

He Followed in the Footsteps of an Apostle

*It was a time of transition. The Church of God had lost its apostle.
Tribulation lay ahead in the world. But a faithful leader stepped into the gap.*

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Satan the devil would like nothing more than to destroy God's one faithful Church!

He can never do that, of course. Jesus said the gates of hell would never prevail against the Church (Matt. 16:18).

Throughout the nearly 2000-year history of the New Testament Church of God, God has provided leadership for whatever job was to be done at the time. An illumination and encouraging example occurred when power was transferred from the first apostles, the original human leaders of the Church, to their successors.

The last original apostle

The apostle John had been taught personally by Jesus Christ and had been one of Jesus' closest human friends. He also lived the longest of Jesus' original 12 disciples and, according to tradition, was the only one to die of natural causes.

After the deaths of the other early leaders, including Peter and Paul, John became the human leader, under Christ, of God's Church. During the latter part of the first century, the Church among the Greeks was headquartered at Ephesus, in Asia Minor.

All was not well. False teachers had risen; even the ancient Babylonian Mystery religion had adopted Christ's name in pursuit of followers. Heresies had crept into the true Church itself; John expended much effort in his later years fighting against the pollution of the original faith.

But there was more. At the end of the first century, God revealed to John a basic truth that every one of the other original apostles, apparently, died without realizing: The return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth were not to occur immediately.

Not until God inspired John to write the book of Revelation did God clearly show that his master plan for humanity stretched 7,000 years, analogous to the seven days of creation. The time of Christ's reign on earth before the second resurrection was finally revealed to be a millennium, or 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4). Now John saw that there was much more work left to do than

anyone had previously thought. The Church had to continue on through seven definite time periods or eras, as revealed in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation.

John himself, regardless of the mounting deceptions around, continued to teach the way of life Jesus had communicated to him, even while the Ephesian era of God's Church – the first of seven historical eras – grew tired of hearing and lost its first love (Revelation 2:4).

Tradition says that John, aged and infirm, had to be carried into Church services, and that he always gave the same message: "Little children, love one another." His listeners grew tired of hearing the same thing over and over and asked why he always delivered the same sermon. John replied, "Because if you do this, it is enough."

In other words, if they expressed true love, which means obeying God's commandments (1 John 5:3), they would be fulfilling their Christian calling.

John's successor

The apostle John died about A.D. 100. What was to happen to the Church, facing persecution from without and possible erosion of the true faith from within?

The Church could not die out – Christ said so (Matt. 16:18)! So God raised up another leader, Polycarp, a disciple of John and the bishop of God's Church at Smyrna, another city in Asia Minor. John "passed the baton" on to Polycarp.

This was a direct fulfillment of Christ's prophecy to John in Revelation 2:8-11. After the Ephesian era of God's Church would come Smyrna.

Polycarp had been personally taught by the apostle John, who had been personally taught by Jesus Christ, and he continued in the footsteps of his predecessor.

Still extant today is an epistle Polycarp wrote to the church at Philippi. Polycarp encouraged the Philippians to "gird up your loins and serve God in fear and truth, forsaking the vain and empty talking and the error of the many" (§2). Polycarp continued to teach the promise of the resurrection from the dead (§2), the truth about the coming world tomorrow under Christ (§5), the fact that the saints will judge the world (§11) and government in God's Church (§6).

Polycarp quoted heavily from John, mentioning "love toward God and Christ and toward our neighbor. For if any man be occupied with these, he hath fulfilled the commandment of righteousness; for he that hath love is far from sin" (§3).

That's exactly what John taught right until the end of his life! Remember? John said: "Little children...love one another" (1 John 3:18; John 13:34).

Speaking of Jesus Christ, Polycarp wrote: "Let us therefore become imitators of His endurance; and if we should suffer for His name's sake, let us glorify Him. For He gave this example to us

in His own person, and we believed this” (§8). Polycarp may well have foreseen what his own future would hold.

Christ’s teaching defended

Polycarp taught the same message he had been taught. But by the middle of the second century, the bishop at Rome, to accommodate pagan converts, accepted Sunday as a day of worship, instead of God’s true seventh-day Sabbath. He taught – incorrectly – that Christ was resurrected from the dead on Sunday morning and thus justified calling Sunday “the Lord’s Day.”

The truth is that Jesus Christ was not resurrected on Sunday morning and that the Bible offers absolutely no justification for changing God’s original Sabbath. We can prove it! Check our publications on the subject on our website, www.thebiblefund.org.

The bishop at Rome also adopted the custom of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on the Sunday after God’s Passover. Polycarp and most of the churches in Asia Minor continued to observe God’s Passover on the 14th of Nisan (Abib) on God’s sacred calendar, just as Christ and the apostles had done. The Passover is today a memorial of Jesus’ death. This struggle over Passover came to be called the Quartodeciman Controversy.

In A.D. 154 Polycarp, now in his 80s, traveled to Rome to discuss this question with Anicetus, bishop at Rome. Little is known of this meeting except that neither man was able to persuade the other. So the Roman church firmly established Easter, while the churches of God in Asia Minor, under Polycarp, continued to observe the Passover. But Polycarp, according to early church historians, “caused many to turn away from the...heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles.” So he had!

The death of Polycarp

Polycarp, John’s student, continued to follow the apostles’ teachings and pass them on faithfully to others. He provided spiritual leadership.

Historians record an occasion when Polycarp met Marcion, a famous heretic. Marcion challenged Polycarp, “Recognize us, Polycarp.” Many today, unwilling to obey Jesus Christ, nevertheless want to be recognized as true followers of His. Polycarp replied, “Yes, indeed I recognize the firstborn of Satan.”

One cold night in February, about A.D. 156, at a retreat outside Smyrna, Roman soldiers arrested Polycarp. Brought before the magistrates, Polycarp was ordered to renounce Jesus Christ and threatened with death. Polycarp answered: “Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

A mob stabbed Polycarp and burned him at the stake, thus ending the life of one of a long succession of God-inspired human heads in the history of God’s true Church. God had provided

an unbroken chain from Jesus Christ to John to Polycarp. Polycarp passed the baton on to a student named Polycrates in Asia Minor.

That same God still rules His Church today, inspiring His servants in the conduct of God's great end-time Work, directing in all matters of government and choosing whom he will have lead His people.

God's Church and God's government can never be destroyed! That Church – made immortal sons of God – will soon begin to administer God's great government over this entire world in the Kingdom of God!