DO THE RIGHT THING

The Social Conscience of the Early Church

- Introduction to the Early Church
- Guiding Principles of Christian Social Behavior
  - Stewardship
  - Equality
  - Hospitality
  - Nonviolence
- Application of Principles to Societal Challenges
  - Abortion
  - Military Service
  - Capital Punishment
  - Slavery
  - Serving/Protecting Vulnerable People

WHAT DOES THE EARLY CHURCH MATTER TO US TODAY?

Our understand of the Reformed Tradition on the subject of ethical Christian social behavior is enlarged and deepened by understanding the social conscience of the early church because the Reformed Tradition includes the early church. Calvin and the reformers viewed themselves as rejecting the corruption and errors of the RCC by returning to the foundations of the church's first five centuries. Calvin read the early church fathers copiously. In fact, Calvin reportedly translated more early Christian literature than any other reformer. When we read Calvin within the context of the Church Fathers, we can see major influences on his interpretation of Scripture with respect to social justice. Therefore, the early church offers an important context for our thinking about the societal challenges that we face today.

Doctors of the Church

Athanasius of Alexandria (295-373)

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389)

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Ambrose of Milan (339-397)

John Chrysostom (347-407)

Jerome (347-420)

Augustine (354-430)

Gregory the Great (540-604)

MAJOR CHURCH FATHERS

Clement of Alexandria (155-220)
Tertullian of Carthage (160-230)
Cyprian of Carthage (200-258)
Gregory of Nyssa (335-395)
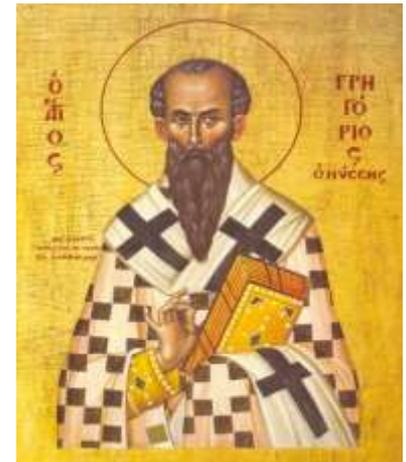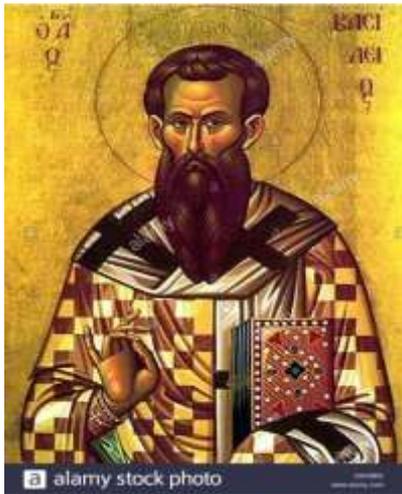
CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS

Justin the Martyr (100-165)

Athenagoras (second century)

Lactantius (240-320)
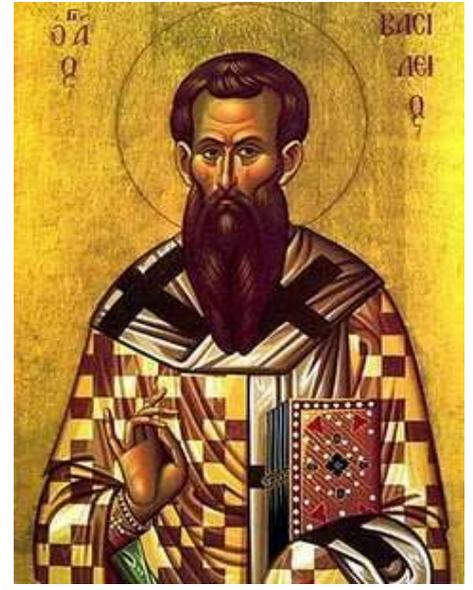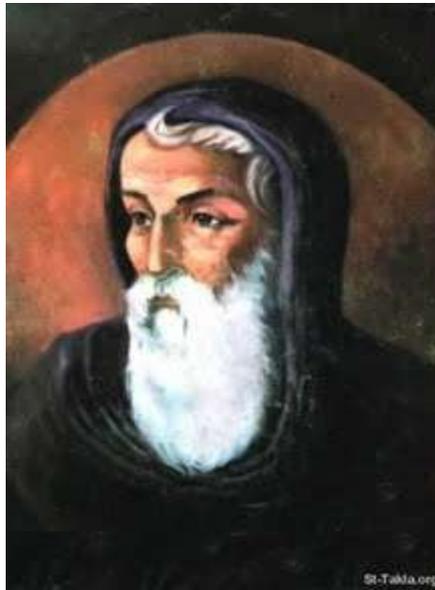
STEWARDSHIP

References:

Hall, Christopher A. *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*

Matz, Brian. "The Principle of Detachment from Private Property in Basil of Caesarea's *Homily 6* and Its Context."

McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*

Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room*

The Christian and his or her possessions was a critical issue in the early church. On the one hand, it was clear that all possessions and resources come from God, belong to God and must be used to serve God; on the other hand, private ownership of property was recognized as a legal reality and decision-making regarding possessions was volitional. However, the spiritual reality of God's ownership of possessions outweighed the legal reality. Thus, the church consistently taught that believers are stewards of all they possess, which has been given to them by God as a trust to be administered on God's behalf. Stewardship was associated with an attitude of detachment toward possessions. The believer maintained personal control over possessions but handled them as belonging to God. This principle of detachment in the service of stewardship held sway in the church for hundreds of years.

