

CHRISTIAN COMPASSION THROUGH THE CENTURIES

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INTRODUCTION

Prof. Wessel has recounted for us the compassionate response of Christians to two epidemics in the second and third century. In AD 312 in the midst of the Great Persecution, also known as the Persecution of Diocletian, another major epidemic spread through the empire. Eusebius of Caesarea recorded that again it was Christians alone who “gave practical evidence of their sympathy and humanity.” He continued:

All day long they diligently persevered in caring for the dying and burying them—for there were countless numbers of them who had no one to look after them; meanwhile, other Christians gathered the starving multitudes throughout the city and distributed bread to them all so that their action was spoken of by everyone, and they [i.e. the non-Christians] glorified the God of the Christians, and convinced by the deeds themselves, acknowledged that they alone were truly pious and God-fearing.¹

Pagan writers also were forced to admit the truth of what Eusebius said. In AD 361 the 30-year old nephew of Constantine, Flavius Claudius Julianus, took over the imperial throne. After turning his back on the Christian faith in which he was raised, Julian the Apostate, as we now know him, did his best to reinvigorate paganism. In one of his surviving letters, he promises to supply an annual subsidy of 30,000 measures of grain and 60,000 pints of wine for distribution to the populace by pagan priests in Galatia. One-fifth was to be used for the “poor” employed at the temples, and the rest was to be distributed to “strangers and beggars.” He supplies the following reasoning for this generous gift: “... it is disgraceful that no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] not only support their own poor but ours as well, yet all men see that our people receive no aid from us.” He adds that he does not want to continue to see Christians “outdoing us in good works.”² It was the informed opinion of the emperor that reversing the rise of Christianity could only be done if their compassion ministry could be matched or surpassed.

The Apostle to the Gentiles had written 300 years earlier, “Now remaineth faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor. 13:13 KJV). While we now render *agape*, the last of this trinity of virtues, as “love,” the King James translators took over the Latin word *caritas* as *charity*, and thus we have come to conceive under that term much of what we think of as “compassion” ministry in the church: acts of mercy to help the helpless.³ Thus, just as God

¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, Church History 9.8.14. He uses the terms τὸ συμπαθὲς καὶ φιλόανθρωπον of the Christians. The translation is adapted from that in the Loeb series, 265:357.

² Letter to Absacius, High-priest of Galatia (Loeb 157:70-71).

³ In passages such as Luke 11:42 which speak of “the righteousness and love of God,” τὴν κρίσιν καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην τοῦ θεοῦ, the Vulgate has “iudicium et caritatem Dei.” Our modern concept of charitable organizations is instead

showed helpless sinners *charity* through his salvific activity, Augustine could say that pardoning anyone who has sinned against us is a form of almsgiving.⁴ Yet the early church based its understanding of charity most specifically on the description in Matthew 25 of how the King will judge or reward his people on the basis of how they have fed, clothed, or ministered to those around them.⁵ The Latin church used this same list to categorize godly charity and still today lists seven corporal works of charity: 1) feeding the hungry; 2) giving water to the thirsty; 3) clothing the naked; 4) sheltering travelers; 5) caring for the sick; 6) ransoming the imprisoned; and 7) providing burial for the dead.⁶ This meant that, unlike the Greco-Roman norm where it was the wealthy who were expected to give benefactions to their city, Christian charity was from the beginning an opportunity for all Christians to take part and to direct their efforts towards helping the neediest of their fellow-men.⁷

LATE-ANTIQUITY

The above quotes from the apostate emperor Julian make it clear that such Christian efforts were widespread and significant enough to be noticed by—yes, even to impact—the pagan community. Cases of providing food during times of famine, caring for orphans and widows, and tending to the sick during times of pandemic, are all widely documented in our early sources. Another well-known example comes from AD 368 when a series of hailstorms and earthquakes led to flooding and severe famine in Cappadocia. Basil of Caesarea, not yet bishop, immediately organized a relief effort that eventually led to the establishment of a charitable program that included a soup kitchen, a poorhouse/hospital, job training programs, and a nursing home for the elderly and dying, as well as shelters for travelers passing through. This *Basiliad* complex, just outside the city walls of Caesarea, was so vast that it came to be called the “new city.” While continuing the normal hours of prayer as appointed in Basil’s monastic rule, a small army of laity and monks staffed the complex “where disease is regarded in a religious light, and disaster is thought a blessing, and sympathy is put into practice.” And Basil led the way, tending to lepers himself at times. After becoming bishop, Basil’s sermons continued to urge the laity to assist the needy in any way they could, and for other monks and clergy to join in that work.⁸ While

linked to “non-profit” status and so to activities that benefit the community at large—freeing us from the restriction of helping the helpless. The connection with God’s righteousness (and justice) is also thus eliminated.

⁴ Augustine, *Enchiridion* 71-72.

⁵ This passage seems to build on Is. 58:6-7.

⁶ These seven are often illustrated in medieval/Renaissance art, such as the drawings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and paintings of Caravaggio (cf. his 1607 work, in Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples). Pope Francis added “care for creation” as an eighth charitable work in a 2016 address.

⁷ Peter Brown speaks of the “studied duet” between the Greco-Roman elite and their cities in which the cities gave munificent gifts to beautify the city and received honors in return (*Through the Eye of the Needle* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012], 63-64). This was expected of the rich elite who would be condemned for their actions, not as “robber barons but niggardly millionaires” (Elias Bickerman, as cited by Brown, *op. cit.*, 59).

⁸ Much of what we know of the *Basiliad* comes from Gregory of Nazianzus’s funeral oration for Basil (Oration 43.34-37 and 63-64; NPNF² 7:395-422). The quotations [ἐν ᾧ νόσος φιλοσοφεῖται, καὶ συμφορὰ μακαρίζεται, καὶ τὸ συμπαθὲς δοκιμάζεται. PG 36:577] given here are from par. 63. In par. 34 Gregory excoriates the buyers and

hospitality was a prominent virtue in antiquity, this type of *xenodochia* (taking care of strangers/outsideers) had no classical precedents, yet it soon was imitated in many other bishoprics.

Some charitable activities, such as ransoming the imprisoned, were in the earliest centuries largely activities that benefited Christians who had been incarcerated or sent to labor in the mines because of their faith; they waned in importance after Christianity was legalized. The extensive Christian catacombs of Rome still testify to the provision made for burying the dead.⁹ By the fourth century, shelter for travelers began to be provided for non-Christians as well, and we see that activity written into some of the early monastic rules. All of these concerns were nicely summarized at the end of the fourth century in a sermon of John Chrysostom: “Charity is not bare words, or mere ways of speaking to men, but a taking care of them . . . as for instance, by relieving poverty, lending one’s aid to the sick, rescuing from dangers, standing by those in difficulties, weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice.”¹⁰

But what was the theological motivation for charity by Christians? Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) wrote an entire treatise on whether a rich man can really enter heaven.¹¹ This was the initial burning question. Helen Rhee has pointed out how most early Christian literature on the subject urged that there was a redemptive nature to almsgiving—it helped save the rich, ensuring they would be among the sheep on Judgment Day!¹² It was also God’s will. Lactantius (d. 320), a convert to Christianity and later imperial advisor to Constantine, urged the wealthy readers of his *Institutes* that, rather than spending one’s wealth on games and public entertainments, their own humanity, *philanthropia*, would be better demonstrated by their charity for the poor. He writes,

Give to the blind, the sick, the lame and the destitute; if you don’t, they will die. Men may have no use for them, but God does. He keeps them alive, gives them breath and honors them with light. Cherish them as much as you can, and sustain their souls with your humanity, so that they do not die. Anyone who can help a dying man but does not is a murderer. . . . The only sure and true office of generosity is to feed the needy and the useless. This is that perfect justice which protects the human fellowship of which the philosophers speak, and these are the greatest and truest fruits of wealth.¹³

sellers of grain who profited through hoarding and inflating prices during the disaster, the exact opposite of proper Christian concern for the needy.

⁹ The occasional catacomb art and inscriptional phraseology that appear pagan might indicate that the church also assisted with the burial of strangers to the faith.

¹⁰ Sermon 7 on Romans (commenting on 3:31; adapted from NPNF¹ 11:380).

¹¹ *Who is the rich man that shall be saved?* (ANF 2:589-604).

¹² H. Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

¹³ *Divine Institutes* 6.11.18-19; 28; 6.12.1 (translation adapted from that of A. Bowen and P. Garnsey in *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 40 [Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2004], 354-55). Lactantius follows with a discussion of the familiar types and objects of charity—hospitality, ransoming captives, caring for orphans and widows and providing for burials.

Unlike Clement's implications, God did not just make the poor to give the rich opportunities to show their faith. Charity also was a way to physically help the poor. Interestingly, Christians seemed to see charity as such an integral part of their Christian life, such a natural fruit, that they did not overtly recognize it as an "outreach tool." No one denied that charity might produce such fruit, but neither did they dwell upon it. As a result, there also seemed to be little if any concern that charity might be viewed as a competitor to the preaching of the Word or administration of the sacraments.

Charity began to be seen in another light in the fourth and fifth centuries. Augustine and others recognized that covetousness and a preoccupation with the world impeded the Christian life of prayer and service. Two common solutions were used to avoid this. Thousands from this period renounced the world and its wealth and turned to a life of monastic seclusion and reflection. Less drastically, others turned to the giving of alms. By dedicating one's time and resources to charitable deeds, believers could train themselves to disregard worldly things while at the same time helping their needy neighbors.

