

Article

Almsgiving and Competing Soteriologies in Second-Century Christianity

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Abstract: While care for the poor was widely advocated and practiced in early Christianity, charity was not universally endorsed. *The Gospel of Thomas* (*Gos. Thom.*), for example, is notable for its rejection of almsgiving, along with other practices such as fasting and prayer (*Gos. Thom.* 6, 14; see also *Gos. Thom.* 27, 104). Ignatius of Antioch accuses some of his opponents of neglecting almsgiving and Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius' friend and fellow bishop, suggests that almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are practices that will help counter false teaching in Philippi. This paper explores the role of almsgiving in competing visions of soteriology in second-century Christianity, including consideration of texts such as *2 Clement* (*2 Clem.*), Ignatius' *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* (*Ign. Smyrn.*), Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* (*Pol. Phil.*), and the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Keywords: *2 Clement*; almsgiving; atonement; charity; early Christianity; *Gospel of Thomas*; Ignatius of Antioch; Polycarp of Smyrna; resurrection; salvation

1. Introduction¹

At some point in the second century, a follower of Jesus prepared a sermon, based in part on Isaiah 54, for an audience of fellow Christ-believers (Parvis 2006; Tuckett 2012, pp. 18–26). This anonymous sermon, known to us now as *2 Clement*, presents its listeners with a series of calls to repentance (*2 Clem.* 8.1; 13.1; 16.1; 17.1; 19.1), including one appeal toward the end of the message that frames the practice of merciful deeds, or “almsgiving,” as an embodied demonstration of repentance:

¹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have received no small opportunity to repent, while we have time let us turn to the God who has called us—that is, while we still have one who receives us. ² For if we renounce these pleasures and conquer our soul by refusing to do its evil desires, we will share in the mercy of Jesus. ³ But you know that “the day” of judgment is already coming like a “blazing oven,” and “some of the heavens will be melted,” and the whole earth will be like lead being melted in a fire, and then both the hidden and public works of people will become visible. ⁴ Therefore, merciful practice (ἐλεημοσύνη) is good as repentance for sin. Fasting is better than prayer, but merciful practice (ἐλεημοσύνη) is better than both, and “love covers a multitude of sins”. Prayer from a good conscience delivers from death. Blessed is everyone who is found full of these things, for merciful practice (ἐλεημοσύνη) lightens the burden of sin.

(*2 Clem.* 16.1–4)²

¹ Some of the material in this essay is adapted from my earlier volume (Downs 2016). I am grateful to Baylor University Press for permission to reuse that material in the present essay.

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. On the translation of ἐλεημοσύνη as “merciful practice,” see (Downs 2016, pp. 33–38).

In the context of a warning about eschatological judgment, the anonymous author of *2 Clement* constructs a hierarchy of praxis that ranks fasting above prayer but identifies merciful practice (ἐλεημοσύνη) as better than both because merciful care for the needy clearly demonstrates repentance. Moreover, drawing on both 1 Peter (1 Pet) 4:8 and Tobit (Tob) 12:8, *2 Clem.* 16.4 stresses the atoning value of care for the needy: merciful practice demonstrates repentance for sin, covers a multitude of sins, and lightens the burden of sin. That the author of *2 Clem* would exhort a second-century Christian audience to practices of fasting, prayer and almsgiving may seem unremarkable, not least considering the same concentration of practices is found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Matt) 6:1–21.³ The practice of ἐλεημοσύνη, or merciful care for the needy, was widely advocated in nascent Christianity, no doubt an indication that early Christ-followers were shaped by Jewish scriptural traditions that emphasize God's special concern for the poor and the responsibility of God's people to show mercy to those in need.

Yet while care for the poor is commonly commended in early Christian texts, charity is not universally endorsed. The *Gospel of Thomas*, for instance, is notable for its rejection of almsgiving, along with fasting and prayer (*Gos. Thom.* 6, 14; see *Gos. Thom.* 27, 104), the other practices together with care for the needy mentioned in *2 Clem* 16:

¹ His disciples questioned him and said to him, "Do you want us to fast? How shall we pray? Shall we give alms? What diet should we observe?" ² Jesus said, "Do not tell lies, ³ and do not do what you hate, ⁴ for all things are plain in the sight of heaven. ⁵ For nothing hidden will not become manifest, ⁶ and nothing covered will remain without being uncovered." (*Gos. Thom.* 6.1–6)⁴

¹ Jesus said to them, "If you fast, you will give rise to sin for yourselves; ² and if you pray, you will be condemned; ³ and if you give alms, you will do harm to your spirits. ⁴ When you go into any land and walk about in the districts, if they receive you, eat what they will set before you, and heal the sick among them. ⁵ For what goes into your mouth will not defile you, but that which issues from your mouth—it is that which will defile you." (*Gos. Thom.* 14.1–5)

Given the collocation of fasting, prayer and almsgiving in *2 Clement* 16 and *Gos. Thom.* 6 and 14, we might raise the question whether these second-century texts are engaged in competition about practices appropriate for followers of Jesus, including especially the value of almsgiving. If by "competition" we mean that there existed a direct literary relationship between *2 Clement* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, with the author of one text responding to claims made by the author of the other, I doubt that the evidence allows for such a confident reconstruction. But if by "competition" we mean that these texts present differing, perhaps even incompatible, visions of Christian belief and practice, regardless of questions about any particular literary relationship, then I would like to suggest that competing views about the value of almsgiving reflect, and are rooted in, competing soteriological perspectives. We see hints of such competing soteriological perspectives in the *Gospel of Thomas* and *2 Clement*, but also in the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp.

