

Short Study

‘Let Us Teach Ourselves First to Follow the Commandment of the Lord’ (Pol. *Phil.* 4.1): An Additional Note on ‘the Commandment’ as Almsgiving*

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In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp of Smyrna offers a reading of 1 Timothy 6 in which he uses the term ‘the commandment’ as an apparent reference to the practice of almsgiving. Polycarp’s *Philippians*, therefore, offers important and heretofore neglected evidence that supports recent contentions that ‘the commandment’ in 1 Tim 6.14 is almsgiving.

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It is scarcely to be doubted that Polycarp of Smyrna, who encouraged the Philippians to study closely letters of the ‘blessed and glorious Paul’ (Pol. *Phil.* 3.2), was himself a serious student of Paul.¹ Consequently, Polycarp’s reception of 1 Timothy 6 has the potential to elucidate recent discussions of the meaning

* We would like to thank Nathan Eubank for his comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1 On the relationship between Paul and Polycarp, see K. Berding, *Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp’s Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature* (VCSup 62; Leiden: Brill, 2002); M. Theobald, ‘Paulus und Polycarp an die Philipper: Schlaglichter auf die frühe Rezeption des Basissatzes von der Rechtfertigung’, *Lutherische und Neue Paulusperspektive: Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselproblem der gegenwärtigen exegetischen Diskussion* (WUNT 182/2; ed. M. Bachmann and J. Woyke; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 349–88; M. Holmes, ‘Paul and Polycarp’, *Paul and the Second Century* (ed. M. F. Bird and J. R. Dodson; New York: T&T Clark, 2011) 57–69; P. Hartog, ed., *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text and Commentary* (OAF; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 65–8.

of ‘the commandment’ (ἡ ἐντολή) in 1 Tim 6.14.² In a short study in *NTS* in 2011, Nathan Eubank argues that ‘the commandment’ in 1 Tim 6.14 is an idiom for the practice of almsgiving, a reading that potentially explains both the enigmatic referent of ‘the commandment’ and the seemingly intrusive placement of a personal charge to Timothy in the middle of a discourse otherwise about wealth (1 Tim. 6.6–19).³ Eubank contends that almsgiving as ‘the commandment’ was a well-known idiom in rabbinic literature with roots in the Second Temple period.⁴ He thus renders 1 Tim 6.14: ‘I command you – in the presence of God who gives life to all things and of Christ Jesus who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate – to *give alms* without spot or blame until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time.’⁵ This rendering, Eubank maintains, explains a seemingly disjointed passage as a coherent discourse on the proper use of wealth (6.6–16).⁶

The lexical evidence marshalled by Eubank, however, has been called into question in a more recent *NTS* article by Anthony Giambrone. Giambrone also sees a relationship between ‘the commandment’ and almsgiving, but he argues that *Leviticus Rabbah* and the *Testament of Asher* are too late and too lexically problematic to be of use for the interpretation of 1 Tim 6.14.⁷ Instead, Giambrone finds Sir 29.9 and especially *Did.* 1.5 (cf. 13.5, 7) to be the most relevant early evidence that ‘the commandment’ was developing into an expression for the practice of almsgiving.

Thus far neglected in this discussion is a passage from Polycarp’s *Philippians* in which ἡ ἐντολή appears to refer to almsgiving in the very context of the Smyrnan bishop’s appropriation of 1 Timothy 6. Polycarp’s use of ἡ ἐντολή in

2 It almost goes without saying that the modern critical position that 1 Timothy is pseudonymous cannot be ascribed to Polycarp, since questions about the authenticity of 1 Timothy were not raised until the nineteenth century; see F. Schleiermacher, *Über den sogenannten ersten Brief des Paulos an den Timotheos. Ein kritisches Sendschreibung an J. C. Gass* (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1807). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

3 N. Eubank, ‘Almsgiving is “the Commandment”’: A Note on 1 Timothy 6.6–19’, *NTS* 58 (2012) 144–50.

4 Eubank, ‘Almsgiving’, 145. Eubank points specifically to Sir 29.8–13; *T. Ash.* 2.5–8; and *Lev. Rab.* 3.1 as texts that demonstrate early usage of the idiom, although he notes the ‘tenuousness of any proposed date for *Testaments*’ (‘Almsgiving’, 148; cf. Tob 4.5–11; 12.8–10; Matt 19.16–22).

