

IRENAEUS'S MISSIONAL THEOLOGY: GLOBAL CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES FROM AN ANCIENT MISSIONARY AND THEOLOGIAN

JACOB A. RODRIGUEZ*

Abstract: *Although scholarly interest in Irenaeus has grown in recent years, studies on Irenaeus have not fully tapped into his hermeneutical and missiological insights. At the same time, global theology is a growing phenomenon with much promise but with a continual need to appreciate both the unity and diversity of global Christianity. This article seeks to address the lacuna in Irenaeus scholarship and offer a paradigm for global theological reflection based on three of Irenaeus's theological commitments: the translatability of the gospel, an appreciation for diversity within the proper boundaries of unity, and the regula fidei as a metanarrative reading of Scripture. Regarding the gospel's translatability, this article analyzes Irenaeus's well-known statement in Adversus Haereses 1.10.2 in which he praises the kerygma for remaining the same even across the diverse languages of the world. This article goes on to argue that Irenaeus's vehement defense of the fourfold gospel is the foundation for his robust theology of unity in diversity, exemplified in his loyalty to apostolic orthodoxy on the one hand and his peacemaking role in the paschal controversy of the late second century on the other hand. Irenaeus's basis for unity is the regula fidei, which he claims was handed down to his generation from the apostles. This article pursues the regula fidei trajectory from the NT to Irenaeus's own writings, and concludes, contra recent scholarship, that Irenaeus viewed the regula fidei as a metanarrative hermeneutic for Scripture. Finally, the above analysis is applied to current trends in global theology.*

Key Words: *Irenaeus, second century, missiology, translation, global hermeneutics, regula fidei, unity and diversity, early Christianity*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that the past few decades have seen a dramatic demographic shift in global Christianity. The new centers of Christianity are rapidly moving southward to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As a result, the shape of global mission is no longer “the West to the rest” but it is maturing into a truly global endeavor. A significant upshot to this shift is that theological reflection is becoming much more culturally diverse. Indeed, such globalization has shown that theologizing of any kind is irreducibly cultural. While this diversity is certainly to be celebrated, it raises a significant question for the global Christian community: how do we maintain unity with such extensive diversity? Or, to put it another way, how do we define orthodoxy in a world of rich theological diversity? Theologians rightfully

* Jacob Rodriguez is missionary theology instructor at The Evangelical Theology College of Addis Ababa, SIM Ethiopia Guesthouse, P.O. Box 127, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

answer this question with reservation, because to define orthodoxy would seem to elevate one's own position above the rest of the global Christian community, and one is reticent to establish a neo-colonial theological hegemony. For this reason, the present article will look back in history before colonialism, even before Constantine, to the second century AD and engage in what John Webster has called a "theology of retrieval."¹ In the second-century world of Christian persecution, rapid church growth, burgeoning heresies, massive tragedies, and turbulent international politics,² St. Irenaeus of Lyons stands out as an excellent example of both a theologian and a missionary.³ He has left us a legacy that is pertinent today by arguing the following: (1) the gospel is translatable; (2) we must contend for orthodox unity while celebrating diversity; and (3) the metanarrative of salvation forms the rule for right Scripture reading.

II. IRENAEUS: MISSIONARY AND THEOLOGIAN

St. Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons in the late second century AD. He was originally a native of Asia Minor, probably Smyrna, where he learned from the teaching of Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of John the Apostle.⁴ Irenaeus thus was in the direct lineage of apostolic teaching, and some consider him to be of the last generation that stood within living memory of Jesus.⁵ Irenaeus is best known for his relentless opposition against the Gnostics of his day, displayed in his well-known work, *Adversus haereses*. But Irenaeus was also somewhat of a cross-cultural missionary, serving in a city over 2,000 kilometers from his homeland. Irenaeus became bishop of Lyons (then called Lugdunum) around AD 180, though he probably arrived as a missionary there sometime earlier.⁶ At that time Lyons was the capital of Roman Gaul. Its economically strategic location at the convergence of

¹ John Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," in *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 583–99.

² For an overview of Christianity in the second century, see Robert M. Grant, "The Social Setting of Second-Century Christianity" in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 1: *The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries* (ed. E. P. Sanders; London: SCM, 1980), 16–29.