According to Brian Matz and John McGuckin:

The principle of detachment/stewardship was firmly established within the church by the teaching of Clement of Alexandria, particularly his exposition on Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler (*Who Is the Rich Man Who Is Saved?*), which became foundational for subsequent pastors and theologians.

"Clement [of Alexandria] articulated a...vision for private property...in which a person may freely possess what he or she needs or is useful to him or her, but all that is superfluous must be given to the poor or otherwise needy." – Brian Matz

Christopher Hall:

"The fathers consistently view all Christians – rich or poor – as stewards of their possessions rather than owners. Only God rightfully owns anything." Where is the line between sufficient and superfluous levels of possessions? "Generally speaking, the church fathers do not provide detailed codes and laws for answering the question of sufficiency and need. Instead, they spend much more time describing …the need for a 'detached attitude' toward 'earthly' possessions combined with a 'respect' for what they can accomplish."

Clement of Alexandria
(155-220)

"He who holds possessions as the gifts of God...and knows that what he possesses is for the sake of others, is blessed by God."

"Possessions and property are supplied by God for people to use. They have been made available to us and placed under our control as means and instruments to be used well by those who understand."

Tertullian
(160-230)

"We should not think that covetousness consists simply in the desire for what belongs to someone else. Indeed, even what seems to be ours belongs to another, for nothing – including ourselves – is ours but all things belong to God."

Cyprian
(200-258)

"Cyprian encourages his congregation to become imitators of God's justice. Whatever God possesses is given to human beings for the use of all, rather than for a select few." – Christopher Hall
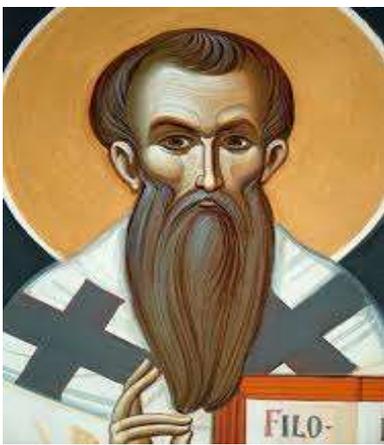
Basil of Caesarea
(330-379)

For Basil, "*the key principle centers on the purpose of our possessions*. In a word, why has God chosen to bless us materially? So that we may become self-indulgent and greedy with hearts closed to the needs of those around us? Too often, Basil argues, the rich 'seize what belongs to all and claim the right of possession to monopolize it.' " – Christopher Hall

"O mortal, recognize your Benefactor! Consider yourself, who you are, what resources have been entrusted to you, from whom you received them, and why you received more than others. You have been made a minister of God's goodness, a steward of your fellow servants. Do not suppose that all this was furnished for your own gullet! Resolve to treat the things in your possession as belonging to others."

Ambrose of Milan
(339-397)

"Ambrose [commenting on the story of Naboth] observes that the rich too often act as though they alone 'dwell on the earth.' The gap between the rich and poor did not always exist, for originally the earth 'was for all in common, meant for the rich and poor alike; what right have you to monopolize the soil?' " – Christopher Hall
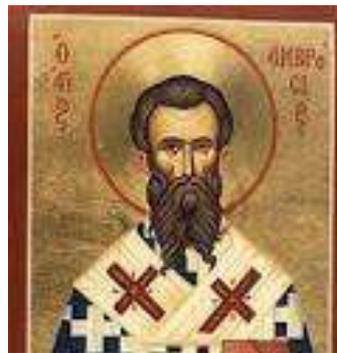
John Chrysostom
(347-407)

"Faith tells us that God alone can supply the material things on which we depend. He gives some people more than they need, not that they can enjoy great luxury, but to make them stewards of his bounty on behalf of orphans, the sick, and the crippled."

"When you are generous to another person, you are not bestowing a gift, but repaying a debt. Everything you possess materially comes from God, who created all things. And every spiritual and moral virtue you possess is through divine grace. Thus, you owe everything to God…When we help someone in need…we will regard our act as no more than a small token of appreciation for all that we have received – or, more precisely, the repayment of a tiny fraction of God's blessings."

Augustine
(354-430)

"Augustine addresses the issue of *When is enough enough?* by drawing a distinction between sufficiency and self-indulgence. He supports *those who wish to advance in the world, as long as their ambition is fueled by a desire to* 'do good by providing for the welfare of [the less fortunate].' ...Augustine's guideline is 'what is sufficient for the necessaries of life [is enough].' " – Christopher Hall

Augustine taught that "everything beyond necessity belonged to the poor. ...God had loaned property and resources to [people to] pass them on to those in need" – Christine Pohl

EQUALITY

References

Holman, Susan R. "Out of the Fitting Room: Rethinking Patristic Texts on 'The Common Good'."

Hughson, Thomas. "Social Justice in Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*: An Exploration."

McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*

The very hierarchical Greco-Roman world, in which the early church resided, assumed the inequality of humanity. A person's worth depend education, land ownership, wealth, legal status, gender and more. The Christian interpretation of Scripture that all humans bear God's image radically transformed the church's understanding of humanity. The "image of God" became a cornerstone of Christian anthropology. If all persons are created in God's image, the church reasoned, then human equality exists at a basic level of shared humanity and the essential worth of each person is equal to every other person. Nobody has greater or less value than anyone else. This seems exceedingly obvious to us today but within the Greco-Roman worldview, the idea of human equality was not only outrageous but incomprehensible.

John McGuckin:

"In the traditional Greek view, the 'real humanity' began at the level of landowner. Slaves and indentured laborers were ...subhuman. ...Christianity had a hard time introducing the idea that the very concept of the human person was not...a subset of the notion of societal standing and wealth."

Thomas Hughson:

Early Christian thinking affirmed "the intrinsic equality in dignity of all human beings because of creation by God in the image of God". This inclined the church toward social justice focusing attention on "the poor and powerless." …The opposite of inequality…[was] rife throughout the empire, dividing rich from poor, elite from the masses, citizens from noncitizens, slaves from owners, powerful from powerless."

Lactantius
(240-320)

"In the eyes of God - who produces and gives breath to people...who gives light, water and food...to everyone, who has not prevented anyone from receiving His heavenly benefits - no one is a slave or a master...all people are to be treated as equals.“

Lactantius “proposes equality as the basic form of justice in human relationships that is due to God creating all human beings in the image of God as equals.” – Thomas Hughson

Gregory of Nazianzus
(329-389)

Gregory of Nazianzus "uses the Greek political terms meaning 'equality of rights' when instructing Christians on social justice. He goes on to express outrage 'that we who are created with equal honor live so unequally with members of the same race.' " – Susan Holman

Gregory of Nyssa
(335-395)

Gregory of Nyssa "called for a just distribution of goods and identified the homeless strangers as 'kin' and 'of your own race' on the basis of human equality." – Susan Holman
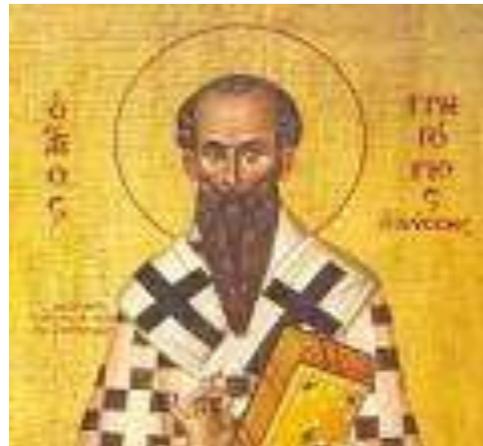
Ambrose of Milan
(339-397)

"The sky is open, and the expanse of the world is free. The elements have been granted to all for their common use. Rich and poor alike enjoy the splendid ornaments of the universe...The house of God is common to rich and poor. ...Nature has produced a common right for all, but avarice has made it a right for only a few."
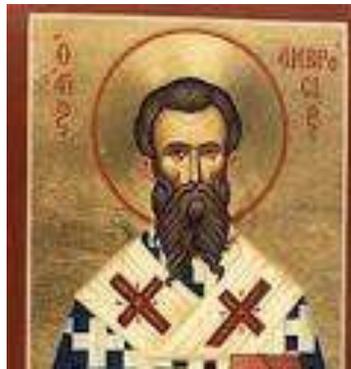
John Chrysostom
(347-407)

"The rich usually imagine that, if they do not physically rob the poor, they are committing no sin. But the sin of the rich consists in not sharing their wealth with the poor. In fact, the rich person who keeps all his wealth for himself is committing a form of robbery. The reason is that in truth all wealth comes from God, and so belongs to everyone equally."

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM
349-407

HOSPITALITY

References

Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room*

Pohl, Christine D. "Hospitality: Ancient
     Resources and Contemporary Challenges."

Although hospitality was both a Hebrew and Greco-Roman virtue, the principle of Christian hospitality contrasted sharply with that of the surrounding culture. In Greco-Roman society, hospitality was purely transactional, belonging to reciprocal relationships in which both host and guest expected to gain from the experience. Hospitality was more like a business luncheon or networking party in our day than simply a social event to enjoy the company of others. The idea of being hospitable to those who have nothing to offer in return or are socially and economically beneath the host was ridiculous and incomprehensible.

In contrast, the whole idea behind Christian hospitality was to create a physical space to serve needy people and strangers who could not reciprocate. Hospitality was the overflow of God's grace to others. Christian hospitality was not primarily an individual endeavor in private homes – although John Chrysostom insisted that Christians with resources ought to maintain a guest room for regular occupancy by a local poor person or family. The physical spaces were communal and the community served. Before Constantine, hospitality was provided in large houses by the church as a household. After Constantine, churches built physical structures for various types of hospitality. Hospitality took the form of the church community serving the larger community. Contemporary examples include the Rotating Shelter, the Friendship ministry and Serve. The Salvation Army is also a great example of the hospitality that was practiced by the early church.

Christine Pohl:

"Hospitality was an essential part of Christian identity. Welcome, compassion, and equal treatment were all part of a proper Christian response to people in need. …Three dimensions of hospitality practiced by early Christians: (1) hospitality as an expression of respect and recognition – in welcoming persons of different status and background into a single place and often a shared meal; (2) hospitality as a means of meeting the physical needs of strangers, traveling Christians, and the local poor; (3) and hospitality as the hosting of local assemblies of believers."

