

Irenaeus, Theodicy, and the Problem of Evil: His Lost Work “That God is Not the Author of Evil” and Evangelism Today

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The second century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons wrote more works than we currently have. Eusebius of Caesarea refers to one called “That God is Not the Author of Evil” which may have influenced Athanasius and Basil. We can compare theological points of contact from Athanasius and Basil to find corresponding points in Irenaeus’ existing works, his instructive *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* and his massive *Against Heresies*. We also find in Irenaeus fuller explanations of certain points related to theodicy and the character of God, because Irenaeus was an integrative biblical theologian. We also explore the modern day relevance and potential of Irenaeus’ approach in the evangelistic mission of the church.

Introduction

Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 – 202 AD) was the disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, disciple of the apostle John. His surviving writings, *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, attest to his intimate knowledge of the Scriptures, skill at observation and ability to research his gnostic opponents, and thoughtful approach to Christian catechesis. Eusebius of Caesarea attests, however, that Irenaeus wrote more works than have survived. One is called *That God is Not the Author of Evil*. What might Irenaeus have said in this work?

Two very prominent bishop-theologians addressed the question, and by glancing at their work, we might make a reasonable inference about Irenaeus’ outline. They are Athanasius of Alexandria (c.298 – 373 AD), in his two volume work *Against the Heathen – On the Incarnation*, and Basil of Caesarea (329 – 379 AD), in *Homily 9: God Is Not the Author of Evil*, perhaps after the destruction of Nicaea in 368 AD,¹ and in *Hexaemeron*, Homily 2.4. Athanasius obligates himself to explain *all* of God’s deeds as expressions of His goodness. He writes:

‘For their deeds must correspond to their natures, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature.’²

He then goes on to repeatedly assert that God is good, and demonstrably through His actions.³ Whether he is completely successful or not, Athanasius states his goal in this way:

¹ Philip Schaff, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 2, Book 8, p.74 writes, ‘It has been conjectured that it was delivered shortly after some such public calamity as the destruction of Nicæa in 368’

² Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 16.4

³ ‘God is good and exceeding noble’ (*Against the Heathen* 2.2), ‘For God, being good and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by Him’ (35.1), ‘His Word...proceeds in His goodness from the Father as from a good Fountain’ (41.1), ‘But the God of all is good and exceeding noble by nature, and therefore is kind; for one that is good can grudge nothing: for which reason he does not even grudge existence, but desires all to exist, as objects for his loving-kindness’ (41.2), ‘Because He is good He guides and settles the whole Creation by His Word’ (41.3), ‘Seeing the power of the Word, we receive a knowledge also of a good Father’ (45.2), ‘Being the good Offspring of Him that is good, and true Son, He is the Father’s Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation, nor as if these qualities were imparted to Him from without... but He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father’ (46.8). ‘The good Father through Him orders all things’ (*On the Incarnation* 1.1), ‘what men deride as unseemly, this by His own goodness He clothes with seemliness’ (1.2), ‘He has yet of the loving-kindness and goodness of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation’ (1.3), ‘For God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness: nor could one that is good be niggardly of anything’ (3.3), ‘for what is evil is not, but what is good is... [and] they derive their being from God who is’ (4.5), ‘For it were not worthy of God’s goodness that the things He had made should waste away... what was God in His goodness to do? ... For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God’s part... It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God’s goodness’ (6.5 – 10); ‘this great work was peculiarly suited to God’s goodness... much more did God the Word of the all-good Father not neglect the race of men’ (10.1), ‘inasmuch as He is good, He did not leave

“The truth of the Church’s theology must be manifest: that evil has not from the beginning been with God or in God, nor has any substantive existence; but that men, in default of the vision of good, began to devise and imagine for themselves what was not, after their own pleasure.”⁴

Basil follows a similar line of thinking in He insists that God is good, that creation is good, and that the source of human evil is not God, but human beings’ abuse of their free will.

Irenaeus makes similar remarks. For example:

For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually.⁵

If God has a good will towards us *continually*, it follows that we should be able to articulate how that is so. Irenaeus addresses many of those concerns in his surviving literary corpus. Whereas Athanasius and Basil wrote in the earlier and latter parts of the fourth century, largely to defend the deity of Christ, Irenaeus preceded them by two centuries, largely to defend the *humanity* of Christ. The concern for Jesus’ humanity led Irenaeus to explore facets of theological anthropology in more detail. An outstanding biblical theologian, Irenaeus explores creation, Israel, and Christ from the standpoint of a biblical theologian more than Athanasius or Basil. As such, Irenaeus already helps us answer certain key questions related to ‘the problem of evil’ and the question of theodicy, issues that concern us today. Our ability to retrieve key elements of Irenaeus’ thought from *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* may lead to a fruitful hypothesis of how the bishop of Lyons might have answered even more questions in his lost work, *That God Is Not the Author of Evil*.

Creation, Humanity, Free Will, and Union with God

First, Irenaeus asserted that God is the creator of all things. The gnostics, by contrast, wanted to keep God ‘unsullied’ by the material world, which they regarded as dreadful and impure. They attributed the creation to angelic beings, or intermediaries, who did the work of creation. In response, Irenaeus appears to take the biblical Hebraic language for creation as ‘the work of His hands’ (e.g. Isa.5:12; Ps.102:25), and He inserts the Son and the Spirit into the phrase as the two ‘hands’ of God.⁶ He uses this expression pointedly with regards to humanity, and often in contrast to the idea that angels were intermediaries in creation.⁷ Irenaeus denies that idea, seeing in it a danger of separating God from His creation, which would affect the Christian vision of redemption also directly involving God. But if creation is good because it is a reflection of God’s goodness, then how might we understand God’s goodness throughout history, especially human history, which includes human evil? The Christian conviction

them destitute of the knowledge of Himself” (11.1), ‘being good, He gives them a share in His own Image’ (11.3), ‘God’s goodness then and loving-kindness being so great’ (12.6), ‘since it were unworthy of the Divine Goodness to overlook so grave a matter’ (43.4), ‘by His guidance and goodness’ (43.7). George Dion. Dragas, *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2005), p.29 writes, ‘In general, God’s *physis* [nature] is good and surpasses all excellence... It could be argued that *physis* agrees not only with *ousia*, but also with *act*.’

⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 7.3

⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1 – 2, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

⁶ Ibid 4.preface.4; 4.20.1

⁷ Ibid 4.7.4; 4.20.4; 5.1.3; 5.5.1; 5.6.1; 5.28.4; cf.5.18; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 10, 11, 26

about creation's goodness leads to theodicy being a logical requirement and companion to formal Christian theology.

Second, Irenaeus describes human beings by referring to the image of God in a particular way. In order to maintain God's goodness, human beings must be originally good, even patterned after the goodness of God. Indeed, Irenaeus says that 'the Son of God, after whose image man was created,' was the archetype God used from within Himself to create humans.⁸ That is, as the Son of God has always been the true image of God through whom the Father is made known (Col.1:15, Heb.1:3), human beings were formed in the image of the eternal Son of God to similarly make God known in the creation (Gen.1:26 – 27). The relation that human beings were intended to have with God external to God but by the Spirit, the Son of God originally and eternally has with the Father within the Godhead by the Spirit.

In debating the Gnostics with their low view of matter, Irenaeus seems to revel even in the physical earth from which God formed Adam. In the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, dated circa 195 AD, meant to summarize Christian teaching for new converts, Irenaeus writes:

'But man He formed with His own hands [i.e. the Word and the Spirit], taking from the earth that which was purest and finest, and mingling in measure His own power with the earth. For He traced His own form on the formation, that that which should be seen should be of divine form: for (as) the image of God was man formed and set on the earth. And that he might become living, He breathed on his face the breath of life; that both for the breath and for the formation man should be like unto God. Moreover he was free and self-controlled, being made by God for this end, that he might rule all those things that were upon the earth. And this great created world, prepared by God before the formation of man, was given to man as his place, containing all things within itself.'⁹

Irenaeus does not elevate the interiority of human rationality to be 'the image of God' as would Augustine and others who compared the individual's psychological thought process (thought, word, and will) to the Trinity in what is now known as the 'psychological model' of the Trinity. Instead, Irenaeus celebrates two aspects of humanity: (1) the physical form of the human as somehow mirroring the divine form, although he does not explain this;¹⁰ (2) participation in the divine 'breath.' Each human being was meant to be in relation to God by the Spirit, in some sense mirroring an internal relation of the Son to the Father in the Spirit.¹¹ For Irenaeus, there was no individualistic

⁸ Ibid 4.33.4, 'But who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except the Son of God, after whose image man was created? And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.'

⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11

¹⁰ I suspect that Irenaeus was thinking of the Hebraic, physical understanding of the oneness of male and female in marriage as being in the image of God, since it is that oneness which is life-bearing and life-giving, as reflected in the grammar of Genesis 1:27 and also the literary concern of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 where God makes all living beings to be life-bearing 'after its kind.' Irenaeus seems to be thinking this way, because he happily commingles phrases from Genesis 2 ('from the earth'; 'breathed on his face') and Genesis 1 ('image of God'; 'be like unto God'; 'rule all those things that were upon the earth') in his explanation of human creation in the *Demonstration*. Hence, Irenaeus has a relational (in fact, marital, it would seem) and physical-morphological understanding for what it meant for human beings to be in 'the image of God.' To the extent that he set about to answer the question of how an individual human being – and not just a married couple – was in 'the image of God,' Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* appealed to the relational identity of the Word-Son as the image of God.

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of Irenaeus' theological anthropology, see Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), ch.1. In particular, Steenberg notes that Irenaeus and Tertullian shared the view that the human soul grows in some sense with the human body, and that the Spirit of God gives life to the soul which mediates life to the body.

notion of human personhood. This sets Irenaeus up to explain the fall and human evil in terms of damaged relationship and damaged human nature, and the work of Christ to restore both, and vindicate the goodness of God.

Irenaeus also adds that God designed humans to make ‘progress day by day... ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.’¹² Logically, an infinite God creating, relating to, and developing finite human beings requires that humans would infinitely make progress, ‘ascending towards the perfect.’ In connection with this progress, Irenaeus asserts that human free will is vital. ‘God has always preserved freedom and self-government in man.’¹³

Irenaeus explains why God gave humans free will, and how that fact relates to God’s goodness. If God is free from coercion from forces outside Himself (as distinguished from being good within Himself), then it follows that God would endow human beings with that type of freedom as well, that we might experience some of the goodness God is and knows: ‘Man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created.’¹⁴ Irenaeus also relates free will to the power to ascend to God via the acquisition of virtue. If the power of free will were not given to human beings, then we would not be able to keep the virtue God invested in us, and develop it.¹⁵ Irenaeus encourages his readers to be like soft clay which retains moisture to remain tractable to the potter, as opposed to hardened clay. Softened clay, Irenaeus says, can be shaped by the potter and adorned with even more beauty.

Significantly, Irenaeus considers the question, ‘Could not God have exhibited man as perfect from beginning?’ and answers with, ‘It was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.’¹⁶ Immediately afterwards, he says again, ‘God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.’¹⁷ Irenaeus is unusual among patristic writers in that he tried to answer this question. Perhaps he relies overly much on the analogy of infancy for Adam. For the question can still be asked, ‘So if God could have created Adam as ‘an adult,’ with already perfected love for God based on perfect knowledge of God, why did He not do so?’¹⁸ To this Irenaeus has no answer. This silence is strange, because Irenaeus himself says, ‘With God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.’¹⁹ If God *could* have done something better *but did not*, what explanation can be offered for that?

¹² Ibid 4.38.3; John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p.50 is an example of a historian who credits Theophilus of Antioch (d.183 – 185 AD), *Letter to Autolycus* 25 with being the first to write that Adam had been *nepios*, ‘a child,’ and needing to properly mature. Irenaeus follows that view in *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11, 14. But it is just as reasonable to suspect that prior to Theophilus, some kind of view of Adam as not being static, but needing to mature in some way, was present in Christian thought.

¹³ Ibid 4.15.2

¹⁴ Ibid 4.37.1 – 2, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

¹⁵ Ibid. In 4.39.2, Irenaeus’ discussion of Romans 2 would be worth an expanded discussion, because his logic argues against the popular Calvinist interpretation of the ‘potter and clay’ passage of Romans 9.