³ While many studies have focused on the various aspects of Irenaeus's theology, few have interacted with the cross-cultural dimensions of Irenaeus's theology or how it related to missiological concerns. Philip Slate ("Two Features of Irenaeus' Missiology," in *Missiology* 23 [1995]: 431–42) stands out as a pioneer in reading Irenaeus missiologically.

⁴ Charles Hill has argued persuasively for the apostolic trajectory connecting Irenaeus to Polycarp in *The Lost Teachings of Polycarp: Identifying Irenaeus' Apostolic Interpreter and the Author of "Ad Diognetum"* (WUNT 1/186; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) and more recently in "The Man Who Needed No Introduction: A Response to Sebastian Moll," in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy* (ed. Paul Foster and Sara Parvis; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 95–104. John Behr finds Hill's argument convincing and concludes that Irenaeus had close connections with several trajectories of early Christianity: *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–66.

⁵ Markus Bockmuehl has recently argued for the value of reading the NT through the lenses of those who lived within the "living memory" of Jesus Christ, namely, three generations or less removed from Jesus; *Seeing the Word: Refocusing NT Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 161–88.

⁶ The exact date of his arrival in Gaul is unknown, though scholars are reasonably certain that Irenaeus became bishop of Gaul shortly after the persecution in AD 177; cf. Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1–10.

the Rhône and the Saône rivers and its position on the Roman road made it a gateway from the Mediterranean to the northwest regions of the Roman Empire. As such, it was the location of a Roman colony and it attracted a significant immigrant community from Asia Minor.⁷ The Christian community comprised mostly Greek-speaking immigrants from Asia Minor, as well as some Latin-speaking immigrants.⁸ Irenaeus probably served among this diverse group of Christians living in diaspora, and it is entirely possible that he had some knowledge of the Gallic language and interacted with the local Gallic culture.⁹ As a native of Asia Minor, steeped in the Hellenistic philosophical and rhetorical culture, Irenaeus was an outsider to the mostly Latin-speaking populace of Gaul. Originally a colony for Roman war veterans, Lyons lacked the Hellenistic cultural heritage to which Irenaeus was accustomed. Christians in Lyons also experienced severe persecution in 177 CE, and Eusebius preserves a late second-century letter that recounts their heroic displays of faithfulness through martyrdom.¹⁰ Irenaeus himself was probably away in Rome during the persecution. When he returned to Lyons, he was appointed as bishop and began a ministry of overseeing a persecuted, fledgling community of faithful believers. Immigration, diaspora, cross-cultural interaction, persecution, and empire characterized Irenaeus's world and ministry. Against this historical backdrop, Irenaeus's reflections on the gospel in a multicultural world prove particularly relevant to the current situation of the global church.

III. IRENAEUS AND THE TRANSLATABILITY OF THE GOSPEL

The first aspect of Irenaeus's theology that this essay will engage is his understanding of the gospel as translatable. Scripture itself attests to the translatability of the evangel. When the NT church was born at Pentecost, her mission was established as a cross-cultural enterprise. By the time of Irenaeus, this cross-cultural mission had spread across the known world, with a Christian presence in Palestine, Asia Minor, Italy, Gaul, Spain, North Africa, Arabia, and Mesopotamia.¹¹ Irenaeus celebrates this geographical distribution in an oft-cited passage in *Against Heresies*:

⁷ For the socio-economic makeup of second-century Gaul and the strategic location of Lyons on the Rhone, see Philippe Leveau, "The Western Provinces," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Matthew Morris, and Richard Paul Saller; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 651–70, esp. 63–65.

⁸ For the ethnographic and sociological makeup of the Christian community in Gaul, see John Behr, "Gaul," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1: *Origins to Constantine* (ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 366–79.

⁹ Scholars disagree as to whether Irenaeus's mention of the "barbaric language" refers to Latin or to a Gallic. See discussion below.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.1–2, 8.

¹¹ The classic work on the expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries is Adolph von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1924). However, his conclusions have been recently critiqued by Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter, eds., *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era* (WUNT 1/301; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2013). While the scholarly conclusions regarding the method and circumstances of early Christian expansion are quite varied, there is a general consensus that there was a Christian presence in the above-mentioned regions of the second century. If nothing else, the late second-

For, the languages of the world are unlike, but the power of the tradition is one and the same. And the churches which have been established in Germany have not believed or handed down anything different, nor have those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But just as the sun—the creature of God—is one and the same in all the world, so also the light—the *kerygma* of the truth—shines in every direction, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to the knowledge of the truth.¹²

Here Irenaeus claims that the “power” of the apostolic tradition is one and the same, even across the languages of the world.¹³ He does not explicitly state that the apostolic gospel—whether oral or written—should be translated, but it is implied that the same message is understood across cultures. Elsewhere Irenaeus defends the Septuagint translation, and though he grants that translation is interpretation, he maintains that the same message of the Hebrew Scriptures was preserved by the Septuagint and was confirmed by the apostles.¹⁴ At the basic level, then, Irenaeus believes that gospel truth can be communicated across languages.

