

Irenaeus in the Hands of Soteriological Inclusionists: Validation or Tendentious Historiography?

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Introduction

Defending orthodox Christian doctrines does not allow for much creativity. After all, the church has been commanded to contend for, not amend or alter, “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Faithful contending certainly demands discernment, wisdom, and knowledge, an ability to listen and detect a challenge to the gospel that is often concealed in a pastiche of modern sensibilities and fallen philosophies. Faithful contending also requires a Christ-like character united with a commitment to the Lord; a Spirit-enabled co-mingling of grace and truth that is so beautifully and remarkably exemplified and personified in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful defending may require creativity in articulation; the ability to present a defense of the gospel that communicates to those governed by differing worldviews. But because the faith was “once for all delivered,” that “creativity in articulation” is limited to expressing truths that have been previously revealed. Though often difficult to discern, creating new ways to say the same thing is altogether different than creating new things to say.

The faithful defense of the gospel comes with boundaries that have historically been governed by systematic theology, developed throughout the history of the church. Faithful systematic theology must be built upon solid biblical theology,

which must be rooted in faithful exegesis of God’s inspired word, Holy Scripture. Admittedly, these are broad boundaries, but they are boundaries nonetheless and the gospel-defender is faced with the reality that there are only so many ways of saying the same thing. Of course, those who choose to ignore the boundaries do not face this dilemma. When historical and systematic theology are ignored, all bets are off, as it were, and the theologian is limited only by conscience and imagination (a troubling thought given the fallen nature of humanity). Further, new ideas sell well. Sadly, there is not as much interest in saying the same thing as there is in saying something new. What is the faithful contender to do? A critical tool in the gospel-defender’s arsenal is appeal to church history. If it can be demonstrated that an idea runs contrary to the historical doctrines of the church, then one has gone a long way towards demonstrating that the idea does not belong in the “faith once for all delivered to the saints.” On the other hand, marshalling the support of church history is an invaluable way of validating a proposal as orthodox.

Making appeals to church tradition has always been and is rightfully a powerful technique in demonstrating the validity of a position. One need look no further than the Magisterial Reformers to find appeals to the church fathers used with great persuasiveness. For example, John Calvin

quoted from, among others, Ambrose, Augustine, Athanasius, Clement of Rome, Cyprian, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Tertullian. His references to Augustine and Athanasius are most insightful, because it is through appeal to these men that Calvin sought to make his case that the Roman church had departed from the orthodox faith.¹ But the writing of history (historiography) is by its very nature subjective. Interestingly, Peter Enns explains, historiography is not the objective restatement of facts, but involves a “shaping of these facts for a particular purpose.”² As such, historical appeals can often be tendentious, distorting historical reality for the purpose of garnering support for contemporary proposals. The subjective nature of historiography demands that historical appeals be scrutinized for accuracy and legitimacy.

One area in which the church is struggling to hang on to its doctrinal moorings is soteriology and the fate of the unevangelized. Some are suggesting that gospel proclamation and conscious faith in Christ are not necessary for salvation because the Holy Spirit is applying the work of Christ to those who do not believe in Christ (usually through no fault of their own), even in the context of other religions. In an attempt to validate this proposal as orthodox, appeals are made to the great Patristic theologian, Irenaeus. If it can be demonstrated that the proposal is not materially different than what was being taught by one such as Irenaeus, then it can be argued that the proposal is really not a “new proposal” at all, but is part and parcel of what the church had taught and ought to teach today.

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Religious Pluralism

The emergence of the postmodern age, the rise of relativism as the prevailing epistemological standard, and the shrinking of the world due to rapid advancements in transportation and communications technology have caused a radical alteration in the theological landscape. The changes that have occurred in culture and the academy with regard to the perception of the nature and accessibility of truth have occasioned a subsequent call for the revisioning of evangelical theological method and the reformulation of Christian doctrine. This is perhaps best exemplified in Christian theology’s interaction with world religions. “Religious pluralism” no longer simply reflects the recognition that there are a multiplicity of worldviews or that Christianity has to confront the major religions of the world. Rather, there is a call for a renewed Christian theology of religions—an investigation into the biblical understanding of world religions and how the major religions of the world fit into the redemptive purposes of God.³

The typical taxonomy for discussing the relationships between salvation, the claims of Jesus Christ, and world religions employs the categories of exclusivism (or particularism), inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism is the historic orthodox Christian position and maintains that salvation is possible only through conscious faith in Jesus Christ. Inclusivism argues that one can only be saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but that conscious faith in the work of Christ is not necessary. In other words, inclusivists defend the ontological necessity of the death and resurrection of Christ, but deny the epistemological necessity of conscious faith in Christ for salvation.

