

Irenaeus and "orthodoxy"

PA 313 - Irenaeus
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St. Irenaeus was a presbyter/bishop in the late second century in the city of Lyons, Gaul (in what is today modern France). Irenaeus was confronted by a movement within Christianity that today is collectively called Gnosticism. A better name for this heresy would perhaps be, as the scholar M.A. Williams states, "...biblical demiurge traditions".¹ This reflects the fact that this Gnostic movement entailed an understanding (extremely simplified here) that the Scriptural² God was a different and lesser deity than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is against this movement that St. Irenaeus wrote to refute the Gnostics and to help shape what would come to be known as "orthodox" Christianity. His understanding of this "orthodox" Christianity is found in the following statement:

Since, therefore, the tradition from the apostles does exist in the Church, and is permanent among us, let us revert to the demonstration from the Scriptures of the apostles who wrote the Gospel, in which they recorded the doctrine regarding God, pointing out that our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth, and that there is no lie in him.³

It is this statement that will be examined below to elaborate Irenaeus' understanding of "orthodoxy".

The first part of the statement says that the apostolic tradition exists in the Church and is permanent. Irenaeus states:

¹M.A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pgs. 51-3.

²note: "scripture" refers to the Law, Psalms, and Prophets - our "Old Testament" today.

³St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, [= A.H.], trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 3.5.1.

We have learned from no others the plan of our salvation than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God handed down (*tradiderunt*) to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith....⁴

The apostolic tradition that Irenaeus is referring to is nothing other than the original apostolic preaching concerning Christ. Tradition is not a separate body of information apart from the apostolic preaching that Christ died and rose "according to the Scriptures". What the apostles preached is what they wrote down in the Gospels, and both are according to the Scriptures. There is no extra information in tradition; rather, apostolic traditions and apostolic writings are two modalities of the **one** Gospel (Figure 1). In other words, Tradition = Scripture correctly understood.

Another point St. Irenaeus makes in the passage under discussion is that the apostolic tradition is permanent among the Churches. Irenaeus refutes the Gnostic teachings because they are not found in the churches that were initially founded by the apostles. He states:

...should we not have recourse to the most ancient churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse, and learn from them what is certain and clear in regard to the present question? For how should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us clear writings? Would it not be necessary in that case to follow the course of tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the churches?⁵

For St. Irenaeus, doctrinal disputes should be settled by referring to the oldest Churches. Even if the apostles had never committed the Gospel to writing, one could appeal to the Traditions in these ancient churches. By means of these ancient apostolic churches, one could see the true Tradition and not be deceived by the teachings of anyone else. This is an important fact for Irenaeus since the Gnostic churches' teachings were not found in these oldest apostolic Churches.

⁴St. Irenaeus, *A.H.*, 3.1.1.

⁵St. Irenaeus, *A.H.*, 3.4.1.