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

We will, for the most part, trace the story of compassion ministry in the western church, the branch from which we descend and which has most formed the background of our own views on the subject. During the Middle Ages this means the Latin-speaking church that becomes known as the Roman Catholic church. However, much the same story could be told of the Greek-speaking Byzantine church in the Eastern Mediterranean,¹⁴ the Coptic-speaking churches of Egypt and Ethiopia, and the Syriac-speaking churches of the Middle East, India, and along the Silk routes leading deep into Asia. In the Greek church, for example, the centrality of almsgiving and other works of charity is evident from their expression that such deeds are "the liturgy after the liturgy," i.e. our service to God in the world continues our worship in church.¹⁵ Much farther East, an eighth-century benefactor of the church is lauded for his "acts of charity. . . . The hungry ran to him and were satisfied; the naked came to him and were clothed; the sick were cured and healed; the dead were buried and rested in peace." This eulogy, written in Chinese in the Syriac-

¹⁴ For the Byzantine world see D. Constantelos, *Poverty, Society and Philanthropy in the Late Mediaeval Greek World* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1992). As it was steadily conquered by Islam, the Byzantine church became impoverished until it was "reduced to purely spiritual and liturgical functions" and "was forced to restrict its social activities" (i.e. compassion ministry) to its own members (ibid., 134).

¹⁵ That expression works equally well in German—the *Gottes Dienst* after the *Gottesdienst*. In the Syriac church we have the following representative quote from the fourth-century father Ephrem Syrus. While making clear that all wealth belongs ultimately to God, he continues: "Your alms and prayers are like loans; in every location they enrich those who take them, while to you belongs the capital and interest. What you offer as a loan returns to you. The alms of the giver . . . returns to him with interest." Hymn in honor of Abraham Kidunaya (text in CSCO 322-323, Hymn 1, ll 7-8; trans. of G. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2013], 32).

speaking mission to China, could have been describing someone in virtually any place where Christianity had spread.¹⁶

The Latin church grew up as the western Roman Empire imploded in the fifth and sixth centuries. The picture of a sophisticated civilization being overrun by plundering northern barbarians has, however, been altered somewhat in recent decades. While political control was taken over by Goths, Lombards, Vandals and Franks, the new rulers tried to preserve the cultural and economic life of their subjects to a large degree, maintaining taxable revenue in the process. Although initially the “catholic” church endured some depredations at the hands of these new, mostly Arian, overlords, by the late sixth century the trinitarian Latin church, with its vast web of dioceses, had become a multi-national body of greater stability and influence than any political entity. While the succeeding centuries saw a continuing decline in urban life and a return to more rural lifestyles, the church’s *polis* or city-based dioceses, with its single bishop supported by an array of priests and deacons, would continue to imprint a stable organized structure on the geographical areas where political control often changed hands. The episcopal organization was supplemented, and in some ways complemented, by the ever-increasing presence of monastic communities scattered across the countryside. The record of Christian charity and compassion in the medieval period is essentially the story of how these two entities—local churches led by their bishop, and the monasteries—carried out this work.

Despite this more accurate reconstruction, however, war, plagues, famine, and economic downturns were encountered at various times. As from its beginning, local congregations, Christian individuals, and families all did their part to help both their fellow-Christians in need and others outside the church. As Christianity spread to every area of Europe, the efforts of these support groups increasingly coalesced. As the population became increasingly rural, charity was often dispensed directly to the needy within extended families and communities. The bishops’ alms were then reserved for travelers, orphans, and others outside the other support networks.

But who should be the object of charity? That question remained a point of discussion throughout the period. The subsistence economy of the age meant that most people were only one bad harvest away from starvation. All of those who were “living on the edge” might be deemed poor (*pauperes*). However, there were also those who had in fact gone over the edge into temporary or more permanent poverty and who could be termed “indigent” (*indigentes*). Except in cases of crop failure and plague, those in temporary need could be aided by others within their local communal group. But those “poor of Christ” requiring more long-term aid became the responsibility of the local cathedrals.¹⁷ This latter group were soon the subject of further distinctions, however. Those who were truly indigent through no fault of their own—widows and orphans, the chronically sick, lepers, aged, and the like—were distinguished from those less

¹⁶ The quote comes from the so-called *Nestorian Stele* of AD 781; the translation is that of M. Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2022), 213.

¹⁷ The distinction is that of Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986; English transl. of his 1974 French work). Discussed in J. Brodman, *Charity & Religion in Medieval Europe* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2009), 13-14, who notes that in some areas the cathedrals developed a system of symbolically enrolling twelve “paupers” for long term support (14-15).

worthy of aid—the lazy, shiftless, and intemperate. Many of these latter became itinerant beggars. Monasteries had a tradition of assisting travelers by washing their feet and providing them with food and lodging, but even they came to limit their charity due to the increasing number of such “unworthy” beggars.

The great increase in the medieval “poor of Christ,” however, was due primarily to the *voluntarily* poor—the monks and nuns who took a vow of poverty upon entering their calling. Since their communities were meant for the most part to be self-sustaining, they should not have required alms from the rest of the church. Yet gifts to monks and monasteries were from the outset viewed as legitimate alms. Not only could a person have the satisfaction of helping such holy recluses, but it quickly came to be understood, often with a formal stipulation, that the monks would in perpetuity remember the donors by name in their prayers. With the rise of the doctrine of purgatory, this type of almsgiving, often a part of wills, became an almost universal symbiotic activity within the Western church.

While the example and exhortations of Christ were still the motivating factors for such acts of Christian compassion, the *opinio legis* gradually added increasingly selfish motivations as well. In the same way that baptism was incorrectly viewed by many as washing away only the previous sins of the Christian, almsgiving was at times viewed as a method of erasing post-baptismal sin.¹⁸ It was also seen as a way of strengthening the effectiveness of one’s fasting and prayers.¹⁹ Although earlier fathers had also often connected acts of charity more with the salvation of the giver than the receiver, this idea became even more prominent in the medieval period. By the high Middle Ages many came to believe that one’s charitable acts would be deposited into a heavenly treasury of transferable merits which God could dispense as he saw fit.²⁰

AN INSTITUTIONAL AND URBAN TURN

Beginning in the tenth century and increasing in the centuries that followed, medieval Europe experienced a growth in population, prosperity, and urbanization. While individual acts of compassion ministry were still encouraged among Christians, more and more the church as an institution carried out such ministry. This was done in monasteries, in local parishes, and by the bishops and their staffs. The burgeoning cities, as yet today, attracted the impoverished and homeless, and they became the *loci* for charitable work. The French historian Paul Veyne has suggested a useful picture. Imagine, he says, doing a fly-over of a typical Greek or Roman city at the time of Christ. Your eye would be drawn to the magnificent public buildings—numerous temples, basilicas, an arcaded forum or two, a theater, a stadium and/or amphitheater. A similar

¹⁸ E.W. Watson in his introduction to Hilary of Poitiers’ works in NPNF² 9:xcii.

¹⁹ Gregory the Great says that prayers for a bountiful harvest should not only be accompanied by “the self-restraint of fasting, but also diligence in almsgiving” (Sermon 17, NPNF² 125).

²⁰ Matt. 6:19-21 and the story of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30) were often cited in support of this idea. Judaism developed similar thoughts as can be seen from the Mishna.

aerial perspective on a medieval European city would have attracted your eye to a totally different set of civic buildings—a towering cathedral, numerous other church towers, an array of large monastic complexes and cloisters, and Christian hospitals, orphanages, and deaconries.²¹ Christianity pervaded these revived and expanding cities. Their new merchant class, like that of their Greco-Roman predecessors, formed an urban aristocracy which was expected to use their newfound wealth as city patrons. But unlike ancient aristocrats whose donations patronized the city as a whole, the medieval Christian culture caused them to direct their gifts to Christian institutions, often in the form of almsgiving. The actual distribution of charity to the needy increasingly became the provenance of organized religious entities dedicated to that task.

This trend was given increased vigor by two movements. The first was the establishment of new monastic orders dedicated to charitable goals. While the more famous Franciscans are known for their own poverty (and their attempts to remain poor), other less famous orders stressed the charity that they themselves gave. When we think today of the Hospitallers of St. John, it is usually of their military actions during the Crusades, but this was both preceded and followed by serious work in providing shelter, care, and even burial for pilgrims and travelers. Similar work was carried out by the Order of St. Antony and the Order of the Holy Spirit, each of which by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries operated some 400+ hospitals (i.e. hospitality centers for those in need) across Europe, ministering not only to travelers but also to the sick, lepers and cripples.²²

The increased travel that accompanied the Crusades not only made care of pilgrims more necessary, but it also resulted in the capture of many Christians. Two other new groups, the Order of the Holy Trinity for the Redemption of Captives (founded in 1198) and the Order of Mercedarians (founded in 1230), both made redeeming Christians, mostly from Muslim captivity, a primary emphasis among the array of charitable deeds to which they dedicated themselves. While little remembered today, the Order of the Holy Trinity grew to over 600 monastic houses in just 40 years.²³ The sincerity with which many approached their work can be gauged from the fact that many of the Mercedarians took a pledge that, if necessary, they would surrender themselves in place of those they could not redeem in other ways.²⁴

Such dedication was fueled by the second contributing factor of the period: the spiritual revival that took place in the late eleventh century and today is called the Gregorian Reform. While that term normally evokes thoughts of the church-state struggle involving lay investiture of bishops and abbots, it was also accompanied by serious attempts to curb simony (the selling of church offices) and to reform church life within the local parishes and dioceses. Although the

²¹ Cited in G. Anderson, *Charity*, 15, from Paul Veyne's *Bread And Circuses* (London: Penguin, 1976; abridged Engl. transl. of the 1976 French version), 19.

