

THINK REFERENCE
COLLECTION

history

THINK FOR YOURSELF ABOUT WHAT SHAPED THE CHURCH

Written by Robert Don Hughes
General Editor Karen Lee-Thorp



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This book is for you, Gail.
For your character, for your forgiveness, for your integrity,
for your faithfulness,
For your insight, for your laughter, for your love—
You are my anchor of faith, my rock of stability, my partner
in prayer,
My colleague upon the road, my daughter's mother,
My best friend, my soul mate, my wife.
Thank you for choosing to spend your life with me.

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About the TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION

The TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION isn't an ordinary set of reference books. Like all of the books in the TH1NK line, we wrote these books for students. That doesn't mean we inserted some hip language into an otherwise dry, boring book to try to make it sound with-it and cool, dude. Instead, we built these books on a couple of assumptions about you.

First, we knew you want honest representations of various points of view. Although all the books in the REFERENCE COLLECTION are written from an evangelical Christian position, we didn't dismiss all other standpoints. Instead, we wrote these books in such a way that those holding different world-views and theological perspectives would be able to read these books and say, *Yes, this gives a good outline of what I and others believe.*

We also believed you are able to draw your own conclusions. Whether the question regards what Buddhists believe or whether or not Christians can lose their salvation, we didn't connect all the dots for you. Each book presents several perspectives. You will have to take the next step on your own and figure out what you believe and why you believe it. Our goal is to do more than answer questions. The TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION is designed to make you think through your own beliefs and convictions, as well as those of others.

Finally, we assumed you want something more than a place to turn to for answers to your questions about Islam or Psalm

119 or the role of women in the church. That's why we designed these books to be read, not just researched. These are books you can read from cover to cover. Along the way, you will find that these books not only dispense information but also entertain you and challenge you and the way you see your world.

The NavPress THINK Team

Introduction

History. Yuck, right? Unpronounceable names that are even harder to spell. Pages of multiple-choice questions with date after date after date. Who can remember it all? Who would want to?

Of course, that's what happens whenever you have to learn what someone else wants you to know. But what about what *you* want to know?

Since you're reading this, I'm assuming you know and love Jesus—that you're a Christian. But what about the church? Do you love *it*? Or are there things about it that make you sick or make you mad? How did the church get to be like it is? It belongs to Christ Jesus, of course, but who made the critical decisions about what should be called orthodox theology? Who started the different denominations, and why are there so many splits?

Who made the choices that made the church what it is today? Somebody did. Or rather, lots of somebodies. And, yeah, some of them had unpronounceable names. But no matter how long ago or far away they lived, these people knew the same Jesus you know as Lord. They prayed each day to the same heavenly Father. They were filled with the same Holy Spirit you are. In fact, you have more in common with these brothers and sisters from the distant past than you do with many of the people you'll drive past today. They're part of your spiritual family tree, your Christian forebearers. The choices they made in their lives directly affect you. Some of those choices were

positive, and some were really negative. What things about the church give you hope? What things about the church cause you to wonder if anybody in it knows what he's talking about? Why are some things so . . . wrong?

CAUSE AND EFFECT

The events that have made us the church are not just a muddle of bunched-up happenings that occurred for no reason. There's a sequence of cause and effect dating back to the beginnings of the church that explains *why* we Christians think the way we do—and why we don't all think the same. It's not a mystery; it's history. Understanding it will help you make better choices in your own life. And, if the Lord doesn't return for another thousand years, some of the choices you make might affect others just as much as did the decisions made long ago by the people we'll discuss.

Why this particular list of people? That's what makes history controversial. What I think is important may not be what you think is important. My selections might even irritate you. What if your favorite hero of the faith isn't on the list? That certainly doesn't mean that person hasn't influenced the kingdom of God. It just means that this is a short book and that I'm the gatekeeper of who and what we'll talk about. Given the opportunity to choose a few of the "most influential" figures in the history of the church, these are the ones that pop out at me. If this book does its job, you'll want to find out a lot more details anyway. There are many books filled with information on each of these figures—as well as many others of the "saints" we don't have space to mention.

HEROES?

I said “hero of the faith,” didn’t I? Were all of these people heroes? Not in the Hollywood sense, certainly. Most of them didn’t plan to change the church—at least not in the ways that they eventually did. Most just tried to be faithful to the Word of God and recognized that the churches of their time didn’t measure up to the ideal. That’s still true of the church today, despite their best efforts. We all know that the churches in which we worship often fall short of the church that Jesus established. What can we do about it? Can we change bad patterns? We might want to model ourselves after some of the figures in this book. We might find ourselves in uncomfortable situations as we take stands that prove unpopular to people stuck in worldly practices. At least few of us risk being roasted alive for doing so!

