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## Polycarp's teaching

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## ***POLYCARP'S TEACHING: THE RECEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY***

### *1. Introduction*

In his 2006 monograph, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*, Charles E. Hill advances two innovative and significant suggestions regarding the preservation of the teachings of Polycarp. First, in part one of his monograph, he suggests that some of the 'oral teaching of Polycarp still exists, imbedded in Irenaeus' book *Against Heresies*, and is still recoverable.'<sup>1</sup> Next, in the second part, he presents 'another case for identifying some of Polycarp's teaching, in the anonymous work known as the *Epistle to Diognetus*.'<sup>2</sup> While Hill believes these two arguments are both persuasive, his monograph demonstrates that each case must be supported with substantial argument. By contrast, in relation to the surviving letter of Polycarp written to the Philippians, Hill states, '[t]his relatively short epistle is our most substantial sample of his teaching, though it was written about forty years before his death.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of Polycarp's prominence and influence as a Christian leader throughout the first half of the second century, little attention has been paid to his teachings or theological thought. In fact, at times it is asserted that Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* contains little that can contribute to the wider understanding of theology in the first half of the second century. In this vein, one of the leading Polycarp scholars, Boudewijn Dehandschutter states:

PolPhil is a short letter, written in a specific circumstance, and cannot serve as a summary of important theological themes that were current in the first half of the second century. It thus makes little sense to classify such a text in the development of so-called "early Catholicism." The letter actually provides an early Christian ecclesiological understanding.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, the focus has fallen upon his martyrdom, or upon his pastoral relations with other early Christian communities, which are thus seen as reflecting Polycarp's ecclesiological views. These are, of course, important topics in their own right. Consequently, perhaps due to the shorter compass of his extant corpus and the narrower range of topics covered in comparison with the seven letter Ignatius collection or the longer single letter of *I Clement*, Polycarp is typically seen as a church leader, rather than a figure with important theological insights. Holmes, however, sees the significance of Polycarp's letter as setting forth the link between believers' behaviours and their beliefs. Thus, he observes of Polycarp that, '[f]or him, orthopraxy is the other side of the coin of orthodoxy; if a community is behaving properly, it is also likely believing properly.'<sup>5</sup> As a corrective to the previous lack of interest, this discussion will consider the teachings and theological commitments contained in Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*. Although it will not be considered here in detail, such a mapping of the teachings of Polycarp's could assist Hill's arguments concerning lost sources of Polycarp's teaching, especially if points of alignment exist between the teachings contained in *Philippians*, and the teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*, WUNT 186 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 3.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Boudewijn Dehandschutter, 'The Epistle of Polycarp', in Wilhelm Pratscher (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2010) 117-133, here, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts with English Translations*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 275.

contained in both those sections of *Against Heresies* and *Epistle to Diognetus*, which Hill attributes to Polycarp.

## 2. Polycarp's demonstrable Use of Earlier Christian Writings

To examine the degree of innovation in Polycarp's theological ideas, it is important to first note Polycarp's degree of indebtedness to various writings that would later be collected to form the New Testament. Alongside this, he presents his solidarity with Ignatius, and certain perspectives of the Antiochene bishop in regard to martyrdom and aspects of , although significant differences also exist. Therefore, by considering Polycarp's indebtedness to existing corpora of tradition and his alignment with earlier Christian theological statements it is possible to better understand how Polycarp saw his own theological perspectives resonating with, and building upon the statements of his predecessors.

### 2.1 Polycarp and the Citation of Earlier Christian Writings

Among the artificial corpus of writings that have been assembled to form the collection known as the Apostolic Fathers, Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* cites the greatest number of identifiable early Christian writings. In particular, Polycarp show significant indebtedness to the Pauline epistles. It is perhaps possible that in this way Polycarp might be one of the earliest witnesses to an early form of a Pauline letter collection.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, although without direct citation, Polycarp not only bears witness to the figure of Ignatius, but also to several of his letters, which he promised to send to the believers in Philippi in response to their request (Poly. *Phil.* 13.2). In regard to the Pauline letter corpus, Polycarp demonstrates fairly certain knowledge of eight (or maybe even nine) of the fourteen letters collection. Here, Hebrews is included among the Pauline writings, not because it was written by Paul, but since from at least the beginning of the third century onwards it circulated together with the Pauline letters.<sup>7</sup> Polycarp, however, does not reveal any knowledge of Hebrews, so it might be the case that he knew of a form of the corpus that did not contain Hebrews.<sup>8</sup> That is, of course, a speculation, but an interesting one nonetheless.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The New Testament text known as 2 Peter refers to a multiplicity of Pauline letters, ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἡμῶν ἀδελφὸς Παῦλος κατὰ τὴν δοθεῖσαν αὐτῷ σοφίαν ἔγραψεν ὑμῖν, ὡς καὶ ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς (2 Pet 3.15-16). However, the date of 2 Peter is difficult to fix and open to significant debate. In his recent commentary on this letter Jörg Frey notes that dates in the range 60-180 C.E. have been proposed. His own suggestion is that 'a time span around the middle of the second century (140-160 C.E.) remains the most likely period for the development of the text.' J. Frey, *The Letter of Jude and the Second Letter of Peter: A Theological Commentary* (trans Kathleen Ess; Waco, Texas: Baylor, 2018) 221.

<sup>7</sup> The earliest witness to the circulation of Hebrews with the Pauline corpus in P<sup>46</sup>. Within this manuscript, which is extant for significant portions of nine the fourteen Pauline letters, Hebrews occurs as the second letter in the manuscript following Romans. Similarly, the later majuscule codex D 06 Codex Claromontanus contains Hebrews, but placed as the last text in the Pauline collection.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Günther Zuntz was of the opinion that Hebrews must have originally circulated independently of the Pauline corpus prior to its incorporation. He attributes the lack of reference to Hebrews in the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp as being due to it not having been incorporated into the Pauline corpus when they wrote He states, 'The Epistle to the Hebrews cannot have been transmitted as an authentic part of the primitive *Corpus Paulinum*, otherwise the absence of references to it in Ignatius and Polycarp would be unaccountable; but since it is in the Chester Beatty papyrus and in other manuscripts of the Pauline Epistles, it must in some way have been added to the Greek *corpus* before the end of the second century. Günther Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition on the Corpus Paulinum* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953) 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Views on the formation of a Pauline letter collection are contested and often contradictory. For one influential, though not universally accepted point of view see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the*

Before turning to a consideration of Polycarp's textual dependence and borrowings from the Pauline letter collection a prior fact needs be kept in mind. That is Polycarp explicitly refers to Paul in his letter four times (Poly. *Phil.* 3.2; 9.1; 11.2, 3) and informs the Philippians not only that Paul was a letter writer, but that he knows Paul himself wrote to the Philippians. Thus, Polycarp states,

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 concerning the truth. And when he was absent he wrote you letters; if you study them carefully you will be able to build yourself up in the faith that has been given to you (Poly. *Phil.* 3.2).

Hence, it is unsurprising that Polycarp knows of a multiplicity of Pauline letters, including correspondence addressed to the Philippians. In fact, Polycarp describes more than one letter sent to the Philippians.<sup>10</sup> If he is correctly informed, then he may know of more epistolary correspondence from Paul to the group in Philippi, than is now known.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to Paul's letter to the Romans, Polycarp's letter contains one passage that contains a parallel that provides a strong case for literary dependence, as well as a couple of other examples where the proposed parallel is not as strong. The following is the strongest of the suggested cases of dependence on Romans.

Pol. <i>Phil.</i> 6.2	Rom 14.10, 12
καὶ πάντα δεῖ παραστῆναι τῷ βήματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἕκαστον ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ λόγον δοῦναι.	πάντες γὰρ παραστησόμεθα τῷ βήματι τοῦ θεοῦ, ... ἄρα [οὖν] ἕκαστος ἑμῶν περὶ ἑαυτοῦ λόγον δώσει [τῷ θεῷ].
we must all appear at the judgment-seat of Christ, and must every one give an account of himself.	For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God ... So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

This example is neither an exact citation, nor a vague allusion. There is verbal correspondence, the use of different forms of the same verb, a commonality in word order, but also some changes such as the switch in genitive referent from τῷ βήματι τοῦ θεοῦ in Rom 14.10 to τῷ βήματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Pol. *Phil.* 6.2. This might suggest that the material from Romans is being cited from memory rather than through the mechanism of direct copying. However, it should be noted that a significant branch of the manuscript tradition for Rom 14.10 reads the genitive noun Χριστοῦ in place of θεοῦ.<sup>12</sup> No suggestion is being made for the originality of the reading Χριστοῦ, it is simply noted that a large section of the manuscript tradition reads Χριστοῦ in place of θεοῦ. This observation might account for the form of Polycarp's text. A second complication occurs due to the

*Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 58-65, 95-101.

<sup>10</sup> This statement has been seen by some as adding weight to the so-called partition theories that question the integrity of the current form of Paul's letter to the Philippians as a unified composition. Such theories tend to see the letter as a pastiche of two or more earlier letters addressed to the Philippians. For instance, see B.D. Rahtjen, 'The Three Letters of Paul to the Philippians', *NTS* (1959-1960) 167-173.

<sup>11</sup> It is unlikely that Polycarp's description of multiple letters to the Philippians can be viewed as offering strong support for theories that see the current form of the letter to the Philippians as a composite of various letters or fragments of letters of Paul to the Philippian congregation, which were assembled in a unified document at a latter stage. For a description of these so-called partition theories and their historical development see John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 33B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 8-13.

