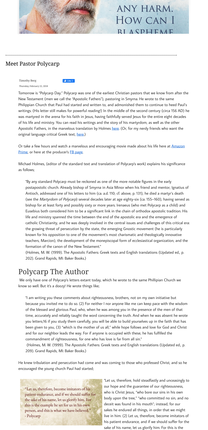

Meet Pastor Polycarp

Timothy Neal
Saturday, February 22, 2020

Tweet

Tomorrow is "Polycarp Day." Polycarp was one of the earliest Christian pastors that we know from after the New Testament. He was born in Philippi, served in Smyrna, and died in Smyrna. We know about him from Irenaeus's Against Heresies and Polycarp's own letter to the Philippians. Polycarp's Church that Paul had started and written to, and admonished them to continue to heed Paul's writings. (this letter still makes for powerful reading!) He was martyred in the mid-second century (AD 155-160) he was martyred in the arena for his faith in Jesus, having faithfully served Jesus for the entire eight decades of his life. Polycarp's life and ministry spanned the time period of the last twelve disciples of Jesus, and Apostolic Fathers, in the tremendous transitioning by Western Sees. Or, for my nerdy friends who want the original language critical Greek text, here.)

Or take a few hours and watch a marvelous and encouraging movie made about his life here at Amazon Prime, or here at the amazing DVD site.

Michael Holmes, (editor of the standard text and translation of Polycarp's work) explains his significance as follows:

"By any standard Polycarp must be reckoned as one of the more notable figures in the early postapostolic church. Already bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor when his friend and mentor, Ignatius of Antioch passed through on his journey to martyrdom in Rome (ca. 108-110), Polycarp was still there when Irenaeus (the Bishop of Lyons) visited Smyrna some 40 or 50 years later. Polycarp was a bishop for at least forty and possibly sixty or more years. Irenaeus tells us that Polycarp was a disciple of the apostles and was appointed to the episcopate by them. Tertullian, who was a contemporary of Polycarp's, tells us that he was the first to convert the Asiatics to the faith. Polycarp's life and ministry spanned the time between the end of the apostolic era and the emergence of catholicism. Irenaeus tells us that he was the teacher who was the central source and bulwark of the orthodox, the growing threat of persecution by the state, the emerging Gnostic movement (he is particularly critical of Marcion, who was a contemporary and acquaintance of Polycarp's), and the transitioning of teachers. Marcion's development of the Christian Scriptures represented a major turning point in the formation of the canon of the New Testament."

(Holmes, M. M. (2007). The Apostolic Fathers: Greek texts and English translations (Updated ed., p. 295). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.)

Polycarp The Author

We only have one Polycarp letter to survive today, which he wrote to the same Philippian Church we read about in Paul. It's a deeply tender little letter, saying:

"I am writing you these things about righteousness, brethren, not on my own initiative but because you invited me to do so (2) For neither I nor anyone like me can keep pace with the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who, when he was among you, in the presence of the men of his time, accurately and reliably taught the word concerning the truth. And when he was absent he wrote you letters; if you study them carefully, you will be able to build yourselves up in the faith that has been given to you, (3) 'which is the mother of us all,' when hope follows and love for God and Christ and our neighbors dwells in us. For he himself and the rest who are like him have faithfully the commendation of the word, for he knew how to be firm about it."

(Holmes, M. M. (2007). The Apostolic Fathers: Greek texts and English translations (Updated ed., p. 295). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.)

We know tribulation and persecution had come and was coming to those who professed Christ, and so he encouraged the young church Paul had started:

> "Let us therefore, brethren, testimonies of the patience we have seen with our own eyes, the tribulations, the great contests, the sufferings we have seen before us, let us be gathered into the grace that comes from God, for this is the crown for those who are worthy of God, and they will be ready for us to receive it."
>
> — Polycarp

Let us, therefore, hold steadfastly and unswervingly to our hope and the guarantee of our righteousness, which is Christ Jesus, 'who bore our sins in his own body upon the tree,' 'who committed no sin, and in his mouth there was no deceit,' but he endured all things for our sake, that we might live in him. Let us, therefore, become imitators of his patient endurance, and if we should suffer for his name, let us glorify him. For this is the example set for us in his own person, and this is what we have believed.

(Holmes, M. M. (2007). The Apostolic Fathers: Greek texts and English translations (Updated ed., p. 295). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.)

Perhaps he knew how true these words would ring in his own life all too soon.

