Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Irenaeus's Theory of Redemption

ROGER E. OLSON, PHD

While Irenaeus's critique of Gnosticism played a significant role in the story of Christian theology by exposing that belief system as heretical by biblical and apostolic standards, his real contribution to theology's story lies in his own alternative vision to Gnosticism. Historical theologians have labeled that Irenaean contribution the "theory of recapitulation," from the Latin term *capitus,* which means "head." Without doubt Irenaeus himself used the Greek term *anakephalaiosis,* which comes from the root *kephalē*, which means "head." *Anakephalaiosis* and *recapitulatio* literally mean "reheading" or "providing a new head." Of course, Irenaeus was not thinking at all of a literal head, as the top part of a body, but of "head" as the source or origin of something, such as the head of a river or stream. In *Against Heresies* and in *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching,* Irenaeus laid out what he believed to be the apostolic Christian teaching about Christ's work of redemption as providing a new "head" of humanity—recapitulation.

The Gnostics thought of Christ's work as purely spiritual and denied the incarnation. For them Christ—the heavenly redeemer—never did get entangled with flesh-and-blood existence. He came down through the levels of aeons and archons and either appeared as a human being without truly taking on human physical nature or else entered into the body of a human being known as Jesus of Nazareth in order to use it as his instrument for teaching about the spiritual origin of human souls. In either version of Gnostic Christology, Christ's work did not require incarnation. His mission was merely to reveal a message to spirits. The material-physical dimension had nothing to do with it, and when Jesus was crucified, Christ was not in him or with him. The human life and death of the man Jesus, then, played no role in redemption. The Gnostics rejected the historical, physical life and death of Jesus from their soteriology (doctrine of salvation).

Irenaeus sought to show that the gospel of salvation taught by the apostles and handed down from them centered upon the incarnation—the human flesh-and-blood existence of the Word, the Son of God. Therefore he emphasized every point of Jesus' life as necessary for salvation. Christ's work on our behalf went far beyond his teachings and extended to the incarnation itself. For Irenaeus (and most of the church fathers after him) incarnation itself was redemptive, not merely a necessary step toward either Christ's

© 2024, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033

teachings or the cross event. Rather the becoming human of the Son of God—God's eternal Word (Logos) experiencing human existence—was what redeems and restores fallen humanity if they let it. This idea has come to be known as saving incarnation and is absolutely crucial to the entire course of the story of theology from Irenaeus on. That is why whenever a theology arose that somehow seemed to threaten the incarnation of God in Jesus, the church fathers reacted so strongly. Any threat to the incarnation—however subtle—was perceived as a threat to salvation. If Jesus Christ was not both truly human and truly divine, salvation is incomplete and impossible. The entirety of redemption hangs on the reality of Christ's flesh-and-blood birth, life, suffering, death and resurrection as well as on his eternal power and deity.

For Irenaeus, then, the incarnation was the key to the entire history of redemption and to personal salvation. The incarnation itself was transformative. It began a process of reversing the corruption of sin that results in alienation from God and death. *Anakephalaiosis*, or recapitulation, was Irenaeus's theological expression for how the physical incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ works to transform humanity. In a literal sense the entire human race is "born again" in the incarnation. It receives a new "head"—a new source, origin, ground of being—that is unfallen, pure and healthy, victorious and immortal. It is "fully alive"—both physically and spiritually.

The Gnostics held out no hope for the human race as a whole or even for whole human beings. Only spirits—and only a few of them—had any hope of being transformed and that only through *gnosis* (knowledge). Irenaeus deeply implanted into the Christian consciousness a belief and a hope in Jesus Christ as transformer of the whole human race through his fusion of divinity with humanity in the incarnation.

Exactly how does Irenaeus's anti-Gnostic theory of redemption—recapitulation—work? That is, what is the mechanism by which the incarnation itself transforms and saves humanity? First of all, it must be understood that Irenaeus assumed a solidarity of humanity in both sin and redemption. That assumption is foreign to many modern Christians, who tend to think and live in a much more individualistic—if not atomistic—fashion. Irenaeus and his colleagues in the early church were no "Jesus-and-me" Christians. He believed and taught that what Adam did in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3) and what Jesus Christ did through his entire life (including his death) affected other human beings automatically because Adam and Jesus Christ (the "second Adam") are not merely individuals but fountainheads of humanity.

In the background of this thinking, of course, stands Paul's reflections on Adam and Christ in Romans 5. Without some awareness of that all-important passage, it is impossible to grasp what Irenaeus is teaching. His theory of recapitulation was an extended and sustained interpretation of Romans 5. Christ is very literally the second

© 2024, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033

Adam of the human race, and in him "God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man [Adam], that he might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man and therefore His works are true."[1]

When Irenaeus wrote that in Jesus Christ God "recapitulated the ancient formation of man," he meant that in the incarnation the Word (Logos) took on the very "protoplast" (physical source) of humanity—the body of Adam—and lived the reverse of Adam's course of life that resulted in corruption. All of humanity is descended from that protoplast—the first Adam. Therefore in order to reverse the Fall and renew the race that fell because of Adam, the Word had to live through it in order to transform both it and its posterity. From Mary, then, the Word took "the very same formation" as Adam—not just one like it. Adam was in some mysterious way reborn of Mary as the humanity of Jesus Christ. For Irenaeus

> if man is to be saved, it is necessary that the first man, Adam, be brought back to life, and not simply that a new and perfect man who bears no relation to Adam should appear on the earth. God, who has life, must permit His life to enter into "Adam" the man who truly hungers and thirsts, eats and drinks, is wearied and needs rest, who knows anxiety, sorrow and joy, and who suffers pain when confronted with the fact of death.[2]

This is Irenaeus's "proof" of the incarnation against the Gnostics who denied it. Without the incarnation Christ could not have reversed the fall of Adam and redemption would not be accomplished. Sin and death would remain forever fundamental aspects of the human condition.

