

PARALLEL GUIDE 4

The Apologists: Justin and Irenaeus

Summary

Irenaeus is the first Christian theologian from whom substantial material still exists. He sought to respond to groups he thought of as mistaken or heretical so we also learn much about early Christian heresies from his writings. This chapter is a short survey of some of Irenaeus' major contributions to theological studies.

Learning Objectives

- Identify the role of the Apologists
- Become familiar with the person and work of Irenaeus of Lyons
- Learn the meaning of the following terms:
 - Heresy
 - Docetism
 - Ebionism
 - Gnosticism
 - Marcion

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. You have been engaged in theological reflection for two years. Two of the key concepts used in theological reflection are the Doctrine of Creation and the Doctrine of Salvation (humanity) that includes sin, Judgment, repentance, and redemption. In what way does Irenaeus inform our Christian conceptions of Creation and Salvation? How does this impact your thinking about the nature of the universe and the meaning of salvation in your life?
2. The difference between “apology” and “apologetics” (a theological term) is significant. How would you explain this to someone who has confused the meaning of these terms?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Come with the meaning of Docetism, Ebionism, and Gnosticism on your mind. When the seminar engages in discussion, see if you can find hints of these concepts in the statements that are made. Docetism and Ebionism are heresies only if we cleave to them alone; therefore, you are not looking for heresies, but rather the tendency that we all possess to lean too far one way or another, at least for a time.

THE APOLOGISTS: JUSTIN AND IRENAEUS

When we move from the Evangelists or Pauline theology into the period of the Apostolic Fathers—the second and third Christian generations—it seems as though we are moving into an arid valley. These writings are much less complex. They offer simplistic moral instruction, and they deal with day-to-day problems. Paul’s teachings about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or about justification by faith through grace have no counterpart in these writings. The situation changes, however, when we come to the middle and end of the second century and to the writings of Justin and Irenaeus (eye-ren-EE-s). Once more we come to a very high level of theological reflection where the doctrines of creation, sin, Judgment, repentance, and redemption are central. By the time of Justin and Irenaeus a canon of Christian teaching—the “Christian Testament”—was available to inform and enrich the Christian faith and defend it against its critics.

The second century is the time when the church first struggled to define its faith. What was the church to believe about God as Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit? What was the authority for belief? From what sources was that belief derived, and in what forms was it to be expressed? How did the church’s worship, preaching, prayer, ministry, and liturgical acts contribute to the church’s rule of truth? Even minor writings like those of Barnabas or Hermas are a significant part in the struggle, if only on the grounds that even failure in the quest for truth has its own value.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Docetism is a word that comes from Greek and means “to seem” or “to appear.” It refers to a belief that Jesus was divine and, therefore, only appeared human. This is contradicted in the New Testament which consistently portrays Jesus as fully human. Even the Johannine writings and the epistle to the Hebrews, although both speak of his preexistence in a very close relationship with the Father, make it clear that his life in this world was completely human. At the same time, the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline literature insist that Jesus stood in a unique relationship with God. Although no New Testament authors see him as only a man with no unique relation to God, they all see him as human. Against any form of Docetism, the New Testament stands firmly for the true humanity of Jesus. Docetism, with its total denial of the goodness of creation, was relatively easy to detect as anti-Christian. Some other kinds of teachings were not so easily judged.

At the opposite extreme from Docetism was a community of Jewish Christians who taught that Jesus was human but not divine. They became known as Ebionites, for reasons not completely clear. The name means “the poor,” or it may come from a personal name, but how it came to be attached to this group is unknown. The Ebionites, however, held an extreme version of the early Jewish-Christian views about Jesus, that he was the human son of Mary and Joseph. According to Irenaeus, whose writings we study later in this chapter, they emphasized the binding character of Mosaic Law, rejected the Pauline epistles, and used only the Gospel According to Matthew, whose writing we study later.

