

Irenaeus. Irenaeus was the preeminent ante-Nicene father, for he, more than any other at that time, promulgated the soundness of the orthodox faith as the apostolic tradition in the face of late-second century Gnosticism. He was a missionary, a pastor, and an apologist.

His Life. Irenaeus was born in the early second century, probably around AD 120-130, in Smyrna, Asia Minor. As a youth he had sat at the feet of the well-known Polycarp, who himself had studied under the Apostle John (*Against Heresies*, Book 3.Ch. 3.Section 4; hereafter, 3.3.4).

It is not clear why Irenaeus eventually traveled to Lyons, Gaul (modern-day France), but it may be owed to his eagerness to propagate Christian missions among the Celts there. Regardless of the reason for his move, he soon became a presbyter of the church in Lyons. Other leaders in Gaul sent Irenaeus to deliver a message to Eleutherus, bishop of Rome, in AD 177/178, to mediate in the Montanistic disputes over ongoing divine revelation. While Irenaeus was in Rome, violent persecution erupted against the Christians in Lyons and the surrounding area, resulting in several martyrs. The bishop of Lyons died from the persecution and Irenaeus was elected bishop there upon his return.

Irenaeus devoted his life to shepherding his flock by refuting heresy and instructing believers. Both his preaching and his penmanship greatly affected Gaul. Numerous missionaries traversed other parts of France as a result of Irenaeus' ministry.

There have been some allegations that, while Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons in the late-second or early-third century, he was martyred during the persecution under Septimus Severus. Though considerable evidence exists for a martyrdom of AD 202 or 203, it is improbable, since all of the notable early church historians fail to mention his death.

When comparing Irenaeus with his contemporaries, one quickly realizes that

Irenaeus of Lyons was the most important Christian controversialist and theologian between the apostles and the third-century genius Origen. He gathered up and combined the traditions of predecessors from Asia Minor, Syria, and Rome and used them to refute the Gnostics who were subverting the Gospel. He built up a body of Christian theology that resembled a French Gothic cathedral, strongly supported by columns of biblical faith and tradition, illuminated by vast expanses of exegetical and logical argument, and upheld by flying buttresses of rhetorical and philosophical considerations from the outside. In his own person he united the major traditions of Christendom from Asia Minor, Syria, Rome, and Gaul. . . . We cannot say that he represents the whole of second-century Christianity, but he does represent the majority views outside Alexandria, where Christian speculative thought was closer to the Gnosticism he fought (Grant, 1).

His Writings. Irenaeus' major writings, which were both apologetic and instructive, include *On the Detection and Refutation of Knowledge Falsely So Called* (or *Against Heresies*, often as the Latin title *adversus haereses*), *On the Unity of God, and the Origin of Evil, Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, as well as several other pieces now lost or only as fragments, but attested by Eusebius.

Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (written during Eleutherus' Roman episcopacy, c. 175-189) stands among the earliest and strongest critiques against Gnosticism in general and various offshoots, such as led by Marcion, Ebion, the Nicolaitanes, and especially Valentinian Gnosticism. Written in five books, *Against Heresies* is a comprehensive refutation of Gnosticism

in favor of apostolic Christianity; Irenaeus outlines what would become known as the catholic (orthodox, universal) doctrine of the Christian faith.

On the evils of Gnosticism, he wrote, “Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself” (Gonzalez, 58). Elsewhere, after setting forth the various descriptions for the Lord Jesus Christ, Irenaeus speaks of Gnosticism’s failure: “Since Logos [Word], and Monogenes [Only-Begotten], and Zoe [Life], and Phos [Light], and Soter [Savior], and Christus [Christ], and the Son of God, and He who became incarnate for us, have been proved to be one and the same, the Ogdoad [eight-fold division of God] which they have built up at once falls to pieces. And when this system is destroyed, their whole system sinks into ruin,—a system which they falsely dream into existence, and thus inflict injury on the Scriptures, while they build up their own hypothesis” (1.9.3).

Furthermore, as to the Gnostic claim that the apostles passed on “secret knowledge” to a special group, Irenaeus flatly rejects: “We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to the perfect in private and in secret, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves” (3.3.1). Irenaeus then traces the succession of bishops from several churches back to the apostles.

Then, turning the tables on his Gnostic opponents, he comments, “Since therefore we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among others which it is easy to obtain from the Church; since the apostles, like a rich man [depositing his money] in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life. For she is the entrance to life; all others are thieves and robbers” (3.4.1). Irenaeus observes that no succession of any kind—apostolic or otherwise—occurs within Gnosticism, “for, prior to Valentinus, those who follow Valentinus had no existence; nor did those from Marcion exist before Marcion; nor, in short, had any of those malignant-minded people, whom I have above enumerated, any being previous to the initiators and inventors of their perversity” (3.4.3). Even if these various sects are connected to one another, each is guilty of perverting the truth of the Christian faith.

A perusal of *Against Heresies* reveals a barrage of attacks—almost like a machine-gun approach—showing the countless holes in the Gnostic belief system. On the flipside, Irenaeus hammers home the special status of apostolic Christianity as genuine divine revelation.

His Theology. Although many of Irenaeus’ works no longer survive, his massive work *Against Heresies* contains a number of his theological beliefs. Select doctrines follow below.