Christine Pohl:

"Hospitality was an important practice for transcending the status of boundaries of the surrounding culture and for working through issues of recognition and respect. It was crucial to meeting human needs – and it made sense in the economy of God. …By offering hospitality to someone in need, one both ministered to Christ and responded to God's generous hospitality. John Chrysostom pointed out the disproportionate generosity of God that stands behind all of our acts of hospitality."

Christine Pohl:

"Christian hospitality...was also to be remedial; its practice among Christians was to counteract the social stratification of the larger society by providing a modest and equal welcome to everyone. ...to welcome persons who had few needs was not true hospitality, the ancient church leaders argued. Hospitality was to be most centrally viewed as kindness to strangers. The focus, however, was on strangers in need, the 'abject and lowly,' those who on first appearance seemed to have little to offer."
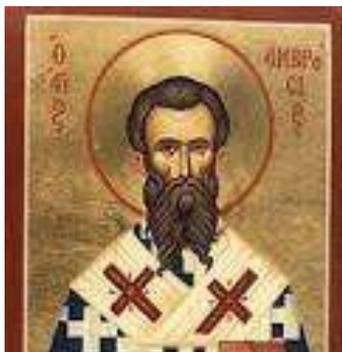
Ambrose of Milan
(339-397)

"Hospitality is a good thing, and it has its recompense: first of all the recompense of human gratitude and then, more importantly, the divine reward. In this earthly abode we are all guests. Here we have only a temporary dwelling place. We depart from it in haste. Let us be careful not to be discourteous or neglectful in receiving guests..."

Jerome
(347-420)

"Let poor men and strangers be acquainted with your modest table, and with them Christ will be your guest."
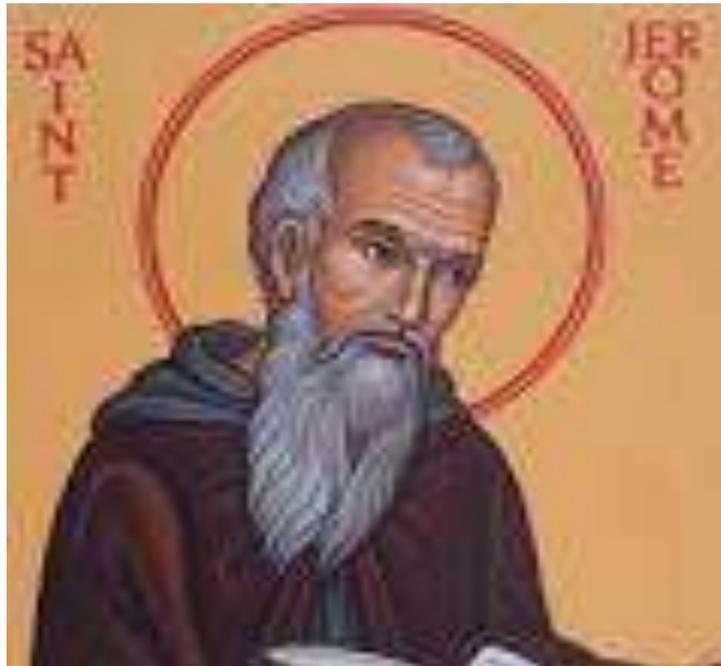
John Chrysostom
(347-407)

"By how much the brother may be least, so much the more does Christ come to you through him. For he that receives the great, often does it for vainglory also; but he that receives the small, does it purely for Christ's sake."

Augustine
(354-430)

(During the disintegration of the Roman Empire): "Sympathize with the suffering, bear the weak; and on this occasion of the concourse of so many strangers, and needy, and suffering people, let your hospitality and your good works abound."

NONVIOLENCE

References

Gorman, Michael J. *Abortion in the Early Church*

Hall, Christopher A. *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*

Hinson, E. Glenn. *The Early Church*

A combination of the doctrine of "humans as image-bearers of God" and an absolutist interpretation of the fifth commandment engendered the highest respect for human life and a very strong commitment to protect every member of the human family. This mandate of Christian social behavior resulted in the rejection of violence of any kind at any level by the early church. In fact, among the reasons that Christians refused to attend arena and theater entertainments was the performance or even the mere portrayal of violence. The early church possessed a deep revulsion to violence.

Michael Gorman

"It is this absolute abhorrence of bloodshed in any form which [drove Christians] away from looking at practices such as gladiator fights and criminal executions. This view stood in stark contrast to the prevailing Roman lifestyle."

Christopher Hall

According to "the early church's high view of the sanctity of human life, to take life, any life, was forbidden. ...Common Roman practices were forbidden because they transgressed the commandment 'Do not commit murder.' "

Athenagoras
(Second Century)

"Who can accuse us of murder and cannibalism, since they know that we cannot endure to see a person put to death even if justly…We who consider that watching someone put to death is next to killing that person have renounced spectacles of contests between gladiators and wild beasts. How, then, can we put someone to death when we do not even watch such spectacles, so as not to inflict on ourselves guilt and pollution?"

"When struck, [Christians] do not strike back."
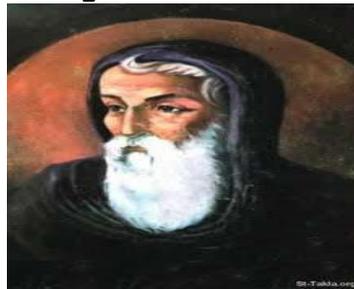
Justin the Martyr
(100-165)

"We who formerly killed one another not only refuse to make war against our enemies but ...would rather die than take a life in self-defense."

