

Can Christianity give a Positive Value to Wealth?

An Engagement with the Early Church Fathers

Peter S Heslam
Transforming Business
Cambridge University
www.transformingbusiness.net

© Peter Heslam 2009. All rights reserved

Jesus talked a lot about wealth but most of his sayings make uncomfortable reading for the rich. Chief amongst these are the words he spoke to the rich man in Mark 10:17-29 (and parallels), which are traditionally taken to provide Jesus' most explicit teaching on the right attitude to wealth. Here, not only is the rich man required to sell his possessions and give to the poor in order to receive eternal life, but the rich who try to enter the kingdom are likened to a camel trying to climb through the eye of a needle. In the light of such teaching it has seemed to many Christian teachers over the centuries very unlikely indeed that Christianity could give a positive value to wealth. This article will, however, seek to discuss the question of the value of wealth, in the teachings of the Church Fathers, as it is their teaching that laid the foundation for the church's attitudes (both positive and negative) to business right up until the present time. If it is part of the church's duty to engage with the realities of the contemporary socio-economic situation, particularly at the level of institutions, it is of crucial importance that it gains perspective on its own inherited attitudes through an understanding of their origins.

For the Fathers of the church, the question of the right handling of wealth was one of the most important issues faced by church of their day, and this is reflected in the amount of attention they pay to it in their extant writings. Despite this, it is an area that has received comparatively little attention in patristic study, and is one in which a great deal of research still needs to be done.¹ The fact that in recent decades the problem of poverty and the growing gap, as many see it, between rich and poor has become a global concern of unprecedented proportions means that there is probably no time in history in which study and reflection in this area is more pressing than at present.²

¹ Far more attention has been paid to aspects of dogmatic or speculative theology. See, however, Martin Hengel's short but important work *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 1974). For a more recent study, see Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper and Row: 1990). González provides an interesting discussion of the reasons for the comparative lack of interest in this area (pp. 230-34).

² Growing disparity between rich and poor is considered by many economists to be a feature within Western states, not just between developed and developing countries. They are generally agreed that relative poverty has been increasing in Britain since 1979.

A number of relevant works will be referred to in this article, but some selected texts by Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Chrysostom and Ambrose will provide the starting-point for the ideas that will be discussed. These texts provide the richest sources for analysis, but they are all homilies, rather than theoretical treatments, and are addressed to specific congregations in specific circumstances.³ This partly accounts for the fact that this area of teaching is shot through with tensions and apparent contradictions between positive and negative strands.

Negative teaching

There are four chief elements to the strand in the teaching of the Fathers that is severely negative about the value of private wealth.⁴ First is the ultimately evil origin of wealth. Irenaeus, Jerome, Chrysostom and Ambrose all agree that the beginning and root of wealth is to be found in some form of injustice, either on the part of the wealthy person themselves or on the part of the person or people from whom their wealth is gained or inherited.⁵ Chrysostom in particular added a measure of theological justification to his arguments, insisting that wealth is evil because God, who is the ultimate owner of everything, has created all material goods to be held in common. To claim sole possession of any part of it, therefore, is to be guilty of theft, both against God and against other human beings. Basil the Great is no less explicit, calling 'robbers' those who make their own those things they have received to distribute, and those who are able but unwilling to clothe the naked.⁶ Thus emerges a line of teaching which may be considered an antecedent to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's famous dictum: 'property is theft'.⁷

³ A thorough and detailed understanding of these works necessitates, therefore, that careful attention is paid to their historical, geographic and social context. Although much work has been done on the social circumstances of the patristic period (see, for instance, the two excellent studies by Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London: Penguin, 1988), and by Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: A.D. 150-750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971)), the relation between the teachings of the Fathers and their immediate social environment is in particular need of further exploration. See Ramsey MacMullen, 'The Preacher's Audience (AD 350-400)', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol 40 (1989), pp. 503-511.

⁴ The existence of this strand in the teaching of the Fathers is not always fully acknowledged by scholars of late antiquity. See, for example, W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), pp. 570-571; G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 433-434. Patristic teaching on the value of wealth is primarily concerned with wealth held by individuals, rather than by larger groups of people. This is significant to any attempt to apply the teaching of the Fathers to modern socio-economic policy.