Another interesting aspect of Irenaeus’s view of language is that, contrary to the Hellenistic culture of his time, he gave dignity to the illiterate “barbarians,” and he may even have attempted to learn their language. Scholars are divided as to whether the “barbarous” dialect” (βάρβαρον διάλεκτον) to which he was accustomed referred to Latin or to a dialect of Gallic.¹⁵ It was not uncommon in antiquity for Greek-speakers to refer to Latin as a barbarous dialect,¹⁶ but Irenaeus proba-

century influence of Irenaeus in Gaul, Justin Martyr in Rome, Serapion in Antioch, Tertullian in Carthage, Clement in Alexandria, and Tatian in Edessa, and the relatively quick transmission of *Adversus haereses* from Gaul to Egypt (e.g. *P. Oxy* 405) suggests that proto-orthodox Christianity was vibrant and interconnected throughout these regions.

¹² *Haer.* 1.10.2, author’s translation.

¹³ The antithetical relationship between διάλεκτοι ἀνόμοιοι and ἡ δύναμις τῆς παραδόσεως μία καὶ ἡ αὐτή shows the “unique and identical content of meaning that exists under this diversity of languages and expressions”; cf. Dominic J. Unger, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies Book 1* (ACW 55; Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 1992) 187, n. 26.

¹⁴ *Haer.* 3.21.3. Likewise, Irenaeus argues that Matthew originally wrote his Gospel in Hebrew and preached the gospel to the Jews in this way, while Peter, Paul and John were preaching in other parts of the Roman Empire (*Haer.* 3.1.1). This assumes that the same gospel can be communicated in multiple languages. However, some have argued that this may have been Aramaic, or simply “with Hebraic idiom”; cf. Matthew C. Steenberg and Dominic J. Unger, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies Book 3* (ACW; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012), 119–21.

¹⁵ Irenaeus says that he has been “dwelling among the Celts” (ἐν κελτοῖς διατριβόντων) and “occupying myself extensively with a barbarous dialect” (περὶ βάρβαρον διάλεκτον), *Haer.* 1.praef.3. The parallelism between these two phrases suggests that the dialect indeed was of the Celtic language family. However, Jared Secord argues that ἐν κελτοῖς does not refer to the people group but rather the region in which Irenaeus lived, and that βάρβαρον διάλεκτον refers to Latin rather than Gallic; cf. “The Cultural Geography of a Greek Christian: Irenaeus from Smyrna to Lyons” in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy* (ed. Paul Foster and Sara Parvis; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 25–34.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Strabo 8.1.1; 6.1.2; Polybius 12.4b.2–3; 5.104.1–11; 9.32.3–39.7; 11.4.1–6.8; Plutarch, *Pyrrh.* 16.7, 13; cf. G. W. Bowersock, “Les Grecs ‘barbarisés,’” *Ktema* 17 (1992): 249–57; Craige Champion, “Romans as *Barbaroi*: Three Polybian Speeches and the Politics of Cultural Indeterminacy,” *CPh* 95.4 (2000): 425–44; Andrew Erksine, “Polybios and Barbarian Rome,” *Mediterraneo Antico* 3 (2000): 165–82;

bly felt no such antipathy towards Romans.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is clear that Irenaeus uses “barbarian” to refer to the illiterate,¹⁸ and in the social context of Lyons, this would have probably been the native Gallic population as opposed to the Latin-speaking Roman colonists.¹⁹ Irenaeus does not look down on the barbarians as incapable of understanding deep truths. In fact, he commends them for their ability to detect heresy and hold to the truth:

