

Irenaeus of Lyons

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We've just finished looking at the apostolic fathers and apologists. We've seen the time period of persecution. What we'd like to do next in our course is take a look at one of the last writers of the ancient church period who wrote exclusively in Greek. His name is Irenaeus. Up until this time, the language of the church has been the Greek language, and in just a few minutes we'll be moving into a new time period when you have a Latin-speaking population and a Greek-speaking population.

Irenaeus of Lyon was born sometime between AD 140 and 160, probably in Smyrna. In 177 to 178 he was sent from Gaul, which is present-day France, to Rome to help mediate concerning a problem in the church surrounding a fellow called Montanus. It was called the Montanus controversy. The year of his death is unknown. Later Christian mythology lists him as dying as a martyr, but we really can't establish that from the evidence of history. Irenaeus is a very important figure of the second century of the Christian church. In fact it's brought up by nearly every book or article concerning him. Because of his importance, he is perhaps more difficult to comprehend, and yet also because of his importance, it's imperative that we understand his thought. To help understand Irenaeus, what I would like us to do is to provide an outline of his thought, and we can look at some of the important textbooks concerning Irenaeus, and I would suggest that you remember to do that in the study outline. If we read our textbooks and put that in combination with the lectures we're just about to hear, we should have a good picture of the thought and life of Irenaeus.

Section A of this lecture concerns Irenaeus's writings. One of his important books is *The Detection and Overthrow of the Pretended but False Gnosis*. You remember from our introductory lectures that we discussed in some detail the philosophical backgrounds to Christianity, what was happening in the philosophical or intellectual culture of that age, and we mentioned that Gnosticism

was a competing philosophy, a rival system of thought. Gnosticism comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, “to know.” Irenaeus is writing about the overthrowing of a pretended but false gnosis, a way in which things are known, and this is his main work. We have a Latin translation of the original Greek. In Latin the title is given more simply *Against Heresies*, so which ever title is easier to remember, what we’re talking about is the attack of the Christians, the attack especially of Irenaeus against heresies, both within and without the church.

Looking at the contents of the book, we see that we have a description in the first book of a type of Gnosticism that was set up to compete against Christianity. There were various gnostic schools during this time period that tried to take the wisdom of the Scriptures and incorporate that wisdom also into their gnostic system so that it became a competing force against Christianity. Later in that first book, which he uses as a foundation for the rest, he goes on to destroy the arguments of the gnostics. He also uses arguments from reason to reject other systems that were competing against Christianity.

There’s another book of Irenaeus called *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. This text was discovered in our own century in 1904, and it was published in 1907. In this work Irenaeus wants to present a demonstration of the truth of Christianity. He does this in two parts. First, he presents the Christian faith as he understands it. There he deals with the Trinity. He deals with the creation of the world and the fall of humankind, and the redemption that we have through the incarnation. The second part of his work demonstrates from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Son of David and the Messiah as well. He ends by exhorting the Christian readers to live lives of godliness. There are fragments of other works of Irenaeus as well.

Let’s make some reflections on the teachings of Irenaeus from the writings which we have. I don’t mean to do this in a very systematic manner, but more in terms of footnotes to readings that you should be doing in your texts. We should note in terms of his theological method, the way in which he presents Christianity, the way in which he understands Christianity, is by abundant use of the text of Scripture. In his works he quotes or refers to about nine hundred different passages of the Scripture. In his doctrine of Christ, Irenaeus asserts that Jesus must have lived to be approximately fifty years old. This is in contradiction to how we normally conceive of the life of Christ and the evidence

that's given to us in the Scripture, but this idea of Irenaeus is a byproduct of an important theory that he had, one that we should understand. This theory of the life of Christ is called the theory of recapitulation. Within the idea of recapitulation, Christ Himself recapitulates all the stages of human life, and that would, according to Irenaeus, necessitate someone living longer than the normal thirty years attributed to the life of Christ.

