

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

James G. M. Purves

The Spirit and the *Imago Dei*: Reviewing the Anthropology of Irenaeus of Lyons

Dr Purves is a lawyer and theologian who did his doctorate in patristics with Professor T. Hart in Aberdeen and is now pastor of Bristo Baptist Church, Edinburgh.

1. Introduction

Since the time of Augustine theological anthropology in western thought has been dominated by a view of man which has wrestled with a distinction between man's original state of Adamic sinlessness and his condition subsequent to the Fall. It became axiomatic to speak of fallen man as stripped of the likeness of God yet retaining God's image. The residual image of God in man, reflective of God in that man, retains the capacity of rational thought, and the free exercise of his will came to be seen as somehow incomplete and less than the whole capacity of human nature which God intended for Adam and his heirs. What had been lost to man in the Fall and what was required to be restored was the likeness of God. In the developing tradition of the west, medieval thought sought to build on this perspective. The image of God was perceived to exist within man's continuing rational faculty. As theological anthropology evolved, it came about that this distinctive trait of human rationality—married to the exercise of free will—should be perceived as the characteristic of man that most ably reflected the divine. Rationality and free will were therefore to be viewed as the most valued and essential qualities of man's being, distinguishing man as uniquely formed in the image of God.

This emphasis upon rationality and free will which found expression in scholastic theology and emergent humanist thought was also to be found at the heart of early reformed thinking. Calvin, although not identifying the image of God in man in terms of Augustine's analogical, Trinitarian model of the soul's 'understand-

ing, will and memory'.¹ perceived the proper centre of that image to lie in man's soul.² The image of God, located in man's soul, was for Calvin the basis of man's capacity to commune with God. The nature of these faculties is more clearly laid out in *Institute* 1.15.7, where Calvin explains:

that the human soul consists of two faculties, understanding and will. Let the office, moreover, of understanding be to distinguish between objects, as each seems worthy of approval or disapproval; while that of the will, to choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but to reject and flee from what it disapproves.³

We should note two features which this centring of the image of God within the faculties of man's understanding and will has led to. First of all, it has affected our approach to soteriology. Where a stress on the Spirit's role in forming understanding within fallen man has been associated with a progressive restoring of the image of God within man, pneumatology has tended to be viewed as quite separate from christology: christology has been more concerned with describing the perfect and unspoilt image of God, the second Adam, who came to atone for our sins. Pneumatology, on the other hand, has been associated with the work of revelation and progressive restoration of the image of God within the descendants of Adam who sinned. Christology has to do with the nature and character of the unspoilt image of God in Christ. Pneumatology has to do with man's intellectual facility being restored to a proper understanding of God and his revelation to man. Put another way, christology can come to be viewed primarily as the science of understanding God in Jesus, affording us a basis from which to work out God's redemptive plan. Pneumatology can come to be viewed as ancillary to the christological focus of God's redemptive plan, the agency whereby we come to grow in understanding of what has been won for us in and through Jesus Christ.⁴

The danger of this approach to soteriology lies in that it can create a conceptual disjunction between christology and pneumatology. This danger is heightened by a second feature arising from centring

¹ Calvin explicitly rejects this in *Institute* 1.15.4

² *Institute* 1.15.3

³ J. T. McNeill (Ed.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, 1954), 194.

⁴ Characteristically demonstrated in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, where one of six major sections is given over to 'The doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ', followed by another on 'The doctrine of the application of the work of redemption', wherein the doctrine of the Spirit is dealt with in terms of his action in applying the benefits of Christ on our behalf. There is no section or part of the work which focuses upon the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit.

the image of God within man's intellectual faculties. A stress can be placed on the cerebral and intellectual development of man in the process of Christian sanctification. The process of restoring fallen man to the full image and likeness of God can thereby become centred on the development of man's rational faculty. Married to a perception that the Holy Spirit's primary function is to provide us with knowledge of God, an emphasis that knowledge of God is founded in the faculties of the human soul can lead to the conclusion that the primary work of the Holy Spirit is to form a conviction within man concerning the nature of God's saving grace, a conviction which is firmly rooted in man's intellectual faculty.⁵

An emphasis upon the Spirit's work in enabling and clarifying man's intellectual understanding of God has, in more recent years, led to some difficulty in reconciling the experiential emphases of pentecostal and charismatic Christianity to mainstream reformed, evangelical thought. In order to address this problem and to explore how a clearer understanding of a common heritage may be had by those within both traditions, we look to re-examine part of the early theological tradition wherein an understanding of man as the image of God was formed. Specifically, we turn to the pre-Augustinian thought of Irenaeus of Lyons in order to provide an alternative perspective to that of the dominant western tradition. We will see how Irenaeus can provide us with a theological framework which allows us to view man's nature as the image of God in a way which avoids the danger of rooting it within an exclusively intellectual framework.

2. Irenaeus

The challenge which faced Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, in the later half of the second century is neither unfamiliar to those who hold responsibility for teaching in the modern church nor dissimilar to the challenges facing Christian leaders in western society today. An orthodox Christian confession was being challenged by other, competing views of man and God. The growth of gnostic syncretism throughout the second century posed a serious threat to the New Testament's emphasis on the unity of Christ as man and God, especially to the unity established between material nature and spiritual man. The gnostic tendency to tear apart the union of material and spiritual struck not only at an Old Testament understanding of God as Creator and upholder of a material and

⁵ The positive value of this approach is evidenced in works such as J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London, 1973).

spiritual universe, the totality of which he had declared as good; but it also struck at the heart of the Christian Gospel's message of full salvation for man's whole being. The nature of this challenge meant that early Christian theology had to develop beyond the Bible-quoting polemic of the early apologists. A theology had to be formed to deal with false teachings which posed a challenge both to Christian appreciation of the unity of Christ as man and God and to an understanding of the way in which the physical and spiritual are united in man.

