

INTRODUCTION

The church Fathers are often looked upon with skepticism and questioning. To many they are outdated. To others they are lost to the annals of time. Others find them difficult to read. Still others lack the interest to read them.

Today, more than ever, though, they are an invaluable resource to the church. Their day is much like present day. Rather, the present day is fast becoming like their day. They lived and taught in a time when the wider culture was less than accepting of their message. In these post-modern times, one begins to see more similarities to their time with each passing day.

Irenaeus was one of the church fathers whose writings offer to believers today much constructive thought and teaching. Defending against those in the church who were teaching false doctrines, while seeking to maintain the overall unity of the church was Irenaeus' passion and desire. It is for this very reason Irenaeus is so invaluable today.

HIS LIFE

Scholars know very little about the life of Irenaeus. What little they do know comes largely from the writings of Eusebius, who records several key events in his life, and the few autobiographical references that Irenaeus gives of himself in his own works.¹

Irenaeus was likely born around AD 115 and lived until around AD 202.² That put him very close to the end of the lives of the Apostles. He was born in, or at least grew up in Smyrna in Asia Minor.³ He wrote and spoke in Greek.⁴

¹W. Brian Shelton, "Irenaeus," In *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy*, Bradley G. Green, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 17.

Having grown up in Smyrna, he had the privilege of being acquainted with and learning from Polycarp. At that time, Polycarp was the head of the church in Smyrna. Polycarp was a disciple of John and was able to recount to Irenaeus the things that John said and even his mannerisms.⁵

In AD 170, Irenaeus settled in southern Gaul in a town called Lyon.⁶ In AD 177, he went on embassy to the church of Rome. There he mediated with Bishop Eleutherus about the Montanist controversy.⁷ Montanists, among other things were seeking new prophecy in signs and visions, and awaiting Christ's imminent return in the desert.⁸ While Irenaeus was in Rome, a severe persecution broke out in Lyon. The Bishop there, Pothinus was martyred. When he returned, Polycarp was elected Bishop to succeed him.⁹

In the late 180s, Irenaeus wrote to mediate another controversy before Victor about the dating of Easter.¹⁰ The Paschal controversy, as it is known, was a division about when Easter should be celebrated. Was Easter to be celebrated on 14 Nisan, no matter the day of the week (as the churches of Asia Minor did) or on Sunday (as Roman church did)?¹¹ Irenaeus wrote to rebut Victor of Rome's decision to break off relations with churches in Asia Minor that differed on the

²Everett Ferguson, *Church History: Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 124.

³Justo Luis Gonzalez. "Irenaeus of Lyon." In *The Westminster Dictionary of Theologians*. Justo L. Gonzalez, ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006., 185.

⁴Ferguson, 124.

⁵Ibid., 124.

⁶Gonzalez, 185.

⁷Ferguson, 124.

⁸Shelton, 19.

⁹Gonzalez, 185.

¹⁰Shelton, 19.

¹¹Frederic William Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889), 108.

date of Easter.¹² While Irenaeus agreed with Victor as to the dating, he did not agree with the break in fellowship in the church over such an issue.¹³

Irenaeus is revered as the first great systematic theologian in his writing of *Against Heresies*.¹⁴ He played an important role as a bridge between the Eastern and Western churches because he had roots and ties in the East, and was well regarded and well known in the West as well.¹⁵ Looking back at Irenaeus, he also functioned as an important transition figure between the sub-apostolic age and the old catholic church.¹⁶

HIS WRITINGS

Irenaeus, unlike some of the other early church fathers, was not an apologist defending the faith against outsiders. Instead, he sought to equip believers in his church and beyond with arguments against common heresies of the day.¹⁷ He writes primarily with pastoral concern and focus on the church.¹⁸ This however does not mean that his writing is easy to read.

The most well known work of Irenaeus that survives to us today is popularly known as *Against Heresies*. The full title is *The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*.¹⁹ Irenaeus probably wrote this work around 190.²⁰ Though it was written in Greek, it survives to the present day in Latin and Armenian translations.²¹ As the title indicates it is largely focused on countering the false teaching of the Gnostics.