This theory of recapitulation will be discussed in more detail as we look at the doctrines of the ancient church. The point to remember at this part of the lecture is that Jesus saves all the aspects of life. In other words, where sin infested all of human life up until this time, Jesus lives a life that saves that part of human life, making then human life holy. Also, some have asserted that Irenaeus is the father of what we call biblical theology. This is because he sees God actively working in this world. In his reaction to Gnosticism, whose God we could say couldn't get His hands dirty, that is, couldn't be active in the creation of the world, couldn't be active in the affairs of human kind, that God, the God of Gnosticism, is quite opposite from the way in which Irenaeus conceives of our God, because the God of the Scriptures is active in time and active in the lives of His church. He's active from the writing of the book of Genesis and the story that we find there to the consummation when He brings all things to its final state.

Looking once again at Irenaeus as an exegete of Scripture, there are certain things that we note in terms of his exegetical method. There are two prominent tools emphasized by Irenaeus. The first is his appeal to Scripture, and the second is that we are to interpret a difficult passage of Scripture by an easier passage. Both of these things are quite common for all of us in evangelical Christianity, and we see that the roots of this way of understanding Christianity, the roots of this way of understanding the Scripture, go way back in the history of the church. Again, his appeal to Scripture as the ultimate norm for theology and his hermeneutical principal of understanding Scripture by Scripture.

Important also for Irenaeus's exegetical methodology is his relying upon tradition. He makes constant appeal to tradition, and these appeals are usually within the context of combating the gnostics. It's difficult to determine exactly what he means by tradition, however. It seems that he is perhaps appealing to one of the earliest Christian confessions as well, a creed that we now call the Old Roman Creed, a precursor to our present Apostles' Creed. Other times his appeal to tradition is in terms of the oral

tradition that we have given in the church by the pastors. He teaches, for example, that true preaching, true exposition of the Bible is taught by the bishop or the pastor and is given to the presbyter or to the members of the teaching body of the church. Especially important are those bishops who can be traced back to the apostles to assure the continuity of truth given from the apostles to the succeeding bishops or pastors.

In his work *Against Heresies*, he makes very clear how we are to understand difficult passages of Scripture. As I've just mentioned previously, this is one of his most important contributions to our understanding of the Scripture, as heretics especially take some portions of Scripture and understand them in a certain way that almost approaches the truth of Christianity. So he says that these passages of Scripture which lend support to, say, gnostic reinterpretations of Christianity must be understood in light of the entire text of the Bible itself, and unless the teachings of a certain school, especially a gnostic school, incorporate the whole teaching of the Bible, then we must be very careful.

We need to move ahead chronologically, and in our lecture outline, we now come to the point that would be numbered "The Western Writers of the Third Century," and our first person in this illustrious line-up is the teacher, Tertullian. He was born about 155 in the city of Carthage, which is a port city on the Mediterranean in North Africa. His parents were pagans, and Tertullian had been trained in law; he was an accomplished lawyer at Rome. He gets converted to Christianity sometime around AD 193 and goes back to North Africa to his hometown of Carthage. Beginning two years later he has a prodigious literary career. He writes somewhere between 195 and 220, and the number of works from his pen are phenomenal. However, in 207, about that time, he goes over to a sect of Christianity known as the Montanus sect, and he becomes the head of that sect and then his followers become known as Tertullianists, and the teaching of the Tertullianists last until the time of Augustine of Hippo. Remember, Augustine, whom we haven't studied yet, isn't born until AD 354, so this was a longstanding sect. His death date is not known precisely, but we do know that it was after AD 220.

Except for Augustine, Tertullian is the most important and original ecclesiastical author during our time period in the Latin language. He's the first significant Christian author to write in the Latin language. I have to admit, for all you budding Latinists, that his Latin is very difficult to read. There have been a number

of literary studies concerning his style. He takes new terms and prefers uncommon grammatical forms, so I don't use this as an advertisement to study Tertullian in Latin. His works can be divided into three main sections. Let's take a look at his writings beginning first with his apologetic works, then turning to his controversial treatises, and then thirdly taking a look at his moral works.