In responding to the gnostic threat Irenaeus sought to move beyond the use of the Bible as a collection of 'proof texts', attempting instead to deal with Scripture as a progressive account of God's self-revelation centred in the person of Jesus Christ. In this respect, Irenaeus was clearly a biblical theologian. We can recognise in his writings a faithfulness both to the Pauline and Johannine traditions, representing the Son of God incarnate as the eternal *Logos* come to man; and also as the second Adam who brings man into the state God had intended for him. Any difficulties that modern Christians experience in dealing with Irenaeus are likely to arise not from his handling of Scripture but from the fact that he writes with the mindset and the perspective of a pre-Nicene theologian.⁶

In looking to Irenaeus we have to be aware of our contemporary perspectives and the assumptions which we bring to our reading of him. More often than not, popular evangelical teaching on the Trinity and the nature of Christ projects back into a scriptural framework Trinitarian and christological formulae which did not arise until the fourth and fifth centuries. We need to be reminded that, in seeking to understand Irenaeus' perception of the *Logos* and the *Logos'* concourse with mankind, we are faced with a view that has not yet been fashioned by the christological formulae of Nicea and Chalcedon: formulae shaped principally by questions relating to the Son's nature—those relating to the *homoousion* as stated at the Council of Nicea in AD 325; and the nature of union between God and man in the two *phuses* of Christ—as defined at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. Indeed we could say that, from a pre-Nicene perspective, the post-Nicene position is dominated by a christological tautology. After Nicea, theological description of man's concourse with the Triune God was to be preoccupied with considerations concerning the status of Christ's divinity and the constitution of his divine and human natures. Irenaeus' concerns, as a biblical theologian of the third century, are quite different. For Irenaeus,

⁶ A good, modern introduction to the works of Irenaeus is to be found in D. Minns, *Irenaeus* (London, 1994).

Christ is central; but not in the same way as he would be for Athanasius or Augustine, whose theological systems are dominated by a focus upon the incarnation of the Son. With Irenaeus, Christ is certainly the means and harbinger of our salvation; but this does not lead him to understand the whole theophany in terms of the Son's incarnation. Irenaeus is neither preoccupied with nor constrained by a dominant christology. We might say that in Irenaeus and pre-Nicene theology as a whole we find a tendency to look more to the *becomingness* of God in and through the Incarnation and atonement; rather than upon the *becomeness* of the Son of God preoccupied with the event of the Incarnation, as in post-Nicene thought.

We would suggest that it is this focus upon the *becomingness* of both the Son and the Spirit from the Father that makes pre-Nicene thought so important in seeking to appraise the legitimacy of contemporary emphases upon subjective experience of God. It can offer a framework wherein we can test experience as a legitimate facet of theology. God's *becomingness* can legitimately be described as God's Being made known to man through God's blessing being received by man. Certainly, within Irenaeus' writings, the precise relationship of the Son and the Spirit in this *becomingness* appears opaque, lacking clear and objective definition. As J. A. Robinson concluded, 'the teaching of St. Irenaeus as to the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Incarnation is vague, perhaps even transitional He seems to prefer to think of a co-operation of the Word of God and the Wisdom of God—the two hands of God to whom the creation of the first formed man was due . . .'.⁷ We might describe Irenaeus' position as subjective in so far as we are given the responsibility of acknowledging that God meets with us through both his Son and his Spirit. The Father meets with men and women through the Son of God engaging with our humanity in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Father meets with us through the Spirit of God, who was fully present in the life of Jesus, confronting us in our present experience. It is when the *becomingness* of the Son and the *becomingness* of the Spirit both confront us within our awareness that the truth of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is perceived by us. As we shall seek to demonstrate, this lack of a clearly stated differentiation of the Son and the Spirit does not mean that a distinction between them cannot be identified within Irenaeus' thought. Pre-Nicene theology was not engaged in the search for an objective description of God characteristic of post-Nicene thought. Rather, we need to grasp that our discussion of the Trinity in pre-Nicene theology should not be detached from our humanity and our present experience of God. For

⁷ J. A. Robinson, *St. Irenaeus: the Apostolic Preaching* (New York, 1920), 66–67.

this reason we shall seek to avoid using the more traditional terms, 'immanent' or 'economic', when speaking of the persons of the Trinity, for their usage suggests that a objective comprehension and analysis of the Trinity is possible or desirable. For Irenaeus it would appear that such a level of detached objectivity was neither possible nor desirable.⁸

From the time of the Arian dispute onwards the key to our understanding of the Trinity is made contingent upon and dominated by christological issues simply because debate was dominated by questions of ontology; more specifically, by questions relating to the Being of the Son of God. In contrast pre-Nicene thought, as exemplified by Irenaeus, places the emphasis upon the dynamic becomingness of God to man. It precedes the more static christology of Chalcedon—a christology which is not perceived by all as helpful in our modern context. In this respect there is still potency in James Dunn's protest that 'We must pass behind the wooden, artificial phrases of the traditional Chalcedonian formulation of the two natures of Christ, to the living, human experience of the Spirit possessing and empowering Jesus in remarkable and unique degree. Whatever its value in past centuries, the static Christology of Chalcedon does no justice to the dynamic Christology of the New Testament.'⁹

Irenaeus can be of help to us because his primary concern is not ontological but, in a broader sense, salvific. He is concerned not with the constitution of Christ but with Christ as the one who enables salvation for mankind. It is the saving power of Christ that is central to all human history.¹⁰ Because of this salvific emphasis, Irenaeus can focus upon Christ as the Son of God who restores and perfects man as the image of God. It is through the humanity of the man Jesus Christ that God restores what was lost in Adam.¹¹ Most importantly, in maintaining this salvific emphasis throughout his work, Irenaeus avoids constructing a theology which absorbs all thought of man's concourse with God into a christological tautology. This is not to say that Christ does not occupy the central place in Irenaeus' theology. What Irenaeus' salvific emphasis does mean is that while he

⁸ This apart, Irenaeus is traditionally described as advocating an economic trinity. The distinction between this and the immanent trinity is well laid by D. Minns, *op. cit.*, chapter 4.