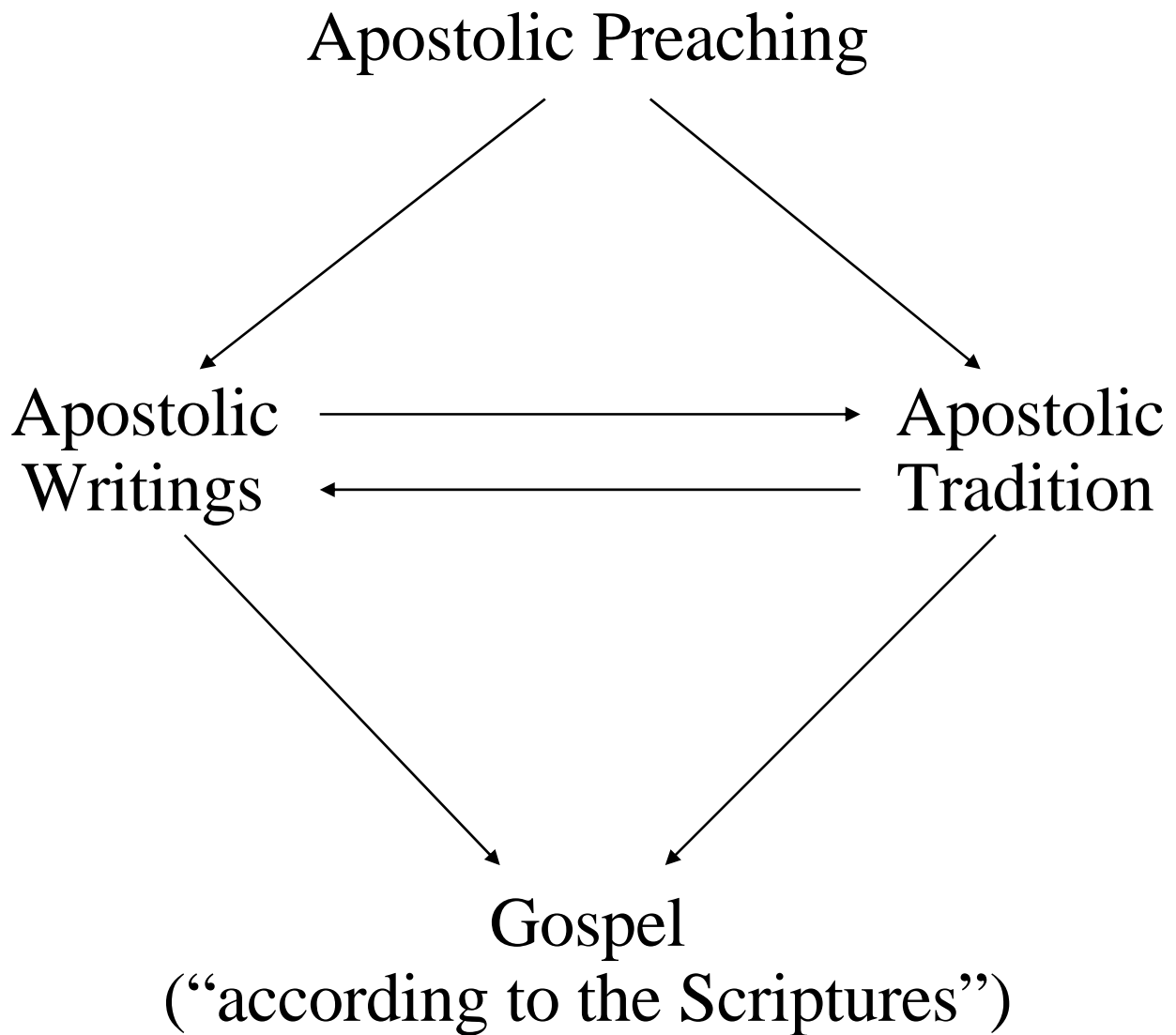


Figure 1: The content of the apostolic preaching is found in both the apostolic traditions and the apostolic writings. Therefore, the apostolic writings and apostolic traditions are two modalities of the same apostolic preaching which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ “according to the Scriptures.”

Continuing on, St. Irenaeus urges us to "...revert to the demonstration from the Scriptures of the Apostles who wrote the Gospel". Against the Gnostic notion that truth can be revealed outside of Scripture, St. Irenaeus points the reader to the Gospel of the apostles. For St. Irenaeus, the apostolic faith is mediated through the apostles. One cannot "chat" with God. The locus of God's revelation and the medium of our relationship with God lies in the apostolic preaching and the Gospels which the apostles wrote. For them, the Cross/Christ is the catalyst in which one is able to re-read Scripture anew and it is in Scripture that the apostles found the terms/images/context in which to explain what happened. The apostolic preaching/tradition was nothing more than the statement that Christ died "according to the Scriptures". St. Irenaeus points out the importance of this fact when he states:

While we work at the demonstrations from Scripture, and set forth briefly and compendiously things which are stated in various ways, do you also attend to them with patience, and not deem them prolix; taking this into account, that the demonstrations [of things contained] in the Scriptures cannot be demonstrated except from the Scriptures themselves.⁶

Thus, the apostolic writings (Gospels) can only be understood based on Scripture (Law, Psalms, Prophets) because it is Scripture that speaks of Christ – then, and only then, is it real in this way.

