

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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March 31, 2006
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The Da Vinci Code

Part Four

“Spotting an Imposter”

Kevin T. Bauder

Irenaeus of Lyons was too young to have known the apostles. He was born about twenty years after the death of the last apostle, John. Though he never met John, he was trained in Christianity by Papias and Polycarp, two men who had themselves been taught by the apostle. Irenaeus became a Christian at a very early age, eventually assuming the responsibility of pastor to the church in Lyons. The years of his ministry (mid-to-late Second Century) are the very years when Gnosticism was at its strongest.

Gnostics claimed to possess a secret tradition handed down orally from Christ through some of the apostles. Some Gnostics also claimed to have secret books written by people such as Thomas, Philip, and Mary Magdalene. They even had a gospel that they claimed had been written by Peter. These books were supposed to present the details of Gnostic belief.

Modern historians sometimes see Gnosticism and orthodoxy as parallel developments among the early followers of Jesus. That is not how the apostles Paul and John viewed

Gnosticism, however. Both men claimed that they were perpetuating the authentic teaching of Jesus, and both wrote to expose Gnosticism as an imposter.

Therefore, Christians of Irenaeus' generation were confronted with two systems. Each tried to support its teachings with a claim that it could trace its traditions and scriptures through the apostles to Christ. Faced with these two systems, pastors like Irenaeus had to engage in debate at two levels. First, they had to debate the legitimacy of Gnostic ideas in general. More fundamentally, however, they were forced to debate the question of authority: which set of writings and traditions really represented the authentic teachings of Christ?

Irenaeus became the most important thinker to wrestle with this question. He knew that he could not simply assert that orthodoxy was true: who would take *his* word for it? Rather, he had to find a way to answer the Gnostics' claim that they possessed a secret tradition and even secret scriptures. He developed his answer in five books that he entitled *Against Heresies*.

Irenaeus knew that he could never prove conclusively that Thomas, Philip, Mary Magdalene, and Peter did not write the gospels that were attributed to them. Rather than beginning with what he could not prove, however, Irenaeus began with facts that were known and accepted by all parties. Everyone agreed that the apostles had founded certain churches. Such congregations as those at Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome were examples of apostolic churches. Irenaeus suggested that the succession of pastors in each of these churches was well known. Beginning with the apostles, each church could trace the names of its pastors in order. The original pastor of each church had been trained by one or more apostles, and then each pastor had trained his successor. Therefore, each of the apostolic churches had an acknowledged tradition of pastors teaching pastors that reached all the way back to the apostles.

Irenaeus then noted that the teaching of all the apostolic churches and their pastors was virtually identical. What was taught in Rome was taught in Corinth and Antioch, and vice versa. This teaching was so uniform that it could even be summarized in a short statement known as the "rule of faith." This uniformity could not be the result of collusion between the churches, for they were too widely separated for their pastors to have conspired. In fact, the churches were not even founded by the same apostles; but wherever apostolic churches were found, they taught the same things.

For Irenaeus, only one solution was possible. All the apostles must have believed the same things. They all must have taught the same things to the pastors of the apostolic churches. Those pastors must all have perpetuated the same apostolic teachings through the years. In the place of a secret Gnostic tradition, Irenaeus boldly presented a very public and obvious tradition among the pastors. The only explanation for this tradition was that it had to stem from the apostles themselves.

This public tradition also provided the key to determining which writings were genuinely apostolic. If a putatively apostolic writing contradicted the teachings of the apostolic churches, it clearly had to be a forgery. Only those writings that reflected the genuine teaching of the apostles as preserved by their churches should be recognized as authoritative Scripture. (Incidentally, this is much the same approach that Paul took in 2 Thessalonians—if a writing contradicted his known teaching, it was to be rejected, even if it had his name on it!)

Using this method, Irenaeus argued that apostolic churches had already recognized certain writings as genuine. These authentic writings included nearly all of the books that make up the

present New Testament, including all four of the canonical gospels. Irenaeus was very specific that only these four gospels in their entirety must be accepted as genuine narratives of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The reasoning of Irenaeus was devastating. Against the Gnostic claim of a secret tradition he advanced a public tradition that could clearly be traced to the apostles. Against the Gnostic claim of secret apostolic writings he advanced writings that had been received and held publicly by the apostolic churches themselves. Irenaeus exposed Gnosticism as an imposter pretending to be Christianity. While the Gnostics continued to reassert their claims, they never really recovered from his critique. Gnosticism continued to linger for some time, but after Irenaeus it became a dwindling philosophy. It has long since been relegated to the museum of curious theological antiquities.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown makes specific claims about differences that existed among the early followers of Jesus. Some of the Gnostics come closest to fitting his description, but even they do not fit it very well. Gnostics were ethical dualists, teaching that all matter is evil, including the human body. Most Gnostics were ascetics who took a very self-denying posture toward bodily pleasures such as eating, drinking, and sex. Virtually all Gnostics were misogynists who relegated women to a very inferior station. The Gnostic scriptures were ill-supported inventions that could not stand up in the face of careful evaluation. Brown suggests that Christian orthodoxy was a late invention, but Christian apostles such as Paul and John were opposing Gnosticism throughout the latter half of the First Century. Brown argues that the New Testament was invented by the Council of Nicea in the Fourth Century, but according to Irenaeus, the apostolic churches already knew and accepted almost all of the New Testament writings (including all four gospels) before the middle of the Second Century.

True, multiple versions of Christianity did exist during the First Century. But these divergences bear very little resemblance to the theories in *The Da Vinci Code*. A good bit of what Dan Brown writes is pure fabrication. In spite of his claims, it is definitely not true that "all descriptions of ... documents, and secret rituals in the novel are accurate." This is not a matter of opinion or speculation. It is a simple matter of evidence. ✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Easter-day

Richard Crashaw (c. 1612-1649)

Rise, Heir of Eternity,
From Thy Virgin Tomb :
Rise mighty man of wonders, and Thy world with Thee
Thy Tombe, the universal East,
Nature's new womb,
Thy Tombe, fair Immortalities perfumed Nest.

Of all the Glories Make Noon gay
This is the Morn.
This rock buds forth the fountain of the streams of Day.
In joys white Annals live this hour,
When life was born,
No cloud-sowl on his radiant lids no tempest-lower.

Life, by this light's Nativity
All creatures have.
Death only by this Days just Doom is forc't to Die ;
Nor is Death forc't ; for may he lie
Thron'd in Thy Grave ;
Death will on this condition be content to Die. ✕

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