

Contents

*Editorial: Retrieval, Resourcement, and the Reformation: Tradition,
Scripture, and the Protestant Reformation*

By: Coleman M. Ford and Shawn J. Wilhite 1-5

Articles:

Finding Wine in the Water Jar: A History of Interpretation of John 2:1-11

By: Chase Sears 6-31

*Early Christian Wives as Household Missionaries: An Analysis of
1 Peter 3:1-6*

By: Miguel Echevarria 32-53

Cogitatio: Ignatius of Antioch

*“Attuned to the Bishop as Strings to a Lyre”: Imitation and Virtue Formation
in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*

By: Coleman M. Ford 54-66

*Ignatius’s Trinitarian Foundation for Church Unity and Obeying Spiritual
Leaders*

By: Edward L. Smither 67-80

Cogitatio: Ignatius of Antioch

“Attuned to the Bishop as Strings to a Lyre”: Imitation and Virtue Formation in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch

Coleman M. Ford
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Introduction

In his *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, André Comte-Sponville explains the virtue of “good faith” as “the agreement of our acts and words with our inner life.” It is an “alethic virtue, it has truth itself as its object.”¹ Good faith, therefore, includes true actions that reveal true self. As Comte-Sponville maintains, faith has truth as its object and right action as its consequence. In Christian perspective, this truth which produces faith and leads to right action is the gospel. Christian faith has the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as its object. It is this object which informs the virtue of faith and the subsequent virtuous actions which form in agreement with that inner life.

John McGuckin notes the origins of virtue language and philosophy from pre-Christian Hellenistic traditions, particularly from

¹André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 195.

Aristotle and Stoic philosophies. Virtue it seems, for Christians, stems from this background yet “it is constituted by biblical structures . . . the apocalyptic judgment of God, and the specific dictates of Christ’s teachings and those of the apostles.”² The tradition of early Christian virtue language, especially the twofold path—or two ways—is evident in early writers such as Paul, the writer of the *Didache*, and the Clementine letters. Missing from this assessment is Ignatius and his letters.

Ignatius, writing to various churches throughout Asia minor in the early second century, presents a vision for church unity and flourishing. In many ways, this vision is not unique, reflecting numerous Pauline parallels for church order and moral witness. In other ways, it is quite unique, demonstrating a contextually based theological vision from a writer one generation removed from the apostolic ministry. For this reason, Ignatius continues to be a figure of interest for those wishing to build a bridge between New Testament Christian practice and that of the subsequent generations.

Much has been written on this martyr bishop from the second century. Some have spent considerable time focusing on Ignatius’s ecclesiological assertions.³ Others have attempted to discern the

²John Anthony McGuckin, “Virtue” in *The SCM Press A-Z of Patristic Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2005), 353.

³Ignatius has been mined for various theological concerns. One recent work on Ignatius and ecclesiology is Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2007). Here Brent argues for Ignatius as the progenitor of the the three-fold ecclesiological office. A more recent text, though broadly assessing early Christian episcopacy is Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

sacramental theology contained within his letters.⁴ Still others have focused on Ignatius's view of early Christianity's relationship to Judaism.⁵ In need of further exploration within Ignatian studies is the martyr bishop's understanding of moral formation within the Christian community. Specifically, how did Ignatius envision the Christian life as growth in virtue? Based on the incarnation of Christ and the establishment of his church, what is the best way to live according to Ignatius? This is a moral question. The aspect of virtue formation has received little attention among Ignatian scholarship, yet insights from ancient virtue language can shed light onto various concerns from this second century martyr bishop.

Life of Ignatius

This second century martyr appears to us as somewhat of a mystery. Like a “meteor” which has traveled through space for eons, only to briefly blaze across our sky, he expires in a “shower of fire.”⁶ The only glimpse we receive of him comes from his seven epistles written to various churches *en route* to martyrdom in Rome. He wrote no dialogues nor expounded on any facet of Christian theology at length, but Ignatius has become for us a window into the world of the post-Apostolic church and a “focus in scholarly discussion of Christian origins,” as Michael Holmes insists.⁷ Ignatius is the one figure we know

⁴F. C. Klawiter, “The Eucharist and Sacramental Realism in the Thought of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” *Studia Liturgica* 37.2 (2007): 129–63.

⁵Thomas A. Robinson, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways: Early Jewish-Christian Relations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

⁶Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 166.

⁷Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 166.

most about in early second century Christianity. By his own affirmation, he was disciplined by men of apostolic generation.

