



## FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

### Irenaeus of Lyon, c.130 – 202 A.D.

*“Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself.” - Against Heresies, I,1:2*

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon in southern France, is one of the more well known of the Early Church Fathers. He was a pastor and theologian whose writings defined and defended Christian doctrine. His writings represent some of the earliest and most comprehensive theology we have records of. His theology, robustly doctrinal in nature, is written with a pastor's mind and intent, and not the purely academic flights of speculation one finds in Origen.

#### The Life of Irenaeus

- Born in Asia Minor around 130 A.D., likely in Smyrna. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was the Bishop of Smyrna during the first half of the second century. Irenaeus wrote fondly of Polycarp, referring to him as an 'old man' or presbyter.
- Polycarp, as we may recall, was a disciple of John the Apostle, and was a friend and supporter of Ignatius when he was on his prison march to Rome from Antioch. Polycarp himself was arrested during an outbreak of persecution in Smyrna, and although he initially hid, eventually allowed himself to be arrested and was martyred in 155.
- The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is the earliest extant account outside the NT of a Christian martyr. It is likely accurate, especially compared with much more fanciful acts of martyrs from later centuries. While supernatural elements are present, they do not overthrow its historicity or reliability, as often argued by critical scholars with an anti-supernatural predisposition
- Sometime as a young adult and for unknown reasons, Irenaeus moves from Asia to Lyon in southern France, and there he becomes a presbyter. Shortly thereafter he is sent with a message to the church in Rome, around 177 AD, and while he is gone a wave of persecution breaks out in Lyon, resulting in the martyrdom of Bishop Pothinus. Upon his return to Lyon, Irenaeus is elected to be the new bishop, an office he held until his own martyrdom in 202.

#### The Times of Irenaeus

- Irenaeus lived during a period where Emperor Trajan's "don't seek out but slam them if brought in" policy was very much in effect. Although the more intense, systematic, and widespread persecutions of Septimius and Decius are a long ways off, these were still uneasy and often unsafe times for Christians, especially their leaders.
- Lyon was a major city and a provincial capital. Straddling the Rhone River, it was a major port on one of the primary rivers of the Romano-Gallic Empire. It was a bustling, thriving city, home to a dizzying array of languages and religions. Dominant over the religious landscape is the cult of Emperor worship, and the standard temples to Jupiter and Juno. Shrines to Attis and Mithras were common; the former was an Asiatic deity whose priests were known for gashing themselves with knives, the latter the stern and demanding hero god of the common Roman legionary.
- The great issue facing Irenaeus was the syncretistic tendencies of the gnostics, who found orthodox Christianity to be too simple. While Gnosticism was never a monolithic entity, and certainly in Irenaeus' day it was in a 'developmental' phase (reaching its height of organization in the third and fourth centuries), there were certainly common ideas central and foundational to gnostics.

## Rector's Forum @ St. George

- The gnostics sought to 'correct' Christianity by utilizing bizarrely complex spiritual cosmologies, founded upon a platonic dualism separating flesh and spirit. Because of their denigration of the material world, gnosticism either sought mortification of the flesh, or its unmitigated indulgence. God is not personal but impersonal, wholly Other. The world is a cruel, harsh, and utterly pessimistic realm. Thus the end result of life is escape, not redemption; and God would never deem to 'get his hands dirty.' Jesus was not God incarnate, but at best lesser spirit named Christ must have manifest in Jesus, and after his time of teaching was done, Christ departed the earth and Jesus disappeared, leaving behind various secret teachings to enable escape to the spiritual realm.
- As is often the case in Christian history, the presence and teaching of various rival versions of Christianity and the teaching of various heresies, forced Christianity to clarify itself. Marcion of Pontus is a good example. Marcion saw the God of the OT as different form that of the NT, and despised much of Judaism. Consequently, he rejected all of the Hebrew OT as scriptural, and only recognized the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke as legitimately 'Christian'. While much of the Christian world at this time had a general understanding of the accepted apostolic writings, including the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there was not a formal effort to create a canon until a response to Marcion was required. This time of self clarification and self-identification also gave rise to the early creeds to distinguish true apostolic Christianity from gnostic variants.

## The Theology of Irenaeus

- Only two of Irenaeus' writings survive: *The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* and *The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*, more commonly known as "Against Heresies". The former makes reference to the latter, and thus is the second of the two.
- In *Demonstration* he gave some basic instruction to the church on Christian doctrine; in the *Refutation* (hereafter *Against Heresies*) the more well known of his two works, he addresses the teaching of gnostics, and explains how their doctrines fall short of the truth of Christianity.
- Irenaeus' writings were first published in English by Erasmus in 1526, and since then Irenaeus has become the most quoted pre-Augustinian Church Father.
- Although Irenaeus is often considered the first great systematic theologian of the Christian Church, he did not write systematic theology. He was first and foremost a pastor teaching and correcting his flock, and *Against Heresies* was intended to be a resource for his church leaders.
- *Against Heresies* is comprised of five books. In the first two Books he explains, often in sarcastic terms, the beliefs of the gnostics, particularly the strands taught by Valentinus, Secundus, Credon, and Marcion of Pontus (see above on Marcion).
- Irenaeus begins by affirming the faith once delivered unto the saints (cf. Jude 3), through the apostles: God the Father creator of heaven and earth, Christ Jesus the Son of God who was made flesh for our salvation, and the Holy Spirit who revealed God's promises concerning Christ, including the virgin birth, the passion and resurrection, and the anticipated return of Christ to judge the world. The full passage bears reading, I,10:1. Irenaeus argues that one of jobs of the church is to preserve this message's truth as well as proclaim it.
- In the next section he describes in fairly extensive detail, with traces of sarcasm, the theological worldview of the gnostic teachers, who have "inconsistent views". A simple reading of their teaching is self evident of their complex and bizarre nature, see, for example: I,11:1ff and I, 27:1ff
- Irenaeus makes extensive use of the four (canonical) Gospels and provides one of the earliest extant descriptions of them (II,1:1-2). He defends both their authority and the apostolic teaching preserved by the elders (II,2:2), which later would be called the (Apostolic) Tradition. In his explanation of the apostolic (teaching) succession he references his personal experience with Polycarp (II,3:4), as well as the teaching of the apostle John (II, 11:1ff). He then goes on to specifically address the number and use, or misuse, by the Gnostics of the four Gospels (II, 11:7-8). This flies directly in the face of a late date of canonicity of the Gospels and supports the fact that there was notable recognition of the four Gospels within the Church long before the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.