

Early Church Fathers: Ignatius

This is the fourth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the influential writers of the pre-Nicene period of the church (before 325 A.D.). Previous installments were an Introduction (*ET&N* 30), Clement of Rome (70), and Justin Martyr (73). The purpose of the series is to examine the writings of these individuals to better understand the context of the early church and determine what lessons they hold for today's Christian. Additional installments of this series will include Polycarp, Tertullian, Marcion, Irenæus, Clement of Alexandria, Origin, Cyprian, Novatian, and others.

Then

As with many early church leaders and particularly martyred church leaders, legends abound about Ignatius of Antioch (also known as Theophorus). All that is really known about him comes from his own letters, written to churches as he was transported, under heavy guard, to Rome for execution. Among the legends is the suggestion that Ignatius was the child of Mark 9:36, whom Jesus put before the disciples as an object lesson on humility. Supposedly, this event was the source of his nickname "Theophorus," meaning *one carried by God*. This is an obvious later invention since even early church historian Eusebius Pamphili, no stranger to hyperbole, failed to mention this legend. Nevertheless, putting Ignatius in the company of Jesus Himself is a clear indication of the respect he enjoyed in the early church. Despite this, I am personally no fan of Ignatius, primarily because of his unbiblical separation of the presbytery and the episcopate and, to a lesser degree, his obsession with martyrdom. The Roman Catholic Church, not surprisingly, cites the letters of Ignatius, written early in the second century, as evidence of the validity of its structured hierarchy. I view it instead of evidence of how quickly the church started going astray after the death of the apostles. That is not to say that the writings of Ignatius have no lasting value, and I'll discuss both his orthodox and heretical (in the sense of differing from apostolic teaching) here.

From an historical perspective, all we really know about Ignatius is that he was a bishop (presbyter, pastor) of the church at Antioch (see *ET&N* 40), the great missionary church that commissioned Paul's journeys. In Catholic history, he is credited as the second bishop after Peter, succeeding Evodius (Eusebius III.22). The reason for his arrest and transport is not known, although *The Martyrdom of Ignatius*, considered authentic by some scholars, provides details. Eusebius reports that Ignatius and his military guard stopped in Smyrna, where he wrote letters to the churches in Ephesus (see *ET&N* 28), Magnesia, and Tralles. Later, during a brief stopover in Troas, he wrote additional letters to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, as well as a personal letter to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (and subject of the next installment in the *ET&N* Early Fathers series). Before proceeding to a discussion of these letters, I'll give a summary of the information in the *Martyrdom of Ignatius*. Some scholars have noted that this harmonizes with Eusebius' account of Ignatius, but everything Eusebius reports can be gleaned from Ignatius' letters, so it appears that he was not familiar with the *Martyrdom*. In their 1867 translation of *The Martyrdom of Ignatius*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson argue for the authenticity of the account, but I find that highly doubtful for two main reasons.

(1) The account claims that the events occurred "in the ninth year of (Trajan's) reign" (Chap II), but this would place it in the year 106 or 107, at which time Trajan had returned to Rome after his Dacian campaign across the Danube. His eastern campaigns did not occur until 113.

(2) The work includes a direct examination of Ignatius by Trajan, who was supposedly staying in Antioch. When Ignatius mentions Jesus Christ, Trajan asks, "Do you mean Him who was crucified under Pontius Pilate?" Early in the second century, Christianity was still a very small movement, and it seems very unlikely that a Roman Emperor would have any knowledge of it or even an obscure governor who served eighty years earlier.

On the other hand, it is clear that whoever wrote *The Martyrdom of Ignatius* was aware of the basic events that had occurred. Basing a verdict of authenticity on agreement with Eusebius is dubious because it may simply indicate that both Eusebius and the writers of *The Martyrdom of Ignatius* had the same oral sources.