Tertullian

"The Creator prohibits every kind of killing of human beings."
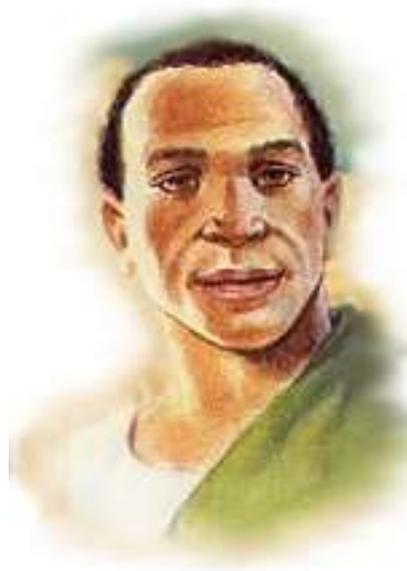
Four Principles Guiding Social Behavior in the Early Church

- **DETACHMENT/STEWARDSHIP**: Possessions are a trust to be administered on God's behalf in the service of the poor and vulnerable.

- **HUMAN EQUALITY**: God's image-bearers share the same worth and rights to God's resources.

- **HOSPITALITY**: Creating spaces to welcome and embrace the least and neediest among us.

- **NONVIOLENCE**: Rejection of all bloodshed and physical harm to God's image-bearers.

Application of Principles

- Abortion
- Military Service
- Capital Punishment
- Slavery
- Serving and Protecting Vulnerable People

Abortion
References

- Ferguson, Everett. *Inheriting Wisdom*
- Gorman, Michael J. *Abortion in the Early Church*
- Hall, Christopher A. *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*
- McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*

Although abortion was a common and widespread practice in the Greco-Roman world, the opposition of the early church to abortion was universal and vehement. It is an example of the application of the Do No Harm / Nonviolence principle to a concrete social issue.

Christopher Hall:

"Abortion was available on a broad scale, particularly in the Roman world, and yet uniformly opposed by the Christian community. … The early church regarded the fetus as a 'living being, the object of God's care' The use of abortion as a contraceptive device is strongly condemned by the early church. …The early church did not view the fetus as a part of a woman's body that might be discarded or separated from her on the basis of her free, autonomous decision."

Athenagoras
(Second Century)

"We call [abortion] murder and say it will be accountable to God... [We] regard that which a woman carries in her womb as a living creature, and therefore as an object of value to God..."

Tertullian

(160-230)

"Indeed for us murder is forbidden once and for all, so it is not permitted even to destroy what is conceived in the womb. To prohibit the birth of a child is only a faster way to murder; it makes little difference whether one destroys a life already born or prevents it from coming to birth. It is a human being, who is to be a human being, for the whole fruit is already present in the seed."

Basil of Caesarea
(330-379)

"A woman who deliberately destroys a fetus is answerable for murder. And any fine distinction as to its being completely formed or unformed is not admissible among us."
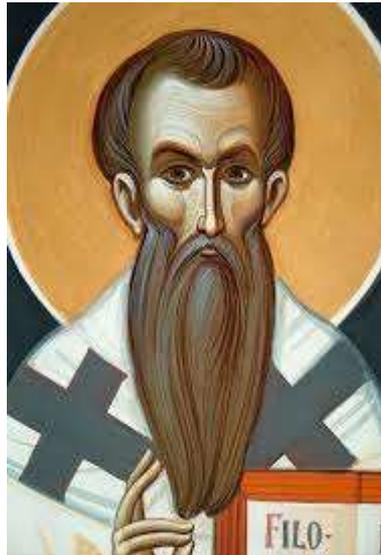
Military Service
References

- Bercot, David W. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*

- Hall, Christopher A. *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*

- Hinson, E. Glenn. *The Early Church*

- McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*

Military service was another concrete situation to which the principle of Nonviolence was applied. Before Constantine, the church generally prohibited Christians from military service. After Constantine, the overall attitude changed to support for allowing Christians to be soldiers, although voices against taking up the sword persisted. There is no solid evidence of Christians in the military until Constantine. Many soldiers who converted to Christianity were required to leave their occupation before their baptism.

Glenn Hinson:

"Christians opposed military service, chiefly for two reasons: dominance of the military by the state religion and biblical injunctions against killing. Soldiers in the ranks could often avoid the obligation of offering sacrifices…None, however, could avoid killing. If soldiers decided to join a church, therefore, they would likely be asked to surrender their commissions in the army."

Christopher Hall :

"Up to the conversion of Constantine the early Christian community opposed Christians serving in the Roman Army. ...As Rome gradually morphed into a Christian nation-state under the leadership of Constantine and succeeding emperors, the perspective of the Christian community dramatically shifted. ...The reflections of the church fathers living in the Constantinian world on the issue of war and military service demonstrate their struggle to navigate the drastically new state of affairs between the church and the Roman government."

Justin the Martyr
(100-165)

"We used to be filled with war, mutual slaughter, and every kind of wickedness. However, now all of us have, throughout the whole earth, changed our warlike weapons. We have changed our swords into plowshares, and our spears into farming implements."

