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## Early Church Fathers: Polycarp

This is the fifth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the influential writers of the pre-Nicene period of the church (before 325 A.D.). Previous installments were an Introduction (*ET&N* 30), Clement of Rome (70), Justin Martyr (73), and Ignatius (80). The purpose of the series is to examine the writings of these individuals to better understand the context of the early church and determine what lessons they hold for today's Christian. Additional installments of this series will include Tertullian, Marcion, Irenæus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Novatian, and others.

### Then

Even though we have only snapshots of Polycarp, he is one of the most important figures in the early church because his life spanned the period from the end of the apostolic age (ca 100 A.D.) to the initial emergence of the hierarchical, monolithic church that would become Roman Catholicism. The errors (unbiblical doctrines) that would characterize the church for the next fifteen hundred years began as a response to the growing number of heresies (Gnosticism, Marcionism, Montanism, etc.) that threatened the true church of Christ and His apostles. It is not, however, my intent in this issue of *ET&N* to bash Roman Catholicism itself but rather to demonstrate the importance of Polycarp apart from unjustified claims.

What we know about Polycarp includes several intriguing vignettes based on five sources:

- Two letters of Ignatius (see *ET&N* 80) of Antioch<sup>1</sup> (ca 107), - one written to Polycarp's church in Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) and the other specifically to Polycarp;
- The only extant document written by Polycarp himself - a letter to the church in Philippi<sup>2</sup> (ca 108);
- An account of his martyrdom<sup>3</sup> (ca 155) written by eyewitnesses in his home city of Smyrna;
- Fragments of the writings of Papias (ca 70-156) quoted by Eusebius in his *Church History*<sup>4</sup> (ca 312); and
- Comments by Irenæus (ca 130-203) from *Against Heresies*<sup>5</sup> (ca 175) and two letters again quoted by Eusebius.

Collectively, these sources reveal a man of quiet leadership, strong convictions, powerful teaching and amazing courage. He was thoroughly-versed in the emerging Christian scripture (but perhaps less so in the Old Testament) and displayed the confidence of one who experienced the privilege of apostolic teaching. According to eyewitnesses, at his execution (ca 155), even unbelievers unrecognized him as "the teacher of Asia, the father of Christians" (*Martyr* XII). Polycarp himself testified that

he had served Christ all of his eighty-six years (*Martyr IX*). Ignatius referred to him as "worthy" (*IgnaSmyr XII*), Irenaeus as "blessed" (*Euse V.XXIV*, quoting his letter to Victor), and it is apparent that he was widely respected by the people of Smyrna.

While there may be many things that can be said about Polycarp, I want to focus on three I see as being of primary importance: his use of early Christian texts, his attitude toward church leadership, and his martyrdom.

## **Polycarp and the New Testament**

While Irenaeus referred to Polycarp's letter to Philippi as a "powerful epistle" (*Iren III.III.4*), many modern commentators describe Polycarp as "unoriginal" because his one extant writing, the *Letter to the Philippians* (ca 108), is almost entirely a compilation of quotes from other authors. Whether or not this is a valid assessment of Polycarp can hardly be determined by a single sample of his writing. Ancient sources attest that Polycarp wrote to many churches, yet only this one letter has survived. Who knows what eloquence may have been evident in other letters? What is important about Polycarp's Philippian letter, however, is not how well he turned a phrase, but rather the sources he used.

Polycarp wrote to Philippi in response to a letter from the church there after Ignatius had passed through on his way to Rome, where he was executed. Ignatius had obviously praised Polycarp as a pillar of apostolic teaching, and the Philippians asked him for some words of encouragement, as well as copies of the letters Ignatius had sent to various Asian churches.

The letter is the earliest testimony - in the first decade of the second century - of the early development of collection of writings recognized as authoritative by the early church. The letter is replete with direct quotations from or references to eighteen of the twenty-six books in our New Testament: Matthew, Mark (perhaps), Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, and 3 John (perhaps). This is a remarkable record, particularly considering that the letter is just a bit over two thousand words. For one complete list of these citations, go to [ntcanon.org/Polycarp.shtml](http://ntcanon.org/Polycarp.shtml). In addition to the New Testament references, there are several allusions to Clement's letter to the church in Corinthians (1 Clement), testifying to the esteem that document enjoyed in the early church.