2. The Gospel of Thomas

A literary analysis of the presentation of almsgiving in the *Gospel of Thomas* shows not merely the dismissal but even the disparagement of care for the poor in this second-century text.⁵ Almsgiving is

³ It is possible that Shepherd of Hermas *Similitude* 5 (especially 5.3.7–8) should be considered as well, since in that parable the combination of almsgiving and fasting is portrayed as the key to effective prayer (Finn 2007, pp. 419–29).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of *Gos. Thom.* come from the work of Thomas O. Lambdin (Lambdin 1989, pp. 52–93).

⁵ Model literary-critical approaches to the *Gospel of Thomas* can be found in the works of Valantasis (1997a) and Fieger (1991). Sellew (1997, pp. 327–46) was one of the first to call for a shift from compositional and historical to literary approaches to

mentioned twice in the Gospel of Thomas. In the first instance, Jesus does not respond directly to the question posed by the disciples in *Gos. Thom.* 6.1.⁶ The saying that precedes *Gos. Thom.* 6 highlights the fact that Jesus' revelation is disclosed in his present teaching, a major theme of the document: "Jesus said, 'Understand what is in front of you, and what is hidden from you will be revealed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be manifested'" (*Gos. Thom.* 5; see *Gos. Thom.* 1, 59, 37, 62). When the disciples ask whether they should fast and how they should pray, give alms, and eat in *Gos. Thom.* 6, Jesus responds with a statement that essentially ignores the question and redirects attention to the disclosure of things hidden and covered. Thus, in response to a query about pious actions, Jesus offers a moral injunction ("Do not tell lies, and do not do what you hate") grounded in the visibility of all things. It seems that the performance of these visible acts of piety is ignored because it is, in fact, hidden motivations and attitudes that will be seen, although the question by whom they will be seen is left unanswered (Valantasis 1997a).

If Jesus ignores the question about fasting, prayer, almsgiving and diet in *Gos. Thom.* 6.1, he returns in *Gos. Thom.* 14.1–3 to the very issues raised by the earlier query. Here the practices of fasting, prayer and almsgiving are not merely dismissed, however. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are characterized as harmful: fasting occasions sin; prayer brings condemnation; and almsgiving results in personal harm. With regard to the second part of the saying in 14.4–5, the claim that food does not defile seems to connect with the last part of the disciples' question in *Gos. Thom.* 6.1: "What diet should we observe?"

The disparagement of almsgiving in *Gos. Thom.* 14 should be located in the larger context of the document's pervasive rejection of traditional Jewish practices (Marjanen 1998, pp. 163–82). If fasting, prayer, almsgiving and dietary observances form a quadrumvirate of praxis in *Gos. Thom.* 6 and 14, these customs are also either rejected or redefined elsewhere in the Gospel of Thomas. Fasting, prayer and sin, for example, are similarly associated in *Gos. Thom.* 104:

¹ They said to Jesus, "Come, let us pray today and let us fast." ² Jesus said, "What is the sin that I have committed, or wherein have I been defeated?" ³ But when the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber, then let them fast and pray." (*Gos. Thom.* 104)

At first glance, it would seem that Jesus allows fasting in *Gos. Thom.* 104, although only after the bridegroom has departed from the bridal chamber. This, in fact, is precisely how the parallel saying is interpreted in the Synoptic Gospels. In Mark 2:18–20, for instance, Jesus is asked why the Pharisees and the disciples of John fast but his disciples do not. Jesus responds, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day" (Mark 2:19–20, NRSV; see Matt 9:14–15; Luke 5:33–35). According to Synoptic Tradition, Jesus is the bridegroom and his disciples will indeed fast after his death.

Yet in *Gos. Thom.* 104, Jesus does not indicate that his followers will pray and fast. In fact, the identity of those who ask Jesus to join them in prayer and fasting is not revealed, and it should not be assumed that those who extend the invitation are Jesus' disciples (cf. *Gos. Thom.* 91 and 100, where the precise identity of those who engage Jesus in conversation is not revealed). The meaning of *Gos. Thom.* 104 for the readers of Thomas hinges on the question of when the bridegroom will leave the bridal chamber. In *Gos. Thom.* 75.1, the image of the bridal chamber is employed to draw a distinction

the Gospel of Thomas. The literary-critical approach adopted here differs from the form-critical method of DeConick (2006). Patterson (2011) addresses the problems associated with DeConick's methodology, including an argument for dating the text between 135 and 200 CE (which is the position adopted here) (see also Gathercole 2014, pp. 112–27).

⁶ That *Gos. Thom.* 14.1–2 seems to provide a suitable answer to the inquiry has led to speculation that perhaps Jesus' reply has been displaced by deliberate redaction, by scribal error, or even by an accidental shuffling of pages. If *Gos. Thom.* 6 and 14 were originally located together, such separation must have occurred relatively early in the manuscript tradition, for the Greek version of *Gos. Thom.* 6 contains similar material, though in fragmentary form (*P.Oxy.* 654). From a literary perspective that focuses on the Coptic version in its present form, however, such questions are secondary (DeConick 2006, pp. 87–88).

between “the many” and “the solitary”: “Many are standing at the door, but it is the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber.” From the perspective of the Gospel of Thomas, the bridal chamber is an image of salvation. The statement about prayer and fasting in *Gos. Thom.* 104, therefore, is likely ironic: there is no need to fast and pray because the bridegroom has not left, and will not leave, the bridal chamber (Marjanen 1998, pp. 171–72; Valantasis 1997b, pp. 261–76; see also Gathercole 2014, p. 270).⁷