¹⁶ Ibid 4.38.1

¹⁷ Ibid 4.38.2.

¹⁸ Steenberg, p.41, offers an answer which does not fully suffice, nor does he answer the objection I raise here.

¹⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.21.3

Although he did not say this in *Against Heresies*, perhaps Irenaeus might have said in his lost work, ‘It was not possible for God to do so.’ Irenaeus already had the framework for saying that. If God has a non-coercive love towards humanity, as Irenaeus has already said,²⁰ and even *is* non-coercive love in God’s own being, then He *could not possibly* create Adam and Eve with an already perfected love for Him, for that would not be a love they had personally chosen. Nor could God create them with an already perfect knowledge of Himself, for that would entail God implanting in them false memories about a past relationship with Him, and God cannot lie (Heb.6:18), or somehow sharing the mind of God directly, and it is doubtful that the finite could comprehend the infinite in such a way. So God had to create them with the desire to receive from Him and an inclination to love Him, but yet at one small step removed from Himself.

If this is so, then God actually *had* to create the tree of life in the garden. He *had* to *invite without coercion* Adam, Eve, and their descendants to participate more deeply in His own divine life in a physically immortal and spiritually ever-increasing mode, which Irenaeus had already deduced of the tree of life.²¹ To an unfallen human being, the tree of life would have had the effect of sealing our will for God and uncorrupted human nature with divine life and the orientation of our personhood as directed outwards towards God, such that we would perfect our ontological freedom as relational creatures designed to depend on God and to constantly ascend intellectually and spiritually towards Him. In other words, under the necessity of authentic love, God *had* to create humanity so they might *freely* choose to *always* choose Him forever. It could not be automatic.

God also *had* to create the tree of knowledge of good and evil to invite us to leave the defining of good and evil with Him, and not take that power into ourselves. God already implanted human beings with the knowledge of good and evil, says Irenaeus.²² Adam and Eve would have grown in goodness, and then understood evil conceptually, by imagining what life would be like if they decreased in goodness. Adam experientially knew what being ‘alone’ had been like, after seeing all the animals parade by him in male-female pairs: ‘not good,’ by God’s own assessment (Gen.2:18). Eve could imagine the aloneness even if she had never experienced it personally herself. If while unfallen, they had a child, and felt the joy of parenthood, they could imagine losing that child and the impoverishment of loss. But they did not have to actually abandon, harm, or alienate that child in reality. They could, Irenaeus says, simply imagine²³ reversing their growth in relationship, love, and goodness. Adam could

²⁰ Ibid 4.4.3; 4.37; 4.39; 5:37

²¹ Ibid 3.23.6

²² Ibid 4.15.1 says, ‘For God at the first, indeed, warning them by means of natural precepts, which from the beginning He had implanted in mankind, that is, by means of the Decalogue...’ If God implanted the Decalogue within all humankind, then to Irenaeus, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not the only source of the awareness of good and evil. It was related, and supplemented human moral awareness. But it did not encompass the totality of cognitive moral awareness.

²³ Ibid 4.39.1 stresses the role of the mind to think through the options of good and evil. Irenaeus says that through ‘mental power man knew both the good of obedience and the evil of disobedience.’ But he does not mean that we must do evil in order to know it. Irenaeus refers to ‘the eye of the mind, receiving experience of both, may with judgment make choice of the better things...’ But again, Irenaeus is referring to the activity of ‘the mind.’ The mind receives experience of both, by revelation and by growth in goodness, as I have suggested above. This is why Irenaeus can also say of the ‘evil thing which deprives him of life, that is disobedience to God, [he] *may never attempt it at all.*’ (italics mine) Irenaeus then says that the tongue tastes sweet and bitter, the eye sees black and white, the ear hears different sounds, and ‘so also does the mind, receiving through the experience of both the knowledge of what is good, become more tenacious of its preservation, by acting in obedience to God: in the first place, casting away, by means of [mental, intellectual] repentance, disobedience, as being something disagreeable and nauseous; and afterwards coming to understand what it really is, that it is contrary to goodness and sweetness, *so that the mind may never even attempt to taste disobedience to God.*’ (italics mine) The intellectual, reflective, and imaginative activities of the mind are evident. Irenaeus does not

wonder, ‘What if I did something to alienate Eve and return to a state of ‘not-good’ aloneness?’ Eve could wonder, ‘What if I did something to harm my children and return to a state before children?’ So growth in the *awareness* of good and evil was not dependent on the second tree, and certainly *not dependent on actual disobedience*. In fact, as the Genesis 3 – 4 narrative suggests, and human observation indicates, when we do evil, we lose understanding of how evil it is, because we rationalize it, blame someone else, etc. God’s goodness is such that He designed a world that was not pedagogically dualistic.

What, then, was the purpose of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Why was it *necessary*? Irenaeus does not directly answer this question. But he leaves open the following possibility. God is a life-giver, and a law-giver. But His law-giving serves His life-giving. Just as two points make a line, the two trees form a line, but not just a line: a vector; a directional movement. The two trees signify the invitation to trust God to define good and evil, and progress infinitely into God’s life. In other words, the second tree would have given human beings the knowledge that God – and God in particular – defines good and evil. In effect, God did design the second tree to confirm for us the knowledge that the definition of good and evil rests with God. Trees represent God: they are larger than us, older than us, are more firmly rooted than us, and can offer us something without perishing. If Adam and Eve grew in goodness and rejected the evil, and left the power to define good and evil in God’s domain. The one heinous act by which God’s loving and good authority could be rejected was taking the fruit from the tree of knowledge. And that, too, God had to offer as a non-coerced choice. It was bound up in His love for us.

