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**DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this is my own and personal work, except where the word(s) or publications of others have been acknowledged by means of accepted reference techniques.

Name: [Christian Medom Jensen]

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Date: 09.01.2019
The Heart of Early Christian Identity

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1. Introduction

The first time I meet a description of the moral life and praxis of early Christians, I was immediately absorbed in it and flattered by the love and caring Christians showed towards others and within their community in the early years.¹ This inspiration has been the starting point for my work with this topic, and the purpose of this research project is to investigate how this moral standard was a part of the identity of the early Christians.

Early Christian formation and identity has been a popular field of research the past century, partly because of the relevant question of Christianity’s rapid growth. How Christianity became the dominant religious movement in the western world in a few centuries is still an interesting and important question.² The question is interesting because it tells us something about the mentality of both early Christian communities and their contemporary society, and it is an important issue when we address the question of the mission of the Church in a modern western society. However, I here focus on a certain angle of this question. The moral and ethical angle; or how Christians treated one another and their neighbours.

Within this specific perspective on early Christian identity lies the investigation of the interpretation of the Greek word *diakonia*. John N. Collins has, through his studies of *diakonia*, argued that a modern Northern European interpretation of the word is wrong due to the original. Through his research, Collins has accentuated the continuing relevance of this issue. If north-Europeans (myself included) have misinterpreted *diakonia*, have they then misunderstood the identity of early Christians?

On this note follows my research question.

2. Research Question

How did charity become a central part of the early Christian identity, and what role did *diakonia* play in the early church? What are the apostle Paul’s teachings on charity and ethics of morality in this

¹ I recognize that some of the descriptions seems to contain exaggerations (i.e. the descriptions by the church fathers). Nevertheless, I believe these could have rhetorical explanations and, therefore, I do not think it necessarily mars the picture the church fathers were trying to paint.

² Many scholars before me have asked this question, but this formulation is inspired by Rodney Stark’s thoughts in *Rise of Christianity*. I use the word ‘Christianity’, though I am aware of the anachronistic pitfalls tied to it. Rodney Stark does the same, while Josef Lössl prefers to use the phrase ‘the early church’: Josef Lössl, *The Early Church: History and Memory* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 13.
respect and how do they correspond with the writings of Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* and Tertullian in *Apologeticum*?\(^3\)\(^4\)

### 3. Methodology

Through the years, scholars have used different approaches to investigate the early Christian identity. I will use a comparative historical method to answer my research question.

To understand the identity of early Christians and explore potential differences, I focus on three persons who have had a great impact on early Christianity and whose testimonies are symptomatic of early Christian thinking. The apostle Paul, Justin Martyr and Tertullian all reflect the Christian movement over a period from the middle of the 1st century CE to the beginning of the 3rd century. They all write passionately about Christianity in their time, though with differently addressees, and they all write in the time before the turn of the Roman emperor Constantine in 313 CE. In this respect, they are comparable. I imply that it is possible to compare three Christian authors who lived and worked in different corners of the great empire.

I will compare Paul, Justin and Tertullian’s views on Christian charity and I will explain how they describe Christians of their time. Following this examination, I will summarize the similarities and differences between them and evaluate the development of early Christian identity.

Additionally, other methods will be touched upon when I report different perspectives on Christian identity. John N. Collins has used a linguistic approach in his investigation of *diakonia* and Rodney Stark combines his data with a social scientific method.

Having formulated how I will answer the research question, I now come to the outset of this rapport.

### 4. The World of The Early Church

Three areas of research are interesting when looking at early Christian charity. Firstly, we will look at the ministry of the early church. Did the church organise any *diakonia*, and what role did the deacon play? Secondly, the patron-client relationship was in many aspects the foundation of an unsecure welfare system in the Roman world. How did it help (if at all) and what social security was available

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3 A few words about my definition of charity are in order. Throughout this assignment, I will define charity as help in a practical manner. I understand “practical” not only in regard of almsgiving, but I will include other aspects as well (e.g. hospitality, nursing/caring, sharing through communion, social service, legal guidance etc.). I will further pay attention to literature in which charity is encouraged in some way (e.g. behind passages speaking about virtues or discipline, may be the encouragement to live a charitable life).

4 About biblical references: where no other scholar is referred to, I use the English Standard Version (ESV).
for a Roman citizen? Thirdly, epidemics was catastrophic in a world without essential medical resources. How did the early church handle epidemics, and how did ordinary people understand early Christian charity?

With this introduction as my point of departure, I now move on to describe the ministry of the early church.

4.1. Ministry in The Early Church

Discussions of how the church organised itself in the early years are still lively. Mark Edwards’ historical overview is therefore helpful in this matter. Generally recognised is the threefold ministry: bishops, priests and deacons. However, we know little about the functions of ecclesiastical ministers from the letters of Paul. Paul addresses in Philippians 1:1 their episkopoi (an overseer) and diakonoi (servitors). The same diakonoi-term is applied to Phoebe in Paul’s greetings in Rom 16:1. Presbuteroi is a third function we hear of in Acts (14:23; 15:23 and 21:18).

Joel C. Elowsky contributes with a similar account bringing further scriptural sources to the table. He argues that already in New Testament time, when the church became more established, some of the charismatic offices disappeared. Reading through some of the early church fathers, we find the same pattern. The question is: how are we to understand the ministry of deacons? What role did they play?

Joel C. Elowsky begins his description of the ministry of deacons with the account of Acts 6:1-7, where deacons are appointed to help “… the apostles from being distracted by the equivalent of ‘waiting on tables,’ so they could devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer that Christ had given to them.” Elowsky continues: “The deacons became the de facto social ministry people, but they also functioned liturgically, assisting with baptisms and also ensuring proper preparation of the elements used in the Eucharist.” In many ways, the deacons were the right hand of the bishop; they did not baptize or preside at the Eucharist, but they ensured “… that all things

8 Ibid., 298.
9 Ibid., 298–99.
were done decently and in order….”

Likewise, women were appointed as deaconesses not long after the men. This was especially important for the growth of the church among women.

Is Joel C. Elowsky right in his description? Perhaps not. John N. Collins, who has dedicated his life to a linguistic study of the Greek term *diakonia*, seems to come to another conclusion. Collins would disagree with Elowsky on whether the ministry of deacons was one of social service, which Elowsky indicates with his definition: “social ministry people.” Elowsky’s opinion is unclear here.