To this arranged order, the many nations of the barbarians who have believed in Christ are persuaded, having salvation written by the Spirit on their hearts, without paper or ink, and, carefully guarding the ancient tradition, believing in one God.... Those who, unlettered, and in regards to dialect are Barbarians, but having believed this very faith, are exceedingly wise in regards to understanding, manner of life, and conduct as citizens; and they do please God, behaving in all righteousness, purity, and wisdom. If any one should ever preach to them the contrived ideas of the heretics, conversing with them in their own language, they would immediately shut their ears and flee far away, not enduring to listen to the blasphemous teaching.²⁰

Here Irenaeus has a much higher view of “barbarians” than what was common among Greeks and Romans in his day. Irenaeus’s reference to salvation “written on the hearts” of the barbarians probably draws from the same conceptual framework as other early Christian authors.²¹ Indeed, Christianity in the second century stood out as a movement that transcended both class and culture.²² The above citations indicate that Irenaeus held that no nation—whether Greek or “barbarian”—is excluded from the enlightening work of the gospel.

Judith Mossman, “*Taxis ou Barbaros*: Greek and Roman in Plutarch’s *Pyrrhus*,” *CJQ* 55.2 (2005): 498–517. Jared Secord summarizes the scholarly discussion well in “Cultural Geography,” 30 n. 55.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Irenaeus’s glowing remarks on the good that the Roman Empire brought to the world in bringing peace to the world, establishing highways and making safe the seas (*Haer.* 4.30.3).

¹⁸ Cf. *Haer.* 3.4.2; *ἄνευ χαρτου και μελανος*, lit. “without paper and ink.”

¹⁹ Roman imperial control was tightly connected to the use of written texts. For example, under Augustus, the Romans imposed their control over Gaul by taxation on the basis of a written census (*Livy, Per.* 139); cf. William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 211. It is therefore unlikely that Irenaeus would refer to the Romans as lacking written documents or as “barbarians.”

²⁰ *Haer.* 3.4.2, author’s translation.

²¹ Cf. 2 Cor 3:2–3; Rom 2:15; Heb 8:10; Justin, *1 Apol.* 60.11; cf. Steenberg and Unger, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies Book 3*, 131 n. 4.

²² Cf. Tertullian’s claim in *Apol.* 42 that Christians were in all classes and businesses. Onomastic evidence from the *Gallian Acts* (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.10; e.g. Blandina the slave, Alexander the physician from Phrygia, and Sanctus the Latin-speaker from Vienne) suggests that the Christian community in Lyons was socially and ethnically diverse; cf. Robert M. Grant, “Social Setting,” 24–25. Larry Hurtado also finds evidence in late second-century and early third-century NT manuscripts for a “sociology of early Christian reading” that integrated far more social strata than Greco-Roman texts of the High Roman Empire; cf. “Manuscripts and the Sociology of Early Christian Reading” in *The Early Text of the NT* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Michael J. Kruger; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49–62. See also Wayne Meeks’s seminal study, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), esp. 51–73, and Peter Lampe’s study that covers through the second century, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), esp. 138–50 and 351–55.

Irenaeus's view of the barbarians contrasts sharply from that of his Greek contemporaries—particularly those within the Second Sophistic tradition.²³ Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius*, depicts Apollonius's encounter with Assyrian barbarians. Apollonius is impressed by their temple, but laments that it is “the home of no serious studies, but only of men half-barbarous and uncultivated.”²⁴ He then prays to Apollo to change the barbarians—“dumb dogs” he calls them—into trees, so that they can at least become vocal mythological cypresses. In Apollonius's encounter with a young Ninevite who wants to be his pupil, Philostratus portrays Apollonius's intellect and *paideia* as far superior to the culture of the Ninevite, whose language was “of a mediocre quality” and who “had not the gift of expressing himself, having been educated among the barbarians.”²⁵ Philostratus seems much concerned with demonstrating Apollonius's cultural and intellectual superiority over the nations of “barbarians and robbers”²⁶ among whom he travels—even if Apollonius does show a paternalistic fascination with the customs of the “other.” Dio Chrysostom, writing a generation earlier, expresses similar disdain for the barbarians. When describing the braveries of the Corinthians in establishing justice, he juxtaposes the term “haters of villainy” and “haters of tyranny” with the term “haters of barbarians,” and puts these terms in parallel with the terms “lovers of justice” and “lovers of freedom.”²⁷ Like Philostratus, he portrays Greek *paideia* as culturally superior, praising Roman equestrians who aspire to Hellenization, and viewing barbarians paternalistically.²⁸ Aelius Aristides provides the starkest case of Second Sophistic “othering” when he describes Attica as epitomizing the greatness of Greek culture by virtue of being unlike the barbarians. According to Aristides, Attica is “to the greatest degree distinct from the barbarians ... separated by the nature of its geography ... [and] removed from the barbarians in the customs of its men.”²⁹ Other examples could be cited from the Second Sophistic,³⁰ but the con-

