

Learning from the Church Fathers (5) Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-107)

Johan D. Tangelder

With the increasing influence and impact of materialism, consumerism and secularism in the post-modern era, many churches appear historically rootless and theologically rudderless. For example, America's largest non-denominational mega-church, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, with a seating capacity of well over 19,000 people at one time is led by Joel Osteen, televangelist and best-selling author. When his megachurch was opened in July 2005 Osteen said: "How do you like our new home? It looks pretty good, doesn't it? This is a dream come true." He later remarked to reporters that the facility is a "Texas-sized sanctuary." The inaugural publicity about the church had no references to God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or any of the other ways in which a congregation proclaims the Gospel. Critics of Osteen argue that he downplays the sinful nature of humanity and the need for repentance. Absent in his new church building are a cross and other traditional religious symbols. This is a far cry from the faith and practice of the early church. It was a church which was literally fighting for its very life. Heresies threatened its existence from within and persecution from governments from without. This was the situation faced by the church father Ignatius, a Gentile Christian of Syrian Antioch.

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius was concerned with establishing the faith and discipline of the Christian community in Antioch rather than with attempting to demonstrate the credibility of the Christian faith. Antioch was the capital city of the Roman province of Syria, a cosmopolitan place with broad ethnic and religious diversity- including an established and influential population of Jews. It was also the city where the apostle Paul had a ministry, which Barnabas shared. When Barnabas arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem and Paul from Tarsus, they came upon a vibrant and entirely new church experience. It was in this city that they found a mixed congregation of the circumcised and uncircumcised acknowledging and proclaiming Jesus as "the Christ". And in this city the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). In Antioch, Ignatius faced opposition on two fronts. One was a legalistic Jewish expression of the faith, the other was Docetism.

The Judaizers

As far as his time and theology are concerned, Ignatius was close to the apostles. To his dismay, he learned that even many Gentile believers in Antioch viewed Judaism as a venerable religion with fascinating rites and customs that ought to be maintained in the Christian church. Therefore, he was trying hard to establish Christian freedom at Antioch in the Pauline tradition. He reminded the church that the apostle Paul's injunction to Gentiles and Jews is to "welcome one another...as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom.15:7). But Judaizers tried to overturn the apostle's circumcision-free basis of divine righteousness and covenantal equality. In circa AD 49, the Judaizers even forced Peter, Barnabas, and the Jewish believers to separate from Paul and the Gentile believers (Gal. 2:11-15). In opposition to this Judaizing tendency, Ignatius urged: "Let us learn to live according to the principles of Christianity. For whosoever is called by any other name besides this is not of God. Lay aside,

therefore, the evil, the old, the sour leaven, and be changed into the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ...It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize." For Ignatius, to keep the law as the basis of salvation was to deny the gospel of grace and to reject the essence of Christianity. Ignatius believed that "if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace." This is exactly what the apostle Paul taught in Galatians (5:2-4).

Docetism

Docetism is a heretical doctrine which already emerged in the New Testament and became prominent in the second century. It is the belief that Jesus did not really come to us in true flesh, but only "seemed" to have come in a physical body. His flesh was actually a ghostly apparition. The apostle John opposed it when he wrote, "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 1:7; cf. 1 John 4:2) Ignatius called the docetists heretics who do not believe in the reality of Christ's sufferings. He argued that they undermined the entire logic of Christian corporate life. In view of the many Christians martyred for their faith, Ignatius noted that if Christ did not really suffer and die, we might as well say that the martyrs do not really suffer.

Bishops

Ignatius has the distinction of being the first advocate for a single bishop serving the entire church community in a city. But Ignatius' proposal has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic view of the role of a bishop. The early church had been seriously undermined by disunity and false doctrine. Single bishops were Ignatius' proposed solution.

Over and over, Ignatius celebrated church unity as a depiction of divine unity. The order of the earthly church mirrors the reflection of the heavenly kingdom. For Ignatius, the community submits to the bishop as its head, as the entire church submits to Christ, who in turn submits to the Father. Because of his office, the bishop presides over baptism, communion, the marriage ceremony and vouches for orthodoxy; this obligates him to a particularly exemplary life, though the valid exercise of his office is not contingent on it. The repeated exhortations to obedience in the church and respect for the bishop must be read in this light. The bishop is the figure who guarantees the harmony of the church by gathering it around him to celebrate Holy Communion. This harmony in Holy Communion is the assurance and expression of a true harmony with the will of God, or the "mind" of God as embodied in Jesus. Ignatius said of the bishop's function in the church: "It is not legitimate either to baptize or to hold an agape [communion] without the bishop...To join with the bishop is to join the church; to separate oneself from the bishop is to separate oneself not only from the church, but from God himself."

Martyrdom

Ignatius was taken in chains from Antioch through what is now southern Turkey. Rome was his final destination. Ignatius gave as reason for his persecution, "I came bound from Syria for the common name [of Christ] and hope."The seven surviving letters of Ignatius were

composed on his journey under guard to martyrdom in Rome (c. AD 107-110); they are addressed to some of the churches in Asia minor which had offered him welcome or support, to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, and to the Roman church. They constitute a unique witness to the personal spirituality of a Christian of the second or third generation. Naturally enough, martyrdom is the theme uppermost in his mind in much of his writings; he begs the Roman church not to interfere or intercede on his behalf so that he may become "imitator of the passion of my God." Ignatius indicates the typical yearning for martyrdom that characterized Christianity during the first two centuries. Polycarp, who was martyred at the age of 86 not long after the middle of the century, was his model on the specific ground that he did nothing to provoke the authorities but quietly waited for them to come and arrest him.

This longing for martyrdom was not merely based on an ascetical and ethical aspiration for perfection, but was rooted in the theology of the imitation of Christ. Ignatius shows us that passionate zeal for truth and desire for loving harmony are not mutually exclusive. Ignatius bolstered the true teaching of Christianity against his opponents by laying down his life as a witness for the name of Jesus. Irenaeus (c. AD 180) testified: "As a certain man of ours [Ignatius] said when he was condemned to the wild beasts because of his testimony with respect to God, "I am the wheat of Christ, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God." Ignatius suffered death by martyrdom during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98-117), as a result of a local persecution of Christians in Antioch. For the sake of the name of Christ, he was said to have been condemned to die in the circus and for this purpose was brought to Rome under guard.

Ignatius's life and martyrdom show that orthodox theology always goes hand-in-hand with piety. The 'head' and 'the heart' belong together. Ignatius did not die for an idea but for the Lord. He was a humble Christian trying to set his eyes on Jesus rather than on the things of the world. Facing his martyrdom, he wrote: "Just let me get to Jesus Christ. Nothing on this wide earth matters to me anymore. The kingdoms of this world are entirely meaningless. I am at the point where I would rather die for Jesus Christ than rule over the whole earth. He alone is the one I seek – the one who died for us! It is Jesus that I long for – the one who for our sake rose again from the dead!"

(To be continued)