The only other place in the Gospel of Thomas where fasting is explicitly mentioned is *Gos. Thom.* 27.1–2: “<Jesus said>, ‘If you do not fast as regards the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not observe the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the father.’” Again, it might appear that the text is advocating the practices of fasting and Sabbath observance. Yet the Greek νηστεύειν κόσμον and the Coptic ⲛⲏⲥⲧⲉⲣⲉ ⲉⲡⲓⲕⲟⲥⲙⲟⲥ should be seen as accusatives of respect, showing “that the verb is not utilized in its concrete meaning of ‘to fast from food’ but figuratively as ‘to abstain from something which is related to the world’” (Marjanen 1998, p. 173). The same would be true with respect to the parallel clause that follows: what is being advocated is not observance of the Sabbath but taking a Sabbath with respect to the Sabbath—that is, nonobservance of the Sabbath. In this logion, then, fasting and Sabbath observance are redefined and the literal practices rejected. This interpretation accords well with the world-denying values of the Gospel of Thomas.⁸

Together with this rejection of fasting, prayer and Sabbath observance should also be included as elements of a larger critique of Jewish practices in the *Gospel of Thomas* (1) the polemic against the Pharisees and the scribes, (2) the disparagement of Israel’s written prophetic traditions, (3) the spiritualization of circumcision, (4) and the rejection of dietary laws found in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

¹ Jesus said, “The Pharisees and the scribes have taken the keys of knowledge (ⲛⲥⲱⲥⲓⲕ) and hidden them. ² They themselves have not entered, nor have they allowed to enter those who wish to. ³ You, however, be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” (*Gos. Thom.* 39.1–3; see *Gos. Thom.* 102)

¹ His disciples said to him, “Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you.” ² He said to them, “You have omitted the one living in your presence and have spoken [only] of the dead.” (*Gos. Thom.* 52.1–2) (see Moreland 2006, pp. 75–91)

¹ His disciples said to him, “Is circumcision beneficial or not?” ² He said to them, “If it were beneficial, their father would beget them already circumcised from their mother. ³ Rather, the true circumcision in spirit has become completely profitable.” (*Gos. Thom.* 53.1–3)

Jesus said, “Why do you wash the outside of the cup? Do you not realize that he who made the inside is the same one who made the outside?” (*Gos. Thom.* 89.1)

⁷ DeConick (2006) sees *Gos. Thom.* 104 as standing in tension with *Gos. Thom.* 6, 14, 27. She posits that *Gos. Thom.* 104 represents the earlier practice of obligatory fasting among earlier Thomasine Christians, a practice that was modified and critiqued by the later Thomasine community. As Valantasis (1997a, pp. 153–54) comments on *Gos. Thom.* 75, “This bridal chamber metaphorizes the unity and merging of subjectivities which these saying promulgate, so that the solitary, by entering into the bridal chamber, joins the many others who have also become spiritual beings. The bridal chamber, in this sense, occupies a communal place similar to the language of the Kingdom of God or the Father’s domain in the rest of the sayings: it is the place that mediates salvation, union, spiritualization and life, but it remains a place for very few, because only the solitaries may enter it.”

⁸ Witetschek (2010, pp. 379–93) has suggested that *Gos. Thom.* 69.2 (“Blessed are the hungry, for the belly of him who desires will be filled”) alludes to the practice of fasting and using the surplus resources that have been saved from abstention for the benefit of others (see Gathercole 2014, pp. 270, 472–74.). Witetschek cites a parallel in Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus*: “But there is another [i.e., practice of fasting] that is even more religious, the praise of which is even pronounced in the writings of certain Apostles. For in a certain book we find it said by the Apostles, ‘Blessed is he who also fasts in order that he may feed the poor one’” (10.2). The parallel between *Gos. Thom.* 69.2 and Origen is intriguing, but even Witetschek admits that such a profound expression of social concern would be “unusual” in *Gospel of Thomas*. Given the other passages that disapprove of fasting in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the lack of concern in the document for issues of social ethics, Witetschek’s reading is unconvincing. It seems most likely the two sayings in *Gos. Thom.* 69.1–2 spiritualize and internalize persecution and hunger (Valantasis 1997a, pp. 148–49).

Thus, the identification of almsgiving as harmful in the *Gospel of Thomas* should be interpreted in the wider context of the document's prevalent dismissal of Jewish practices—customs that are either denied or radically reinterpreted (Kim 2007, pp. 393–414).⁹ The polemic of Thomas against Judaism, or perhaps against Christ-followers who identify with Judaism and its practices, is one reason that the document can plausibly be dated to the early-to-middle part of the second century, at a time when some strands of the Christian movement were advocating for the separation of Christianity and Judaism (Jipp and Thate 2010, pp. 237–55; Gathercole 2014, pp. 121–23).

Yet almsgiving in the *Gospel of Thomas* is perhaps characterized as injurious not merely because it is associated with Jewish religious ritual. The *Gospel of Thomas* also displays very little concern for socially embodied ethics, including care for the poor. Of course, it is difficult to maintain that the *Gospel of Thomas* communicates any clear, consistent ethical agenda. It is important to note, for example, that *Gos. Thom.* 25 does encourage brotherly love: “Jesus said, ‘Love your brother like your soul, guard him like the pupil of your eye.’”¹⁰ Even if this is the only text that advocates social concern for the other in the entire document, the theme is at least nominally present here. On the whole, however, the *Gospel of Thomas* emphasizes an individualized soteriology with minimal concern for communally embodied existence. Logion 87 may, in fact, issue a warning against mutual dependence: “Jesus said, ‘Wretched is the body that is dependent upon a body, and wretched is the soul that is dependent on these two.’” (see Uro 2003, pp. 58–62) That is, wretched is the individual human body that depends upon a social body, and the soul should be free of both. The individualism of the *Gospel of Thomas* does stand out when compared with other early Christian texts that advocate almsgiving, including those that stress the atoning value of the practice, such as 2 *Clem.* 16.1–4. Perhaps almsgiving is harmful in the *Gospel of Thomas* not only because it constitutes a Jewish observance that must be abandoned but also because the very nature of the practice diverts one from the soteriological vision revealed to the individual throughout the document. If one's primary goal is the interpretation of the secret sayings spoken by the living Jesus, then tangible manifestations of love and financial assistance for the impoverished other are distracting and, therefore, harmful.

