

Ignatius' Trinitarian Foundation for Church Unity and Obeying Spiritual Leaders Edward L. Smither, PhD, Columbia International University

While on the road to stand trial and face martyrdom in Rome, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 110) authored seven letters—five to Asian churches, one to Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, and one to the church at Rome. Providing rich insight into the issues of the second-century church in Asia, the letters also reveal a good bit of Ignatius' theology, including his thoughts on ecclesiology, martyrdom, Judaism, heresy, and the Trinity. In this paper, I suggest that Ignatius' pleas for church unity and obedience to the bishop—arguably the strongest themes in his letters—were founded on his understanding of the Trinity and that his ecclesiology depended on this developing Trinitarian thought.

Preliminary Thoughts

Not a great deal is known about Ignatius until this final period of his life. Arguably his greatest claim to fame was setting into motion a monoepiscopal (single bishop) model of leadership in Antioch that was replicated by other church communities around the ancient world.¹ Recently, Alistair Stewart has challenged this traditional view, suggesting that Ignatius may have simply been a bishop over a single house fellowship in Antioch or a federation of house churches in the city.² Though this debate continues, we know that Ignatius followed Clement of Rome (d. ca. 99) in advancing the bishop-presbyter-deacon model for church governance, which his Trinitarian thought shaped.³

Despite the challenge of dating Ignatius' letters and death, he was most likely writing during a limited window of time—perhaps just a few weeks—within the first quarter of the second century.⁴ Following Michael Holmes' chronological ordering, I have read and analyzed Ignatius' letters in this order: (1) Smyrnaens (2) Polycarp (3) Ephesians (4) Magnesians (5) Philadelphians (6) Trallians and (7) Romans.⁵ In terms of style and content, Clement, Hermas and Paul seemed to have influenced Ignatius' writing. In addition to Paul, Ignatius clearly had access to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke although he referred very little to the Old Testament.⁶

In examining the Ignatian corpus to grasp his Trinitarian thinking, I have generally followed Allen Coppedge's method for studying the godhead within Scripture. Coppedge evaluates the biblical data in four areas: references to the Father and Son, Son and Holy Spirit, Father and Holy Spirit, and references to all three. He asserts that many helpful insights can be gleaned from passages on just the Father and Son toward a complete biblical picture of the Trinity.⁷ Ignatius mentions the Father, Son, and Holy

¹ See Ignatius, *Romans* 2.2, 9.1.

² See Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 260-268.

³ See 1 Clement 42.4-5; 44.1-5; 57.1; also Foster, "The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (Part 2)," *The Expository Times* 118:1 (2006), 2-3.

⁴ See Foster, "The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (Part 1)," *The Expository Times* 117:12 (2006), 491-492.

⁵ See Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 94.

⁶ See Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 92-93; also Foster, "The Epistles (Part 2)," 8-10.

⁷ See Allan Coppedge, *The God who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2007), 26-30.

Spirit together only three times in his letters. In the remainder of his many references to the godhead, he refers only to the Father and Son. This is not surprising because Ignatius' primary theological concerns in his letters are Christological and he devotes much space to combatting Docetism and defending the humanity and divinity of Christ. Following Coppedge, I am persuaded that Ignatius' Father and Son references provide helpful insight into his Trinitarian thoughts.⁸

Trinitarian Salutations

Similar to Paul, Ignatius routinely greets his readers with a Trinitarian salutation, which set the tone for discussing unity in the church and obedience to leaders. He addresses the Smyrnaeans as the "church of God the Father and of the beloved Jesus Christ."⁹ In his greeting to the church's leader, Polycarp, Ignatius describes him as the "bishop of the church of the Smyrnaeans . . . who has God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as his bishop." Declaring the Magnesians "blessed through the grace of God the Father in Christ Jesus our Savior," Ignatius offers "greetings in God the Father and in Jesus Christ."

Extending the Ephesians "heartiest greetings in Jesus Christ our God," Ignatius reminds them that they enjoy the "fullness of God the Father." Declaring that they are "united and elect through genuine suffering by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ our God," Ignatius reveals some initial economic Trinitarian perspectives. He also concludes the Ephesian letter by communicating "Farewell in God the Father and in Jesus Christ, our shared hope."¹⁰ Similarly, he emphasizes the Father and Son's work in salvation in his salutation to the Trallians whom he described as "dearly love by God the Father of Jesus Christ, elect and worthy of God, at peace in flesh through the suffering of Jesus Christ."

In the opening of *Philadelphians*, Ignatius stresses a church unity founded on the godhead, which we will explore more below. He refers to them as "the church of God the Father and of Jesus Christ . . . established in godly harmony and unwaveringly rejoices in the suffering of our Lord, fully convinced of his resurrection in all mercy, which I greet in the blood of Jesus Christ, which is eternally and lasting joy." This continues in his salutation to the Romans whom he greets in the "majesty of the Father Most High and Jesus Christ his only son . . . bearing the name of the Father, which I also greet in the name of Jesus Christ, son of the Father, those who are united in flesh and spirit to every command of his."

