ECCLESIOLOGY AND ELECTION IN THE EARLY FATHERS

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Abstract

The doctrine of election has been one of the most contested theological loci throughout the Church’s history. Particularly since the Reformation, it has suffered from two basic problems. First, the doctrine has tended to be individualized. Second, the interpretive emphasis has tended to focus on the question of human destiny, rather than upon the eternal and pre-temporal origins of God’s decision. In this article, I demonstrate that, no matter what other issues there may be, two of the Church’s very earliest leaders—Ignatius of Antioch and Origen of Alexandria—avoided these problems by considering election only ever in the context of the Church community, and always with greater reference to God’s eternally free decision than to any individual’s ultimate fate.

Keywords
election, community, church, early Christianity, Ignatius, Origen

Karl Barth was quite right when, in his magisterial study of election in Church Dogmatics II/2, he gave priority to the election of the community (§34) over the election of the individual (§35).¹ This was not, he hastened to add, because the community (Gemeinde) can ever be the object of election in and for itself. There can be no legitimate elevation of “Israel,” or “the Church,” or indeed any other group that considers itself to be divinely “chosen,” over and above the one Jesus Christ in whom election finds its truest ground and embodiment. There can be, and is, no community that is elected independently (selbständige) or, worse, in its own right.² Nonetheless, the community of the elect forms the necessary “mediating” environment through which the election of Jesus Christ is attested and into which the

¹ Of course, the election of the community is, in Barth’s work, itself preceded by and subsidiary to the election of the one Individual, Jesus Christ (§33).
² Karl Barth, KD II/2, 216. This was precisely the danger that Barth saw in a Nazified Volkskirche, in which the sole Lordship of Jesus was replaced by the new revelatory medium of “Germanness.” See also Dietrich Ritschl, The Logic of Theology (London: SCM Press, 1986), 115.
The doctrine of election has consistently and necessarily invited questions about the nature of the community into which one is either elected, or from which one is (if this is, ultimately, even possible) kept apart. As Markus Barth has provocatively asked, “Who are the people of God? Jews, Christians, both together, or neither of them?” Similarly, Dietrich Ritschl has expressed the issue with generous clarity. Israel and the Church are together, he says, “part of the ecumene,” but that ecumene itself must be understood as broadening out considerably beyond the scope of those two. Indeed, asks Ritschl, “is it at all theologically legitimate to distinguish the people of God from others as though the whole of humanity were not affected by the coming, death and resurrection of Jesus in a way that ‘extended’ the history and election of Israel to all people?”

Yet Barth and Ritschl are, at one level, merely two of the more recent exponents of a much older set of questions that were asked, in their own particular contexts, by Ignatius and Origen themselves. Along with others of the Church’s first leaders, they also wrestled with who they were communally, and with what it meant to be “the elected community of God.” A necessary part of that wrestling was a determination also to find the limits of the Church. Howard Clark Kee has rightly observed that any serious attempt to enquire into the self-understanding of the early Christian communities needs to address what he calls “boundary questions”—what were the markers of group identity, how and by what authority were the boundaries determined and defended, and through what processes could those boundaries be crossed? Baptismal belonging gave

3 Barth, CD II/2, 196–97.
5 Ritschl, The Logic of Theology, 45.
6 Howard Clark Kee, Who Are the People of God? Early Christian Models of Community (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 13–14. Kee notes the importance also of “authority questions” and “ritual questions”; that is, what were/are the governance structures, and
expression to membership around the eucharistic table but, as James Papandrea has noted, this did not fully answer the question: “On the one hand, some who were not yet baptized could consider themselves Christians … . On the other hand, some who were baptized might not be considered within the true Church.” Taking seriously Jesus’ commands to “go to the ends of the earth” (Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8), but in equal seriousness the Christ-ian specificity of the gospel, the Fathers realized their need for an ecclesiological grammar that could hold together the Church’s universality, as well as its particularity—a particularity that took not only doctrinal but also, primarily ethical, shape. For this, a determination to define the marks of membership was needed.

In other words, when one considers the multitude of controversies and schisms with which the early Christian communities were riven between the middle of the first century and the middle of the fifth, one major factor stands apart from all others. The apologies for the faith as well as the refutations of heresies and heretics, were done with the singular aim of ensuring the faithfulness and purity of God’s community on earth. No matter whether one considers the repudiation of Arian Christology, or the insistence on a proper ordering of baptismal catechesis, the determinative agenda was to retain the holiness of the Christian ecclesia. Even if Rowan Williams is correct, that the Arian debates and their ilk were primarily exegetical, they were nonetheless contests in which certain exegetical principles (as well as their logical doctrinal consequences) came to be deemed to be beyond the ecclesial pale.