5 Eubank, ‘Almsgiving’, 148–9 (emphasis original).

6 The observation that ‘the commandment’ is to be fulfilled in the same manner as merciful practice towards widows (i.e. without reproach, ἀνεπίληπτος, 5.7; 6.14) further strengthens Eubank’s argument; see D. Downs, ‘The God Who Gives Life That Is Truly Life: Meritorious Almsgiving and the Divine Economy in 1 Timothy 6’, *The Unrelenting God: Essays on God’s Action in Scripture in Honor of Beverly Roberts Gaventa* (ed. D. Downs and M. Skinner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) 247–8.

7 A. Giambrone, ‘“According to the Commandment” (*Did.* 1.5): Lexical Reflections on Almsgiving as “The Commandment”’, *NTS* 60 (2014) 452–55.

Phil. 3.3–5.1 to refer to the practice of merciful care for the needy, therefore, strengthens Eubank’s claim that ‘the commandment’ in 1 Tim. 6.14 is almsgiving.⁸ The lexical aspects of the arguments advanced by Eubank and Giambrone seek to establish that ἡ ἐντολή was beginning to have a stabilised meaning as ‘almsgiving’ at the time 1 Timothy was written. We take as a starting point the previous lexical work of Eubank and Giambrone, but our argument is primarily *wirkungsgeschichtliche*. That is, assuming that the term ἡ ἐντολή *could* refer to the practice of almsgiving, we turn to Polycarp’s *Philippians* to ascertain whether such an understanding elucidates his reception of 1 Timothy 6 and, in turn, the plausibility that early readers of 1 Timothy might have understood ‘the commandment’ as a reference to almsgiving. This approach, by shifting the interpretive focus from what an author meant to what a reader understood, sets forth early evidence of what might have been ‘culturally presupposed’ as regards the term ἡ ἐντολή and thus complements the arguments advanced by Eubank and Giambrone.⁹ After establishing that Polycarp was indeed an early reader of 1 Timothy 6, we will argue that his use of ἡ ἐντολή in *Phil.* 3.3–5.1 is best understood in terms of almsgiving.

Polycarp’s *Philippians* and the Reception of 1 Timothy 6

The appropriation of 1 Timothy 6 by Polycarp is almost certain. The strong verbal coherence between Pol. *Phil.* 4.1 and 1 Tim 6.7, 10 indicates that some literary relationship exists between the texts:

Pol. <i>Phil.</i> 4.1a	1 Tim 6.10
ἀρχὴ δὲ πάντων χαλεπῶν φιλαργυρία	ρίζα γὰρ πάντων τῶν κακῶν ἐστὶν ἡ φιλαργυρία
Pol. <i>Phil.</i> 4.1b	1 Tim 6.7
εἰδότες οὖν ὅτι οὐδὲν εἰσηνέγκαμεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον,	οὐδὲν γὰρ εἰσηνέγκαμεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον,
ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ ἐξενεγκεῖν τι ἔχομεν	ὅτι οὐδὲ ἐξενεγκεῖν τι δυνάμεθα

In Pol. *Phil.* 4.1a, ἀρχή replaces ῥίζα, χαλεπός replaces κακός, and εἰμί is omitted. In Pol. *Phil.* 4.1b, ἀλλά replaces ὅτι, and ἔχω replaces δύναμαι. Although the texts are not identical, the verbal similarities between Pol. *Phil.* 4.1 and 1 Tim 6.7, 10 clearly signal that they are somehow related.¹⁰

8 For the sake of clarity and given its use in the studies of Eubank and Giambrone, we retain the term ‘almsgiving’, even if ‘merciful care for the needy’ might better render the holistic approach to almsgiving assumed in many early Christian texts; see D. Downs, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

9 Giambrone, “According to the Commandment”, 453 (emphasis original).

10 Holmes calls the literary relationship between Polycarp and 1 Timothy a ‘high probability’, Berding calls it ‘almost certain’, and Hartog calls it ‘certain’ (see the table in Holmes, ‘Paul and Polycarp’, 60).

The precise nature of the literary relationship between these texts, however, remains undetermined. Aside from Polycarp's dependence on 1 Timothy, there are proposals that the two texts were written by the same author, that 1 Timothy depends on Polycarp, that two authors independently used common sayings, and that the authors shared the same paraenetic material.¹¹