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.30.1; Jerome, *Letters* 120.1; Chrysostom, Homily 12 on 1 Timothy (*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), vol 13 (1979), pp. 444-448), Homily on the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (*De Lazaro Concio*, 2,4, *Patrologia Graeca (PG)* 48:987-88). In this latter homily, Chrysostom argues forcefully that the rich are in possession of the property of the poor. See also Ambrose, *De Nabuthe*, 11, *Patrologia Latina (PL)* 14:747; Martin McGuire, *S. Ambrosii De Nabuthe Jezraelita: A Commentary with an Introduction and Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1927), p. 53. Augustine also expressed such views. See his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 88, 2, *PL* 37: 1134; Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1983), p. 113.

⁶ *Homilia in illud Lucae*, PG 31: 276-7; John A. Ryan, *Alleged Socialism of the Church Fathers* (Saint Louis: Herder, 1913), p. 9.

⁷ Proudhon first formulated this statement in his *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* of 1840.

A second element is the outright condemnation of usury.⁸ Usury is regarded, particularly by the Cappodocian Fathers, as a sin against nature. Not only did it involve a logical absurdity - gold begetting gold - but it was a means of profiteering out of the needs of the poor.⁹ The poor are often regarded, thirdly, as being more favoured by God than the rich. Great intercessory powers are accorded to them, such that the rich who are generous to them would be saved by the beneficiaries' appeals to God on their behalf. Largely because of this, the rich have far more to receive from the poor than *visa versa*.¹⁰ Related to the idea of God's special favour to the poor is the notion, fourthly, that Christ is identified with them.¹¹ This notion is developed in the works of some Fathers, notably in the West, in terms of the concept of the poor Christ, a theme that was later often repeated in medieval mystical writings.¹²

The evil origins of private wealth, the sinfulness of usury, God's special favour towards the poor, and the notion of the poor Christ are the chief elements in the Fathers' negative attitude towards wealth. Other related but secondary themes are also prevalent, such as the inability of the rich to contain their avarice, and the desirability of holding 'all things in common' (the *panta koina* of Acts 4:32).¹³ Taken together, these themes reveal that the teaching of the Church Fathers in the first four centuries provides a remarkable witness to a radical stance on wealth that many have taken as a faithful reflection of the radical thrust of Jesus' teachings.

⁸ See, for instance, Ambrose's commentary on the Book of Tobit, which is in fact a treaty against usury. In it Ambrose speaks of children being sold at auction to pay off their father's debts, and of usurers refusing burial to their debtors. *De Tobia (Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum (CSEL), 32/2, 519-573)* 8.29-30; 10.36-37. Recalling Deuteronomy 23:20-21, Ambrose is prepared to make an exception in the case of lending to an enemy (*De Tobia*, 14.51).

⁹ This teaching derives from Aristotle (*Politics*, 1.10). The Fathers' condemnation of usury, at least when practised between Christians, is so often repeated that earning money through the charging of interest was undoubtedly a common form of income. This is confirmed by the fact that usury was permitted by Roman Law, providing it did not exceed a certain fixed rate. See Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 71-115.

¹⁰ The interdependence of the poor and the rich is graphically portrayed in the second century *The Shepherd of Hermas*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans/T&T Clark, 1986). A detailed and important study of this work is C. Osiek, *Rich and Poor in the Shepherd of Hermas: An Exegetical-Social Investigation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983).

¹¹ Chrysostom, for instance, reflects on Mt 25:31-46: 'Because he is a poor man, feed him; because Christ is fed, feed him'. Later, he says, 'Do you wish to pay homage to Christ's body? Then do not neglect him when he is naked. At the same time that you honour him here with hangings made of silk, do not ignore him outside when he perishes from cold and nakedness'. *Homilies* 48.9 and 50.4 on Matthew, *NPNF*, vol 10 (1983), pp. 301-302, 313.

¹² See Jerome's *Letter*, 125/20, *PL* 22.1085. The notion of Christ the pauper can also be found in Augustine, who tells his congregation 'how great is the merit for having fed the hungry Christ, and how great is the crime of having scorned the hungry Christ' (*Sermon* 60.11.11; cf 14.9).

