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A Psychosocial Theories Approach

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Explaining Early Christian Charity: A Psychosocial Theories Approach

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Abstract

The charitable practices of the Christians before Constantine's conversion were exemplary. But the question of how the Christians sustained their charitable practices has seldom been explored. This article provides a sense of the sacrificial character and significant scale of their charity and then employs psychosocial theories to provide a scientific explanation for its success. It argues that the early Christians' charitable practices depended on their group norms of charity; on a social context that helped to set Christians apart, thereby enabling the norms to shape behaviors; and on church leaders who embodied sacrificial charity in word and deed, thereby shaping and sustaining charity as a group norm.

By 312 C.E., Christianity was accepted widely enough by the populace of the Roman Empire to make Emperor Constantine's conversion politically viable. In Christianity's first three centuries, early Christian communities¹ had experienced tremendous numerical growth; there were 6.3 million Christians by 300 C.E. and 33.8 million by 350 C.E. (Stark 1996: 7).² Many explanations of this growth have been proposed (Schnabel 2004), but in the words of Henry Chadwick (1993: 56), "the practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success."³ Yet scholarly treatments of this charity typically do no more than analyze the exhortations of the church fathers or simply describe their charitable works (see, e.g., Uhlhorn 1883; von Harnack 1908). No robust rationale is provided for how such an extraordinarily powerful and effective charity could have been possible. Charitable behavior, like any other human behavior, is rarely, if ever, driven by teachings alone. My primary concern in this article is the "how" of the phenomenon of early Christian charity; my goal is to understand the aspects of the early Christian communities that may have helped to motivate and enable their charitable activities.

In determining the method to use in reaching this goal, I have taken my cue from the social scientific methods of understanding early Christian texts and their communities. These methods, which emphasize the important influence of local contexts on how a text or other phenomena are generated, maintained, and passed on, have flourished in scholarship on early Christianity since the landmark publication of Wayne Meeks's *The First Urban Christians* in 1983.⁴ Social scientific theories and methods, as well as their application, are diverse and have been used to study such texts as the Gospel of John (Meeks 1972), the economic dimensions of early Christianity (Friesen 2004; Meggitt 1998), and the politics of Christian existence in the Roman Empire (Horsley 2004). Psychosocial understandings of group identity have also been used to assess the relationship between early Christian communities and their texts (Esler 1987, 2003). Along similar lines, I posit that a social scientific method can help to explain the phenomenon of

¹ The term *early Christianity* in this article refers to Christianity before Constantine's conversion in 312 C.E., which serves as the boundary for this article's explorations. I chose this date because Constantine's imperial institutionalization of Christianity would probably have brought about drastic changes in the dynamics of Christian communities (e.g., changes from predominantly house church gatherings to increasingly grand cathedral-based gatherings) and the organization of their charitable activities.

² The fact that early Christian communities grew very rapidly throughout the empire in its first three centuries is uncontroversial. However, the precise trajectory of growth (e.g., consistent exponential growth versus erratic periods of rapid or steady growth) and concrete numbers are less certain. For at least one plausible thesis, see Stark (1996).

³ Similar sentiments have been voiced by other patristic scholars, such as Peter Brown (2002), Adolf von Harnack (1908), and Eckhard J. Schnabel (2004).

⁴ For a review of the rich body of scholarship that Meeks's book spawned, see Still and Horrell (2009).

early Christian charity. To be sure, this method does not exhaust all the possible factors driving the phenomenon. Still, the social scientific approach can, even if only in part, fill important gaps in our understanding of how the early Christians were able to sustain their noteworthy forms of charitable care for others.

Before one can explain the “how,” one must get a sense of the “what,” that is, what Christian charity was like or, more precisely, what it required of the Christian practitioner. After all, caring for someone in need by giving away all of one’s possessions is much harder to do, and therefore requires more (or at least a different) explanation, than caring for someone by donating a small sum from one’s surplus wealth. Therefore in this article, I will first argue that early Christian charity—broadly understood as acts of caring for someone in need—was extraordinary precisely in its sacrificial character and its significant scale.⁵ I will then describe and use social identity and self-categorization theories to argue that such charitable practices depended in crucial ways on early Christian group prototypes and norms, which derived their affective power from various factors that helped to set Christian communities apart from Roman society and that were shaped predominantly by leaders who embodied these factors in word and deed.

