

THE 40 MOST INFLUENTIAL CHRISTIANS

WHO SHAPED WHAT WE BELIEVE TODAY

DARYL AARON



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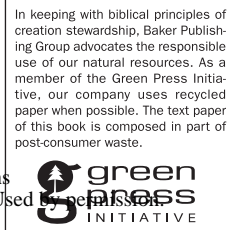
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*This book is dedicated to
my past and present colleagues
in the Biblical and Theological Studies Department
of Northwestern College.*

*It has been my immense privilege to serve with
you for sixteen years and counting.
You too have been and are very influential Christians—
in the lives of thousands of students as well as my own.*

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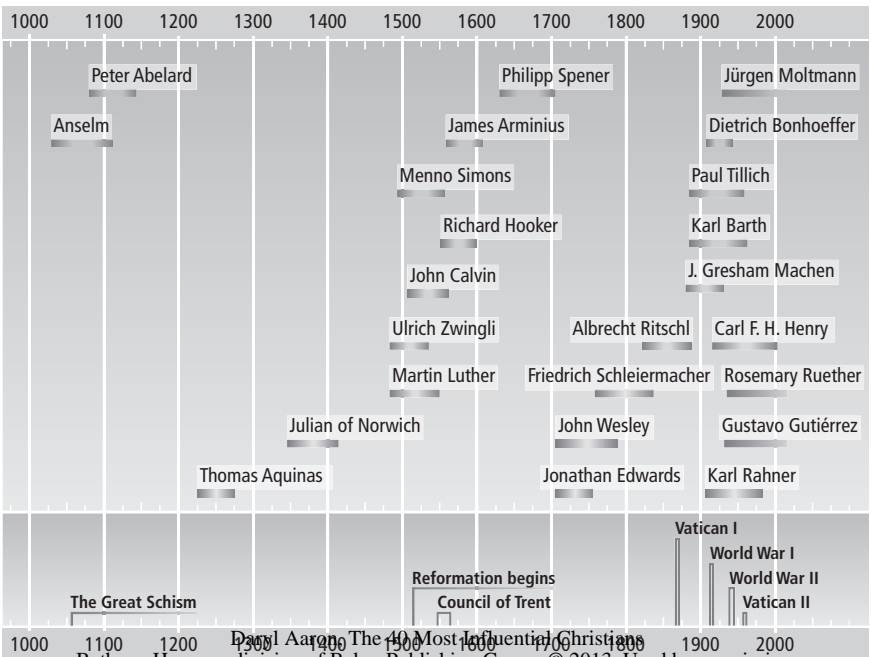
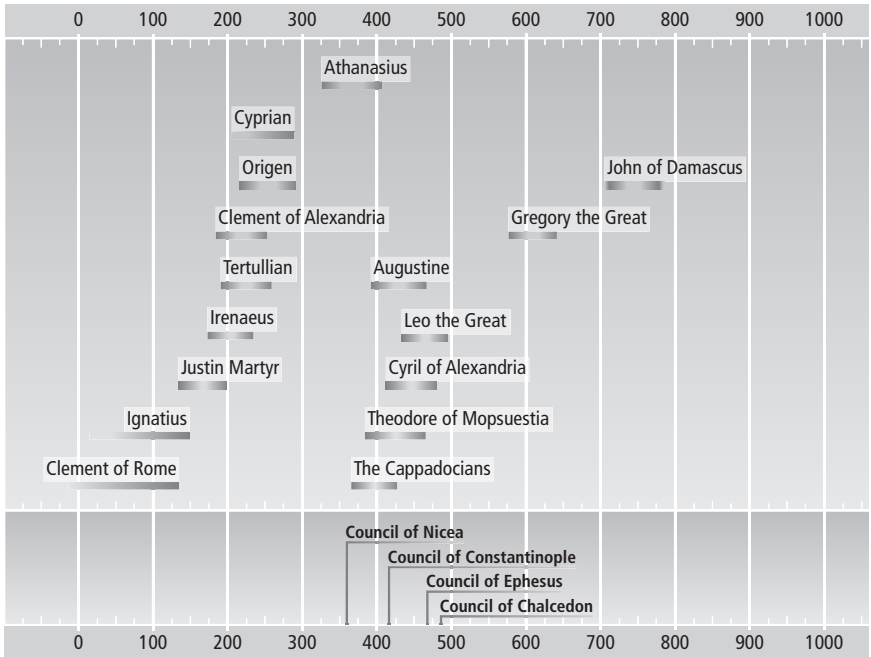
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A Chronology of These Influential Christians



INTRODUCTION

Theology is often not a very popular topic among Christians. The term sometimes conjures up visions of overly educated individuals who have overly lofty thoughts about things that are totally irrelevant to pretty much everything. But this reflects a misunderstanding of what theology is as well as the vital importance of theology to our own spiritual health and that of our churches.¹ Similarly, the idea of any kind of “history of theology” is sometimes not highly regarded and is often misunderstood by many Christians. The thinking is, “The Bible was complete in the first century. What we believe is based on the Bible. Therefore, how can there be a history or development of that? Isn’t that just going beyond the Bible?”