Words like *reform*, *renew*, and *return* have described the goals of many of the great leaders of the church—especially those we’ll examine. They lived in different ages, when different ways of thinking prevailed. In fact, we’ll track the reality that the rules of logic and reason in one generation sometimes don’t fly for later Christians. Does this mean the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) *changes*? We know God doesn’t change. Scripture doesn’t change. But every generation interprets Scripture to understand God in the light of the time in which it lives. How *you* process information—any information, be it historical or theological or whatever—is different from the way Thomas Aquinas processed it, because he lived in a different time, in which people thought in different ways.

God birthed us into this day and age. We need to accept that reality and figure out how to help people process the gospel of Christ in the present. How do we know how to do that?

History can help. We can see how past generations responded to their own times with new *explanations* of the unchanging nature of God.

SIX BIG CHALLENGES

Six things jump out at me as I read church history—six challenges that show up again and again in the church no matter what the time or the place or the language used. Understanding these will help to explain why the church seems to be in need of reform in every generation. These will be our benchmarks as we (quickly) survey two thousand years of spiritual victories, human crises, and tragic false starts.

People Like Us

The first challenge is simply that the celebrated saints of church history were *people*. Imperfect people. They were, in fact, people like us. While this book is not designed to “dis” the greats of the church, it *is* going to try to be honest about the clay feet of those God has used. Only Jesus is perfect. The rest of us are just sinners saved by God’s grace. If the saints of the past dealt with the same human problems we encounter daily, does that make them any less saintly—or us any more? Perhaps this will help us to be more honest about our own feet of clay and discourage us from trying to hide ourselves behind holy masks.

The Body of Christ and the Human Institution

The second challenge is that *we are dealing with something that is both the church of Christ and a human institution*. We know that Christ established his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But that doesn’t mean the powers of hell

haven't established suburbs in certain pews. The book of Acts shows the church struggling with management issues. Acts 6 begins with complaints of one group against another group. The Holy Spirit guided the apostles to a solution of that issue, but it's clear that the church in Jerusalem was full of flawed individuals. Flawed individuals often find flawed solutions to problems, and as Acts continues we see more and more problems arising.

Look at the first few chapters of Revelation and you'll see that out of seven churches in Asia Minor, only two receive Christ's praise. Ephesus, the great mother church of all these, lost her first love (see 2:4). This expression may mean that the Ephesian church had gotten so tangled up in worldly concerns and local issues that the body of Christ was taking a back seat to the human institution. Similarly, churches today have one foot in God's world and the other foot firmly planted in earth's soil. Questions like, "Doesn't God want Christians to be rich?" and "Shouldn't we be giving more money to missions rather than adding on to the family center?" run across denominational lines. Every local body of genuine believers is part of the body of Christ, the church. But every local body is also an institution of flawed humans. If none of the ancient saints was totally righteous, how should we expect all church members to be? And church members—including pastors and leaders—are the people who fashion the institutions we call churches.

This is more than just another aspect of the "we're all just people" challenge. Sometimes very good people can build—or maintain—flawed, bad, even evil institutions. We'll talk about some of those flawed institutions, but let's be clear here: The church is simultaneously the body of Christ—in some ways his incarnate presence on earth—and a human institution.

In that way, the church is both holy and flawed. As we think through the centuries, we'll need to remind ourselves of this again and again. It's been a constant struggle in church history from the beginning.

Church + State = Very Bad Things

Which is a good place to move to the third challenge: *When the church gets married to the state, the result is very bad things.* After all, the church is the bride of Christ. It should be married only to the Lord. But since the time of Constantine, the church has again and again become so entangled in affairs of state that it has—yeah, I'll go ahead and use the word—*prostituted* itself. God used that image himself when talking of his people in Hosea.

Some have said that the church ought to be in *control* of the state. John Calvin, for example, believed this. Martin Luther may not have believed it originally, but he certainly wasn't a Christian revolutionary.

And what about those two words being used together: Is *Christian revolutionary* an oxymoron? One of the great criticisms the church has had to bear from the world is the historical record of how many people have been killed in Jesus' name—generally in support of or in revolution against the state. We'll try to see how the church has gotten entangled with the state in times past and look at whether that's a good idea or not.

Faith Versus Reason

A fourth challenge that recurs in almost every generation is *the primacy of faith versus reason.* This became especially pronounced in the years of the Enlightenment, when reason

crowned science king and logic irrefutable. The fact of the matter is that most ideas are refutable, and we live in an age when science and logic have fallen under suspicion. The great irony of our postmodern time is how often logic is used to demonstrate how *nothing* is absolutely true.

Throughout Christian history there has been a constant plea from one quarter of the church or another to return to simple faith. But what does that mean, exactly? Each generation redefines simple faith in its own terms—in its own logic. While God doesn't change, and the biblical record remains available to all of us, the issue of faith versus reason changes like a kaleidoscope with every turn of the tube. There is a changing vogue of rationality in every age. This is why we have to become effective interpreters of the faith—and why old methods of doing this sometimes no longer work effectively.