John N. Collins concludes that the office of deacons in the early church had nothing to do with social charity work. This definition, he argues, comes from a misunderstanding of the cognate word *diakonia* used by German-Lutheran theologians in the 19th century. *Diakonia*, instead, means to “go between”, to be “emissary by someone” or to be “commissioned by someone”, Collins argues. This interpretation is also found in his analysis of Acts 6:1-7. In Collins’ view, Acts 6:1-7 is “… more about Luke’s conception of a community with official structures than about how the community cared for its widows.” Collins emphasises that this is the first “church-made office” and the “… duty [Collins translation of *diakonia* in this context] … is a public function under someone’s direction already existing in the community…” Hence, a deacon, in Collins’ opinion, is someone who works as an agent or provides a service for a superior office. Collins discovers the same understanding in Rom 15,8, when Paul calls Jesus a deacon.

Oscar Skarsaune, who is known for his studies of the early church, support Collins’ position and has, in an article about church offices, written the following (my translation): “The deacon was the bishop’s assistant, messenger, secretary, intermediary (not the congregations, not the needy) […]. And it seems that it was the deacon’s relation to the bishop that gave the deacon his title…” (Skarsaune’s underlining). Thus, the deacon was the right hand of the bishop, his liturgical assistant and sometimes his substitute.

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10 Ibid., 299.
11 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 231.
17 Ibid., 227–28.
19 Ibid.
The same pattern can be recognised among early church fathers (Ignatius, Clement, Polycarp etc.) in Collins’ view.20 The following description is found in Didache: “Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord […], for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers.”21 Collins proposes that this description suggests that the deacons are the assistants of the “overseers.”22

We can see that Collins’ research has proved that a Northern European Lutheran context has misunderstood the function of a deacon due to its cognate word diakonia. Diakonia, when correctly interpreted, means to go between or to be sent by someone. A deacon would, in the beginning, have helped the bishop, maybe as a stepping stone in his career, but not as a social service worker. The bishop was responsible for the community’s caring for the needy, and in this respect the deacon would have served others, but it was not implied in his title.23

The church, therefore, did not have a specific office for charity work. However, this only answers what role the deacon played in the early Church. I will continue to investigate below how charity work was part of the common early Christian identity.

### 4.2. Early Christian Charity as an Identity Marker

Several passages from early Christian and non-Christian literature show how charity was part of early Christian thinking and life.24 In the following paragraphs are some contemporary examples that give an insight into early Christian literature:

The Didache:

“Give to everyone who asks you, and do not demand it back, for the Father wants something from his own gifts to be given to everyone. Blessed is the one who gives according to the command, for such a person is innocent.” (1:5)25

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20 Collins, Diakonia. Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources, 238–44.
22 Collins, Diakonia. Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources, 238.
24 As you may already have noted, I interpret the Greek word, diakonia, with ‘charity’ or ‘service’ or ‘help’. It should also be expressed that we know of significantly more Christian than non-Christian literature about the life of the early Church.
“Take, therefore, all the first fruits of the produce of the wine press and threshing floor, and of the cattle and sheep, and give these first fruits to the prophets […]. But if you have no prophet, give them to the poor.” (13:3-4)\(^{26}\)

The letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans

“[About bad teachers] They have no concern for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty.” (6:2)\(^{27}\)

The Epistle to Diognetus:

“[About the distinctiveness of Christians] They live in their own countries, but only as nonresidents; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives.” (5:5-7)\(^{28}\)

Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*:

“[About the Sunday gathering] … and the distribution and the partaking of the eucharistized elements is to each, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And those who prosper, and so wish, contribute what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the Ruler, who takes care of the orphans and widows, and those who on account of sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among us, and in a word (He) is the guardian of all those in need.” (*I Apol 67*)\(^{29}\)

Aristides:

“They do not overlook the widow, and they save the orphan. The one who has ministers ungrudgingly to the one who does not have […]. And if there is any that is a slave or a

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 365.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 255.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 703.
poor man, they fast two or three days and what they were going to set before themselves they send to them, considering themselves to give good cheer even as they were called to good cheer.” (Apol. 15.7)  

In addition, Eusebius, in his Church History, witness the account of bishop Cornelius, who famously is quoted with having said that the church supported more than fifteen hundred widows and people in need.  

However, how can we be sure that this was a distinct identity? Did ordinary Romans not help other people? In other words, was charity a new Christian invention or did it already exist? The quote from The Epistle to Diognetus before gives us an indication that early Christians behaved distinctively, but can we find non-Christian sources that paint the same picture?  

Rodney Stark, a sociologist in religion, has answered some of these questions in his book The Rise of Christianity. In the chapter “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion” he reveals how epidemics (and the depopulation and demoralization that followed because of it) probably helped Christianity to become as dominant as it did. Stark writes a quote from bishop Dionysius of Alexandria from around 260 CE, when the second great epidemic occurs. Dionysius writes about the local Christians and their caring and nursing effort:  

“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of 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, drawing on themselves the sickness of nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead…. The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

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31 Ibid., 105.
33 Ibid., 82.
“The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.”34

Stark argues that Christian values from the beginning had been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity.35 Because of this pattern, Christians were better able to cope with epidemics and, therefore, had a higher survival rate.36 As we discovered before, we need some non-Christian evidence for a stronger case. Stark agrees and gives us one. A century later, after Dionysius, the emperor Julian (Julian the Apostate) launched a campaign to institute pagan charities to match the Christians, Stark explains.37 He unfolds how Julian complains in a letter to the high priest of Galatia that the pagans needed to equal the qualities of Christians. Julian, who had turned away from Christianity himself, concludes that recent Christian growth was caused by their moral character.38 Julian, in another letter, describe how Galileans (Christians) observed the priests neglecting the poor and in benevolence devoted themselves to them. Julian also wrote, “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”39 Along with this literary evidence, the story listed below, written by Lucian from Samosata, is also relevant. Lastly, Stark summarizes that Julian’s testimony supports the claim that Christian level of benevolence was significantly higher than the level of pagan communities. Not only during epidemics, but also in times of relative prosperity, such as during Julian’s reign.40

Stark highlights another non-Christian source that helps us validate Dionysius’ account. In History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, a survivor of a deadly plague in Athens (431 CE), reports that people were afraid to visit one another because of the disease.41 Thucydides says, that “… they [the sick] died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of any attention […]. The bodies of the dying were heaped one

34 Ibid., 83.
35 Ibid., 74.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 83; See also, Bruce W. Longenecker, Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 63.
39 Ibid., 84.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 84–85.
on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets or flocking around the fountains in their desire for water." This description, though significantly later, has great similarities with the report of Dionysius. Stark also mentions the famous classical physician Galen who lived through the first epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Galen escaped the epidemic by fleeing to a country estate in Asia Minor. It was not seen as unusual or discreditable at the time. Rather, as Stark comments, “It was what any prudent person would have done, had they the means – unless, of cause, they were ‘Galileans’.”

