

WINTER 2005

Religion and Spirituality (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality.aspx)

BIOGRAPHY

Polycarp: The Apostolic Legacy

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Polycarp of Smyrna holds a very special and perhaps even unique position in the history of the [Christian church](#) ([/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043](#)). He was personally taught by the [apostle John](#) ([/visionmedia/the_apostles/the_apostle_john/21835.aspx](#)) and therefore is important to the continuity of beliefs from the time of Christ through the [apostolic age](#) ([/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043](#)) and beyond.

Polycarp is believed to have been born around the year 69 or 70. Not many details of his early life are known. According to Maxwell Staniforth's *Early Christian Writings*, he is thought to have been a native and lifelong resident of the Roman proconsular province of Asia, which became a new center for the Christian world after the fall of Jerusalem in 70. Many followers of Christ, possibly including Polycarp's family, left Judea to settle in the cities of Asia. In particular, writes Staniforth, the last surviving apostle, John, "had made his home in Ephesus, and his name and influence had become a magnet for all that was most vital in Christendom. The young Polycarp himself was one of his disciples, and in later life was fond of recalling his precious memories of the saint."

Polycarp served as bishop of Smyrna for some six decades, from the closing years of the first century to the mid-second century. The early-third-century theologian Tertullian writes in chapter 32 of his *Prescription Against Heretics* that, according to "original records," it was the apostle John himself who ordained Polycarp to that office.

His later years as bishop saw major changes begin to occur within the church. W.H.C. Frend, a prominent 20th-century church historian, describes the period from 135–193 as a period of “acute hellenization” of the church. It was a time noted for the “rise of [orthodoxy](#) ([/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D145](#)).” As a link to the apostolic age, Polycarp vigorously sought to prevent both of these developments.

Irenaeus, a second-century theologian and student of Polycarp, recorded his memories of his mentor. The theologian wrote to a heretic known as Florinus about Polycarp’s dedication to passing on the teachings of the apostles. Although Irenaeus’s original account is lost to history, church historian Eusebius quoted a portion of it, including the following, in book 5 of his *Ecclesiastical History*: “When I was still a boy I saw you [Florinus] in Lower Asia in Polycarp’s company... . I can describe the place where blessed Polycarp sat and talked, his goings out and comings in, the character of his life, his personal appearance, his addresses to crowded congregations. I remember how he spoke of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord; how he repeated their words from memory; and how the things that he had heard them say about the Lord, His miracles and His teaching, things that he had heard direct from the eye-witnesses of the Word of Life, were proclaimed by Polycarp in complete harmony with Scripture.”

Documenting this line of scriptural teaching through Polycarp to the apostles had become increasingly critical through the course of the second century. The final years of Polycarp’s life were already dominated by problems within the church over doctrinal changes and external persecution. Polycarp’s inestimable value to the church was that, unlike those around him, he appears to have remained totally faithful to the teachings of the apostles. Hence Irenaeus was able to write of Polycarp’s dedication to what he had learned:

“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 [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering 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” (*Against Heresies* 3.3.4).

Polycarp's adherence to the teachings of the apostles became especially evident during his visit to Rome, most likely in 154 or 155. The heretic Marcion had led many astray by his efforts to separate the church from its Jewish roots (see "[Is Christianity Off Base?](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/interviews/john-garr-apostle-paul/437.aspx)" (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/interviews/john-garr-apostle-paul/437.aspx>)). Polycarp, by his persuasive teaching, turned a large number of the Marcionites from their errors.

The bishop's steadfastness failed, however, to prevent the church at Rome from adopting an unscriptural practice: the church there had introduced a new means of celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus, known today as the Good Friday–Easter Sunday tradition, in place of the Passover service. Disagreement over this change, referred to as the Quartodeciman Controversy, caused a huge rift in the church. Polycarp urged Anicetus, then the bishop of Rome, to return to the observance of the festival on the 14th day of the first month in the Hebrew calendar, as the apostles had taught. Polycarp wished to remain true to the teachings he had received and to observe this festival in the manner he had learned from the apostle John in his youth.

Anicetus refused to change his position, however, claiming that he was following his own immediate predecessors. The ensuing split in the church notwithstanding, the two men apparently remained on friendly terms and agreed to disagree.

In His message to the seven churches of Asia, Jesus Christ had prophesied of Smyrna that "the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested... . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Polycarp, as bishop of Smyrna, held true to this standard when he was arrested around 155 and tried for refusing to sacrifice to Caesar or renounce his allegiance to Christ. The bishop was summarily burned alive as a martyr for his beliefs. At the time of his death, he spoke of himself as having served Christ for 86 years.

During those years, Polycarp took the precious knowledge handed down to him from Jesus Christ through [the apostle John](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/the_apostles/the_apostle_john/21835.aspx) ([/visionmedia/the_apostles/the_apostle_john/21835.aspx](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/the_apostles/the_apostle_john/21835.aspx)) and passed it on to his own disciples. He embodied those teachings and stood firm in his beliefs, even though it meant death. Polycarp truly lived according to the following words from his only extant work, his epistle to the Philippians: "Stand fast, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm and unchangeable in the faith, loving the brotherhood, and being attached to one another, joined together in the truth, exhibiting the meekness of the Lord in your intercourse with one another, and despising no one."

