

A Defense of Ignatius of Antioch's Martyrdom
and View of Redemption

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Introduction

The late first, early second-century bishop Ignatius of Antioch is most remembered for his martyrdom and the seven extant letters he wrote en route to Rome, his likely place of martyrdom: letters to the Ephesians, the Magnesians, the Trallians, the Romans, the Philadelphians, the Smyrneans, and the bishop Polycarp. Among the most prominent themes in these letters is church unity, the role of the bishop, and Ignatius's own expectation of death. Ignatius writes so passionately, even eagerly, of martyrdom that some scholars have raised the question of whether he had an unhealthy desire to suffer for his faith or saw redemptive value in his suffering, either for himself or for others.¹ As one scholar has noted, Ignatius's "language sometimes betrays an exuberance and wildness which could be interpreted as neurotic."² Another scholar writes that "the charge of fanaticism is not entirely without foundation in the case of Ignatius."³ So was Ignatius's desire for martyrdom either neurotic or fanatical, motivated by a salvific view of suffering?

¹ For a good list of recent scholarly works contending that Ignatius viewed his death as having salvific significance, particularly on behalf of those to whom he wrote, see Alexander N. Kirk, "Ignatius' statements of self-sacrifice: intimations of an atoning death or expressions of exemplary suffering?", *The Journal of Theological Studies* 64, no. 1 (April 2013): 67-68.

² L. W. Barnard, "The Background of St. Ignatius of Antioch," *Vigiliae Christianae* 17 (1963): 193.

³ William R. Schoedel, *A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), xii.

This paper will argue the opposite. Its thesis is that Ignatius's legal predicament was genuine, his motivating desire for writing was primarily to promote Christian unity and faithfulness, and his outlook on redemption was apostolic in origin and Christocentric in focus. The case will be made by examining Ignatius's own words in his seven letters, referring to the original Greek for a couple of key terms, and by comparing various scholarly interpretations of Ignatius's key themes.

Ignatius's Life and Writings

Little is known directly about Ignatius apart from what he writes of himself in his letters. Church tradition fleshes out his story, and he is mentioned by Christian writers in the centuries following his death, but none of these sources are contemporary to the man himself. Ignatius reveals he is a prisoner being transported from Syria to Rome in his letter to the Ephesians⁴ and that he was bishop of Syria, most likely meaning Antioch, in his letter to the Romans.⁵ Alistair Stewart has argued it is not safe to assume Ignatius was sole bishop of Antioch, because congregations within cities may not have been united under the oversight of a single bishop at this time.⁶ Either way, Ignatius was a bishop, likely of Antioch, and the occasion of the authorship of his seven letters was his trip under guard to Rome.

Depending on how Ignatius's life is dated, Antioch was probably a free city during his spiritual leadership there, later becoming a colonial city under Emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161).⁷ The city was diverse, incorporating different ethnic groups and religions, including a historic Jewish community, and both Roman legions and a well-known pleasure garden were located nearby.⁸ Docetism and Judaism, or more accurately Judaizing, presented challenges to churches throughout Asia Minor; it is possible these heretical impulses came from a single Judeo-Gnostic religious group rather than two different groups.⁹ Ignatius writes against

⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians*, 2.11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, *Romans*, 2.2.

⁶ Alistair Stewart, trans., *Ignatius of Antioch: The Letters* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 11.

⁷ Barnard, 195.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 197, 201.

both false teachings. He displays familiarity with the Gospel of Matthew, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and potentially other Pauline letters and Johannine writings, and he has come to be seen as perhaps history's clearest representative of Antiochene Christianity at the turn of the second century.¹⁰

One of the curious terms Ignatius applies to himself in all of his letters is *θεοφορος*, or "God-carrier."¹¹ Understanding his context within the pre-Christian Roman Empire and its public cultic practices may shed light on the term. Official gods of the empire were often carried during a city's religious processions.¹² Ignatius would have seen many such processions in Antioch. If he had this referent in mind when employing the term "God-carrier," it would have evoked a stark contrast for his original readers between imperial power and God's power and between secular significance and spiritual significance. There is no reason to believe Ignatius was the only prisoner or even a prominent prisoner during his chained transport to Rome. Thus he was, as Stewart has noted, "a chained figure in an imperial procession, a small part of a larger event, claiming to be the center, as he is the carrier of the true God in the procession of an emperor already divinized by his non-Christian subjects."¹³

