



# Patristic Perspectives on Wealth and Inequality: Theological Economics in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great

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*Abstract.* This study examines the intersection of theology and economics through Patristic interpretations of economic inequality, focusing on the scriptural account of the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-30). It contrasts the perspectives of two early Church Fathers: Clement of Alexandria, who views wealth as a morally neutral tool requiring proper stewardship, and Basil the Great, who condemns wealth-hoarding as a form of social injustice necessitating redistribution. These divergent views illustrate how theological insights can shape economic thought and policy. By analyzing their writings, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Patristic theology for contemporary debates on wealth and inequality. This research argues that theological perspectives, while diverse, provide essential moral and ethical foundations for addressing economic disparities.

*Keywords:* Patristic ethics, wealth distribution, economic policy

## 1. Introduction

The Bible, while not an economics textbook, addresses a range of economic themes, including work, rest, debt, stewardship, poverty, integrity, and interpersonal relationships, as noted by Tatum (2020). The ways in which biblical scriptures are applied to modern economic dilemmas vary greatly. Some interpret these teachings as specific to their historical context, while others extract universal principles relevant to contemporary economic systems. Another approach, and the focus of this study, is to engage directly with primary theological sources to uncover the richness of their perspectives on economic issues. By examining how Patristic theologians interpreted Scripture, we can see how their insights provide moral and ethical frameworks that remain relevant today.

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Gregory Soderberg, Quinn Jacquez, and Nadia Fourie for research assistance, and to attendees of the 2024 UK Association for Christian Economics Annual Study Group Meeting and the CREDO Economics and Catholic Social Thought virtual workshop for valuable comments.

This paper examines how divergent theological interpretations of a single biblical passage, specifically the story of the rich young man, can inform contemporary reflection on economic inequality. By comparing the perspectives of Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great, the study does not aim to resolve theological differences or prescribe specific policies. Rather, it shows how such theological diversity expands the moral imagination of economic actors and policymakers, inviting a broader range of ethical considerations and institutional possibilities.

The story of the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; and Luke 18:18-30) serves as a case study for this type of inquiry. In Matthew's account:

Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. Also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions (19:16-22 NRSV).

Patristic scholars long debated this passage, recognizing it as both a theological and social challenge that demanded reinterpretation and application (Rhee 2012, 77). Among them, Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great offer strikingly different readings. In his treatise *The Rich Man's Salvation*, Clement argues that wealth is morally neutral, and the true challenge lies in its proper use. For him, the passage calls for an inner detachment from riches rather than their literal renunciation. Basil, by contrast, takes a more radical stance in his homily "To the Rich," contending that wealth accumulation is intrinsically tied to social injustice and must be redistributed for the common good. Their divergent perspectives illustrate how theological interpretation shaped moral reasoning and, by extension, economic thought.<sup>2</sup>

Engaging with primary sources like these not only enriches scriptural interpretation but also demonstrates how historical theological reflection can inform contemporary discourse on inequality. Theological inquiry, as Hirschfeld (2019) argues, does not necessarily seek to impose economic equality but rather reframes the conversation by emphasizing moral

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<sup>2</sup> Other Patristic writers who examined the story of the rich young man include Origen of Alexandria (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Book 15), John Chrysostom ("Homily 63 on Matthew"), Jerome (*Commentary on Matthew*, Book 3), and Augustine of Hippo ("Sermon 36").

responsibility, communal interdependence, and the ethical use of resources. Biblical practices, such as the redistribution of land during the Jubilee year or the communal living of post-Pentecost believers in Jerusalem, were not necessarily calls for absolute economic equality but rather efforts to address the systematic needs of the poor and marginalized (Hirschfeld 2019, 260).

Despite the absence of a singular biblical directive on inequality, theology should remain central to economic ethics (Tatum 2017, 133-4). Hirschfeld (2019) further argues that integrating theological viewpoints reshapes economic debates by shifting the focus from isolated individuals to an interconnected social fabric. This perspective challenges conventional economic models by treating wealth as a means rather than an end and by addressing inequality through a holistic framework that includes ethics, justice, and human flourishing (Hirschfeld 2019, 269, 277-8).