²³ Some scholars speak of the Greek construction of the barbarian mostly in terms of “othering”; cf. Wilfried Nippel, “The Construction of the Other,” in *Greeks and Barbarians* (ed. Thomas Harrison; Edinburgh Readings on the Ancient World; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 278–310. Other scholars see the process as more complex, involving a repertoire of identity negotiation within ancient globalization; cf. Kostas Vlassopoulos, *Greeks and Barbarians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 161–225. While Vlassopoulos offers a properly nuanced perspective, it is hard to ignore the dynamic of Greek “othering” that was particularly pronounced in the Second Sophistic period when the Greeks were negotiating their identity in Imperial Rome.

²⁴ *Vit. Apoll.* 1.16 (all translations by Christopher P. Jones; LCL 16); ἀνθρώπους ἡμιβαρβάρους καὶ ἀμουσούς, lit., “half-barbarous and without muses.”

²⁵ *Vit. Apoll.* 1.19; φωνὴ δὲ ἦν τῷ Ἀσσυρίῳ ξυμέτρως πράττουσα, τὸ γὰρ λογιεῖδες οὐκ εἶχεν, ἅτε παιδευθεῖς ἐν βαρβάροις.

²⁶ *Vit. Apoll.* 1.20; βάρβαρα ἔθνη καὶ ληστρικά.

²⁷ *Cor.* 17–18 (all translations by H. Lamar Crosby; LCL 376); φιλέλληνες καὶ φιλοδίκαιοι καὶ φιλελεύθεροι καὶ μισοπόνηροι καὶ μισοτύρανοι. μισοβάρβαροι μὲν γὰρ οὕτως ἦσαν.

²⁸ Cf. *Cor.* 27: “... no one even of the barbarians may despair of attaining the culture of Greece (ἀπογινώσκη τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας) when he looks upon this man [i.e. a Hellenized Roman].” Dio Chrysostom can look favorably upon the barbarians only if they become Hellenized.

²⁹ *Panathenaic Oration* 14–15; translation by Charles A. Behr in *P. Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works. Volume I. Orations I–XVI* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

trast is evident: Irenaeus gives dignity and common identity to the barbarian “other” in a way that is foreign to his Greek contemporaries.³¹

Irenaeus’s sympathetic attitude toward other languages and cultures is grounded in his theology of recapitulation. Irenaeus is well known for this aspect of his theology, namely, that Jesus Christ, as the Second Adam, reverses all the wrongs that the first Adam caused by his sins, and by summing up all things in himself he renews all of creation.³² As part of this work of recapitulation, Christ also sums up the peoples and languages of the whole world, all of which descend from Adam. Commentating on Luke’s Adamic genealogy, Irenaeus says:

On account of this, Luke exhibits the genealogy from the begetting of our Lord all the way back until Adam, having seventy-two generations, joining together the end with the beginning and signaling that it is he [i.e. Christ] who has recapitulated all the nations dispersed successively from Adam, and all the tongues and generations of men, together with Adam himself.³³

By virtue of the comprehensive salvation that Christ brings, every nation and language is accounted for in the divine economy of salvation.³⁴

Irenaeus also relates the work of the Spirit to the multiplicity of languages among the people of God. Speaking particularly of Pentecost, Irenaeus says that the “all-leading Spirit... came down, after the ascension of the Lord ... having the authority to permit all nations to enter into life and into the opening of the new covenant.” By the Spirit’s empowering, the nations “having the same mind, in all languages made hymns to God, as the Spirit brought the separate tribes into unity and offered the first fruits of all the nations to the Father.”³⁵ Elsewhere Irenaeus

³⁰ See, e.g., Plutarch’s comment that barbarians think highly of a “violence and avarice” (*Num.* 3.5; βίαν και πλεονεξίαν), his use of the lexeme βάρβαρος as an insult in collocation with the lexeme μιαρός (*Demetrius* 51.3), and his praising of Timolean for delivering Syracuse from the Carthaginian barbarians who represent everything contrary to the ideals of Greek culture (cf. *Tim.*).