The precise route taken by Ignatius's captors appears to be unusual. He mentions leaving in the late summer in his letter to the Romans.¹⁴ From Antioch he is taken to Philadelphia, then Smyrna, Troas, and Philippi; if he travels through other cities after Philippi and before arriving in Rome, we have no record of it.¹⁵ This time of year was not ideal for travel, which is what makes the journey unusual, but Ignatius offers no explanation for either the timing or the route by which he was taken.¹⁶

As alluded to earlier, the dating of Ignatius's letters, and thus of his life and ministry, is subject to debate. He could have written as early as AD 100 or as late as the 130s. The content of his letters is also a matter of interpretation, as there is a manuscript history for several versions. It is worth devoting space to untangling these versions since any study of

¹⁰ Ibid., 205.

¹¹ Stewart, 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 19-20.

¹⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans*, 10.3.

¹⁵ Stewart, 11-12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

Ignatius' life and theology has little else upon which to reliably draw. The testimony of later Christian writers is uncertain, with different schools of thought tending to see in Ignatius support for their own views.¹⁷

In sum, there are three versions of Ignatius's collected letters, which have come to be known as the short, middle, and long recensions. The short recension exists only in Syriac and includes abridged editions of four of his letters: to Polycarp, to the Ephesians, to the Romans, and to the Trallians.¹⁸ The middle recension can be found in manuscripts or manuscript fragments in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and Coptic, and it includes the unabridged seven letters generally attributed to Ignatius in modern translations of his writings.¹⁹ The long recension was the version most familiar to the Reformers; it can be found in Greek and Latin manuscripts, and it includes expanded versions of the seven letters in the middle recension along with six additional letters: to Mary of Cassobola, to the Tarsians, to the Antiochenes, to Hero, to the Philippians, and from Mary of Cassobola.²⁰

Current scholarly consensus holds that the middle recension is most authentic, with the long recension determined to have appeared in the middle of the fourth century, reflecting concerns of that era, and the short recension seen as an abridgment created by monks for their own use.²¹ Bishop James Ussher, who is perhaps most often remembered in the modern era for his dating of the age of the earth based on biblical genealogies, discovered evidence for the middle recension in the 17th century, which was a boon to those who had objected to the theme of Roman supremacy in the long recension.²² This paper accepts the current consensus and focuses on the middle recension of Ignatius's letters most commonly published today.

The dating of Ignatius's letters merits consideration as well. Stewart has proposed a somewhat novel view, arguing that Ignatius wrote his letters during the summer of AD 134 and that he traveled in a party with the Emperor Hadrian himself, who was returning from Syria to Rome at

¹⁷ See Schoedel, 1, for an example of Chalcedonians and Monophysites both finding support for their Christology in Ignatius.

¹⁸ Schoedel, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

that time after suppressing a Jewish revolt.²³ Three lines of evidence support his view: (1) It allows for Ignatius to be writing against fully formed Gnosticism as taught by Basilides; (2) it provides a context for Ignatius to denounce Judaism, in light of the recent revolt; and (3) it allows time for a more mature system of church offices to have developed.²⁴

Nevertheless, the more commonly held view is that Ignatius wrote earlier, during Emperor Trajan's reign (AD 98 – AD 117). Supposing that Ignatius traveled in the Emperor Hadrian's party, in particular, seems unlikely; if he did, he never mentions it in any of his letters. Precisely when he wrote during Trajan's reign is not agreed upon, with scholars who hold this view proposing different dates within several years of each other.²⁵ For the purposes of this paper, determining an exact year is unnecessary; a range of AD 105 to AD 115 will be accepted as most likely.

Ignatius writes in his letters with passionate wording, feeling free to use the Greek language inventively. According to Ignatius scholar William Schoedel, "There is, indeed, no piece of literature of the time that violates the language in such a sovereign manner."²⁶ His letters follow a Hellenistic epistolary form, and he employs a highly mannered, somewhat florid style that has come to be called "Asianism."²⁷ In short, he is a man of strong expression in his letters, and his vocabulary and rhetoric reflect the urgency of his message.

A few other facts about Ignatius's life have been provided by later writers. Though there is little reason to believe the writers were intending to misinform, their assertions cannot be verified. Eusebius mentions that Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch, for instance, succeeding Evodius, and that he died in the eleventh year of Trajan's reign (AD 108 or AD 109).²⁸ Theodoret writes of him being appointed by

²³ Stewart, 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See, for example, the dates of AD 110 and AD 113 in James G. Bushur, "Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Romans: The Passionate Confession of Christian Identity," *Logia* 24, no. 2 (2015): 14, and Stevan L. Davies, "The Predicament of Ignatius of Antioch," *Vigiliae Christianae* 30, no. 3 (September 1976): 178.

