

Ignatius of Antioch

Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch—the city where the followers of Jesus were for the first time called “Christians”—was martyred in Rome around A.D. 110. Because he may well have known the Apostles personally, he is identified as an “Apostolic Father.” As he travelled across Asia (modern Turkey), he received delegations from the Christian communities. Seven of the letters he sent back to these Churches are still extant and constitute a precious record of the faith of the primitive Church. What follows is the letter he wrote to the Church in Philadelphia.

Introduction

Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus,¹ to the Church of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, which is at Philadelphia, in Asia, which has obtained mercy, and is established in the harmony of God, and rejoices unceasingly in the passion of our Lord, and is filled with all mercy through his resurrection; which I salute in the blood of Jesus Christ, who is our eternal and enduring joy, especially if men are in unity with the bishop, the priests, and the deacons, who have been appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ, whom He has established in security, after His own will, and by His Holy Spirit.

The Role of the Bishop

Your bishop, I know, obtained the ministry (which pertains to the common good) not of himself, neither by men, nor through vainglory, but by the love of God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ; I am struck with admiration at his meekness and by his silence, which can accomplish more than those who babble. For he is in harmony with God’s commandments, just as the harp is with its strings. Wherefore my soul recognizes that his blessed understanding is directed towards God in virtue and perfection, and that in his stability and freedom from anger he imitates the infinite meekness of the living God. . . .

My brethren, I am greatly enlarged in loving you. In rejoicing greatly in you, I seek to secure your safety. Yet it is not I, but Jesus Christ, for whose sake being bound I fear the more, inasmuch as I am not yet perfect. But your prayer to God shall make me perfect, that I may attain to that

¹ “Theophorus” means “bearer of God.”

portion² which through mercy has been allotted me, while I flee to the Gospel as to the flesh of Jesus, and to the apostles as to the presbytery of the Church. And let us also love the prophets, because they too have proclaimed the Gospel, and placed their hope in Him, and waited for Him; in whom also believing, they were saved, through union to Jesus Christ, being holy men, worthy of love and admiration, having had witness borne to them by Jesus Christ, and being reckoned along with us in the Gospel of the common hope. . . .

Unity in Christ

For though some would have deceived me according to the flesh, yet the Spirit, as being from God, is not deceived. For it knows both whence it comes and whither it goes, and detects the secrets of the heart. For, when I was among you, I cried, I spoke with a loud voice: "Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons." Now, some suspected me of having spoken thus, as knowing beforehand the division caused by some among you. But He is my witness, for whose sake I am in bonds, that I got no intelligence from any man. But the Spirit proclaimed these words: "Do nothing without the bishop; keep your bodies as the temples of God; love unity; avoid divisions; be the followers of Jesus Christ, even as He is of His Father." I therefore did what belonged to me, as a man devoted to unity. For where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop. I trust as to you in the grace of Jesus Christ, who shall free you from every bond. And I exhort you to do nothing out of strife, but according to the doctrine of Christ. When I heard some saying, "If I do not find it in the Old Testament, I will not believe the Gospel"; on my saying to them, "It *is* written," they answered me, "That remains to be proved." But to me Jesus Christ is in the place of all that is in the old dispensation: His cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which is by Him, are undefiled monuments of antiquity; by all of which I desire, through your prayers, to be justified.

The Old Testament as Prophecy

The priests indeed are good, but [Jesus] our High Priest is better; to whom the holy of holies has been committed, and who alone has been trusted with the secrets of God. He is the door of the Father, by which enter in Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the prophets, and the apostles, and the Church. All these have for their object the attaining to the unity of God. But the Gospel

² This is a reference to his approaching martyrdom; he was to be thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman Coliseum.

possesses something transcendent, namely, the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, His passion and resurrection. For the beloved prophets announced Him, but the Gospel is the perfection of immortality. All these things are good together, if you believe in love.

Closing section

Since, according to your prayers, and the compassion which you feel in Christ Jesus, it is reported to me that the Church which is at Antioch in Syria possesses peace, it will become you, as a Church of God, to elect a deacon to act as your ambassador of God to the brethren there, that he may rejoice along with them when they are met together, and glorify God's name. Blessed is he in Jesus Christ, who shall be deemed worthy of such a ministry; and you too shall be glorified. And if you are willing, it is not beyond your power to do this, for the sake of God; as also the nearest Churches have sent, in some cases bishops, and in others priests and deacons.

Now, as to Philo the deacon, of Cilicia, a man of reputation, who still ministers to me in the word of God, along with Rheus Agathopus, an elect man, who has followed me from Syria, not regarding his life—these bear witness in your behalf; and I myself give thanks to God for you, that you have received them, even as the Lord you. But may those that dishonoured them be forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ! The love of the brethren at Troas salutes you; whence also I write to you by Byrrhus, who was sent along with me by the Ephesians and Smyrnæans, to show their respect. May the Lord Jesus Christ honour them, in whom they hope, in flesh, and soul, and faith, and love, and concord! Farewell in Christ Jesus, our common hope.