

A Biblical Spirituality:

*The Call of Irenaeus of Smyrna against Gnosticism and For an
Orthodox Christianity*

Presented to the Academy by

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“there can be no greater conceit than this, that any one should imagine he is better and more perfect than He who made and fashioned him, and imparted to him the breath of life, and commanded this very thing into existence”¹

¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book II, XXVI. 1. 397.

Spiritualism flourishes in contemporary culture. It has become en vogue to invoke an interior spirituality, an esoteric “knowledge” one has within oneself, in reference to deity and to the nature of human knowledge. With the blending of postmodern assumptions about reality and a renewed vigor toward all things spiritual (but not religious), intensity of excitement flourishes at this “new” philosophy. In reality, were it not for the early church fathers, namely Irenaeus of Smyrna, these foundational philosophies would pervade the Christian church itself. As such, we should learn the lessons of how Irenaeus handled the radical diversions of the spiritualists of his day from the biblical Gospel. Although his life is somewhat obscure and his theology a bit strange at times, the response of Irenaeus came at a critical time for the catholic Church. Through his *magnum opus* work Against Heresies, Irenaeus challenged and contradicted the ideology of the Gnostic heresy in such a way that it never seriously infiltrated orthodox Christianity as a system again. In his time and place in history, Irenaeus provides a powerful glimpse into the various ways in which God preserved His Word and the truths therein from those who would twist and pervert it to justify their own sin.

A Crucial Moment- “one of the chief architects of the Catholic system of doctrine”²

Very little is actually known about the personal life and history of Irenaeus. Schaff states that “He sprang from Asia Minor, probably from Smyrna, where he spent his youth. He was born between A.D. 115 and 125. He enjoyed the instruction of the venerable Polycarp of Smyrna, the pupil of John, and of other ‘Elders,’ who were mediate or immediate disciples of the apostles.”³ This immediate connection to the disciples of Jesus and the founders of the Christian church would be a theme invoked frequently by Irenaeus, possibly to a fault in ascribing authority. Regardless of his date of birth, Irenaeus moved as an early missionary into the area of Gaul (modern-day France), where according to Litfin “eventually he came to the provincial city of Lyons, where he described himself as a ‘resident among the Celts.’ Irenaeus was painfully aware of the lack of refined culture in his new surroundings. In one of his works he even apologized for his crude writing style because he had become accustomed to using a ‘barbarous dialect.’”⁴ As the cultural center of the day would have been in the area of modern-day Turkey (the locale of Smyrna included in this area), this cultural change to the outposts of the Roman Empire was indeed a cross-cultural mission undertaking. He became the bishop of the church of Lyons, and lived there presumably until his death. The intensity of Irenaeus’ ministry is unavoidable in studying his life; Schaff states “he was elected bishop of Lyons, and labored there with zeal and success, by tongue and pen, for the restoration of the heavily

² Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*, 748.

³ *Ibid.*, 749

⁴ Litfin, Bryan M. *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: an Evangelical Introduction*, 80.

visited church, for the spread of Christianity in Gaul, and for the defence and development of its doctrines.”⁵ His direct and forthright personality bleeds through various other writings, as well, but it is his intense concern for the Church herself that primarily occupied Irenaeus. Ironically, even as he is known for his main work lambasting and despoiling the Gnostic heresy, Litfin chronicles a narrative of a much differing strain; in opposition to attempts to excommunicate the church in his native Asia Minor because of divergent views on the exact date of Easter Sunday, Irenaeus strongly backed harmonizing the two sides:

Irenaeus insisted the churches should be in harmony with one another, and should agree to disagree about some minor questions. Irenaeus’ name comes from the Greek word for “peaceful.” Eusebius picked up on this meaning with his comment that “Irenaeus, who was truly well-named, became a peacemaker in this matter, exhorting and negotiating on behalf of the peace of the churches.”⁶