One of the accusations Rodney Stark’s – and similar surveys – have been confronted with, is the lack of interest in contemporary Greek-Roman philosophy. It is argued that Stoicism and Cynicism contain the same virtues as held by Christians. Runar M. Thorsteinsson does just that. He has compared the moral teachings of Stoicism and Christianity, and he argues that the main difference is that, in Christianity, the virtue of love is not applicable for outsiders, whereas stoicism teaches a universal humanity. Thorsteinsson’s contribution – and others alike – is not without relevance. Generally speaking, Christians were not ethically superior. However, I do believe that Thorsteinsson forgets common known church history in his considerations. For instance, Marcus Aurelius (161-80 CE), Roman Emperor and well known as a Stoic philosopher, did not hesitate persecuting Christians – even intensifying it – under his reign. Since my task is not to engage in a specific scholarly discussion, I will not comment any further on the matter. This appetizer is only meant to give the reader an indication of the complex, vivid and varied field of research.

Continuing investigating the difference between Christian and pagan practice: why are pagan and Christian practices different according to Rodney Stark?

Stark argues that the difference is found in the issue of doctrine. It was not new to Roman society that the supernatural makes behavioural demands upon humans. Instead, “[w]hat was new was the notion that more than self-interested exchange relations were possible between humans and the supernatural. […] alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another.”

42 Ibid., 85.
43 Ibid., 86.
Now, the canon of the New Testament was still not closed in 1st through 3rd century; anyway, it is this doctrine that is the norm of the New Testament (e.g. Matt 25:35-40). What characterises early Christians, in Starks own words, is their “…linking of a highly social ethical code with religion. […] It was not that Romans knew nothing of charity, but that it was not based on service to the gods.” In addition, Christians believed in a god who provided an escape from mortality – a life beyond death.

Due to this examination, early Christian identity seems closely linked with charity, almsgiving and benevolence. Moving forward, we discover another possible difference in moral practise between Christians and pagans.

4.3. The Moral World of The First Christians

In terms of understanding early Christian charity, a description of the Roman society, or more precisely, the social-economic world of early Christianity, is appropriate. If we understand the moral world of the early church, we understand the radical perspective of Christian charity. An evaluation of Christian and pagan lifestyles will help us see how Christian identity was distinct from other contemporary traditions. I will focus on the system of patronage, the Greco-Roman attitude towards wealth and the social system in general. It is my theses that the early church broke with the patronage system in terms of its ethic of reciprocity.

The Roman society was characterised by a social hierarchy. People were graduated due to their formal orders; a social pyramid based on power, privilege and prestige. People identified themselves and others by their social locations. Wayne Meeks exemplifies this by showing how people would put inscriptions on their tombstone with details about their status – also people of lower rank. In this social setting, honour and shame dictated people’s lives. Meeks gives the example of Acts 16,37, where Paul identify himself as a Roman citizen and reacts against the dishonour he had been treated with. Helen Rhee continues: “These orders were further reflected in a conceptual

48 Ibid., 86–87.
49 Ibid., 86–88.
50 Ibid., 88.
51 Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 6; Wayne Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians (London: SPCK, 1987), 32–35. Both authors makes clear that our sources are primaraly from the elite.
52 Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians, 32.
53 Ibid., 32–33.
distinction (by the elite) between *honestiores* (the honourable) and the *humiliores* (the humble)…”

The *honestiores* title belonged to the elite (1-3 percent of the population) while the *humiliores* title belonged to the “rest” (97-99 percent). Further fundamental distinctions were made between free and slave, and between citizen and non-citizen. Helen Rhee clarifies: “Both distinctions indicated again a legal status, not necessarily economic or social status […]; free citizens could be rich or poor, just as slaves could be rich or poor.”

Regarding financial distribution, Rhee states that 85-90 percent of the population would have access to 50 percent of all income.

Social mobility was not impossible, but it was very much in the hands of others. In this case, the patronage system becomes significant. Embedded in the Roman economy and the social structural hierarchy was the system of patronage. The patron-client relationship is determined as a “… social relationship between individuals based on a strong element of inequality and difference in power which permit the exchange of different and very unequal resources.”

Though, as David A. deSilva points out, patronage also occurred between social equals.

Patron-client relations were a form of fictive kinship, Philip F. Esler explains. Helen Rhee further clarifies that the patron, the social superior, provided his client, the dependent, with protection and economic and political benefits. The client would in return support and show loyalty towards the patron for enhancing the patron’s honour and status.

Why is this knowledge important in the research of early Christian charity? The patronage system is here explained because of the ethic of reciprocity. The question is: did the early Christians act with the same ethic of reciprocity? Helen Rhee describe how the recipients’ needs were not considered favourable factors in the distribution. Rhee continues: “The poor received gifts only indirectly. When they were included in the distribution, it was not because they were poor but because they were simply part of and participated in the civic community; the poor were never singled out for any special treatment…”

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55 Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 7.
56 Ibid., 7–8.
57 Ibid., 8. For a more thorough description of the socially system see the table 1 at page 9-10.
58 Ibid., 10.
63 Ibid., 19.
something you receive proportionally to your status and not your need. The ethic of reciprocity did, therefore, not favour your needs, but your position.

Did early Christians follow the same line of thinking? An example indicates the opposite: the Syrian-Greek writer Lucian from Samosata, a satirist, indirectly gives us an account of early Christian charity through his story about the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus Proteus.

Peregrinus joined various religious communities to expose their stupidity, and he became a great man among the Christians, because of the group’s naivety. Because of a local persecution, he ended up in prison, where he, with irony, described how widows and orphans from the congregation brought him food and clothes while the leading men visited him, comforting him and helping with legal assistance. The peculiar part of this story is that Lucian, unwittingly, describes Christian charity, as it was.

Due to this example, it would seem that Christian charity changed the ethic of reciprocity. Yet, contrary to this, Philip F. Esler portrays, how Christians continued to operate within the ancient framework of patronage after Christianity became a legitimate religion. The bishop would act as a patron towards the Christian community in matters of church buildings, Esler explains. Rhee also clarifies how relatively wealthy hosts or hostesses acted as patrons of the Christian group that met in their household. This was particularly noticeable at the important agapê meal, where “…the invited recipients in the dinner were expected to pray for the wealthier hosts for their spiritual blessings in return.” It is, therefore, difficult to define in what direction the early church evolved through the first three centuries; how much Christianity was influenced by Roman praxis (probably to a large degree) and whether or not it differed from location to location.