The Struggle Toward Orthodoxy

Docetism

Ebionism

Ebionitic views stemmed from a background of Jewish monotheism that found it difficult to affirm any kind of divinity for a human being—even so holy a person as Jesus. All that was necessary in the Jewish setting was to claim he was the long-awaited Messiah who fulfilled the Torah and opened the new age of the kingdom of God. In the face of Gentile speculations that would make Jesus into a god, so the Ebionites insisted that he was only a human, like the ancient prophets—a man inspired by God and enabled to live the Torah to its fullest. By rejecting Ebionism the church demonstrated the gulf that separated it from its Jewish antecedents.

Within the Hellenistic preoccupation with fate and death, then, the extremes of the christological spectrum were set. In Docetism, Jesus was too ‘divine’, in Ebionism, too human. Between these poles, however, there was still plenty of space for different interpretations.

**Salvation as
Knowledge or
as
Deliverance**

When Christian thinkers in the early second century sought to define their faith, they tended to interpret Christ’s work of salvation from two distinct but related standpoints. For some, Christ was the bearer of perfect knowledge, the one through whom (in a phrase from the second letter of Clement) “God has made manifest to us truth and the life of heaven.” This kind of language sounds characteristically Hellenistic. In this way of thinking, knowledge is superior to faith. It is the contemplation of reality. Christ redeems us by giving us true knowledge. We can be saved from ignorance, doubt, sin, and death by knowledge—not just any knowledge, of course, but saving knowledge, the knowledge that we are made in God’s image, belong to God, and are called to become one with God beyond the passing and corruptible things of this life.

There is, however, another way of thinking about Christ’s salvation when it is understood as deliverance from death by Christ’s sufferings and death. The martyr Polycarp expresses this idea when he says that Christ “endured all his sufferings on account of us, that we might live in him.” This sounds more like the message of the New Testament. Christ is not only the teacher who imparts the truth; Christ is also the suffering servant. But what happened in his death on the cross? Here the Hebraic idea of representative humanity or corporate identity comes back again. If Christ bears our human nature, then in his sufferings and death on the cross and in his resurrection from the dead, our human nature is raised. His death and resurrection are therefore not just examples to inspire in us courage and a desire to imitate them; they are also the death and resurrection of our humanity. We come to fullness of life in him. In early Christian reflection, the salvation of Christ is both the revelation of truth; and also an act in which sin and death are destroyed.

**Justin-The Bridge
Between Christianity and Hellenism**

**Christianity
as a
Rational
Religion**

Justin is the first of the major theologians to build a bridge between Christian and Hellenistic thought by asserting the propriety of both ways of thinking about Jesus Christ. He was a convert to Christianity, the son of pagan parents in Flavia Neapolis, in Palestinian Syria, formerly the ancient Samaritan city of Shechem. He received

an excellent education in philosophy, including Stoicism and Platonism (introduced in Year 2). One day in the course of his journeys he found himself walking along the seashore near Ephesus where he encountered an old man who convinced him that Platonic philosophy could not satisfy the heart. From this encounter he walked away on a new journey. “Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul, and a love of the prophets and of those men who are friends of Christ possessed me. And while revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable. Thus, and for this reason, I am a philosopher.” He might have said “a Christian philosopher,” for his life progressed far beyond scholarly detachment or arid intellectualism. He died a martyr’s death in Rome, probably in 165, for his dedication to Christ.

Justin used his concept of the Logos or “Word” as an instrument to build a bridge between philosophy and Christian theology. As a Christian, he knew (as the prologue of John’s Gospel states) that the Word was in the beginning with God, and was God, and was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-14). As a philosopher, he also knew that Logos was the universal reason that governs the world. The term had been used by Greek philosophers from the time of Heraclitus (fifth century BCE). In the *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) it is used to translate the Hebrew *dabhar*, meaning “word.”

Justin used Logos as a term to commend the Christian faith to cultured inquirers or philosophical critics. Before Jesus Christ came, he says, there were people who possessed what he calls the “spermatic word” or germinal word. He suggested that human reason or intelligence is the ground of our perceptions of similarity between God and ourselves. The spermatic word enables us to discern the truth. The philosophers, he says, owe their own wisdom and rationality to it. Thus those who lived with the Logos even before the coming of Christ—Socrates, for instance—can properly be regarded as Christians. Since the Logos is implanted in every human being, there is no fundamental opposition between Christianity and philosophy. But—and here Justin speaks as a Christian—the Logos is Christ. Christ is the true Word of God, who reveals the truth about God by coming to the world with enlightenment. The Logos doctrine thus provided Justin with the means of showing not only the continuity between God and the world but also the continuity between pagan philosophy and Christianity.