Hence, the garden in Genesis, with the two critical trees, was the *only possible world* God could have made for humanity. It flowed from His commitments, which flowed from His character. This necessity removes all accusations against God of being arbitrary or of taking an unnecessary risk of letting suffering and evil materialize. Irenaeus himself was not far from offering this answer: ‘It was *not even possible* for God to create man perfect from the beginning, because the definition of perfection itself involves an active choice.’ All the elements were actually there in his biblical exposition and theology. Irenaeus’ conviction can be maintained with this understanding: ‘With God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.’²⁴

Irenaeus’ written statements about the positive purpose of the tree of knowledge correspond to another second century work, the *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*. Taken together, Irenaeus and the *Epistle to Diognetus* indicate that the Christian community in the second century believed that God had an original, positive purpose for the tree of knowledge:

“For in this place the tree of knowledge and the tree of life have been planted; but it is not the tree of knowledge that destroys — it is disobedience that proves destructive. Nor truly are those words without significance which are written, how God from the beginning planted the tree of life in the midst of paradise,

believe in a dualistic pedagogy where human beings must do and experience evil personally in order to appreciate goodness. God is good and wise enough to design a world and human nature so that evil is never logically necessary.

²⁴ Ibid 4.21.3

revealing through knowledge the way to life, and when those who were first formed did not use this [knowledge] properly, they were, through the fraud of the Serpent, stripped naked. For neither can life exist without knowledge, nor is knowledge secure without life. Wherefore both were planted close together.”²⁵

Although *Diognetus* does not explain how the tree granted true knowledge of good and evil, the letter nevertheless affirms points that corroborate my interpretation of both Irenaeus and Genesis itself. God intended human beings to grow in both life and knowledge together. God intended the tree of life and the tree of knowledge to reflect complementary principles from creation, not merely from the fall. Hence, God expected human beings to grow in the knowledge of both good and evil, through the direct participatory experience of goodness and life, and the knowledge of evil by imagining undoing one’s own growth in goodness and life. Disobedience, not the tree of knowledge per se, was destructive for humanity and God’s original purpose. Once again, the garden in Genesis was the only possible world God could have made for humanity, because God made human beings to grow. Both life and knowledge of good and evil are only possible through growth.

Why could God not create human beings to love Him irrevocably and perfectly from the start? Because to do so would render human beings into static robots and automatons. But that is not possible, both from the standpoint of God’s character and from the definition of the human, for the two things are linked. Finite beings in conscious relation with the infinite God of love requires ever-deepening growth and awareness of that growth. What energy provides the movement? Since God is uncoerced by any force outside Himself, human beings whom God made in His own image must be uncoerced from any force outside themselves, including God Himself. But there must be some inner inclination towards God which comes from within: that is our own human nature, desiring union with our Creator. In order for human love to be genuine, human beings would have to choose to love God in an uncoerced manner, *to perfect our natures and our love* in a uncoerced act of love for God to be united with Him. In other words, God *had* to create human beings as human *becomings*, called to be lovingly united with Himself, so that in that union, we could henceforth be ever-deepening as finite creatures experiencing infinite love. For God to do the impossible, and create human nature already fixed from the start, and human personhood as already determined in an orientation of other-love, would mean that human love would not be a true choice. In such a situation, human love would be something less than love. And human beings would be something less than human. If we are ultimately only acted upon, and not actors ourselves, then we would ultimately be indistinct from the rocks and grass of the created universe – a mirror passively reflecting objects, but not the image of God. Again, the garden of Eden, the two trees, and the necessity of a personal narrative of development are all *logical necessities resulting from* God’s free, spontaneous, and unconditioned choice to create us. If the Son’s *eternal*, relational choice to be loved and love the Father in the Spirit *reflects and constitutes* His very nature and personhood, then this impacts how we define human beings. We are also beings who are becoming, where our *temporal*, relational choice to be loved by God and love God will reflect and *constitute* our nature and personhood.

²⁵ *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* ch.12

The Fall and the Exile

Was God good in the face of human sin, and His exiling from the garden? Irenaeus answers yes. Irenaeus understood human sin as being a corruption within human nature, a defacing of the image and likeness of God in physical and personal form, and a breaking in the relationship between God and man internalized into human flesh and reproduced by the human mind. In a comment on Genesis 3, Irenaeus held that the corruption in humanity is an expression of sin in us:

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’²⁶

This is a remarkable insight which other Greek fathers repeat.²⁷ For Irenaeus, Adam and Eve *forced God* to close access to the tree of life. God, being love, and having love for Adam and Eve and all the children who would come from them, was confronted by two options. Would God allow the rather likely possibility that human beings would immortalize the corruption of their human nature within themselves? Or would God instead interpose death as an instrument by which this fate could not happen? God chose the latter, because death could be overcome later by resurrection, and human beings could choose to receive into themselves the healing in Christ for their corruption. So death, though tragically unpleasant, was a type of mercy and pity.

This may be surprising for those accustomed to thinking that God imposed death as a retributive punishment in retaliation for sinning, much like sending children to their room as punishment for stealing cookies. In the human case, the punishment is *in its essence* disconnected from the crime. But in the story of the fall, the punishment *is* the crime: Eating from the tree of knowledge is taking into one’s self the power to define good and evil from within one’s own self. It is in its very essence alienation from God, separation from His life, and a wounding of one’s very self because it implants into the human being a desire to be a relativistic absolutist – that is, the desire to define good

²⁶ Ibid 3.23.6

²⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.8 makes a general principle, ‘Wherefore I will grant that He punishes the disobedient... for correction; but I will not grant that He wishes to take vengeance. Revenge is retribution for evil, imposed for the advantage of him who takes the revenge. He will not desire us to take revenge, who teaches us to pray for those that despitefully use us. [Mt.5:44]’ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.16 says, ‘But as children are chastised by their teacher, or their father, so are we by Providence. But God does not punish, for punishment is retaliation for evil. He chastises, however, for good to those who are chastised, collectively and individually.’ Methodius of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5, says, ‘In order, then, that man might not be an undying or ever-living evil, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body, and was provided with immortal sustenance, God for this cause pronounced him mortal, and clothed him with mortality... For while the body still lives, before it has passed through death, sin must also live with it, as it has its roots concealed within us even though it be externally checked by the wounds inflicted by corrections and warnings... For the present we restrain its sprouts, such as evil imaginations, lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble us, not suffering its leaves to unclothe and open into shoots; while the Word, like an axe, cuts at its roots which grow below. But hereafter the very thought of evil will disappear.’ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 says, ‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition...’ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45, writes, ‘Yet here too he makes a gain, namely death and the cutting off of sin, in order that evil may not be immortal. Thus, his punishment is changed into a mercy, for it is in mercy, I am persuaded, that God inflicts punishment.’ Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassios*, Question 44.5 says, ‘And now, lest he put forth his hand and take from the Tree of Life and live forever,’ providentially produces, I think, the separation of things that cannot be mixed together, so that evil might not be immortal, being maintained in existence by participation in the good.’

and evil (to be an absolutist) but from within one's own self (to be relativistic) by being the standard and measure of all things, rather than allowing God to define good and evil for us. So human death was an ontological consequence that was *forced upon God*. Moreover, the other consequences of the fall – pain in childbearing and futility in gardening (Gen.3:16 – 19) – were ontological as well. They are not additional punishment or retribution from God. They are simply the outgrowth of Adam and Eve's choice to try to separate themselves from God, the source of life. Human beings are wholly dependent on God for life and the production of more life; we are unable to be bearers of life and caretakers of life without Him. Anything having to do with producing more life would be difficult and frustrating.

