inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:4). They share the spiritual gift of communion enacted in the Eucharist. But the *Didache* is saying that there ought to be a fellowship in the present, temporal things to match this. Moreover, it's in view of the Christian's imperishable inheritance that they can hold their earthly possessions lightly, as the *Didache* puts it: "Do not claim that anything is your own." It's in view of that imperishable inheritance that Christians can be ready and eager to give, can "stretch out [their] hands" when it comes to *giving* and not be greedy when it comes to receiving.

### Almsgiving as Repentance and Eschatological Readiness

Two of the items which the *Didache* connects with almsgiving present a significant challenge to the reader, especially the modern Lutheran reader. These are the ideas of reward and redemption: "You shall give a ransom for your sins," "you shall know



who is the good paymaster of the reward." It is helpful to recognize that the *Didache* and other documents were reflecting their own scriptural milieu when they used such evocative language. The apocryphal books of Sirach and Tobit contain a high concentration of texts attributing almsgiving with atonement of sins and deliverance from death.<sup>9</sup> From our own canon, Daniel 4:27, in the Old Greek translation, records Daniel exhorting Nebuchadnezzar to redeem

(λύτρωσαι) his sins and injustices with gifts of mercy (ἐλεημοσύνας). The fact that the *Didache* and other Christian commentators were relying on an accepted pool of scriptural language helps to explain why they spoke the way they did.

Seeing almsgiving from the perspective of a “two ways” worldview, moreover, goes a long way toward accounting for such elevated rhetoric. Almsgiving delivers from death, one might say, because it belongs to the way of life. It is the opposite of greed, oppression of the poor, and neglect, which belong to the way of death. “Two ways” catechesis emphasizes a turning from the way of death to the way of life. This turn is not only cerebral but is characterized by tangible evidences of true repentance. As their names indicate, the two ways were viewed in terms of their endpoints. The way of life culminates in life; the way of death culminates in death. There is a great sense of urgency, then, among the early Christian writers, that Christians should be diligent and vigilant to be walking by the way of life. The return of Christ was (and still remains) just over the horizon.

The early homily known as *Second Clement* picks up the image of the clay and the potter from Jeremiah 18 and Romans 9 as an image for the end times. He says, now is the time to be shaped and formed in the hand of the potter, before you are thrown into the kiln and can no longer be repaired. Now is the time for repentance, obedience to the commandments, and keeping the seal of baptism.<sup>10</sup> *Second Clement* places almsgiving into this context of preparation for the end times.

But you know that the day of judgment is already coming as a blazing furnace, and some of the heavens will dissolve, and the whole earth will be like lead melting in a fire, and then everyone’s works, the secret and the public, will be revealed. Charitable giving [ἐλεημοσύνη], therefore, is good, as is repentance from sin. Fasting is better than prayer, while charitable giving is better than both [Tob 12:8], and love covers a multitude of sins [1 Pet 4:8], while prayer arising from a good conscience delivers one from death. Blessed is everyone who is found full of these, for charitable giving relieves the burden of sin.<sup>11</sup>

This quotation attributes both prayer and almsgiving with great power. Once again, the author of *Second Clement* relies on scriptural rhetoric to inculcate almsgiving.<sup>12</sup> While this rhetoric obviously offends Lutheran sensibilities, it is important to assert that *Second Clement* was viewing almsgiving as part and parcel with true repentance and faith.<sup>13</sup> The Greek text of this homily in fact encourages this assertion.<sup>14</sup> It might accurately be rendered, “Charitable giving, therefore, is good, *as* repentance from sin.” For this teacher, faith is inseparable from its accoutrements. Repentance, prayer, fasting, almsgiving — all of these make up in *Second Clement* what it means



to be vigilant for the return of Christ. All of these things belong to the way life.

## Conclusion

Between the Scriptures that the Apostolic Fathers employed and their “two ways” perspective on the Christian faith, they engaged in strong rhetoric promoting charitable giving. It would be a mistake to think that they believed they could “buy off” God and effect their own forgiveness, however. They are clearly aware of and articulate salvation by Christ alone.<sup>15</sup> But they are deeply concerned with taking that salvation seriously. They know that Christ has paved the way to life by his own death and resurrection, and they seek to encourage saints to walk in that way, throwing off, as it were, the unfruitful works of darkness, and living in the light.

