

From Issue 3/October 1, 2007

Irenaeus on the Gospel

We are sometimes asked “are you sure that the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I’ve never heard it before!” In light of this objection it is helpful to read the following quotes from Irenaeus of Lyon, who lived in the 2nd Century. His book, *Against All Heresies*, was his effort to refute false versions of the gospel that circulated in his day. In doing so he gave eloquent expression to the correct gospel.

He spoke of humanity’s adoption in Christ, and used the word “recapitulation” to describe Jesus’ work. By using this word he says that Jesus’ is a new “head” or “source” of human existence. Because of Jesus the definition of a human being is not “a sinful descendant of Adam.” Jesus is the new source of humanity and therefore a human being is “an adopted child of the Father in the Son, Jesus.”

Notice, also, in the final passage, that he describes the atonement as the destruction of sin, not in legal terms of “satisfying God’s wrath.” He is describing the cross as a great victory of Christ, in and with humanity, over sin and death.

To aid your reading of the following quotes we have italicized key words and phrases that show Irenaeus’ understanding of the adopted life. Take note that when he uses the word “man” he means “humanity,” not just male persons.

Here, then, are three quotes from Irenaeus:

As it has been clearly demonstrated that the Word, who existed in the beginning with God, by whom all things were made, *who was also always present with mankind*, was in these last days, according to the time appointed by the Father, united to His own workmanship, inasmuch as He became a man liable to suffering, [it follows] that every objection is set aside of those who say, “If our Lord was born at that time, Christ had therefore no previous existence.” For I have that the Son of God did not then begin to exist, being with the Father from the beginning; but when He became incarnate, and was made man, *He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam—namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might recover in Christ Jesus.*

~ Against All Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 18, Paragraph 1

Therefore, as I have already said, *He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God.* For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And again: *unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely. And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility.* For it was incumbent upon the Mediator between God and men, by His relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord, and present man to God, while He revealed God to man. For, *in what way could we be partaken of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself, unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us? Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God.*

The Adopted Life ©2007

www.theadoptedlife.org

~Against All Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 18, paragraph 7

For it behooved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, *so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death*. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: “God, true are His works.” But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: *God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.*

~ Against All Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 18, paragraph 7