²² Hospitality to strangers and travelers is one of the principal acts of charity in ancient and medieval times that has fallen out of vogue in our era. The Greek concept of *philoxenia* and the Roman idea of *hospitium* were transformed by the church both as to their motivation (service to God and love of neighbor) and as to their object (the poor and needy). The English "hospitality" does not do justice to this concept.

²³ On these lesser known orders, see Brodman, *op. cit.*, 91-172.

²⁴ M. O'Kane, "Raymond of Peñafort," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911; retrieved June 6, 2022 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12671c.htm>).

Reformation showed that Gregory VII's program did not ultimately succeed, there is no denying the effect of his efforts, including his encouragement of the new orders and the organization of new charitable institutions.

Many of the new orders integrated some form of the Rule of St. Augustine into their founding documents. The rule that had come down under the name of the bishop of Hippo was flexible and emphasized both service to God and service to neighbor. It also allowed for participation by non-monastics. It is during this period that we begin to hear more and more about lay men and women who volunteered their time and resources to assist in the growing numbers of hospitals and other charitable institutions. Although confraternities (local lay associations that included social, religious and charitable activities) existed already in the ninth century, an explosion now took place in their number and size.²⁵ Since these important charitable institutions are often overlooked in surveys of church history, we will pause to give two examples, both from the northern Italian city of Florence.

With a population of about 80,000 in the mid-fourteenth century, perhaps 17,000 were indigent or beggars. The city was served by 36 churches, 12 priories, 25 convents, and 25-30 hospitals, as well as many other religious institutions. As many as 4,000 of its inhabitants received some sort of public relief, mostly through the church and many via the city's confraternities. One of the most famous was the confraternity of Orsanmichele at the piazza of that name. The group held processions, prayer and worship services, and collected and distributed charitable alms from the market patrons, supporting local hospitals and the poor as well as local religious houses. The vast majority of their gifts went to unemployed laborers, pregnant women, orphans and those in debtors' prison. By 1325 this confraternity was impacting some 1,500 individuals in the city.²⁶ A second famous confraternity in Florence was that of the Misericordia. Founded in 1244 by Peter Martyr, it claims to be the oldest private voluntary institution in the world still active. Specializing in transporting the sick to hospitals, collecting alms as dowries for poor girls, and giving burial to the dead, it was especially lauded for its work during the years of the Black Death. The black hooded lay brothers can still be seen carrying out their work in the city today. Florence, with its vast array of churches, cloisters, and hospitals, all supported by its thriving merchants and its zealous lay brothers and sisters, was a good example of the city that Paul Veyne was thinking of with his medieval flyover.²⁷

The same type of religious institutions found in Italian cities were found also in France and England where the ruling monarchs joined the upper and middle classes in works of almsgiving, both for their own spiritual benefit and the benefit of the needy. Besides founding and supporting monasteries and other church institutions, monarchs were led at times by religious devotion into other forms of compassion. The kings who went on Crusade certainly

²⁵ Brodman, *op. cit.*, 187-207.

²⁶ During the famine of 1347 and the plague years that followed, the confraternity of Orsanmichele gave out bread to the sick and orphaned, distributing twenty times the aid of the city's largest hospital.

²⁷ Brodman summarizes that "by the early to mid-thirteenth century, there is no doubt of the existence of an ideology that not only valued charity but also privileged it as an expression of an authentic Christian vocation. The real question is whether this ideology had won a broad acceptance." He concludes that it had (*op. cit.*, 269).

would have cited their participation as an act of charity towards the oppressed in the Holy Land. They also could use their unique power of pardoning convicted criminals as an expression of Christian compassion. King John of England proclaimed that the blanket pardon he issued in 1204 was an act of almsgiving. It freed all English prisoners “whatever the cause for which they may have been detained, whether for murder, felony, or larceny, or breaking the forest laws, or for any other wrong whatsoever.”²⁸

Of note is the fact that being poor itself is not listed as a wrong by the king. This would shortly change. The increase of wealth in the burgeoning cities was not shared equally by the populace. As the cities grew, so did the number of indigent and beggars. The forms of almsgiving and compassion ministry could not keep up with the need. By the time of the Reformation, the indigent had become a major social problem.

THE REFORMATION

In contrast to Florence, let us now look at a smaller city, a century or two later—early sixteenth-century Wittenberg. About the time Martin Luther became a professor at the recently founded university there, it was a city of 2,000 to 2,500 inhabitants, living in some 400-450 houses. The populace worshipped in a single parish church, or for special occasions, in the Elector’s Castle Church. The large Franciscan monastery and the smaller Augustinian cloister also had services, though mainly for their own residents. Excluding a small funeral chapel adjacent to the graveyard, the only other religious institution was the small Antoniterkappelle. It was part of a small monastic building maintained by the previously mentioned Order of St. Antony, but it was not continuously occupied.²⁹

In Wittenberg, charity for the needy thus came from a limited number of institutions. Most seems to have been distributed by the town parish which had the usual almsbox (*Almosenkasten*) for donations, as well as designating for this purpose a portion of the tithe it received from parishioners. The Franciscans also did some charitable work, although they were equally the recipients of charity; as mendicants they regularly sought alms by begging. The Augustinians also were involved in both giving and receiving charity, but they were involved more intimately with the university which contributed to their support. The Electoral family also was a patron to both monasteries and to the poor. In addition, the Elector would have numbered among his charitable acts the free access given to his collection of relics to be seen in the newly expanded Castle Church, designed specifically for their display. The indulgences obtained through the veneration of those relics were viewed as great acts of charity long before John

²⁸ Could a certain Robin of Loxley have benefited from this act and have been reunited with a maid named Marian, and then resumed his charitable giving to the poor in the neighborhood of Sherwood Forest, perhaps through the hands of a friar named Tuck?

²⁹ Monks came to the Antoniterkappelle from time to time from their house at Lichtenburg (Prettin), 20 miles to the southeast. On Wittenberg, see the still useful chapters in E. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1950), esp. 199-253.

Tetzel appeared in the area offering the opportunity to purchase indulgences not only for oneself, but for others—which was itself another opportunity for charity.

The writings of Luther confirm that Wittenberg’s more limited resources (as compared to those of Florence) were insufficient to care for all of its indigents, beggars, sick, disabled, and aged. If the town was similar to cities like nearby Augsburg, it may have enrolled “legitimate” beggars and given them a weekly subsidy from the city’s tax revenue. Luther’s stance is seen already in Thesis 43 of the *Ninety-Five Theses* when he said that “Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.” Compassion shown by one Christian to another is the most basic and efficient form of charity. Two years later we find him writing against the selfishness of the many charitable brotherhoods and urging each guild or trade society to carry out its own distribution of alms to its own members in a coordinated way with the help of a common chest and suggesting that each parish should have a similar common chest with which to help others in need.³⁰

Luther develops these thoughts further in his famous 1520 work addressed *To the Christian Nobility*. In it he supports the practice of social safety nets for the mostly urban poor that was evolving in Renaissance Germany. Yet this could best be done by abolishing begging altogether, including by monks. He says:

Every city should support its own poor, and if it was too small, the people in the surrounding villages should also be urged to contribute, since in any case they have to feed so many vagabonds and evil rogues who call themselves mendicants. In this way, too, it could be known who was really poor, and who was not. . . . There would have to be an overseer or warden who knows all the poor and informs the city council or the clergy what they needed.³¹

The aid should be just enough so that “the poor are decently cared for.” He continues, “It is not fitting that one man should live in idleness on another’s labor, or be rich and live comfortably at the cost of another’s hardship, as it is according to the present perverted custom.”³² Luther is here reflecting the growing attitude that begging and laziness are often related and feed upon each other. Thus, proper Christian charity has to help the needy while not encouraging dependence among those able to work. How does one do this when, there was a constant increase in the numbers of the poor (usually estimated at between 15-23% of the total population!).³³ As Luther sees it, the best way to ensure that charity reaches the “deserving poor” is to operate in a coordinated way within the local community.

³⁰ *On the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519; LW 35:48, 69). In the same work he later links the *collect* in the liturgy with the earlier and better practice of taking up collections for the poor (35:57, par. 12).

³¹ LW 44:189-90.

³² *Ibid.*, 191.

³³ The rise in poverty seems to have been due largely to the deteriorating agricultural situation and the numerous peasant revolts that ensued from this.

As the reformation progressed in Electoral Saxony and surrounding areas through the 1520s, Wittenberg and other cities implemented this more centralized, communal system of charity, with town councils and local parishes coordinating their efforts.³⁴ In 1522, the Saxon town of Leisnig sought Luther's advice on reorganizing their town and parish along Lutheran lines. This produced a document which contained a rudimentary congregational constitution as well as regulations for operating a common chest that would both pay the local clergy and provide alms in an organized way. Luther was obviously in agreement with this model plan as he wrote the preface and submitted the work for publication (1523).³⁵ We should note the checks and balances put in place for this small town of about 1,500 which included seven surrounding villages. The "common chest" was exactly that—a box requiring 4 keys to open it. The ten trustees were divided among four groups—two from the nobility, two from the town council, three from the city's burghers, and three from the rural peasantry. Each group would have one of the four keys.³⁶ This was no naïve system, but it took into account social and class tensions and disparities. It sought to direct aid to the needy and not have it go to the less deserving. When Christians, whether as individuals or through their church or town, gave alms to the truly needy, they were doing so as the masks of God in Luther's familiar metaphor.³⁷

In 1530, when commenting on Psalm 82, Luther still sees the temporal ruler as a crucial leader in seeking to alleviate societal problems such as begging and poverty. The Christian ruler will both secure justice for all his citizens and help the poor, orphaned and widows.³⁸ If he through example and good laws inculcates such a generosity in his entire land, he would be making it into one large hospital for all.

