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Heresy Happens!

Truth Matters!

Irenaeus, the "Patron Saint" of heresy-hunters.

Irenaeus of Lyons

Defender of The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints

"Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself. One famous man has well said, in reference to this point, "A clever imitation in glass casts contempt, as it were precious jewel the emerald (which is most highly esteemed by some), unless it come under the eye able to test and expose the counterfeit. Or, again, what inexperienced person can with ease detect the presence of brass when it has been mixed up with silver?" Lest, therefore, through my neglect, should be carried off, even as sheep are by wolves, while they perceive not the true character of these men, they outwardly are covered with sheep's clothing (against whom the Lord has enjoined us to be on guard), and because their language resembles ours, while their sentiments are very different"⁽¹⁾

- The above statement was written about **185 A.D.**
- It comes from his work entitled "*Adversus Haereses*" (*Against Heresies*)
- It is one of the most complete works the Church possesses regarding early gnostic cults and their beliefs
- *Against Heresies* is divided into Four Books, each dealing with different topical matters

Who Was Irenaeus ?

- Irenaeus has been described as a **Polemicist** (one who defends the faith from attacks within)⁽²⁾
- Irenaeus has been described as an **Apologist** (one who refutes false charges brought against the Church from those outside the faith)⁽³⁾
- Very little is known about his life prior to his conversion to Christianity
- Irenaeus was from Asia Minor and probably the city of Smyrna⁽⁴⁾
- He sat under Polcarp of Smyrna - who was a disciple of the Apostle John⁽⁵⁾
- "St. Irenaeus (c 130 - 202 CE) was the most important theologian of the second century."⁽⁶⁾
- "Scholars have delighted in this father because of his extensive writings and his place as the father of Biblical Theology."⁽⁷⁾
- Pothinus asked Irenaeus to become a presbyter at the Church of Lyons
- Irenaeus was sent to Rome with an important letter and while gone Pothinus was martyred under the persecution of Marcus Aurelius in 177 CE
- When Irenaeus returned he was appointed the Bishop of Lyons⁽⁸⁾
- "Irenaeus was the first person to develop an Old Testament and New Testament that worked together."⁽⁹⁾
- "He was also the first person to cite reasons for admitting or rejecting books into the canon."⁽¹⁰⁾

[Events Affecting the Church During the Life of Irenaeus \(130-202 CE\)](#)

Irenaeus lived in a time of religious persecution by the Roman Empire

Marcus Aurelius was the emperor and a devout Stoic and he persecuted the Church between 161-180 CE

Christians were blamed for natural disasters⁽¹¹⁾

Gnosticism had many followers during this period

By 180 CE 22 books of the New Testament were accepted as canon

Montanus and his prophetesses were active in the Church

The heretic Marcion formed his own Church and Biblical canon about 160 CE

Valentinus caused the Church to emphasize apostolic succession as a repository of truth⁽¹²⁾

During the life of Irenaeus the Church was being affected by forces from **without** and **within**. From without we had the crumbling Roman Empire was looking for a scapegoat for its failures. Within the Church we had various heretical factions rising up claiming divine authority for its beliefs. Also there were various gnostic sects which called themselves Christians, yet were not either in belief or practice.

Reasons For the Prominence of Irenaeus

He is best known for his work entitled *Against Heresies* which left the Church an understanding of some of the common beliefs of various gnostic sects.

"Irenaeus is thus a forerunner of both covenant theology and the concept of redemptive history (*Heilsgeschichte*)"⁽¹³⁾

Irenaeus was the first to interpret the Christian Scriptures as a unified document. His interest lay chiefly in the Gospels and the writings of Paul, but the overall framework of his interpretation was provided by the history of salvation beginning in ancient Israel and culminating in Christ, who sums up all things that began in Adam.⁽¹⁴⁾

Irenaeus' approach to interpretation was to have enormous impact on later Christian interpretation. He repudiated piecemeal exegesis, that is, picking and choosing individual texts to defend arcane or idiosyncratic views, and insisted that the Bible was the church's book and had to be interpreted in light of central Christian beliefs. Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, and many others followed his lead in their exegesis of the Bible in theological disputes.⁽¹⁵⁾

What Did Irenaeus Believe?