CHARACTER AND SCALE OF EARLY CHRISTIAN CHARITY

Henry Chadwick (1993) and other historians of the early Church plausibly argue that charity was a primary driver of the rapid expansion of early Christianity. Christian charity was extraordinary for the extent to which it set itself apart from the general acts of magnanimity practiced in the broader Roman world. Unlike the Greco-Roman philanthropists, the early Christians responded primarily to human need. Peter Brown (2002), for example, argues that Christians’ concern for the needs of people who were rendered vulnerable by poverty, illness, or other social causes was distinct from the Greek and Roman tradition of civic giving, in which the style of a charitable act conveyed a corresponding image to the beneficiary community. So a “great” giver was expected to give to a specific group that was “worthy” of his or her charity and not necessarily to a group in need. Similarly, patrician families often donated food and festivals primarily to gain popularity or loyalty from the lower classes rather than to meet their needs.

Significantly, in pagan philanthropy, “those living in comfort were praised and honored for contributing from their superfluous goods and wealth to benefit those of a lower economic class who were materially disadvantaged” (Bird 1982: 158). In contrast, early Christians scorned such forms of charity because they involved no genuine sacrifices on the part of the donor. In the Gospel of Luke, the

⁵ The goal here is not to provide an exhaustive survey of early Christian charity but to argue specifically for its radical character. For a comprehensive description of early Christian charitable activities, see von Harnack (1908) and Uhlhorn (1883).

poor widow who puts in two small copper coins is said to have “put in more than all of them [the rich]. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:1–4).⁶ Rather, early Christians went to great lengths—that is, made substantial sacrifices—to meet other people’s needs. The apologist Aristides, writing in the second century, reports that “if there is among them [Christians] any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food” (Aristides 1896: 277). Clement of Rome, sometime in the first century C.E., wrote: “We know that many among us have had themselves imprisoned, that they might ransom others. Many have sold themselves into slavery, and with the price received for themselves have fed others” (Clement of Rome 2004: 697). Even in the giving of alms, Christians probably went beyond the tithe that was instituted later, in perhaps the fourth century (Bird 1982). The transfer of resources from the rich to the poor was, after all, large enough to meet the basic needs of everyone in the community. Hence the author of the Book of Acts claimed that “there was not a needy person among them [Christians], for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:34–36).

The extent of the early Christians’ sacrificial care for the needs of others is perhaps best exemplified by their care for the sick during two great infectious disease epidemics that swept through the Roman Empire in 165 and 251 C.E. The first epidemic killed one quarter to one third of the empire’s population over its fifteen-year duration. The second epidemic was similarly devastating, killing 5,000 people a day in the city of Rome alone at its height (Stark 1996: 76-77). Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria at that time, reportedly described the epidemic as “more frightful than any disaster whatever,” according to the historian Eusebius (Eusebius 1966: 305), writing sometime around 320 C.E. The typical pagan response during the epidemic was to flee. The flight of Galen, a prominent physician, to his country estate in Asia Minor during the first epidemic was probably typical of what most pagans did if they had the means to do so (Stark 1996: 84). During the second epidemic too, bishop Dionysius observes: “At the first onset of the disease, they [pagans] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead.” In contrast, Dionysius notes that “[m]ost of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty. . . . Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease. . . . The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons,

⁶ All biblical quotations from are from the English Standard Version.

and laymen winning high commendation” (Eusebius 1966: 305-306).⁷ By caring for the sick at the risk of their own lives, Christians acted not only self-sacrificially, but also, in that respect, in a way that set their actions apart from the broader culture.

But how widespread were these sacrificial acts of meeting other people’s material or medical needs? After all, the various Christian communities were, in some ways, different from one another. Perhaps these acts were characteristic of just a community or two. Indeed, New Testament studies make much of the sectarian nature of early Christianity, in terms of both region and leadership (Pauline, Matthean, Johannine, etc.). However, recent scholarship has begun to question these dominant assumptions (Horrell 2009). There are compelling reasons to believe that Christian communities were not as sectarian as New Testament scholars have tended to assume. Richard Baukham argues, for example, that some influential early Christian documents, along with their central teachings (charity among them), were widely circulated among all Christians. He notes that while such documents as the Pauline epistles were directed at specific communities, the gospels were written for a much broader Christian audience. This wide circulation of documents was possible, Baukham claims (1998: 30), because “the early Christian movement was not a scattering of isolated, self-sufficient communities with little or no communication between them, but quite the opposite: a network of communities with constant, close communication among themselves.” Baukham reasons that the degrees of mobility and communication in the Roman world generally were very high. Well into the second century, many of the early church leaders moved around a lot; the Christian movement widely understood itself to be a worldwide movement; and letters were frequently sent from one church to another, establishing not only written communication, but also human connections via messengers. If Baukham is right, the exhortations to charity that are found throughout the gospels would have circulated widely among Christian communities, and the free movement of early Christian leaders would have facilitated the establishment of charity as an important aspect of Christian life. The importance of the Christian leadership in enabling sacrificial charitable practices among members will become clearer in the following section.