Religious pluralism rejects the claims of both exclusivists and inclusivists, believing that one can find salvation through various religious traditions, belief systems, and ethics.⁴

Many recent attempts by inclusivists to answer the question of how Christianity and world religions relate center on the possibility that the Holy Spirit is at work in a salvific sense in other religions. These proposals are motivated by a struggle over the seemingly irreconcilable axioms that (1) God has a universal salvific will and (2) salvation is based upon the historical work of Jesus Christ.⁵ While maintaining the work of Christ as the basis for redemption, some inclusivists posit that the Spirit could be applying that work to individuals apart from conscious faith in Christ. That is, the Holy Spirit is at work in the world, perhaps even in and through world religions, drawing people into a reconciled relationship with their Creator apart from the gospel.

Of course, to make such an assertion will require that one engage in a fair amount of theological revisionism at the Christological, pneumatological, ecclesiological, and soteriological levels, just to name a few. Specifically, one must create a hypostatic independence between the Son and the Spirit in order to posit a relative autonomy of the Spirit in his global operations. But evangelicals such as Clark Pinnock and Amos Yong are not intimidated by the prospects. Indeed, Pinnock suggests, "Let us see what results from viewing Christ as an aspect of the Spirit's mission, instead of . . . viewing Spirit as a function of Christ's."⁶ Yong believes that only a pneumatological approach will lead to a robust trinitarian theology. "I propose that a pneumatological approach to theology (in general and

theological hermeneutics in particular) opens up toward a trinitarianism that is much more robust than that which has emerged to date from a christological starting point."⁷

It is my firm conviction that contrary to those who assert either an independent work of the Holy Spirit apart from the Son or a work of the Son that is subordinate to the Spirit in world religions, the roles of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are inextricably linked, and they are linked in this way: the Holy Spirit always seeks to glorify the Son. When Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, "He will glorify Me, because He will take from what is Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14), Christ was not merely defining one aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, he was declaring the nature of the relationship between himself and the Holy Spirit within the broad scope of trinitarian life and redemptive history. Therefore, those who posit an independent salvific work of the Holy Spirit in world religions are denying the essential relationship of the Son and the Spirit in the economic Trinity. That is, I believe that the pneumatological inclusivism posited by some current evangelicals fails on the grounds of proper theological method, historical theology, biblical theology, and systematic theology.

A full-scale critique of pneumatological inclusivism at all of those levels lies outside the scope of this article but my attempts can be found elsewhere.⁸ The purpose of this article is to examine the appeals by inclusivists to the theology and writings of Irenaeus to support their claims. As any student of church history realizes, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit had not received much attention until the last century. As Killian McDonnell observes, "Anyone writing on pneuma-

tology is hardly burdened by the past and finds little guidance there.”⁹ It is precisely because of the relative dearth of writing on the Holy Spirit that current theologians must be careful when making appeals to church history to support their proposals. I want to demonstrate that any attempt to appeal to Irenaeus for support in advocating an independent economy of the Holy Spirit from the Son is to engage in serious misrepresentation. Irenaeus, far from justifying the claims of relative independence, actually speaks against such a proposal.

Irenaeus and the “Two Hands” of the Father

Irenaeus is the earliest and most significant figure in most contemporary pneumatological inclusivists’ appeals to church history. This is so, not because he developed a theology of the relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit, but because of the “two hands of God” metaphor that he employed a number of times in his monumental work *Against Heresies*.¹⁰ Discussion of Irenaeus’s work will focus on *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*.¹¹

Illegitimate Appeals to Irenaeus’s “Two Hands of God”

In the current postmodern climate, where many theologians are rethinking how to reconcile the exclusive claims of Christ and the reality of religious pluralism, much has been made of Irenaeus’s teaching on the “two hands of God.”¹² Appeals are made to Irenaeus to assert a “hypostatic independence” of the Spirit from the Son, authorizing pneumatology as the starting point for a theology of religions. In the non-evangelical world, Georg Khodr provides an excellent

example. Paul Knitter quotes Khodr at the Baar Consultation in 1990:

The Spirit is omnipresent and fills everything in an economy distinct from the Son. The Word and the Spirit are called the “two hands of the Father”. We must here affirm their hypostatic independence and visualize in the religions an all-comprehensive phenomenon of grace.¹³

