The Life, Work and Contribution of the Church Father, Polycarp

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Thesis Statement

Surveying the works of the early church fathers makes it possible to place church history in its equitable context. Among others, the life, work, and contributions of church father Polycarp stand as a monument that inspires the value of faithfulness and service. He faced persecution for the glory of Christian faith taught by Apostle John to glorify Jesus Christ.

Introduction

The objective of this research paper is to highlight the traits and characteristics that made Polycarp so revered. Pastor Polycarp was a second-century Christian bishop who had a huge influence on later preachers of Christianity. He lived from 69 to 155 AD in the second century; he was the Bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp died as a martyr, and he was burned at the stake. He was also stabbed to death when the fire failed to touch him. Polycarp is regarded as the most influential saint in Christian history; he was the father of the Christian Churches like Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and the Orthodox Church (Brown, 2012).

As we know, the Christian church is the church of Jesus Christ, who is the Savior and Lord of humanity. His church has always faced persecution, and its members have suffered for the sake of righteousness in this mortal life. After the persecution of Jesus Christ, the Christian faith did not fade, and new heroes were born. One of the most significant of those heroes of Christianity was Bishop Polycarp. He was the elder minister in the church of Jesus Christ; his death was just as illustrious as the death of the most important heroes in Christian history. His death is the biggest example of faithfulness in martyrdom. His entire life was a testimony to the power of the light of Jesus Christ and his teacher, Apostle John. He reminds the saints of God today that suffering for the sake of the gospel and Jesus is a blessing in disguise. His work in Smyrna is significant and extensive; he took care of the church and the poor community. He took care of children and women whose husbands and fathers were in prison. His influence and fame extended throughout the region of Asia. Over many decades during the first and second centuries, Saint Polycarp performed many important tasks in the church. He had set an example for the following bishops who joined the church in a minor role and continued their journey to become bishops (prca.org, 2017).

In Greek, the meaning of Polycarp is “much fruit”. He was the disciple of John the Apostle; he was ordained as the Bishop of Smyrna by John. Many people tried to kill him in the second century; he was not killed however and died in his old age due to the sufferings of age. He was exiled to the island of Patmos. Polycarp is regarded as one of the three chief Apostolic Fathers. He wrote a letter to the Philippians which is also the sole surviving document written by him; Irenaeus of Lyons first recorded it (Brown, 2012).

Martyrdom of Polycarp

From the actual age of persecutions, the Martyrdom of Polycarp is one of the works of Apostolic Fathers. His martyrdom promotes the ideology of martyrdom which was published in the 4th century and again in the 10th and 13th centuries. The manuscripts are compiled from fourth-century history and provide an account of Polycarp’s martyrdom. A Greek and a Latin version of the Martyrdom of Polycarp, dating from the tenth century, also exist independently (Brown, 2012).

Life of Polycarp

The great saying of Polycarp goes like this:

He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails.

Since his childhood, Polycarp had been a faithful Christian; he was in his old age in his eighties when the Romans got around to him and wanted to kill him. His martyrdom is the first recorded martyrdom in the post-New Testament church history (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Polycarp lived in one of the most important eras of the church; the church was making a significant transition to the second generations of believers. He was discipled by John and was also appointed as the Bishop of Smyrna, which is in present-day Turkey. He tried to settle some disputes at an early age regarding celebrating Easter on a particular date. He was confronted with one of the most horrific heretics of the church, the Gnostic Marcion. He was also regarded as the first born of Satan when he ran into him. Polycarp also abolished agnosticism by converting many to the religion of Christianity (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

He wrote a letter to the church of Philippians which is his only surviving piece of original writing in history; the letter shows that Polycarp did not have much formal education and learned to write mostly in the church. He was an incredibly humble personality and also a straight individual. His martyrdom also reflects such traits of his personality. An account of his martyrdom was written one year after his death (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Polycarp was also arrested at the age of 86, although it is not clear why he was subject to arrest in his

old age. He showed incredible patience and courage when the Roman officials came to arrest him; he stayed at home and waited for them. His friends could feel the panic and had a feeling there was something wrong, so they told him to flee. He agreed with them and finally calmed them down by fleeing to a small state outside of his town (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Polycarp received a vision. Of course, nobody knows what exactly he saw or heard in that vision, but he explained to his friends the reason for his being burned alive. Polycarp died in 156 A.D. After that, in 168 A.D., the martyrdom of Justin Martin also occurred (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Martyrdom and Death