<sup>12</sup> The pronoun Χριστοῦ is read in the following manuscripts  $\kappa^2$  C<sup>2</sup> L P  $\Psi$  048 0209 33 81 104 365 1175 1241 1505 1881  $\mathfrak{M}$ . The genitive noun θεοῦ is the reading that occurs in  $\kappa^*$  A B C\* D F G 630 1506 1739. The reading θεοῦ is somewhat better attested than Χριστοῦ, due to its presence in Vaticanus B and as the reading of the first hand of Sinaiticus  $\kappa^*$ . Here, however, it may simply be the case that Polycarp read a text with the reading Χριστοῦ, thus following the form of Rom 14.10 that he knew.

occurrence in the Pauline corpus of another passage that is similar to Romans 14.10, where Paul refers to τοῦ βήματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ (2 Cor 5.10). This might be a case of a conflation of two passages on the part of Polycarp, although the overall form of the material in Pol. *Phil.* 6.2 show more resemblance to Rom 14.10, 12, than to 2 Cor 5.10. In this vein, Berding argues for the likely influence of 2 Cor 5.10. Thus he states that Polycarp ‘evidently conflates Rom 14:10, 12 with 2 Cor 5:10 (though Rom 14:10, 12 is the primary text).’<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Polycarp’s knowledge of 1 Corinthians appears virtually certain. The strongest example is the parallel between Poly. *Phil.* 5.3 and 1 Cor 6.9-10.<sup>14</sup>

Pol. <i>Phil.</i> 5.3	1 Cor 6.9-10
οὔτε πόρνοι οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενικοῖται βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομήσουσιν οὔτε οἱ ποιοῦντες τὰ ἄτοπα.	Ἴη οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι ἄδικοι θεοῦ βασιλείαν οὐ κληρονομήσουσιν; μὴ πλανᾶσθε· οὔτε πόρνοι οὔτε εἰδωλολάτραι οὔτε μοιχοὶ οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενικοῖται οὔτε κλέπται οὔτε πλεονέκται, οὐ μέθυσοι, οὐ λοῖδοροι, οὐχ ἄρπαγες βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομήσουσιν.
neither fornicators, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals shall inherit the kingdom of God, nor those who do things inconsistent and unbecoming	Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor <i>the</i> covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

In this case Polycarp’s form of the tradition is far shorter than the Pauline form – with only three vices mentioned in place of the ten that occur in 1 Cor 6.9-10. He also inverts the structure, by place the vices before the reference to inheriting the kingdom of God. Furthermore, word order is also inverted. Despite this thoroughgoing recasting of the Pauline tradition, there can be little doubt that Polycarp is dependent here on the material in 1 Cor 6.9-10. This case for literary dependence is due to the use of common terms to denote three of the vices and then linking those practices with exclusion from inheriting the kingdom of God. Thus Benecke made the following assessment in relation to this parallel: ‘it seems impossible to doubt that the passage in 1 Corinthians is the source for Polycarp’s words.’<sup>15</sup>

Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* also presents good evidence for the author’s knowledge and use of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians and 1&2 Timothy. In order to motivate the recipients of his letter to live a life in accord with God’s commandments,<sup>16</sup> Polycarp provides the following statement as a basis of constancy: ‘knowing therefore that God is not mocked’ (Pol. *Phil.* 5.1). This seems to reflect Paul’s exasperated comment to the Galatians: ‘Do not be deceived, God is not mocked’ (Gal 6.7). The fact that Polycarp introduces this phrase with the verb εἰδόντες ‘knowing’, suggests that this is information that the recipients already possessed. Moreover, in the surviving literature, the expression ‘God is not mocked’ is found only

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Berding, *Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp’s Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature*, VCS 62 (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 85.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion on this text see Paul Foster, ‘The Text of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers’, in Charles E. Hill and Michael J. Kruger (eds), *The Early Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2012) 282-301, here 299.

<sup>15</sup> P.V.M. Benecke, ‘The Epistle of Polycarp’ in A Committee of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology, *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905) 85.

<sup>16</sup> On this point see J.B. Bauer, *Die Polykarpbriefe*, KAV (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), 53.

in Gal 6.7 prior to Polycarp's use of the phrase.<sup>17</sup> In relation to his use of Ephesians, Polycarp again employs the formula εἰδότες ὅτι, 'knowing that', to preface the statement χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων 'by grace you have been saved not from works' (Pol. *Phil.* 1.3). The first three words, χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι, are an exact verbal parallel to Eph 2.5b repeated again in Eph 2.8a and the second sequence of three words, οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, replicates Eph 2.9a. Here it appears that Polycarp is intentionally recalling the wording of Ephesians 2.8-9, but in an abbreviated form. As Berding states, '[n]ot only are these phrases identical to those found in Eph 2:5, 8, 9 but they function adequately as a summary of the intent of Paul's thought.'<sup>18</sup>

The knowledge and use of Paul's Letter to the Philippians in Polycarp's own letter addressed to the same geographical location, albeit several decades later, is perhaps the strongest case for Polycarp's literary knowledge of dependence upon a text that came to be included in the New Testament. Polycarp explicitly refers to Paul's letter writing activity addressed to the Philippians (Pol. *Phil.* 3.2). In addition, Berding notes ten possible cases where Paul's letter influenced Polycarp or was used more explicitly by him. Not all of those ten cases are equally strong or persuasive. However, in several instances the parallel is sufficiently strong to posit direct influence. In his discussion on martyrs, Polycarp comments that 'all these did not run in vain' (Pol. *Phil.* 9.2). Here there is a string of four Greek words that are orthographically identical to the Pauline expression in Phil 2.16: οὐκ εἰς κενὸν ἔδραμον. Here the reason for specifying orthographical equivalence is because although the verb ἔδραμον maintains the same orthography in both passages, in its Pauline context it is a first person singular 'I did not run', whereas in Pol. *Phil.* 9.2 it is a third person plural 'they did not run'. Thus, the morphological similarity can mask the semantic difference. Notwithstanding this observation, the case for literary dependence is strong, but not only because of the verbal parallel. Additionally, there is also a thematic connection which pertains to the assessment of believers at the termination of life. For Polycarp, the endurance of martyrdom was a demonstration of their righteousness and that 'they are in the place due to them with the Lord' (Pol. *Phil.* 9.2). Similarly, Pauline anticipates the eschatological assessment of his work when he states, 'so in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain' (Phil 2.16).<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Polycarp's knowledge and use of Paul's Letter to the Philippians is perhaps the best attested example of his use of any Pauline writing due to the combination of direct reference to Paul's correspondence with the Philippian community and the occurrence of several loose citations drawn from Paul's epistle to that community in Polycarp's own letter to the same location.

Among the writings that form the collection known as the Apostolic Fathers, only Polycarp preserves a citation of material apparently drawn from 2 Thessalonians. This case is somewhat further complicated owing to the fact that the parallel in Polycarp's letter occurs in a portion of the text that survives only in Latin. This problematises the comparison of equivalent expressions since the Greek text of 2 Thessalonians is not directly comparable with the Latin lexical forms at the relevant point in Polycarp's letter. Furthermore, the fact that the parallel occurs in a versional text of the letter leads to the

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<sup>17</sup> See Paul Foster, 'The Text of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers', in Michael Bird and Scott Harrower (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Apostolic Fathers*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2019) forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> As Reumann notes, '[i]n this context of eschatological salvation (2:12e) and proper boasting at the judgment over mission work, what Paul says about his own prospects, including (possibly imminent) death (1:19-26; 2:17-18, 23-24, 30), is to be placed.' Reumann, *Philippians*, 414.

possibility that it could be a later embellishment. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the parallel may be set out as follows.

Pol. <i>Phil.</i> 11.3	2 Thess 1.4a
in quibus laboravit beatus Paulus, qui estis in principio epistulae ejus: de vobis etenim <i>gloriatur in omnibus ecclesiis,</i>	ὥστε αὐτοὺς ἡμᾶς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐγκαυχᾶσθαι ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τοῦ θεοῦ
In whose midst Paul labored, and who are praised in the beginning of his letter, For he boasts about you in all the churches	ita ut et nos ipsi in vobis gloriemur in ecclesiis Dei (Vulgate)  so that we ourselves boast in you among the churches of God

As noted, in this instance it is not possible to speak of exact verbal parallels, since the text of Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* is not extant in Greek. The Vulgate is included for reference, although this Latin translation dates from the end of the fourth century. In the Latin it is possible to see a level of parallelism that strengthens the case for literary dependency. The most significant challenge with this example appears to be a misunderstanding on Polycarp’s part. As Benecke describes the problem, ‘[t]he context shows that Polycarp supposes himself to be quoting words addressed to the Philippians (cf. *etenim*). Similar words actually only occur in 2 Thessalonians, and Epistle addressed to another Macedonian Church, which Polycarp might easily have thought of, by a lapse of memory, as sent to the Philippians.’<sup>20</sup> That the Macedonian location was a factor in Polycarp’s confusion may be unlikely, however, it appears that he has transposed a description about the Thessalonians onto the Philippians. This was probably an error, rather than an intentional decision.

Polycarp also appears to know both of the letters addressed to Timothy. In relation to 1 Timothy, at one point he appears to conflate two passages drawn from the letter.