Irenaeus is also a favorite of evangelical pneumatological inclusivists Clark Pinnock and Amos Yong. For example, Pinnock appeals to Irenaeus’s work on recapitulation as evidence of a wider hope: “The work of Christ as last Adam who represents all humanity was emphasized by Irenaeus. God came into the world in Jesus in order [sic] save humanity from sin and death, to restore and perfect the creation. This indeed is a broad concept of redemption.”¹⁴ From Irenaeus’s recapitulation model of the atonement, which Pinnock sees as a “broad concept of redemption,” Pinnock attempts to characterize Irenaeus as emphasizing a broader hope in salvation, thereby rejecting the “sort of harsh views” that were introduced by soteriological exclusivists such as Augustine.¹⁵

Pinnock’s commitment to Irenaeus as an advocate of a wider hope causes him to interpret Irenaeus’s works in that light. Although Irenaeus did not write anything that could be interpreted as expressly supporting an inclusive view of salvation, Pinnock is not discouraged by the silence. Irenaeus may not have possessed an explicit openness to salvation outside the church, but he cannot be blamed for this attitude. He was “unaware of the existence of a large number of unevangelized people and thus of our entire problem. We cannot say what he might have thought

had he lived in our day.”¹⁶

Another example of Pinnock’s appeals to Irenaeus is when he quotes from *Against Heresies* 3.12.13: “God by various dispensations comes to the rescue of humankind.” Pinnock, who is already committed to viewing Christ as an aspect of the Spirit’s mission in Scripture, uses Irenaeus’s quote to suggest that “[t]he Spirit is ever working to orient people, wherever they are, to the mystery of divine love.”¹⁷ In his argument, Pinnock asserts that the Spirit has been at work in the cosmos dispensing grace in advance of the incarnation. Elsewhere, Pinnock uses the same quote from Irenaeus and immediately writes, “Spirit is present everywhere, and God’s truth may have penetrated any given religion and culture at some point.”¹⁸

Both Pinnock and Yong place great emphasis on Irenaeus’s “two hands” metaphor. Yong is more contextual and, therefore, slightly more circumspect than Pinnock in his use of the figure of speech. In *Spirit-Word-Community*, Yong traces the development of Irenaeus’s metaphor and summarizes, “Throughout *Against Heresies*, then, Spirit/Wisdom and Word are thus understood as the two hands of God which formed the visible world, including its inhabitants, and accomplish the purposes of God.”¹⁹ He also traces the development of the motif to the Magisterial Reformers who recaptured the image, arguing for the inseparability of the Word and the Spirit, with strong regard to illumination. Yong, however, finds fault with the Reformers for not following through with a full re-appropriation of the metaphor.²⁰ In Yong’s economy, Irenaeus developed a “motif which has since proven to be a rich source for reflection in the Christian theological tradition.”²¹ In contrast to the Reformers, Yong “proposes a

fully trinitarian hermeneutical vision that builds on Irenaeus’s insight concerning the relationship between the Spirit and the Word.”²² Yong understands rightly that the metaphor is a polemic against Gnosticism and its doctrine of creation. It teaches the full ontological equality of the Son and the Spirit with the Father. But Yong advances the metaphor beyond ontological equality when he suggests:

More important theologically, however, is that the two hands explicitly posits an intratrinitarian egalitarianism. . . . Yet at the same time, because of its non-subordinationist vision of Spirit and Word, it also contained the seeds for the radically relational trinitarianism developed by the fourth century Greek fathers.²³

Perhaps Yong knows that Irenaeus would not have used the figure of speech to assert an “intratrinitarian egalitarianism,” but he is happy to use Irenaeus’s metaphor as a springboard to advance his own proposals.²⁴

For Pinnock’s part, Irenaeus’s metaphor suggests a “double mission” of the Son and the Spirit.²⁵ Elsewhere, he claims that Irenaeus’s “two hands” metaphor teaches a joint mission of the Son and the Spirit: “The missions are intertwined and equal; one is not major and the other minor.”²⁶ Ironically, in the very next paragraph, Pinnock states, “We begin by placing Christology in the context of the Spirit’s global operations, of which incarnation is the culmination.”²⁷

Pinnock also appeals to Irenaeus in an attempt to justify an ethical criterion for salvation. He quotes Irenaeus from *Against Heresies* 4.13.1: “The Lord did not abrogate the natural precepts of the law by which man is justified, which those who were justified by faith and pleased God did observe previous to the giving

of the law.”²⁸ Immediately following this quotation, Pinnock begins a discussion of Vatican II and its experimentation with “holy pagans;” those who meet an ethical criterion for salvation but do not meet any sort of faith in Christ criterion.²⁹ The flow of Pinnock’s argument leads the reader to believe that Irenaeus’s writing on the non-abrogation of the Law in the life of a justified believer supports the inclusivist assertions of both Vatican II and Pinnock. But is this a legitimate reading of Irenaeus? On analysis, it is clear that Irenaeus was addressing the need for both belief and a changed life that continually grows into conformity with the character and nature of God.