Acknowledging this, however, poses two quite obvious difficulties. First, much of the initial determination around ecclesial limits was decided on doctrinal grounds that were themselves ambiguous. Definitions of orthodoxy—and therefore what was extra ecclesiam—were not readily apparent, or at least generally agreed upon, until the Church formally decided them in ecumenical councils. Thus, the basis on which any given group or individual might be excluded from the Church’s fellowship, and by implication from the community of the elect—other than by recourse to allegations of visible moral imperfection—was not always self-evident.

how were/are formative experiences of change and transition liturgized? I will touch on both of these matters throughout this article.


10 Community discipline, including temporary exclusion from that community was part of early liturgical practice. See for example, Justin Martyr: “And this food is called among us
Denials of Jesus’ resurrection were easy enough to handle. So, for example, Ignatius warns the Smyrneans to distance themselves from those who “make a jest of the resurrection” and in so doing deny the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, Irenaeus castigates those who “do not take into consideration the power of God who raises it [flesh] from the dead.”\textsuperscript{12} Such refutations were clearly directed against various docetic tendencies within or hovering at the fringes of Christian communities. More complex doctrinal matters, on the other hand, took considerable time to configure and were not so easily adjudged. There was simply no formula for describing the proper inter-relationship of the Trinitarian persons until Constantine called the bishops to Nicaea in \textit{325 CE}. Similarly, there was no single authoritative statement of what constituted an orthodox account of the relationship of Jesus Christ’s divine and human natures until Chalcedon in \textit{451 CE}.

This is not to suggest that the creedal statements and formulae that emerged from those Councils were greeted with unanimous endorsement; there were, in both cases, smaller groups of Christians who for various reasons refused to accept the determinations. Nor is it to suggest that the final authoritative statements of belief were dreamed up in conciliar vacuum, as though they had not been thoroughly explored and debated in the preceding years. Irenaeus’ “rule of faith” in his \textit{Adversus Haereses}, for example, provides a structure of belief that anticipates in form and content much of what would later be expressed at Nicaea, as does chapter thirteen of Tertullian’s \textit{Prescription Against Heretics}.\textsuperscript{13} It is, however, to say that until those landmark statements were approved in Council there was no fixed canon of ecumenical orthodoxy, and in consequence a range of opinions existed that were nearer to or further away from what those statements ended up defining.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, the fact that many of those who ended up being branded

\textit{Eὐχαριστία} [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and \textit{who is so living as Christ has enjoined}:

\textit{1 Apol}, LXVI. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{11} Ign. \textit{Smyr}, VII (longer version).
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Against Heresies}, V.III.2
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Against Heresies}, I.10.1; \textit{Prescription Against Heretics}, XIII.
\textsuperscript{14} This is not to deny that people like Marcion, Valentinus and Basilides were indeed repudiated, with Marcion himself being excommunicated by the church in Rome in \textit{144 CE}. However, as Jonathan Wright correctly says, it is impossible to conclude from these excommunications and anathematizations that there was, at this time, “a single, obvious, and authentic version of Christianity … . Almost everything was in flux and the notion of a single Christian truth [was] chimerical … . [In Ignatius’ day] the stark division between Christian truth and Christian error was still \textit{in ovo}.’ Jonathan Wright, \textit{Heretics: The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the Modern Church} (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 5, 17–18.
“heretics” could cite otherwise orthodox theologians for support goes to show how fluid the nature of ortho- and heterodoxy was in the Church’s formative centuries.\(^{15}\) As Hans Küng quite rightly asks, are we really to expect that “light and darkness are … equally distributed between Church and heresy? Or … that the power of evil is only effective outside the Church, and that faith only exists inside it?”\(^ {16}\) In other words, the opinions that were in the end rejected as heretical were rejected by ecumenical consensus only once the definitions and creedal affirmations had been finalized. Until that point, however, they were often nothing more than genuine, if ultimately unpersuasive, attempts to find conceptual paradigms for ideas that lie fundamentally beyond discursive capacity.\(^ {17}\) The holders of such views did in many cases eventually find themselves outside the limits of the Church, but the holding of such views could not, in the first instance, be a self-evident proof that one did not belong.