The Martyrdom of Ignatius

The writers claim to have been "eye-witnesses" of the events described (chapter VII), so the best presumed candidates are Philo, a deacon from Tarsus; Rhaius Agathopus, a Syrian; and Crocus, an Ephesian whom Ignatius describes as "one dearly beloved by me," all of which accompanied Ignatius at some point during his transport to

Rome (*Smyrneans X*, *Philadelphians XI*, *Romans X*, respectively). The authors first explain Ignatius' desire for martyrdom, reporting that he felt deficient as a Christian, having "not yet attained to a true love to Christ, nor reached the perfect rank of a disciple." "The confession which is made by martyrdom," they continue, "would bring him into a yet more intimate relation to the Lord." This jibes with Ignatius' own comments and seems to me a somewhat inappropriate motivation for martyrdom because it is ultimately selfish. Submitting to and courageously facing death for one's faith is one thing, seeking it in order to gain a personal advantage is quite another. Even Jesus did not seek his death (see Matthew 26:39) but rather submitted to it as the will of the Father.



Ignatius' journey to Rome

The authors claim that Ignatius' arrest is the product of Trajan's desire to stamp about Christianity, but there is no historical evidence of such an edict by Trajan and it seems at odds with the emperor's own instructions to Pliny the Younger (see [ET&N 78](#)) that (Christians) "are not to be sought out." But the authors claim it was "in accordance with (Ignatius') own desire" that he be brought before Trajan, and a short examination ensues. "Who are you, wicked wretch," Trajan asks, "that defies my commands and gets others to do the same?" Ignatius takes exception to being called wicked, but from Trajan's perspective the point is well-taken. This man is putting the lives of others in peril. After Ignatius testifies to the uniqueness of the Father and the saving power of Christ Jesus, Trajan pronounces his sentence: "We command that Ignatius, who affirms that he carries about with him Him that was crucified, be bound by soldiers, and carried to the great Rome, there to be devoured by beasts, for the gratification of the people." Ignatius joyously thanks the emperor for this "honour" (Chapter II).

It is uncertain just what Trajan convicted Ignatius of, but his wording, given the fact that he could not possibly understand the indwelling of Jesus through the Spirit, conveys distaste for a man who admits carrying around a dead man, and he may suspect some form of necrophilia. I have discussed the false charges of incest,

cannibalism, and atheism often levied against Christians in previous editions of *ET&N*, and I think some early Christians contributed to the misconceptions through ambiguous "church-speak." Just as today's seekers find distinctive church vocabulary both off-putting and somewhat mysterious, it shouldn't be surprisingly that ancient pagans would feel the same way. There is no reason for such enigmas - God's message and Christ's purpose are clearly explained and described and should be shared as such. That does not mean that clarity alone will convince an unbeliever, but it is virtually certain that obtuse ambiguity won't.

The Martyrdom of Ignatius then continues to describe how Ignatius embarks from Seleucia (the port of Antioch, where Paul and Silas embarked on the first Gentile mission (see Acts 13:4) and eventually ("after a great deal of suffering") arrives at Smyrna on the western coast of Asia (now Turkey). In this context (chapter III), the writers describe Ignatius, as well as his friend Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna) as a "disciple of St. John the Apostle." If this is a translation of the precise language of the original, it indicates a much later composition since no one at that time referred to disciples of Christ as St. this or St. that! "Saint" (Greek, **hagios**, also translated *holy*) always refers to a group of Christians and is therefore synonymous with the church (**ekklesia**).



Byzantine Icon of Ignatius

In addition, the suggestion that Ignatius was a student of John is questionable since, again, Eusebius fails to mention this important distinction in his discussion of Ignatius. Apostolic succession quickly became a key test of orthodoxy in the early church. Linking documents and teaching to the apostles had become criteria for canonicity even before Eusebius' time. If Eusebius knew that Ignatius was a student of an apostle, he certainly would have mentioned it prominently. The inclusion of this claim by the authors of *The Martyrdom of Ignatius* therefore appears to be a later one designed to lend greater authority to Ignatius' letters, just as many Gnostic writers did in claiming apostolic authorship of their texts.