Israel and the Sinai Covenant

Irenaeus is unusual among patristic writers for the sheer volume of material he dedicates to analyzing – not simply quoting (as Justin Martyr did) – the Old Testament, and for the direct and indirect material by which he answers the question, 'Why did God appoint an Israel in the first place?' This is related to Irenaeus' defense of the Old Testament against the gnostic heresies. Our interest today is different. Because of Jewish suffering in history, especially due to medieval Christian persecution, and because of post-World War II regrets about anti-semitism within so-called 'Enlightenment' nation-states, Christian theologians must develop an adequate answer to this question, 'Why did God need, or appoint, an Israel in the first place?' To this, Christian theology – resting especially on the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Ecumenical Councils – can answer that Jesus needed to be truly human, which means that he needed to have a community of people who would physically protect and nurture him, and also spiritually and intellectually help him develop. Therefore, God needed to protect and purify Israel. That explains on the one hand, to some degree, why God protected Noah from the violence of his peers, Abraham and Sarah from the predations of Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. It also explains on the other hand why God purified Israel from those within Israel who would subvert God's purpose, from the first generation of Israelites to false prophets and faithless kings. God needed a focus group – Israel – who would partner with Him to struggle against the corruption within human nature, produce a canonical written diagnosis of the problem, and hope for the cure in the Messiah. Given the human (Adamic) tendency to blame sinful choices on other people, circumstances, and God Himself, this was no small achievement. Thus, in order to produce the Incarnation for humanity universally, God needed Jewish particularity. Irenaeus addresses this topic with more clarity than anyone else.

Irenaeus starts book 4 of *Against Heresies* with what sounds like a medical anthropology and medical diagnosis: 'For it is impossible for any one to heal the sick, if he has no knowledge of the disease of the patients.'²⁸ God is like a good doctor who lays a challenging health regimen on His focus group, Israel.

The first reason God appointed Israel, Irenaeus says, was because to demonstrate that sin was a terrible disease, and death was a terrible symptom. 'But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death's) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as

²⁸ Ibid 4.preface.2

a murderer.²⁹ Irenaeus argues that the moral clarity expressed in the commandments of the Sinai covenant aimed at revealing the nature of sin and death. Both sin and death are unnatural, and not part of God's original good design. This produced hope in Israel, and not fatalism. Ultimately, God in Christ rejects both sin and death as foreign intruders.

The second reason why God appointed Israel, correspondingly, was to call for Israel's partnership in battling the corruption of sin within themselves. In the same passage, Irenaeus says, 'It [the Sinai covenant] laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it.'³⁰ God's aim was to get rid of the disease in His patients. Irenaeus recognizes that one of the biblical idioms for this was 'circumcision of the heart.' Physical 'circumcision' was an act, or a type, of healing.³¹ It was then taken to represent the spiritual 'surgery' that people needed, which God called for with Israel's partnership, as they were meant to fully internalize God's commandments.³² None of them were able to live up to it, however.

The third reason why God appointed Israel was to enlist them to document their self-diagnosis, and hope for God's cure in the messianic God-man. Irenaeus writes:

'For the law never hindered them from believing in the Son of God; nay, but it even exhorted them so to do, saying that men can be saved in no other way from the old wound of the serpent than by believing in Him who, in the likeness of sinful flesh, is lifted up from the earth upon the tree of martyrdom, and draws all things to Himself, and vivifies the dead.'³³

'The law,' in Irenaeus' mind, may have been ethically impossible to fully uphold, as the Israelites would have stumbled over the tenth commandment, as the apostle Paul had discussed in Romans 7:14 – 25. But the law 'exhorted them' to believe in the Son of God. 'In the likeness of sinful flesh' here comes directly from Romans 8:3, which is how the apostle Paul saw the vexing problem of 'the flesh' to be resolved: through the agency of the Son healing his own human nature via internalizing God's commandments whereas the Israelites could not. Irenaeus also links John 3:14 – 15, John 12:32, Numbers 21:4 – 7, and Genesis 3:1 – 7 to this statement, showing that, in narrative form, a 'medical diagnosis' of sorts was written in 'the law,' which also prescribed a cure for the venom in the humanity of the Son of God.

The fourth reason why God appointed Israel was to prepare Israel and the Gentiles for the coming of the messiah. Irenaeus, again unusually among the fathers, addresses Jewish or Jewish-oriented questions like, 'Why did Jerusalem fall?' He replies, in 4.4.1 – 2, that there was appropriate fruit-bearing for a time and for a particular purpose. Irenaeus does not elaborate as much as he could, but presumably he would say that the temple

²⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

³⁰ Ibid 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

³¹ Ibid 4.12.1

³² Ibid 4.16.1 and note that in 4.16.5, Irenaeus speaks of the laws of Jesus (e.g. Mt.5:21 – 26 and 27 – 30, etc.) that addressed the human heart

³³ Ibid 4.2.8

arrangement, the sacrificial calendar cycle, and the Davidic monarchy served a purpose to foreshadow Jesus.³⁴

Irenaeus says that the Word

‘at that time, indeed, by means of His patriarchs and prophets, was prefiguring and declaring beforehand future things, fulfilling His part by anticipation in the dispensations of God, and accustoming His inheritance to obey God, and to pass through the world as in a state of pilgrimage, to follow His word, and to indicate beforehand things to come. For with God there is nothing without purpose or due signification.’³⁵