Second, and much more significantly, there was no single understanding of what the “Church” was or meant. While it may not be entirely incorrect to say that “Church” was understood at least conceptually by its membership—that is, it was roundly understood to be the “body of Christ … the extension of the kingdom of God on earth, and [that] it existed wherever people gathered” in Christ’s name\(^ {18}\)—such an affirmation nevertheless hides more than it reveals. Principally, it hides the fact that a more concrete sense of what being the “body of Christ” actually meant in any given region evolved only gradually, and in different ways across different locations. Though now well over a hundred years old, the view put forward by James Bethune-Baker in 1903, that “of the doctrine of the Church … there was for some time no clear definition framed … [but only] a general sentiment about it …,” remains essentially as true now as when he first proposed it.\(^ {19}\)

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\(^{15}\) So, for example, Arius was backed by Eusebius of Caesarea, Secondus of Ptolemais, and Theonas of Marmarica, as well as by the renowned scholar Lucian of Antioch. Apollinaris cited Athanasius in support of his own Christology. Even Cyril of Alexandria was at times confused, apportioning a key phrase—“one incarnate nature of the Word of God”—to Athanasius, when in fact it had originated with Apollinaris.


\(^{17}\) We should therefore not be entirely surprised to note that some of the so-called heresies have been rehabilitated in more recent times, precisely because the construals of the first four centuries are now recognized to be, at particular points, susceptible to critique. So, for example, the renewed interest in divine passibility. Similarly, the Chalcedonian formula has never achieved complete ecclesial endorsement, with the continuation of non-Chalcedonian miaphysitism in the Egyptian and Ethiopian churches.


McGowan has more recently said in his study of early worship practices, ‘‘[e]arly Christianity was characterized by processes of community formation, involving both ritual and theory … through a variety of controversies and contests … .’’ What we now recognize to be in some sense normative, says McGowan, ‘‘was not always and everywhere the most or only obvious way to be Christian.’’ This is as true in ecclesiology as it was in the matter of liturgy and ritual development. Even though baptism provided a visible boundary to the Church community, it was not at all well understood why only some ventured, through baptism, to cross the boundary into that community. Nor was it clear precisely what sort of community it was that people were being included into by their baptism, or conversely from what they were being excluded if they were not baptized.

Perhaps the most concrete notion of Church that assumed early and general endorsement was that of a eucharistic community, centred around a bishop. Irenaeus and Tertullian, for example, both insisted, as had Ignatius before them, on proper episcopal jurisdiction as ingredient to the Church’s existence. In their view, episcopal continuity in any given see was the guarantor of doctrinal purity. As Irenaeus puts it: ‘‘it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.’’ But, while this might have given visible and indeed ethical expression to Church membership, it did not answer any questions about the nature of the larger eschatological community beyond the temporal sphere. This is the difficulty with Küng’s account of ecclesial being. For Küng, the first communities drew heavily upon the imagery in, particularly, the Pauline and Lukan texts that spoke of the Church as the ek-klesia of God (e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 12:28). Insofar as the members understood this to mean that they were the ‘‘called-out’’ ones, gathering around a shared belief in the resurrection of Christ, they were justified, says Küng, in self-

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21 See Papandrea, Reading the Early Church Fathers, 7.
22 The presence of a bishop at eucharistic celebrations seems to have been the norm in the early centuries, until larger and more complex organizational structures of Church life in the mid-fifth century made it impractical for the bishop to be everywhere that services were held, resulting in greater roles for presbyters. Note, though, that Ignatius’ need to stipulate episcopal authority in his letters from the second century suggests perhaps that even this minimal descriptor of ‘‘Church’’ was not always operative. See McGowan, Ancient Christian Worship, 41, 174.
23 Against Heresies, IV, xxvi.2.
identifying as an eschatological community of faith, the new *kehāl Yahweh* (community of God). For this very reason, he says, they were the *ἐκλεκτοὶ* (the “elect”).24 And yet, as the doctrinal controversies were to prove, and Augustine’s own “twin-city” typology later to confirm, mere membership within an ecclesial gathering, even on the part of those who affirmed faith in the resurrected Christ, did not prove that one was thereby a member of “the Church” in any ultimate sense. Neither eucharistic participation, nor the confession of faith and baptism by which it was always preceded, said anything about the basis in God’s predestinating will for any person’s inclusion in or exclusion from this “ek-lektic” community of faith. Sociological belonging was not an altogether accurate proxy for what we might usefully call “elected sociality.”

