

## The Bible: "Early Church History "

By: Mike Porter

Written on: 11/05/2006

### Polycarp

Some authors and theologians have come up with some fanciful stories about Jesus: that He didn't die on the cross and that the church made up His divinity centuries after His life. Some, like the theologians of the Jesus seminar, vote on which portions of the gospels were truly Jesus speaking and which portions the church revised later. To believe such stories one has to take the witness of the gospels, the epistles and the early church fathers and come up with a grand conspiracy theory of lies and intrigue. Is there any support for such a conspiracy? This writing gives us a taste of early church history through the eyes of one bishop: Polycarp.

Polycarp ministered and was martyred while serving as the bishop at the church of Smyrna, in present-day Turkey. He was born at 69 A.D and died at the age of 86 at 155 A.D. He was a younger friend of Ignatius and the "teacher of Irenaeus of Lyons, and thus the connecting link between the apostolic and post-apostolic ages."<sup>1</sup> One of his epistles, "The Epistle to the Philippians" still exists today and there also is an account of his martyrdom which was written by witnesses in the church of Smyrna within a year of when it happened (it also has been preserved until today). Both epistles were widely circulated throughout the churches of Asia until the time of Justin. Church historian Eusebius in the early fourth century quoted what Irenaeus wrote about Polycarp,

*"Polycarp, a man who had been instructed by the apostles, and had familiar intercourse with many that had seen Christ, and had also been appointed bishop by the apostles in Asia, in the church at Smyrna, whom we also have seen in our youth, for he lived a long time, and to a very advanced age, when, after a glorious and most distinguished martyrdom, he departed this life. He always taught what he had learned from the apostles, what the church had handed down, and what is the only true doctrine."* \_

### 1st and 2nd Century Smyrna: Setting the Stage

Smyrna, in present day Eastern Turkey just north of Ephesus, was a town that was built on the perfume industry, "Called the crown of Asia, this ancient city (modern Izmir, Turkey) was the most beautiful in Asia Minor and a center of science and medicine. Always on the winner's side in the Roman wars, Smyrna's intense loyalty to Rome resulted in a strong emperor-worship cult. Fifty years after [the Apostle] John's death, Polycarp, the pastor of the church in Smyrna, was burned alive at the age of 86 for refusing to worship Caesar. A large Jewish community in the city also proved hostile to the early church." \_

"Some have asserted, without sufficient proofs, that Polycarp was born [in Smyrna], but

---

<sup>1</sup> p. 501, History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2, Philip Schaff, Hendrickson Publishers, 1858.

that it was the place where he received his education, exercised his ministry, and finished his course, is agreed on all hands.”<sup>2</sup> At Smyrna, a plain stone monument still marks his grave.

Jesus gave a vision to the Apostle John in the book of Revelation that was to be sent to messengers at the seven churches of Asia including Smyrna. Many believe that the messenger that the Apostle John was writing to in Smyrna was Polycarp himself- this seems likely, and makes the study of Polycarp indeed a fascinating study. God raised up Polycarp to lead the church in Smyrna in the midst of a hostile environment to be a solid pastor to guide the church well into the second century while heresies and persecution ever threatened the church. The fact that the church at Smyrna remained strong all the way to Polycarp’s martyrdom in 155 A.D. is a testimony to the good shepherding of this man of God.

The brief letter that Jesus wrote to Smyrna in Revelation chapter two spoke both of their present situation and their future throughout the decades leading up to Polycarp’s martyrdom. “Smyrna means “myrrh”- the substances used for perfume and often for anointing a dead body for aromatic purposes.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly Polycarp’s martyrdom was a fragrant aroma to the Lord- how precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints (*Psalm 116:15*)! Jesus said to the messenger at Smyrna that He knew the blasphemy of the Jews from the “*synagogue of Satan*” that came against them. He also knew of their sufferings and He foresaw their future, “*Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*”<sup>4</sup> The church has always shined most brilliantly during times of intense persecution. Smyrna was an example of that. The church in Ephesus was already beginning to wane lukewarm at the time Revelation was written, but Smyrna was a fragrant aroma.

### **Polycarp’s Teaching and Zeal For Doctrinal Purity**

How well did Polycarp serve the church during those times of persecution? “Taught by such excellent masters [the apostles], and endowed with most valuable talents and gifts, he long continued a burning and shining light in the church, diffusing the truth with unwearied zeal, and adorning the principles he inculcated by an unblemished integrity, an enlarged benevolence, a sublime devotion, and a deportment dignified, yet condescending, gentle, and amiable.”

According to Irenaeus, Polycarp went to Rome to talk with Anicetus, the head of the

---

<sup>2</sup> P. 121, Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History, Complete and Unabridged, Translated by C.F. Cruse, 1998, Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts.

<sup>3</sup> p. 1994, The MacArthur Study Bible, John MacArthur, NKJV, Thomas Nelson Bibles, 1997

<sup>4</sup> P. 11, Piety Exemplified in the Lives of Eminent Christians, J. Thornton, William Baynes and Son, London, 1825.