Polycarp The Faithful Pastor

Polycarp seems to have been a Christian for a long time. He would have been born around AD 69-70. Together notes that almost all of his quotations come from the writings of the Apostles and the evangelists. He was a student of Irenaeus (Irenaeus was raised in a Jewish home, whose parents were taught from the OT. It seems quite possible that he was appointed to his position as Bishop in Smyrna by the Apostle John himself. Tertullian says that John personally ordained the church in Smyrna. Polycarp was also half a century. We can only imagine the wisdom of his years, and what it was like to see crowds of young people hungrily listening to the wisdom of the aged Polycarp. Polycarp was a pastor, and he was a pastor who was willing to spend time with his people, and he was a pastor who was willing to stand up against false teachers. Irenaeus describes how his own experiences memory what such moments must have been, and how the wisdom of Polycarp's teachings had been passed down to Irenaeus:

"For when I was a boy, I saw him in lower Asia with Polycarp, moving in splendor in the royal court, and endeavoring to gain the approbation of his superior. I remember the events of that period better than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it, so that I am able to tell the place in which the blessed Polycarp used to sit when he discoursed, and his going out and his coming, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the manner in which he used to talk of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And he so remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, as one who had received them from eyewitnesses of the Word of life, Polycarp also bore testimony to all things in harmony with the Scriptures. I listen to these things being told by him, by means of God, I listened to them attentively, noting them down, not on paper, but in my heart. And continually, through God's grace, I recall them faithfully. And I am able to bear witness before God that if that blessed and apostolic presbyter had heard any such thing, he would have cried out, and stopped his ears and, according to his custom, would have exclaimed, O good God, unto what times thou hast spared me that I should endure these things? And he would have fled from the place where, when he was sitting or standing, he had heard such words."

(Eusebius of Caesarea. "The Church History of Eusebius." CCB-225. Print. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series.)

Irenaeus also describes how Polycarp would so sharply contend for the faith once delivered to the saints against all the heretics who came to his city - and there were many.

> "But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia appointed bishop of the church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried long among us, and departed very old, having most gloriously and nobly fulfilled his martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To this witness of the Asiatic Churches testify, as also there are others who have succeeded Polycarp, that he present time,—who are the pillars of the truth, if God shall grant us to attain to the mark of his sure knowledge, and to search out what is the character of the Churches, and what is the character of the Church of which we are the offspring, and what was the character of the Church in the days when Polycarp conversed with the Church, and how the Lord was in the habit of preaching, from whom he received the testimony of the truth, and how he used to preach these things, which he also received from the Lord, and how he used to bear testimony to all the Scriptures, even to his death, which also we have, as many as are in God's true faith, and are not ashamed to bear the sentence of the truth, as he bore testimony, and used to call them to the faith, which he also, being the most firm witness of God, rejoiced in, even that which, being the first-born of Satan, he had gone to meet, that he might be also glorified in his bonds, and might be buried in his sleep, because he had suffered for the sake of his adoption as a son, that he might be also a partaker of the cup of Christ, for the resurrection of life, both of the soul and of the body, through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, which, being thus nourished and ministered unto, and being at last given up to the fire, and slain, and being about to be thrown to the wild beasts, because he could not exhibit the spectacle of a combat with lions, he underwent that fire, being fastened to the stake, and being consumed by the flames, as a ram taken from the midst of a great flock, for a sweet-smelling sacrifice, being prepared beforehand, that there, by means of the fire, he might, in the case of this man also, exhibit the bodily image of the true sacrifice, being made a martyr by those who had seen the truth, and had borne testimony to the Lord, who was numbered among the martyrs, who also, in the kingdom of God, alone of all the prophets, is still living in his bodily form, because his martyrdom was not a false one, but one in which was found the truth. Of all this he was the witness, and he was willing to be the witness, and he was the teacher of the truth, which all the heretics call blasphemy, and of which they are the children, and are worthy of such parents, and are condemned by their own judgment, as Polycarp was wont to call the first-born of Satan, that he might turn from the error of his ways, and might be saved in the coming judgment, which shall be upon all the unrighteous, and which also the Lord foretold, that it will be a judgment of good and evil, and that the tares shall be bound in bundles, and cast into the burning fire, because they have been sowing tares, and not wheat, and have done evil, and have not given fruit to the Lord, who, when he was in the flesh, underwent the struggle of the true man, and was crowned with the crown of immortality, and obtained the heavenly kingdom, and received the good things of God, which no man has seen, nor have they entered into his heart, but which he had spoken of, when he was with us, and which he had promised to his servants, even to those who are his true disciples, and who do not, like some, deny him, who, at his coming, will be cast into the fire, and will be burned up, and will be made manifest that we are not God's, but that he who is the true Christ has come, and has suffered, and has risen again, and has been received into the heavens, and has been glorified, and has been proclaimed to be the Son of God, and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit, and has been sent by the Father to the world, to be the Saviour of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and has been found to be the Son of God, and has been glorified by the Father

Gospel Contradictions	Greek	Hands
Historical Jesus	Historical Theology	History
Homosexuality	Journal Of Travels	Kingdom Chronicles
Kingdom Of God	Kjvonly	Lewis
Liturgy	Marriage	Matthew
Mattthew	Minimal Facts	Music
Nt	Oh My God	Omg
Paraphrase	Pastor	Paul
Philosophy	Polycarp	Praying
Psalms	Radicals	Reformers
Satire	Sermon Notes	Sex Drive
Sexuality	Single Life	Singles
Spiritual Gifts	Spirituality	Strongs
Synoptic Problem	Taking The Lords Name In Vain	Tattoo
Text	The Doctrine Of Preservation	The Power Of The Tongue
The Singer	Translation Methods	Tro
Webster's	William Tyndale	Word Studies
Words	Worship	

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