Why give alms?

Sunday's Coming Premium
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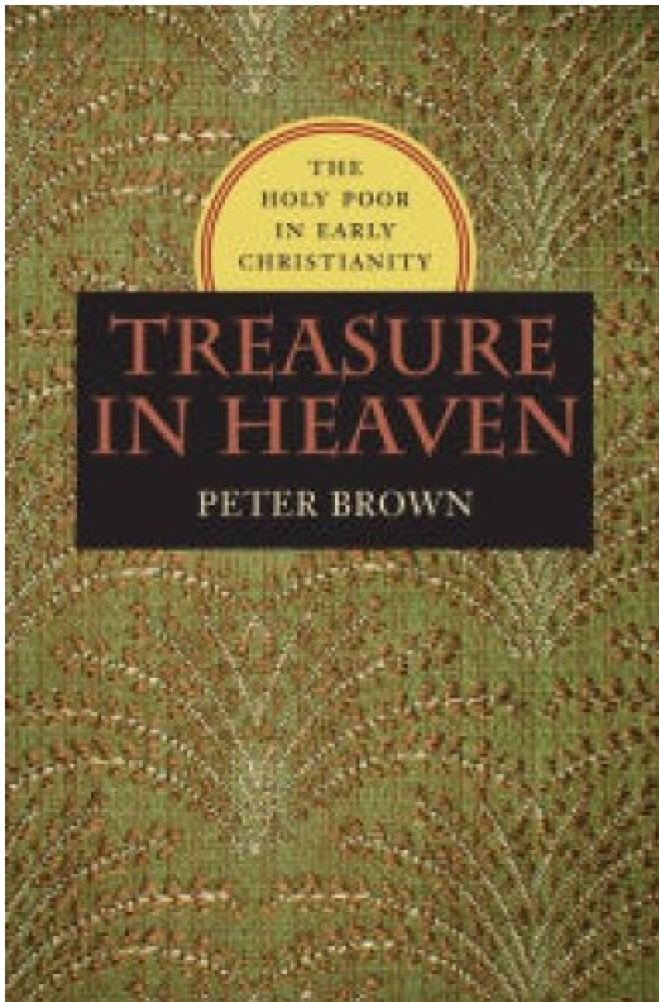
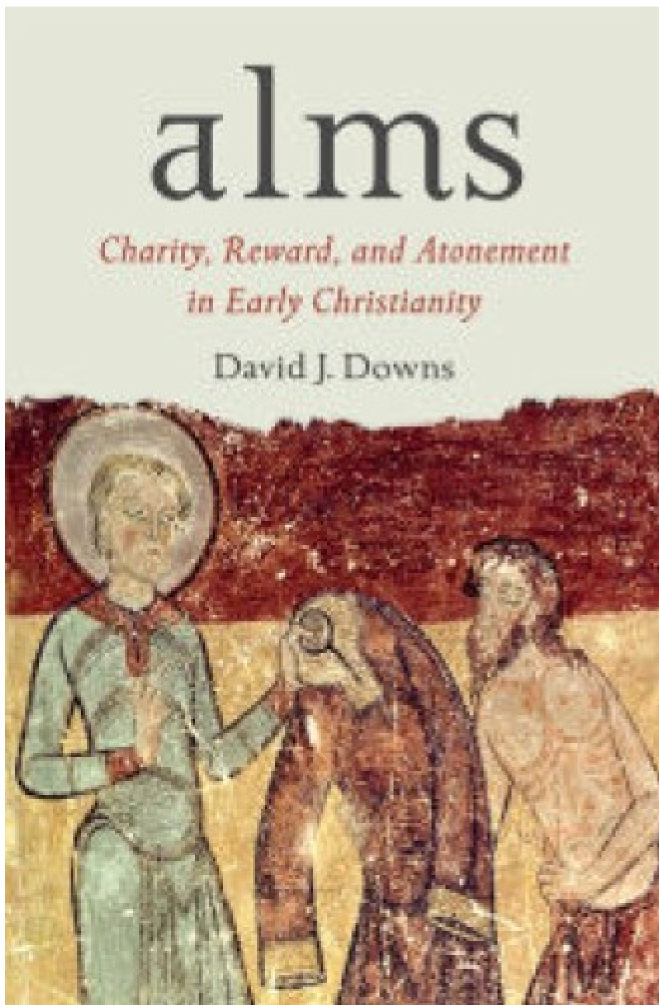
In Review



Treasure in Heaven

By Peter Brown
University of Virginia Press



Alms

By David J. Downs
Baylor University Press

Issues involving the value of work and the perimeters of generosity have perhaps never been more relevant than they are today. The Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, housed at Vassar College, has documented the social health of our nation according to factors such as child poverty, old-age poverty, and income inequality. Mapping gains and losses from 1970 to 2011, the institute found that both income inequality and child poverty have worsened since 1970. Indeed, as Jesus observed in his sobering paraphrase of Deuteronomy 15:11, “the poor you will always have with you.”