There is something both right and wrong in this thinking. What is right and important to note is that the earliest generations of Christians, all the way back to the first century, had a *basic* belief system: There is only one true God—Yahweh, the God of Israel. Sin has separated all people from God, who is holy. God fulfilled his Old Testament promises of a Messiah who happens to be the Son of God, God himself (fully and eternally), and who also became a human. This unique individual, Jesus Christ, died to pay the penalty for sin, was buried, and was resurrected in victory over sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:1–9). This same Jesus returned to

1. I have tried to address this briefly in *Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes a Day* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2012), chapter 1.

heaven but will one day come back to earth. This is also what most Christians believe today in continuity with first-century Christians.

So what the first-century Christians knew and believed was *necessary*—those truths are the heart of the Christian faith—but it was not *sufficient*. How could it be when the object is the *infinite* being and mind of God himself? For example, the first-generation Christians believed that Jesus was fully God and fully human, but they had not yet considered how that could possibly be. They also believed that Jesus’ heavenly Father was also God, as was the Spirit, who was sent on a broader mission on the Day of Pentecost. This did not mean that they believed in three gods—they were still strictly and fervently monotheists—but they had not yet thought through how there could be three but still one. They believed that Jesus died for sin, but they had not yet fully considered the significance of this. How exactly did he die for sin? For whose sin? Is forgiveness of sin *all* his death accomplished? And so on and so on. These are the questions and issues that later generations of Christians took up. Their suggested answers were sometimes wrong and rejected by the majority of Christians; this was called *heresy*. But little by little, Christians were coming to grips with the deeper truths of God and becoming spiritually healthier as a result.

So the idea of development of theology or doctrine is not wrong or dangerous; rather, it is to be expected. It does *not* involve *expanding* on Scripture, that is, going beyond it; the Word of God is sufficient, meaning God has given us everything that we need to know (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Rather, it involves *explaining* Scripture, that is, going deeper into it. Scripture is sufficient, but our understanding of it is not sufficient.² Even now in the twenty-first century we are only really “scratching the surface” of the infinitely deep and high things of God (Job 11:7–9; Isaiah 55:8–9).

So theology is a good thing and the history of theology is a good thing because they both help us to understand God better, and that is a very good thing. There are a few other benefits that come

2. John Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 24–28.

from studying the history of theology that could be mentioned: First, it helps us to be discerning by being able to recognize theological errors that have been made in the past. Second, it helps us to distinguish between what is just a passing fad in Christianity today from what is timeless and enduring biblical truth. Third, it should impress upon us the sovereignty and mercy of God who has preserved his truth despite false teaching and fleeting trends. Fourth, it promotes a healthy humility as we realize that great thinkers have made great errors in the past and that our understanding of the Bible today is in large part due to hundreds of years of thought on the part of others. As many have said, we modern Christians are standing on the shoulders of giants. Fifth and finally, in an age when the concept of truth—especially universal, timeless truth—is being denied, the history of theology reminds us that, for centuries, God’s people have not only believed in universal truth, but also that the most *vital* truth has been recorded and preserved in the Bible. And it is just as relevant today as when it was written.

Regarding the title of this book, you may be thinking, *Really? THE 40 MOST Influential Christians?! Come on!* Please understand that I am not under the illusion that I have nailed the definitive top 40 list of theologians. (Actually, it is the top 42; I snuck a couple of bonus Gregorys into chapter 10.) I thought a more accurate title would be *40 of the Most Influential Christians Who Shaped What We Believe Today, in the Humble Opinion of One Particular Writer*, but that seemed a little unwieldy to the publisher. Good arguments can be made that some of these should not have made it while others should have.