The gift that Jesus has brought to us is knowledge. But what is that knowledge? It is not simply knowledge of the divine or knowledge about the truth of things. It is not even knowledge of God, for God is ultimately unknowable. The knowledge that Christ brings to us is knowledge of sin and of our bondage to the devil and his minions. All evil in the world has come from them, and they deceive their victims and try to keep them in bondage. Since they are irrational and have always opposed reason, they have attempted to destroy any teachers who have tried to deliver people from their influence—Socrates, for instance. Supremely, their opposition to truth came to a climax in the sufferings and death of Christ.

At the cross Christ has finally and conclusively destroyed the evil powers. Christ, to use Justin’s own words, “submitted to become incarnate, and be born of this Virgin

of the family of David, in order that the serpent that sinned from the beginning, and the angels like him, may be destroyed, and that death may be condemned.” Thus, salvation for Justin is knowledge, but it is the specific knowledge of our bondage to evil powers and death. We are saved not just by knowing the truth but by knowing that the truth is Christ crucified.

Although the language of Justin sounds mythological, we need to understand that he used the language and the ideas available to him, to struggle to unfold the meaning of Christ’s death and victory on the cross. Christ’s whole life—from the wilderness temptations to the cross—was one of conflict against the devil. In modern terms we might prefer to speak about the dark or irrational force of sin or the destructive power of death. By the cross Christ has defeated these evil powers that hold us in bondage. Justin’s message, although couched in mythological terms, actually conveys a very important aspect of the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. As human beings we stand between creation and the Creator. We participate in both, since we are part of the creation and yet also have within us the divine gift of reason or Logos. We can move in one direction or the other. By making the creation our ultimate concern, we lose our concern for the Creator and we lose our being; if we turn to God, and trust in God for salvation, we receive the gift of life. As Justin expresses it, we become “worthy of incorruption,” that is, we achieve our true being in communion with the God who made us.

Irenaeus and the Development of Catholic Doctrine

In his controversy with those whom he regarded as heretics, Irenaeus drew a distinction between what he called “the tradition that is derived from the apostles” and the private and secret teachings of Gnostics such as Valentinus (Valen-TINE-us) and Basilides (Basil-EYE-days). The term used to describe these heretics is Gnostics and the heresy is Gnosticism, derived from the Greek word for knowledge. In a nutshell Gnostics were people who claimed a special and often secret knowledge, not generally available to the public, about the meaning of life and salvation.

Gnosticism

According to the Gnostics, the Lord had secretly delivered to a privileged group of disciples the inner meaning of his teaching. Irenaeus insisted that the Lord had imparted “a sure gift of truth.” For Irenaeus that meant that the apostolic tradition—the teaching handed down—was public and ascertainable. We might say that, in the Gnostic way of thinking, a dark tunnel separated the teaching of Jesus from the present life of the church. The tunnel was dark, because there was a danger that the teaching of Jesus might be profaned if it got into wrong hands. After all, had not Jesus said to the disciples: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables” (Mark 4:11)?

In the second and third centuries Gnosticism developed complex mythological systems and various schools of thought. It was totally incompatible with Christianity in its Docetism, denying the reality of Jesus’ human nature, and in its dualism, rejecting the goodness of the created order and of the God who created it. It cleverly picked up the Christian story of Jesus, turned it upside down, and dressed it in these two

Gnostic principles. So disguised, Gnosticism appealed to the sophisticated intellectuals of Hellenism and the church was forced to respond.