The Unity of God. Irenaeus’ theology focuses mainly on God’s unity in contrast to the numerous emanated “gods” (Aeons) of Gnosticism. Multiple “gods” cannot exist, for there is but One “Almighty” God, “for how can there be any other Fulness, or Principle, or Power, or God, above Him, since it is a matter of necessity that God, the Pleroma (Fulness) of all these, should contain all things in His immensity, and should be contained by no one” (2.1.2)? The obvious answer, as Irenaeus goes on to prove, is that God must be one.

Scripture. Irenaeus held an extremely high view of Scripture, for he believed the Septuagint “had been interpreted by the inspiration of God” (3.21.2). He is also the earliest Christian writer to list the four canonical Gospels (3.11.8). Furthermore, Irenaeus upholds all the Pauline writings as authoritative, because he derives apostolic succession from them (see 3.3.3). Finally, he employs other apostolic writings (as well as tradition) to build his case against Gnosticism’s falsehood.

The Origin of Evil. Irenaeus believed God created Adam and Eve as children, frail and open to Satan’s seducing: “Humanity was a child; and its mind was not yet fully mature; and thus humanity was easily led astray by the deceiver” (*Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 12, in McGrath, 93). God is not at fault, however, for “things which have recently come into being cannot be eternal; and, not being eternal, they fall short of perfection for that very reason. And being newly created they are therefore childish and immature, and not yet fully prepared for an adult way of life. And so, just as a mother is able to offer food to an infant, but the infant is not yet able to receive food unsuited to its age, in the same way, God, for his part, could have offered perfection to humanity at the beginning, but humanity was not capable of receiving it. It was nothing more than an infant” (4.38.1).

The Trinity. Though other creeds about the Trinity existed in Irenaeus’ day, he groups each member of the Trinity together with distinct functions. Moreover, he views belief in the Trinity as a standard of the Christian faith. He observes, “This is the rule of our faith, the foundation of the building, and what gives support to our behavior. God the Father. . . . The Word of God. . . . The Holy Spirit. . .” (*Apostolic Preaching*, 6, in McGrath, 93).

Christ. Though *Against Heresies* promotes strong Christological statements (see above), a few surviving *Fragments* from Irenaeus’ lost writings address this issue (52-55). Scripture declares that Christ “as He is the Son of man, so is the same Being not a [mere] man; and as He is flesh, so is He also spirit, and the Word of God, and God. And as He was born of Mary in the last times, so did He also proceed from God as the First-begotten of every creature. . . . as He was the son of David, so was He also the Lord of David. And as He was from Abraham, so did He also exist before Abraham. And as He was the servant of God, so is He the Son of God, and Lord of the universe” (52). Similar statements occur in the other fragments.

Christ’s Atonement. Irenaeus promoted the Recapitulation theory of Christ’s atonement, mixing elements of the Ransom to Satan theory (see ATONEMENT). Irenaeus writes that when Christ “was incarnate and made man, he recapitulated [*or* summed up] in himself the long line of the human race, procuring for us salvation thus summarily, so that what we had lost in Adam, that is, the being in the image and likeness of God, that we should reign in Christ Jesus” (3.18). He also adds that Christ “passed through every stage of life”—infancy, childhood, young man, older man (based on a misunderstanding of John 8:57, Irenaeus wrongly thought Jesus died around age fifty), and death to sanctify every life stage for man (2.22.4). Basically, the Recapitulation theory states that Christ, as the second Adam, undid what Adam did wrong—Jesus succeeded where Adam failed; Christ’s obedience matches Adam’s disobedience. The purpose of Christ’s work was to save/reunite man with God through Christ.

Adding elements of the ransom theory, Irenaeus claims that Christ “gave himself as a ransom for those who have been led into captivity. The apostate one unjustly held sway over us, and though we were by nature the possession of Almighty God, we had been alienated from our proper nature, making us instead his own disciples” (5.1.1).

The Church. Irenaeus focused on the church's function as teaching the faith, understandably so, since he often attacked heresy. He writes that

true knowledge is the teaching of the Apostles, the order of the Church as established from the earliest times throughout the world, and the distinctive stamp of the body of Christ, passed down through the succession of bishops in charge of the church in each place, which has come down to our own time, safeguarded without any spurious writings by the most complete exposition [i.e., the Creed], received without addition or subtraction; the reading of the Scriptures without falsification; and their consistent and careful exposition, avoiding danger and blasphemy; and the special gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which surpasses all other spiritual gifts (4.33.8).

Again, the same common beliefs of the apostles were still held in unity by all the churches in the late-second century. For, "the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. . . . as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1.10.2).

End Times. Irenaeus held premillennial views, for he outlined his beliefs in Rome's future fall, the Antichrist's reign for three-and-one-half years, and Christ's return when the just are raised to life and the unjust are condemned (much of the latter half of Book 5 deals with these issues). A sample of Irenaeus' eschatological views shows that the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and John concerning the coming of "the day of the LORD. . . were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord: and through Him they shall become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father. . . and [with respect to] those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one" (5.35.1).

Conclusion. Irenaeus' missionary and pastoral efforts influenced Gaul and the surrounding area long after his death. His works on apologetics and theology helped crystallize orthodox doctrine in the face of creeping heresies. Nineteenth century church historian Philip Schaff provides an apt summary of this figure: "Irenaeus is the leading representative of catholic Christianity in the last quarter of the second century, the champion of orthodoxy against Gnostic heresy, and the mediator between the Eastern and Western churches. . . . Irenaeus is an enemy of all error and schism, and, on the whole, the most orthodox of the ante-Nicene fathers" (562).

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Joel R. Breidenbaugh