In reality, how much difference does it make if Ignatius were, in fact, a student of John? For the Roman Catholic Church, where church tradition and teaching carries equal weight to Scripture, it is vital because it extends the presumed inerrancy of apostolic teaching to their successors. There is, in Simon the magician, at least one clear biblical example of errancy among those who were direct students of the apostles (see Acts 8:9-24).

The Martyrdom of Ignatius then tells of Ignatius' journey on from Smyrna (after taking time to write to the church in Rome, asking them not to interfere with his execution), landing at Troas then across the Aegean to Neapolis. Crossing Macedonia on foot, he again boards ship and sails around the boot of Italy. Ignatius had hoped to follow in Paul's footsteps and land at Puteoli, but a storm pushes the ship on to Ostia, where Ignatius disembarks and walks the final few miles to the imperial capital. He is immediately thrown to wild beasts in the amphitheater, and the book closes with the testimony of multiple visions of a resurrected Ignatius, each apparently different.

The Letters of Ignatius

[Note: quotes from the letters of Ignatius are from "The Letters of Ignatius" in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Michael W. Holmes (ed), Baker Books, 1999.]

The seven genuine letters of Ignatius (there are numerous forgeries to additional cities, as well as expanded versions of the genuine letters) can be considered in four groups:

- I. Letters to Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles written from Smyrna.
- II. The letter to the church in Rome, also written from Smyrna but with a different emphasis.
- III. Letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia written from Troas.
- IV. A personal letter written to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, also from Troas.

To Asian churches from Smyrna

Each of these three letters (Ephesians, Magnesians, and Trallians) extol the virtues of their respective bishops - Onesimus, Damas, and Polybius - each of which, sometimes accompanied by presbyters and deacons, traveled to Smyrna to greet Ignatius. Word of Ignatius' arrest and armed transport was obviously being carried ahead of him, but it is unclear why local church leaders would make sometimes arduous trips to see him. Smyrna lies about forty miles north of Ephesus - a not insignificant distance in those days. No ancient source provides any indication of Ignatius' renown prior to this "death march." Perhaps his status is explained by his friendship with Polycarp who, as a leader of the church of Smyrna, may have had considerable influence in the region. Perhaps they merely wanted to pay their final respects to a fellow-leader who was facing the ultimate trial of faith. Or perhaps, more cynically, all of these leaders took the opportunity to solidify the power they had gained that was not biblically theirs.

These letters were written less than twenty years after John's death and the "official" end of the apostolic period, but John had outlived his colleagues by as much as four decades. John had taken up residence in Ephesus shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., accompanied, according to some traditions by Mary, the mother of Jesus. He formed a close-knit community of the slopes of Mount Koressos, where a house with a first century foundation is claimed to be that of Mary.



The House of the Virgin Mary on Mount Koressos outside Ephesus, a papally-sanctioned pilgrimage site. Photo by Peter Riggs, www.ptr.co.nz

Despite being well into his nineties following his return from exile on the island of Patmos, John traveled around the area, and his influence must have extended to the churches in nearby Magnesia and Tralles. John also wrote extensively, penning his Gospel, Revelation, and three letters. No where in any of these is there any suggestion of a mandate, or even approval, of a single bishop. In fact, he writes rather disapprovingly of one church leader who seems to be acting presumptuously (see 3 John 1:9-10).