What particular motivation do Christians have to address the pain around us? Jesus’ instruction to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the

things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17) appears to separate financial and spiritual accountabilities. Yet Christians have long recognized that belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ places within the realm of Christian responsibility attention to suffering bodies.

Many Christian authors, from scripture forward, have advocated cultivating something called “soul” and ignoring something called “body”—which in experience are never known except in irreducible unity. A more adequate theology can be stated quite simply. For followers of the incarnate God, bodies of whatever color, gender, sexual orientation, and other variables, *matter*. Accordingly, Christians—in the concrete conditions of our own time and place—must seek and find ways to honor and heal suffering bodies.

It is unlikely that the solutions relevant to the particularities of ancient circumstances could be simply adopted for our world. Their efforts might, however, inspire our own efforts to help others. Historians Peter Brown and David Downs demonstrate the timeless importance of heated discussions of this responsibility in all of its dimensions. They do so not in the abstract but in response to concrete social conditions in the Fertile Crescent of late antiquity.

Brown, who taught history at Princeton University, has written widely on economics in early Christianity. Thinking geographically and picturing real people conversing in real space, he identifies clusters of excited attitudes in different locations rather than tracking the slow development of ideas across the world of late antiquity (the stock-in-trade of most church historians). In *Treasure in Heaven*, Brown demonstrates the centrality and longevity of questions about the value of work, bodies, and society in Jewish, Christian, Manichaean, and Buddhist discussions across the Fertile Crescent.

Brown recounts a story of Eusebius of Caesarea to highlight an ancient prejudice regarding the relationship between physical work and the intellectual life. Around 90 CE the Roman emperor Domitian, investigating a rumor that Jesus’ relatives were still alive and fearing that they might be dangerous, summoned them to appear before him. Eusebius explains,

> They turned out to be small farmers. . . . They were men of *ponos* (drudgery) and they proved it by doing what the Apostle Paul was said to have done a generation earlier: They showed him their hands, bringing forward as proof of

> their toil the hardness of their bodies and the calluses inflicted on their hands by incessant labor.

Eusebius reports that this demonstration convinced the emperor that Jesus' family was incapable of endangering the empire with seditious religious ideas. The drudgery of physical work was understood to disqualify intellectual pursuits. Disagreement about work's value—or lack thereof—was "an explosive issue that affected Roman society as a whole" and influenced the formation of monastic practices regarding work and almsgiving.

In the first two centuries of the Common Era, texts and preachers urged generous almsgiving on grounds that material wealth was transferrable to "treasure in heaven." But who were to be considered the rightful recipients of alms and other kinds of support by Christians? Who were to be considered "the poor"?

Brown distinguishes between the "real" (economically) poor and the "holy poor." The holy poor were usually clergy and monks who "had abandoned their usual means of support . . . to pursue the highest aims of the Christian life." Both needed support. Brown locates within Christians' "novel emphasis on almsgiving to the poor" an intense debate that began with the apostle Paul and continued until its (temporary and partial) resolution in the differing styles of the fourth-century monasteries of greater Syria and Egypt.

Looking to the authoritative writings of St. Paul for guidance, Christians found confusing ambiguity on the question of whether or not the holy poor should be supported by Christian individuals and communities. Eager to distinguish his ministry from that of wandering charlatans, those "religious entrepreneurs" and "charismatic spongers" who sought material support in exchange for spiritual instruction, Paul claimed both that his work among the nascent churches warranted material support and that he supported himself by the labor of his hands. Paul did not settle the question, and two different monastic lifestyles developed.

In continuity with the ancient prejudice demonstrated by Eusebius that work (drudgery) deadens the mind, Syrian monks aspired to "the life of the angels." Their days, freed from work, were spent in prayer and other spiritual labor, considered an invaluable resource for Christian communities. In exchange for their spiritual labor, Syrian monks received alms from both clergy and laity.

In contrast, Egyptian monks chose to work—both in order to be self-supporting and to have means with which to help the impoverished poor. Work was not seen as a curse, but rather as a salient acknowledgment of participation in the human condition. “It was not seen as a degrading condition that only a few exceptional human beings might be enabled to transcend: to work was to be human.”

Moreover, the Egyptian monastics believed that to have a body—to work in order to keep eating—was to honor the incarnation. Tertullian had proposed that a human birth guaranteed Christ’s humanity, and other patristic authors had suggested that Christ’s human suffering and death demonstrated his full humanity. But Athanasius of Alexandria, in his treatise *On the Incarnation*, considered Christ’s human body to be the distinctive mark of his humanity. Moreover, revering Christ’s consanguinity with human bodies also prompted “heightened compassion” for the vulnerable bodies of the (economically) poor.

