“EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT COMES FROM ABOVE”: THE EPISCOPAL CONTROL OF CHARITY AND CHRISTIAN(-IZED) PATRONAGE

The post-Constantinian church did not have to defend or argue for but simply took for granted the episcopal role in centralized almsgiving unlike its counterpart in the previous centuries. In course of the third century, Christian koinonia and mutual care grew comprehensive and the church experienced increasing structural and cultic institutionalization. The ecclesiastical charity then mirrored and corresponded to this process of institutionalization revolving around clerical authority and functions, especially those of bishops (though not without challenges). In this paper, I will examine the ways in which the church as a growing institution centralized its charitable ministries under clergy (bishops in particular) and the process of Christianized patronage through which the clerical control of charity for those in need took place. I will analyze the rationale for ecclesiastical control of almsgiving via Christianized patronage by looking at the Didascalia in its rather comprehensive portrait of institutional church life in Syria on the one hand and the letters of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, who eventually succeeded in establishing theological and practical foundation for Christianized patronage that would last for centuries to come, on the other.

**Christian(-ized) Patronage in the Didascalia**

The Roman patronage networks, which formed a bedrock of Roman social relations of reciprocity, worked based on (or because of) the structural inequality and limited access to resources; as the patron of superior status bestowed gifts and benefits (*beneficia*) on (typically) one’s client(s) of inferior status, the client(s) in return showed gratitude by loyalty and public praise, which in turn enhanced the honor and
status of the patron and thus motivated and obligated him or her to bestow further beneficia, and the cycle continued.\(^1\) Patronage networks therefore functioned as a necessary means of socio-political cohesion and control based on the ethics of reciprocity (between unequals). By the third century CE, with the church as “a society within the society” more or less established,\(^2\) we see the major development of Christian patronage also working in a context of structured inequality — religious as well as socio-economic hierarchy — with similar albeit transformed dynamics. Early on, even in the first century, Christians had already adopted the prevailing Roman patronage system and Christianized it over the subsequent centuries as the wealthier lay householders naturally took leadership of the nascent Christian communities by offering their houses for assembly. These wealthier members also contributed to the care of the needy in their Christian communities with dinners (meals), hospitality, burial plots, and almsgiving, although these works of charity were exhorted to and practiced by the faithful in general and were not confined to the wealthy. However, there is no doubt that the more affluent members were major contributors to the common fund (koinos), agapē, etc. and felt greater expectation and obligation to share their resources with the poor in their communities; but in return, the poor recipients of alms and other acts of charity were exhorted and obligated to pray for salvation and spiritual blessings for their donors (patrons) in gratitude (e.g., Herm. Sim. 2.4–10; Clement of Alexandria, Quis div. 31–35; Ap. Trad. 28.1–4). This “established” symbiosis between the wealthy and the poor with theological undergirding and spiritual sanction shows the Christianized patronage at work at the most basic level. In the course of the third century, there was a notable shift from patronage of the wealthy lay leaders in household settings to patronage of bishops and other clergy in a more formalized church structure with the ownership of buildings and other properties as the clergy largely took over the official roles of patrons with their el-

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