

CHAPTER 7

Love Spent in the Service of Others

The hospitable care of others was an essential mark of early Christians. It is listed as one of the virtues in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, an apocalyptic document dating from around the year 100 C.E.: "To minister to widows, to look after orphans and the destitute, to redeem God's slaves from distress, to be hospitable, for in hospitality may be found the practice of good."¹ This care issued from the worship of the gathered community. In the earliest days of Christianity, the believers would come together and share of what they had: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32-37).

The need of others was the reason for the gathering of alms, tithes and gifts. They were not gathered as a fee or membership as would have been required of those who were members in an association or cult. The purpose and its recipient were clear. Tertullian explains the unique and holy purpose for the collection. He also clearly identifies the recipients:

Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small

¹ *Shepherd of Hermas*, Mand. 8. 10., quoted in Donald Wayne Riddle, "Early Christian Hospitality: A Factor in the Gospel Transmission," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 57 (1938): 141-154.

donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able; for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession.²

This care for others became a part of who the Christians were. It was not extraordinary or exceptional to special occasions. It was central to their understanding of their faith and was demonstrated each time they gathered at the table. In the cultural and social mix of early Christianity, table sharing was "the major integrative moment" of the Christian house community.³ Anthropologists use the word "commensality" to speak of "the rules of tabling and eating as miniature models for the rules of association and socialization. ... Table fellowship is a map of economic discrimination, social hierarchy and political differentiation."⁴ For this reason, commensality "is not a matter of charity, of almsgiving, of

² Tertullian. *Apology*. <<http://earlychristianwritings.com/tertullian.html>> 27 January 2004.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 198.

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 68.

a handout at the door. It is about the just sharing of food as the material basis of life, of life that belongs to God.”⁵

When Christians came together to share a meal, it was done within the context of the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It was also done within the memory of Jesus’ examples of meals shared with tax collectors and disreputable women.⁶ Jesus spoke of a great banquet open to all (Matt. 22:1-13, Luke 14:15-24), those who lived on the highways and byways, those who lived on the street, those who had no food. The guest list for this banquet was not determined by ethnicity, nationality, ability or gender.

The great banquet was symbolic of the new kingdom; the world as it would come to be when the reign of God was accomplished. It was a world where hunger no longer existed, where the wounded are healed, the broken made whole and all are welcome. In this way, the community that Jesus taught and lived was a product of Jesus’ Jewish roots:

It (Christianity) embraced Judaism’s sense of the covenant relationship with the one God, who had heard the cries of the Israelites in slavery and responded to their suffering. And it embraced the imperatives of Israel’s community practices first fashioned at Sinai. These were imperatives to redress social inequities, protect the vulnerable, keep the power of privilege in check and under critique, extended

⁵ Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 68.

⁶ See the anointing at Simon the leper’s home (Mark 14:3-9) and the banquet at Levi’s house (Luke 5:27-32).

hospitality to the stranger and sojourner, and considered the enemy's welfare on the same terms as one's own.⁷

When, by the second century, deacons assisted in worship and carried what was left from the bread and wine to the absent members, it was the means by which the community worked to bring about the reign of God. The proceeds of the collection from worship were handed over to the pastor and were distributed to the widows, orphans, the sick, the prisoners, and to strangers.⁸ The food and goods moved from the gathering table of the community out into the community. This was no small undertaking in a city the size of Rome. It is estimated that at about 250 C.E. the Roman church had expended from half a million to one million sesterces in the cares of others.⁹ von Harnack attributes the beginning of this generosity of spirit to the diaconate who were the first to care for those on a journey: they "went outside the circle of the individual church when it deliberately extended its labours to include the relief of *strangers*, i.e., the first instance of Christian brethren on their travels."¹⁰

⁷ Larry Rasmussen, "Shaping Communities" in *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Dorothy Bass, ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 125.

⁸ Justin, *Apologies* 1. 67., quoted in Bo Reicke, "Deacons in the New Testament and Early Church." in *The Ministry of Deacons* World Council Series, no. 2 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1965), 12.

⁹ Adolf von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 157.

¹⁰ von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 177.

Christians became known for their service to the hungry and the ill, especially during times of plague and epidemic. Eusebius records Bishop Dionysius' description of the plague in Alexandria, in the year 259 C.E.:

The most of our brethren did not spare themselves, so great was their brotherly affection. They held fast to each other, visited the sick with fear, ministered to them assiduously, and served them for the sake of Christ. Right gladly did they perish with them. ... Indeed many did die, after caring for the sick and giving health to others, transplanting the deaths of others, as it were, into themselves. ... (T)he best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.¹¹ (Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. 7. 22.)

