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Steven Ritchie · Oct 24, 2016 · 15 min read

# Ignatius of Antioch, Theology of

*Theological view: Oneness Modalism*

### IGNATIUS LIKELY TAUGHT THE SAME THEOLOGY THE APOSTLES TAUGHT HIM

Ignatius is called an "Apostolic Father" because he was taught by the original apostles within the first century. Although the historical information about Ignatius' background is somewhat vague, we can be sure that Ignatius had been taught by some of the original apostles within the first century, as scripture informs us that Peter and Paul had ministered in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14). Historical sources within early Christian literature also inform us that both Ignatius and Polycarp had been students of the apostle John (O'Connor, John Bonaventure. "St. Ignatius of Antioch." The Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 15 Feb. 2016). This is likely the case, as we know that the apostle John had ministered throughout Asia Minor.

In about 190 AD, Clement of Alexandria wrote that the apostle John had travelled "from church to church, appointing bishops."

"When John the apostle returned to Ephesus from his exile on the island of Patmos, he was invited to numerous churches. He went from church to church, appointing bishops, strengthening the people, and ordaining others who were marked out by the Spirit." (Clement of Alexandria, Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved? ch. 42, c. A.D. 190).

Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch in Northern Syria which borders Asia Minor where the apostle John ministered "from church to church." Although we cannot be certain if Ignatius had been ordained as the bishop of Antioch by Peter, Paul, or John - as there are conflicting accounts in later church history (Theodoret, Dial. 1. p. 33 says "Peter" / The Apostolic Constitution states that "Euodius" was "ordained by Peter" and "Ignatius by Paul" / The "Synaxarium: The Martyrdom of St. Ignatius, and Patriarch of Antioch", Coptic Orthodox Church says "John"), no respectable scholar would argue against Ignatius being ordained by one of the first century apostles and that he had heard their teachings firsthand. It is therefore highly unlikely that Ignatius did not fully understand the theology of the first century apostles, as he sat under their teachings. Ignatius' close association with the apostles would certainly explain why Ignatius was so highly venerated among the churches of Asia Minor and why his seven letters were copied and spread throughout the world.

Since most historians and scholars agree that Ignatius was martyred under Emperor Trajan within the time frame of 107-113 AD, it is very unlikely that Peter or Paul could have ordained Ignatius the third bishop of Antioch, as Ignatius would have been more than eighty years old by time of his death. If Peter or Paul ordained Ignatius, he would have had to be ordained in the late 50's or early 60's before their martyrdom's (Peter died 64-68 / Paul died 67-68). Therefore I am prone to believe the historical sources pointing to Ignatius being mentored and ordained by the apostle John.

The "Synaxarium: The Martyrdom of St. Ignatius, and Patriarch of Antioch" says,

"On this day, the honorable St. Ignatius, Patriarch of Antioch, was martyred. He was a disciple of St. John the Evangelist and travelled with him to many cities. St. John ordained him Patriarch of Antioch where he preached the life giving Gospel, converted many to the knowledge of God, baptized them, illumined them, and showed them the error of worshipping idols." ("Synaxarium: The Martyrdom of St. Ignatius, and Patriarch of Antioch", Coptic Orthodox Church Network)

Ignatius of Antioch who lived in the first century and was taught by the apostles, wrote to Polycarp 3:2,

"Look for Him who is above time - the Timeless, the Invisible, who for our sake

became visible, the Impassible, who became subject to suffering on our account and for our sake endured everything."

If Ignatius had been a disciple of the apostle John, and had travelled with him, he would have been very familiar with John's theological beliefs. Ignatius would have known the precise meaning of John 1:1 where the apostle John wrote about "the logos" ["expressed thought"] of God in John chapter one being "with God" along with the precise meaning of John 14:24 when Jesus said that "the logos" was not his, but the Father's. "The logos (word) which you hear IS NOT MINE, but THE FATHER'S."

**TRINITARIAN SCHOLARS AND HISTORIANS HAVE ADMITTED**

## THE MODALISTIC MONARCHIAN TENDENCIES OF IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

The famed Eastern Orthodox church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, wrote that “Many of the passages in ancient Christian writers sound like Modalistic Monarchianism” (The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, Vol. 1, Pg. 177). Then in the same paragraph (page 177) Pelikan cited Ignatius of Antioch (40-113 AD) and Melito of Sardis (130-180 AD) to show that their writings sounded “like Modalistic Monarchianism.”

After citing Ignatius of Antioch and Melito of Sardis, Pelikan admitted that “Modalistic Monarchianism ... turns out to have been a systematization of popular Christian belief in ancient Christian theology” (The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition Vol. I. – Page 179)

If Trinitarian thought had been a “popular Christian belief in ancient Christian theology,” we can be certain that Mr. Pelikan would have pointed it out to us. To the contrary, Pelikan wrote that “Modalistic Monarchianism” was the “popular Christian belief” as the most “ancient Christian theology.”