Yet three pieces of evidence weigh strongly in favour of Polycarp's appropriation of 1 Timothy 6. First, Polycarp uses εἰδότες ὅτι to introduce authoritative texts every other time he employs this construction in his letter (1.3; 5.1; 6.1).¹² The use of the formula in Pol. *Phil.* 4.1 thus strongly suggests that Polycarp is introducing a text he regards as authoritative. Second, the two sayings included in both 1 Tim 6.7, 10 and Pol. *Phil.* 4.1 were well-known maxims, but they did not often appear together.¹³ Polycarp's use of both sayings in close proximity makes dependence on 1 Tim 6 more plausible than the independent use of common sayings by both authors. Third, Kenneth Berding has shown a notable tendency in Polycarp 'to cluster Pauline citations and allusions after each of the three references to the apostle'.¹⁴ Thus, allusions to Gal 4.26 and, presumably, 1 Tim 6.10, 7 follow the reference to the 'blessed and glorious Paul' in Pol. *Phil.* 3.2; allusions to Phil 2.16, 2 Tim 4.10, 1 Cor 15.58 and Rom 12.10 follow the exhortation to exercise endurance like Paul in Pol. *Phil.* 9.1; and allusions to 2 Thess 1.4, 3.15 and Eph 4.26 follow the evocation of Paul's teaching and labour in Pol. *Phil.* 11.2–3. For all of these reasons, Polycarp's use of material from 1 Timothy 6 in Pol. *Phil.* 4.1 is nearly certain.

'The Commandment' in Pol. *Phil.* 3.3–4.1

Of the four times Polycarp uses the lexeme ἐντολή, two appear in close proximity to his appropriation of 1 Timothy 6 (*Phil.* 3.3; 4.1).¹⁵ In both instances, ἐντολή seems to refer to almsgiving, particularly because of the relationship Polycarp establishes between adherence to 'the commandment' and the proper use of wealth.

11 See the summary in M. Holmes, 'Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians and the Writings that Later Formed the New Testament', *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (ed. A. Gregory and C. Tuckett; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 215–16, who finds Polycarp's dependence on 1 Tim 6 most plausible.

12 Holmes, 'Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians', 188–9.

13 Holmes, 'Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians', 216; for a discussion of parallel texts from Greek and Hellenistic Jewish literature, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) 645–53.

14 Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*, 349.

15 To be clear, we are not arguing that ἡ ἐντολή is a *terminus technicus* for almsgiving, since the noun does not refer to practices of merciful care for the poor in 2.2; on ἡ ἐντολή in 5.1, see below.

In *Phil.* 3.3c–4.1a, Polycarp explains to the Philippians that the ‘commandment of righteousness’ is fulfilled by love for God, Christ and neighbour, which he contrasts with the love of money by recalling 1 Tim 6.10. He writes: ‘For if anyone is within the limits of these things [i.e. faith, hope and love], that person has fulfilled the commandment of righteousness (πεπλήρωκεν ἐντολὴν δικαιοσύνης), for whoever has love is far away from all sin. But the beginning of all evils is the love of money’ (3.3c–4.1a).¹⁶ Here the economic commitment entailed though perhaps not exhausted by love (ἀγάπη) is made clear through its contrast (signalled by the adversative δέ) with love of money (φιλαργυρία). To love by practising almsgiving *is* to fulfil the commandment of righteousness.

The contrast between these two loves – one rightly directed to God, Christ and neighbour and one wrongly directed to money – becomes more striking in light of the spatial metaphor that Polycarp develops as he introduces righteousness as the topic of his letter. Faith, hope and love are the boundaries within which the commandment is fulfilled: ‘for if anyone is within the limits of these things (ἐάν γάρ τις τούτων ἐντὸς ᾗ), he or she has fulfilled the commandment of righteousness (ἐντολὴν δικαιοσύνης)’ (3.3b). These limits, however, are more like the walls of a caravan than a fence around a plot of land, for Polycarp conceptualises love for God, Christ and neighbour as a guide that ‘leads the way’, while hope ‘follows’ (3.3a). This spatial metaphor throws into sharp relief the contrast between the love by which the commandment of righteousness is fulfilled and the love of money. Love leads one far away from sin because the commandment of righteousness is fulfilled by loving with mercy. By contrast, the love of money locates one outside the limits of faith, hope and love at the very wellspring of evils (cf. 1 Tim 6.10). That is, the love of God and neighbour entails an economic commitment incompatible with the love of money, which is ‘the beginning of all troubles’ (cf. 1 Tim 6.10).