Pol. <i>Phil.</i> 4.1	1 Tim 6.10a, 7
Ἀρχὴ δὲ πάντων χαλεπῶν φιλαργυρία εἰδότες οὖν ὅτι οὐδὲν εἰσηνέγκαμεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ ἐξενεγκεῖν τι ἔχομεν	ρίζα γὰρ πάντων τῶν κακῶν ἐστὶν ἡ φιλαργυρία, ... οὐδὲν γὰρ εἰσηνέγκαμεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, ὅτι οὐδὲ ἐξενεγκεῖν τι δυνάμεθα·
But the love of money is the beginning of all troubles. Knowing therefore, that we brought nothing into world and can take nothing out ...	For the love of love money is a root of all evils ... For we brought nothing into the world so we can take nothing out.

The second part of the statement in Pol. *Phil.* 4.1 forms the stronger parallel. As has been noted elsewhere, ‘[i]n Greek there is a string of eight words where the only difference is the choice of the conjunction. This provides strong evidence of literary dependence.’<sup>21</sup> It also appears to be the case that Polycarp knows 2 Timothy and cites some material from the letter in modified form. The author of 2 Timothy describes Demas as a deserter who left the Pauline group ‘having loved the present world’ (2 Tim 4.10). Polycarp adopts similar phraseology, but adds a negative particle so it becomes a positive statement about Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus and others that ‘they did not love the present world’ (Pol. *Phil.* 9.2).

Having assembled this evidence for the range of Pauline writings known to Polycarp, it is striking to see the range of Pauline texts that can be shown to have been known to him. It may be the case that he know other Pauline writings but had no need to

<sup>20</sup> P.V.M. Benecke, ‘The Epistle of Polycarp’, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Foster, ‘The Text of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers’, forthcoming.

cite them in the course of his own letter. However, in the absence of evidence, the strong and reasonable secure observation can be drawn that Polycarp appears to have known eight of Paul's letters: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, and quite possibly an ninth, 2 Corinthians. This is, therefore, one of the most important piece of evidence for an early and reasonably extensive collection of the letters of Paul. Moreover, because of this surprising range of knowledge of different Pauline writings, Harrison saw this as another reason why the letter of Polycarp could not as a whole be dated to the later portion of Trajan's reign. Thus in a somewhat loaded manner Harrison states,

If a process of development so charged with destiny for future ages really had got so far in Trajan's day as we can see clearly that it must have done when this Epistle was written, well and good! But it would be impossible without the help of this Epistle to prove that it had. ... On the other hand, if there be serious reasons for questioning whether Polycarp wrote these chapters till perhaps twenty years after the death of Trajan, it is obviously desirable that these reason be brought to light.<sup>22</sup>

The aim here is not to resolve Harrison's theory that the current form of Polycarp's *Philippians* is in fact the conflation of an earlier letter be Polycarp written shortly after Ignatius left Asia Minor on his journey to Rome, and a second later letter that reflects knowledge of the death of Ignatius.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Harrison's comment, regardless of dating and compositional theories, reveals the range of Pauline texts known to Polycarp. That range and use of writings that would constitute the Pauline collection – and later be incorporated into the New Testament, also reveals Polycarp's theological indebtedness to the traditions contained in those writings and his desire to use them as a source and guarantee of authenticity for the teaching of the early church.

### 3. *Theological Themes in Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians*

Within his letter, albeit to varying degrees, Polycarp touches upon a number of important theological ideas. Alongside this, there are also several significant aspects of wider Christian theology to which Polycarp makes little or no discernible reference. The reason for this is straightforward, even though it has led some erroneously to dismiss Polycarp as an early Christian figure with a remarkably meagre theological contribution. In this vein, Glimm coolly stated in regard to the letter that its doctrinal content 'hardly requires analysis.'<sup>24</sup> However, if Polycarp is acknowledged to have made a contribution to wider theology, then the topic that is most frequently identified as his locus of theological discussion is in the area of ecclesiology. It is not difficult to understand why this is the case. Polycarp's primary purpose in writing to the Philippians revolves around ensuring the well-being and stability of the church in Philippi. While the exact nuance of Polycarp's ecclesial concern has been debated, Maier is surely close to the mark when he states that 'the main focus of the letter is the protection of the purity of the Philippian church.'<sup>25</sup> The discussion of Polycarp's ecclesiology will, therefore, receive a significant

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<sup>22</sup> P.N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge: CUP, 1936) 7.

<sup>23</sup> For Harrison, the initial letter was a short note now preserved in the *Poly. Phil.* 13 (maybe also 14) 'dispatched probably within a fortnight of Ignatius's departure from Philippi.' The second letter, on this theory comprised *Poly. Phil.* 1-12 and 'the date of this second Epistle would thus fall towards the end of Hadrian's reign.' Furthermore, according to Harrison, the two letters were joined together shortly after Polycarp's death, which is placed around A.D. 155-156. For the fuller statement of these points see Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, 15-16.

<sup>24</sup> F.X. Glimm, J.M.-F. Marique and G.G. Walsh, *The Apostolic Fathers*, FC 1 (New York: Clima, 1947) 133.

<sup>25</sup> H.O. Maier, 'Purity and Danger in Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians: The Sin of Valens in Social Perspective', *J ECS* 1 (1993) 229-247, here 246.



degree of attention in any treatment of the theological themes in his *Letter to the Philippians*.

However, many other theological themes recur throughout the letter. Several of these ideas occur as intertwined topics, and Polycarp makes no attempt to treat such themes in isolation from one another, or to provide an exhaustive treatment of each theological concept. Instead, and in common with Christian writings of the second century, Polycarp's theological perspectives are embedded within a text with a different purpose from the pure exposition of doctrinal themes. Consequently, the mention of theological ideas is subservient to, but essential for the overall presentation of his pastoral argument. Notwithstanding this, Polycarp refers to a number of core belief commitments in the early Jesus movement. At various points the shared christological beliefs come to the fore. Similarly, Polycarp reveals his understanding of the nature of God the father, most prominently both in relation to his son and to the salvation of believers. By contrast, it is perhaps noteworthy that no certain reference to the holy spirit occurs in the letter.<sup>26</sup> Within the letter eschatological language is prominent. Polycarp both assures believers of their future resurrection (Poly. *Phil.* 2.2), as well as reminding them of the future universal judgment (Poly. *Phil.* 5.2). Linked with the promise of future resurrection, Polycarp also refers to the mechanism of salvation as he understands it. Yet all these theological ideas support the larger concerns of the letter, which are to instil in group members correct ethical behaviours, and thereby to avoid the type of problems that have arisen with the former presbyter Valens. Combined with this, Polycarp also provides reflection on the nature and purpose of martyrdom. This was an issue of great concern in the fledgling Jesus movement, as well as being a topic where there was divergence of opinion.

These theological topics are woven together to form a pastoral letter aimed at instilling correct behaviours and praxis in the Philippian community. However, such theological ideas are not simply presented as a means to an end. They are the foundation and the intellectual reason why the ethical behaviours that Polycarp seeks to instil in the Philippians should be adopted. Moreover, by articulating common beliefs, Polycarp appeals to the identity he and his readers share as believers in Christ. Thus the discussion of theological ideas articulates the basis of a shared faith and strengthens a sense of unity by describing a common identity.

### 3.1 Christological Ideas

Like nearly all early Christian writings, Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* contains multiple and varied references to Jesus. In the opening salutation asks that the Philippians might be recipients of 'mercy and peace' that has a dual origin, coming both from 'God

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<sup>26</sup> The letter contains only two occurrences of the term πνεῦμα. (Poly. *Phil.* 5.3; 7.2). In the first passage where the young men are encouraged to maintain sexual purity, Polycarp notes that, πᾶσα ἐπιθυμία κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος στρατεύεται, 'every sinful desire wages war against the spirit' (Poly. *Phil.* 5.3). The reference to the 'spirit' here is ambiguous and either denotes the human spirit or the indwelling holy spirit. Typically this has been resolved by appeal to similar passages in the New Testament. Thus, Hartog noting parallels to Gal 5.17 and 1 Pet 2.11 states, 'The same interpretive issue arises in Gal. 5.17, although most explain the πνεῦμα there as a reference to the Holy Spirit.' P. Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Oxford Apostolic Fathers (Oxford: OUP, 2013) 121. By contrast, Bauer identifies a parallel with Rom 7.14-25, 'Den widerstreit der Begierde gegen den Geist schildert Paulus Röm 7,14-25.' Bauer, *Die Polykarpbriefe*, 54. This seems to imply for Bauer the reference is to the human spirit. By contrast, the citation of the saying from Matt 26.41 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Poly. *Phil.* 7.2), which corresponds with Jesus' Gethsemane words is typically seen as representing the inner human struggle between flesh and spirit. Therefore, Polycarp presents nothing explicit of his pneumatology in this letter.

almighty and Jesus Christ our saviour' (Pol. *Phil.* salut.). Here the idea is that a salvific dimension is foundational to christological expression, and this is enshrined in the titular reference to Jesus Christ as 'saviour'. This concern with salvation and the understanding that Jesus as the source of salvation features elsewhere in the letter. For instance, using a combination of phraseology drawn from Eph 2.5, 8, Polycarp informs the Philippians 'that by grace you have been saved, not because of works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 1.3). The mechanism of salvation is not stated in this context, rather the affirmation being presented is that the salvation of believers arises from the will of God, which is accomplished through Christ.

