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*Ignatius of Antioch: Bishop, Theologian, and  
the Apologist of Life and Death*

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***The following is a highlight of Ignatius of Antioch, including his life and ministry, his thought, and the history of scholarship.***

Ignatius (c.35–c.107) was the bishop of Antioch in Syria, the place where the term “Christian” was first used to depict the followers of Christ (Acts 11:26). Very little is known about him, as only seven of his letters are extant.<sup>1</sup> Although the view is limited, the letters do provide a window into the life of patristic theology and apologetics.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Of the many translations of Ignatius' letters these two are helpful: “The Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch,” in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 128-201; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers Volume 1*, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 202-321. Because both translations are used by scholars, references to the letter, section, and paragraph numbers will be used in the body of this essay. Holmes' *Apostolic Fathers* is used when quoted in full.

<sup>2</sup> A number of important studies are Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy*, T & T Clark Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2009); Thomas Lechner, *Ignatius adversus Valentinianos? Chronologische und theologiegeschichtliche Studien zu den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999); Cyril Richardson, *The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935); and the introductory matter to William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius*

author wrote as he was under the apprehension of ten members of the Imperial guard (*Rom.* 5.1). Due to his adherence to what was yet an illegal religion, Ignatius had been displaced from his Antiochan see and brought to Rome where he was presumably tried and executed. His letters were written en route to the so-called Eternal City. In Ignatius we have an example of one who was willing to lose all, including his life, for the sake of Christ. His letters are therefore important as an encouragement to sanctification. They are also important as they shed light on ecclesiastical structures in post-apostolic times. They provide insight into the various theological difficulties facing the earliest church and if anything, are early, non-canonical sources of orthodox Christological teaching. Pre-eminently, the letters draw a connection between the so-called “abstract” debates of theology and real life; Ignatius died for what he believed and defended. This essay will look at the life, letters and thought of Ignatius who is an example for Christians today who need to take serious the issues that challenge the faith. Ignatius was an apologist who laid his life down for the cause of God and truth.

### **Ignatius’ Thought: A General View**

Of his seven letters, six were written to churches, the seventh to a bishop. They were penned from two cities, Troas and Smyrna. Four were drafted in the latter, namely the letters to the churches in Tralles, Magnesia, Ephesus and Rome. Three were from Troas, one each to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna and the final one to Polycarp, Smyrna’s bishop. Six of the letters were written in response to kindness shown to Ignatius on his journey to Rome, while the Roman

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*of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985).

letter anticipated his arrival there. The letters to Tralles, Magnesia and Ephesus were written in gratitude for the visitation of members from those churches, primarily their bishops. The two letters to Smyrna and the one to Philadelphia were written after Ignatius had visited them personally.

A number of general themes permeate the letters, most significantly Ignatius' impending martyrdom, the need for church unity under the bishop, and the churches' obligation to disregard false teaching. Themes specific to certain letters are also found, in particular a strong Christology emphasizing the deity and humanity of Jesus, pneumatology, Ignatius' apparent use of creedal statements as well as a fledgling Eucharistic theology.

Both Ignatius' desire for martyrdom and his episcopal encouragements vie for the place of most prominent theme in his letters. Much like the apostle Paul in Philippians 1:21-24, Ignatius' desire was to die and be with Christ. Frequently Ignatius made statements expressing his hope "to succeed in fighting with wild beasts in Rome" (*Eph.* 1.2. Cf. *Trall.* 4.2; 12:3; *Phil.* 5.1; *Smyrn.* 4.2). The most graphic expression of this desire is found in *Romans* 5.3 where he explains, "Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!" The spirituality of such macabre longing can only be appreciated if one recognizes the all-surpassing worth of Christ in Ignatius' thinking. As Michael J. Wilkins says, such a statement "shows Ignatius' eagerness to undergo any suffering to attain discipleship, which here means final attainment of being with Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> For the bishop, martyrdom was linked with discipleship.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, "The Interplay of Ministry, Martyrdom and Discipleship in Ignatius of Antioch," in Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige, eds., *Worship, Theology*

Of his death he could say to the Romans, “Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple” (*Rom.* 5.3. Cf. *Eph.* 1.2; 3:1; *Rom.* 4.2; 5.1; *Pol.* 71). It is apparent from this letter that the Romans were trying to gain his political freedom through legal means—something that Ignatius was deeply against. Much of the letter is a plea to refrain from anything that might change his martyr’s fate. “Grant me nothing more than to be poured out as an offering to God while there is still an altar ready” (*Rom.* 2.2).

