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# The relational soteriology of Irenaeus of Lyon

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THE RELATIONAL SOTERIOLOGY OF  
IRENÆUS OF LYON

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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BY  
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# GEORGE FOX

## EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

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**Title:** The Relational Soteriology of Irenaeus of Lyon  
**Presented by:** Brian Bews  
**Date:** December 22, 2010

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the fundamental theology of St. Irenaeus of Lyon as found in his work *Against Heresies*. The point of emphasis and common thread of his theology was a relational soteriology whereby people matured in their faith by following the New Adam represented by Jesus Christ. In the Introduction, the context of Irenaeus' life is explored revealing the backdrop of his ministry. Chapter Two explores the Gnostic system which Irenaeus was combating. Particular attention is paid to how this was a threat to the Church as well as the flaws Irenaeus perceived within that system. Chapter Three looks at the doctrine of Recapitulation and how this concept shaped Irenaeus' theology. Chapter Four compares the Anthropology of Irenaeus to those of the Gnostic schools. Chapter Five details the Creation and Christological doctrines of Irenaeus and compares those to the Gnostic doctrines. I conclude this paper by highlighting the subjects covered and delving into the implications of Irenaeus' theological contributions.

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## INTRODUCTION

“When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

Esther 4:12-14

Very little is known about Irenaeus in regard to his background or lineage other than what can be drawn from the historical events that positioned him to accomplish what he did. This early Church Father was not a man who came upon the scene with lofty expectations placed upon him. He was intelligent, but far from the brilliant mind of an Origen. In fact, modern scholars have criticized his rudimentary philosophic scholasticism evidenced in his apologetic writings. Wagner states: “Irenaeus admitted that he was not eloquent, but he considered his presentations of Christianity to be persuasive and free of distortions.”<sup>1</sup> In what should be a great lesson to modern scholars today, the power of Irenaeus’ influence was not due to its presentation, but rather the genius of its content. A well-timed, inspired idea is still powerful even if the presenter lacks the charisma to carry the day. To say that what Irenaeus contributed to the theology of the Church at that time was important is an understatement of colossal proportions.

Irenaeus was, for all intents and purposes, the first true catholic theologian. While there had been speculation into what the soteriology of Christianity was, the focus had been the imitation of Christ and the transmission and obedience of his teachings.<sup>2</sup> The threat posed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles : Christianity in the Second Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 206.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 143.

fast growing Gnostic sects and their infiltration into the Church forced a response, one that Irenaeus was in the perfect position to give. His response became the first theology of the early Church. Roger Olson says,

In the process of exposing Gnosticism, Irenaeus also developed a Christian doctrine of redemption that profoundly influenced the entire course and direction of Christian theology. ... Some Eastern Orthodox theologians aver that all of theology is but a series of footnotes to Irenaeus. In any case it would be difficult to overestimate his influence.<sup>3</sup>

It is not only future theologians that would look upon Irenaeus as instrumental as a theologian; he was, according to von Balthasar, “indisputably the greatest theologian of his century. That is how he was regarded by experts on the theological tradition such as Tertullian, Eusebius, Theodoret, and Epiphanius, who showered their praise on him.”<sup>4</sup> What were the events that brought this churchman to the forefront of theology?

Irenaeus hailed from Smyrna where he had been a student of Polycarp, an immensely influential person in Irenaeus’ life and a disciple of John. In the same way that Paul’s Roman citizenship and background in Pharisaic Judaism allowed him to be an early Christian missionary par excellence, Irenaeus’ Greek background and Johannine background under Polycarp made him the perfect theologian to address the rise of Gnosticism. One of the major threats of Gnosticism was its attack upon apostolic tradition. Here Irenaeus’ apostolic lineage to John as well as his ecumenical relationship with Rome and the Eastern centers of Christianity proved invaluable.<sup>5</sup> In 177 the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius called for sacrifices and unity in the Empire to combat the incursion of Germanic invaders. Part of this edict was the outlaw of secret societies, a category into which the citizens of Gaul and Lyons in particular placed Christianity.

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<sup>3</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 69.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Scandal of the Incarnation*, trans., John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Demetrios J. Constantelos, "Irenaeos of Lyons and His Central Views on Human Nature," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1989): 351.

The persecution and martyrdom of the Christians was truly horrific.<sup>6</sup> While Irenaeus was in Rome, having been sent by his Gallic congregations as a presbyter to address the issue of Montanism, reports of the martyrdoms in Lyon and Vienne were brought to the attention of the Church in Rome. Among the casualties was the Bishop of Lyon, Pothinus. Irenaeus returned to the devastated congregations there and was elected bishop by the survivors. The Christians of these Gallic communities were made up of Greek immigrants as well as the native Keltae, and Irenaeus was dismayed to see the influence of Gnosticism that had taken root while he had been in Rome.<sup>7</sup>

To address this growing threat, Irenaeus penned five books entitled *Against the Heresies* and about a decade later the summative handbook *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. It was the writing of these works as much as anything else that articulated Irenaeus' theology. In *Against the Heresies*, he dismantles the systems of prominent schools of Gnostic thought such as the Valentinian, Marcionite, and Ebionite. What made these works move from mere apologetics to foundational theological writings however was that, after exposing the flaws in these systems, Irenaeus then built a theological response answering the issues of salvation that the Gnostics had raised with their practices. His theology was groundbreaking, since here was finally an explanation of what the larger purpose of the coming of Jesus and the formation of the Church was truly all about.

In his apologetic writings, Irenaeus also established the use of scripture in a new way. He was the first to specify that there were only four orthodox gospels and helped to develop exegetical and hermeneutical approaches to understanding scripture. In response to Marcion, who had pillaged the scriptures to create a canon more in line with his unique theology, Irenaeus

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<sup>6</sup> Wagner, 205.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, 69.

attempted to show the unity of the scriptures from the Genesis account to the writings of Paul as they foretold and told the story of God's redemptive activity.<sup>8</sup> In Irenaeus we find the unusual combination of Eastern and Western theology, as well as the authority of apostolic tradition and those scriptures that had been used within the Church. This gift of synthesis without syncretism was what separated Irenaeus from other speculative Christian philosophers.

The threat posed by Gnosticism was a devastating attack upon the Church with its attempt to undermine apostolic tradition, scripture, and the nature of soteriology. It was left to Irenaeus to reveal the flaw of these attacks upon scripture, apostolic authority, oral tradition, and soteriology so far outside the norm that it was deemed heresy. The urgency for Irenaeus was not that this was a competing religion trying to steal converts away from Christianity, but that it was a virus that had infiltrated the Church using the same language, symbolism, and rituals to far different ends. One of the tools that Irenaeus used was a kind of "common sense" litmus test that he called the Rule of Faith. While no strict definition of the Rule of Faith can be found, its basic application would be to take an interpretation of scripture or doctrinal teaching and compare it to the traditional and historical understanding of that scripture or teaching. Using this tool, Irenaeus was able to delineate those ideas which were questionable but had traditional roots, from those which were new but had no historical foundation. Whether the issue at hand was scripture or tradition, the problem for Irenaeus was interpretation, especially when his opponents used the same language as the traditional church but changed the meaning of those terms and ideas to correspond with their Gnostic theology. Donovan says, "The difficulty is false interpretation. The assumption behind Irenaeus's insistence on right interpretation is that what is of prior importance is the community's faith in Jesus Christ; the New Testament written precipitate of

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<sup>8</sup> Wagner, 217.

that faith.”<sup>9</sup> While the effectiveness of Irenaeus’ attack on Gnosticism was without a doubt effective in its time, the subtlety and variations of Gnostic thought have always been an informal threat to the validity of Christianity even to this day. Though Irenaeus was himself martyred in yet another uprising against Christians in the Gallic church around 202, his theological foundation is still worthy of serious consideration as is his clear warning against the threat of Gnosticism within the Church.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this project is to identify the theology built around Irenaeus’ understanding of the economy of God in salvation. I have attempted to illustrate the vastly complex theology behind the Gnostic belief system using (as Irenaeus did) the doctrines of the Valentinians, so that the reader might better grasp the inherent threat of Gnosticism. The danger of Gnosticism was rarely found in the directness of its teachings, but in the underlying implications of its doctrines. I have researched and explained the doctrine of recapitulation, which is perhaps Irenaeus’ greatest theological contribution and one that needs to be seriously revisited in our modern and post-modern view of salvation and mission. In Chapter Four I explain the view of humankind which Irenaeus develops against the Platonic backdrop built into the Gnostic belief system that flesh is evil and to be diminished as much as possible. Chapter Five illuminates Irenaeus’ response with his view of creation and his unique Christology. My hope is that the reader will think through the very basic understandings of who they are, why they are here, and what Christ has accomplished in his gift of salvation. If we will consider such questions through the historical context and theology of Irenaeus, then there is the potential for a new understanding of these questions and perhaps a much different interpretation of their common answers within the Church.

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner, 207.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE Gnostic DILEMMA FACING IRENAEUS AND THE CHURCH

Differences on practical matters in the Church can be tolerated without harm being caused; indeed, to a certain extent they merely underline the continuing unity which is created by the Faith. The all-important thing is this ancient Faith itself, the truth of the gospel transmitted by the apostles; but it is nevertheless important to be on guard when new doctrines appear, which attempt to steal or falsify the original treasure.

Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Church*

History making theology is never created in a vacuum or ivory tower. It always finds its beginnings in the twin forges of crisis and controversy. To begin fully to understand what theological conclusions Irenaeus came to, one must understand the context in which he came to them. Although Irenaeus lived and died in a time of government sponsored and popular persecution of Christianity, he directed his writings and theological efforts to confront the growing Gnostic heresies within the Church. This fact in itself speaks volumes to the gravity of the situation in which the young Bishop of Lyons found himself. If we view the theological distinctive outside of the context of Irenaeus' battle with the Gnostics, we will fail to realize the meaning behind his polemic. Irenaeus was not simply writing systematic theology, but rather was providing a theological foundation for orthodoxy as an alternative to the doctrines of the Gnostics that had infiltrated the Church. This chapter will reveal the nature of the Gnostic threat and address Irenaeus' theological responses to that threat so that we may gain a fuller understanding and context for his soteriology.

### *The Roots of Gnosticism*

According to the tradition of the Early Church, and by extension Irenaeus, the first Gnostic Christian was Simon Magus referred to in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus builds a kind of Gnostic form of apostolic succession from Simon including heretics like Marcion, and, the schools of thought that descend from their founders like the Ebionites and Nicolaitans. His primary target in his early writings however, is the school and ideas of Valentinius.<sup>2</sup> To understand the complexity of Irenaeus' challenge, however, one has to appreciate the fact that Gnosticism was a fluid and diverse movement. The goal of *Against Heresies* was not to refute a particular school of thought, but to show the emptiness of this style of thinking in contrast to his own idea of Orthodoxy. He writes his first work to this end for the sake of an unknown friend that has fallen under the sway of Ptolomaeus' Gnosticism, and while he targets Valentinianism, in the direct thinking of Irenaeus, "It is not necessary to drink up the ocean to learn that its water is salty."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps if Gnosticism had taken on the random individualism of a single philosophy or teacher it would not have posed so great a danger to the Church. Irenaeus however recognized that it is not the fluidity and diversity of Gnosticism that posed such a threat, but its commonalities and ideologies. Whatever its distinctives, one thing was clear to Irenaeus: Gnosticism was anathema to the vitality of Christianity and threatened to replace that which had been handed down through apostolic succession with a different gospel.

At the heart of the Gnostic heresies was the most blatant deviation from the traditional teachings of the Church. Despite their differentiations and pursuit of novelty, there was an underlying pattern to their view of God which did not line up with what had been accepted

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<sup>1</sup> John Glyndwr Harris, *Gnosticism Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Norris, "Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Later Second Century," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 52, no. 1-2 (1998): 52.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *AH* 2.19.8

earlier within the Church, and the accepted exegesis of both the Jewish Scriptures as well as the un-canonized yet still relatively authoritative gospels and letters that would make up the New Testament canon.<sup>4</sup> Christian Gnosticism undid the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity by creating a complex doctrine of Aeons.<sup>5</sup> This doctrine divides God and creates different gods that are less than the original. Here we find a small but significant point of distinction between this early Gnostic heresy and the development of what would become Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. Does not Trinitarian doctrine also divide God and challenge the monotheism of Judaism? The critical differentiation is that the Trinitarian ideology seeks to find the unity in the aspects of a one all-powerful God. The Gnostic division is far more drastic, and in Irenaeus' view dangerous. It reduces God to a flawed creation and suggests that a higher power exists in the Pleroma over the God professed by the obviously less enlightened Christians. Pagel writes:

Irenaeus states as his major complaint against the Gnostics that they teach the insidious doctrine that "there is another god besides the creator," Hans Jonas is hardly original, then, when he declares that what characterizes orthodox teaching is its insistence upon monotheism, upon the monarchy of God—the claim that God is one, creator and lord. What characterizes Gnostic doctrines, however diverse these are, is the denial of this claim: Gnostics either teach dualistic ontology, or they modify monotheism to distinguish between God as creator, on the one hand, and God as father, or as spirit, on the other.<sup>6</sup>

This dualistic theology not only created greater and lesser versions of God, but it had the same effect ecclesiologically. Here again history repeats itself. Where Christianity had created strife within the synagogue between the enlightened followers of Jesus and the more traditional Jews who clung to a more conservative understanding of Judaism that had no room for a semi-divine messiah from Nazareth, the Gnostics claimed an enlightened higher revelation of God that traditional Christianity could not condone. Irenaeus' great fear was realized in a false

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<sup>4</sup> Gerard Vallee, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics* (Waterloo, Ontario Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1981), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine H. Pagels, "The Demiurge and His Archons," *Harvard Theological Review* 69, no. 3-4 (1976): 301.

Christianity that appealed to Christians using the same terms for differently understood meanings. Von Balthasar writes, “Pagan polytheism was relatively easy to deal with. But here was an enticing system claiming to incorporate Christianity into its ‘synthesis’.”<sup>7</sup>

*Polytheism Answers Theodicy*

One of the key points of departure between Irenaeus and those Gnostics whom he identifies as heretics and blasphemers is the differentiation between the Creator God and the Gnostic Demiurge. The Gnostic Demiurge creates, but is neither omniscient nor supreme, rather He is subordinate to the greater gods of the Pleroma. At first glance, this appears to be a radical departure from Christianity and the scriptures. The story of God and in particular the story of creation were being exegeted differently and the story was being combined with the special revelation of the Gnostics, creating an entirely new interpretation of Scripture. From this starting point two very different views on various practical matters emerged. Is Creation good and done with full knowledge, free will, and power by a supreme God, or is creation an accident or that which was done with shortsightedness or ignorance? How one views the material world and creation colors one’s view of many things in Christianity. Irenaeus argues that the very idea of another God pulling the strings of the Creator God (Demiurge) is ridiculous. Donovan says, “The basic thrust of his argument is that to hold a Pleroma superior to the Creator God contradicts both principles of sound thought (Irenaeus accepts that one cannot argue for an infinite regress: *AH* II. 1,3) and the common understanding of God as one who is neither ignorant, negligent, nor bound by necessity.”<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, in fairness to the Gnostics, that their creation myth at least explained some issues for which the Church had far less attractive answers. If creation is tainted and the material world a mistake, that would help explain the problem of evil, natural

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<sup>7</sup> Balthasar, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Donovan, 50-51.

disaster, disease and other troubling realities. Which is easier to accept: that these things are the pawns of a sovereign God, or that the created order is broken and the God who made it at least slightly flawed?

The implications of starting with a different view of creation such as the one postulated by Valentinus are dramatic. We should not be surprised that Irenaeus in his refutation of Gnosticism does significant work developing and communicating orthodox theology. How we approach creation is at the heart of systematic theology. It is the loose thread that unravels the whole garment.