The apologetical works. He writes to the heathens an apology in about AD 197. His apology is one of his most important works. It's dedicated to the governors of the various Roman provinces known to him, and he deals with some of the questions that we find the apologists earlier wrestling. He knows that Christians are hated because of the ignorance of the masses. He knows that Christians are hated because they're considered to be unfriendly to the Roman government. He refutes the idea that the Romans rule the world because they venerate their gods. In other words, in the common mind it was equated that because the Roman society was a polytheistic one, it was the gods of the Romans that kept the Roman Empire together, and he shows that that's certainly not the case. He demonstrates that Christians are not enemies of the state.

He also refutes the idea that Christianity is some new philosophy. It's not a new philosophy! It's divine revelation. In his apologetic works, he also writes something on the soul in about 197, maintaining that the soul is eternal and that the soul knows that there is a God, reflecting on the teaching of Paul in the first chapter of Romans. He also writes to a proconsul whose name is Scapula in Africa concerning persecution, asking that in Africa persecution would cease. He writes a number of other apologetics works. Not only is he fighting against Roman culture, fighting against Roman persecution, but he also writes a work against the Jews where he implements probably some of the material that we've seen earlier used by Justin. We see similarities to Justin's dialogue with Trypho. Here we have a debate between a proselyte for Christianity and a proselyte for Judaism.

Moving from apologetical treatises, we move to the second main section of his works, the controversial treatises. There we have written in about AD 200 a prescription against the heretics, and this work had the great goal of ending all controversies between what we would call Catholic Christians and heretics. He uses the term "Catholic Christians" to mean the universal Christian church, that is, those who hold to the universal teachings of Christianity.

And there are those who profess to be Christians during this time period but who don't hold to that Catholic teaching, and this work is called *The Prescription Against the Heretics*. That might seem like a strange word, but remember that he was trained as a lawyer and the *praescriptio* was a technical term in Roman law, and it's a fascinating story to see. In the *praescriptio*, as two Roman citizens are about to meet each other in the courts of law, the defendant objects to the way the plaintiff presents the case; that is, the person who is having a case brought against them thinks that the way in which the case is being presented is a false way and that the case shouldn't even come to court. The objection or the *praescriptio* had to be written out before the case appeared, and that's how we get the word *prescription* from the Latin—*pre*, the prefix “to come before,” *scriber*, “to write”—it was written before. And what Tertullian believes is that the heretics shouldn't even have their case brought before the courts, because the heretics don't understand the Bible. It's the Bible that is the foundation for the teaching of Christianity, and these people who call themselves Christians, who take the Bible and twist it to their own ends, have a false case. It's not theirs to use. They take the Bible and misuse it and, therefore, they shouldn't be given the chance even to present their case, and that's why it's called *The Prescription Against the Heretics*. This is a very valuable work for understanding the way in which the Christian community understood itself in terms of being in contrast to the community that called itself Christian but wasn't Christian.

There are a number of other works of a controversial nature; that is, that they are engaged in controversy either within or without [outside] the church. He writes a work against Marcion, and Marcion is very important for biblical scholars, and in his work against Marcion, he gives us our main sources of knowledge concerning the controversy surrounding him. He has a number of other ones against the Valentinians, against a fellow named Hermogenes, but more important than those, he has a work on baptism, and this controversial treatise is the only work that we have before Christianity became legal in 312. It's the only one on the nature of the sacraments. It's twenty chapters long; it's not a short work, but what's important for us to note is that he considered baptism to be prefigured in the Old Testament. As the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry land, as they passed through that wall of water, so we too in baptism pass through our own Red Sea. As Moses struck the rock and the water gushed forth, so this too is a prefiguring of the washing away of our sins in water. We see a number of prefigurations in the Old Testament concerning

that rite, that sacrament of baptism, which becomes a prime sacrament in the early Christian church.

