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CONCORDIA SEMINARY

THE THEOLOGY OF ST. IRENAEUS
A SURVEY

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN RELIGION

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

BY
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Irenaeus of Lugdunum stands as the first great theologian produced by the Christian Church following the close of the apostolic age. In his work we see for the first time, outside of the New Testament corpus, a large developed theological system. However, as is true of most Ante-Nicene Fathers, Irenaeus is not primarily a systematician. He is a polemicist, one of the great anti-gnostic writers. Most likely, Irenaeus saw himself and his pastoral ministry in this light. Johannes Knudsen calls Irenaeus a "counter-puncher", hardly a detached systematic thinker.¹

This tension — that Irenaeus wrote a defense against heresy and yet is studied as a systematic theologian — makes him a rather controversial figure in Early Church History. There is far from unanimous agreement among scholars on many, even basic, points of his theology. Does he represent, as John Lawson contends, ". . . the survival or else the revival of a more truly Pauline, and more truly Christian strain."² Or is he the beginning, or at least an early stage, in the departure of Catholic theology from primitive

¹Johannes Knudsen, "Recapitulation Christology and the Church Today," Dialogue 2 (Spring, 1963): 129.

²John Lawson, The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus, (London: The Epworth Press, 1948), p. 251.

and Biblical Christianity?

The question, I believe, arises because scholars fail to recognize Irenaeus first as a polemicist and then as a developer of a theological system. ". . . while it is perfectly true that in the latter half of his magnum opus he provides what may be called the first systematic exposition of Christian belief, it is equally true that this is quite incidental to his polemic onslaughts."¹ Throughout his writings, he is constantly attentive to the perversions represented by the Gnostic systems. This is not to say that Irenaeus' theology lacks cohesive unity. On the contrary it is the very beautiful unity of purpose and thought that blinds one to the polemical nature of his work.

In this paper we shall attempt a general survey of Irenaeus' theology. We will use the typical systematic categories and order (which Irenaeus himself tends to follow), yet we will constantly keep in mind the Gnostic theology and philosophy which he fought and, as Church history and even the very existence of Church history shows, successfully opposed.

Historical Background

Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor, most likely in Smyrna, probably between the years 115 and 125 A.D. The dating of his birth, in any case very inexact, depends heavily upon the date of the martyrdom of Polycarp,² to whom Irenaeus claims to have listened

¹Morton S. Enslin, "Irenaeus: Mostly Prolegomena," Harvard Theological Review 40 (July, 1947): 147.

²Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. II: Ante-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325 (Charles Scribner's Sons,

as a young boy.¹ It is generally believed that he studied in Rome, perhaps traveling there with the aged Polycarp in 154 A.D.² From there, Irenaeus went to Southern Gaul and became a presbyter in Lugdunum (Lyons). Such a move was far from surprising for the Gauls were racially akin to the Galatians of Irenaeus' native province. Lawson theorizes that Southern France was the "overseas mission field" for the strong Church in Asia Minor.³ In 177 A.D. Irenaeus was commissioned by the Church at Lugdunum to bear a letter to the Bishop of Rome, Eleutherus, interceding for peace in the Church over the Montanist issue.⁴ While Irenaeus was thus away, the aged Bishop of Lugdunum, Pothinus, fell victim to the persecution under Marcus Aurelius. When Irenaeus returned to Lugdunum, he was apparently elected as Pothinus' successor. "As Bishop of Lyons [Lugdunum], Irenaeus had also oversight of the see of Vienne and of numerous scattered parishes in Southern Gaul."⁵ In this

1910; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 748.

¹Irenaeus, bp. of Lugdunum, Against Heresies, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), III. iii. 4 (p. 416); Irenaeus, bp. of Lugdunum, "Letter to Florinus," in Second Century Christianity A Collection of Fragments, ed. Robert M. Grant (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1946), p. 115.

²Schaff, p. 749.

³Lawson, p. 3.

⁴Eusebius Pamphilus, bp. of Caesarea, in Palestine, Ecclesiastical History, trans. C. F. Cruse (London: George Bill and Sons, 1887), V. iv (p. 171).

⁵John A. Newton, "Their Word to Our Day VI. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-200)," The Expository Times 80 (April, 1969): 200.

capacity he labored for the next twenty-five years, preaching, teaching, and striving ceaselessly for the preservation of the Christian faith. John Newton rightly emphasizes the importance of this pastoral context for understanding Irenaeus' theology.¹

After the year 190 we lose sight of Irenaeus. It was at this time that he became involved in another peace-keeping endeavor with Rome. He sent a letter to Bishop Victor of Rome, encouraging toleration of Churches in Asia Minor, who were refusing to adhere to the Quartodecimian observance of Easter.² Later tradition reports that Irenaeus followed Pothinus in martyrdom about 202 A.D. But the silence of Tertullian and other contemporaries, as well as Eusebius, makes this doubtful.

Irenaeus has left us several important writings and letters. The most famous is A Refutation and Subversion of Knowledge Falsely So Called, commonly known as Adversus Haereses. The Greek original is lost to us, except for a few fragments preserved by Eusebius, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and others. However the entire work is preserved in a somewhat stilted Latin version.³ Adversus Haereses, written from ca. A.D. 177-190, provides us not only deep insight into Second Century Christian doctrine but is also a rich source of information on various Gnostic sects, especially that of Valentinus. Written in five books, the first is mainly an exposition of various

¹Ibid.

²Irenaeus, bp. of Lugdunum, "Letter to Victor," In Second-Century Christianity A Collection of Fragments, ed. Robert M. Grant (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1946), pp. 116, 117; Eusebius, V. xxiii, xxiv (pp. 194-199).

³Schaff, footnote 3, p. 752.

Gnostic doctrines (in a quite objective manner); the second, their exposure on the basis of human reason; and the last three, their refutation from Holy Scripture.

Another work, mentioned by Eusebius as The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching¹, was thought lost until 1904, when it was found in an Armenian translation. It is a simple handbook of Christian doctrine, non-polemical in tone.

Though Eusebius mentions several other works by Irenaeus,² the only other writings which have survived are numerous fragments, preserved by later writers, and portions of two epistles. The first is the above-mentioned letter to Bishop Victor of Rome concerning the Easter controversy. The second is an emotional letter to Florinus, a close friend and fellow student of Polycarp, who had fallen prey to several Gnostic doctrines. This letter gives us more insight into the character of Polycarp and Irenaeus' friendship with him than it does the theological issues that prompted it. Both fragments are preserved by Eusebius.³

From this brief glance at the history of Irenaeus' life several points can be made. Irenaeus is a Greek. In his writings Greek ideas, concerns, and emphases breathe freely. But he also is a Latin. His religious training and life's work were accomplished within the sphere of Rome, not Antioch or Ephesus. "Latin West and Greek East mingle in this man's mind, and produce a theology which

¹Eusebius, V. xxvi (p. 199).

²Ibid.

³Ibid., V. xxiv (pp. 191, 192, 197-198).

unites the profound Eastern emphasis on the Incarnation with the Western devotion to the Passion of Jesus."¹

Just as important, however, is his proximity to the Apostles. Irenaeus claims a direct and traceable link to the Apostle John via Polycarp. He can call the venerable Apostle his "grand-teacher".² Perhaps too much can be made of this for Polycarp and Irenaeus were both very young when they sat under their respective Patriarchs. However such impressions are also very formative and remain as strong guidance throughout one's lifetime, as Irenaeus testifies.³ "Thus there is in Irenaeus an Hebraic interest which acts as an effectual counterpoise to the Hellenic interests of Gentile Christianity, which is also there."⁴

Irenaeus, then, is a complex figure, a man formed by many influences. His theology reflects all of these and our study of him must remain sensitive to this fact.