Trinitarian Unity

Ignatius cherished unity in the church and constantly appealed to his readers to pursue unity. In this first discussion, I will show that this unity was based on his understanding of the godhead, which we observe in at least six ways.

First, Ignatius asserted that a bishop himself was united with the godhead. Concluding his letter to Polycarp, he writes: "I bid you farewell always in our God Jesus Christ; may you remain in him; in the unity and care of God (ἐν ἐνότητι θεοῦ καὶ

⁸ See Ignatius, *Ephesians* 9.1; *Magnesians* 13.1, 2; also J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 92.

⁹ All English translations of Ignatius' letters are from Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers in English*.

¹⁰ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 21:2.

ἐπισκοπῆ).”¹¹ Here Ignatius declares that God cares for—literally “bishops”—Polycarp, which underscores Ignatius’ point in the letter’s salutation that God is this bishop’s bishop. Referring to the unity of God, Ignatius uses the same term (ἐνότης) that Paul employs to describe the unity of the church, believers, and the Spirit.¹² For Ignatius, this unity with God generated from the unity with God and Christ. Similarly, in his letter to the Philadelphians, Ignatius indicates that their bishop received his ministry because of his worshipping devotion to the godhead: “I know that the bishop obtained a ministry . . . not by his own efforts or through people or out of vanity but in the love of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³

Second, for Ignatius, Trinitarian unity promoted a collegiality among church leaders—bishops, presbyters, and deacons. In his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius greets “the bishop, so worthy of God, and the godly council of presbyters, and my fellow servants, the deacons, and all of you, individually and collectively, in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ One way that his unity was expressed was through the church and its leaders striving to encourage the bishop. In *Trallians*, Ignatius exhorts the church to: “Persevere in your unanimity (ὁμονοία) and in prayer with one another. For it is right for each one of you, especially the presbyters to encourage the bishop, to the honor of the Father and to the honor of Jesus Christ and of the apostles.”¹⁵ To make his case and expand this idea of unity, Ignatius employs a musical idea—“unanimity” or “harmony” (ὁμονοία)—a term found at points within the Psalms (LXX).¹⁶ For Ignatius, unity among church leaders mirrored the sweet fellowship that existed between the Father, Son, and apostles. Stewart suggests that Ignatius especially valued unity and encouragement in the church and among leaders because of the conflict and division that he had probably experienced within the church at Antioch.¹⁷

Third, in Ignatius’ letters, Trinitarian unity implied that the bishop was one with the church. Ignatius famously wrote to the Smyrneans: “Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop . . . wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.”¹⁸ In one sense the bishop’s unity with the church paralleled Christ’s unity with his body. In another, the bishop’s presence validated the community as an authentic church. Without a bishop, the church could not truly experience worship, particularly the Eucharist. Ignatius exhorts the Smyrnaeans: “Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he designates) is to be considered valid.”¹⁹

Fourth, and quite related to the previous points, Ignatius called for the church to be united by imitating the Son’s unity with the Father. In *Ephesians* he writes: “I

¹¹ Ignatius, *Polycarp* 8.3

¹² See Eph 4:3,13; Rom 15:6; Gal 3:28; Phil 2:2; Col 3:15. Cf. Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 124–125.

¹³ Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 1.1.

¹⁴ Ignatius, *Polycarp* 8.3.

¹⁵ Ignatius, *Trallians* 12.2.

¹⁶ See Pss. 54:15; 82:6.

¹⁷ See Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 246–247.

¹⁸ Ignatius, *Smyrneans* 8.2; cf. Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 210.

¹⁹ Ignatius, *Smyrneans* 8.2; cf. Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 210; also Adam Hensley and Hamilton Vic, “Submission to Bishop, Presbytery, and Deacons in the Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 35:2 (2001), 76, 82.

congratulate you who are united with him [your bishop], as the church is with Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is with the Father, so that all things may be harmonious in unity (ἵνα πάντα ἐν ἐνότητι σύμφωνα ᾗ).²⁰ In this letter, Ignatius employs yet another musical term, σύμφωνα (“harmonious”) to describe this unity (ἐνότης).