Frequently Ignatius admonished his hearers to pay due respect to their local bishop. So strong in fact is Ignatius’ episcopal ecclesiology that he would often equate adherence to the bishop with adherence to God. In *Magnesians* 3.1 obedience to the bishop is “not really to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, the Bishop of all.” Later in the letter Ignatius’ ideal church government is laid out with “the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons...entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ” (*Mag.* 6.1). In 13.1 the presbytery and deacons are referred to as “that beautifully woven spiritual crown.” In striking language, Ignatius says to the Smyrnaeans, “the one who does anything without the bishop’s knowledge serves the devil” (*Smyrn.* 9.1). The bishop has sole authority over the church and all members must follow him. Only he, or one designated by him, can administer the Eucharist (*Smyrn.* 8.1) and only he can approve of all marriages (*Poly.* 5.2). Harrington observes that Ignatius’ strenuous encouragement to monoepiscopacy could be due to the lack of its practice in the early church: “In fact, so strenuous is Ignatius’s insistence on one bishop and the harmonious working together of bishop, presbytery, and deacons that one gets the idea that he ‘protests too much’ and that his ideas were not universally

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*and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1992), 311.

obvious or acceptable to everyone.” Daniel Harrington goes on to explain that such a view of the bishop was a means of combating heresy: “Nevertheless, Ignatius and his fellow bishops apparently viewed the monoepiscopate and the threefold structure of church offices as the sure means of defense against Docetists, Judaizers, and other 'heretics.’”<sup>4</sup>

An intriguing observation has to do with the bishopric in Rome. It is worth noting that Ignatius is assiduous in referencing the bishop of every church that to whom he writes, save for the letter to Polycarp who was himself a bishop and to the church of Rome. If it were a fact that the Roman bishop was the Pope, why does Ignatius fail to mention him in the letter? This is especially curious when one considers the very formal and respectful nature of the introduction to *Romans* when compared with the other letters. If Ignatius' purpose in writing to this church was to secure his martyrdom, he would need to enlist the help of the Roman church's bishop. It could very well point to the fact that the bishop of Rome did not have the authority that Roman Catholics would grant him today, or that there was a bishop in Rome at that time.<sup>5</sup> However, Ignatius is strong when he says that salvation is found only in the church. For instance, “All those who repent and enter into the unity of the church will belong to God” (*Phil.* 3.2. Cf. *Phil.* 8.1). This

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Harrington, SJ, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach us Today* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 164. Cited in Matthew Levering, *Christ and the Catholic Priesthood: Ecclesial Hierarchy and the Pattern of the Trinity* (Mundelein, IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2010), 123n6.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Paul Foster, “The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch,” in Paul Foster, ed., *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, T & T Clark Biblical Studies (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 96. See Ian Hugh Clary “Ignatius and Papal Succession” at Sola Scriptura Ministries blog.

<http://solascripturaministriesinternational.wordpress.com/2011/07/18/ignatius-and-papal-succession-by-ian-hugh-clary/> (accessed September 19, 2011).

anticipates similar statements of Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) and can be explained by seeing the continuity between the church and the gospel.<sup>6</sup> If the church turned from the gospel, it would no longer be the church.<sup>7</sup>

As an undershepherd of Christ, Ignatius was concerned to protect the sheep. He uses strong language when speaking of false teachers calling them “wolves” (*Phil.* 2.2), “evil plants” (*Phil.* 3.1) and “wild beasts” (*Smyrn.* 4.1). Two forms of false teaching are specifically attacked: Judaizing and Docetism. It is difficult to tell if Ignatius responded to two separate groups, or if the Judaizers are also Docetic.

Now that a general view of his thought is given, and before getting into his theology and apologetics, a discussion of the text-critical issues involved with the discovery of his authentic letters is in order.

### The Authentic Letters

The authenticity of the seven letters of Ignatius has been debated throughout the history of the church, particularly in the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> John Milton (1608-1674), author of *Paradise Lost*, captures the

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<sup>6</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, “Epistle 72” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* ed., Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 5:358, 384.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., Martin Luther “Sermon for the Early Christmas Service, Luke 2:15-20 (1521-1522)” *Works* Hans J. Hillerbrand, Helmut T. Lehmann eds., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 52:39-40 for a Protestant interpretation of Cyprian’s phrase “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*”

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of this debate see Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1960), 1-30; William R. Schoedel, “Introduction” in *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, William R. Schoedel, ed., Helmut Koester (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1985), 1-7; Christine Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 29 (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 9-15.

complexity of the debate in his satirical question, “In the midst therefore of so many forgeries where shall we fixe to dare say this is Ignatius? as for his stile, who knows it? So disfigur’d and interrupted as it is.”<sup>9</sup> While most contemporary scholars are in agreement that the so-called middle recension of letters is authentic, there have been some who have argued otherwise.<sup>10</sup> Our purpose is to survey the scholarship pertaining to the letters to see how the conclusion was reached about the middle recension.

## Recensions

It has been recognised since the work of J. B. Lightfoot (1828-1889) that there are three different classifications of letters—called recensions—that claim to be Ignatian.<sup>11</sup> In chronological order the first is the middle recension, containing the seven authentic letters, referred to in Eusebius’ (263-339) *Historia Ecclesiastica*.<sup>12</sup> The second is the long recension that appeared in the latter part of the fourth century. The third, known as the short recension was not discovered until the middle of the nineteenth century. In the following the short recension will be discussed first, followed by the long and concluding with greater attention to the middle.