Authority and Tradition

Part of Irenaeus' opening salvo in Adversus Haereses contains this very revealing statement:

Error, indeed is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is carefully decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expres-

¹Newton, p. 201.

²Schaff, p. 751.

³Irenaeus, "Letter to Florinus," pp. 115, 116.

⁴Lawson, p. 117.

sion may seem) more true than the truth itself.¹

It was this couching of error in the guise of truth and proclaiming it as the 'real' Christian theology that aroused Irenaeus to write his monumental work. In this study we will not outline each specific Gnostic doctrine that Irenaeus combats. Our purpose is to provide an overview of this Father's understanding of the Christian faith. However, on one very crucial point, on the nature of Authority and Tradition, we must discuss the Gnostic, as well as the Irenaeian position.

"In the Gnostic view, the Bible is no more than an illustration of the true, 'deeper' or 'higher' action taking place in the Pleroma [the Gnostic pantheon]."² The flexibility with which they interpreted Scripture (indeed with total disregard of the context or the intention of the passage), their secrecy, and their contention that only they themselves were competent to interpret Scripture, made polemics against them very difficult.³ But it is noteworthy that Irenaeus does not disagree with the Gnostic contention that ". . . the truth which alone can interpret Scripture has been transmitted by a tradition."⁴ His agreement with them on this point is in fact the very heart of his argument against them.

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, I. Preface. 2 (p. 315).

²J. T. Nielsen, Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons (Assen, The Netherlands:Koninklijke Van Gorium and Comp. N. V., 1968), p. 5.

³Ibid., p. 54.

⁴Philip Hefer, "Saint Irenaeus and the Hypothesis of Faith," Dialogue 2 (Fall, 1963): 302.

Theirs is the incorrect tradition by which they misinterpret Scripture. As a consequence they produce new doctrines and attempt to substitute them for the old.¹ Therefore they reject the traditions that each Christian generation has received and preserved from the Apostles. Ironically, as Irenaeus points out, the Gnostics think themselves to be far wiser than the apostles and the presbyters who followed them, because the Gnostics claim that they only have discovered the pure and unadulterated truth.² Thus with biting sarcasm Irenaeus writes,

According to them, therefore, Peter was imperfect, and the rest of the apostles were imperfect; and so it would be fitting that they, coming to life again, should become disciples of these men, in order that they too might be made perfect. But this is truly ridiculous. These men, in fact, are proved to be not disciples of the apostles, but of their own wicked notions . . . But the Church throughout all the world, having its origin firm from the apostles, preserves in one and the same opinion with regard to God and His Son.³

Nor will Irenaeus allow the Gnostics to explain their deviation from the Apostolic Tradition by saying that the Apostles' public statements merely accommodated the hearers who were weak and unable to understand the truths which the Apostles passed on in secret. Such an idea charges the Apostles with increasing ignorance and disease, rather than healing it.⁴

It is in this context that Irenaeus' famous doctrine of Apostolic Succession emerges. He must show that the tradition he

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, II. xiv. 2 (p. 376).

²Ibid., III. i. 2 (p. 415).

³Ibid., III. xii. 7 (p. 443).

⁴Ibid., III. v. 1, 2 (pp. 417, 418).

holds, the tradition taught in the Church throughout the world, is the true and original tradition from Christ Himself. There are three steps in this succession from the Lord as recognized (and exemplified) by Irenaeus. Christ delivered the truth to His Apostles (e.g. John). These in turn taught their disciples (e.g. Polycarp). And finally Irenaeus himself was taught by a disciple of the Apostles.

In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth.¹

W. C. von Unnik explains the significance of this doctrine for the Second Century world. Among the ancient Greeks, the veracity of an historical account was established by the fact that the writer was an eyewitness to the event.² In Hellenistic times a further refinement was made, in that a historian's report was also reliable if the historian received his information from trustworthy eyewitnesses.³ Therefore ". . . when Irenaeus highlights the fact that these Presbyters saw and heard the Apostles, he did not use a category that was peculiar to himself and was foreign to others, but he took over a standard for trustworthiness current in the Hellenistic and Roman World."⁴

¹Ibid., III. iii. 3 (p. 416).

²W. C. von Unnik, "The Authority of the Presbyters in Irenaeus' Work," in God's Christ and His People Studies in Honor of Nils Alstrup Dahl, ed. Jacob Jervell and Wayne E. Meeks (Oslo-Bergen-Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1977), p. 256.

³Ibid., p. 257.

⁴Ibid., p. 256.

Irenaeus then places great emphasis on the bishops and presbyters¹ as preservers of the truth and thus can say ". . . 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."² However concerning the bishops as "channels of sacramental grace" he has little to say.³ Nor is submission to the Church a "salutary moral exercise." It is because She preserves the true doctrine that Irenaeus deems submission necessary.⁴

Undoubtedly Irenaeus' doctrine of Apostolic Succession lies in the chain of developments producing papal supremacy. It is even perhaps a major element.⁵ But clearly papal supremacy or even a strong episcopal government is not Irenaeus' intention. He seeks to preserve the faith originally given to the Apostles and handed down by them. From his perspective, unaware and unable to see the serious consequences it might have, the bishops and presbyters held the obvious and important role of having received, preserved, and

¹Irenaeus uses the terms 'bishop' and 'presbyter' almost interchangeably and they do not seem to designate two different offices. He is concerned with their role as witnesses, not as rulers. Enslin, pp. 159,160.

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. xxvi. 2 (p. 497).

³Lawson, p. 254.

⁴Ibid., p. 255.

⁵See Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. iii. 2 (p. 415,416). In this famous and much disputed passage one thing must be kept in mind. It is not the authority of Bishops as rulers and formulators that Irenaeus is advocating. Rather it is their authority as preservers and teachers of that which was entrusted to them which is so

transmitted that precious faith. It is on this basis alone that they held so much authority and importance for Irenaeus.

Doctrine of God

If disagreement with the Gnostics about the formal principal of theology was part of the motivation for Irenaeus' belief in the succession of bishops from the Apostles, it was the Gnostics' distinctly pagan understanding of creation that helped draw him to monotheism and trinitarianism. The Gnostics held that the Supreme God and the Demiurge (the Creator God) were different; that the Supreme God was unknowable while the origin of the Demiurge resulted from the attempt of an intermediate god to know the Supreme God; that the Supreme God was good and the Demiurge was evil or at least tainted with evil.

In response to these notions Irenaeus is quick to maintain first of all that the Supreme God is pre-existent to all of creation.¹ Thus far the Gnostics themselves would go. But that the Supreme God and the Demiurge were equal and the same, the Gnostics would not tolerate. Matter (for that is all the Gnostics held that the Demiurge had created) was viewed as evil. To make the Supreme God responsible for creation, in the Gnostics' mind, would be to contaminate Him with evil. Therefore, as Lampe rightly maintains, creation lies at the heart of Irenaeus' Trinitarianism.² Further,

important. Irenaeus saw Rome as the premier example, not the supreme ruler, of Christendom.

¹Gustaf Wingren, Man and the Incarnation A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), p. 5.

²G. W. H. Lampe, "Christian Theology in the Patristic

his understanding of creation is fundamental to his whole theology.

The Gnostics, in order to separate the Supreme God from the created order, postulated a series of intermediate beings, Aeons,¹ the last of which was responsible for the existence of matter. Irenaeus disagrees, "this is a peculiarity of the pre-eminence of God, not to stand in need of other instruments for the creation of those things which are summoned into existence. His own Word is both suitable and sufficient for the formation of all things."² In the Valentinian system, the Demiurge was the result of the last Aeon's (Sophia's) inordinate passion to know the unknowable Father. When she was 'cured', her passion was cast from her and it became the Demiurge. This Irenaeus can only regard with contempt.