### *The Problem of the Flesh*

Once it is established that the created world is flawed (without even getting into the process of the Pleroma and Aeons), then it is a simple leap to the position of elevating the psychic and spiritual above the physical realm. Norris writes:

The two essential points, then, on which the heretics agree is (a) their refusal to acknowledge that the one ultimate God is the Creator—in the Valentinians' Platonic language, the Demiurge—of the visible cosmos, and (b) their refusal to acknowledge that 'flesh'—which is what Irenaeus means by 'God's handiwork'—is susceptible of salvation. Thus they are 'ungrateful to the one who made them' and at the same time contemptuous of their own salvation (since they too, Irenaeus thinks, are certainly flesh, whether they acknowledge it or not).<sup>9</sup>

By neglecting the world of the flesh, the Valentinians were treading upon that most sacred ground of the early Church: salvation. Later theologians throughout history will lean towards a disdain of the flesh and yet will not receive the vigorous rebuke that Irenaeus gives the Gnostics. What happened here that their soteriology generated such vehement opposition by this Church Father?

Certainly battles have been fought, councils convened, and heretics declared, all based on different interpretations of scripture, the nature of God, and the process of salvation throughout

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<sup>9</sup> Norris: 53.

The Church claimed revelation and oral tradition as its locus of authority, as did the Gnostic Christians. They had exegetical methods and hermeneutical interpretations of scriptures, as did the Gnostics. All of these similarities put Irenaeus and the other Church fathers in an awkward position. They had to find a way to dissect the Gnostic heresy without impugning methodologies such as revelation, oral and apostolic tradition, and exegesis of the scriptures. Irenaeus brought into the discussion as his primary weapons both the disunity and unsoundness of the Gnostics' teaching and what he calls the "Rule of Faith." The Rule of Faith is Irenaeus' contribution to orthodoxy; it involves not simply what is being taught, but the legitimacy of the teacher as well as the reception of the doctrine by the wider Christian community. Donovan states, "It is true that there was not a *comprehensive* Rule of Faith, but there was indeed a *widely accepted* one. What was at work was not the unbridled exercise of authority, but the exercise of authority within a believing community whose norms were in the living faith proclaimed in the word and celebrated in sacrament."<sup>12</sup> The Christians who supported Irenaeus' Rule of Faith lived in a world of flesh and blood and saw the incarnation of God for the salvation of humankind as the crux of the gospel. For Irenaeus, then, another primary heresy of the Valentinians was their dismissal of the flesh and the salvation that goes with it. Irenaeus even alludes to how they will be raised in the flesh at the resurrection whether they like it or not.<sup>13</sup> Why Irenaeus finds this disdain of the flesh to be so dangerous is the subject of a later chapter. What we are asking at this point is simply why the Gnostic Christians felt the need to develop this viewpoint and how it affected their understanding of the gospel?

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<sup>12</sup> Donovan, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." 1.22.2

*A Gnostic Twist on Exegesis and Authority*

The source of the Gnostic dualism that defines their view of matter and spirit is actually found in Genesis. Genesis 1:26 suggests that God employed other intermediaries to help create the world by using the phrase, "Let us make..." In monotheistic Judaism, God alone created the world and would have needed no other. Early Christianity took a similar view to Judaism yet had already begun the makings of Trinitarianism by claiming that the Logos of God helped create the world. Reimherr says, "The main stream of Judaism had already affirmed that God was both the ultimate and the efficient cause. This raised the problem of how a good God, who was all-powerful, could have created an imperfect world. The question therefore arose whether early Christianity could adopt a mediator and still retain its belief in the creator which it found in Jewish theology."<sup>14</sup> With the door already opened by the speculation of many Jews and early Christians, creating a Gnostic mythology to explain these mysteries was not a great stretch. If there is more than one god, then there must of course be a hierarchy. Different Gnostic teachers postulated on this doctrine. Cerdo, who influenced Marcion, developed the "two god" theory. One god was good and higher, while the other cruel and lower. It was the latter who created the world and all the matter in it.<sup>15</sup> Heracleon, another follower of Valentinius, developed his theology from John's gospel and concluded that there were three gods: the supreme Father God, the God of the Jews, and the God of the Samaritans who was also the devil.<sup>16</sup> Diverse versions of this doctrine of emanation existed in Gnosticism, but they agreed, in stark contrast to monotheism, that God had or needed help in creation and that perhaps the god or archon who actually did the creating was not all good. This doctrine allowed for an imperfect world and for evil while at the same time allowing for a perfect and transcendent God who is worthy of

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<sup>14</sup> Otto Reimherr, "Irenaeus and the Valentinians," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1960): 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

worship. The fact that this perfect and transcendent God is removed from this world allows for the problem of evil and suffering, while keeping the ultimate and highest God removed from an imperfect creation.<sup>17</sup> Thus the God of the Old Testament is the author of sin by virtue of his imperfect creation and his own imperfection. This creates a serious challenge to the understanding of Christology for the Christians of that day. If sin can be transcended, then why is there a need for a mediator for sin in Christ? If the God of the Old Testament was imperfect, yet Christ was perfect and without sin, then whose Son is he? We find in Valentinian Gnosticism a reinterpretation of the role and nature of Christ as the early Church understood it.

According to the Valentinian doctrine noted by Irenaeus, there were two distinct versions of Jesus: The Jesus of the economy, meaning the human Jesus who was born of Joseph and suffered in the flesh, and the Savior Jesus who descended upon Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and ascended again before the suffering and death of the human Jesus on the cross. Donovan says, “This group, the Valentinians, separate the Jesus of the economy, born of Joseph and able to suffer, from the Christ who is invisible, incomprehensible, and impassible. Irenaeus comments that they wander from the truth because they deny the true God when they deny that God’s only-begotten Word was made flesh and suffered for us.”<sup>18</sup> The idea that Christ is invisible, incomprehensible, and impassible gives us some insight into how and why Irenaeus developed more distinctly his view of the incarnational Christ who not only can be known and understood, but came specifically to make God known and understood as the Word in the flesh. Here we see the roots of Irenaeus’ Johannine Christology and the foundation for his soteriology of recapitulation. For Irenaeus, the truth of God is not found by mystical and secret revelation, but in the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus, the Logos incarnate. What is fascinating is that it

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<sup>17</sup> Denis Minns, *Irenaeus* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Donovan, 81.

was John whom many of the Gnostics claimed was part of the inner circle of disciples that received the higher knowledge that could only be passed on to those who could understand it. Roger Olson comments, “Irenaeus assumed that if such a teaching existed, Polycarp would have known of it and would have told him about it. That none of the bishops of the Christians recognized or acknowledged it seriously undermined the Gnostics’ claim.”<sup>19</sup>

James, the brother of Jesus, also proved to be an attractive figure for the initial source of Gnostic thought handed down in secret through oral tradition.<sup>20</sup> The non-canonical epistle of James (*AP JAS*) lends itself to a Valentinian reading. There is debate among scholars however if this is a Gnostic gospel due to its positive assessment of Jesus’ death and martyrdom.<sup>21</sup> What we do find in *AP JAS* is the re-occurring source of authoritative oral tradition claimed by the Christian Gnostics. We find in the assertion of a secret oral tradition by the Gnostics the cyclical logic that so infuriated Irenaeus. If one disagreed with the Gnostic position it was because they were unenlightened. Those who were unenlightened were not able to comprehend the complex beauty of the Gnostic doctrines. Therefore, if one did not accept their teachings, it was because he or she was of an inferior spiritual class and were unable to receive the wisdom of these elite and secret oral traditions. Needless to say, it was extremely difficult to combat this type of logic, especially when your opponent used the same words and images as your tradition, and utilized oral and written tradition just as you did. Thus, Irenaeus did not spend a great deal of ink combating their methodology; rather he attacked directly the core irrationality of their teachings and defended the authority of the Church.

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<sup>19</sup> Olson, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Pheme Perkins, "Johannine Traditions in *Ap. Jas. (Nhc 1,2)*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, no. 3 (1982): 403.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Investigating the Gnostic Doctrines*

We cannot look back on the battle for the souls of the Church that Irenaeus waged without calling into question the accuracy of his interpretation of Gnostic teachings. Do we have an argument from silence on behalf of the Gnostics? Is Irenaeus' illumination by refutation an accurate depiction of what the Christian Gnostics believed and taught? Irenaeus claimed to have written his apology after having discussions with Gnostics and reading the *Commentaries* of the disciples of Valentinus and Ptolomaeus.<sup>22</sup> Until the relatively recent discovery of the Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi, Irenaeus' depiction of early Gnostic teachings was the foundation of the Church's understanding of the Gnostic heresy. Tiessen states, "Irenaeus provided us with the earliest clear exposition of Gnostic teachings in order to provide the church with an adequate critical response."<sup>23</sup>

Not all scholars concur with this view that Irenaeus' version of Gnostic teachings lines up accurately with those found at Nag Hammadi. Elaine Pagels rejects the notion that Irenaeus fairly represents Valentinian teachings. She compares Irenaeus' depiction with that of the early Christian Gnostic writer Theodotus and notes that Irenaeus selectively omits essential points of Valentinian doctrine.<sup>24</sup> Her argument boils down to the fact that Irenaeus had an agenda and was more than willing to omit or misrepresent Valentinian teaching to serve his purpose. "Irenaeus' *Treatise against the Heresies* is not to be mistaken for a fairly straightforward presentation of Valentinian theology that essentially parallels the *Excerpts from Theodotus*. Those who have

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<sup>22</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, "Gnosticism as Heresy: The Response of Irenaeus," *Didaskalia* (Otterburne, Man.) 18, no. 1 (2007): 32.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 31-32.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine H. Pagels, "Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology : Irenaeus' Treatise Vs the Excerpts from Theodotus," *Harvard Theological Review* 67, no. 1 (1974): 35.

taken it as such have underestimated Irenaeus' ability to 'subvert and destroy' the theology of those he considers a serious threat to the unity of the church."<sup>25</sup>

Terry Tiessen takes a different approach and claims that, for the most part, the Nag Hammadi texts have confirmed the reliability of Irenaeus and "demonstrated his knowledge of the various Gnostic traditions which appear in those texts."<sup>26</sup> In fairness to both Dr. Pagels and Irenaeus, he did of course have an agenda, and certainly did not approach the topic with a scholarly detachment. For Irenaeus the authenticity of the Church and the Gospel was on the line. However, it should be noted that there is scholarly consensus that there was an enormous diversity of Gnostic teaching even within particular schools of thought such as the Valentinian. The discovery of a small library of Gnostic teachings from that era in Upper Egypt, and the other few scraps of writing that remain, cannot reasonably span the breadth of Gnostic doctrine and its many variations. It would seem one would have to give the benefit of the doubt to Irenaeus who devoted himself to combating what he perceived to be an enormous threat to the Church. Tiessen's argument is that, while *Against Heresies* does not exactly line up with what was found at Nag Hammadi, as a survey of Gnostic teaching it is fairly accurate.<sup>27</sup> One must also take into account the fact that Irenaeus' audience would have been at least familiar with the basic tenets of Gnostic doctrine. The quickest way to jeopardize his own efforts would have been to misrepresent grossly teachings such as the Valentinians', giving them a clear opportunity to refute what they believed. We must remember that at the time of its publication, Christianity was still a small and largely underground religious sect. They had no authority over anyone but their own members and were still being persecuted by the governing authorities. Irenaeus was not combating Gnostics in general, but rather Christian Gnostics who were part of the community of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 53.

<sup>26</sup> Tiessen: 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

faith who, like other Christians of that day, were members of a group which drew the ire of the government and were often persecuted. The last thing that Irenaeus wanted would have been to stir up trouble within the Church unless he truly understood the Christian Gnostics to be a greater threat to the life of the Church than the hostility of the Roman Empire.

So what was the doctrine of the Pleroma and the Aeons that the Valentinians taught? The doctrine of the Pleroma is confusing, to put it mildly. In its most basic form it is a hierarchy of divinity one creating the next a little lower until the cycle of the Pleroma is complete. According to Irenaeus, these gods or Aeons serve different purposes and have different names in a traditional pantheistic fashion. The all powerful and uncreated Aeon that is over everything the Valentinians called interchangeably Proarche, Propator, and Bythos.<sup>28</sup> There existed with Bythos his contemporary Sige with whom he deposits his seed and to which the Aeon Nous was born; equal to Bythos, Nous alone was able to comprehend his father's greatness. Nous they also called Monogenes, Father, and the Beginning of all things. Bythus and Sige also produced Alethia. "These four constituted the first and first begotten Pythagorean Tetrad, which they also denominate the root of all things."<sup>29</sup> Monogenes begins to fashion the Pleroma by creating Logos and Zoe, who in turn create Anthropos and Ecclesia. Logos and Zoe after creating Anthropos and Zoe create and send forth ten other Aeons. Anthropos and Ecclesia then produce twelve other Aeons. The original Ogdoad (Bythos, Nous, and their children) produce the Decad (through Logos and Zoe) and then the Duodecad (through Anthropos and Ecclesia). The youngest of the Duodecad, Sophia, in an impossible attempt to understand Bythos (who is unknowable except by Nous), creates in her passion a kind of spiritual matter named Acamoth. This matter was contaminated and imperfect because of Sophia's passions and was cast out from the Pleroma.

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<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH 1.1.1*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Nous then created Christ and Holy Spirit to encourage and police the Aeons, lest Sophia's mistake be made again. Due to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Aeons came together and taking the very best of their attributes created perfection naming him Jesus. They also at this point created the angels as his body-guards.<sup>30</sup>

Acamoth, like her mother Sophia, was overwhelmed with passions and desired to return to the Pleroma. These passions ultimately formed the matter that makes up the world. Acamoth petitioned Christ to return to the Pleroma. He in turn sent Jesus, Savior, which Irenaeus called the Paraclete to Acamoth. When Acamoth's wild passions created the world, Jesus separated Acamoth from her passions but did not destroy them as they had taken on a life of their own. He separated them into the evil passions and the good that must endure suffering. Before returning to the Pleroma, Acamoth formed the Demiurge and his angels in the likeness of Jesus and his angels.

