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The idea of Revelation in the early Church—2

by Leonard DeMoor

After studying the idea of revelation in the apologists and other second-century Christian writers, Dr. De Moor turns to examine its presentation in Irenaeus.

OUR survey thus far has given us rather a general view of the primitive church's doctrine of revelation. To make room for some more detail we shall devote the rest of this article to a consideration of the view of revelation of one of the early apologists who, for reasons we shall give, may be taken as eminently representative of the view of the early church on Revelation when it definitely came to self-consciousness. We refer to Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons from A.D. 177 to perhaps somewhere in the 90's of the same century.¹

It was when the Christian Church stood face to face with Gnosticism, that so-called Christian eclectic philosophy-theology, that it rose to the first clear conscious expression of its distinctive faith. Irenaeus, because of the leading part he took in all the ecclesiastical transactions and controversies of his day, surrounded as he was by the pervasive influence of the rising Gnosticism was forced to deal with it as his most practical problem as a teacher of the gospel, and when he did address himself to vindicate the Christian faith against this opposing worldly-wisdom, he stepped forth as one of the clearest spokesmen of that self-consciousness of the church. That is mainly the reason why he deserves a special hearing. It was not that the earlier apologists of the middle of the second century, namely Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus and Athenagoras, did not know what was distinctively Christian. But because in their day the Gnostic system was still in the formative stage, there was with them a greater leniency exhibited to what belonged to the heathen philosophic culture, and even a desire to show that on its own account the Greek tradition showed positive anticipations of what came to clearest light in Scripture. But when the growing strength of Gnosticism threatened the distinctive truth of Christianity, as came to be the case in Irenaeus' day, we would expect to find in his polemic against heresies a purer confession of the Christian Church's faith.

¹ For the extreme difficulty of the chronology of Irenaeus' life see article on Irenaeus by Lipsius, Richard R., where full bibliography is also given on the subject ("Irenaeus", *Dictionary of Christian Biography*).

In giving an exposition of his view of revelation as we have sought to learn it from his great work *Against Heresies*, we believe that all Irenaeus has said on the subject may be conveniently discussed under (1) the need of revelation; (2) the divine initiative in the imparting of revelation; (3) the sources and nature of our knowledge of God; (4) the repository of true knowledge of God; (5) the progressiveness of revelation; and (6) the end of revelation.

1. Men need revelation because of their lack of true knowledge. The content of revelation, therefore, whatever else it may be, is true knowledge. Irenaeus denies to the Gnostics that which their very name boasted of possessing, γνῶσις. For, as for the Gnostics, "I will merely say, in opposition to these men—Did all those who have been mentioned with whom you have been proved to coincide in expression, *know*, or not *know* the truth? If they knew it, then the descent of the Saviour into the world was superfluous. For why (in that case) did he descend? Was it that he might bring that *truth* which was (already) known, to the knowledge of those who knew it?"² Except as bringing true knowledge, therefore, which the race does not possess, the incarnation is, in Irenaeus' opinion, useless and beside the point.

The root error in Gnosticism, which our apologist seeks to lay bare in it, is pride or self-conceit, in arrogating a greater knowledge to itself than is allowable. The Gnostic fashions his own conception of God and the innumerable aeons which emanate from him, which are made to give rise, ultimately, to all worlds. All this Irenaeus declares to be a phantasy, a fond creation of the mind, in conceiving which the Gnostic places himself above God himself who is the Creator, and whose works we can know only as we are taught "from the Word", since we ourselves are created beings. The limitation of man's mind as a created being, therefore, is urged as the ground for the need of a self-disclosure on the part of God to man.

If, however, any one does not discover the cause of all those things which become objects of investigation, let him reflect that man is infinitely inferior to God; that he has received grace only in part, and is not yet equal or similar to his Maker; and, moreover, that he cannot have experience or form a conception of all things like God; but in the same proportion as he who was formed but today, and received the beginning of his creation, is inferior to *Him who is uncreated*,³ and who is always the same, in that proportion is he, as respects knowledge and the faculty of investigating the causes of all things inferior to Him who made him. For thou, O man, art not an uncreated being, nor didst thou always co-exist with God, as did

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ii. 14.7 (in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by A. Roberts and James Donaldson, from which subsequent quotations will be made).

³ Lipsius (see under note 1) says that Irenaeus is "the first doctor of the Church who maintained with the utmost distinctness the eternal coexistence of the Son with the Father" (p. 276).

His own *Word*; but now, through His pre-eminent goodness, receiving the beginning of thy creation, thou dost gradually learn from the *Word* the dispensations of God who made thee.⁴

That God can be known only through God, is Irenaeus' reason for shutting man, a created being, outside the possibility, by means of his *derived* powers, to know God, who, though implied in creation, yet also stands independently outside of it.

