

IRENÆUS OF LYONS:
ANTE-NICENE MISSIONARY?

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How can one know if a particular figure in Christian history is a missionary or simply a theologian? What would qualify one of these great men or women to be a missionary? Historians of missions have the monumental task of recording and describing missionary activity over at least two thousand years! The typical beginning point for studying missionary activity is in the book of Acts, though argument could be made that the Old Testament book of Jonah is descriptive of missionary activity. Much attention has been given to the New Testament as a resource for the missionary strategies and practices of the earliest Christians communities.¹ After the New Testament period, many missionary historians seem to skip several centuries, beginning anywhere from the 8th to the 18th centuries as the next significant periods of missionary history. One missiologist, claiming his task is to “present a capsule history of mission strategy before the rise of Protestant efforts”² begins his study in the 8th century with Boniface. A few exceptions would include Bosch and Latourette.³

At this point, it will become necessary to define what qualifies someone to be a “missionary.” In Matthew 28:19 Jesus calls Christians to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” and in Acts 1:8 Jesus says that believers will be his “witnesses” (ESV). So,

¹ See R. Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011) and E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

² R. P. Beaver, “The History of Mission Strategy” in *Perspectives: On the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed, ed. R. D. Winter and S. C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 228.

³ See D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 93-101 and *Witness to the World*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 190-213. Also K.S. Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, vol. 1 *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1937).

“missions is the task of every [Christian].”⁴ But, does that mean that every Christian is a missionary? Thomas Hale defines a missionary as “any Christian who crosses cultural boundaries to further the building of Christ’s church and the expansion of God’s kingdom.”⁵ He then states, “The title ‘missionary’ presupposes that one has crossed cultures for the express purpose of advancing God’s kingdom and has received God’s call to do so.”⁶ By this definition, every Christian is to be a witness, but not every Christian is a missionary. Hale’s definition will be the one used for this paper.

What evidence must be submitted to claim that any of the Ante-Nicene, Nicene, or Post-Nicene writers can also be described as missionaries? Certainly, the focus of the writings in this period were more theological in nature, focusing (especially after 325 A.D.) on articulating the nature of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and defending the faith from fatal heresies, but these works are written in the context of pastoring churches and securing the soteriological message that distinguished Christianity from every other religion. The early church fathers had a clear vision of the need for missionary work through the preaching of the gospel. According to the definition given above, a missionary must be involved in cross cultural advancement of God’s kingdom. So, to define one of the patristic fathers as a missionary, evidence must be provided which reveals that they are involved in cross cultural work. This author contends that this type of missionary activity can be found in the life of the Ante-Nicene writer Irenaeus of Lyon. By his life, self-description, and the content of his major works, Irenaeus of Lyon demonstrates his practice and methodology as a gospel-centered missionary.

⁴ T. Hale, *On Being a Missionary*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8

⁶ *Ibid.*

Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus of Lyons is considered by patristic scholars to be “the most important Christian controversialist and theologian between the apostles and the third-century genius of Origen”⁷ and “the most profound and influential theologian of the second century.”⁸ Because of his importance for theology, his influence as a missionary would be just as valuable to missiology. In order to define Irenaeus in these terms, this paper will look at Irenaeus’ life as it leads him to become a presbyter in Lyons, evaluate whether he can truly be considered a missionary, and, if these tasks are successful, define and assess the importance of his larger works (*Against Heresies* and *On the Apostolic Preaching*) in a missiological context, searching for methodology and strategy.

Towards Episcopal Life in Lyons

Very little biographical data is available about the life of Irenaeus. However, some information is available through his primary works and his work preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Church History*. Irenaeus recounts that “when I was a boy, I saw thee [Florinus, to whom the letter is written] in lower Asia with Polycarp...”⁹ He apparently grew up in Asia Minor, most likely Smyrna,¹⁰ where he had been influenced by the teaching of Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John.¹¹

⁷ R. M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

⁸ J. Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. J. Behr, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 1.

⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, in vol. 1 of *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 5.20.5.

¹⁰ Grant, 2.