Alister McGrath has suggested that a key factor in this lack of conceptual clarity was because “ecclesiology was not a major issue in the early church.” Eastern theologians, he says, showed “no awareness” of the significance of ecclesiology, and the Greek Fathers were content simply to use scriptural phrases “without choosing to probe [the issue] further.”25 Yet McGrath’s claim itself needs further probing. Is it in fact true that the lack of precision regarding the nature, being and extent of the Church was because the Fathers were uninterested in the question? How did the community formation processes, of which McGowan has spoken, become concerned not only with the ordering of liturgy and governance, but with the eternal divine willing of ecclesial membership? These are the questions to which we must now attend, by specific reference to Ignatius and Origen.

**Ignatius of Antioch**

Ignatius of Antioch, traditionally thought to have been a disciple of Saint John and then Antioch’s third bishop after Saints Peter and Euodias, had his own uncompromising views about the proper constitution of the Church. In his mind, the existence of the Church in any given town was guaranteed by the authoritative presence of a single bishop, to whom all believers in that city were to be subject. To the Smyrnean Church, Ignatius insists that, “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic Church [*καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία*] … .”26 Similar sentiments are expressed in his other

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26 Ign. *Smyr.* viii. This is the first time that the word “catholic” was used to describe the
letters to the Trallians, Ephesians, Philadelphians and Magnesians. This should not cause us to think that the bishop was the only holder of responsible authority: there was place, too, for presbyters and deacons, whose roles were appointed by God to be in locum apostolorum. As Allen Brent reminds us, Ignatius supposes a mutual cooperation between bishop, presbyters and deacons, in which submission to authority is nuanced and shared; it is to the threefold order that lay submission is required, and never to the bishop alone. Nevertheless, the bishop in this model occupied a unique place in the Church’s order, as the “strings” to the “harp” of God’s commandments.

Küng notes that this Ignatian ordering was the first example in the Church’s life of a three-tiered hierarchy, in which a single episkopos ruled in place of a college of equals. But, while this may seem to be nothing more than a particularly legalistic model of governance, Küng argues that it denotes, in fact, an image of Church that is both mystical and pneumic. It is so precisely because of the way in which the three orders of clergy represent, in their offices, God himself and Christ’s apostles. Throughout his letters, Ignatius commends union with the bishop as being analogous to union with Christ, with the bishop indeed standing “in the place of” (εἰς τόπον θεοῦ) God himself and the presbyters delegating in the place of the apostles.

Far from being merely a governmental issue, this is a matter that goes to the very heart of what Ignatius understood that it meant to be in, and to be, the Church. We know, from the Ignatian letters themselves, as well as from inferences within the Didache and the Gospel of Matthew—both of which likely also originated from Syria, and within a few decades of each other—that the Syrian Churches were riven by factionalism in and around the turn of the second century. The First Evangelist, for example, has in view those who read the messianic promise in a universal sense; thus he writes of eastern sages who recognize the baby Jesus to be the Christ (Matt 2:2, 10), and then concludes the Gospel with the dominical injunction to “Go and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19). At the same time, however, Matthew is also conscious of a more sectarian view amongst some who read the messianic promise in exclusively Jewish terms; for such as these, Jesus

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27 See, for example: Ign. Eph. VI; Ign. Mag. III-IV; Ign. Trall. II-III; Ign. Phil. I-II, IV. Note that these constitute those letters generally considered to be authentic.
29 Ign. Phil. I.
30 Küng, The Church, 524–25.
31 Ign. Eph. V; ign. Mag. VI.
is sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). Similarly, the Didachist speaks into a Church context in which it has become hard to distinguish true prophets from the false, with the members of the community being urged to beware those who would turn them against each other.\textsuperscript{32} Conflict and division are evidently at play in both Syrian communities from which these writings emerge.