For thy Former cannot be contained within limits; nor, although thou shouldst measure all this (universe), and pass through all his creation, and consider it in all its depths, and height and length, wouldst thou be able to conceive of any other above the Father Himself. For thou wilt not be able to think Him fully out, but, indulging in trains of reflection opposed to thy nature, thou wilt prove thyself foolish; and if thou persevere in such a course, thou wilt fall into utter madness, whilst thou deemest thyself loftier and greater than thy Creator, and imaginest that thou canst penetrate beyond His dominions.⁵

The *nature* of the revelation we most need is spiritual, and as such we see an added reason why that revelation, made known in Scripture, could not be given to us through human conceptual thought or experience, for "since many even of those things which lie at our very feet (I mean such as belong to this world, which we handle, and see, and are in combat with) transcend our knowledge, so that even these we must leave to God"⁶ how much more so is not this the case with regard to spiritual and heavenly things which concern our salvation, which unless God teaches us, we cannot learn by ourselves. Wherefore, in the incarnation of Christ, the Son of God, which is the heart of God's revelation to man, it is declared once for all that something more was needed to bring men to a true knowledge of God than an extraordinary illumination of his mind. For "the advent of the Lord will appear superfluous and useless, if He did indeed come intending to tolerate and to preserve each man's *idea* regarding God rooted in him from of old".⁷ Whatever else the incarnation may have meant to Irenaeus, and to the early Church, it at least did mean that in Christ was brought to man the *true knowledge of God*.

But in a passage which we feel to be superbly beautiful our author epitomizes quite adequately his teaching about our need of revelation, and what is implied therein. He conceives that since the gospel, as God's revelation, is essentially a medicine to those who are sick, it would have been the most foolish thing for God to prescribe the medicine according to the whims of the patients. The sickness being due to ignorance, the effectual medicine which alone can drive out the malady is knowledge. "Wherefore, the Lord used to impart

⁴ Irenaeus ii. 25.3.

⁵ Irenaeus ii. 25.4.

⁶ Irenaeus ii. 28.2.

⁷ Irenaeus ii. 12. 6.

knowledge to his disciples, by which also it was His practice to heal those who were suffering, and to keep back sinners from sin. He therefore did not address them in accordance with their pristine notions, nor did he reply to them in harmony with the opinion of his questioners, but according to the doctrine leading to salvation, without hypocrisy or respect of person".⁸ Nothing could be clearer than that man's lack, man's need, man's deficiency which made the giving of revelation urgent, was his inherent ignorance, by virtue of his existence as a creature.

2. But if man's limitation calls for help in his most desperate plight, he does not remain unanswered. And this is the second noteworthy thought we wish to emphasize with reference to his view of revelation: the *divine initiative* in imparting revelation. Conceiving God's revelation, therefore, as a plan of salvation which, through his Word He has worked out in the course of history, He

chose the patriarchs for the sake of their salvation; and *prepared* a people beforehand, *teaching* the headstrong to follow God; and *raised up* prophets upon earth, *accustoming* man to bear His Spirit (within him) and to hold communion with God; He Himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but *granting* communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and *sketching out*, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those that pleased Him. And He did Himself *furnish* guidance to those who beheld Him not in Egypt, while to those who became unruly in the desert He *promulgated* a law very suitable (to their condition). Then, on the people who entered into the good land He *bestowed* a noble inheritance, and He *killed* the fatted calf for those converted to the Father, and *presented* them with the finest robe. Thus, in a variety of ways, He *adjusted* the human race to an agreement with salvation.⁹

This passage, as is readily observed, fairly sings the deeds of God: it is God the active One whom we see here, He who seeks man out, He who deliberately acts upon man, even to the degree of adjusting the human race to agreement with salvation which God freely offers, but which stubborn human nature reluctantly and hesitatingly accepts. We could hardly find a more emphatic passage to drive home the realization that for Irenaeus, at any rate, revelation was not something which issued out of the mind and consciousness of man, but, in his own words, is a benefit bestowed,—thrust upon us; a benefit we need in order to live the fullest life, but which, except for God's overbearing goodness to us, we would never have gained.

3. In turning to the third topic under which we wish to expound Irenaeus' idea of revelation, namely, the *sources and nature* of our knowledge of God we have already at hand from our discussion so

⁸ Irenaeus iv. 5.2.

⁹ Irenaeus iv. 14.2.

far, and especially from the last quoted passage, a clear indication of at least one of the sources of that knowledge, namely, the Word (*Logos*), the Son, who is the active principle in the world revealing the Godhead. Irenaeus states this unambiguously when he declares that "The Son is the *Knowledge* of the Father, but the knowledge of the Son is in the Father; and has been revealed through the Son; and this is the reason why the Lord declared: 'No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; nor the Father, save the Son, and those to whomsoever the Son shall reveal Him'."¹⁰ It is perfectly clear that Irenaeus views the manifestation of the Son as the self-disclosure of God the Father to man, and that apart from this self-disclosure of God in the Son, no man has ever known the Father, ever does, or ever will be able to know Him. "For in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become man. For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except His own proper *Word*."¹¹ This source is primary—the incarnate *Word*.