This peacemaking heart concurred with a zealous fervor and jealousy for the purity and holiness of the Church and its doctrine. Schaff provides a sweeping and powerful overview of what his life and writing contributed to the Church as a whole:

Irenaeus is *the leading representative of catholic Christianity in the last quarter of the second century, the champion of orthodoxy against Gnostic heresy, and the mediator between Eastern and Western churches...He is neither very original nor brilliant, but eminently sound and judicious...*His position gives him additional weight, for he is linked by two long lives, that of his teacher and grand-teacher, to the fountain head of Christianity. We plainly trace in him the influence of the spirit of Polycarp and John. ‘The true way to God,’ says he, in opposition to the false Gnosis, ‘is love. It is better to be willing to know nothing but Jesus Christ the crucified, than to fall into ungodliness through over-curious questions and paltry subtleties.’⁷

A Biblical Epistemology- *“as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*⁸

The theological spectrum of the work of Irenaeus is extremely diverse, much too complicated for me to adequately cover in its fullness. As such, I will focus my discussion on the two main tenets of his preserved work Against Heresies, the nature of the human and the person and work of Christ. To provide such a discussion, I must give a cursory overview of the principles of Gnostic theology, which provided the theological impetus to Irenaeus to write his great work. In so doing, however, I will unavoidably be incomplete in the description of Gnosticism in all its complexity and ambiguity. I was overwhelmed by the variety and diversity

⁵Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 749.

⁶ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 83.

⁷ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 751, italics mine.

⁸ *Against Heresies*, Book I, X. 2. 331.

of theological doctrine among the various sects of Gnosticism, which Irenaeus painstakingly restates and refutes in Against Heresies; however, there are very distinctive markers which Irenaeus and other church historians chronicle about the religious movement. The Gnostic system itself was a syncretistic blending of pagan religious tradition with Christian principles and persons. The introductory note of Against Heresies gives a framework for what Irenaeus attempted to do, stating, “The task of Irenaeus was twofold: (1) to render it impossible for any one to confound Gnosticism with Christianity, and (2) to make it impossible for such a monstrous system to survive, or ever to rise again..Irenaeus demonstrated its essential unity with the old mythology, and with heathen systems of philosophy.”⁹ This system was good in motivation, but incorrect in authority, as Roberts in the Introductory Note details Gnostic presuppositions:

The fundamental object of the Gnostic speculations was doubtless to solve the two grand problems of all religious philosophy, viz., How to account for the existence of evil; and, How to reconcile the finite with the infinite. *But these ancient theorists were not more successful in grappling with such questions than have been their successors in modern times. And by giving loose reins to their imagination, they built up the most incongruous and ridiculous systems; while, by deserting the guidance of Scripture they were betrayed into the most pernicious and extravagant errors.*¹⁰

The radical divergence from Scripture was founded in an assertion of esoteric and secret “knowledge” (which is where the term *Gnostic* finds its origins in meaning, deriving from the Greek word for knowledge, *Gnosis*) found only among the spiritual. Within Gnostic thought, there were three classes of people: The physical (unsaved, pagan unbelievers), the “soulish” (orthodox Christians such as Irenaeus who could be saved through good works), and the spiritual (the Gnostics, those who understand and know the true nature of the universe, the saved). These “do not have to perform good works since their salvation is assured by their inborn ‘spiritual’ natures.”¹¹ As one might expect, this group of “spiritual” people were notorious for their licentious behavior, as they believed in experiencing all sorts of human behaviors free from eternal consequences; Irenaeus vehemently opposes this assertion, stating, “this impious opinion of theirs with respect to actions—namely, that it is incumbent on them to have experience of all kinds of deeds, even the most abominable—is refuted by the teaching of the Lord, with whom not only is the adulterer rejected, but also the man who desires to commit adultery.”¹² Rather, Irenaeus asserted and defended the necessary obedience to the righteous requirement of the believer in living the Christian life, citing numerous times the scriptural call to sacrificial and holy living. The purpose of his polemical language tinged with righteous anger

⁹ Ibid., Introductory Note.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 86

¹² *Against Heresies*, Book II, XXXII. 1. 408.

was due to the pervasiveness of Gnostic thought at the time, an urgent necessary message that the true Gospel was not bound up in a group of elitist truth-hoarders with “inborn spiritual natures.”