The law also trained Israelites in the virtues and ethical life, which is the fifth reason Irenaeus articulates.³⁶ The Sinai covenant, therefore, was not simply a legal backdrop against which God proved a supposed principle that He could punish people infinitely, as the Lutheran-Calvinist traditions would argue. Rather, God’s revelation to Israel constituted real progress for humanity.³⁷ Irenaeus’ language of ‘becoming accustomed’ is vital. With Abraham, God ‘accustomed’ man to follow His Word.³⁸ Because humanity had become ‘accustomed’ to the bonds of sin, God gave the law.³⁹ God was ‘accustoming man to bear His Spirit.’⁴⁰

Irenaeus may not have answered every question surrounding God’s historical relationship with Israel. Our present day sensibilities prompt us to ask more of the biblical text than Irenaeus sought to answer in *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration*. For example, he does not seek to explain *why* God drowned human life in the flood of Noah, rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, or took the Egyptian firstborn in the Exodus, etc. But, one might wonder whether in his lost work, Irenaeus explicitly said that God needed to preserve both the safety of Israel (thus, hostile Gentiles) and the integrity of Israel (thus, opponents of Moses’ leadership in Numbers, or Uzzah touching the ark in 2 Samuel 5, etc.) prior to Jesus’ incarnation for the sake of Jesus’ authentic humanity. Jesus had to be an infant and child raised by faithful Jewish parents, protected in a certain type of Jewish community, and presented to Jewish followers who were already sufficiently persuaded of God’s goodness that they would follow an itinerant rabbi into the hostile Gentile world. Irenaeus would have surely said that after his crucifixion, Jesus descended to the realm of dead souls (1 Pet.3:18; 4:6; Eph.4:11) to present himself to all who died before him, offering them salvation and deliverance from Hades.⁴¹ Thus, God was doing good by preserving Israel, by preventing the opponents of Israel from menacing the humanity of Jesus and therefore their own salvation from sinfulness, and also from damaging their human nature further in the moment.

³⁴ Ibid 4.7 addresses the Old Testament theophanies of the Son appearing to Abraham, Moses, and others.

³⁵ Ibid 4.21.3

³⁶ Ibid 4.8.2, ‘For the law commanded them to abstain from every servile work, that is, from all grasping after wealth which is procured by trading and by other worldly business; but it exhorted them to attend to the exercises of the soul, which consist in reflection, and to addresses of a beneficial kind for their neighbours’ benefit.’ In 4.8.3, Irenaeus extends the purpose of the law to educate God’s people about general priestly roles and responsibilities: ‘For David had been appointed a priest by God, although Saul persecuted him. For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank.’

³⁷ Ibid 4.9.3, ‘For the new covenant having been known and preached by the prophets, He who was to carry it out according to the good pleasure of the Father was also preached, having been revealed to men as God pleased; that they might always make progress through believing in Him, and by means of the [successive] covenants, should gradually attain to perfect salvation.’

³⁸ Ibid 4.5.4

³⁹ Ibid 4.13.2

⁴⁰ Ibid 4.14.2, ‘Thus it was, too, that God formed man at the first, because of His munificence; but chose the patriarchs for the sake of their salvation; and prepared a people beforehand, teaching the headstrong to follow God; and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming man to bear His Spirit [within him], and to hold communion with God: He Himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but granting communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and sketching out, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those that pleased Him.’

⁴¹ Ibid 4.22.1

Jesus Christ and the Healing of Human Nature

Jesus' incarnation and bodily resurrection is God's affirmation of His commitment to physical matter in general, human bodies in particular, and the creation story as a whole. After he demonstrates from Scripture that the Word of God himself took human flesh in Jesus,⁴² Irenaeus says that Jesus saves human nature in himself by destroying the sin in himself. Irenaeus says, in a very significant passage:

Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished... But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death's) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it. For sin had no dominion over the spirit, but over man. For it behooved *Him who was to destroy sin*, and redeem man under the power of death, that *He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that *sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: 'God, true are His works.' But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated *in Himself* the ancient formation of man, that *He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.⁴³

This is a very significant passage in Irenaeus. In it, he insists that Jesus came to resolve a problem within human nature itself, and offer back to us his renewed humanity. He says here and elsewhere that Jesus took his humanity not from some other substance, like the virgin soil from which Adam was first taken, but from the virgin womb of Mary.⁴⁴ The Word of God did this to partake of the same human nature that we all share, to renew it and save it. He did not start a different type of human being, because that would have been of no help to us! This is why Irenaeus constantly referred to Jesus' person and work as the 'recapitulation' – or the summing up, or literally, the re-heading up – of all humanity. Taking this concept from Paul (Eph.1:10), Irenaeus says that Jesus is the 'second Adam' (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 22; 45 – 49) the one from whom a new life passes into all other human beings. In fact, Irenaeus says that Jesus had to pass through each stage of human life, to sanctify each stage.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid 3.18.7

⁴³ Ibid 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

⁴⁴ Ibid 3.21.10 says, 'Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.' Cf. 3.22.1 – 2

⁴⁵ Ibid 2.22.4 says, 'Being a Master, therefore, He also possessed the age of a Master [i.e. thirty years at least], not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in Himself that law which He had appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to Himself. For He came to save all through means of Himself – all, I say, who through Him are born again to God – infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, He came on to death itself, that He might be 'the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence [Colossians 1:18], 'the Prince of life [Acts 3:15], existing before all, and going before all.' Cf. 4.38.2

God was always prepared to heal and redeem human nature, and recover human relational personhood for Himself. In the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus writes very similar statements.⁴⁶ For example:

‘Thus then He gloriously achieved our redemption, and fulfilled the promise of the fathers, and *abolished the old disobedience*. The Son of God became Son of David and Son of Abraham; perfecting and summing up this in Himself, that He might make us to possess life. The Word of God was made flesh by the dispensation of the Virgin, to abolish death and make man live. For we were imprisoned by sin, being *born in sinfulness* and living under death. But God the Father was very merciful: He sent His creative Word, who in coming to deliver us came to *the very place and spot in which we had lost life, and brake the bonds of our fetters*. And His light appeared and made the darkness of the prison disappear, and hallowed our birth and destroyed death, loosing those same fetters in which we were enchained. And He manifested the resurrection, Himself becoming the first begotten of the dead, and *in Himself raising up man that was fallen*, lifting him up far above the heaven to the right hand of the glory of the Father: even as God promised by the prophet, saying: And I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen; that is, *the flesh* that was from David. And his our Lord Jesus Christ truly fulfilled, when He gloriously achieved our redemption, that He might truly raise us up, setting us free unto the Father.’⁴⁷