⁹ J. D. G. Dunn, 'Rediscovering the Spirit', *Expository Times* 84, 1972-3, 11.

¹⁰ Aloys Grillmeier comments that it is this salvific focus that shapes Irenaeus' Christology (*Christ in Christian Tradition* Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1975), 98-104).

¹¹ Cullmann applauded Irenaeus for making 'the only attempt in the whole history of doctrine to build a Christology on the concept of "Man"'. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London, 1963), 189.

expounds the significance of Christ's presence and involvement in our human predicament he also preserves a focus on the whole *becomingness* of God not just the singular, historic becomeness of the Son of God in the incarnation—in looking to the complementary relationship that exists between the ministries of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is not only the Son but it is the Son and the Holy Spirit as they together come from the Father that expresses the Triune becomingness of God towards man. It is in this context that Irenaeus can speak of the Son and the Spirit as the 'two hands' of the Father.

We shall return to this understanding of a duality of the Son and the Spirit in God's becomingness. First of all, we require to examine further the salvific thrust of Irenaeus' thought, an emphasis which is focused in his anthropology and found principally in his perception of man as made in the image and likeness of God.

2. The *image* and the *likeness* of God in man

The central, salvific theme that is sustained throughout Irenaeus' thought provides us with a key to his anthropology. We might say that Irenaeus presents us not with a theological anthropology but, more specifically, with a salvific anthropology. Consequently, in any discussion of how Irenaeus views man in terms of the image and likeness of God, we need to bear in mind that his principal focus is on how restoration of communion with God is effected for man and not upon the nature of man outwith the redeeming action of God.

For Irenaeus the key to understanding man as the image of God is unmistakably found in the person of Jesus Christ. Adam may have been formed as the image of God but he never realised his full potential in that capacity.¹² Christ, on the other hand, is fully manifest as the image of God, undoing the damage of the first Adam; and yet more than that, enabling man to go further and enter into eternal communion with God.¹³ The pivotal scripture to this approach is *Ephesians* 1.10, around which is fashioned Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation. It is in the whole life of Christ, from birth through to death, resurrection and exaltation that we see revealed the true pattern and nature of man as intended by God.¹⁴ The first Adam, through his fall, never fulfilled God's design for him and cannot properly be said to have manifested or reflected God's design that man should be the image and likeness of God. It is in Christ that

¹² *Against Heresies* 4.38.1 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (= ANCL) Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, 1977), 521).

¹³ *Against Heresies* 5.16.2 (ANCL 1, 544).

¹⁴ *Against Heresies* 3.16.6 (ANCL 1, 442).

the full intent of God for man is revealed. Adam may have been formed as the image of God; yet he never realised his full potential in that capacity. Christ, on the other hand, is manifestly the image of God, reversing the damage occasioned by the first Adam; and yet more than that, enabling man to go further and enter into eternal communion with God through Christ's exaltation.¹⁵ Christ, embracing and drawing mankind to himself through his participation in human existence, recapitulates the whole of human life within his own humanity: that humanity which he experiences and takes to himself through birth, life, death, resurrection and beyond.¹⁶

It is because of this salvific emphasis that Irenaeus can hold together two suppositions which, taken apart from his emphasis on restoration through Christ, might be viewed as mutually exclusive. In the first supposition, Irenaeus can look upon the potential with which Adam was formed and see that, compared with what is made manifest in and through Christ, Adam never in fact came into the full inheritance of what might have been, had he not fallen. The projected growth of humanity in Adam and Eve, from childhood through to maturity, was never fully realised. Yet at the same time, Irenaeus can hold to a second supposition: he can freely affirm that Adam and Eve were originally created in perfection. This perfection consisted in the potential for growth and development which lay within Adam and Eve, a potential to grow into the full image of God. Although frustrated by the Fall, this potential was there within them.

By maintaining throughout a salvific anthropology, Irenaeus is able to bring these two suppositions together. Adam and Eve were created in original perfection, yet they did not remain in that state. This is not to say that their original 'perfection' was fatally flawed: Irenaeus does not view perfection in absolute, static terms. The potential that lay within Adam and Eve was never properly realised; yet the process of man's growth was fulfilled and completed in and through Jesus Christ, whose humanity was unfailingly sustained through the whole process of life to reach its fulfilment in Christ's glorification and exaltation. The perfection seen in Christ is, in fact, the true revelation of man as the image and the likeness of God. The

¹⁵ Nielsen succinctly condenses his understanding of Irenaeus on this as follows: 'Adam was created after the image of God, but the image was not shown. For the Word was invisible, after whose image man was created. That was why man so easily lost the likeness. But when the Word had become flesh, two things happened: the Word showed the true image, by itself becoming that which the image was, and the Word secured the likeness for once and all, by making man entirely like to the invisible Father by means of the visible Word.' (J. T. Nielsen, *Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons* (Assen, 1968), 22).

¹⁶ *Against Heresies* 2.22.4 (ANCL I, 391).

first Adam's failure and immaturity is interpreted in the light of the mature obedience of Jesus Christ.

We would suggest that it is this focus upon a salvific anthropology, rather than an interest in anthropology as such, that characterises Irenaeus' interest in the image of God and the manner in which man's constitution is reflective of the Creator. Irenaeus views the image and likeness of God as a unitary feature, in that both image and likeness are fully evolved and developed only in Jesus Christ. As those restored to communion with God through our union with Christ, we come to participate in Christ's identity as the image and likeness of God. Where the process of forming the image and likeness of God in man was not completed but aborted in the life of the first Adam, it is a process which, through our participation in Christ, we are now brought to share in and fully engage with afresh.