Such is the way that Irenaeus is utilized by pneumatological inclusivists. Our next task is to examine Irenaeus in order to determine whether or not he can be legitimately used or appealed to in this manner. It is significant that Terrance Tiessen, who has offered an inclusivist proposal of his own, did his doctoral work on Irenaeus and his teaching on the unevangelized. In a telling footnote, he writes:

The work of the Holy Spirit is given much attention in recent discussion of the state of the unevangelized. For this reason, the paucity of material in Irenaeus is somewhat disappointing. However, it is not surprising when one considers the time in which he wrote and the Gnostic context he addressed.³⁰

Irenaeus and His Theology

Background

Irenaeus, born in Asia Minor, served as Bishop of the church in Lyons, France from A.D. 178 until his death in 200. He had the distinction of being disciplined by Polycarp of Smyrna, who was himself the disciple of the Apostle John.³¹ On a trip to Rome during a time of great persecu-

tion, Irenaeus was first introduced to the Gnostic teachings of Valentinus and his followers. In the years following, during his service as Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus sought to fight the growing influence of Gnosticism. A brief overview of the Gnostic threat as perceived by Irenaeus is important because it is only by understanding this context that Irenaeus’s use of the “two hands of God” can be properly understood. His five-volume *Against Heresies* was the first systematic refutation of the Gnostic heresy by a Christian leader and his link to the Apostle John via Polycarp no doubt served to enhance the credibility of the work.³²

Gnosticism

Though beginning to flourish, the Gnostic movements of the second century were fragmented and disunited.³³ Rather than a particular uniform set of teachings, Gnosticism is best known for its syncretism.³⁴ Such syncretism and eclecticism presented a unique challenge and opportunity to the early church. Without a systematized set of doctrines, it was up to early church leaders to formulate many biblical doctrines such as salvation, knowledge of God, revelation, and creation in the context of fighting urgent heretical challenges. It is beyond the scope of this article to give a thorough accounting of the diverse teachings of Gnosticism and the challenges that Gnostic theology presented the early church, but some particular Gnostic teachings must be covered to set the stage for Irenaeus’s writing.³⁵ It is evident that Irenaeus considered the Gnostics to be worse than the godless heathen. He took it upon himself to present their teaching in a coherent form and systematically refute it.³⁶ Discussion will be limited to those areas that are germane

to the topic of Word and Spirit to which Irenaeus responded, namely revelation, salvation, and creation.³⁷

Irenaeus was most concerned with the radical dualism of Gnosticism that impacted creation, epistemology, Christology, soteriology, Scripture, the church, anthropology, and hamartiology.³⁸ This sharp Gnostic dualism expressed itself most fundamentally in the nature of God and the nature of man. God was the ineffable unknowable Absolute, while material existence was evil and the active enemy of the spirit and spiritual living. Because of its material nature, the world was base and brought only despair. This caused a seemingly unbridgeable gap between God and the world. It fell to religion to attempt to bridge that gap.

There was diverse Gnostic teaching on creation, but given the nature of both the unknowable Absolute and the inherent evil nature of matter, Gnosticism was consistent in denying that God was actively involved in creation. In some Gnostic thought, the Archons or gods created the world. These evil gods also created the soul and flesh of humankind (not the spirit), whose body was shaped “in the image of the divine Primal (or Archetypal Man) and animated it with their own psychical forces.”³⁹ In other Gnostic teaching, emanations came from the unknowable Absolute. One of the lower emanations (very distant from God) was responsible for creation.