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<sup>9</sup> John Milton, *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*, 1641 cited in Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius in Syria and Asia*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> For instance Josep Rius-Camps, *The Four Authentic Letters of Ignatius, The Martyr Christianismos 2* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1979). For a response to Rius-Camps and others see William R. Schoedel, “Are the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch Authentic?” in *Religious Studies Review* 6.3 (July 1980): 196-201; and Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia*, 11-15.

<sup>11</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp* (London: Macmillan, 1889; reprinted Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius The Church History: A New Translation with Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999), 123-125.

## Short Recension

The short recension is so labelled because of the brevity of its form and because the letters “lack phrases, sentences, and even long sections that appear in the text of the uninterpolated seven.”<sup>13</sup> It is thought to be a précis of the middle recension, specifically the letters to Polycarp, Ephesians and Romans with a paragraph from Trallians. William Schoedel surmises that the summary was constructed for monastic purposes.<sup>14</sup> Corwin compares the letter to the Ephesians in the short and middle recensions showing that the former is one-third the length of the latter.<sup>15</sup>

The short recension exists only in a Syriac text.<sup>16</sup> William Cureton was the first to publish it in his *Antient Syriac Version of the Epistles of Saint Ignatius to St. Polycarp, the Ephesians and Romans* (1845) after the letters had been brought from the Nitrian desert to the British Museum. It was Cureton’s argument that these were the genuine letters and that Eusebius had not been absolutely certain of the letters (middle recension) he referenced.<sup>17</sup> Both Theodor Zahn<sup>18</sup> and Lightfoot argued against Cureton’s thesis in favour of the middle recension. Most scholars since their time have followed in their footsteps, dismissing Cureton’s arguments.

The most decisive blow levelled by Lightfoot against Cureton is the comparison he made between the short recension and fragments of

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<sup>13</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Schoedel, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>15</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 72-73.

<sup>17</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor Zahn, *Ignatius von Antiochen* (Gotha, Germany: Perthes, 1873).

a Syriac translation of the middle recension. “It is strange that Cureton should not have been struck by the close resemblance between the Syriac fragments (S<sub>1</sub>, S<sub>2</sub>, S<sub>3</sub>) and the Syriac version of the three epistles in the Short recension (S).”<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot felt that the coincidences between them were so strong that the only possible conclusion was that one had to be derived from the other. If it can be shown that the short is dependent upon the middle, “all the evidence for the genuineness for the Short recension disappears.”<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot observes, “Cureton failed to see the resemblance, and therefore did not enter into this question, though it was one of paramount importance to him, inasmuch as his theory of the genuineness of the Short recension stands or falls as it is answered.”<sup>21</sup> For Lightfoot, it makes more sense to think that a Syrian had found a copy of the middle recension and summarised it for one reason or another, than to think that it was expanded upon in forgery: “This is the more obvious explanation.”<sup>22</sup> Quoting C. C. Richardson, Milton Brown says, “In the works of Theodor Zahn and of J. B. Lightfoot it was ‘convincingly shown that Cureton’s text represents a rather crude abridgment of the original letters.’”<sup>23</sup>

### **Long Recension**

The long recension has its name because it is the largest collection of letters, thirteen in all. Schoedel claims that it first appeared in the late

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<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Milton Perry Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius: A study of linguistic criteria* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1963), xiii.

fourth century and was first referenced by the monophysite Stephen Gorbarus in 570 AD.<sup>24</sup> The long recension contains the seven letters found in the middle recension, namely those to the churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, Smyrna and Rome and to the bishop Polycarp. Accompanying these are five additional letters addressed to the churches in Tarsus, Antioch and Philippi as well as to a man named Hero (said to be Ignatius' replacement in Antioch<sup>25</sup>) and a woman named Mary of Cassabola. There is also included a letter from Mary to Ignatius. Manuscripts for the long recension exist only in Greek and Latin.<sup>26</sup>

Of its style, excluding the letter from Mary, Brown observes, "These twelve letters bear a remarkable resemblance to the pattern of Paul's corpus...There is an inner consistency of form, notably in the salutations and farewell greetings, and there is considerable homogeneity of thought, doctrine, and exhortation. The amount of writing is extensive enough for an application of the customary linguistic or stylistic tests."<sup>27</sup> This description differs widely from the letters of the middle recension, which were apparently written in haste. Corwin describes the writings as "broken, marred occasionally with uncompleted sentences and above all lacking in connected argument. Nowhere is there development of ideas in measured, logical sequence."<sup>28</sup> By noting the style Corwin does not seek to "dispose of the letters as inconsequential," rather, the hurriedness of their style

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<sup>24</sup> Schoedel, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>25</sup> Maier, *Eusebius The Church History*, 125.

<sup>26</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Authentic Writings of Ignatius*, xi.

<sup>28</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 19.

speaks to the external conditions suffered by Ignatius as he travelled in chains from Antioch to Rome. The letters of the middle recension, over and against the long, “bear the clear marks of having been written under external as well as internal pressures.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the structure and form of the long recension described by Brown militate against their being the genuine letters.

