



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Ignatius of Antioch, c.35 – 107 A.D.

The Life of Ignatius

- Born shortly after the earthly life of Jesus, he became Bishop of Antioch in Syria, a leading Church where, according to Acts, the disciples of Jesus were first called “Christians” (11:26).
- According to Eusebius, Ignatius succeeded Evodius as Bishop of Antioch, who was successor to Peter.
- Ignatius comes to the pages of history because he was arrested in Antioch and condemned to death in the Coliseum of Rome. On his journey to his martyrdom in Rome, he was able to stop in a number of towns in Asia Minor where local Christians sent delegates to meet with him, first in Smyrna and then again in Troas. He was able to write letters to a number of these local Churches as well as to a well known early Bishop and friend, Polycarp of Smyrna. His seven letters survive and are his legacy to the Church (Polycarp is the one who collected and preserved them for posterity).
- Polycarp was a direct disciple of John (the Apostle), and Ignatius himself may have been as well.
- Ignatius’ letters are some of the earliest writings we have of the first Christians outside of the New Testament. They are also unique in that they are primarily personal, rather than doctrinal in nature. Although Ignatius certainly addresses key doctrinal heresies the church was facing, these are very much “the letters of a prisoner on his way to martyrdom” (Richardson, 74).

The Times of Ignatius

The State of the Empire

- Christianity’s relationship to the Roman government was a sticky one. Although initially viewed as a (heretical) sect of Judaism, which itself was a legalized if troublesome religion permitted by the state, within a few decades of the Resurrection became seen as a distinct religion.
- The burning of Rome under Nero in 64 AD was a watershed moment in Christianity’s relationship with the Imperial state. Nero blamed Christians for the catastrophic fire which destroyed ten of the fourteen sections of Rome and burned for ten days. While the persecution under Nero, and later Domitian (r. 81-96 AD) were heinous, they were neither long lived nor empire-wide.
- Pliny the Elder, governor of Bythnia, and his correspondence with Emperor Trajan (c.111): Christians were not to be sought out (a waste of state resources) but should they be accused and brought before officials they should be forced to recant or be punished, usually suffering execution. This was the official ‘un-official’ position of the empire for the next 200 years.
- We do not know who accused Ignatius and had him arrested. Was it a pagan neighbor? A disgruntled parishioner? We also know from his letter to Polycarp that the whole Antioch Church suffered.

First Century Theological Issues

- Judaizers – to fully or truly be a Christian meant one must also take on the marks of the Mosaic Law, particularly circumcision, observation of dietary laws, and Sabbath keeping. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a stinging theological and pastoral addressing of the dangers of this group and its theology: namely that the very nature of the Gospel itself is at stake.
 - “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (2:16)
 - “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish! Having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (3:2-3).
- Gnosticism – Gnosticism was a very multifarious and non-monolithic ‘spirituality’ arising in nascent form in the late first century and becoming a more clearly identifiable ‘religion’ by the third century.

Rector's Forum @ St. George

It is deeply rooted in dualistic platonic ideas, wherein the spirit is good and the flesh is bad. Escape from the flesh is the goal which is accomplished through 'secret' wisdom. Obtaining this secret knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) enables one to leave the flesh and attain to the spirit.

- It gave rise to a number of heretical doctrines including docetism, which is the idea that Jesus only appeared to be human, but really was only a spirit being we could see. It is a denial of both the Incarnation and the bodily Resurrection, the two ultimate foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. Even in the NT itself there are issues with what scholars call 'proto-Gnosticism'; see for example 1 John 4:2-3.
- Ignatius' letters repeatedly argue against both these false teachings. While Ignatius is very clear on his denunciation of these doctrines, the bulk of his letters are not theological treatise.

Church Organization

- Bishops, presbyters, and deacons: *episcopoi, presbuteroi, diakonoi*
- Ignatius sheds light on the Early Church's ecclesiastical organization, which, while leading to what became the medieval Roman Church and has similarities, is not quite as hierarchically distinct.
- Each church was led by a college of elders (presbyters), which was overseen by a bishop (*episcopus* = overseer) and had a group of deacons who engaged in the physical needs of the community (see Acts 6:1-7). The importance of the bishop was their role in preserving apostolic teaching.
- The bishop functioned in many ways like a Rector does now, presiding over the Eucharist, and officiating at baptisms and weddings (see Smyrnaeans 8:1-2), but was also seen as having authority springing from the Apostles as guardians of the Apostle's teaching. As such the church is to honor and respect the bishop as they would Jesus Christ.

The Theology of Ignatius

- Seven Letters: Smyrnaeans, Polycarp, Ephesians, Magnesians, Philadelphians, Trallians, and Romans.
- Ignatius often refers to himself as *theophorus*, which means "god bearer". This name is likely not an official title, but may spring from his prophetic gifts in the Antioch Church.
- Ignatius' letters have three primary concerns or themes: 1) his impending martyrdom, 2) the unity of the church, especially regarding the respect of the presbyters and bishops, and 3) the dangers of heretical teaching, primarily Gnosticism/Docetism and the judaizers (see above)
- Ephesians – Ignatius mentions Onesimus, the bishop of the Ephesian church (1:3) – possibly the same Onesimus mentioned in Paul's letter to Philemon in the NT.
 - See 6:1 for Ignatius' view on bishops – respect the bishop as one would Jesus himself
 - Early creedal statement focuses on the incarnation (7:1-2)
 - He also focuses on the centrality of communal worship and the importance of Communion in the life of the church (20:1-2), the "medicine of immortality".
- Magnesians – Magnesia is a town about 15 miles from Ephesus, who also sent delegates to Smyrna
 - Ignatius remarks against Judaizing elements in the church is found in this letter (8:1-9:2). One of the key things to note is his reference to the change from keeping the Sabbath to worship on the Lord's Day (9:1)
 - Although he does not use the actual term "Trinity" he refers specifically to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (13:1)
- Smyrnaeans – this is the city where Polycarp was bishop, to whom Ignatius wrote a personal letter.
 - Ignatius comments at length about the problem of docetism/Gnosticism, and gives another of his unique and brief creedal statements (1:1-3:2).
- Trallians – Tralles is a town east of Magnesia, who sent their Bishop, Polybius, to Ignatius
 - Ignatius speaks very simply and plainly of his impending death at the closing, 13:3
 - He exhorts them to follow their bishop and presbyters and deacons (2:2-3). Here we also see an early argument for what later became the doctrine of the *esse* of the ordained orders.
 - Rejection of docetism and affirmation of the incarnation and crucifixion (9:1-10:2)