¹¹ See Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, in vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 3.3.4

Since Irenaeus was not born and raised in Lyons, how is it that he became the bishop (or presbyter, the words are used interchangeably by Irenaeus¹²) in this important city in Gaul? The way he came to Lyons is uncertain, though it has been suggested that Irenaeus “may have gone from Asia Minor to Rome in pursuit of a career in rhetoric, and from there moved to Gaul.”¹³ This suggestion is made because it would seem from his writings that his native language was Greek, and “his style makes it clear that he received more than a rudimentary education.”¹⁴ One reason he may have gone to Lyons is that Polycarp had sent him.¹⁵ Also, R. M. Grant explains that “migration from Asia to Gaul was common in the second century.”¹⁶ Whether the reason was migration or a mandate from Polycarp, Irenaeus was ministering in Gaul by 177 A.D. as the presbyter of the church in Lyons when persecution began in that area. Eusebius of Caesarea records:

The same [Gallic] witnesses also recommended Irenaeus, who was already at that time a presbyter of the parish of Lyons, to the above-mentioned bishop of Rome [Elutherus], saying many favorable things in regard to him, as the following extract shows:

“We pray, father Elutherus, that you may rejoice in God in all things and always. We have requested our brother and comrade Irenaeus to carry this letter to you, and we ask you to hold him in esteem, as zealous for the covenant of Christ. For if we thought that

¹² See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, 5.20.7 where he refers to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna as “apostolic presbyter” and 5.24.14 where, in his letter to Victor, bishop of Rome, he refers to the “presbyters before Soter,” or Victor’s predecessors. These references were found in Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 2.

¹³ D. Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction*, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Grant, 5. Grant explains that “In the sixth century Gregory of Tours imagined that Polycarp sent Irenaeus on his mission to Lyons and that he converted practically the whole city to Christianity before becoming a martyr. There is no evidence for this, though it reflects that later enthusiasm for Irenaeus found in the churches of Gaul.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 4

office could confer righteousness upon any one, we should commend him among the first as a presbyter of the church, which is his position.”¹⁷

Is Irenaeus a Missionary?

Thus far, Irenaeus’ life clearly shows that he ministered as a presbyter in a region to which he was not native, but is that enough to claim that Irenaeus was a missionary? Grant believes he is a missionary: “Irenaeus was eager to take part in the worldwide mission of the church and become a missionary among the Celts of Gaul.”¹⁸

Perhaps an appropriate beginning point for determining whether or not Irenaeus was a missionary would be to ask whether or not he considered himself a missionary. As far as this author has found, Irenaeus does not refer to himself using the term “missionary.” However, the task of finding whether he considers himself a missionary will not be impossible. There are three references in *Against Heresies* which may help, each of which will be discussed in turn:

1.preface.3.

Thou wilt not expect from me, who am resident [διατριβοντων]¹⁹ among the Keltae, and am accustomed for the most part to use a barbarous dialect [βαρβαρον διαλεκτον], any display of rhetoric, which I have never learned, or any excellence of composition, which I have never practiced, or any beauty and persuasiveness of style, to which I make no pretensions.²⁰

In this passage, Irenaeus is asking for grace from his readers in Asia and Phrygia²¹ because his style may not have “excellence of composition” to which they may be accustomed. Mostly

¹⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, 5.4.1-2.

¹⁸ Grant, 4

¹⁹ Greek text as found in Irenaeus of Lyons, *Sanctus Irenaeus, Episcopi Lugdunensis et Martyr*, in *Patrologiae Graecae Tomus VII. Pars Prior*, ed. J. P. Migne, 1857, 444

²⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 1.preface.3.

²¹ Grant, 6.

likely, *Against Heresies* was originally written in Greek (which was Irenaeus' native language and the native language of the supposed recipients). However, the only complete extant copy is in the Latin, though there are sections in Greek that have survived.

Irenaeus describes himself as a “resident [διατριβοντων] among the Keltae” and “accustomed for the most part to use a barbarous dialect [βαρβαρον διαλεκτον].”²² The Greek word here translated “resident” is the participle form of the verb διατριβω which means “stay, remain with someone.”²³ So, literally, Irenaeus states that he is “one who remains among the Keltae [or Celtic people, the citizens of Gaul].” Irenaeus does not consider himself to merely be visiting or helping set in order the affairs of this church. He is living with them; taking up residence with them. He seems to have in mind here an idea of permanence to his ministry among these people.