Similarly, in his salutation to the Philadelphians, Ignatius uses the musical metaphor (ὁμονοῖα) once again, commending the church for being “established in godly harmony” because they “are at one with the presbyters and deacons who are with him [the bishop] who have been appointed by the mind of Jesus Christ, whom he [the Father], in accordance with his own will, securely established by the Holy Spirit.” Alluding to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the same passage, Ignatius demonstrates that the unified thought and action of the godhead provide a model for the church and its leaders to emulate. Hensley and Vic helpfully note, “they have the consent and approval of God . . . because bishops are ‘in the mind of Christ,’ who is the mind of the Father, to concur with the mind of the bishop is also to concur with God’s mind, and therefore to know Christ as he truly is.”²¹

As shown, Ignatius opened his letter to the Romans greeting them in the “majesty of the Father Most High and Jesus Christ his only son . . . bearing the name of the Father, which I also greet in the name of Jesus Christ, son of the Father, those who are united in flesh and spirit to every command of his.” Praising the Father and Son for their unity, Ignatius also seems to be praying for this same unity for his readers.

Fifth, Ignatius reminds the churches that they are united in salvation—a redemption that is thoroughly Trinitarian. In just one of three passages that explicitly mention the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Ignatius declares that the Ephesians are “stones of a temple, prepared beforehand for the building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit, and love is the way that leads back to God.”²² Employing rule of faith, creedal language, he adds in the same letter: “For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit. He was born and was baptized in order that by his suffering he might cleanse the water.”²³ Throughout his letters, Ignatius particularly emphasizes that the Son’s suffering accomplishes this salvation. As shown, he greets the Ephesians by declaring that they are “united and elect through genuine suffering by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ our God.”²⁴

Finally, Ignatius argues that the church should be unified for the purpose of worship. In *Ephesians*, he writes: “So you are all participants in a shared worship, God-bearers and temple-bearers, Christ-bearers, bearers of holy things, adorned in every respect with the commandments of Christ.”²⁵ Given this reality, Ignatius urges them to meet regularly and “make every effort to come together more frequently to give thanks and glory to God.”²⁶ Emphasizing the central place of the Eucharist in worship assemblies in his day, Ignatius adds: “All of you, individually and collectively, gather together in grace, by name, in one faith and one Jesus Christ . . . breaking one bread,

²⁰ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 5.1; cf. Foster, “The Epistles (Part 2),” 3.

²¹ Hensley and Vic, “Submission to Bishop,” 76.

²² Ignatius, *Ephesians* 9.1.

²³ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 18.2.

²⁴ In addition to the Ephesians, see Ignatius’ salutations to the Trallians and the Philadelphians.

²⁵ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 9.2.

²⁶ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 13.1; see also *Ephesians* 5.3 and *Polycarp* 1.2.

which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote we taken in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ.”²⁷ The Eucharist, of course, served as a visual reminder of the Son’s passion and death and the Father’s work to raise him to new life, purchasing salvation for those who believe. Highlighting this unity of the Father and Son and the consequent unity of the church, Hensley and Vic conclude: “the relationship between Christ and the Father continues incarnationally through the liturgical life of the church as people, bishop, and presbyterate gather for worship.”²⁸

Obedience to Church Leaders

Quite related to his appeal for unity in the church, Ignatius also urges them to obey their leaders, particularly bishops but also presbyters and deacons. Ignatius’ understanding of the Trinity also provides a foundation for this obedience in the church.

First, Ignatius commands the Asian believers to follow and obey their bishops just as Christ followed and made himself subservient to the Father. In *Smyrneans*, he writes: “You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father.”²⁹ To the Magnesians, he adds: “Be subject to the bishop and to one another, as Jesus Christ in the flesh was to the Father . . . that there might be unity, both physical and spiritual.”³⁰ This admonition finds special application in the case of the younger bishop of Magnesia. Ignatius encourages the church to “respect him in accordance with the power of God the Father.” Also, presbyters should go against the accepted social norms of assigning authority to older patrons and “defer to him as one who is wise in God; yet not really to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of all.”³¹

In a rare isolated reference to the Holy Spirit, Ignatius claims that the Spirit admonishes similar unity with and obedience to the bishop. In *Philadelphians*, he writes: “the Spirit is not deceived . . . the Spirit itself was preaching, saying these words: ‘Do nothing without the bishop. Guard your bodies as the temple of God. Love unity. Flee from divisions. Become imitators of Jesus Christ, just as he is of his Father.’”³²

Second, continuing this line of logic, Ignatius urges the church also to obey the presbyters and deacons whom he likens to the apostles. He urges the Trallians: “Let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God’s council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called a church.”³³ Similarly, he admonishes the Smyrneans: “follow the council of presbyters as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God.”³⁴

Finally, Ignatius instructs the churches to pursue unity through obeying church leaders. He instructs the Ephesians: “in every way glorify Jesus Christ . . . so that you, joined together in a united obedience and subject to the bishop and the council of

²⁷ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 20.2.

²⁸ Hensley and Vic, “Submission to Bishop,” 79; cf. Foster, “The Epistles (Part 2),” 5.

²⁹ Ignatius, *Smyrneans* 8.1-2.