What About Missions?

An interesting thing happened on the way to systematic theology. *Missions, which are the heart of the New Testament, got misplaced.* Up until Constantine in the fourth century, the church spread across the Roman world like a wildfire of evangelistic zeal. Then it slowed down to get organized. The great questions of Christology and Trinity were debated and resolved, which is good, but the church also got focused inward instead of outward. There were still missionaries, and they proved effective, but there were too few of them for too long. Marrying the Roman Empire didn't help. It meant that those outside the realm of Rome viewed Christianity as a Roman religion and a means of enslaving them. In some measure at least, that was true. Far to the north and east, the missionaries continued their activities, but often the nations that emerged in those new areas

followed the Roman model of the state church—and missions were forgotten. Have missions been forgotten again in our present generation? Is that still a danger?

Ethics Optional?

Our final challenge—at least the last we’ll consider closely—is *the tendency of some leaders to treat ethics as optional*. Some throughout history have been selective in the ethical standards they have lived by and/or taught. If the church has often been in bondage to the state, it has even more often been in bondage to the culture. The American church is not a state church—but it certainly is an *American* church.

Missions studies talk of the need for the church to become indigenous to the place in which it is planted, as a palm tree is indigenous to Hawaii and a redwood is to California. But these same studies warn of *accommodating* the gospel to the culture—changing the faith to fit the folks. This dilutes the gospel until it’s no longer the gospel but something else. Nowhere does the level of accommodation of the church to its culture show up so starkly as in the ethical standards of its local Christians.

When this problem is really acute, we don’t even recognize just how much the world’s values have flavored our faith. While we may see this clearly in our present age, this is not a new problem at all. We can see people wrestling with these same issues back in—again—Acts. Does this mean we need to give up on ethics, rationalizing that what God really is concerned about is whether we’ve accepted Christ or not, and continuing to live exactly as the world does? I don’t think that was the original idea—do you?

BACK TO BASICS

So what was the original idea? Reformers in every century have tried to get back to the New Testament model. Sometimes they've succeeded. Sometimes their successes have faded within a generation. Is it hopeless? Do we quit trying? Do we give up on the institutional church entirely and go out to live as hermits? (Actually, that's been tried, and it wasn't a silver bullet. It produced an institutional church composed of hermits.)

The joy of history is this: We can see that the problems we face are not new, even if they wear new faces. We can see that the faithful have never stopped struggling, even in the face of overwhelming odds. We can see that they made mistakes while they struggled, just as we do, yet God used them. Let's study the history of the church together through the lives of some of its best-known figures and pray that this study helps us to live just as courageously. And if the Lord doesn't return for another thousand years and our time becomes yet another chapter in the church's history, will those who come behind us find *us* faithful?

Faithful unto Blood

POLYCARP

The huge crowd that had gathered in the stadium of Smyrna stamped and roared and shouted for blood. Did the sun shine brightly on the carnage smeared across the dust of the stadium floor? Or did gray clouds slip sullenly across the sky, diffusing the light, cloaking the insanity of the crowd's hatred even from the enraged pagans themselves?

The Martyrdom of Polycarp doesn't tell us these details, but it does reveal many others: On a February day in AD 156, this angry mob had already watched eleven Christians from Philadelphia torn apart by lions. They had witnessed the bravery of young Germanicus, who'd refused to reject Christ and had instead pulled the hungry beasts to his chest. They had cackled in triumph as a Christian named Quintas quailed in terror and not only swore the oath to the emperor but also volunteered to betray Polycarp's hiding place to the authorities. Now they took up the chant, demanding that the aged leader of the church of Smyrna be caught and butchered. "Away with the atheists!" they screamed—meaning, of course, the Christians. Why did they think Christians were atheists?

Because Christians believed only in *their* God, not the Roman gods. “Let Polycarp be sought!” they shouted. And he was.

POLYCARP

ca. AD 70–156

Polycarp was a faithful leader of the church in Smyrna, whose life — although obscured by legend — appears to have stretched from the time of the apostles halfway into the second Christian century. Intent on delivering to following generations what he had received, he collected the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, who was martyred in Rome around 113, and may also have been an essential player in collecting the books that became the New Testament. Thought to have heard firsthand the testimony of the apostle John, he was the mentor of Irenaeus, one of the first great Christian apologists and bishop of Lyon. Polycarp’s epistle to the Philippians is not very creative, but it certainly reflects his dependence on Scripture, for almost every line is a quotation from some earlier inspired work. Polycarp was martyred at the age of eighty-six, and his grace and peace in the face of the fire became a testimony to all the martyrs that followed him.