³¹ Irenaeus probably derives this mentality from the Apostle Paul (Rom 1:14; Col 3:11; cf. Gal 3:28). This is not to say that all Christians of Irenaeus’s day shared his generosity towards barbarians. Early Christian conceptualization of barbarian identity is indeed variegated; see Arthur J. Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1989), and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (WUNT 112; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1999).

³² *Haer.* 3.18.1, 5.21.1. The Latin verb used is *recapitulavit*, but the Greek original is most like the lexeme ἀνακεφαλαιώ and its cognate noun, ἀνακεφαλαίωσις.

³³ *Haer.* 3.22.3, author’s translation.

³⁴ One might argue that Irenaeus’s interpretation of the figure of Ham and the Noahic cycle is an example of Irenaeus excluding a people group from the scope of salvation based on their ethnic lineage (see *Epid.* 20). However, for Irenaeus, Ham functions as a typological representation of all idolaters who reject God’s commands, not a particular ethnic group; cf. Susan L. Graham, “Irenaeus as Reader of Romans 9–11: Olive Branches,” in *Early Patristic Readings of Romans* (ed. Kathy L. Gaca and L. L. Welborn; Romans through History and Cultures; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 87–113.

³⁵ *Haer.* 3.17.2, author’s translation. See also *Haer.* 5.6.1; the Spirit himself speaks these different languages: *et omnibus linguis loquuntur per Spiritum [Dei], quemadmodum et ipse loquebatur* (τελείως λέγων τοὺς ἐπιδεδυμένους τὸ Πνεῦμα τοῦ Θεοῦ και πάσαις γλώσσαις λαλοῦντας διὰ τοῦ Πνεύματος, καθὼς και αὐτὸς ἐλάλει).

says that persons “perfected” by the Spirit can speak in different kinds of languages, though he may be referring to glossolalia.³⁶

The cumulative evidence suggests that Irenaeus had a profound understanding of the translatable nature of the gospel. This gave no preference to the literate but rather elevated non-Hellenic cultures. Ultimately, Irenaeus’s doctrines of the work of Christ and the Spirit formed the basis for his understanding of the gospel’s translatability. The fact that the second and third centuries saw the beginning of NT translations into Syriac, Latin, and Coptic also strongly indicates that Irenaeus’s sentiments about the value of translating the gospel were shared elsewhere in the church of his day.³⁷

IV. IRENAEUS ON UNITY IN DIVERSITY

It was Eusebius who first made a pun of Irenaeus’s name, observing that Irenaeus made a sort of “peace offering” by promoting church unity during the late second-century church controversy relating to the celebration of Easter.³⁸ Around AD 190, Victor, the bishop of Rome, attempted to standardize the celebration date of Easter and excommunicate the Eastern churches who maintained that Easter should be celebrated on the fourteenth day of Nisan, according to the Hebrew calendar. Irenaeus was part of a delegation of bishops who wrote to Victor and convinced him to allow for a diversity of paschal traditions.³⁹ But while Irenaeus winsomely argued for peace in the church, he was not afraid to be antagonistic against what he perceived to be heresies that threatened the integrity of the apostolic gospel.⁴⁰ Indeed, the driving force behind Irenaeus’s *magnum opus*, *Adversus Haereses*, was the need to respond to the various forms of Gnosticism in his day, as well as Marcionism. Irenaeus thus sought a balance between unity on the essentials and diversity on the non-essentials.

The essentials to which Irenaeus vehemently adhered were summarized in the *regula fidei*—a canon of truth that Irenaeus claimed had been “handed down” directly from the apostles to each of the churches throughout the world, all of which faithfully preserved this core teaching. Irenaeus uses the lexeme *παράδιδωμι* and the lexeme *λαμβάνω* with its compound forms to describe the “handing down”

³⁶ *Haer.* 5.6.1. Irenaeus is referring to 1 Corinthians 14 in this passage.

³⁷ For the dates and provenances of the early translations with a summary of the current research, see Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the NT in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (2nd ed.; Leuven: Brill, 2013), esp. the essays by Peter J. Williams, Philip Burton, and Christian Askeland.

³⁸ *Hist. eccl.*, 5.24.11–18; John Behr articulates well Irenaeus’s commitment to unity in diversity: *Irenaeus of Lyons*, esp. 47–57, 205–10.