Related to the individualized soteriology of Thomas is the document's framing of eschatology without reference to the future appearance of the kingdom of God or the future resurrection of the dead, the latter of which is probably explicitly rejected in *Gos. Thom.* 51. It is not quite accurate to say that the *Gospel of Thomas* is non-eschatological, for the document opens with the promise that “he who shall find the interpretation of these words shall not taste death” (*Gos. Thom.* 1).¹¹ Avoidance of death is mentioned several times in Thomas (see *Gos. Thom.* 18; 19; 111), and *Gos. Thom.* 50 appears to offer a path for the enlightened soul to ascend past the archontic powers into the bridal chamber (see *Gos. Thom.* 75) (Gathercole 2011, pp. 286–87). The *Gospel of Thomas*, however, rejects notions of bodily resurrection, new creation, and a future kingdom, particularly through dialogues in which the disciples ask eschatological questions in which their assumptions about these realities are corrected by Jesus (*Gos. Thom.* 18, 51, 113) (Gathercole 2011, pp. 291–93; Patterson 2013, pp. 61–92; Jipp 2011, pp. 242–66; Gathercole 2014, pp. 229–32).¹² There is in the *Gospel of Thomas*, therefore, no apparent

⁹ Marjanen (1998, p. 181) locates this thematic emphasis in the *Gospel of Thomas* in the context of emerging debates about the relationship between followers of Jesus and Judaism: “Therefore the logia dealing with Jewish religious practices are utilized to confront and to instruct [readers who are bound to their Jewish heritage] in order that they might abandon that form of Christianity (or Judaism) which is characterized by pious observance of various religious obligations, and that they might assume the Thomasine version of Christianity with its emphasis on self-knowledge and rejection of worldly values.” Gathercole (2011, pp. 280–302) also contends that *Gos. Thom.* 40, 68 and 71 reflect an anti-Jewish polemic centered on “the destruction of Judaism as an institution,” including the destruction of the Jewish people and the Jewish temple.

¹⁰ Yet even when it is acknowledged that this one text encourages brotherly love, it is interesting that the injunction is phrased with reference to love of the soul. The canonical command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Matt 19:19; 22:39; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8) seems to leave more room for an open, embodied love that considers the material needs of both insider and outsider.

¹¹ Translation from Schneemelcher (1991, p. 117).

¹² Pace Crislip (2007, pp. 595–613).

connection between deeds done in the body and eschatological reward or punishment, and almsgiving is neither meritorious nor atoning but injurious.

3. Ignatius and Polycarp on Almsgiving, Eschatology and Resurrection

It is the connection between almsgiving, eschatology and resurrection that I would like to explore in two additional second-century Christian texts, namely, Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Smyrnaeans and Polycarp of Smyrna's letter to the Philipppians.

As is well known, in his letters Ignatius is particularly concerned with the danger of false teachers, a topic that provokes his ire in several epistles.¹³ When writing to the Smyrnaeans, for example, Ignatius levels an interesting and distinctive accusation against some false teachers in that city. In addition to their abstention from the Eucharist and prayer (Ign. *Smyrn.* 7.1), these opponents, Ignatius alleges, neglect practices of caring for the needy:

Observe well those who hold divisive views about the gracious gift of Jesus Christ that has come to us, and see how they are opposed to the purpose of God. They do not have any care for love (περὶ ἀγάπης οὐ μέλει αὐτοῖς), none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the one who is in chains or the one released, none the one who is hungry or the one who is thirsty. (Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2)

Key to Ignatius' critique of his Docetic opponents here is the connection between love for the poor, the flesh of Jesus Christ, and the reality of resurrection. Ignatius immediately follows his censure of his opponents' lack of love by condemning their abstinence from the Eucharist and prayer (Ign. *Smyrn.* 7.1). The Docetists in Smyrna desist from these Christian practices, according to Ignatius, "because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our savior, Jesus Christ, flesh that suffered for our sins and flesh that the Father raised up in his kindness" (Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2).¹⁴ Then, after stating that those who deny God's gift will perish in their contentiousness, Ignatius suggests that practice of love (ἀγαπᾶν) leads to resurrection. Of his opponents Ignatius says, "It would be better for them to love, in order that they might also rise up" (ἵνα καὶ ἀναστῶσιν [Ign. *Smyrn.* 7.1]). Since Ignatius has defined "love" (ἀγάπη) in the preceding statements in 6.2 as showing concern for widows, orphans, the oppressed, prisoners, freed prisoners,¹⁵ the hungry, and the thirsty, the implication is that those who do not care for the needy will not share in the resurrection of Christ. In these comments, Ignatius forges a close connection between almsgiving and soteriology: resurrection is the future of those who love, and love is the practice of caring for the needy. Moreover, Ignatius ascribes a theological motivation for his opponents' failure to show love to the poor—namely, a rejection of the flesh (σάρξ) of Jesus Christ. These Docetists in Smyrna, according to Ignatius, explicitly reject the confession that the flesh of Jesus

¹³ The nature of the false teaching identified and confronted by Ignatius is still very much debated (see Myllykoski 2005, pp. 341–77; Marshall 2005, pp. 1–23; Trevett 1983, pp. 1–18). I think it is reasonable to label the false teachers in Smyrna "Docetists" (see Trebilco 2004). I assume the modern consensus, established by the work of B Lightfoot (1885) and Zahn (1873), that the seven letters of the so-called middle recension are authentic. Given recent discussions that have questioned the assumption that Ignatius' letters should be dated to the reign of Trajan (98–117 CE; see Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.36), I would posit a broad time frame for the letters sometime in the first half of the second century (Barnes 2008, pp. 119–30; Foster 2007, pp. 81–107; Lechner 1999; Hübner 1997; Lindemann 1997; Schöllgen 1998; Edwards 1998).

