

Doing Church With the “Early Fathers”: The Church Living Out Its Faith

Doing Church with Polycarp of Smyrna: The Church Living In Community

Ephesians 3:14 -4:7

Pastor Dale Evans

Let's open by reading Ephesians 4 and the first seven verses.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

From Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, that was likely intended to be circulated to the other churches in the region, we see a picture of the Christianity that presupposes a gathering of people, because of their experience and understanding of the Gospel and the work of Christ, loving, serving and living together. This was imperative for them to be the eschatological picture of the universality and eventuality of the fullness of the kingdom yet to come. Their living (seen in the metaphor of “walking”) was to be worthy to their position in the gospel. A oneness and unity was

to characterize how they interacted with each other both in their attitude and in their activities. The church in Ephesus was to view itself in light of this eschatological reality and live now as the one that will be perfected. Until then they were to use their gifts to encourage one another. What Paul goes on to say in these next chapters is to characterize this community as they live out their station he so majestically stated in the first three chapters of this letter. Community is the means that God builds and expresses the Gospel in the world.

Remember we are spending a few evenings looking at four historical figures from the very early days of Christianity. These four have left us with some documentary evidence of their lives and beliefs, giving us some insight on how Christians were applying the message of the gospel and interpreting the Scriptures in the late first and early second centuries. How others have understood and applied Scripture will help us as we tackle different yet in many ways similar concerns. The quote from philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" reminds us that the experiences of the past, its mistakes and failures, are training grounds for growth and change in the present and then for the future.

Tonight our historical figure is named Polycarp, who was from Smyrna. Smyrna is a city in the province of Asia just north of Ephesus. This Roman province is on the western coast of modern Turkey on the Aegean Sea. Though not as important of city as Ephesus, it was a seaport with considerable traffic through it. Polycarp's name means "much fruit". There are some ancient people with this name but it does not seem to have many carry-overs to other languages. There are no real English equivalents. I cannot think of anyone else with this name.

We know about him and his life from a few sources. One, we have a letter from him to the church at Philippi, we have a letter from Ignatius to him personally and to the church at Smyrna and we have references to him in the later literature as well. He is said to have been a disciple of John the apostle and a friend of another notable father named Papius. His relationship with John is why he is important, he speaks of his knowing the apostolic witness and was said to have been ordained into ministry by the apostle himself.

He is said to be converted in the apostolic era and died in mid-150's. There is a reported quote that says, "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong." Whether that means he was 86 years old or had been a believer for 86 years is unclear. His death was as a martyr for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor. He was then burned at the stake and then stabbed because the fire would not consume him. Polycarp is reported to have said, "How then can I blaspheme my

King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked...I bless you Father for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."

We will read an excerpt abridged from Polycarp's letter of encourage to the Philippians. In this letter, it appears that one of his key emphases was to maintain and protect the integrity of the community. He cared deeply for both beliefs and behaviors. Polycarp believed that wrong behaviors were evidence of and were derived from wrong belief. And equally so that wrong beliefs inevitably produce wrong behaviors.

Polycarp and the presbyters with him, to the church of God that sojourns at Philippi: may mercy and peace from God Almighty and Jesus Christ our Savior be yours in abundance...I am writing you these comments about righteousness, brothers, not on my own initiative but because you invited me to do so. For neither I, nor anyone like me, can keep pace with the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul. When he was with you in the presence of the people of that time, he accurately and reliably taught the word concern 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, which is the mother of us all, while hope follows and love for God and Christ and for our neighbor leads the way...Stand fast, therefore, in these things and follow the example of the Lord, firm and immovable in faith, loving the family of believers, cherishing one another, united in the truth, giving way to one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no one. When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because charity delivers one from death. All of you be subject to one another, and maintain an irreproachable standard of conduct among the Gentiles, so that you may be praised for your good deeds and the Lord may not be blasphemed because of you...

We should take note of his connection of his thoughts with what he understood of their previous relationship and correspondence with Paul. We have in our Bibles one letter to the Philippians but Polycarp suggests there were at least two by referring to "letters" and suggesting they study "them" carefully. He uses this to demonstrate his concern that they stay grounded in the truth and then be led by that truth in love for neighbor. He

connected being immovable in faith with then loving the family of believers, cherishing one another and giving way to one another. They are to be subject one to another and do good because of the testimony it brings to the Lord. He recognized the importance of their lives together in community. He encouraged them to saturate themselves with the Scripture and apply it to their particular circumstances. Because they were immovable in faith, he told them this should be expressed as “loving the family of believers, cherishing one another, united in the truth, giving way to one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no one.”

So how does that impact and inform us to live as a church, emphasizing the purpose and goals of community?

We must recognize the primacy of community in the NT. From the gathering of the twelve, to the concluding letters found in John’s Revelation, the assumption is that Christians gather together to worship god and love and encourage each other. The vast majority of what we believe to be New Testament Christian Scripture is correspondence to or about the gathering of believers. Live and membership with one another is not considered “optional commitment.”

We must understand the nature of community from the NT. This requires that we read, study and apply the teaching of Scripture to today. We can create our own personal concepts of what we think community should be, but we must be reminded to find our calling and charter from the pages of the Scriptures.

We must be committed to the concept of community. We then should remind ourselves to be oriented to this idea. It is one thing to say that something is true, like the nature of community for New Testament churches; it is another to live it out in reality from day to day.

We must intentionally build community. If the New Testament speaks so much to living in community in light of the truth in faith and love, then we should recognize that there is a real and inevitable tendency for us to disregard, discount or even deny its importance in our living. We must have intention to participate, encourage and promote community.

We must live in community. This was a challenge for the churches from the beginning. Paul and those following him felt it important, in fact essential to truly express the Gospel to one another and to the unbelieving world. We must...