

**HEROES AND HERETICS:**  
**An 8-Week Course on Early Church History**

**WEEK 1**            **January 10, 2016**  
**Teacher:**           **Pastor Pickens**

**Ignatius – The Church After the Apostles**

**Introduction:**

Explanation of approach: biographically (exciting to see Christians in their place in history), theologically (understanding their theology and thinking in its place). We want to acknowledge people as they really were and not to slip into pessimism (about present or past) or idealization (without acknowledging the flaws of people).

Purposes of Church history:

- Learn from mistakes
- Learn from success and tradition (tradition verses traditionalism). We have in Church history guardrails for our theology.
  - “If the Church were led to wipe out of existence all products of the thinking of nineteen Christian centuries and start fresh, the loss, even if the Bible were retained, would be immense.”<sup>1</sup>
- Optimism in our Lord’s faithfulness and purpose
  - “The Church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend, to guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end: though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale, against a foe or traitor she ever shall prevail” (Samuel Stone).

**Ignatius’s life:**

60??-110/115 AD – A disciple and successor of Peter

Well-connected to key figures in the early church (Polycarp, Polybius)

Bishop of Antioch in Syria

Forceful man (conversation with Walt – some dispositions are our greatest strengths and also inroads for besetting sins)

Opposed Gnosticism and emphasized the humanity of Christ. From the onset the emphasis will be placed on Christ. There is an understanding from the Jews that this is not Judaism. The Christians understood it to be the continuation of Judaism. The Jews regarded it as something separate. The Jews were some of the greatest opponents to Christianity during its origin. There is a guard from within from the onset against false views.

“I urge you, therefore—not I, but Jesus Christ’s love—use only Christian food. Keep off foreign fare, by which I mean heresy. For those people mingle Jesus Christ with their teachings just to gain your confidence under false pretenses.”<sup>2</sup>

Wrote quite a lot (7 letters on way to martyrdom to the churches and church leaders of the areas through which he was passing). The writings of the early church fathers were not primarily systematic doctrine as such but pastoral. He preached to the congregations in the cities through which he passed on his way to Rome. He encouraged them to stand fast, to submit to their authorities, and to hold on to the trustworthy message as it had been taught to them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism*. P. 38

<sup>2</sup> Placher, William C. *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Vol. 1: From Its Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation*. P. 16

Arrested for his Christian faith and led off to Rome for martyrdom. Eager for martyrdom in what may have been an unhealthy way. You have polarization on the issue of martyrdom in the early church. On his way to Rome he went so far as to write ahead and encourage the believers there not to oppose his martyrdom.

The persecutions of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century were primarily localized. It was not widespread, governmental persecution from the Roman Empire at this point. The Jews persecuted the Christians. The Romans would persecute church leaders to keep peace.

“I am corresponding with all the churches and bidding them all realize that I am voluntarily dying for God—if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts—that is how I can get to God...Thus, when I have fallen asleep, I shall be a burden to no one. Then I shall be a real disciple of Jesus Christ when the world sees my body no more.”<sup>3</sup>

Already in the post-apostolic church, you have priority given to the writings of the apostles. He’s living throughout some of the years that the apostles are still writing and he gives priority to them above himself. There is recognition already of the unique role and office of the apostles (Eph. 2). Ignatius does not assume himself to be on the same level as the apostles. He does assume himself to have authority. Already thoughts and establishment of church authority is taking place. While not ironed out in a systematic and written way, church authority is assumed from the beginning and dependent upon Christ Jesus himself. Ignatius endorses a kind of threefold structure to the offices of the church. He writes of elders (presbyters), deacons, and bishops. By the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century this is the common structure of the church. Ignatius’s stress is church unity. He is writing and preaching in the midst of struggle. He’s on his way to martyrdom and he’s aware of early heresies already sprouting in the church. In the New Testament the words for elder and bishop are interchangeable.

There is a distinguishing care for the poor in the early church.

Knew other church leaders and supported church leadership (Polycarp, known by Irenaeus)

“For when you obey the bishop as if he were Jesus Christ, you are (as I see it) living not in a merely human fashion but in Jesus Christ’s way, who for our sakes suffered death that you might believe in his death and so escape dying yourselves. It is essential, therefore, to act in no way without the bishop, just as you are doing. Rather submit even to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ. He is our Hope [cf. 1 Tim. 1:1], and if we live in union with him now, we shall gain eternal life.”<sup>4</sup>

The spread of the church is very real. It spreads through persecution. It is strengthened by martyrs (‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’ – Tertullian). It spreads through public arenas and personal interaction. The church reached into present Italy and into northern Africa. Thus Christianity knew war against the Roman Empire and overcame without shedding a drop of blood, save its own.

The church took time to unify in its common structure. The way that it took shape was organic. It followed the structure of Jewish synagogues. There was a common place for meeting together and centralized, local authority. The worship included: singing, praying, reading Scripture, preaching, the Lord’s Supper, and often a love feast with all who had been baptized eating together.

From the beginning the New Testament and its authority were assumed. The early church announced and took hold of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it was accomplished by Christ and taught by the apostles (1 Cor. 15:1-11).

“Be deaf then, to any talk that ignores Jesus Christ, of David’s lineage, of Mary; who was really born, ate, and drank; was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was really crucified and died, in the sight of heaven and earth

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 17

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 16

and the underworld. He was really raised from the dead, for his Father raised him, just as his Father will raise us, who believe on him, through Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have no genuine life.”<sup>5</sup>

**Take Away:**

The Scriptures are our only rule of life and doctrine. Tradition is good, traditionalism is not. Church authority has been assumed and practice since the onset of the church.

“[A]n appeal to tradition became of major importance. The word “tradition” literally means “that which has been handed down or over,” although it can also refer to “the act of handing down or over.” Irenaeus insisted that the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) was faithfully preserved by the apostolic church, and that it had found its expression in the canonical books of Scripture. The church had faithfully proclaimed the same gospel from the time of the Apostles until the present day.”<sup>6</sup>

Thank God for how he’s made you and how he’s worked in you. Beware of your personality and dispositions.

God works suffering, trials, and persecution (both on a micro and macro scale) for his good purpose and for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.

**Further Reading:**

Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought – Alister E. McGrath

The History of the Church – Eusebius (Penguin classics)

Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Vol. 1 – William C. Platcher

Introduction to the History of Christianity – Tim Dowley

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 16

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, Alister E. *Historical Theology*. P. 29