For Irenaeus, Jesus Christ provided redemption by going through the entire scope of human life and at each juncture reversing the disobedience of Adam. Whereas the first Adam disobeyed God and fell, introducing corruption and death into human existence, the second Adam obeyed God and lifted humanity up to a higher state than even Adam experienced before he fell.

The real crux of Christ's accomplishment of redemption came at the event of temptation by Satan in the wilderness. When Satan came to Eve and to Adam, they were conquered and fell. When Satan came to Adam again in Christ, he was conquered and put down, and humanity through its connection with Christ achieved a great victory and regained life.

---

[1] Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.18.7.

[2] Gustaf Wingren (1959). *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*, trans. Ross Mackenzie. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 95–96.

© 2024, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033

If the temptation was the crux, the cross and resurrection were the culmination of Christ's work of recapitulation. By dying in obedience to God, Jesus Christ provided the ultimate sacrifice and conquered death. Those who willingly participate in Christ's new humanity by choosing him rather than the first Adam as their "head" through repentance, faith and the sacraments receive the transformation made possible by the incarnation of the Son of God. They enter into a new humanity—a new race—with the hope of sharing in God's own immortal, divine nature.

For Irenaeus, then, redemption was a process of restoring creation rather than one of escaping creation as in the Gnostics' soteriology. It was a process of reversing the corruption that entered into creation through Adam's fall, and "the end of this process is man's entrance upon a life which is no longer subject to the limitations of generate existence; a life in which, in fact, the liabilities of creaturehood are overcome by the grace of God. This life is characterized by that incorruption which both results from and leads to the vision of God and the mirroring of God's glory in man himself."[3] Irenaeus clearly envisioned salvation as transformation of humans into partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). This idea of redemption—known to later church fathers as "divinization," or "deification" *(theosis)*—lies in the background of Irenaeus's vision of Christ's work as recapitulation.

God's purpose and goal in redemption is to reverse the sin, corruption and death introduced into humanity by Adam and lift humanity up to life and immortality. The incarnation accomplishes this as a possibility by fusing humanity with divinity. Humans may be "divinized" by solidarity with Christ while remaining humans and not becoming God himself. The basic contours of this vision of salvation are assumed by most later church fathers. During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, however, most Protestant theologians rejected or neglected it in favor of a more forensic (legal) and individualistic view of salvation as personal reconciliation with God.

By the end of the second century the story of Christian theology had progressed quite a way from its beginning and yet had far to go. Irenaeus's theory of redemption as recapitulation represented a quantum leap of intellectual reflection beyond the simple moralism of some of the apostolic fathers. And yet it left much unanswered regarding the relationship between the Word and God the Father and regarding the Holy Spirit and the unity of all three. It also left unanswered questions about how redemption is applied to individuals and why some are included in Christ's new humanity and some are not.

[3] Norris, R.A. (1965). *God and the World in Early Christian Theology: A Study in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen*. New York: Seabury Press, 94.

© 2024, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033

These and many more questions come to the fore and provided grist for the mill of later theological debate and controversy.

At the end of the second century and opening of the third (200/201), Gnosticism and Montanism were waning in importance and influence. Other heresies were arising and would be dealt with by Tertullian and Cyprian and other third-century church fathers. The bishops in apostolic succession were gaining a monopoly on authority in the churches so that more and more people within the churches and outside of them recognized one relatively united orthodox and catholic church of Christ represented by the bishops. This made it much easier to defeat the various heresies that arose, although, as we shall see, that struggle remained a challenging one. The idea of salvation as primarily received through sacraments, including infant baptism and the Eucharist, was becoming normative, although a few voices rose in protest. The church and its structure and theology were gradually becoming formalized and standardized. A certain line of orthodoxy represented especially by Ignatius, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus was widely recognized and acknowledged.

As the second century closed and the third century dawned, one great question stood on the horizon as yet to be resolved: What is the proper relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian thought? The apologists had not solved that complex problem. In fact, they had contributed to its deepening. Toward the beginning of the third century, two great North African church fathers appeared in the story of Christian theology to wrestle with this and related issues. Both of them laid foundations for later theological reflection in their own regions of North Africa. Clement of Alexandria founded the "School of Alexandria" in Greek-speaking Egypt and profoundly influenced the entire Eastern region of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Tertullian in Carthage led the Western, Latin-speaking region of Christianity in a different direction. Their differences help explain why the Great Church, both orthodox and catholic, eventually split up and went separate ways as Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic.[4]

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc*.

[4] Olson, R. E. (1999). *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 73-78.

© 2024, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033