It is in this process of bringing about man's restored communion with God and in establishing man as the image and likeness of God that we see two divine agents at work. These are the two hands of God, the Son and the Spirit. Irenaeus also characterises the Son as the Word and the Spirit as the Wisdom of God. In *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* he explains the relationship of the two as follows:

the Word establishes, that is to say, gives body and grants the reality of being, and the Spirit gives order and form to the diversity of the powers; rightly and fittingly is the Word called the Son, and the Spirit the Wisdom of God.¹⁷

Likewise, in *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus shows us that, where it is the Son who 'gives body and grants the reality of being' it is the Spirit who forms man into the likeness of the Son. In *Against Heresies* 5.9.2, he states,

If, therefore, anyone admit the ready inclination of the Spirit to be, as it were, a stimulus to the infirmity of the flesh, it inevitably follows that what is strong will prevail over the weak, so that the weakness of the flesh will be absorbed by the strength of the Spirit . . .¹⁸

Note how the relative functions of the Son and the Spirit are expressed. In the passage quoted above from *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, the Son's function might be described as absolute, in that he serves as the template for man's restored being; for the full potential of man, restored to communion with God, is seen and found only in the Son of God's life in human form. The

¹⁷J. A. Robinson, *St. Irenaeus: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (London, 1920), 73-4.

¹⁸ANCL I, 535.

potential for a process of restoration comes through the shared humanity of Christ with us. This potential is actuated in us through our humanity being joined to God through the Son in his incarnation. The Son of God is therefore central in effecting the salvific process in and for man. What is of special interest to us is that it is not the Son alone who is seen to effect man's salvation and restoration to his place as the image of God. The Spirit too has a distinct yet integral function within this process.

The integral function of the Spirit is found in Irenaeus' designation of the Spirit as 'the Wisdom of God', complementary to the Son's designation as 'the Word'. Where the Son's function might be described as absolute in providing the template for man's restored humanity, the Spirit adds the dynamic of relative and progressive change. We find this illustrated in the passage taken from *Against Heresies*, where Irenaeus continues, '“in us all” is the Spirit, who cries “Abba Father”, and fashions man into the likeness of God'.¹⁹ Where the Son acts as the template the Spirit works along with the Son, relating men into and towards the full image of God that is in the Son. In this process of transformation, the Spirit is not depicted as merely the ancillary agent to the Son's salvific function. Man's transformation and restoration into the full image and likeness of God requires the mutual action of both the Son and the Spirit. The ministry of the Son and the Spirit are complementary of one another. Neither the Son nor the Spirit offers a focus, in preference to the other, in effecting the work of salvation.

In what way might this salvific emphasis of Irenaeus be open to misinterpretation? We earlier noted that Irenaeus' soteriology does not arise from a developed christology as this came to be expressed in post-Nicene orthodoxy. Consequently, Irenaeus' anthropology is not built upon a sophisticated christological foundation. Irenaeus simply recognises that the true man, the image of God, is found in Christ; and that this true man is brought into being by the mutual work of the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of God. For this reason it is not altogether surprising that Irenaeus may appear vague and even inconsistent in the way in which he variously designates man as both the image and likeness of God. When Irenaeus describes man as the image of God, his eyes are not on Adam but on Christ.

Irenaeus' emphasis upon a salvific anthropology is important to remember when we compare his position to that of medieval scholastic anthropology and its critical distinction between the image and likeness of God in man. In this later development the contention

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

was that both the image and the likeness of God in man were present in Adam's unspoilt state, with only the former continuing in Adam after the fall. Certainly, Irenaeus suggests in *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 that the likeness, born in man by the Spirit, is absent in man after the Fall yet present beforehand. This can be interpreted, however, as not so much a reference to the nature of man's original state but as an observation on the unrealised and frustrated potential which lies within man; a potential which Jesus Christ reveals and a potential which can be realised in us only as our lives are laid bare to the Holy Spirit. A focus on the question of man's original state, which was to arise in the later debate between Augustine and Pelagius, was not Irenaeus' concern. It is the work of the Spirit alone which can bring us to be conformed to Jesus Christ. Certainly, in Irenaeus' mind this is a process of restoration that will not be completed until our final resurrection and transformation: 'But we do now receive a certain portion of his Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God . . . It will render us like unto him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God'.²⁰

There have been attempts, outwith the scholastic tradition, to find a theological key within Irenaeus himself which might suggest that a deliberate distinction between *image* and *likeness* was, in fact, introduced by him. David Cairns, in his book *The Image of God in Man*, contended that while it was 'probable that he believed Adam to have been created in the likeness as well as the image of God . . . It remains, however, certain that Irenaeus thought that regenerate man has a far firmer possession of the likeness than Adam'.²¹ Cairns developed this distinction to suggest that the rationality inherent in the *image* is, for Irenaeus, capable of opposition to God, serving human lusts;²² and it is a separate work of the Spirit of God that is required to reform, in believers, the full image and likeness. He concludes that 'the view should probably be accepted that, according to Irenaeus, God's Spirit creates, or makes active in man a spirit which is the bearer of the likeness'.²³

We would, however, question whether Cairns' interpretation gives sufficient weight to the salvific emphasis within Irenaeus' anthropology, which consistently brings our search for the true nature of man to focus not upon believers or the first Adam but upon Jesus Christ

²⁰ *Against Heresies* 5.8.1 (ANCL I, 533).

²¹ D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London, 1953), 78–9.

