

The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious - Part 4

by William Dool Killen

William Dool Killen argues against the authenticity of the Ignatian Epistles by examining historical testimonies and contrasting them with early church writings.

Scripture: Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 3:1, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1

Topics: "Early Church History", "Episcopal Authority"

Description

William Dool Killen delves into 'The Testimony of Irenaeus and the Genesis of Prelacy,' examining the claims of the Epistles attributed to Ignatius and the development of Episcopacy in the early Christian Church. The evidence from Irenaeus and Polycarp's writings fails to support the authenticity of the Ignatian letters, leading to suspicions of forgery. Dr. Lightfoot's arguments for the early spread of Episcopacy in Asia Minor and Syria are challenged, highlighting the lack of solid foundation for such claims.

Transcript

Chapter 4

THE TESTIMONY OF IRENAEUS

AND THE GENESIS OF PRELACY.

1. The Testimony of Irenaeus.

The only two vouchers of the second century produced in support of the claims of the Epistles attributed to Ignatius, are the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians and a sentence from the treatise of Irenaeus Against Heresies. The evidence from Polycarp's Epistle has been discussed in a preceding chapter. When examined, it has completely broken down, as it is based on an entire misconception of the meaning of the writer. The words of Irenaeus can be adduced with still less plausibility to uphold the credit of these letters.

The following is the passage in which they are supposed to be authenticated. "One of our people said, when condemned to the beasts on account of his testimony towards God -- 'As I am the wheat of God, I am also ground by the teeth of beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God.'" [53.1] It is worse than a mere begging of the question to assert that Irenaeus here gives us a quotation from one of the letters of Ignatius. In the extensive treatise from which the words are an extract, he never once mentions the name of the pastor of Antioch.

Had he been aware of the existence of these Epistles, he would undoubtedly have availed himself of their assistance when contending against the heretics -- as they would have furnished him with many passages exactly suited for their refutation. The words of a man taught by the apostles, occupying one of the highest positions in the Christian Church, and finishing his career by a glorious martyrdom in the very beginning of the second century, would have been by far the weightiest evidence he could have produced, next to the teaching of inspiration.

But though he brings forward Clemens Romanus, Papias, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, [54.1] and others to confront the errorists, he ignores a witness whose antiquity and weight of character would have imparted peculiar significance to his testimony. To say that though he never names him elsewhere, he points to him in this place as "one of our people," is to make a very bold and improbable statement. Even the Apostle Paul himself would not have ventured to describe the evangelist John in this way.

He would have alluded to him more respectfully. Neither would the pastor of a comparatively uninfluential church in the south of Gaul have expressed himself after this fashion when speaking of a minister who had been one of the most famous of the spiritual heroes of the Church. Not many years before, a terrific persecution had raged in his own city of Lyons; many had been put in prison, and some had been thrown to wild beasts; [55.1] and it is obviously to one of these anonymous sufferers that Irenaeus here directs attention.

The "one of our people" is not certainly an apostolic Father; but some citizen of Lyons, moving in a different sphere, whose name the author does not deem it necessary to enrol in the record of history. Neither is it to a written correspondence, but to the dying words of the unknown martyr, to which he adverts when we read, -- "One of our people said, As I am the wheat of God, I am also ground by the teeth of beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God." The two witnesses of the second century who are supposed to uphold the claims of the Ignatian Epistles have now been examined, and it must be apparent that their testimony amounts to nothing.

Thus far, then, there is no external evidence whatever in favour of these letters. The result of this investigation warrants the suspicion that they are forgeries. [55.2] The internal evidence abundantly confirms this impression. Any one who carefully peruses them, and then reads over the Epistle of Clemens Romanus, the Teaching of the Apostles, the writings of Justin Martyr, and the Epistle of Polycarp, may see that the works just named are the productions of quite another period.

The Ignatian letters describe a state of things which they totally ignore. Dr. Lightfoot himself has been at pains to point out the wonderful difference between the Ignatian correspondence and the Epistle of Polycarp. "In whatever way," says he, "we test the documents, the contrast is very striking, -- more striking, indeed, than we should have expected to find between two Christian writers who lived at the same time and were personally acquainted with each other." [56.1] He then proceeds to mention some of the points of contrast.

Whilst the so-called Ignatius lays stress on Episcopacy "as the key-stone of the ecclesiastical order," Polycarp, in his Epistle, from first to last makes "no mention of the Episcopate," and "the bishop is entirely ignored." In regard to doctrinal statement the same contrariety is apparent. Ignatius speaks of "the blood of God" and "the passion of my God," whilst no such language is used by Polycarp. Again, in the letter of the pastor of Smyrna, there is "an entire absence of that sacramental language which confronts us again and again in the most startling forms in Ignatius." [57.1] "Though the seven Ignatian letters are many times

longer than Polycarp's Epistle, the quotations in the latter are incomparably more numerous as well as more precise than in the former."

