

BOOK SUMMARY: *ON THE APOSTOLIC PREACHING*

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A Paper

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by

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Irenaeus. *On the Apostolic Preaching*. Translated by John Behr. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.

The translator, John Behr, breaks Irenaeus' *On the Apostolic Preaching* up into two distinct parts in which each part has its own various subheadings. However, the original text was not separated as such and thus ought to be read as a unified, flowing work (17). The purpose of this paper is to summarize the content of Irenaeus' *On the Apostolic Preaching*. This paper will accomplish this task by following Behr's outline and divisions of the text as a guideline for commentary and summary.

Irenaeus begins his demonstration of the apostolic preaching with a preface in which he identifies the addressee and the purpose for the document. He is writing to his friend, Marcianus, whom he is separated from and appears to dearly miss. What Irenaeus intends to accomplish in sending this letter to Marcianus is a demonstration and summary of the preaching of the truth with the result that his friend's faith may be strengthened (39). This goal illumines Irenaeus' understanding of the role of faith in salvation. He exhorts Marcianus to ". . . make [your] way by faith . . ." while later he adds that it is also necessary to ". . . keep the rule of faith . . ." (40-1). In addition, he ends the preface stating that ". . . the conserver of our salvation is faith . . ." (41). Therefore, Irenaeus sees faith as belief in the truth and the means by which truth is evidenced in reality. Faith protects, preserves, and progresses salvation which is founded upon the absolute truth of the Word of God.

In part one entitled, "The Apostolic Preaching", Behr divides this section into three main subheadings. In the first division, labeled "of God and Man", Irenaeus admits that the faith which he believes and preaches was handed down to him from the

“disciples of the apostles”. Following this assertion, Irenaeus shows that the ultimate source of his message is God. Also, a common theme in this letter is Irenaeus’ acknowledgment of the Trinity. Here in the first section of his writing, Irenaeus attributes baptism and the forgiveness of sins as accessible and authorized only by the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (42). Thus, the Triune God is the fountainhead of salvation.

Within this stream of thought, Irenaeus returns to the concept of the rule of faith denoting its three main articles: God the Father, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit (43-4). Each person of the Trinity has a specific role in creation and redemptive history. Therefore, for Irenaeus it is necessary to understand each one’s function and accomplishment in salvation. The “baptism of regeneration” occurs only in the Triune God. Moreover, according to Irenaeus, the doctrine of the Trinity is indispensable for salvation and holy conduct (43-4).

Once he establishes the nature of God and the nature of faith, Irenaeus begins to look at creation and the events which sparked the need for the gospel of Christ. Through this discourse, Irenaeus depicts the scene in the Garden where man is created in the image of God and is given a living spirit “. . . in order that what would be seen should be godlike . . .” (45-6). However, while in the Paradise in which God had placed man and woman, he gave them a single law so that they would not “. . . entertain thoughts of grandeur nor be exalted . . .” (49). And, according to Irenaeus, Satan, who was jealous of man, succeeded in convincing man to disobey God; thus, the nature of man changed from immortal to mortal leaving him ruined by sin and the serpent cursed by God (49-50).

In the second division which Behr labeled, “The Preparation for Salvation”, Irenaeus recounts redemption history in the Old Testament primarily through the

Pentateuch. Immediately, he addresses the utterly wicked state of the world subsequent to the Fall. Then, he displays the righteousness of Noah and the judgment of the earth by water (50-1). In this retelling, Irenaeus introduces the work of God in preparing for salvation from sin as he notes the blessing of Sem and cursing of Cham, two of the sons of Noah, as well as the covenant of God in the sign of a rainbow after the flood (52-3). Here, he builds off of God's covenantal relationship with his people as Abraham is reckoned righteous by faith in God's promise and inherits the "... original blessing [given to] Sem passed to Abraham and from Abraham to Issac, and from Issac to Jacob, the Spirit assigning the inheritance to them . . ." (54-6).

Next, Irenaeus launches into a retelling of Moses' role in salvation history. God keeps his covenant with the descendants of Abraham by delivering them from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. In addition, Irenaeus takes this opportunity to interpret the Passover as a saving event which revealed the "... mystery of the Passion of Christ . . ." (56). Furthermore, he upholds his Trinitarian emphasis as he attributes the writing of the Decalogue at Mount Sinai to the work of the Holy Spirit (57). Finally, Irenaeus recounts the significance of Joshua and Caleb in the wilderness, Moses' giving of a new legislation, namely Deuteronomy, Israel's possession of the Promised Land, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Prophets who preached the coming Messiah "... announcing that his flesh would blossom from the seed of David . . ." (57-60).

