

# The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious - Part 5

by William Dool Killen

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*William Dool Killen argues that the Ignatian Epistles are forgeries crafted to bolster episcopal authority in the early Church.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:15, Romans 16:17, 2 Corinthians 11:13, Galatians 1:6, Ephesians 4:14, Colossians 2:8, 1 Timothy 6:5, 2 Peter 2:1, 1 John 4:1

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

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## Description

William Dool Killen delves into the controversial topic of the Ignatian Epistles, suggesting that they are likely forgeries originating in the early part of the third century. He explores the possible involvement of Callistus, who later became Bishop of Rome, in the creation of these letters to strengthen the hierarchy of the Church. The Epistle to the Romans, believed to be the first produced, subtly introduces the concept of episcopal authority and martyrdom, aiming to solidify the claims of the bishops. Killen highlights the intricate web of deceit and manipulation woven into these letters, challenging the authenticity and motives behind their composition.

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## Transcript

Chapter 5

THE FORGERY

OF THE

IGNATIAN EPISTLES.

If, as there is every reason to believe, the Ignatian Epistles are forgeries from beginning to end, various questions arise as to the time of their appearance, and the circumstances which prompted their fabrication. Their origin, like that of many other writings of the same description, cannot be satisfactorily explored; and we must in vain attempt a solution of all the objections which may be urged against almost any hypothesis framed to elucidate their history. It is, however, pretty clear that, in their original form, they first saw the light in the early part of the third century.

About that time there was evidently something like a mania for the composition of such works, -- as various spurious writings, attributed to Clemens Romanus and others, abundantly testify. Their authors do not seem to have been aware of the impropriety of committing these pious frauds, and may even have

imagined that they were thus doing God service. [67.1] Several circumstances suggest that Callistus -- who became Bishop of Rome about A.D. 219 -- may, before his advancement to the episcopal chair, have had a hand in the preparation of these Ignatian Epistles.

His history is remarkable. He was originally a slave, and in early life he is reported to have been the child of misfortune. He had at one time the care of a bank, in the management of which he did not prosper. He was at length banished to Sardinia, to labour there as a convict in the mines; and when released from servitude in that unhealthy island, he was brought under the notice of Victor, the Roman bishop. To his bounty he was, about this time, indebted for his support. [68.1] On the death of Victor, Callistus became a prime favourite with Zephyrinus, the succeeding bishop.

By him he was put in charge of the cemetery of the Christians connected with the Catacombs; and he soon attained the most influential position among the Roman clergy. So great was his popularity, that, on the demise of his patron, he was himself unanimously chosen to the episcopal office in the chief city of the empire. Callistus was no ordinary man. He was a kind of original in his way. He possessed a considerable amount of literary culture. He took a prominent part in the current theological controversies, -- and yet, if we are to believe Hippolytus, he could accommodate himself to the views of different schools of doctrine.

He had great versatility of talent, restless activity, deep cunning, and much force of character. Hippolytus tells us that he was sadly given to intrigue, and so slippery in his movements that it was no easy matter to entangle him in a dilemma. It may have occurred to him that, in the peculiar position of the Church, the concoction of a series of letters, written in the name of an apostolic Father, and vigorously asserting the claims of the bishops, would help much to strengthen the hands of the hierarchy.

He might thus manage at the same time quietly to commend certain favourite views of doctrine, and aid the pretensions of the Roman chief pastor. But the business must be kept a profound secret; and the letters must, if possible, be so framed as not at once to awaken suspicion. If we carefully examine them, we shall find that they were well fitted to escape detection at the time when they were written. The internal evidence warrants the conclusion that the Epistle to the Romans was the first produced.

It came forth alone; and, if it crept into circulation originally in the Imperial city, it was not likely to provoke there any hostile criticism. It is occupied chiefly with giving expression to the personal feelings of the supposed writer in the prospect of martyrdom. It scarcely touches on the question of ecclesiastical regimen; and it closes by soliciting the prayers of the Roman brethren for "the Church which is in Syria." [69.1] "If," says Dr. Lightfoot, "Ignatius had not incidentally mentioned himself as the Bishop 'of' or 'from Syria,' the letter to the Romans would have contained no indication of the existence of the episcopal office" [70.1] Whilst observing this studied silence on the subject which above all others occupied his thoughts, the writer was craftily preparing the way for the more ready reception of the letters which were to follow.