This paper recommends we seek to emulate these fathers, if not their exact choice of words—which might cause no small disturbance in the pews—then their zeal for the way of life and for the teachings of Jesus. Because of our Reformation history, Lutherans do not resonate with rhetoric that sounds like works-righteousness. The Reformers demonstrated that passages such as Tobit 4:10 could be taken in an orthodox sense. Still, announcing to the congregation that “charitable giving delivers from death” would probably raise eyebrows. And yet we ought to resonate with the Apostolic Fathers’ *zeal* for almsgiving, *especially* in light of our Reformation history. It was the replacement of the Christian practice of almsgiving by indulgences which, among other things, prompted the young Martin Luther to pen the 95 Theses. As Luther wrote later, in his explanation to the 5th commandment:

In the second place, this commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so. If you send a naked person away when you could clothe him, you have let him freeze to death. If you see anyone who is suffering from hunger and do not feed her, you have let her starve. Likewise, if you see anyone who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved.

Therefore God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life.

## Vanderhyde: Almsgiving in Early Christian Catechesis

He will pass a most terrible sentence upon them at the Last Day, as Christ himself declares. He will say: “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” That is to say, “You would have permitted me and my family to die of hunger, thirst, and cold, to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, to rot in prison or perish from want.”<sup>16</sup>

On a pedagogical level, the Apostolic Fathers teach us to see almsgiving, care for the needy, works of mercy—along with all of the works of the way of life—in terms of their endgame. Both the coming judgment of Christ and the inheritance promised to the sons of light should be brought into contact with the Christian life here and now, as motivation for Christians to live both in the hopefulness and the sobriety sincere faith. It is the perpetual duty of Christian pastors to exhort their people to lift up their hearts to the unfathomable love of God, to the inheritance prepared for them, and to the imminent return of Christ by showing mercy to those around them. Almsgiving is a non-negotiable mark of the church. Pastors ought to reflect this by connecting this teaching to the central doctrines of the faith: repentance, faith, eschatology, redemption, etc. Conveniently, Jesus did most of the hard work as far as this is concerned, having left behind a plethora of teachings in the Gospels dealing with the subject. In which case, the most effective way for us to follow the example of the early church is simply to preach the text!

## Endnotes

- 1 Saint Cyprian, *On Works and Alms* 4.
- 2 Ep. Diog. 1.1–2. Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).
- 3 Ep. Diog. 10.1–6.
- 4 See Luke 6:36, “Be merciful even as your Father is merciful.”
- 5 Did. 1.2–6.
- 6 Did. 1.5.
- 7 Chemnitz recognizes that many of the philosophers and church fathers (including Ambrose and Augustine) taught that we should examine the character of the recipient. He agrees that we should do this, but that the examination should not be excessively rough or prying. After all, “alms are often deceived.” Martin Chemnitz, *On Almsgiving*, trans. James A. Kellerman, 2nd edition (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2019), 13–14.
- 8 *Did.* 4.5–8.
- 9 Cf. Sirach 3:14, 3:30; Tobit 4:10, 12:9, 14:11.
- 10 2 *Clem.* 8.1–6.
- 11 2 *Clem.* 16.4
- 12 *Second Clement* interprets 1 Peter 4:8, “Love covers a multitude of sins” as referring to the love of almsgiving covering the sins of the one giving alms. The earliest commentators on 1 Peter 4:8 are unanimous in interpreting it thus (David J. Downs, “Love Covers a Multitude of Sins’: Redemptive Almsgiving in 1 Peter 4:8,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 65, no. 2 [October 2014]: 489–514).
- 13 This exactly how the Reformers handled such passages. See AP IV, par. 252.
- 14 *καὶ ἅλ. οὖν ἐλεημοσύνη ὡς μετάνοια ἁμαρτίας.*
- 15 See, for instance, 2 *Clem.* 1.6–8; Ep. *Diog.* 9.2–6.
- 16 LC I v 189–191.