Polycarp employs the fulsome combination of christological titles contained in the appellation 'Lord Jesus Christ' on several occasions, especially at the beginning and at the end of the letter (Pol. *Phil.* 1.1, 2; 2.1; 12.2; 14.1). This concatenation of forms of address portrays the elevated status of the one so described, as well as marking this figure as being deserving of deference and piety. By contrast, in the body of the letter this longer triple form of address is typically reduced to various combinations of its constituent elements. Thus Polycarp can speak of 'Jesus Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 1.3; 7.1; 12.2) or 'Christ Jesus' (Pol. *Phil.* 8.1) in a way where both expressions appear to be broadly equivalent. The term 'Christ' is used singly on several occasions. It occurs in expressions such as 'the judgment seat of Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 6.2) and with greater frequency when Polycarp is referring to actions that he sees as directed towards both 'God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 3.3; 5.2; 5.3). Thus believers are to express 'love for God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 3.3), deacons are 'servants of God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2), and people should display obedience to presbyters and deacons 'as to God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2). Therefore, Polycarp appears to understand God and Christ as co-recipients of the love and respect of believers. He expresses this understanding by naming God and Christ together as figures to whom believers behave deferentially. However, in these contexts, he does not articulate the relationship between these figures, nor does he explain why both should be seen as co-recipients of pious devotion. That is simply something that is taken for granted, and assumed to be a matter for which readers require no explanation. While Polycarp uses the term 'Christ' in isolation from other christological forms of address, he never does so with the name 'Jesus'. Polycarp employs the name Jesus on eleven occasions (Pol. *Phil.* 1.1 [twice], 2, 3; 2.1; 7.1; 8.1; 12.2 [three times]; 14.1), and always in combination with another form of christological address.

The term κύριος 'Lord' is used with relatively high frequency, occurring on twenty-seven occasions (Pol. *Phil.* 1.1 [three times], 2; 2.1, 3; 4.1, 3; 5.2; 6.2 [twice], 3 [twice]; 7.1, 2; 9.2; 10.1 [twice], 2, 3; 11.2, 3, 4; 12.2 [twice]; 13.2; 14.1). When it is used in combination with other christological titles it is clearly employed to denote Jesus. However, as is not uncommon in several early Christian writings, when it is used singly the referent is ambiguous, and could potentially be a designation for God the father or for Jesus. At other times, however, the single use of κύριος unambiguously designates Jesus. Thus, when Polycarp exhorts the Philippians to be 'mindful of what the Lord said in his teachings' (Pol. *Phil.* 2.3), he cites several examples of Jesus' teaching that are a pastiche of material paralleled in the Matthean and Lukan sermons.<sup>27</sup> As these sayings were

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<sup>27</sup> The precise source used by Polycarp is difficult to determine. The forms 'blessed are the poor' rather than 'poor in spirit' and the reference to 'the kingdom of God' rather than 'heaven' show affinities with the Lukan forms of these sayings. However, with the reference to those who 'are persecuted for the sake of righteousness', the use of the term δικαιοσύνη appears to reproduce a favourite Matthean redactional term as well as employing a beatitude that occurs in the first gospel (Matt 5.10) without parallel in Luke. This divergent data led Hagner to suggest that these traditions were derived from an oral source, Donald A. Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) 306-307.

spoken by Jesus in the gospels, the term ‘Lord’ in this context refers to him, and not to God the father. The same is true of the case where Polycarp cites the phrase ‘not to lead us into temptation’ and states this is according to what ‘the Lord has said’ (Pol. *Phil.* 7.2). Less certain, but still likely to be a reference to Jesus given the preceding dominical sayings in Pol. *Phil.* 2.3, is the injunction ‘to walk in the commandments of the Lord’ (Pol. *Phil.* 4.1). Furthermore, the convoluted discussion in Pol. *Phil.* 6.2 makes better sense for the overall logic if the term κύριος is understood as a reference to Christ. Having stated that presbyters must do ‘what is honourable in the sight of God’ (Pol. *Phil.* 6.1), Polycarp continues by stating that in respect of sin believers must ‘ask the Lord to forgive us.’ Here it might initially be unclear whether the referent is the father or Christ. However, Polycarp continues by stating that the Philippians should exercise forgiveness of others since ‘we are in full view of the eyes of the Lord and God. While the expression τοῦ κυρίου καὶ θεοῦ, being governed by a single definite article might suggest a dual reference to single entity – the one who is both Lord and God, this is unlikely. Immediately afterwards, Polycarp describes ‘the judgment seat of Christ’ showing that believers will be in the full view of Christ when they come to the place where they hope to be forgiven. Thus it appears more likely that ‘Lord and God’ is Polycarp’s way of referring to both Christ and also to the father in this context. However, several other references are less clear such as the description of the ‘faith of the Lord’ (Pol. *Phil.* 4.3), ‘the truth of the Lord’ (Pol. *Phil.* 5.3), and ‘the oracles of the Lord’ (Pol. *Phil.* 7.1). Yet given the fact that elsewhere Polycarp appears to reserve the term κύριος ‘Lord’ as a reference to Jesus, it is perhaps more likely, though admittedly not certain, that he uses this term consistently throughout his letter as a reference to Jesus and not to the father.

Polycarp also understands Jesus to be in a filial relationship with God. He expresses this relationship in two conjoined ways. He can describe God as ‘father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Pol. *Phil.* 12.2), while in the same section of the letter referring to Jesus as ‘the son of God’ (Pol. *Phil.* 12.2). This filial relationship is one of the fundamental ways in which Polycarp expresses the relationship between Jesus and God. In this expression, Polycarp is not a theological innovator, but shows himself to be indebted to a common christological affirmation that shaped theological thought from its earliest inception. Here, although not directly drawing on his writings, Polycarp reproduces an idea that is central in Pauline thought (cf. Rom 1.3-4; 1 Cor 1.9; 2 Cor 1.19; Gal 4.4; Eph 4.13). However, the understanding of Jesus filial relationship with God probably originates in the dominical *abba* language of Jesus himself.

One of the characteristics of the christology of Ignatius of Antioch is his straightforward designation of Jesus as God. He can state of himself that ‘I glorify Jesus Christ the God who made you wise’ (Ign. *Smyr.* 1.1), or that ‘our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary’ (Ign. *Eph.* 18.2). Hence, ‘one of the key theological developments in the middle recension, or earliest form of the letters of Ignatius, in comparison with the Pauline epistles, the synoptic gospels and several of the other writings contained in the New Testament is the unambiguous declaration of the divinity of Christ.’<sup>28</sup> Only on one occasion does Polycarp appear to have anything that approaches this form of expression, where Jesus is designated as God. As part of his concluding

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Alternatively, Berding believes that this list reveals ‘Polycarp’s relationship to *1 Clement* in this case is primarily in the *fact* that “Clement” has such a list and less on the *form* of each individual saying. In other words, Polycarp may have been influenced by “Clement” to employ such maxims in his own exhortation.’ Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Foster, ‘The Ignatian Problem: The Recensions of a Letter Corpus as a Reflection of Theological Concerns and Developments’, in Joseph Verheyden (ed.), *Texts in Context*, BETL (Leuven, Peeters, 2020) forthcoming.

exhortations, Polycarp states that he offers his prayer on behalf of all those who either in the present or in the future well 'believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his father who raised him from the dead' (Pol. *Phil.* 12.2). Taken at face value, here is a passage that refers to Jesus and the father separately, and in relation to Jesus describes him both as 'Lord and God', perhaps even drawing on the language of Thomas' declaration in the Gospel of John ('my Lord and my God', Jn 20.28). Here, however, a number of textual problems abound. First, this phrase occurs in a portion of the letter that is only preserved in the Latin version, and is not extant in the surviving Greek manuscript evidence. The relevant portion of the Latin printed text reads, *qui credituri sunt in dominum nostrum et deum Iesum Christum*. Yet in regard to the key phrase *et deum*, the Latin witnesses are divided concerning its inclusion (L<sup>mpf</sup>) or its omission (L<sup>ovbct</sup>). None of these manuscripts is typically dated earlier than the ninth century, and some as late as the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Furthermore, as Lightfoot observed, the Latin 'translation is very loose at times, and the Greek text from which it was made was not free from errors. Moreover, the text of the version itself has not been transmitted to us uncorrupted.'<sup>29</sup> Consequently, caution should be exhibited when using this statement as an indication of Polycarp's christology. Hence, it is perhaps safest to conclude that no certain evidence is found in the *Letter to the Philippians* that demonstrates that Polycarp spoke in an unambiguous manner referring to Jesus as God, especially when compared with the christological formulations that occur in the letters of Ignatius.

### 3.2 The Understanding of God

God is a constant, though frequently unexplained presence in much of what Polycarp writes. The Philippian believers are identified as a community in relationship to God: 'the church of God that dwells at Philippi' (Pol. *Phil.* salut.). Employing a term was to become synonymous with the deity, Polycarp describes God as παντοκράτωρ 'almighty'. Although the term is frequent in 1 Clement (1 Clem 1.1; 2.3; 8.5; 32.4; 56.6; 60.4; 62.2), elsewhere among the writings of the Apostolic Fathers it is not used with great frequency (*Diog.* 7.2; *Mart. Pol.* 14.1; *Hermas* 11.5; *Did.* 10.3). Among the New Testament writers, with the exception of a single reference in the Pauline letters (2 Cor 6.18), it occurs only in Revelation on nine occasions (Rev 1.8; 4.8; 11.17; 15.3; 16.7, 14; 19.6, 15; 21.22). Polycarp does not explain the significance of the term. No doubt he considers it to be readily understandable as a designation for one who holds all power, and furthermore the lexeme was probably viewed as a widely used term in early Christian sociolect.