In terms of methodology, Long (2000, xiii-ff) notes that theology is inherently historical in a way that economics is not. Theology is grounded in the divine revelation manifested in historical events and in the theological discourse that emerges from these moments. In contrast, modern economics often abstracts itself from history, prioritizing mathematical models and predictive frameworks. This study, as an exercise in theological economics, embraces theology's historical rootedness by engaging with the writings of the Church Fathers, specifically Clement and Basil.

This approach follows Thomas Oden's "classical Christian consensus" model, which seeks to interpret theology through the unified witness of the early church rather than through narrow denominational perspectives (Oden 1979; 1987; 1989; 1992). It also challenges what C. S. Lewis famously described as "chronological snobbery," the assumption that modern ideas are inherently superior to those of the past. As Lewis observes, every age possesses its own characteristic intellectual blind spots, and older works can serve as a corrective by exposing assumptions that contemporary writers often share (Lewis 2014, 219). By taking seriously the voices of early theologians, this study resists the tendency to view contemporary economic and moral issues as wholly unprecedented.

Furthermore, this method is inherently ecumenical. The writings of the Church Fathers are a shared theological resource across Christian traditions, valued by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and many Protestant scholars. Their interpretations offer a common ground for dialogue, illustrating how the church's historical wisdom continues to inform ethical considerations in modern economic thought. By examining Clement's and Basil's views on wealth and inequality, this study not only recovers early Christian insights but also encourages readers to engage with a wider, and more diverse, set of primary sources as a means of developing their own perspectives on pressing social issues.

This paper does not pretend to be an exhaustive treatment of patristic teachings on wealth and inequality, nor does it seek entirely novel contributions to the literature on either Clement or Basil. Rather, as an exercise in "theological economics" (a relatively new

interdisciplinary field), it aims to explore how theology and economics can complement and enrich each other. This approach builds on earlier work that frames theology as a normative discourse that raises questions about justice, purpose, and human flourishing: questions that precede and guide the technical work of policy design (Tatum 2017). As Hirschfeld (2018) similarly puts it, theological and economic reasoning are complementary: theology helps determine good outcomes, while economics helps craft institutions and policies to achieve them. Economists, theologians, pastors, and businesspeople do not have to be “experts” in every field in order to learn valuable lessons from each other, and to engage in creative exploration and dialogue. This paper is a preliminary step in a long journey, and the authors invite specialists of all kinds to join in the discussion.

Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that theological reflection on economic matters extends beyond theoretical discourse and bears tangible implications for contemporary economic ethics. By drawing from both Scripture and Patristic thought, this study aims to develop a broader framework for understanding economic inequality and exploring possible solutions. Viewed this way, theological economics functions as a normative tradition, one that begins with ethical questions about the purpose of economic life and the kind of society we hope to cultivate. It sets the moral horizon within which economists can then ask how best to design institutions that serve the common good (Tatum 2017; Hirschfeld 2018). The next step in this inquiry is to examine economic inequality in its modern context, defining its specific manifestations and assessing its current scale before analyzing the theological insights of Clement and Basil in greater depth.

## **2. Types and scale of economic inequality**

Economic inequality manifests in disparities across income, wealth, and opportunity. According to the *World Inequality Report 2022* (Chancel et al. 2022), the bottom half of the global population owns just 2% of total wealth and receives 8.5% of total income (measured using Purchasing Power Parity). In stark contrast, the wealthiest 10% control 76% of household wealth and earn 52% of global income (10–11). These global inequalities have also been growing over time: since the 1980s, income and wealth disparities have risen, though the pace and intensity of this trend vary by country (11). While income gaps between countries have narrowed, inequality within countries now accounts for more than two-thirds of all global economic disparity (13). These cross-national differences suggest that inequality is not an inevitable byproduct of economic development but is largely shaped by political and institutional choices (11).