Throughout these three letters, Ignatius writes of the bishop (singular), the presbytery, and the deacons, insisting that they be respected and obeyed. He equates the bishop to "the Lord himself" (L.Eph 6:1; L.Mag 6:1; L.Tra 2:1); the presbyter to "the council of the apostles" (L.Mag 6:1; L.Tra 2:2); and the deacons to servants of Christ himself (L.Mag 6:1) or to the "mysteries of Jesus Christ" (L.Tra

2:3). He commands the church "to act in harmony with the mind of the bishop" (L.Eph 4:1), and "not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters" (L.Mag 7:1; cf L.Tra 2:2). He seems to ascribe greater power to the prayer of a bishop (L.Eph 5:2), and even suggests the bishop is to be feared (L.Eph 6:1). To his credit, Ignatius does not call for such obedience to himself, but then he is not the bishop of these cities. Nevertheless, Ignatius projects a consistently humble attitude with such statements as "I am only beginning to be a disciple" (L.Eph 3:1); "I do not know whether I am worthy" (L.Tra 4:2).

This notion that Christians are "not to do anything without the bishop (and the presbyters) is particularly odious. "Without these (bishop, presbyters, deacons)," he writes. "No group can be called a church" (L.Tra 3:1). "Do not attempt to convince yourselves," he tells the Magnesians, "that anything done apart from (the leaders) is right..." (7:1). One of the most profound truths about the church was stated clearly by Jesus: "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them*" (Matthew 18:20). The position stated by Ignatius and later adopted universally by the Roman Catholic Church presumptuously seeks to supersede the words of our Lord. If Jesus is among any two or three gathered in His name, how can anyone suggest that it takes a bishop to have a legitimate church? It is ironic that Ignatius slams those who practice elements of Judaism ("strange doctrines and antiquated myths", L.Mag 8:1) within Christianity, while he advocates a Judaistic hierarchical and intermediary system! He insists that Christians "be firmly grounded in the precepts of the Lord and the apostles" (L.Mag 13:1), while he himself presumes to make void those very precepts with his insistence that "whoever does anything without bishop and presbytery and deacons does not have a clean conscience" (L.Tra 7:2).

That Ignatius is able to name bishops (Onesimus, Damas, Polybius), presbyters (Euplus, Fronto, Bassus, Apollonius) and deacons (Burrhus, Zotion) from these cities proves that he did not invent the hierarchical system, but his letters form the basis for the all-too-human justification for these traditions that effectively nullify the word of God. Later, Cyprian (a subject of a later installment in this series) would further extend the argument - error compounding error.

Other comments in these three letters indicate that there are potential problems in each city: Ephesus has been visited by "certain people...with evil doctrine" (9:1); Magnesia has Christian practicing elements of Judaism (about which Ignatius says, "It is utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism", 10:3); there are some in Magnesia who apparently question Damas' authority because of his youth (3:1); and there are hints of docetism in Tralles (10:1). Ignatius expresses confidence that, by following their respective bishops, they will weather these storms.

Noteworthy thoughts in these letters include a plea for mankind and what appears to be an early creed:

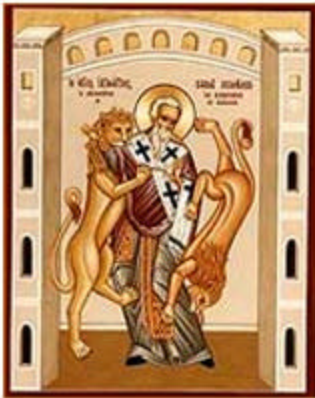
Pray continually for the rest of mankind as well, that they may find God, for there is in them hope for repentance. Therefore allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. In response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to their slander, offer prayers; in response to their errors, be 'steadfast in the faith' (see Colossians 1:23); in response to their cruelty, be gentle..." (L.Eph 10:1-2)

Be deaf, therefore, whenever anyone speaks to you apart from

Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David, who was the son of Mary, who really was born, who both ate and drank; who was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who really was crucified and died while those in heaven and on earth and under the earth looked on; who, moreover, really was raised from the dead when his Father raised him up - his Father, that is - in the same way will likewise also raise us up in Christ Jesus who believe in him, apart from whom we have no true life (L.Tra 9:1-2)

To the Church in Rome

While Ignatius was in Smyrna, word reached him that the church in Rome intended to do something to prevent his execution. Deeply distressed, he writes a desperate plea virtually demanding that they not interfere even, he writes, "if upon my arrival I myself should appeal do you..." (7:2). While I am not entirely comfortable excoriating a "saint," I find Ignatius' Roman letter filled with his selfish obsession. Never once does he express the hope that by his death some may be brought to Christ. Never once does he believe his death might encourage others to remain firm in their faith. Instead, there is a litany of self-indulgent protests.