The Demiurge, then, became the creator of everything outside of the Pleroma creating the heavens and the earth and humanity; though Irenaeus says he was ignorant of all forms as well as his own mother Acamoth. This Demiurge believed himself to be all there was, ignorant of the distant Pleroma as he was ignorant of any spiritual essences.<sup>31</sup> Acamoth before leaving, deposited a spiritual seed that the Demiurge was unaware of which was passed on to humankind in their creation. While the Demiurge gives them flesh and an animal soul, Acamoth's "gift" allows them a spiritual soul as well. Acamoth does not return however to the Pleroma, but was deposited into a kind of purgatory until all of her spiritual seed has returned from Earth to the Pleroma. This gift of a spiritual soul was not universal to humankind however. People fell into three categories which the Valentinians attribute to Cain, Abel, and Seth. The hylic have only the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. *AH* 1.2.6

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. *AH* 1.5.4

animal soul and cannot fathom the spiritual; these were doomed to destruction as they were really only thinking matter. The psychic were those who can go either way depending on their openness to the Gnostic revelation. The pneumatic were those gifted with the spiritual seed who are transformed by their gnosis and can return to the Pleroma. Essentially, these were the elect who had been given the special revelation and would be saved regardless of what they did.<sup>32</sup> Jesus came then to enlighten the psychic (and ironically the Demiurge) since both the hylic and pneumatic were predestined to their fates. Irenaeus notes that, according to the Valentinians, the Church are the psychics who required good works and gnosis to make it to purgatory, but who could go no further as they were not truly elect, but were saved or damned by their free will.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most fascinating elements of the Valentinian doctrine of the Pleroma is that the Jesus of the Pleroma and Acamoth, through the gift of the pneumatic soul, foretold the Savior's coming through the Old Testament prophets.<sup>34</sup> This is yet another example for Irenaeus of how the Gnostics twisted scripture to fit their theology. McRay says, "Unlike those who have gone before, Irenaeus must argue on the basis of Scripture itself since his opponents are neither pagan nor Jew and accept the Scripture as authoritatively as he does. The danger now is that the Scripture is being perverted."<sup>35</sup> In relation to scripture, the greater danger that the Gnostics presented was not which books were considered authoritative, but rather how they were exegeted. Though other Gnostic scriptures were in use during this time, those could be easily renounced. The real threat to the Church for Irenaeus was the hijacking of scripture to fit the Gnostics' pre-existing theology. Norris says,

The Valentinians for their part asserted that the key to their exegesis—to its content, and presumably to its method—was to be found in an oral tradition they had received, an oral

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<sup>32</sup> Donovan, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *AH* 1.7.4

<sup>35</sup> John McRay, "Scripture and Traditions in Irenaeus," *Restoration Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1967): 1.

tradition which Paul himself alludes to when he speaks of a “wisdom not of this aeon” that is conveyed “among the perfect”—and, clearly, *only* among “the perfect,” a style the Valentinians applied to themselves.<sup>36</sup>

Irenaeus accuses them of focusing on parables and obscure parts of scripture while seeming addicted to numerology.<sup>37</sup> Yet, both the Valentinians and the “Orthodox” church claim authority based on oral tradition and apostolic authority. One has to wonder if the issue really came down to exegetical hermeneutics. While the Valentinians and other Gnostic schools certainly read themselves into the text and postulated theories answering questions no one was asking, such as claiming that the Centurion of the gospels who met Jesus and in whom Jesus marveled is actually the Demiurge,<sup>38</sup> allegorical interpretations of scripture were also a popular and orthodox method of the Church’s hermeneutic. Olson says,

It is tempting now to ridicule such allegorical interpretations as ludicrous, but modern readers should know that they were extremely common in the ancient world, especially in cultures profoundly influenced by Greek philosophy. In general, early Christians did not reject the literal or historical meanings of Scriptures, but they often looked for two or three layers of meaning in them. The “spiritual meaning,” which is often difficult for modern readers to see in the same way, was considered the truer and deeper meaning than the literal, historical, or ethical ones.<sup>39</sup>

Irenaeus was left with a serious dilemma that had no theological precedent. What does one do with a group of people within the Church who interpret scripture in a way that is far different than the traditional meaning associated with a certain text? His problem was compounded by the trumping of the bishops’ oral traditions with a secret Gnostic oral tradition that acted as a kind of cipher, unlocking a plethora of new interpretations of scripture. John McRay postulates that the church had in a sense fallen asleep on the job due to the sense of the imminent parousia of Christians. “Until the time of Irenaeus there had been no development in any significant theology

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<sup>36</sup> Norris: 54.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies.” AH 1.7.4

<sup>39</sup> Olson, 49.

of Scripture in the Church with which he might identify himself.”<sup>40</sup> It is Irenaeus who establishes the precedent of orthodox hermeneutics in his rebuttal of the Gnostic interpretations. By no means a master of philosophy and rhetoric, Irenaeus had a unique ace up his sleeve with which to establish the error of the Valentinian use of scripture: his spiritual lineage to John the apostle.

### *Scripture versus Platonism*

One of the most foundational pieces of scripture used by the Valentinians was the prologue in the gospel of John.<sup>41</sup> Unlike the synoptic gospels, John is loaded with dualistic imagery. While the Valentinians co-opted John to make their case for the doctrine of the Pleroma, Irenaeus claimed that John was written specifically to combat the early forms of the Gnostic myth. Logan says, “His argument that the Fourth Gospel was written expressly to answer the spiritual ancestors of the Valentinians would neatly undercut the latter’s appeal to it.”<sup>42</sup> Irenaeus was uniquely qualified for this fight due to his position as a former student of Polycarp who in turn studied under John. In this way, he was able to speak as an expert about John’s gospel because of this very short chain of apostolic tradition. Irenaeus’ argument against the Valentinians is that the gospel was specifically written to answer the docetic and dualistic errors of Cerinthus, a forerunner of the Gnostic heresy who was included in Irenaeus’ genealogy of heretics going back to Simon Magus. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp told the story of how, upon hearing that Cerinthus had entered the bathhouse at Ephesus, John fled “lest the whole place collapse at the presence of such a notorious enemy of the truth.”<sup>43</sup> Had the appeal of Gnostic teaching merely relied upon a different interpretation of scripture, one has to believe that

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<sup>40</sup> McRay: 3.

<sup>41</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies.” *AH* 1.5.5

<sup>42</sup> Alistair H.B. Logan, “John and the Gnostics,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43, no. S (1991): 44.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*: 42.

its appeal would have been short lived. The power of the Gnostic argument, however, was its roots in Platonic thought and philosophy.

Irenaeus stated explicitly in his preface of *Against Heresies* that he, as a resident of the Keltae, was not used to or equipped to write against the Gnostics with any great demonstration of rhetoric or philosophy. Instead he pressed his case that what he expounded was the simple truth that he hoped those who were trained in these arts would develop more fully.<sup>44</sup> It is impossible to grasp the depths of how influential Platonic thought was to the Western Greek mindset. Gnosticism for all of its mythology was not a foreign idea and one must keep in mind it was monotheistic Judaism and Christianity, which were foreign to the Hellenistic world. The teachings of the Gnostics, as farfetched as they seem to us today, were built upon the foundation of Greek philosophy and far more familiar than Judean theology. For example, one of the key elements of the Gnostic soteriology was the idea of the pre-existence and trans-migration of souls, a thoroughly Platonic idea.<sup>45</sup> One of the hallmarks of Greek philosophy and Gnostic teachings was speculation regarding the metaphysical. In part, this goes a long way in explaining the myriad of teachings regarding God and Christ. Irenaeus however, avoids this kind of philosophical speculation. His emphasis is instead an attempt to correlate the redemptive love of Jesus and the nature of God.<sup>46</sup> Reist says, "Irenaeus' failure to refer to Justin Martyr more than once, and then in a God-Jesus framework, points to a non-philosophical bent in his writings. His God is theocratic, merciful, a God who speaks and not the nature-god of Gnostic experience or the rational principle of Justin."<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that Irenaeus avoided rhetorical tools entirely. He does appeal to reason and common sense in his philosophical arguments, most of

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<sup>44</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* Preface.3

<sup>45</sup> Irwin W. Reist, "The Christology of Irenaeus." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 13, no. 4 (1970): 242.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*: 243.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

which are found in Book II, and excels in the use of irony and *ad hominem*.<sup>48</sup> He simply does not put too much weight on these weaker arguments, preferring to appeal to theological and scriptural arguments to carry the weight of his critique. When he does use philosophical tools it is primarily to demonstrate the humanity of Jesus as well as his full divinity. Finger writes: “Thus, 250 years before Chalcedon, we find Irenaeus, like many who followed him, underlining Jesus’ full deity and humanity, not for metaphysical but for *soteriological* reasons.”<sup>49</sup>

Comparing the systems of the Valentinians with that of Irenaeus, the most obvious differentiation is one of root methodology. Both groups wrestle with the nature of God, humanity, creation, and salvation. However, the paths that the two take are distinctively different. The Valentinians ask the same questions as the early Church fathers, yet they pursue these questions using philosophy where the Church fathers including Irenaeus (with the exception of perhaps Origen) pursue these same questions theologically. Donovan comments,

Theodotus, a disciple of the great Gnostic Valentinus, illustrates the Gnostic approach in his list of key questions: “Who were we? What have we become? Where were we? Whither have we been cast? Whither do we hasten? From what have we been set free?” Reflection oriented by such questions takes as its starting point the human dilemma. The accent is on the human being, and the movement of thought is philosophical.<sup>50</sup>

These questions are not without merit, nor are they ignored by Irenaeus. Instead he moves the locus of authority from speculative philosophy to the theological, finding the answers to these questions in the revelation of God in Christ and the scriptures. In an ironic twist, however, Irenaeus co-opts Platonism in the same way that he accuses the Gnostics of co-opting the scriptures and language of the Church. He takes Platonic ideals and language out of their context

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<sup>48</sup> Vallee, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas N. Finger, “Christus Victor and the Creeds : Some Historical Considerations,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 1 (1998): 37.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Ann Donovan, “Alive to the Glory of God : A Key Insight in St Irenaeus,” *Theological Studies* 49, no. 2 (1988): 293.

applying them to his subject matter distorting them, even to the point of distorting them systematically. Norris comments,

What this means, however, is not just that Irenaeus is not a very good philosopher (although that certainly is the case), nor even that he ends up in a position which can only very loosely be described as Platonist. What it means is that he creates a situation which requires new questions be asked and fresh answers be given them, and that situation is the principle result of the influence which late Platonist philosophy had on his thinking.”<sup>51</sup>

It was these very questions raised by the Gnostic teachers, which threatened the Church that ultimately led to Irenaeus’ incredible theological contributions. Had the threat not been so great, and the questions so central to the definition of orthodoxy, would Irenaeus, a churchman more than a theologian, had the impetus to delineate the nature of God and Christ, the state of humanity and creation, and the implications of salvation? While Gnosticism is a far more subtle threat to the Church today, the theological ideas of Irenaeus, which come from his struggle, are the jewels which we can enjoy today. They hold significant value for Christianity and the Eastern Church in particular.

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<sup>51</sup> Richard A. Norris, "Irenaeus and Plotinus Answer the Gnostics : A Note on the Relation between Christian Thought and Platonism," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36, no. 1 (1980): 23.

## Chapter 2

### RECAPITULATION IN IRENAEUS

Recapitulation is one of Irenaeus' fundamental doctrines, and it is necessary to understand it in order to understand his theology. The term "recapitulation" has various meanings in ancient writers, and Irenaeus himself uses it in more than one sense. But the principal and characteristic meaning of the term "recapitulation" in Irenaeus is that which sees in it the best way to express the work of Christ as head of a new humanity.

J.L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*

One cannot begin to understand the impact of the theology of Irenaeus both during his time and our own, without coming to terms with Irenaeus' overriding theology of recapitulation. It informs his view of salvation, Christology, hermeneutic, and view of humanity and the Church. Without an understanding of recapitulation, one hears only the transcendence and initiative of God which seemingly points his theology towards universalism. Recapitulation, when used by Irenaeus, maintains the tension between a sovereign God and the free will of humanity to grow into the work that God has begun. Wagner writes, "For Irenaeus, salvation engaged the cosmos and history in a divinely planned movement toward the wholeness of humans who obeyed their Creator."<sup>1</sup> Simply stated, the role of Christ was to recapitulate the original creation. It is not limited merely to the incarnational act of God, but is also dependent on the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus. In Christ there is a new Adam who confronts the evil of a broken world, triumphing at every stage and reversing the mistakes of the first

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<sup>1</sup> Wagner, 209.

Adam, and who restores humanity to its original glory and fellowship with God.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, we will look at four key elements of recapitulation according to Irenaeus: Christ as the new Adam, God's victory over Satan, Christ's life work and death, the role of the recapitulated Church, and the ramifications of deification. This chapter is not intended to detail the theology of Irenaeus in each of these four areas as they would be chapters unto themselves, but rather the role that recapitulation plays in each. Since Irenaeus did not set out to write a systematic theology, but rather a refutation of the Gnostic heresies, there is significant overlap in these four elements. Rather than counting such overlap as redundancies, one should marvel at the holistic elements of Irenaeus' use of recapitulation and their interconnected nature.

### *Christ the New Adam*

The role recapitulation played in Irenaeus' view of Christ as the New Adam must be understood within the context of Irenaeus' own writings. One must always read between the lines in any theological statement that we find in the writings of Irenaeus, as their context is taken from a war that was being waged against the threat of Gnosticism within the Church. For Irenaeus, relating Christ to Adam is no mere theological metaphor, but an ontological reality. John Hochban fleshes out this reality with great clarity:

Intimately connected with the teaching of St. Irenaeus on the Saviour as the New Adam, is his doctrine of "recapitulation." The word is employed in different contexts and takes on various meanings, but as applied to Christ in His role of Redeemer, the fundamental notion is that our Lord, as the second Adam, sums up the whole of humanity in Himself as a closed unit. In virtue of this union and solidarity, Christ, by the Spirit which had been lost and which He possessed in its fullness, permeated and sanctified the entire human race, by His life vivified it, and by His obedience 'annulled the old disobedience.' All of this was possible only because Christ became an organic part of that unity which is the human race.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church*, ed. Tim Dowley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 227.

<sup>3</sup> John I. Hochban, "St. Irenaeus on the Atonement," *Theological Studies* 7, no. 4 (1946): 542.

Thus while Irenaeus makes his case for the humanity of Christ to correct the Gnostic heresies, he illuminates a remarkable theological concept. The recapitulation of Adam in Christ restores the Spirit to humanity<sup>4</sup> and in doing so heals what was broken in Eden. Humanity is delivered from a Mosaic ideology that to see God is to die, to a Jesus of the Johannine gospel who claims that to see Him is to see the Father. Humans, like all of creation have been recapitulated through the one who is exemplary of all that Adam was meant to be. Gonzalez states, "According to Irenaeus, everything that has happened since Adam and Eve's petulant mistake is intended by God to help humanity grow up. God always intended that humanity should mature over a long historical process. The actions of Adam and Eve may have altered the details of his plans, but not the basic process. Even if Adam had not sinned, Christ would still have been sent, although he might not have come as a savior."<sup>5</sup> Yet, humankind does sin. Adam and Eve do fall, and with them comes a brokenness that affects all of creation. The recapitulation seen in Christ as the new Adam is a restoration offered to all who will believe and obey, coming under the new head of humanity, Jesus Christ. Thus humanity is given a choice, to follow the old Adam and continue in brokenness and indebtedness to God, or to follow the New Adam in Christ. Kim writes, "There is a strong concept of 'restoration' by Christ of what the primal man Adam lost by his disobedience. In a parallelism between Adam and the second Adam, Christ, Irenaeus demonstrates that by reversing the process whereby sin infected the earth, Christ granted humankind a new creation."<sup>6</sup> The idea that salvation in God's economy is a learning and growing process concedes the idea of progressive revelation. Humanity not only grows into the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Gonzalez, *The History of Christian Thought*, vol. I (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Dai Sil Kim, "Irenaeus of Lyons and Teilhard De Chardin : A Comparative Study of "Recapitulation" and "Omega", " *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13, no. 1 (1976): 70.

new Adam of Christ within a lifetime, but progresses along the timeline of history as well. This theology allows Irenaeus to illustrate and defend the development of numerous covenants within the Old Testament and ultimately the opportunity given by God in Jesus for divine adoption.<sup>7</sup> While on the one hand this appears at first to be an endorsement of the new revelation of the Gnostics, it is in fact one of the central pillars of Irenaeus' attack on Gnosticism. His contention is not that God is unchanging, but that He reveals the unfolding of his plan of salvation cohesively throughout history bit by bit, until it is fully revealed in Christ. This is a brilliant response to the discontinuity those like Marcion saw in the Old Testament and the case for the two God theory. For Irenaeus there is an unbroken economy of history that reveals the ongoing plan of God and the development of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Irenaeus' view of Adam and Eve is instrumental in understanding Christ's role as the new Adam. Where later Church Fathers, and the influential Augustine in particular, view Adam and Eve as complete in their development and relationship with God, Irenaeus sees them as children. Gonzalez states, "So Irenaeus makes the startling claim that Adam and Eve were created as children. This may mean physically, but Irenaeus primarily means that they were *morally* immature. When they disobeyed God, it was in a childish way, because they wanted to grow up too soon, before the right time."<sup>9</sup> This claim by Irenaeus changes both the way we see Christ as the new Adam, but also the purpose and flow of the entire scriptures. Again we must remember that Irenaeus' theology is embattled with a Marcionite view which devalues the Old Testament and its role. Irenaeus writes:

Because as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline, For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, [but she does not do so], as the child is not yet able to

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Gonzalez, 28.

receive more substantial nourishment; so also it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.<sup>10</sup>

What we find from this view of Adam and Eve are the roles that time and potential play. How Adam fell changes the nature of Christ's mission as the new or second Adam. If, as Gonzalez suggests, theirs was a childlike disobedience and not an outright rebellion against God, then what was lost in the Fall, and how does Christ as the second Adam recapitulate it?