Brunori, Ferreira, and Peragine (2013) establish a positive correlation between income inequality and inequality of opportunity. While some disparities may reflect differences in effort, skill, or innovation, they find that “an important portion of income inequality observed in the world today ... can be directly ascribed to exogenous factors such as family background,

gender, race, place of birth, etc.” (16). Milanovic (2016, 228–9) contends that policies targeting general inequality can also mitigate group-based disparities by restructuring economic and political power without exacerbating identity-based divisions.

This study focuses on economic inequality in high-income countries. While global inequality takes many forms, including disparities shaped by race, gender, and historical legacies such as colonialism and resource dependency, these dimensions, though vital, lie beyond the scope of this paper. Their complexity, cultural specificity, and geopolitical scale resist a unified policy response and require sustained, context-sensitive engagement. By contrast, wealthier countries possess the institutional capacity to implement redistributive policies through taxation, social programs, and regulation. Moreover, in many high-income contexts, economic growth has slowed, making it increasingly difficult to reduce inequality through expansion alone. In these settings, policy choices, rather than growth dynamics, play a more central role in shaping intrastate inequality, which now accounts for the majority of global disparity. For these reasons, this paper concentrates on the ethical and theological relevance of inequality within affluent societies.

Leading economists recognize economic inequality as a pressing issue that requires targeted policy intervention (Blanchard and Rodrik 2021, xii-xiv). To address this, scholars propose a multi-phase approach spanning different stages of the economic process. At the pre-production stage, policies focus on expanding access to education, healthcare, and financial resources. During production, recommendations include enforcing minimum wages, implementing job guarantees, promoting industrial policies, and strengthening antitrust regulations. In the post-production phase, suggested measures range from enhancing social safety nets for low-income populations to imposing wealth taxes on the affluent (xix).

Understanding the complexities of economic inequality requires both empirical analysis and ethical reflection. While economic data offer a quantitative perspective, theological narratives, such as the story of the rich young man, provide a moral and spiritual framework for evaluating wealth, justice, and social responsibility.

The next section will examine the scriptural account of wealth and inequality, focusing on how Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great interpreted the moral obligations of the wealthy within their historical contexts.

### **3. The Scriptural account**

The Bible’s teaching on economic inequality extends far beyond the story of the rich young man. Scripture consistently emphasizes themes of justice, generosity, and social responsibility, particularly regarding wealth and poverty. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God calls on those with resources to care for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 15:7-8, and James 2:15-7) and commands the wealthy to practice generosity (1 Timothy 6:18). The Bible also warns against the corrupting influence of wealth (1 Timothy

6:10), condemns exploitation of workers (James 5:4), and establishes structural safeguards against intergenerational poverty, such as the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25). Additionally, early Christian communities are depicted as pooling their resources to meet collective needs (Acts 2:44-5; 2 Corinthians 8:13-4).

However, the command that Jesus gives the rich young man in the Synoptic Gospels is unusually radical. Rather than merely encouraging generosity, Jesus commands the man to sell all he owns, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Him, effectively calling for a complete renunciation of his previous life. This striking directive appears in all three Synoptic accounts, Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-30, each of which presents the encounter with distinct nuances.

While the core narrative remains consistent across the Gospels, each writer brings a unique emphasis to the encounter. Notably, Luke describes the man as a “ruler” (*archon*), implying a position of influence, whereas Matthew and Mark refer to him simply as a “young man.” Additionally, Matthew presents the man asking what “good deed” he must do to attain eternal life (Matthew 19:16), whereas Mark and Luke phrase it more generally: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18).

Mark’s account adds a sense of urgency, depicting the young man running up to Jesus and kneeling before Him, consistent with Mark’s fast-paced narrative style. Jesus’ response shifts the focus from personal achievement to divine authority, stating that “only God is good” before instructing the man to keep the commandments. All three Gospels list similar commandments, focusing on ethical conduct, and the young man confidently asserts that he has followed them. Mark and Luke emphasize the man’s lifelong observance, adding the phrase “from my youth” (Mark 10:20; Luke 18:21).