Impious indeed, beyond all capacity, are these men, who assert that the Maker of heaven and earth, the only God Almighty, besides whom there is no God, was produced by means of a defect, which itself sprang from another defect, so that according to them, He was the product of the third defect.³

In view of this understanding of creation, Irenaeus also asserts the identity of the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament. There are at least three reasons why this is so. The first involves the relationship of sin and forgiveness.

He, the same against whom we had sinned in the beginning, grants forgiveness of sins, in the end. But if indeed we had disobeyed the command of any other, while

Period," in A History of Christian Doctrine, ed. Hubert-Cunliffe-Jones (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, LTD., 1978), p. 46.

¹Any where from 30 (Valentinus) to 365 (Basilides).

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, II. ii. 5 (p. 361).

³Ibid., I. xvi. 3 (p. 342).

it was a different being who said 'Thy sins are forgiven thee,' such a one is neither good, nor true, nor just.¹

The second, relates back to what was said earlier about the traditions handed down. The Apostles, prophets, and even Jesus Christ Himself, held no other than the Creator to be the Supreme God. It is incumbent upon us to do the same.² Finally, to separate the two endangers the saving work of Christ, to which the Old Testament and New Testament both testify.³

Monotheism provides a strong base for all of Irenaeus' thought and the major theme is the assertion that the Supreme God is the Creator. It cannot be emphasized enough that Irenaeus' entire understanding of Christology, Anthropology, and Soteriology rests on this principle.

Two points need to be mentioned concerning the relationship of the Son to the Father. As Morton Enslin states, Irenaeus represents a "crosssection of thought a little more than halfway - both chronologically and theologically speaking - along the road to Nicea."⁴ One looks in vain for the strong statements of the Divinity of Christ (i.e. homoousion) that are present in the Nicene Creed. Nonetheless, Christ's Divinity as well as His humanity solidly underlie Irenaeus' Christology.⁵

¹Ibid., V. xvii. 1 (p. 545).

²Ibid., III. ix. 1 (p. 422).

³Ibid., IV. ix. 1 (p. 472).

⁴See Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xvi. 3, 7 (pp. 441, 443), IV. xcii. 6 (p. 484), V. xvii. 3 (pp. 545, 546). In these and other places, we see the second and third century Christological and Trinitarian struggles in action. Here is Irenaeus himself attempting to probe the mystery of the Trinity, to arrive at what will ultimately be formulated at Nicea.

Note first of all that the Son is pre-existent with the Father.¹ Moreover, the Son and the Spirit are the 'hands' of God by which the world was made. But this is not to place a mediator between God and Creation, as the Gnostics did. Rather, "it is an unfolding of the implications of the phrase 'One Creator God.'"²

Coupled with this creative activity, the Son has a distinct revelatory role. On this point Irenaeus is most insistent. He begins by asserting the self-revealing nature of God - "For the Lord taught us that no man is capable of knowing God, unless he be taught of God; that is, that God cannot be known without God."³ Therefore,

In no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word of God, had become man. For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except His own proper Word. For what other person 'knew the mind of the Lord,' or who else 'has become his councillor?'" [Romans 11:34]⁴

This was the great mistake of the Jews (and also the Gnostics): they attempted to know God apart from His Word, Christ.⁵ Irenaeus sums it up best in a beautiful confession.

As regards His greatness, therefore, it is not possible to know God, for it is impossible that the Father can be measured; but as regards His Love (for this it is which leads us to God by His Word), when we obey Him, we do always learn that there is so great a God⁶

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xviii. 1 (p. 446).

²Lawson, p. 125

³Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. v. 4 (p. 468).

⁴Ibid., V. Preface (p. 526).

⁵Ibid., IV. vi. 4 (p. 470).

⁶Ibid., IV. xx. 1 (p. 487).

Christology: The Incarnation

Irenaeus' doctrine of God naturally leads into his Christology. Here too, his emphasis on the created order dominates. "It is his concern with the re-creation of mankind which provides the driving-force for his Christology. He is interested primarily in soteriology: in the restoration of God's original creation."¹ In fact, Nielsen goes so far as to say that "for Irenaeus, the whole history of mankind has one particular aim: the appearance of the God-man."² In this light, the Incarnation becomes very important for Irenaeus, but important only as the necessary preliminary to the atoning work.³ It is not an overstatement to say that in Irenaeus, Christology is subsumed in Soteriology.

Christ became man for one very important reason - so man might become divine. "Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."⁴ The soteriological telos of the incarnation is even more explicit in the following.

For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first incorrup-

¹Lampe, p. 46.

²Nielsen, p. 57.

³Gustaf Aulen, Christus Victor, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), p. 20.

⁴Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. Preface (p. 526)

tibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by the incorruptibility, and the mortal by the immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?¹

It is instructive to see Irenaeus' doctrine of the Incarnation in light of the heresies he was combating. The Gnostics, because they held that matter was evil, were forced into a Docetic or Ebionitic notion concerning Christ. In their peculiar fashion they separated Christ and Jesus, the latter being the body which the former, a special Aeon of the Pleroma, inhabited. Irenaeus condemns them all saying, "According to the opinion of no one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh. For if any one carefully examines the systems of them all, he will find that the Word of God is brought in by all of them all as not having become incarnate (sine carne) and impassable."² Moreover,

If he pretends that the Lord possessed another substance of flesh, the sayings respecting reconciliation will not agree with that man. For that thing is reconciled which had formerly been in enmity. Now, if the Lord had taken flesh from another substance, He would not, by so doing, have reconciled that one to God which had become inimical through transgression.³

The Incarnation is a startling contrast to Gnostic speculation.

The Word has saved that which really was [created, viz.,] humanity which had perished, But the thing which had perished possessed flesh and blood. For the Lord, taking dust from the earth, moulded man; and it was upon his behalf that all the dispensation of the Lord's advent took place. He had Himself, therefore, flesh and blood.⁴

¹Ibid., III. xix. 1 (pp. 448,449).

²Ibid., III. xi. 3 (p. 427).

³Ibid., V. xiii. 3 (p. 542).

⁴Ibid., V. xiv. 2 (p. 541).

This is nothing but a preview of the same truth that won the Christological battle two centuries later. It is Gregory of Nazianzus' bold axiom "That which He has not assumed He has not healed."¹ And just as those later controversies resulted in the formulation of the doctrine of the hypostatic union, so also, the Gnostics forced Irenaeus to conclude that Jesus Christ was one being, both God and Man.

It is plain that He was Himself the Word of God made the Son of man, receiving from the Father the power of remission of sins; since He was man, and since He was God, in order that since as man He suffered for us, so as God He might have compassion on us, and forgive us our debts, in which we were made debtors to God our Creator.²

It is difficult to look at the Incarnation and earthly life of Jesus apart from Irenaeus' concept of Recapitulation, for Jesus' life is the Recapitulation. However, before we examine that pivotal concept, a few preliminaries should be mentioned about the earthly life of our Lord.

Irenaeus, as all Church Fathers do, accepts the Virgin Birth as fact, foretold in the prophets, made a reality with Mary. However, as Wingren points out, the Virgin Birth is not used by Irenaeus as a sign of Christ's divinity, but of His humanity. If God had created an entirely new body out of the dust for Christ, then Christ would not have restored Adam and all mankind. If Christ had an earthly father, then His birth would have been unlike

¹Epistle 101, "To Cledonius Against Apollinaris."

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xvii. 3 (p. 545).

Adam's.¹ Thus the Virgin birth is not only a testimony of Christ's humanity, but very necessary to maintain Christ's solidarity with the human race.