The authenticity of the long recension has been the subject of “learned and acrimonious” debate.<sup>30</sup> During the fourth century when the long recension first came into existence, the church was embroiled in the Monophysite controversy regarding Christ’s two natures.<sup>31</sup> Much of the interpolated texts were anachronistic<sup>32</sup> having “reflected the religious and social realities of the time.”<sup>33</sup> Yet the long recension came to dominate in the medieval period, displacing the authentic letters.<sup>34</sup>

In the seventeenth century a debate over ecclesiastical polity erupted and Ignatius was again a key figure. Because his letters were the first in the early church to offer a tripartite distinction between the offices of bishop, elder and deacon,<sup>35</sup> those in favour of monoepiscopal church order sought to establish an early date for

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<sup>29</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, reprinted 2003), 44.

<sup>31</sup> For more on monophysitism see Iain R. Torrance, “Monophysitism” in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 378-380.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius*, xii.

<sup>33</sup> Schoedel, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius*, xiii; Schoedel, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ephesians* 3.1-6.1; *Magnesians* 3.1-4.1; 6.1-7.2; *Trallians* 2.1-3.2; *Smyrnaeans* 8.1-9.1; *Polycarp* 1.2-1.2.

his letters to demonstrate the antiquity of their view. Many Nonconformists argued against this, hoping to either discredit Ignatian authorship of the letters altogether, or at least demonstrate that they were of a later date. A casualty of this debate was the spurious collection of letters and interpolations that contributed to the long recension whose true nature was realised.

### **Middle Recension**

The middle recension contains seven letters, in uninterpolated form, that constitute modern collections of the letters of Ignatius and are widely recognised as authentic. They exist in Greek (Codex Mediceo-Laurentianus), Latin and Armenian versions as well as fragments in Coptic and Syriac.<sup>36</sup> An early reference to them can be found in Eusebius, who records Ignatius as the second bishop of Antioch after Euodius with Hero succeeding him.<sup>37</sup> The historian also draws attention to references to the letters by Irenaeus and Polycarp in their writings.

The authenticity of the long recension held sway throughout the medieval period. In 1623, when the Genevan Nicholas Vedelius (1596-1642) published a text that contained the middle recension with an appendix of spurious letters attached, scholars began to question the long recension. Vedelius was of the opinion that even the Eusebian letters were interpolated and were dependent upon the *Apostolic Constitutions* that had been written long after Ignatius lived.<sup>38</sup> As much

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<sup>36</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 73; Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 4. Schoedel, "Introduction," 3, notes an Arabic text close in relation to the Syriac.

<sup>37</sup> Maier, *Eusebius The Church History*, 123-125.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius*, xii; Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia*, 9.

as he tried, Vedelius could not establish the original text of letters.<sup>39</sup> It was not until the work of an Irish primate that serious headway could be made in determining which letters were the ones that came from Ignatius' own hand.

James Ussher (1581-1656), archbishop of Armagh in Ireland, is memorialised for his *Annals of the World* that set the date of the world's creation at 4004 BC.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, Ussher's brilliance as a theologian and historian has been overshadowed by contemporary creation/evolution rhetoric. One discipline that Ussher was regarded as an expert was patristic history.<sup>41</sup> Often engaged in debates with Roman Catholics, Ussher defended the antiquity of Protestantism by tracing its precedence to the early church.<sup>42</sup> As the debate over the authenticity and date of Ignatius' letters continued in the seventeenth century, Ussher was a key authority; it was Ussher who made a major contribution to the final laying aside of the long recension.<sup>43</sup>

Robert Grossteste (c. 1250), bishop of Lincoln, published works of various Latin quotations by Ignatius. In the fourteenth century more quotations were to be found in the writings of John Tyssington (c. 1381) and William Wodeford (c. 1396). Upon reading them, Ussher saw that the quotations coincided with ones found in Eusebius, and differed

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<sup>39</sup> Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> For Ussher see Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early-Modern Ireland and England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> J. E. L. Oulton, "Ussher's Work as a Patristic Scholar and Church Historian" in *Hermathena* LXXXVIII (November 1956): 3-11; Ian Hugh Clary, "The Conduit to Conveigh Life': James Ussher's *Immanuel* and Patristic Christology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 30.2 (Autumn 2012): 160-176.

<sup>42</sup> For instance James Ussher, *An answer to a challenge made by a Jesuite in Ireland* (Dublin, 1624).

<sup>43</sup> Ford, *James Ussher*, 237.

with the long recension.<sup>44</sup> Because English writers quoted them, Ussher concluded that the Latin text of Ignatius' letters must be housed in an English library. His search paid off as Ussher discovered two Latin manuscripts of the letters. As he studied them, Ussher surmised that the translator was likely by Grossteste himself. Notes in the margin betrayed an English author: "Incus est instrumentum fabri; dicitur Anglice anfeld."<sup>45</sup> There were also comparisons made in the notes between the Latin translation and the original Greek. Knowing that Grossteste was one of the foremost Greek scholars in England at the time, he was the best candidate for translator.<sup>46</sup> Lightfoot proved that Grossteste was the author by accurately comparing a manuscript from Tours that testified to be authored by the bishop of Lincoln.<sup>47</sup>

The seven letters of the Latin translation were enough to convince Ussher that six of the seven were genuine; he rejected the letter to Polycarp. Ussher came to this conclusion due to a statement from Jerome who argued that the Polycarp letter was inauthentic. In 1644 he published *Polycarp et Ignatii Epistolae* offering his conclusions. Of his importance, Lightfoot could say, "To the critical genius of Ussher belongs the honour of restoring the true Ignatius."<sup>48</sup>

In 1646 Isaac Vossius (1618-1689) published a short form of the Greek text found in the Medicean Library in Florence. Although the letter to the Romans was absent, it was later included as authentic

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<sup>44</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 76; Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius*, xii; Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> "The anvil destroys the workman's tool; says the Englishman's anvil."