PASTOR POLYCARP

Yes, it’s a funny-sounding name. I’ve never heard of anyone’s naming a son after him. Why should this old pastor claim our attention? After all, others had been martyred before Polycarp, and *many* others have been since. We could as easily focus on Ignatius, the second bishop of Antioch, who wrote seven lengthy letters encouraging various churches as he traveled to

Rome to be killed. One of these was addressed to Polycarp, who was at that time the young pastor of Smyrna. In fact it was Polycarp who collected and preserved these letters so we can read them today. Or we could examine the life of Irenaeus, one of the first great apologists of the church, who defended the faith against the heresies of Marcion and the gnostics. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon (in present-day France), had grown up in Smyrna under the teaching of—yes—Polycarp. While both Ignatius before him and Irenaeus after left lots of writings, history has preserved for us only one letter written by Polycarp. He sent it to the Corinthian church, and it reads like some term papers I've received from my students: a collection of quotations from the writings of others, strung together by *and*, *but*, and *so*. Some Christian scholars have even criticized Polycarp for being so unoriginal.

Perhaps that alone is a good enough reason to focus on this ancient pastor and teacher. He was in every way *orthodox*. That means he was faithful to pass along unchanged the message of the gospel as he received it—and he'd received it from the apostles themselves. One of his own mentors was John. Polycarp is a transitional figure in the life of the church—the last of those who had known the people who walked with the Lord, and the first of the leaders of the postapostolic age. We owe him a great deal for his faithfulness to the Word of God. He helped preserve it for us.

THE WITNESS OF JOHN

What must it have been like to sit and listen to the memories of “that disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7)? John, after all, met Jesus on the day the Lord was baptized. He walked beside him for three years—saw him transfigured, crucified,

and resurrected. John visited heaven and saw the whole of this history we study. He wrote the cosmic gospel and said at the end that if all the things Jesus did were written in detail, then the world itself couldn't contain all the books. But even if he couldn't write them all down, John surely remembered them. Imagine young Polycarp listening, his eyes and ears wide open, hearing details we'll not learn until we're in heaven ourselves.

He would have been a young man when John was taken at last to that glory that Revelation describes. Polycarp was born around AD 70, probably somewhere in Asia Minor (now Turkey) near the great city of Ephesus. Was he a second-generation Christian? It would seem so; when he died, he said he'd served God for eighty-six years. He missed seeing the man he called "the blessed Paul," but since Paul had planted the church in Ephesus and Smyrna was only about fifty miles away, he would have heard story after story about the great missionary from people who *had* known Paul. Timothy followed Paul as leader in Ephesus, and John followed Timothy. What a string of leaders that church had!

How the stories of the martyrs must have hung in Polycarp's mind. He lived, after all, with the threat of persecution all his life, beginning with those of Domitian (who became emperor in AD 81) on through to the persecutions of Antoninus Pius that finally took Polycarp's life. He knew those who had "resisted unto blood." Did he expect finally to become a martyr himself?

The Greek word from which we get *martyr* didn't originally mean a person who dies for a faith. It meant simply a "witness," as in a court of law. The word gained its more severe meaning in the Roman courts as Christians bore witness to their faith in Christ and thus condemned themselves to death.

John experienced the martyrdom of imprisonment on Patmos for his confession. But he survived and returned to Ephesus to share his vision.

Read John 21:18-23, and imagine what it must have been like for the believers when John died. They had all expected Christ to return before the last of the disciples passed from the scene, in part because of this incident. Did John's death cause a crisis of faith for young Polycarp? Probably. Don't we all tend to struggle when God doesn't meet our expectations? Whether he faltered or not, we can read the results of Polycarp's reaction to the beginning of the postapostolic period. He, with his friend Onesimus, became preservers of the written records that became the New Testament.

ONESIMUS OF EPHESUS

We know much about the prominent figures of the New Testament: Jesus, of course, and the disciples, as well as Stephen, Paul, Barnabas, Philip the Evangelist, James, Timothy, and John Mark. Others, like Epaphras and Philemon, we know much less about. Still others we know only by name and association with a particular church, as Paul greeted them at the end of one of his letters or Luke mentioned them in passing in the book of Acts. One of the intriguing characters about whom we know *some* is Onesimus. This is because Scripture includes a short personal letter from Paul to his friend Philemon regarding Philemon's runaway slave.

The name Onesimus meant useful, and in his letter Paul played upon that meaning as he explained to Philemon that his slave—who doubtless seemed useless since he'd run away—had been useful indeed to Paul during his imprisonment. Paul asked Philemon to accept back his servant and

to treat him as he would Paul. Really, Paul demanded it of Philemon. We have to figure that Philemon did as Paul asked, because the letter has been preserved and included in Scripture. Why, exactly? Why would a personal letter regarding a slave be included with the great theological treatise of Romans and Paul's advice to the young pastors Timothy and Titus?