²⁶ Schoedel, 7.

²⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.22; *Chronicle*, Trajan. 10.

the apostle Peter,²⁹ and John Chrysostom preaches a sermon in his honor, the “Homily on Saint Ignatius.” This paper will limit its focus to the writings of Ignatius himself and to recent scholarly interpretations of those writings.

The Validity of Ignatius’s Martyrdom, Message, and Understanding of Redemption

Martyrs held a place of special esteem in the early church. Tertullian’s statement is well-known: “The Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more.”³⁰ Yet he is hardly the only affirmer of martyrdom among early Christian writers. Justin Martyr points to the lack of persecution against heretical groups of so-called Christians as proof they are not true believers: “We do know that they are neither persecuted nor put to death by you, at least on account of their opinions.”³¹ Origen, Augustine, and Eusebius all write positively of martyrdom as well, though not in unqualified fashion; there is thus some scholarly debate about whether the early church broadly supported seeking martyrdom as opposed to merely accepting it when inevitable.³²

Regardless, in light of the honor afforded to martyrs, questions of Ignatius’s motives are perhaps unavoidable. He writes, “May I delight in the beasts prepared for me, and I pray they may be found ready for me. I shall encourage them to devour me speedily ... even if they do not wish to do so, I share force them.”³³ Language like this could certainly bespeak fanaticism. Was Ignatius a chaser of suffering, akin in his mindset to the follower of a modern-day death cult?

This paper argues against such a conclusion based on three lines of argumentation: (1) Ignatius’s arrest and legal dilemma are legitimate, (2)

²⁹ Theodoret, *Dial. Immutab.*, 1.4.

³⁰ Tertullian, *Apology*, 50.

³¹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 26.

³² See, for example, the discussion in Frederick W. Weidmann, “Rushing Judgment? Willfulness and Martyrdom in Early Christianity,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 53, no. 1-2 (January 1999): 61-69, and in Paul Middleton, “Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 64, no. 2 (October 2013): 556-573.

³³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans*, 5.2.

martyrdom is not a primary theme in his letters, and (3) his Christology and theology of redemption are orthodox. First, though, a brief review of his letters will provide the context for investigating these assertions.

A Survey of Ignatius's Letters

Ignatius writes his first letter to the Ephesians following a visit from Onesimus.³⁴ He focuses on unity among the believers, submission to the bishop, and rejecting false teaching, devoting a couple of paragraphs to a rudimentary summary of the gospel that mentions Jesus' birth, death, and baptism.³⁵ Several times he writes of his forthcoming martyrdom, but he does not concentrate on it overmuch. He views it as an imitation of Christ and the apostles, a matter of faithful discipleship, and, in a passage that sounds similar to the apostle Paul in Colossians 1:24, he portrays his suffering as a kind of service to the Ephesians. As he writes, "I am your expiation, and am being consecrated as such on your behalf, Ephesians."

In his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius again stresses unity, along with church order under the bishop and presbyters. He devotes space to refuting Judaizers and exhorts his readers to "be keen to stand strong in the opinions of the Lord and the apostles."³⁶ He writes almost nothing about martyrdom in this letter, except that believers must be willing to die for Christ if they belong to him: "[Jesus's] life, if we do not choose willingly to die for truth in likeness of his passion, is not in us."³⁷

To the Trallians Ignatius upholds the bishop and church unity, as he does in nearly every letter, and he writes against what appears to be a form of Docetism that denied Jesus's full humanity. His words against this false teaching include a basic summary of the gospel with affirmation of Jesus's birth from Mary, death, and resurrection.³⁸ He also admits to being tempted toward pride over his pending martyrdom and to his need for humility.³⁹

³⁴ Stewart, 27.

³⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians*, 18.2–19.3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, *Magnesians*, 13.1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, *Trallians*, 9–10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.2.