Extant sources strongly suggest that the early Christians’ charitable activities were significant in scale and visibility. One indication of scale is the sheer diversity of Christians’ efforts to care for others’ needs. To the hungry poor, for instance, Christian communities offered temporary relief through agape feasts, where all could eat and drink according to need, regardless of ability to contribute (Tertullian 1885). Toward the faithful and strangers alike, Christians practiced

⁷ As Rodney Stark (1996: 83) observes, Dionysius is unlikely to have fabricated the deaths of presbyters, deacons, and laymen in his pastoral letter, since his parishioners would have had firsthand knowledge of the epidemic.

hospitality; writing in the late first century, Clement of Rome (2004: 697) praises the Corinthian Christians for the “magnificent character” of their hospitality. In the early fourth century, Lactantius (1886: 177) observes that Christians provided proper burial for the dead, whether they were poor or strangers, because the Christians were not willing to “suffer the image and workmanship of God to lie exposed as a prey to beasts and birds.” Extant letters from people who were imprisoned expressing thanks for deeds done (Uhlhorn 1883) indicate that Christians obeyed the charge to “send to him [a prisoner] from your labour and your very sweat for his sustenance, and for a reward to the soldiers, that he may be eased and be taken care of” (Anonymous 1886: 437). Christians also paid significant attention to the needs of widows and orphans, who are mentioned as recipients of Christian aid in the apologies of Justin Martyr (1984) in the mid second century, Tertullian (1885) some fifty years later, and Aristides (1896) around 120–130 C.E. By 251 C.E., for example, the church in Rome was providing for the needs of 1500 widows and needy people (Chadwick 1993: 58). Book IV of the “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles” specifically urges bishops to care for widows as a husband would and to care for orphans as a parent would. In the name of charity, Christian brethren were asked to adopt orphans as their own sons (Anonymous 1886). A notable example of a beneficiary is Origen, who was taken in by a pious woman in Alexandria after his father’s martyrdom in 202 C.E. (Uhlhorn 1883: 185).

Another indication of the scale of Christian charity is the significance that the Christians themselves attached to it. Charity was important enough in the life of Christian communities to be consistently spotlighted by apologists. Christian charity is one of the first characteristics that Tertullian highlights in his *Apology*, in which he describes what Christian communities were actually like rather than what they were not like, which is his preoccupation in prior sections of the apology. Charity is similarly held up by Justin Martyr (1984: 56) when he notes, in his “First Apology,” that “we who once took most pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need.”

Given that pagans were frequently hostile to Christians, apologists perhaps would not have put so much emphasis on works that were impossible to observe in actuality. Visibility, then, is a final indication of scale. Christian charity drew considerable attention—and admiration at times—from pagan observers, especially as Christian communities grew in number and size. Even as early as the second century, Tertullian (1885: 46) observes, “But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See, they say, how they love one another . . . how they are ready even to die for one another.*” Christian charity probably grew in visibility along with the expansion of Christian communities, and by the time Christianity became an imperial religion, charity was firmly

established as a defining feature of Christian bishops, who were considered “lover[s] of the poor’ *par excellence*” (Brown 2002: 1). By 362 C.E., even Julian the Apostate lamented that “it is disgraceful that, when . . . the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us” (in Brown 2002: 2).

PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORIES OF HUMAN/SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

The early Christians did much more than merely donate from their surplus resources; they practiced self-sacrifice on a significant scale to meet the needs of others, and they did so within a broader culture that found it perfectly respectable to do otherwise. Also impressive is the fact that Christianity sustained its dedication to this kind of charity in the midst of rapid numerical growth. Despite the steady stream of new converts, many of whom were habituated into pagan, rather than Christian, attitudes toward the poor, Christian charity continued to impress, reaching a point in the fourth century at which Julian the Apostate directed paganism to emulate it. How did Christianity’s difficult brand of charity succeed? What were the factors that motivated and enabled Christians to meet others’ needs by making sacrifices in ways that ran counter to the prevailing culture? To the extent to which these acts of charity were human behaviors with parallels to other human behaviors, psychosocial theories that can accurately predict such behaviors have much explanatory value.