Roman church about when to celebrate the Passover. They agreed to disagree amicably and Polycarp addressed other heretics that were at Rome.

*“While he was at Rome, he is said to have reclaimed many from the errors into which they had been drawn, and brought them back to the pure doctrine of Christ, and the fellowship of His church. The ringleaders of heresy knew well the weight of [Polycarp’s] name and character, and left no means untried to gain some token of friendship from him, which might be interpreted as a sanction to their impious notions.”<sup>5</sup>*

One such character was Marcion, whom Polycarp sharply rebuked for his heresies. Around 140 A.D., Marcion, a wealthy ship owner, came to Rome and fell under the spell of a Gnostic teacher Cerdo, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> The Gnostics taught that Jesus was divine but didn’t have a fleshly, human nature, rather He was a sort of phantom. Polycarp saw Marcion and called him *“the firstborn son of Satan.”*<sup>7</sup> In the Epistle to the Philippians Polycarp wrote,

*“Whoever doth not confess, that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is antichrist, and whoever doth not confess the mystery of the cross, is of the devil; and he, who wrests the words of the Lord according to his own pleasure, and saith, there is no resurrection and judgment, is the first-born son of Satan.”<sup>8</sup>*

This is clearly a reference to 2 John 7, *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.”* Polycarp wasn’t a profound theologian like some of the other church fathers, but he simply taught the apostle’s teachings and refuted false teachers. He was a shepherd who loved the flock and carefully guarded the flock from the wolves of heretics.

### **Polycarp’s Martyrdom**

The details of Polycarp’s martyrdom come from a letter from the church at Smyrna to other churches. Polycarp was amazing in his demeanor the day of his martyrdom. The persecution of Christians had resulted in many martyrs. A cry in Smyrna went out for Polycarp’s blood, *“Let Polycarp be sought for.”*<sup>9</sup> When the enemies of Polycarp entered the residence he was in, he exclaimed,

*“‘The Lord’s will be done’ ...And descending from an upper room, with a placid and cheerful countenance, he saluted his enemies, and commanding*

---

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur Study Bible, p. 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 2:10

<sup>7</sup> J. Thornton, *ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Church History in Plain Language, Bruce L. Shelley, Thomas Nelson Publishers, , Nashville, 1982

*food to be set before them, begged only to be favored with one hour for prayer. This being granted, he poured out his heart with such solemnity and fervor in behalf of his acquaintance and friends, the whole church of Christ, and mankind at large, as greatly astonished and affected the very persons sent to apprehend him.”<sup>10</sup>*

The proconsul tried to persuade Polycarp to renounce his faith and swear by Caesar and thus be released. Polycarp said those famous words, “*Fourscore and six years have I served Him, and He never yet injured me; how then shall I now blaspheme my King and my Savior?*”<sup>11</sup> The proconsul threatened Polycarp with beasts then fire, “*I have a fire that shall subdue thee, unless thou repent.*”<sup>12</sup> Polycarp replied, “*Thou threatenest me with a fire which burns for an hour, and is extinct, but art ignorant, alas of the fire of eternal damnation, and the judgment to come, reserved for the wicked in another world?*”<sup>13</sup>

He was then condemned to death by fire- burned at the stake.

Polycarp’s prayer before death demonstrates clearly many of the foundational doctrines of the deity of Christ, which is very significant given that it was at 155 A.D. We are reminded today of the many liberal theologians who say that Jesus was a man who was deified by the 4th century church- evidently they ignore the early church fathers and the New Testament!

Polycarp prayed, “*O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Thy well-beloved and ever-blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels, powers, and of every creature...I bless Thee...that I may receive a portion in the number of Thy holy martyrs, and drink of Christ’s cup, for the resurrection to eternal life of both soul and body, in the incorruptibleness of the Holy Spirit...I praise thee for all Thy mercies; I bless, I glorify Thee, through the eternal High Priest, Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ: with whom, to Thyself, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen.*”

### **Polycarp’s Doctrines and the Epistle of the Philippians**

Many of the things written by Polycarp in the *Epistle of the Philippians* are reminiscent of the New Testament Scriptures, demonstrating Polycarp’s command of these scriptures. The *Epistle of the Philippians* opens like a Pauline epistle- Polycarp wasn’t all that original in his writing, but he was nearest in tone to the apostles of all the early church Fathers. He opened the epistle as follows:

*“Polycarp and the presbyters with him to the congregation of God which sojourns at Philippi. Mercy and peace be multiplied upon you, from God*

---

<sup>10</sup> p. 665, History of the Christian Church.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

*Almighty, and from Jesus Christ our Savior. I have greatly rejoiced with you in the joy you have had in our Lord Jesus Christ, in receiving those examples of true charity, and having accompanied, as it well became you, those who were bound with holy chains [such as Ignatius and his fellow prisoners, as mentioned in chapter nine of the epistle of the Philippians]; who are the diadems of the truly elect of God and our Lord; and that the strong root of your faith, spoken of in the earlier times, endureth until now, and bringeth forth fruit unto our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sins, but whom God raised from the dead, having loosed the pains of Hades [Acts 2:24]; in whom though ye see Him not, ye believe, and believing rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory [1 Pet. 1:8]; into which joy many desire to enter; knowing that by grace ye are saved, not by works [Eph 2:8,9], but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup>*