The Teaching of Irenaeus on Son and Spirit

Although, Irenaeus did not develop a theology of Son and Spirit *per se*, references to the relationship between the Son and the Spirit abound in his writings. In Irenaeus’s economy, the Spirit is

inextricably bound to the Son. Irenaeus had discourses on the Father and the Son often in isolation from the other Triune members, but never the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Irenaeus was not silent on the Holy Spirit however. He taught the equal divinity of the Holy Spirit, and was the first theologian to bring attention and focus to the work of the Holy Spirit in creation.⁴¹ But even when discussing the role of the Spirit in creation, ecclesiology, or revelation, the Son was always in view. Throughout Irenaeus’s writings, the Spirit was never mentioned in isolation from either or both the Father and the Son.⁴²

Irenaeus consistently taught a symmetric order within the Godhead. The Son is sent by the Father to reveal the Father. The Spirit is sent by the Son to reveal the Son. The Spirit reveals the Son and brings people to the Son. The Son in turn presents these to the Father.⁴³ As will be demonstrated, this general order is repeated over and over again in the doctrines of Irenaeus. For example, in discussing the process of regeneration, Irenaeus writes,

And for this reason the baptism of our regeneration proceeds through these three points: God the Father bestowing on us regeneration through His Son by the Holy Spirit. For as many as carry [in them] the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is to the Son; and the Son brings them to the Father; and the Father causes them to possess incorruption. Without the Spirit it is not possible to behold the Word of God, nor without the Son can any draw near to the Father; for the knowledge of the Father is the Son, and the knowledge of the Son of God is through the Holy Spirit; and, according to the good pleasure of the Father, the Son ministers and dispenses the Spirit to whomsoever the Father wills and as He wills.⁴⁴

In Proof 7 of *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, he summarized well the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in revelation and salvation. Irenaeus described the Son as “the knowledge of the Father,” while knowledge of the Son comes “through the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁵ The Word reveals the Father and the Spirit reveals the Word.⁴⁶ This economy stems from their inner-trinitarian relationships. Irenaeus, like most of the early church fathers, did not see a large distinction between who God is in his being and the economic Trinity: how God’s acts flows out of who God is.⁴⁷ This general economy is very clear from Irenaeus’s writings on the doctrines of revelation, salvation, ecclesiology, and creation.

Inspiration

Irenaeus’s understanding of inspiration was that the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and through the writers of both the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁸ As in all things, the purpose of the Spirit’s speaking is to reveal the Word. This economy is evident from Proof 5 of *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, where Irenaeus commented on Eph 4:6:

Well also does Paul His apostle say: *One God, the Father, who is over all and through all and in us all. For over all is the Father: and through all is the Son, for through Him all things were made by the Father; and in us all is the Spirit, who cries Abba Father, and fashions man into the likeness of God. Now the Spirit shows forth the Word, and therefore the prophets announced the Son of God; and the Word utters the Spirit, and therefore is Himself the announcer of the prophets, and leads and draws man to the Father.*⁴⁹

The Spirit “shows forth the Word” so that the prophets announce the Son of God.⁵⁰ But it is the Word who “utters

the Spirit” and the Word who is the “announcer of the prophets.” Thus while the Spirit speaks to the prophets, it is actually the Son who is speaking to and through the prophets. The purpose in Irenaeus’s thought was not to confuse the Spirit and Son, or to separate the Spirit and the Son, but rather to demonstrate that the mission of the Spirit is to reveal the Son.⁵¹

Soteriology

Irenaeus did not treat the procession of the Spirit in a systematic manner, but much can be inferred from his writings. The Spirit’s role is determined by who he is: The Spirit of the Word. MacKenzie suggests that this points to a procession of the Spirit. In summarizing Proofs 5-8 of *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, MacKenzie writes,

The cry of the Spirit, “Abba Father”, is the utterance of the Son in His eternal relation to the Father in the relations which the Godhead is. We therefore have at least an implicitly pointed trinitarian formula indicating the procession of the Spirit: that He comes “through” the Son in such a way that the Son is personally present with us.⁵²

The Holy Spirit brings people to the Son and the Son “brings them to the Father . . . to possess incorruption.”⁵³ In principle, this does not limit the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of non-Christians, but in the salvific economy of Irenaeus, the Holy Spirit is tied immediately and expressly to the church. In responding to the false teachings of the “heretics” and “Gnostic impiety,” Irenaeus declares,

“For in the Church,” it is said, “God hath set apostles, prophets, teachers,” and all the other means through which the Spirit works; of which all those are not partakers

who do not join themselves to the Church, but defraud themselves of life through their perverse opinions and infamous behavior. For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth. Those, therefore, who do not partake of Him, are neither nourished into life from the mother's breasts, nor do they enjoy that most limpid fountain which issues from the body of Christ; but they dig for themselves broken cisterns out of earthly trenches, and drink putrid water out of the mire, fleeing from the faith of the Church lest they be convicted; and rejecting the Spirit, that they may not be instructed.⁵⁴

Irenaeus was clearly granting to the Spirit a role in salvation that is exalted and necessary, but he did not leave any room for a relative autonomy. The Spirit, in bringing salvation, is simultaneously building the church, which is the body of Christ. The convictions of Irenaeus on the economy of the Spirit are consistent: God has granted to the church apostles, prophets, and teachers. The Spirit has spoken to and through these to bring people to the Son. The Spirit continues this work in the Son.⁵⁵ Where the Spirit is, there is the church. To flee from the "faith of the Church" is equal to "rejecting the Spirit." To reject the Spirit is to have no part in Christ.