The primary way in which Polycarp depicts God is in relation to Jesus. Apart from designating God as the father of Jesus (Pol. *Phil.* 12.2), perhaps an even more prominent aspect of that relationship that Polycarp describes is the role God plays in raising Jesus. Consequently, one of the reasons that Polycarp presents to the Philippians as a basis for Christian rejoicing is recognition that it was 'our Lord Jesus Christ ... whom God raised up, having loosed the birth pangs of Hades' (Pol. *Phil.* 1.2). This is a fundamental and recurring affirmation for Polycarp: the Philippians are said to have 'believed in him who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave him glory' (Pol. *Phil.* 2.1), and the further promise is that God who raised Jesus will also raise believers. Thus the resurrection of Jesus functions as a pattern and a promise for the future resurrection of believers. Moreover, Polycarp describes the purpose God's action in raising Jesus. He states in relation to martyrs that they love not the world but rather Jesus who died for them. Following on from this statement, Polycarp explains, it is for the sake of believers that God raised Jesus from the dead (Pol. *Phil.* 9.2). Such activity is understood to have

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<sup>29</sup> See J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Part 2 Ignatius and Polycarp* (London, Macmillan, 1889) vol. 1, 551.

soteriological consequence especially for martyrs in this context, but also for all who believe in Christ.

There are several other ways in which Polycarp speaks of God and Jesus in concert. The Philippians are encouraged to build themselves up in 'love for God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 3.3), deacons are described as being 'servants of God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2), believers are to obey 'the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.3), and in relation to judgment all people are said to be 'in full view of the eyes of the Lord and God' (Pol. *Phil.* 6.2). These statements which affirm that faithful actions are directed towards both God and Christ, or that God and Christ act in unity, demonstrate that Polycarp presents a fundamentally christo-centric understanding of God. This is not equivalent to the way in which Ignatius unambiguously names Jesus as God. Notwithstanding this difference, Polycarp's description of the common actions of Jesus and God, and of these two being the common focus of believers' piety, reveals a unity between Jesus and God. However, the basis of that unity or the nature of the relationship is not explained, beyond the affirmation that Jesus is in filial relationship with God and that God was the active agent in raising Jesus from the dead.

### 3.3 Eschatology and Final Judgment

Polycarp discusses the final judgment and the inauguration of the eschatological age for three main reasons. First, this material functions as a motivation to encourage correct behaviour in the present age, second it is seen as a guarantee of future hope for believers, and third it acts as a demonstration of ultimate divine justice. In what approaches a litany of the post-crucifixion roles of Jesus, Polycarp describes Christ as raised from the dead, given glory, seated at God's right hand, having all things made subject to him, and being served by every creature (Pol. *Phil.* 2.1). The list then concludes with the following two elements. First it names Jesus as the one 'who is coming as judge of the living and the dead', and second Polycarp states that it is Jesus 'for whose blood God will hold responsible those who disobey him' (Pol. *Phil.* 2.1). Here Polycarp both reprises a theme that is found in several New Testament writings (cf. Matt 25.31-46), and which also has a particular resonance with specific phraseology found in those writings: 'Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead' (2 Tim 4.1), 'the one who has been appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead' (Acts 10.42). Much of this sequence of post-crucifixion functions of Christ has been viewed as reflecting wider early Christian beliefs at least in the content of the affirmations, if not in the precise use of pre-existing phrases.<sup>30</sup> Berding states in relation to this semi-credal teaching that, '[t]his section at the least provides a small window into some of the elements in the doctrinal system of at least some Christian groups in the early part of the second century.'<sup>31</sup> However, Polycarp's climactic element that states God will hold the disobedient responsible for the shedding of Jesus' blood has no close parallel in earlier surviving Christian writings. This interpretation might be Polycarp's own innovation. If so, he presents a dire consequence for those who are disobedient – namely that they are held responsible for Jesus' death.

Polycarp presents the practice of righteousness, particularly by deacons as leading to future blessings. While Polycarp commences with a description of the behaviour required of deacons (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2a), by the end of the section he has adopted the generalised reference to all believers in the first person plural voice, 'we'. Therefore he instructs the recipients of the letter in the following terms:

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<sup>30</sup> See Richard P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) 54-55.

<sup>31</sup> Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*, 44.

If we please him in this present world, we shall receive also the future world, according as he has promised to us that he will raise us again from the dead, and that if we live worthily of him, 'we shall also reign together with him', provided only we believe. (Pol. *Phil.* 5:2b)

Hartog notes that this passage 'highlights the resurrection of the righteous because it looks beyond that event to the co-reigning with Christ.'<sup>32</sup> While that is not incorrect, there is a more fundamental reason for the focus on the resurrection of believers in this context. That is due to the fact that Polycarp is trying to motivate deacons and all believers more generally to adopt behaviour consistent with their faith in Christ by reminding them that their participation in future resurrection is linked to acting in a pleasing way 'in this present world'. As the argument unfolds, it becomes clear that one of Polycarp's primary concerns is purity, but especially in regard to what he presents as sexual sins. Young men in particular are reminded that failure to maintain sexual continence will lead to them not inheriting the kingdom of Paul (Pol. *Phil.* 5.3). Here Polycarp is indebted to Paul's discussion of vices in 1 Corinthians where the outcome is similarly loss of inheritance of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6.9-10).<sup>33</sup>

Polycarp uses a similar line of argument when he encourages the Philippians to be forgiving towards each other, since he reminds them that their actions will be divinely observed and in the eschaton 'we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and each one must account for his own actions' (Pol. *Phil.* 6.2). Polycarp's repeated references to the future judgment are primarily deployed as a motivation for righteous behaviour. However, he can use reference to the final judgment simply as a dire warning. When decrying the avarice of the former presbyter Valens, Polycarp generalises the moral lesson to remind the Philippians that love of money is a form of idolatry and such a practice will lead to them being 'judged as one of the Gentiles, who are ignorant of the Lord's judgment' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.2).

In terms of eschatological perspectives, Polycarp's main reflection focuses on the final judgment either as a means of motivating believers to maintain correct ethical behaviour, or to assure them that those who are not believers will be subjected to God's judgment. Additionally the resurrection of Jesus functions as a guarantee to the hope believers have for their own future resurrection. While these three aspects form the major focus of Polycarp's eschatological teaching, he also briefly refers to the future heavenly existence of believers. Citing Paul by name as his source, he reminds the Philippians *quia sancti mundum iudicabunt, sicut Paulus docet*, 'that saints will judge the world, as Paul teaches' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.2). Furthermore, he tells the Philippians of their eschatological privilege since they will reign together with Christ (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2b). In this way Polycarp looks beyond the dual fates that the final judgment brings, to the eschatological transformed existence of believers when they reign with Christ in his kingdom.

### 3.4 Ecclesiology

As a pastoral letter, Polycarp's epistle seeks to assist the Philippian believers in tackling a range of problems that confront their community. However, those pastoral suggestions are to be enacted among a group of believers that interacts with one another in an ordered and hierarchical setting. Although the term *ἐκκλησία* occurs only in the opening salutation where the Philippians are addressed as 'the church of God' (Pol. *Phil.* salut.), ecclesial concerns recur throughout the letter.

In terms of the leadership structure, it is striking that Polycarp never uses the term *ἐπίσκοπος* 'bishop' to describe himself, or in relation to any church leader in Philippi, or

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<sup>32</sup> Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Berding describes the use of 1 Cor 6.9-10 as a 'compressed citation'. Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*, 194.

even to describe a leadership position in the church in a general manner. By contrast, Ignatius considered the term ἐπίσκοπος as the most apt way to describe Polycarp's role among his own community, 'to Polycarp bishop of the church of the Smyrnaeans' (Ign. *Poly.* salut.). In this regard Sullivan draws the following inference:

One can hardly avoid drawing the conclusion that the church of Philippi, at the time Polycarp wrote the letter, was being led by a group of presbyters, assisted by deacons, but without any bishop over the whole community. If the absence of a bishop were merely temporary, as it was at the time in Antioch, one would surely expect Polycarp to make some reference to the situation.<sup>34</sup>

It is therefore striking that while Ignatius refers to Polycarp as ἐπίσκοπος, this is not a designation that Polycarp uses of himself, at least in his letter to the Philippians. However, in the letter there are repeated references to both deacons and presbyters occupying leadership roles.

As a group, the presbyters stand with the deacons as the leaders of the Philippian community, and other members are to be obedient to their leaders, ὑποτασσομένους τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις καὶ διακόνοις (Pol. *Phil.* 5.3). Polycarp expects the presbyters to be examples of correct moral behaviour for the community, but above all to treat community members with care and gentleness (Pol. *Phil.* 6.1). Their pastoral duties include care of the sick and provision for the alienated or socially isolated. In particular, Polycarp enjoins the presbyters ἐπιστρέφοντες τὰ ἀποπεπλανημένα 'to return those who have wandered' from the community. As it transpires towards the end of the letter, this was no theoretical injunction. Polycarp brings up the pressing pastoral case of Valens, a former presbyter in the Philippian community, who appears to have been removed from office because of some financial misdemeanour. In relation to the actions committed by Valens, Polycarp asks the rhetorical question, 'how can somebody who is unable to exercise self-control in these matters preach self-control, to anybody else?' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.2). Apart from explicitly demanding an encratic life from presbyters, Polycarp appears to reveal that a key duty of presbyters was undertaking preaching activity that involved among other things exhortation to live a self-controlled life. While Polycarp does not chastise the Philippians for the action they have taken in regard to Valens and his wife, the generalised call earlier in the letter for compassion and mercy to be practiced by presbyters now becomes a specific instruction to the Philippian presbyters. After praying for Valens and his wife that the Lord might 'grant them true repentance' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.4), he continues with the following directions. He tells the Philippian presbyters that 'you, therefore, for your part must be reasonable in this matter, and do not regard such people as enemies, but, as sick and straying members, restore them, in order that you may save your body in its entirety' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.4). Therefore, presbyters exercise governance over the community in pastoral matters and group discipline. It is implied that they are responsible for preaching to group members. They are expected to be examples of correct ethical behaviour in accordance with the standards of the group. Moreover, infringement of those standards can lead to removal from the office of presbyter.