Ignatius's letter to the Romans contains by far the bulk of his statements about martyrdom. He appears most eager to experience it here, and, indeed, any argument in support of Ignatius having an unhealthy desire for martyrdom must be based largely on this letter. Yet his vision for martyrdom is framed more as a matter of consummation than salvation. He generally describes it using the term *επιτυχειν* (or, relatedly, *τυχειν*), meaning to "obtain," "acquire" or "attain."⁴⁰ As he writes, "My desire is crucified, and there is no love of the material burning in me. Rather there is living water speaking in me, saying to me, within, 'Come to the Father.'"⁴¹ Ignatius repeatedly asks the Romans not to intervene and stop his martyrdom, which may present a clue as to why he devotes this particular letter to his upcoming death. Of all the recipients of Ignatius's letters, only the Roman believers could have sought to impede his sentence, so he takes pains in this letter to make clear his desire to complete his discipleship and be united in person with God.

In his letter to the Philadelphians, Ignatius returns to his themes of unity and church leadership. This letter also contains both a clear statement of the offer of the gospel and a clear statement about martyrdom. Of the gospel offer, Ignatius writes: "The Lord forgives all who repent if they repent in the unity of God and the council of the bishop."⁴² He sees repentance as the key to forgiveness—not suffering, it is worth noting—with Christian unity and the bishop's oversight being guardrails within which such repentance must occur. On martyrdom, Ignatius writes that he wishes to "attain to the lot which I have received in mercy, as I flee to the gospel"⁴³—an unusual phrase that suggests again a completion of his Christian journey, which is itself a gift.

Ignatius deals most fully with Docetist teaching in his letter to the Smyrneans. Those who would deny Jesus's full humanity either before or after his resurrection are bereft of gospel hope, "advocates of death rather than the truth."⁴⁴ He questions why he should be willing to suffer

⁴⁰ "Επιτυχειν," *NAS Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, The Lockman Foundation, 1988, accessed at <http://biblehub.com/greek/2013.htm>.

⁴¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans*, 7.2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, *Philadelphians*, 8.1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.1

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, *Smyrneans*, 5.1

physically if Jesus only appeared to suffer, and he connects salvation to Jesus's suffering. "[H]e suffered all this for our sake, so that we might be saved."⁴⁵ The bishop's centrality and leadership are again upheld, and Ignatius uses the word "catholic" in this letter to refer to the universality of the church within Jesus.⁴⁶

Finally, in his only letter to an individual, Ignatius writes to Polycarp to exhort him to fulfill his duties as bishop of Smyrna. He includes both pragmatic and spiritual guidance. The several times he mentions his martyrdom, Ignatius speaks of it as a faithful act of discipleship and, again, as a sacrifice on behalf of the church. In particular, he writes, "I am a ransom for those who are subject to the bishop, the presbyters, deacons,"⁴⁷ thus tying his concern for church order to his pending death.

In sum, Ignatius writes in nearly every letter of the importance of church offices and Christian unity and of dispelling false teaching. He mentions his martyrdom regularly but devotes less space to it, except in his letter to the Romans, and he tends to use the wording of *επιτυχειν*, or "attain[ment]," to describe it. He also summarizes the gospel in several letters, stressing Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection in an abbreviated manner that reads like a primitive version of the Apostles' Creed.

The Legitimacy of Ignatius's Legal Dilemma

In order to determine that Ignatius was not an unhealthy pursuer of martyrdom who sought a pretext for his arrest and sentencing, the validity of his legal predicament must be demonstrated. This requires clearing a couple of hurdles: first, concerning the existence of persecution against Christians at the time, and second, concerning Ignatius's legal status and likely reason for being sent to Rome.

During the first two decades of the second century, no coordinated, large-scale suppression of Christians was underway in the Roman empire.⁴⁸ However, Christians were not safe and could be executed if

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2. Also, note the similarity here to Pauline language in verses like 2 Cor. 5:21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, *To Polycarp*, 6.1.

⁴⁸ Kenneth R. Morris, "Pure Wheat of God' or Neurotic Deathwish? A Historical and Theological Analysis of Ignatius of Antioch's Zeal for Martyrdom," *Fides Et Historia* 26, no. 3 (September 1994): 26.

brought individually to the attention of authorities. A letter from the Emperor Trajan to Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia between AD 109 and AD 112, indicates this sort of piecemeal but still harsh policy: "Do not go out of your way to look for them [Christians]. If indeed they should be brought before you, and the crime is proved, they must be punished."⁴⁹ The punishments Pliny meted out to Christians included torture and an unspecified verdict that could have been a death sentence.⁵⁰