He has another work but with a clever title called *Scorpiace*. We all know what scorpions are, but not living in the Middle East, scorpions don't play a very important role in our lives, but they did then. And scorpions had a deadly and painful sting, and so he's going to provide an antidote to the sting of the scorpion, and the scorpions of that age are the gnostics. The gnostics think it's foolish for Christians, for example, to permit martyrdom. Because the gnostics always had a separation of flesh and spirit, they maintained that whether one is martyred or not isn't really important, but Tertullian knew that martyrdom was an important part of life for the Christian before Christianity became legal. The gnostics would encourage the Christians to make accommodations to the Greek culture, to save their lives, but Tertullian said, "No, this is wrong. We must realize that martyrdom is something that is glorious"; that is, to die, to suffer for Jesus Christ was a glorious way to end life. And he's against then any type of accommodation with Roman culture.

Tertullian also wrote a work on the flesh of Christ, maintaining that Jesus was fully human as He walked here on earth. Already at this time, the church was struggling with how to put together the full humanity of Christ and the full deity of Christ, and there was a group in the church called the Docetists who denied the reality of the human flesh of Christ. They maintained that it was an appearance, it was an illusion that as He ate fish, for example, as He slept, as He wept, as He was thirsty; He wasn't really thirsty, He didn't really sleep, His flesh was not really like our flesh, but Tertullian maintains that this important part of Christian teaching, that Jesus is fully man, is something that must be defended.

He also wrote a work on the resurrection of the flesh. The Greek pagans, some heretical sects of Christianity, and the Sadducees maintained that a resurrection was an abomination. Certainly it was against all of Greek teaching. And he defends the resurrection of the flesh for Christ in the time that we call Easter, and our own resurrection. He uses biblical references and reasonable arguments to assert the importance of the resurrection of the flesh.

And the last work that we want to look at under this subsection, the controversial treatises, is a work against a fellow named Praxeas. We have to remember that there's a point in Tertullian's life when

he becomes a Montanist, and this work is written during that time period. He maintains that Praxeas, who is a Christian, does not have a full understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of how they worked independently and yet unitedly. Praxeas was what we call—and here's another technical word: *patripassian*. What does that mean? All of us have *pater*, we all have dad, and all of our fathers have had a passion. Now we understand the word *passion* in terms of what men have for women or women have for men, but *passio* in the Latin means to undergo a struggle, and if you put these two words together then, you can understand what a *pater passion* is. It's that the father struggled or that the father suffered. It was believed that as Jesus was on the cross, there was a molding of the Father and the Son so that it was the Father who was crucified. The Bible speaks against that and maintains the complete independence and separation of the Father and Son, and yet the Bible also speaks of the complete unity of the Father and the Son. The church struggled with how to combine unity of being and yet separation of function. And as we reflect upon the Scripture, putting ourselves in their time period, we can see that this was not an easy doctrine to work out.

Anyway, Praxeas was a *patripassian*, and Tertullian demonstrates how this teaching is wrong, and he goes on to develop in a very good way the doctrine of the Trinity. This teaching of Tertullian was used at the Council of Nicea later on in 325 and was used to help the church understand the full relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—how they are one and yet how they are also separate in their function. And as he's writing in Latin, he uses the word *trinitas* to describe the relationship between the three persons; he uses the word Trinity. I would remind you that that word is not found in the New Testament. The church had to struggle with the passages of Scripture to come upon this biblical teaching that is complex in its historical unfolding.

We move now to the moral works of Tertullian, and I would remind you that we haven't discussed all of his various pieces of literature. In his moral works we find some very fascinating material that gives us glimpses into the lifestyle and the lives of the early Christian church. He has one work written to the martyrs, and he's encouraging his brothers who are imprisoned as they face the execution that will become theirs to persevere, to stand fast in their confession of faith. He has a work on the shows, and he condemns Christian participation in all of these public games which were dedicated to the many gods of the Greeks.