In his thought provoking article, Vogel hits on a key Irenaen concept which flies in the face of his Gnostic opponents and in some ways our Western understanding of Christianity and salvation. According to Vogel, ascribing original sin as merely pride is only telling half of the story. "The original act of haste, which plays itself out in every human being, is the root of sin. Attributing the fall to haste does not necessarily contradict the more traditional description of original sin as pride, though it implies it is only partially correct."<sup>11</sup> The guilt of humanity identified in Adam and Eve is the grasping for that which can only be received over time. Vogel writes,

According to Irenaeus, the fall is a mistake about means more than ends. Though God has always intended to give human beings a share in the divine nature, it is necessary for them to become accustomed to bearing it over time. Instead they forfeit this opportunity by trying to become gods too quickly. They try to take what can only be given, to grasp what can only be graciously bestowed on them. ....In other words, in their effort to take the divine life early, human beings render themselves unfit for participation in it, because the divine life is essentially only receivable. It proves elusive to all clutching, clinging, and clasping.<sup>12</sup>

This view of the fall and recapitulation in Christ was the direct antithesis of various Gnostic doctrines and views of Christ which despised the slow preparation of mankind to find their God

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<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *AH* 4.38.1

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Vogel, "The Haste of Sin, the Slowness of Salvation: An Interpretation of Irenaeus on the Fall and Redemption," *Anglican Theological Review* 89, no. 3 (2007): 448.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 443.

breathed potential in the new Adam both in the macro historical development, and the micro life experience of the individual. The very basis of secret knowledge holding the key to becoming like God is the exact lie that Satan uses against mankind in the beginning, and what Irenaeus reveals Christ came to undo.

The question remains as we view Irenaeus' view of the fall and Christ as the new Adam, what exactly was lost in the garden? Later doctrines of original sin and total depravity show a much harsher outcome than what one sees from Irenaeus upon first glance. Steenberg writes, "An attempt to read Irenaeus as presenting no scheme whatever of an Edenic 'fall' would be to over-estimate the case. But of the loss itself, Irenaeus presents the scenario, absent among Christian writers before and rare among those since, of humanity losing that which it did not in actuality possess."<sup>13</sup> What is lost in the fall and recapitulated in Christ is quite simply potential. Part of the reason that Irenaeus goes to such great lengths in his writings *Against Heresies* is to show God's preparation of humans to reach this potential through the Patriarchs and later Israel, the Covenants and the Law. Christ then becomes the potential of Adam incarnate and even that is done through the slow development of waiting on and receiving from God. Vogel writes, "It is not merely the Son's act of becoming incarnate that is redemptive, but his consent to the necessity of growth over time."<sup>14</sup> Christ, the incarnate one, grows as we grow. He comes as a babe, grows through adulthood, and is tempted by the Devil just as we are to follow the ways of Adam and grasp at Godhood. Yet, neither the temptation in the desert, nor the conflict of wills in Gethsemane moved Jesus from trusting and patiently receiving from God. So the new Adam recapitulates humanity showing there is now a second trajectory for life devoid of the "haste of

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<sup>13</sup> M. C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), 168.

<sup>14</sup> Vogel: 444.

sin” as Vogel calls it that is content to follow the lead of Christ and rediscover the potential that was lost in Eden.

The ultimate evolution of Irenaeus’ recapitulation of creation is rooted in his idea of deification. While this is often a doctrine that can be misunderstood, it is important to note that for Irenaeus, deification did not mean merely becoming like God. God, in Irenaeus’ monotheistic worldview, is God alone. It is the various Gnostic teachers that posit a hierarchy of gods most of whom have nothing to do with creation or man, and the avenue of gnosis which transports one to this hierarchy. Irenaeus uses the concept of deification to mean essentially the fullness of the recapitulative salvation process. The creation is still created and has not become, by effort or grace, the creator. God alone is the creator, but through the recapitulative work of Christ, humanity can evolve into the fullness of what it means to be created by God. Mackenzie says,

But the fulfillment of humanity (and in this consists its ‘deification’) is that that which is made is brought into such a personal relation with its Maker through the One who became as we are in order to bring us to what He is, that the closest proximity, the most intimate converse, the direct seeing face to face, is the fullness of the community of union of humanity with God in which humanity’s integrity as the handiwork of God is complete.<sup>15</sup>

The difference in his view of salvation through recapitulation and the popular modern view of salvation are astounding. We find the acknowledgement of sin, evil and brokenness, without the heavy hand of Augustine’s total depravity. Free will and sovereignty are both amply demonstrated and work together in concert to produce not just a saved individual, but a being restored to their original relationship with the creator and a being made whole because of it. Deification is not a doctrine reserved for the elect (election is far more popular with the Gnostic

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<sup>15</sup> Iain M. Mackenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostilicy Preaching* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 77.

crowd at this point than the Orthodox Church) but is the ontological reality of all who God adopts and trains up in Christ.

*Recapitulation as victory over Satan*

In his classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis reveals what is true about those of us who are “enlightened” moderns. If we give any thought to Satan in a real ontological sense, we rarely give him his due. That, however, was not the case for Irenaeus and other Ancient Church Fathers. For them, the battle between Satan and God’s kingdoms was very real and a central part of many of their writings. Irenaeus expands recapitulation beyond merely the forgiveness of human sin, but sees it as the mode of warfare against the devil. “He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam...”<sup>16</sup> As we speak of this elusive theological term of recapitulation we must see the ways that Irenaeus uses it in regard to his view of Satan as it presents a central theological component of recapitulation.

It must be recognized that when Irenaeus applies recapitulation to the motif of Christus Victor, it is not a singular theological concept. When humanity fell and lost their potential to grow in godliness, they were placed into bondage, corrupted and redirected to grow under the tutelage of Satan. If history has taught us anything, it is that human potential cannot be thwarted. We are by nature learners, and if not recapitulated by God, we become excellent students of evil. Finger states, “Whereas Justin frequently mentions current conflicts with demons and Jesus’ mission to free humankind from Satanic bondage, Irenaeus develops the latter theme more thoroughly. He stresses that being under this bondage separates us from God and destines us towards darkness, corruption and death.”<sup>17</sup> What we find in the development of Irenaeus’

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<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” AH 5.21.1

<sup>17</sup> Finger: 46.

thoughts on the recapitulation of humanity is not merely a Christ who teaches blind people how to see, but a liberator who breaks the bonds and tutelage of the devil reminding humanity of who they are and were always meant to be.

The devil, however, as he is the apostate angel, can only go to this length, as he did at the beginning, [namely] to deceive and lead astray the mind of man into disobeying the commandments of God, and gradually to darken the hearts of those who would endeavour to serve him, to the forgetting of the true God, but to the adoration of himself as God.<sup>18</sup>

Is it any wonder, then, considering the context of Irenaeus why his view of recapitulation takes into account the methodology of the devil and the way in which Christ is victorious? Steenberg says, "This methodology of deception is, Irenaeus can declare, the only genuine power the devil possesses."<sup>19</sup> For Irenaeus, the incarnation and initiation of recapitulation has begun but the battle is far from over. If deceit is the weapon of the Devil, then the bishop of Lyons need only look around at the Marcionites, Valentinians, and other sects sprouting up within the Church to see that Satan has dug in, and the real battle has now begun.

Contrary to how the Church will respond in the future to what it considers threats to orthodoxy and authority, for Irenaeus this struggle of truth against Satan and his lies is intrinsically non-violent.

Since the apostasy tyrannized over us unjustly, and, though we were by nature property of the omnipotent God, alienated us contrary to nature...the Word of God...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 violently 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...<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 5.24.3

<sup>19</sup> Steenberg, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." 5.1.1.

It is both fascinating and humbling to begin to appreciate Irenaeus' Christus Victor motif. His mentor Polycarp is martyred as are members of his congregations by a hostile and violent government and his beloved Church is besieged by heresies which threaten to undermine it and yet he sees it through the eyes of one watching a cosmic struggle. Threatened with violence and surrounded with questions regarding the legitimacy of the apostolic traditions, Irenaeus' theology lends itself to long suffering, and waiting on a growing relationship with God. Finger says, "Irenaeus discusses this growing relationship with God with penetrating insight. He notes that his opponents, the Gnostics, crave instant spiritual perfection; therefore they are 'unwilling to be at the outset what they have also been created—men subject to passions.' Instead, 'before that they become men, they wish to be even now like God.'"<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the Irenaen view of recapitulation requires time, maturity, and a slow growth into incorruptibility. It is precisely this waiting on God in obedience that produces spiritual growth and wisdom so that we might know ourselves, and know that these good "favors" are not of our own making, but gifts of God. Yet our inclination is always haste. "We are prone to such a tendency, Irenaeus says, because our bondage under Satan obscures God's love toward us and weakens our gratitude; this leads us to underestimate how much greater God is than we."<sup>22</sup> This then becomes the heart of Christ's recapitulative mission, all that his life, work, and death entail: to bring sight to the blind that we might see the way of death, and through him the way of life.

### *Christ's Life, Work, and Death*

There is no way to write about the life, work, and death of Christ from an Irenaen perspective without making recapitulation the starting point. Irenaeus leaves no room for focusing on merely one aspect, such as the crucifixion, to the detriment of the whole of Jesus'

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<sup>21</sup> Finger: 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

life. Davidson notes, “For Irenaeus, it is vital that the divine Word assumed full human flesh and suffered and died as a human being in order that he might represent humanity to God.”<sup>23</sup> That the divine Logos was incarnate is not enough, for humanity to be recapitulated a new Adam had to appear on the scene and not only reveal who God is, but who mankind was meant to be as well. “By living a perfect human life and triumphing at every stage over the power of evil, Jesus avoided the errors of the first Adam, reversed their ultimate effects, and restored humanity to its original glory in fellowship with God. The final consequence of his participation in the human condition is that human beings come by grace to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).”<sup>24</sup>

The life of Christ can be best summed up in light of his recapitulative work as the one who waits on God. If the way of Adam is a haste filled grasping, then the way of Christ is growing into perfection within God’s timing. Vogel states, “If it is haste that alienates human beings from God, insofar as it leaves them ill-disposed to receive divine life, a fitting salvation would have to undo this impatience. Christ also had to submit to time, to grow into perfection.”<sup>25</sup> When one takes into account the gospels and the teachings of Christ found therein, a pattern can be found there. Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees stems from their twisting the law and thereby forcing the issue. He teaches the people to seek the kingdom and not worry about the troubles of the day. Even Jesus’ pattern of solitude shows an example of one who waits on God. The miracles and signs not only point to Jesus’ unique status, but inherently teach and model the need to be receptive and dependent upon God. Von Balthasar writes,

God intended man to have *all* good, but in his, God’s time; and therefore all disobedience, all sin, consists essentially in breaking out of time. Hence the restoration of order by the Son of God had to be the annulment of that premature snatching at

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<sup>23</sup> Davidson, 227.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Vogel: 451.

knowledge, the beating down of the hand outstretched toward eternity, the repentant return from a false, swift transfer in eternity to a true, slow confinement in time.<sup>26</sup>

For Irenaeus there can be no breaking down of the life, work, and death of Christ into separate theological events. They are holistic, each has its own interconnected character, but none is greater or lesser than the rest. Vogel says,

It is for this reason that Irenaeus insists on the need for Christ to have passed through every stage of human existence. His willing endurance of conception, birth, baptism, growth to maturity (which for Irenaeus means his arrival at old age), his subjection to temptation, betrayal, and, finally, even death—all of which occurred without sin—together constitute the saving act of God in Christ.<sup>27</sup>

This is not to say that Irenaeus does not put a tremendous emphasis upon the cross. He is extremely Pauline in his viewpoint regarding the necessity of the cross, though his emphasis lacks some of the atonement theories which would develop later in history. For Irenaeus, the cross is the ultimate example of obedience. The Gnostics of course had a great many problems with the idea of the God/man really suffering and dying on the cross. But for Irenaeus, the cross is the great proof of Jesus' recapitulative consistency. Osborn writes,

Truth and goodness must go together. If Christ did not really suffer we have nothing for which to thank him *si enim non passus est, nulla gratia ei*, and much to blame him. For he told us that we should suffer gladly by turning the other cheek, but he himself (heretics claim) avoided the painful consequences of this injunction. A non-suffering Christ would be inferior to his followers. Further, unless his obedience has really replaced our disobedience, sin has not been destroyed.<sup>28</sup>

There is one final aspect to the recapitulative work of Jesus in his life, work, and death, and that is the re-introduction of the Holy Spirit. It is not simply enough to see the new Adam modeled, or to be allowed to enter again into the divine life. Those who believe in Christ, who choose his headship, and the way of the new Adam are given the gift of the Spirit as a means of maintaining and growing into their divine relationship. Hochban states, "The principal result of

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<sup>26</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Vogel: 452.

<sup>28</sup> Eric F. Osborn. "Love of Enemies and Recapitulation," *Vigiliae christianae* 54, no. 1 (2000): 18-19.

Christ's redeeming work was, we saw, the re-union of God and His creature. Through the restoration of the Spirit, man could once again achieve his final end, the vision of God, for, says St. Irenaeus, they who are saved 'ascend through the Spirit to the Son and through the Son to the Father.'"<sup>29</sup> The outpouring of the Spirit again caps off the gift of recapitulation creating the vibrancy of life and the power to pursue the path laid for mankind since the first Adam drew breath.

### *The Role of the Church in Recapitulation*

The theology of recapitulation follows a coherent and logical flow from God's initiative to the obedience and atoning work of the Son as the new Adam to the gift of the Spirit. There is, however, one glaring piece that is lacking. How does one move beyond individual salvation and the slow process of deification to the role and gift of the Church, which Christ also leaves and forms? Here again we see the hand of recapitulative redemption at work. It is difficult to keep in mind that for Irenaeus and those of his day, salvation and growing into Christ was not possible outside of the catholic or universal church. Frend writes:

If Irenaeus was a pioneer in his theology, his concept of the church and its work followed more traditional lines. He was a pastor moved as in the prayer found in *1 Clement* (LXIX.6) to "reclaim the wanderers and convert them to the Church of God," and to "confirm the minds of the neophytes." The catholic, or universal church was the means through which salvation was obtained. Its teaching had been established by the apostles and "made clear in all the world," The Eucharist united God and creation by imparting Christ's divine life to believers and guaranteed the regeneration of the flesh.<sup>30</sup>

We must keep in mind the times Irenaeus lived in. There is no government-sponsored church, but instead a history of cyclical persecution. Threats from both inside the church and out are questioning its authority and theological interpretations. One must keep in mind that Irenaeus' theology was the result of works dedicated entirely to combating heresy and defending the

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<sup>29</sup> Hochban: 557.

