

3 “*Christianity’s teaching about and role in social welfare has changed (OR has not changed) over time. Christianity has been (OR has not been) more involved in care of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed at some times, than at others.*”

To answer this question, I have to assume Jesus himself is the model for involvement in social welfare. So it follows that basic Christian teaching, i.e. the Gospels, about it has not changed. The intensity with which Christianity has followed that model has ebbed and flowed in the last 2000-plus years.

The Gospels tell us Jesus ministered personally, one-on-one to the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Many were on the fringe of society because they suffered *physical* disabilities. One woman could not even get close enough to ask Jesus for his help. Yet, she was healed simply by touching his the hem of his garment. He made a leper whole even though lepers were considered untouchable. He also befriended *social* outcasts and restored them to society. The woman at the well: it was extremely unusual for any woman to be alone there, but she was a social pariah. Jesus engaged her. Even the crowd around Jesus believed Zacchaeus, the tax collector, was a sinner, but Jesus chose to eat with him.

In the early church, the Apostles continued to model Jesus. Peter and John got jailed for healing a lame man. The diaconate, for which most of us in this class are studying, was established to be certain that widows were fed. Paul and Silas even prevented their jailer from suicide by remaining in his jail when they could easily escaped after an earthquake.

Because Christianity remained a faith of the primarily lower classes and non citizens of Roman society until Constantine, I’m comfortable believing that the early church continued to include outcasts, feed the hungry, and pray for healing of the sick and disabled.

The Edict of Milan vastly enlarged an upper class in the Church. Wealthy Romans, seeking favor with the Emperor, were quite willing to at least become nominal Christians. When I went looking for information on the relationship between the poor and the late Roman Empire, I found very little. Agreement on Creeds, structure of the church, and the preservation of shrines that occurred in Constantine’s time are far more memorable. However, one contemporary Eastern Orthodox Christian, (davidjdunn.com), asserts that under Constantine, “Tax revenues *were* lavished upon the church, but percentages of those funds were earmarked for support of the poor. In addition, one of Constantine’s most notorious laws, in which he gave bishops judicial powers, seems to have been an attempt to equalize the civil justice system, which then (as now) was slanted against those who lacked money and influence.” Assuming this is true, care of the poor became institutionalized and did not always serve the their needs particularly effectively, if at all.

From the fall of Rome until the 19th century, Christianity’s concern for social welfare continued to ebb, evidenced by the lack of discussion about the topic in our readings about those eras. The Medieval feudal system provided little aid for serfs and peasants when they were hungry or ill. Since churches were often beholden to the landowner for their own survival, there probably was little left for care of the poor. Monasteries offered sanctuary for small numbers of peasants. Though most were servants, they were safe, housed, and fed.

As the Medieval period drew to a close, the rise of the bourgeoisie allowed many to escape poverty by becoming craftsmen and merchants. Among the demands for their skills and wares were those elaborate churches that were being built. But raising the standard of living contrasts vividly with the ministry Jesus offered. Not much is written about the poor in during