Pliny also mentions to the emperor that Christianity is spreading not just in cities but in surrounding towns and villages.⁵¹ It is evident from the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan that restoring order and upholding the official civic religion of Rome is part of Pliny's task. Thus, the stance of Rome toward Christianity during these decades can be summarized as one of opposition and disruption, if not yet a sweeping pogrom, which would explain why Ignatius sees a spiritual conflict underlying his arrest and punishment. As Allen Brent has noted, "Ignatius describes his appearance in Rome in language that clearly implies that his act confronts Roman power with a superior, spiritual alternative."⁵² Ignatius's use of the term θεοφορος, "God-carrier," to describe himself further casts his procession to Rome as a kind of alternative to processions of the Imperial Cult.⁵³

One other aspect of Rome's punishment of Christians is worth noting. Public associations of Christians were what the emperor most disliked, particularly gatherings for the Eucharist, which were held under the leadership of bishops. Persecution of individuals was thus meant to undermine corporate Eucharistic services: "Pliny's aim was precisely the fragmentation of Christian associations."⁵⁴ This background could explain, in part, Ignatius's emphasis in his letters on the bishop's authority, Christian unity, and his suffering on behalf of other believers.

⁴⁹ Pliny, *Letters*, 10.97.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.96.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Allen Brent, "Ignatius of Antioch and the Imperial Cult," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52, no. 1 (February 1998): 31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁴ James G. Busher, "Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Romans: the passionate confession of Christian identity," *Logia* 24, no. 2 (2015): 13.

The second question about Ignatius's legal predicament revolves around his legal status and the reason for his transport to Rome. Citizens to Rome could appeal verdicts to the emperor; thus, one possible reason for Ignatius's guarded escort could be an appeal he entreated himself. However, Roman citizens generally could not be killed by beasts or fire, the means of death Ignatius mentions in his letters.⁵⁵ This presents a conundrum: If Ignatius were not a citizen, why would he be heading to Rome? If he were a citizen, how could he expect the kind of brutal death he depicts?

There are further problems with viewing him as a citizen. First, Roman citizens under appeal could not be chained, as Ignatius reports he is.⁵⁶ Second, if a governor condemned a citizen to death, it wouldn't be necessary to execute that sentence in Rome.⁵⁷ An appeal would necessitate the trip, but is Ignatius likely, in light of his expectant statements about martyrdom, to have appealed a death sentence? Third, the only means of confirming the crime of Christianity was confession, yet a Roman citizen who confessed to a crime abandoned any right of appeal.⁵⁸ It's difficult to imagine a scenario by which Ignatius as a citizen could be sent to Rome for execution.

Viewing Ignatius as a non-citizen presents a similar problem, as there is no historical record of non-citizens being executed in Rome during this time period, unless those non-citizens were prisoners of war.⁵⁹ Ignatius was not a member of an army or a participant in an armed uprising. If he were not a citizen, how could he have received the ostensible privilege of appeal or death in Rome?

Steven L. Davies has proposed a scenario that correlates the available facts about Ignatius's trip with Roman legal practice. Only a governor or emperor could condemn a person to death. However, a governor's legate could oversee cases while a governor was away without determining a final sentence. In Lyon in AD 177, Christians were arrested and questioned in this manner while the governor was absent, and executions

⁵⁵ Michael A. G. Haykin, "Come to the father': Ignatius of Antioch and his calling to be a martyr," *Themelios* 32, no. 3 (May 2007): 29.

⁵⁶ Stevan L. Davies, "Predicament of Ignatius of Antioch," *Vigiliae Christianae* 30, no. 3 (September 1976): 176.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

were carried out upon his return.⁶⁰ Thus, Ignatius could have been tried before a legate who recommended but could not execute a death sentence; rather than waiting for the governor of Syria, Ignatius could have been sent instead to the emperor.⁶¹ This scenario would explain Ignatius's chains, his expectation of death but also worry that his verdict might be overturned, and the possibility that Roman Christians could intervene, as a legate's recommendation carried less weight than a governor's official sentence.⁶²

In the view of this researcher, Davies's scenario is convincing. There may be alternate, less likely scenarios under which Ignatius as a citizen could have been sent with unusual harshness to Rome for execution. Either way, the existence of targeted persecution of Christians during the early second century and of possible circumstances under which such a prisoner could be sent to Rome for execution bespeak the validity of Ignatius's legal dilemma.

Martyrdom Is Not a Primary Theme of Ignatius's Letters

Ignatius mentions his forthcoming martyrdom often, yet, as stated earlier, he devotes little space to it in most of his letters. Only in his letter to the Romans does it take center stage. If he harbored an unhealthy desire for martyrdom, it might be expected to comprise a major theme in his writing. That case is difficult to make. Scholars differ on how precisely to identify Ignatius's main messages, but together their observations form an approximate consensus.