Some of them are blatantly obvious: Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, etc. Other names are perhaps rather unfamiliar: Clement, Cyprian, Cyril, Julian, Richard Hooker, Rosemary Ruether, etc. In fact, just because I have chosen to include some of these theologians does not mean that I am necessarily a fan of their theologies. A few of them, in my opinion, have been more harmful than helpful. “Influential” does not necessarily mean “accurate.” But all of them, from Anselm to Zwingli, who lived in important centers of theology from

Antioch to Zurich, advanced theological thinking or contributed to a certain Christian tradition in significant ways. All of these individuals *did* play important and influential roles in the overall story of the development of Christian theology. It is that story that I am also trying to tell.

Regarding format, each chapter will be divided into three main sections with two subparts: **context** (*theological* and *biographical*), **contribution** (*theological* and *bibliographical*), and **conclusion** (*theological* and *personal*).

First, we will discuss the **context** of these great Christian thinkers. All thinking takes place within a historical context, and in this case also a *theological* one. The question is, What was taking place in the historical setting that prompted these Christians to think and write about what they did? Very often this setting was theological controversy, and in some cases outright heresy. It is rather amazing how often great strides forward in Christians' understanding of the Bible and its theological teachings came about as a result of heresy. Some self-professing Christian would come up with an idea that was rather novel (to put it mildly), and many others in the Christian community would respond, "That is intriguing, but it doesn't sound like what we have traditionally believed." The result was that Christians would be pushed back to the Word of God to check out the new idea and come to a deeper understanding of what God's Word really taught, and a deeper understanding of what they had believed all along. This realization should also impress us with our great God, who, far from being sidetracked or frustrated by false teaching, actually uses it to accomplish his sovereign purposes. This kind of God deserves our ultimate trust and sincere worship. So first we will become acquainted with the historical-theological context of these great Christian thinkers. We will also consider these thinkers' *biographical* context, that is, some highlights of their personal lives. Sometimes these are just as interesting and significant as their thought and writings.

The second main section of each chapter will be their **contribution**. The *theological* contribution will be a brief overview of their main ideas that advanced or challenged our understanding of the

Word, ways, and works of God. The *bibliographical* contribution will be a notation of their main writings and a few quotations from those writings—letting these great Christian thinkers speak for themselves.

The **conclusion** will briefly wrap up that Christian thinker’s *theological* contribution and occasionally suggest some *personal* applications—lessons we can learn from their lives.

We are going to begin this story in the second century AD. The pre-story is that the canon of the Bible has been completed. Christians accepted the books of the Old Testament as authoritative, that is, the very Word of God—inspired, to be accepted and believed. By the end of the first century, all of the books of the New Testament had been written and also acknowledged, at least informally, as authoritative and equivalent to the Old Testament (although more was to happen along these lines in the next three centuries, as we will see).³ Also, by the end of the first century, all of the apostles—the *personal* authoritative source of God’s truth following the ascension of Jesus—had died.

As the Church entered the second century, it had the complete written Word of God and a body of truth based on the Word of God—known as the “teachings of the apostles”—but only an elementary understanding of it all. So God continued to work through his people to build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) in order to take believers in Jesus deeper into the infinite person and mind of God.

What is most important in what follows is not getting to know these great Christian thinkers better, nor is it understanding theology better (in and of itself); rather, what is most important is getting to know God better. After all, our Savior, Jesus Christ, commanded us to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). These are the stories of Christians who were trying to do that and trying to help others do it as well.

3. For more, see Daryl Aaron, *Understanding Your Bible in 15 Minutes a Day* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2012), 101–104.

CLEMENT OF ROME

First Apostolic Father

Context

The last apostle, John, died at the end of the first century, ending what is known as the “apostolic period.” At this time, all of the books that would eventually make up the New Testament had been written by the apostles and a few others closely associated with them. So by the end of the first century, God had given, through inspiration, all of his Word that he intended for people to have (Old Testament and New Testament).

The period immediately following, beginning in the second century, is called the “post-apostolic” period. Immediately, Christians began reflecting on and writing about the teachings of the apostles as recorded in the books of the New Testament and the rest of Scripture. Some of these individuals actually knew the apostles and were indeed their disciples. The writings from this period are known as the “works of apostolic fathers” and include the following: the *Epistle of Clement* (or, *1 Clement*¹), seven epistles of

1. This distinguishes it from *2 Clement*, which was not written by Clement.

Ignatius, the *Epistle of Polycarp*, the *Didache* (or, *Teaching of the Apostles*), the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.² The authors of the last three are not known.³ Some Christians in the early centuries even regarded some of the apostolic fathers on the same level of authority as the works of the apostles themselves. However, by the end of the fourth century, none of these books were considered canonical—inspired by God and divinely authoritative.