<sup>46</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 76-77.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Oulton, "Ussher's Work as a Patristic Scholar and Church Historian," 9.

after it had been found in a Latin manuscript of the “Acts of Ignatius” published by Theodore Ruinart (1657-1709) in 1689 in his *Acta Martyrum Sincera*.<sup>49</sup> The work of these seventeenth-century scholars essentially closed the door on the question of which were the authentic letters. The final work of Zahn and especially Lightfoot placed final confirmation in the minds of scholars that they can rest assured that the seven letters of the middle recension are indeed those written by Ignatius.

Now that we have an understanding of proper Ignatian sources, a survey of his apologetic approaches to Christology and pneumatology are in order.

### **Christology**

In arguments against false teachers, Ignatius provides an apologetic for the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ. A number of Christological statements appear in what could be considered rough creedal form found in *Ephesians* 7.2; 18.2; *Magnesians* 11; *Trallians* 9.1-2 and *Smyrnaeans* 1.1-2. This essay will first evaluate assertions about Christ’s humanity and then his deity. This evaluation is based on the creedal forms and relevant statements found elsewhere in the letters.

### **Humanity**

In the early church an erroneous teaching developed regarding the humanity of Christ called Docetism. Believing the material world to be evil, Docetists taught that Christ did not assume a physical body nor did he suffer on the cross. Though he seemed to possess a human form he was only a spirit. Their name is derived from the Greek *dokei/n* meaning “to appear” because Christ was human and suffered in

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<sup>49</sup> Brown, *The Authentic Writings of Ignatius*, xii.

appearance not in reality.<sup>50</sup> Ignatius explained this teaching to the Trallians saying, “some atheists (that is, unbelievers) say, he suffered in appearance only” (*Trall.* 10. Cf. *Smyrn.* 2). These people “mix Jesus Christ with poison...and so with fatal pleasure drink down death” (*Trall.* 6.2). Ignatius combated this “heresy” (*Trall.* 6.1) by stressing both the historical and physical nature of Jesus’ person.

In regard to His historicity, Ignatius told the Magnesians to “be fully convinced of the birth and the suffering and the resurrection” of Jesus (*Magn.* 11). Into each of the five creedal statements Ignatius injects historical figures grounding the life of Christ in space and time. Four characters are mentioned: Mary (*Eph.* 7.2; 18.2; *Trall.* 9.1), King David (*Eph.* 18.2; *Trall.* 9.1; *Smyrn.* 1.1), Pontius Pilate (*Magn.* 11; *Trall.* 9.1; *Smyrn.* 1.2) and Herod the Tetrarch (*Smyrn.* 1.2). David is mentioned in reference to Christ who was his descendant; Mary is the mother of Jesus; and both Pontius Pilate and Herod were rulers at the time of Jesus’ death. This attention to detail regarding history is important because it allows the readers and hearers of the letters to think of Christ in relation to concrete people and events. These were not fables or legends. From this it is readily apparent that Ignatius believed Jesus to be a real person who lived in a particular place at a specific point in history.

Alongside Christ’s historical reality, Ignatius also places an emphasis on His physical being. The “one physician” was “both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in humanity...” (*Eph.* 7.2). He was not a Docetic phantasm; rather He existed in real flesh and blood. Jesus experienced all of the regular limitations of a human being. For instance, He was conceived (*Eph.* 18.2); he was born (*Eph.* 7.2; 18.2;

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<sup>50</sup> Stuart G. Hall, “Docetism” in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000), 163-165.

*Magn.11.1; Trall. 9.1; Smyrn. 1.1*); he “both ate and drank” (*Trall. 9.1*); he was baptized (*Eph. 18.2; Smyrn. 1.1*); he suffered persecution (*Trall. 9.1*); he was nailed to a cross (*Trall. 9.1; Smyrn. 1.2*); he died (*Magn.11; Trall. 9.1*); and he was resurrected (*Magn.11; Trall. 9.2*).

In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius disparaged the idea that Jesus “suffered in appearance only.” Jesus “suffered for our sakes...and he truly suffered just as he truly raised himself” (*Smyrn. 2*). Jesus was “in the flesh even after the resurrection” and appeared in order for His disciples to touch His raised body (3.1). Luke 24:39, “when he came to Peter and those with him” is offered as proof of this (3.2). Ignatius, quotes Jesus as saying, “‘Take hold of me; handle me and see that I am not a disembodied demon.’ And immediately they touched him and believed...” As in the statement of *Trallians 9.1-2*, Ignatius again affirms that Jesus ate and drank with the disciples “like one who is composed of flesh...” (3.3).