Deacons are mentioned only twice in the letter, both time in Pol. *Phil.* 5. The same ethical demands placed on presbyters are also placed on deacons, and furthermore on all community members. Thus the letter demands that 'deacons be blameless' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2). Next Polycarp provides a list of moral behaviours that are to characterise such blamelessness. He states of deacons that, '[t]hey must not be slanderers, double-tongued, or lovers of money, but temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, walking

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<sup>34</sup> F.A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: The Newman Press, 2001) 130.

according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant of all' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2). Here there is perhaps a different emphasis on the role of deacons from that contained in the writings of Ignatius, or even authors writing later in the second century such as Justin and Irenaeus.<sup>35</sup> Hence, Hartog observes that '[a]ccording to Polycarp, deacons (διάκονοι) are to be servants (διάκονοι) of God and Christ and not of people. A differing emphasis is found in Ign. *Trall.* 2.3, where deacons (described as "ministers of God's church") are to "please everyone in every respect."<sup>36</sup> The material that follows presents a list of virtues and vices that are required of the young men in the community. This group of young men are then told to be 'subject to the presbyters and deacons, as to God and Christ' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.3).

Therefore, together with the presbyters, the deacons are to be obeyed by other community members. Moreover, in conjunction, the two offices of presbyters and deacons appear to form the leadership structure that Polycarp assumes to be operative among the community in Philippi. It is a twofold form of leadership. While Polycarp does not describe significant factors that distinguish the roles (presumably that was already known by the recipients of the letter) he does attribute a greater range of roles to the presbyters than to the deacons.

### 3.5 Ethical Imperatives

Polycarp's letter is not a comprehensive treatise on early Christian ethical behaviours. The topics treated are presumably selected due to the perceived needs that have arisen in the community, and they may also include some generalised aspects of Christian teaching, especially as derived from predecessor sources such as the letters of Paul. While many of the ethical imperatives are directed to specific groups such as presbyters, widows, or young men, in several cases there is considerable overlap. This suggests that not all of the ethical behaviours described were relevant only to certain sectors of the group, but that several have been selected because they form a wider picture of the type of moral behaviour required from all group members.

It is important to recognise, as Dehandschutter observes, that Polycarp deploys some ideas that might traditionally be viewed as theological concepts primarily for ethical or behaviour-forming ends. Thus Dehandschutter writes the following in relation to the theme of 'righteousness'.

The *Christian life as a life in δικαιοσύνη* is the decisive theme that is drawn through PolPhil and that the author summarises as 'the word of righteousness' (9.1). The fact that the theme is thus more ethical than theological-eschatological arises from the situation of the letter.<sup>37</sup>

However, while Polycarp indeed presents the Christian ethical life as a life of righteousness, he also uses other terminology to present his behavioural instructions to the Philippian believers. One of Polycarp's first imperatives to the Philippians is that they must prepare themselves in order to 'serve the Lord in fear and truth' (Pol. *Phil.* 2.1). For Polycarp, the behaviours that exemplify serving the Lord are represented through the actions of 'leaving behind the empty and meaningless talk and the error of the crowd' (Pol. *Phil.* 2.1). Therefore, Polycarp exhorts the Philippians to maintain purity of speech and to distance themselves from those who do not hold to the same beliefs as the community – which he characterises as being the error of the crowd. This rejection of of

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<sup>35</sup> See P. Foster, 'Deacons (διάκονος) and διακονία in the Writings of Justin and Irenaeus', in Bart J. Koet, Edwina Murphy and Esko Ryökäs (eds), *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) 215-226.

<sup>36</sup> Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 119.

<sup>37</sup> Dehandschutter, 'The Epistle of Polycarp', 128.



unprofitable speech forms is described using the expression τὴν κενὴν ματαιολογίαν ‘empty and meaningless talk’,<sup>38</sup> or perhaps more accurately as ‘the vain fruitless speech.’ This command resonates with similar injunctions in the Pauline corpus. The call for edifying speech and the avoidance any ‘unwholesome word’ πᾶς λόγος σαπρὸς ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν μὴ ἐκπορευέσθω (Eph 4.29), has some similarities with Polycarp’s exhortation. In this context, the sense appears to be that of the rejection of coarse speech.<sup>39</sup> Polycarp’s command, however, seems to go beyond an injunction to avoid crude speech. His use may be more closely aligned with rejection of ‘fruitless speech’ or ‘idle prattle’ that occurs in the Pastoral epistles. The closest parallel describes certain people who ἐξετράπησαν εἰς ματαιολογίαν, ‘have turned aside to fruitless speech’ (1 Tim 1.6).<sup>40</sup> A similar concern arises in Titus, where those described as rebellious individuals exemplify as one of their characteristics behaviour described as ματαιολόγοι καὶ φρεναπάται, that is being ‘empty talkers and deceivers’ (Tit 1.10).<sup>41</sup> The sense that the ‘fruitless speech’ that concerns Polycarp is not coarse talk but erroneous teaching is reinforced by the following clause where the remedy or safeguard is presented as ‘believing in the one who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave him glory and a throne at his right hand’ (Pol. *Phil.* 2.1). It may be wrong to link this deviant teaching exclusively to docetic views,<sup>42</sup> although it is possible that might be part of the concern in this context.

Polycarp also presents a list of positive examples of behaviours, based on the teachings of Jesus, that should inform the ethics being upheld by the believers in Philippi. Thus he instructs the recipients of the letter that they should be

mindful of what the Lord said in His teaching: ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged; forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you; be merciful, that ye may obtain mercy; with what measure you use, it shall be measured back to you’, and once more, ‘Blessed are the poor, and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.’ (Pol. *Phil.* 2.3).

As has been noted, these instructions are a pastiche of sayings from Jesus’ teachings contained primarily in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. Such instruction had become stereotypical in early Christian communities (cf. 1 *Clem* 13.2), but it is interesting to note that Polycarp presents those instructions that have a degree of reciprocity. This may suggest that inner-group relations were an area where Polycarp considered ethical teaching necessary to govern the way in which group members conducted their interactions. Strikingly, as Hartog notes, ‘[t]he themes found in Pol. *Phil.* 2.3 reappear later in the letter, manifesting how they were on Polycarp’s mind.’<sup>43</sup>

Polycarp discloses the fact that the Philippians had invited him to write to them on the topic of righteousness (Pol. *Phil.* 3.1). He then turns to address the issue of the love

<sup>38</sup> This is the translation offered by Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 283.

<sup>39</sup> As Lincoln understands the meaning of the phrase, ‘[w]hat is prohibited under the category of evil talk (cf. Col 3:8; Eph 5:4) includes obscenity, abusive language, and spreading of malicious gossip.’ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* WBC 42 (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1990) 305.

<sup>40</sup> In relation to the term ματαιολογία, Marshall notes that ‘[i]t belongs to the battery of terms used to denounce the false teaching as “vain, empty talk”.’ I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) 372.

<sup>41</sup> In Titus the form of false teaching being targeted is different from that which Polycarp addresses. In relation to Titus, Mounce notes in regard to the description, that it ‘is one of the clearest indications in the PE that the false teaching of Paul’s opponents was primarily Jewish. ... the text is clear on the Jewishness of the opponents, and not all Jewish false teaching must have centered on the law, even though this was part of the false teaching in Ephesus.’ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 396.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. R.A. Kraft and G. Krodel (London: SCM, 1971) 72-73.

<sup>43</sup> Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 109.

of money and as a guard against financial greed he exhorts his readers with the command 'let us arm ourselves with the weapons of righteousness' (Pol. *Phil.* 4.1). This is followed by a code of behaviours first for wives and then for widows. It is interesting that Polycarp once again turns to the topic of finances, encouraging the widows among other things 'to stay far away from ... love of money' (Pol. *Phil.* 4.3). Next in this series of advice given to subgroups in the community, Polycarp addresses deacons. The list of behaviours addressed to them likewise includes the injunction that they are not to be 'lovers of money' (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2). This repeated injunction not to love money, although having precedence in earlier Christian writings, occurs with a far higher frequency here. Given that the concrete situation of the former presbyter Valens involved his removal from office due to avarice or love of money,<sup>44</sup> it is perhaps unsurprising to see Polycarp address this issue both as a piece of generalised teaching and also as a concrete example of defective ethics in the community. Hence, given the apparently recent trauma of a presbyter failing in his duties in regard to financial misdemeanours, Polycarp emphasises this as a particularly area where believers must maintain high ethical standards.