The letters of Ignatius, the pre-eminent Syrian bishop of the time, demonstrate the same set of problems. He repeatedly insists that division within the Church is the worst of all errors.\textsuperscript{33} Consequently, much of the content of his letters is given over to proposing what, in his mind, is the only workable solution. Disharmony, he insists, is to be avoided most effectively by maintaining happy communion with the bishop. And so, “nothing should be done” without, or apart from the bishop, to whom the Church is to be subject “as to Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{34}

Strangely perhaps, it is in this very context that we encounter, at last, references to election:

Ignatius, who is called Theophorus, to the Church which is at Ephesus … being blessed in the greatness and fullness of God the Father, and predestined (προωρισμένη) before the ages, that it should always be for an enduring and unchangeable glory, [the ones having been] united and elected (ἐκλελεγμένη) through the true passion by the will of the Father … . \textsuperscript{35}

Ignatius writes also to the Trallian Church, which is, he says, “beloved of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, elect (ἐκλεκτῇ) and worthy … .”\textsuperscript{36} These epistolary prefaces provide important clues about how Ignatius understood election within the context of his pastoral ecclesiology. First, election is only ever construed communally. For Ignatius, there is no other object of election than the Church. Contrary to so much of this doctrine’s history, individualized election is never mentioned within his letters. Second, the predestining decision of God, of which Ignatius speaks in reference to the Ephesian Church, takes place πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων. It is, in other words, a pre-temporal act of the Father that has, as its purpose, that the Church should bear wit-

\textsuperscript{32} Did., 11, 15.
\textsuperscript{33} Because love is the greatest of all virtues, any sort of schism—understood as a breach of love—is thus the worst of all evils. See Boniface Ramsey, Beginning to Read the Fathers (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 104.
\textsuperscript{34} E.g. Ign. Trall. II; Ign. Smyr. VIII–IX.
\textsuperscript{36} Ign. Trall. Preface. Emphasis added.
ness to an abiding (παραμονών) and immutable (ἀτρεπτον) glory. Third, the election is accomplished “through [ἐν—that is, as a consequence of] the true passion.” This could refer to the Ephesians’ own suffering under persecution, by which they had been compelled to come together in self-defensive unity. This, though, would require evidence of far greater persecution from either Roman or Jewish opponents in the first decade or so of the second century than we in fact have.\(^\text{37}\) What is the more likely interpretation is that “the true passion [or suffering]” refers to the death and resurrection of Christ. If so, then Ignatius must have in mind that the election of the Church is something willed in uncreated eternity, and then brought into effective being through the cross. In any event, the concept of election that Ignatius proposes in this letter is marked by these discernible characteristics: that it is communal, eternally willed, and actualized christologically at the cross.

We also learn in these letters that election is intrinsically tied to unity and worthiness. Those who belong to the Church are “united and elected,” “elect and worthy.” Given his constant reiteration of the need for the Church to be united against factionalism, it makes sense that the unity of which he speaks in the Ephesians preface is not so much a unity of the Church with God (although it undoubtedly also includes that) but rather a unity of the Church with itself. Such internal ecclesial unity is, for Ignatius, a sign (though not a cause) of its election. Moreover, the fact that Ignatius maintains in all his letters that the Church is where it is united with the bishop as to Christ, suggests that its worthiness is also tied to its obedient unity under episcopal rule. The Church that is worthy, says Ignatius, “possess[es] peace [ἐἰρηνευούσῃ] … ,” presumably as opposed to division.\(^\text{38}\) In other words, while election occurs before all time, its characteristic markers in time, which demonstrate the community’s worthiness to bear the mantle of election, are peaceable unity in obedient submission to the bishop and presbyters, in whom Christ’s own presence and the guarantee of apostolic fidelity reside.

That is to say, Ignatius’ view of the Church is one in which there is the constant threat of disunity and division. The Church is not hermetically sealed from the danger of factionalism. Equally, however, the community that can withstand those threats and remain internally united under the leadership of a bishop who stands in the place of Christ himself, demonstrates by that very harmony that it is, in fact, the Church that has been elected from before the ages.

\(^{37}\) See, for example, Paul Trebilco, The Early Christians in Ephesus: From Paul to Ignatius (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

\(^{38}\) Ign. Trall. Preface.
If we are not careful, the heavy emphasis on clerical governance in these Ignatian letters can blind us to what Küng calls the “spiritual-pneumic” aspect of the Church, which is in fact the more important thing with which Ignatius is concerned. Read in this light, the Ignatian letters start to describe in embryonic form the idea of ecclesial election that has its origin in the pre-temporal will of God, and its manifestation in the harmony of episcopally-led peaceful obedience. Far from being merely a set of instructions about how to behave and who to obey, Ignatius’ letters to the Churches start to indicate a very particular understanding of what, to him, elected sociality looked like.