In his letters, Ignatius presents a model of three-tiered church leadership, that is, churches led by a single bishop with a council of elders and deacons. This apparently disparate ecclesiology, disparate because it appears to be a dramatic shift from New Testament leadership structures, has led some to call for a late second century date for Ignatius writing.⁸ Based on the context of his writing, this doesn't seem to be the case, and early Christian sources attest otherwise. Scholars date Ignatius's journey and writings in the early second century, perhaps around AD 107, during the reign of emperor Trajan.

Ignatius was bishop in Antioch, perhaps appointed by Peter himself, but no such evidence for this exists besides an assertion by a (much later) fifth century father by the name of Theodoret of Cyrus. History does not record the events leading to his arrest, but presumably an outbreak of local persecution arose, and as the leader of the community, Ignatius was singled out for execution. His seven epistles to the various churches demonstrates a concern for unity in the face of persecution, heresy, and potential inner strife. He writes as a concerned pastor rather than a controlling force. Any agenda that Ignatius might have had is best discerned as a shepherd concerned with the health of the church that he loves in order to promote the gospel for which he is giving his life. Not only the example of Ignatius's testimony, but also the concepts for which he so passionately contends, are worthy of investigation towards Christian character formation.

⁸Timothy D. Barnes, "The Date of Ignatius," *Expository Times* 120.3 (2008): 119-30.

The Origin and Goal of Virtue in Ignatius

In his letters, Ignatius is primarily concerned with the unity of the church and the holiness of each local congregation. These two facets are intimately connected in the mind of Ignatius. The holiness of the body, both corporately and the individual members therein, serve to uphold the unity necessary to further promote such unity. Ignatius, using rich musical metaphors, describes this concept as the harmony of the church. Believers are to be united in order to “run together in harmony with the mind of God.” (Ign.*Eph.* 3.2). This harmony with God is displayed in the each local church's mutual submission to their God-appointed leadership. Since the Jesus Christ is in the mind of the Father, and the bishops are in the mind of Christ, it is only natural for believers “to run together in harmony with the mind of the bishop.” (Ign.*Eph.* 4.1). This harmony with the bishop, as well as the presbyters who are "attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre, leads to a “unanimity and harmonious love” in which “Jesus Christ is sung.” (Ign.*Eph.* 4.1). This theme is repeated throughout his letters, as Ignatius implores his hearers, “Be eager to do everything in godly harmony.” (Ign.*Magn.* 6.1).

Ignatius further implores his hearers to this harmony and states:

You must join this chorus, every one of your, so that by being harmonious in unanimity and by taking your pitch from God you may sing in unison with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, in order that he may both hear you and, on the basis of what you do well, acknowledge that you 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. (Ign.*Eph.* 4.2).

Godliness for Ignatius includes harmonious living in the church. Only when in harmony with the church leaders and fellow believers can Christians truly experience growth. Those who do anything apart from church leadership “[do] not have a clean conscience.” (Ign.*Trall.* 7.2). The ideal of harmony comes both from the Trinitarian economy of God, as Ignatius notes in his letter to the Ephesians, as well as a following the commands of God. Regarding the bishop in Philadelphia, “[He] is attuned to the commandments as a harp to its strings.” (Ign.*Phil.* 1.1). The sheep, according to Ignatius, should follow their shepherd.

Ignatius has a unifying purpose even if he addresses specific issues and people. Throughout the extent of his letters, Ignatius implores believers to a Christo-centric life in a unified community. Schoedel notes unity as the “central concern” for Ignatius.⁹ To this end, he implores readers to godly virtue, pointing to church leaders as models to imitate. To the Magnesians he writes, “Let all of you run together as to the one temple of God, as to one altar, to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from one father and remained with the One and returned to the One” (Ign.*Magn.* 7.2). Underneath this basic paradigm is the witness of the apostles and reality of Christ's incarnation. The incarnation of Christ, and the Trinitarian economy of God, provide the foundation for Ignatius's moral exhortation. Virtue apart from this foundation, for Ignatius, is sham virtue. Any supposed display of godliness apart from the unified body of Christ, led by three-fold offices of church leadership, are illegitimate, divisive, and immoral.

⁹William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 21.