See now what a hospital such a prince can build! He needs no stone, no wood, no builders; and he need give neither endowment nor income. To endow hospitals and help poor people is, indeed, a precious good work in itself. But when such a hospital becomes so great that a whole land, and especially the really poor people of that land, enjoy it, then it is a general, true, princely, indeed, a heavenly and divine hospital. For only a few enjoy

³⁴ In Wittenberg this was begun by Karlstadt in 1521 while Luther was still at the Wartburg. In a tract published in late January of 1522, entitled "That There Should Be No Beggars Among Christians" (translated in *The Essential Carlstadt* [Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2019], 120-128), he writes that towns should rid themselves of beggars "not in an unreasonable or despotic way, but by the giving of well-intentioned help," and that Christians "must apply such diligence to the hungry that they are fed before their hunger drives them to cry for bread" (121). The tract also recommends use of a common bag or box for contributions (126).

³⁵ LW 45:159-94. Its implementation in Leisnig, however, took several years, as a local abbot vociferously raised objections to the plan. This is understandable since Luther suggested in his preface that, when a monastery is disbanded, the property be sold and the proceeds first be used to provide for the monks, and then the remainder be given to the common chest. He continues, "there is no greater service to God [*Gottes Dienst*] than Christian love which helps and serves the needy, as Christ himself will judge and testify at the Last Day" (172-73).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

³⁷ LW 14:114-15, although he does not specifically mention almsgiving in his commentary on Psalm 147:13. Carter Lindberg (*Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 166) concludes that Luther's teaching of the universal priesthood gave a theological basis to the "secularization" of German cities and their government, ending a tug-of-war between various monastic/ecclesiastical structures and town councils on matters of poverty relief.

³⁸ LW 13:53. This always meant helping the *rechten Armen* ("the real poor").

the first kind of hospital, and sometimes they are false knaves masquerading as beggars. But the second kind of hospital comes to the aid only of the really poor, widows, orphans, travelers, and other forlorn folk. Besides, it preserves rich or poor, his living and his goods for everyone, so that he does not have to become a beggar or a poor man.³⁹

Luther goes on to list suppressing violence and punishing the wicked as the third of the three great virtues of a ruler. By doing that, “he protects the poor and preserves peace; thus he is a true rescuer, or knight, and justly wears the golden spurs.”⁴⁰

Catholic cities also had almsboxes and systems of aid, but the begging and monastic involvement made the difference obvious to the observer. At the same time, not so visible was the fact that Catholic theology still promoted giving as a way of acquiring God’s grace, while Lutherans saw it as a means of using their God-given wealth to benefit their neighbor. For them, giving alms was a combination of good stewardship and love for one’s neighbor.⁴¹ These two aspects came to the fore when the great plague of 1527 swept through Saxony. Luther again urged service to one’s neighbor as the highest calling: “If you wish to serve Christ ... very well, you have your sick neighbor close at hand.”⁴²

THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD IN EUROPE

In a fascinating study entitled “The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy,” Sigrun Kahl distinguished the modern social policies of European countries on the basis of their main religious traditions—Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed.⁴³ These countries all developed various governmental social safety nets for their citizens, but these were introduced at different times, varied widely in their inclusiveness, and differed substantially in their methodologies—due, at least in part, to theological factors.

The Scandinavian countries with Lutheran backgrounds viewed poverty as a societal responsibility. They all developed single unified systems which included work programs and ways to integrate the poor back into society. This grew out of the Lutheran teaching that work was an intrinsically positive activity, that all types of legitimate work were equally a fulfillment

³⁹ Ibid., 53. Richard Niebuhr charged that for Luther “no obligation rests upon the Christian to change social structures so that they might conform more perfectly to the requirements of brotherhood” (*The Nature and Destiny of Man* [NY: Scribners, 1964], 2.192-93. Carter Lindberg (*op. cit.*, 160), after surveying Luther’s life and writings, sees this as a false conclusion. He notes that while Luther did criticize all attempts to radically transform society, he constantly urged charity towards one’s neighbor and the poor (166).

⁴⁰ LW 13:58.

⁴¹ Carter Lindberg also points out that “If salvation is by grace alone, poverty no longer serves anyone.” Thus begging monks and the poor were no more blessed than others, and at the same time the rich could not use them to earn salvation. This accounts for the stark contrast in theology (*op. cit.*, 165). Among Anabaptists, charity was a virtue of emphasis, but because of their closed communities it tended to only take place in-house.

⁴² *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* (LW 43:130). This wonderful tract can be read with great relevance by Christians during the current Covid pandemic.

⁴³ “The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant Traditions Compared,” *European Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 1 (April 2005): 91–126.

of a person's God-given vocation, and that the pursuit of material gain in and of itself was dangerous. Kahl summarizes the general attitude in nineteenth-century Scandinavia as follows:

The poor were supported out of a common chest that was financed through weekly collections. This system reduced the role of the hospitals to attending to the sick and the weak. Poor relief rigorously enforced the distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” and relief tended to be restricted to the residential, authentic and morally upright poor, and the able-bodied should work.⁴⁴

However, led by their sense of Christian stewardship and in order to encourage rehabilitation, Lutheran cities in Germany and the Scandinavian countries also had poor houses and poor laws that helped distinguish the undeserving from the truly needy. Kahl illustrates this by citing the motto engraved over a poor house in Hamburg: *Labore nutrior, labore plector*—“With labor I feed myself, with labor I am punished” (apparently even the poor were expected to know Latin).⁴⁵ In these areas, the existing religious institutions were built into the new secularized systems, with the cooperation of church representatives. While the programs were mandated at the regional or national levels, they were implemented wherever possible at the local level. In nineteenth-century Copenhagen, for example, “one poor relief officer was responsible for no more than 15 families, so he could keep an eye on them and encourage them to industriousness, order, domesticity and cleanliness.”⁴⁶

By the mid-nineteenth century Denmark's constitution made it clear that the government had ultimate responsibility for the poor, and by the end of the century Bismarck's Germany had introduced social insurance. Sweden, Norway and Finland all followed at various paces, until by the mid-twentieth century these Lutheran areas, all with Lutheran state churches, had the world's most extensive social programs. The vast majority of care for the poor, sick, and elderly was now paid for by the government via tax revenue. The church's role was to take care of the small percentage of people who fell through holes in the system, or to help the poor access the system's benefits.

In Catholic countries the church remained the primary source of charity much longer, being given renewed emphasis as part of the Counter-Reformation. In Spain, France and Italy, begging remained common, although it was gradually regulated. While some legislation was passed against vagrancy and to encourage the able-bodied to work, there was no way to enforce legislation when charity remained primarily in the hands of church institutions. The medieval system remained even in post-revolutionary France, where clergy continued to staff the hospitals while receiving salaries from the state. At least 300 new religious orders were created in France

⁴⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 105, citing p. 177 of G. Bonderup, “Health Care Provision and Poor Relief in Enlightenment and 19th Century Denmark,” in O. Peter, A. Cunningham and R. Jütte Grell, eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, 172-88). A German law of 1881 in its civil code (*Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*) differentiated between non-profit and for-profit organizations, giving strong tax incentives for charitable gifts.

in the nineteenth century alone, with some 100,000 women serving in them, not counting the men.⁴⁷ Far into the twentieth century, the church remained the primary operator of hospitals and provider of charity for the poor in both Spain and Italy as well.⁴⁸

Holland, England, and parts of Switzerland display a third approach to the poor and charity, strongly influenced by Reformed theology and its development of the Protestant work ethic. Luther's concept of work as dignified by God's *Beruf/calling/vocation* (a vocabulary and concept that never developed in Catholic lands) was turned into a way to ensure one's state of grace and the security of one's salvation. Kahl links this with the Calvinist emphasis on predestination, producing an attitude that saw work as a calling for the elect, but as punishment and toil for the poor. "Calvinist moralism implicated that the poor needed to be punished and corrected. Beggars were to be whipped and forced to work."⁴⁹

This latter development can be seen most clearly in England where few charitable institutions survived Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and seizure of church lands. The medieval hospitals and poor houses were turned into or replaced by workhouses.⁵⁰ Poverty increased rapidly during Britain's industrial revolution, and by the eighteenth century there would be 200 workhouses across Britain. When reading about them in the novels of Charles Dickens one might forget that they were viewed as charitable institutions.

England's Poor Law of 1601–1603 formally distinguished between the impotent who were to receive relief, the indigent unemployed who were to receive employment or materials for their trade, and the idle who were to be punished as an incentive to labor. The law was to be implemented by the local parish, but this was done haphazardly and without consistent enforcement. Specially appointed governmental committees (with church leaders taking prominent part) periodically introduced reforms and improvements to the poorhouses and their operation, but these also were not uniformly implemented. The "New Poor Law" of 1834 did little to change things, and by then the workhouse was viewed primarily as a deterrent, but in practice they contained almost entirely disabled and elderly people. Conditions in them were maintained so as to be severe enough to discourage people from landing inside (if at all possible), and this in turn allowed the industries that used unskilled labor to keep their salaries

⁴⁷ Ibid., 101, citing p. 312 of O. Faure, "Health Care Provision and Poor Relief in 19th Century Provincial France," in O. Peter et al., eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief*, 309-24. One of the more notable was the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, founded in 1833 by seven young philanthropists to serve the poor.

