

Abstract

Exchange of financial support between geographically distant groups was a characteristic practice in early Christianity. The Pauline collection for the poor in Jerusalem was one of the most ambitious undertakings in Christian origins. Recent assessments of the Pauline collection have focused on patronage to explain the social relations between Jerusalem and the Pauline groups and the strategies adopted by Paul in promoting and completing the collection. This study challenges this approach and proposes that other factors shaped Paul's stance with respect to the collection and the practical details of its execution. A comparison with the worries that surrounded patronage in the Greco-Roman world shows that patronage is not the appropriate framework to understand the Pauline collection. Paul was interested in reassuring the Corinthians, most of whom lived around subsistence level, about the financial outcome of the collection and in dispelling doubts that he might take advantage of them. In Paul's eyes, the collection was not only an action modeled on the self-sacrifice exemplified by Jesus and divine generosity, but also an exchange within a reciprocal relationship with the Jerusalem group. The Jerusalem believers had already offered spiritual gifts to the Pauline groups and would provide material help if need were to arise in Corinth.

This study surveys similar instances of intergroup support between Christian communities in the first three centuries CE. This examination demonstrates that intergroup support was a widespread phenomenon in early Christianity, involving churches from most of the Mediterranean Basin and known even outside of Christian circles. Transfers of money were organized according to a consistent pattern probably modeled on local charitable practices. Intergroup support especially addressed financial needs connected with the ransom or sustenance of Christians imprisoned for their faith. Bishops had a key role in the organization and administration of financial support. Although there was no direct link between the Pauline collection and later instances of intergroup support, the Pauline collection had similar characteristics and can be seen as part of a more widespread economic practice.