As textual evidence has shown, charity was a part of early Christian identity. But were Christian good deeds for free (gratia) and therefore distinct from the common ethic of reciprocity, or did early Christians expect something in return for their good actions? Some of the viewpoints already presented seems to go in both directions.

David A. deSilva’s research about grace in early Roman society has revealed that it was virtuous if one offered his “gifts” without motives. At the same time the “…recipient was ‘to feel

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64 Ibid.
67 Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 103–4.
68 Ibid., 110–11.
indebted for more than the amount’ [received] […]; the giver should forget that the gift was given, the recipient should always remember that the gift was received…”69 This “double set of rules”, as deSilva explains, existed in Roman society. Whether early Christians responded to this set of rules or they changed it, we have already been able to unfold a little, but do my preliminary theses stand?

Yes and no! As described by Philip F. Esler and Helen Rhee, patronage and its ethic of reciprocity continued to some extent within the early Christian community (at least it looks like it). On the other hand, Rhee demonstrates that Christian doctrine (as Rodney Stark suggested) changed the understanding of reciprocity. As we have seen, many examples prove that early Christians had a completely different understanding of justice and mercy. Helen Rhee offers an explanation with the early fourth century apologist, Lactantius, who differentiates between a civil utilitarian understanding of justice and a “natural” Christian (or God’s) justice.70 Since everyone has an equal standing before God, in his uniform rule, it must be true justice. Hence, Lactantius can say that there is no distinction between Christians: “There is no distinction between Christians because Christians measure everything spiritually and not physically.”71 Rhee emphasises Lactantius’ remarkable translation or projection of spiritual equality into social equality.72 She puts it this way: “Among Christians, social distinctions ‘disappear’ and do not constitute injustice or inequality because of spiritual equality, whereas social distinctions among Greeks and Romans testify to their gross injustice and inequality because of the absence of spiritual equality due to their polytheism (paganism).”73 In this way, Rhee argues that Lactantius breaks with the deeply seated Greco-Roman custom of reciprocity and patronage.74 People act in terms of their self-interest; charity would have targeted those who were “suitable” i.e., those who could repay and return the favour.75 Lactantius criticises Cicero for having this viewpoint. In contrast, Lactantius unfolds how Christian generosity and charity should be directed to “the unsuitable” as far as possible, “because a deed done with justice, piety and humanity is a deed you do without expectation of return.”76 In Christian reciprocity, in terms of Lactantius, a return for one’s favour comes not from the recipient, but from the ultimate provider and judge, God himself.77

69 deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity, 117.
70 Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 135.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 136.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 137.
“Give to the blind, the sick, the lame and the destitute: if you don’t, they die. Men may have no use for them, but God has: he keeps them alive, gives them breath and honours them with light. Cherish them as much as you can, and sustain their souls with humanity so that they do not die. Anyone who can help a dying man but doesn’t is his murderer. (6.11.18-19)”

Lactantius

Interestingly, Lactantius’ words and ethic of reciprocity mirrors Jesus’ words in Luke 14,12-14. Thus, we can recapitulate that early Christians were remembered by non-Christians as people acting with benevolence and charity towards others. What made Christian charity spectacularly different were the religious motivations behind it. The ethic of reciprocity did change with Christian practise. Along with this (as we saw), patronage, to some extent, would have existed in Christian communities, and other philological schools (like Stoicism and Cynicism) would have taught some of the same virtues as early Christians held.

I now continue to analyse Pauline statements in order to find out whether Paul taught early Christian communities charity or not. Subsequently, I will compare Paul’s understanding with the understanding of Tertullian and Justin Martyr.

5. The Apostle Paul and Charity

In order to analyse Paul, I will focus on various (social) aspects of his writings and try to conclude what emphasis he put on charity – or rephrased as a question: does Paul have a theology of the needy?

Bruce W. Longenecker has, in his book Remember the Poor; Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman world, argued that the practice of caring for the poor was “…embedded in the Jewish scriptures and traditions and (therefore) in the proclamation and practices of Jesus…” Longenecker claims, that “… lines of connection can be drawn from the scriptures and traditions of Judaism, to Jesus, to the Jesus movement based in Jerusalem, and on to the proto-orthodox churches…” Since Paul played a significant role in the spreading of Christianity and therefore the historical chain mentioned above, I will try to identify Pauline statements that could indicate that his teachings were in line with Jewish tradition and the Jesus-movement on this matter. On the other hand, as

78 Ibid., 136.
79 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 135.
80 Ibid.
Longenecker puts it: “If concern for the poor was central to Jesus’ mission, and if Paul did not share that central concern, claims about Paul having extended the mission of Jesus look optimistically thin.” nach Nevertheless, our main concern is not the relationship between Jesus and Paul, but instead the identification of Paul’s theology in terms of early Christian/church identity.

5.1. Paul’s Theology of The Needy

When looking at the Pauline letters (here the letters which are undisputed), we identify a significant number of examples.

5.1.1. 1 Thess 5:12-22

In 1 Thess 5:12-22, Paul gives his last admonitions before closing the letter in 1 Thess 5:23-28. Among other things, Paul exhorts the community in Thessaloniki to “…admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help[ing] the weak, be patient with them all.” (1 Thess 5:14). Here the term “weak” probably refers to those who were economically vulnerable. Longenecker argues that “weak” has a wide semantic domain in Paul and that it can contain this economic dimension. For illustration, 1 Cor 1:26-29 show how Paul let “what is weak in the world” stand in contrast with “the strong” things. In this context, Paul compares “the strong” with those who are wise, powerful and well-bred. Another reference indicates that Paul can use ἄσθενή in an economic setting. In 1 Cor 9:22, Paul explains how he has become “weak” to win the “weak.” By this, he refers to his own self-imposed economic vulnerability mentioned in 1 Cor 9:12, 15-18.