Generally speaking, the writings of the apostolic fathers were more practical and pastoral than theological, at least in the sense of any deep reflection and speculation on what the apostles taught. The church was still in its infant stages and just trying to find its way in the complex setting of the second-century Roman Empire. That deeper reflection would come soon, but not quite yet. Very early on there were pressing problems and threats that needed to be addressed. These were the primary concerns of the apostolic fathers. We will consider just two of them: Clement and his epistle in this chapter, and Ignatius and his seven epistles in chapter 2.

The writer of *Clement* was the bishop of the church in Rome in the last decade of the first century, and therefore generally known as Clement of Rome. He *may* be the Clement mentioned in Philipians 4:3. Not much is known about him otherwise.

Contribution

No author is named in the letter, but there is universal agreement that Clement of Rome did write it. It was written from Rome to the church in Corinth (chapter 1) around AD 96. This, then, is the first Christian document that we have following the writings of the apostles themselves.

In these earliest post-apostolic writings, we clearly see acknowledgment of foundational Christian truths. For example, Clement

2. A few others are sometimes added.

3. The *Epistle of Barnabas* is pseudonymous, that is, the name of Barnabas was falsely attached to it.

used the “triadic formula”—referring to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as God—reflecting his belief in the doctrine of the Trinity even though Christians did not yet use the word *Trinity* for this truth (e.g., chapter 58).⁴ Clement clearly understood that the death of Christ was for salvation (e.g., 7), and he would agree with Paul that we “are not justified by ourselves, nor by our . . . works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men . . .” (32).⁵ Clement and other apostolic fathers faithfully passed on these fundamental truths that they had received and been taught by the apostles themselves.

Clement’s main contribution to Christian thought is in the area of church unity and leadership. Threats to unity were of great concern to Jesus himself (John 17:20–23) and to the apostles (Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Peter 3:8–9). In fact, that was one of Paul’s concerns when he wrote to the Corinthians—division within the church (1 Corinthians 1:10ff.). This was also Clement’s concern when he wrote to the same church some forty years later. For some reason, some of the younger Christians there were rebelling against the leaders of the church, and some of those leaders had been forced from their positions. The result was a crisis of leadership and division in the church.

Some New Testament background regarding church leaders would be helpful at this point. The New Testament refers to the primary office of church leadership as *episkopos* (e.g., Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 2:25), from which we get the term *Episcopalian*. The Greek word literally means “overseer,” but in some older English versions, such as the King James Version, and in translations of the Fathers, such as Clement, it is translated

4. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 38.

5. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the works of the apostolic fathers are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (WORDsearch Database, 2006; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), with minor updating of the language (e.g., “ye” to “you”). The numbers cited in the parentheses refer to the chapter from which the quote was taken. *Clement* has 65 (short) chapters.

as “bishop.” The New Testament also referred to a church leader as *presbuteros* (e.g., Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). This word literally means “elder,” and from it we get the term *Presbyterian*. However, this is *not* something different from an overseer. Rather, they are two different titles for the *same* office or leadership position in a local church. This is clear because both are sometimes used in the same context (e.g., Acts 20:1, 28; Titus 1:6–7). Clement showed that he understood this in the same way because he used both *episkopos* and *presbuteros* for this church leadership position (e.g., chapter 44).

Now, back to Clement’s concern regarding the crisis of leadership and division in the Corinthian church. He urged his readers to find their unity in Christ, but more specifically in those who had been appointed to oversee their church. For example, he wrote, “Let us reverence the Lord Jesus Christ . . . let us esteem *those who have the rule over us* [overseers/bishops]; let us honor the presbyters [elders] among us . . .” (21). Clement also called upon the troublemakers to repent and submit to their elders (57; cf. Hebrews 13:17).

His reasoning for expecting Christians to submit to their leaders was this: God had chosen and appointed Jesus; Jesus had chosen and appointed the apostles; the apostles had chosen and appointed their successors, elder-overseers/bishops (including Clement himself). Therefore, this pattern should be repeated through the succeeding generations of church leaders (42). This idea eventually came to be known as “apostolic succession.” Clement’s motive here was good: to preserve the truth of the apostolic message (just as Paul was doing in 2 Timothy 2:2) and to preserve order and unity in the church. Church elders do indeed have authority in a local church. But the very *same* authority as the *apostles*? As we will see, the concept of apostolic succession continued to develop and eventually presented some significant problems for the church.