What we have in Polycarp's letter to the church in Philippi is a remarkable testimony of the very early recognition of the writings that would make up the New Testament. This is years before any list was constructed and centuries before any council statement. It is simply a letter in which one leader used what he knew to be apostolic teaching to exhort and encourage other Christians. There is only a sprinkling Old Testament references, suggesting that within about forty years of the deaths of Peter and Paul, the church had come to recognize the teachings of the apostles largely supplanted that of the Old Testament. We cannot know if Polycarp's citations were from memory based on oral teaching or from written copies of the letters, but the extent to which he uses Christian Scripture suggests the careful study of documents which circulated among the churches in Asia, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy.

Near the end of the letter, Polycarp comments that the Philippians "are all well-trained in the sacred Scriptures" (*Poly 12:1*) immediately thereafter quoting from the fourth chapter of Ephesians, clearly indicating that he considered the Christian

writings he quoted equal to what we now call the Old Testament in terms of authority. Furthermore, he also affirms that "nothing is hidden" (*ibid*) to them - a testimony to the sufficiency of Scripture in understanding the Christian message given by Christ and His apostles.

For those who claim late authorship of many New Testament books and the much later development of the canon, the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philipians* provides a powerful contradictory evidence.

## Polycarp and Church Leadership

Hierarchicalists in the modern Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox churches use the letters of Ignatius as proof-texts to justify the monoepiscopate and the papacy. Polycarp is also used as a vital link in the doctrine of apostolic succession, which suggests that authority rests in bishops because of an unbroken chain of appointment through ordination back to the apostles themselves. I will have a great deal more to say about the doctrine of apostolic succession in a future installment of the Early Fathers series (Irenaeus), but for now I simply want to examine whether Polycarp himself seems to have claimed apostolic authority.

As I have written before (see [ET&N 10](#) and [ET&N 76](#)), the Bible itself clearly uses the Greek terms **episkopē** (overseer, bishop) and **prebuteros** (elder, presbyter) interchangeably. There is not even a hint of apostolic teaching for one-man (bishop) rule of an individual congregation, let alone an entire city or region. Yet, the monoepiscopate emerged in the second century, and Polycarp is cited as one of those city rulers. Throughout his seven authentic, extant letters, Ignatius of Antioch repeated separates the **episkopē** from the **prebuteros**, calling them respectively, God's "managers" (**oikonomos**, chamberlain, governor, steward), a civil term applied to Erastus in Romans 16:23; and "assistants" (**paredroi**, a term not used in the New Testament). This idea that elders are assistants to the bishop has no basis whatsoever in Scripture. In the Roman brand of Christianity, the presbytery morphed into the priesthood as a specialized class of intermediaries uniquely authorized to administer sacraments (baptism, communion, etc.) on behalf of the bishop. This too has no basis in Scripture, where **all** Christians are called priests.

In writing to the church in Smyrna, Ignatius told them to "(p)ay attention to the bishop" (*IgnSmyr* 6:1) but unlike several of his other letters, he does not name their bishop, and in his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius never refers to him as the bishop. Furthermore, in his letter to the Philippian church, Polycarp never refers to himself as a bishop. If, as Ignatius suggests elsewhere (*Ignatius to the Trallians* 2:2) the church may "do nothing without the bishop," it is extraordinarily curious that Polycarp fails to cite his own authority or that of a Philippian bishop. In fact, it appears that Philippians does not have a bishop. He mentions their elders (**prebuteros**), but not a bishop (**episkopē**), strongly suggested that this early, highly respected teacher did not recognize any distinction whatsoever between **prebuteros** and **episkopē**, which is entirely in line with Pauline teaching about church government.

Nevertheless, in the Catholic tradition, the monoepiscopate was to succeed in defiance of Scripture, although clear evidence of it does not exist until where into the third century. A related issue involves the supremacy of Rome and the consequent supremacy of the bishop of Rome (pope). While this does not emerge until at least the fourth century (and not definitively until the seventh), papists try to point back to the writings of Irenaeus (180's), but ironically, in these very writings, there is

*prima facie* evidence that Polycarp at least did not recognize any Roman supremacy whatsoever.

In Polycarp's time and continuing for many years afterward, there was a controversy over the celebration of the anniversary of Christ's resurrection. The eastern churches (including Polycarp's in Smyrna), celebrated on the 14th of Nissan (Passover), regardless of the day of the week, while the western churches (represented by Rome) always celebrated on a Sunday. In addition to the date, there were distinct differences in the manner of the observance.