Origen of Alexandria

From troubled Syria at the beginning of the second century, we turn now to Alexandria at the start of the third, and focus our attention upon that most ambiguous of figures, Origen. Remembered both for his exegetical genius, and yet also for his advocacy of subordinationist Christology, Origen nonetheless has valuable things to say about the nature and being of the Church in the eternal will of God. Matthew Levering may be overstating the case when he says that Origen’s views on this topic “inform all later discussions . . .” Nonetheless, his is a vital voice to hear in this context. Moreover, the details of what he has to say take us significantly beyond Ignatius.

For Origen, too, election is shaped by his construal of the Church. It is well known that Origen advocated an ultimately universalist view of salvation. Insofar as predestination generally, and election specifically, are typically concerned with ultimate destinies, this might be thought to exhaust Origen’s views on the matter. In fact, it does not. Origen says that God does indeed predestine some and not others. But the emphasis in this predestining will lies heavily upon the free choices made by God’s creatures rather than upon God’s own ontically intrinsic freedom. In particular, Origen understands the subjects of God’s foreknowledge and predestination to be those who, by the freedom of their own created will, have chosen to love and obey him. Thus, it is those who “freely purify their souls from sin” whom God takes to be his chosen vessels. Predestination is therefore the anticipatory consequence, and not the cause, of one’s love for God. As Thomas Scheck puts it, Origen’s doctrine of predestination and election is “essentially [God’s] foreknowl-
edge of [an individual’s] merits.”

For those, on the other hand, who do not freely purify themselves, and who are as a result not God’s “chosen vessels,” there remains the purifying fire of hell. Yet Origen insists that even this is not an eternal damnation. On the contrary, this punishment acts in a curative fashion as a “physician of the souls” in order that, in the end, God will achieve the restoration of all. Through restorative torment, all souls emerge gradually from bondage to freedom, this “perfect restoration of the entire creation” being the final actualization of unity in Christ.

In other words, Origen does not discount the type of bifurcation of individuals into righteous and unrighteous, elect and damned, that has come to be regarded as synonymous with the doctrine of election. Some are chosen, and others are not. But for Origen, this bifurcation is not on the basis of God’s sovereign pre-temporal choice, nor is it absolutized into eternity. Rather, it privileges on the one hand the freedom of individuals to choose for or against God, and on the other hand the ultimately victorious power of God’s unifying love that, in the end, relativizes all human choice.

Nevertheless, this utterly eschatological vision of universal purification is not all that Origen has to say about the concept of election. Just as we miss much of significance in Ignatius if we focus only upon structures of episcopal governance, so too we miss a vital element in Origen’s view of election and predestination if we ignore how he sees the community of the elect taking shape in this life. Thus, in order fully to appreciate his thoughts on election, we need also to ask how Origen understood the being and limits of the Church.

We have seen that Ignatius understood that the Church was elected by God in pre-temporal eternity (πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων), and then takes form in history as a united body in willing obedience to the local bishop. This sequential move from the elected ideal to the elected real is, as we shall see, a key point of difference between the ecclesiologies of Ignatius and Origen.

For Origen, the Church of God is “the body of Christ, animated by the Son of God,” and in which the members are all who believe, having been vivified into that belief by the Word of God, without which they then do nothing. In itself, this is a slightly different emphasis on Church membership than what we see in Ignatius. The stress here is upon individual belief, rather than any particular order of liturgical praxis or episcopal governance. This focus upon belief rather than structure accords well with Origen’s broader claim that the
Church is the “autobasileia of Christ in the soul of each individual” and thus an earthly image of the heavenly kingdom.⁴⁴

But these believers who constitute the Church also in some way exist beforehand. As Origen puts it in his commentary on the Song of Songs 1:11–12:

You must not think that it [the Church] is called the bride of Christ only from the time of the coming of the Savior in the flesh, but from the beginning of the human race and from the very foundation of the world—indeed, if I may seek the origin of this deep mystery with Paul as my guide, even before the foundation of the world. For this is what he himself says, “As he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world …” [Ephesians 1:4].⁴⁵

In the same commentary, Origen goes on to speak of the angelic ministration to the saints—those, he says, who belong to the Church—during the time of the prophets and even as far back as Adam. Famously, Origen cites the prostitute Rahab, and her house, as an iteration of the Church that is present before Christ.⁴⁶ Boniface Ramsey argues that Rahab functions in this homily merely as a sign and symbol.⁴⁷ However, Origen’s Rahab should not be understood only semiotically. If Origen does indeed hold that the Church pre-dates the incarnation and has historic actuality back at least to Adam, then Rahab becomes not simply a symbol of the future Church, but indeed a very real member of the already-existent but hidden Church. That Origen even says in this homily that Rahab “knew that there was no salvation for anyone except in the blood of Christ,” suggests that Rahab has more than just a proleptic symbolic function. Clearly, Origen holds that there is a Church that exists within history, yet which remains hidden until the incarnation.