In this light, Irenaeus also carefully maintains that Christ experienced all phases of human existence. "Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God."² Irenaeus carries this even to the point of asserting, quite dogmatically, that Christ lived to be almost fifty years old.³

It is important here to note, in spite of his eccentricities, the importance Irenaeus places on the life of Jesus. ". . . according to Irenaeus there is not a single part of humanity lacking in Him. If there were, it would mean that the sinless One had not wholly entered the sphere from which sin was to be expelled."⁴ To be sure, Irenaeus gives the death and resurrection of Christ their due emphasis. But he always keeps them in balance, and even in tension, with the Lord's earthly life.

Also of note are Irenaeus' thoughts on Christ's suffering. Against the Gnostics he firmly maintained that they were real. If Christ did not suffer, if he merely passed out of Jesus during the trial or if He only appeared to suffer, then all His teaching on

¹Wingren, pp. 96,97.

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xviii. 7 (p. 448).

³Ibid., II. xxii. 4-6 (pp. 391, 392). He does this on two grounds. First, he claims the Apostle John (and other of the Apostles) taught that Jesus lived until close to the age of 50. Second, on the basis of John 8: 56, 57, he contends that Jesus must have been older than 40 for the Jew's objection to have made sense.

⁴Wingren, p. 86.

patience and perseverance is mere hypocrisy. Irenaeus saw clearly that such a teaching, in that grim world of persecution and death, only makes a mockery of martyrdom.¹ Irenaeus draws an interesting comparison between Christ's passion and that of Sophia in the Gnostic system. The positive, redeeming, even creative effect of Christ's suffering contrasts sharply with the confusion and decay effected by Sophia.²

The reality of Christ's suffering in flesh and blood was very important for Irenaeus because of its redeeming value. Whether he regarded Christ's suffering as vicarious on behalf of men will be considered later. But here it is to be seen that His suffering in flesh and His shedding of blood indicate both His essential unity with mankind and also that man's flesh and blood could be saved. Both were crucial points of Christian theology denied by the Gnostics.

Now this [blood] could not be required unless it also had the capability of being saved; nor would the Lord have summed up these things in Himself, unless He had Himself been made flesh and blood after the way of the original formation [of man], saving in his [sic] own person at³ the end that which had in the beginning perished in Adam.

Christology: Recapitulation

We now turn to perhaps the most characteristic element of Irenaeus' theology - his doctrine of Recapitulation. This is the one concept that runs as a unifying thread throughout his Adversus

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xviii. 6 (p. 447).

²Ibid., II. xx. 3 (p. 388).

³Ibid., V. xiv. 1 (p. 541).

Haereses and makes his theology a system. Irenaeus himself provides us an apt introduction by summarizing all that has been said up to this point.

For the Creator of the world is truly the Word of God: and this is our Lord, who in the last times was made man, existing in this world, and who in an invisible manner contains all things created, and is inherent in the entire creation, since the Word of God governs and arranges all things; and therefore He came to His own in a visible¹ manner, and was made flesh, and hung upon a tree, that He might sum up all things in Himself.²

The exact nature of this recapitulation³, this summing up, Irenaeus never defines per se, but he comes close in the following:

. . . what is joined together could not otherwise be put asunder than by inversion of the process by which these bonds of union had arisen; so that the former ties be cancelled by the latter, that the latter may set the former again at liberty. And it has, in fact, happened that the first compact looses from the second tie, but that the second tie⁴ takes the position of the first which has been cancelled.

From this we can safely infer that the Recapitulation covers everything necessary for man to receive renewal of life and immortality.⁵ Wingren claims Recapitulation is ". . . an attempt by Irenaeus to embody the whole of the Biblical proclamation about the work of Christ in a single word."⁶

¹The text reads 'invisibiliter' which seems clearly an error. (ed.)

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xviii. 3 (p. 546, 547).

³Latin; recapitulatio; Greek:

⁴Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xxii. 4 (p. 455).

⁵Andrew J. Bandstra, "Paul and an Ancient Interpreter: A Comparison of the Teaching of Redemption in Paul and Irenaeus," Calvin Theological Journal 5 (April-November, 1970): 56.

⁶Wingren, p. 80.

Exactly where Irenaeus found the word is unknown. While Justin Martyr uses the word, Wingren claims it is unlikely that Irenaeus borrowed it from him.¹ Nilesen feels Irenaeus took a word used among the Gnostics and cleansed it of their interpretation.² Perhaps it is best to trace it back to its Pauline usage in Rom.13:9 and especially Eph. 1:10. Lawson states that the Greek word κεφαλαίου expresses the action by which anything comes to its κεφάλιον (the head or whole of a thing). ἀνα is then not to be taken in its proper sense of 'upwards' but in the sense of the Latin 're'.³ Therefore ἀνακεφαλαίου in its basic sense means 'to collect together again to the head.'⁴

Many commentaries on Irenaeus have attempted to distill the essence of Recapitulation in a few words. Lawson catalogues several of these. For Harnach Recapitulation was the reunion of things separated. Wendt saw it as a restoration to the original as well as a collection of the separated. Sieberg disagrees with the restoration and limits Recapitulation to only a collection. Vernet on the other hand emphasizes it as a work of reconstruction.⁵ Lawson himself claims the fundamental idea is "going over again rather than comprehensive unity."⁶ Bromiley contends that it is

¹Ibid.

²Nielsen, footnote 2, p. 58.

³Lawson, p. 140.

⁴Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich define ἀνακεφαλαίου "to sum up".

⁵Lawson, p. 142.

⁶Ibid., p. 143.

a reversal as well as a restoration.¹ Kelly emphasizes that it is a gathering together, that Christ " . . . comprises the whole of reality in Himself" ² However, an attentive reading of Irenaeus reveals that not one of these is wrong. Recapitulation includes all the above ideas for it includes everything Christ accomplished in human history. "To put it in its simplest form, recapitulatio or ἀνακεφαλαιώσις covers the whole period from the birth of Jesus to the eschatological perfection."³

What is fundamental, then, to the Irenaeian concept of Recapitulation is that Christ is the center of human history. Human history revolves around the work of Christ. Humanity itself revolves around the person of Christ. "Christ, then is at the beginning (as the Word, cf. John 1:1), in the middle, and at the end of human history. He 'recapitulates' everything in himself."⁴

There is a tendency among some scholars to separate the Incarnation and Recapitulation in Irenaeus; to consider each without due reference to the other, giving each isolated characteristics and results. However, this is unnecessary and does violence to the thought of Irenaeus. Recapitulation is the over-arching concept of which the Incarnation is but a part. The Incarnation is one of the most important parts of Recapitulation, and if it receives more attention than do other parts, it is due to the Gnostic denial

¹Geoffrey Bromiley, Historical Theology An Introduction (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company:1978), p. 23.

²J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, revised ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978), p. 172.

³Wingren, p. 192.

⁴Nielsen, p. 59.

Irenaeus was combatting. The relationship of the Incarnation to Recapitulation is that of Investiture to Office. The Incarnation is part of Christ's Recapitulation; yet it is more. It is that which qualifies Him to be the Recapitulator.¹

For it behooved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; . . . But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.²

It is on this basis that Irenaeus compares the life of Christ with Adam's. He ". . . exploits to the full the parallelism between Adam and Christ which was so dear to St. Paul. Christ is indeed, in his eyes, 'the second Adam' (ὁ δεύτερος Ἀδὰμ), . . ."³ In praise of this Lawson contrasts Irenaeus with Athanasius. He finds the latter guilty of overemphasis on the Incarnation.

One of the most valuable and pleasing things about S. Irenaeus is the circumstance that the Recapitulation provides a doctrinal system in which an adequate place is found for the whole human career and the human character of our Lord. . . . The plan of salvation is to be seen working itself out not only in one or two great events like the Incarnation and the Cross, but also in the events of Christ's life in general.⁴

The Virgin Birth plays a very important role in Christ's Recapitulation. As was previously stated it was appropriate for Christ to be born of a virgin.