Tertullian
(160-230)

"How will a Christian serve in war? In fact, how will he serve even in peace without a sword? For the Lord has taken the sword away. ...In disarming Peter, the Lord disarmed every man."

Lactantius
(240-320)

"When God forbids us to kill…He warns us against doing those things that are considered lawful among men. For that reason, it will not be lawful for a just man to engage in warfare."
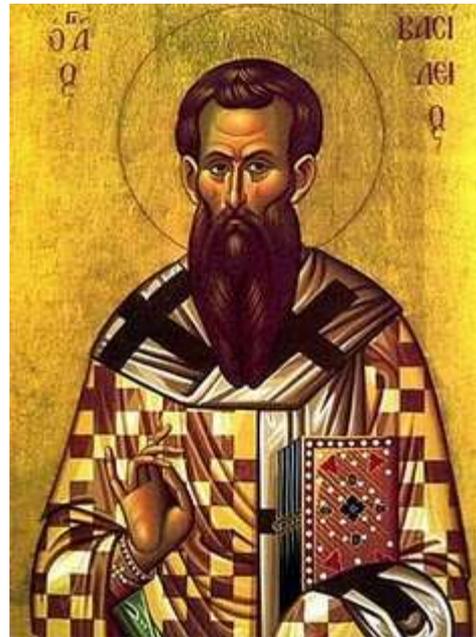
Augustine
(354-430)

Augustine was "aware that the Latin tradition, now poised in his day between Tertullian's bristly pacifism and the new accusation that Christianity had led to Rome's fall, simply had to be given some systematic coherence. Augustine set himself the task of thinking out a position more coherent than situation ethics. He was the first to attempt a moral justification of the profession of arms. He took the basic ideas of "just war" from Cicero and set out what would be the terms and conditions of a Christian "just war." Most writers of the Latin church followed him after that point. The East…resisted the idea that war, as such, could ever be legitimated in the abstract." – John McGuckin

Basil of Caesarea
(330-379)

"Those [soldiers] whose hands are unclean [i.e., shed blood] must abstain from communion for three years."
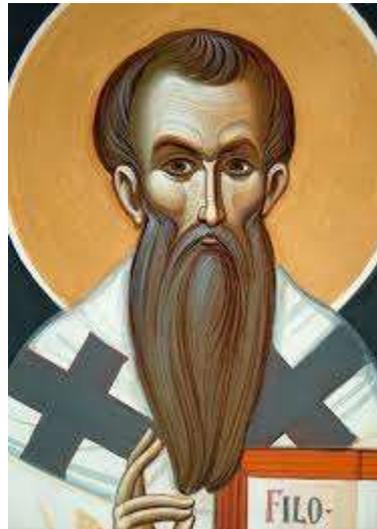
John Chrysostom
(347-407)

"War is an abomination. It is quite wrong that one nation should attack another in the pursuit of land, power or wealth. It is doubly wrong that the victors should proclaim the glory of their battles, while their victims lie maimed and dying. The glory of war is illusory; war brings only misery. Yet this does not mean that military service is a dishonorable profession, nor that carrying arms impedes salvation. ...An army is necessary to keep peace with other nations, and to keep peace within a nation. What, then, if the king orders his army to perform an evil act, such an invading a neighboring nation? Should the Christian soldier disobey his orders, even at the risk of being executed for his disobedience? In such a situation he must weigh one evil against another: the evil of participating in the invasion, against the evil of leaving his family without material support. None of us can presume to judge the soldier's decision, but rather must pray that the Spirit guides his conscience."

Capital Punishment

References

- Aquilina, Mike. "The Early Church and the Death Penalty."

- Nuffelsen, Pater Van. "Social Ethics and Moral Discourse in Late Antiquity."

The abhorrence of bloodshed extended to executions of criminals by the state. However, there were conflicting attitudes and ambivalence on this issue within the early church. Early Christian literature contains evidence of acceptance of capital punishment when carried out by the state in cases of capital offenses. But this was not necessarily the dominant view of the church before Constantine Christianized the empire. Multiple pillars of the pre-Constantine church opposed capital punishment. There is evidence that in some cases believers may have avoided pressing charges against wrongdoers who were guilty of capital offenses. Of course, post-Constantine, the church increasingly viewed the state as literally the sword of God. However, the church fathers strongly emphasized that capital punishment ought to be rare, reserved for extreme circumstances and generally yield to mercy. The church's deep-seated abhorrence of bloodshed did not vanish for this issue.

Athenagoras
(second century)

"We cannot endure even to see a person put to death, though justly."