The battle over the very nature of the human was a central focus of Irenaeus’s theological struggle with the Gnostics. The Gnostic school of thought asserted that “Christ came to destroy the God of the Jews, and to save all who believed in him, and these are they who have a spark of life...two kinds of human beings were fashioned by the [creating] angels, one bad and the other good...the Savior came to destroy evil human beings and the demons and to save the good. But marriage and procreation, they declare, is of Satan.”¹³ All physical aspects of humanity are therefore considered evil. The assumption of some humans created good and others created evil strongly irked Irenaeus, who spent considerable time defending the natural goodness of created man. These assertions create some theological issues to be discussed below, but first the arguments themselves. Hall nicely summarizes the response of Irenaeus to these beliefs about human nature:

Irenaeus emphasizes...that the movement from obedience to rebellion, whether on the part of humans or the demonic hordes, is not the result of nature. ‘But He made neither angels nor people so by nature.’ Irenaeus’ repetition of the goodness of human nature as created by God—an emphasis that sounds quite similar to Pelagius’ assertions years in the future—is surely linked to his Gnostic opponents’ insistence that creation itself was the mistake of a lower deity. Irenaeus is not concerned with exhorting his readers in their quest for Christian holiness at this juncture. Rather, he is much more concerned with the Gnostic attempt to denigrate creation itself.

Thus the avid responses in arguing for the moral goodness of created man, as reflective of the perfections of the biblical God undermined by Gnostic theology, provide a very specific context for this discussion of human nature. However, this type of language further shaded into later semi-Pelagian thought, as Hall chronicles that “Irenaeus pictures humanity’s descent into sin as closely related to the devil’s desire to disrupt God’s creation out of envy and enmity...Adam and Eve, more from immaturity than anything else, succumbed to the devil’s lures...They lacked the maturity to recognize fully the danger before them, and disaster was the result. The fault, though, seems to Irenaeus to be more the devil’s than humanity’s.”¹⁴ The Christian Theology Reader concurs with this opinion in stating that “In marked contrast to the ideas later associated with Augustine, Irenaeus argues that humanity was created weak and powerless, and was thus easily led astray. Where Augustine spoke of a “Fall,” Irenaeus tends to think more in terms of a deflection or loss of direction for humanity.”¹⁵ In this sense, then, I think that Irenaeus over-stepped the boundaries of a biblical theology about the utter depravity of natural

¹³ *Against Heresies* in The Christian Theology Reader, 260.

¹⁴ Hall, Christopher. *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, 128.

¹⁵ The Christian Theology Reader, “Comment” on Irenaeus, 179-80.

man (as expressed in Rom. 1 and Eph. 2) in his zealous attempt to defend the biblical holiness of God. The idea of the personal autonomy of humans as moral agents is expressed when Irenaeus states “the wheat and the chaff, being inanimate and irrational, have been made such by nature. But man, being endowed with reason, and in this respect like to God, having been made free in his will, and with power, over himself, is himself the cause to himself, that sometimes he becomes wheat, and sometimes chaff.”¹⁶ This combination of Satan’s responsibility for the Fall of humanity and the assertion that humans are free moral agents provides an interesting contradiction for Irenaeus, one which is furthered when he asserts in Against Heresies that God “Himself in Himself, after a fashion which we can neither describe nor conceive, predestinating all things, formed them as He pleased, bestowing harmony on all things, and assigning them their own place, and the beginning of their creation.”¹⁷ Regardless of these puzzling statements, Irenaeus’ assertion of God’s foundational character of holiness marks his writings. Hall argues this tension over sinful human nature as non-existent, asserting that “Issues that will later surface as Christians continue to ponder the meaning of salvation, such as the effect of sin upon the will’s ability to choose the good, do not occupy Irenaeus’ attention.”¹⁸ Rather, these statements are to be kept in their specific context as Irenaeus argued for the biblical creation as “very good.” I think there to be a balance between these two opposing views, as Irenaeus clearly is asserting ideas which contradict Augustine and the Reformers’ views on the doctrines of Grace. However, his initial assertions about the creation of man as good would be wholeheartedly accepted by any historical Christian. Thus there seems to be a degree of complication in ideas, one which scholars themselves disagree upon.