Another area of behaviour that Polycarp addresses as part of his behavioural instructions is that of sexual ethics. These concerns are addressed most directly to the young men in the community, but also appear to be a concern in the instructions given in regard to wives. The instruction concerning wives in regard to what appears to have undertones of sexual ethics is somewhat vague, perhaps due to restraint about discussing such matters. Polycarp writes:

καὶ ἀγάπη καὶ ἀγνεία στεργούσας τοὺς ἑαυτῶν ἄνδρας ἐν πάσῃ ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγαπώσας πάντας ἐξ ἴσου ἐν πάσῃ ἐγκρατεῖα (Pol. *Phil.* 4.2)  
and in love and purity cherishing your own husbands in all truth, and love all others with equality in all self-control (Pol. *Phil.* 4.2)

Here the term ἐγκράτεια has been translated given its more general sense. However, it is frequently used to denote restraint in regard to sexual matters.<sup>45</sup> Based on its most likely meaning in this context and wider early Christian use, Holmes is almost certainly correct to render the sense of the final phrase as 'loving all others equally in chastity.'<sup>46</sup> If that is the case, then Polycarp would appear to instruct wives to cherish their husbands in a monogamous sexual relationship, but at the same time love everybody else equally with a non-sexual love.

Much clearer instructions are given to the young men in the group regarding their sexual conduct. This may suggest a greater problem among this group in the area of sexual ethics. Drawing on material from 1 Cor 6.9, Polycarp describes three types of behaviour that will jeopardise possession of the kingdom, and to this traditional material he adds a generic catch-all description. Therefore, the young men are informed that οὔτε πόρνοι οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενικοῖται βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομήσουσιν οὔτε οἱ ποιοῦντες τὰ ἄτοπα (Pol. *Phil.* 5.3). The first term in the list, πόρνος, may have originated as a description of one who had sex with a prostitute (πόρνη), but it appears to have become more generalised to describe sexual irregularity as judged by the standards of certain

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<sup>44</sup> Holmes translates the Latin phrases *abstineatis vos ab avaritia* as 'avoid the love of money' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.1) and *si quis non se abstinuerit ab avaritia ...* as 'Anyone who does not avoid the love of money ...' (Pol. *Phil.* 11.2). Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 293.

<sup>45</sup> In relation to the seven instances in the New Testament, Goldstein states, '[i]n all instances ἐγκρατ- refers first of all to sexual abstinence, but then is extended to include positive , general self-control and discipline.' See H. Goldstein, 'ἐγκράτεια', in H. Balz and G. Schneider (eds), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990) 378.

<sup>46</sup> Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 285.

contemporary sexual ethics.<sup>47</sup> The next two terms appear to describe different roles in male same-sex intercourse. Here *μαλακός* appears to designate the passive partner, or the person who is the recipient of the penetrative act. Alongside this *ἀρσενοκοίτης* (which may as a euphemism denote ‘males laying together’) denotes the active partner, or the one performing the penetrative act. The final type of behaviour that is described is again somewhat euphemistically described as *οἱ ποιοῦντες τὰ ἄτοπα*, ‘those doing the things out of place’. Here Holmes captures Polycarp’s sense with the translation ‘those who do perverse things.’ Here, Polycarp tells the young men not to engage in sexual acts that may be described as *πορνεία* (‘sexual irregularity’, or ‘fornication’), nor to engage in homosexual activity which is seen as being at variance with the ethical values of early Christian communities. As conclusion to this set of instructions, as Hartog comments, in contrast to these practices that are rejected, ‘Polycarp charged these young men to be concerned about purity.’<sup>48</sup>

Standard early Christian ethical behaviour is also commended in the letter, at times addressed specifically to leaders, or on other occasions more generally to all believers. Presbyters are to be actively engaged in the pastoral care of the marginalised. This is to entail visiting the sick and caring for vulnerable group members including widows, orphans, and the poor (Pol. *Phil.* 6.1).<sup>49</sup> Inner-group forgiveness is presented as a necessary behaviour for those who have been forgiven (Pol. *Phil.* 6.2), but alongside this Polycarp recommends avoidance of ‘those who bear the name of the Lord hypocritically’ (Pol. *Phil.* 6.3). The identity of those described in this way is not entirely clear. In similar terms, Ignatius warned the believers in Ephesus against some he regarded as false in their faith: ‘for there are some who are accustomed to carrying about the name maliciously and deceitfully while doing other things unworthy of God’ (Ign. *Eph.* 7.1). Given what Ignatius writes in the following section ‘there is one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man ...’ (Ign. *Eph.* 7.2), it is likely that in that context Schoedel is correct when he states ‘doctrinal issues – specifically docetism – may also have been involved.’<sup>50</sup> It is also probable that the same broad concern with docetism is the target of Polycarp’s polemic here. In the following section states that ‘everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist’ (Pol. *Phil.* 7.1). The reference to ‘bearing the name hypocritically’ is reminiscent of Ignatius’ similar expression used to attack docetic opponents. Moreover, Polycarp labelling those who fail to confess Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh’ as ‘antichrist’ recalls the Johannine critique on docetic tendencies: ‘every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this is the spirit of the antichrist’ (1 Jn 4.2-3).<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it appears that Polycarp has

<sup>47</sup> The following assessment appears correct in relation to the semantic group of which *πόρνος* is part: ‘[i]n the Pauline writings the word group evidently denotes any kind of illegitimate sexual activity (except for *πόρνη*, which means specifically “prostitute”).’ Moises Silva (revisions editor), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4 (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2014) 115.

<sup>48</sup> Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 121.

<sup>49</sup> Compare the advice in the Epistle of James to visit widows and orphans (Jas 1.27). In writing to the Symraeans, Ignatius represents the behaviour of his opponents as being characterised by lack of concern for the marginalised: ‘they have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; of the bond, or of the free; of the hungry, or of the thirsty’ (Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2).

<sup>50</sup> W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Hermeneia, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1985) 59.

<sup>51</sup> In relation to this passage, Strecker (citing R. Bultmann) states, ‘[b]ecause the false teachers instead contest Christ’s having come in the flesh, they deny Jesus’ fleshly existence and hence the “paradoxical identity of the historical and eschatological figure of Jesus Christ.”’ Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 135.

cited the language of 1 John, albeit in truncated form, to identify either the same or a closely related group of opponents, calling them antichrist and those who bear the name of Jesus Christ in a hypocritical manner.

Polycarp's ethical teaching contains nothing that is novel, or would have surprised the recipients of the letter. His instructions align with similar moral advice circulating in early Christian communities. However, from the elements he emphasises, – such as not loving money, avoiding irregular sexual relationships, and guarding against fruitless speech – it might be possible to infer something concerning the circumstances that led to the composition of the letter. That is certainly the case in the warning against love of money, since Polycarp describes a concrete example where misuse of the group's finances has occurred. In the other cases, the emphasis suggests that the issues being discussed go beyond the generalised repetition of early Christian ethical instruction, and might instead involve specific concerns among group members.

### 3.6 Martyrdom

In this letter, which is probably broadly contemporaneous with the authentic letters of Ignatius, one sees the beginnings of an early theological understanding of martyrdom. Admittedly, Polycarp does not employ any of the terms in the *μαρτυρ*-semantic group. Instead, he speaks of fellow believers being put to death for their faith by employing different terms.

Polycarp commends the Philippians for helping 'those confined by chains' on their journey to trial. In elevated and emphatic terms, he describes such chains as 'the diadems of those who are truly chosen by God and our Lord' (Pol. *Phil.* 1.1). Viewing the chains of an incarcerated believer as a form of adornment resonates with the description Ignatius gives of his own chains: 'I carry around these chains (my spiritual pearls!)' (Ign. *Eph.* 11.1). Here the exalted status of those punished for their faith begins to emerge. Later this would flower into widespread Christian veneration of martyrs.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently he speaks of the need to become imitators of Christ and he ties this imitation to the example of the paschal sufferings. In this vein he writes, '[I]et us, therefore, become imitators of his patient endurance, and if we should suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him' (Pol. *Phil.* 8.2). Dependence on the language of 1 Pet 4.14-16 has been suggested. Whether or not that is seen as compelling, Schoedel is correct to note that in this context 'Christ's endurance and man's perseverance are closely interrelated.'<sup>53</sup> Following on from this, Polycarp is more explicit concerning the fate of martyrs. He names 'the blessed Ignatius and Zosimus and Rufus' along with others from their own community and the temporally more distant apostles as those called 'to exercise unlimited endurance' (Pol. *Phil.* 9.1). The endurance of these early Christian figures is intentionally set in parallel with the immediately preceding description of the 'patient endurance' of Christ during his passion and crucifixion. Therefore, martyrdom is viewed by Polycarp as the ultimate form of imitation of Christ. Moreover, in contrast to those who are accused of 'bearing the name hypocritically' (Pol. *Phil.* 6.3), those who 'suffer for the sake of his name' are said to 'glorify him' (Pol. *Phil.* 8.2).

Polycarp's respect for those believers who had imitated the sufferings of Christ was no mere abstraction. The letter demonstrates his desire to know the circumstances of those facing impending death for the sake of their faith. Thus he asks the Philippians, 'as for Ignatius himself and those with him, if you learn anything for certain, let us know'

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<sup>52</sup> See the comments of Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> W.R. Schoedel, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary – Volume 5: Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias* (Campden, N.J.: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1967) 27.