Icon depicting Ignatius' death

"I am afraid of your love," he writes. "In that it may do me wrong." It appears that Ignatius is familiar with 1 Corinthians, for on at least five occasions he either quotes it, alludes to it, or paraphrases it, but he appears to have missed 1 Corinthians 13 (see [ET&N 77](#)), where Paul provides his eloquent ode to agape love. One of the greatest expressions of one's love for others is to allow them to express their love. This, Ignatius denies to the Roman church. Instead, he doggedly insists on his own way (see 1 Corinthians 13:5), even telling the Romans that through any interference, "you will have hated me" (8:3). If the Romans intervene, he "will never again have an opportunity...to reach God" (2:1). He wants to prove that he is a Christian (3:2). He "no longer want(s) to live according to human standards" (8:1). He wants "to be

someone" (9:2). It may be that Ignatius fears his own human weaknesses and sees martyrdom as the only way to escape temptation for he writes, "The ruler of this age wants to take me captive and corrupt my godly intentions" (7:1).

In this letter, Ignatius also gives us a glimpse into what may be occurring in the troubled Syrian church he has left behind when he reveals it "has God for its shepherd in my place. Jesus Christ alone will be its bishop..." (9:1). In other words, they are experiencing a crisis in leadership. One of the best indications of effective leadership comes when a group loses its leader. A leader who has effectively trained his or her people will continue to function despite his or her absence. It will fall back on the processes, procedures, and culture the leader has created. Furthermore, a good leader will typically train up an assistant or successor, who can step in and maintain group momentum. It appears that Ignatius has failed because none of this has happened, and the church has apparently dissolved into divisions.

To churches through which he passed

When Ignatius and his Roman guard reach Troas, he writes three additional letters, the first two to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, through which he has recently passed. Somewhere between Smyrna and Troas, he has received word that

the situation back in Syria has improved. In answer to their prayers, he tells both churches (L.Phi 10:1; L.Smy 11:1), "the church at Antioch in Syria is at peace." If Ignatius' passion for authoritarian leadership was motivated by his own failings in Antioch, one might expect this news to tone him down, but he does precisely the opposite.

In what may be an obtuse allusion to Paul, he writes that there is "one Eucharist...one cup...one altar, just as there is one bishop..." (L.Phi 4:1, cf Ephesians 4:5). But Paul's instruction to the Ephesians (and in 1 Corinthians 12) contradicts Ignatius' insistence on authoritarian leadership, for the apostle insists that all members of the body have equal importance. Ignatius thoroughly usurps this ecclesiastical equality when he says "Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid" (L.Smy 8:1) and "It is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop" (L.Smy 8:2). Completing this extreme (and unbiblical) line of thought, he adds, "the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil" (L.Smy 9:1)!

Ignatius instructs both churches to appoint an "ambassador" to travel to Antioch to "congratulate them..." (L.Phi 10:1; L.Smy 11:2) "because...their corporate life has been restored to its proper state" (L.Smy 11:2). Someone apparently emerged from the chaos to assume leadership of the Antioch church. Perhaps Ignatius merely hopes the churches will rejoice in Antioch's restoration, but if so, wouldn't a letter do? Why send officially-appointed representatives from numerous churches? Could it be that Ignatius wants to see the authoritative position of the new Antioch leader solidified by similar leaders throughout Asia Minor? Admittedly, I may be detecting more conspiratorial intentions than exist, but the pieces seem to fit together.