The next clause in the passage being discussed states that within the apostolic writings/tradition is found the doctrine regarding God. For Christians, Scripture and the Scriptural God is the first principle of all knowledge. This first principle which is grasped only by faith becomes the basis for evaluating other truths. It forms the "canon of truth" where canon (*kanon* in Greek) is the measure or ruler by which a criteria of truth is established. St. Irenaeus states:

Therefore, lest we suffer any such thing, we must keep the rule of faith unswervingly, and perform the commandments of God, believing in God and fearing

⁶St. Irenaeus, A.H., 3.12.9.

Him, for He is Lord, and loving Him, for He is Father.⁷

The canon/rule of truth/faith is received at baptism and for St. Irenaeus allows one to see the fabrication (*plasma*) of the Gnostics for what it is. St. Irenaeus' canon of truth (too long to quote here) is found in Book I Chapter 10 of Against Heresies; it states - among other things - that the Church believes in **one** God, the maker of heaven and earth and all things, and in Jesus Christ, the **one** Son of the **one** God, and in the Holy Spirit. St. Irenaeus states that

...anyone who keeps unchangeable in himself the canon of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables from the Scriptures, but this blasphemous hypothesis of theirs he will not recognize. For if he recognizes the jewels, he will not accept the fox for the image of the king.⁸

In other words, the canon of truth expresses the very *hypothesis*, or presupposition, of Scripture and allows Scripture to accurately display Christ.⁹ This canon of truth then enables one to see that the Gnostic writers have taken Scripture and molded it into something that it is not - as St. Irenaeus describes it, the mosaic image of the king re-arranged to make a picture of a fox. That same person can then replace the stones, based on the canon, and restore the image of the king. By doing this, one can reveal the blasphemous hypothesis of the Gnostics.¹⁰

One final concept of absolute importance for St. Irenaeus that is not mentioned in the passage under discussion is the role of apostolic succession. For St. Irenaeus, Tradition is apostolic, and has been maintained in public through the succession of presbyter/bishops in the church.

⁷St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, tr. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 3.

⁸St. Irenaeus, A.H., 1.9.4.

⁹John Behr, "Scripture, the Gospel, and Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43 (1999), pg. 245.

¹⁰St. Irenaeus, A.H., 1.9.4.

St. Irenaeus states:

...the tradition of the apostles, which is manifest throughout the whole world, is clearly to be seen in every church by those who wish to see the truth. And we are able to list those who were appointed by the apostles as bishops in the churches and their succession in our own times. They have neither taught or known the gibberish spoken by these people. For if the apostles had known secret mysteries, which they taught "the perfect" privately and apart from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the churches themselves. For they desired that these men should be perfect and blameless in all things, who they were leaving behind as successors, delivering up their own place of teaching.¹¹

The apostles evangelized and then taught those who were appointed as bishops. These bishops then taught in place of the apostles and would have taught the secret teachings of the Gnostics if those teachings were valid. The succession of bishops does not automatically insure the apostolic faith, but rather the bishops are bishops by virtue of the fact that they have kept the apostolic tradition, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, intact.¹² Thus, apostolic succession is not the continuity of the order of bishops, but rather the continuity of the apostolic faith. St. Irenaeus claims that it is not the Gnostic teachings that were handed down but rather that "[i]n this order and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles and the preaching of the truth have come down to us."¹³

In conclusion, the passage that was investigated has demonstrated four inseparable components to Christian "orthodoxy" which are Scripture, Canon, Tradition, and Apostolic Succession. These four components are absolutely vital to the self-identity of the Church. These components insure that there is one Gospel and that it is God's *plasma* and not man's *plasma*. The truth that must be maintained is that there is one Lord Jesus Christ the one son of God the Father and

¹¹St. Irenaeus, A.H., 3.3.1.

¹²Behr, pg. 246.

¹³St. Irenaeus, A.H., 3.3.3.

the one who reveals the Father and is made known by the Holy Spirit through Scripture. Thus, the basis for "orthodoxy" relies not on later definitions of ecclesiology, but upon the one Gospel. That Gospel, as St. Irenaeus states, points "...out that our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth, and that there is no lie in Him."