5.1.2. 2 Cor 8-9

In 2 Cor 8-9 Paul discusses the collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. From Gal 2,10, it looks like Paul accepted responsibility for “the poor.” The reason for their poverty in Jerusalem is unknown to us. However, Paul offers to help. It looks like a noble act of charity and compassion, but Ralph P. Martin argues that Paul might have used it as an opportunity to demonstrate the unity of the two wings of the church, both Jewish and Gentile (on behalf of the text in 2 Corinthians and

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81 Ibid., 137.
82 To narrow down my analysis of Paul, I only look at his undisputed letters.
83 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 143.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
Romans). In Martin’s view, Paul did this in order to “…cement relations – often strained – between the two cultural groups and win over the Jewish Christians to the full acceptance of the validity of his own mission.” D. J. Downs argues in a similar way and highlights Paul’s use of κοινωνία, "fellowship,” in connection with the offering (2 Cor 8:4, 23; 9:3, 13; Rom 15:26; cf. Gal 2:9) as an argument of Paul’s ecumenical purpose.

Another theory, raised by S. Joubert, suggest that the collection “…should be interpreted in light of the framework of reciprocal relationships of benefit exchange in ancient Mediterranean societies.” Joubert interprets the Jerusalem church’s recognition of Paul’s “Law-free gospel” (cf. Gal 2:1-10) as a benefaction offered to Paul, which, according to the system of reciprocity, would make Paul and Barnabas obligated to “remember the poor” (cf. Gal 2:10). Conversely, Downs argues that Joubert’s position does not fit with the rest of Pauline theology. On the same note, and contrary to Joubert, J. R. Harrison claims that Paul never accepts, but even critiques and transforms the Hellenistic reciprocity system and, therefore, the values of Greco-Roman patronage. Harrison argues this because of Paul’s use of the concept of χάρις, “grace, gift.”

Paul’s motives are the subject of our particular interest when we look into his theology of the needy. Yet, our primary purpose is to see what Paul teaches. I will here highlight three important points from 2 Cor 8-9.

Paul, presumably, was motivated by a desire to help the poor among the saints in Jerusalem, which at the time probably had been exposed to periodic famines in the late 40s CE. First, one notices the rich amount of theological terms related to the collection Paul uses (cf. 9:10, 13). Especially his repeated use of χάρις (“grace/gift”) – the word occurs ten times in 8:1-9:15 – is likely meant to put the collection into a larger frame of generosity towards God’s gifts in general.

As Ivor Jones notes (quoted by Horrells): “…both chapters [2 Cor 8-9] show Paul’s deep concern

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87 Ibid., 419; See also: David G. Horrell, Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul’s Ethics (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 234.
88 Ibid., 424.
89 Ibid., 425.
90 Ibid., 426.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 426.
93 Ibid.
94 I will not be able to comment on the discussion of the inter-relational perspective of the two chapters. Instead see: Ibid., 429–32.
95 Horrell, Solidarity and Difference, 235.
96 Ibid., 236; See also: Capes, Reeves, and Richards, Rediscovering Paul, 165–66.
that the Collection for the Saints should not only be an act of charity but an act overflowing in praise to God.”

Secondly, 2 Cor 8:9 represent Paul’s key motivation: Christ being the example of a model for generous giving. By establishing a connection between the collection and the Christ event, Paul combines a material and spiritual way of thinking to motivate the Corinthian Christians in their participation. Hence, Paul wants to stress the important virtues of self-giving and humbleness by making Christ a moral paradigm.

Thirdly, Paul ends his treatment of the Jerusalem-collection with some exhortations (9:6-15) and the phrase καὶ εἰς πάντας (9:13) is of special interest here. Is Paul asking the Corinthians to broaden the frame of reference to include “all” (others)? Longenecker is convinced; Paul wants to include all others and generosity is an on-going practice in the corporate life of Jesus-groups. Martin more careful concludes that, since we do not have any clear examples of generosity towards others, “…we must take the phrase to be a general one in praise of the generous spirit that moves the readers and would move them wherever there may be need.” Longenecker refers to another Pauline passage – Gal 6:10 (“let us do good to everyone”) – as an argument for Pauls ethical universalism. Douglas J. Moo interprets, along with Longenecker, Gal 6:10, as a statement to include “unbelievers.” It can, therefore, be argued, that Paul taught his communities to extent the charity work already existing within the communities to other groups as well (see also 1 Thess 5:15). However, we hear very little about generosity and charity extended to others in Paul’s letters, and a general suspicion against the theory of ethical universalism comes from the fact that most of Paul’s exhortations are context-based within the Christian community (e.g. 1 Cor 14:24-25).

5.1.3. Rom 12:9-21 and 1 Cor 11:17-34

Two more Pauline passages are particularly relevant when exploring Pauls theology of the needy. In Rom 12, Paul has moved from dealing with the salvation of Israel (Rom 9-11) to focusing on life in the church. Paul begins his exhortations in Rom 12:9-21 with the heading ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνωπόκριτος (“let

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97 Horrell, Solidarity and Difference, 236.
98 Ibid, 237.
99 Ibid., 237–38.
100 Self-giving = Giving of one’s own volition. Borrowed by Horrell. Ibid., 238.
101 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 141.
102 Martin, 2 Corinthians, 475.
103 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 141–42.
love be sincere”). Almighty plays a significant role in Paul’s ethic (cf. Rom 13:8-10; 1 Cor 13). It was not a common word in contemporary secular literature, but James D. G. Dunn downplays the significance of its use in the New Testament. However, Dunn emphasises that “…the subsequent use of ἀγάπη by Christians for their common meal (“love feast” […] underscores the Christians’ own consciousness of its distinctiveness...". The virtue of love was, in this respect, put into some kind of practise within the early Christian community as we see in 1 Cor 11:20-22, which I examine below.

Paul encourages the Roman Jesus-followers to “contribute to the needs of the saints” (Rom 12:13). Longenecker argues, that “needs” here means material needs. Dunn agrees and explains that Paul’s use of κοινωνία probably refers to material or financial help. Because of the same phrase, Dunn suggests that Paul probably had the Jerusalem-collection in mind (cf. Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4). Conversely, Longenecker, with reference to Douglas J. Moo, maintains that Paul did not necessarily think of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, Paul takes the liberty to instruct a community he had not even met to help those in need without distinguishing between believers and unbelievers.

That Paul clearly distinguishes between insiders and outsiders in 12:9-21 is, however, irrefutable. The instructions given by Paul revolve around two poles, Stuhlmacher claims, “...the love for one’s neighbour which is to be exercised above all within the church, and the love for one’s enemy which is to be exercised outwardly toward those who are not Christians.” Stuhlmacher is probably right in his presumption that the early (house) churches would not have been able to exist for centuries without this twofold attitude.