A fascinating work is on the dress of women, and wait 'til you hear the prescriptions that he has for women. He wants women to not be dominated by pagan fashion but to show modesty. He wants all cosmetics and all jewelry to be abolished in the Christian church, because all cosmetics and all jewelry have diabolical origins. Jewelry and cosmetics come from the devil. He maintains that we should not wear any rings or precious stones—pearls, gold, or silver. And furthermore—so far he sounds pretty radical—wait until you hear this, he maintains that we shouldn't have any cloth that is dyed, because dying the cloth changes it from the way in which God would have things to be. Furthermore, he maintained that if human beings were to fly, they'd be born with wings. No, no, that's a later argument. Sorry.

“Since we are the temple of God,” Tertullian argues, “we should be modest. We shouldn't change the beauty of the work of the Creator by adding dye to the hair or paint to the face.” A fascinating commentary. Quite extreme; a little bit more rigorous than any of us would want to maintain, but we see that some of the struggles that we as parents or that we as Christians face as we raise our children or as we ourselves attempt to live Christian lives in our own culture. The struggles that we face too are not new to our century but have roots way back in the history of the church. I don't suggest reading Tertullian as a model to go by today.

Concerning prayer we have by Tertullian the oldest surviving exposition of the Lord's Prayer. It seems, because of this exposition, that the Lord's Prayer was an important part of the life of piety of the Christian church and that Jesus' admonition that they pray in this fashion was taken by the church from the earliest times, and this is our first commentary on the Lord's Prayer. He has a number of works that are dedicated to what we would call the Christian virtues. He has a work on patience where he praises patience. A work on repentance where he maintains that Christians who sin should be bold in their repentance, that they should publicly confess their sin, and he admonishes interestingly that those who have been caught in sin, who make public profession of their sin and confess it to be sin, should then go on and do an act of penance, which is eating, for example, plain food like dark bread and water, and this teaching will later be expanded and developed in the Medieval church so that a whole system of penance will eventually emerge.

He also writes a letter to his wife. It's written about AD 200 to 206, and he expects to die, and so in a sense this is his last will

and testament for his wife. He makes certain suggestions to her and for her life after his death. He advises her to stay a widow, not to get married because there's no good excuse ever to get married again, and we can see this attitude of anti-worldliness in Tertullian.

He then begins to think about chastity and makes an exhortation to chastity to a friend who had recently lost his wife. This is a male friend, and he says, "Don't get married and just be chaste." Finally he puts the capstone to his teaching on a work on monogamy and says that in all cases, under no extenuating circumstances, should a second marriage be entered into given any grounds. He also maintained, and again this gives us a glimpse at the Christians' attempts to come to grips with their own culture, the Christians' attempt to speak to their society, he writes a work on the veiling of virgins, and he maintains that all virgins should be veiled and that's because the etiquette of their society went along with this type of veiling. Once again, we see the cultural relativity of his writings. I don't think any of us fathers would insist on putting veils on our young daughters. That's not the point, but the point was his attempting to translate his culture and Christianity, to translate them so that the Christians could live in that culture as witnesses to the truths of Christianity and not cause an affront to moral etiquette at the time.

He continues to write his many, many moral works. He writes a very moving piece of literature that I would strongly suggest reading, and it's available in modern translation called *The Crown*. It reads like a short novel, and it gives the story of a Christian young man who is in service in the Roman military. During that time all young men had to serve military service, whether they were Christians or non-Christians, and here was a Christian young man who participated in the athletic activities surrounding all military affairs, and he too was an athlete and at the end of athletic competition, just like we have as we think about the Greek Olympic games, the crowning of the athlete with an all olive leaf crown. The pagan connections to that activity were such that this Christian young man refused to be crowned. He said that it was wrong, and then he receives a martyr's death because of that. It's a moving tale. Whether it's true or not, we don't know, but he suggests that this is the way in which Christian young men should handle themselves.