“Being Imitators of God”

Ignatius repeatedly calls his readers to imitation as a means to growth in godliness. A good argument can be made for a distinctly Pauline theme in Ignatius’s imitation motif. To the Ephesians, Ignatius recognizes their act of love as a result of their imitation of Christ. The Ephesians being imitators (*μιμηται ὄντες θεοῦ*), completed a task that was natural for them, according to Ignatius (*Ign.Eph.* 1.2). The act of love following the example of Christ thus becomes a naturally expressed virtue. This has parallels to Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian church a generation before from Eph 5:1-2. This expression of corporate love comes primarily through the person of the ephesian bishop, Onesimus. This leader of the group, showing “inexpressible love” lives “in accordance with the standard set by Jesus Christ” and is therefore worthy of imitation (*Ign.Eph.* 1.3). The imitative relationship here is cyclical. The corporate body, imitating Christ, has expressed their love to Ignatius chiefly through sending their bishop, who himself is following the standard of Christ and should be imitated. Ignatius observes something similar in the Trallians, who are “imitators of God” and, when they demonstrate that they are subject to the bishop, are “living not in accordance with human standards but in accordance with Jesus Christ.” (*Ign.Trall.* 1.2-2.1). Thus, it seems as though the relationship of imitation includes both God and those whom God has appointed who serves as “[models] of the Father.” (*Ign.Trall.* 3.1).

Ignatius, likewise, praises his hearers for not imitating those who speak untruthfully about Jesus Christ. These are the “mad dogs that bite by stealth” whose “bite is hard to heal.” (*Ign.Eph.* 7.1). Those who came through “with evil doctrine” were not allowed a hearing. (*Ign.Eph.* 9.1). These ones “adulterously corrupt households” who have

polluted themselves and “will go to the unquenchable fire”—and so do those who follow them (Ign.*Eph.* 16.1–2). Likewise, the Ephesians should “not be eager to imitate” the deeds of unbelievers, but rather “be eager to be imitators of the Lord” (Ign.*Eph.* 10.2–3). This imitation of the Lord, which bears wrong-doing and rejection, culminates in a call to live with “complete purity and self-control...[and abiding] in Christ Jesus physically and spiritually” (Ign.*Eph.* 10.3). Ignatius relates the goodness of Christ as the model of imitation. He relates, “For if he were to imitate the way we act, we are lost” (Ign.*Magn.* 10.1).

Much of Ignatius's language of imitation centers on the role of the bishop and other church leaders. To the Trallians, they should follow the presbyters as if they were the apostles of Jesus Christ (Ign.*Trall.* 2.2). Ignatius praises the bishop of the Philadelphian church for his “godly mind” which is “virtuous and perfect” and as one who has “steadfast character” (Ign.*Phil.* 1.2). The implication here is that this bishop is worthy of imitation. Likewise, to the Smyrnaeans, the calls for obedience to the bishop in a way that imitate’s the Son’s submission to the Father (Ign.*Smyrn.* 8.1). This guarantees against evil division, which is contrary to the nature of God and thus the goal of the church.

Parenesis and Protrepsis

Additional considerations help readers understand the nature of moral formation in the letters of Ignatius. The literary notions of protrepsis and parenesis. The concepts of protrepsis and parenesis draw attention to the manner in which a writer conveys moral direction. Protreptic literature “[urges] the reader to convert to a way of life, join a school, or accept a set of teachings as normative for the reader’s life.”¹⁰

¹⁰Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986), 92, 113.

Parenesis, from the Greek *παραινέω*, is a “[technical] term describing a literary style that offers a moral and ethical exhortation based on common religious or moral convictions.”¹¹ Such terms, originating in Greco-Roman moral literature, yet ultimately appropriated in Jewish and early Christian literature, greatly aid in our understanding of Ignatius’s ethical exhortation. Throughout his letters, Ignatius offers a parenesis to his readers, imploring them to greater acts of virtue. To the Ephesians, he encourages them to continue praying for the salvation of humankind. Prayer should be coupled with action, instruction by means of their deeds (*Ign.Eph.* 10.1). Each evil act should be met with an equally virtuous act, that is, gentleness for anger, humility for pride, prayers for slander, and civilized action for cruelty (*Ign.Eph.* 10.2).

Paranetic language often centers on unification and obedience to church leadership, as previously observed. To the Magnesians, Ignatius encourages them to “be firmly grounded in the precepts of the Lord and the apostles” along with the bishop, council of presbyters and the “godly deacons” (*Ign.Magn.* 13.1). Following this Ignatius implores to subject themselves to the bishop “and to one another” just as Christ was subject to the Father and the apostles to Christ (*Ign.Magn.* 13.1). Similarly, to the Trallians, he urges his hearers to “do nothing without the bishop” and to “be subject also to the council of presbyters as to the apostles of Jesus Christ” (*Ign.Trall.* 2.2).