¹³ Ernst Troeltsch famously described the picture of the early church given in Acts 4:32-35 as one of 'love communism'. See his *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols, (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), I, 63. There is no suggestion in the Fathers that the sense of *koinōnia* was to be restricted to the religious communities; it was meant to be characteristic of the church as a whole.

Positive teaching

The idea that private wealth is wicked at its very source may appear to rule out the possibility that the Fathers could entertain any positive appreciation of wealth. However, although the Fathers occasionally preached sermons espousing a return to the primordial condition of perfect commonality they held to have existed, they also taught that the possession of private goods was legitimate providing these goods were properly used. In the same sermon, for instance, in which Chrysostom declares that the root of all wealth lies in injustice of some sort, he also declares that wealth is not evil in itself, so long as the rich do not hoard it for themselves, but share it with the poor.¹⁴ This line is developed in particular by Clement of Alexandria, who stresses the importance of the right attitude of the rich towards their wealth. Commenting on the story of the rich man in Mark 10 Clement declared that Jesus' words were about the dangers, not the inherent evil of wealth, and were to be taken spiritually rather than literally.¹⁵ Jesus was concerned not lest his followers own wealth but lest they be preoccupied with it. He could not possibly have intended that the rich renounce their possessions, for, if they did, they would not be able to continue their giving to the poor. Riches could not, therefore, be considered good or bad in themselves, but only as dangerous because of their propensity to incite sin, such as avarice and lack of charity. Through conversion of the heart and detachment from material things these dangers could be overcome.¹⁶

Clement's positive teachings, along with those of Ambrose and Chrysostom, turned on the understanding that material possessions were legitimate as long as they were used to further the common good. This proper use of wealth was generally referred amongst the Fathers in terms of almsgiving.¹⁷ It is particularly important that this concept is properly understood, as it is vital to the argument of this article, as will become clear later. From the sense that all material possessions are commonly owned, and that the possession of private wealth by a few is therefore theft against the poor, emerged the idea that when the rich give to the poor this is a matter of just

¹⁴ Homily 12 on 1 Timothy. Ambrose expresses a similarly moderate line regarding the value of property: 'Not all poverty is holy nor are all riches criminal. But as luxurious living corrupts wealth, so holy living commends poverty' (*Expositio evangelii secundum Lucan* 8.13, cf 8.5, *CSEL*). For Ambrose the crime is not in possessing worldly goods but in their selfish misuse. In one of his letters he writes: 'wealth is redemption if one uses it well; it is a snare if one does not know how to use it' (*Letters* 2, 11 (*PL* 16.881)).

¹⁵ *Quis dives salvetur?* Translated as *Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), Vol. 2 (1986), pp. 591ff. This work is the earliest extant exposition of a scriptural passage from the period of the early church. Amongst Christians it became the classic justification for the ownership of private property. It may be noted, however, that the same gospel passage inspired Anthony of Egypt to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. See Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, translated by Robert T. Meyer (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950), pp. 1-11.

¹⁶ See especially sections 11-16 of *Quis dives*. Similar arguments are expressed by Augustine in *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 131.5, and by Cyprian of Carthage in *On Good Works and Almsgiving*, 13.

¹⁷ A large number of sermons and treatises devoted to this practice have survived from Christian antiquity, beginning with Cyprian's *On Good Works and Almsgiving* from the middle of the third century. Besides arguing that wealth has its *raison d'être* in helping the poor, they also declare that the poor themselves are obliged to give alms to those who need them, if not in the form of money, then in some other way. Jerome writes that even poverty must not prevent a person from at least giving a cup of cold water to someone who asks for it (*Comm in Matt.*10.42). Augustine provides what is perhaps the most extensive list of possible almsdeeds in his *Enchiridion* (19.72, *PL* 40.266).

redistribution rather than of charity.¹⁸ It is simply rendering the poor their due, a matter of obligation rather than of bounty or charity.¹⁹ There were, however, benefits to the giver. Indeed, with prayer and fasting it was regarded as one of the three great acts of religion to obtain forgiveness of sin.²⁰

It is clear, in conclusion, that the Fathers' vigorous attack on private property was often tempered by criticism not so much of its existence as of attachment to it, its excessive accumulation in the hands of the rich, and the refusal to meet the demands of justice by sharing it with those in need. Although they denounce the love of money, luxurious living, and the lack of a sense of moral obligation towards the poor, they do not advocate the kind of compulsory communal sharing which might be expected of them if their negative teachings are considered on their own.²¹ They emphasize the dangers of wealth but maintain a sense of its basic goodness.