Chiliasm in prophetic outlook - a pre-millennial outlook which anticipated the return of Christ and His reign for a literal thousand years before the final judgment.⁽¹⁶⁾

He taught that the God of the Old Testament was that of the New Testament in His work *Proof Of Apostolic Preaching* which refuted gnostic teachings that the God of the O.T. was not the same as that of the N.T.⁽¹⁷⁾

Irenaeus was Trinitarian in belief

He believed in Apostolic succession - that the Bishops exercised authority as handed down from the Apostles.

He taught anything not handed down by the Apostles, as taught by the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be revelation.⁽¹⁸⁾

He believed in infant baptism

In the real presence of Christ in the celebration of communion

He gave the Church two statements which have never been improved upon: (1) ***Filius dei filius hominis factus***, "The Son of God [has] become a son of man, (2) ***Jesus Christus vere homo, vere deus***, "Jesus Christ, true man and true God."⁽¹⁹⁾

He believed that Scripture had to be interpreted in accordance with tradition, thus stressing the unity of the Church's testimony delivered through the bishops.⁽²⁰⁾

Detection and Overthrow of the Pretended but False Gnosis

(Against Heresies)

The Enduring Work of Irenaeus

Was originally written in Greek but survives only in the Latin translation today

It is comprised of five books, each dealing with a specific aspect of his theme

Against Heresies was written about 181 A.D.

Against Heresies was written by Irenaeus to a friend as an explanation of gnostic beliefs and why they are false in light of the teachings of Scripture and the traditions of the Church as passed on from the Apostles.

It was written in two sections. Section One (chapter One) explains the various systems of Gnostic thought and Section Two, (chapters two through five) refutes the errors put forth by the Gnostics.

According to Irenaeus, the Gnostics had misused and perverted the Scriptures to support false and idiosyncratic ideas contrary to the church's tradition. The aim of his work was to show the agreement of the Scriptures with the church's tradition, thereby retaining the Scriptures for the church. To do this he set forth for the first time the idea that the Scriptures have one central meaning, one scope. This unifying sense was found in the rule of faith (Lat.{Lat. Latin} *regula fidei*), a simple creed used for catechetical instruction and at baptism by Christian congregations in all parts of the Roman world.⁽²¹⁾

Section One \ Chapter One

"These men falsify the oracles of God and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation. They also overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away,

under a pretense of [superior] knowledge, from Him who rounded and adorned the universe; as if, forsooth, they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal, than that God who created the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein."⁽²²⁾

Irenaeus took time to:

Read their Commentaries

Made himself acquainted with their tenets

Spoke personally with some gnostic believers

He thoroughly researched his topic and wrote as one with a solid understanding of their beliefs and thus as one with authority.

Book One is valuable to us because it gives us an understanding of several of the most common Gnostic mystery religions of that time. Irenaeus begins with Simon Magus, and deals with the beliefs of the followers of Valentinian.

Simon Magus: (*Adversus Haereses* 1. 16) "Irenaeus and the others regard him as the first major heretic, the initiator of a long chain of interrelated errors. The modern association of Gnostic origins with heretical forms of Judaism may suggest that their instinct was not far wrong."⁽²³⁾

Valentinus wrote "The Gospel of Truth" and it alludes to most of the NT books in a way which suggests recognition of their authority. This book is ascribed to Valentinus by Irenaeus, though this has been denied (*cf.* H. M. Schenke, *ThL* 83, 1958, pp. 497ff.). Van Unnik has attractively proposed that it was written before Valentinus' break with the Roman church (where he was once a candidate for an episcopal chair), when he was seeking to establish his orthodoxy.

[Section Two \ Chapter Two](#)

Irenaeus shows the absurdity of the gnostic belief systems

He does this in three ways:

- 1) From a position of **REASON**
- 2) From a position of **CHURCH TRADITION**
- 3) From a position of **THE TEACHINGS OF THE APOSTLES**

[Section Two \ Footnotes](#)

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