SENDING HERETICS TO COVENTRY?
IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH ON REVERENCING SILENT BISHOPS

BY

ALVYN PETTersen

For some time Ignatius of Antioch’s conviction that when a bishop said nothing he was then to be regarded with special reverence¹ has been a source of curiosity to scholars. Lightfoot pointed to a supposed quiet and retiring disposition in Onesimus, bishop of Ephesus,² a disposition thought to have echoed the passive side of Jesus’ life. Baur referred to an absence in the bishop of the gift of eloquence.³ Upon these causes of silence the laity were believed to have presumed. Hence, according to both Lightfoot and Baur, Ignatius cautioned against presumption by his valuation of the episcopal silence. Meinhold⁴ and Trevett⁵ resisted Lightfoot’s and Baur’s explanations, largely on the grounds that they were conjectural. They might also have noted that Ignatius in fact speaks of the Ephesians not as those who presume upon their bishop but ‘who are knit to [Onesimus their bishop] as closely as is the church to Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ to the Father’.⁶ They might also have sided with Corwin⁷ in resisting Lightfoot’s understanding of the passive side of Jesus’ life. The Jesus, silent before Pilate,⁸ whom the bishop is supposed to have imagined, certainly was not silent either through a quiet and retiring disposition or through an absence of eloquence. Christ’s silence before the tribunal appears deliberate, bold and active.⁹

Meinhold and Trevett rather noted the importance given by the Didache¹⁰ and by Justin Martyr¹¹ to the place and value of extemporary prayer and preaching; they then suggested that Onesimus possibly was not sufficient to the demands of such an extemporary ministry. To meet the criticism of Onesimus, especially by the charismatics, Ignatius was supposed to have insisted that the bishop, ‘silent’ though he might be, was to be received like all who come to minister, namely, ‘as the Lord himself’.¹² So the bishop, who was particularly vulnerable to criticism and loss of respect from those who stood in a tradition in which silence on the part of ministers had no place and in which teaching and pro-
phecy were prominent, was defended. Pizzolato argued a kindred case: the bishop is to be respected all the more when he shows himself willing both to remain silent and to point to the authority of him who sent him. All these suggestions are doubtful. Whilst not denying that a charismatic ministry, in which prophecy and teaching figured largely, was actively part of early Christianity, it seems that the context of Ignatius' thinking about episcopal silence is rather that of false teaching. To assume then that the episcopal silence both was through inability rather than deliberate choice and was general rather than specific seems at best conjectural and at worst wrong. Suffice it to say that the silence mentioned in the parallel passages in Ephes. XV and Philad. 1, a silence which is not a mute but meaningful silence, is the deliberately keeping silent before and about threatening heresies, the keeping oneself pure that one 'may be', that is, may truly live, and the preserving intact the true and holy unity of the church with her 'one Teacher', who even in his silence was 'worthy of his Father'. This episcopal silence is then not the dumb silence which results from an inability to pray and teach extemporaneously and which contrasts with the 'words' of charismatic prophets. This episcopal silence, like the episcopal words and deeds, is deliberately chosen and speaks volumes.

A further flaw with their theses is the direct connecting the silence of a bishop with the assertion that the bishop 'is to be regarded as the Lord himself' in Ephes. V-VI. The assertion that everyone whom the Master of the household sends to administer his own household ought to be received as the Sender's very self relates to the argument that the Ephesian Christians are not to follow the Docetists. The Christians are not to 'resist the bishop, that [they] may be living in submission to God'. The reference to the reverencing the silent bishop is better taken as parenthetical. The silence of their bishop is not to be grounds for resistance. Rather, as Ignatius states, but without here giving the reason 'why', Onesimus' silence is to be the grounds for a greater reverence and obedience. Indeed, that there should not be this direct linking of the episcopal silence and the argument of receiving the bishop 'as the Lord himself' comes of the recognition that the bishop is to be received 'as the Lord himself' whether the bishop speaks or remains silent. The receiving Christ's representative as Christ himself does not therefore explain why the bishop, when silent, is deserving of greater reverence—unless one adopts Chadwick's thesis that 'the silence of the bishop is a matter of the profoundest significance. God is silence; therefore when