We're left to speculate on the answer to that because there is very little accurate information to go on beyond the New Testament books themselves. But there is record that a certain Onesimus became the bishop of the Ephesian church, guiding it at about the same time Polycarp led the church of Smyrna. (A bishop at this point in church history wasn't what we mean by bishop today. It was more the recognized leader of a number of associated house churches in an area.) It seems that Polycarp and Onesimus may have worked together to gather the writings we know as the New Testament. Would it be any surprise that the personal letter Onesimus delivered himself to his master would have been included by a grateful Onesimus? He knew firsthand that it was a genuine letter from Paul.

Ensuring that the writings of the New Testament were genuine was a major issue for the church in Polycarp's time. There were myriad documents floating about among the churches that claimed some connection to the apostles, many of these obviously fakes. Some of them put forward ideas that were absolutely contradictory to what we have come to know as Scripture. They come to light from time to time, and the media makes a big deal of them. Recently the so-called gospel of Judas was discovered, and naturally the media jumped to tell all about its "mysteries." Of course, the church knew of the gospel of Judas in the third century, dismissing it as a fake gospel filled with gnostic heresy. Good thing Polycarp was so

insistent upon orthodox theology. The Roman world was as mixed up religiously as our own is today.

DOCETISM

Have you ever looked seriously at Scientology? This religion holds that the spirit is everything and the body is nothing. It's not a new idea. In the early years of the church, a number of groups made this same assumption, that all that counts is the spirit and the body is disposable trash. This type of thinking was part of what the New Testament writers were responding to when they emphasized the resurrection of Jesus' *body*, and the fact that Thomas could touch it. Some writers were already contending that what the disciples saw was a ghost. Others argued that Jesus had never been flesh and blood, but had only *appeared* to be. This is called Docetism (from the Greek word for "to seem, to appear").

Some odd ideas emerged from this kind of thinking. For instance, if your body is spiritually irrelevant, then you can indulge its appetites without worrying that your actions will affect your spirit. But if your body is as much "you" as your spirit is, and if Jesus dignified the human body by taking one himself, then what you do with and to your body (and other people's bodies) matters.

IGNATIUS

When Polycarp was still a young bishop, he was much influenced by his older friend Ignatius, who was fighting Docetism wherever he found it. Ignatius served as bishop of the church in Antioch, the first missionary church, which had sent out Barnabas and Paul. The fourth-century historian Eusebius said he became bishop in AD 69, just a few years after Paul's

own martyrdom. He had been arrested late in the reign of Emperor Trajan (around 111–115) and was being taken to Rome to be fed to the wild beasts. As he traveled, he wrote letters to the churches of the Ephesians, the Magnesians, the Philadelphians, the Smyrnans, the Trallians, the Romans, and to Polycarp personally.

His writings show him to be a passionate man, almost neurotically obsessed with thoughts of how the wild beasts would tear him apart. He wrote to the Roman Christians to tell them that they were not to try to prevent his martyrdom. His other primary themes were loyalty and obedience to the local bishop (had he experienced frustrations with some of the lay leaders in Antioch?) and belief in Jesus' physical body. It was as if he saw his final legacy was to establish a legitimate chain of authority in the church to combat false teachings.

Polycarp made a point of collecting and preserving Ignatius' letters and thereby picked up the crusade against distorted teaching. One certain way to combat toxic teaching was to ensure that the faith "once and for all delivered to the saints" would be preserved in written form.

GNOSTIC HERESIES

Preserving the integrity of the books that would become the New Testament became critical in Polycarp's generation, because gnostic teachers were mixing the teaching of the apostles with other, contradictory elements. *Gnosis* is Greek for "knowledge," and the various gnostic groups taught that they had special, inside knowledge on Jesus that the Christian churches didn't have. (Sounds a bit like *The Da Vinci Code*, doesn't it? It should. This is where all those "secret teachings" got started.) Groups like these had already begun in

Paul's day, but they became bolder once the apostles had all died. Their theologies varied, but all seemed to agree that the material world was not important—only the spiritual world mattered. They hated the physical body and elevated the spirit in two fairly simple equations: body = bad, spirit = good. Who were these people, and how did they come to have so much influence?

Some groups are referred to as Judeo-agnostics: These sects, including the Ebionites, Elkesaites, Sabians, and Mandaeans, all appeared in the first century. They emerged from a Jewish background and held to the Torah (the Law of Moses), but had a much more Greek-philosophical understanding of Judaism than did the rabbis or the temple priests. They all had differing views of Jesus, but while each believed him to be the Messiah, they did not view him as the Son of God. They denied the crucifixion and held that Jesus and Satan had been begotten of God together. Some aspects of present-day Mormonism appear to be echoes of this ancient view.

Simon Magus, Menander, Satornilus, and Basilides were all Samaritan agnostics who were linked together by their Samaritan tribal heritage and (to some extent) succeeded one another. Simon Magus is mentioned in Acts 8:18 as seeking to buy the power of the Holy Spirit. A widely known magician in the first century, he passed to his disciples a belief that redemption was not by faith alone but by transcendental magic. This “secret knowledge” was passed along only to those who *deserved* to hear it.