The ‘fallen tabernacle of David,’ Jesus has raised up ‘in himself’: i.e. the sinful ‘flesh’ of David which he inherited from Adam and passed down to everyone in his royal line, including Jesus. Jesus, at his death, did not take some kind of retributive punishment saved up by God for man. Instead, he finally set human nature free from ‘the bonds of our fetters’ by ‘in himself raising up man that was fallen.’ Entering into death as a judgment upon his own fallen humanity, says Irenaeus, Jesus brought the exile sequence in Genesis full circle to its reversal. The disobedience by the tree by which Adam and Eve corrupted human nature, Jesus reversed on another tree by his final step of obedience, which consisted of ‘putting away the knowledge of evil,’ where ‘evil’ Irenaeus defines as ‘to disobey God.’ Jesus did away with the last possibility for his human nature to do evil, by dying, and then raising it anew. Redemption, Irenaeus therefore defines, is the setting free of our human nature from our imprisonment to ‘sinfulness,’ the sinfulness into which we were born.

There is a medical and ontological substitution occurring. It is a subset of the christus victor category, and arguably its only possible foundation, because it understands Christ as victorious over the internal enemy we face: sin indwelling us. Whereas other facets of the christus victor theory can emphasize the devil, or death, or some enemy external to us, the ontological substitution atonement theory highlights the internal contradiction within our ontological and relational being: we are corrupted (ontology) and alienated and hostile (relational) to God. Those who mischaracterize the patristic atonement theology as merely Jesus paying a ‘ransom’ to the devil, or to God’s retributive justice, are grossly misunderstanding the mind of the early church, and misunderstanding the mechanism by which ‘the flesh’ (as Paul and John used that term in a technical sense to refer to the corruption in our nature)

⁴⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 32 says, “‘Because death reigned over the flesh, it was right that through the flesh it should lose its force and let man go free from its oppression. So the Word was made flesh, that, through that very flesh which sin had ruled and dominated, it should lose its force and be no longer in us. And therefore our Lord took that same original formation as (His) entry into flesh, so that He might draw near and contend on behalf of the fathers, and conquer by Adam that which by Adam had stricken us down.’” And in 34, says, “‘And the trespass which came by the tree was undone by the tree of obedience, when, hearkening unto God, the Son of man was nailed to the tree; thereby putting away the knowledge of evil and bringing in and establishing the knowledge of good: now evil it is to disobey God, even as hearkening unto God is good... So then by the obedience wherewith He obeyed even unto death, hanging on the tree, He put away the old disobedience which was wrought in the tree.’”

⁴⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 32, 34, 37 – 38

served as the point of influence by which the devil had access to us. The patristic and Nicene theologians were working in ontological and relational categories.

Those Christians who believe in penal substitutionary atonement have difficulty explaining what God is actively doing about *all* human evil. One problem they encounter is the question of why God apparently grants salvation from sin to some but not all. In order to explain why everyone does not avail themselves of the forgiveness offered by Jesus, penal substitution advocates have to say either that the scope of the atonement was limited by the Father to begin with, or that Jesus' work on the cross was 'sufficient' for all but 'efficient' only for some, which then sunders the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to sinners, since the Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ only, apparently, to the 'elect.' This divides the members of the Trinity one way or another, which makes it impossible for us to say to any particular non-Christian, 'God loves you,' because of the uncertainty injected into the theology: We would simply not know whether God in fact loves the person right in front of us. Furthermore, penal substitution makes it impossible for us to say, 'God cares about all human evil.' This is simply an extension of the problem. For penal substitution offers very little explanation for what Jesus is actively doing to address all of human evil. It would seem that God has simply found a way to tolerate human evil while He waits for the next age of the world. It then becomes disingenuous for a Christian who subscribes to penal substitution to claim that God wants to undo, heal, and transform all human evil, injustice, and brokenness at its very source: within each and every person. The theology simply does not support it. Penal substitution actually makes God complicit in human evil. For this theory posits that at the heart of Christian theology – the atonement – God is solving a problem internal to Himself in relation to some people, rather than a problem internal to us directed towards all people.

Simultaneously, Irenaeus also incorporates the Holy Spirit along with the Son into the work of atonement. Interestingly, Irenaeus says that the Holy Spirit needed to become 'accustomed' to dwelling in humanity, first in Jesus, to therefore dwell in believers.⁴⁸ As the Spirit's indwelling of believers is part and parcel of the reconciliation and communion Jesus brought about between humanity and God, the interrelation between the Son and the Spirit over the course of Jesus' life is very significant.

⁴⁸ Ibid 3.17.1 says, "Wherefore He [the Spirit] did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with Him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ." Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.72 says, "Irenaeus believes that the Spirit became accustomed (adsuesco) to dwell, rest, and work among human beings as Christ's Unction. Irenaeus considers the anointing of Jesus to involve not only the Spirit acting on Jesus but also the Spirit as acted upon. He does not say here that the Spirit created an environment within the humanity of Jesus suitable to his presence and work. Instead, he says the Spirit himself had to become accustomed to dwelling, resting, and working in the human environment. The need for the Holy Spirit to become accustomed... entails the presupposition that the Spirit was not prepared to perform and so could not have performed such works prior to the period of accustomization." I believe Briggman goes a bit too far in leaving us with the impression from 3.17.1 alone that Irenaeus 'does not say here that the Spirit created an environment within the humanity of Jesus suitable to his presence and work.' For Irenaeus says immediately afterwards, in the very next chapter, 3.18.7, that the eternal Son of God corrected something within his human nature. He became genuine 'man, who had sin in himself... to destroy sin... so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death. God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man.' It seems that the effects on the Spirit and on Jesus' humanity are reciprocal. On the one hand, the Son, by the power of the Spirit, cleansed his humanity of the corruption of sin through his life, death, and resurrection, and thus accustomed his humanity to the presence of the Spirit. On the other hand, the Son accustomed the Spirit to indwelling humanity, through his incarnation into flesh by the Spirit, reception of the Spirit at the Jordan-event baptism, triumph over sin by the Spirit at his death and resurrection, and eventual communication of the Spirit after his resurrection. But otherwise, I heartedly welcome Briggman's remarks about Irenaeus' linkage of the Spirit to the overall work of atonement.