But this does not mean that it is denied that God, as Creator, and thus as One, can be learned apart from the special revelation in the incarnation. On the contrary, "since His [the Supreme God's] invisible essence is mighty, it confers upon all a profound mental intuition and perception of His most powerful, yea, omnipotent greatness. Wherefore, although 'no one knows the *Father*, except the Son, or he to whom the Son will reveal Him,' yet all (beings) do know this one fact at least, because *reason*, implanted in their minds, moves them, and reveals to them (the truth), *that there is one God, the Lord of all*."¹² This is the distinction between what in theology we usually call general and special revelation, common grace and special grace, to which Paul has given such clear expression in Romans 1: 16, 17 (special) and verses 18-21 (general).

Nevertheless that which in both these sources of our knowledge of God stands out prominently in Irenaeus' conception of them is their objective nature; that is, their real existential reality apart from human acknowledgement thereof. This comes out when he asserts that

by means of the creation itself, the *Word* reveals God the Creator; and by means of the world (does He declare) the Lord the *Maker* of the World; and by means of the formation (of man) the same *Artificer* who formed him; and by the *Son*, the *Father* who begat the *Son*. and these things do indeed address *all* men in the manner, but all do not in the same way believe them. But by the law and the prophets did the *Word* preach both Himself and the *Father* alike (to all); and all the people heard Him alike, but all did not alike believe. And through the *Word* Himself who had been made *visible* and

¹⁰ Irenaeus iv. 15.7.

¹¹ Irenaeus v. 1.1.

¹² Irenaeus ii. 6. 1.

palpable, was the Father shown forth, although all did not equally believe in Him; but all saw the Father in the Son for the Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son the visible of the Father."¹³

So clear is our apologist about the objective nature of God's revelation that he goes on in the next paragraph to show that that declaration of God, that proclamation of the way of salvation which came from God, embodied in his Son, has approved itself and been testified to even by those who are its enemies and have not appropriated it to themselves in saving knowledge. It becomes perfectly clear, therefore, that for Irenaeus there is a self-disclosure of God the Creator in his works, and of God the Father through his word to all of mankind, apart from His acceptance, acknowledgement and appropriation by all. His manifestation stands before men forever as a testimony which cannot be put out of the way without taking account of it.

To be sure, not until the knowledge of and acknowledgement of certain facts becomes appropriated by a person, and not until the significance of these facts has gone through the alembic of a person's life, so that he is as a consequence of them a different person, can we in metaphysical strictness speak of a revelation *for that person*. Yet this failure of absorption on the part of some individuals of something palpably available for appropriation does not do away with the reality of the existence of that something. For example, there is the actual historical record of the existence and life of Jesus Christ; there is the entire New Testament literature about Him and his earliest followers. These are historical facts, and as such they are the disclosure of God to the human race of His character as Father. Now, that disclosure having once taken place stands there as an everlasting monument—capable of being seen by all who came within its radius. It is the task of Christians to bring men and women within radius of that monument so that they can behold it. This is the preaching of the gospel,—the declaration of what has been done for us by God in Christ. But the fact that there are many who have been brought within the radius of God in Christ, but have not responded to him in such a way as to partake of the power of reconciliation there is in him to bring them to God, does not mean that there is not a real disclosure of God there. God stands available to be appropriated; that He is not, no one can be blamed but recalcitrant man. Such reflections are much needed in our day and generation, because, as we shall in the proper place observe, we are in real danger of whittling down the reality of God's revelation to man to our own subjective response, the final outcome of which will be that in the end we will no longer have something to respond to.

¹³ Irenaeus iv. 6.6.

4. We come, now, in the fourth place, naturally to observe that by the *repository* of God's special revelation to man, Irenaeus understands both the Old and the New Testaments.¹⁴ He calls the "good word of revelation" contained in these Scriptures, "the oracles of God."¹⁵ And "the Scriptures testify of Him" (God) because the word who is the organ of God's revelation, speaks through them.¹⁶ And these same Scriptures are surely not the record made by men of their experiences of God, for "we, inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than the word of God and His Spirit, are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of his mysteries."¹⁷ The conviction that the whole of the Bible is a unity, because it proceeded from one and the same God (a belief which the Gnostics denied, declaring that the God of the Old Testament was an inferior God) can be clearly seen expressed in the following words: "Now that the preaching of the apostles, the authoritative teaching of the Lord, the announcements of the prophets, the dictated utterances of the apostles (*apostolorum dictatis*) and the ministration of the law—all of which praise one and the same Being, the God and Father of all . . . are in harmony with our statements, has, I think, been sufficiently proved."¹⁸ Though the incarnation of the word is the culmination of God's plan of salvation—His supreme revelation, Irenaeus understands the Scriptures as the divinely inspired and trustworthy record of God's movement in the giving of this His supreme gift to the world.