Michael Haykin summarizes Ignatius's themes as unity in the churches, resisting heresy, and assistance in completing his own "vocation" of martyrdom.⁶³ It is important to clearly differentiate this last point: Ignatius asks his readers to aid him in completing his death sentence faithfully; he does not encourage them to seek a similar sentence.⁶⁴ Ignatius writes as a leader with authority, and his primary messages reflect his instructions. Yet a general commendation of

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 177-178.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Haykin, 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

martyrdom does not rise to this level in any of his letters, even in his letter to the Romans.

Kenneth Morris lists church unity, church leadership, and false teaching as Ignatius's key themes.⁶⁵ These themes are interrelated. Ignatius endorses unity in different ways, such as "unity in mutual deeds of love, unity in purpose, unity in the Eucharist."⁶⁶ In addition, obedience to the bishop is an expression of unity, and false teaching poses a challenge to unity, as Ignatius stresses in his letter to the Philadelphians.⁶⁷ Thus, in Morris's view, Ignatius highlights an overarching or coordinating theme above all, the theme of unity under which his other concerns cohere.

Further dimensions of Ignatius's view of unity can be identified. For instance, church unity is reflective of heavenly unity in Ignatius's understanding; if church unity is disrupted, then the church's connection to heaven is likewise disrupted.⁶⁸ Unity with the church and bishop also form the basis of unity with Christ and God.⁶⁹ As Ignatius writes, "Those who are of God, and Jesus Christ, are with the bishop. Those who are repentant and who come into the unity of the church will also be God's, so that they may live in accordance with Jesus Christ."⁷⁰ This last phrase, "live in accordance with Jesus Christ," suggests again Ignatius's concern for right doctrine as a component of unity.

John Lawyer, Jr., identifies four themes in Ignatius's letters: the importance of the Eucharist, the centrality of the bishop, church unity, and right teaching.⁷¹ He notes that Ignatius's conception of martyrdom is subsumed in at least one way under his theme of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist feast, Ignatius sees Jesus coming to be with his people; in his own martyrdom he will go to be with Jesus—thus his death on behalf of Christ is "a sort of Eucharist in reverse."⁷² In another demonstration of

⁶⁵ Morris, 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 34, 38.

⁶⁸ Richard A. Bower, "Meaning of *epitychein* in the epistles of St Ignatius of Antioch," *Vigiliae Christianae* 28, no. 1 (March 1974): 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁷⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Philadelphians*, 3.2.

⁷¹ John E. Lawyer, "Eucharist and martyrdom in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch," *Anglican Theological Review* 73, no. 3 (1991 1991): 280.

⁷² *Ibid.*

the interrelatedness of Ignatius's primary themes, the bishop and right doctrine can be tied together, because the bishop is in his view the keeper and transmitter of apostolic tradition.⁷³ This may explain the somewhat unusual praise Ignatius gives to silence in a bishop in his letters to the Ephesians and the Philadelphians. Any engagement with false teaching corrupted a local church, but silence left improper doctrine outside of the congregation's holy gathering.⁷⁴

What may be concluded about Ignatius's primary themes? First, concerns about the bishop, church unity, and correct teaching make up the bulk of his letters, and scholars agree on their centrality to his thought, alongside the related and most identifiable aspect of church gatherings, the Eucharist. There is also an internal coherence to Ignatius's thought, as his themes support and reinforce each other. Second, martyrdom is an important personal concern of Ignatius's, but it is not part of his message to the church; he shares no directions concerning it. He understands martyrdom within the framework of his primary themes, and it can be seen as a practical outworking of them or, better, as an act of faithfulness he accepts in light of them.

The Orthodoxy of Ignatius's Christology and Theology of Redemption

Moving beyond Ignatius's main themes, it is helpful to investigate specifically his Christology and theology of redemption. Did Ignatius in any sense view his martyrdom as salvific, either for himself or others? Alexander Kirk lists seven clear instances where Ignatius mentions suffering on behalf of others, three in his letter to the Ephesians, one each in his letters to the Trallians and the Smyrneans, and two in his letter to Polycarp.⁷⁵ What does he write about Christ, redemption, and martyrdom that give us insight into his soteriology?

⁷³ Allen Brent, "History and eschatological mysticism in Ignatius of Antioch," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 65, no. 4 (1989): 309.