According to Irenaeus (as quoted by Eusebius), Polycarp traveled to Rome early in Anicetus' bishopric (155-166) to combat some heresies that had arisen there. While there Polycarp and Anicetus debated the Easter/Passover issue and "neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what had always observed,...neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it (as he had)." Ultimately, they apparently agreed to disagree, and Anicetus showed his respect for Polycarp by having him administer the eucharist in the Roman church (*Euse V,XXIV.16-17*). The problem here should be obvious - if Anicetus inherited alleged Peter's authority to "bind on earth" (see Matthew 16:19), how could Polycarp not acquiesce to Anicetus?

### **Polycarp and Martyrdom**

In about 155 A.D. (or perhaps a decade later according to some commentators), a localized persecution of Christians broke out in Smyrna and neighboring Philadelphia. Probably somewhere around a dozen highly-visible Christians were subjected to cruel tortures and eventually to execution when they refused to deny Christ and sacrifice to the emperor. A man named Evarestus (*Martyr 20:2*), on behalf of the church in Smyrna, wrote a letter to the church in Philomelium (Phyrgia), describing in considerable detail the executions, particularly that of Polycarp. This martyrdom story was to become the archetype of later martyrdoms, highly popular reading in the early church as a source of encouragement.

The detail provided in the story strongly suggests an authentic eyewitness account of Polycarp's execution, although some elements have a mythic character. Before Evarestus describes Polycarp's execution - which he says "is in accord with the gospel" (*Martyr 1:1*), that is, it followed the pattern of Christ's execution - he gives a generic account of some Roman methods. Christians were "so torn by whips that the internal structure of their flesh was visible as far as the inner veins and arteries" (2:2), they were exposed to wild beasts, and "they were forced to lie on sharp shells" (2:4).

He names two who faced such tortures - one Germanicus who endured, and one Quintus who "turned coward" (4:1) and was "persuaded to swear the oath and to offer the sacrifice (to the emperor)." Apparently Quintus had turned himself in, initially anxious to face martyrdom, but Evarestus comments that such behavior is contrary to gospel teaching. In you are captured, Evarestus implies, it is praiseworthy to face death bravely, as Germanicus did, but it is not appropriate to seek martyrdom, as such later Christians did. This lesson seems to serve as an introduction to Polycarp, who did not turn himself in and was even persuaded by the church to go into hiding at a farm in the countryside near Smyrna. There, he experiences a trance in which he saw his pillow on fire from which he concludes and announces, "It is necessary that I be burned alive."

Pursued by Roman officials, led by a police captain appropriately named Herod, Polycarp moves to a second farm, where he is betrayed (as Jesus was) by one of his own people - a young unnamed servant. Discovered, he greets his pursuers calmly and asks that they be served food and drink when he withdraws to pray for two hours. He is brought into the city on a donkey (as Jesus was), where Herod and his father, Nicetes, first try persuasion. "What harm is there," they say, "in saying, 'Caesar is Lord' and offering incense?" When Polycarp refuses, they threaten him and push the octogenarian off the donkey before taking him into the stadium to face Statius Quadratus, the Roman governor (as Jesus did).

Polycarp's entrance into the stadium is accompanied by what may be the first mythic element of the story. Evarestus reports that "a voice from heaven" said, "Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man" (Greek, **andros**, a human being, as opposed to **aner**, a male) (9:1). It certainly is not impossible that there really was such a heavenly message, but the fact that Evarestus reports that only the Christians heard it makes it questionable.

Quadratus also tries persuasion first, to which Polycarp replies with his most-quoted phrase, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" (9:3) He then boldly states, "I am a Christian" (10:1), and offers to teach Quadratus the "doctrine of Christianity."

"Persuade the people," Quadratus replies, and here Polycarp seems to reveal his own weakness, replying "You I might have considered worthy of a reply,...but as for these, I do not think they are worthy" (10:2). Quadratus then resorts to threats, but Polycarp continues to refuse. Finally, Quadratus orders Polycarp to be burned. After being tied to a post (he asks not to be nailed), Polycarp makes a lengthy final speech, thanking God for being considered worthy (of martyrdom) and praying that he may "be received among (previous martyrs) in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice" (14:2).

But Polycarp's prophesy of being burned is not fulfilled, according to Evarestus, because the fire formed an arc around him - a miracle witnessed only by the Christians present, perhaps another mythic element - so that he was not burned. In fact, instead of burning flesh, the Christians "perceived a very fragrant odor, as if it were the scent of incense or some other precious spice" (15:2). This is apparently a direct irony aimed at the Roman demand that Christians offer incense to the emperor.