Another point of contest between the Gnostic thinkers and the orthodox Christian view of Irenaeus comes in the area of Christology, which would be a direct outflow of this view of humanity and of God. The Gnostic view recognized the perfection of Christ, but rejected the humanity of the Christ in the person of Jesus; rather, Gnostic thinkers believed that Jesus was a normal human who was briefly “possessed” by the spiritual “Christ” when the dove descended upon Him at His baptism. Obviously, Gnostic thought could not accept the idea that the Christ had inhabited an inherently evil body. Bewildered by these words spoken against Scripture, Irenaeus powerfully responds by simply providing the Word Himself:

It certainly was in the power of the apostles to declare that Christ descended upon Jesus, or that the so-called superior Saviour [came down] upon the dispensational one, or he who is from the invisible places upon him from the Demiurge; but they neither knew nor said anything of the kind: for, had they known it, they would have also certainly stated it. But what really was the case, that did they record, [namely,] that the Spirit of God as a dove descended upon

¹⁶ *Against Heresies*, Book IV. IV. 3. 466.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Book II. II. 4. 361.

¹⁸ Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, 129.

Him; this Spirit, of whom it was declared by Isaiah, 'And the Spirit of God shall rest upon Him,' as I have already said.¹⁹

With the assumption of Christ as merely an ethereal spirit, the Gnostics openly opposed the biblical assertion of Jesus as both spiritual deity and human physicality. Irenaeus responds again with the Bible, in that “from the writings of St. Paul, and from the words of our LORD, that Christ and Jesus cannot be considered as distinct beings; neither can it be alleged that the Son of God became man merely in appearance, but that he did so truly and actually.”²⁰ Using language very close to what would become the Nicene Creed, Irenaeus foreshadows another major battle over biblical language of the Christ when he strongly asserts his position on the matter:

Jesus Christ was not a mere man begotten from Joseph in the ordinary course of nature, but was very God, begotten of the Father most high, and very man, born of the virgin...Those...who allege that He took nothing from the Virgin do greatly err...if He did not receive the substance of flesh from a human being, He neither was made man nor the Son of man; and *if He was not made what we were, He did no great thing in what He suffered and endured.*²¹

Thus and so Irenaeus defended the dual physical and spiritual realities of Jesus Christ from those who would deny Him both properties. In so doing, he formed a very distinct view of what the Atonement of Christ on the cross accomplished for humans. Litfin states that “For the Gnostics, the basic human problem was ignorance. But Irenaeus believed the problem went much deeper. It was one of sin and guilt. Irenaeus was the first Christian theologian to develop the Pauline understanding of the fall of humanity through Adam.”²² In using the term “recapitulation,” Irenaeus spoke extensively and substantively on the effect of the death of Jesus in returning humanity to its former state of bliss. He understood the centrality of Christ and the cross to Christian theology, as evidenced by statements such as “salvation history must be centered on the historical Jesus Christ, whose obedience unto death canceled the work of Adam”²³ and “when he was incarnate and became a human being, he recapitulated in himself the long history of the human race, obtaining salvation for us, so that we might regain in Jesus Christ what we had lost in Adam, that is, being in the image and likeness of God.”²⁴ The theological legacy of Irenaeus in the area of Christology is rich with biblical descriptions of the completed work of Christ on the cross as the focal moment of human history.