<sup>30</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 249. 249

Orthodox Church and its recapitulative function. It is in the Church where the saints grow in their relationship with God and imitation of Christ, the Church which holds the keys to the kingdom. The Church is in short the practical machinery of God's recapitulative act, and the true cupbearer of the life giving traditions. Frend says,

In the Eucharist, therefore, believers participated in Christ and were redeemed. The distinctive marks of the church were the proclamation of the Word based on Scripture and the identification of the Christian with Christ through baptism and the Eucharist. Pauline mysticism, absent from the writings of second-century orthodox leaders, was being restored to a more central role in Christian thought by Irenaeus.<sup>31</sup>

While we see Christ taking on the role of the new Adam, the Church takes on the role of the new Eden. In it, humanity finds salvation and the way back into communion with God. Joel Kurz states, "The church is the 'new Eden' established in the midst of creation; it is the distinct sphere of recapitulation in the world, as Irenaeus explained: 'For the church has been planted as a garden (*paradisus*) in this world; therefore says the Spirit of God, "Thou mayest freely eat from every tree of the garden," that is, Eat ye from every Scripture of the Lord."<sup>32</sup> The church then for Irenaeus becomes the place of life giving nourishment for the believer of a new creation and a new order. Where he sees the tree in the garden bringing bondage and death to humanity, Irenaeus sees in the church, and in particular the Eucharist, a recapitulation of that first food. Where one brought death, the new food of Christ brings life.<sup>33</sup> The recapitulative value of the church however goes beyond its access to the Eucharist and traditions. It is the keeper of the true and orthodox faith.

It is interesting to note that Greek Christianity, which gravitated later to Irenaeus' view of deification, was not immediately enamored with the Bishop of Gaul. This primarily has to do

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Joel R. Kurz, "The Gifts of Creation and the Consummation of Humanity: Irenaeus of Lyons' Recapitulatory Theology of the Eucharist," *Worship* 83, no. 2 (2009): 123.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

with Irenaeus' literal translation of the millennium in Revelation as well as his dedication to the church in Rome. Davidson writes, "Although Irenaeus painted a picture of the true church as a catholic and universal entity, he also chose to mention the Church of Rome in particular as a powerful instance of the apostolic succession."<sup>34</sup> In the face of the Gnostic challenge, Irenaeus relies heavily upon both scripture and the apostolic tradition, which we will discuss in a later chapter. He goes to great length to raise up the church in Rome as a shining example. "His concern, though, was to signal the unbroken continuity of apostolic authority vested in one Episcopal lineage as an example of the orthodox tradition. He asserted that 'every church, that is, the faithful everywhere, should be in agreement with [the translation is disputed] this church, on account of its pre-eminent authority.'"<sup>35</sup> Again we must remember that first and foremost Irenaeus was an apologist and the battle he waged was for the very core orthodoxy of the Church. Any and all theological insights and lessons spring from this.

The final recapitulative function of the church mimics that of Christ's final gift. For Irenaeus, the church is to be a wellspring of life in the Spirit. While the church is the gathering of restored humanity, it is also brought to life by the Holy Spirit. Kurz says, "Irenaeus beheld the Spirit as the church's animating presence, 'bringing distant tribes to unity and offering to the Father the first-fruits of all nations.'"<sup>36</sup> Effectively, while the recapitulation of humankind is carried out in the spiritual and abstract realm, the church provides the physical and mundane means for this new community to live out their new reality.

Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation provides a fascinating alternative to the more traditional legal and atonement theories of Western Christianity. He is able to develop a theology that is grounded in scriptural theology from both the Old and New Testaments. Contrary to his

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<sup>34</sup> Davidson, 228.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Kurz: 123.

adversaries, Irenaeus is able to provide an explanation of salvation that sees the handiwork of God from Genesis to the current day. Recapitulation develops the best of Pauline doctrine of adoption and the new Adam while at the same time giving a quantifiable picture of what the doctrine of sanctification looks like once it has run its course. This doctrine is perhaps the greatest gift and legacy that the Bishop of Lyons left Christianity as he sought to deal with the more immediate threat of Gnosticism within the Church.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE GENIUS OF IRENAEUS' ANTHROPOLOGY

What can there be so close as *making* and *made*?  
Nought twinned can be so near; thou art more nigh  
To me, my God, than is this thinking I  
To that I mean when I by me is said;  
Thou art more near me, than is my ready will  
Near to my love, though both one place do fill;  
Yet, till we are one, ah me, the long *until*!<sup>1</sup>

The problem with many anthropologies is that they begin and end with humankind. There seems to be no end to the theories and perspectives of humankind's greatest questions. In our modern age, we devote entire sciences to determine all that we can about the nature of humankind. We are a biological marvel, a psychological conundrum, and a sociological mystery. While these sciences find ample material to study, they cannot begin to answer the questions immune to science that have plagued man for all of history. Philosophy's questions have not been answered by our astounding leaps in science and technology. Xintaras says, "Fortunately, man is beginning to study himself once again, his inner life and deeper aspirations and to seriously ask the questions that have always puzzled him—Where did I come from, why am I here and whither shall I go?"<sup>2</sup> If humankind is indeed made, and not the byproduct of a random collision of particles, then is it possible for people to answer that question about themselves? Is it not the province of the creator to give meaning and purpose to its creation? Better yet, if there is

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<sup>1</sup> George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1975). 28 April.

<sup>2</sup> Zachary C. Xintaras, "Man, the Image of God : According to the Greek Fathers," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 1, no. 1 (1954): 48.

no creator and all of life is a random accident, then are not the questions then moot as there are no answers, and no one who can answer them anyway?

In one of the great ironies of Irenaeus' theological contributions, he who claims to not be a philosopher argues one of the most profound answers to the question of humankind. Irenaeus begins his anthropology to combat the starting point of the Valentinians and other Gnostic writers who use humankind as their starting point for identifying these anthropological questions. Canlis writes, "Appraising this new 'theology' put forward by various Gnostic groups, Irenaeus sounded the alarm that the very life of humanity was at stake. His accusation centered on their offence of 'wounding men unto death, by teaching blasphemy against God our Maker and Supporter'."<sup>3</sup> His main thrust is not that the Gnostics have a false knowledge (though that will be the running theme throughout *Against Heresies*), which colors their view of humankind, but that they miss the point of anthropology all together. Irenaeus' response is as simple as it is elegant, for it is no counter theory to explain away the human condition. It is simply this: we are made; God is the maker. "And in this respect God differs from man, that God indeed makes, but man is made; and truly, He who makes is always the same; but that which is made must receive both beginning, and middle, and addition, and increase."<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Gnostic thought, God is not an imperfect creator who somehow overlooked the divine spark that allows the elect to be transformed by their gnosis into transcendence. Irenaeus establishes a God who is a perfect creator who creates a non-static creation. Just as the earth changes, so man also changes. If a person is evil, if wickedness and suffering abound, it is not a flaw in creation; it is the price that is paid for an open ended creation. In short, it is the price that is paid for humankind's free will.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. Canlis, "Being Made Human: The Significance of Creation for Irenaeus' Doctrine of Participation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 4 (2005): 435. Pg. 435

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 4.11.2

<sup>5</sup> Xintaras: 54.

*Avoiding an Augustinian view of Free Will*

It is difficult for many in the West today to read about humanity's free will without seeing it through the lens of the debates of Augustine and Pelagius. Augustine's theology developed into a kind of monergism in which God's sovereignty so overshadowed humanity's free will as to make it virtually non-existent.<sup>6</sup> However, Irenaeus develops his synergistic view of human free will long before the "glass half-empty" pessimism of Augustine or the "glass half full" optimism of Pelagius. For Irenaeus, the free will of humanity is one of the tools which God gives to people so that they might grow and evolve in their understanding and life in the New Adam that is Christ. It was the Gnostics who contended a measure of predetermined fatalism in their anthropology by claiming that only some had the divine seed that would allow them to transcend their humanity. Donovan writes, "We are free to do good or evil, to believe or not, and even 'to accept or to refuse that gift of the Spirit which is the likeness (*homoiosis*), which alone is able to make [the human person] pursue conduct pleasing to God.' This strong affirmation of human liberty is at the same time a clear rejection of the Gnostic notion of predetermined natures."<sup>7</sup> According to Osborn, Irenaeus' version of free will therefore also differs from Pelagius in that the latter saw free will as the means by which "humans can live sinless lives through their 'natural endowments' and are responsible to do so."<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus establishes the synergistic middle ground by admitting that the point of sin is to teach people the right way of God so that they would choose correctly, while at the same time recognizing that there are those who purposefully choose sin and will be judged accordingly. Irenaeus writes, "No doubt, if anyone is unwilling to follow the Gospel itself, it is in his power [to reject it], but [such conduct]

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<sup>6</sup> Olson, 254.

<sup>7</sup> Donovan, "Alive to the Glory of God : A Key Insight in St Irenaeus," 294.

<sup>8</sup> Olson, 268.

brings no small amount of injury and mischief.”<sup>9</sup> This view of sin is a natural development from Irenaeus’ view of humanity in the story of Adam and the Fall.

*Adam and Eve as the key to humankind*

Irenaeus bases the root of his anthropological theology in the creation of Adam and Eve. Unlike other church fathers, he combines the two accounts of humankind’s creation in Genesis, emphasizing the fact that the hands of God made Adam from the finest earth.<sup>10</sup> This seemingly irrelevant detail was a critical counter to the Valentinian belief that the human person was made from a fluid and diffused matter. His creation account takes another unexpected turn when Irenaeus relates that Adam and Eve were created as children. This idea is in stark contrast to the more common view that Adam and Eve were made perfect and then lost perfection, paradise, and immortality through original sin. While Irenaeus with the apostle Paul holds that Adam and Eve were created as immortals in paradise, Irenaeus holds that Adam and Eve did not lose their perfection along with the rest in their disobedience, as they had never been created in a state of perfection. What Adam and Eve did have that was lost was free communion with God.<sup>11</sup> Here we see the major deviation from later Western theology regarding the Fall. According to Irenaeus, Adam’s sin was not a calculated exercise in disobedience, but rather that of a child who grasps at what he cannot yet have. He makes this clear in his argument with Tatian, that God’s wrath was poured out on the serpent who, by deceiving Adam and Eve, held them captive promising immortality, but delivering death. Interestingly, Irenaeus does not let Adam and Eve off of the hook for their sin, but instead uses it to show how humankind was deceived into foregoing their

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<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *AH* 4.37.4

<sup>10</sup> John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87.

<sup>11</sup> Hochban: 530.

relationship with God by wanting to become the maker instead of that which was made.<sup>12</sup>

Irenaeus' interpretation of humanity's fall is intrinsic to opposing the Gnostic anthropology. It is through the secret gnosis of the "pneuma" that the Gnostics believed they rediscovered their lost perfection and participation in the community of the Pleroma. The need for a distant and transcendent God coupled with a flawed and ignorant creator was foundational for this approach. Irenaeus completely disarms the Gnostic foundation by highlighting the creative and transcendent God who binds himself to humanity through the act of creation. Canlis states:

To unmake God is to unmake humanity. For what Irenaeus knew about the nature of God's relationship to humanity the Gnostics could not accept, namely, that God has bound Godself to humanity in such a way that anthropology is the inverse of theology, not it's opposite. For 'the glory of man is God', and if human glory is indeed God, then what is needed is not Gnostic anthropological myths but a holy imagination in which to grasp God and his remarkable commitment to the human race.<sup>13</sup>

Adam's fall does not unmake humanity; to have done so would have been victory for the serpent and utter defeat for the Creator. What Irenaeus stresses from the original sin of Adam and Eve is both God's uncompromising fidelity and justice, and the lesson that choosing sin (not choosing the way of God) leads to death and destruction. Hochban points to the lesson of gratitude gleaned from sin: "As a sick person, by the experience of disease and its sufferings, learns to esteem the benefit of good health, so man learns to appreciate the joy and value of communion with God by the experience of its opposite."<sup>14</sup> While this view of original sin and Adam and Eve gives us a different starting point than later theologians such as Augustine, Irenaeus in no way believes that human free will and the knowledge of sin are in themselves enough to restore communion with God. Something else was lost in the Fall that needed to be reclaimed; something only the hands of God could recapitulate.

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<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 3.23.1

<sup>13</sup> Canlis: 438.

<sup>14</sup> Hochban: 531.

*The Hands of God and the Imago Dei*

Irenaeus uses early Trinitarian language to explain the nature of God compared to the complexity of the Aeons found in the Gnostic Pleroma. Simply put, the two hands of the creative Father are the Son and the Spirit. With these he effects and affects humankind creating the human person in the image of the one God. “Now man is a mixed organization of soul and flesh, who was formed after the likeness of God, and moulded by His hands, that is, by the Son and Holy Spirit to whom also He said, ‘Let Us make man.’”<sup>15</sup> This is a far more theologically loaded statement than it appears on the surface. In what way does Irenaeus conclude that the human person has been made by God in His image and likeness? Why the need for two descriptive words instead of saying either God’s image *or* His likeness? If the creative instruments of God are the Son and the Spirit, was the creation of humanity completed with Adam, or are these instruments of God continuing to create humankind into the image and likeness of God? The answer that Irenaeus gives in answer to the Gnostic teachings which remove an artistic God from the creation of humanity are seriously challenge our view of our own anthropology and interaction with God.

In stark contrast to a theological viewpoint that ascribes perfection to God’s creation in Adam and Eve, Irenaeus makes no claim to such a lofty anthropology. His praise is reserved for the patience of the creator. Canlis says, “The work of the two hands is not complete on the sixth day of creation, but they persevere in their creative work throughout the history of humanity and the history of each person, so involved as to leave fingerprints.”<sup>16</sup> Being created as experientially an infant, humankind is a work in progress. Irenaeus departs from the Gnostic view of haphazard creation by insisting that the hands of God are always at work drawing the human person into the

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<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH 4.Pref.4*

<sup>16</sup> Canlis: 442.

fullness of the New Adam, the prototype of what people are to become. He develops the metaphor of the Hands of God, even more concretely. The Spirit (which Irenaeus attributes to wisdom unlike Paul and Hebrews which attribute it to the Word) leads and guides humankind in God's perfect timing. Here Irenaeus strikes against the Marcionite and Valentinian teachings, which try to separate the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament. For Irenaeus, the Spirit and the Son lead, guide, and order humankind until the time of the final human perfection in Christ. Osborn says, "Adam never left the hands of God, who made him and finally perfected him in Christ. There was nothing strange in the assumption of Enoch and Elijah into heaven for, from Adam onwards, the hands of God had grown used to ordering, ruling, and supporting what they had formed."<sup>17</sup> Not only does Irenaeus establish a doctrine of creation based on the Genesis accounts to show the intentionality of creation as opposed to the haphazard creation theory of the Gnostics, but he introduces the beautiful depiction of the *imago dei*. Adam is not merely carefully and lovingly made, he is made in the very image and likeness of God by the Word. Here we see Irenaeus' Johannine background described in detail as the pre-existent Word shapes humanity in his own image, an image that is the visible depiction of the invisible God.

One must be careful not to read in modern interpretations of the image of God to Irenaeus' depiction. To do so would be to miss the power of his imagery and the essence of his theology. Irenaeus steps outside of chronology when he describes the formation of humankind in the image of God. The pre-existent Word does not form humanity and then come incarnate in history in the same form, but instead forms humanity in the image of that which he will come. To put it another way, the Word does not come as a human in Jesus because that is what humans looked like, but rather forms humanity in the beginning to reflect what he will look like when he

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<sup>17</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 91.

comes. Mackenzie notes, "In other words, the sequence is not that humanity has a form which the Word at His incarnation has to take, but that the word made flesh, in the dispensation of God who beyond time and space orders the temporal/spatial character of creation, is the pattern which is traced on humanity."<sup>18</sup> This thoughtful and intentional creation of humanity after the pattern of Christ flies in the face of the Gnostic view of the flesh which was seen as corrupted and an imperfect byproduct of an imperfect creation. Irenaeus subtly reveals the great flaw in the Gnostic view of the flesh by declaring it to be an integral part of the salvation of humanity. Humanity is not saved from the flesh, but is transformed and perfected while in the flesh.