⁴⁸ Often Catholic religious charities received support from private companies in these countries. In Italy, for example, it was only in the 1990s that legislation encouraged charities to engage in purely philanthropic pursuits separate from for-profit groups.

⁴⁹ "The most certain mark of election was proving one's faith in a worldly activity, and success in a worldly occupation and wealth became an absolute sign that one was saved by God from the start, while poverty became the certain sign of damnation. The Calvinist creation of the Protestant work ethos and the strict and systematic requirements about what constitutes a life that increases the glory of God (e.g. personal responsibility, individualism, discipline, and asceticism) made poverty appear to be the punishment for laziness and sinful behavior" (ibid., 107).

⁵⁰ Notable benefactors still provided examples of individual charitable acts. One such was textile manufacturer and unitarian Thomas Firmin (d. 1697), who visited debtors, provided relief for religious refugees, raised funds, wrote pamphlets, and employed hundreds of unskilled laborers in a London workhouse he built.

low.⁵¹ One famous quotation summarized the view of the manufacturing and trading classes: “Everyone but an idiot knows that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious.”⁵² The English system of workhouses was not closed until 1930.

Groups within the Church of England and among the dissenting churches continued to show compassion to the less fortunate in other ways, however, throughout the period.⁵³ Most famous is the anti-slavery efforts of the Clapham group and its allies. The Wesley brothers’ new Methodist groups, embodying the same Reformed/Arminian viewpoint on the value of work, were successful in encouraging many low-paid wage earners living in the booming tenements around the new industrial centers to save their money, to refrain from gambling and drinking, and in this way they helped many raise themselves from poverty. This would result in the originally blue-collar Methodist church becoming a white-collar church in the following centuries. The Salvation Army, founded in 1878 in London, was another Christian group that sought to help the poor and indigent with soup kitchens, hostels, and the like. Their methodology, however, has kept them from experiencing the same socio-economic “lift” that the Methodists experienced, and so they have maintained their focus on serving the poor yet today.⁵⁴

COMPASSION IN EARLY AMERICA

Kahl argues that it was the English attitude towards the poor and charity that was imported with the Puritans and others to British colonies, and soon became part of the fledgling American culture. That is why, unlike in Lutheran countries, the US federal and state governments have met constant resistance from substantial elements of the population, and often in the name of Christian ideals, as they have increasingly taken responsibility for providing help for the elderly (Social Security and Medicare), for the poor (Food Stamps, Head Start, job training programs),

⁵¹ The first workhouse was Bridewell, established in 1555. The classic study of English attitudes to the poor is the 3-volume study of the socialist advocates Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History* (vols. 7-9 of *English Local Government*), first published 1927–1929. A good short introduction can be found in D. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). <http://archive.org/details/philanthropypoli0000andr>.

⁵² A 1771 quote from Arthur Young (a thinker respected by John Stuart Mill), given by Kahl, *op. cit.*, 109-10.

⁵³ On the one hand as Britain became an industrial powerhouse, the “political arithmetic” told leaders that the poor were merely a social problem to be solved in order to preserve the country’s prosperity. Writers such as Bernard Mandeville in his popular *Fable of the Bees* and *Essay on Charity and Charity Schools* (1723) argued that most charity sprang from selfish motives as well as was bad for the economy and nation: “Pride and Vanity have built more Hospitals than all other [Christian] Virtues together” (cited in Andrew, *op. cit.*, 33). Increasing the number of productive citizens was the predominant goal, rather than sharing one’s God-given affluence to those in need. When in 1727 Thomas Guy left his entire fortune for the foundation of a hospital to care for the poor, he was criticized for denying his heirs their rightful inheritance (Andrew, *op. cit.*, 47). Eight years later (1735) Britain passed its statute of mortmain to prevent donors from locking wealth into permanent endowments to charitable organizations; this was soon imitated in France (1749) and in Hapsburg Austria (1755). In the US in 1844, on the other hand, the Supreme Court ruled in support of such donations and forced heirs to honor the donor’s intent when charitable gifts were included in bequests.

⁵⁴ The work of Rev. Thomas Chalmers in early nineteenth-century Glasgow providing organized poor relief through Sunday schools, counseling and food distributions was another example of individual Christian initiative to supplement governmental programs.

and for the sick (Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act)—and why it was well into the twentieth century before any of this happened. A discussion of the merits (politically, socially, and theologically) of this expansion is outside the scope of this paper. But rather we must ask, how has the compassion of American Christians individually, and corporately as congregations and church bodies, exhibited itself in our nation’s development? While Pastor Kolander will address the current situation in the next paper, I have his permission to make some preliminary, historical observations.

The great experiment in liberal democracy that is the United States of America was launched with a unique set of factors that have influenced not only its political and religious development, but also its forms of compassion and charity, Christian and otherwise. The so-called “Protestant work ethic,” the opportunities offered by the seemingly endless frontier, the energy and vitality of the constant stream of immigrants and the communities they formed, the constant struggle to balance federal and states’ rights and powers, and the sociological, psychological and religious burdens of thriving in a land where slavery was such a formative influence and the subjection and marginalization of indigenous peoples was viewed as an economic, and in many cases, a religious necessity—all of these realities factored into the American ethos, and still are with us, at least in a historical and subconscious way, yet today. It was not only chattel slavery, but America itself that became a “peculiar institution.”

Eight of the original thirteen colonies were either officially Anglican or non-conformist (Congregationalists), and several of the others had substantial Reformed, Arminian and/or Quaker populations.⁵⁵ Thus, there was indeed a strong Reformed/Arminian coloring to early American attitudes.⁵⁶ During their overseas voyage from Great Britain to America, the Puritans heard their leader John Winthrop (d. 1649) preach a sermon that urged them to become “A Model of Christian Charity.” In their new home, he said, they could build a community “knit more nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection” and committed to helping one another in every need.⁵⁷ The central elements of the Puritan lifestyle were religious observance coupled with hard work, an abstemious personal and social life, and a legalistic implementation of biblical morality within their community in order to build God’s kingdom on earth. Compassion was shown and charity given to the needy who were deserving of it, as interpreted according to the community’s standards. The signs in front of the historic homes in Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, still reveal to visitors today evidence of one such charitable practice that had rarely been seen elsewhere for some centuries—redemption of captives, in this case of those

⁵⁵ Virginia, New York, North and South Carolina, and Maryland were Anglican; Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire were Congregational; Delaware, Rhode Island, Georgia, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania had no established religion, but the last was founded specifically as a haven for Quakers.

⁵⁶ Cotton Mather’s *Essays to Do Good* is a typical example of the preaching and writing that encouraged individuals in voluntary acts of charity towards their neighbor. Published originally in 1710, it was reprinted well into the 19th century.

⁵⁷ The sermon was later published and includes the following ideal which he held up for the new community: “All the parts of this body being thus united are made so contiguous in a special relation as they must needs partake of each other’s strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe. ‘If one member suffers, all suffer with it; if one be in honor, all rejoice with it’ [1 Cor. 12:26]” (<https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>).

carried off to Canada in 1704 after raids during the French and Indian Wars. However, some signs say that the inhabitants never returned, because there was no one to “redeem” them, raising questions about the limits of compassion, or at least resources.⁵⁸

The religious revival that swept New England from the 1730s through the 1770s and was known as the First Great Awakening included calls for and produced increased charitable giving and the founding of many voluntary charitable organizations as well. The Second Great Awakening (c. 1795–1835) brought a second surge of charitable activity. The Second Great Awakening, however, also provided a further injection of American individualism and resulted not only in the creation of many new denominational offshoots, but also set the stage for non-denominationalism. It also spread a strong Arminian flavoring to many churches, still evidenced across the Bible Belt.⁵⁹ And just as individuals declared themselves to be pastors, often without training but with the sole qualification that they were moved to do so by the direct call of the Spirit, so many Christians felt the direct call to charity without working through a denominational group, making individual compassion and benefaction more prominent in America than elsewhere. We can only trace these developments in very broad strokes and provide a few examples. And of course there were also non-Christian acts of charity and charitable societies formed along community and ethnic, rather than denominational, lines.⁶⁰ The number and vigor of American voluntary associations was noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his study of our nation’s infant democracy (1835, 1840), and he attributed much of its societal strength to them. It would be natural to conclude that many of the American charities that had no formal religious affiliation were still using Christian charity as a model for their work, and the Judeo-Christian background of society in general helped form the consciousness even of those who outwardly denied the faith.

In the colonial and pre-Civil War periods, however, Christian charity was predominant. Roman Catholic individuals and groups imported their traditional charitable activities and, due to the general discrimination they experienced in the US, of necessity formed their own schools, hospitals, and other charitable institutions. The first orphanage in the New World was founded in

⁵⁸ The author still remembers feeling a new understanding of the word *redemption* after reading sign after sign in Old Deerfield many years ago. That the colonists thought in biblical terms of the ransoms which were paid is made clear by the surviving records. Note for example a pamphlet entitled *The Redeemed Captive returning to Zion. A faithful history of remarkable occurrences in the captivity and deliverance of Mr. John Williams, minister of the Gospel in Deerfield...wherein there is annexed a sermon preached by him upon his return...Luke 8.39, Return to thine own House, and know how great Things God hath done unto thee*. The fifth edition was published in Boston in 1774. Available at: <http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp?itemid=7777>.