Then there were Cerinthus and Carpocrates, Jewish-Christian agnostics who taught in Alexandria, Egypt. They believed that Jesus was just an ordinary man who received the “Christ force” at his baptism, which then departed from

him before the crucifixion. Polycarp's student Irenaeus said that John wrote his gospel to refute Cerinthus. That helps us to understand the stress John placed upon "the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us" (1:14, emphasis added) doesn't it?

Carpocrates claimed to possess secret teachings disclosed by Jesus to his apostles, and he used a secret gospel, allegedly written by John Mark, which contained erotic rites. Sex and sin were to be encouraged since they highlighted God's grace. What? It's like this: If you want to receive a lot of grace, then sin *grandly*. Some scholars think this was the same teaching practiced by the Nicolaitans, a group condemned in Revelation 2:15.

But the most influential of the second-century gnostics was Valentinus. He left the Roman church when he was not made the bishop. We can quickly see why he wasn't: He taught that God gave rise to eight emanations, which produced in turn fifteen male-female pairs of angelic beings, which through their sexual activities procreated the material cosmos. Valentinus urged his followers to emulate the actions of these angelic pairs. An important Valentinian orgiastic celebration began on the evening preceding the Roman Lupercalia—that is, on February 14. (Does that date sound familiar? Something about *Valentine's Day*?)

All of these groups and ideas were afloat in the Roman world during the second century, and Polycarp struggled to maintain orthodox beliefs in the face of their influence. He had a face-to-face encounter with another former Christian named Marcion, who taught that only the soul is the object of redemption—not the body. The Marcionite sect became one of the greatest challenges to the early church, forcing it to establish the biblical canon in defense against his teachings.

A rich shipbuilder and the son of a Christian bishop, Marcion arrived in Rome around AD 140 and began to study gnostic teachings. He developed his own ideas about Jesus and spread them to others. He didn't believe Jesus had ever been a flesh-and-blood man. In Marcion's view, Jesus had been a spirit that *looked* like a man. Jesus wasn't born; rather, he suddenly appeared in AD 29 in the synagogue at Capernaum. While Marcion argued that Christ's life and crucifixion were necessary, he didn't believe Christ actually suffered or died on the cross. Nor did he believe in the resurrection of the body. This is, again, Docetism.

It's worth remembering this idea, for there are people today whose view of Christ is similar, and who have little interest in the physical world. After all, flesh is evil, right? While other sects moved toward free sexuality in defiance of legalism, Marcion taught a strict asceticism (that means denying the body) that forbade relations even between married couples. The end was coming soon, he said, and they needed to keep themselves spiritually pure. This idea has shown up again and again through the centuries. The Shakers of the 1800s practiced it—which is why they died out. The Heaven's Gate cult that committed group suicide in 1997 held the same view.

Marcion despised the Jews and the God of the Old Testament. He said Christianity was a gospel of love and not law, and that when Christ descended into hell Cain, Esau, and the men of Sodom all accepted his message. Abel, Enoch, Noah, and the Jewish patriarchs did not and therefore remained below. All of the New Testament books had been written by this time, and Marcion had a collection of them, but he put together a version of his own in which he edited out what he didn't like. Whatever sounded too Jewish to him, he

discarded. He threw away all the gospels except that of Luke, and he cut the birth story out of *it*. He also cut out Acts, the pastoral letters, Revelation, and Hebrews, keeping only ten of Paul's letters. He believed Paul was the only apostle who did not corrupt the gospel of Jesus. Of course, through his editing, he pretty well corrupted Paul's teachings too.

Marcion's ideas were roundly rejected by the church at Rome, and it tossed him out in 144. This didn't stop him. Like many a present-day cult leader, he set up his own organizations which he called churches and thereby drew away many followers of Christ.

This was the heretic Polycarp met face-to-face. Irenaeus wrote that when Polycarp ran into Marcion one day in the street, Marcion asked Polycarp, "Do you recognize me?"

"Indeed!" Polycarp responded, pulling away. "I recognize you as the firstborn of Satan!"

Polycarp was a straight speaker—perhaps even a bit tart tongued—but he said what he believed. You can see that in his response to Marcion, which is echoed in his letter to the Philippians (see "Polycarp to the Philippians" 7:1). In that same letter, he rebuked Valens (about whom we really only know this), saying, "I am very unhappy on account of Valens, who was formerly made an elder among you, that he should so misunderstand the office given him. I exhort you, then, to abstain from love of money and to be pure and trustworthy" (11:1). Was it his sharp tongue and his unwillingness to speak anything but the truth that got him into trouble that day in the arena?