³⁹ *Hist. eccl.*, 5.23–24.

⁴⁰ Scholarship following in Walter Bauer’s legacy has challenged any sharp dichotomies between orthodoxy and heresy. The secondary literature is well beyond the scope of this article, but John Behr has helpfully argued that by the time of Irenaeus there was a self-aware apostolic catholicity, and the “heretical” groups separated themselves from the catholic community before they were ever formally excommunicated; cf. *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 21–47.

and “receiving” of this apostolic tradition.⁴¹ This *regula fidei* is, broadly speaking, a narrative summary of God’s saving action within human history, climaxing in the work of Christ.⁴² Irenaeus refers to the “rule of truth” (κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας) eight times in *Against Heresies* (*Haer.* 1.9.4, 1.22.1; 2.25.2, 2.27.1, 2.28.1, 2.28.3; 3.15.1; 4.35.4) and the equivalent term “rule of our faith” (κανὼν τῆς πίστεως ἡμῶν) once in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (*Epid.* 6), but the content of the *regula fidei* permeates his writings in many places.⁴³ The content of the *regula fidei* is closely related to Irenaeus’s use of the lexeme εὐαγγέλιον,⁴⁴ though this lexeme has a slightly different range of meanings. For Irenaeus, εὐαγγέλιον can refer to either the oral proclamation of the apostolic teaching regarding salvation or the four Gospels that came to be canonical.⁴⁵ As Irenaeus says:

We have not come to know the economy of our salvation through any others but those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, [the Gospel] which at that time they preached in public, but later, according to the will of God, they handed down to us in the Scriptures, which are the foundation and pillar of our faith.⁴⁶

Here “Gospel” (Latin: *evangelium*; Greek: τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) is semantically parallel to “plan of salvation” (Latin: *dispositionem salutis*; Greek: οἰκονομίαν τῆς σωτηρίας). This “gospel” is both proclaimed orally and written down. Most importantly, this “gospel”—oral and written—is the “ground and pillar of our faith,” and it is “handed down to us” from the apostles. Echoing Paul in 1 Tim 3:15,⁴⁷ Irenaeus elsewhere argues that this one Gospel is what unites the church that is “scattered throughout all the world.”⁴⁸ Thus the plan of salvation summarized in the *regula fidei*

⁴¹ Cf. *Haer.* 1.10.1; 3.1.praef.; 3.3.2–3; 3.11.9. Irenaeus is following the pattern set down in the NT itself; cf. Luke 1:2; Acts 6:14; 16:4; 1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1–3; 2 Thess 3:6; 2 Tim 2:2; Heb 2:3; 2 Pet 2:21; Jude 3. Other proto-orthodox second-century writers appeal to their connection to the same apostolic tradition; cf. *1 Clem* 7.1; 42.1; 43.1; Ignatius, *Magn.* 8; Polycarp, *Phil.* 7; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.13.93; *Ad Diog.* 11; Serapion (in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12.3–6); *Muratorian Fragment*, lines 66–7; *Epistula Apostolorum* 1.

⁴² Cf. Paul M. Blowers, “The *regula fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro-Testament* 6 (1997): 199–228; and Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (London: S.P.C.K., 1987), 154–60. However, Nathan MacDonald argues that Irenaeus’s use of the Rule of Faith does not have a metanarrative stretching from creation to new creation, but rather Israel’s story, while prefiguring salvation in Christ, is not constrained by a determinative account; cf. “Israel and the OT Story in Irenaeus’ Presentation of the Rule of Faith” *JTI* 3/2 (2009): 281–98. Though MacDonald makes a very sophisticated case, he does not fully appreciate that for Irenaeus the Rule of Faith functions as a metanarrative upon which Irenaeus builds his entire worldview.

⁴³ Cf. *Haer.* 1.10.1; 3.2.2; 3.4.1; 3.5.1; 3.14.4; 4.32.1; 4.33.8.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Haer.* 3.1.1; 3.10.5; 3.11.7–9; 3.14.4.

⁴⁵ Cf. Annette Y. Reed, “ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses*,” *VC* 56 (2002): 11–46.

⁴⁶ *Haer.* 3.1.1, author’s translation; cf. 3.11.8.