He is also “accustomed...to use a βαρβαρον διαλεκτον.” The word βαρβαρος is defined as a foreign language or a non-Greek language and διαλεκτος is a reference to the “language of a nation or a region.”²⁴ Irenaeus, then, is claiming not only that he is living amongst the people of Gaul, but that he is also speaking their language, likely Gaelic. Since his native tongue was Greek, this evidence would indicate that Irenaeus had learned the language of the people of Gaul, and conversed, as well as preached to them in their own native language.

1.10.2.

For although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor do those in Gaul, nor those in

²³ W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. 1952), 189.

²⁴ Ibid. 184

the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world.²⁵

Can one be certain that that the people in Gaul spoke Gaelic? Or did they perhaps speak Latin, which also would have been considered a “barbarous” language to educated Greeks? From the writing of Irenaeus, this question cannot be answered fully, but there is indication that the people of Gaul did in fact speak Gaelic (or some other, non-universal language). In 1.10.2 Irenaeus is defending that even though the languages of the world (the Roman Empire, by his description) are dissimilar, the message of the gospel (“the tradition”) is the same throughout all the nations. In other words, all true Christians believe the same message, no matter what language they speak, therefore the Church is unified. After describing that the “languages of the world are dissimilar...,” he describes the nations in which Churches have been planted. In context, it would make sense that he mentions nations whose languages are dissimilar. Among the nations he lists are Germany, Spain, Gaul, the East, Egypt, and Libya. Given the context, then, one can gather that Irenaeus, who is living in and speaking the language of Gaul, is saying that Gaul has its own “dissimilar” language.

3.4.2.

Those who, in the absence of written documents, have believed this faith, are barbarians, so far as regards our language.... If any one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their ears, and flee as far off as possible, not enduring even to listen to the blasphemous address. Thus, by means of that ancient tradition of the apostles, they do not suffer their mind to conceive anything of the [doctrines suggested by the] portentous language of these teachers, among whom neither church nor doctrine has ever been established. (The bracketed section in this excerpt is found in the translation.)²⁶

One final excerpt that must be examined in relation to discovering if there is a missionary nature to Irenaeus’ activity in Lyons is section 3.4.2 of *Against Heresies*. In this paragraph, Irenaeus

²⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.2

²⁶ Ibid. 3.4.2.

once again appeals to the unity of the doctrine of the Church worldwide. The heretics will be obvious because they will be in contradiction with the Gospel. He claims that the believers in the many nations who have accepted Christ without “written documents” are only barbarians in regards to their language (the translation says “our language” which may show a deep level of identification with these barbarians). Since the gospel is so preserved, even amongst those without the written Scripture, Irenaeus claims that “if one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their ears, and flee as far as possible, not enduring even to listen to the blasphemous address.”²⁷ This could be the mere hypothesis of an optimistic and idealistic theologian, but there is likely more to this statement, which may reveal a piece of Irenaeus’ own missionary strategy.

In these three sections, Irenaeus describes himself as a person who lives among the Celts and who speaks their language. In sections 1.10.2 and 3.4.2, he shows a world-vision of the gospel that includes all languages and nations. R. D. Winter and B. A. Koch describe several different levels of evangelism, ranging from E0 to E3, wherein E0 is evangelism done within a person’s home church and E3 is evangelism done in a culture very different from the evangelist.²⁸ Barriers to evangelism that would raise the levels would include language, ethnicity, nationality, etc. Certainly, an evangelist who permanently leaves and preaches the gospel in an E3 context would be considered a missionary! From the evidence available about the life of Irenaeus, by his own self-description, and by what a missionary is by definition, Irenaeus should, indeed, be considered a missionary.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ R. D. Winter and B. A. Koch, “Finishing the Task,” in *Perspectives: On the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph. D. Winter and Steven. C. Hawthorne, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 532.

Missionary Strategy in Irenaeus' Major Works

Now that Irenaeus can appropriately be claimed as a missionary, is it possible to decipher any specific missionary strategy? Not only will identifying missionary strategy within Irenaeus' works help us better understand him as a missionary, but identifying his missionary strategy will also help in developing a better understanding of how mission work was accomplished in the western parts of the Roman empire during the late second century. First, in *Against Heresies* observations can be made about his preparation for ministry, including language studies and relocation, and observations can also be made about the role apologetics played in his defending the Christians from dangerous heresies. Secondly, in his work *On the Apostolic Preaching*, insight is given into his articulation of the gospel for both evangelism and post-evangelism discipleship.