The Epistle to the Romans tacitly embodies their credentials. It slyly takes advantage of the connection of the name of Ignatius with Syria in the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians; assumes that Syria is the eastern province; and represents Ignatius as a bishop from that part of the empire on his way to die at Rome. It does not venture to say that the Western capital had then a bishop of its own, -- for the Epistle of Clemens, which was probably in many hands, and which ignored the episcopal office there -- might thus have suggested doubts as to its genuineness; but it tells the sensational story of the journey of Ignatius in chains, from east to west, in the custody of what are called "ten leopards."

This tale at the time was likely to be exceedingly popular. Ever since the rise of Montanism -- which made its appearance about the time of the death of Polycarp -- there had been an increasing tendency all over the Church to exaggerate the merits of martyrdom. This tendency reached its fullest development in the early part of the third century. The letter of Ignatius to the Romans exhibits it in the height of its folly. Ignatius proclaims his most earnest desire to be torn to pieces by the lions, and entreats the Romans not to interfere and deprive him of a privilege which he coveted so ardently.

The words reported by Irenaeus as uttered by one of the martyrs of Lyons are adroitly appropriated by the pseudo-Ignatius as if spoken by himself; and, in an uncritical age, when the subject-matter of the communication was otherwise so much to the taste of the reader, the quotation helped to establish the credit of the Ignatian correspondence. Another portion of the letter was sure to be extremely acceptable to the Church of Rome -- for here the writer is most lavish in his complimentary acknowledgements.

That Church is described as "having the presidency in the country of the region of the Romans, being worthy of God, worthy of honour, worthy of felicitation, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy in purity, and having the presidency of love, filled with the grace of God, without wavering, and filtered clear from every foreign stain." "The Epistle to the Romans," says Dr. Lightfoot, "had a wider popularity than the other letters of Ignatius, both early and late. It appears to have been circulated apart from them, sometimes alone." [71.1] It was put forth as a feeler, to discover how the public would be disposed to entertain such a correspondence; and, in case of its favourable reception, it was intended to open the way for additional Epistles.

It was cleverly contrived. It employed the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians as a kind of voucher for its authenticity, inasmuch as it is there stated that Ignatius had written a number of letters; and it contained little or nothing which any one in that age would have been disposed to controvert. The Christians of Rome had long enjoyed the reputation of a community ennobled by the blood of martyrs, and they would be quite willing to believe that Ignatius had contributed to their celebrity by dying for the faith within their borders.

It is very doubtful whether he really finished his career there. some ancient authorities attest that he suffered at Antioch; [72.1] and the fact that, in the fourth century, his grave was pointed out in that locality, apparently supports their testimony. [72.2] The account of his hurried removal as a prisoner from Antioch to Rome, in the custody of ten fierce soldiers -- whilst he was permitted, as he passed along, to hold something like a levee of his co-religionists at every stage of his journey -- wears very much the appearance of an ill-constructed fiction.

But the disciples at Rome about this period were willing to be credulous in such matters; and thus it was that this tale of martyrdom was permitted to pass unchallenged. In due time the author of the letters, as they appeared one after another, accomplished the design of their composition. The question of the constitution of the Church had recently awakened much attention; and the threat of Victor to excommunicate the Christians of Asia Minor, because they ventured to differ from him as to the mode of celebrating the Paschal festival, had, no doubt, led to discussions relative to the claims of episcopal authority which, at Rome especially, were felt to be very inconvenient and uncomfortable.

No one could well maintain that it had a scriptural warrant. The few who were acquainted with its history were aware that it was only a human arrangement of comparatively recent introduction; and yet a bishop who threatened with excommunication such as refused to submit to his mandates, could scarcely be

expected to make such a confession. Irenaeus had sanctioned its establishment; but, when Victor became so overbearing, he took the alarm, and told him plainly that those who presided over the Church of Rome before him were nothing but presbyters. [73.1] This was rather an awkward disclosure; and it was felt by the friends of the new order that some voucher was required to help it in its hour of need, and to fortify its pretensions.

The letters of an apostolic Father strongly asserting its claims could not fail to give it encouragement. We can thus understand how at this crisis these Epistles were forthcoming. They were admirably calculated to quiet the public mind. They were comparatively short, so that they could be easily read; and they were quite to the point, for they taught that we are to "regard the bishop as the Lord Himself," and that "he presides after the likeness of God." [74.1] Who after all this could doubt the claims of Episcopacy?