The protreptic nature of Ignatius’s letters often come in his negative pronouncements regarding alternate ways of life. These are the false teachers regarding the person and work of Christ and the ethical consequences of disbelief. These teachers “have no concern for

¹¹“Parenesis” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*. See also BDAG, “*παραινέω*,” 148.

love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty” (Ign.*Smyrn.* 6.2). These are the ethical consequences for disbelieving the incarnation—a denial of care for those in the flesh. These flesh-deniers will ultimately “perish in their contentiousness” though Ignatius extends a word of hope that even these too would learn to love and experience resurrection of life (Ign.*Smyrn.* 7.1). Regarding these ones, Ignatius implores his hearers to hold fast to the gospel, which includes the confession of the suffering and risen Christ, not allowing false teachers a public or private hearing (Ign.*Smyrn.* 7.2). Similarly, he implores Polycarp to stand firm “like an anvil” against those who “teach strange doctrines” (ἑτεροδιδασκαλοῦντες).

The Will and Human Action

It is worth mentioning something of the will and human action in Ignatian perspective. Traditional virtue formation posits numerous components leading to action. In one respect for Ignatius, the will and human action is directly related to endurance. In this regard, the goal is to reach God and Christians are called to “patiently endure all the abuse of the ruler of this age and escape” (Ign.*Magn.* 1.2). With the prophets as an example, Christians “patiently endure, in order that [they] may be found to be disciples of Jesus Christ” (Ign.*Magn.* 9.1). To Polycarp he calls his bishop friend to “patiently bear all things. . . [be] more diligent that you are. . . [and wait] expectantly for the one who is above time” (Ign.*Poly.* 3.1-2). This action is founded upon the belief of the incarnate Christ who suffered and endured on his behalf.

Ignatius everywhere recognizes the relationship between action and virtue. For Ignatius, righteous deeds are voluntary actions, yet not actions disassociated from Christo--centric motivation. Echoing Jesus's

words in Matt 12:33-35, Ignatius maintains, “The tree is known by its fruit; thus those who profess to be Christ's will be recognized by their actions. For the work is a matter not of what one promises now, but of persevering to the end in the power of faith” (*Ign.Eph.* 14.2). Ignatius entreats Polycarp not only to “[flee] from wicked practices” but to preach a sermon imploring his hearers to do the same (*Ign.Poly.* 5.1). Such a sermon should call hearers to marital faithfulness, chastity, humility, and a God-honoring life (*Ign.Poly.* 5.1-2).

Ignatius engages the idea of the will in numerous places. Christians must choose to act like a Christian, “not just be called Christians” (*Ign.Magn.* 4.1). Additionally, the two ways language in his letter to the Magnesians appeals to man's will to act. Those who have been stamped with the image of “God the Father through Jesus Christ” must “voluntarily choose to die into his suffering” (*Ign.Magn.* 5.2). Voluntary language in this passage highlights the nature of the two ways motif. Walking down either path, the way of death or the way of life, is ultimately a voluntary action. In fact, the protreptic nature of much of his writing displays an understanding of voluntary action. Though founded upon the example of Christ, members of the body must choose to act in accordance with a Christ-like life. A Christ-centric life demands Christ-centric action.

Additional Considerations

Ignatius uses other language that is important for virtue. To the Magnesians, he praises their “well-ordered” love toward God (*Ign.Magn.* 1.1). The idea of “well-ordered” loves points to a later tradition of moral reflection, particularly Augustine and other fathers regarding the nature of human passions in light of the fall. This idea as

well as the Greek terminology here (πολυεύτακτος), deserves further exploration.

Ignatius also testifies to a prophetic utterance in the Spirit regarding imitation and virtue. The Spirit, accordance to this testimony, calls for unity among the body. To the Philadelphians, Ignatius reports not a human but the Spirit preaching when he says, “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.” (Ign.Phil. 7.2). This string of imperatives, supposedly prompted by the Spirit, raises some interesting questions. Does Ignatius believe that he is presenting a true prophetic utterance, or is this Ignatius’s way to confirm his teaching? To what extent does the Spirit implore Christians to virtue? What role then, if any, does pneumatology play in Christian virtue formation? While Ignatius doesn’t ultimately answer these questions, the presence of a potentially Spirit-informed call to virtuous living opens up considerations on how early Christians conceived of the role of the Spirit towards virtue formation.

Conclusion

Reading the letters of Ignatius through the lens of virtue formation provides a more robust reading and highlights some of the main concerns for this martyr bishop. Ignatius’s preoccupation with the moral question, that is, how should Christians live, is one that I assert was of primary importance for this condemned bishop of Antioch. Concerns of ecclesiology, sacraments, Christology, trinitarianism, and more can best be understood through the filter of Christian moral reflection. In light of these things, then, how should Christians live? It is this question that helps readers understand the letters of Ignatius

most clearly, and reveals how this martyr bishop sought to use his last remaining days to encourage the church.