It is apparent from just the first few verses of the Epistle that Polycarp had at his disposal much of the New Testament, as did the other early church fathers. This is a critical point: it is obvious that the later councils which finally declared which scriptures were and weren't canon (God's Word), weren't determined by the councils at all, but rather the councils were merely a stamp of approval for what the catholic (universal) church already acknowledged. "The epistle is interwoven with many reminiscences of the Synoptical Gospels and the epistles of Paul, John and First Peter, which give to it considerable importance in the history of the canon."<sup>15</sup> The epistle was written after the death of Ignatius and in chapter thirteen, Ignatius is mentioned. "It's a simple letter which commends the Philippians for the love they showed Ignatius in bonds and his companions, and for their adherence to the ancient faith; and proceeds with simple, earnest exhortation to love, harmony, contentment, patience, and perseverance, to prayer even for enemies and persecutors. Also giving special directions for deacons, presbyters, youths, wives, widows, and virgins; with strokes against Gnostic Docetic errors. Of Christ it speaks in high terms, as the Lord, who sits at the right hand of God to whom everything in heaven and earth is subject; whom every living being serves; who is coming to judge the quick and the dead; whose blood God will require of all, who believe not in Him."<sup>16</sup>

With a bit of energy, it is possible to read up on the various writings of the early church fathers and connect them dot-to-dot with each other and show continuity of doctrine, such as the doctrines of the Trinity and their quotes of scripture- this indeed is important in this age of relativism where historical truth is severely downplayed. Josh McDowell notes that "Even 120 years after the death of Christ, at least one godly Christian, Polycarp, was still living who could verify what some of the original disciples of Jesus had reported."<sup>17</sup> Church historian Sir David Dalrymple was asked about how much scripture was quoted by the early church fathers, 'Suppose that the New Testament had been destroyed, and every copy of it lost by the end of the third century, could it have been collected together

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 14

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Epistle to the Philippians, Polycarp, as recorded on p. 669 of History of the Christian Church

again from the writings of the Fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries?’ Dalrymple concluded that only eleven verses in the New Testament were NOT quoted by the early church fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries!\_

### **Polycarp: A Witness**

Polycarp is an example to us all of how to trust Christ in times of persecution and how to love our enemies and pray for them and entreat them with the gospel while loving the brethren. Like Stephen, He was given the grace to endure torture to the end and thus demonstrate to believers and unbelievers alike a witness that Jesus Christ is Lord. Likewise Paul wrote of the witness of the Thessalonian church, *“We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*<sup>18</sup> Polycarp had this hope and conviction as he went to his death in flames. May we learn from his example.

### **A Message to Skeptics**

If you’re one who is reading this writing as a skeptic, feeling secure in your unbelief because there are so many other expert skeptics out there, I’d like to plead with you: are you so sure of where you will spend eternity? Could your skepticism, like mine when I was a skeptic, be built on a house of cards? Do you feel secure about death without trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Maybe you feel secure because you feel that you’re basically a good person and believe you haven’t done anything worthy of eternal damnation. Could it be that your standards of righteousness are totally different from God’s standards?

Consider the Ten Commandments- have you kept them perfectly? Have you ever told a lie? Ever coveted what belonged to another? Has your coveting ever resulted in stealing (the value is irrelevant)? Jesus said that if you lust after a person, you commit adultery in your heart. Have you ever hated, gossiped or backstabbed someone- Jesus equated that with murder of the heart or lips.

Jesus said of those who rejected Him as Lord and Savior, “If you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins.” (*John 8:24*) The second commandment says that we’re not to make an idol- if you’ve chosen to reject Jesus Christ as your Lord (your master), and replaced Him with another god or gods or philosophy to suit yourself, then you have committed idolatry. If you say things like, “My God is loving and would never send people to hell,” then you are right- your god won’t send people to hell, because your god doesn’t exist- that god is a figment of your imagination. If you’ve violated these commandments, then according to God’s standards you are a lying, thieving, adulterous,

---

<sup>18</sup> p. 667, History of the Christian Church.

covetous, murderous idolater at heart and will have to face a holy Judge on Judgment Day, who is described as a “consuming fire”. It doesn’t matter that you no longer do these things- the law of God requires perfection. Jesus said, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (*Matthew 5:48*) It is not sufficient that you are sorry for what you’ve done wrong- you should be sorry.

God is love (*1 John 4:16*). He demonstrated His love for us by paying the ultimate price- dying for our sins in our place. Jesus paid our fine- the sentence for our sins is death and condemnation, and He paid for our sins by His own death in our place. He was condemned for us on the cross. Salvation is a gift to be received by faith. God longs that none would perish but all would come to repentance (*2 Peter 3:9*). Are you ready to cry out to God to receive the mercy, forgiveness and grace that is abundantly yours through faith in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for you?

In Christ’s Love,  
Mike Porter