In fact, Irenaeus says that Jesus' response to the accusations of the enemy is to commend his own human nature to the Holy Spirit to share with believers. Irenaeus creatively deploys the parable of the good Samaritan to refer to the fallen humanity of Jesus. Jesus' human nature is the man fallen among thieves, restored by the activity of the Son and Spirit:

'Wherefore we have need of the dew [i.e. Spirit] of God, that we be not consumed by fire, nor be rendered unfruitful, and that where we have an accuser there we may have also an Advocate, the Lord commending to the Holy Spirit His own man [*suum hominem*], who had fallen among thieves, whom He Himself compassionated, and bound up his wounds, giving two royal denaria; so that we, receiving by the Spirit the image and superscription of the Father and the Son, might cause the denarium entrusted to us to be fruitful, counting out the increase to the Lord.'⁴⁹

In this passage, Irenaeus indicates that the healing of human nature in and through Jesus involved, or consisted in, accustoming his humanity to the Spirit. This would suggest that the work of atonement can and must be stated in terms which refer to the Spirit and the intended intrinsic relation between the Spirit and humanity. The problem of Christian disobedience, therefore, is still rooted in human free will. It may serve as a pastoral challenge, but it does not impugn the goodness of God, for God's goodness and love are expressed in His commitment to our free will.

Eternity, Bliss, and Hell

Is God good even if some people are in hell? The Calvinist Westminster Confession, understood by the Reformed as the pinnacle of their theology, says that God has two faces. He elects some to salvation and others to damnation because He must express those two faces, eternally.⁵⁰ For many modern Protestants, and some Catholics, hell is God's prison system. In it, God keeps those who have rejected Christ in their earthly life, even though they almost certainly can be understood as wanting to get out of hell in eternity. This is simply in keeping with their doctrine of God's holiness-justice-wrath. If Jesus absorbed a certain amount of God's wrath on behalf of the elect, to uphold God's justice, then what remains for the non-elect is the proportion of God's wrath that did not fall on Christ. This effectively means that God has two main attributes: love (manifested towards the elect as mercy and grace) and wrath (manifested towards the non-elect as retributive justice). When we try to integrate these two divine attributes, it is unclear what we have. Most would simply say that at the core, then, God is simply arbitrary. This is difficult to integrate into the conviction that God is Triune, which means that love is God's primary attribute (1 Jn.4:8).

Irenaeus understood hell in a framework where God's love was the constant. He said that God is like the sun, with one attribute, not two. Therefore, when it comes to passages involving God 'causing' blindness or hardening Pharaoh's heart, etc., Irenaeus says that we must interpret that without making God arbitrary and dualistic in his fundamental character:

⁴⁹ Ibid 3.17.3

⁵⁰ *Westminster Confession*, chapter 33, paragraph 2 says, '[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.'

‘For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.’⁵¹

‘But God, foreknowing all things, prepared fit habitations for both, kindly conferring that light which they desire on those who seek after the light of incorruption, and resort to it; but for the despisers and mockers who avoid and turn themselves away from this light, and who do, as it were, *blind themselves*, He has prepared darkness suitable to persons who oppose the light, and He has inflicted an appropriate punishment upon those who try to avoid being subject to Him.’⁵²

Hell, therefore, is not another attribute or face of God. Like the sun, God has a singular nature – love – and is not reducible to dueling attributes, which would ultimately make Him arbitrary. Hell is, in fact, the love of God: the love of God which is seeking to purify the person who happens to be resisting. But in this case, just as the person with weak or diseased eyes is pained by the light of the sun, so the person with a weakened or diseased nature is pained by the presence of God. Therefore, that person experiences the wrath of God against the corruption in their nature because the wrath of God is simply the love of God trying to burn away the impurity and sin and resistance which they do not want to give up, which they have chosen to identify with for all eternity precisely because they have rejected Jesus, and the cleansed, purified, God-soaked new humanity he has for them.⁵³ Hell, to Irenaeus, is most fundamentally a state of *becoming* in which the human being has become and continues becoming an addict who resists treatment.

Conclusion

Irenaeus’ *That God Is Not the Author of Evil* might have been a potent tool in the toolboxes of Christian evangelists today. Although we must remain unsure of what exactly Irenaeus wrote, we can perhaps approach the question by considering if Irenaeus inspired Athanasius and Basil to write in service of the mission of the gospel. Their approaches to the question illuminates common Christian patterns of argumentation. In fact, perhaps Athanasius and Basil worked off of Irenaeus’ outline. If so, then perhaps we can arrange Irenaeus’ points from his two existing works into a certain order that follows that pattern, which seems to be the biblical salvation story. Irenaeus has certain axiomatic principles about God’s goodness and His love for humanity that he works hard to defend. They are logically framed by Irenaeus’ concern to vindicate the creation and God’s goodness, despite and throughout all that the creation has had to endure. We do well to try to retrace the steps of this great expositor and theologian.

⁵¹ Ibid 4.29.1

⁵² Ibid 4.39.4. Irenaeus, like Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 43 before him, understood God’s foreknowledge as intuitive, not actual, and is caused by man’s choices. Thus, God’s foreknowledge is His understanding of all possible futures, not simply one future. If there are many possible futures, then correspondingly, human free will is real. If there is only one future, it is not.

⁵³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 69 seems to reiterate the same basic thought, but is a difficult passage. He produces a questionable translation and exegesis of Isaiah 53:8, but appears to say that the judgment of Jesus is upon the sinfulness he bore in himself, to bear away from humanity (68). That very ‘judgment is for some unto salvation, and to some unto the torments of perdition... Now those [who crucified him] took away to themselves the judgment... And the judgment is that which by fire will be the destruction of the unbelievers at the end of the world.’