Interestingly, Pinnock laments that the real weakness in the traditional theology of the Spirit has been its "almost exclusively ecclesial understanding of his work, as if God's breath were confined within the walls of the church."⁵⁶ Of course this is precisely what Irenaeus believed and explicitly taught.⁵⁷ Given this, how can Pinnock appeal to Irenaeus? Pinnock does interact with *Against Heresies* 3.24.1 (quoted above) to teach that the Spirit guides the church into truth. But Pinnock is selective in his quotation, ignoring the

broader context that makes strong claims of ecclesiological exclusivism.⁵⁸

Salvation and the church are clearly linked in Irenaeus's theology, but this is consistent with his understanding of the trinitarian economy. "The Father is indeed above all, and He is the Head of Christ; but the Word is through all things, and is Himself the Head of the Church; while the Spirit is in us all, and He is the living water, which the Lord grants to those who rightly believe in him, and love Him."⁵⁹ The Spirit's role in salvation does not and cannot stand alone in Irenaeus's economy. Believers are carried to the Son by the Spirit, through whom they then ascend to the Father.⁶⁰ The mission of the Spirit is important, but the reality of the Spirit's work in the church makes salvation a trinitarian work. Ochagavia summarizes well:

In conclusion we can say that the Spirit works upon the faith revealed by Christ and transmitted by the apostles to the Church. A purely charismatic Church—as we find it in the Montanist Tertullian—is completely absent from Irenaeus's perspective. In his conception the Church is very much rooted in the visibility of the Word made flesh—that *corpus de terra*, to speak with Irenaeus's realism—and in the apostles and their successors in the episcopacy.⁶¹

In the economy of Irenaeus, Jesus Christ is the head of his church. The Holy Spirit bears testimony to this reality.

In light of this, one wonders how an appeal can be made to Irenaeus in support of a wider hope for the unevangelized. Whereas Pinnock quotes Irenaeus's discussion in *Against Heresies* 3.1.13: "God by various dispensations comes to the rescue of humankind" to garner support for a universal work of the Spirit whereby "truth may have penetrated any given

religion and culture at some point,"⁶² Irenaeus consistently united the witness of the Spirit to the building of the Body of Christ. Any attempt to call on Irenaeus for support of a paradigm that asserts a relative autonomy between the Spirit and the Son is misleading.

Creation

Perhaps the most important thing that Irenaeus could say about God was that "God is creator."⁶³ Gnostics believed that God is completely transcendent and unknowable. The sharp dualism of Gnosticism entailed an inability of God to create unless he did so through emanations or intermediaries. It is in the context of creation that Irenaeus used the striking metaphor of the "two hands of God" to describe the work of the Son and the Spirit. God was actively at work in the creation of the world and he had no need of intermediaries to help him,

. . . as if he did not possess his own hands. For with him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously he made all things, to whom also he speaks, saying, "Let us make man after our image and likeness."⁶⁴

Irenaeus returned to the metaphor to describe the creation of Adam, where the Son and the Spirit were both involved: "For never at any time did Adam escape the hands of God, to whom the Father speaking said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"⁶⁵ Irenaeus also saw continuity between the creation of the first Adam and the second Adam, attributing that continuity to his hands. "And for this reason in the last times . . . his hands formed a living man, in order that Adam might be created [again] after the image and likeness of God."⁶⁶ Irenaeus

saw this as a consistent theme throughout redemptive history, citing the translation of Elijah and Enoch:

By means of the very same hands through which they were molded at the beginning, did they receive this translation and assumption. For in Adam the hands of God had become accustomed to set in order, to rule, and to sustain His own workmanship, and to bring it and place it where they pleased.⁶⁷

So for Irenaeus, all the work of the Father, including creation and providence, is carried out by the two hands of God, namely, the Son and the Spirit.⁶⁸

Conclusion

In the hands of pneumatological inclusivists such as Georg Khodr, this metaphor becomes a statement of "hypostatic independence."⁶⁹ For Irenaeus, it was a polemic against Gnosticism. Pinnock is right to affirm that the missions of the Son and Spirit are intertwined;⁷⁰ such usage of the metaphor is consistent with how Irenaeus used it. But to use the work of Irenaeus to enable one to view Christology as a function of the Spirit's global mission,⁷¹ or to authorize an "intratrinitarian egalitarianism" per Amos Yong,⁷² is to stretch the metaphor past the point of breaking.