¹⁴ The noun σάρξ occurs only in the phrase translated "the flesh of our savior"; the following two instances in which I have provided the word "flesh" represent the article τὴν and the relative pronoun ἣν, both of which I have translated as "flesh." The emphasis on Jesus' embodied existence is important, since Ignatius is ostensibly contending against those who deny any salvific importance to the σάρξ of Jesus. The section numbering here reflects Holmes (2007); some editions include this material in Ign. *Smyrn.* 7.1.

¹⁵ The phrase οὐ περὶ δεδεμένον ἢ λελυμένον probably refers to those imprisoned and those recently released from prison, the latter group possibly including "Christian 'confessors' who on being released from prison continued to be supported by the church until they had established themselves again" (Schoedel 1985, p. 239). It is at least possible, however, that those "set free" are Christian martyrs "set free" by death, for whom the Docetists did not care while the martyrs were alive (see Ignatius' *Letter to the Romans*. [Ign. *Rom.*] 4.1–5.3). Kirk (2013, pp. 91–94) has argued that the language of "freedom" in Ign. *Rom.* 4.3 refers to freedom obtained at death, including the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (see Ignatius' *Letter to Polycarp* [Ign. *Pol.*] 4.3). Elsewhere in Ignatius' letters, the verb λύω contrasts the bishops' chains with the freedom of his readers (Ignatius' *Letter to the Magnesians* [Ign. *Magn.*] 12.1), however.

Christ suffered for the deliverance of sins and that the flesh of Jesus Christ was raised by God from the dead (Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2; see 1.1–2; 3.1–3; 5.2; 12.2). Ignatius implies that a lack of love—that is, caring for the needy—and a denial of the salvific importance of the flesh of Jesus Christ are tied together.

It might be objected that Ignatius' critique of his opponents' failure to love the poor is an exaggeration or untruth. Indeed, separating reality from fiction in early Christian polemic is notoriously difficult. Yet the fact that Ignatius is writing to a church that knows well and may even be tempted to welcome those whom Ignatius derisively calls "wild beasts in human form" (Ign. *Smyrn.* 4.1) suggests that Ignatius' assessment of his opponents' practices cannot be too far off target, or else his criticism of his opponents' lack of charity would be exposed as a misrepresentation and his hope for the repentance of these Docetists thwarted (Ign. *Smyrn.* 4.1). If Ignatius' assessment of his opponents is broadly accurate, then his comments evocatively suggest that, among the competing visions of salvation in Smyrna, divergent views about the importance of embodied existence entailed not merely abstract christological debates about the *past* of the Christ event. These anthropological and christological differences were also intimately related to *present* practices of almsgiving, Eucharist, and prayer among Christians in Asia Minor. Ignatius implies that he and the ideal readers of his letter care about the bodies of the poor and powerless because of the soteriological importance of the embodied Jesus. For Ignatius, the body of Jesus Christ—both in suffering flesh and in resurrected flesh—matters for Christian practices of love. Conversely, Ignatius intimates that his opponents neglect love for the bodies of the destitute because they neglect the soteriological importance of the body of Christ.¹⁶

Interestingly, there is a very similar dynamic reflected in a letter to the church in Philippi written by Polycarp, Ignatius' friend and episcopal colleague.¹⁷ Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, both at the time he penned his missive to the Philippians and earlier when Ignatius wrote to him and to the church of the Smyrnaeans. Among the primary concerns reflected in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians are the bishop's moral exhortation about the avoidance of avarice (2.2 [φιλαργυρία]; 4.1, 3; 5.2 [ἀφιλάργυρος]; 6.1; 11.1, 2 [*avaritia*]) and his condemnation of false teaching (7.1–2).¹⁸ These two central themes in *Pol. Phil.* have often not been understood in relation to one another, but avarice and heresy are closely connected in the logical progression of Polycarp's letter, and quite possibly this connection is forged for some of the very same reasons Ignatius had earlier criticized certain opponents in Polycarp's own city of Smyrna—namely, that the false teachers denied a future resurrection and a future judgment of behavior, with the result that those who denied these eschatological realities also failed to care for the poor.

Much of Polycarp's paraenesis in his letter to the Philippians, and particularly Polycarp's instruction regarding the sin of "love of money" (φιλαργυρία/*avaritia*), is rooted in his conviction regarding God's future judgment, a judgment Polycarp believes is denied by certain false teachers (Hartog 2013, p. 30).¹⁹ In *Pol. Phil.* 2.2, for example, Polycarp insists that "the one who raised [our Lord Jesus Christ] from the dead will raise us also, if we do his will and follow his commandments and love the things that he loved, while avoiding all unrighteousness, greed, *love of money*, evil speech, false testimony." This assertion is typical of Polycarp's presentation of the relationship between eschatology and ethics. The connection between eschatology and ethics is also emphasized with reference to "love of money" in 4.1–3, which begins, in a statement that echoes 1 Tim 6:10, with a declaration that readers should "follow the commandment of the Lord" (i.e., give alms) because of the belief that those who

¹⁶ Ignatius regularly images the church as the corporate embodiment of Christ: Ign. *Smyrn.* 1.2; Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians* (Ign. *Eph.* 4.2; Ignatius' *Letter to the Trallians* (Ign. *Trall.*) 11.1–2; see also Ign. *Eph.* 9.1, 15.3; Ign. *Magn.* 7.2.