¹Wingren, p. 82.

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xviii. 7 (p. 448).

³Kelly, p. 172.

⁴Lawson, p. 153.

And as the protoplast himself, Adam, has his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil . . . so did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam [into Himself], from Mary, who was as yet a virgin. If, then, the first Adam had a man for his father, and was born of human seed, it were reasonable to say that the second Adam was begotten of Joseph.¹

In fact such a birth was necessary.

Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.²

For Christ to effect the recapitulation of His creation He had to follow exactly the path trod by Adam, even in birth itself.

Eve provides the pattern for Mary. Both were virgins, yet both had husbands.³ Likewise their actions follow the script of Recapitulation. "For just as the former was led astray by the word of an angel, so that she fled from God when she had transgressed His Word; so did the latter, by an angelic communication, receive the glad tidings that she should sustain (portaret) God, being obedient to His Word."⁴ "And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith."⁵

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xxi. 10 (p. 454).

²Ibid.

³Irenaeus believed that in Paradise Adam and Eve were not yet fully mature and therefore had no understanding of procreation.

⁴Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xix. 1 (p. 547).

⁵Ibid. III. xxii. 4 (p. 455).

Christ's temptation in the wilderness, especially that concerning food, reflects Adam's temptation. Adam, experiencing no hunger, fell; Christ, though sorely in need of food, obeyed.¹ The Cross itself is significant, for ". . . as by means of a tree we were made debtors to God, [so also] by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our debt."² Even the day on which Christ was crucified corresponds to the same day on which, according to Irenaeus, Adam fell.³

Finally, the call that God extends to all men on account of Christ's redemptive work corresponds to a prototype in the Garden. "For just as at that time God spake to Adam at eventide, searching him out; so in the last times, by means of the same voice, searching out his posterity, He has visited them."⁴ Thus, Wingren aptly concludes, "The exact correspondence between the defeat of Adam and the victory of Christ points to an inner connection, and agreements in detail between the two prove that recapitulatio is here involved."⁵

The effect of this work of Recapitulation is, for Irenaeus, twofold. First of all, it directed God's wrath away from us.

He turned the enmity by which [the devil] had designed to make [man] the enemy of God, against the author of it, by removing His own anger from man, turning it in another direction, and sending it instead upon the serpent.⁶

¹Ibid., V. xxi. 2 (pp. 549, 550).

²Ibid., V. xvii. 3 (p. 545).

³Ibid., V. xxiii. 2 (p. 551).

⁴Ibid., V. xv. 4 (p. 544).

⁵Wingren, P. 124.

⁶Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. xl. 3(p. 524).

This is simply another way of saying that in Christ, we were once again made obedient to God. "In the second Adam, however, we are reconciled, being made obedient even unto death. For we were debtors to none other but to Him whose commandment we had transgressed at the beginning."¹

However, there is also a recreative aspect to the Recapitulation — the restoring of men to Life. "Now Adam had been conquered, all life having been taken away from him: wherefore, when the foe was conquered in his turn, Adam received new life; and the last enemy, death, is destroyed, which at the first had taken possession of man."² Man is once again liberated to be man, to grow and become that which God had originally intended. Man can return to, indeed is recreated in, the imago et similitudo Dei.

Doctrine of Man

Because of his heavy emphasis on the Incarnation and Christ's solidarity with mankind, Irenaeus' anthropology is intimately tied up with his understanding of the Recapitulation. First of all, we must note that Man is not the imago and similitudo of God.

The affinity between the Son and man and the distinction between them are part of the same reality, and both the distance between them and the bond which unites them are expressed by saying that man is created in the imago and similitudo of the Son; but it is a better definition to say that the Son is the imago and similitudo of God, and that man is created in God's imago and similitudo.³

Even more peculiar, Irenaeus did not conceive of man, as

¹Ibid., V. xvi. 3 (p. 544).

²Ibid., III. xxiii. 7 (p. 457).

³Wingren, p. 21.

God created him, as fully mature. Had God created man 'perfect', the being He would have created would not have been man. An angel or robot perhaps, but not a man. ". . . God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it could he have retained it."¹ "God could have made Adam perfect by nature from the outset, but to do this would have short-circuited his becoming perfect (by the exercise of freedom, the imago dei)."² Adam was a being who was destined to grow.³ As Lawson indicates this does not mean Adam was in any sense imperfect, only that man was capable, in some sense, of "spiritual advance through man's own action."⁴

Some scholars see this idea as Irenaeus' attempt to explain why man, created with perfect freedom and no innate tendency towards rebellion against God, could have fallen. If Adam did not fully know, it could be maintained that he ". . . sinned largely through moral inexperience."⁵

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. xxxviii. 2 (p. 521).

²Robert F. Brown, "On the Necessary Imperfection of Creation: Irenaeus' Adversus Haereses iv, 38," Scottish Journal of Theology 28 (February, 1975): 24.

³Seeberg claims this notion reflects the Greek side of Irenaeus, yet he concedes it does have some resemblance to John. Reinhold Seeberg, Text-Book of the History of Doctrines. vol. 1; History of Doctrines in the Ancient Church, trans. Charles Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), p. 122.

⁴Lawson, p. 203.

⁵Ibid., p. 218. C. S. Lewis in the second book of his space trilogy, Perelandra, strikingly parallels the Irenaean concept of the original state of Adam and Eve.

The original nature of man is tripartite according to Irenaeus, based on I Thess. 5:23.¹

Now the soul and the spirit are certainly a part of the man, but certainly not the man; for the perfect man consists in the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded after the image of God.²

However, it seems that Irenaeus regarded fallen man as lacking the Spirit, for he writes ". . . our substance, that is, the union of flesh and spirit, receiving the Spirit of God, makes up the spiritual man."³

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for Irenaeus, Adam is not just the first individual of our race (although he would not deny that fact), he is our race itself. In Irenaeus, Adam stands for all men, for himself, for those to whom he was writing - for those who had died as well as those unborn. To use Wilhelm Hunger's metaphor, in Adam man is as a river seen in one glance from its mouth to its source.⁴ The significance of this is tremendous when considered in the context of Recapitulation. It is not enough for Irenaeus to say that as Adam's fall affected all men, so also Christ's obedience affects all men. Rather, as in Adam's disobedience every man was disobedient, so also in Christ's obedience every man (i.e. every believer) is obedient. Adam and Christ do not merely stand as representatives of mankind, but in them mankind participates

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. vi. 1 (p. 532).

²Ibid., (p. 531).

³Ibid., V. vii. 2 (p. 534).

⁴Wingren, p. 25.

in their respective works. Therefore, everything we now say about the fall of Adam, in a very real sense, is to be said about each and every individual.

Irenaeus held an interesting notion about the Devil's fall. It was not so much envy of God, but of man, that caused his fall. ". . . the devil, being one among those angels who are placed over the spirit of the air, as the Apostle Paul has declared in his Epistle to the Ephesians [2:2], becoming envious of man, was rendered an apostate from the divine law . . ." ¹ Wingren connects this envy with the fact that man, though created a mere 'child', was greater than the angels who were created perfectly mature. ²

In any event, Adam was enticed to disobey by the devil. Nielsen maintains that "the fall is described by Irenaeus as an infirmity which God let man experience that he might not become proud." ³ However, this is not to be understood that God in any sense wanted man to fall, or that the fall was necessary for man's growth and maturity. God, by His infinite power and wisdom was able to turn even the fall of man to good, so that by this experience man receives ". . . the true knowledge as to God and man, and increased his love towards God. Now, where there exists an increase of love, there a greater glory is wrought out by the power

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xxiv. 4 (p. 553).