Historiography is, by its very nature, subjective. Unless one is intentionally careful, references to history can be tendentious. This is the case with pneumatological inclusivists' appeals to Irenaeus. Readers are not free to interpret him however they wish; rather, readers have a moral obligation to read and interpret in context.⁷³ Christian scholars, of all people, should recognize this. Irenaeus's "two hands" metaphor has become a playground of free interpretation in the

hands of pneumatological inclusivists. Of course, authors can use metaphors, even metaphors that have been developed by others. But when that use concurrently smuggles in the illegitimate affirmation of church history then the metaphor is being used irresponsibly. This is what is happening with pneumatological inclusivists' use of the "two hands" metaphor. Appeals to Irenaeus, when the context is ignored, make an attempt to claim the support of church history that is simply not there.

ENDNOTES

¹See A. N. S. Lane, "Calvin's Use of the Fathers and Medievals," *Calvin Theological Journal* 16 (1981): 149-205.

²Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 60. He elaborates, "To put it another way, historiography is an attempt to relay to someone the significance of history" (*ibid.*).

³H. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 12. Netland's book provides an excellent treatment of the issues surrounding religious pluralism, although he leaves the door open for salvific faith through general revelation (*ibid.*, 323).

⁴This taxonomy is used by D. Okholm and T. Phillips, ed., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). Pluralism "maintains that the major world religions provide independent salvific access to the divine Reality" (*ibid.*, 17). Inclusivism believes that "because God is present in the whole world . . . God's grace is also at work in some way among all people, possibly even in the sphere of religious life" (C. H.

Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic Age*, 98). This taxonomy was earlier developed by A. Rice in his *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

⁵See, for example, P. F. Knitter, "A New Pentecost? A Pneumatological Theology of Religions," *Current Dialogue* 19 (1991): 34; C. H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 13-14; J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (trans. R. R. Barr; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991, 1993), 125-51.

⁶C. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 80.

⁷A. Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 9.

⁸See, for example, T. L. Miles, "Severing the Spirit from the Son: Theological Revisionism in Contemporary Theologies of Salvation" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006); *Idem*, *Son and Spirit: A Christian Theology of Religions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, forthcoming).

⁹Killian McDonnell, "A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit?" *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 191. J. I. Packer notes that prior to the twentieth century, "Only one full-scale study of the gifts of the Spirit had been written in English, penned by the Puritan John Owen in 1679, 1680" (*Keep in Step with the Spirit* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984], 28).

¹⁰Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*; trans. A. Roberts and W. H. Rambaut; 10 vols. 1; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899; repr., Grand Rap-

ids: Eerdmans, 1975).

¹¹Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (in *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching: A Theological Commentary and Translation*; trans. J. Armitage Robinson, in Iain M. MacKenzie; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002). These two works of Irenaeus provide his most thorough work on salvation and the Holy Spirit. It is also in these two works that the "two hands" metaphor is developed and utilized.

¹²Interest in the metaphor is not limited to issues surrounding inclusivism and theology of religions. Kevin Vanhoozer also utilizes the "two hands" metaphor in the development of his theological method proposal in *The Drama Of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 69. In utilizing the metaphor he does not explicitly reference Irenaeus.

¹³Paul F. Knitter, "A New Pentecost? A Pneumatological Theology of Religions," *Current Dialogue* 19 (1991): 36.

¹⁴Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 36.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶Clark H. Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," 101. Such a statement strains the limits of credulity. It could be granted that Irenaeus did not have the awareness of the world's population and diversity that twenty-first century inhabitants possess, but it is farfetched to suggest that Irenaeus was "unaware of the existence of a large number of unevangelized people."

¹⁷Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 83. See

also idem, "An Inclusivist View," 104-05.

¹⁸Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 202.

¹⁹Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 51. Yong believes that the "doctrine of coinherence logically follows from Irenaeus's two hands model and therefore presupposes it" (*ibid.*, 53).

²⁰*Ibid.*, 51.

²¹*Ibid.* Yong then suggests that the trinitarian doctrine of coinherence follows logically from Irenaeus's "two hands" metaphor (*ibid.*).

²²*Ibid.*, 52.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴For example, Yong uses the "two hands" metaphor to establish the Word representing concreteness and the Spirit representing dynamism. From this, Yong develops a metaphysics of spiritual discernment. Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 43, 130-39.

