



Lenten Study 2025: Being People of Peace & Justice

Turning to the post-Biblical world and our roughly 2000 years of history since the time of Jesus, we see two time period emerging. The church of the earliest generations and throughout the Middle Ages was focused on charity as part of their faith expression, and in this they drew inspiration from the Sermon on the Plain and the Epistle of James.

It wasn't until after the continental reformers and the move towards the Enlightenment that there is a tonal shift in Christian action that will come to be known as Social Justice, a term that was

coined around 1840 CE, by an Italian theologian. This movement of social justice will be the focus of our final week of study.

Various thinkers and theologians weighed in on the concept of faith in action, a concept that Martin Luther (c. 1500 CE) would later refer to as “works righteousness”, and dismissed as inconsequential to salvation. Luther taught salvation came through the grace of God alone. In many ways he seems to have missed the point of those who came before him.

For the earliest church faith in action, the care of others... charity essentially, was a necessary part of faith. It was not, as Luther accused, understood as the path to salvation, but rather the addition to one's life of faith. St. Francis of Assisi would eventually state that faith without works is merely piety, and we were called to something larger in our care for one another.

Week 4: Do unto others



The concept of ‘canon’ confuses many people when we look at the books of the Christian Scriptures and those additional books written that we do not consider scripture. Some have gone so far as to claim there was a conspiracy for not including those books we now consider Gnostic. That was not the case.

In the early Christian Church - more accurately the early Christian churches plural - as there were many assumptions about how to work together, how to understand God, and what Jesus was really talking about in his more vague references, there were many schools of thought. Naturally people wrote those thoughts down, and depending where someone lived throughout the Mediterranean in the first centuries of the Common Era, those writings were available and considered scripture, or they were neither available nor considered.

The eventual canon of the Christian Scriptures took centuries to finalize and some consider it

still open. The through line of what we recognize as the Christian Canon, was an attempt to keep the thoughts and teachings supporting each other and consistent.

While this limited the theological ideas we find in accepted scripture, one of the things never limited was how to treat others. Charity was at the heart of all actions in Jesus' name.

One of the first pieces of post-canonical writing of the early church that was never considered 'scripture', was a document called the Didache. It was an order, or a rule for how missionaries and teachers were to behave. Much of it was a copy of instructions Jesus had already given in the Gospels. Interestingly, the Didache does not include one word about how to perform acts of charity nor does it discuss the need for charity. It is simply a given in the early church, such a normal part of life and faith that it did not need to be recorded.

Around the same time as the Didache was being written, c. 110 CE, we find a letter from Pliny the Younger to his mentor Emperor Trajan about two women he had arrested for the crime of being Christian, and wanted to know what to do with them. Their real crime was that they were slave women giving orders to freed people of society, and directing charity. The lifestyle of the Christians treating all as equal offended Pliny. Trajan responded by telling Pliny to let it go.

Christians understood equality, but they had not yet developed any sense of challenging social order.

This theme of equality and offending the Roman social order appeared again a century later, c. 210 CE, when Origen wrote *Contra Celsus*, or *Against Celsus*. Celsus was a senator in Rome who vehemently opposed the spread of Christianity. Origen was an apologist who countered every one of Celsus negative and erroneous claims against Christianity. We only have Origen's response not Celsus' original claims, but it is not until almost the end of the treatise that we see anything about charity. Origen maintained that prayer, meditation and worship were in fact works of faith, and that not all fights had to be military to be meaningful. Again charity is mentioned but not expounded upon. It was just part of Christian expression, and what the Christian community was becoming known for.

Moving on historically, by the end of the Western Roman Empire, the monastic lifestyle was well known and attractive to many believers and converts. As a result of the proliferation, many of the leaders in the monastic movement wrote rules for behaviour. St. Benedict, c. 530 CE, was perhaps the most famous. In his many rules he gave eight nods to charity.

Rules 14-20 told those in the Benedictine monastic life to refresh the poor, cloth them, visit the sick, bury the dead, help in troubles, comfort in sadness, and to "be a stranger to the world", a concept that would later be phrased "be in the world but not of the world". The final rule on the topic was Rule 26 that said not to abandon charity.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, monastic life had developed to have three written orders in many places. First order was for monks, second was for nuns, and a third order was written for the laity who wanted to have many lifestyle similarities to monastic life without actually being monastic. In the 12th century in Belgium, Germany and the surrounding low countries, a third order of lay women emerged

known as the Beguine (Beghards were their male equivalent). These were single women who lived together and worshipped together, while still working and owning their own property. They were well known in the wool and lace economy of the day, and if you travel to Brugge, Belgium, you can still see a well preserved Beguinage, the houses where they lived.

An example of the Rule they followed can be found in the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1221), where charity is outlined as a major part of their role. St. Francis reminded his followers that everything was about love, and to live that love simplistically. He warned against only focusing on belief because that lead to piety. He considered acts of faith or charity, was necessary to fully follow Jesus and understand God's expectations. For St. Francis, a complete lived faith meant both an interior focus of love for others, and an external focus of charity.

As in most situations, those at the top and those living life on the ground differed in their approach. The higher organized structure of the church had reduced charity to alms giving, rather than living with and supporting people. It was this disconnect, among other things, that would eventually see the rise of Martin Luther and the continental reformers. This is the launch pad for what will eventually become known as Social Justice, the topic of our next and final portion of this study.