In *Phil.* 4.1, Polycarp appropriates the claim, derived from 1 Tim 6.7, that ‘we have brought nothing into the world, but neither do we have anything to bring out’ as a warrant for his exhortation: ‘Let us teach ourselves first to follow the commandment of the Lord’ (ἡ ἐντολή τοῦ κυρίου, 4.1b). In the context of 1 Timothy, this saying militates against the desire to be wealthy, a desire that elicited ‘ruin and destruction’ and caused some to wander away from the faith (1 Tim 6.9–10). In the context of Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, the οὖν relates the saying back to his contrast between love for God, Christ and neighbour and the love of money. Since readers know that the love of money is the beginning of all evils and wealth itself is evanescent, the Philippians ought to walk in ‘the commandment of the Lord’. Although no immediate referent elucidates the content of ‘the commandment of the Lord’, the reason Polycarp gives for following this

¹⁶ The customary division of these statements into two different chapters fails to account for the unity of the discourse.

commandment points towards an open-handedness with wealth motivated by genuine love. In other words, if we take ‘the commandment of the Lord’ to mean ‘almsgiving’, then the warrant given for following the commandment becomes particularly compelling.¹⁷

After the charge to ‘teach ourselves first to follow the commandment of the Lord’ in 4.1, Polycarp offers a separate instruction – marked by the adverb ἔπειτα – for wives in 4.2. This signals the transition to *Gemeindetafeln* regarding wives (4.2), widows (4.3), deacons (5.2), young men (5.3), young women (5.3) and presbyters (6.1). The instruction provided for members of the congregation in specific roles in 4.2–6.1 is broken by a general exhortation in 5.1: ‘Therefore, knowing that God is not mocked, we ought to walk worthy of the commandment and glory of God’ (τῆς ἐντολῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ δόξης). That the general exhortation to walk worthy of the commandment and the glory of God follows immediately the advice to widows in 4.3 is intriguing, for the virtuous behaviour commended to widows is rooted in their knowledge that ‘they are God’s altar and that all offerings are inspected and nothing escapes his notice, whether thoughts or intentions or secrets of the heart’. The metaphor of widows as God’s altar reflects the concept, discerned by Giambone in several other early Jewish and Christian texts, of ‘a kind of “parallel cult”’, one in which the provision of material assistance to the needy is imaged as cultic sacrifice.¹⁸ For Polycarp, widows are God’s altar not because they offer prayers to God, as Hartog suggests, but because they are the recipients of the sacrificial offering of alms (cf. 1 Tim 5.3–16).¹⁹ Polycarp’s instruction regarding the necessary purity of widows as they receive sacrificial offerings is then followed by a general exhortation for readers ‘to walk worthy of the commandment and the glory of God’. God’s commandment in 5.1, then, is also probably a reference to almsgiving: readers will be worthy of God’s commandment if they provide material care for widows, who function as God’s altar when they receive these sacrificial offerings.

In addition to the literary features that point to understanding the term ἐντολή as almsgiving in Pol. *Phil.* 3.3–5.1, Peter Oakes’ plausible reconstruction of the historical context of *Philippians* suggests a scenario in which the practice of almsgiving might work as an antidote to the communal disease of φιλαργυρία. Gathering

17 It is worth considering the reason for the qualifier τοῦ κυρίου, especially since elsewhere in Polycarp’s *Philippians* κύριος introduces sayings from the Jesus tradition (2.3; 7.2; cf. 7.1). Eubank has argued that Jesus’ encounter with the rich man in Matt 19.16–22, in which Jesus instructs the man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, frames ‘almsgiving – albeit in its most extreme form – ... as the culmination or perfection of the commandments’ (‘Almsgiving’, 147).

18 Giambone, ‘According to the Commandment’, 456–65; see also G. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 15–34.

19 So C. Osiek, ‘The Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol’, *SecCent* 3 (1983) 159–69; *pace* Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 118.

evidence in both Paul's and Polycarp's letters to the Philippians that believers in Philippi suffered on account of their faith (Phil 1.27–30; 3.10; 4.1; Pol. *Phil.* 1.1; 2.3; 9.1), Oakes argues that the Philippians probably suffered beatings, imprisonment and compromised social relations and that 'the most tangible long-term effect was likely to be economic'.²⁰ In this context, φιλαργυρία threatened community boundaries because it could draw Christians back into relational networks and practices that involved a breach in faithfulness to God, Christ and neighbour. In order to avoid φιλαργυρία one had to stand firm in the faith when facing economic loss.²¹ To recall the spatial metaphor Polycarp develops in his appropriation of 1 Tim 6.10, φιλαργυρία locates one at the wellspring of evils, outside the boundaries of faith, hope and love.