¹⁷ Assuming the literary unity of *Pol. Phil.*, the letter was probably written between 100 and 140 CE, although the range could be more strictly limited to 100–117 CE (Hartog 2013, pp. 40–44).

¹⁸ My understanding of these issues in *Pol. Phil.* is indebted to Hartog (2013, pp. 76–78). Hartog (2013, pp. 27–37) offers a more detailed articulation of his thesis. Holmes (2007, p. 274) has indicated that "a major interpretive question is the relationship (or lack thereof) between" the "Philippians' request for a discussion of 'righteousness' (3.1–10.3) and the problem of Valens, an avaricious presbyter (11.1–4)."

¹⁹ Polycarp mentions or alludes to future judgment in *Pol. Phil.* 2.1–3; 4.1; 5.2–3; 6.2; 7.1–2; 8.1; 10.2; 11.2; and 12.2. See the example and the reward of Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus in *Pol. Phil.* 9.1–2.

brought nothing into the world can take nothing out of it (i.e., when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ [6.2]).²⁰

Similarly, Polycarp teaches that deacons are to be blameless in the presence of God's righteousness—a blamelessness that includes not being lovers of money (ἀφιλάργυροι)—with the promise that those who please God in the present world and prove to be worthy citizens of God will receive the world to come and will be raised from the dead (Pol. Phil. 5.2–3). According to Polycarp, the avoidance of avarice rests in the conviction that there will be a future judgment and resurrection, two eschatological realities denied by those whom Polycarp identifies as false teachers.

The connection between eschewing “love of money” (and the opposite of φιλαργυρία—namely, care for the poor), future judgment, and the non-eschatological nature of the false teaching Polycarp wishes to combat is seen most clearly in the logical progression of Pol. Phil. 6–7. In 6.1, Polycarp concludes the *Hausstafeln* that runs from 4.1 to 6.1 with instructions for “presbyters” (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι) to practice almsgiving:

The presbyters also should be compassionate, showing mercy to all (εἰς πάντας ἐλεήμονες), turning back those who have gone astray, looking after all the sick, not neglecting a widow (χήρας), or an orphan (ὀρφανοῦ), or a poor person (πένητος), but always considering the good before God and before people, abstaining from all anger, partiality, unjust judgment, being far from all love of money (μακρὰν ὄντες πάσης φιλαργυρίας), not being quick to believe the things spoken against someone, not harsh in judgment, knowing that we are all debtors of sins (πάντες ὀφειλέται ἐσμέν ἁμαρτίας).

Polycarp then follows this instruction for presbyters to care for the needy while also avoiding avarice (among other transgressions) with a discussion of forgiveness and judgment: “Therefore, if we ask the Lord to forgive us, we ourselves also should forgive, for we are before the eyes of the Lord and of God, and everyone must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and each one must render an account of himself or herself” (Pol. Phil. 6.2).²¹ It does not appear that Polycarp refers to forgiveness and judgment in 6.2 because he believes that the practices of almsgiving discussed in 6.1 are a means to obtain the former and fare well with respect to the latter, as is the case in 2 Clem. 16. Yet the notion that all the Philippians (and not merely the presbyters mentioned in 6.1) are observed by God and will be judged by Christ on the basis of their actions, including for their care for the needy and avoidance of avarice, sets the instruction regarding almsgiving within an eschatological framework.

It is precisely this connection between ethics and eschatology, however, that Polycarp alleges that his opponents fail to grasp. Pol. Phil. 6.3 “serves as a bridge between the moral *paraenesis* extending from 6.1 and the polemic against false teaching extending into 7.1” (Hartog 2013, p. 33):

And so let us serve him [i.e., Christ] with fear and reverence, just as he himself has commanded, as did the apostles who proclaimed the gospel to us, and the prophets who announced in advance the coming of the Lord. Let us be zealots regarding the good, and let us avoid those who tempt others to sin, and false brothers, and those who bear the name of the Lord in hypocrisy, who lead foolish people astray. (Pol. Phil. 6.3)

The Philippians are to serve Christ with fear and reverence, as was commanded by Christ himself, by apostles, and by prophets.²² In the context of the letter, the exhortation to be “zealots regarding the good” (ζηλωταὶ περὶ τὸ καλόν) in 6.3 refers to practices of charity, for the phrase “always considering the good” (προνοοῦντες ἀεὶ τοῦ καλοῦ) is used in 6.1 as a way to designate what it means to show

²⁰ For the argument that “the commandment of the Lord” in Pol. Phil. 4.1 refers to the practice of almsgiving, see (Downs and Rogan 2016, pp. 628–38).

²¹ On the relationship between Pol. Phil. 6.2 and materials from the New Testament (especially Matt 6:12–15; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; 11:4; Romans 14:10, 12; 2 Corinthians 5:10), see (Holmes 2005, pp. 187–227; Berding 2002).

²² For the argument that the antecedent of the pronoun αὐτῷ in Pol. Phil. 6.1 is Christ instead of God and that the “prophets who announced in advance the coming of our Lord” refers to Old Testament prophets, see Hartog (2013, pp. 32–33).

mercy to all, including the sick, widows, orphans and the poor. Moreover, in 10.2, the Latin *benefacere* (“to do good”) stands in a parallel relationship with *eleemosyna* (“merciful practice”) in an exhortation to charitable action.