New Testament scholars debate intensely about whether and how social scientific theories should be applied to early Christian studies. Some criticize the use of modern social scientific theories and avoid their use altogether. Edwin Judge (1980), for instance, notes that modern social scientific theories are generated from observations of people living in a culture quite different from that of the first Christians. Imposing such theories onto an ancient and very different world runs the risk of anachronism. However, as Peter Esler (1987: 15) has argued, “It is impossible to collect facts without . . . already subscribing to a whole range of theoretical presuppositions.” In other words, it is naive to assume that one can collect data, free from the influence of some sort of model or theory. In this view, the use of theory makes explicit an otherwise unexamined set of presuppositions on which the scholar may be relying to give meaning to the various pieces of historical evidence. But there are differences even among scholars who incorporate social scientific theories into their studies of early Christianity. Scholars such as Meeks and Theissen, for example, have been criticized for their eclectic use of ideas derived from various scientific theories (Horrell 2009). Their approach, critics argue, is prone to being subject to the scholar’s preconceived ideological biases. As a corrective to such shortcomings, scholars such as Philip Esler and Bruce Malina have relied on robust social scientific theories that are

widely accepted within the social scientific communities to analyze the group dynamics and texts of the early Christians (Esler 2003; Horrell 2009).

This latter approach, then, is the one that I take in this article. To be sure, reliance on a robust set of social scientific theories means that the analysis is only as good as the soundness of those theories. But this approach helps to ensure an explanation of early Christian charity that is at least explicit about its presuppositions and is perhaps more scientifically valid than using an eclectic set of ideas. It better avoids the danger of imposing what an individual author, a priori, might think are the factors enabling sacrificial acts of charity.

Group Norms in the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Identity Theory

An influential theory in social psychology is the theory of planned behavior. Two decades of research (both theoretical and applied) have demonstrated its high explanatory and predictive power for a wide range of human behaviors (Terry, Hogg, and White 1999). The theory posits that behavior is best predicted by a person's intentions or willingness to perform that behavior (Rivis and Sheeran 2003; Terry and Hogg 1996). The factors that determine intentions are therefore the key to predicting behavior. These factors include attitude (a person's evaluation about the consequences of performing a certain behavior), perceived behavioral control (the degree of control the person believes that he or she has over the performance of the behavior), and subjective norm (a person's perception of the extent to which important others want him or her to perform the behavior) (Rivis and Sheeran 2003).

According to the theory of planned behavior, then, human intentions have a personal dimension whereby potential consequences and other people's expectations are actively weighed and interpreted by the acting subject. But it is crucial to observe here that a person's attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm each have a social dimension, without which they would be rendered meaningless. After all, how can one evaluate consequences without a social context in which one's action plays out; how can one evaluate one's ability to perform a given task without a social reference by which to judge how well others or oneself is performing or has performed an action; and how can one consider what others want without a social network of others? Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that a factor such as attitude ultimately will not even be expressed behaviorally unless a supportive social context is present (Rivis and Sheeran 2003).

In recent years, therefore, the theory of planned behavior has been crucially supplemented by social identity theory, which has helped to further elaborate on the central importance of social context in human behaviors. Social identity theory posits the importance of a person's self-identity (or self-concept) for whether or not, and to what extent, a community's norms of behavior shape the

person's intentions and therefore behavior. According to the theory, this self-concept is largely derived from one's membership in various social groups and categories. To the extent to which one's identification with a group's identity is a salient basis for one's self-concept, the group influences one's intentions and actions (Terry, Hogg, and White 1999). This means that the more closely a person identifies himself or herself with a social group, the more likely the person is to act in accordance with the group's norms.

These norms, generated and inculcated by the group, are the most prominent means by which the group instills its distinctive identity into individual members. These norms are "shared cognitive representations that . . . describe and prescribe the behavior of in-group members" (Hogg and Reid 2006: 10). It is in reference to these norms that members who wish to belong to the group and share its identity know how they should think, feel, and behave. Group norms are essential to narrowing down social and moral choices to those that accord with the group's sense of who and what it is. At this point, two related questions are relevant to understanding how early Christianity sustained extraordinary practices of charity among its members: How are group norms generated or determined, and how does a community become an integral part of its members' self-concepts so that its norms are translated into practice?

