

## ***The Significance of Tertullian & St. Irenaeus on the early Church.***

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Tertullian of Carthage and St. Irenaeus of Lyons were two towering figures of the second century Church. Irenaeus, Church Tradition states, died a martyr's death. Tertullian, on the other hand, despite his great contributions, died outside the Church. As J.D. Kelley writes, "For both of them Christ Himself was the ultimate source of Christian doctrine, being the truth, the Word by Whom the Father had been revealed; but He had entrusted this revelation to His apostles, and it was through them alone that knowledge of it could be obtained" (Early Christian Doctrines, 36). We will focus on a couple of the key doctrines which these two great Christian writers helped the Church to understand better.

### **A. The Christology of Tertullian of Carthage:**

Tertullian wrote between 160 and 220 AD and was the "first ecclesiastical writer of prominence to use Latin" (A History of the Christian Church, Walker, 64). Tertullian represents an early stage of development in the Christological thought and doctrine of the Church. He was an exponent of the Spirit-Christology common in his time. This Christology identified the "spirit" mentioned in Luke's Gospel (1:35) which came down upon the Virgin, with the Son of God rather than the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Thus writers like Tertullian considered that Christ, "pre-existing as spirit or Word, was to incarnate Himself in Mary's womb" (Kelley, 144). Tertullian helped the western Church to form a more mature understanding of Christology before that of the Eastern Church. In fact, Kelley writes of Tertullian's Christology, "the pattern he shaped was to prove of lasting significance" (149).

Central to his Christology was Tertullian's understanding of two natures in Christ -which he preferred to refer to as "two substances." Tertullian affirmed the pre-existence of the Word, alongside the Father, from all eternity. He was a separate person, but one in essence with Father. The Son of God became man because -only as man- could He accomplish man's salvation. Tertullian taught, while not needing a human father, it was necessary for the Son of God to derive His humanity from a human source. Thus, following his Spirit-Christology, Tertullian taught that the Son of God, as a divine spirit, entered the Virgin Mary in order to become man. Tertullian insisted that this birth was real in contrast to the position of the heretical Gnostic Valentinus who taught that Christ's birth was virtual. Tertullian (contrary to the position of the Church Fathers) went so far on this point as to claim that Mary lost her virginity as a result her birth-giving (Kelley, 150).

Importantly, Tertullian also insisted that every facet of Christ's humanity was genuine and complete, including having a human soul as well as a body. These were necessary prerequisites of man's redemption, including enduring human passions like hunger, thirst, tears, birth and death. Yet the Word was always the overriding principle in His make-up. As Kelley writes, "Tertullian leaves no doubt that it was He, the divine spirit, Who 'took the man to Himself,' and 'mingled God and man in Himself'" (151).

Tertullian stands out as possibly being the first theologian to wrestle with the issue of the inter-relations between Christ's human and divine natures. Tertullian affirmed that the Word "is

in flesh” (cf. Jn 1:14). In his explanation of the Incarnation, Tertullian rejected the notion that God could be transformed (or metamorphosed) into flesh. Such a thought to Tertullian, denied the immutability (or unchangeableness) of God, and thus suggested a monstrous or third kind of existence of a God-man hybrid. He rather affirmed that in Christ, spirit and man are joined together in one Person. As Kelley writes, “Anticipating later definitions, Tertullian can say that each of them preserves its peculiar qualities and activity, the spirit performing the miracles and the humanity enduring the sufferings” (151). While maintaining this careful distinction between the properties of each substance, Tertullian simultaneously was not apprehensive about using expressions like, “‘God allows Himself to be born,’ ‘the sufferings of God,’ and ‘God was truly crucified,’ -language which foreshadowed the interchange of characteristics (*communicatio idiomatic*)” which would become a hallmark of orthodox Christology (Kelley, 152). Thus Tertullian greatly contributed to the development of the Christology of the Church.

## **B. The Ecclesiology of Irenaeus of Lyons:**

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing around the year 180 AD, gathered together the main ideas about the Church circulating in the second-century in order to especially combat Gnosticism. For Irenaeus the Church is the new Israel and is “endowed with mysterious powers which it exercises without charge, and bestows graces which cannot be counted” (Kelley, 192). The Church is the unique abode of the Holy Spirit, which is given to her for the communion of Christ with God’s people. Irenaeus’ sublime ecclesiology is expressed in his own words, “Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace...” (Haer. 5, 32). Therefore to be separated from the Church is to not participate in the Spirit, nor nurse at their mother’s breasts and to be denied “the bright fountain issuing from Christ’s body” (Kelley, 192).

For Irenaeus, it is the Church which preserves all truth. She is able to do this because she is the sole repository of the apostolic writings, apostolic oral teachings (or tradition), and the apostolic faith. In turn, even though the Church is scattered throughout the world, she can be said to be one because she proclaims only one faith. Irenaeus gives to this one faith the title, “the canon of the truth.” By this he means the measuring stick or rule of doctrine handed down in the Church which is everywhere the same faith.

Another important part of Irenaeus’ ecclesiology is his argument of authenticity based on the unbroken succession of bishops maintained by the great sees going all the way back to the apostles themselves. In order to give a demonstration of his theory, Irenaeus cites the example of the Roman Church. This passage was later to be used by the Church of Rome to support its claims of supremacy. But Irenaeus’ reason for using the Roman Church lay rather in its size, its antiquity, its foundation by Sts. Peter and Paul, and its universal recognition. All of this made the particular church of Rome an excellent example to demonstrate his argument about the universal Church. Although the Roman Church construed from this passage that Irenaeus taught because of Rome’s greater authority, all other Churches must agree with her, this is not necessarily what he meant. It is more likely that he simply meant that the Roman Church, as Kelley writes, “supplies and ideal illustration because, ‘in view of its preeminent authority’ based on its foundation by Peter and Paul, its antiquity, and so on, every Church in which the apostolic tradition has been preserved must as a matter of course agree with it” (193).

In the case of the *Quatrodecimans* Irenaeus' view of the role of the Roman Church is demonstrated. Eusebius of Caesarea explains, "[Pope] Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia [Minor], with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate. But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant sharply rebuking Victor. [Irenaeus] fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom..." (*Church History* 5:23:1-24:11). Thus even though the Pope of Rome excommunicated an entire church, this was not final. When the majority of bishops, represented by Irenaeus, disagreed with the Pope about this and refused to accept his decision, Pope Victor conformed his decision to be in harmony with the judgment of all.

### **C. Conclusion:**

Thus Tertullian led the Church to declare and defend the real humanity and true divinity of Christ in ways that safeguarded the integrity of both of these natures as well as the integrity of his single personality. St. Irenaeus' ecclesiology can be said to have centered on two key points in order to differentiate the true Church from the Gnostics. The true Church, first of all, taught only one doctrine, even though she is spread throughout the world. Secondly, the true Church can demonstrate a succession of her bishops which extends all the way back to the apostles. Both Tertullian and Irenaeus, through their writings, contributed an inestimable service to the Church in helping her to develop, understand and pass on true apostolic doctrine.