⁷⁴ Alvyn Petterson, "Sending Heretics to Coventry? Ignatius of Antioch on Reverencing Silent Bishops," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 4 (December 1990): 347.

⁷⁵ Alexander N. Kirk, "Ignatius' statements of self-sacrifice: intimations of an atoning death or expressions of exemplary suffering?", *The Journal of*

Ignatius's Christology

The key criteria to understanding Ignatius's Christology is his submission to apostolic tradition. He distinguishes between the apostles' teaching and his own, and he views apostolic teaching as sitting above his own.⁷⁶ We can understand the goal of his theological reflection to be a faithful representation of the apostolic deposit. Ignatius upholds a high Christology, viewing Jesus as the center of that deposit and of the Old Testament Scriptures.⁷⁷ As he writes, "For me the archives [Scriptures] are Jesus Christ, the sacred archives, his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith which comes by him."⁷⁸ He summarizes in creedal form several times the basic historical facts about Jesus—his birth, death, and resurrection—and it is clear that he views these facts as essential to the Christian faith.⁷⁹

Death and sin are aberrations of God's creation, according to Ignatius, and in the incarnation God the Son overcomes those aberrations.⁸⁰ Ignatius refers to Christ in his letters as the source of life.⁸¹ He restates this point negatively in his letter to the Trallians, writing that the "Father will similarly raise us who believe in him, in Jesus Christ, apart from whom we do not have true life."⁸² It is worth noting that immortality is conditional in Ignatius's view. While death may be an aberration, eternal life is dependent solely on Jesus. As John Romanides has summarized, "In the epistles of St. Ignatius the idea of natural immortality as a proper

Theological Studies 64, no. 1 (April 2013): 66-67. Kirk also quotes on p. 67 an unpublished dissertation by Hendrik Adrianus Bakker that succinctly summarizes the salvific perspective: "Ignatius viewed his death as a sacrifice that augmented Jesus' death. Because Ignatius' identity appeared, therefore, to join with Jesus', and because he saw himself as a 'scapegoat' and a 'ransom', his death has salvific significance."

⁷⁶ Daniel L. Hoffman, "The authority of scripture and apostolic doctrine in Ignatius of Antioch," *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 1 (March 1985): 78.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, *Philadelphians*, 8.2.

⁷⁹ Hoffman, 76. See also John S. Romanides, "Ecclesiology of St Ignatius of Antioch," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 7, no. 1-2 (1961 1961): 55.

⁸⁰ Romanides, 54.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Ignatius of Antioch, *Trallians*, 9.2.

element of man's soul is completely absent. Both those before and after Christ have the death and resurrection of Christ as their source of life."⁸³

Ignatius argues for Jesus's genuine physical nature and physical suffering, but he just as firmly upholds his divinity, revealed especially in phrases he chooses to describe him. Ignatius refers to Jesus as "the mind of the Father" and "our God," and he describes his blood as "the blood of God"; he also writes that Jesus and the Father are "mingled."⁸⁴ Overall, Ignatius's Christology adheres to apostolic orthodoxy in this affirmation of Jesus' humanity and divinity, as it also does in his grasp of the creedal events of Jesus's incarnation and in his understanding of Christ as the giver of life.

Ignatius's Theology of Redemption

Ignatius's understanding of redemption begins with God, because human salvation has been his plan for eternity.⁸⁵ Jesus is the Savior, the implementer of God's plan. The purpose of Jesus's incarnation is entirely soteriological, he suffered for the sake of humanity, and in doing so he became our healer.⁸⁶ The enemy from whom Jesus saves humanity is not primarily personal sin, but rather death and the devil, though believers are saved to righteousness and imitation of Christ. Jesus's death defeats the devil and earns peace for God's people.⁸⁷

In light of the wording Ignatius uses to frame salvation, L. W. Barnard has concluded that he was unfamiliar with the apostle Paul's concept of salvation from "the flesh" and also that he had "no real appreciation of the Pauline 'righteousness by faith.'"⁸⁸ Yet this latter statement may be

⁸³ Romanides, 55.

⁸⁴ These quotes are taken from *Magnesians* and *Ephesians*. For a fuller discussion of Ignatius's understanding of Christ's humanity and divinity, see Edward Fudge, "The eschatology of Ignatius of Antioch: Christocentric and historical," *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 15, no. 4 (September 1972): 233-236.

⁸⁵ Fudge, 236.

⁸⁶ Donald F. Winslow, "Idea of redemption in the epistles of St Ignatius of Antioch," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (1965): 120.