If Polycarp’s appeal in 6.3 to be “zealots regarding the good” points back the discussion of almsgiving in 6.1, his warning against those who tempt others to sin, against false brothers, and against hypocrites points forward to the discourse against false teachers in 7.1–2. According to Polycarp in 7.1, a false teacher—polemically labeled (probably in language drawn from the Johannine epistles) an antichrist, of the devil, and the firstborn of Satan—is someone who (1) “does not confess that Jesus has come in the flesh” (see 1 John 4:2–4; 2 John 7; Ign. *Smyrn.* 1.1, 2; 3.1–2; 7.1; 12.2); (2) “does not acknowledge the testimony of the cross” (see Ign. *Smyrn.* 1.1; *Eph.* 18.1; *Trall.* 11.2; *Phld.* 8.2); and (3) distorts the sayings of the Lord in order to claim “that there is neither resurrection nor judgment.”²³ In particular, the false teacher “twists the sayings of the Lord to suit his own sinful desires” (7.1). Polycarp, therefore, appears to be disturbed by a denial of future judgment and resurrection that is tied to a distortion of Jesus’ teaching that leads to sinful practice.

Interestingly, Polycarp’s immediate solution to the problem of false teaching in Philippi in 7.2 involves an exhortation to “return to the word handed on to us from the beginning, being self-controlled with respect to prayer and being persistent with respect to fasting” (ἐπὶ τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἡμῖν παραδοθέντα λόγον ἐπιστρέψωμεν νήφοντες πρὸς τὰς εὐχὰς καὶ προσκατεροῦντες νηστεία). Presumably, the content of “the word handed on to us from the beginning” alludes back to the instruction commanded by Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets in 6.3. If this commandment from Jesus in 6.3 is related to “the commandment of the Lord” to give alms in Pol. *Phil.* 4.1, then Pol. *Phil.* 7.2 would present practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting as ways of countering the false teaching in Philippi, the very tryptic of praxis highlighted in 2 *Clem.* 16.4 and two of the three practices (i.e., charity and prayer) that Ignatius indicates are rejected by Docetists in Smyrna. Regardless of the content of “the word handed on to us from the beginning,” Polycarp stresses the close connection between ethics and eschatology: “The targeted opponents denied any future resurrection and judgment, and Polycarp feared the ethical ramifications of this denial.” (Hartog 2013, p. 37)

Such an understanding of the logical progression from the exhortation to almsgiving in 6.1 to the critique of false teachers in 7.1 also sheds light on Polycarp’s discussion of the sin of the presbyter Valens near the end of the letter (11.1–4), for Valens failed in the office entrusted to him precisely because of avarice.²⁴ With reference to Valens, Polycarp indicates that the fallen presbyter is, in fact, ignorant of the Lord’s judgments: “But how can someone who is unable to exercise self-control in these matters preach self-control to anyone else? Anyone who does not avoid love of money (*avaritia*) will be polluted by idolatry and will be judged as one of the Gentiles, who are ignorant of the Lord’s judgment. Or do we not know that the saints will judge the world, as Paul teaches” (11.2).²⁵ Drawing on 1 Cor 6:2, Polycarp reminds his readers in Philippi of their participation in the eschatological judgment of the cosmos, while also suggesting that either the cause or the result of Valens’ fall into the sin of avarice is ignorance with regard to the final judgment. Valens, then, fills the profile of the false teacher described in 7.1; he is one who “twists the sayings of the Lord to suit his own sinful desires and claims that there is neither resurrection nor judgment.” To be sure, Polycarp hopes for restoration for Valens and his

²³ Hartog (2013, p. 36) raises the possibility that, while Polycarp’s words are addressed to the church in Philippi, the nature of the false teaching with which he is concerned is also present in Smyrna. Given the overlaps between the descriptions of false teaching in Pol. *Phil.* 7.1 and Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2–7.2, it may be the case that Polycarp’s concerns about false teaching in Philippi reflect his own experience in Smyrna.

²⁴ The exact nature of Valens’ offense is not specified by Polycarp. It has been suggested that perhaps Valens pilfered money from the congregation’s communal fund or “compromised his Christianity to escape economic suffering” (Oakes 2007, p. 369). “Given Valens’ identity as a presbyter (Pol. *Phil.* 11.1) and Polycarp’s instruction for presbyters to care for the needy (Pol. *Phil.* 6.1), it is likely that Valens’ avarice involved some failure to practice almsgiving, either because he misappropriated funds marked for the poor or because his life was marked by failure to understand the importance of almsgiving and lack of avarice for those holding the position of presbyter.”

²⁵ Translations from the Latin sections of Pol. *Phil.* 10–14 are from Holmes (2007).

wife (11.4). But until this couple repents, they are to be avoided and treated as sick and wayward members of the Philippian body.

In chapter 11, Polycarp does not articulate a precise remedy for the sin of Valens and his wife, aside from the bishop's wish that the transgressors be granted "true repentance" (*poenitentiam veram* [11.4]). It may be that the antidote to Valens' sin is proposed earlier in chapter 10, however. The final verse in chapter 10 issues a woe against "the one through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed" and calls for all to be taught self-control (10.3). Valens is explicitly said to lack the virtue of self-control, a fact that disqualifies Valens from teaching about the topic (11.2). The offense of Valens is clearly in mind, then, in Pol. Phil. 10.3 (Hartog 2013, pp. 140–41).²⁶ In the verse that immediately precedes this turn to Valens—after an exhortation to endurance and mutual love, concern, unity and gentleness in 10.1—Polycarp cites a text from Tobit in order to commend the practice of almsgiving: "When you are able to do good (*benefacere*), do not put it off, because charity delivers one from death (*quia elemosyna de morte liberat*)" (10.2).²⁷ The phrase "charity delivers one from death" is a quotation of either Tob 4:10 (διότι ἐλεημοσύνη ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται) or Tob 12:9 (ἐλεημοσύνη γὰρ ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται) (Berding 2002, p. 105; Hartog 2013, p. 140).²⁸