Eusebius also records the actions of Christians in the plague during the reign of Maximinus Daza:

Day by day some would busy themselves with attending to the dead and burying them (for there were numbers to whom no one else paid any heed): *others gathered in one spot all who were afflicted by hunger throughout the whole city, and gave bread to them all.*¹² (Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. 9. 8.)

¹¹ Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. 7. 22., quoted in von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 171.

¹² Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. 9. 8., quoted in von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 173.

Meeks states that many joined cults and associations because of their commitment to burial of the dead.¹³ It was the duty of the deacon to see that everyone was properly interred.¹⁴ The significance of this Christian ministry was acknowledged by Lactantius in *Institutions* 6. 12: "We cannot bear that the image and workmanship of God should be exposed as a prey to wild beasts and birds, but we restore it to the earth from which it was taken."¹⁵ During an epidemic, concern over the burial of the dead would have been an obvious and acute problem. The action of Christians was a direct contradiction to the norm in society. Again from the writings of Eusebius:

Quite the reverse was it with the heathen. They abandoned those who began to sicken, fled from their dearest friends, threw out the sick when half dead into the streets, and left the dead unburied."¹⁶ (Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. 7.22.)

The service Christians offered in accompanying the sick, and the dignity they gave in death, did not go unnoticed by officials of the empire. Even following the end of persecution marked by the Edict of Milan, Emperor Julian, in 362 C.E., complained in a letter to the high priest at Galatia that the "pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians for recent Christian growth was caused by their 'moral character, even if pretended,' and by their 'benevolence

¹³ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 78. Meeks explains that it was not just the actual burial of the deceased that was important. Christians would also hold meals at the cemetery on several specific anniversaries of the death. This on-going care and respect for the dead was common among pagans as well as Christians in later centuries. See 162.

¹⁴ *Apostolic Constitutions* 1. 2., quoted in von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 7.

¹⁵ Lactantius, *Institutions* 6. 12., quoted in von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 166.

¹⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7. 22., quoted in von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 171.

toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead’.”¹⁷ Later Julian wrote to another priest:

“I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans (Christians) observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence.”¹⁸

Julian’s attempt to revive paganism was futile in the newly accepted atmosphere of toleration and the growing attraction of the Christian faith.¹⁹

Because they were already ministering to the needs of the poor and hungry, Christian communities were well prepared to respond when epidemics took over the population. The restoration of health to the once sick, and the survival of the Christian caregivers directly exposed to disease, was considered a miracle.²⁰ Stark suggests a less miraculous origin for the success of these health-care ministries. Simply nursing the sick contributed significantly to their recovery.²¹ Because Christians nursed and cared for the sick while they themselves were still strong and healthy, Christians developed natural immunities that kept them well

¹⁷ Julian, found in Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 75 and from David Ayerst and A.S.T. Fisher, *Records of Christianity*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 179-181, quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996, HarperCollins, 1997), 84.

¹⁸ See note 17.

¹⁹ John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 121.

²⁰ To support this Stark, in *The Rise of Christianity*, 74, refers an Easter letter from Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria showing that “Christian values of love and charity had, from the beginning, been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity. When disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope, and this resulted in *substantially higher rates of survival*.”

²¹ Studies show that “conscientious nursing *without any medications* could have cut the mortality rate by two-thirds of even more.” See Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 89.

while others grew more ill and died.²² The Christian population survived and grew while the pagan population died and decreased. The ratio of Christian to pagan tipped in favour of Christians.²³

The care given in these times contributed to the growth of Christianity. Even as Christians died in caring for the pagan, those who were nursed to health owed their lives to their Christian caregivers. Those who were never sick themselves could not help but notice that Christians, and those whom they cared for, survived. During such times of incredible hardship, Christianity offered not just the tangible assistance of food and medical care, but also hope in the midst of tragedy:

[E]ven a shattered remnant of survivors who had somehow made it through war and pestilence or both could find warm, immediate and healing consolation in the vision of a heavenly existence for those missing relatives and friends. ... Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed.²⁴

Add to this the growing numbers who were now without family as their primary relationship network. The attraction to such a caring, supportive community with a vision of a heavenly reward must have been enticing.²⁵

²² Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 90.