Insofar as he consciously recalls us to Paul’s words in Ephesians, Origen seems also to be insisting that this pre-existent Church pre-dates not only the historic ecclesial community that exists from the time of Christ, but that it pre-dates time itself and thus extends back into eternity. This is not dissimilar to the concept of a hidden, pre-existent Church that one finds in the Shepherd of Hermas from the mid-second century. In the Shepherd’s second vision, he learns that the old woman, from whom he has received revelation, is the personified and idealized Church—old, because “she was created first of all,” and for whose sake the world itself was made.⁴⁸

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⁴⁴ Küng, The Church, 127. Emphasis added.
⁴⁵ Origen, Song of Songs, 2:8.
⁴⁶ Origen, Homily on Joshua, 3.4–3.5.
⁴⁷ Ramsey, Beginning to Read the Fathers, 109.
⁴⁸ The Shepherd of Hermas, Book I. Vision 2.4. See also Wilhelm Pratscher (ed.), The
Both Origen, and the Shepherd (of whom Origen was aware and whom he occasionally cites) thus develop Ignatian ecclesiology in one very particular and important way. The pre-temporally elected Church in Ignatius’ letters becomes existent only in the historic actuality of harmonious fellowship around a bishop. Its elected pre-existence is thus something of an abstract ideal until the coming of Christ. The Origenist Church, on the other hand—also pre-temporally elected (thus the reference to Ephesians)—is actualized in time prior to the incarnation, in the lives of the saints and prophets, and indeed even exists as such before the creation of the world. While Origen shares with Ignatius the idea of the Church’s election before time, he envisages the Church as having a real (albeit hidden), and not simply ideal, existence right back to the beginning of time, and even before.

In other words, Origen’s construal of predestination and election is somewhat more complex than just his universalist eschatological restoration of all things. True, he insists upon that ultimate triumph of God’s love that finally embraces and purifies even the unrighteous. But his doctrine of election is also tied to his concept of the Church, according to which Origen extends the idea of elected sociality beyond the boundaries of any Church membership that can be readily accessed through authorized rites of baptism, or recognized by virtue of a community’s bishop-facing unity. The Church is indeed the body of the elect, constituted by those whose inward selves and beliefs have been vivified by the Word of God. But, the possibility—and reality—that such vivification has encompassed countless people prior to the Church’s historic unveiling radically enlarges the ecclesial limits and makes “the elect” a far more inclusive group than that depicted in the Ignatian epistles.

Conclusion

From the very earliest days of the Church’s self-conscious existence in the mid-first century, there was an evident if intuitive sense of what constituted the gathered community of the faithful in any given place. This took form, early and notably, through the presence of a bishop around whom the liturgical practices could take place. However, there was little systematic consideration given to the way in which the Church as such was constituted in its membership by the electing will of God. Exclusion from the community could, for a time, be occasioned by moral misdemeanours, the refusal of obedience to the bishop, and the denial of obvious articles of faith, including the triunity of God, Jesus’ bodily resurrection, and the necessity of baptism.
But this did little more than set out some minimal criteria of membership. What remained under-developed was any sense of how membership of (or alternatively, exclusion from) the earthly community of the Church was established by a prior decision of God’s freedom in pre-temporal eternity.

The fathers we have considered here, Ignatius and Origen, sought to address this gap. Ignatius affirmed the eternally elect status of the Church, but limited its historic actualization to the time after the incarnation. Origen similarly knew the Church to have been eternally elected by God. For him, however, the Church had a very real, if hidden, existence throughout history at least from the time of Adam. Such a paradigm shifted Ignatian ecclesial election in a more progressive, inclusive direction. There were, of course, more significant developments to be made, which in the first instance were furnished chiefly by Cyprian and Augustine. But by the middle of the third century, it was now no longer possible to consider either ecclesiology or the doctrine of election in isolation from the other.