²² *Against Heresies* 4.4.3

²³ D. Cairns, *op. cit.*, 79.

alone. For Irenaeus the mature and complete image and likeness of God is found in Christ alone; Christ, in whom the mutual work of both the Son and the Spirit come to such a complete and perfect fulfilment. The Swedish theologian, Gustav Wingren, justly points out that "The passage in *Colossians* 3.10 about the new man who "is being renewed in the image of its creator" is an affirmation which Irenaeus finds of profound and particular significance. It implies that man, by faith in Christ, becomes a new man, becomes like Christ. And yet it was in the likeness of Christ, the Son, that man was created".²⁴ As we have already noted, however, such a marked christocentricity does not lead Irenaeus to prefer a focus that is wholly on the Son, thereby subrogating or minimising the role of the Spirit. Even as Christ is the new man, so the Spirit is the agent of man's transformation into the similitude of Christ. Irenaeus can assert that 'men, if they do truly progress by faith towards better things, and receive the Spirit of God, and bring forth the fruit thereof, shall be spiritual, as being planted in the paradise of God.'²⁵ For Irenaeus, the work of making man in the image and likeness of God is one that is only fully realised through man's participation in and communion with both the Son and the Spirit: a communion which, through faith, effects within us the benefits of union with Jesus Christ.

To summarise, we might say that, while christocentric in his theology, Irenaeus's christocentricity is not restricted or confined, as later patristic theology would be, through a focus upon the incarnation of the Son. Irenaeus is concerned with the mutual action of both the Son and the Spirit in the becomingness of God towards us. In the person and atoning mission of Jesus Christ there is both the action of the Son and that of the Spirit. Where this allows us to describe the Son as providing the template for man's restored humanity, the Spirit can be perceived as adding the dynamic of relative and progressive change. The Spirit's work is that of fashioning man into the full *image* and *likeness* of God which is found in Jesus Christ. Consequently, it is not surprising that some confusion can arise when we seek to discern a clear distinction and definition in Irenaeus' use of image and likeness in speaking of man, in a generic sense, as made in the image of God. A state of absolute, Adamic perfection is not envisaged by Irenaeus. The Fall of man, albeit fatal, is the disruption of a process rather than the shattering of an ideal. The restoration which is brought about in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ, in whom both the Son and the Spirit have a

²⁴ G. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation* (Edinburgh, 1959), 23–24.

²⁵ *Against Heresies* 5.10.1 (ANCL 1, 536).

work to do, is the restoration of man to the process of realising his potential, the potential which God decrees to be realised in his Son incarnate, Jesus Christ. This is brought about by the agency of both the Son and the Spirit by means of their becomingness from the Father towards man. Consequently, the work of salvation for man can be viewed as a progressive development and transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit for all who are being grafted into union with Christ through faith. The Word of God in Christ is he who would embrace all mankind, in his work of recapitulation; but the executor and means of this centripetal and transforming action of God in man is the Holy Spirit, drawing man more fully into deeper participation with the Son of God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

We now turn to examine in more detail how it is that Irenaeus perceives this duality in God's becomingness, the action of the Father in reaching out to man through the two hands of the Son and the Spirit.

3. The Son and the Spirit: the 'two hands' of the Father

In his study on the theology of Irenaeus, J. Lawson makes the pertinent observation that Irenaeus' thought is heavily shaped by a Hebraic world view,²⁶ therein reflecting a perception of God that is expressed more in concrete rather than in abstract terms. We might put it another way. Irenaeus, in speaking of God's salvific becomingness towards man, insists that his description and understanding of God has a clearly anthropocentric bearing. As B. Studer observes in the recently published English translation of his study on *Trinity and Incarnation*, Irenaeus always speaks of the two hands 'in the context of salvation history'.²⁷ God is only described as he is in so far as we can discern and speak of him as he is in his becomingness towards us.

In Irenaeus we are faced with a writer who sees a distinctive work being undertaken by the Spirit. He is able to distinguish, within God's salvific purpose, between the becomingness of the Holy Spirit and that of the Son.²⁸ Given that his main works are in the form of *Against Heresies*, an exposure of the Valentinian Gnosticism that was invading his church, and *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a catechetical summary of Christian belief, we meet in Irenaeus with one who is not yet concerned, as others would later be, with

²⁶ J. Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus* (London, 1948), 119.

²⁷ B. Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation* (Edinburgh, 1993), 62.

²⁸ A fuller discussion of Irenaeus' perception of the Spirit and how it contrasts to that of Justin is found in J. A. Robinson, *St. Irenaeus: the Apostolic Preaching*, 24-68.

innovative, apologetic thinking.²⁹ This makes Irenaeus' contribution to a review of pneumatology's place in a theology of the atonement all the more significant, for his understanding is presented in a context where the preservation and proper presentation of the Christian kerygma is the primary issue.

In seeking to understand Irenaeus' perception of the Spirit and his operation within God's salvific economy, we might usefully make a distinction between the work undertaken by the Holy Spirit (*opus operandi*) which has a clearly christocentric reference; and the means whereby this work is made effective (*modus operandi*). The *modus operandi* of the Spirit appears to be viewed by Irenaeus in terms of the becomingness of the Spirit, the person and function of the Spirit being both dynamic and immediate towards the human condition. In Irenaeus' understanding, the primary *opus operandi* of the Spirit is to testify to the Son.³⁰ The Spirit comes to the Son³¹ and also to the church, that the church might be fruitful in her relationship with the Father and the Son, whose image and superscription the church bears by the Spirit.³² While the Spirit's operation bears reference to the Son, it is complementary to and not to be confused with the mission of the Son. The Son and the Spirit are the two 'hands of God',³³ separately assigned³⁴ functions in the work of salvation and sanctification; yet always working in conjunction with one another.³⁵ In this way, we can say that the Spirit fulfils his *opus operandi*. Consequently, the *modus operandi* of the Spirit is to be found in the Spirit's own becomingness expressed in and upon the lives of men, distinct from yet complementary to that of the Son. As the Spirit renews and vivifies the church, the church is made inseparable from the Spirit's presence because of her contingency upon the Spirit. The Spirit confirms faith and acts as the guarantee of our salvation, nourishing the faithful as a babe is nourished at its mother's breasts.³⁶ The Spirit may be spoken of, in the same breath, as the agent both of revelation and of sanctification;³⁷ but distinguished in his *modus operandi* from the Son, to whom he testifies.