Trinitarian historians such as J.N.D. Kelly and Edmund Fortman have correctly pointed out Ignatius' tendency to think of the Oneness of God in that “the Son and the Spirit” are “modes of the Father's self-revelation” (JND Kelly Early Christian Doctrines, p.93). On the other hand, Kelly and Fortman pointed out Ignatius' use of the titles, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit listed together in two occurrences within his seven authentic epistles. The use of the titles Father, Son, and Holy Spirit listed together is not problematic for Oneness Pentecostals, as this does not necessitate a belief in a three person deity. Matthew 28:19 lists Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together without proving a Trinity of three divine persons. Oneness adherents believe that God the Father has manifested Himself through His own Spirit (God in action – Gen. 1:2-3) and that He was later “manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16) as “the man Christ Jesus” in order to “save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:18-23). Therefore, rather than believing in three coequally distinct divine persons, Oneness adherents can affirm that Ignatius believed that the Son and the Holy Spirit are manifestations of the Father's own self-revelation.

Catholic scholar Edmund J. Fortman wrote in his book, The Triune God, “He (Ignatius) urges the Magnesians to ‘be eager ... to be confirmed in the commandments of our Lord and His apostles, so that whatever you do may prosper ... in the Son and Father and Spirit’ (Magn. 13.2). And in one of his most famous passages he declares: ‘Like the stones of a temple, cut for a building of God the Father, you have been lifted up to the top by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the Cross, and the rope of the Holy Spirit’(Eph. 9.1). Thus although there is nothing remotely resembling a doctrine of the Trinity in Ignatius, the triadic pattern of thought is there ...” (The Triune God, Edmund J. Fortman, p. 39-40)

Notice that while acknowledging the three-ness “pattern of thought” in Ignatius, Mr. Fortman still acknowledged that “there is nothing remotely resembling a doctrine of the Trinity in Ignatius.” This speaks volumes! To Fortman, Ignatius' use of the titles Father, Son, and Holy Spirit does not even “remotely” resemble “a doctrine of the Trinity.” If Ignatius was a true Trinitarian, why is there “nothing remotely resembling a doctrine of the Trinity” in his writings?

According to historians Kelly and Loofs, the only alternative view describing Ignatius' theology is that “the Son and the Spirit” are “merely forms or modes of the Father's self-revelation (JND Kelly Early Christian Doctrines, p.93),” which was clearly the Modalistic Monarchian view held by the majority of the earliest Christians within the first three hundred years of Christian history (Tertullian, Against Praxeus 3 affirms that the Modalists were “always the majority of the faithful” in the West, while Origen's Commentary of the Gospel of John Book 1., chapter 23, affirms that the Modalists were “the general run of Christians” in the East).

Trinitarian Church historian, J. N. D. Kelly, accurately described the theology of Ignatius when he wrote, “... he speaks of God the Father and Jesus Christ, declaring that ‘there is one God, Who has revealed Himself through His Son Jesus Christ, Who is His Word emerging from silence (Magnesians 8:2)’. Christ is the Father's ‘thought’ (gnome – Ephesians 3:2), ‘the un-lying mouth by which the Father spoke truly’(Ephesians 3:2; Romans 8:2).” (JND Kelly Early Christian Doctrines, Pg. 92)

Mr. Kelly succinctly described the theology of Ignatius from the following passages written by Ignatius:

“... there is one God who manifested Himself through Jesus Christ His Son, who is His Word that proceeded from silence...” (Magnesians 8:2; J.B. Lightfoot).

The context proves that One God the Father “MANIFESTED HIMSELF through Jesus Christ HIS SON, who is HIS WORD.” According to Ignatius, the Son is the Father's Word rather than a coequal Word Person. The text does not state that a God the Son manifested Himself as an alleged distinct God the Word Person called the Son, but rather, One “God” the Father “was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16) through “His Word that proceeded from silence.”

“... run in harmony with the mind of God: for Jesus Christ also, our inseparable life, is the mind of the Father ...” (Ephesians 3:2, J.B. Lightfoot)

How could Jesus be “the mind of the Father” while being a coequal God Person? Could an alleged God the Son have been mindless, not having His own divine mind? If the Son is “the mind of the Father,” then that makes Him the Father's Logos (the Father's “expressed thought”) as an extension of the Father Himself revealed (“the arm of Yahweh” - Isaiah 53:1).

The original word order of John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the word (logos) and the word (logos) was with God, and God was the word (logos).” The Greek word “logos” simply means the “expressed thought” of someone. According to the apostle John, the “logos” is the “expressed thought” of God which would naturally be the expressed mind or thought of God the Father Himself. Since there are early Christian sources affirming that Ignatius was taught and mentored by the apostle John himself, it is easy to see how Ignatius knew the correct

meaning of the logos in John 1:1 as "Jesus Christ" being "the mind of the Father" and the word of the Father Himself (John 14:24 "the logos (word) which you hear IS NOT MINE, BUT THE FATHER'S").

"... Jesus Christ, the unerring mouth in whom the Father hath spoken [truly]." (Romans 8:2, J.B. Lightfoot)

Jesus said in John 14:24, "The word (logos) which you hear is not mine, but the Fathers who sent me."