The creation of humans in the image of God goes far beyond the idea that Adam was patterned after the incarnate Word. Image and likeness carry with them a relational component that goes beyond the physical creation. Simply being formed to look like the incarnate Word is not enough, the likeness of God relates to the relational aspect of communion with God. As the hands of God are in perfect communion with the intellect of God (Irenaeus' Trinitarian picture), so also was humanity made to be in perfect communion with God upon reaching his full maturity in the New Adam of Christ. Mackenzie notes, "Thus the image of God is not a quantitative, formal or physical consideration by itself and for itself and in the first instance: it is found primarily in the qualitative, relational existence which stamps human estate and dignity just that only in its relation with God through his Word after whose image man is made."<sup>19</sup> The brilliance of Irenaeus' rebuttal of the Gnostic teaching, which he describes as a "homicidal doctrine,"<sup>20</sup> is not that he replaces their knowledge with his own, but shifts the argument from one of correct knowledge to one of a worshipful response. The Gnostic view of the divine seed planted in the elect cannot co-exist with a God who is intimately involved with His creation because the

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<sup>18</sup> Mackenzie, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 3.16.8

Gnostic god is too far removed in his transcendence. God is not at work in the formative work of ongoing creation, instead he has merely left the gnosis that certain individuals can follow like a roadmap to find him. The object of worship is no longer the relational creator, but knowledge itself. The line that Irenaeus draws in the sand is that humankind is not saved by what he or she knows, but who they know and the relational nature of that atonement. Yes, humanity can progress towards God, but that progress is only possible by being in union with God through His Word and led by His Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

### *The True Cost of the Fall*

One might think at this juncture that if humans did not fall from perfection with the sin of Adam, and that God never stopped forming and drawing humanity to himself, then the sin of Adam had no lasting consequences. Nothing could be further from Irenaeus' perspective. According to Thomas and Parker, the Western theological view of the Fall is colored by Augustine's extraordinary theological influence.<sup>22</sup> The traditional emphasis has been on the guilt of Adam and Eve and God's subsequent punishment. However, reading the Genesis account through the lens of Irenaeus, the key element at work is not guilt but shame. It is shame that brings ruin to humanity's relationship with God, and this broken relationship delivers humanity from its intended relationship with the Creator to the captivity of the Serpent. If God does not deliver humankind over to Satan because of their guilt, how then do they become captive to the Devil? Here Irenaeus provides an interesting insight into the motivation of Satan at the Fall. According to Irenaeus, the Serpent (he uses terminologies such as the Serpent, Satan, and the Devil interchangeably) reveals his own jealous opposition to God through the envy of God's

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<sup>21</sup> Mackenzie, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Thomas and Stephen Parker, "Toward a Theological Understanding of Shame," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2004): 176.

creation and the image and likeness that they share relationally with God. Wingren writes, “Envy of man seized one of the angels...With the intention of depriving man of the life which he lived in accordance with the *imago* and *similitudo* of God, of wresting from him his superiority and his destiny.”<sup>23</sup> By enticing the infantile creations with a shortcut to what they will one day become, Satan shows his hand and draws humankind into his own fall. Thus the bondage of the Devil is not one of a power struggle between Satan and God, for only God can create and is Himself master over the Serpent, but one of subtle education. Satan has taught humankind through their disobedience to God, the ways of sin and death, for which he is the true master. Humankind wanting what they were not ready for, disobeyed God beginning a cycle of grasping distrust. As humanity was seduced into disobedience and rebellion, the relationship with God was broken and Adam and Eve, along with all who would come after, found themselves joined in rebellion with Satan against the Creator and His creation.

Irenaeus expresses the idea that evil is not a natural part of the world; it is indeed unnatural, born of lies and false promises.<sup>24</sup> The Gnostic explanation for the problem of evil in the world places the blame at the feet of a flawed creation and flawed creator. Irenaeus counters this by attributing the evil in the world to the fateful lessons learned by Adam and Eve that taught them the ways not of life, but death. Their bondage is not by Satan’s power alone but by their own addiction to living in disobedience to God, and the lessons they have learned from the Serpent. At this point it seems apparent that a distinction must be made for there is a fine line in Irenaeus’ view of evil and the Fall which brings it about.

It is one thing to take into account the reality that evil can happen when men and women make evil and cruel choices. This is nothing earth shattering, and seems to be universally

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<sup>23</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 43.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

accepted in all religious and philosophical systems as they wrestle with the problem of evil. Yet in spite of this simplistic viewpoint, there is an undercurrent of unexplained evil. Pain, sickness, disease, decay, in essence the very story of Job from the Old Testament, these are the elements of evil that confound the world's great thinkers. How indeed can a good God either allow evil to terrorize humanity, or more disturbing still, be the author of such evil? The Gnostic's answer to this question was simple. Evil exists because the demiurge who created the world and created humanity is flawed and thus evil simply is woven into the fabric of the world. Whether that evil is perpetuated by humans against each other or the consequences of nature is beside the point. Irenaeus claims both aspects of evil are under the purview and hands of God. Humans can choose evil because they are beings of free will, however evil itself is a tool used by God to teach humankind repentance. Irenaeus gives neither Satan nor humanity too much credit when it comes to the evil in this world. Using the story of Jonah, Irenaeus illustrates that without death and other evils, "we would never repent either."<sup>25</sup> The implication that Irenaeus makes that God is unapologetically the author of evil is staggering. Neither the Gnostics flawed deity, nor Augustine's claim that evil is the abuse of free will, carry the weight of Irenaeus' explanation.<sup>26</sup> Evil is not the byproduct of something else gone awry; it is the gift of God. As any competent doctor will tell you, pain is your body's way of letting you know something is wrong. Within that same line of reason, Irenaeus ascribes evil not merely as a consequence of humanity's sin, but as a clarion call to the much larger problem of his broken relationship with his creator. A dramatic remedy is required beyond simply a better exercise of free will. What is needed is a full recapitulation, a new teacher who can show them what they were meant to be, and the empowering of the Spirit to help them break their cycle of addiction.

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

### *The Thrust of Anthropology*

Had Irenaeus written his theology centuries later, his view of humanity and the nature of anthropology could be dismissed as a difference of opinion amongst theologians. The very placement of Irenaeus in history however, does not allow us to dismiss his doctrines so easily. Irenaeus' development of his anthropology is a clear and direct response to the Gnostic heresies of his day. It cuts to the very core of theology, namely soteriology. As much as I have explored his doctrine of original sin and the Fall, I would be remiss to not point out the stark implications of this doctrine. The underlying current of Gnostic thought was so vastly different than Irenaeus' anthropology that it threatened the very essence of salvation itself. To say that Gnostic and Platonic thought had a disdain for the flesh would be an understatement. For the groups that Irenaeus was writing against such as the Valentinians, salvation was, in reality, a salvation from flesh itself. Theirs was a spiritual transcendence that threatened the purpose of salvation entirely.

What complicated the matter for Irenaeus was that the Gnostic Christians fueled their flesh transcending soteriology from none other than the Apostle Paul. Irenaeus writes, "Among the other [truths] proclaimed by the apostle, there is also this one, 'That flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.' This is [the passage] which is adduced by all the heretics in support of their folly, with an attempt to annoy us, and to point out that the handiwork of God is not saved."<sup>27</sup> According to Lawson, Wilhelm Bousset accuses Irenaeus of being the one to distort the words of Paul in his attack on the Gnostics by claiming, "He has torn away from the system of Paulinism all those statements from which the Gnostics had drawn consequences."<sup>28</sup> Yet as John Lawson points out, Paul was first and foremost a Jew who held claim to the Jewish hope of resurrection and did not divide humanity into elements of body and soul. Furthermore, the

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<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 5.9.1

<sup>28</sup> Hochban: 229.

transfiguration and resurrection of Jesus left an indelible imprint on Paul and early Christianity. “The hope of the Christian was naturally and rightly moulded by these circumstances, and the result was the doctrine of a real bodily resurrection for humanity, though of a transfigured body.”<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus contends that the apostle’s use of “the flesh” was not to be taken literally, but represented the carnal lusts of the flesh. By interpreting Paul and other scripture into their existing hermeneutic, the Gnostics have missed the point of anthropology and salvation altogether.

Irenaeus makes it clear in his exasperated rebuttal, *Against Heresies*, that the root error of their theology is that it precludes participation with God. Canlis states, “It is only now that we are fully situated to appreciate the depth of Irenaeus’ polemic against Gnosticism. Far from excessively cataloguing or caricaturizing Gnostic cosmologies, Irenaeus is taking on these very cosmologies *because their frame work prohibits participation*.”<sup>30</sup> To be saved, and brought back to the fullness of what it means to be truly human, is to find one’s life in God. “The means for that life lies in participation (*participatio*) with God, a participation involving knowing God and enjoying God’s goodness. According to God’s love God is known in such participation, and human beings in turn enjoy the goodness of God in the same participation,” says Donovan.<sup>31</sup> The glory of God then is not merely the majesty of His handiwork according to Irenaeus; the pinnacle of His handiwork is the dynamic relationship between the creator and the created. What a far cry then from the Gnostic doctrine of transcendence which lacks the relational aspect of a god who is so transcendent that there are layers of Aeons between humankind and himself. Is it any wonder then, that Irenaeus attacks the Gnostic threat with such passion? They have not simply

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<sup>29</sup> John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: The Epworth Press, 1948). 231.

<sup>30</sup> Canlis: 443.

<sup>31</sup> Donovan, “Alive to the Glory of God : A Key Insight in St Irenaeus,” 289.

misinterpreted scripture or traditional doctrine, but have missed the point of soteriology altogether.

### *Anthropology in Community*

Up to this point, it would be easy to isolate the individualistic nature of these opposing anthropologies. Irenaeus, however, was a churchman who believed in the community of the Church and who wrote against the Gnostic ideology to maintain the unity of the Church and the salvation of its members who had fallen under the sway of this “false knowledge.” He makes a rather strange and perhaps double-minded claim by saying that the Church has been planted as a garden in the world (*paradisus*) by God. He sees it as living demonstration of the recapitulative theology, which he has attributed to humanity.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Irenaeus is placing the impetus on the living reality of his theology, thereby moving away from complicated theologies and abstract knowledge. On the other hand, he is not content to let the Gnostics claim the intellectual high ground either. While their claims make sense from a Hellenistic and Platonic viewpoint, Irenaeus also claims that it is the Church that has been the repository of “true” doctrine and the keepers of the true and saving knowledge of God. Irenaeus is not content to claim that the Church is merely the depository of true gnosis, or that they are ambivalent to knowledge content to practice an unthinking faith. In true Irenaen fashion, he finds a synthesis of both. He unabashedly compares lineages between the apostolic tradition and that of the Valentinians and Marcionites, claiming not only the backing of scripture written from the founding fathers, but also the apostolic tradition that was given to the unlettered barbarians, who although they are unfamiliar with scripture, have grasped the good news of the gospel. “If any one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their

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<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies.” *AH* 5.20.2

ears, and flee as far off as possible, not enduring even to listen to the blasphemous address.”<sup>33</sup>

While it is obvious that Irenaeus is challenging Gnostics within his churches, it is critical to note that his anthropology cannot exist without the Church. It is the praxis and vehicle for all that God has done for humankind and all that humankind reflects in their participation with God. Osborn says, “The beauty of the church derives from the presence of God’s gift of the spirit in all the church, ‘for where the church is, there is also the spirit of God, and where the spirit of God is there is the church and every grace. And the spirit is truth.’”<sup>34</sup> Humanity’s participation with God is a communal effort, and this is the great cause for despair for the Bishop of Lyon. It was not that a new philosophical theology challenged the traditional views of the Church; it was that there was a movement within the community that threatened to destroy the integrity of that community.

### *Anthropology Encapsulated in Ritual*

One of the most severe challenges to the new teachings of the Gnostic movements within the Church was the incompatibility of their ideology and the rituals of the community. It is one thing to claim a different exegesis of scripture, or to have a secret oral tradition passed on to the elect. These are challenges to orthodoxy that prove difficult to contest. There was however at the heart of the Church two traditional rituals which reinforced the theology of Irenaeus to which the Gnostics had no real answer. The Eucharist was a key cohesive element to the early church. Unity was not dependent on uniformity of doctrine or practice, but rather on those few elements that had been handed down as sacred. The bread and wine of the Eucharist carried with it a power and understanding that the Gnostics struggled to replicate. Ideologically, the Eucharist represented the flesh and blood of Jesus, the flesh and blood that in some way (depending on

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<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 3.9.2

<sup>34</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 122.

one's doctrine) brought salvation to humankind. How then does one celebrate this hallmark of Christian community when the foundation of one's theology is that flesh and blood are corrupted and of no lasting value? Irenaeus points out, "How could those who believed that created matter emerged from base and vile origins also claim to have a true Eucharist in which 'the bread over which thanks have been given is the body of their Lord, and the cup His blood, if they do not call Himself the Son of the Creator of the world?'"<sup>35</sup> The only viable option for the Gnostic sects was to keep the form of the ritual while transforming its meaning. According to Donovan, Irenaeus is unimpressed with the "magical" rites performed in the name of the Eucharist by the Gnostics, as well as the reinvention of baptismal rites that conform in a more mystical way with the theology of the Pleroma.<sup>36</sup> The Gnostics were forced to reinterpret and create new alternatives to these traditional rites to align them better with their secret theology. This creates a glaring and obvious problem for them that Irenaeus highlights when he traces the lineage of the apostolic tradition of the church with that of the Gnostic schools. They are exactly what they appear to be, new inventions based on older orthodox ritual whose practice can be traced to the birth of the church. The Gnostic aspersion of the rites of the Eucharist and baptism are not only then challenges to the orthodox church in the same way as their doctrinal teachings, they are in fact a direct challenge to head of the church and redeemer of the world who initiated their institution. Kurz says, "For Irenaeus, the Eucharist itself stands as the strongest witness to the faith of the church regarding creation and the sacramental consecration, the incarnation and the consummation of all things. The Eucharist attests to the goodness of God's creation while at the same time affirming the creator's will to give life and humankind's ability to receive it."<sup>37</sup> When the dust settles, Irenaeus has a unifying force that carries far more weight than his writings or his

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<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 4.18.4

<sup>36</sup> Donovan, *A Guide to Irenaeus*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Kurz: 113.

subtly brilliant theological connections. Those are for future theologians and generations to ponder. What enables Irenaeus to protect the unity of the church he loves is ultimately the sacred rituals which every person can partake and identify with whether they are man, woman, scholar or “barbarian.” The bread and wine are flesh and blood; the water is Spirit. It is these rituals that attest to the ongoing work of God in humankind and the relational progression toward God that will see these communities of faith through their first great theological crisis.

