

**I**gnatius was a Christian who was martyred in Rome sometime during the reign of Trajan, AD 98-117. While journeying to Rome, he wrote several uninspired epistles which give valuable insight into conditions among churches in the post-apostolic era.

His letters reveal one of the first departures from the New Testament pattern: the elevation of one particular man, the bishop, over the elders (or presbytery) and the rest of the congregation. Consider the following passage from Ignatius' letter to Smyrna:

"You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist (Lord's supper – jj) which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid.

"Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic (universal – jj) church. It is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop. But whatever he approves is also pleasing to God, in order that everything you do may be trustworthy and valid ... It is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil" (8:1-2; 9:1, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 112-113).

Other passages from Ignatius' epistles indicate that in the absence of apostles the bishop acquired almost popish status in an attempt to protect the church from heresy. Thus, organizational corruption arose out of a lack of confidence in congregational oversight by a group of spiritually mature men – the elders.

This early apostasy should serve as a warning to all who would take lightly the organizational pattern of the local church. Denominations, of course, have altered organizational structure with their centralization. As one recent delegate to the Alabama Baptist Convention said, "We vote on the politics of our church."

But no less offensive are those brethren who sponsor projects beyond their means and then enlist the financial support of other churches to implement them. From Ignatius to the institutional churches of our day, the underlying motives of tampering with congregational autonomy and organizational structure have to do with pride, power and prestige. Let us be careful how we function as a local church.