To show that his belief in the real humanity of Jesus was seriously held, Ignatius points to his eventual martyrdom as proof. “For if these things were done by our Lord in appearance only, then I am in chains in appearance only. Why, moreover, have I surrendered myself to death, to fire, to sword, to beasts?” (4.2. Cf. *Trall. 10*). The physical suffering and death of the “perfect man” as well as His physical resurrection were such fundamental truths for Ignatius that he was willing to lay his life down for them. He did not want the recipients of his letters to think that such teaching was optional for the Christian. For Ignatius, apologetics became a matter of life and death.

## **Deity**

While Ignatius emphasized the humanity of Jesus, he did not do so to the neglect of His deity. To the Ephesians Ignatius could say that He was “God in man” (*Eph. 7.2*) He was “our God, Jesus the Christ” (*Eph.*

18.2). In the opening of his letter to the Romans Ignatius twice refers to Him as “our God” (*Rom.* 1). To the Magnesians he said that Jesus Christ “came forth from one Father and remained with the One and returned to the One” (*Magn.* 7.2).

A beautiful testimony to the deity of Christ can be found in the creedal statement of *Ephesians* 7.2, where Ignatius declares, “There is one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering and then beyond it, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In this passage, in paradoxical couplets, Ignatius affirms both the humanity and deity of Christ in one relationship that almost seems to anticipate the Nicene Creed published two hundred years later. Jesus is the “one physician” yet is “flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man.” The “one physician” speaks to the unity of Christ’s person, yet His human and divine natures are paired concerning its physical and spiritual character. His temporality and eternity is couched in terms of the natural and divine birth of the incarnation. Jesus was “God in man” both “from Mary and from God.” Later in *Ephesians* 18.2 Ignatius says, “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” (See also *Trall.* 9.1).

In *Smyrnaeans* 1.1 Ignatius wants the church to be “totally convinced with regard to our Lord that he is truly of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to divine will and power, truly born of a virgin.” Again, the human and divine origin of Christ is affirmed, as well as the virgin birth. Specifically Ignatius points to Jesus as the “Son of God” and is so because of “divine will and power.” This also comes just after Ignatius has said, “I glorify Jesus Christ, the God who made you so wise.”

In his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius encourages his fellow bishop in the faith. He provides the bishop of Smyrna with a number of practical suggestions (*Pol.* 1.2-5.2) laced with doctrinal affirmations. One such affirmation has to do with the divinity of Jesus. Ignatius tells Polycarp in 3.2 to “Understand the times. Wait expectantly for him who is above time: the Eternal, the Invisible, who for our sake became visible; the Intangible, the Unsuffering, who for our sake suffered, who for our sake endured in every way.” In this one statement a number of important points about Jesus’ life are laid out, including the incarnation, crucifixion and second coming. But there is one affirmation pointing clearly to the divinity of Jesus: He exists outside of time. He can do so because He is eternal, invisible and intangible. Of course, Ignatius has argued firmly for the real humanity of Christ in other letters, so in this statement it is Christ’s divine nature that is being referred to. His humanity is also seen in the affirmation of His becoming “visible” in the incarnation. Therefore, in this one term, “above time” Ignatius paints a clear picture of the divinity of Jesus.

A final note about Ignatius’ letters concerning the divinity of Christ is the place he provides Jesus in the Trinity. Though it appears only briefly in the letters, the Trinity is clearly formulated (*Magn.* 13.1; *Eph.* 18.2). In *Magnesians* 13.1 those addressed are told to “be eager” to be “firmly grounded in the precepts of the Lord...in the Son and the Father and in the Spirit.” The Son is clearly Jesus Christ as earlier in the letter Ignatius writes “there is one God who revealed himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word which came forth from silence...” (*Magn.* 8.2. Cf. *Eph.* 4.2; *Trall.* 3.1). In *Ephesians* 20.2 Jesus is called the “Son of man and Son of God.”

Another Trinitarian statement is found in *Ephesians* 18.2. Here Ignatius says, “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.” Jesus is affirmed as God, yet is also spoken of as being conceived by God’s plan. There is a distinction in the two uses of the word “God.” One use is in reference to Jesus and the other is in reference to the one planning His conception. Mentioned alongside God and Jesus the Christ is the Holy Spirit. In *Magnesians* 13.1 Ignatius speaks of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and in 7.2 states that the Son came from the Father. With this in mind it is therefore plausible that the God who planned Jesus’ conception is none other than the Father. Be that as it may, what is clear is that Jesus is referred to as God in what appears to be a Trinitarian statement.

By placing Him alongside the Father and the Spirit in both letters Ignatius recognises Jesus as the Son, the second person of the Triune Godhead. But what of his view of the Holy Spirit?