Not all theological assertions of Irenaeus are likewise glowingly accepted. In the midst of a period in which revelation was given, signs and wonders were performed, and the first

¹⁹ *Against Heresies*, Book III. XVII. 1. 444.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XVIII. Introduction, 444.

²¹ *Ibid.*, XIX. Introduction, 444. and XXII.1.454, italics mine.

²² Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 91.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Against Heresies* in The Christian Theology Reader, 344.

reverberating echoes of Christianity were reaping the reward of a fantastically-quickly growing Church, the canon of the New Testament was yet to be established officially; however, as noted earlier, Irenaeus recognized and affirmed the New Testament canon long before it was debated in the fourth century. Within this unsettled period of uncertain authority, reliance upon the traditions of the elders was necessary. The historical circumstances in which Irenaeus lived, coupled with his writings on the nature of church authority and the role of tradition, externally serve Roman Catholic doctrinal purposes very readily; he asserts the role of church authority in reading and interpreting Scripture:

It is [necessary] 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 [it is also necessary] to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever, [looking upon them] as heretics of perverse minds, or as schismatics puffed up and self-pleasing, or again as hypocrites, acting thus for the sake of lucre and vainglory. For all these have fallen from the truth.²⁵

One might understand how such language might be used to construct a Catholic doctrine of authorial Scripture interpretation. But again, I think there to be a distinct difference between the situation of Irenaeus in the early days of Christianity and the formation of the Catholic doctrine of biblical hermeneutics. While Irenaeus does strangely appeal at one point to a tradition in which Jesus was in his fifties when he died in order to oppose the numerology used by the Gnostics with the events surrounding the life of Jesus, his submission to the authority of the elders as biblical interpreters were also appeals to many men who had studied under disciples of Jesus or who were disciples of disciples. As such, the period of succession was radically smaller and more controlled than what Roman Catholic doctrine would later become in all its extravagant pomp and central power structure. Also, never in these sections does Irenaeus refer more heavily to the apostle Peter, which would seem to naturally follow if his view on succession concurred directly with future Catholic views. Instead, he heavily leans on the apostle John in proving many of his points in refuting the Gnostic assertions. Therefore I would be highly skeptical of the existence of strong evidence which suggests that Irenaeus is strictly a historically Catholic (large C) theologian. In fact, as the Church at the time was the holder of all New Testament letters, it is pretty understandable that he would assert that “there is no need to look anywhere else for the truth which we can easily obtain from the church...this is the gate of life; all others are thieves and robbers.”²⁶ With the twisting and perversion of what had been preached, I would venture to argue that Irenaeus was simply seeking to centralize and crystallize the doctrinal affirmations of biblical Christianity rather than ignore the ability of the

²⁵ *Against Heresies*, Book IV, XXVI. 2. 497.

²⁶ *Against Heresies* in The Christian Theology Reader, 80.

individual believer to understand the Bible. Irenaeus did hold to some very strange beliefs about historical figures in Israel, stating at one point that “We should not hastily impute as crimes to the men of old time those actions which the Scripture has not condemned, but should rather seek in them types of things to come: an example of this in the incest committed by Lot.”²⁷ In this and other places he fails to oppose the sinful actions of Old Testament fathers, which reflects the reality of his own humanity. Although there are portions of his writings which leave the reader scratching his/her head in utter confusion or frustration, his theological opposition to Gnostic teachings about the created nature of humans and the person and work of Jesus Christ create an indelible historical mark on biblical Christianity.