Finally, one of the executioners, perhaps impatient at Polycarp's failure to die, stabs him with a dagger (similar to Jesus), and Evarestus reports yet another miracle - this one witnessed by the entire crowd. The wound from the dagger produces such a quantity of blood that the fire is extinguished. According to some manuscripts, the blood is accompanied by a dove, but this kind of mythic element is almost certainly a later addition. The most reliable manuscript (which does not include the dove) is a copy of a copy of a copy from "the papers of Irenaeus" (22:2), so there was ample opportunity for embellishment.

Regardless of the veracity of every detail of the martyrdom story, however, by any measure, Polycarp was one of the truly great leaders of the early church, a man widely admired by his fellow Christians not only in his death, but throughout much of his life.

## Polycarp and John

Just a brief comment here because I'll have more to say about this in the Irenaeus issue of the Early Fathers series. Polycarp is often thought to have been a student of John, the disciple and apostle of Jesus. The claim is based on an ambiguous fragment from the writings of Polycarp's contemporary, Papias, as quoted by Irenaeus. The problem is that Irenaeus had a distinct agenda in his work; that is, to counter the growing heresies that emerged in the second century. To do so, he may have invented the doctrine of apostolic succession, which suggests that authority rests in only in orthodox bishops because of an unbroken chain of appointment through ordination back to the apostles themselves.

The major problem with this claim is that it does not seem to be supported by Polycarp's only extant letter in which he quoted from all three synoptic gospels, but not once from the Gospel of John. That Polycarp would be a student of John and fail to quote his Gospel stretches credulity past all limits. It appears that Polycarp may have been the student of another John, called "the presbyter" by Papias, who was a teacher in Asia who may have been the writer of the Johannine letters, from which Polycarp does quote.

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<sup>1</sup>Quotes from the *Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp* in this article are labeled *Ign*, from his *Letter to the Magnesians*, *IgnMag*, and from his *Letter to the Smyrneans*, *IgnSmyr*.

<sup>2</sup>Quotes from the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* are labeled as *Poly*.

<sup>3</sup>Quotes from the the *Letter from Smyrna to Philomelium*, which describes the martyrdom of Polycarp are labeled as *Martyr*.

<sup>4</sup>Quotes from Eusebius' *Church History* are labeled as *Euse*.

<sup>5</sup>Quotes from Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* are labeled as *Iren*.

View a Polycarp video (excerpt from "Drive Thru History with Dave Stotts.") © 2005 Coldwater Media. All Rights Reserved. Posted at [www.allaboutreligion.org/polycarp-video.htm](http://www.allaboutreligion.org/polycarp-video.htm) ([allaboutgod.com](http://allaboutgod.com), Colorado Springs, CO)



## The Continuing Defense of One-Man Church Rule

Despite the complete lack of biblical support for the doctrine of monoepiscopal rule, its defenders remain undaunted. Most notably, of course, is the Roman Catholic Church, whose core structure is based on bishops subservient to the pope. The Catholic Encyclopedia boldly states, "It is of Catholic faith that bishops are of Divine institution. In the hierarchy of order they possess powers superior to those of priests and deacons; in the hierarchy of jurisdiction, by Christ's will" (Bishop), but the article never provides any evidence this alleged will of Christ.

In fact, the first "fully established" fact the article offers is that "To some extent, in this early period, the words bishop and priest **episkopos** and **presbyteros**) are synonymous," but even this statement is erroneous because **presbyteros** does NOT mean "priest." The Greek word for priest is **hiereus**. It is used extensively in the Gospels and Acts, always referring to a Jewish priest - most often the high priest (**archierus**) - with the exception of Luke's reference to the priest of Zeus in Lycus (Acts 14:13). It is also used extensively in Hebrews, where the author presents the doctrine of Jesus as High Priest (archierus). The Hebrew writer points out that "*every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in*

*relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Hebrews 5:1) and that Jesus, "being made perfect,...became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest..." (Hebrews 5:9-10).*

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was the final and ultimate sacrifice God required for sin. *"Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:25-26).* If Christ's sacrifice, as the permanent High Priest, was "once for all" and the role of a priest is to offer sacrifices for sin, what further sacrifice can there be? Under the New Covenant, all believers become priests; we need no intermediary other than Christ. An authority no less than Peter himself makes this plain: *"you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).* And Paul tells us that the sacrifice we are to offer is no longer a substitutionary animal, but our entire selves (Romans 12:1).