²⁹ F. L. Cross remarks that *Against Heresies* appears untidy and unsystematic (*The Early Christian Fathers* (London 1960), 111–12).

³⁰ *Against Heresies* 3.16 (ANCL I, 440–44).

³¹ *Against Heresies* 3.17.1 (ANCL I, 444).

³² *Against Heresies* 3.17.3 (ANCL I, 445).

³³ *Against Heresies* 5.1.3 (ANCL I, 527).

³⁴ *Against Heresies* 4.pref.4 (ANCL I, 463).

³⁵ *Against Heresies* 4.38.3 (ANCL I, 521–22).

³⁶ *Against Heresies* 3.24.1 (ANCL I, 458).

³⁷ *Against Heresies* 4.1.1 (ANCL I, 463).

What we appear to meet with in Irenaeus is a perception of the Spirit at work that is rooted in the Spirit's dynamic becomingness: the realisation of his Being and a relationship with man which is one of becomingness from the Father. As we noted earlier, a concern with the identity of the immanent Trinity has not yet developed, in that there is no apparent concern with relations within the immanent Godhead outwith God's salvific purpose for man. While acknowledging and holding to the monarchy of the Father and the specific, salvific mission of the Son, Irenaeus maintains an understanding of the Spirit where the Spirit is distinguished, in his becomingness, from both the Father and the Son. This understanding is founded on the salvific purpose of God; but Irenaeus betrays no interest in establishing an understanding of God to and within himself, removed from his salvific purpose.

It is no surprise, then, to find that Irenaeus emphasises the present operation of the Holy Spirit in the church,³⁸ nor that he marries the complementary work of the Son and the Spirit in explaining that the location wherein the activity of the Spirit may be met with is the church, the body of Christ on earth:

For this gift of God has been entrusted to the church, as the breath of life to created man, to the end that all members by receiving it should be made alive . . . 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.³⁹

We might say that, for Irenaeus, the separately assigned functions of the Son and the Spirit coincide in the church: in terms of Trinitarian economy, the church represents the confluence of the Son and Spirit in their work and act of becomingness, as it is assigned to them by the Father. Without the church there would be no ready means of explaining the relation of the Son and the Spirit.

Where does this Irenaean perception of the Spirit's role in testifying to the Son differ from a post-Nicene understanding? The answer lies in the breadth of scope that is assigned to the Spirit. Where the later need to affirm Christ's divinity would lead to an increasing emphasis upon the role and function of the Son incarnate in executing the atonement, this was to be accompanied by a growing emphasis upon viewing the Spirit in terms of immanent, Trinitarian relationships. Emphasis was to be placed upon redemptive contact between God and man that is forged in and through the Incarnation. At the same time, this was accompanied by an obscuring of the Spirit's becomingness as part of the Triune God's

³⁸ *Against Heresies* 2.32.4 (ANCL 1, 409).

³⁹ *Against Heresies* 3.24.1 (ANCL 1, 458).

becomingness towards man. The focus of post-Nicene theology in the west would come to be dominated by the becomeness of the Son, relegating the Spirit to the status of an agent, a bond between the Father and the Son,⁴⁰ uniting the Father to the Son and effecting communion between God and man. The Spirit would increasingly come to be viewed as one whose primary function is to provide us with knowledge of God, acknowledge that is founded on the residual image of God within man which lies within the rational faculties of the human soul.

Irenaeus, in contrast, does not seek to delimit or circumscribe the function of the Holy Spirit. A focus upon the becomingness of both the Son and the Spirit is preserved. The Spirit is active upon the totality of man, transforming and effecting man's whole being, thereby bringing man into a closer degree of similitude to Jesus Christ.

At the very outset of the Patristic era, we are presented by Irenaeus with an understanding of the Spirit which is founded not on a Trinitarian model explicated in terms of relationships within God's immanent Being; but one that is rooted in God's engagement with us. The revelation of God is met with in the becomingness of God at work in his salvific economy towards mankind, realised both in the incarnation of the Son and in the continued action of the Holy Spirit towards us: the work of the 'two hands' of the Father. To describe the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit in terms other than those denoted in this economic action is seen to be neither urgent nor helpful, in that it is in God's salvific becomingness that God is met with by man. Consequently, the problem of how the Spirit can be viewed within a theological structure which is dominated by a christocentric focus does not face Irenaeus. The Spirit, along with the Son, is to be acknowledged and met with by man. The work of the Spirit may be to bring man more deeply into communion with the Son incarnate, and in that sense the becomingness of the Son and the Spirit coincide within the church. The Son and the Spirit remain, however, distinctively the 'two hands' of the Father.

4. The Spirit and the *Imago Dei* in contemporary Spirituality

Can we apply the theology of Irenaeus in seeking to address current problems within Western spirituality? Irenaeus' approach might be applied to varying aspects of contemporary debate in seeking to evaluate whether any specific expression of spirituality can be held as congruous to an orthodox Christian confession and belief. On the

⁴⁰ The *vinculum caritatis* of Augustinian thought.

basis of Irenaeus' construction, a distinctively Christian theology needs to acknowledge the becomingness of both the Son and the Spirit, the Word and the Wisdom of the Father. In this article, we restrict ourselves to mentioning briefly one area of Christian devotion and practice which has presented, in the eyes of many, a challenge to orthodox, evangelical Christianity. We refer to the growth of the Charismatic Movement and the growing influence of popular charismatic or post-charismatic writings and practices within evangelical circles.⁴¹

At first glance that emphasis, which lies within Irenaeus' thought, on the dynamic becomingness of the Spirit in his economy towards man looks well suited to adaptation within a popular piety that speaks much of the Spirit of God within human experience. Irenaeus expresses, as do charismatic Christians, a direct and immediate becomingness of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women. Further, this work of the Spirit is described by Irenaeus in terms that are broader than those found within the customary constraints of an evangelical Christianity which has been forged in the western tradition and sifted by Calvin: a tradition that is most comfortable when it speaks of the illuminatory and didactic agency of the Spirit, rather than invoking the subjective, experiential terms of the charismatics. Irenaeus, in presenting us with a mission of the Spirit which is both distinctive and complementary to the mission of the Son, appears to allow for a focus on a general, present experience of the Spirit which charismatic Christians want to stress as a central part of the Christian life.