²Wingren, p. 43; See also Irenaeus, bp. of Lugdunum, Proof of the Apostolic Preaching, trans. Joseph P. Smith, in Ancient Christian Writers, no. 16, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1952), 16 (p. 57).

³Nielsen, p. 76. See Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. iii. 1 (p. 529).

of God for those who love Him."¹

Because created man was by nature free, Irenaeus regarded sin as the ". . . wrong moral choice by a responsible free agent", not an inborn defect of nature.² Sin is organic, not confined to discrete actions. It is also wholistic.³ The latter is especially significant, for the Gnostics regarded matter as evil, and thus relegated sin to the body only.⁴ Sin, Irenaeus counters, has invaded man's whole being; his body is neither the cause, nor the seat. Likewise, then, original sin is not a natural condition of concupiscence of the body, but an ". . . inherited defect of the human race . . ."⁵

The effect of the fall was to place man in bondage and make him liable to death. Man is in bondage to the law and to Satan. He has become a "robber's possession"⁶; and has lost his freedom to grow, to accomplish God's will, to be man. Death is the natural consequence of sin, for the latter separates men from the Giver and Sustainer of life. However, death does not seem to be as much a punishment for Irenaeus as an inevitable result of sin, and physical death is even an assuasive to sin. It is part of God's

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. iii. 1 (p. 529).

²Lawson, p. 222.

³Aulen, p. 23.

⁴The result was therefore extreme asceticism (to remove one's essential self, the soul, from evil) or extreme licentiousness (for evil could not contaminate the soul which was immaterial).

⁵Lawson, p. 216.

⁶Wingren, p. 115.

grace and mercy. "But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease."¹ For this reason God also drove Adam and Eve from the Garden that they might not partake of the Tree of Life and continue in sin forever. But death was not God's solution to man's sin, only, if you will, a temporary measure. Christ's work reverses sin, and thus destroys death.

Theory of Atonement

The Atonement in Irenaeus has received much attention from scholars. Gustav Aulen used Irenaeus in his very fine study, Christus Victor, to introduce what he termed the classical (and Biblical) concept of the atonement. Others regard Irenaeus as the beginning of the decline in theology to the "Devil Ransom" theories of the Later Fathers and Medieval Theologians.

In view of this we must start our discussion of his soteriology from the perspective of Christ's person. Aulen's statement, "He does not think of the Atonement as an offering made to God by Christ from man's side, or as it were from below; for God remains throughout the effective agent in the work of redemption,"² represents only half the truth. This must be combined with Lawson's perspective that for Irenaeus, as for Paul and the author of the Hebrews, it is definitely God, but God as man, that effects the redemption.³ To de-emphasize either is to understand only superficially what Irenaeus says about the Incarnation, and to miss his concept of Recapitulation altogether.

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xxiii. 6 (p. 457).

²Aulen, p. 33.

³Lawson, p. 176.

Specifically concerning the atonement, both Seeberg and Bandstra see at least three different motifs that Irenaeus uses to express his thoughts. They are (1) Christus victor, (2) Renewal, and (3) Vicarious sacrifice.¹ It is disputed which is more basic to Irenaeus' thought, though certainly the last motif is less pronounced than the other two.²

Christus victor really describes Christ's work as the Recapitulator, ". . . God himself Incarnate, at work in the world."³ According to Wingren, in Irenaeus' view, "the crucifixion was not principally a sacrifice offered to God, but is Jesus's [sic] entering into the darkness where man is held prisoner. As Jesus was tempted in order to destroy sin, so He was put to death in order to destroy death."⁴

However the effect of the Recapitulation was definitely, for Irenaeus, the renewal of mankind. In this respect, Pittinger labels Irenaeus' doctrine of the atonement as "rather biological" only in the same sense that Original Sin is "biological". "Christ saves men by injecting into humanity a new power of victorious divine life which drives out evil."⁵ Irenaeus emphasizes the renewing activity of Christ to such an extent that he almost loses sight of Christ

¹Seeberg, p. 128; Bandstra, p. 47.

²Bandstra, p. 48.

³Lawson, p. 147.

⁴Wingren, p. 120.

⁵W. Norman Pittinger, "St. Irenaeus, "Anglican Theological Review 34 (January, 1952): 33.

effecting forgiveness of sins. This again is probably due to his Greek background.

However Irenaeus can, and does speak of Christ suffering vicariously on behalf of mankind. Christ ". . . did also suffer for us, and rose again on our behalf" ¹ Again, ". . . the Lord has restored us unto friendship through His incarnation, having become the Mediator between God and Men; propitiating indeed for us the Father against whom we had sinned, and cancelling (consolatus) our disobedience by his obedience; conferring upon us the gift of communion with, and subjection to, our Maker." ² Finally Irenaeus applies Isaiah 53 to Christ, emphasizing his suffering, by the will of the Father ". . . for the sake of our salvation." ³

Thus while the vicarious atonement is not emphasized, Irenaeus does insist that Christ redeemed us through his blood and that Christ's obedience was necessary. ⁴ He therefore cannot be charged with a naturalistic or physical view of the atonement. ⁵

One final point should be considered before we look at how Irenaeus understood salvation to be appropriated by the individual: Did Irenaeus hold to a 'Devil Ransom' view? The key and very much disputed passage is the following:

¹ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xxiii. 6 (p. 457).

² Ibid., V. xxvii. 1 (p. 544).

³ Irenaeus, Proof, 69 (p. 92).

⁴ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. viii. 2 (p. 471), V. ii. 3 (p. 528), V. xiv. 4 (p. 542), V. xvi. 3 (p. 544).

⁵ Bandstra, p. 56.

And since the apostasy tyrannized over us unjustly, and, though we were by nature the property of the omnipotent God, alienated us contrary to nature, rendering us its own disciples, the Word of God, powerful in all things, and not defective with regard to His own justice, did righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means, as the [apostasy] had obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own, but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction. Since the Lord thus has redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh, and has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation, and bestowing upon us at His coming immortality durably and truly, by means of communion with God - all the doctrines of the heretics fall to ruin.¹

The phrase "giving His soul for our souls and His flesh for our flesh" Lampe and Kelly take as ransom paid to the devil.² Wingren and Lawson disagree.³ Man was not the devil's by right, but had been unjustly snatched through deceit.

Man must be torn from the Devil's grasp in conflict. Christ gives His life as a ransom for man, not as a payment which is received by God's enemy. The metaphors of conflict are here substituted for judicial ones. A man who joins battle in order to deliver his friend does not give his life as a payment to the enemy, though he does give it as a 'ransom' for the other⁴

It is hardly possible here to investigate fully this matter and, as Bandstra says, any idea of a ransom paid to the devil is not really

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. i. 1 (p. 527).

²Lampe, p. 49; Kelly, p. 173.

³Wingren, p. 129; Lawson, p. 198.

⁴Wingren, p. 129.

integrated into Irenaeus' system.¹ Bromiley perhaps provides the best solution.

In accordance with his 'logical' nature the Word (or Logos) shed his blood to ransom us from captivity. The 'apostasy' held us unjustly, having unnaturally alienated us from God when we belonged by nature to him. The Word, however, did not violently redeem us but dealt justly with the tyrant. He thus carried through his purpose but in so doing did not incur a charge of injustice.²

Sola Gratia

In spite of his inexactness about the nature of the atonement³, Irenaeus is a champion of sola gratia.

For as it was not possible that the man who had once for all been conquered, and who had been destroyed through disobedience, could reform himself, and obtain the prize of victory; and as it was also impossible that he could attain to salvation who had fallen under the power of sin, - the Son effected both these things, being the Word of God, descending from the Father, becoming incarnate, stooping low, even to death, and consummating the arranged plan of our salvation⁴

Our salvation was "according to the tender mercy of God the Father, who had compassion on His own handiwork, and gave to it salvation, restoring it by means of the Word - that is, by Christ - in order that men might learn by actual proof that he receives incorruptibility not of himself, but by the free gift of God."⁵ In fact, to regard salvation as something we do for God is to rob God of His

¹Bandstra, p. 50.