Clement planted another related seed that began to sprout very quickly and eventually resulted in the clear distinction between the “clergy” and the “laity,” and the elevation of the former over the latter. In chapter 40 he wrote, “For [the Lord’s] own peculiar

services are assigned to the [Old Testament Jewish] high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations pass on to the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen.” In this last sentence he used the Greek word *laikos*—from which we get the word *laity*—for the first time in Christian literature. What he is obviously doing is drawing from the Old Testament way of serving God—through one high priest along with many priests and Levites *exclusively*—and applying it to the New Testament church. Even though this is certainly not what Clement had in mind, the analogy quickly developed into the belief that Christian bishops were the “priests,” and they *alone* were qualified to do the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Christian priesthood is designated to serve God; everybody else does something less.

Others took this even further: The bishop of the church in Rome (now known as the pope) is the highest bishop of all, the Christian *high priest*. This idea is known as the “supremacy of the papacy.” The former pope Benedict XVI found support from this in Clement: “Thus, we could say that Clement’s *Letter* was a first exercise of the Roman primacy after St. Peter’s death.”⁶ Why would Pope Benedict say this? Because Clement was bishop of *Rome*, but he seemed to be exercising some authority over the church in *Corinth* by telling them how to deal with matters there.

Conclusion

Clement’s primary concern reflected the very clear concern of other New Testament writers—the preservation of the unity of the church. Clement also understood, as did other New Testament writers, the importance of local church leadership for the sake of preserving biblical truth and biblical unity. All of this demonstrates

6. Pope Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church through the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 4. “Roman primacy” refers to the superiority of the bishop of Rome—the pope—over all other clergy in what is now known as the Roman Catholic Church.

what *should* still be important to local churches today. On the other hand, Clement illustrates the danger of saying something that is picked up by others and taken far beyond what was originally intended. This happened all too often in the flow of church history, as we will see.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Eager Martyr

Context

The gospel of Jesus Christ spread rapidly after Jesus' ascension (Acts 2:41, 47; 6:7; 9:31), and Christianity was firmly entrenched throughout the Roman Empire very early on. Christianity was not officially condemned; nevertheless, Christians immediately faced significant persecution. Jesus had warned of just this certainty (Matthew 16:24; John 15:20; 16:33; 17:14), as had Paul (2 Timothy 3:12) and Peter (1 Peter 3:14–17; 4:16). The second apostolic father we will consider experienced this personally. In fact, he died as a martyr.

Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch in Syria, the city in which the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), which was initially a derogatory term—something like “little Christs.” The dates of Ignatius' life are a bit obscure, but he probably died in the second decade of the second century. Not much else is known about his life other than what he himself wrote about in his letters. We know that he was arrested due to his faith in Christ and

was sent from Antioch, across Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), to Rome, where he expected to be executed.

Contribution

During his trip to Rome he wrote seven letters: to the churches in Magnesia; Tralles; Ephesus (from which Christians had come to visit him along the way); Philadelphia; Smyrna; and Rome, his destination; as well as a personal letter to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. One New Testament scholar said that these letters are “one of the finest literary expressions of Christianity during the second century.”¹ Even though they are not deeply theological, “It may be fair to say that these letters contain the first real theology in Christianity [beyond the apostles’ own writings].”² As we saw previously, the apostolic fathers were not primarily theologians, but rather pastors who were doing their best to encourage Christians in the early days of the church, which found itself in a challenging environment.

A major theme that runs throughout Ignatius’s letters is a strong affirmation that Jesus Christ is fully God and (especially) fully human, and the related idea that the denial of this, especially Christ’s genuine humanity, was a significant threat to vital Christian truth as well as the unity of the church.

Like Clement, Ignatius clearly understood that his Savior, Jesus Christ, was none other than God himself. He referred to Jesus as “Christ our God” (Smyrnaeans 10). There is no reflective thought regarding *how* Jesus could be fully God along with the Father and the Spirit, but neither was this a pressing concern at this point. What was important in those early days was to believe it, not to be able to explain it.

But of greater concern to Ignatius was that Jesus was genuinely human. Some Christians had come to believe that Jesus was truly

1. Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 4.

2. Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 46.

God but not truly human—he only *appeared* to be human. This view is called *Docetism*, one of the “Christological heresies” in the early centuries. The term comes from the Greek word *dokeō*, which means “to appear to be.” This probably reflected the influence of an aspect of Greek philosophy known as dualism, the assumption that what is spirit is good by definition, and what is physical or material is evil by definition. The obvious implication is that God, who is spirit and therefore good, would not and could not be associated with what is physical and necessarily evil. God would *never* “incarnate” himself (put on flesh) by becoming genuinely human.