Kelly goes on to mirror German historian Friedrich Loofs assessment of Ignatius as a Modalist (Friedrich Loofs, Professor of Church History at the University of Halle-Wittenberg in Germany, 1858-1928), by writing,

"Ignatius regarded God 'as an undifferentiated monad in His essential being, the Son and the Spirit being merely forms or modes of the Father's self-revelation, only distinguishable from Him in the process of revelation.'" (JND Kelly Early Christian Doctrines, p.93)

Myriam Webster succinctly Defines Modalism as, "Three modes or forms of activity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) under which God manifests himself." Monarchianism simply means a belief in "One Ruler." Monarch comes from "mono", meaning "One" and "arch", meaning "Ruler." Hence, Modalistic Monarchianism is the belief in God as One Monarch [Ruler] who has manifested Himself in three modes of activity.

If Loofs and Kelly's description of Ignatius' theology does not sound like Modalism, I don't know what else does! Loofs and Kelly admitted that Ignatius and the early Christians of Asia Minor (who were taught by the original apostles) believed in God as "an undifferentiated monad (monad = "a single unit or entity") in His Being" as "the Son and the Spirit" were to them, "merely" "modes of the Father's self-revelation." Therefore, even Trinitarian historians describe the theology of Ignatius with vocabulary that fits perfectly with the definition of Modalistic Monarchianism.

Why would Trinitarian scholars state that Ignatius believed that "the Son and the Spirit" were merely "modes of the Father's self-revelation" if Ignatius was a true Trinitarian? As honest historians Kelly and Loofs had to admit, Ignatius taught that the Son and the Spirit are manifestations of the self-revealing Father.

"For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary according to a dispensation, of the seed of David but also of the Holy Ghost." (Ephesians 18:2, J.B. Lightfoot)

Ephesians 18:2 in a modern translation is much easier to understand,

"For our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God's plan, both from the seed of David and from the Holy Spirit. ..." (Ephesians 18:2, Modern Translation)

Ignatius clearly believed that the humanity of Jesus Christ was "of the seed of David" from "Mary", while the divinity of Jesus Christ was "of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20)." Therefore, Ignatius believed that the Holy Spirit is the divine nature of the Son from which he claimed divinity (John 8:58; John 14:9), whilst the same omnipresent Holy Spirit is the divinity who Fathered the Son (Luke 1:35).

Ignatius further claimed that the Holy Spirit is the same divine person "who is Jesus Christ."

"Fare ye well in the harmony of God, ye who have obtained the inseparable Spirit, who is Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:17; Romans 8:9; John 14:16-18)." (Magnesians 15:1, Roberts-Donaldson Translation)

According to Ignatius, "the inseparable Spirit" "is Jesus Christ." Just as Paul contextually wrote in his second Epistle to the Corinthians, "Christ Jesus the Lord (2 Cor. 4:5)" and "the Lord is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17)," so Ignatius faithfully followed the theology of the Apostles by writing, "the inseparable Spirit, who is Jesus Christ." Early first and second century Christian writers often spoke of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit who became the Son through the virgin (Hermas, Clement, Mathetes, Aristides, Irenaeus, Melito) because this is precisely what the first century apostles had taught in all the churches.

Pelikan observed that the earliest Christian witness believed that the Lord Jesus Christ is the indwelling Holy Spirit, "... the use of Lord for the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:17, continued to require explanation even after the Trinitarian issues appeared settled." Then in the very next paragraph (Pg. 185) Pelikan wrote, "Christ is constantly described as Spirit by the fathers, in virtue of His divine nature ... The use of Spirit for the divine in Christ was prominent in those early Christian writings which still show the marks of the Jewish origins of Christianity." (The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, Pg. 185, Jaroslav Pelikan)

Church historian J. N. D. Kelly further wrote,

"Ignatius even declares that He is 'our God' (Ephesians 8:2; Trallians 7:1), describing Him as 'God incarnate' (Ephesians 7:2; 19:3 – 'en sari genomenos theos') and 'God made manifest as man (theou anthrōpinōs phaneroumenou).' He was 'in spirit united with the Father' (Smyrna 3:3). In His pre-existent being 'ingenerate': (the technical term reserved to distinguish the increate God from creatures), He was the timeless, invisible, impalpable, impassible one Who for our sakes entered time and became visible, palpable and passible (Ephesians 7:2; Polycarp 3:2). His divine Sonship dates from the incarnation." (JND Kelly Early Christian Doctrines, p.92).

Kelly accurately described Ignatius' belief that the "timeless" and "increate" "invisible" Spirit of God "entered time" to become subject to sufferings through "His "Sonship" which "dates from the incarnation." In other words, although Ignatius believed that the Sonship was dated to the incarnation through the virgin (having a beginning in time), he believed that the timeless, eternal Spirit of God became the "divine Son"



only in "the incarnation." Hence, Ignatius did not believe in a timeless God the Son of a three person deity. Ignatius' theology was clearly Modalistic, as the One Spirit of the One God became incarnate as the Son in "the incarnation."

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