⁵⁹ Wendy Gamber has argued that during the Second Great Awakening the Reformed teaching of predestination was replaced by Arminian millennialism in forming Protestant attitudes toward work and poverty. See, “Antebellum Reform: Salvation, Self-Control, and Social Transformation,” in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, L. Friedman and M. McGarvie eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 131-32.

⁶⁰ A Scots Charitable Society was set up by Scottish immigrants in Boston already in 1657 to collect alms for distribution to other Scots in their community. In 1727 the Deist Benjamin Franklin set up the Junto Club of Philadelphia dedicated to making civic improvements in that city. In 1786 the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began giving rewards, not to those who rescued animals but to those who rescued the drowning, as well as setting up swimming lessons and educating the populace on resuscitation techniques. Groups such as the Freemasons also included in their goals charity via gifts and actions.

New Orleans in 1729 by sisters of the Ursuline Convent.⁶¹ Protestant congregations also assisted the local poor, and individuals targeted virtually every other area where human flourishing was hindered in the infant nation.

Education was a very obvious need. Local parsons were often the earliest schoolmasters for elementary education, but little existed at a higher level. This led Boston pastor John Harvard (d. 1638) to make a charitable bequest of his library and half of his estate to establish the first institution of higher learning in the US, the university that still bears his name. He was soon imitated by other Christians such as Elihu Yale. Dozens of other colleges were founded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries under the auspices of Christian individuals or denominations.⁶² A substantial portion of the hundreds of additional colleges and seminaries that would be founded in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening would have a similar Christian goal. But higher education became more secularized in the second half of the nineteenth century, due in part to the 1862 Land Grant College Act which set aside federal lands for colleges to “benefit the agricultural and mechanical arts.”⁶³ Meanwhile, throughout the twentieth century there would be a severing or watering down of religious affiliations, focus, and Christian identity among the institutions that had been Christian at their founding.⁶⁴

It was left to Christians also to broaden educational opportunities to women, the disabled, and native groups. Schools for Native Americans were begun already in the 1630s by Catholics, and Protestant groups quickly followed. In 1818, Emma Willard, an Episcopalian, opened the first female college, Troy Female Seminary. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was studying to be a pastor when he met a deaf woman and saw deaf education as his new divine calling. He opened a school for the deaf in Connecticut in 1817. One of his sons, Thomas, became an Episcopal priest and opened St. Ann’s Church for Deaf Mutes in New York City and by 1873 The Church Mission to Deaf-Mutes. In 1857 the Baptist politician Amos Kendall helped found a school in Washington, DC for “the deaf, dumb, and blind,” today’s Gallaudet University, with Edward Gallaudet, another son of Thomas, as the first superintendent.

The young nation also had few resources to devote to healthcare. The Quaker Dr. Thomas Bond was assisted by Ben Franklin in raising funds for the first general hospital in the colonies; it opened as Pennsylvania Hospital in 1756. It treated the sick and mentally ill and was free for the poor. Private gifts to the hospital were matched by the Pennsylvania General Assembly, a revolutionary idea at the time. After serving at the Pennsylvania Hospital, the Episcopalian

⁶¹ This was more than a decade before the Foundling Hospital became the first such institution in Britain (1741), again showing the vitality of compassion ministry in America

⁶² The first institution of higher education in Wisconsin was an Episcopal seminary in 1842, Nashotah House. When in 1865 Ezra Cornell founded the university which still bears his name, its first president, A.D. White, proclaimed how its goal was to be a different kind of Christian university. He said, “We will labor to make this a Christian institution, a sectarian institution may it never be,” meaning it would not be denominational.
<http://www.cornell.edu/search/index.cfm?tab=facts&q=&id=630>.

⁶³ University names that include A&M still remind us of their origins.

⁶⁴ Christian donors continued to set up new institutions as well, John D. Rockefeller’s University of Chicago (c. 1890) for example. Yet while it was founded together with the American Baptist Education Society, the institution quickly dropped that connection.

physician Benjamin Rush established the Philadelphia Dispensary in 1786, the first free medical clinic for the poor. Christian beliefs helped lead Dorothea Dix on her crusade for more humane treatment of the mentally ill in the 1840s and to serve as Superintendent of Army Nurses for the Union Army in the Civil War.

Numerous other examples of benefactions, charitable acts, and innovations motivated by Christian love could be given. Let me just give one more example, that of Thomas Eddy (1758–1827). The son of Quaker immigrants, he worked his way to wealth in New York City, contributing in a wide variety of ways to those around him who were in need. He founded a reformatory for children as an alternative to prisons. He was also a founding member of the New York Bible Society and the New York Manumission Society, negotiated treaties and worked to alleviate suffering among the Six Nations tribes, and assisted in reforming New York’s penal laws. He helped establish a House of Refuge for juvenile delinquents and the New York Hospital (a free hospital for the poor in New York City), followed by a mental asylum. Finally he is remembered for opening the mutual Savings Bank of New York in 1803 to help the working poor save their meager earnings; it was designed to minimize the risk to small investors yet guarantee a return.⁶⁵ While Eddy was truly exceptional in the variety and scope of his charitable work, the same Christian motivation of compassion towards the less fortunate was seen in smaller ways by millions of early American Christians of all denominations.

About the time of the Civil War, however, we can detect also a growing secular interest in concern for the less-fortunate in America, by the government, private non-religious organizations, and by more secular individuals. Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe was an example of the new breed of compassionate reformer, more in the cut of the Deist Benjamin Franklin. He trained as a surgeon, ministered to the wounded and fought in the Greek Revolution, returned to the US where he started a school for the blind (1832), assisted Dorothea Dix in founding her school for mentally challenged youth (1848), became influential in the abolition movement, sent relief to war refugees on Crete, and helped found the State Board of Charities of Massachusetts (1863).⁶⁶ For such people the more general Judeo-Christian heritage of charity merged with the Reformed work ethic, the American sense of democratic equality, and the Enlightenment belief in the limitless advancement of civilization through education to spur on a more rationalistic, common-sense approach to philanthropic endeavors. In the same category we can put famous philanthropists such as George Peabody, Peter Cooper, and Andrew Carnegie,⁶⁷ forerunners of

⁶⁵ In a letter dated Feb. 9, 1802, seeking support from Thomas Jefferson, he wrote, “I am perfectly satisfied that thou are attached to a reform, founded on the pure principles of Christianity” (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-36-02-0357>).

⁶⁶ His faith in a god was clear, but his belief in phrenology seemed to outweigh any conviction about Christian doctrines. See Harold Schwartz, “Samuel Gridley Howe as Phrenologist,” *The American Historical Review* 57.3 (April, 1952), 644-51. His wife, Julia Ward Howe, was the composer of the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

⁶⁷ George Peabody was influenced less by his religious beliefs and more by his own experience of a lack of formal education to establish the “Peabody Education Fund” in 1867 as well as the Peabody Institute, the first major arts center in an American city (1857). The education fund centered its efforts on strengthening existing public schools in the South after the Civil War, thus not helping much with the education of former slaves. It is often termed the first modern foundation. The Unitarian Peter Cooper wished to provide free instruction in the sciences and arts through his Cooper Union which opened in New York City in 1859. A half-century later (1911), the Carnegie

modern secular philanthropists such as Bill and Melinda Gates. While such work was usually inspired by a general concern for one's fellow men and especially fellow-citizens, the goal had changed from helping those most in need to making life better for the community and raising up more flourishing and better citizens.⁶⁸

As the young nation grew and matured, its initial Puritan/Reformed cultural coloring was absorbed to some extent by the new waves of immigrants consisting of other Protestants, Catholics, and Lutherans, though the latter didn't become a significant group until the mid-1800s when it began to rival German, Irish, and Italian Catholics as the largest immigrant group. As with the first colonies, the newcomers normally tried to deal with people in need internally within their own cultural groups. The language barrier and discrimination were two factors that encouraged such an approach, and this practice in turn helped maintain the trajectory of local responsibility already set by the original colonies. There were also outsiders moved by their Christian upbringing to help new settlers. Jane Addams is an example. She founded Hull House (1889) in Chicago, the first settlement house to provide support services for the poorer immigrant community, including classes in English.

Several nineteenth-century social movements, however, were seen to require broader solutions by their very nature. The most obvious was the movement for the abolition of slavery which dominated the mid-nineteenth century. Many of both the famous abolitionists and their rank-and-file supporters were motivated by Christian charity to push for systemic change. They worked through voluntary societies to support publications, education, lectures, and the Underground Railroad. As paradoxical as it seems to us today, however, we must remember that many sincere Christians supported slavery as a God-given order, and they were moved by charitable feelings to carry out what they viewed as acts of compassion towards slaves and slave-owners. Charitable acts are no guarantee that the other branches of one's life are bearing equally good fruit.⁶⁹

Foundation was established "to promote advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding," endowing some 2,500 free Carnegie libraries worldwide, as well as many other projects. Two articles he wrote were circulated under the title "The Gospel of Wealth" in which he encouraged philanthropy among men of wealth. We could have also included British scientist James Smithson who never visited the US but left his fortune in 1829 to establish a cultural institution in Washington, DC. He also seems to have been motivated by Enlightenment more than Christian ideals.