After affirming the man’s obedience to the commandments, Jesus offers a greater challenge: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). At this, the young man departs in sorrow. Matthew and Mark explain that he went away grieving because he had “many possessions,” while Luke does not indicate that the man left, but instead highlights his emotional response, describing him as extremely rich and deeply saddened by Jesus’ instruction. Mark alone includes an intimate detail: “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mark 10:21). This suggests that Jesus’ directive was not a harsh rebuke but a loving invitation to deeper discipleship.

The story of the rich young man has given rise to varied theological interpretations. To explore these, we will examine two distinct perspectives on the passage: those of Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great. Rather than searching for a single overarching biblical principle on inequality, this approach allows us to engage with contrasting views that highlight the complexities of economic inequality and demonstrate the value of Scripture for theological discernment.

#### 4. Theological interpretations of the Scriptural account

The story of the rich young man has elicited widely varying interpretations throughout Christian history. Patristic theologians, in particular, grappled with its meaning in ways that reflected both their theological commitments and the socioeconomic realities of their time. This section examines two contrasting interpretations offered by Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great, whose readings of the passage highlight a key theological divide. In *The Rich Man's Salvation*, Clement emphasizes one's inward disposition toward wealth, arguing that the true danger lies in attachment rather than in material possessions themselves. In "To the Rich," Basil takes a more radical stance, arguing that the very accumulation of wealth is a moral and social failing that demands redistribution in the name of justice. These perspectives illustrate how Christian thought on wealth and inequality has long oscillated between personal virtue and structural justice, a tension that continues to shape contemporary economic ethics.

Clement of Alexandria lived in the second and early third centuries AD, a period of relative economic stability within the Roman Empire. As a theologian in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, he was surrounded by both immense wealth and intellectual sophistication. His interpretation of the rich young man reflects this setting, focusing less on economic redistribution and more on personal moral development.

For Clement, Jesus' command should not be understood literally. He argued that Jesus was not instructing the man to "fling away the substance that belongs to him and part with his riches," but rather to rid his soul of its unhealthy attachment to wealth (Clement of Alexandria 1919, 291-3). The true issue lies in "its excess desire, its morbid excitement over [riches], its anxious cares, the thorns of our earthly existence, which choke the seed of the true life" (293). In this interpretation, possessions themselves are not inherently problematic; the problem arises from how individuals relate to and prioritize them.

Clement views wealth as a morally neutral tool, neither inherently good nor evil; its value depends on how it is used. He likens money to a musical instrument: "An instrument, if you use it with artistic skill, is a thing of art; but if you're lacking in skill, it reaps the benefit of your unmusical nature, though not itself responsible. Wealth, too, is an instrument of the same kind" (299). Just as an instrument can produce either harmony or discord depending on the musician, wealth can serve righteousness or wickedness depending on its possessor.

To wield wealth as a tool for good, one must first possess it. Clement underscores this necessity, asking, "How could we feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, cover the naked and entertain the homeless ... if each of us were already in want of all these things?" (297). As Gordon (1989, 86) observes, "Clement regards poverty as a major obstacle to an individual's development as a person. He contends that 'the possession of the necessities of life keeps the soul free and independent if it knows how to use earthly goods wisely.'" Material deprivation, then, is not inherently sanctifying but can instead hinder moral and intellectual

growth. Jesus' call was not for the rich to renounce wealth but to wield it righteously in service to others.

For Clement, the key was proper stewardship. He maintained that the wealthy "must learn how and in what manner wealth is to be used and life acquired" (Clement of Alexandria 1919, 327). In other words, managing wealth wisely requires intentional effort and is not an innate skill. Wealth, like any instrument, must be mastered to produce good.