Clement of Alexandria
(155-220)

"When one falls into any incurable evil, it will be for his good if he is put to death"

Apostolic Tradition
(Church Manual)
(early third century)

"A man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out"
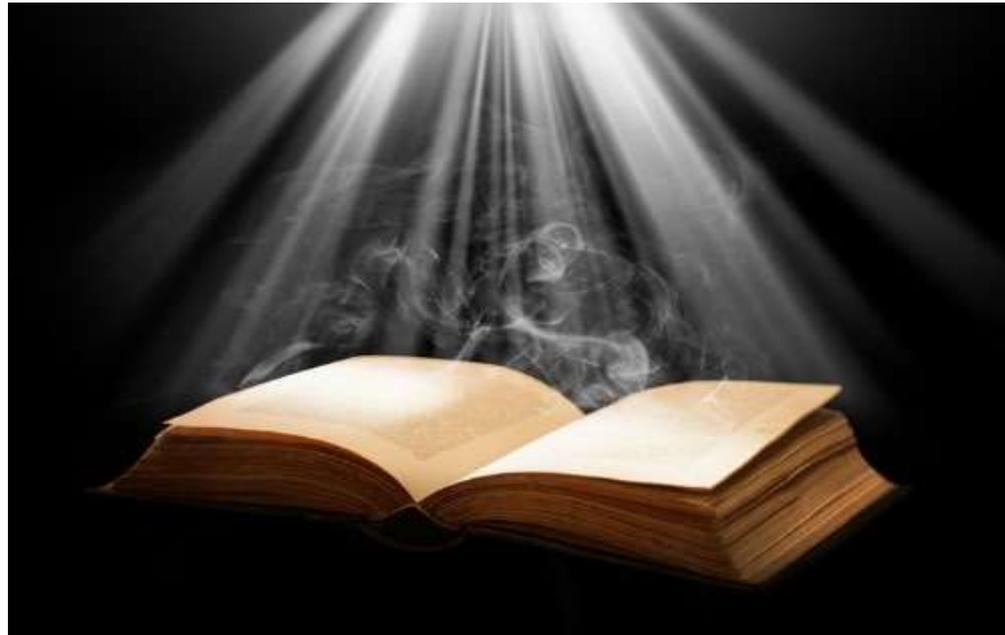
Lactantius
(240-320)

"When God forbids us to kill, he prohibits not only murder...but does not permit us to condemn anyone for a capital crime, because it makes no difference whether you kill a person by the sword or by a word when the act of killing is prohibited."
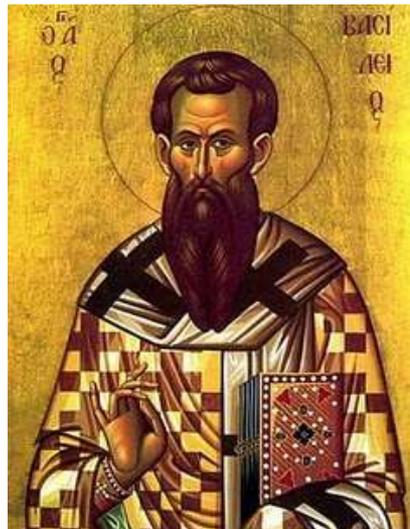
Post-Constantine Christianity

"The great Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries — Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine — recognized the right of the state to execute criminals, but urged rulers not to exercise that right. St. Ambrose told a Christian judge named Studius: 'You will be excused if you do it, but you will be admired if you refrain when you might have done it.' Augustine characterized the good Christian ruler as 'slow to punish, but ready to pardon' He justified capital punishment when there was 'no other established method of restraining the hostility of the desperate.' Then, he said, 'perhaps extreme necessity would demand the killing of such people.' Augustine recognized the state's right to wield the sword, but he hoped that lethal use would be extremely rare." – Mike Aquilina

Slavery

References

- Ferguson, Everett. *Inheriting Wisdom*

- Hughson, Thomas. "Social Justice in Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*"

- McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*

The social issue regarding which the early church was perhaps most conflicted and unable to reach a coherent social morality was slavery. On the one hand, the belief that all persons bear the image of God and the Christian principle of human equality across all social, economic and ethnic boundaries enabled believers to regard the human dignity and worth of slaves as identical to everyone else. Within the church the community, Christian slaves were treated with a respect as peers that was radically different from the surrounding social milieu. There is evidence of churches ransoming slaves, especially in the first and second centuries. On the other hand, the church fathers were unable to imagine society without slavery. Although slavery was generally viewed as an evil consequence of humanity's fallen, sinful condition and completely contrary to God's will, the early church considered slavery to be a necessary evil for the functioning and well-being of the economy. Pastors exhorted slave owners to treat their slaves humanely with kindness and gentleness; but they did not tell them to free their slaves. The early church never called for an end to slavery. It never imagined that such a thing was possible.

John Chrysostom
(347-407)

"Slavery is an abomination. It is quite wrong that one person should buy another, and that such a purchase has the protection of the law. A person does not even possess his own life; so how can he possess another person's life? Yet this does not mean that slaves should be disobedient to their masters, nor that they should try to escape their condition. ...Masters need not necessarily feel compelled to release their slaves."

Augustine
(354-430)

"Augustine regarded the existence of slavery as a direct result of original sin, part of the pervasive suffering the human race had brought on itself. ...Augustine was personally greatly concerned with the plight of slaves and expended much effort and church money to ransom young children captured by African slave traders." – John McGuckin

Serving & Protecting Vulnerable People

References

- Hall, Christopher A. *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*
- Hinson, E. Glenn. *The Early Church*
- McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*
- Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room*
- Williams, D,H. *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism*

The guiding principles of stewardship and hospitality held tremendous sway over the social practices and development of the church as well as the impact early Christians made upon the surrounding society. The early church became renowned throughout the Roman Empire for its social welfare services that were offered without discrimination. Although Romans practiced charity, it belonged to a patronage system wherein the philanthropy was an instrument of increasing and consolidating wealth, power and prestige. Recipients were carefully selected on the basis of their ability to benefit the donor. In contrast, Christian social aid began with the practice of almsgiving within the local church communities to provide for the poor, widows, orphans and abandoned children. The church safety net quickly expanded to include a variety of other groups of vulnerable people: the elderly, the sick, the disabled, shipwrecked sailors, victims of plagues and natural disasters, and prisoners. Interestingly, the church also gave the bodies of deceased poor people the dignity of proper burials. As the scope of Christian social welfare widened, the church cared for exiles, foreigners, and slaves in distress; it ransomed POWs and captives of pirates; provided work for the unemployed; and extended hospitality to travelers. Church charities were directed by bishops while the actual work of serving and protecting vulnerable people was carried out by deacons and the orders of widows.