However, this was *not* what the apostles taught—just the opposite! For example, the title “Son of Man” is applied to Jesus over eighty times in the New Testament (and was Jesus’ favorite way of referring to himself). He was born of a woman (Luke 2:7) and had a family tree (Matthew 1:1–16; Luke 3: 23–38). Jesus referred to himself as a “man” (John 8:40), as did Paul (Romans 5:15; 1 Timothy 2:5). As a matter of fact, the apostle John had already addressed the denial of Christ’s humanity. He called it the “spirit of the antichrist” (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7–11).

Ignatius passed on this apostolic teaching. For example, he wrote, “There is one Physician [Jesus Christ] who is possessed both of *flesh* and spirit . . . God existing in *flesh* . . . both of *Mary* and of God . . . [who] *became also man*, of *Mary* the virgin. For ‘*the Word was made flesh*’ [quoted from John 1:14]. Being incorporeal [without a body], He was *in the body*; being impassible [incapable of suffering and dying], He was in a passible *body*; being immortal, He was in a *mortal body* . . .” (Ephesians 7, emphasis added).

One of the reasons that this was so strongly addressed by John and Ignatius was this: If Jesus was not really human, then he did not really suffer, die, and rise from the dead with a real human body. To deny the humanity of Jesus, then, is to deny the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1–4), and to deny the gospel is to forfeit any hope of salvation. For this reason, the denial of Jesus’ humanity was a serious threat to Christians and why Ignatius had to warn his readers about it.

Like Clement, Ignatius was concerned for church unity, and Docetism was a significant threat to that. So, repeatedly in his

letters, he warned Christians to “flee from division and wicked doctrines” (Philadelphian 2). Also, like Clement, Ignatius believed that the bishop played an important role in the preservation of unity and doctrinal purity. Statements such as the following appear over and over again in Ignatius: “Do nothing without the bishop” (Philadelphians 7) and “See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father. . . . Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let [the church] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church”³ (Smyrnaeans 8).

There is something vital here. Church leaders do indeed play a critical role in passing on biblical truth and protecting the church from error (2 Timothy 1:13; 4:2; Titus 1:5, 9, 13; 2:1). However, Ignatius seems to water the seed planted by Clement that resulted in the elevation of one bishop/overseer over the many presbyters/elders and other church leaders. For example, he wrote, “Your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles” (Magnesians 6). Ignatius’s motive was good: the preservation of unity and truth. The problem, however, is that bishops, indeed all church leaders, are human, fallible, sinful, and, as history soon demonstrated, could themselves be the promoters of false teaching and the cause of disunity. Clement’s and Ignatius’s views would continue to evolve into an unbiblical elevation of the clergy, giving them power and status that God never intended for them to have.

Conclusion

Ignatius exhorted his readers to believe in the true humanity of Christ, but his positive pastoral advice also came from this: If Jesus Christ, in addition to being God, is also fully human, then

3. Ignatius was the first person to attach the word *catholic* to the church, not to be confused with the Roman Catholic Church. The word *catholic* means “general” or “universal.” The concept of the “catholic church” became an important one in the early centuries—there is *one* church, even though there are many Christians who are spread around the world. This is a wonderful and vital truth of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 4:3–4).

Christians should gladly identify with him, be devoted to him, and imitate him, even to the point of being willing, even eager, to suffer and die, just as Jesus did. This is not some kind of abstract theological commitment on the part of Ignatius. He was going to his own martyrdom, and he was *joyful* about it, so much so that he did not want any well-meaning Christians trying to prevent it in any way (Romans 4). “Ignatius’s thinking about his death reveals a man who rightly knew that Christian believing demands passionate engagement of the entire person, even to the point of death.”⁴ Ignatius’s willingness and eagerness to suffer and die indicated that his faith in Christ, who also suffered and died, was sincere, not just empty profession.

Ignatius reminds us of several important things: First, false teaching is dangerous to spiritual health and must be rejected; biblical truth is vital and must be believed. Second, belief in biblical truth is more than just intellectual; it should also affect how we live, and maybe even how we die!

4. Michael A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 33. Interestingly, the word *martyr* comes from the Greek word *martus*, which literally means “witness” (e.g., Acts 1:8). There was a close association between being a witness for Christ and dying for Christ!