Scholars have recognized Clement's treatise *The Rich Man's Salvation* as a paradigm for early Christian reflection on wealth and money. As Ulrich (2024) argues, the tractate responds to the spiritual anxiety of wealthy Christians in Alexandria who feared that their possessions might bar them from salvation. Clement assures them that wealth is not inherently evil, but its ethical value depends on whether it fosters love of neighbor and detachment from passion. Ulrich highlights Clement's use of the category τὰ ἐκτός, morally indifferent things, and emphasizes that this theological framework, rooted in eschatological hope and love of neighbor, shaped broader Patristic thinking and persisted into the fourth century.

While Clement focused on internal disposition and responsible use, Basil the Great approached the issue from a starkly different perspective, shaped by the worsening economic conditions of his time. By Basil's era in the fourth century AD, the Roman Empire faced deepening social stratification and widespread poverty, making the ethical implications of wealth accumulation even more urgent. In Cappadocia, where Basil served, these dynamics were intensified by a regional famine, an event that shaped the socio-economic context of several of his most impassioned homilies, including his denunciations of hoarding by the wealthy (Holman 2001, chap. 2). This context of acute deprivation and widening inequality deeply informed Basil's interpretation of the rich young man, which he saw not merely as a spiritual challenge but as a response to urgent economic injustice. At the same time, the Church was entering a socially paradoxical phase: while continuing to preach modesty and voluntary poverty, it was also becoming a more powerful institution that increasingly attracted members of the wealthy classes (Brown 2012, 31-9). Basil's own theology, however, remained deeply shaped by pastoral engagement and material deprivation.<sup>3</sup> As a bishop deeply engaged in social justice, Basil viewed the rich young man's failure to follow Jesus at that moment not merely as personal moral weakness, but as a broader indictment of economic injustice.

Unlike Clement, who interpreted Jesus' command to the rich young man as primarily addressing an individual's spiritual condition, Basil viewed it as a direct and unambiguous mandate. He dismissed concerns about material deprivation, asserting that those who obey

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<sup>3</sup> See Holman (2001, esp. 3-17). Holman situates Basil's theology of almsgiving and justice within the practical realities of fourth-century Cappadocian poverty, highlighting how his homilies called the wealthy into a redemptive economic relationship with the poor.

God's commands will not be left without provision: "God will provide what they need to live" (Basil the Great 2006b, 54). For Basil, wealth was not merely a test of personal virtue but a divine expectation tied to justice and compassion.

Basil further argued that the rich young man's claim to have kept all of God's commandments was invalidated by his hoarding of wealth. True love for one's neighbor, Basil insisted, would have compelled the man to relinquish his excess long before Jesus' challenge. As he writes, "If [he] truly loved [his] neighbor, it would have occurred to [him] long ago to divest [himself] of this wealth" (43). In Basil's view, retaining wealth at the expense of others was not just a moral failing but an act of injustice that undermined the well-being of the entire community.

Basil also emphasized the corrupting nature of wealth, describing it as tyrannical and destructive: "Nothing withstands the influence of wealth. Everything submits to its tyranny, everything cowered at its dominion" (51). He saw wealth as a driver of societal harm, arguing that it fosters crime and oppression: "Because of wealth, the desert teems with murderers, the sea with pirates, and the cities with extortionists" (53). To Basil, hoarding wealth was not just a failure of charity—it was an active force of moral and social decay.

Paul Schroeder (2006) describes Basil's perspective as an "ethic of sustainability." According to Basil, God provided sufficient resources for all, but He distributed them unequally to encourage the wealthy to share with the poor, thus benefiting both. "It befits those who possess sound judgment to recognize that they have received wealth as stewardship, and not for their own enjoyment" (Basil the Great 2006b, 46). While both Clement and Basil advocate for stewardship, Basil is more explicit in insisting that wealth's primary purpose is redistribution.