I mentioned earlier a problem during the time of Christian persecution with those whom we called the lapsed, those who

would profess Christianity or would even be pastors in churches who during times of persecution would either turn over their Bibles to be burned or would burn incense to the gods to save their own lives. Or some Christians, when persecution was coming to their city, would flee to the next city to escape that persecution. Tertullian, in his normal style, writes a work concerning flight in persecution, and you can imagine what his advice would be. Stay in your town and die for Christ, rather than flee.

Finally two or three other works. He has a work on fasting, and he believes that the church was becoming a little bit too lax in their policy concerning fasting and would like to see more fasting in the Christian church. Once again, we see his movement as he grows older into this Montanist position, which was considered then later to be heretical by the Christian church. The Montanists were those believed that they were direct organs of the Holy Spirit, that they could speak the words of God, and as they spoke the words of God, they developed a lifestyle that was extremely rigorous, with extreme fasting, for example.

And finally, he maintains in his two last works—one is on modesty—that Christians should be modest and that they should wear certain clothes that are exemplary of modesty. In other words, to translate this into the twentieth century, it would seem apparent that Tertullian would advise the Christian community to adopt a lifestyle very similar to the Amish lifestyle where there would be no use of certain modern contraptions for clothing. The Amish of today don't wear buttons, for example; they don't wear ties, for example. These modern contrivances should probably be avoided as we try to translate Tertullian into our own century in terms of his admonition for how Christians are to live.

How do we analyze the teaching of Tertullian and look at his life in general? In general we see that Tertullian was the type of man who was obviously brilliant. He had a conversion, he was not raised in the Christian church, he had a conversion to Christianity, and his type of personality led him as he grew older and older to more and more extreme positions concerning Christian lifestyle, and eventually it led him, because of his superior ability to found his own sect. However, he was orthodox in other ways as well; for example, in his teachings concerning the Trinity, his incisive mind was able to penetrate the different passages of Scripture that lay out for us the interrelationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and how they are unified and yet how they are separate. So Tertullian provides for us tremendous material for

the development of theology and gives us a good insight for the struggles of the Christian community during this time period.

How do we live as Christians in a pagan society? I would think that twentieth-century evangelicals would reject much of the advice that Tertullian gives; however, I think the admonition of Tertullian is one that we should take to heart as well, that we should be thinking about the ways in which we stand with our culture and the ways in which we should be in rebellion against our culture.

And finally concerning Tertullian, we see that his life, which was a life of radical antithesis, comes also in his theology. In other words, as he rejected, as he grew older and older, as he rejected more and more the culture of his time, so he believed that Christianity should reject the philosophical culture of his time. He maintained the revelation of God in Christ is holy other from the philosophy of the world, and so he sees Christianity as radically distinct from Greek philosophical culture. And I believe that that's a good movement in the development of the theology of the Christian church. We see in Tertullian, then, both good and bad. We see him informing us concerning complexity of logical things, we see him providing a bridge, a pathway in which Christian theology can go, and yet, we unfortunately see a man who went to an extreme, who himself becomes a leader of a sect of people who are no longer considered to be members of the Catholic church in their extreme, in their rigor. And finally we see in Tertullian the beginnings at this early point of some of the themes which will be later elaborated in the time period of the Middle Ages, which will also lead the church into ruin. As we reflect upon the necessity for penance, for example, and that in connection with confession of sin must come certain acts that originally could be considered to be good, that is, as the Christian confesses his sinfulness so he performs acts of obedience. But that idea of penance, which has some good implications, especially in the early church period, will become part and parcel for how Christians understand the way in which they are to live their lives so that a penitential system becomes developed in the Christian church.

Tertullian has a lot to offer to us, and he's a good life to study. I would suggest that we read the work on The Crown for even devotional literature as we see his admonition for the Christians who live in a time of persecution to stand firm for Jesus Christ

during that time, to stand against their culture, and so to stand as lights in the midst of a dark time and a dark place.