The only use of **hiereus** outside of the Gospels, Acts and Hebrews is in Romans 15:15-16, where Paul writes, *"But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister (**hiereus**, literally priest) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:15-16).* In this case, Paul appears to use the term **hiereus** in reference to his own priestly (intermediary) sacrifice on behalf of the Gentiles, who were a people separate from God. Once become Christians, Gentiles too became priests, requiring no further human intervention.

Catholics are, however, not the only Christian group to stray from biblical teaching about church leadership. Many Protestant groups reject a separate priestly class yet distinguish between the pastor (**poimēn**, *shepherd*) from the **episkopos** and **presbyteros**, but it is clear from Paul's farewell sermon to the Ephesians elders (Acts 20:17-36) that the three terms all refer to one role; e.g., the elders (**presbyteros**) serve as overseers (**episkopē**) by acting as shepherds (**poimēn**) over the flock. In many churches, elders serve as assistants to the ruling pastor. This is essentially no different than Ignatius' claim that presbyters are assistants to the bishop. Neither arrangement has any biblical justification.

## **Martyrdom**

Today, brothers and sisters in Christ are dying the death of a martyr in countries like China, where the state is opposed to Christianity, but we see few martyrs in America. At the same time, we all desperately need heroes - people who inspire us with their lives and testimony. As I indicated above, some elements of Polycarp's martyrdom may not have actually happened as they were described in Evarestus' letter. There may not have been a voice from heaven, the fire may not have formed an arc around him, and a dove may not have emerged from his bleeding wound. If these were embellishments, intended to create a larger-than-life legend around an already-respected leader, who could blame the members of his church?

What is certain is that Polycarp's courageous confrontation with a cruel death mimicked, at least to some degree, that of the Lord he served and it inspired those who witnessed it and heard of it. In those days before the authoritative formation of Christian Scripture (although, as we saw, Polycarp's letter to the Philippian church

demonstrates substantial early acceptance of much of the New Testament), the oral and informal written stories served as important lessons.

Is the same true today? Is the creation of a story or the embellishment of an account justified in order to encourage Christians? I do not wish to denigrate the memory of Cassie Bernall nor to discount the encouragement she may have served for many believers, but it appears that the facts do not match this modern legend. For those of you who may not recognize the name, Cassie Bernall was the Christian girl shot at Columbine High School in suburban Denver after allegedly admitting to believing in God. Michael W. Smith authored a song as her eulogy, her mother authored a book entitled "She Said Yes," her former church maintains a website ([cassiebernall.com](http://cassiebernall.com)) dedicated to her martyrdom, and the family maintains a site ([cassierenebernall.org](http://cassierenebernall.org)) for the Foundation in her honor.

By all accounts, Cassie Bernall was a committed young Christian, a joy to her family, her friends, and her church. She died tragically on April 20, 1999 when fellow students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went on a killing spree. Almost immediately after that terrible day, the story circulated that one of the killers put a gun to Cassie's head and asked if she believed in God. When she affirmed her belief, he shot her. The incident sparked rumors that Harris and Klebold targeted Christians, but other rumors cited jocks and Jews. Apparently, none of those were true.

According to the official Sheriff's Department report on the Columbine killings, Harris and Klebold were completely indiscriminate in their actions. In fact, their primary intent was to set off two propane bombs in the school cafeteria. Bombs don't discriminate between Christians and non-Christians, jocks and nerds, Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, according to the same report, Cassie was killed when one of the killers simply shoved a gun under a cafeteria table and pulled the trigger. According to witnesses, the exchange about God occurred with another girl, Valeen Schnurr, who survived that horrible day.

Perhaps this is news to you, perhaps it is not. My point is not about the facts surrounding Cassie Bernall's death, but rather whether - in this age of mass media - the persistence of the story, contradicted by the official investigation, serves a justifiable purpose. The truth has not been widely circulated because, in the words of one investigator, "This is just too sensitive." Some *ET&N* readers may be annoyed that I even chose to mention this, but truth is truth, regardless of the consequences, and in this case, the truth is more terrible, more revealing, than the legend. Cassie believed in God, but she did not die for that belief. Instead, she died as the result of the senseless, random violence that has been displayed in schools across our country, where children of all faiths die just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. This speaks not to some anti-Christian sentiment (which may or may not exist), but to the very real existence of evil in the world, something far too many Americans refuse to recognize. Such voluntary ignorance only serves to embolden the enemy further.

## Discussion ([Witches and Goblins and Ghosts, Oh, My!](#))

Comments posted on the [ET&N](#) blog



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17: 10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: Co-Workers: Jesus Justus (Nov 28)**

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