⁶⁸ A fascinating example of Christian charity is that of Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage, who personally was active in local Christian charity work during the lifetime of her very parsimonious husband, but then, after his death, set up the \$10 million Russel Sage Foundation to support that work in a major way. See R. Crocker, "From Gift to Foundation: The Philanthropic Lives of Mrs. Russell Sage," in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, L. Friedman and M. McGarvie eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 199-215.

⁶⁹ A good example of this is the Slater Fund that funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars into industrial schools for blacks during Reconstruction, but which withdrew funds from Huntsville State Colored Normal and Industrial School when its principal and students attempted to ride in "white only" railway cars. On this incident and the Sloan Fund's larger impact, see R. Finkenbine, "Law, Reconstruction, and African American Education in the Post-Emancipation South," in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility*, 161-78. Finkenbine also comments that while secular philanthropists assisted with practical training, it was mostly Christian denominations who set up liberal arts programs in the South for African Americans.

The second great compassionate movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the temperance movement. Spurred on by the heavy use of alcohol in frontier culture and by the Second Great Awakening, an ever-increasing number of temperance groups, mostly Christian in origin, promoted abstinence or at least moderation. The effect of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (1874)⁷⁰ and the men's Anti-Saloon League could be seen in new laws forbidding the sale of liquor on Sundays and the revitalization of local "blue laws" in many strongly Puritan and Reformed communities.⁷¹ Unlike the anti-slavery movement, temperance was something that almost all Congregationalists, Unitarians, Methodists, Baptists and Episcopalians could widely agree on. And while denominationalism was still strong within mainline churches, this type of charitable endeavor encouraged cooperation among local churches and thus helped knit together the otherwise religiously pluralistic society. The movement remained strong overseas for a century, especially among Scandinavian Lutherans.⁷²

COMPASSION MINISTRY IN MODERN AMERICA

As with other social movements, the originally strong evangelical character of the call to temperance became more generally secular over the decades. As one writer put it, "the emphasis changed from the drunkard's soul to his liver. The ideal of virtue became a health ideal."⁷³ This change was part of a larger religious change that was bringing a deep divide into the Christian, and especially the American Protestant, church. Unitarian discrediting of trinitarian theology, Enlightenment skepticism about the atonement of Christ, Darwinian attacks on the creation account in Genesis, and higher-critical disparaging of the Bible had left many in the mainline Protestant movement with little Christian faith remaining other than a belief in the moral teaching of loving one's neighbor. The church's goal was changed from re-establishing the sinner's spiritual relationship with God to helping God's creatures live a fulfilling life on earth.

⁷⁰ The Women's Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1874 and existing yet today, soon had chapters across the country. They held non-violent protests and pray-ins outside saloons. Frances Willard (d. 1898), the WCTU president for most of its first quarter-century of existence, came from a solidly Christian family (Congregationalist, then Methodist), but the Christian tenor of her work, like that of the Union, was increasingly overshadowed by a more general humanitarianism. Their work played an important part not only in the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment enforcing prohibition but also the Nineteenth on women's suffrage. The WCTU pivoted in the early twentieth century to also include "Americanization" activities designed to help integrate immigrants into the dominant culture. The WCTU is still in existence, is now international in scope, and claims to be "the oldest voluntary, non-sectarian woman's organization in continuous existence in the world."

⁷¹ Blue laws had existed originally in virtually all the colonies but had been modified or unenforced in many areas over time.

⁷² In Norway, Sweden and Finland, the movement was strong from 1880–1930, resulting in numerous referendums and laws. Originally centered in urban areas, its nucleus gradually moved to the countryside where it remained a strong conservative issue. Several of the prominent Swedish groups organized as "orders of Good Templars," or simply "templars."

⁷³ Bengtsson, "The Temperance Movement and Temperance Legislation in Sweden," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 197 (May, 1938), 137. He also documents, however, how in legislation and licensing of liquor sales, the strong local self-government of Sweden's led to the 1917 licensing law making it clear that there could be a "communal veto" of licenses.

The theological argumentation that supported this shift became known as the Social Gospel, and it contrasted itself to the burgeoning fundamentalist movement that grew out of the Second Great Awakening. A more moderate centrist Evangelical movement tried to balance the two with varying degrees of success. All of these developments impacted the Lutheran church as well.

The nineteenth century saw other important movements develop in the English-speaking churches of England and America. While usually not thought of as a compassion ministry, the American Bible Society (1816) aimed to make Bibles available for those who could not otherwise afford them, and similarly Christian teaching was provided through the American Tract Society (from 1825) and the American Sunday School Union (1824 on).⁷⁴ The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was founded to serve and educate Christian youth, including those away from home, much as monastic hospitality facilities did in the early and medieval church. It was begun in 1844 in London and spread rapidly, as did the YWCA for women (founded in 1855 in North London). America, with its denominational diversity and its individualistic energy, became especially fertile ground for the development of what we now call parachurch organizations, many of them involved in compassion ministries.

The Irish Potato Famine (1845–1851) was perhaps the first calamity that garnered worldwide attention, and an international response. Christians were prominent among those who sent aid or provided direct help.⁷⁵ The Quakers in particular were remembered for their soup kitchens and other assistance. Other Protestant groups that worked on the ground were remembered more for their attempts to use the situation to proselytize (referred to at the time as “souperism”)—an accusation that would be raised (at times with justification) during similar relief efforts ever since. As advances in communication made people for the first time aware in real time of the ravages of war, famine, disease and natural disasters taking place around the world, Christian and secular charities responded.

The great Protestant mission movement had already begun sending missionaries out from Europe and America, and hospitals, schools, orphanages, leprosariums, and other outgrowths of compassion ministry had been established worldwide by the mid-nineteenth century. Christian compassion and teaching was instrumental in ending various forms of polygamy and infanticide, accusations of witchcraft, and other customs such as immolation of widows in India (*sati/suttee*) and foot-binding in China.⁷⁶ These would in turn eventually spawn indigenous charitable

⁷⁴ The Sunday School Movement aimed to inculcate moral and religious instruction. It was founded in Britain in 1780 by Robert Raikes, aided by Hannah More who stressed literacy training for the poor. When discussing the ABS and its rapid growth, Robert Gross (“Giving in America: From Charity to Philanthropy,” in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility*, 43) comments that it and similar Christian organizations also “introduced antebellum Americans to modern bureaucracy.”

⁷⁵ The relief efforts were hampered by the popularity of the over-population theories of Thomas Malthus (d. 1834) who argued that indiscriminate relief of the poor would only fuel excessive population growth. The English leaders in both church and state that were appointed to study the growing issue of poverty in Ireland in the decades before the great famine were unduly influenced by Malthus's theories, and this prevented any real reforms or alleviation of the situation.

⁷⁶ Missions strategists have at times warned against concentrating efforts on the marginalized members of societies, arguing that this makes it difficult to reach the more central elements of the population. While admitting the logical

organizations in many countries and would serve as inspiration for even more works at home in the West.

The Christian charitable work of his Reformed parents was an influence on the Swiss Henry Dunant when he organized the International Red Cross (1863). But although denominational and non-denominational Christian groups continue yet today to send relief and aid wherever needed, most of the more well-known and larger organizations have become secular. The International Rescue Committee formed during WWII to help re-settle refugees, and the more recent Doctors Without Borders, are two examples. An exception to the trend is Habitat for Humanity which has solidly maintained its Christian mission since its founding in 1976. American marketing creativity also led to new methods of charitable giving. During my own childhood I remember helping put Christmas Seals, which supported tuberculosis research, on the Christmas cards sent out by my parents, and saving up small change to contribute to the March of Dimes for polio research.⁷⁷

Such groups also made charity big-business, and both the church and the government were forced to make adjustments. The federal government passed the Revenue Act in 1913 exempting organizations from federal income tax if they are devoted to “religious, charitable, scientific or educational purposes.” An expanded act of 1936 led to a clear legal recognition of a non-profit sector in the economy. The beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 saw the focus of charities quickly shift from combatting endemic poverty to providing immediate relief in the form of alms, shelter, and breadlines. At the same time, the New Deal of the 1930s saw a flurry of legislative action that led the federal government into taking a much more active role in providing jobs, such as through the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), in overseeing direct relief to millions of unemployed Americans, and in ensuring an income for retirees through the new Social Security program. Yet it was only in 1975, when federal grants began funding state welfare programs, that the government for the first time surpassed private efforts as the largest supporter of basic needs for the poor.⁷⁸ While lauded by many, others saw all of this as a new and unwelcome big government mentality.

Yet the government continued to call on churches, individuals, and charitable agencies to supplement what it did both for its own citizens and internationally. The newly formed United Nations began mobilizing massive relief efforts after WWII, and the US government’s Marshall

truth of such an argument, the command of Christ to show compassion to all has generally won the day, often leading (counter-intuitively) to conversions among the general population.

⁷⁷ Christmas Seals began in 1904, and the March of Dimes was founded by Franklin Roosevelt in 1938. After a polio vaccine was developed, it switched its attention to birth defects. The National Society for Crippled Children began raising funds using Easter Seals in 1934.

⁷⁸ This was due to President Gerald Ford signing Title XX of the Social Security Act. <https://www.historyofgiving.org/1930-1980/1960-the-u-s-government-funds-major-programs/>. Among some Christian groups, including some in our own circles, contributing to Social Security was seen as inappropriate, or at least poor stewardship, and some opted out on “religious grounds.”