¹²Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, Translated by Stanley Godman, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), 23.

¹³ Campenhausen, 21.

¹⁴Cyril C. Richardson, ed. *Early Christian Fathers*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 344.

¹⁵ Shelton, 17-18.

¹⁶ Ferguson, 124.

¹⁷ Campenhausen, 21.

¹⁸ Richardson, 246.

¹⁹ Richardson, 344.

²⁰ Shelton, 20.

²¹ Gonzalez, 185.

Gnosticism taught a strong dualism between the spiritual realm and the earthly or physical realm. As such, Gnostics would deny the full humanity of Christ, or claim him to be divine but only appearing to be human. In addition, Gnosticism found salvation in escape from the physical/material world, not in resurrection in a new and glorified body. This view leaned on the understanding that the world was created a demegurde god, who was essential evil. The aim of one's life was to come to know the secret knowledge that would enable one to live and escape this world to the pleroma, a place without physical/material corruption.²²

Against Heresies consists of five books or sections. The first book describes the heresies and teachings of the Gnostics.²³ The second book demonstrates the contradiction and problems of Gnosticism.²⁴ The third, forth, and fifth book function together to lay out what Irenaeus understands to be the true teaching of Christianity.²⁵ While many often criticize the first and second book for their tediousness, it is the third, forth, and fifth book that stands as one the first attempt at a systematic presentation of theology.²⁶

One other major work, this one much smaller, survives to the present day. It is called *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. This work survives in Armenian translation.²⁷ It was originally written to a friend of Irenaeus, Marcianus, around AD 190.²⁸ It aimed at teaching the basics of the Gospel and Biblical message.²⁹

²² Shelton, 25.

²³ Gonzalez, 186.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Richardson, 344.

²⁷ Ferguson, 125.

²⁸ Shelton, 22.

²⁹ Gonzalez, 186.

THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS & SIGNIFICANCE FOR TODAY

Irenaeus' theological contributions to the Christian faith far outweigh what scholars know of his life and the comparatively little firsthand material that they have from him today. His aim is to compose a development of what true Christian doctrine is and to contrast that to the errors of his day not only were defining in that time, but continue to shape and impact today.

One topic on which Irenaeus dealt extensively with and is important for consideration today is that of Scripture. Irenaeus did not have the advantage that is afforded today of having a completed cannon of Scripture readily available. Living so soon after those who wrote those texts meant that their had not yet been enough time to establish which books were in fact Scripture and which were only beneficial to read or perhaps not worth reading at all.

This was an important matter to be dealt with. In Irenaeus' day, many claimed that various writings were true and acceptable texts. Irenaeus dealt at length with the Gnostics. Those who held to the secret knowledge would claim authority in many texts that sought to recast Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection into different formats. These would often follow the general Gnostic dualism and view Jesus in highly spiritualized terms. The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection were reinterpreted into the spiritual/non-physical and earthly/physical divide.

Against this Irenaeus appealed to three sources. First, he appealed to the apostolic tradition.³⁰ The teachings of the apostles were handed down to faithful men, who continue to teach the same doctrines they taught. Irenaeus claimed to be able to site the names of those faithful disciples. This unbroken line, in his context being so close to the lives of the Apostles, was an important claim, for those who taught the Gnostic doctrines did not follow in this pattern

³⁰ Shelton, 26.

of teaching and did not learn their doctrines from those who were passing on the faithful testimony.³¹

Secondly, Irenaeus appealed to the common rejection that that the Gnostic doctrine had among the churches.³² While many claimed legitimacy in their teaching, Irenaeus would not let the failure of this teaching to be accepted by the church as a whole. This unity of faith was important for Irenaeus. Moreover, Irenaeus esteemed and valued the leading of the church of Rome because of the past and present influence of Paul and Peter there.³³ However he did not esteem it such that he would not differ with the bishop there (as he did in the Paschal controversy), or elevate the teachings of Rome over the teachings of Scripture.³⁴ Irenaeus ultimately made his appeal to Scripture itself.³⁵

As previously noted, there was no “Bible” as one has now. Against the Gnostics, Irenaeus was the really the first church father to argue from both the Old and New Testaments.³⁶ Most interestingly, he quotes from almost every book of the New Testament (again, which was not set in its final form at that time).³⁷ For Irenaeus, the Old and New Testaments were not contrary, but rather were complimentary. There was continuity between them.³⁸ The story and salvation that was presented there was in harmony. Scripture, of both Testaments, bore witness to God’s plan of salvation.³⁹

Another significant lasting impact of Irenaeus’ theological development is his understanding of creation. As already noted, Gnostics taught a dualism between creation and

³¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2005), 131.