Irenaeus attacks the anthropology of the Gnostics because it is the foundational disdain of the flesh and their transcendent, impersonal gods of the Pleroma which he believes are such a threat to Christianity. Much of the Gnostic mythology can be written off as the byproduct of over active, and imaginative, speculative philosophy. However, as Gnosticism found its way into the Church it threatened the very fabric of Christianity not only because of the story behind their mythology, but also its implications. The implication of the Gnostic system is that humanity must find their way clear of the physical realm to join with God. This self-reliant kind of thinking is the very antithesis of an incarnational God who takes on the flesh of humanity, suffers and dies so that we might know God, and be known by God. The incarnation of God is the very definition of immanence, and any doctrine or theology which precludes the immanence of God would not only create a vastly distorted anthropology, but would dramatically change the adherent’s Christology as well.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHRISTOLOGY AND CREATION

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

*The Prologue to the Gospel of John*

During the time of Irenaeus' ministry there was not an authorized canon of scripture, no lengthy corpus of Church law, nor the precedent setting councils and creeds that would establish the boundaries of orthodoxy within the Church. This not only allowed for a great deal of religious diversity within Christianity and the different cities of influence, but it allowed for an essential measure of grace within community. This was, after all, a persecuted group following the traditions and teachings of persecuted and often martyred men and women who were following their persecuted and martyred founder from Nazareth. The early church fathers themselves often speculated on aspects of Christianity as they developed their theologies in an attempt to explain what had occurred in the coming of Christ. What must it have taken then for a bishop within the church to begin to draw lines declaring who by their doctrinal positions were "in" the community and who would be considered "outside" of the Church? To put it simply, various Christian practices from different parts of the cosmopolitan Roman Empire just do not merit the claim of heresy. For heresy to be identified and rooted out at this early stage in the development of the Church could mean only that the very identity of Christ, and by default the Church, was at stake. The heresy combated by Irenaeus was Christological and replaced the

traditional view of Christ and Creation with a philosophical forgery that was as dangerous to the church as any civil persecutions. Norris states,

‘Heresy,’ by contrast, was in the first instance, as Irenaeus understood it, a denial or perversion of this elementary truth (and, to be sure, it’s obvious or immediate implications). This is clear enough from his definition of the two capital errors shared by all ‘heretics’: refusal of the ultimacy of the Creator of the visible, material world, and refusal of the bodily dimension of human persons as both essential to their nature and capable of sharing in salvation.<sup>1</sup>

Norris goes on to shed light on the exuberance with which Irenaeus (and Justin before him) carries out against the heretic doctrines as he sees them ultimately as a demonic attack. They are for him no different, albeit far more subtle, than the physical attacks upon, and martyrdom of Christians.<sup>2</sup>

### *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*

Both traditionalists like Irenaeus and Gnostic teachers like Valentinus and Marcion share a common starting point for the Christ. In both theologies, Christ is pre-existent and in both He descends to and ascends from Earth. He alone knows the truth about the invisible supreme God who rules the cosmos (though Irenaeus’ Christ knows relationally, while the Gnostic Christ simply possesses the knowledge of God) and He is the revealer of the path of salvation. From this point forward, however, we find an enormous deviation of the purpose, process, and very make-up not only of these two extraordinarily different Christs’ but also that of the world they came to save.

The point of great deviation that the Gnostics need to find a way around is the act of the Incarnation. The irony is rich when one considers that the Incarnation was a blasphemous offense (one could argue the *ultimate* punishable offense) to the conservatively monotheistic

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<sup>1</sup> Norris, "Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Later Second Century," 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Jews, while at the same time offensive to the Greek mind, which considered matter and creation imperfect and tainted. Yet, the Incarnation of the pre-existent Logos is the starting point for the Church's Christology at least from Irenaeus' Johannine tradition. Reist states, "The Incarnation is for Irenaeus the basis for the meeting place of God and man. It is the focal point of God's salvation for man. The key question is 'For why [in that case] did He descend?'"<sup>3</sup> The Gnostic response identified with the Valentinians was that Christ descended to impart the saving gnosis and rituals that would free the elect from the power of the Demiurge who rules this Earth. This Demiurge believes himself to be God alone, but is in fact one of many emanations from the true God who is invisible and transcendent.<sup>4</sup> The Incarnation, from this perspective then, was merely a way of communicating in a way humanity (though not all) could understand the secrets of salvation from the power of the Demiurge (the God of Israel) who ruled the world. While it may seem a bit "cloak and daggerish," it relegates the Incarnation of the pre-existent Christ to a minor role. He is the messenger, the Incarnation is the means, and the real key is the gnosis that he leaves behind. By relegating the Incarnation to a minor role, the Valentinians are able to synthesize their doctrine with the doctrine of the Incarnation while minimizing the fleshly dynamic of Christ.

Irenaeus' answer to the question of why the Incarnation occurs strives for the exact opposite of the Valentinian explanation.

Now this is His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God. Wherefore the prophets, receiving the prophetic gift from the same Word, announced His advent according to the flesh, by which the blending and communion of God and man took place according to the good pleasure of the Father, the Word of God foretelling from the beginning that God should be seen by men, and hold converse with them upon earth, should confer with them and should be present with His own creation, saving it, and becoming capable of being perceived by it, and freeing us from the hands of all that hate

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<sup>3</sup> Reist: 245.

<sup>4</sup> Pagels, "A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters," 313.

us, that is from every spirit of wickedness; and causing us to serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days, in order that man, having embraced the Spirit of God, might pass in the glory of the Father.<sup>5</sup>

Irenaeus is a Greek who is familiar with the Hellenistic viewpoint of matter, so why such adverse conclusions? The answer it seems is the influence of Polycarp and the Johannine school, which did not denigrate what God had created. In a synergy of Greek and Christian thought, transcendence was union with God, just as in Platonic, Stoic, and other mystery religions and philosophies. The difference was that this union was not merely spiritual, but included the whole person. Constantelos says,

In John's and Irenaeus' language, as well as in Greek patristic thought, salvation as union with God includes the total person, body, spirit, and soul, but not in a pantheistic manner which would mean absorption of the human by the divine. Irenaeus' understanding of man's union with God should be understood in the sense of the union of a cell with an organism or a body.<sup>6</sup>

Ascribing a purpose to something as mysterious as the Incarnation is no easy feat. One must realize that both Irenaeus and the Gnostics doctrines are already established by their soteriology. The purpose of salvation therefore defines in many ways their Christologies and the doctrines and theology that they create to explain their positions. If the purpose of salvation is a spiritual escape into transcendence, as the Gnostics propose, then everything that Jesus does and is must be read through that lens. If on the other hand Jesus has come to save humankind as the God/Man, as Irenaeus and other Patristic Father's teach, then some greater significance must be placed upon the Incarnation that illustrates and sheds light more clearly on how it is that God has come to save His creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *AH* 4.20.4

<sup>6</sup> Constantelos: 355.

*Christ the New Adam*

The starkest contrast between the Gnostic and Irenaen Christologies is that of informer versus reformer. When Jesus comes, we see the immediate parallels with Adam. Just as God creates Adam from virgin soil that had not “yet been rained upon, tilled and sown with seed,” so Christ comes from the immaculate conception of a virgin in Mary.<sup>7</sup> If ever one has wondered why the need and emphasis of the virgin birth was such a significant theological concept within the Church, Irenaeus begins to hint at it in the purpose of Christ. Mary becomes then the archetype of Eve in the redemptive and recapitulative process. Humankind is not recapitulated through her, as only the Logos can accomplish that, yet she certainly plays a recapitulative role.

The Gnostics have their own explanation for Mary since they must account for her in their Christology. The various schools of thought all come to the same basic conclusion that the divine Saviour “passed as if through a tube” through Mary. She is merely a conduit and nothing else.<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus turns this idea on its head claiming that the involvement of Mary does exactly the opposite. His claim, according to Steenberg, is that “the reality of Christ’s true humanity is guaranteed by his birth from a human woman, who by conceiving and giving birth imparts her own human nature to her child.”<sup>9</sup> The immaculate conception of Jesus not only gives him a full element of humanity, but it also removes from the equation any sense of adoptionism. Here again we see the parallel with Adam. Adam is formed by God, he is God’s direct creation for whom no one else can take credit. The immaculate conception of Christ serves the same parallel purpose. God is the creator of Jesus; he is not appointed or chosen. There is no agent Christology at work here. The Logos of God is merged with the virgin flesh of Mary to produce that which is both of

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<sup>7</sup> Mackenzie, 102.

<sup>8</sup> M. C. Steenberg, “The Role of Mary as Co-Recapitulator in St Irenaeus of Lyons,” *Vigiliae christianae* 58, no. 2 (2004): 122.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

God and of humankind. What is utterly fascinating is that it appears Irenaeus builds his polemic against the Gnostics specifically to counter their version of events and ideology. His is not a variation of a theme, or a different explanation, but a radically opposite conclusion at almost every turn. Furthermore, by using the Gnostic teachings as the blueprint for his apology he lays the groundwork for what will become deeply influential orthodox theology, particularly in the East. It is as though through his refutation Irenaeus is revoking any Gnostic claim to Christianity because they seem to have missed the point of Christianity altogether and nowhere is that more clear than in their Christology.

The holistic beauty of Irenaeus' view of Christ and atonement is that it does not hinge on a single event to the devaluation of any other event in his life. When Jesus comes as the New Adam he is not simply coming to preach a new way of life within the Kingdom of God, or to die as a form of propitiation, or even to start a new religious movement. His coming, the very incarnation of the Word, begins a cosmic chain of events. Hill comments:

Christ, for Irenaeus, is central to God's plan for helping humanity become mature. He is the invisible God made visible on earth; but he is also human, made from the same lump of clay as everyone else. This mere fact, that the Creator has become joined to the creation, begins the process of salvation. It is as though creation has been *infected* with God's nature.<sup>10</sup>

By coming as he does and ministering in his particular style, Jesus the reformer purposefully avoids the Jewish political messianic expectations and the celebrity notoriety of a prophet who speaks for God and whose impact is decided by what is said. Instead, the power of Jesus' ministry is driven by the power and mystery of who and what He is. Does Christ speak to the political powers? Certainly. Does he speak prophetically the will and Word of God? Of course, but only because he is that very will and Word of God. Jesus' ministry was not driven by what needed to be said, but rather who he needed to be. Jesus comes to save humankind by showing

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<sup>10</sup> Hill, 30.

humankind how to *be* again. He models the dynamic relationship of the Father/Son, Creator/created dynamic to offer a way back to God. If there is a core to his soteriological view of Christ for Irenaeus, it was not found in his dying, but in his coming.<sup>11</sup>

As Satan plays a central character in the original story of Adam and the Fall, so in the gospels we find him in the inauguration of Jesus' ministry as the New Adam. The simple explanation that this passage was included in the gospels merely to show that Jesus was sinless, misses the parallelism in Irenaeus' Christology. The three temptations of Satan in the wilderness are repetitions of the initial temptations with which the Serpent snared humankind. The first temptation is the most obvious and basely physical. After fasting, Jesus is tempted to eat that which God has not provided, grasping if you will to have what he wants rather than trusting on the provision of God.<sup>12</sup> Jesus' remonstrance of Satan's temptation serves as a rebuke as well for the way of fallen humanity who has believed the lie. Satan's second appeal is that of a rational argument filled with crafty half-truths. Just as Eve is convinced by the argument because of the seed of truth that they do want to be like God, and that to a degree He wants them to understand good and evil as He does, *albeit in his own timing and economy*, so Satan uses scripture to test the divinity of Jesus and places the rational mind in a manner that is autonomous to God. Mackenzie notes, "This pride of reasoning, says Irenaeus, is countered by our Lord's humility, and by the fact that his is the very presence of God though here as man."<sup>13</sup> The final temptation which was so evidently appealing to Adam and Eve, holds no such appeal for Jesus. Satan claims dominion over the Earth and is willing to share that in exchange for worship. This is the same promise of the Serpent to Adam and Eve that by disobedience to God (and in fact obedience to the Serpent) they too could become like gods." Irenaeus points out that this seemingly desperate

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>12</sup> Mackenzie, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

temptation, which is easily countered by Jesus claiming that only God is worthy of worship, not only reveals the Devil's apostasy but his ignorance as well as he does not recognize Jesus as that very God.<sup>14</sup> I cannot concur with MacKenzie's assessment of this ignorance by Satan, nor his ascribing of that to Irenaeus' position, simply from the standpoint that the gospels with which Irenaeus was intimately acquainted with frequently show examples of the demons' own awareness of Jesus divine place as the Son of God. It is hard to fathom that they would know and yet Satan would not be aware of the true identity of Jesus. Regardless, it does appear that the modes of temptation used by Satan (which seems grossly inadequate for one such as Jesus) are a parallelism to the original temptation within the garden, thereby giving a measure of support to Irenaeus' New Adam Christology.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence for this type of Christology is the ministry of Jesus himself. If, as the Valentinians claimed, Christ came merely to deliver an incredible yet secret truth, then why the miracles, the healings, the teachings and the Passion? In fairness, the Valentinians, Marcionites, and other Gnostic sects have their own ways of working out explanations for these events. However, if as Irenaeus claims, the purpose of the coming of Christ is to be found in his redemption of humankind and his modeling of what it means to be truly human, then the ministry of Jesus leading up to his death and resurrection begins to take on a greater meaning than perhaps we have traditionally allowed. Where the Western Church has traditionally focused heavily on the Passion, Irenaeus sought a more holistic approach that also put equal emphasis on Jesus' ministry because in it, we find the essence of what a new humanity will look like.

Trying to encapsulate the ministry of Jesus is no simple task. When John asked from prison if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus replied by describing what he had been doing. Those who

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

were blind can see, the lame can walk, the leprous are made clean, and the poor get good news.<sup>15</sup> Essentially, Jesus is framing his ministry in the restorative work of Shalom. The New Adam has a ministry of restoration, bringing God and humankind into relationship and peace with one another. Yet Shalom goes beyond that, as it also encapsulates the harmony of humankind with one another, with creation, and with their Creator. The New Adam of Christ brings about a restoration in Irenaeus' viewpoint even of natural creation. Wagner states,

The new Adam's father was God, not an ignorant demiurge, and was not in bondage to Satan but filled with the gifts of the Spirit. According to Irenaeus, when the new Adam walked on the earth, the soil hardened by the expulsion of the first couple from Eden began to be renewed because now God's presence was once more among women and men.<sup>16</sup>

Irenaeus uses the concept of recapitulation to describe the work itself of Christ and while he uses it broadly to describe the work of the Word, the point of this chapter is not to delineate how Irenaeus saw salvation achieved through recapitulation, but rather who it was that accomplished this work; for it was not methodology that separated the Gnostics from Irenaeus as much as it was Christology.

### *A Glimpse behind the Curtain*

The transfiguration of Christ holds an unusual place in the theology of the gospels. Strong evidence already existed in the gospels that Jesus claimed some degree of divinity. So what was the point of this obviously special event done only for a select few? S.L. Johnson observes:

The transfiguration of Jesus Christ is one of the most astonishing and perplexing of his earthly experiences. It is the one occasion in which the bright beams of his divine glory blazed through the sackcloth covering of his humanity. It is somewhat strange, then, that

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<sup>15</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, ed. *Today's New International Version Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006). Matthew 11:1-6

<sup>16</sup> Wagner, 214.

commentators and preachers, usually gushing blethers, have become as Peter who “wist not what to say” (Mark 9:6).<sup>17</sup>

Irenaeus sees in the transfiguration of Christ the “smoking gun” of his Logos Christology. The man Jesus is no simple man at all, but the embodiment of the Word. As Steenberg points out, His is “the manifestation into the world of God’s being, his presence, the ‘face’ which was, under the first covenant, unapproachable to men.”<sup>18</sup> In the incarnation, however, the unapproachable is made approachable, the unknown known, for God is made man.”<sup>19</sup> What is revealed at the transfiguration is the fullness of the New Adam and the fullness of the divine Word. While this does not prove beyond a shadow of doubt the unity of Jesus as the God/man, the transfiguration does call into question the Gnostic position, and in particular the Valentinian position, that the Savior Jesus from the Pleroma who was pure Spirit and the human fleshly Jesus were two different beings. By ascribing the possession of the human Jesus by the spiritual Christ, the Valentinians are able to maintain the strict aversion to the combination of spirit and matter which made up their theology. However, the transfiguration of Christ proves to be a bit of a problem for their theological system. Irenaeus is even less gracious considering this form of thinking as it not only demeans the suffering of the Word on the cross but all who are martyred and suffer for the hope that the redeemer of humanity has come, and that man has an opportunity again to be truly human. Irenaeus states,

I judge it necessary therefore to take into account the entire mind of the apostles regarding our Lord Jesus Christ, and to show that not only did they never hold any such opinions regarding Him; but, still further, that they announced through the Holy Spirit, that those who would teach such doctrines were agents of Satan, sent forth for the purpose of overturning the faith of some, and drawing them away from life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> S.L. Johnson, “Transfiguration of Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124, no. (1967): 133.