There is, however, a significant qualifier to this. In Irenaeus' thought the Spirit's dynamic becomingness is viewed as a parallel action to that of the Son. The mission of both the Son and the Spirit are focused upon the unique person of Jesus Christ. The reception of the Spirit in the lives of men and women arises out of the predicate and paradigm found in the life of Jesus Christ. That image of God, the paradigm of human personhood and purpose which is found in Jesus Christ, serves as the foundation for our full experience of the Spirit of God. For Irenaeus, Christian experience of the Spirit can only properly be understood if we view the becomingness of God towards man not simply in terms of the Spirit but in terms of both the

⁴¹ Early literature, such as D. Bennett's *Nine O'Clock in the Morning* (Eastbourne, 1978), was highly influential. Critical, reflective works include T. A. Smail, *The Giving Gift* (London, 1988), J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, 1975) and J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (London, 1992). More recent popular accounts include J. Wimber, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth* (London, 1990) and D. Roberts, *The 'Toronto Blessing'* (Eastbourne, 1994).

Son and the Spirit, the Word and the Wisdom of God, together acting in conjunction in their salvific mission from God to man. Indeed, it is this essentially bifocal view of God in Irenaeus, as he views the Son and the Spirit in their becomingness from the Father towards man, that distinguishes Irenaeus' perception of the Spirit's role in the atonement from much contemporary charismatic piety, where we are often faced with a devotion that can appear both monofocal and pneumatocentric.

At the same time, it could be said that the pneumatocentric concentration of much charismatic devotion arises as a legitimate attempt to provide a corrective to a monofocal, logocentric theology which arises from the historic domination of christological concerns in forming an understanding of the atonement. That many charismatics tend to emphasise the centrality of the Spirit without any clearly adumbrated relation to the Son may in fact occur because of an attempted corrective, arising out of the charismatic experience of communion with the Triune God, to an inherited theological structure which has emphasised the centrality of the Son while minimising the equally important mission of the Spirit.

Here, we would suggest, lies the real challenge to contemporary evangelical theology. Where charismatic Christianity may be guilty of overemphasising the becomingness of the Spirit, this has been due in no small part to a theological structure within western evangelical theology which has both restricted and misled charismatic Christians in their theological formulations. The inherited tradition within western theology has failed charismatics in two ways. Firstly, it has tended to reduce the becomingness of the Spirit to the singular role of illuminatory agent to man's understanding, obscuring other aspects of the Spirit's becomingness into the whole of human experience. Secondly, by holding to an inherited framework in which christology and pneumatology have traditionally been held apart, popular charismatic belief has not readily been able to make the necessary connection as to how an experience of the Spirit's becomingness must, if God is truly the Triune God, be measured not by subjective, experiential criteria; but rather against the measure of man as the image of God, as found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, who provides us with both the predicate and paradigm of Christian living.

A reaction against the apparent subjectivity of much charismatic belief and practice within evangelical circles has been both predictable and understandable. Evangelical Christianity has, for over a hundred years, been fighting against a nineteenth century liberal theology where an understanding of the Spirit was often confused with man's personal consciousness. There has been a

reticence and caution over embracing or encouraging a contemporary movement of popular piety which speaks of the Spirit of God's action upon man where this is not clearly accompanied by a proper appreciation as to how this relates to the atonement brought about between God and man by the Son of God incarnate. Yet, other than cautioning against excesses or offering outright condemnation, what positive help can evangelical Christians offer their charismatic brethren, where the inherited structures of western theology themselves offer no satisfactory understanding as to how a comprehensive pneumatology and a clear christology are to be related, one to another?

The danger in seeking to form a charismatic theology shaped by experience of God lies in presenting an understanding of the Spirit which is dichotomised from the context of Christ, the Son incarnate. A pneumatocentric theology of experience may simply perpetuate a sense of Schleiermacherian subjectivity. Granted, charismatic subjectivity is, more often than not, married to a biblical fundamentalism: yet fundamentalism, unarticulated in terms of a proper theological foundation and structure, is highly vulnerable. We might say that charismatic expression runs the risk of emphasising the becomingness of God; but not in a Trinitarian sense. The becomingness is interpreted in terms of the present becomingness of the Spirit alone. The Son is more likely to be viewed in terms of his historic becomeness and atoning work on the cross of Calvary. Consequently, it is difficult to see how a properly balanced understanding of the relationship between the Son and the Spirit is to be preserved. Jesus may well be hailed as the sacrificial lamb who once made atonement for our sins; yet without a balanced understanding of the Son and the Spirit, it is perhaps too easy for the charismatic to focus on the present work of the Spirit without clear reference to the Son. That the Father has two hands—both the Son and the Spirit—can be both forgotten and lost sight of.

At the same time it is not difficult to see how reformed thought, when torn from a strong devotional base, might lead to a sterile rationalism. Where the Spirit is viewed principally in terms of his agency in aiding our understanding there is the parallel danger of failing to appreciate the present becomingness of God. A focus on the becomingness of God through the incarnation of the Son in the life of Christ can easily lead to an exclusively christocentric emphasis on God's becomeness in Christ. The danger within charismatic circles is an exclusive focus on the Spirit: the parallel danger in reformed circles is an exclusive focus on the Son. In either case, a properly Trinitarian perception of God can be lost sight of. In the final section of this paper, we would like to suggest a way forward, building on

the foundations of Irenaeus' Trinitarian understanding and salvific anthropology.