Generating and Identifying with Group Norms: Prototypes and Self-Categorization

Group norms arise from individual members' consensual and shared prototypes, which are "fuzzy sets, not checklists, of attributes (e.g., attitudes and behaviors)" that define the group's identity. The prototypes in turn are constructed and modified in a process known as self-categorization. In this process, an individual conceptually categorizes other people in terms of group prototypes. In so doing, one almost always involves oneself or references oneself, so the individual necessarily also categorizes himself or herself within the same categorization process (Hogg and Reid 2006: 10–11). Whether one is categorizing self or others, categorization crucially involves depersonalization, whereby the self and others are viewed not as unique individuals but as embodiments of group prototypes. In other words, the self and others are understood in terms of how well they embody the relevant group prototype.

Through this process, members can "transform a bewilderingly diverse social stimulus domain into a smaller set of distinct and clearly circumscribed categories." Individuals are able to gain a greater degree of clarity and control over a potentially chaotic diversity. During self-categorization, members of a particular community naturally seek to construe the in-group as a "coherent and distinct entity that is homogeneous and well structured, has clear boundaries, and whose

members share a common fate” (Hogg and Reid 2006: 10). As members construct and modify their group’s prototypes through intergroup and intragroup comparisons, they seek to accentuate the differences between groups and the similarities within the group while favoring the in-group over the out-group (Terry and Hogg 1996).

Self-categorization is also a group process; prototypes and the norms that they generate are both explicitly and implicitly negotiated and shared by the group’s members. Definitions of social identity can be quite fluid as members relate their social norms to their social relations and social realities. Consensus within the group can fail when a disagreement involves fundamental norms that threaten the very nature of the group,⁸ but by and large, as Haslam and colleagues (1999) have argued, members expect to agree with other members and actively strive to reach such agreements. Such consensus is critical to the process by which proto-types are generated. It is through consensus that the various members’ perceived prototypes become shared beliefs that are validated and come to represent a common, as-if-objective view (Hardin and Higgins 1996; Haslam et al. 1998; Moscovici 1984).

Given the negotiated and dynamic nature of the way in which prototypes and norms are generated, leaders and other central members have a disproportionately greater influence in determining prototypical or normative behavior within the group. Individuals tend to infer their prototypes of the group most directly from what other people say and do, and members almost always look to leaders and central group members for the most reliable source of relevant information. But it is a particular kind of leader or member that is looked to; such leaders are trusted for normative information to the extent to which they tend to identify more strongly with the group and tend to behave in more group-oriented and group-serving ways than others do (Hogg and Reid 2006). As Haslam (2001: 66) states,

one important way in which self categorization theory conceptualizes the leader (the group member who is likely to exercise most influence in any given instance) is as the *ingroup prototype*. As the (most) prototypical group member the leader best epitomizes (in the dual sense of both defining and being defined by) the social category of which he or she is a member. This means that to be seen as displaying leadership in a given context a person needs to be maximally representative of the shared social identity and consensual position of the group.

This categorization process, then, enables members of a given community to generate an “emotional and value significance to self of group membership” (Hogg and Reid 2006: 9), that is, a feeling of belonging and group identification.

⁸ For a case example and analysis of a schism understood in terms of group identity, see Sani and Reicher (2000).

Moreover, the process transforms how the person feels and behaves to conform to the group prototype. In other words, “Self-categorization causes our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behavior to conform to our prototype of the in-group” (Hogg and Reid 2006: 11). Indeed, the more closely a person identifies himself or herself with a social group, the more the person internalizes the group’s norms, and the more likely it is that the person will be to act in accordance with the group’s norms.

CHARITY AS A GROUP PROTOTYPE

In light of the above discussion, my thesis in this article is that the extraordinary charity displayed in practice by the early Christians was a result, in part, of the prototypicality of charity in their community. In support of this thesis, I will argue that early Christianity was highly salient to its members’ self-conception. According to the theory of planned behavior and social identity and self-categorization theory, such group salience would have been essential to translating group norms into actual behavior. It was within this reality that the extraordinary type of charity that was observed in practice was understood as a prototypical group norm by prototypical Christian leaders.

Self-Categorization of Early Christians

The degree of a community’s salience to the member’s self-concept or identity is a function of a self-categorization process by which the person constructs and understands the group prototypes. Because the process requires categorizing in-group and out-group prototypes and creating clear boundaries between them, a community that has relatively clearer and more distinct prototypes is likely to be more salient to its member’s self-concepts. The greater the salience, of course, the more likely it is that the community’s norms will shape the member’s behavior. Evidence of early Christians’ distinctive in-group vocabulary, morality, and marginalized state of existence gives some indications that Christian communities did draw very clear boundaries between themselves and other out-groups.

