

Treasure in jars of clay



1: Irenaeus

In this occasional series **Jon Garvey** looks at some of the great upholders of the Gospel over the last 2,000 years, what they taught, what they mean for today – and sometimes their faults, too

The amphitheatre at Lyons – scene of hideous torture and execution of Christians in AD177.

Remarkably, Irenaeus was in Rome at the time, and had to replace his murdered predecessor as Bishop of Lyons on his return

Irenaeus the bishop knew his Bible thoroughly, which shames many current leaders

Many of the people who achieved great victories in building, or preserving, our faith are forgotten today by most Christians. We praise pygmies and ignore – or denigrate – giants. Ignorance is understandable, because their writings are sometimes lost in dusty volumes, often in foreign languages and always less appealing than the latest paperback. But whereas Christian paperbacks have an average shelf-life of 6 months, these writings affect our faith centuries later. G K Chesterton said, 'The disadvantage of men not knowing history is that they do not know the present.' To put it another way, he who does not learn from history is condemned to repeat it. Many mistakes are being repeated by Christians today.

Irenaeus embodies someone, largely forgotten today, whose teaching underlies much of what we take for granted. He was also very early – born around 130 AD in Asia Minor. Indeed in his youth he was taught by Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (Izmir), who in turn had heard the apostle John. He then became a missionary to far-flung Lyons – in his books he apologises for his Greek since he usually speaks Celtic. He became its bishop during terrible persecution in 177.

'Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching'

Two of his main works have come down to us today. The first is *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching*, dedicated to someone called Marcianus as 'a manual of essentials.'

What does Irenaeus consider essential? The first thing is his teaching authority, which consists of extensive quotations from both Old and

New Testaments. He does not particularly stress this, but that fact alone shows that it was assumed then that the whole Bible had unquestionable authority – even before the complete list of New Testament books had been finally settled. It is also clear that Irenaeus the bishop knew his Bible thoroughly, which shames many current leaders.

The second 'essential' of interest is the way that Irenaeus actually uses the Bible in his book. He shows God's salvation plan unfolding through history, from the Garden of Eden, through Noah, Abraham, Moses and King David to the coming of Jesus – both God and Man – foretold by the prophets. Gratifyingly this parallels the structure of my recent series in PT, *The Covenants of God*, which demonstrates that there is no new thing under the sun! **This understanding of Scripture – that it tells one unfolding story – is nowadays called Biblical Theology, and though so long-established is, surprisingly, quite uncommon today.**

On the one hand liberals – and liberals who call themselves evangelicals – have scoffed at the idea that there is one big picture in the Bible. Their claims that Israel's religion evolved gradually, was largely the result of human psychology, and that the Bible was assembled piecemeal from sources of widely varying ages, more or less preclude a view of God's progressive revelation. Irenaeus, though, just two generations from St John, considered such a view the 'apostolic' one.

On the other hand, mainstream evangelical tradition has tended to view Old Testament events somewhat in isolation, perhaps as symbolic of Christian truth, but inferior to it. How many sermons, for example, are written about

Faith on the Earth





How often do preachers use the creation stories to oppose evolution rather than to show why Christ had to come?

King David's character rather than his place in salvation history? How often do preachers use the creation stories to oppose evolution rather than to show why Christ had to come? Irenaeus does so – we're 1,900 years behind the times.

'Against Heresies'

Irenaeus's longest, and most important, work is his book against the Gnostic ('Knowledge') heresies common at that time. The details of these aberrations need not detain us – though they detain Irenaeus for 2 of the 5 parts of his book.

These sects all have common themes. For example, the God of Jesus is not the 'inferior' god of the Creation (and of the Old Testament), so creation is actually evil. However, the good God left a spark of himself in some, spiritual, people. He sent Jesus to give them secret knowledge about how to escape from the wicked material world to the world of the spirit. This 'knowledge' (falsely so-called!) is where it gets complicated, not to say tedious. All kinds of spiritual realms and beings have to be encountered, and engaged in the right way, to pass beyond – like some incredibly involved Dungeons and Dragons game.

Esoteric and irrelevant? Maybe – but some of the ideas are very contemporary. How many weeks since you heard someone complain that the loving God of Jesus would be OK if it weren't for the bloodthirsty God of the Old Testament? But nearly *all* the key ideas are in William Blake – his hymn *Jerusalem*, beloved of public schools, was a manifesto for Gnostic ideas, and the Swedenborgian Church to which he belonged has a large office in London. Gnostic ideas underlie Freemasonry, too.

Irenaeus's main contribution was to debunk the idea that there was ever a secret body of Christ's teaching kept hidden from rank and file believers. He did this firstly by reminding us that Christian doctrine is Biblical, and that the Bible has always been in the public domain.

He also pointed out that Christian doctrine was first taught by the apostles, who passed it on to the leaders of the churches they founded. They in turn passed it on to their successors – not to some clique of the spiritually initiated – and taught it to all-comers publicly. If you want to hear apostolic doctrine, he said, if you want the correct interpretation of Scripture, go to the churches where it has been openly taught for over a century.

This was sound methodology – read, for example Colossians 1.21-23. It applies today. Consider, for example, the various false prophetic movements that have troubled the Church in the last few years, like the Kansas City Prophets, who predicted a 'Joel Army' of specially spiritual saints who would usher in the coming of Christ. Suspect any teaching that divides 'ordinary' Christians from 'proper' ones on the basis of some special knowledge or experience.

Even more topical, though, is *The Da Vinci Code*, a runaway best-seller based on the premise that the 'real' teaching of Jesus is in secret writings suppressed by the Church – including the very documents Irenaeus successfully rubbished over 1,900 years ago. The novel was actually inspired by *The Secret Gospel*, a book by a recognised scholar, which claimed there was a secret Gospel of Mark (now, inconveniently, lost). Both these books sold millions: clearly Irenaeus's message is still needed.

Downsides

The main criticism of Irenaeus is that some of his teaching encouraged later errors of Roman Catholicism. This is unfair. It was reasonable in the second century, in the context of 'secret gospels', to say, 'Look to the oldest churches for the truest teaching, where the gospel has been passed faithfully from pastor to pastor.' It was even reasonable to look first to Rome, one of the oldest, actually founded by *two* apostles. It is another thing to argue from there to the infallibility of church tradition, a sacred apostolic succession and the primacy of the Roman bishop! Again, his comparison of the Virgin Mary to a new Eve (based on Genesis 3.15) is in context orthodox, if strained – what has been erected on it by Rome is simply idolatrous. **You cannot blame a man for being misused.**

Sources

Irenaeus's remaining writings can be obtained, but are not the lightest of reading! Look on <http://www.amazon.uk> under his name. But you can download them free from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org/>), a brilliant source for old Christian writings. There is a good summary of his life in *The Lion Handbook of the History of Christianity* (p.100) and of his teaching in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP) (p.340).

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