As in the letters to the three Ephesian-area churches, Ignatius again addresses some specific issues that have arisen in Philadelphia and Smyrna. One particularly interesting controversy relates to Luke's comment about the nobility of the Bereans. Spirited away from Thessalonica by Christians who believe they are in danger from angry Jews, Paul and Silas go to Berea and preach in the synagogue there. "*Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica,*" Luke writes. "*They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so*" (Acts 17:11). But Ignatius denigrates those in Philadelphia who do essentially the same thing. He writes, "I heard some people say, 'If I do not find it in the archives [i.e., the Old Testament], I do not believe it in the gospel.' And when I said to them, 'It is written,' they answered me, 'That is precisely the question'" (L.Phi 8:2). Whereas Luke refers to such people as "more noble," Ignatius accuses them of a "spirit of contentiousness," contending that "the 'archives' are Jesus Christ, the inviolable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith which comes through him..." (8:3). While certainly endorsing Ignatius' praise of the value of the death, burial, and resurrection and admitting that some Old Testament passages are difficult to understand in a Christian context, it seems that Ignatius is insisting that everyone accept what he or other bishops say without question. In so doing, he effectively nullifies a major portion of God's Word and may lack faith in its consistency. What does Ignatius fear in allowing or even encouraging people to confirm his teaching?

In Smyrna, Ignatius apparently found evidence of more docetic, or perhaps even emergent Gnostic, teachers. Some "wild beasts in human flesh" (4:1) are denying that Jesus rose in bodily form. "Anyone who does not acknowledge (that Jesus was 'clothed in flesh') denies him and is clothed in a corpse" (5:2), Ignatius counters. It appears that at least one of these teachers was someone in a position of authority and Ignatius reveals the first hint of the disagreements that still surround the nature

of the bread and wine in the Communion. Ignatius seems to be a confirmed transubstantiationist, belittling his opponents by observing that "they abstain from the Eucharist...because they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ" (6:2). To me, the arguments over the bread and the wine obscure the primary purpose of Communion as a unifying event during which Christians focus on the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps, the "heretics" to whom Ignatius refers only refused to participate in HIS Eucharist but conducted one in accordance with their beliefs. Of course, to Ignatius, this would be no Eucharist at all because it would be held apart from the bishop.

The personal letter to Polycarp

In this letter, Ignatius tells his friend Polycarp that he had hoped to write to other churches, but since he is about to sail from Troas to Neapolis, he asks Polycarp to take up the task. We have only one extant letter from Polycarp - to the church in Philippi in which he asks for information about Ignatius - so we have no evidence that Polycarp fulfilled Ignatius' request. Early on, Ignatius repeats his now-worn appeal to authoritarianism, telling Polycarp to "Stand firm" and "Let nothing be done without your consent" (4:1).

The bulk of Ignatius' letter, however, consists of exhortations that carry echoes of canonical works. He urges Polycarp to "press on in your race" (1:2, cf 1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7; Hebrews 12:1); be devoted to unceasing prayers (2:3, cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17); bear hardship "as a perfect athlete" (1:3, cf 1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 2:5); attend to widows (4:1, cf 1 Timothy 5:3; James 1:27); "flee from wicked practices" (5:1, cf 1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22); command men to "love their wives, as the Lord loves the church" (5:1, cf Ephesians 5:25), and serve Christ "from whom you receive your wages...as a soldier" (6:2, cf 1 Corinthians 9:7; 2 Timothy 2:4). In perhaps his most eloquent phrase, reminiscent of Paul's "armor of God" passage in Ephesians 6, he tells Polycarp, "Let your baptism serve as a shield, faith as a helmet, love as a spear, endurance as armor" (6:2).