5. Rebuilding the Image of God in Christian Spirituality

We earlier noted that Irenaeus appeared to view neither God's economy in salvation nor man's development as the image of God in static terms. In describing the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of the Father, Irenaeus emphasised God's becomingness towards man. Likewise, in holding to a salvific anthropology, Irenaeus stressed the ongoing action of God in the life of man in bringing men and women through a process of becomingness into the similitude of the true image of God which is met with in Jesus Christ alone.

Irenaeus perceives the key to the Spirit's becomingness upon man to be in Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, that the Spirit's work in forming and completing the image of God is to be found. At the same time, Irenaeus allows us to perceive the mission of the Spirit towards man as parallel and complementary to that of the Son. Where the incarnate Son of God experiences the becomingness of the Spirit, man can receive the Spirit because of Jesus Christ's relationship to all men through his incarnation. As Jesus Christ has received the Spirit, so man can receive the Spirit because of Jesus Christ.

In what way, then, does Jesus Christ differ from other men? In order to distinguish between the uniqueness of Christ's experience of the Spirit and other human experience of the Spirit, we require to determine a further point of reference to man's communion with the Triune God as a corollary to the christocentric reference. Our suggestion would be that in order to reach towards an understanding of God's relationship to man, there has to be a point of reference taken to man himself: man, outwith the moment of revelation that is in and through the Incarnation. At the same time, we need to take full cognisance of the priority of the Incarnation in shaping our understanding of man as made in the image of God. Consequently, we require to develop a Trinitarian model which preserves a symmetrical balance between the becomingness of both the Son and the Spirit as met with in the Incarnation and life of Jesus Christ and the becomingness of the Spirit as met with in charismatic experience. This bifocal symmetry, focusing upon the becomingness of the Son expressed in the Incarnation and the becomingness of the Spirit realised with reference to ourselves, will allow us to distinguish our understanding of God's self-revelation from an exclusive christocentricity while also avoiding a Father-Spirit binitarianism—such as

found in G. W. H. Lampe's *God as Spirit*.⁴²—and the consequent danger of circumventing or minimising the significance of the Son's incarnation. Through maintaining a bifocal symmetry, focused on both the becomingness of the Son as met with in the Incarnation and the becomingness of the Spirit identified with reference to ourselves, we will find ourselves drawn further into the life of Jesus as we search for and seek out the implications of the Spirit's presence both in his life and in ours. Moreover, we thereby safeguard the distinctive identities of the Son and the Spirit in our understanding of the salvific economy which is from the Father, without subrogating the becomingness of either the Spirit or the Son through focusing on one in preference to the other.

By emphasising the bifocal symmetry of the Son and the Spirit in their mutual becomingness, we can hopefully present a perception of the distinctiveness of both the Son and the Spirit in their salvific economy. While maintaining the catholic tradition of focusing on that theophany which is in Christ Jesus, we would suggest that we might usefully recognise a further point of relationship in the salvific economy, not only identifying the Incarnation as the point of God's meeting with man; but also acknowledging man, outwith Christ, as met with in the Spirit: the same Spirit who calls and draws men to Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus Christ that we can see man as the true image of God, the full becomingness of the Son and the Spirit active in one man. It is to Jesus Christ that the same Spirit draws us to discover that our true identity can be found only in him.

Because his understanding of both God and man avoids the static categories which would be developed in later, post-Nicene thought, Irenaeus offers us a key as we seek to reappraise the manner in which we think of God's becomingness to man; and the nature of man as the image of God. Irenaeus reminds us that it is possible to form both christological and anthropological models without resorting to static categories. Not only in terms of our communion with and relation to Christ and the Spirit but also in terms of our own potential as those called to be in the image of God, his theological method invites us to review the dynamic nature of God's becomingness and its legitimacy as a valuable concept both in anthropology as well as in theology; and one that can be embraced without violating either biblical or evangelical precepts.

This approach may be of added value to evangelical thought in that, while affirming the universal significance of Jesus Christ for all men, it also stresses that our union with the Son incarnate needs to be sealed through the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit within our

⁴² G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford, 1977).

lives. Irenaeus opens the door to a fresh perspective which allows us to affirm the need for man to turn to Christ; but also to partake of the renewing power of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit seeks to transform us more fully into the image of God, an image which is found to be fully manifest and expressed in the person of Jesus Christ alone. A fresh appraisal of Irenaeus invites us to appreciate the dynamic reality of God's saving grace: the grace of the Triune God, met with in the becomingness of both the Son and the Spirit.

Abstract

This article looks at Irenaeus' theological anthropology, seeking to tease out the fragile yet popular belief that Irenaeus was responsible for laying the foundations of the distinction, which grew up in western theology, between the *image* and the *likeness* of God in man. In offering a fresh interpretation of Irenaeus' presentation of Christ's saving mission and in noting how Irenaeus preserves a strong and distinctive pneumatology, we set out to examine the interaction of christological and pneumatological motifs in Irenaeus' understanding of the atonement and theological anthropology. More specifically, we look at the importance of a particular theme in Irenaeus' thought: his perception of the Son and the Spirit as the 'two hands' of the Father.

The author of this article believes that a re-examination of Irenaeus' perception of man as the image of God can be of help in addressing problems, relating to the relative significance of the Son and the Spirit, which arise within the field of contemporary Christian spirituality.

The Recovery of Mission

Beyond the Pluralist Paradigms

Vinoth Ramachandra

A very lucid introduction to Asian theology, reflection on Western theology and current thinking, with a call to rediscover the missionary thrust at the heart of the Gospel.

'Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant . . . It really is superb and is much needed.

The inter-faith debate is so full of scholarly floss that this book is refreshing by its very learnedness.'

Chris Wright (Principal, All Nations College)

Vinoth Ramachandra gained his doctorate whilst studying Nuclear Physics at Imperial College, London. He also studied with Professor Stephen Williams.

ISBN 0-85364-739-9 / 282 pp / £14.99



THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

PO Box 300 Carlisle Cumbria CA3 0QS UK