Should not the words of an apostolic Father put an end to all farther questionings? Hippolytus, who was his contemporary, has given us much information in relation to Callistus. He writes, indeed, in an unfriendly spirit; but he speaks, notwithstanding, as an honest man; and we cannot well reject his statements as destitute of foundation. His account of the general facts in the career of this Roman bishop obviously rest on a substratum of truth. As we read these Ignatian letters, it may occur to us that the real author sometimes betrays his identity.

Callistus had been originally a slave, and he here represents Ignatius as saying of himself, "I am a slave." [74.2] Callistus had been a convict, and more than once this Ignatius declares, "I am a convict." [74.3] May he not thus intend to remind his co-religionists at Rome that an illustrious bishop and martyr had once been a slave and a convict like himself? Callistus, when labouring in the mines of Sardinia, must have been well acquainted with ropes and hoists; and here Ignatius describes the Ephesians as "hoisted up to the heights through the engine of Jesus Christ," having faith as their "windlass," and as "using for a rope the Holy Spirit." [74.4] Callistus had at one time been in charge of a bank; and Ignatius, in one of these Epistles, is made to say, "Let your works be your deposits, that you may receive your assets due to you." [75.1] Callistus also had charge of the Christian cemetery in the Roman Catacombs; and Ignatius here expresses himself as one familiar with graves and funerals.

He speaks of a heretic as "being himself a bearer of a corpse," and of those inclined to Judaism "as tombstones and graves of the dead." [75.2] It is rather singular that, in these few short letters, we find so many expressions which point to Callistus as the writer. There are, however, other matters which warrant equally strong suspicions. Hippolytus tells us that Callistus was a Patripassian. "The Father," said he, "having taken human nature, deified it by uniting it to Himself, ... and so he said that the Father had suffered with the Son." [75.3] Hence Ignatius, in these Epistles, startles us by such expressions as "the blood of God," [75.4] and "the passion of my God." [75.5] Callistus is accused by Hippolytus as a trimmer prepared, as occasion served, to conciliate different parties in the Church by appearing to adopt their views.

Sometimes he sided with Hippolytus, and sometimes with those opposed to him; hence it is that the theology taught in these letters is of a very equivocal character. Dr. Lightfoot has seized upon this fact as a reason that they are never quoted by Irenaeus. "The language approaching dangerously near to heresy might," says he, "have led him to avoid directly quoting the doctrinal teaching." [76.1] A much better reason was that he had never heard of these letters; and yet their theology is exactly such a piebald production as might have been expected from Callistus.

It is not easy to understand how Dr. Lightfoot has brought himself to believe that these Ignatian Epistles were written in the beginning of the second century. "Throughout the whole range of Christian literature," says he, "no more uncompromising advocacy of the episcopate can be found than appears in these writings ... It is when asserting the claims of the episcopal office to obedience and respect that the language is strained to the utmost. The bishops established in the farthest part of the world are in the counsels of Jesus Christ." [76.2] It is simply incredible that such a state of things could have existed six or seven years after the death of the Apostle John.

All the extant writings for sixty years after the alleged date of the martyrdom of Ignatius demonstrate the utter falsehood of these letters. It is certain that they employ a terminology, and develop Church principles unknown before the beginning of the third century, and which were not current even then. The forger, whoever he may have been, has displayed no little art and address in their fabrication. From all that we know of Callistus, he was quite equal to the task. Like the false Decretals, these letters exerted much influence on the subsequent history of the Church.

Cyprian, though he never mentions them, [77.1] speedily caught their spirit. His assertion of episcopal authority is quite in the same style. Origen visited Rome shortly after they appeared; he is the first writer who recognises them; and it is worthy of note that, of the three quotations from them found in his works, two are from the Epistle to the Romans. It is quite within the range of possibility that evidence may yet be forthcoming to prove that they emanated from one of the early popes.

They are worthy of such an origin. They recommend that blind and slavish submission to ecclesiastical dictation which the so-called successors of Peter have ever since inculcated. "It need hardly be remarked," says Dr. Lightfoot, "how subversive of the true spirit of Christianity, in the negation of individual freedom and the consequent suppression of direct responsibility to God in Christ, is the crushing despotism with which" the language of these letters, "if taken literally, would invest the episcopal office." [77.2] And yet, having devoted nearly thirty years off and on to the study of these Epistles, the Bishop of Durham maintains that we have here the genuine writings of an apostolic Father who was instructed by the inspired founders of the Christian Church!! In this Review no notice is taken of the various forms of these Epistles. If they are all forgeries, it is not worth while to spend time in discussing the merits of the several editions.

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