²³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 90.

²⁴ William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 108, quoted in Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 80.

²⁵ See Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 75. "As mortality mounted during each of these epidemics, large numbers of people, especially pagans, would have *lost the bonds* (through death) that once might have restrained them from becoming Christians. Meanwhile the

It was the basic theological premise of Christianity that would have been most startling in a pagan culture. Religion in Greco-Roman times understood that the gods made behavioural demands upon humans through sacrifice and worship. They also knew that the gods could be induced through sacrifice. What was unique to the Judeo-Christian religion was the belief that God is a God of love: "Whoever does not love does not know God for God is love" (1 John 4:8). The extension of this belief, that God's love is shown in humanity's love for one another,²⁶ would have been even more alien to a pagan belief system. Christians brought a "*ministering love* (that was) *the practical expression of love to God*."²⁷ While acts of charity and mercy were not unknown in Roman culture,²⁸ actions of caring would never have been based upon service to the gods.²⁹ Christians proclaimed a God who demonstrated love through sacrifice: For God so loved the world that he gave his only

superior rates of survival of Christian social networks would have provided pagans with a much greater probability of replacing their lost attachments with new ones to Christians. In this way, very substantial numbers of pagans would have been shifted from mainly pagan to mainly Christian social networks."

²⁶ "This is my new commandment, that you love another as I have loved you" John 15:12.

²⁷ von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 148.

²⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 86. Stark also quotes E. A. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1970), 136-137, who explains that "love of one's neighbour is not an exclusively Christian virtue, but in [this] period Christians appear to have practiced it much more effectively than any other group." See Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 207.

²⁹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 88. Stark refers to E. A. Judge's note that classical philosophers regarded mercy and pity as "pathological emotions—defects in character to be avoided by all rational men". E. A. Judge, "The Quest for Mercy in Late Antiquity." In *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox*, P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson, ed. (Sydney: Macquarie University Press), 107, quoted in Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 212.

Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

Christians knew that their demonstrated love of their God through service and sacrifice to one another (Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ—Gal. 6:2) would have been a totally foreign concept in the Greco-Roman world. As Tertullian proclaimed:

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us.

See, they say, how they love one another, for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death.³⁰ (Tertullian. *Apology*. 39.)

What Christianity brought to the world of the first Christian centuries was Jesus' call to love others. With this call to love came the gift of community that overcame alienation, instilled belonging and gave a sense of purpose and hope. As Stark describes it:

... while membership was expensive, it was, in fact, a bargain. That is, because the church asked much of its members, it was thereby possessed of the resources to *give* much. For example, because Christians were expected to aid the less fortunate, many of them received such aid, and all could feel greater security against bad times.

Because they were asked to nurse the sick and dying, many of them received such nursing. Because they were asked to love others, they in turn were loved.³¹

³⁰ Tertullian. *Apology*. 39. <<http://earlychristianwriting.com/tertullian.html>>. (27 January 2004).

³¹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 188.

Christianity was a counter-cultural movement in a culture that placed male over female, Roman citizen over non-Roman, aristocrat over peasant. It modeled a "life in which despised and humbled people were transformed into a people in solidarity with one another"³². The font of their solidarity was their devotion and fidelity to the crucified and risen one, the Lord Jesus Christ. This was a stunning challenge in a culture where loyalty was owed to the Emperor.³³ Christianity practiced a powerful resistance to Hellenism and to Rome.

Christianity brought the power of community and belonging to a harsh and indifferent world. In a culture that believed that "pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and inexcusable only in those who have not yet grown up,"³⁴ Christians demonstrated pity, mercy and compassion each time they nursed the sick, fed the hungry and welcomed in those whom others rejected. With this care and compassion came self-respect and wholeness. von Harnack calls what Christian communities brought "the language of love" that was more than

³² Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995 English translation Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 126.

³³ Romans understood their Emperor to be a god. The divine emperor claimed "lordship over all spheres of life" including the religious devotion of the people. For Christians to give loyalty to anyone other than the Emperor was an overt act of resistance. See John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath The Stones, Behind the Texts* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 49 and Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, 126.

³⁴ E. A. Judge, "The Quest for Mercy in Late Antiquity." In *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox*, P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson, ed. (Sydney: Macquarie University Press), 107, quoted in Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 212.

a language, "it was a thing of power and action."³⁵ For early Christians it was simply a matter of living out what the gospel meant to their lives. They called it hospitality.

³⁵ von Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 149.