

Polycarp

The unbending faith of the Christians during the first centuries of the church stood out as a shining example to the pagan world. How could anyone stand unflinching in the face of death and claim the crucified Jesus to be God, if the story was a myth? Such absolute trust in an unseen God was inexplicable to the pagan mind. What was the source of such courage? Many people began their journey of faith asking those very questions.

One of the first widely publicized martyr stories in the post-apostolic era was that of Polycarp, the much-loved bishop of Smyrna. Like all ancient figures, his story is dimmed by the centuries that separate his time from ours, and the most recent scholarly research of his life leaves the reader with more questions than answers. The traditional account is familiar. “He was a venerable figure,” writes F. F. Bruce, “forming the last link with those who had seen Christ in the flesh, for he had sat at the feet of John, the beloved disciple.”²⁴ How or when he became a Christian is unknown, but by the early second century he had a thriving ministry in Smyrna. “Slaves, local aristocrats and ... members of the Proconsul’s staff were counted among his tightly knit and well-organized congregation,” according to W. H. C. Frend.²⁵

So forceful was his ministry against paganism that he was denounced throughout all Asia Minor as the “atheist”—“the teacher of Asia, the destroyer of our gods.”²⁶ In the eyes of the pagans he was glorifying a dead man, and his stirring sermons on the teachings and miracles of Jesus, of which he had been told firsthand by John, were particularly upsetting. His writings too were a source of irritation. The only extant document written by him is a letter to the Philippian church, a letter that shows Christology as the pivotal point of his message. “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.”²⁷

But was Polycarp even a disciple of the apostle John? In *Polycarp and John*, Frederick Weidmann reviews the ancient literature and provides an English text of Coptic literary fragments on Polycarp that had not previously been available. He points out that Polycarp’s writing more closely parallels Paul’s than John’s, and that the references to his learning at the feet of John may refer to a John other than the apostle.²⁸ Certainly, he revered the apostles, especially Paul, as is evident in his letter to the Philippians: “I write these things, brethren, not in arrogance, but because you have requested me. For neither I, nor any other like me, can attain the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who was among you ... and firmly taught the word of truth.”²⁹

But despite such discrepancies, the sources consistently show Polycarp as a man who was deeply devoted not only to preserving the true faith passed down by the apostles but also to spreading that faith as the apostles had. Indeed, like so many “theologians” of this era, Polycarp was an evangelist and missionary who conveyed a deep sense of urgency in his interaction with the pagan culture around him. He was known in Smyrna as a teacher who could be found sitting in his special spot with believers and unbelievers, listening and debating. But he did not confine his ministry to one geographical area. He journeyed to Rome as an old man, and during that visit, according to Irenaeus, he “won many of the Gnostic heretics over to the Christian Church.”³⁰

For some fifty years Polycarp wielded powerful influence in his position as bishop. Yet in the words of Elliott Wright, “He was the gentlest ... of men ... a case study in humility.”³¹ He was remembered as a man of prayer—a man who, according to one ancient source, “prayed constantly night and day”—prayer that apparently did not interfere with his daylight hours devoted to teaching and his nights to studying the Scripture.³²

In approximately A.D. 156 anti-Christian persecution broke out in the province of Asia. Civil authorities, for reasons not fully clear, decided to kill certain Christians. Realizing that he was a target, Polycarp, with the help of local believers, went into hiding. But after torturing a servant, as one account relates, the soldiers discovered Polycarp in a hayloft and took him into custody.



Polycarp being burned at the stake in Smyrna.

Execution was not what the authorities wanted, however. After all, Polycarp was a very old man, and what could be gained by putting him to death? What they really wanted was a denial of his faith. What a victory that would be for paganism and what a blow to the “cult” of Jesus. “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord’ and offering incense and saving yourself,” the officials pleaded after they had taken him into custody. “Have respect for your age,” the proconsul begged; “swear by the divinity of Caesar; repent and say, ‘Away with the atheists.’... Take the oath, and I will let you go.” Polycarp stood firm, and then uttered the words that will forever be associated with his name: “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”³³

The authorities carried out their threat, and Polycarp was burned at the stake. But the end result was a victory for the Christians. Many nonbelievers were horrified by the spectacle of burning at the stake this revered man, by some accounts 86, by other accounts 104 years old. His death served as a witness to believers and nonbelievers alike to the suffering of Christ and to the courageous commitment of Christ’s followers.

Perpetua

The cessation of persecution in Asia Minor following the death of Polycarp did not apply to the whole Roman Empire. Persecution continued elsewhere, and during the early years of the third century it became widespread and well-coordinated, especially in North Africa where Perpetua and her slave girl Felicitas were executed. Before this period of intense persecution, however, there were isolated instances that were highly publicized—one in Rome just one decade following the death of Polycarp. This time it was Justin, who since his death has been referred to as Justin Martyr.

Schooled in the philosophy of Plato, Justin was converted to Christianity as a young man and soon became one of the faith’s ablest defenders. He was a forceful writer who intelligently presented Christianity to his pagan readers and openly denounced the persecution of his fellow-believers. In Rome he gave instruction to believers and inquirers