The critical theological question that Irenaeus debated with the Gnostics was redemption. We can clarify the difference by defining the Gnostic worldview as one marked by incommunicability. There is no communion—the Greek word is *koinonia*—between the Godhead itself, in its fullness, and the material world. For the Gnostic, the present world is a sorry mess, utterly unable to make contact with the ground of its being. There is no communion, either, between eternity and time, or between Spirit and flesh. Human beings are alienated from the true God, and there can be salvation for them only as they are delivered out of the present evil environment and reconstituted into the divine being from which they ultimately have come. Confronted by such a picture of creation and salvation, Irenaeus spoke in quite a different way, and his way of interpreting the life and ministry of Jesus may be said to have set firmly the direction which theologians after him took.

For Irenaeus, the teaching of the church was sure because it derived directly from Jesus and because in every generation it was kept safe by reference to this source. The church's preaching and teaching are consistent with the truth, because they are both public and ascertainable. In contrast with the many versions and schools of thought within Gnosticism, the church's teachings have remained constant. No one has tampered with the teaching in the interests of any one-sided theology or particular worldview, and the evidence for this freedom from distortion in the church's teaching is out in the open. From the first, the church has had its official teachers or representatives—the bishops—who preserved and continued to circulate the tradition that comes from the apostles. Wherever, then, there is a matter in dispute, or wherever a false idea has to be corrected, the churches have a yardstick or measure by which they can assess the extent of error and amend distortions in Christian teaching.

By this time a more or less recognizable canon of Christian teaching existed. A body of Christian teachings, which we now call the New Testament, was known and used in the churches. Irenaeus himself was familiar with all the books of the New Testament except The Letter to the Hebrews. These books, together with the Hebrew Scriptures, became a weapon of orthodoxy by which to safeguard and advance the church's teaching and life. For this reason we may speak of Irenaeus as a biblical theologian. He was not a speculative theologian, but a Christian teacher for whom the church's message about Jesus Christ was grounded in the church's book, the Bible. To examine his teaching more carefully we can use for convenience the themes of creation, sin, Judgment, repentance, and redemption.

According to Irenaeus, the basic truth about our human existence is that we have been created by God. God whom we know as Creator is also the God whom we know as Jesus Christ. God has created us, as John's prologue states, through the Word who is Jesus Christ. And the Spirit we also know as the Creator Spirit. Thus Irenaeus approaches the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis as a trinitarian theologian.

Irenaeus as a Theologian of the Church

Creation

No Christian thinker before Irenaeus made such full use of Genesis 1 and 2 to develop a doctrine of salvation. Human beings have been made in the image and likeness of God, living beings who are capable of living in communion with their Creator. Life is possible only when we live in communion with God, obedient to the order and will of the Creator. God creates, we are created; God gives life, we receive it. We have been created, moreover, in order to grow to fullness, so growth is a critical category for Irenaeus. It is the authentic mark of the existence of the creature. When Irenaeus asks about the goal of that growth, he uses christological language. The end of our growth is that of which we read in Ephesians 4:13, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” In summary, we can say that the two characteristics of our created existence are, first, physical—the gift of life itself—and, second, ethical. We are created to live in communion with the Creator. As Irenaeus expresses it, a law was given to us that we might know that we have for lord the Lord of all.

4

Sin and Judgment

Something has happened to the good creation. The man and the woman who bear the image and likeness of God have yielded to temptation. Created to live in a moral universe, human beings in fact live in rebellion against God. We have lost the capacity to grow, to move toward the destiny appointed for us. The human tragedy is that we are sinners who set our wills against the Creator’s. Furthermore, to oppose the Creator is to oppose the one who has made and continues to sustain all things. It is to be out of communion with the author and giver of life—it is to be in death. Where there should be communion between God and the creature, now the creature is no longer free, responsive to God, or responsible.

Judgment and Repentance

Irenaeus speaks about the Fall in both physical and ethical terms. In its ethical aspect the Fall is a way of saying that we are sinners, who assert our own will against the Creator and in consequence have ceased to be free. In its physical aspect the Fall means that human beings have cut themselves off from the source of life. They die. For Irenaeus death is both a biological question and a theological one: separation from God is death, just as separation from light is darkness. Human beings have fallen into bondage to a new lord, the devil. Instead of living in the freedom of the children of God, they encounter God’s will in the form of Judgment. The sovereign God forces us into some form of obedience to the moral demand upon us. We experience that compulsion in the form of the demands that are laid upon us in the Law and in the commandments. For it is by these that God controls the course of sin in human life. Without the Law and the commandments—whether written Law or even the demands made on us by our neighbors each day—life would degenerate completely into chaos.