What strategy can be observed in *Against Heresies*? First, he prepared for his ministry with language studies and relocation²⁹. He did not merely write letters to the people of Gaul, hoping that they would be discipled merely by the pen. Instead, he learned the heart language of the Gallic people and even moved permanently from his home. Missionaries today pursue the same preparations for the mission field.

However, preparation is not the only aspect of strategy that can be seen in *Against Heresies*. The work as a whole is a defense against Valentinian Gnosticism, Marcionism, and other popular heresies endangering the Church.³⁰ At 3.4.2, Irenaeus claims that the gospel has remained pure throughout the nations, even with language differences or even absence of written

²⁹ See above discussion about *Against Heresies* 1.preface.3.

³⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 1.1.1-1.31.4 detail the beliefs of the heretics, while books two through five describe how Scripture does not teach those doctrines and how Christ is superior to those false doctrines.

documents. Indeed, Irenaeus is qualified to make such a statement. He has traveled across the known world to reach and minister in Gaul. He describes in 1.10.2 some of the nations he has in mind when he speaks of the cross-cultural unity of the gospel: Germany, Spain, Gaul, Egypt, Libya, the East, etc. He grew up in the East (Asia Minor) and served in Gaul, which was located near Germany and Spain. It is possible that his musings on the unity of the Church was not mere armchair idealism, but was in fact spoken from ministerial experience.

Irenaeus suggests that “if any one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their ears, and flee as far off as possible, not enduring even to listen to the blasphemous address.”³¹ If his knowledge of the cross-cultural unity of the gospel is borne out of experience, this statement, as well, may be borne out of his ministerial experience. He was not making an optimistic, idealistic assertion, but was making a suggestion to his readers based on the successes of his own ministry. As a presbyter, he likely addressed these heresies to his parishioners so that they would not fall prey to their false teachings. He addressed them in their own language, explaining what Valentinus and Marcion were teaching. Showing the Gallic people the errors of Gnosticism, the people rejected their teachings. If this assumption can be made, the writing of *Against Heresies* was Irenaeus’ attempt to pass along this successful strategy and argumentation to other churches that were facing more difficulty in defending against Gnosticism. Defending this assertion in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, though it seems to be a plausible suggestion.

Missionary method and strategy is also visible in Irenaeus’ exegetical work, *On the Apostolic Preaching*. He declares in the preface of the work that he is writing to a man named Marcianus in order “to demonstrate, by means of a summary, the preaching of the truth, so as to

³¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3.4.2.

strengthen your faith.”³² Already, this work is seen as a way to disciple an individual. It is also likely, then, that this work would give insight into how Irenaeus himself would disciple the believers in his own church. He gives Marcianus an exhortation to “keep the rule of faith.”³³ In an endnote, Behr explains that this expression, for Irenaeus, “designat[es] the model of faith which is received in baptism...and which epitomizes the ‘order and connection of the Scriptures.’”³⁴ The rest of the work is an explanation of the gospel³⁵ message as given by the apostles (which he would likely have learned from Polycarp). *On the Apostolic Preaching*, then is not just discipleship for Marcianus, but an explanation of the Christian message as a whole. From a missionary perspective, then, this work gives insight into what evangelism and post-evangelism would have looked like for Irenaeus.

So, where does the “rule of faith” begin for Irenaeus? In other words, what is the basic message of Christianity? Irenaeus says:

And this is the order of our faith, the foundation of [the] edifice and the support of [our] conduct: God, the Father, uncreated, uncontainable, invisible, one God, the Creator of all: this is the first article of our faith. And the second article: the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was revealed by the prophets according to the character of their prophecy and according to the nature of the economies of the Father, by whom all things were made, and who, in the last times, to recapitulate all things, became a man amongst men, visible and palpable, in order to abolish death, to demonstrate life, and to effect communion between God and man. And the third article: the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs learnt the things of God and the

³² Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ Behr, 102

³⁵ Upon hearing the word “gospel,” one should not assume New Testament texts. For the writers of this period, as Behr explains, “the Gospel is not fixed in a particular text, but as we will see, in an interpretative relationship to the Scripture – the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets.” The Ante-Nicene writers saw the “gospel” as a proclamation and interpretation of the Scriptures (Old Testament) that had been handed down by the apostles. See J. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

righteous were led in the path of righteousness, and who, in the last times, was poured out in a new fashion upon the human race renewing man, throughout the world, to God.³⁶

The basic gospel message, for Irenaeus is the Trinity! Irenaeus brings forward this topic very early in his letter. Likely, this would have been the point at which Irenaeus would begin post-evangelism or even evangelism in his own ministry. According to Christian theology, at least as far as Irenaeus and many other church fathers are concerned, without the Trinity there is no salvation. A fundamental misunderstanding of who God is will inevitably lead to heresy and a false message of salvation.