This conviction is most vividly expressed in another of Basil's homilies, "I Will Tear Down My Barns," in which he harshly rebukes those who hoard their wealth instead of sharing it:

Who are the greedy? Those who are not satisfied with what suffices for their own needs. Who are the robbers? Those who take for themselves what rightly belongs to everyone. And you, are you not greedy? Are you not a robber? The things you received in trust as a stewardship, have you not appropriated them for yourself? Is not the person who strips another of clothing called a thief? And those who do not clothe the naked when they have the power to do so, should they not be called the same? The bread you were holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy. You are thus guilty of injustice toward as many as you might have aided, and did not (2006a, 69-70).

For Basil, inequality between the rich and poor was not merely an unfortunate reality but a moral failure that demanded resolution.

The interpretations of the story of the rich young man by Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great reveal contrasting theological perspectives on wealth. Clement's view emphasizes the internal spiritual relationship to wealth, advocating for detachment and proper stewardship, while Basil's interpretation underscores the tangible and social implications of hoarding wealth, condemning it as a moral injustice and a root cause of societal harm. Despite their differences, both Patristic theologians agree on the necessity of stewardship and the moral responsibility to use wealth for the common good.

Though rooted in distinct historical contexts, the insights of Clement and Basil remain strikingly relevant. Their contrasting frameworks, one grounded in personal virtue, the other in structural justice, reflect ongoing tensions in contemporary economic ethics. Whether addressing the moral responsibilities of individuals or the reform of institutions, their interpretations of the rich young man illustrate how theological reflection can help shape a more just and humane economy.

## **5. Economic policy implications of the theological interpretations**

Scripture, as 2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us, serves to instruct, correct, and equip believers for good works. Hebrews 4:12 describes it as "alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword," meaning its teachings remain relevant across time and contexts. These truths extend beyond personal spirituality and help shape broader discussions about economic justice and policy. While the Bible does not prescribe specific economic policies, it provides foundational ethical principles that can shape the priorities of governance and economic frameworks.

While we cannot determine the specific policies Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great might endorse if they were alive today, we can explore the modern policy implications of their interpretations of the story of the rich young man. A perspective aligned with Clement might prioritize policies that foster economic growth and incentivize philanthropy, emphasizing individual moral responsibility. These could include moderate social welfare programs to address basic needs, coupled with efforts to promote ethical and moral education. Alternatively, Clement's perspective might lean toward a *laissez-faire* approach, advocating minimal government intervention and leaving economic and social challenges to individuals and communities.

In contrast, a perspective aligned with Basil might advocate for policies aimed at addressing systemic inequality, such as universal basic needs programs, investments in accessible education and job training, as well as both progressive and inheritance taxes designed to redistribute wealth and address disparities.

Those who share Clement's interpretation might suggest that economic growth could provide the wealthy with more "tools" to assist the poor, while philanthropic incentives might

encourage greater generosity. Moral and ethical training could teach the wealthy “how and in what manner wealth is to be used.” Moderate social welfare programs could act as a safety net, ensuring that the most vulnerable have their needs met when charitable efforts fall short. However, if the emphasis is on the moral agency of the wealthy—their ability to make virtuous, voluntary choices—then a laissez-faire approach might better align with Clement’s vision of individual responsibility.

As noted above, those who share Basil’s interpretation might advocate for policies such as universal basic needs programs and investments in accessible education and job training. This connection is supported by Basil’s establishment of the Basiliad near Caesarea—a groundbreaking charitable city where the poor, strangers, and those in need were provided with food and shelter. The Basiliad included specialized buildings for the sick, staffed with caregivers, while orphans were educated and vocational schools were created to provide them with skills for the future (Tomitanul 1979, cited in Petcu 2019, 82). As Holman notes, Basil recognized that institutional structures were needed to direct surplus wealth for the common good, and he believed that bishops had the right and responsibility to oversee such distribution (Holman 2001, 15, 17).