Redemption: The Incarnation

Until the time of Irenaeus, Christian writers gave little place to the Incarnation in God’s work of redemption. As theology developed in the West, the Latin theologians tended to emphasize the sufferings and death of Christ in their doctrine of redemption. Irenaeus moves in a different direction. For him, the whole incarnate life of Christ has meaning for our salvation.

In a well-known phrase Irenaeus summarizes his doctrine of redemption: “By reason of his immeasurable love (Jesus Christ) became what we are, in order to make us

what he himself is.” This phrase became the main theme of the message of the early church. Jesus Christ became what we are. He came fully into our place, taking on himself the bondage of our slavery to sin and death, so he is properly called Savior. Jesus Christ has made us what he is. He has brought us into communion with God. He has brought us to life.

The key term Irenaeus uses to describe the redemption is “recapitulation.” To recapitulate means, for him, to perfect or complete. When Jesus Christ recapitulates the creation of God, he brings it to the fullness or unity intended for it by the Creator. In this act of recapitulation he also goes over again the same kinds of acts as the man and the woman of whom the Book of Genesis speaks.

With the coming of Jesus Christ, in other words, history enters a new phase. We can see this in Jesus’ birth of the virgin. The first Adam was of the earth—formed, as it were, out of the virgin soil, earth that had never been tilled or sown with seed. The second Adam—Irenaeus is close to Paul here—was likewise born of a virgin. That he was born of Mary is a sure sign of his true humanity. Irenaeus will have nothing to do with a Gnostic redeemer who only *appeared* to be human. Moreover, Mary’s role in salvation is not merely passive. She freely consented to fulfill the design of God and, as Irenaeus expresses it, “became the cause of salvation both for herself and for the whole human race.” Or again, “As the human race was subjected to death by a virgin, so it was saved by a virgin.”

Irenaeus has no sense that Mary is co-redeemer with Christ, for salvation is from God alone. No doubt many later theologians, in their profound veneration of Mary, looked to Irenaeus as the fount of their thinking, but Irenaeus emphasizes Mary’s role in salvation in order to emphasize that Jesus Christ is fully one with us in our humanity. Through Mary, Jesus Christ has taken our humanity. Our humanity is in continuity with his, and had he not assumed this fallen humanity, there would be no possibility of salvation, for there would not be a Savior among us. The humanity of Jesus, furthermore, is the developed and mature humanity to which we are called to grow, and his sinlessness means that he has overcome the disorder of sin and death, which separate us from God.

In our human nature Jesus has come to face the struggles of our actual existence. Like us, he is tempted to disobey God. In the very place of our struggles—the ethical struggles of everyone’s existence—he stands among us as one of us. He faces our temptations, but he does so depending only and wholly upon God. His whole life is marked by this obedience, from the wilderness to the cross. Like the first Adam, he too was tempted to eat—to turn stones into bread. On the cross, likewise, he was tempted to become something other than what he was—to grasp at a divine power that would keep him from such pain. Both in the wilderness and on the cross he fights against the enemy with the weapons of truth and obedience. Jesus Christ came to live among us not merely to show us life in perfection and integrity, but also to enter into conflict with the enemies of sin and death. His victory over the tempter is a struggle between the Creator of life and the destroyer of life.

The Church

The sphere in which we enter into the victory of Christ is the church, for the new *koinonia* or communion in and of the church is an expression of his recapitulation. Human life, subject as it is to sin and death, begins to be renewed in baptism, which according to Irenaeus is the “seal of eternal life.” The renewal of life which is given in our baptism implies that it is in the church that we begin to grow anew toward the destiny appointed for us by God. As children grow by receiving life from their mother, so believers grow by receiving life from the Giver of life. In this sign of the new creation, the church, God provides us with the nourishment necessary for our lives, the “daily” bread for which we pray.

