

CPC Church History I
February 1, 2009
Gnosticism and Irenaeus

Gnosticism

Fundamental Characteristics

- Belief that they have a secret, hidden knowledge
- Salvation comes through this knowledge (hence the name)
- Emphasis on the spiritual over the physical—the true man was spirit and longed to return home
- Contempt of matter—matter is evil, and therefore cannot be the work of the most high God.
- Often allowed licentiousness because only spirit matters
- Complex cosmological schemas (aeons, pleroma; see Kelly for one famous example), which supports their claim that they have secret knowledge (must be complex or others would know it) which alone can save
- Devaluing of history—it tended to be at best the story of failure, something to be overcome in ascending to the primal spiritual realm.

How is it like Christianity?

- Saving knowledge which comes through Christ alone
- The material world is not what is ultimately meaningful

Problems from a Christian Standpoint

- Inability to affirm with God that creation is good (Gen. 1)
- Devaluing of history and denigration of matter mean that it is not possible to see Incarnation as the chief end of God for the salvation of men's souls.

Irenaeus (fl. 180 AD) – A Christian Response

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was said to be a disciple of John. He was bishop in what is now Lyon, France.

- Recapitulation – Counter to the Gnostic devaluing of history, Irenaeus sees history as integral to the Incarnation. Christ is not just taking on our human nature, but also our entire story. Therefore in the life of Christ we see all of salvation history recapitulated. In effect, Christ is going back and making all the decisions we ought to have made the first time, living not just a spotless human life, but the archetypal spotless human life. At the heart of this is a belief that humanity was created immature by God, and had to grow up through the process of salvation history. Accordingly, one can see God, the loving Father, educating and training his dull child to adulthood in Christ.
- Revelation primarily contained in the Scriptures, and all else must be tested against it. Irenaeus did not deny an oral tradition, but in contrast to the Gnostics, it was not secret—it was public, so that anyone could plainly discover what it was. The apostolicity of this tradition is guaranteed by the unbroken succession of bishops going back to the apostles, and by the presence of the Holy Spirit within the church.

- Over against the multiplication of God into aeons and pleromas, Irenaeus emphasizes the unity of God.

The non-counter-Gnostic Irenaeus

Not all of Irenaeus' thought was developed in polemic with the Gnostic. His own constructive thought also did much to shape the theology of the early Church:

- Distinction between the immanent and economic aspects of God's being:
 - Immanent refers to who God is in himself, considered apart from anything he has accomplished. It has to do with who God *is*, not what God does.
 - Economy has to do with God's works—it says who God is in his actions, whether in creating, redeeming, sanctifying. It says, when God acts, he is *this sort of* actor.
- At a time when Trinitarian formulations had not advanced very far, Irenaeus provides a highpoint. His claim that whatever is begotten of God is God issues in a direct affirmation of the divinity of Christ and an indirect affirmation of that of the Spirit. Given his emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, the power this would have for later Trinitarian discussion was enormous. Important to note here is the way the Trinity is portrayed: not three equal persons, but one person in the unity of his Word and Spirit. This has led to the following distinction:
 - Immanent Trinity: God is eternally three persons in one divine essence (anachronistic language for Irenaeus)—what we traditionally think of as the doctrine of the Trinity.
 - Economic Trinity: God is eternally one, but in the outworking of his plan, has appeared in three persons. Accordingly, the persons are eternal only to the extent that the divine activity is eternal—but before the generation of the Son and spiration of the Spirit may be imagined a time when God was pure solitude, and not Trinity. This heretical view is often applied to Irenaeus, but unfairly, for he clearly kept the mystery of eternal Trinity in view, even though he speaks so often in economic terms.
- Soteriology: Christ becomes like us to make us like himself. His most oft-quoted saying: “Because of His measureless love, He became what we are in order to enable us to become what He is” (*Ad. Haer.* V, preface). Christ is the second Adam. What we lost in Adam, we regain in Christ. The atonement is begun through Incarnation, not crucifixion—though without Christ's blood there would still have been no forgiveness. The exact nature of the atonement is not clear, as several ideas are present in Irenaeus:
 - Ransom: Christ's blood was the ransom paid to buy us back from the devil (not fully developed)
 - Reconciliation: Christ's blood heals the rift between us and God
 - Propitiatory: (closely allied to above) Christ's death is that which appeases the angry God
 - Sacrifice: (again, closely connected) God sacrificed Christ on our behalf
- Supralapsarianism – Irenaeus seems to have held that Christ would have come even had we not sinned. Our sin did not determine the coming of Christ, but only his coming as *Savior*. It was always God's plan to unite all things to himself in Christ.