Early Christians used language as a powerful means of drawing boundaries around the in-group. They referred to one another using language that was emotion filled and that fostered a sense of family. When members were welcomed into the Christian community, they were said to be baptized “into one body” in whom divisions between social categories, such as male and female, slave and free, and rich and poor, were relativized. Adoption as God’s child, and the accompanying status of brother or sister in God’s family, gave the new member a new primary identity. Once initiated, members referred to fellow Christians in familial and emotive terms, use of which appears to have been widespread in

Christian communities. For instance, fellow Christians in New Testament letters are referred to as *children of God*, *children of apostles*, *brothers and sisters*, and *beloveds*. In the opening address of 1 Thessalonians, God is invoked as the “father,” and the addressees are referred to as “brothers loved by God” (1 Thessalonians 1:3–4). The short passage is also infused with familial affection and with speech about love, affliction, joy, and remembrance. While pagan groups might have used emotive and familial language at times, the Christians’ use of such terms was notable for its frequency and emotional intensity (Meeks 1983: 86).

The repetitive use of such terms within the group would have played a significant role in fostering in members a sense of cohesive identification with the group, particularly given the contrasting language that was used to refer to non-Christians. At times, pagans were neutrally referred to as *outsiders* or broadly as *the world*. But at other times, negative terms, such as “unrighteous” (1 Corinthians 6:1, 9), “those despised in the church” (1 Corinthians 6:4), or “those who do not know God” (Galatians 4:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:8), were used to draw clear distinctions from in-group members. Such sharp boundaries as these would have greatly aided the process of a Christian’s self-categorization toward greater identification with the Christian community. Not only were the two groups different, but members of one group were family, and members of the other group were unrighteous outsiders.

Christian communities were also likely to induce strong self-categorizations with their distinctive morality. I have already shown that Christian charity went against the cultural norm in, among other things, its sacrificial character. The contrast that Dionysius (in Eusebius 1966: 305–306) draws between the response of the pagans, as mentioned above (“At the first onset of the disease, they [pagans] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead”) and the response of Christians (“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty”), is quite telling. Such distinctions around moral conduct extended to other realms as well, such as the idea that God loves people and cares about how they treat one another. Some classical philosophers had taught that mercy and pity were pathological emotions to be avoided by rational individuals. They taught that because mercy entailed help that the recipient had not earned, it was contrary to justice. Christians differed from pagans on other social issues as well. For instance, the early Christian subculture offered women a notably higher social status than the broader pagan society did. Furthermore, Christianity prohibited infanticide in a culture that condoned its wide use. Seneca, a first century Roman philosopher and statesman, thought that drowning unwanted babies was reasonable and commonplace, and Tacitus, a first century senator, argued that teachings against killing unwanted children were “sinister and revolting” (Stark 1996: 118). When it came to sexual ethics, Christianity upheld strict standards within a broader society in which

uninhibited sexual practices prevailed. Clement of Rome's sharply biting exhortation in the late first century perhaps reflects the prevalence of opposite practices in the wider society: "Seeing then that we are the portion of the Holy One [i.e., unlike the pagans], let us do all the things that pertain to holiness, forsaking slander, disgusting and impure embraces, drunkenness and rioting and detestable lusts, abominable adultery, detestable pride" (Clement of Rome 2004: 706).

Another reason to believe that Christian prototypes were understood in deep distinction from others is the fact that Christians were a persecuted community for much of Christianity's first three centuries. Pre-Constantine Christians endured several waves of persecutions of various duration, geographic prevalence, and intensity. The first notable persecution was under Nero in 54–68 C.E., who blamed Christians for a fire that destroyed much of Rome. In this relatively localized persecution, Christians were "made a mockery" as they were "covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire—so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night," according to the contemporary historian Tacitus (2002: 85). Other persecutions followed, but in 250 C.E., Emperor Decius ordered the first empire-wide systematic persecution of Christians by requiring that everyone possess a certificate proving that he or she had sacrificed to the gods (Chadwick 1993). The resulting number of apostates was immense. Christians then survived other more minor periods of persecution before Constantine's conversion.

In response to the broader society's hostility toward them, Christians generally intensified their in-group fellowship and solidarity (Schnabel 2004). This is precisely how the Apostle Paul exhorted Christians to respond: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:12–16). Moreover, Paul framed the experiences of hostility and danger as a normative Christian experience. Paul frequently tied Christian afflictions to the image of Christ's suffering and death (Meeks 1983: 96) and encouraged his readers to imitate Christ's endurance: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). According to self-categorization theory, as Christians experienced hostility as an in-group norm, their conceptual in-group boundaries would have solidified further, hence strengthened their identification with the group's norms.