The end, however, has not yet come. Only in the final consummation will God’s word be fulfilled—“Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. . . . Male and female he created them.” The life which we receive from God in the church we shall continue to receive even more abundantly in the eschatological kingdom. In that kingdom, as Irenaeus quaintly expresses it, we shall “forget to die.” We shall receive “more than life—life that has no end of days, length of days for ever and ever. Then we shall be perfectly what God created us to be.”

Rival Religions

Judaism itself, once the mother of Christianity, was a rival religion, but Christians knew its language and how to speak to it. The old polytheistic religions of the various peoples who made up the Hellenistic culture had no significant effect on the Christian church. Polytheism had always been completely alien to the monotheism Christianity inherited from Judaism; now the ancient gods were all but dead, no longer capable of expressing a vital religion. Two forms of religious belief did speak in lively dialogue with Christianity, however—the ‘mystery cults’ and Gnosticism.

The Mysteries

The mystery cults were so called because their rites and practices were kept secret, mysterious except to the initiated. Because of such secrecy, little is known about their details, even now. Originating in nature religion, they were adapted from ancient agricultural fertility cults, like the baalism we saw in Canaan during Old Testament times. The seasonal cycles of fertility were mythologically expressed as the recurring death and resurrection of the god of the crops.

Imported into Hellenistic culture in varying forms from the many lands of their origins, these agricultural myths changed into cults of individual salvation for their devotees. Living in the large cosmopolitan empire meant that individuals had to cut off former ties with family, race, clan, and culture. They began to feel alienated and lonely, caught up and carried along by uncontrollable tides. The two irrational forces of *fate* and *death* seemed to rule life. The mystery cults offered to release the hapless individual from these twin dooms through union with the dying-and-rising god. Fellowship with other human beings in the intimate circle of those initiated into the mysteries helped to integrate their lives.

Rites varied from cult to cult. Typically, an animal identified with the god was sacrificed. The initiate was bathed in the animal’s blood—thereby being infused with its (and the god’s) life. Finally, a communal meal was held in which the god was symbolically eaten, either in the form of the of the sacrificed animal or in the form of bread signifying the god’s body.

It was characteristic of most ancient religions, including Yahwism, to feature blood as the symbol of life, communion with the god through partaking of the meat of the animal victim, and the solidarity of the worshipping community by means of a common rite. But there were two essential Christian practices that appeared especially to resemble these characteristics of the mystery cults. In accordance with basic Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians adopted an initiatory rite—baptism—that signified death to the old life and resurrection to the new eschatological life in Christ. They also ate a meal in which bread and wine were associated with the body and blood of the Savior. All this made the church resemble a mystery cult.

Christianity, however, possessed a view of reality markedly different from that of the mystery cults, for it spoke of a God who has created the world and is now at work in history to redeem it. Time is moving forward to an ultimate fulfillment. The mystery cults ignored history; for them time moved only in the circular pattern of the recurrent seasons. Their god never actually came into this world of futility, at a specific time and as a specific person. The cultic myth told of events taking place in another realm, beyond time and space. In spite of these wide differences, to the outside observer the mystery cults and Christianity resembled each other.

Some nineteenth-century historians suggest that the Christian practices of baptism and the Eucharist and the emphasis on Jesus as a savior—a word universally applied to the mystery-cult deities—resulted from the influence of these cults. Most scholars today find that view unconvincing; Christian belief and practice are firmly rooted in Israelite salvation-history, not borrowed from the mythologies and cultic practices of the mysteries. The church was inevitably responding to the same needs as those the cults served. Like the mysteries, the church offered individuals, whatever their ethnic background or social status, fellowship in a close community, communion with God through Christ, and salvation from the meaninglessness of fate and death. There is little doubt that as the ‘good news’ of Jesus was translated into terms that were meaningful for Hellenists, salvation from fate and death—the basic motifs of the mysteries—became also the fundamental mode of expressing the Christian gospel. The Messiah of the Jews was transformed into the Savior.