The martyrdom of Polycarp happened when the Roman soldiers finally found out about his whereabouts. They came directly to his door when he replied to his friends that “God will be done.” He denied his friend’s request to flee this time and asked them to let the soldiers inside. He was escorted to the local proconsul. He was interrogated in front of a crowd of onlookers by Statius Quadratus. He remained calm during the interrogation and never seemed to answer anything out of his wits. But the interrogators lost their temper and threatened Polycarp; they threatened to throw him to the wild beasts or burn him at stake (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Polycarp told them that the fires of judgment that God has made for the unjust and unbelievers would not be quenched. He told them not to delay and do what they wanted to do to him (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

The soldiers grabbed Polycarp and nailed him to the stake, but he stopped them and told them to leave him as he was. He said, “For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails.” When the fire was lit, Polycarp prayed aloud while his flesh was burning and being consumed in the fire. The account of the death and martyrdom of Polycarp is remembered by everyone as a monumental death in history (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Significance of Polycarp

Polycarp was also the friend of Papias, who was the hearer of John. The memory of Polycarp is also linked to the apostolic past. He sat down in the place and spread the word of God; he was a blessed person of God. Irenaeus also remembered that the great Bishop was converted to Christianity by apostles. He also communicated and talked to many people who had been in contact with the Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

In the history of the Christian Church, no one has ever held such a privileged position and a special place as Polycarp. Personally taught by Apostle John, the great Saint Polycarp took the true Christian beliefs beyond the age of Apostle during his lifetime. He was a savior and a figure, a brave legendary

leader, and a mentor. His family settled in the cities of Asia and left Judea in the 1st century. All the followers of Christianity were great admirers of his mentor, Apostle John, who made a home in Ephesus. The young Polycarp was a great disciple and a visionary who took forward the legacy of his teacher Apostle (vision.org, 2005).

For six decades, the great Bishop Polycarp served the churches of Smyrna until, in the mid-second century, he developed a great rivalry with the Kings and lost his life for the sake of his religion and glory of Jesus Christ. During his lifetime as a bishop of the church, great changes occurred in the church. He was a church historian and prominent Christian leader in the second century. The mission of Polycarp was to prevent the rise of orthodoxy and the promotion of Christianity. He faced many hurdles in his lifetime. A student of Polycarp and a theologian named Florinus wrote the memories of his great teacher Polycarp. His miracles and his teachings were seen by the people with their eyes in his lifetime. All through his life, Polycarp remained a loyal, faithful servant of God because his teacher Apostle John taught him to remain faithful all his life. The problems began to dominate the final years of his life and unfortunately ended his life. The external pressures were enough to affect his working in the church in the final age when he had to flee to another town and leave his church (vision.org, 2005).

Polycarp was the student of an Apostle and had direct communication with Jesus Christ. He also learned from the Apostles in Asia and taught these things faithfully until he departed this life as a martyr. The church of Rome was also under the threat of adopting an unscriptural practice. A new means of celebrating the death of Jesus Christ was founded by the church known as Good Friday Easter Sunday. Polycarp had to argue with many bishops, including the Bishop of Rome. He was still true to the teachings of Jesus Christ and what Apostle John had taught him. Anicetus blamed him for following in the footsteps of his predecessors. He knew that the devil was about to test some people and he was one of them; so he had to remain calm and face the storm with solid Christian beliefs (vision.org, 2005).

As Bishop of Smyrna, the great Polycarp remained true and faithful to the vision of Apostle John that he learned in his youth. Around the year 155, he was arrested and still refused to sacrifice his beliefs. He also had precious knowledge, handed down from Jesus Christ through Apostle John, during the last few years of his life. He kept standing firm in his belief and embodied his teachings. It brought him death, but he was called a true martyr (vision.org, 2005).