<sup>18</sup> M.C. Steenberg, “Two Natured Man,” *Pro Ecclesia* XIV, no. 4 (2005): 416.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *AH* 3.16.1

For Irenaeus, the transfiguration not only reveals the divinity of Jesus, but it reveals to the disciples present, the fullness of humankind. As the New Adam prototype of a redeemed humanity, it is a glimpse of what humanity may become in their fully mature restoration.

Steenburg says:

The significance of this fact for our reading of the transfiguration is immense... The human nature which Christ bears into the eternal kingdom, witnessed atop the mountain by the apostles, must be understood as related to, in fact consubstantial with, this nature in its full scope—thus of human nature in the personhood of every human individual. So in the transfiguration we witness not only the realized eschatology of Christ's glorified state, but also the full vision of humanity in its own perfection.<sup>21</sup>

If indeed, as Irenaeus believes, the human nature of Christ is not a copy of ours, but in fact the prototype of true humanity, then the transfiguration of Christ is an astounding glimpse behind the curtain of what the deification of humankind is to look like. Jesus not only reveals the divine nature, but human nature as well. These two aspects cannot be divided as the Gnostics would prefer to do, or else the salvific importance of the incarnation itself is lost.

### *The Role of the Cross*

A cursory glance at the soteriology of Irenaeus would seem to place very little importance upon the passion of Christ in respect to all else that he has accomplished. A closer look however reveals just the opposite. The crucifixion holds a key place in the theology of Irenaeus just as it does for the other patristic fathers. What we find missing in his theology are the various theories of atonement, which spring up around this event later in the history of the Church and the elevation of the Passion as the central element of salvation. If Christ is to recapitulate the sin of the first Adam, it is not enough only to defeat Satan, showing humankind the errors of living under the Devil's lies. It is also not enough to reveal what the fullness of humanity looks like in its redeemed state. Christ must undo the very disobedience of Adam

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<sup>21</sup> Steenberg, "An Anthropology of Transfiguration," 419.

which brought about death. Irenaeus makes yet another interesting parallelism between Adam and the New Adam in Christ. Just as Adam's disobedience to God hinged upon a tree bringing brokenness to humankind in his participation with the Divine, so Jesus' obedient act of suffering and dying upon a tree reverses Adam's disobedient act of eating the fruit of the tree. There seems to be some scholarly debate as to whether Irenaeus saw the crucifixion as merely an extreme act of obedience, or where there are more Pauline themes of atonement at work. Bandstra states: "It is widely held that this motif is not—or only barely—present in Irenaeus' teaching."<sup>22</sup> Bandstra cites Lawson who says: "S. Irenaeus apparently knows nothing of any theology of Penal Substitution, of Divine Appeasement, or of Satisfaction."<sup>23</sup> While Irenaeus certainly follows the more mystical and incarnational view of atonement, the place of the cross in his Christology still looms large. He leans heavily on Isaiah's suffering servant motif showing that the obedience that Christ showed in accordance to his two natures is a dual obedience to both God and humanity. Mackenzie says, "But this participation is in the existence of Christ as the suffering servant, as He obediently both cuts his way forward and subjects himself to the will of the Father and the wrath of man, in the obedience of that cutting forward and cross, and bears away the judgment of God on disobedient humanity and the hatred of that humanity for God, re-creating humanity in Himself."<sup>24</sup> Tiessen notes that there is a larger cosmic element to the cross in Irenaeus that is a calling together of both the heights and depths of creation, and the "East and West" calling of all humankind back to God.<sup>25</sup> While it is inaccurate to say that Irenaeus places no relevance on the propitiation element of the cross, perhaps it is better to ascribe to him a much more vast sense of

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew J. Bandstra, "Paul and an Ancient Interpreter : A Comparison of the Teaching of Redemption in Paul and Irenaeus," *Calvin Theological Journal* 5, no. 1 (1970): 59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Mackenzie, 200.

<sup>25</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, "Irenaeus and Modern Responses to the Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Didaskalia (Otterburne, Man.)* 18, no. 1 (2007): 57.

what that propitiation entails. While it is unarguable that the Incarnation lies at the forefront of Irenaeus' soteriology and Christology, it is as though the events of the Passion are the climactic point of reckoning where all offended parties are called to the table for reconciliation.

The cross is then the dramatic and ultimate exclamation point of all that the Word came to do in the Incarnation. Osborn says, "For the cross displays the ultimacy of love. The reconciling act is declared in 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' A new epoch begins as he who taught the forgiveness of enemies now makes real his precept."<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus takes the battle to the Gnostics by claiming that if a second Christ came who avoided the cross we would prefer without hesitation the one who suffered yet bore no grudge against those who did evil to him.<sup>27</sup> This is a direct blow to the Gnostic view that the spiritual Christ escaped the suffering of the human Jesus since a humiliated and suffering god defied their sensibilities. In what is a brilliant Christological stroke, Irenaeus claims that if such a "savior" escaped suffering he would not be worth following. Osborn writes, "If Christ did not really suffer, so far from thanking him we should blame him. He told us to suffer gladly by turning the other cheek, but he himself (heretics claim) avoided suffering and was inferior to his followers. Even our salvation is undone for unless his obedience has really replaced our disobedience, sin has not been destroyed."<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus' Christology seems complete. Satan has been undone, humanity has been shown its true nature, and Adam's disobedience is annulled by Christ's obedience unto death. Yet there is one more foe that remains which Christ must defeat, and that foe is death itself.

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<sup>26</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 247.

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *AH* 3.18.5

<sup>28</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 247.

*The Resurrection and Incorruptibility*

That Easter proves an enormous problem to the Gnostic system is an understatement. Jesus' death and the giving up of his spirit on the cross gave the Gnostics an example for their view of transcendence. Their system held no fear of death, for death released the pneuma into a Platonic union with God. Flesh and blood were merely vessels of the spirit, an inconvenience, and a temporary one at that. Yet, Christianity was born and thrived at the resurrection of Jesus from the dead in a body (albeit different) that still showed the scars of the cross. *AH V* is dominated by Irenaeus' teaching regarding the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the transforming of the mortal to immortality, and corruptibility to incorruptibility. He is particularly concerned with the belief of some that the resurrection modeled by Christ has no value. Donovan says, "Such people, he claims, do not value the thing modeled by God and do not accept the salvation of the flesh. In their view after death they will ascend beyond the heavens and even beyond the Demiurge to the Mother, or to the imagined Father. They do not understand that the Lord, in his resurrection, set a model valid for all."<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus' theology and teaching regarding the salvation of the flesh and the resurrection of those in Christ leans heavily upon his understanding of Paul. Once again we see the theology of Irenaeus delineated in his criticism of the Gnostics. Hochban states, "The trouble with the Gnostics, according to him, was that they were so preoccupied with the weakness of the flesh, that they lost sight completely of the power of God."<sup>30</sup>

Keeping in line with Irenaeus' sense of progressive redemption, the immortality and incorruptibility of those who choose Christ as their new head (versus the old Adam) are not somehow gained in a singular event either initially, or at the resurrection. The other "Hand of

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<sup>29</sup> Donovan, *A Guide to Irenaeus*, 166.

<sup>30</sup> Hochban: 554.

God” the Spirit draws people to Christ initially, they are molded and then He in turn presents them to the Father completely mature at the resurrection of the dead and the formation of the New Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the final aspects of Irenaeus’ saving Christology are the Church and the Eucharist. The Church having been called by the Spirit is both the body of Christ and the collection of those who have begun down the path of incorruptibility. Salvation is restored union with God beyond a merely onetime event. The Church grows and is fed quite literally for Irenaeus, by the Eucharist. The Eucharist, so anti-Gnostic in its glorification of the savior’s flesh, is now the very food of life for a new humanity. Walker comments:

The fruit of the tree is He who hung on the cross....The flesh of the crucified and risen, the glorified and deified Savior now becomes the food of those redeemed by Christ. As Adam and Eve manifested their disobedience and pride through eating the forbidden fruit, so now man, to manifest his obedience to God’s redeeming economy in Christ, must eat the flesh and drink the blood of him who hung on the cross, lay in the tomb and arouse for our salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Irenaeus uses the analogy of a seed of wheat or corn in relation to the Eucharist and the resurrection. “So also our bodies being nourished by it, and deposited in the earth, and suffering decomposition there, shall rise at the appointed time, the Word of God granting them resurrection to the glory of God.”<sup>33</sup> What Irenaeus’ Christology lacks in its systematic development and vagueness regarding the particular atonement theories, it more than makes up for in its sheer enormity. In Irenaeus we see the picture painted of a pre-existent Word who is the very hand of God that helps shape creation, who comes to humankind in the flesh to restore to us our humanity by showing us what it means to live life in participation with God, and then suffers and dies to be raised again conquering even death, that we too might know immortality with

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<sup>31</sup> Donovan, *A Guide to Irenaeus*, 168.

<sup>32</sup> Anselm Walker, "The Recapitulation Theme in St. Irenaeus," *Diakonia* 12, no. (1977): 250.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," *AH* 5.2.3

God. He reveals the lie that we should attempt to become the creator and restores to us the beauty and meaning of what it is to simply be made.

What began as an attempt to refute the dichotomized view of Christ taught by the Gnostics, created an early and profound Christology. By highlighting the role of Christ as the New Adam, Irenaeus offers a view of Jesus that neither minimizes his humanity, nor his divinity. Irenaeus does not simply attack the Gnostic view of Christ, pointing out its weaknesses and deficiencies, but also creates an alternative explanation from within the bounds of the traditions of the Church. The beauty of his Christology is the way it refutes the Gnostic view while at the same time solidifying one of the first theological explanations for why Christ came and what he really accomplished. Irenaeus' incarnational Christology was not only groundbreaking, but also laid the foundation for those theologians which were to come.

## CONCLUSION

To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)  
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven

A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal  
A time to laugh, a time to weep

The theme of Ecclesiastes<sup>1</sup>

My first encounter with Irenaeus of Lyon was during a Christian History class in Seminary. As we passed through the early Church Fathers, something about this saint stood out. It was commented in class that Irenaeus was two apostolic generations removed from John, the disciple who happened to pen my favorite gospel. I began to ruminate on how we as Christians come to think the way we do about so many of the essentials of our faith. My immediate response, when learning about Irenaeus, was that we should drop everything and listen to what this man had to say, if indeed we truly had a theologian so close to the early Church and to John. Ironically after working through this project my initial attitude is still the one I hold. We should drop everything and listen to what this man had to say, not because he was such an early theologian, but because having studied his message, I think it offers ways of understanding ourselves and the church in light of the modernist and post-modern shift in thinking, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> As interpreted by Pete Seeger. 1959

the realization of the cultural shift in Christianity that is moving farther away from a Western understanding.

When I started out in pastoral ministry, I thought that if one could somehow recapture the power and innocence of the early Church, they could make the Church of today look the same. While certainly a worthy goal, I have come to realize that there was never an era where the Church had it all figured out and acted accordingly. In every epoch of the Church, they wrestled with their own humanity, the role and nature of the Church and Scriptures, Jesus Christ, and not so much the how, but the why of events. At times I think being closer to the event gave the Church great insight, as in the case of Irenaeus. At other times, I think that having a millennia or two to ruminate on who Christ was and what he actually accomplished is of great value. We would be wise to glean from men and women like Irenaeus of Lyon whatever we can and try to see where their “near-sightedness” can show us what we have been missing.

The element of this study, which for me holds the greatest and in many ways most disturbing value, is the economy of God that Irenaeus saw so clearly. Beginning in the Garden of Eden, humanity has attempted to grasp, grab, and take what we think we need, when in truth, our good Creator will give it to us when He is ready. This addresses many larger socio-historical issues; after all, how many of our problems have come from wanting what we are not meant to have? How many wars have been fought, atrocities committed, and lives destroyed from such a pressing sense of urgency? It is the implications of Irenaeus’ message such as the role of haste in regard to sin, which makes Irenaeus such a compelling figure to modern theologians. That pride was not the original sin of Adam and Eve but haste, according to Vogel,<sup>2</sup> changes one’s perspective of theology profoundly. It is as though the starting coordinates on a map are just a bit off, a minor deviation at first, but by the end of the trail, it has changed the entire trajectory of

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<sup>2</sup> Vogel: 444.

the journey regardless of how well one has followed the map. Irenaeus' early theological foundation, so foreign to Western Christians, has a significant impact on our understanding of humanity's divine purpose above all else.

I have the great privilege and joy of teaching a group of freshmen at George Fox University this year and we have just completed the Gospels. When I ask them why Jesus came (according to the gospel writers), the inevitable and perfectly acceptable answer is that He came to save us. When I press them to answer the question "to save us from what?" or "how does He save us?", the silence is profound. Had this been a seminary class full of theologians and pastors, the question would have been asked and the next three hours of class would have been taken up with the students answering it. I am learning to prefer the former.

When I read Irenaeus and the ridiculously complex system of the Gnostics I see the deeper lesson. Gnosticism made more sense to some Christians because no matter how new or complicated it was, it appealed to questions that the church was not answering, or at least answering well enough. Gnosticism is certainly still alive and well, though not in its more recognizable form in the Church today. By understanding the attraction of it to the congregants of Lyon and the direct and indirect threat that it posed, I find Irenaeus teaching me to dig beneath the surface of the latest and greatest church fad. I see the ideological danger that Gnosticism posed is unchanged today. It seeks transcendence and absorption into God, but no relationship, no interplay. Irenaeus' theology shows a God who is far more involved than I had previously considered an awe inspiring and fearful thing.

Irenaeus' does create some problems theologically. His response to the questions of pain and suffering which we find conflicts with the theodicy of the Gnostics. The Gnostic answer for evil was simple incompetence. A flawed creator creates flawed creations. Irenaeus' counters

this idea with a perfectly competent and sovereign God who uses pain and suffering as tools to shape humanity. That God allows evil to run amok because it ultimately teaches us the good we need to know to grow in Him brings little comfort, yet Irenaeus proclaims it clearly as the price of a deeply loving and deeply relational God.

Finally, Irenaeus' view of Christ and creation and the answer that he gives to my students of what it is that He saves us from and how does He do it, will forever change my understanding of Jesus. I find it impossible to read scripture and not consider what is said or done in view of this greater cosmological story that Irenaeus' draws us to. That Jesus comes to undo all that Adam did in his Fall and then invites me to partake of His divine adoption leaves just about any theological subject a dull subtopic by comparison.

I have attempted in this paper to unravel the significance of Irenaeus for contemporary Christians. By understanding more completely the Gnostic threat that faced the early Church, it is my hope that we can see the dangers behind those teachings and recognize the implications of similar ideas for what they are today. I have explained the doctrine of recapitulation that is so foreign to modern evangelical Christianity, with our legal understandings of salvation and atonement. The chapters I have written that deal with anthropology and Christology have given me a new perspective on what it means to be truly human in light of the nature of Christ revealed by Irenaeus. By shedding light on a Church Father who has been until recently fairly neglected in the West, it is my hope that the reader will be challenged and yet more open to this ancient view of soteriology.

What Irenaeus ultimately forces us to do is unwind all that we have been taught in our western and generally evangelical traditions and grapple with questions like how Jesus goes about saving us without the crutches and perhaps blinders of so many centuries of atonement

theories. Irenaeus did not have that level of indoctrination and precedent setting theologians who had gone before him. He had a serious theological problem and came up with an amazing theological solution. It is raw, unsystematic, at times outlandish, and tremendously thought provoking. While I have attempted to understand the implications of Irenaeus' theology for humanity, I will be the first to admit that this work barely scratches the surface of scholarship on Irenaeus. In many ways he lived in a quite different world than we find today, in other ways it hasn't changed. There is tremendous value for anyone that seriously studies what this original theologian had to say and it merits renewed investigation.

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