²⁵Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 58.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 82.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 97.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 98.

³⁰Terrance L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized* (ATLA Monograph Series, no. 31; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993), 258 n. 3.

³¹Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 19.

³²Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 69. See

also Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 11ff.; and Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (vol. 1 of *The Story of Christianity*; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), 68ff.

³³Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 36.

³⁴Justo L. Gonzalez, *From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (vol. 1 of *A History of Christian Thought*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 128-29.

³⁵By way of brief summary, Gnostics did share a common belief that they possessed a higher knowledge or teaching than that offered by the church or its bishops. Matter was seen to be inherently evil, while the spirit was inherently good or divine. The material body, therefore, was a "prison" or "tomb" to the essentially good human soul or spirit. Salvation was seen as release from the "tomb" of the body that came through special knowledge or *gnosis*. Borrowing from and perverting Christian doctrine, Gnostics believed that the Spirit was an emanation or offshoot from the unknowable and ineffable God. Jesus Christ was an immaterial being (the incarnation being impossible due to the inherent evil of matter) who was sent from God to deliver a message of salvation to the other divine "offshoots" trapped in a material prison. See Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 28-29; Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 128-40; McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 40-41; Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 18-19; William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theol-*

ogy: *An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 45-59; and Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1963).

³⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1, Preface 2.

³⁷See especially Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 35-63.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 41.

³⁹Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 44.

⁴⁰Undoubtedly, this is due to the lack of attention given to the Holy Spirit in early church doctrinal formulation, but the historian and theologian can only examine the texts before him. To suggest that Irenaeus meant something other than what he wrote is to leave the path of exegesis and wander into speculation.

⁴¹MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 83-84.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 84.

⁴³Thus Irenaeus could rightly argue that the penultimate mission of the Holy Spirit is to bring people to God. "The Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, and the fathers learned the things of God, and the righteous were led forth into the way of righteousness; and who in the end of the times was poured out in a new way upon mankind in all the earth, renewing man unto God." Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵So connected are the roles of the triune members in the thought of Irenaeus that Ochagavia is led to comment, "The only difficult point is to distinguish the function of the Son from that of the Spirit" (Juan

Ochagavia, *Visibile Patris Filius: A Study of Irenaeus's Teaching on Revelation and Tradition* [Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1964], 61). Ochagavia's confusion is exaggerated and misplaced. The economy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Irenaeus's thinking is Johannine. The Father sends the Son who glorifies the Father. The Son sends the Spirit who glorifies the Son.

⁴⁶Tiessen explains, "The pattern is clear. The Father initiates a self-manifestation according to his own good pleasure. The Son mediates this revelation to those whom the Father wills, and he does so by giving them the Spirit. The Spirit leads them back to the Word, who presents them to the Father, who gives them eternal life, and the circle is complete" (*Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 181).

⁴⁷MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 82.

⁴⁸See for example, ". . . to whom the Spirit through many men, and now by Paul, bears witness, that 'he believed God, and it was imputed . . .'" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.8.1).

⁴⁹Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 5.

⁵⁰Again Irenaeus, "The second point is: The Word of God, Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was manifested to the prophets according to the form of their prophesying and according to the dispensation of the Father" (*ibid.*, 6).

⁵¹Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 179-80.

⁵²MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration*

of the Apostolic Preaching, 86.

⁵³Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 7.

⁵⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.24.1.

⁵⁵Tiessen summarizes the work of the Spirit in the unevangelized: "Not to have the Spirit is to be without life. But, not to be a part of the church, to which the Spirit gave apostles, prophets and teachers, and in and through which the Spirit does all his work, is not to have a part in the Spirit" (*Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 185-86).

⁵⁶Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," 105.

⁵⁷"For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth" (*Against Heresies* 3.24.1).

⁵⁸Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 221.

⁵⁹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.18.2.

⁶⁰McDonnell, "A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit?" 208.

⁶¹Ochagavia, *Visibile Patris Filius*, 133.

⁶²Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 202.

⁶³Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.1.1.

⁶⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.1. Letham points out that Irenaeus taught here that the Son and Spirit are both coeternal with the Father and that they both also share with him his work of creation. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 93.

⁶⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.1.3.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.5.1.

⁶⁸Letham points out that though this

may seem to subordinate the Son to the Father, Irenaeus was clear that the two hands are not external to the Father, but “unmistakably divine, always with the Father” (*The Holy Trinity*, 94).

⁶⁹Georg Khodr, quoted by Paul F. Knitter, “A New Pentecost?” 36.

⁷⁰Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 82.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 52.

⁷³See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 367-441.