Marcion was a native of Asia Minor and the son of a bishop there. As he saw it, the church had largely lost the essential teaching of Paul—salvation by the love and forgiveness of God. Many of the foremost Christian teachers of his time were interpreting Christianity primarily in moral terms. Jesus was the giver of a new law, and Christianity was the attempt to live in accord with his teachings. Marcion viewed such an interpretation as a regression to the legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament Law against which Paul had fought. But Marcion went too far in his protest. Paul had never rejected the salvation-history recorded in the Old Testament. Nor did he spurn the moral content of the Torah. What he objected to was the sequence with which people approached God: by his own freely given grace God claimed sinners as his own children; then—filled with his Spirit—they were able to live the life the Law commanded. This is the opposite of legalism, which tries to earn the love of God by performing the deeds the Law commands.

Marcion

Marcionism

Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament notion of a God of justice. He saw this God as angry, unforgiving, totally different from the God revealed in Jesus. The God whom Jesus revealed was a God of love; the Old Testament God, a God of anger. Yahweh, Marcion claimed, was not God at all, but a fallen angel who had lost his vision of the supremacy of love and created the material world in order to wreak his wrath on any who opposed his will. Christ, according to Marcion, was sent by the true God, the God of love, to call people away from the false ‘god’ of justice. It was a docetic Christ, untainted by Yahweh’s material world. Paul, as interpreted by Marcion, had known this, as had his follower Luke. Accordingly, Marcion recognized as authoritative only the letters of Paul and the writings of Luke, purged of references speaking favorably of the Old Testament.

Marcion came to Rome in 140, and he was excommunicated—cast out from the fellowship of the church—by the bishop of Rome. He thereupon established his own church and for the first time, Christianity was faced with the existence of two rival bodies in the same area, each claiming to be ‘the true church’.

The Appeal of Irenaeus

Irenaeus published his work, *Against Heresies*, with Gnosticism as the chief target. He used logic to argue against the existence of spiritual powers the Gnostics claimed separated the world from ‘the One’ who was the source of all. He also appealed to scripture, showing that the Gnostics twisted its meaning beyond all recognition; but his principal argument appealed to the tradition of the church.

Irenaeus argued that, if Jesus had given some secret *gnosis* to his disciples, that teaching would certainly have been transmitted to the disciples’ successors, the bishops, and the bishops would have seen to it that it was taught within their congregations. But no such teaching existed. He himself, a bishop in Lyons, had known the aged Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna and had been taught by him. Polycarp, in turn, had known some of the disciples of the Lord, especially John. From this chain of descent, he had heard nothing of the strange teachings the Gnostics espoused. In other churches that had been founded by the apostles themselves, such as the church at Rome at which both Peter and Paul had worked, the descent of the bishops had been maintained from the apostles’ time, yet the same Christian gospel was taught in all these churches. While Gnosticism takes on many different forms, the Christian gospel remains the same wherever the successors of the apostles teach.

The apostolic succession of the true faith from the apostles through their successors, the bishops, is the foundation of Irenaeus’ defense against gnostic distortions. The scriptures themselves, newly being determined from among the many Christian writings available at the time, would eventually provide a standard for true teaching. But as the Gnostics showed, it was possible to distort the meaning of the scriptures themselves. The teaching authority of the hierarchy, the leaders of the church, was thus asserted as one means of deciding the proper interpretation of the scriptures.

Irenaeus, then established many aspects of what the church and Christianity would display in future centuries, even up to our own time. Long before the church officially determined the principles of christological orthodoxy, Irenaeus—as had his

predecessor Ignatius of Antioch—insisted on the two natures of the incarnate Lord. Indeed, he coined the maxim that was to be the touchstone by which the Christological debate would be evaluated: “He became what we are in order that we might become what he is.” His insistence on the priority of Creation made his assertion of the full humanity of Jesus credible. It was ‘natural’ of deity to become human since humanity is God’s image and likeness. He expanded the notion of ‘apostolic succession’ and made it an essential element in the church’s preservation of truth.

