GOD AND THE POOR IN
EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT*

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With the recent proliferation of studies on poverty and religion in late antiquity,¹ theologians and scholars may now more effectively nuance traditional studies of ‘God in early Christian thought’ by engaging with the pervasive and often controversial theme of ‘God in the poor.’ This theme, closely associated with soteriology (in ‘redemptive alms’) and with some inevitable discussion about christology (in the association of the poor with Christ) thus directly relates to the topic of this book. The present essay briefly discusses two particular aspects of this theme where these issues relate to the doctrine of God in early Christian

* It is an honor to offer this paper in memory of Lloyd Patterson. My greatest regret is that there is little here to answer that ponderous question that echoes among my fond memories of Lloyd: “What about Origen?”

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sources. These two are the topics of heterodoxy and the image from Matthew 25:31–46 of Christ and the poor in the last judgement.

The discussion is organized into three parts. The essay begins by outlining the dominance of the theme of ‘Christ in the poor’ in certain patristic texts, and the critical relevance of this theme for a full and nuanced understanding of ‘God in early Christian thought’ as it relates to both social ethics and christology. Section 2 moves into a discussion of how this theme is—or is not—evident in a number of examples of early Christian rhetoric concerning issues of ‘heterodox’ christology. In section 3, the essay reflects on two sources, one text and one early Christian image, as examples of how the needy poor effectively disappear in the eschatological focus on that very same text—Matthew 25:31–46—that is best known for this classic rhetorical association of the poor with Christ. In a brief concluding summary, the essay argues that no theological understanding of God in early Christian thought is complete without a discussion of the relationship between the divine and the needy human person; but that this relationship is ever, ultimately, directed to the eschatological image of Christ, the second person of the Trinity, in whose judgement-day presence the bodies of the poor effectively disappear.

Christ and the Poor in Early Christian Thought

It is widely recognized that the poor in the early Christian thought of late antiquity were most often imaged in homiletic rhetoric that closely identified them with Christ incarnate, as in some mysterious way a moral embodiment of the second person of the Trinity. This view of the special, functional presence of Christ in ‘ordinary’ destitute human beings by no means diminished—nor was it ever confused with—the theological uniqueness of the historical Jesus Christ within the godhead. Nevertheless, early Christian writers, taking the text of Matthew 25:31–46 at its word, repeatedly hammered out the message of Christ’s embodied presence in the poor. Persons who practiced ϕιλοπτώχεια, love for the poor, consequently offered up a service to God, directly, in behavior that characterized them as the proverbial ‘sheep,’ those on the judge’s right hand whose actions are lauded as they are welcomed into eternity.

John Chrysostom is perhaps the best-known example among the Greek fathers for stridently asserting this view, as Swiss-Protestant