Love is the centre around which Paul’s ethic orbits, as already mentioned above, and this is particularly evident in the case of the Love Feast in 1 Cor 11:17-34. Here, it becomes clear that the early church was not a homogeneous group. Socio-economic issues among those partaking in the ἀγάπη meal are revealed by Paul (1 Cor 11:21); they do not seem to have a corporate identity and,

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107 Dunn, Romans 9-16, 739.
108 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 144.
109 Dunn, Romans 9-16, 743.
110 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 144–45.
112 Ibid.
consequently, this is exposed at the table, meaning that some are starving while others have plenty.\textsuperscript{114} The problem for Paul here is that the Corinthian Christians ends up offending God by their ruthless behaviour and, therefore, expose themselves to his judgement (11:31), and Paul explains the consequences of this abuse; that many among them “are weak and ill, and some have died” (11:30).

To counter the Corinthians’ behaviour and their disregard of the needy, Paul reintroduces the narrative of the self-giving Jesus (11:23-26), and by this, Paul reminds them of Jesus’ command, “do this in remembrance of me” (11:24-25).\textsuperscript{115} Meaning that the community meal should be a place where people support one another and voluntarily give their resources. This conduct is important for Paul to reintroduce because of the purpose of the meal; to proclaim, “the Lord’s death until he comes.” (11:26). Longenecker concludes from Paul’s reference that caring for the poor was something Paul expected to identify a Jesus-follower, because this behaviour lay at the heart of the story of Jesus.\textsuperscript{116}

5.2. Paul’s Theology in Review

Where does this analysis put Paul, and where does it ultimately put us? When going through some of Paul’s letters, a pattern definitely occurs. As we have seen, a number of passages bear witness to Paul’s thoughts and teachings regarding the needs of those less fortunate. However, as Longenecker proposes, this aspect of Paul’s theology is only rarely compared with the life and teachings of Jesus, showing that it is seen as less important (at least among scholars).\textsuperscript{117} It is likewise disputable that Paul actually has a particular theology of the needy, when we counterbalance his statements against the rest of his writings, and when we compare his emphasis on the poor with that of Jesus.\textsuperscript{118} Paul’s theology of the needy should probably also be viewed in the larger context of Paul’s teachings on the body of Christ, as Longenecker suggest.\textsuperscript{119}

On the other hand, Paul convincingly, in his ἀγάπη-ethic and reference to Christ as a role model, demonstrates that self-giving and generosity (charity) are supposed to be the core identity of Jesus-followers. Paul’s emphasis on community (body-of-Christ-theology) actually intensifies his point. In this respect, Longenecker concludes: “For Paul, the poor were not simply to be ‘remembered’ by tossing the odd coin to them on the streets […] [or] simply to keep the poor at arm’s

\textsuperscript{114} Longenecker, \textit{Remember the Poor}, 153.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 154–55.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 135–36.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 136–37.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 281.
length through charitable gestures. Instead, to the extent that such was possible, the poor were to be welcomed into the very heart of those communities of fellowship and ‘gifted’ as contributing members within it." It was, Longenecker continues, a way to incarnate the new heavenly kingdom established by Jesus within the Greek-Roman society. “It seems, then, that Paul imagined initiatives for the poor within their communities to be incarnations of a divine order that was invading the very structures of the not-yet-restored world,” as Longenecker assess. Longenecker may, in my opinion, be reading too much into Paul here.

The obvious question is, then, whether Paul’s theology of the needy was meant for only those inside the early Christian community?

In short, it is most likely that Paul’s social concern was primarily practised intra-communally within Jesus-groups. The resources of the early Christian community would have been limited, and it is hard to imagine an extended support practised outside the community with only few supplies (e.g. this seems to be Paul’s concern when he talks about the widows in 1 Tim 5:3-16). Similarly, Runar M. Thorsteinsson argues that Paul’s concept of ἀγάπη is only meant as an in-group term, because Paul does not use ἀγάπη when he addresses the “outsiders” in Rom 12:14-21. Thorsteinsson therefore questions Paul’s love being universal.

However, different passages reveal that Paul did think about those outside the Christian community when addressing his social ethics (e.g. Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 5:14-15). The practise of caring for the needy within the Jesus-communities is probably not to be seen in opposition to caring for those beyond. Longenecker, in this respect, argues that Paul’s theology did contrast with Greco-Roman customs; since Roman associations (see note) probably would not have directed their generosity towards the needy beyond their relations. Thorsteinsson disagrees. But Longenecker denies that Jesus-followers would have been better people than Stoics, Cynics etc. Instead, Longenecker argues that Jesus-followers acted differently because “… they had been immersed in an overarching narrative about Israel’s deity, and that narrative spurred them on and held them to account with regard to care for the needy even beyond their struggling membership.”

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120 Ibid., 289–90.
121 Ibid., 290.
122 Ibid., 291.
123 Thorsteinsson, Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism, 193–194. Thorsteinsson’s survey of Paul only include Paul’s letter to the Romans. His conclusion, therefore, should be read in this context.
124 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 292.
125 Association = a group with a common interest. Ibid., 293.
126 Thorsteinsson, Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism, 191–92.
127 Longenecker, Remember the Poor, 293.
“It would be unfair, then, to claim that Jesus-followers were ‘morally superior’ to their Greco-Roman contemporaries. But it might be fair to say that they shared a powerful narrative that held within it the theological motor that drove them to care for the poor in notable ways.”

Bruce W. Longenecker

I thus conclude that Paul did advocate for the importance of early Christian charity. His teachings on communal love are often a part of his exhortations, which – roughly speaking – are his theology put into practise. Paul’s theology of the needy is delivered in the context of his characteristic κοινωνία-perspective. His application of the body-of-Christ concept. However, it is not entirely clear whether Paul intended his theology to include outsiders or whether his social ethic was actually different from the contemporary Greco-Roman world. Nonetheless, what probably separated the early Christian community from contemporary associations was the deeply rooted and powerful narrative about Jesus.

After having analysed Paul and his teachings, I now move on to see how Justin Martyr and Tertullian relate to the same issue.

6. Justin Martyr and Tertullian

We have now seen how Paul in his letters encouraged early Christians to love one another; first and foremost, an encouragement of love between fellow Christians, but also love for one’s enemies. This love, which was an example given by Christ, was Paul’s motivation for early Christian charity.

The question is, whether Paul’s concept of thought continued within the early Church or it changed. We will, therefore, now shortly analyse two early Christian writers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, and compare their contributions with those of Paul. This will finally help us identify either a shift or a continuation of the Christian philanthropic identity taught by Paul.

