

Reformed Christian Theology ~ A layman's understanding of the will of God in the Christian life, from a reformed theological perspective.

Annotated Irenaeus' Against Heresies: Book I

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POSTED BY CRAIG TRUGLIA IN CHURCH HISTORY

≈ 3 COMMENTS

Tags

Against Heresies, Baptismal Regeneration, Bible, Catholicism, christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy, Irenaeus, Reformed Theology, Roman Catholicism

Irenaeus is considered by many the first systematic theologian of the Church. Being the first at something makes it is easy to ascribe to him the qualities of unerring thought and perfect insight.

As much as my learning allows* I am undergoing a thorough reading of his books. In order to make them more easily understandable, I am annotating them like a study Bible.

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*Some will say I do not have the scholarly background to undertake this task. All I can say is that they must judge my work on its own merits. I am grateful that God has provided for me in the past some decent instruction on Neo-Platonism when I studied the subject at Columbia University. My only peer-reviewed published work is on the Neo-Platonist doctrine of the Chain of Being. Understanding Neo-Platonism to some extent greatly assists me in knowing what the Gnostics were talking about.

Gnosticism is essentially the melding of Greek Dualist thought with the trappings of Christianity. It mixes Pythagoreanism, Platonism, and Greek Polytheism. There is nothing distinctly Christian about it.

[Click here in order to read Book I of Irenaeus' Against Heresies](#), with my annotations.

A few things I would like to reflect upon that are of interested, from a Reformed Theological apologetic standpoint:

- There are many parts, which upon reflection, it appears that Irenaeus was writing extemporaneously. He misquotes parts of the Bible (particularly in Chapters 3 and 18.) For example, he says the Gospel of John records something that is only found in Matthew and Luke. Oftentimes, the Gnostic systems he records are internally inconsistent. A careful reader may notice it might not be that particular system, but rather Irenaeus is forgetting which branch of Gnosticism taught what, and this confusion

finds its way into the text. Hence, my sense is that this book was not carefully edited nor was Irenaeus copiously recording from information out of books open right in front of him.

- What are the ramifications of this for us? For one, it gives us reason to exercise caution when quoting Irenaeus as a be-all, end-all authority. The work gives us a sense of what orthodox Christians believed, but it does not reflect the most careful, studied thought. Further, when people cite that Irenaeus “as a child learned from Polycarp, who learned from John,” they often do so under the pretense that Irenaeus carefully re-presents John’s thought. Being that Irenaeus *misremembers* what the Gospel of John really says, which he surely owned a copy of, it is not wise to take seriously that he would remember tons of things that Polycarp would have taught him in immense detail.
- To my surprise, Book I on several points teaches against Baptismal Regeneration (see chapter 21). Instead, it teaches a baptism of repentance, in line with the plain meaning of 1 Peter 3:21 and the writings of Justin Martyr and Origen (roughly Irenaeus’ contemporaries). I will reserve further comment on the subject until I read the entire corpus of Irenaeus’ works—but so far the evidence is suggestive that Justin and Origen do represent an earlier line of thought than later third century conceptions of the efficacy of the baptismal sacrament.

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thoughts on “Annotated Irenaeus’ Against Heresies: Book I”

1. said:Restless Pilgrim

February 24, 2016 at 6:55 pm

I’m impressed, I’ve always told myself that one of these days I’m going to work through the entire work, but I have to actually do it!

What in chapter 21 do you think speaks against baptismal regeneration? I’ve only had a very quick scan but I’ve found a section where he describes baptism as “*regeneration to God*”.

I’m extremely rusty on Irenaeus, but I recall that he talks about it again in Book III, comparing it to the rain received by dry trees (the unregenerate), allowing them to bring forth fruit.

REPLY

o said:Craig Truglia

February 24, 2016 at 10:29 pm

Thank you for the kind words, I had a lot of typos in that...i was rushing to get it out on my way to work. Quoting paragraphs 1 and 2 from chapter 21:

“And when we come to refute them, we shall show in its fitting-place, that this class of men have been instigated by Satan to a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God, and thus to a renunciation of the whole [Christian] faith.

2. They maintain that those who have attained to perfect knowledge must of necessity be regenerated into that power which is above all. For it is otherwise impossible to find admittance within the Pleroma, since this [regeneration] it is which leads them down into the depths of Bythus. For the baptism instituted by the visible Jesus was for the remission of sins, but the redemption brought in by that Christ who descended upon Him, was for perfection; and they allege that the former is animal, but the latter spiritual. And the baptism of John was proclaimed with a view to repentance, but the redemption by Jesus was brought in for the sake of perfection.”

Irenaeus says the heretics deny true baptism, and in doing so reject the whole Christian faith. He then compares the Gnostic view, from the Christian view. The Gnostic view is that baptism brings “perfection,” i.e. it is an initiation into perfect knowledge (gnosis). In fact, Irenaeus speaks of a heretical sect that taught that unless one was baptized, salvation was impossible!

He criticizes those in paragraph 4 who “But there are some of them who assert that it is superfluous to bring persons to the water, but mixing oil and water together, they place this mixture on the heads of those who are to be initiated, with the use of some such expressions as we have already mentioned. And this they maintain to be the redemption.”In paragraph 5 he criticizes those, “ who continue to redeem persons [via baptism] even up to the moment of death...”

Yet, according to Irenaeus, the baptisms of the real “physical Jesus” for the remission of sins and John “for repentance” are the ones that are actually recognized by Christians. So, Irenaeus puts up the “remission of sins” and “for repentance” as foils against which false teaching is compared to, and then he criticizes the false teachers in paragraphs 4 and 5 for thinking that they can actually save people with their baptisms, that baptism is not necessary at all, and that people can be baptized before they were dead without being catechized. So, unless we believe that Irenaeus actually believed that people can be saved by virtue of being baptized and was not conflating baptism with repentance, which the sense of paragraph 2 leads me to believe, I do not see how Book I can be reconciled with the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. It reads eerily similar to Justin Martyr’s treatment on the topic, and we know that Irenaeus read Justin Martyr. However, I will reserve final judgement until I can complete reading what Irenaeus wrote. I just caution those who see the word “regeneration” next to “baptism” in a work from a Church Father and immediately import meaning onto what they said, without actually listening to the rationale offered in what was actually said.

God bless
Craig

REPLY

○ *said:* **Craig Truglia**

February 24, 2016 at 10:33 pm

Just so you don't think I am wrongly conflating the baptism for repentance with the baptism for the remission for sins, let me quote Mark 1:4- "John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance FOR the remission of sins."

REPLY

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