²Bromiley, p. 22.

³The Church as a whole has never delineated the nature of the Atonement with the exactness She has treated other doctrines, for example the Person of Christ.

⁴Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xviii. 2 (p. 446).

⁵Ibid., V. xviii. 2 (p. 446).

majesty and glory.

. . . but as regards us who have been redeemed, [He does this] graciously. For we have given nothing to Him previously, nor does He desire anything from us, as if He stood in need of it; but we do stand in need of fellowship with Him. And for this reason it was that He graciously poured Himself out that He might gather us into the bosom of the Father.¹

Because Irenaeus regards faith as a thing commanded² and equivalent to obedience ("to believe in Him is to do His will"³), Seeberg maintains that Irenaeus failed to understand the Pauline concept.⁴ Lawson disagrees. "He does follow [Paul] in the essence of the doctrine, in that he most adequately emphasizes that for salvation man is to trust not in himself, but in a great objective Divine redeeming work."⁵ Perhaps the difficulty can be solved when one remembers that Irenaeus has closer ties with the Apostle John than with the Apostle Paul. When he discusses faith, he does so in the Johannine categories of confession and obedience. Irenaeus is not fighting the Judaistic legalism as was Paul. He is fighting Gnostics who agreed that salvation came from outside of man through revelation, and thus concentrates his attention in that direction.

However, one area where Irenaeus and Paul do seem to disagree is over the nature of man's will. Irenaeus is definitely a champion of the freedom of man's will. The following passage is

¹Ibid., V. ii. 1 (p. 528).

²Ibid., IV. xiii. 1 (p. 477).

³Ibid., IV. vi. 5 (p. 468).

⁴Seeberg, p. 132.

⁵Lawson, p. 189.

of note.

. . . God made man a free [agent] from the beginning possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests (ad intendum sententia) of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a goodwill [towards us] is present with Him continually. . . . so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves. On the other hand, they who have not obeyed shall, with justice, be not found in possession of the good, and shall receive condign punishment.¹

Lawson claims that in Irenaeus, this is merely the 'common sense' attitude he took in order to maintain the goodness of God, the moral responsibility of man, and salvation sola gratia.²

Irenaeus feels the nature of faith itself demands that man's will be free.

And not merely in works, but also in faith, has God preserved the will of man free and under his own control, saying, 'According to thy faith be it unto thee,' [Matthew 9:29], thus showing that there is a faith specially belonging to man, since he has an opinion specially his own. And again, 'All things are possible to him that believeth;' [Mark 9:23] and, 'Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.' [Matthew 8:13] Now all such expressions demonstrate that man is in his own power with respect to faith.³

Therefore man is himself responsible whether he becomes wheat or chaff.⁴ And God will deal justly with all men at the final judgment because all men have previously made their choice freely.⁵

The freedom of man's will is also evidenced by the fact that God

¹Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. xxxvii. 1 (p. 518).

²Lawson, p. 224.

³Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV. xxvii. 59p. 519, 520).

⁴Ibid., IV. iv. 3 (p. 466).

⁵Ibid., V. xxvii. 1 (p. 556).

has commanded him to keep certain precepts. If it were not within our power to do these things, Irenaeus says, God would hardly be just in commanding us to do them.¹

One must not, however, be quick to judge Irenaeus' concept from a post-reformation perspective (e.g. the Luther - Erasmus conflict). Rather one must keep in mind the tremendous significance Christ's recapitulation of man had for Irenaeus. In a very real sense, Christ (as also Adam) is a collective figure. In Christ, all men obeyed. Therefore, in Christ, it would seem that all men have a 'second' chance. As Adam's choice was free, so also theirs is now free.²

Even more important for understanding Irenaeus' concept of free will is seeing it in the light of the Gnostic soteriology. For them, man had no choice as to his eternal destiny. The lowest order of men, 'hylics', were to be destroyed; the highest, 'pneumatics', all were saved. God, in their system, was ". . . powerless before this predestination from below . . ." ³ Therefore, Irenaeus' doctrine of man's free will is actually an expression of God's omnipotence! It means that God can save all men, no matter their

¹Ibid., IV. xxxvii. 4 (p. 519).

²Wingren comments, "Man who falls and is delivered has been created by God. He is a free man. He was not forced, mechanically, into sin, but rather allowed himself to be dragged into sin; nor is he forced, mechanically, out of his imprisonment by the victory of Christ, but rather is freed from his bonds and can now go anywhere he wants - out into freedom in Christ, or back into bondage to the Devil. But since through all that happens to him, from Creation to the Last Judgment, he remains man, he has the responsibility for everything that he does from first to last. p. 38.

³Ibid., p. 140.

station in life and no matter their intellectual abilities.¹ In Irenaeus' day, to deny man's free will was to come perilously close to denying that God could save whomever he wished.

The effects of man's salvation we have touched on before when we considered the result of Christ's recapitulation. First of all, man is restored to life. "As, then, he who was made a living soul forfeited life when he turned aside to what was evil, so, on the other hand, the same individual, when he reverts to what is good, and receives the quickening spirit, shall find life."² Brown maintains that man is not only restored to the status he held before the fall, but he is elevated or perfected to a higher form of being. He notes that many commentators stress one or the other, but both ideas are prominent.³ It also must be mentioned that in salvation, fellowship with God is restored. Again, for Irenaeus, this is a direct result of the Incarnation - Christ in His very nature becomes the Mediator between God and man.⁴

One point on which Irenaeus absolutely insists is that the flesh of man is included in salvation, that the flesh will participate in the resurrection. Of course this is directly opposed to the Gnostic equation of matter and evil.⁵ Against such notions Irenaeus leveled a number of attacks. First of all, the Incarnation

¹Ibid., p. 140.

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xii. 2 (p. 538).

³Brown, p. 17.

⁴Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xvii. 1 (p. 544)

⁵Against the Gnostic's literalistic interpretation of I Cor. 15:50, Irenaeus rightly shows that here the Apostle Paul is referring to those who have not received the Spirit of God through Jesus Christ. See Ibid., V. ix. 1 (pp. 534, 535).

itself does not make sense apart from the resurrection of the flesh.

For if the flesh were not in a position to be saved, the Word of God would in no wise have become flesh. And if the blood of the righteous were not to be inquired after, the Lord would certainly not have had blood [in His composition].¹

Also, the restorations and other miracles of healing performed by Christ make no sense, unless the flesh is included in salvation.²

"For if it was [merely] a temporary benefit which He conferred, He granted nothing of importance to those who were the subjects of His healing."³ Christ's sufferings in the flesh and the pouring out of his blood are also called in as witnesses on this point.⁴ And finally, Irenaeus argues that as Christ rose from the dead in the flesh, we also can look forward to the same.⁵ Nielsen is right in pointing out that here Irenaeus is guilty of overstatement, for he makes no distinction between Christ's human body before His death, and His resurrected body.⁶ We can be confident it is the same Jesus Christ ". . . who shall also come in the same flesh in which He suffered, revealing the glory of the Father."⁷

Irenaeus only briefly and in passing discusses Sanctification. However he does maintain two strains of thought in this area also.

¹Ibid., V. xiv. 1 (p. 541)

²Ibid., V. xiii. 1 (p. 539).

³Ibid., V. xii. 6 (p. 539).

⁴Ibid., V. xiv. 4 (p. 542).

⁵Ibid., V. vii. 1 (p. 532), V. xxxi. 2 (p. 560).