### **Pneumatology**

Of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit appears less frequently than the Father or the Son in Ignatius. The Greek words *pneuma*, *pneumatikos*, *pneumatikon* and their cognates appear over thirty-five times, yet only seven refer explicitly to the Holy Spirit (*Eph.* 9.1; 18.2; *Magn.* 13.1, 2; *Phld.* Intro; 7.1, 2) while one other may possibly be related (*Smyrn.* 3.3). All of the other uses of this word group are in relation to the incorporeal aspect of a physical person, often referred to by Ignatius as “flesh and spirit” (For example *Smryn.* 1.1; 13.2).

This section will address those verses in Ignatius’ writings that relate specifically to the Holy Spirit. By doing so it will be observed that as a Trinitarian, he considers the Spirit to be equally God alongside the Father and the Son. Also, Ignatius’ understanding of the function of the Spirit within the lives of his people in relation to soteriology and ecclesiology will be examined.

## Spirit as God

In the four Trinitarian statements found in the letters of Ignatius (*Eph.* 9.1; 18.2; *Magn.* 13.1-2; *Phld.* 7.2), the Holy Spirit is afforded a place alongside the Father and the Son as a member of the Godhead. The inclusion of the Holy Spirit with the Father and Son in the Trinitarian statements demonstrates that he also is God.

*Magnesians* 13.1 is a clear Trinitarian statement where Ignatius, after exhorting the church to “stand securely” in the faith, tells them that they will prosper in everything done “in faith and love, in the Son and the Father and in the Spirit.” The use of the word faith is significant because God is the only person that Christians are to place their faith in (Cf. *Eph.* 9.1). It would therefore be idolatry if one were to place their faith in the Spirit were he not God. Following this, in *Magnesians* 13.2, Ignatius continues this Trinitarian thinking by exhorting the church to submit to their leaders as the apostles submitted “to Christ and to the Father and to the Spirit.” Again, it would be idolatrous to expect his readers to submit to the Spirit in such a way alongside the Father and Son were he not God.

Ignatius views the Spirit as God, but he also understands him as a person, as in *Philadelphians* 7.1. Here Ignatius refers to those who may seek to deceive him according to the flesh. In contrast to this, he notes that the Spirit cannot be so deceived because “it comes from God.” He then says that the Spirit “knows whence it comes and where it is going.” The Spirit also “exposes the things that are hidden.” By attributing to the Spirit the ability to know, to not be deceived and to expose hidden things, Ignatius personifies him. A non-personal entity would not have the ability to know, nor would it be possible to either deceive or not deceive something that is not a person; the idea of attempting to deceive an inanimate object is absurd. Finally, only a person can do the work of exposing things that are hidden. Later in 7.2

Ignatius speaks of the Spirit preaching about Christian unity. Only a person can preach. He then fills out the Trinitarian nature of devotion by saying, “Keep your flesh as the Temple of God; love unity; flee divisions; be imitators of Jesus Christ as he is of his Father.” Essentially, the Spirit says to imitate the Son who imitates the Father.

In each of these attributes, Ignatius is showing that the Spirit is a person who thinks, communicates and acts. Ontologically the Holy Spirit is God. He is a person who shares equally in the divinity of the Godhead just as the Father and Son. Therefore, the Spirit is one to whom faith and submission are due.

### **Spirit and Salvation**

Economically, the Holy Spirit plays an important role in relation to the created order. With the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit has a specific part to play in the outworking of salvation, both historically and personally. Ignatius’ letters reveal certain aspects of this role in terms of salvation.

Recently, theologians have recognised two aspects of the plan of salvation the so-called *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*.<sup>51</sup> The former has to do with the historical outworking of this plan of the Father to redeem a people to himself primarily through his Son, Jesus Christ. The latter is the application of the finished plan to this people both as individuals and as a collective whole. In Ignatius’ letters, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in reference to aspects of both the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis* (though he does not use that terminology). In terms of the *historia*, the Spirit is spoken of in relation to Christ’s earthly life, especially his birth. In the *ordo* he places particular focus on the doctrine of sanctification.

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<sup>51</sup> See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* trans. John R. DeWitt (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 14.

In *Ephesians* 18.2, Ignatius speaks to the human and divine nature of Jesus. He was “conceived by Mary according to the plan of God” and “he was from the seed of David, but also from the Holy Spirit.” Not only does Ignatius argue for the reality of the incarnation, he does so by explicitly stating its Trinitarian nature. The plan of Mary’s conception originated with God. God here is to be understood as the Father, distinct from the other use of the word God in reference to Jesus Christ. It could literally be read, “God the Son was conceived by Mary according to the plan of God the Father.” By being born of Mary, Jesus was of the Davidic line (Cf. *Eph.* 20.1; *Trall.* 9.1; *Rom.* 7.3; *Smyrn.* 1.1). But Ignatius also points out that Jesus was “from the Holy Spirit” reflecting the teaching in Matthew 1:18 as well as Luke 1:35. In the latter the Holy Spirit is said to have come upon Mary and the power of the Most High would overshadow her allowing her to conceive the Son of God as a virgin. Therefore, one aspect of the Spirit’s role in redemptive history is the incarnation of the Messiah.