Over the centuries, Christian social services became more systematic and wide ranging. Before Constantine, the church was unable to construct buildings to house the various types of social welfare. However, when Christianity was given a favored status within the empire, the government entered into a partnership with the church whereby the government funded the vast relief network that the church had created during its first 300 hundred years. Government funding was combined with parish almsgiving and donations from wealthy Christians to support the construction of buildings and activities dedicated to

[32] specific social services: from leprosariums to poor houses, from hospitals to hospices, from hostels to orphanages, from centers for the aged and infirm to centers for the disabled.

Christopher Hall :
"The canons of the Council of Nicaea require bishops to organize centers that would offer care for the sick and receive the poor and foreigners."
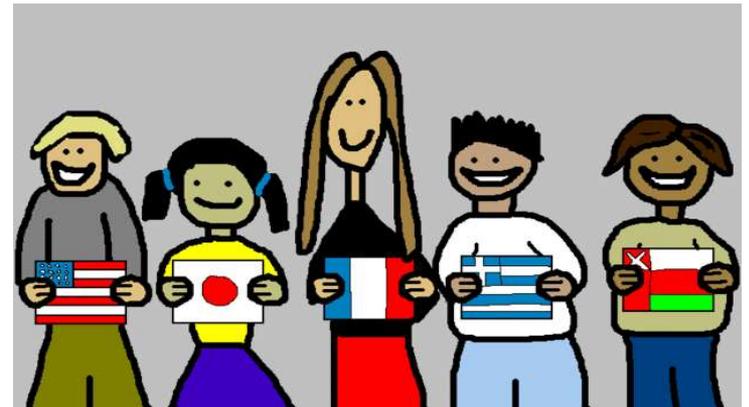
Christine Pohl:

"Outsiders recognized Christian institutions of care as exemplary. A significant testimony to the importance of charity…came from a hostile source – the Emperor Julian (A.D. 362). In his attempt to reestablish Hellenic religion in the empire, Julian instructed the high priest of the Hellenic faith to imitate Christian concern for strangers. Referring to Christianity as "atheism", he asked, 'Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism?' He therefore instructed the priest to establish hostels for needy strangers in every city and also ordered a distribution of corn and wine to the poor, strangers and beggars. 'For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg and the impious Galilaeans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us. Teach those of the Hellenic faith to contribute to public service of this sort.' "

Justin the Martyr
(100-165)

"Those who have, provide for all those who are in want. ...Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, give what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the [bishop]. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in want due to sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, and strangers who are sojourning among us – in a word, he becomes protector of all who are in need."

Ambrose
(339-397)

"When the treasures of the church were requested by [pagan persecutors], [a deacon named Lawrence in the church of Rome] promised to show them. On the following day he led out the poor. When asked where the treasures that he promised were, he pointed to the poor and said, 'These are the treasures of the church.' "

"When you clothe the naked, you clothe yourself with righteousness. When you bring a stranger under your roof, when you support the needy...you sow material things and reap spiritual things...No one is more blessed than the one who understands the needs of the poor and the distress of the weak and indigent."

John Chrysostom
(347-407)

"Those who have a spirit of love and mercy will give money away if they have it. If they see anyone in distress, they will weep. If they encounter people who have been wronged, they will stand up for them. If they see others treated maliciously, they will reach out their hand to them. For those that have a treasure house of blessings, a loving and merciful soul will make it overflow to meet all of their neighbors' needs."

John Chrysostom
(347-407)

John Chrysostom "urged his parishioners to make a guest chamber in their own houses, a place set apart for Christ – a place within which to welcome 'the maimed, the beggars, and the homeless.' Recognizing that some Christians would hesitate to take strangers into their homes or guest rooms, Chrysostom suggested that they could at least make a place in their household for a local poor person who was known to them." – Christine Pohl

Augustine
(354-430)

"You hear the voice of a beggar, but before God you are yourself a beggar. Someone is begging from you, while you yourself are begging. As you treat your beggar, so will God treat his. You who are empty are being filled. Out of your fullness fill an empty person in need, so that your own emptiness may again be filled by the fullness of God."

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God used the church of the first five-to-six centuries to transform the world known to Christians at that time. The church that was empowered for this task was a radical movement. Outsiders could write off as stupidity and ignorance the Christian beliefs about and worship of an obscure rabbi whose career had ended in crucifixion, but the social behavior of this crucified rabbi's followers was too radical to ignore. It demanded a response – one way or the other.

This is our heritage: our inheritance as members of the church Christ built by the power of the Holy Spirit during the first half of the first millennium – during the period of church history that John Calvin called "the ancient form of the church instituted by the apostles and the only model of a true church."

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