In the Ignatian letters, of "quotations from the New Testament, strictly speaking, there is none." [57.2] "Of all the Fathers of the Church, early or later, no one is more incisive or more persistent in advocating the claims of the threefold ministry to allegiance than Ignatius." [57.3] Polycarp, on the other hand, has written a letter "which has proved a stronghold of Presbyterianism." [57.4] And yet Dr. Lightfoot would have us to believe that these various letters were written by two ministers living at the same time, taught by the same instructors, holding the closest intercourse with each other, professing the same doctrines, and adhering to the same ecclesiastical arrangements!

The features of distinction between the teaching of the Ignatian letters and the teaching of Polycarp, which have been pointed out by Dr. Lightfoot himself, are sufficiently striking; but his Lordship has not exhibited nearly the full amount of the contrast. Ignatius is described as offering himself voluntarily that he may suffer as a martyr, and as telling those to whom he writes that his supreme desire is to be devoured by the lions at Rome. "I desire," says he, "to fight with wild beasts." [57.5] "May I have joy of the beasts that have been prepared for me ...

I will entice them that they may devour me promptly." [58.1] "Though I desire to suffer, yet I know not whether I am worthy." [58.2] "I delivered myself over to death." [58.3] "I bid all men know that of my own free will I die for God." [58.4] The Church, instructed by Polycarp, condemns this insane ambition for martyrdom. "We praise not those," say the Smyrnaeans, "who deliver themselves up, since the gospel does not so teach us." [58.5] In these letters Ignatius speaks as a vain babbler, drunken with fanaticism; Polycarp, in his Epistle, expresses himself like an humble-minded Presbyterian minister in his sober senses.

Ignatius is made to address Polycarp as if he were a full-blown prelate, and tells the people under his care, "He that honoureth the bishop is honoured of God; he that doth aught against the knowledge of the bishop, rendereth service to the devil" [58.6] Polycarp, on the other hand, describes himself as one of the elders, and exhorts the Philippians to "submit to the presbyters and deacons," and to be "all subject one to another." [58.7] When their Church had got into a state of confusion, and when they applied to him for advice, he recommended them "to walk in the commandment of the Lord," and admonished their "presbyters to be compassionate and merciful towards all men," [58.8] -- never hinting that the appointment of a bishop would help to keep them in order; whereas, when Ignatius addresses various Churches, -- that of the Smyrnaeans included, -- he assumes a tone of High Churchmanship which Archbishop Laud himself would have been afraid, and perhaps ashamed, to emulate.

"As many as are of God and of Jesus Christ," says he, "they are with the bishop." "It is good to recognise God and the bishop!" "Give ye heed to the bishop, that God may also give heed to you." [59.1] The internal evidence furnished by the Ignatian Epistles seals their condemnation. I do not intend, however, at present to pursue this subject. In a work published by me six and twenty years ago, [59.2] I have called attention to various circumstances which betray the imposture; and neither Dr.

Lightfoot, Zahn, nor any one else, so far as I am aware, has ever yet ventured to deal with my arguments. I might now add new evidences of their fabrication, but I deem this unnecessary. I cannot, however, pass from this department of the question in debate, without protesting against the view presented by the Bishop of Durham of the origin of Prelacy. "It is shown," says he, referring to his Essay on the Christian

Ministry, [59.3] "that though the New Testament itself contains as yet no direct and indisputable notices of a localized episcopate in the Gentile Churches, as distinguished from the moveable episcopate exercised by Timothy in Ephesus and by Titus in Crete, yet there is satisfactory evidence of its development in the later years of the apostolic age, ... and that, in the early years of the second century, the episcopate was widely spread and had taken firm root, more especially in Asia Minor and in Syria.

If the evidence on which its extension in the regions east of the Aegaeon at this epoch be resisted, I am at a loss to understand what single fact relating to the history of the Christian Church during the first half of the second century can be regarded as established." [60.1] In this statement, as well as in not a few others already submitted to the reader, Dr. Lightfoot has expressed himself with an amount of confidence which may well excite astonishment. It would not be difficult to show that his speculations as to the development of Episcopacy in Asia Minor and Syria in the early years of the second century, as presented in the Essay to which he refers, are the merest moonshine.

On what grounds can he maintain that Timothy exercised what he calls a "moveable episcopate" in Ephesus? Paul besought him to abide there for a time that he might withstand errorists, and he gave him instructions as to how he was to behave himself in the house of God; [60.2] but it did not therefore follow that he was either a bishop or an archbishop. He was an able man, sound in the faith, wise and energetic; and, as he was thus a host in himself, Paul expected that meanwhile he would be eminently useful in helping the less gifted ministers who were in the place to repress error and keep the Church in order.

That Paul intended to establish neither a moveable nor an immoveable episcopate in Ephesus, is obvious from his own testimony; for when he addresses its elders, -- as he believed for the last time, -- he ignored their submission to any ecclesiastical superior, and committed the Church to their own supervision. [61.1] And if he left Titus in Crete to take charge of the organization of the Church there, he certainly did not intend that the evangelist was to act alone. In those days there was no occasion for the services of a diocesan bishop, inasmuch as the Christian community was governed by the common council of the elders, and ordination was performed "with the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery." [61.2] Titus was a master builder, and Paul believed that, proceeding in concert with the ministers in Crete, he would render effectual aid in carrying forward the erection of the ecclesiastical edifice.