Resounding Effects- *“The man...who would undertake [lost people’s] conversion, must possess an accurate knowledge of their systems or schemes of doctrine. For it is impossible for any one to heal the sick, if he has no knowledge of the disease of the patients”*²⁸

Historically and contemporarily, it’s not difficult to see the significance of the life and writings of Irenaeus. In the historical sense, his ministry was both divisive and protective, as he vehemently opposed the dominantly popular ideas of Gnosticism by showing its thoroughly unbiblical worldview and hermeneutic; in the same token, he understood the balance of which battles to fight, and was willing to overlook some difference of opinion within the Church herself on non-essential issues. I also see this as an excellent argument for asserting that he does not fit well within the historical parameters of the Roman Catholic Church, as he was much more flexible and willing to make peace on peripheral matters. In a contemporary sense, the theological implications of the work of Irenaeus are unmistakable. With the prevalence of New Age postmodern spirituality conflating with Christian doctrines in many modern circles, the siren sound of Irenaeus’ biblically-rooted theology must be revisited. He was among the first to openly write defending biblical doctrine from a specific set of ideas, thereby implicitly championing a biblical apologetic (as seen in the epigram above). He strongly argued for the continuity and consistency of the Old and New Testament Scripture, expounding the idea of stability between the God of the Old Testament and the God who is called the Father of Christ and the God of the Gospels; “There is but one Author, and one end to both covenants.”²⁹ In foundationally arguing for the continuity of the Scripture and the fullness of revelation, a timeless call for obedience to the biblical God is sounded, as Litfin notes that “Before his time, there was no awareness within the church that the sacred books of Christianity comprised a

²⁷ *Against Heresies*, Book IV. XXXI. 1. 504.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Introduction, 462.

²⁹ *Against Heresies*, Book IV, IX. Introduction, 472.

second body of writings alongside the received Jewish scriptures.”³⁰ The biblical Christology of Irenaeus is likewise no less important for the Church today to thoroughly defend, and he connects the canonical consistency with his Christology in stating that “The Scriptures, and those written by Moses in particular, do everywhere make mention of the Son of God, and foretell His advent and passion. From this fact it follows that they were inspired by one and the same God.”³¹ The fervent apologetic against those who would purport the idea of abiblical spirituality today is one which is foundationally important regardless of historical age. I would even argue that these underlying presuppositions about the nature of spirituality and authority are just as important in apologetic discussion today as they were twenty centuries ago. His intense fervor for the Church and protective language for her expression of Christian love is evidenced by the statement that “the distinctive stamp of the body of Christ...received without addition or subtraction; [is] the reading of the Scriptures without falsification; and their consistent and careful exposition, avoiding danger and blasphemy; and the special gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which surpasses all other spiritual gifts.”³² There are no less dangerous doctrines surfacing in and out of the contemporary Church today, so these calls for biblical faithfulness and spiritual submission to Christ as Head are essential now as well as then. Truly as Solomon notes in Ecclesiastes, “there is nothing new under the sun.” A restatement of old doctrines should not alarm the believer, but should challenge us to boldly oppose error as Irenaeus did.

The life and work of Irenaeus of Smyrna is ultimately a narrative and an apologetic of life. His willingness to boldly condemn heretical doctrine and unbiblical principle do not diminish his reputation as the gentle and peaceful minister and shepherd of the church of Lyons. His readiness to oppose a wildly-popular movement even within the Church serves as a template for godly Christian living, a legacy which will not fail or fade because it is rooted in a love and concern for the biblical God, His Son, and His true Word. Enigmatic secret movements or any other opposition to the truth of the Gospel are to be condemned, not entertained. Spiritual experimentation in opposition to biblical revelation is to be opposed, not respected or accepted even in part. As with any theologian, Irenaeus was human. Some of his doctrinal statements are puzzling and even seemingly contradictory. However, his high view of Scripture and the Christ of God pointed to within the Scripture (both in body and in Spirit) demonstrate admirably the work of the Holy Spirit in his own life. His submission to the full revelation of God as revealed in the Bible reflects further this legacy of humility and zeal for the LORD’s house, and makes a study of his life and work a fascinating and rewarding endeavor.

³⁰ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, X. Introduction, 473.

³² *Against Heresies* in The Christian Theology Reader, 490.

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