Evaluation

In evaluating the patristic teachings an attempt will be made to show that a Christian attitude to wealth must maintain, in keeping with the Fathers, both negative and positive elements, despite the untidiness and ambiguities this creates. Space does not allow for more than five brief points to be made.

Firstly, the positive teachings of the Fathers invite a fresh examination of the teachings and example of Jesus. Are the gospels only negative about wealth or do they contain positive elements as well? Jesus' encounter with the rich man is, in fact, the only recorded instance in which he told someone to give away everything they had [Nigel Harris: there is also Lk 12:33, though it doesn't say 'all' possessions]. It also seems that Joseph of Arimathea continued to be wealthy after he had become one of Jesus' disciples (Mt 27:57) and the same is likely to be true of Nicodemus. During his ministry, Jesus was supported by wealthy women (Lk 8:1-3), and he announced that salvation had come to Zaccheus when the latter promised to give only half of his possessions to the poor (not all of them, as was required of the rich man) and repay those he had cheated (Lk 19:1-10). Jesus appears in some passages not to have disapproved of saving and even investing money (Mt 25: 14-28; Mk 7: 9-12), and of enjoying the material benefits of wealth - he ate with the rich and privileged (Lk 11:37), went to a lavish wedding (John 2:1-11), and helped to make it yet more lavish. He was even accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (Mt 11:19). Following his conversation with the rich man, moreover, Jesus declares that with

¹⁸ See, for instance, Ambrose's *De Nabuthe*, 11, *PL* 14:747.

¹⁹ Ambrose addresses the rich in his *De Nabuthe* with these words: 'You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his' (12.53). Similarly Augustine wrote that 'the superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor', and that therefore 'whatever you have in excess is not your own property' (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 66.3).

²⁰ Boniface Ramsey, 'Almsgiving in the Latin Church', *Theological Studies* 43 (1982), 226-259. It is no doubt because of the spiritual benefits that were thought to come to the giver, and not only because of the material benefits would be gained by the recipient, that the theme of almsgiving appears so frequently in the writings of the Fathers.

²¹ This conclusion is an important corrective against the tendency in some writings on the Fathers to regard them somewhat uncritically as providing a basis for Marxist teachings. See Avila, pp. xi-xxi, and John A. Ryan, *Alleged Socialism of the Church Fathers* (Saint Louis: Herder, 1913).

God it *is* possible for the rich to be saved (Mk 10: 27). It would seem, therefore, that the tensions and contradictions in the teachings of the Fathers are a true reflection of the diversity of the Gospel witness to Jesus.

This does not deny, secondly, that the Fathers should be commended for making an honest attempt to reckon with the hard sayings of Jesus. Whilst the view, characteristic of Clement, which emphasizes inner disposition, is a reasonable interpretation of Jesus' teaching, given its diversity, it has to be acknowledged that it is not what Jesus appears to have meant in the story of the rich man. There are no grounds for thinking that Jesus did not mean what he said when he instructed the rich man to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Indeed, if Jesus' teachings are considered as a whole, there would seem to be a closer connection between poverty of spirit and material poverty than Clement is willing to concede. The loss of this connection has the danger of blunting the sharp edge of much of the New Testament perspective on wealth, and of encouraging complacency. This may well account in part for the fact that, despite the Church's formidable reputation in the fourth century for the relief of poverty, it was never able to completely recapture the spirit of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, as described in Acts.²² Any attempt to provide a positive Christian attitude to wealth must take the radical thrust of Jesus' teaching fully into account, without seeking to change the original meaning of uncomfortable passages.