His words are true, and they represent a great deal of change in the lives of Christians. He told them to stand tall and follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a great reflection of Jesus Christ whose faith was unshakable and unchangeable (vision.org, 2005).

Polycarp also visited Rome during the 150s and 160s. He discussed the differences that existed between Asia and Rome. He made a decision to correctly celebrate Easter at a particular time. Polycarp also followed the practice of celebrating the festival on the 14th of Nisan which is regarded as the day of the Jewish Passover. Polycarp extinguished the fire miraculously which was burning him,

and he lived for 86 years. He said to the people that they are ignorant of the punishment of fire that Lord of Jesus Christ God has prepared for the unjust and unholy (Chrisitianitytoday.com, 2012).

Polycarp was not only burnt at stake, but he was also pierced with a spear. When he said goodbye, he said the words “thankyou father for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs, I may share the cup of Christ.”

The final date of Polycarp’s death is, however, not clear; it is disputed by historians. Eusebius dates it to the reign of Marcus Aurelius, c. 166–167. The letter of Martyrdom of Polycarp reveals that Polycarp was taken to the Sabbath on the day of the Sabbath and was killed at the great Sabbath (Phillip, 2006).

Saint Polycarp was a father of the church and was an early teacher and witness of Apostolic traditions of the Christian Church. He led his life with extreme purity, and he was a diligent transmitter of the apostolic traditions. Although few details are available for the life of Saint Polycarp, a taste of his personality is given by the Philippians who have provided his biography. The Martyrdom of Polycarp provides the following account of his death:

Now the blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first half of the month of Xanthicus, the seventh day before the Kalends of March, a great Sabbath, at the eighth hour. And he was arrested by Herod when Philip of Tralles was High Priest when Statius Quadratus was Pro-Consul, but Jesus Christ was reigning forever, to whom be glory, honor, majesty and an eternal throne, from generation to generation, Amen.

Polycarp died a glorious death and lived a long holy life and preached to his people the true meaning of Christianity. He was an example of someone who stood solidly by the church when the firstborn of Satan was ready to kill him. In his trip to Rome, Polycarp solved many important issues including a dispute between the two bishops. The life of Polycarp would fit better in the mid second century than the early half of the second century. God selected him to be the martyr, and he was a prize jewel for Christianity. Philippians believed that he was the greatest example of Christian endurance and he would get the full enjoyment and reward from the Lord Almighty for his good deeds and sacrifice (Phillip, 2006).

He was an example of a person like no one else in his time after Jesus Christ. He will get the reward of his endurance and is the key to a virtue of Christian life. The suffering and passion of Polycarp is the example of suffering experienced by Jesus Christ on the cross where he was crucified to death. He could feel the suffering and passion of the Holy Christ; he enjoyed the reward and blessings of eternal fellowship with the Christ. The Christian martyr is a highly prized personality in the history of Christianity, and his works are a monumental example of sacrifice for righteousness. He will always be admired by the Christians by the end of time for building the example of Christian endurance. He loved the things that Jesus Christ loved and believed that Christ would be resurrected by God, who created him. Through the direct affiliation with Apostle John, the great Polycarp followed the great tradition of apostolic doctrine which gives a genuine message of faith in Jesus Christ and God. He was

a great father of Christianity in the 1st and 2nd centuries (Phillip, 2006).

The virtues of Christ were transferred into Polycarp. Christ loved virtues like love, poverty, honesty, forgiveness, suffering from righteousness and serving God. His Christian virtues also included his mildness, forgiveness, restraint, mercy, and passion for serving the Lord. The anger of God and his wrath are brought by the sin of man. For Saint Polycarp, forgiveness is the biggest virtue, and it was the essential trait in a human being to serve God and fear him in this mortal life. Christians are given a huge lesson to be loved and love God; they are to serve the true God that is good all the time and spend their lives by refraining from sin.