5. Revelation, even in the Bible, then, is not a static quantity: it has grown. God has moved step by step until in these last times he has spoken to us through his Son. This *progressiveness* is the fifth characteristic of Irenaeus' revelation concept. Yet this progression does not mean contradiction, for "the Lord remains the same, and the same Father is revealed," but "the same Lord granted by means of his advent, a greater gift of grace to those of a later period than what he had granted to those under the Old Testament dispensation."¹⁹ The necessity for this gradual unfolding of his plan of salvation rather than a sudden bestowal of it in completion, inheres in the fact that God must needs "adapt (His works) to the nature and

14 Windelband, W., *History of Philosophy*, p. 221: "In the Christian Church the need of establishing a collection of writings in which the system of faith should be defined with certainty, first developed with Marcion, and then was gradually satisfied in the completion and conclusion of the New Testament: with *Irenaeus* and *Tertullian* both Testaments already appear with the full value and validity of churchly authority."

15 Irenaeus i, preface.

16 Irenaeus iv. 11.1.

17 Irenaeus ii. 28.2.

18 Irenaeus ii. 35.4.

19 Irenaeus iv. 11.3.

tendencies of the materials dealt with".²⁰ The insinuation no doubt is that it was at least ignorant, if not sinful, human nature that He had to deal with in imparting His plan of salvation. This factor of an advance in the unfolding of God's purpose to save humanity can never be ignored as a real feature in any adequate conception of revelation. But when this thought of growth and progress is applied to human achievement, and this in turn is given the name revelation, whatever else we shall later have occasion to say about this way of conceiving revelation, let us be sure that it was not that of the early Church, or of Irenaeus. For him the final end of revelation rested in the incarnation and all that is involved in that event. For the word (*Logos*) is the revealer of all knowledge of God, who is active "at one time conferring with His creature, and at another propounding His Law; at one time, again, reproving, at another exhorting, and then setting free His servant, and adopting him as a son (*in filium*); and, at the proper time, bestowing an incorruptible inheritance, for the purpose of bringing man to perfection. For He formed him for growth and increase."²¹ The end of revelation is reached, therefore, in Christ who brings perfect knowledge of God. Revelation in Him does stretch to the utmost confines of the universe, since "all things have been made by Him . . . and in Him all things consist".²² But this is a fuller explication of a fact already accomplished, and is not due to a creative power in man which makes it legitimate to call the products of his inventive genius revelation.

6. Are we not now naturally brought to inquire what then, more specifically, Irenaeus considered to be the *end* of revelation? This, indeed, will be the sixth and last aspect under which we shall study his idea of revelation. The end of His revelation Irenaeus conceives to have been with God from the beginning, before he created Adam, for "in the beginning God formed Adam, not as if He stood in need of man, but that He might have (someone) upon whom to confer His benefits. . . For, as much as God is in want of nothing, so much does man stand in need of *fellowship with God*."²³ The supreme good which it is conceived that revelation brings is—God Himself. Man's highest good is fellowship with God. This, too, is the criterion for the judgement of what revelation is. That man might come into the possession of the largest life; that man might have that (Him) without the possession of whom life would itself be empty, meaningless, and hollow, but in the possession of whom is the fulness of life—this is revelation. "For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of

²⁰ Irenaeus ii. 35.4.

²¹ Irenaeus iv. 11.1.

²² Colossians 1: 16f.

²³ Irenaeus iv. 14.1.

God, which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the word, give life to those who see God."²⁴

We may now briefly summarize what by our investigation we have come to see the revelation-concept of the early Christian Church was. In the forefront stands the unwavering stress upon the theo-centric character of revelation, boldly contrasted with the deliverances of man's mind. Throughout there is the sense of the vast difference between God's realm and man's realm, so that left to itself, there would be no coming to God; while the degree to which certain thinkers and poets did give evidence of adumbrations of truth which come to their full measure in Scripture, and in Christ its key, was conceived as due to God's extraordinary working through the *Logos*. But of the vast need of such a breaking through of God into man's realm in a personal way there can be no question; and this consideration led to recognizing the content of revelation as true knowledge, which it is necessary to possess in order to pass into the state of pure felicity. That this theo-centric emphasis was not merely a chance circumstance, but the conscious and assertive confession of faith of the early Church may be seen in its inveighing against all worldly-wisdom which would parade in the clothes of divine revelation, and notably in its subjugation of the subtle Gnosticism of these early centuries.

Hastings, Nebraska

²⁴ Irenaeus iv. 20.7.