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128 Ibid., 293–94.
129 By “shortly” I mean that our analysis of Martyr and Tertullian will only include two of their writings, the First Apology (Martyr) and The Apology (Tertullian), and I will only highlight the most important aspects of the texts.
6.1. Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was a Greek Apologist, born in Flavia Neapolis, not far from Shechem (Samaria). He was born around 100 CE by Roman parents, who probably had immigrated to Samaria, and he speaks of being brought up in Gentile customs. He received his education in Rome and, eventually, this was the place he converted to Christianity, which was around the Bar-Cochba revolt in 132. Justin’s personal task became to defend the Christian faith against false accusations coming from both governmental and local places. The First Apology is written around 151-155, and it is addressed to the contemporary emperor, Antonius Pius, his son and the philosopher Lucius (I Apol. 1). But it is not certain whether Justin’s apologies reached the emperor. The important question here is, whether Justin uses Christian good deeds and practises as an argument in his apologies. A couple of examples will reveal Justin’s way of thinking.

In at least six different contexts, Justin, directly or indirectly, emphasises the generosity of Christians by referring to the importance of virtues:

1) As a defence against the false accusations towards Christians, Justin asks the reader not to judge the Christian because of the Christian name, but instead in light of his evil actions (I Apol. 7). By this, Justin insinuates, that evil actions were not part of early Christian practise; rather the opposite. Later, Justin argues that “…we [Christians] are your [the official institution] helpers and allies in the cause of peace.” (I Apol. 12).

2) Justin often links salvation with a virtuous life, which included generosity. For example, Justin teaches that God only accepts those “… who imitate the good things which are in Him [God], temperance and righteousness and well-doing…” (I Apol. 10). Under the same soteriological theme, Justin accentuates the works of the faith and states that those “…who are found not living as He [God] taught should understand that they are not really Christians…” (I Apol. 16).

3) The moral power of Christianity seems important to Justin, and he also uses it as a validation of Christianity. Almost in line with Paul’s theology about the new life in Christ (Gal 2:20), Justin argues that “…we who once valued above everything the gaining of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock, and share with everyone in need…” (I Apol. 14). Leslie William Barnard argues that Justin probably refers to what was organised charity within the smaller Christian groups – and not communities of ‘communism.’ This is, in Justin’s eyes, what

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131 Martyr, St. Justin Martyr, 3–5.
132 Ibid., 31. See note 85 on p. 118.
should happen to a man when he becomes a Christian. He offers his money in charity. Similarly, this new life also implies a new attitude towards one’s enemies. Justin explains: “…we who hated and destroyed one another, and would not share the same hearth with people of a different tribe […] since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies…” (1 Apol. 14).

4) Moral character should be shown to others. Justin wants “…your good works [to] shine before men…” (1 Apol. 16). Once again charity is included in Justin’s definition of “good works.” This passage is not to be misunderstood; Justin is not talking about one’s righteousness. Here the “good works” are supposed to draw other people to God and, therefore, should be shown.

5) In a few places, Justin speaks about a contemporary problem, which in his eyes is a humanitarian problem. Specifically, he mentions how newborn infants were abandoned and later found by people who would raise them to live in prostitution (1 Apol. 27).

6) Finally, Justin refers in a number of places to the life and works of Christ, and Justin often emphasises, in this context, Christ’s charitable mission and self-giving. So, in 1 Apol. 31, Justin tells the story of how Jesus came and healed every disease and every sickness and raised the dead. Furthermore, in line with Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Justin demonstrate how Christ gave his life and suffered for the sins of humans (1 Apol. 50). It is clear, throughout his First Apology, that Justin is occupied with demonstrating God’s love and compassion for men and women, revealed through the supreme Jesus Christ.\(^{133}\)

Additionally, Justin, at the end of his text, describes how a common Sunday service was held. This is particularly interesting, because he describes how the wealthy would come “…to the aid of the poor…” and how a collection would help “…the orphans and widows, and those who, on account of sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among us…” (1 Apol. 67). Similar to Paul (cf. 2 Cor 9:7), Justin explains that the collection was a voluntary affair. As Justin clarifies, “…those who prosper, and so wish, contribute what each think fit…” (1 Apol. 67). Hence, no one was forced to contribute.

After having analysed Justin Martyrs First Apology, the question arises: how does Justin’s apology relate to the theology of Paul, and is there a connection?

I find that Justin’s apology is connected to Paul’s theology of the needy on four levels. First, Justin is occupied with Jesus being the example for the Christian (new) life (cf. 1 Apol. 14, 16), same as Paul in 1 Cor 11:23-26 and Rom 15:7. Secondly, similar to Paul, Justin emphasises the good deeds (e.g. charity) as the identifying mark of the Christian (cf. 1 Apol. 10). Charity, then, is an

\(^{133}\) Ibid., 21.
identity marker for Justin, as it is for Paul (cf. Gal 6:10). Thirdly, as with Paul in (among other places) Rom 12:9-21, Justin finds the virtues important; the new life after the will of God (cf. 1 Apol. 14). Fourthly, Justin has a clear distinction between the “outsiders” and “insiders,” though he is positive to those “outside.” As is Paul, and both of them talk about loving your enemy.

What seems to disconnect the two is the Platonism which Justin was carrying with him. Justin is, as Paul, interested in the example of Christ; however, Justin’s school of thought places Christ outside the believer – God is a transcended god. For Paul, Christ is very close and, essentially, in the believer (cf. Col 2:6-15).

As the research has demonstrated, Justin Martyr lived and worked around hundred years later than the apostle Paul. Despite the time span, Justin’s understanding of early Christian charity is much in line with Paul. And, as Justin describes, Christian charity was, in his time, part of the common Christian life.

6.2. Tertullian

A few decades later, in the late 2nd century into the 3rd century, Latin Christianity began to develop. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (ca 160/170 - ca 220) was a pioneer of the new style, and he was a skilled rhetorician with an excellent philosophical and literary education. We know little about his life. However, we know he flourished between 190 and 215, when all of his writings are from. Tertullian was raised in a secular context in the North African city of Carthage (the second largest city in the Roman empire at the time), but when and through what influence he became a Christian is uncertain.

Tertullian’s Apology is often judged as his masterpiece. Similar to Justin Martyr’s First Apology, Tertullian’s Apology is addressed to the rulers of the Roman Empire (cf. Apol. 1,1), but it seems to shift from the philosophical mode to the rhetorical and even juridical. “Tertullian is the apologist as advocate…,” as David Wright describes. This is evident, when Tertullian uses his rhetorical talents, mingling defence with attack etc.

