

## **Doing Church With the “Early Fathers”: The Church Living Out Its Faith**

### **Doing Church with Ignatius of Antioch: The Church Living the Gospel**

*1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5*

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Lets begin by turning to I Corinthians, chapter 1 and read from verse 18 to verse 5 of chapter 2.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but

in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. In the opening of Paul's first canonical epistle to the church at Corinth he grounds his critique of their practice, their expression of the Christian life, their means of "doing church" upon the fact, meaning and implications of the gospel. Just flip through the book and see how many times he goes back to gospel themes in his correction of their varied and confused concerns. In this passage he challenges them from the perspective that, regardless of what the current cultural wisdom says, their life and practice must be in agreement with the gospel even if it appears foolish. Their wisdom and power (understanding and ability) must be based upon and flow from the gospel, "Jesus Christ and him crucified". There are no scholarly re-readings, alternative interpretations, or compromising positions. The gospel, thought of comprehensively, is the only hope and ground of true live now and acceptance with God forever.

We are spending a few evenings looking at four historical figures from the very early days of Christianity. You may or may not have heard of them. They have been dressed up by tradition, of which some may be true, some may not. The four you will hear about in the next several Sunday evenings have left us with some documentary evidence of their lives and beliefs. This will give us some insight on how Christians were applying the message of the gospel and interpreting the Scriptures in the late first and early second centuries, in the first one hundred years after Jesus' crucifixion. Our looking back as to how others have understood and applied Scripture will help us as we tackle different yet in many ways similar concerns. The philosopher George Santayana stated, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The implications is that the experiences of the past, its mistakes and failures, are training grounds for growth and change in the present and then for the future.

The first individual we are going to introduce to you is Ignatius of Antioch. He has a strange name indeed. It has etymological connections to words from which we get the word ignite. In Spanish it is Ignacio but it is not a common English name. There is a catholic congregation named for him in West Carrollton, on Springboro Pk.

Nothing is known of Ignatius' life except what may be gleaned from letters he wrote and from later traditions. There is report that he and another fellow we will hear from, Polycarp, were both disciples of the apostle John. One tradition even suggests he was one of the children whom Jesus took in his arms and blessed.

His own letters testify that he was an elder in the church of Antioch. This Antioch is properly referred to as Antioch on the Orontes to distinguish it from Antioch of Pisidia where Paul visited on his first journey. This

Antioch is known in the Book of Acts as the place where Paul considered his home base. Antioch was likely the third largest city of the empire behind Rome itself and Alexandria in Egypt. It had a large Christian community very early. Because of the nature of the city, its commerce and diversity it presented a gospel that was embraced by many including previously pagan gentiles. Because of this, it was the place that engaged the issue of how the gospel brings together both Jew and Gentile. This is the environment that Paul matured his understanding of the nature of church and how to present the gospel as the fulfillment of the Old Testament program. They engaged the Christians in Jerusalem on more than one occasion regarding the nuances of how gentiles both entered and lived out the gospel life.

This church would have been challenged to live and teach a gospel that experience persecution from both Jew and Pagan. Religious and civil strain would have been their common lot. They would have had to learn of the power of living the gospel, bearing the cross of Christ, not only in word, but also in deed. As a leader in this church, Ignatius would have been an heir of Paul's teaching and may have experienced the confrontation of Paul with Peter and Barnabas. He would have been challenged himself to live out a consistent life. He would likely have had to face challenges of many and varied false teachers regarding various aspects of gospel living.

We come to know Ignatius from several letters he wrote while traveling from Antioch to Rome where he faced trial and likely death. The circumstances of his arrest are not clear. It appears he left the church of Antioch in some element of disarray and embroiled in controversy. By the time he is nearing Greece he hears that his prayers have been answered and the concern seems over. Whether or not this conflict lead to his arrest, perhaps as a conspirator to disturb the peace, which would be a civil crime we do not know. But along the way to Rome in the first decade of the second century, he wrote seven letters. He wrote letters to the Ephesians, to the Magnesians, to the Trallians, to the Philadelphians, to Smyrnaeans, and to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. Tradition has it that he was killed in the Coliseum (or perhaps the Circus Maximus) by being thrown to wild animals such as lions on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 108AD. That, by the way, with the exception that it was 1850 years earlier is my birthday.

His letters describe his resolve to die a noble death in likeness to Christ's. This was to reflect his commitment to the cross in life as well as in death. His desire to be an example in this regard fits what we can surmise that the church in Antioch lived and taught as they lived together in a complex and complicated world. I want you to hear what he says in the opening to his letter to the church at Smyrna, a church the apostle John had written to in the opening of the book of Revelation. Listen carefully to the gospel

references he makes as he affirms the Smyrnaeans' own commitment to the gospel.

Ignatius, the image bearer, to the church of God the Father and of the beloved Jesus Christ at Smyrna in Asia, mercifully endowed with every spiritual gift, filled with faith and love, not lacking in any spiritual gift, most worthy of God, bearing holy things: heartiest greeting in a blameless spirit and the word of God. I glorify Jesus Christ, the God who made you so wise, for I observed that at you are established in an unshakeable faith, having been nailed, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in both body and spirit, and firmly established in love by the blood of Christ, 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 the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him, truly nailed in the flesh for us under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch (from its fruit we derive our existence, that is, from his divinely blessed suffering), in order that he might raise a banner for the ages through his resurrection by his saints and faithful people, whether among the Jews or among the Gentiles, in the one body of his church...

You should have that he is confident they are unshakeable in their faith as though they themselves are "nailed to the cross of Jesus." You should note he claims the blood of Christ" creates their love for one another. He links their confidence in the Lordship of Christ because of how Jesus fulfills the Scriptures as Messiah and the servant of Isaiah being the suffering king. Ignatius also sees their hope as based upon Jesus' resurrection, which brings together Jew and Gentile into one body, one community of faith. He wants them to recognize that their church, as much as his home church in Antioch, lived because of, in light of and with the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So how does that impact and inform us to live as a church, dependent upon the gospel?

We must understand the gospel well. The gospel is not complicated or difficult. The arguments against the gospel are however. Our responsibilities are not to be able to defend against every version of the objection, but we should not be ignorant of them. But more importantly, the better we understand the gospel, the better we apply it to the wide

variety of concerns and issues of life and living. It impacts our thoughts, daily events and our life together in ministry and fellowship.

We must see the gospel as God's plan from the beginning. Our trust in the gospel grows, as we understand it is God's purpose for the display of His glory from eternity. It is integral to all else God is accomplishing in the unfolding of his wisdom and love.

We must see the gospel not as merely an abstract idea. It is in Christ and him crucified. Christ died for our sins. Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us, keeping us in His love and care through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.

We must be committed to live the gospel. We must put all of our faith in what has been accomplished for us. We cannot, indeed must not, hold back part of our lives or thinking for some other, lesser allegiance.

We must live the gospel. It is not "fire insurance." The gospel is not merely some companion to living. It is not something added to how we live and think. It is to be the transforming power that reorients us to a new way of living and thinking.

Individually and as a community we must live together in the Gospel, from the Gospel and through the Gospel.