And what proof has Dr. Lightfoot produced to show that "the episcopate was widely spread in Asia Minor and in Syria" in "the early years of the second century"? If the Ignatian Epistles be discredited, he has none at all. But there is very decisive evidence to the contrary. The Teaching of the Apostles, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Polycarp prove the very reverse. And yet Dr. Lightfoot is at a loss to understand what single fact relating to the history of the Christian Church during the first half of the second century can be regarded as established, if we reject his baseless assertion! 2. The Genesis of Prelacy.

Jerome gives us the true explanation of the origin of the episcopate, when he tells us that it was set up with a view to prevent divisions in the Church. [62.1] These divisions were created chiefly by the Gnostics, who swarmed in some of the great cities of the empire towards the middle of the second century. About that time the president of the Presbytery was in a few places armed with additional authority, in the hope that he would thus be the better able to repress schism.

The new system was inaugurated in Rome, and its Church has ever since maintained the proud boast that it is the centre of ecclesiastical unity. From the Imperial city Episcopacy gradually radiated over all

Christendom. The position assumed by Dr. Lightfoot -- that it commenced in Jerusalem -- is without any solid foundation. To support it, he is obliged to adopt the fable that James was the first bishop of the mother Church. The New Testament ignores this story, and tells us explicitly that James was only one of the "pillars," or ruling spirits, among the Christians of the Jewish capital. [62.2] The very same kind of argumentation employed to establish the prelacy of James, may be used, with far greater plausibility, to demonstrate the primacy of Peter.

Dr. Lightfoot himself acknowledges that, about the close of the first century, we cannot find a trace of the episcopate in either of the two great Christian Churches of Rome and Corinth. [63.1] "At the close of the first century," says he, "Clement writes to Corinth, as at the beginning of the second century Polycarp writes to Philippi. As in the latter Epistle, so in the former, there is no allusion to the episcopal office." [63.2] He might have said that, even after the middle of the second century, it did not exist either in Smyrna or Philippi.

He admits also, that "as late as the close of the second century, the bishop of Alexandria was regarded as distinct, and yet not as distinct from the Presbytery." [63.3] "The first bishop of Alexandria," says he, "of whom any distinct incident is recorded on trustworthy authority, was a contemporary of Origen," [63.4] who flourished in the third century. Dr. Lightfoot tells us in the same place, that "at Alexandria the bishop was nominated and apparently ordained by the twelve presbyters out of their own number." [63.5] Instead of asserting, as has been done, that no single fact relating to the history of the Christian Church during the first half of the second century can be regarded as established, if we deny that the episcopate was widely spread in the early years of the second century in Asia Minor and elsewhere, it may be fearlessly affirmed that, at the date here mentioned, there is not a particle of proof that it was established ANYWHERE.

Irenaeus could have given an account of the genesis of Episcopacy, for he lived throughout the period of its original development; but he has taken care not to lift the veil which covers its mysterious commencement. He could have told what prompted Polycarp to undertake a journey to Rome when burthened with the weight of years; but he has left us to our own surmises. It is, however, significant that the presbyterian system was kept up in Smyrna long after the death of its aged martyr. [64.1] Dr.

Lightfoot has well observed that "Irenaeus was probably the most learned Christian of his time;" [64.2] and it is pretty clear that he contributed much to promote the acceptance of the episcopal theory. When arguing with the heretics, he coined the doctrine of the apostolical succession, and maintained that the true faith was propagated to his own age through an unbroken line of bishops from the days of the apostles. To make out his case, he was necessitated to speak of the presidents of the presbyteries as bishops, [64.3] and to ignore the change which had meanwhile taken place in the ecclesiastical Constitution.

Subsequent writers followed in his wake, and thus it is that the beginnings of Episcopacy have been enveloped in so much obscurity. Even in Rome, the seat of the most prominent Church in Christendom, it is impossible to settle the order in which its early presiding pastors were arranged. "Come we to Rome," says Stillingfleet, "and here the succession is as muddy as the Tiber itself; for here Tertullian, Rufinus, and several others, place Clement next to Peter. Irenaeus and Eusebius set Anacletus before him; Epiphanius and Optatus, both Anacletus and Cletus; Augustinus and Damasus, with others, make Anacletus, Cletus, and Linus all to precede him.

What way shall we find to extricate ourselves out of this labyrinth?" [65.1] The different lists preserved attest that there was no such continuous and homogeneous line of bishops as the doctrine of the apostolical succession implies. When Irenaeus speaks of Polycarp as having "received his appointment in Asia from apostles as bishop in the Church of Smyrna," [65.2] he makes a statement which, literally understood, even Dr. Lightfoot hesitates to endorse. [65.3] The Apostle John may have seen Polycarp in his boyhood, and may have predicted his future eminence as a Christian minister, -- just as Timothy was pointed out by prophecy [66.1] as destined to be a champion of the faith.

When Episcopacy was introduced, its abettors tried to manufacture a little literary capital out of some such incident; but the allegation that Polycarp was ordained to the episcopal office by the apostles, is a fable that does not require refutation. Almost all of them were dead before he was born. [66.2]

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