Let us persevere then constantly in our hope and the pledge of our righteousness, which is Christ Jesus, who bore our sins in his own body on the cross, who did no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth, but endured all things for us that we might live in him. Let us be imitators, then, of his endurance, and if we suffer for his name let us glorify him. For this is the example which he set in himself, and this we learned to believe.

“POLYCARP TO THE PHILIPPIANS” 8:1-13

UNSOUGHT MARTYRDOM

A new persecution, mostly local in nature, threatened the church in Smyrna. Polycarp was old, and he didn't want to run from it, but, like Paul in Acts 19:30-31, he agreed to his friends' requests and allowed himself to be hidden. He was in a farmhouse on the outskirts of the city when the authorities, directed to the place with the help of the turncoat Quintas, finally found him. Unruffled by their rough treatment, he offered them dinner and asked permission to pray while they ate. He prayed for about two hours, and those who had come to arrest him began to feel bad that they had to apprehend such a godly old man.

Polycarp was unsurprised by these events. He'd had a vision in a dream several days earlier, in which his pillow had caught fire, and when he awoke he told those who were hiding him that he knew he would be burned alive. The arresting officers pleaded with him to respect his age and simply say, “Caesar is Lord.” He would not, so they took him back to the stadium, still filled with people roaring for his blood. The proconsul

begged him to change his mind and to say, “Away with the atheists!”—meaning the Christians. Polycarp instead looked at the crowd, waved his hands dismissively at them, and cried up to heaven, “Away with the atheists!”—meaning *them*.

The proconsul tried again: “Take the oath and I will let you go. Revile Christ.” Polycarp answered, “I have served him eighty-six years, and in no way has he dealt unjustly with me, so how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Frustrated, the proconsul threatened him with wild beasts. Polycarp said, “Bring them on.” Was he thinking of the death of his friend Ignatius when he said this? Then the proconsul threatened to burn him to death. Here was the fulfillment of his vision. Polycarp answered, “You threaten me with fire, which burns for an hour and is soon quenched. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the wicked. But why do you wait? Come, do what you will!”

There was no firewood in the stadium, but the mob ran out into the nearby shops and collected wood of every kind to burn him. Soon a pyre was made. Why were they so angry? Why were they so violent? Why were they so intent on destroying the witness of this one old man? Was it because they saw their way of life disappearing into the fires of the persecutions, as more and more people around them accepted the gospel and let it change their lives? As for destroying Polycarp’s witness—well, they didn’t, after all. We’re talking about him still. We have the story of his witness—his martyrdom—still today.

Those who wrote of the event testified of miracles—that the fire couldn’t consume his body, that it instead arched above him like a sail. In an echo of the Crucifixion, he was then stabbed in the chest—and a dove ascended into heaven even

as his blood spilled out and doused the fire. Shall we believe these accounts? Those who watched testified to it, and the story spread widely through the Roman world. Miracles do happen when God so chooses. Once Polycarp was dead, the Jews present urged the proconsul to burn his body so there would be no threat of resurrection stories as well. The faithful collected his bones—“more precious than costly stones and finer than gold”—and kept them in a safe place. From that day on they celebrated this “birthday” with joy, remembering Polycarp and the Lord he’d glorified to the very end. They wrote, “Through patience he overcame the unjust magistrate and thus carried off the crown of incorruption, and rejoicing with the apostles and all the just he is glorifying God and the Father Almighty and is blessing our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls” (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 19:2).

The account of Polycarp’s martyrdom set the pattern for a new form of Christian literature, the martyrdom story. Many other such accounts followed, from those of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and women like Perpetua in these early centuries, to *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* in the sixteenth century, to the recent martyrdom stories of Bill Wallace and Jim Eliot. These stories have inspired Christians of every generation to “resist unto blood” and to carry the gospel everywhere regardless of the personal cost. If, after Jesus, Peter, Paul, and others, Polycarp’s courage helped to establish this pattern, then certainly he made a lasting impact on the church. But was that impact altogether positive? Let’s think through our six points:

People Like Us

Polycarp was certainly a man of flesh and blood—a person like us. But the story of his martyrdom is less an account

of a normal Christian saint and more the veneration of a completely holy Saint (note the capital *S*). It was the herald of a problem that would grow. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* is what is referred to as hagiography, or “writings of the holy.” This kind of writing separates the Saints from ordinary Christians, and in some way makes them seem different from us. In that difference we can find excuses for ourselves. We, after all, are not Saints—but ordinary saints. The standards, then, need not be so high for us. But that’s not true, is it, if these people we study were people like us?

The saving of Polycarp’s burned bones encouraged the veneration of “relics”—pieces of the bodies of the Saints that came to be almost—or literally—worshipped by later Christians. We’ll see later that Martin Luther had plenty to say about this. Why would people venerate a Saint? Start with the belief that there are some heroic Christians who deserve to be remembered for the example they set. Today, for instance, there are celebrity Christian leaders on radio or television, or who write books that millions read, or who pastor huge churches, and lots of believers look up to them. There’s nothing wrong with that unless our tendency to idolize the famous gets out of hand. And sometimes it does get out hand. Heroes—role models we want to listen to and imitate—are a good thing. Hero *worship* can be a problem.