Plan gave \$13 billion in loans to rebuild Europe. Still, it was ordinary citizens who were called upon to help and who responded by donating 10 million CARE packages of food and supplies.⁷⁹

Charity continues to be an important factor in our modern society and economy, but the focus of its efforts has changed drastically, and the Christian church is no longer either its central driver or provider. A Supreme Court decision in 1953 expanded the ability of corporations to make charitable contributions.⁸⁰ According to the National Philanthropic Trust, there are 1.54 million charitable organizations in the US today. Of the \$485 billion in charitable donations given in 2021, some \$326 billion came from individuals.⁸¹ In addition, about 30% of US adults are estimated to donate a total of 5.6 billion hours of volunteer service each year, and about half of this is for collecting, making and distributing food and clothing.

Although much of the money and manpower comes from secular or non-Christian donors, compassion ministry is still alive and well among Christian churches and individuals. The forms have changed. Most even mildly affluent Americans don't have to walk past beggars to get to work, and can, for the most part, avoid today's homeless and hungry. We contribute to congregational food pantries and perhaps volunteer to take food to the elderly through Meals on Wheels. We contribute to pregnancy counseling centers or volunteer our time at the local hospital. My parents were more likely to help raise charitable funds by attending spaghetti suppers by the men's club or bake sales by the women's group at church which also sewed quilts and layettes for foreign missions. My children are more likely to take part in a blood drive or a charity run, or to give money via an online crowd-sourced fund to cover a friend's medical bills. Few if any congregations still offer free Christian primary education in their communities, but they may offer free English classes to immigrants, or an after-school program for neighborhood youth. While no longer the center of society's efforts to help the needy, Christians still have a role to play, and still do it for the same reason they always have—out of love for God and compassion for their neighbor.

Our forebears in the conservative Lutheran synods of the Midwest carried out acts of compassion from their earliest days of ministry—helping new immigrants from the old country get on their feet, tending sick neighbors, providing food when needed, adopting orphans. Although its theological basis was questioned by many, fraternal life insurance companies were founded to help bury the dead and care for the widows and orphans. The synod made provisions to care for the families of pastors and teachers. A relief committee was organized to regularize

⁷⁹ CARE, established in 1945, stood for Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe. Twenty-two American charities funneled into CARE the donations they received from individuals and groups. The organization exists yet today and works worldwide. The political ramifications of charity overseas were seen during the Cold War when American aid attempted to counteract the communist threats it saw in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America—with dubious results.

⁸⁰ The ruling in *Smith vs. Barlow* states that corporations can make such contributions even over the objections of individual stockholders. The economic importance and clout of the public non-profits was also seen when in the following year a bill was passed which allowed any public charity to spend up to one million dollars per year in lobbying efforts.

⁸¹ 2% came from foundations, and 10% from bequests. 27% of individual donations were given to religious groups, 14% to education, 13% to human services, 13% to grant-making foundations, and 11% to public/social benefit groups. See <https://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics/>.

shipment of food and clothing to Germany following the devastations of WWII. Nurses supplied medical care in Central Africa, and an orphanage was operated on the Apache reservation. The developmentally disadvantaged were cared for at Bethesda Lutheran Home. The synod also provided help for congregations and their members after fires, tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes. But to many in our circles, providing elementary and secondary education was the best way to show compassion while staying focused on Gospel ministry. Like other conservative denominations, we shied away from most other forms of compassion ministry to the poor out of fear that we would be sucked into the whirlpool of the Social Gospel. Pastor Kolander's paper tomorrow will show how a more balanced perspective can be achieved today.

Contrary to many contemporary detractors, this essay has made a strong case that the church has benefited the world through its compassion for all people.⁸² I would be remiss, however, if I were not to at least mention the subject of missed opportunities and miscalculated efforts at compassion ministry. Charlemagne's conquest of the Saxons was followed by one of the few examples of overt forced conversion to Christianity. The Crusades were initially conceived as an act of compassion towards pilgrims and Eastern Christians threatened by Muslim armies. The Thirty Years War and similar conflicts before and after it in western Europe were waged at least partly in the name of religion. These and many similar examples that could be given from the age of European colonialism, left long-lasting stains on the western church, on its reputation for compassion, and on the openness to the gospel of certain populations. In addition, as upholders of the traditional theology of the Bible, conservatives (including Lutherans) have at times fallen into the trap of being upholders of conservative social and economic systems and viewpoints as well. Both open and tacit support has been given at times to institutions such as slavery, theories about race, segregation and inter-racial marriage, and the like. We should learn from these miscues that the church must be extremely careful when its gospel ministry and charitable activities espouse political or social theories, or become associated with particular governments and their programs..

The larger inheritance of the church's compassion ministry, however, has been overwhelmingly positive. While still in the world, its efforts will be imperfect. Yet, as Luther encouraged us, even if we expect the world to end tomorrow, we should continue preaching the gospel, planting trees, and continuing our compassion ministry to the best of our ability. Permit me to close with a personal story. For every famous example of Christian charity, every Mother Teresa, there are 10,000 unknown men, and probably twice as many Christian women, who have selflessly, humbly, and quietly shown the love of Christ in their lives. One of these latter was named Lydia Wiederhoeft, my great-aunt. A second-generation German-American who grew up on a farm in rural northern Wisconsin, it was a dream come true for her to be able to come to Milwaukee in her early twenties to finish high school at the Synodical Conference's Lutheran

⁸² For book-length discussions of this, see Mike Aquilina and James L. Papandrea, *Seven Revolutions: How Christianity Changed the World and Can Change It Again* (New York: Image, 2015), and Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

high school. Never marrying, she went on to become a Lutheran elementary school teacher. Knowing that her brother did not provide spiritual training for his children, she took from her meager savings to make sure that my mother could attend a Lutheran summer camp and stay connected to the church. At the end of WWII, she emptied that same savings account in order to send relief packages to starving relatives back in Germany. When in her seventies I convinced her to accompany me on a trip to Germany to meet those relatives, her impact became obvious to me as they greeted her with tears of joy as “St. Lydia.” While still in good health, she provided free-of-charge in-home care for aging pastors and their wives. Her life of service and compassion was evident to everyone who knew her, and we were moved to imitate her without ever thinking about it. That is true compassion ministry, the ministry the church has carried out in good times and bad across the centuries, imperfectly to be sure, often invisibly to the society around it, but always known to our Lord. May we continue to carry on this tradition, in his name.

APPENDIX: TWO POST-REFORMATION ELABORATIONS OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY OF COMPASSION MINISTRY

The Lutheran approach was given more systematic treatment in the later sixteenth century by the second Martin, Martin Chemnitz, in his section “On Poverty” in his *Loci*.⁸³ After establishing that God ordained possession of private property and before discussing the marketplace and usury, Chemnitz goes to great length to confirm that God does not allow some to be rich and others poor “because He chose the wealthy and rejected the poor” but because he “wants our faith to be seen and charity (love) exercised through that sharing of goods.”⁸⁴ He then says that there are six scriptural elements to a truly godly charitable act: that it is 1) an act of mercy; 2) it is directed toward the needy, oppressed, broken, or afflicted; 3) it provides some sort of sustenance (*bion*); 4) it comes from the heart; 5) it understands that it is actually God’s charity; and 6) it is not something being required by civic duty.⁸⁵ He also suggests that there is an order of importance in selecting the object of one’s charity: 1) one’s own household; 2) fellow Christians; 3) neighbors; 4) strangers, travelers, and exiles; 5) enemies.⁸⁶ However, he quickly adds, “Let us ourselves not pick out those whom we wish to assist, but rather those whom God puts before us on whatever occasion, just as God put the man who had been robbed and beaten in the path of the Samaritan.”⁸⁷ He also agrees with Aquinas that “Alms ought to be an act of three virtues: mercy, justice, and service.”⁸⁸ Chemnitz concludes with a long discussion of the biblical passages on showing mercy and charity—both how one should understand the threats against those who do not offer charity, and also proper conclusions about the encouragements to it. When the Bible speaks of the benefits of charity, “The promises were not given so that we might attach to this doctrine some ungodly notion about rewards, but so that we might arouse thoughts of mercy by considering those promises.”⁸⁹

A generation later John Gerhard in his *Loci* would agree with Chemnitz, emphasizing that “the care of the poor and the visitation of the sick” is one of the seven duties of ministers of the church.⁹⁰ Citing 1 Peter 4:9, he points out that being hospitable (Luther’s *Gastfrei*) means doing

⁸³ Chapter 4 of his locus on poverty has been made available online by the LC-MS in the translation by J.A. Kellerman, entitled *On Almsgiving* (<https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/LTlbcCfgOs97sTJqdSatUq1klDlk1QwR?>).

⁸⁴ *On Almsgiving*, 2 (all references will be to the LC-MS reprint mentioned in the previous note).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁰ The LC-MS has also made this section of Gerhard’s *Loci* available in translation as *On the Duties of Ministers of the Church* (<https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/795DF28A-84C8-4E77-A65B-5AFFA226AE38>).

this with a joyful heart.⁹¹ “Ministers of the church,” he writes, “should not think that anything related to caring for the poor is foreign to them.”⁹² Just as the early church appointed deacons to oversee this work, church treasurers continue to collect and distribute the goods of the church. Yet compassion ministry is the job of everyone in the church. Before ending with a lengthy exhortation to pastors not to run away or isolate themselves in time of plague, he says, “Rather with the frequent exhortation of their hearers to exercise generosity toward the poor, by their own example of hospitality and generosity, and by watching over the church treasury” they should help the poor.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., 42-43.

⁹² Ibid., 66.

⁹³ Ibid., 67.