Thirdly, because of the negative strands in the teachings of the Gospels (and in much of the rest of the New Testament), the radical teachings of the Fathers cannot be dismissed on the grounds that such teachings were propounded most vigorously by heretical groups, rather than by the Fathers.²³ As demonstrated above, radical elements were part of the teachings of orthodox Christian teachers. Moreover, the fact that certain emphases were characteristic of heretical teachers does not necessarily mean that they have to be rejected as unorthodox.²⁴ The negative teachings cannot, also, be rejected or relativized on the basis of their inconsistency with positive elements, or on the basis of their often dubious theological foundations.²⁵ Rather, they must be recovered and maintained as teachings that reflect the radical sayings of Jesus. Although they exist in tension with positive elements, this tension is not to be resolved, but preserved and

²² The level of the Church's charitable interests is reflected in the fact that by early 360's the pagan emperor Julian asserted that concern for the poor was a decisive element in Christianity's success in gaining converts, and he urged pagan priests to imitate their Christian counterparts in providing for the needy. Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (London: Collins, 1978), p. 125.

²³ There are signs of such dismissal in Boniface Ramsey's analysis. See his *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 191. The heretic Pelagius insisted, for instance, that the rich could not enter heaven unless they renounced their wealth (*De Divitiis* VIII.2.3).

²⁴ Since Walter Baur's important work on early Christianity in the 1930's, there has been much scholarly debate as to how helpful the categories 'heretical' and 'orthodox' are to the academic study of Christian thought and history. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 1972); Maurice Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1976), pp. 28-27, 180-193.

²⁵ Ramsey is again wrong to suggest, in the context of pointing out that the Fathers were not always consistent, that they made radical statements regarding the problem of poverty from which they later had to withdraw. See *Beginning*, pp. 195-196; cf 185-186. Ramsey has since made the same mistake, in an essay in which he dismisses the radical teachings of the Fathers as 'a few inconsistent statements by men like Ambrose and Chrysostom'. See his 'Christian Attitudes to Poverty and Wealth' in Ian Hazlett, *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp. 256-265 (p. 261).

celebrated, despite the difficulties it creates, as a dynamic and challenging force. Paradoxes and ambiguities, so characteristic of the Christian faith, cannot be eliminated through appeals to consistency.²⁶ Although, as has been shown, the Fathers sometimes espoused a rejection of private wealth in favour of holding things in common, and yet at other times held that such wealth was legitimate as long as it was properly used, does not negate or reduce the validity of either claim. They can and should be held in tension with each other. The fact that the radical teachings often rest on the suspect theological foundation of an idealized innocent paradisaical state in which all things were held in common is also insufficient reason to reject them entirely.²⁷ There is no need to agree with the Fathers' theological rationale to recognize that their teachings contain vital principles, born out of a desire to apply the teachings of scripture to the social circumstances of their day. In their Christian instruction, romantic longing and nostalgia were turned into sharp denunciation and practical teaching. The purpose of loosening people's minds from thoughts of the inalienable right of private property to things held in common was not to evoke a mythical world prior to the existence of property, but to encourage those who had possessions in the present order to share with those who did not. This does not excuse flawed theology, but it does mean that positions derived from such theology should not be rejected out of hand, without due consideration of their intention within a particular context, as they may contain valuable insights that are worth preserving.²⁸

Fourthly, a proper understanding of the value of wealth may gain from the Fathers a keener awareness of the origins of wealth, and the possibility that these lie in some form of injustice. This injustice, which may or may not involve the exploitation of the poor, is not necessarily on the part of the person who owns wealth, but on the part of those individuals from whom his or her wealth is derived. In contemporary society such individuals and their actions cannot be easily identified. A great deal of current wealth is generated through complicated economic processes, which means that it is often impossible to trace its origins at the level of human relationships, where injustices may be incurred. Nevertheless, the teaching of the Fathers are able to alert us to the possibility of economic exploitation in the form of 'structural injustice', and to encourage the asking of searching moral questions about the origins of both private and corporate wealth. Failure to do this is to court the possibility of giving positive value to something the very existence of which relies on some form of injustice, as in the case of an exploitative gold mine owner in South Africa who regards his profits as a sign of God's blessing.

Fifthly, and finally, a positive valuing of wealth from a Christian perspective needs to recover, from the teachings of the Church Fathers, a far more radical notion of almsgiving than has often been propounded in Christian teaching. For the Fathers, as shown above, giving to the

²⁶ Wiles writes, 'Good theology does not try to eliminate...paradox or incoherence.' Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*. The Hulsean Lectures 1973 (London: SCM, 1973), pp. 108-10 (p. 108). See also Ronald H. Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism* (London: SCM, 1991), *passim*. The concept of ambiguity is a typically Niebuhrian term. It springs from an understanding of human nature as at once made in God's image and fallen. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (London: Nisbet, 1945), pp. v-vii.

