CHAPTER 24

Living as a “Christian”: Christian Ethos According to the Writings of Ignatius of Antioch

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1 Introduction

What does it mean to be a “Christian”? What did it mean to act like a “Christian” in an early community founded by Paul or in a later community shaped by his thinking?1 These sorts of questions are difficult to answer even today after nearly two millennia of Christianity, and must have been just as challenging for the first generations of “pagan Christians”—or perhaps it would be better to say “followers of Jesus from an uncircumcised background, whose pedigree meant they did not have to follow all the commandments of the Torah.”2

Paul tried to construct an “identity”3 for the communities he founded by focusing on their relationships—relationships with the God of Israel,

* Michael W. Holmes played an important role for me in my early career, starting to work together with me on shared projects when I was still an unknown post-doc. I have not only learned a great deal from his work, but admire his wonderful collegiality, his humour and fairness. Dear Michael, thank you very much—and ad multos annos.


2 I hesitate to use the term “Christian” for followers of Jesus in the first and second centuries, as these persons would not always have used that designation for themselves. It is first found in Acts and 1 Peter. Nevertheless, because Ignatius uses the term “Christianity” consciously, it makes sense in this context, even if one has to admit that the terms used by Ignatius may not have been the ones used by his opponents.

3 In what follows I use the terms “identity,” “ethics” and “ethos” similarly to J.G. van der Watt, “Introduction,” in Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament (ed. J.G. van der Watt; BZNW 141; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), v–ix. See esp. vi–vii, where he writes, “Identity relates to the question: ‘Who are you?’ Identity refers to who is a person or persons (a community) regard themselves to be and why. A person’s identity has a direct and determinative influence on what follows, namely ethics and ethos. . . . Ethics relates to the question: ‘according to
with Jesus Christ, and with other members of the community, the “family” of brothers and sisters in Christ. While he did not totally abandon the Torah, he linked many of his ethical injunctions to these sorts of relationships.  

In the communities addressed by Ignatius of Antioch a few generations after Paul, the question of what it meant to be a “Christian” and what it meant to act like a “Christian” seems to have been just as urgent. Ignatius himself had begun to use (or had even coined) the term “Christianity” (Χριστιανισμός), which he employs in stark contrast to the terms “Judaism” and “Hellenism” (e.g., Magn. 10.1; Rom. 10.3; Phld. 6.1). Drawing a strict “borderline” between Christianity and Judaism, Ignatius does not follow Paul in assigning the Torah a positive role in regulating a Christian’s life. For Ignatius, all good things relate to Christ, and anything that does not relate to Christ—a category which for Ignatius includes the Torah as such—is worthless. But this creates a problem: if the Torah, the “fence” that had marked out Jewish identity, is no longer something positive because Jewish and Christian identities now have to be sharply distinguished, new identity markers are needed. Shared beliefs can of course serve as identity markers, but a group ethos that distinguishes one group from

which rules are you and your group acting and why? This is the ‘ought to’ or ‘should’ question. It is understood as the motivated ‘rules/principles/basic exhortations/ethical pointers’ presented in a particular document . . . —Ethos relates to the question: ‘how do you behave or what do you do?’ This is a behavioural category. It focusses on the behavior of a group concretely expressing the above-mentioned rules (ethics) and thus functionally displaying their identity. I should also add that “identity” should not be regarded as a stable, but rather as a dynamic concept, and that both insider and outsider perspectives are relevant.


For Ignatius, some commandments of the Torah (e.g., Sabbath observance) actually function negatively to show that a person is living according to Judaism and not according to Christianity.