If Polycarp's citation of the phrase "because charity delivers one from death" from Tobit is directed at the Valens situation, perhaps the bishop envisions merciful practice on behalf of the needy as a way to counter the sin of avarice and to restore "sick and wayward" believers like Valens and his wife (cf. the connection between bribery and atoning almsgiving in LXX Prov 15:27). In this sense, Polycarp might imply that almsgiving is atoning because charity provides a remedy for "love of money."²⁹ While Polycarp does not invoke Tobit explicitly to support the notion of atoning almsgiving, his pastoral response to Valens' avarice appears to be an encouragement that almsgiving can alleviate sin, for "charity delivers one from death." In order to heed this wisdom from Tobit mediated by the Smyrnaean bishop, however, Valens must forsake his ignorance regarding the Lord's judgment and recognize that care for the poor and the avoidance of avarice, two sides of the same ethical coin, are to be motivated by the expectation of the future judgment and future resurrection.³⁰

4. Conclusions

Practices of gift-exchange, including care for the poor, have the power to engender, solidify and occasionally threaten communal solidarity (Downs 2016, pp. 1–26; Barclay 2015, pp. 11–65). For this reason, almsgiving, when it is practiced, is crucial to the formation and maintenance of communal identity. The avoidance of charity has similar effects. Practices of giving and receiving assistance,

²⁶ The case of Valens is probably also targeted in Polycarp's command in Pol. Phil. 10.2 to "maintain an irreproachable standard of conduct among the Gentiles," lest God's name be blasphemed.

²⁷ Hartog (2013, p. 140) points out, "The phrase 'do good' can be used synonymously with charity" (see Mark 14:7; Luke 6:33–35; 1 Timothy 6:18; Hebrews 13:16; Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur* 33; *Paedagogus* 3.7; Shepherd of Hermas, *Visions* 3.9.2–6; *Mandates* 2.4), and in this context the equivalence seems justified.

²⁸ The claim for a direct citation of Tobit in Pol. Phil. 10.2 depends on the assumption that the Latin translator has accurately rendered Polycarp's phrasing. It has been suggested that the Latin *quia* is an abbreviated form of the scriptural citation formula "it is written" (Beckwith 1984, p. 336; Penner 2010, pp. 62–84). If Polycarp's (or his Latin translator's) *quia* is shorthand for "it is written," this would indicate that Polycarp considers Tobit to be a scriptural text. It is more likely, however, that *quia* is simply a translation of either *διότι* in Tob 4:10 or *γὰρ* in Tob 12:9 (Berding 2002, p. 105; Hartog 2013, p. 140).

²⁹ There is little doubt that Polycarp maintains a vibrant belief in the atoning nature of Jesus' death. The letter opens with Polycarp's report that the bishop rejoices that the faith of the Philippians, "renowned from the earliest times, still endures and bears fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured for our sins even to the point of death" (1.2). Moreover, Pol. Phil. 8.1 reads, "Therefore, let us hold steadfastly and unflinchingly to our hope and the guarantee of our righteousness, who is Jesus Christ, who bore our sins in his own body upon the tree, who committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth; instead, for our sakes he endured all things, in order that we might live in him." The allusions to 1 Pet 2:22–24 in Pol. Phil. 8.1 locate Polycarp in a stream of early Christian tradition that understands Jesus' death as a uniquely vicarious sacrifice that atones for sin. At the same time, after reminding the Philippians of the importance of the Pauline triad of faith, hope and love, Polycarp earlier affirms that "the one who has love is far from all sin" (Pol. Phil. 3.3).

³⁰ In this sense, I would offer a qualified agreement with Roman Garrison's claim that Polycarp advocates, in Garrison's terms, "redemptive almsgiving" (Garrison 1997, pp. 74–49).

or their dismissal, “communicate a distinctive self-image of the community,” both to insiders and to outsiders (Brown 2002, p. 3).³¹

In the four texts considered in this essay—2 Clement, the Gospel of Thomas, Ignatius’ letter to the Smyrnaeans, and Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians—we see competing visions of the role of almsgiving in Christian faith and practice tied to competing soteriologies.

On one side were those who disparaged, or at least were open to the charge that they ignored, the practice of almsgiving, and this lack of concern for the bodies of the poor seems to have been in some way connected to a denial of future eschatological judgment and the future resurrection of the body. Such a perspective is characteristic of the Gospel of Thomas, and it is implied of their opponents by Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. It is certainly possible that Ignatius and Polycarp offer critiques of their alleged opponents that reflect the rhetorical designs of these bishops far more than what was actually being taught or practiced in Smyrna and Philippi. Yet given the fact that Ignatius and Polycarp wrote letters to real communities in which the recipients could judge the accuracy of the critiques leveled against the epistolary opponents, it is best to assume that at least some Christ-followers in Asia Minor and Greece imagined or formed communities in which care for the poor was not a social value.

On the other side were those who maintained that care for the poor was an essential marker of Christian communal identity, in part because the future judgment and the resurrection of body would hold believers accountable for their love, or lack thereof, for the bodies of the poor. In various but similar ways, the author of 2 Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp all narrate a vision of Christian identity in which care for the poor is not only central but is also integrated into an eschatological hope that emphasizes bodily resurrection and God’s judgment of deeds done in the body. The advocacy of the meritorious and atoning value of merciful deeds in these early Christian texts is forged in contrast with those who disregarded the body, including the bodies of the poor. To judge from these representative texts, then, practices of and discourses about almsgiving, rooted in differing perspectives regarding the body and God’s future judgment, appear to have stood at the center of competing conceptions of Christian identity, solidarity, and community in the second century.

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³¹ Rhee (2012, pp. 159–89) expertly explores the issue of economics and early Christian identity with reference to a larger set of concerns, including business activities, the denunciation of avarice and luxury, almsgiving, and public service.

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