Charity as a Prototypical Norm Embodied by Christian Leaders

Given this social reality of a distinctive "us" and "them," the psychosocial theories discussed above suggest that Christianity must have enjoyed a high degree of

group salience relative to its members' self-concepts, and its norms must have powerfully influenced its members' behaviors. Among the group norms that the early Christians put into practice was an extraordinarily sacrificial charity. This type of charity as will be shown, not only was embodied by prototypical Christian leaders but, just as important, was specifically understood as a prototypical norm, that is, a norm that was essential to group identity and well-being.

As was noted above, self-categorization theory identifies leaders and other central members as those who epitomize group prototypes in the sense that they both shape and are shaped by group prototypes and norms. The early Christian leaders who exhorted the norm of charity were already central members of their communities. Some leaders, such as Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, or Cyprian of Carthage, were the bishops of their congregations. Others, such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, were participants and keen observers of their communities. Still others, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, were theologians who were involved in interpreting the scriptures for their communities. Moreover, the leaders often affirmed and borrowed the authority of the apostles and Christ (Giordani 1977; Wogaman 1993), the ultimate prototypes of Christianity. Polycarp (1885: 34), for instance, writing around 110–140 C.E., references 1 Timothy and Ephesians in his condemnation of materialism: “‘But the love of money is the root of all evils.’ Knowing, therefore, that ‘as we brought nothing into the world, so we can carry nothing out,’ let us arm ourselves with the armour of righteousness.” The embodiment of sacrificial charity, in speech and action, by these prototypical Christian leaders would have been crucial to sustaining it as a group norm.

The early Church leaders clearly reflected and, in turn, shaped a norm of sacrificial charity in their exhortations. The authors of the gospels, for example, tied sacrificial denial and charity to discipleship, so these behaviors were understood as requisites to becoming prototypical members of Jesus' community. According to the author of Mark, Jesus said, “if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. . . . For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:34–36). In Luke, Jesus rhetorically asks what one gains by loving, doing good, or lending in return to those who do the same. Even sinners do the same to one another. Instead, Jesus reportedly said to “love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. . . . Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:32–36). Later church leaders exhorted a similar ethic of sacrifice. For example, Book V of the “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” written around 375–380 C.E., asks the faithful to fast if necessary to set aside food for their imprisoned brothers and sisters and to visit and harbor persecuted Christians regardless of the dangers involved (Anonymous 1886; Uhlhorn 1883).

Christian leaders embodied and shaped charity as a norm through their actions as well. The New Testament is replete with implicit and explicit references to the poverty of the disciples (Bird 1982). Several apostles, such as Matthew, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, left their occupations and inheritance at Jesus' invitation to follow him (Matthew 4:18–22, 9:9). Later influential disciples, whom Gerd Theissen (1978: 8) called “wandering charismatics,” were similarly characterized by homelessness, lack of family, and lack of possessions. Various church leaders in the first three centuries of Christianity were also noted for their sacrifices. Cyprian of Carthage, for example, gave away all of his property and “distinguished himself by his social concern and his charitable activities, especially during the plague that devastated his city” (Phan 1984: 85). Indeed, to the extent to which sacrificial charity was a group norm, any leaders who lived in luxury would have been behaving in a way that was contrary to Christian norms and would have deeply undermined their own status as Christian leaders. (Recall that leaders not only shape the group, but must also be shaped by the group.)

Sacrificial charity, however, was not simply exhorted as a task to be done, as though from a list of chores. Rather, Christian leaders understood and presented sacrificial charity as a norm that was at the heart of what it meant to be a Christian and to be identified as a Christian. For example, in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, an influential work among Christians in the second and third centuries, charity is explicitly tied to a fundamental Christian self-understanding as “set apart.” The author argues that Christians do not belong in this world as the pagans do and that Christians are and should be fundamentally different from the world. Therefore Christians are to “be careful” while they “live in a foreign land, not to acquire anything more than an adequate sufficiency.” Christians are instead to build up treasures in their true eternal home in the following ways: “Look after widows and orphans and do not neglect them. Spend your wealth and all your possessions you have received from the Lord on this kind of fields and houses. It is for this purpose that the Master has made you wealthy, to perform this ministry for him.” This, the author concludes, is the Christian’s “luxury. . . . Do not live in the luxury of the pagans; it is of no use to you, servants of God” (Anonymous 1984b: 52–53). Thus sacrificial charity was understood to be a fundamental expression of Christians’ very identity as God’s set-apart people.