Basil’s interpretation might also support progressive and inheritance taxes, given his belief that wealth corrupts, creates negative externalities, and exceeds genuine needs. He writes, “After all, what is the use of wealth? Do you wish to wrap yourself in fine apparel? Surely, two lengths of cloth are sufficient for a coat, while the covering of a single garment fulfills every need with regard to clothing. Or would you spend your wealth on food? A loaf of bread is enough to fill your stomach” (Basil the Great 2006b, 44). Saving wealth for the future or one’s children, he argues, is no excuse: “Being found worthy to become parents, did you at once add the following, ‘Give me children, that I might disobey your commandments?’ ... [Also] who will vouch for the prudence of your children, that they will use what is left to them for good ends? For many, wealth becomes an aid to immorality” (54).<sup>4</sup>

Where Clement might favor policies that foster economic growth and incentivize the wealthy to assist the poor voluntarily, Basil’s perspective suggests a stronger mandate for redistributing resources to meet the needs of the poor and develop the community as a whole. Both would undoubtedly agree that the primary actor in these policies would be the Church. For the early church is where believers received instruction about all of life, and were held accountable to the demands of Christian discipleship. In this sense, both Clement and Basil would probably be in the camp of “ecclesial postliberalism,” which advocates for the centrality of the Church in both private and public life (Rogers and Leithart 2024).

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the policies proposed in this paper to address economic inequality are examined in Blanchard and Rodrik (2021), among other sources. Notably, six chapters in their work specifically focus on wealth and progressive income taxation, featuring contributions from economists such as Gregory Mankiw, Lawrence Summers, Emmanuel Saez, Wojciech Kopczuk, Stefanie Stantcheva, and Gabriel Zucman.

Of course, we cannot know what specific policies Clement and Basil would support today, but these policy implications seem reasonable, given their differing interpretations of Jesus' command—whether it was meant literally or figuratively, and their contrasting views on whether the command focuses on the individual's spiritual condition or on the wellbeing of the community. As Salter (2024) argues, economic reasoning is most appropriate as a descriptive tool that clarifies the trade-offs and consequences of certain institutional arrangements. It should not serve as a moral compass in its own right. Normative guidance, especially in a Christian framework, must come from Scripture, tradition, and moral theology. It should not be grounded in assumptions embedded in cost-benefit analysis or efficiency metrics. This underscores the value of beginning with theological reflection, even when considering policy debates. As Pahman (2025) notes, Orthodox social thought, especially as expressed through ascetic practice, offers a vision of economic life oriented toward neighborly love, spiritual formation, and restraint—rather than efficiency or material accumulation.

Two knowledgeable and well-meaning believers can look at the same Scripture and arrive at vastly different policy conclusions. This is unsurprising. Yet, for those seeking to align their policy considerations with their faith, or to broaden the range of policy options they consider, comparative analyses of different scriptural interpretations can be invaluable.

## **6. Scripture relevance in the policy realm**

As one might expect, many of Clement of Alexandria's and Basil the Great's arguments are framed in spiritual rather than material terms. As a result, they may carry less weight with broader, secular audiences in the public square. For instance, Clement's arguments focus primarily on the attitudes of the wealthy toward their possessions rather than the material aspects of wealth itself. Similarly, Basil supports his position with theological reasoning, including the intertemporal trade-off of eternal rewards. Addressing the rich young man, Basil writes:

Why then are you sad? Why do you mourn in your soul, hearing 'Sell your possessions'? Even if your belongings could follow you to the future life, they would not be particularly desirable there, since they would be overshadowed by truly precious things. If, on the other hand, they must remain here, why not sell them now and obtain the profit? You are not disappointed when you must spend gold in order to purchase a horse. But when you have the opportunity to exchange corruptible things for the Kingdom of Heaven, you shed tears, spurning the one who asks of you and refusing to give anything, while contriving a million excuses for your own expenditures (Basil the Great 2006b, 47).

Compounding this difficulty, many early Christian authors (reflecting the cultures in which they lived) assumed a fixed amount of wealth in the world. For one person to gain, another had to lose. This zero-sum logic helps explain why the acquisition of wealth was often viewed as morally suspect and why early theological reasoning focused so strongly on redistribution and restraint rather than growth (Whitener and Salter 2023, 108-9). Strikingly though, this ancient intuition finds echoes in some contemporary economic models, which suggest that even in growing economies, wealth tends to concentrate absent deliberate mechanisms for redistribution, a dynamic that mirrors Basil's concern that systemic inequality may deepen even without overt injustice (Boghossian 2019).