Parenthetically, in his closing comments, Ignatius greets "Attalus, my dear friend." Could this Attalus, apparently in Smyrna at this time, be the Attalus who was executed in Lyons in 177? The Lyons Attalus is said to be a native of Pergamum, an Asian city between Smyrna and Troas. The date of Ignatius' letters is generally considered to be 106-117, although some scholars have enlarged the possible time frame to as late as 138 (during Hadrian's reign). The earliest date would make Attalus (if the two are the same person) a very old man, but later dates make it plausible, particularly since Attalus is described in the letter of the Gaul churches to Asia and Phrygia as having "always been a pillar and foundation" of the Pergamum church.

Now

Radical hierarchicalism dominates Ignatius' letters, and we may rightfully ask how he could both call for apostolic truth and violate it so blatantly, particularly if he really was a student of John. Paul last left Antioch about fifty years before Ignatius was escorted away in chains, and that is more than enough time for well-meaning people to compromise lofty ideals. After all, in even less time, American patriots betrayed their foundational "all men are created equal" ideal by bowing to political expediency in failing to immediately eradicate slavery from the new nation. This blight, culminating in the disastrous Missouri Compromise, which might better be

labeled the "Missouri Appeasement," succeeded about as well as most appeasements to evil do.

Furthermore, we might also ask if Ignatius' protests about obeying bishops had more to do with him than he writes. Also present in each of these letters is an appeal for the churches to pray for the church in Syria, Ignatius' territory. Evidently, there were problems, and when you combine that fact with Ignatius' stated self-doubts and self-effacement, one wonders if his desire for martyrdom represents a misguided attempt to prove his own worthiness for respect and obedience from his Antioch congregation. I suspect Ignatius, having encountered significant challenges to his own leadership in Antioch, was experiencing a bit of a personal crisis. For whatever reason, he lacked the God-given authority to effectively lead the church and therefore sought to prove his worthiness through martyrdom. Gaining an increased degree of notoriety as he was dragged across Asia Minor, he seized the opportunity to argue vehemently for the authority he lacked.

Authoritarian leadership may work for a time, and it may be appropriate in some worldly settings, but it is anathema to the church, where the model of pastoral leadership is commanded. In the church, leaders are not made by their insistence nor that of others; they are made by a record of exemplary service, effective teaching and merciful shepherding of others. I'm sure Ignatius must have exhibited at least some of these characteristics, but in insufficient quantity. As a result, his own insecurities seem to have led him to espouse a thoroughly unbiblical leadership structure that continues to plague the church (and not just the Roman Catholic Church). While he appeals to apostolic authority, he appears to hold the position that apostolic authority is hereditary - passed to the clergy down through the generations. Ignatius does not advance a clergy-laity distinction, but his letters laid the groundwork others would seize to make later human traditions equivalent to divine decree.

It should neither surprise us nor overly discourage us to recognize that even very early church leaders made serious mistakes. If religious leaders err today, why would we believe it would be otherwise then? The problem, of course, is a general tendency to believe that those chronologically closest to the events of the New Testament must necessarily be closer to the truth, but this is a fallacy. Evidence of Judaizing legalism, simony (paying for church offices), and presumptuous authoritarianism exist in the New Testament itself. There is no reason to think, given that it is populated by humans, that the church would be more pure after the apostolic age than it was during it.

A more profound question, however - one recently asked of me by a close friend - is why God allowed a rigid hierarchical structure to dominate the church, mirroring that of the Roman Empire around it, for centuries. I don't have a definitive answer to that, but I suspect that God, in His wisdom, foreknew that a period of intense barbarism was approaching, when only a highly structured church could preserve His authentic message. Just as the writer of the [Letter to Diognetus](#) suggested that God allowed a "season of unrighteousness" before ushering in the gospel of Christ Jesus, so too perhaps God allowed a season of hierarchy. Happily, we may be in the latter stages of that season, as groups of people form more genuinely "first century" Christian communities dedicated to the kind of selfless service and equality Jesus and his immediate disciples demonstrated. Such groups most surely need inspired leadership, but Ignatian authoritarianism may someday be relegated to the pages of Christian history. I pray for that day!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Paul in the School of Hillel (August 8)

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