The way Polycarp addresses the sin of Valens, an elder among the Philippians who seems to have fallen into φιλαργυρία, strongly suggests that the remedy to φιλαργυρία is the practice of almsgiving. In Pol. *Phil.* 11, when Polycarp first introduces the story of Valens, the bishop does not articulate a precise remedy for the transgression of the fallen presbyter and his wife, aside from his wish that the transgressors be granted 'true repentance' (*poenitentiam veram*, 11.4). It may be, however, that Polycarp proposes the antidote to Valens' sin in 10.3, where he issues a woe against 'the one through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed' and calls for all to be taught self-control. Since Valens lacks the virtue of self-control, he is disqualified from teaching about the topic (11.2).²² Polycarp's claim in 3.3 that 'whoever has love is far away from all sin' may already anticipate his solution to the sin of Valens. Just prior to addressing the sin of Valens and after he exhorts the believers in endurance, mutual love, concern, unity and gentleness, Polycarp commends the practice of almsgiving with a saying from Tobit: 'When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because charity delivers one from death (*quia eleemosyna de morte liberat*)' (10.2). The phrase 'charity delivers one from death' is a citation of either Tob 4.10 (διότι ἐλεημοσύνη ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται) or Tob 12.9 (ἐλεημοσύνη γὰρ ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται).²³ 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 love shown through almsgiving as a way to counter the sin of

20 P. Oakes, 'Leadership and Suffering in the Letters of Polycarp and Paul to the Philippians', *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers* (ed. C. Tuckett and A. Gregory; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 363–4.

21 Oakes, 'Leadership and Suffering', 368–9. H. Maier argues that wealthy community leaders such as Valens might have used their wealth to maintain their 'socio-economic links within pagan society', thereby threatening community boundaries, but his focus on Valens is narrow and his judgements are sometimes speculative ('Purity and Danger in Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians: The Sin of Valens in Social Perspective*', *J ECS* 1 (1993) 238).

22 The sin of Valens is clearly in mind, then, in 10.3 (so Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 140–1).

23 So Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*, 105; Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 140.

avarice and to restore 'sick and wayward' believers such as Valens and his wife.²⁴

While love in Polycarp's *Philippians* need not be reduced to demonstrations of material assistance for the needy, it is evident that Polycarp expected love to be revealed through works of mercy.²⁵ In *Phil.* 9.2, for example, faithful and righteous sufferers such as Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus and Paul 'did not love the present world but the one who died for us and who was raised by God for our sake' (cf. 2.2). Since these martyrs are set forth as examples of righteousness and endurance, Peter Oakes contends that *Phil.* 9.2 relates to the avoidance of φιλαργυρία, that is, "not loving the present age" would particularly be lived out in terms of issues such as reputation and wealth' (cf. 9.2).²⁶ Oakes' observation is supplemented by the suggestion that not loving the present age would also entail love for the needy among the suffering community of believers (cf. 1 Tim 6.17–19). Interestingly, the only other use of the noun ἀγάπη outside *Phil.* 3.3 and 4.2 refers to the hospitality and material assistance that the Philippians provided to 'the imitators of true love' (1.1).²⁷ For Polycarp, the opposite of φιλαργυρία is ἀγάπη. On the other side of avoiding φιλαργυρία is love shown forth in merciful care for those in material need. In a historical context in which the Philippians were threatened by economic loss on account of their faith, the imperative to 'follow the commandment of the Lord' by providing material assistance to fellow Christ-believers with economic need becomes all the more urgent.

Conclusion

Polycarp uses the term 'the commandment' with apparent reference to the practice of almsgiving in his reception of 1 Timothy 6. Although there is no direct statement in *Philippians* that 'the commandment' is almsgiving, both lexical evidence highlighted in earlier studies and the relationship Polycarp sets forth between the commandment and wealth strongly suggest that 'the commandment' refers to merciful care for the needy. In light of the economic suffering the

24 See R. Garrison, 'The Love of Money in Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians', *The Graeco-Roman Context of Early Christian Literature* (JSNTSup 137; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 74–9.

25 Ignatius, interestingly, defines love (ἀγάπη) primarily in terms of practices of care for the needy in his critical remarks about false teachers among the Christ-believing community in Polycarp's city of Smyrna: '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 for the one who is hungry or the one who is thirsty' (Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2).

26 Oakes, 'Leadership and Suffering', 368.

27 The participle ἐνελημμένους probably refers the provision of material assistance for prisoners during transport (so Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 99).

Philippian community probably faced at that time, Polycarp's instruction 'let us teach ourselves first to follow the commandment of the Lord' (4.1) offers both an antidote to the sin of φιλαργυρία and an exhortation for the Philippians to practise almsgiving. Thus, Polycarp's *Philippians* is a witness to how the charge to keep 'the commandment' in 1 Tim 6.14 was received as a summons to the practice of almsgiving by one of its earliest readers. Polycarp's *Philippians*, therefore, offers important support for the arguments advanced by Eubank and Giambrone that 'the commandment' in 1 Tim 6.14 refers to almsgiving.