(Pol. *Phil.* 13.2). Polycarp's enquiry is no morbid curiosity, but it is rather a request for the details of the fate of a fellow early Christian leader. No doubt Polycarp, when he penned this request for information, assumed that Ignatius' fate would be martyrdom. However, in this context, he sought to ascertain whether the state-sanctioned execution had already taken place, or whether it was still impending. There is obviously some level of tension between this desire to be informed of the fate of Ignatius (Pol. *Phil.* 13.2), and the comment made earlier in the present form of the letter, which lists Ignatius, Zosimus and Rufus, alongside Paul and the other apostles as examples of those who had already been called 'to exercise unlimited endurance' (Pol. *Phil.* 9.1).

For Harrison, this tension between Pol. *Phil.* 9.1 with its apparent view that Ignatius was already dead, and Pol. *Phil.* 13.2 where Polycarp requests information about Ignatius' fate, led to the view that what has come down as a single letter of Polycarp was in fact originally two letters, which had been melded into a composite text at a later stage.<sup>54</sup> Here one must also admit that the poor state of the preservation of the manuscripts of the letter, with lacuna in the Greek tradition requiring supplement from the Latin versions, at the very least suggests a turbulent textual history. Moreover, several of the Greek manuscripts of Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* circulate in combination with long recension of the letters of Ignatius – a collection that itself had been subjected to substantial later editorial reworking,<sup>55</sup> and even more significantly as Lightfoot noted, '[a]ll nine manuscripts belong to the same family, as appears from the fact that the Epistle of Polycarp runs on continuously into the Epistle of Barnabas without any break.'<sup>56</sup> These factors may speak in favour of Harrison's proposal that the tension around comments concerning the death of Ignatius are due to two letters that were written at different times, being stitched together at a later date. However, others have found the statements concerning Ignatius' fate as not creating such an unbearable tension so as to preclude their occurrence in the same composition.<sup>57</sup>

Either way, Polycarp shows a clear respect for those who had died or were about to die for their confession of faith in Christ. Here one finds the beginnings of the early development of the veneration of the Christian martyrs. This relatively harmless form of respect and devotion articulated by Polycarp was to develop in ways that could not be anticipated. Later developments were to create a rival authority structure within the church based on the words or the absolutions pronounced by those facing impending martyrdom, as opposed to the ecclesially sanctioned mechanisms for penance.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the status of the martyrs as those who faced 'unlimited endurance', as opposed to church leaders who recanted their faith or handed over copies of the Christian scriptures, was to create lengthy structural challenges during the period of the Donatist schism.<sup>59</sup> Here, however, along with Ignatius, Polycarp reflects the initial stages of the development of a theological perspective on martyrdom, combined with an early form of praxis concerning respect and veneration of those who endured even to death for the confession of faith.

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<sup>54</sup> Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, 15-19.

<sup>55</sup> The longer recension of Ignatius' letter have been subjected to obviously editorial activity, illustrating a significant degree of textual instability.

<sup>56</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Part 2 Ignatius and Polycarp* (London, Macmillan, 1889) vol. 3, 317.

<sup>57</sup> Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 158-159.

<sup>58</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965) 348-350.

<sup>59</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

#### 4. Conclusions

Polycarp's longevity as a church leader, whose time in office spans probably the first six decades of the second century, makes him a fascinating figure who witnessed key developments in the early Jesus movement. Despite this, apart from his *Letter to the Philippians*, very few of his ideas have been transmitted with certainty. This makes this letter, be it a unity or a composite, a highly significant document.

Notwithstanding this significance, many have wanted to limit its theological value by casting it as a mere pastoral tractate with at best flimsy theological insights. Thus, in dismissive tones, Thomas Torrance damned it as being 'a little disappointing to the student of historical theology.'<sup>60</sup> However, expecting Polycarp to write as a systematic theologian (prior to the development of the discipline) is a gross failure to recognise the situational-based and *ad hoc* nature of the theological themes he addressed in his correspondence with the Philippian community. In fact, the surprising feature is that he touches upon so many fundamental theological ideas in a single short letter.

Polycarp's use of earlier Christian writings is surprising for its breadth. Many of these writings would later be collected together as the New Testament, but his literary indebtedness is not constrained by later canonical boundaries. He knows of, and at times appears to allude to near contemporary writings such as the letters of Ignatius, and *1 Clement*. Perhaps, however, his most striking literary relationship is with the Pauline epistles. Not only does Polycarp mention the figure of Paul on multiple occasions, he also cites passages from at least eight of the Pauline letters in a fairly unambiguous manner. In addition to this, he uses material from 1 Peter and 1 John. Furthermore, Polycarp is obviously familiar with various sayings of Jesus, but due to the truncated or imprecise way in which he cites such material in combination with the parallelism between the synoptic gospels, it is not possible to determine whether Polycarp drew on a specific gospel text, was combining parallel passages, or had received such traditions through other mechanisms such as oral tradition or even summaries of gospel teachings that had been repackaged in different literary forms. However, this literary indebtedness reveals that Polycarp was no radical innovator in regard to early Christian teaching. He saw his own epistolary instructions as being aligned with the teachings of his predecessors, especially Paul, who had written to the Philippians several decades earlier.

In terms of the contents of his letter, Polycarp touches upon or addresses several theological themes. His christological affirmations appear fairly standard alongside much contemporary Christian literature, although admittedly he is not as innovative as Ignatius who explicitly refers to Jesus as 'God' (Ign. *Smyrn.* 1.1; *Trall.* 7.1), or as 'our God' (Ign. *Eph.* 15.3; 18.2; *Rom.* praescr.; 3.3; *Pol.* 8.3). Nonetheless, Polycarp repeatedly draws attention to Jesus' filial relationship with the father, and notes that Jesus and the father operate with the same purpose, or receive the same devotion. Thus, for Polycarp, in many areas what is true for the father is true for the son. The inverse of this is that Polycarp's descriptions of God focus on representing the father in relationship with Jesus. However, in this short letter there is no reference to the Holy Spirit,<sup>61</sup> or mention of pneumatological

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1948) 91.

<sup>61</sup> Holmes also notes 'the complete absence of any trace or mention of the Holy Spirit.' Michael W. Holmes, 'Polycarp of Smyrna, *Epistle to the Philippians*', in P. Foster (ed.), *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers* (London: T&T Clark, 2007) 108-125, here 120.

activity among believers.<sup>62</sup> Probably not too much should be inferred from this silence, although it might reflect a routinization of charisma.<sup>63</sup> This phenomenon is well known in new religious movements, and may reflect a development of early Jesus communities as they transformed from groups with ecstatic pneumatic activity to become structures with a more hierarchical and regularised leadership and mode of operation.

In this vein, Polycarp presents instructions pertaining to a two-tiered pattern of leadership focused on presbyters and deacons. The roles and duties of these two offices are not described in detail. However, there is obvious overlap, and members of both groups are called upon to exemplify correct ethical behaviour in accordance with group norms. Notably, there is marked difference from the threefold pattern of ecclesial leadership presented in the writings of Ignatius with a single bishop being the leader of the council of presbyters and the deacons in each locale.<sup>64</sup> Polycarp seeks to produce correct ethical behaviour in the recipients of the letter which is in accord with his understanding of the concept of 'righteousness'. In part, this ethical instruction has arisen due to the financial failings of Valens, one of the communities presbyters who because of his actions had left or been removed from his leadership role. Polycarp also uses eschatological perspectives to motivate community members. This is not solely a negative motivation, although the coming judgment is mentioned on more than one occasion. Instead, Polycarp reminds the Philippians of their future role in the eschatological kingdom. He informs the Philippians that they will judge the world (Pol. *Phil.* 11.2), and also that they will reign together with Christ in his coming kingdom (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2b). Therefore, the implication is that the ethical standards that are required of group members should align with their future status in the coming reign of Christ.

Polycarp also makes a theological contribution in terms of his understanding of the place of early Christian martyrs within the larger structure of the church. His desire to know more about the fate of such individuals builds upon a practice of letter exchange and a communication structure that created a network of believing communities. Such a network was structurally important for the nascent Christian movement in the second century, since it facilitated a hierarchical form of leadership that would in time transcend individual communities. Polycarp commends respect for those who died for their faith, since they are seen as imitating the sufferings of Christ. As part of this perspective it is possible to view the beginning of the practice of the veneration of Christian martyrs – although the benefits and the problems that such a practice would bring could not be anticipated during the first quarter of the second century.

In fairness, to label Polycarp as a theologian would in all probability be an overblown claim. However, to view him as an influential Christian leader with genuine pastoral concerns for the Philippian community is certainly correct. Yet, those pastoral concerns were not divorced from a strong desire to instil correct teaching related to areas that are correctly described as being theological. For Polycarp, in line with his contemporaries, theological reflection does not appear to have functioned as an intellectual abstraction. Rather, correct theological thinking and practice had to be instantiated within the behaviours of individual believers, and equally importantly in the relationships that existed in the setting of early Christian communities. In this way,

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<sup>62</sup> Aligned with this Hartog comments that '[a]ctivities that are pneumatological elsewhere have not been attributed to the Holy Spirit in Pol. *Phil.*' Hartog (ed.), *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 69.

<sup>63</sup> Most famously, see Maximilian Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.R. Anderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1947) see section V. 'The Routinization of Charismatic', 358-373.

<sup>64</sup> In this regard see Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 103-125.

Polycarp is perhaps best understood as an ecclesial theologian, or as a practice-based Christian thinker. His reflections on a range of theological topics were not pursued to the point of intellectual completeness and finality, but only so far as was necessary to instil 'righteousness' as a standard of ethical behaviour as a preparation for believing communities to become the eschatological participants in the coming kingdom of God and of Christ.

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