Again, our purpose is to analyse the way Tertullian describes contemporary Christians in relation to Christian charity. As with Justin, we find no systematic examination in Tertullian’s

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134 Ibid., 16.
writings, but our purpose is to see whether or not Tertullian uses Christian charity to legitimise Christian beliefs.

As we read through Tertullian’s *Apology*, we discover that he has both direct and indirect accounts of Christian charity. Beginning with the more indirect descriptions, we find the following.137

Christians, who had converted, often went through a change of lifestyle, but, even though they had gained a more upright character, people hated them (*Apol. 3,3-4*). Tertullian demonstrates the absurdity of only hating the Christian because of a name, and throughout his case he describes how Christians lived virtuous lives; (lives of good works). He maintains that it is irrational to hate the Christian name, since the name is innocent: “… it comes from sweetness and benignity,” as he states (*Apol. 3,5*).

Christians seek the welfare of the Roman emperor by praying for him (*Apol. 31.3-32.3; 39,2*), and they are not to hate (but love) the enemy (*Apol. 37,1*). Indirectly, this speaks of a specific attitude that was based on love and expressed through material actions.

Of the more direct accounts, we find these.

Tertullian emphasises the charity work done by Christians very directly. In *Apol. 39*, he stresses what is good about Christian society and, first and foremost, he finds that Christian society is characterised by communion. Ironically, Tertullian notices that “…we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us but our wives.” (*Apol. 39,11*). Furthermore, charity was organised: “[o]n the monthly day, if he likes each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary.” (*Apol. 39,5*) The donations would be for the supporting and burial of poor people, orphans, old persons confined to their houses, shipwrecked persons, prisoners etc. (*Apol. 39,6*). When Tertullian highlights the good organisation of Christian society, it has to be viewed in the broader context of contemporaries trying to keep together the Roman Empire. Indirectly, Tertullian argues that Christianity would be better for the Empire’s unity.

On behalf of this analysis, I continue comparing Tertullian with Paul. Therefore, how different is Tertullian’s testimony from that of Paul?

Compared with Paul, we find a number of similarities in Tertullian’s *Apology*, even though they write in two different genres. It is obvious that Tertullian (like Paul) has built in a general

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division between insiders and outsiders. However, it is more emphasised and almost an isolated theme in the Apology, undoubtedly because of the different purpose of the document. As we know from Paul’s letters, funds were collected within the local churches to provide for those in need. Tertullian’s account gives us a similar picture, and two important aspects of Paul’s theology are witnessed in Tertullian’s Apology. First of all, Tertullian refer to the same Greek word, ἀγάπη, as Paul to describe the intention and motivation for Christian charity (cf. Apol. 39,16). Secondly, as Eric Osborn implies, Tertullian denotes the communion of Christians (= the church) as “a society” (cf. Apol. 39,1). This definition is highly linked with Paul’s definition of the church being a “body” (cf. “body of Christ” in 1 Cor 12:12-14).

Both Paul and Tertullian emphasise the obedience and discipline of the Jesus-follower. Conversely, where Paul seems to be more determined to spread the Gospel, having life in eternity in mind, Tertullian seems to focus on the connection between Christian beliefs and Christian works. Helen Rhee argues (putting Tertullian in his Alexandrian context), that Tertullian “… describes salvation as a consistency between the inner reality and virtue of Christianity and its outer expression and conduct.”139 Paul would probably agree on the consistency between outer and inner life, but Tertullian’s Alexandrian influence comes closer to the theology of James, who is significantly more interested in the immanence effect and social revolution of Christian belief than Paul (cf. James 1:27; 2:1-26).140

Through this analysis, I conclude that Tertullian used Christian charity as an argument for the Christian faith and, in doing so, revealed (part of) the identity of Christians in the third century. In line with mainstream New Testament ethics, Tertullian refers to the church being “a society,” distinct from other contemporary associations, and he uses Paul’s ἀγάπη-theology as the principal motivation for Christian charity. Different from Paul is Tertullian’s Alexandrian influence, which links him more with the theological perspective of James.

7. Conclusion
Charity, understood as practical help, is the heart of early Christian identity. Diakonia, as it is interpreted in a modern North-European context (diakonia = charity = the work of a deacon), separate

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139 Rhee, Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich, 91.
140 As a side note: It is difficult to judge whether Tertullian as early as this (ca 197) would have been influenced by the New Prophecy (Montanism). Jane Merdinger argues that it was not until 208 Montanism became increasingly attractive to Tertullian; Merdinger, “Roman North Africa,” 234.
from the interpretation and task of a deacon in the early church, when the bishop was responsible for the poor.

Behind the rapid spread of Christianity in the first three centuries of its existence, Christian charity played a significant role. This new religion or “superstitio,” as it was labelled by Roman rulers and administration, attracted people from all levels of society, but mainly those from the lower strata. What appealed to many inhabitants in the Roman Empire was the organised charity work within the Christian communities. The special (“family-”) bond that Jesus-followers developed became a safety-net for many, and the weekly collections, the sharing of property, contributed to a common welfare. This new attitude is what seems to have been a reformation of common understanding of the ethic of reciprocity. Ethically speaking, generosity and love were not new virtues first introduced by Christians; they already existed and belonged to the Jewish roots of Christianity. However, Christian charity was motivated by the narrative of Jesus Christ, whose life had been the example of the perfect self-giving attitude.

The apostle Paul emphasised in his letters the importance of Christian almsgiving, and I have argued that Paul had a theology of the needy. Though his overall mission was to preach the Gospel, Paul’s teachings demonstrate that one way to respond to the Gospel was to love, in practice, your new Christian “sisters” and “brothers.” Paul does so by taking part in the collection for the congregation in Jerusalem. In addition, through many of his exhortations he encourages believers to demonstrate love. The key motivation for Paul, to demonstrate love, is the example of Christ who suffered and gave himself – in love – for the receivers of Paul’s letters. Furthermore, several references indicate that Paul’s congregational love was extended to nonbelievers as well.

Later in the history of the early Church, the apologist Justin Martyr observes a continuation of the New Testament practice. Charity work was organised within the Christian community, and Justin uses this practice to legitimise Christian beliefs and existence. Generally, what was important to Justin – the discipline and virtues of Christians – was similarly important to the 3rd century apologist Tertullian. Tertullian very clearly proves how converts became new persons in terms of lifestyle, and he uses it as a benchmark for Christians in his Apology. As for Paul, Tertullian emphasises the love towards others as being the outset for Christian charity work.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Christian mission and charity are often linked together today, and this research has also indirectly touched upon this fact. Yet, for further study, it would be interesting to see how mission and charity were related in the early church.
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