In regard to the *ordo salutis*, Ignatius pays specific attention to the work of the Spirit in sanctification. Just as Ignatius framed the incarnation in Trinitarian categories, in *Ephesians* 9.1 the progress of sanctification also involves all three members of the Godhead. He says, “You are stones of the Father’s temple, prepared for the building of God the Father. For you are being carried up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a cable the Holy Spirit; and your faith is your hoist, and love is the path that carries you up to God.” Ignatius writes this after having expressed his concern over those “with an evil teaching” who had “passed through” and his pleasure that the Ephesians “did not allow them to sow any seeds” among them. Vivid imagery is used to explain the Christian life, utilizing a crane or hoist as an illustration. The cross is the “crane of Jesus Christ” that carries Christians up to the heights of God by the

hoist of faith along the path of love. Interestingly, the Holy Spirit is referred to as a “cable” or “rope” (skoini,on). The idea is that the Holy Spirit carries a person to God by faith based upon the saving power of Christ’s cross.

Another redemptive-historical theme in Ignatius that likely relates to the Holy Spirit is that of Christ’s spiritual union with the Father. In *Smyrneans* 3.3, when explaining Christ’s post-resurrection appearances, Ignatius points out that the Lord ate and drank with his disciples as a “fleshly being.” This was in contrast to the docetic teaching that Jesus never assumed a physical body. Yet all the while that “he was in the flesh even after the resurrection” (3.1) “he was spiritually united with the Father” (3.3). It is this spiritual union between Christ and the Father that has a potential link to the Spirit. The adverb “spiritually” (pneumatikw/j) used to explain this union may have reference to the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 the apostle Paul speaks of the “natural person” who “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God.” This is the case because such things are “spiritually discerned.” The word translated “spiritually” is pneumatikw/j the same used by Ignatius in 3.3. Only the “spiritual person” can discern such things (2:15) because he or she has “received the Spirit” (2:12) and is “taught by him” (2:13). Pneumatikw/j is to be understood in relation to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:14; therefore it is a good possibility that Ignatius is using it in the same manner. If this is the case, the implication is that the Holy Spirit united Jesus Christ to the Father while he ministered on earth.

### **Spirit and Church**

Besides soteriology, the Spirit’s role in ecclesiology is also noteworthy (*Magn.* 13.2; *Phld.* Intro 7.2). Ignatius has a very high view of his office and frequently admonishes the recipients of his letters to submit to the

authority of their church leaders. In a number of places he referenced the Spirit as added weight to his argument. For instance, in the introduction to *Philadelphians*, Ignatius claims that the bishop, presbyters and deacons were “securely set in place” by the Holy Spirit. These church officers had also been “appointed in accordance with the mind of Jesus Christ.” At the very beginning of the introduction Ignatius calls the Philadelphians “the church of God the Father.” Although not a formal Trinitarian statement, the church is founded upon the unity of purpose between the three members of the Godhead. It is within this schema that the Holy Spirit’s own role is explained, that of securely setting in place the three offices of the church.

Another text outlining the relationship of the Spirit to ecclesiology is *Philadelphians* 7.2. Here Ignatius makes the claim that the Spirit preached to him saying, “Do nothing apart from the bishop...” and continues on to explain the Trinitarian nature of devotion noted above. It is this appeal to Spirit’s authority for the establishing of a specific form of church government that is important to note. For Ignatius, submission to the bishop is not a mere human requirement and comes not from a “human source” but from the Spirit of God himself. To deny the bishop is essentially to deny the Spirit. However, Ignatius was also quick to distance the authority of a bishop, like himself, from that of the apostles. In *Rom.* 4.3 he says, “I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul: they were apostles, I am a convict.”<sup>52</sup>

Although Pneumatology is not a prominent theme in Ignatius’ letters, they do contain a high view of the Holy Spirit and are a helpful resource when considering the early development of this foundational Christian doctrine.

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<sup>52</sup> For a more complete treatment of Ignatius on apostolic authority see Charles E. Hill, “Ignatius and the Apostolate,” *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001): 226-248.

## Conclusion

Some scholars have detected a certain “mania” in Ignatius’ desire for martyrdom; Michael A. G. Haykin answers this pointing to the dedication of the bishop to his Saviour: “A careful study...of Ignatius’ thinking about his own death reveals a man who rightly knows that Christian believing demands passionate engagement of the entire person, even to the point of physical death.”<sup>53</sup> Ignatius’ passionate engagement involved the demand to give a reason for his hope in Christ, to the degree that he laid his life down to demonstrate the depth of his belief. While not every Christian today is called to martyrdom, we are to live out our faith in our “entire person” as Ignatius did. This includes our apologetic, an important component of our theology. An apologetic that is only worth defending abstractly, without a whole person devotion, is probably not worth much in the first place. May the legacy of Ignatius continue to encourage Christians to whole-hearted devotion, whether theologically or in terms of practice. Christ devoted himself wholly to the church, it is the very least we could do.

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<sup>53</sup> Michael A. G. Haykin, “‘Come to the Father’: Ignatius of Antioch and his calling to be a martyr,” *Themelios* (32.3): 27.