⁸⁷ Romanides, 55.

⁸⁸ Barnard, 203-204.

misleading. While Ignatius never uses language like “righteousness by faith,” he does view salvation coming about by belief.

In Ignatius’s view, the believer experiences redemption, entering into Christ’s church and his salvation, by belief rather than by good works.⁸⁹ As Ignatius writes to the Trallians, “believing in his [Christ’s] death, you may escape death.”⁹⁰ Redemption is then experienced through participation in Christ, because an ongoing connection with Christ is the source of life.⁹¹ Donald Winslow has summarized Ignatius’s understanding of redemption, focused on Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, as follows: “The Incarnation is the invasion of our world by the divine. The Cross is the instrument of salvation. And the Resurrection is the completion of the redemptive act.”⁹² Redemption is therefore God’s work from beginning to end. Winslow calls this understanding “the bed-rock of Ignatius’s soteriology.”⁹³

Yet the believer does have a role to play in Ignatius’s understanding. Redemption is not a passive act, nor is it a one-time experience. Ongoing participation in Christ requires obedience. Obedience is not an earned condition by which redemption is maintained, but is rather the essence of the redeemed individual’s life, as Jesus allows believers to obey and participate in his life. Obedience is thus a gift “in some way made possible through divine grace and mercy.”⁹⁴

Ignatius’s Perspective on Martyrdom

With Ignatius’s understanding of obedience in view, as well as his perception of salvation being from death and into the life of Christ, his perspective on martyrdom becomes more clear. Ultimately, martyrdom is a kind of trial of obedience; by undergoing it Ignatius will complete his journey of salvation and attain full unity with Christ.⁹⁵ This is the deepest significance of his impending martyrdom. Death and corruption will be left behind when he dies to them and obtains uninterrupted life in Christ.

⁸⁹ Romanides, 55, 57-58.

⁹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Trallians*, 2.1.

⁹¹ Romanides, 59-60.

⁹² Winslow, 121.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹⁴ Bower, 3.

⁹⁵ Bushur, 14, 18.

Ignatius sees further relevancies in his martyrdom. It will provide him an opportunity to imitate Christ and, in so doing, to confess with his own actions Jesus's salvific suffering.⁹⁶ It also will give him the opportunity to practice "exemplary suffering," providing other believers with a model for following, just as he self-consciously follows the apostle Paul's model in self-renunciation and obedience to Christ.⁹⁷ His language about suffering on behalf of others is most clearly understood through this lens. As Kirk has concluded, "These passages do not re-enact Jesus' salvific death on behalf of sinners but rather mimic Paul's intimate bond with his fellow believers forged by his suffering."⁹⁸

A caveat should be highlighted: While martyrdom will be Ignatius's path to final and full unity with Christ, nowhere does he indicate that martyrdom is the primary means by which a believer may complete the path of discipleship. Nor does he suggest that a believer can suffer in a salvific manner for another. Martyrdom is the noble path he must take, however, and Ignatius is determined not to fail the test. His letters reveal the passion of a man confronting his own death and grasping firmly onto his hope of salvation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Ignatius of Antioch did not pursue martyrdom in a neurotic manner and that his soteriology was orthodox, mainly by examining persecution against Christians during the early second century, the primary themes of Ignatius's letters, and his theology of redemption. A couple of points can be added in closing. First, Ignatius's letters should be remembered for being occasional, sparked by his arrest and pending sentence. They were not written from a place of peaceful, private reflection. As such, they do not contain a fully developed theology of martyrdom, which doesn't appear to have been Ignatius's aim.⁹⁹ They are, rather, fervent letters and highly personal on the subject of martyrdom.

⁹⁶ Haykin, 34, 39.

⁹⁷ Kirk, 66.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹⁹ Haykin, 32.

Second, during the period in which Ignatius wrote, the truth of Christianity was displayed more convincingly by actions rather than arguments.¹⁰⁰ Christians aimed to undermine the ideologies of the Roman empire not as much through demonstrations of logic as demonstrations of morality and belief. Martyrdom spoke as strongly as any action to the living hope believers had in Christ. Ignatius's words about his coming death may, admittedly, strike modern readers as strange, but to read psychological unbalance into them is anachronistic.¹⁰¹ Instead, he can better be seen as a committed leader of the church who responded to a death sentence with nearly the only positive option available to him, by embracing his opportunity to bear witness to his Savior and to complete his personal path of discipleship.

¹⁰⁰ Morris, 24.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 25.