Brown implicitly questions historians’ recent preoccupation with sexuality, celibacy, and power in late antiquity—subjects, it must be noted, that Brown himself brought to the fore in earlier publications. He is what Michel Foucault has called the “founder of a discursivity.” Over several decades Brown has raised questions and modeled methods that have engendered flurries of scholarship in response to his suggestions. His arguments in this book depend on other scholars’ detailed studies of particular places, which he acknowledges with unusual generosity. Rather than burying authors’ names in footnotes, he lifts them into his text, praising their careful and insightful scholarship. Over the long course of his career, Brown’s scholarship has modeled and engendered collegial scholarly conversation. One such conversation partner is Downs, who both cites and is cited by Brown.

In *Alms*, Downs, who teaches New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, documents in detail an apparent incongruity in early Christian teaching on how sin can be atoned. Christ’s death on the cross was understood as the only means of atonement for sin, yet a vast literature advocates another method for expiating sin. For example, in the context of a severe shortage of food in fourth century Cappadocia, Basil of Caesarea preached that even original sin could be “destroyed” by charity: “For as sin came through Adam’s evil act of eating, so we ourselves blot out his treacherous consumption if we remedy the need and hunger of a brother.”

Downs is careful to distinguish between meritorious almsgiving and atoning almsgiving. The former indicates almsgiving in which reward is expected to accumulate to the donor; the latter understands charity as a means of “canceling, cleansing, covering, extinguishing, lightening, or in some way atoning for human sin and/or its consequences.” Downs’s interest lies in Christian advocacy for atoning almsgiving and its emergence from scriptural exegesis.

Discussing atoning almsgiving from the New Testament to the mid-third century CE, Downs traces the historical roots and development of the model “from its antecedents in the Old Testament and the literature of Second Temple Judaism” to New Testament statements linking almsgiving and reward. He discusses patristic authors to the time of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, whose treatise *On Works and Alms* “represents a bold and innovative attempt to hold together the confession that forgiveness, redemption, and healing are possible only through the suffering and death of Christ and the conviction that sins after baptism can be washed away by deeds of mercy.” Downs shows that Cyprian was the first Christian author to see a need to justify the claim that the practice of merciful deeds cleanses or covers sins.

Downs finds useful Hans-Georg Gadamer’s insistence that the meaning of a text cannot be separated from its history of influence. Reception theory assumes that meaning is not inherent in a text but instead emerges as the result of a “conversation between a text, the influence of that text, and an interpreter or interpretive community.” Accordingly, Downs carefully considers the interpretation history of a scriptural passage frequently cited by advocates of atoning almsgiving: the claim that “love covers a multitude of sins” in 1 Peter 4:8. Patristic authors agreed that the love that covers a multitude of sins refers not primarily to God’s love for humanity, but rather that “human love covers the sins of those who demonstrate such love.”

Downs recognizes that his documentation of patristic interpretations of 1 Peter 4:8 challenges 16th-century reformers’ rejection of “works” as efficacious toward salvation. Contemporary evangelical Protestants may also be wary of the apparent ease with which the patristic authors held together both the saving significance of Christ’s death and the affirmation that mercifully caring for the needy covers a multitude of donors’ sins.

Brown and Downs uncover differing attitudes toward bodies in Christian communities of the first centuries. Both discern that attitudes toward physical work

relate to understandings of the centrality of the incarnation to the Christian message. While Brown links Egyptian monks' regard for work to emphasis on the incarnation, Downs finds that advocacy of meritorious and atoning almsgiving responded directly to "those who disregarded the body, including the bodies of the poor." Both books contribute generously to our knowledge of the concrete discussions underlying late antiquity theological questions.

"Benevolence is good, but when is it a moral mistake?" Iris Murdoch asked in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Her question is not answered by either Brown or Downs. In times of great personal and social vulnerability, exhortations to Christians to give to those in need apparently did not require further specification.

As Downs points out, late antiquity was a time of great instability, for which the "binary reality" of stable categories of rich and poor are inadequate. A person who at one time could be an almsgiver might, in rapidly changing circumstances, soon be in need of alms. In these conditions, advocacy and activism for social change did not suggest itself to Christians. Indeed, Christian authors often rationalized social injustice by idealizing and spiritualizing the suffering of the economic poor. And the poor were praised for their (involuntary) humility and dependence on God, ignoring the physical reality of their crushing material deprivation. Two centuries later, Augustine employed the same strategy in *The City of God* when he ignored the harsh physical reality of slavery and opined that it is a "happier lot to be a slave of a man than of a lust."

Many Christians today will not find either the accumulation of "treasure in heaven" or the concept of "atoning almsgiving" attractive incentives for generosity. Without lapsing into intricate and inevitably unedifying fourth-century controversies, I suggest that, in the parlance of our time and place, the simple insistence that bodies matter can express our understanding of what it means for us today to act out—to body forth—our belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.