²⁷ This idea reflects Greek and Roman philosophy and mythology concerning a golden age, a primal childhood of the human race. It can be found in Stoic teaching and is present in Ovid and Virgil, Strabo, Seneca and others. The Church Fathers of the fourth century generally had a classical education and were steeped in the thought of the Graeco-Roman world.

²⁸ A recent example of this approach may be found in the Vatican's attempt to correct alleged errors in liberation theology in the *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* (*Libertatis Nuntius*) of 1984.

poor is not only a matter of charity, but of justice, and therefore of obligation. The radical nature of this teaching is highlighted by the fact that, at the time of the Fathers, Roman law regarded ownership as a human right without emphasizing its social obligations.²⁹ Since this notion is both radical in its appeal to the rich and 'moderate' in its recognition of the value of wealth, it represents a prime example of what can result from the attempt to hold positive and negative attitudes towards wealth in the kind of untidy but creative tension suggested in the previous point above. A great advantage of this notion, together with the related idea that the rich have more to receive from the poor than the poor from the rich (at least in spiritual terms), is that it guards against any patronizing or paternalistic attitude that may accompany charitable giving. Ramsey might be right to point out that in the face of the injustices that the leaders of the Church of the fourth and fifth centuries in particular speak and write eloquently about, few offered solutions more radical than almsgiving.³⁰ But it has to be emphasized that their view of almsgiving, with its stress on justice, went much further than mere 'charity' or 'mercy', even though these were terms that were often applied to it.³¹

Conclusion

The teaching of the Fathers confirm, in agreement with certain aspects of the life and teaching of the Jesus of the Gospels, that Christianity can give a positive value to wealth. Its radical elements are evidence, however, that it can do only on a number of conditions. Firstly, it has to be recognized that the possession of wealth carries with it intrinsic moral obligations towards society. In contemporary Western society this challenges ideas of the absolute rights of property which, having their antecedents in Roman law, grew in popularity in the seventeenth century and still permeate much Christian thinking. In the spirit of the Fathers, the prevailing sense of ownership needs to be challenged and transformed through the notion that human beings are regarded as responsible for sharing. A second condition is that human beings are regarded as the stewards, rather than the owners of God's creation, and that the objects within their charge have been created for the common good, rather than for individual interest. Thirdly, it must be acknowledged that not only the rich but the poor have dignity, and that because of Christ's identification with them, they are specially favoured. Fourthly, those who possess wealth are not to be preoccupied with it, or accumulate it to 'excessive' levels, but are to recognize the dangers that are involved in possessing it, seek detachment from it, and fulfil their obligation to share it with others. The results of such a positive attitude, on certain conditions, will not only be for the material benefit of the poor but the moral or spiritual benefit of the rich.

Such a conclusion may seem simplistic and overly optimistic to the contemporary mind that has become alert to the vast scale and complexities of the problem of the global disparity between affluence and deprivation. The collapse of communism in Europe only reinforces the fact that a recovery of radical modes of thought will no more be able to

²⁹ Grant, pp. 96-123.

³⁰ Ramsey, 'Christian Attitudes', p. 259. See also Frennd, p. 749.

³¹ The idea that giving to the poor is merely giving them what is their due challenges the New Right in contemporary British politics, some of whom maintain that helping the needy is always an act of voluntary charity - there is no obligation to do so. See John Atherton, 'The Limits of the Market', in *Christianity and Conservatism: Are Christianity and Conservatism Compatible?* With a Preface by Margaret Thatcher, ed. by Michael Alison and David L. Edwards (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), pp. 263-84.

produce a utopia today than they were in the period of the early church. The structure of the societies in which the Church Fathers lived were, indeed, comparatively simple, and this is reflected in the solutions they offer to the question of wealth and poverty, which are largely confined to the individual or personal level. It is true, therefore, that no attempt should be made to apply their teachings uncritically to the contemporary situation. Nevertheless, they do contain dynamic principles, which, when held together in tension with each other, are able to exert a creative and transforming force both in the area of thought and of practice.

Dr Peter S Heslam
Transforming Business
University of Cambridge
www.transformingbusiness.net