³⁰ Ignatius, *Magnesians* 13.2; cf. *Trallians* 2.2; 13.2; *Ephesians* 5.3; also Hensley and Vic, “Submission to Bishop,” 76, 82.

³¹ Ignatius, *Magnesians* 3.1-2; cf. Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 282-283.

³² Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 7.1-2.

³³ Ignatius, *Trallians* 3.1; cf. Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 110-111; also Hensley and Vic, “Submission to Bishop,” 82.

³⁴ Ignatius, *Smyrneans* 8.1-2.

presbyters, may be sanctified in every respect.”³⁵ Again employing the terms ὁμονοία (“unanimity” or “harmony”) and σύμφωνα (“harmony”), Ignatius uses vivid musical imagery to make his case:

Run together in harmony with the mind of the bishop . . . for your council of presbyters . . . is attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre . . . in your unanimity and harmonious love (ἐν τῇ ὁμονοίᾳ ὑμῶν καὶ συμφώνῳ ἀγάπῃ) Jesus Christ is sung. You must join this chorus, everyone of you, so that being harmonious in unanimity (σύμφωνοι ὄντες ἐν ὁμονοίᾳ) and taking your pitch from God you may sing in unison with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, in order that he may hear you and . . . acknowledge that you are members of his Son. It is therefore advantageous for you to be in perfect unity, in order that you may always have a share in God.³⁶

Likening the church communities to the Levitical singers in the temple who sing to God, Ignatius exhorts them to “sing Christ” through obeying spiritual leaders. Again, as the church emulates the godhead by being united, this bears fruit in worship.³⁷

Ignatius’ admonitions beg the question: why was there such an emphasis on obeying spiritual leaders. First, as discussed, it appears likely that the churches in Antioch and Asia experienced considerable dissension. Foster hypothesizes that Ignatius led the church in such a hierarchical manner and that his style contributed to the conflict. Ignatius’ natural response to this crisis was insisting that churches obey their bishops.³⁸

Second, and more explicit in his letters, Ignatius urges obedience to church leaders because bishops functioned as guardians of sound doctrine. Likening aberrant teaching to “evil plants,” Ignatius commands the Philadelphians:

Stray away from evil plants, which are not cultivated by Jesus Christ, because they are not the Father’s planting . . . For all those who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the bishop, and all those who repent and enter into the unity of the church will belong to God, so that they may be living in accordance with Jesus Christ.³⁹

Stewart helpfully asserts, “unity under an *episkopos* is the means by which heresy is kept out of the churches.”⁴⁰ As bishops like Ignatius shepherded the flock and protected it from false teaching, the stature and authority of the bishop only increased toward a monoepiscopal model in the second century.

³⁵ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 2.2; cf. Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 270-271.

³⁶ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 4.1-2; cf. *Ephesians* 20.2; *Magnesians* 6.1-2.

³⁷ Cf. Hensley and Vic, “Submission to Bishop,” 80-81.

³⁸ Cf. Foster, “The Epistles (Part 2),” 3-4.

³⁹ Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 3.1-2; see also Ignatius, *Magnesians* 7.1-2; *Trallians* 7.1-2.

⁴⁰ Stewart, *Original Bishops*, 269; cf. Hensley and Vic, “Submission to Bishop,” 77.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed Ignatius' concerns for church unity and obeying leaders and have endeavored to show that Ignatius' understanding of the godhead, especially the relationship between the Father and the Son, supported his thoughts. He believed that the church should be one because the Father and Son are one. He was also convinced that the church should obey its leaders, especially bishops, because the Son willfully submitted to the Father. Obeying the bishop—the appointed shepherd and guardian of sound teaching—would also keep the church free of heresy.

As shown, Ignatius employed rich and colorful language to communicate a picture of church unity. He used the familiar Pauline term “unity” (ἐνότης), which showed the apostle's linguistic and theological influence on Ignatius. His use of the musical terms “harmony” or “unanimity” (ὁμονοία) and “harmonious” (σύμφωνα) point to Old Testament influences, specifically the Psalms and the Levitical singers, that also shaped his vocabulary and thinking on unity. Though Ignatius did not cite or allude to Old Testament passages in his letters, this musical vocabulary seems to be the exception.

Finally, though Ignatius' early second-century Trinitarian thoughts are based largely on reflections about the Father and Son, these reflections do provide a basis for his admonitions toward church unity and to obeying spiritual leaders. In this sense he anticipates the mid-third century thoughts of Cyprian of Carthage (195-258) on the Trinity and church unity:

The Lord says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30); and again it is written of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, “And these three are one” (1 John 5:7). And does any one believe that this unity which thus comes from the divine strength and coheres in celestial sacraments, can be divided in the church, and can be separated by the parting asunder of opposing wills?⁴¹

⁴¹ Cyprian, *Unity of the Church* 6.