⁶Nielsen, p. 82.

⁷Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xvi. 8 (p. 443).

First, in keeping with our salvation sola gratia Dei, man should always live in a state of gratitude to God.¹

For He did not set us free for this purpose, that we should depart from Him (no one, indeed, while placed out of reach of the Lord's benefits, has power to procure for himself the means of salvation), but that the more we receive His grace, the more we should love Him.²

But our salvation should also result in greater obedience. Greater revelation and greater grace always requires greater responsibility.

For as, in the New Testament, that faith of men [to be placed] in God has been increased, receiving in addition [to what was already revealed] the Son of God, that man too might be a partaker of God; so is also our walk in life required to be more circumspect, when we are directed not merely to abstain from evil actions, but even from evil thoughts, and from idle words, and empty talk, and scurrilous language³

It is in this light that Irenaeus understands the work of the Holy Spirit.

But we do now receive a certain portion of His Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God; which also the apostle terms 'an earnest' [Eph. 1:13], . . . This earnest, therefore, thus dwelling in us, renders us spiritual even now, and the mortal is swallowed up by immortality.⁴

¹Ibid., III. xx. 2 (p. 450).

²Ibid., IV. xiii. 3 (p. 478).

³Ibid., IV. xxviii. 2 (p. 501).

⁴Ibid., V. viii. 1 (p. 533).

Ecclesiology

Irenaeus does not discuss the doctrine of the Church in great depth and only a few points need be mentioned here. Since, as Wingren points out, "The Church is the actual meeting place in the present time of man and the Incarnation,"¹ and "a manifestation of Christ's progressive dominion"² over the world, Aulen is correct when he says "the Recapitulation does not end with the triumph of Christ over the enemies which had held men in bondage; it continues in the work of the Spirit in the Church."³ Recapitulation is everything Christ does among men to restore them to God's original intention. Because the Gnostic teachers were threatening the proclamation of Christ's saving work, Irenaeus sees the Church first of all (and almost exclusively) in terms of preserving and proclaiming the kerygma. Obviously this ties directly to his view of the preservation of tradition through the succession of Bishops and presbyters. The Church was ". . . a circle of disciples gathered around their faithful teacher, the Bishop."⁴ As Lawson claims, there is very little in Irenaeus about the Church as a fellowship of all believers in Christ.⁵

Irenaeus' understanding of Christ's work also shapes his view of the Sacraments.

¹Wingren, p. 147.

²Ibid., p. 141.

³Aulen, p. 22.

⁴Lawson, p. 263.

⁵Lawson, p. 263.

The recapitulation takes place in the Church, in the living body of Christ. It takes place in the worship of the church, more particularly in the sacrament It [the sacrament] is¹ an actual re-experience of the original act of salvation.

He does not dwell at all on this subject and in fact Wingren maintains that sacramentum is never used by him to denote Baptism or the Eucharist but always "a secret."² He seems to regard Baptism as efficacious only for men's physical bodies.

For our bodies have received unity among themselves by means of that laver which leads to incorruption; but our souls, by means of the Spirit. Wherefore both are necessary, since both contribute towards the life of God³

The Bread and Wine receive slightly more treatment from Irenaeus if only because in them he sees tangible proof of the essential goodness of matter and that our bodies can be saved.

When, therefore, the mingled cup and the manufactured bread receive the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the blood and body of Christ is made, from which things the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they affirm that the flesh is incapable of receiving the gift of God, which is life eternal, which flesh is nourished⁴ from the body and blood of the Lord, and is a member of him?

And he also seems to hold a view very close the the 'Real Presence.'

For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of resurrection to eternity.⁵

¹Knudsen, p. 130.

²Wingren, p. 164.

³Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III. xvii. 2 (p. 445).

⁴Ibid., V. ii. 3 (p. 528); see also III. xi. 5 (p. 427).

⁵Ibid., IV. xviii. 5 (p. 486).

Eschatology

If the Recapitulation is continued in the Church, then it is culminated at the final consummation of all things. "In actual fact the whole of Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation in all its phases is oriented towards the Parousia."¹ Irenaeus looks forward with great anticipation to the Final Day. ". . . what shall it be when, on rising again, we behold Him face to face; It will render us like unto Him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God."²

A significant insight is gained into Irenaeus' concept of the Recapitulation when he pictures the Devil involved in a similar recapitulation. The Devil is a kind of 'anti-recapitulator.'

There is therefore in this beast [of Revelation] when he comes, a recapitulation made of all sorts of iniquity and of every deceit, in order that all apostate power, flowing into, and being shut up in him, may be sent into the furnace of fire.³

The Devil, the champion of evil, will then be finally and forever defeated and the power of evil will be at an end.⁴

Because Christ's work is the reinstating and recreating of that which was lost, the final judgment will not be the destruction of the created universe, but only of everything that is not in Christ.⁵ "Those who are condemned in the Judgment are those

¹Wingren, p. 193.

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. viii. 1 (p. 533).

³Ibid., V. xxix. 2 (p. 558).

⁴Lawson, p. 280.

⁵Sterling Rayburn, "Cosmic Transfiguration," The Church Quarterly Review 168 (April-June, 1967): 164; Wingren p. 85.

who are separated from God, and their condemnation is identical with their separation from God which they have freely chosen."¹

Like many early Christian fathers, Irenaeus is a millennialist. His use of the Old Testament is almost allegorical when he says "For in as many days as this world was made, in so many shall it be concluded."² But his millennialism is motivated by a concern very central to his whole theology. God's original intention for man cannot and must not be forever subverted. "And it is right that when the creation is restored, all the animals should obey and be in subjection to man, and revert to the food originally given by God (for they had been originally subjected in obedience to Adam)."³ The Millennium is a return to Eden, the working out of the divine plan in the world created and recreated by God. His eschatology is an 'emotional tension' running the breadth of Irenaeus' theology. Lawson very effectively sums it this way.

S. Irenaeus views the history of the world as a development from present imperfection to ultimate perfection. In his eschatological expectation is the token that he is not content to view this evolution dispassionately, as an historian. He is passionate as a prophet who hungers and thirsts to see that evolution speedily consummated in a heaven and earth utterly transformed, with God's sheer majesty gloriously displayed to every creature. Apocalyptic religion is the faith of the man who burns against the sin of the world, and who knows that the sinful world may quite burn against him.⁴

¹Wingren, p. 57, 58.

²Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V. xxviii. 3 (p. 557).

³Ibid., V. xxxiii. 4 (p. 563).

⁴Lawson, p. 289.

Evaluation

We have now briefly reviewed the Christian faith as understood by St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lugdunum. Any assessment we make of his theology will of course necessarily be determined by our own understanding of Christianity. By Protestants, Irenaeus is often caricatured as being the first statement of Roman Catholic departure from primitive Christianity. Roman Catholics contrariwise regard him as a clear supporter of Papal authority. Neither is accurate.

In this paper we have attempted to understand Irenaeus within the second century context to which he was writing. Irenaeus had one goal - to defend his faith against the sly onslaughts of the Gnostics. Because Gnosticism challenged central, not peripheral issues, Irenaeus plunges into the heart of Christian theology.¹ He is not interested in a refined theological system, but in the preservation of the truth. Bromiley accurately indicates that Irenaeus did not fall prey to the temptation to accommodate divine revelation to human (Gnostic) thought, but brought human thought into captivity to the faith he cherished so dearly.² Since twentieth century intellectualism and scientificism are the 'Gnosticism' of our day, this is perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from this ancient Father.

He [Irenaeus] also impresses upon us that unless our theology is to be just anything we decide it should be, his perceptions, rethought and restated though they may have to be, will have to have a place in any authentic expression of the Christian message.³

¹Bromiley, p. 26.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

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