The third division of part one named, "The Salvation Wrought by the Son of God", looks at the salvific work of Jesus as the Messiah. In this section, Irenaeus draws on many themes in order to demonstrate how God would "... vanquish in Adam that which had struck us in Adam (60-1)." Here, Irenaeus portrays Jesus as the new Adam

who rights the sinful actions of the first man. He then links the necessity of the incarnation, the virgin birth, and “the obedience of the tree” as the means by which sin is conquered and Adam’s disobedience is undone (62). Furthermore, Irenaeus shows how Christ fulfilled the promises of God in Abraham and David. He then closes this division with a further apology for the genuineness of the life and work of Jesus, a review of the teaching of the law, the prophets, and the apostles, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and an affirmation of the inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s promise of salvation (63-7).

In part two entitled, “The Demonstration from the Prophets”, Irenaeus substantiates his apostolic preaching from the foretelling and fulfillment of Christ as witnessed to in the Scriptures. Behr separates the second part into four subheadings. The first division, “The Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ”, is a summation of examples and interpretations of Scriptures which show the eternal pre-eminence of Christ. Irenaeus argues that Jesus was with God “. . . before the world came to be . . .” (68). Also, he mentions that Abraham, Jacob, and Moses all three saw and spoke with Jesus before he became “. . . the Son of God in human form . . .” (69-71).

Next, Irenaeus attempts to demonstrate Christ’s office and authority as manifested in the Scriptures. First, he portrays the Son and the Father as one God and Lord. However, Irenaeus properly distinguishes between the personhood of the Son and the Father as he cites David who testifies that the Son of God is God. Again, he references David as the one who also attributes Lordship to the Son. Irenaeus continues to build his argument by evidencing the prophetic agreement of Isaiah and David concerning how they identify the coming Messiah not only as the Son of God, but also as the “. . . King of all nations . . .” (71-3). Irenaeus further exhorts his reader to see Jesus in other Scriptures

“. . . which speak in a similar manner, believing Christ and seeking wisdom and understanding God, in order to understand what was said by the prophets (74).”

In the second division of part two, “The Human Birth of Jesus Christ”, Irenaeus teaches that the Messiah was to have a physical birth, where he was going to come from, and the manner in which he was to come. First, he uses Isaiah to underscore the Messiah’s virgin birth as well as his Trinitarian identity as the Son of God. Second, Irenaeus references Moses in order to assign Judah as the region from where Christ would come (74-8). Third, Irenaeus brings back into view God’s covenant fulfillment to Abraham, namely Jacob, and David as he depicts through them the Messianic lineage (79-80). Fourth, he proposes “. . . Bethlehem, the country of David” as a more exact location for the virgin birth as derived from the prophet Micah (81). Finally, Irenaeus proclaims the manner of his coming as he cites the prophecy of Isaiah which tells Jerusalem that its Messiah is the King, “. . . humble and seated upon the foal of an ass, a colt, a foal of an ass . . .” (82).

The third division, marked as “The Miracles, Passion and Glorification of Jesus Christ”, serves as an accumulation of Scriptures which prophesied the various aspects of the life and work of the Messiah. For example, Irenaeus shows from Isaiah that the Son of God is to be a healer of diseases and infirmities. Also, from David, Irenaeus points out that David with regard to scourging was speaking of Jesus due to the fact that he himself was never scourged (83-4). In addition, he displays the sufferings of the Messiah from many other references such as the striking of the Shepherd in Zechariah and his arrest and binding found in the “Twelve Prophets” (88-9). Furthermore, Irenaeus also recounts the details of the crucifixion from various O. T. passages. He demonstrates that the Scriptures

foretold the stretching out of his hands on the cross, the dividing up of his garments, Judas' betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces of silver, and the drinking of the gall to quench his thirst on the cross (89-91). Last, Irenaeus confirms Jesus' glorification asserting that David prophesied that ". . . He ascended to the place whence he descended . . ." which was at the right hand of God (92).

The final division of part two, "The Calling of the Gentiles: The New People of God", primarily speaks about the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's promise of salvation. Irenaeus begins by contending that the apostolic message and ministry was for the "whole world" (92). He cites Isaiah in order to propose the Gentiles as the new people of God which fulfills the "new thing" God promised to make (94). Because the ". . . Son of God became the Son of man . . ." and inaugurated the new covenant, God has written his laws upon the Gentiles hearts, has manifested himself to a people who had not sought him, and gave them a heart of flesh (95-6).

In conclusion, Irenaeus summarizes the apostolic preaching and states what one must do in order to receive salvation (98-9). Once again, he proclaims that his "preaching of the truth" comes from the prophets and the apostles and is handed down to the Church (100). Then, he returns to his affirmation of the Trinity as the necessary doctrine for salvation. He warns Marcianus to beware of false teachings about the Trinity which are not conducive unto salvation (101). Irenaeus ends his letter in praise declaring, "Glory to the All-Holy Trinity and one Divinity: Father and Son and all-provident Holy Spirit, forever, Amen (101)

