

“I am a Christian”

Week 3: Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

This week our series on the *Apostolic Fathers* continues with Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (c. 69 - c. 155/156). Though the name Polycarp may not sound familiar, he was a crucial link between the apostolic era of Jesus’ disciples and the development of the early church.

The collection known as the *Apostolic Fathers* contains two writings directly associated with Polycarp, a letter he wrote to the Philippians, and a letter written about his martyrdom. These writings are valuable because they connect him with Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (whose letters we read last week), and because the writing about his martyrdom is the oldest written account of Christian martyrdom outside of the New Testament (see Acts 6-7 about Stephen). The letter concerning his martyrdom also includes the earliest clear use of the term “catholic church” (meaning “universal church”) which would also eventually find its way into the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. In addition, the writing about his martyrdom also contains the earliest witness to the formation of a church calendar commemorating martyrs, or what we would call today, “saints.” On the ELCA church calendar, Polycarp is commemorated on February 23rd.

Polycarp was also mentioned in the writings of early church theologians, Irenaeus (c. 130 – 202) and Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 220). According to Irenaeus, Polycarp fought against a heresy known as Gnosticism, and in particular, two of its teachers, Valentinus and Marcion. He also wrote that Polycarp traveled to Rome, meeting with the bishop, Anicetus, to discuss ways of determining the date for Easter among various church traditions. Irenaeus also stated that when he had been a young man, he had heard Polycarp preach. Tertullian wrote that Polycarp knew John the apostle and had been consecrated as bishop by John. Perhaps most importantly, Irenaeus and Tertullian sought to demonstrate that leaders such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna were links between the apostolic era and the early church.

A word about the charge Polycarp faced for being a Christian is in order. To admit to being a Christian meant that that person did not worship the Roman gods and Caesar. So in Polycarp’s case, he was specifically charged with “atheism,” because though Christians worshiped their own deity, they did not worship the Roman gods. From the point of view of the Roman state they were atheists. We see this played out in the readings provided below.

Polycarp is significant for us today because he was involved in critical issues of his day that helped shape the Christian tradition as we have inherited it. Polycarp was a “witness” (in Greek “martyr”) to Jesus Christ at a time when clear statements of faith were needed under growing hostility and persecution by the Roman state. Polycarp also represents the beginning of a concern for orthodoxy in battling heretical teachings, particularly those of Gnosticism. As bishop, Polycarp is a significant witness in the development of the episcopal form of church governance. Finally, Polycarp showed knowledge of writings that would eventually become the New Testament. In an age when the New Testament was not yet fully formed or agreed upon, Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* shows familiarity with Matthew, Luke and Acts, as well as Paul’s letters to the Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and with pastoral letters such as 1 John and 1 Peter. Our knowledge of how the church developed after the age of Jesus’ apostles is therefore deepened by historical figures such as Polycarp, through whose witness the Christian faith has been passed down to us today.

Excerpts from Polycarp:

From *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians:*

[8] Let us, therefore, hold steadfastly and unceasingly to our hope and the guarantee of our righteousness, who is Christ Jesus, 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. Let us therefore, become imitators of his patient endurance, and if we should suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him. For this is the example he set for us in his own person, and this is what we have believed.

[10] Stand fast, therefore, in these things and follow the example of the Lord, firm and immovable in faith, loving the brotherhood, cherishing one another, united in the truth, giving way to one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no one. When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because “charity delivers from death.” All of you be subject to one another, and maintain an irreproachable standard of conduct among the Gentiles, so that you may be praised for your good deeds and the Lord may not be blasphemed because of you. But woe to him through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed. Therefore teach to all the self-control by which you yourselves live.

[12] ... Now may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal High Priest himself, the Son of God Jesus Christ, build you up in faith and truth and in all gentleness, and in all freedom from anger, and forbearance and steadfastness and patient endurance and purity, and may he give to you a share and a place among his saints, and to us with you, and to all those under heaven who will yet believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father who raised him from the dead. Pray for the saints. Pray also for kings and powers and rulers, and for those who persecute and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, in order that your fruit may be evident among all people that you may be perfect in him.

[13] Both you and Ignatius have written me that if anyone is traveling to Syria, he should take your letter along also. This I will do, if I get a good opportunity, either myself or the one whom I will send as a representative, on your behalf as well as ours. We are sending to you the letters of Ignatius that were sent to us by him together with any others that we have in our possession, just as you requested. They are appended to this letter; you will be able to receive great benefit from them, for they deal with faith and patient endurance and every kind of spiritual growth that has to do with our Lord. As for Ignatius himself and those with him, if you learn anything more definite, let us know.

From *The Martyrdom of Polycarp:*

(Written from the Church at Smyrna to the Church at Philomelium)

[7] ... And closing in on him late in the evening, they found him in bed in an upstairs room in a small cottage; and though he still could have escaped from there to another place, he refused saying, “May God’s will be done.” So when he heard that they had arrived, he went and talked with them, while those who were present marvelled at his age and his composure, and wondered why there was so much eagerness for the arrest of an old man like him. Then he immediately ordered that a table be set for them to eat and drink as much as they wished at that hour, so that he might pray undisturbed. When they consented, he stood and prayed, so full of the grace of God that for two hours he was unable to stop speaking; those who heard him were amazed, and many regretted that they had come after such a godly old man.