Because Saint Polycarp lived the life of a saint in his early childhood, he was sold as a slave to a rich woman named Calisto. She treated him as her son, and he came to know about Jesus Christ in his early life as a savior of the human race. He was lucky enough to study under the Apostle John as he grew up and he sat with those people who were lovers of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Polycarp was actively involved in serving the Lord in the Church of Smyrna. When the woman Calisto died, he became the owner of her wealth after her death, and he used his riches and wealth for good deeds and invested his life and money for the cause of Christ. He helped those people who were needy and poor when the pastor of his church died; he appointed him to be the next pastor of the church. He remained the minister of that church after the death of the minister for many years in Smyrna (Phillip, 2006).

Final Journey

The emperor of Rome spared Polycarp for many years, but in the later years of his ministry, he was exposed to death and persecution in his ministry. God Almighty appeared in his dream three days before his death and revealed to him that he would be burned at stake. His friends insisted on hiding him when his life was in danger, but he made it clear that he would not run or hide anymore. He welcomed the soldiers who came to capture him and offered them food. He also requested them to allow him to pray before they finished their food. He then prayed for two hours as he was granted his request and said loudly, “”inasmuch that many of the soldiers began to repent, that they were come out against so godly an old man.”

They took him into the city by placing him on a donkey, and he was considered an enemy of the religion of the pagans. He was seated on a chariot and was told to sacrifice to their God. He refused to do so firmly, and that made the judges incredibly angry. They were wrong when they thought they would easily persuade Polycarp to kneel before their God. A serious injury came to his thigh when they threw him forcefully out of the chariot and started to drag Polycarp to the place where he was to be burnt at stake. Polycarp heard a voice from heaven which told him to remain calm and be strong. No one saw who was speaking to Polycarp, and others heard the voice also (Phillips, 2006).

Polycarp was a strong example of someone who stood for Jesus Christ till the end of his life. He was

ordered to renounce Christ, and all the efforts failed in front of his courage and strength of faith. There was nothing in the world that could make him deny his faith in Christ; his famous response is recorded in the history in the golden words:

“Eighty and six years have I now served Christ, and he has never done me the least wrong: How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

Polycarp offered his faith to the judges who were angry enough to kill him on the spot, this ignited their rage even more and they rejected the offer angrily by threatening him. Polycarp confessed himself to be a Christian and offered them the gift of Christianity, they nailed him there at stake. The last prayer of Polycarp is all about the salvation of his body, faith, and soul. He said to the Lord to let the holy ghost save his spirit and praised God who is just and no foul thing. When he said amen, the fire was lit, and strangely fire could not touch him. Then flames arched around Polycarp like a sail of a ship filled with the wind, and he would not burn. The commander gave the command to kill him with the sword. He was martyred in 168 AD.

Conclusion

The writings and life of the greatest Christian teacher and bishop Polycarp are of great importance to the Christian world. People heard his message when he started preaching at a young age and learned the principles of faith and Christianity by following the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The life and death of Polycarp were monumental. He left a significant mark on the lives and teachings of Christianity and helped shape the future of the church.

In the history of an early Christian church, the contribution and importance of Polycarp and his efforts can never be forsaken. He was the disciple of Apostle John, he was also the elder of a congregation and contributed heavily to the founding of Christian Church. He was the most important elder minister of a church among all the other ministers. He was stabbed to death and burnt at the stake when a significant amount of blood rushed out of his body. He prayed to God for the salvation of his soul and Christianity at the time of his death and never surrendered to the forces of evil Satan all his life until he was martyred.

He left an indelible mark on the lives of others through his service and faithfulness. Polycarp was certainly the greatest example of faithfulness. He left for all to follow in their walk with Him. He was the great founder and the first bishop of the Christian Church ordained by Apostle John. His contributions to the founding of the Christian Church are immense. He was the one who held the legacy of compiling, editing and publishing the New Testament.

In his early manhood, his acquaintance with Apostle John was the most monumental and intriguing aspect of his life. They knew each other for twenty years and his pupil Polycarp had the great privilege to become his favorite student while studying Christianity at John’s feet. It was as if he was taking lessons straight from Jesus Christ and following faithfulness with the solid attitude like Jesus

did.

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