Given these insights, their arguments, though shaped by theological commitments, still offer meaningful insights for secular reasoning. If one broadly asserts that attitudes toward wealth are more important than wealth itself, Clement's policy implications remain relevant. Similarly, if one contends that wealth imbalances harm both the wealthy and society as a whole, Basil's policy implications also hold significance. Thus, comparative scriptural analysis may have broader applicability beyond Christian contexts.

For Christians, however, the motivation behind actions clearly matters. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we read: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21), a truth acknowledged by both Clement and Basil. In a fallen world where perfect solutions are unattainable, the question becomes: to what extent should motivation matter?

The answer depends on several factors. First of all, is the issue solely about the rich man's soul, or does it also concern his impact on the community? If the latter is included, then policy intervention may have a role to play. Second, what is the appropriate institutional framework? Should such policies be led by the Church, relying on voluntary generosity, or by the State, enforcing redistribution? Third, how does policy affect moral agency? Does intervention encourage responsibility, or does it diminish personal initiative? Finally, how does the policy shape personal agency itself, and how much does that matter? These complexities naturally lead to differing policy conclusions, but that is entirely appropriate. What matters, from the standpoint of theological economics in the Christian tradition, is that we begin where Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great did, with Scripture, and ask the essential question: How then shall we live?

Comparative analysis of scriptural interpretation is a valuable methodology for determining policies and their objectives. For many economic topics, Scripture provides enough guidance to make definitive statements without requiring comparative analysis. However, on the issue of economic inequality, biblical guidance is less explicit, making comparative analysis especially useful in broadening theological understanding. Moreover, drawing from the teachings of the Church Fathers enriches our shared ecumenical Christian heritage, offering insights that are relevant to Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants alike. Consequently, comparative Patristic analysis helps build a foundation for theological

economics that explicitly considers Scripture while expanding the range of analysis and policy options.

## **6. Conclusion**

The intersection of theology and economics is complex, and the story of the rich young man provides a compelling case study for exploring these complexities. This study has demonstrated how two prominent Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great, reflecting upon Jesus' command to the young man, arrived at distinct interpretations, each carrying different implications for economic thought and policy. Clement viewed wealth as a morally neutral tool, with the primary concern being the spiritual disposition of the wealthy toward their possessions. Basil, on the other hand, regarded wealth accumulation as a social injustice and emphasized the necessity of redistribution to meet the needs of the poor.

These perspectives continue to inform modern discussions on economic inequality. Clement's interpretation suggests policies that promote economic growth and philanthropy, emphasizing individual moral responsibility and voluntary generosity. In contrast, Basil's vision aligns with systemic approaches to reducing inequality, advocating for redistribution, progressive taxation, and social welfare programs to ensure a just and equitable society. While these positions differ, both underscore the theological imperative of stewardship and the ethical responsibility of wealth.

The broader goal of this study has been to show how divergent theological readings of a single scriptural text can still enrich modern economic reflection. Rather than seeking a unified conclusion, this approach invites policymakers and scholars to consider a wider array of moral frameworks and institutional responses. The enduring value of Clement and Basil lies not in their offering of economic blueprints, but rather in the ways they nudge us toward expanding our ethical imagination when confronting the challenges of inequality.

Ultimately, applying theology to economics is not about imposing rigid formulas but about shaping a deeper, ethically grounded economic vision. The insights of Clement and Basil remind us that economic inequality is not just a policy issue; it is a moral and theological concern. As modern societies grapple with persistent disparities, theological perspectives offer valuable wisdom on how wealth can serve the common good. The question remains: How do we balance individual moral responsibility with the need for systemic justice? The voices of the Church Fathers challenge us not just to seek economic efficiency, but to pursue economic virtue.

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