³² Shelton, 29.

³³ Shelton, 30-1.

³⁴ Ferguson, 125-6.

³⁵ Shelton, 53.

³⁶ Ferguson, 125.

³⁷ Farrar, 100.

³⁸ Shelton, 33.

³⁹ Ferguson, 125.

spiritual. They saw creation as evil and that which is non-physical as good. Irenaeus disagreed. He argued for creation and man as being formed good in the beginning, not evil.⁴⁰ In addition he saw a continuity of the story of Scripture from creation through to redemption, with redemption undoing the corruption that came to creation in the fall.⁴¹

Irenaeus understanding of the Godhead is also significant to note. In the face of Gnostic teaching that Jesus could not have been God since he was a man, Irenaeus stressed the oneness of God the Father and God the Son.⁴² In addition, he argued that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all one, yet distinct. To Irenaeus, the Son and the Spirit were the “two hands of God”.⁴³ Looking back it is easy to see that Irenaeus set the stage for what would come to be considered the orthodox view of the Trinity.

Moreover, this unity of the Trinity prevented Irenaeus from treating Jesus as a second or lesser god under the one true God. For Irenaeus, Christ was the *logos*, or word of God.⁴⁴ Additionally, there was no division between the creator god and the redeemer god in his theology. They were one.⁴⁵

This led to Irenaeus holding to an “economy of salvation”, that is, salvation was carried out from beginning to end by one and the same God.⁴⁶ This understanding of salvation certainly is consistent with his understanding of the unity of the Old and New Testaments as well.

Salvation was brought in three phases. The first was creation in a pure state, followed by the fall of mankind into sin, with the effects of sin marring everything in creation. The second phase is Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection, whereby he dealt with sin. The third phase

⁴⁰ Gonzalez, 186.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ferguson, 125.

⁴³ Shelton, 43.

⁴⁴ Latourette, 143.

⁴⁵ McGrath, Alister, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*, (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 123.

⁴⁶ McGrath, 123.

is the final redemption of mankind and all of creation.⁴⁷ For Irenaeus, atonement was not just a legal solution to man's sin, but extends further to all of creation. In the end, the whole cosmos will be redeemed.⁴⁸

One of the ways that Irenaeus expounded the way in which Christ's salvation extends to man was through the idea of recapitulation, that is, the re-heading of humanity. Where in all man kind is born into their nature head of Adam, subject to sin and death, mankind could be born of the Second Adam, which is Christ, who sets man free from sin and death.⁴⁹ This understanding remains vital today in understanding Christ's work on the cross.

CONCLUSION

Though the church fathers receive very little attention today, especially among Protestants, they have much to offer. Irenaeus' writings give insight to the ways in which a man, serious about understanding the Word of God and teaching it to his people, sought to explain the powerful truths contained therein. He and his writings have not become outdated, rather, they are just as valid and helpful today, as they were almost 2000 years ago.

⁴⁷ Shelton, 47

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁹ Gonzalez, 186.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Campanhausen, Hans Von. *The Fathers of the Greek Church*. Translated by Stanley Godman. New York: Pantheon Books, 1959.

Farrar, Frederic William. *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography*. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889.

Ferguson, Everett. *Church History: Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Gonzalez, Justo Luis. "Irenaeus of Lyon." In *The Westminster Dictionary of Theologians*. Justo L. Gonzalez, ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2005.

McGrath, Alister. *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.

Richardson, Cyril C., ed. *Early Christian Fathers*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Shelton, W. Brian. "Irenaeus." In *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy*. Bradley G. Green, ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.