Moreover, the early Christian leaders conceived sacrificial charity as being beneficial to both the giver and the community, and they saw lack of charity as the real danger. If instead their teachings had been viewed as self-destructive, social identity theory would suggest that their exhortations to charity might have been a source of schism in the group. The church leaders, then, emphasized the mortal pitfalls of misusing wealth on one hand while proclaiming the benefits of its proper use on the other. They did not see wealth itself as evil; rather, what was evil was the almost inevitable misuse of wealth (Giordani 1977). Some leaders,

such as Clement of Alexandria, saw misuse as less inevitable than others did, but even he was keenly aware of its dangers (Clement of Alexandria 1984).

More specifically, wealth was considered too great a temptation to idolatry. Polycarp (1885: 35), in his letter to the Philippians, written in the early to mid second century, argues that “if a man does not keep himself from covetousness, he shall be defiled by idolatry, and shall be judged as one of the heathen.” Polycarp thus reflected the thinking of Jesus as reported in the Gospels: “No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24; see also Luke 16:13). Charity, then, was the antidote; if done in the spirit of service to God, it would help to neutralize the dangers of idolatry. In *The Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, the use of money is subservient to God’s will: “from the fruit of your labors, which is God’s gift to you, give to all those in need without distinction. . . . Give to all, since it is God’s will that we give to all from his bounties” (Anonymous 1984b: 52). Clement of Alexandria likewise asks his readers to “[i]magine a man who holds his possessions, his gold, silver and houses, as the gifts of God; who serves the God who gave them by using them for the welfare of mankind; who knows that he possesses them more for the sake of his brethren than his own . . .; and who, should he be deprived of them, is able to bear their removal as cheerfully as their abundance” (Clement of Alexandria 1984: 76). Such a person, Clement concludes, “is the one whom the Lord calls ‘blessed’ and ‘poor in spirit.’”

The church fathers were also keenly aware that wealth could too easily become a source of division, not unity. So Clement of Alexandria (1885: 280) carefully articulates the fundamental sameness of the rich and the poor: “Take away, then, directly the ornaments from women, and domestics from masters, and you will find masters in no respect different from bought slaves in step, or look, or voice, so like are they to their slaves.” If anything, Clement reverses the normal hierarchy of the rich and poor: “But they differ in that they [the rich] are feebler than their slaves, and have a more sickly upbringing” (Clement of Alexandria 1885: 280). Charity, then, if done in the right spirit of unity, could overcome the dangers of division in the group. The *Didache*, a widely disseminated ancient guide for the early church, exhorted a uniting charity with a view toward eternity: “share all your possessions with your brother, and call nothing your own. If you and he share what is immortal in common, how much more should you share what is mortal!” (Anonymous 1984a: 44). Clement of Rome similarly alludes to unity in God through giving: “So in our case let the whole body be saved in Christ Jesus. . . . Let the rich support the poor; and let the poor give thanks to God, because he has given him someone through whom his needs may be met” (Clement of Rome 2004: 708).

CONCLUSION

I began this article by noting the success of Christian charity in terms of its impact on the rapid growth of early Christian communities. What can modern Christians learn from the extraordinary nature of early Christians' efforts to meet other people's needs? On one hand, Christian communities and their members today are quite different from their counterparts almost two millennia ago; there is a large divide in terms of time, social context, values, ideas, and culture. On the other hand, Christians from every historical period have shared much, including their humanity, and they have the same capacity for charity, which requires a basic set of intention-shaping factors to help actualize. In light of such similarities and differences, any lesson from the early Christians would need to be learned, adapted, and applied with some caution and much care. Significant discussion is still needed.

In the hopes of starting such a discussion, I have provided in this article a sense of the extent and extraordinarily sacrificial character of early Christian efforts to meet the needs of others and then employed psychosocial theories to provide a scientific explanation for how such charity might have been possible. I have argued that Christian communities were a significant, if not dominating, component of their members' self-concepts. Their strong in-group/out-group categorization, as indicated by their distinctive language, morality, and persecuted existence, supports such an interpretation. Crucially, within such a reality, sacrificial charity was a prototypical group norm that was both embodied (exhorted and practiced) by prototypical Christian leaders and justified as an identity-defining and group-affirming norm. According to the modern psychosocial theories considered here, these factors would have been a powerful enabler of the extraordinary charitable practices of the early Christians.

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