[8] Now at last he finished his prayer, after remembering everyone who had ever come into contact with him, both small and great, known and unknown, and all the universal (catholic) church throughout the world, it was time to depart, and so they seated him on a donkey and

brought him into the city on the day of a great Sabbath. Herod, the police captain, and his father, Nicetes, came out to meet him. After transferring him to their carriage and sitting down at his side, they tried to persuade him, saying, "Why, what harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and offering incense," (and other words to this effect) "and thereby saving yourself?" Now at first he gave them no answer. But when they persisted, he said, "I am not about to do what you are suggesting to me." Thus failing to persuade him, they began to utter threats and made him dismount in such a hurry that he bruised his shin as he got down from the carriage...

[9] But as Polycarp entered the stadium, there came a voice from heaven: "Be strong Polycarp, and be courageous"... And then, as he was brought forward, there was a great tumult when they heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore, when he was bought before him, the proconsul asked if he was Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, "Have respect to your age," and other things as they are accustomed to say: "Swear by the Genius ("guardian spirit") of Caesar; repent; say, 'Away with the atheists.'" So Polycarp solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen that were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then groaning as he looked up to heaven said, "Away with the atheists!" But when the magistrate persisted and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ," Polycarp replied, "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?"

[10] But as he continued to insist, saying, "Swear by the Genius of Caesar," he answered: "If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the Genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing"... (from *The Apostolic Fathers*. Trans. Lightfoot & Harmer, Ed. by Michael W. Holmes, 2nd edition, 1989).



Meditation

Jesus asked his disciples, "*But who do you say that I am?*" (see Mk 8:29). We might rephrase this question and ask, "But who do you say that you are?" Peter's reply, "*You are the Messiah*" is certainly the most famous answer to the first question, though it would take Peter time to understand what this meant and give an answer to the second question. As Jesus' rebuke of Peter showed, Peter did not yet understand who Jesus is *for him*. Jesus said to him, "*For you are not setting your mind on divine things but on human things.*" That's the trouble, Peter could say who Jesus is, but Peter could not yet say who he had become in knowing Jesus.

In this week's readings Polycarp answered that second question, saying, "I am a Christian." That confession of self-identity and discipleship to Christ was spoken in an ancient stadium in Smyrna (present-day Turkey), near the coast of the Aegean Sea. Smyrna was one of the seven churches John wrote to with the words, "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Rev. 2:8-11). Polycarp was bishop of that church and heir to these words about faithfulness that leads to the crown of life.

Polycarp's eighty-six years of life and discipleship to Jesus led him to a self-defining moment, in which he didn't just say, "I believe", but in which he said "I am." His witness to Jesus, who shaped his life and self-identity, still reverberates today across almost two millennia. Saying, "*I am a Christian*" declares our self-identity in the world as followers of Jesus.

Throughout his martyrdom narrative, Polycarp was asked to swear allegiance to Caesar, offer incense and worship saying, "Caesar is Lord." The demand for Polycarp to say, "Caesar is Lord,"

stood in contrast to the early Christian confession, “*Jesus is Lord*” (see 1 Corinthians 12:3 and Romans 10:9). According to Paul, the confession “*Jesus is Lord*” is evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit and the truth that “*there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him*” (Rom. 10:12).

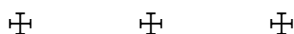
The conversation between Polycarp and the Roman proconsul was not without humor. With complete seriousness, but also perhaps a touch of exasperation, Polycarp said, “Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing.” As if to say, “Anyone can come to know Jesus is Lord, you too, could say, ‘I am a Christian.’”

For early Christians like Polycarp, saying “I am a Christian” had both religious and political dimensions. Before Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, to confess, “Jesus is Lord,” was a treasonous declaration, since it placed one’s allegiance to Christ over and above the Roman gods and the temporal power of Caesar. At the same time, Polycarp exhorted the Philippians to maintain an irreproachable life in the world among non-Christians, urging them to “pray for kings and powers and rulers, and for those who persecute and hate you.” To be a Christian meant living in a way that cared for others, while praying for the world. Being a Christian did not take one out of the world, but placed them in the very center of it pointing to the Lord who is generous, without distinction, to all who call upon him.

By any measure, two thousand years is a long time. None of us may want to go back to that world, and yet in a very profound way that world exists in each of us as inheritors of a culture and history shaped by Christians who believed that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Though modern Christians are significantly different than Polycarp, we share one profound reality: Jesus Christ. We also say, “I am a Christian.” We, too, can say those words “I am” that declare something profound and defining about us. They are words that open us to all the world; they are words that speak of God’s love for each person. “I am a Christian” is both individual and corporate at the same time. They are words that mark us and words that make us who we are. To say “I am a Christian” brings us into fellowship with the “apostolic and catholic church” around the world. These words means Christ’s body the church needs each of us, while at the same time meaning that each of us needs Christ and his body to understand our identity as human beings. Christ loves each of us, and yet none of us are alone in that love.

Jesus Christ has not changed. To be a Christian is to know the same Lord as Polycarp knew. To say, “I am a Christian” frees us to live as human beings, imitating Jesus and serving others, so that at the end of our lives we might also like Polycarp, say, “All these years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong.” Amen.



For further reading:

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity. Edited by Everett Ferguson, New York & London: Garland Publishers, second edition, 1999.

The Apostolic Fathers. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1891; second edition, 1989), third edition, 2006.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. Edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition, 1983 (1990 reprint).