After affirming that the basic message of Christianity is the work of the triune God, Irenaeus explains in detail what that work is, using Scripture (our Old Testament). Beginning in the Pentateuch, he explains creation, the pre-fall state of man, and the results of the fall. Then, Irenaeus shows how God prepared the way for salvation and enacted that salvation through the incarnation of the Son of God, His virgin birth, death on the cross, and resurrection as a fulfillment of Scripture. The second section of *On the Apostolic Preaching* deals entirely with a proper understanding of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, and as the One revealed by the Prophets in the Scripture. Expositing through texts in Isaiah, the Psalms and other prophetic texts, he explains the human birth, miracles, death, and glorification of Jesus, showing how He is the foundation of salvation.

For Irenaeus, the message of the Christianity was based on an apostolic understanding of the Scriptures. Discipleship, then, is explaining this proper interpretation of the Scriptures, thereby passing along these teachings. Interestingly, Irenaeus' method of working through the whole of Scripture is not unlike the narrative or story evangelism being found useful internationally to today's missionaries.

³⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 6.

Conclusion

Irenaeus brings useful insight into the life and work of a missionary in the late second century. As has been shown, it is entirely appropriate that he be considered a part of missions' history. Even though he does not specifically declare himself to be a missionary, he certainly can be defined in those terms. Since he can be considered a missionary, his works can also be viewed as the writings of a missionary, wherein discernible missionary strategy is revealed. He prepared for the field with language training and relocation, defended his flock from dangerous heresy, and taught the Scriptures, explaining how they teach about Christ, who is the author and only means of salvation.

What can today's missionaries learn from Irenaeus? Missionaries can be encouraged that they are not the only Christians who have struggled through learning another language and leaving their home to evangelize the nations. In fact, Christians for nearly two thousand years have followed this same practice. Concerning strategy, a missionary can learn that Irenaeus did not allow his people to fall prey to false teaching. Instead, he sought to correct error, especially when it threatened salvation. Irenaeus did not take a "hands-off" approach when it came to heresy and error. He wanted to protect the Church and the message of the gospel, and he took on the long and grueling task of defending it (*Against Heresies* is made of five long books). He was also willing to share what he had learned with others, evidenced by the fact that he even wrote *Against Heresies*. A missionary should not be afraid to share the insights given to him from the Lord.

Missionaries can also learn from Irenaeus an apostolic method of evangelism and discipleship. Missionaries should not shy away from what seem to be difficult doctrines. Surely, a missionary should have adequate training in and knowledge of the Scriptures, so a missionary

will be able to defend its doctrines and teachings. For Irenaeus, the Trinity is the basic doctrine of Christianity. Without the Trinity there is no salvation. Without the Trinity, there is belief in a false god who can offer no salvation. The Trinity is essential to Irenaeus' message.

Understandably, the Trinity is a difficult doctrine, one which confounds even the wisest of people, but that does not mean the topic should be avoided, especially in a missionary context. Other cultures may not know the difference between their gods and the God of the Scripture. Clarity is essential if the gospel is to be proclaimed accurately. Dealing with the Trinity on the front end of evangelism and discipleship can help believers know the God whom they serve, rather than shelving the doctrine for advanced discipleship. Though the disciplines of the Christian life (prayer, moral living, etc.) are important, they do not save. The Trinitarian God of the Scriptures does save!

Missionaries can learn the value of using the whole of Scripture in evangelism and discipleship. Many believers, even today, have difficulty in understanding the Old Testament and what it has to do with Jesus. Unfortunately, a Marcionite evil god is often understood upon reading the Old Testament. If believers are shown, as Irenaeus models, that all of Scripture (not just the New Testament) is about Jesus, a holistic understanding of God will lead to deeper and stronger faith. Christians are assaulted most about their faith in and belief in a God that could allow and even command the type of things seen in the Old Testament. Using all of Scripture in evangelism and post-evangelism will help develop strong believers, and help toward preventing believers from falling away.

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