Next, add the entirely orthodox belief that Christians who have died still live eternally, and one day we’ll all be together with Christ. So if it’s appropriate to ask a Christian friend to pray for you when you’re struggling with something, and if it would be great to ask a real giant of the faith to pray for you, then what about asking a giant of the faith who no longer lives on this earth? Many Christians today would say there’s

nothing in the Bible about doing that, so it's going too far. But in Polycarp's time, it started happening, and it became common in later centuries. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox still do this, and they don't consider it worship of the Saint or an occult practice. What do you think?

Then add the fact that humans naturally respect the physical remains of their beloved dead. Today a lot of people bury their loved ones in wildly expensive caskets designed to keep air out so the body won't quickly decompose. So treating the bones of a dead believer with respect makes sense. But how far do you go in treating remains with respect? Today it's a hermetically sealed titanium casket for one's mother; in the Middle Ages it was jeweled boxes for bones of the Saints. And then there grew up a thriving business in the sale of supposed remains of Saints. And if miracles happened to Polycarp when he was dying, why not miracles connected to his remains? A faith in God's ability and willingness to intervene in our world to display his glory can easily slip into a belief in magic. If you watch enough Christian television today, you'll hear things that sound a bit more like magic than like biblical faith.

It's incredibly easy for something that starts sensibly to get out of control—and many Protestants feel that veneration of the Saints got way out of control and needed to be changed or eliminated entirely. One reason to study the church's history is to see how things got extreme in the past so you'll notice if something similar is happening to you.

The Body of Christ and the Human Institution

Throughout this period, we can witness the growth of the church as an institution—a necessary growth in response to heresy and to organizational instability. But there was also

a fairly constant emphasis in the writings of the period on maintaining the church as the body of Christ. Collecting the canonical writings helped to network together the like-minded, provided a shared record of the past, and set a standard against which to measure new—and contrary—teachings. Ignatius's emphasis on the pastoral authority of bishops was certainly well intentioned. Still, when an organization becomes an institution, its original purpose often becomes captive to the health of the organization. The seeds were being sown for the growth of a hierarchy that could be diverted from its primary cause.

Church + State = Very Bad Things

In contrast to the gnostics and others who wanted to subtract aspects of the gospel, the Bible, or Jesus' identity, the church in this period began to call itself *catholic*, meaning “the whole thing.” The word *catholic* was used first by Ignatius in his letter to Smyrna (shortly after AD 100), and then appears three times in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. It wasn't applied to a particular *part* of the church until much later.

This catholic church lived in defiance of the Roman state, so it was not yet influenced by the state negatively, apart from persecution. The growing list of martyrs was instead having a positive effect—the pagan Roman world was beginning to admire the courage of Christians.

Faith Versus Reason

How did reason relate to faith during this period? Certainly a type of “reason” drove much of the gnostic reaction to the faith. Gnosticism showed the imprint of Greek philosophy—especially that of Plato—mixed with “mystery” religions of the day that melded Egyptian, Babylonian, and Hindu elements.

It was this same Greek-flavored reason that was to bend the thinking of Origen in the next century, which we'll talk about in the next chapter. Meanwhile, faith remained central to the Christian response to gnostic and Marcionite attacks.

What About Missions?

The missionary purpose of the church was still ever-present, with martyrdoms serving as a powerful (if unintentional) means of publicizing the gospel.

Ethics Optional?

Ethics were far from optional in this period, and the way men and women like Polycarp lived out the principles of holiness attracted attention from non-Christians. Now there *were* some ethical debates peculiar to the period: Quintas, who had volunteered for martyrdom but changed his mind when he saw the beasts, caused the church to regard *seeking* martyrdom as unethical. But there were also growing debates among Christians about whether it was ethical to *flee* martyrdom. This question would cause a rift in the church in the next generation. But whatever the ethical impact of these questions in a time of persecution, there can be no doubt that it was the morality and holiness of Christians that brought them under this persecution in the first place. Christians were different. They lived differently—so differently that they challenged the pervasive immorality of the age. Which raises the question for Christians in *our* age: Can the world see such a difference in *us*?



WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Many books are available concerning the postapostolic fathers, but the best resources are probably the writings of the Fathers themselves. Jack Sparks's *The Apostolic Fathers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997) is excellent. Besides the section on Polycarp, you can read there the letters of Clement and Ignatius, as well as the *Didache*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and the so-called *Letter of Barnabas*. These are not Scripture, although they were highly regarded well into the third century. However, they provide for us a window to a period of history most Christians know little about, the age closest to the apostles themselves.