⁴⁷ Cf. θεμέλιον καὶ στῦλον τῆς πίστεως ἡμῶν; echoing 1 Tim 3:15, στῦλος καὶ ἐδραῖωμα τῆς ἀληθείας.

⁴⁸ *Haer.* 3.11.8. While the church is scattered throughout the world (cf. κατέσπαρται δὲ ἡ ἐκκλησία ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς), she has one pillar and foundation, namely the Gospel (cf. στῦλος δὲ καὶ στήριγμα τῆς ἐκκλησίας τὸ εὐαγγέλιον).

and preserved in the written Gospels is the foundation upon which the church stands unified.

While the one Gospel is the source of ecclesial unity for Irenaeus, it is also the supreme example of unity *in diversity*. Irenaeus calls the four “Gospels” one “Gospel” that is “four-formed.”⁴⁹ Even though Irenaeus vehemently opposes the obscure numerology of the Gnostics, he has a strange fascination with the fourfold nature of the Gospels, and his argument for the “four-formed” canon is at first glance slightly odd:

It is not possible for the Gospels to be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four regions of the world in which we live, and four cardinal winds, while the church is scattered over all the earth, and the pillar and support of the church is the Gospel and the Spirit of life, then it follows that she [i.e. the church] should have four pillars, breathing out immortality from all sides and reviving men to life.⁵⁰

In this passage, Irenaeus goes on to cite the four living creatures of Ezekiel and John as a model for the four-formed Gospel. Irenaeus’s intent is to show that the Gospel by definition is four-formed, just as the earth is by definition laid out in four principal directions. Irenaeus contrasts the four-formed Gospel with the seemingly endless Gospels of the Gnostics on the one hand and the truncated Gospel of Marcion on the other. For Irenaeus, the Gospel can be no more and no less than a fourfold witness.⁵¹ This is the foundation for Irenaeus’s concept of unity in diversity.

The significance of the Gospel’s quadriformity is profound, for each of the Gospels reveals a particular aspect of Jesus’s ministry, such that they give a sufficient witness of Christ only as a fourfold voice. According to Irenaeus, John relates the Son’s generation from the Father, Luke relates his priestly ministry, Matthew relates the humanity of Christ, and Mark relates the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus’s ministry.⁵² On the contrary, the error of the Ebionites, Marcionites, and Valentinian Gnostics is precisely that they do not appreciate the four-formed nature of the Gospels.⁵³ This quadriform Gospel is the pillar and foundation of the church.

⁴⁹ *Haer.* 3.11.8; *πλεονεξίαν τετράμορφον τὸ εὐαγγέλιον.*

⁵⁰ *Haer.* 3.11.8, author’s translation. There is clear symmetry here: four “cardinal winds” (τέσσαρα καθολικὰ πνεύματα), covering all of creation as the church does, and “four pillars” (τέσσαρας στύλους) referring to the four Gospels through which the “Spirit of life” makes men alive. We have a comprehensive economy of salvation for the whole world displayed in the fourfold Gospel, according to Irenaeus.

⁵¹ For helpful treatments of Irenaeus’s conception of the fourfold Gospel, see Graham Stanton, “The Fourfold Gospel,” *NTS* 43 (1997): 317–46; Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 301–30; Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the NT Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 155–203; each of these scholars argues that Irenaeus was not an innovator but received the fourfold Gospel witness from those who came before him. Francis Watson, however, credits Irenaeus with more creativity and sees Irenaeus’s push toward a fourfold canon as an effort to “promote ecumenical consensus and understanding between the churches of East and West”; *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 493.

⁵² *Haer.* 3.11.8.

⁵³ *Haer.* 3.1.7.

As such, it is the source of unity for the church, and it is quite likely that Irenaeus saw it as the source of proper diversity in the church as well.

Irenaeus's model for church unity was the common confession of the faith that had been handed down by the apostles. As noted above, this confession could be proclaimed and understood by the diverse languages of the world. Furthermore, he allowed diversity in cases like the paschal controversy and even celebrated it in the varying accounts laid out in the four-formed Gospel. Ultimately it was Irenaeus's understanding of orthodoxy—based on the oral proclamation and the fourfold written witness of the apostolic Gospel—that provided him the framework for maintaining unity in diversity while opposing teachings that threatened the integrity of the gospel. In order to argue for unity in orthodoxy, Irenaeus needed criteria for recognizing orthodoxy; for Irenaeus the litmus test was the *regula fidei*.⁵⁴ Irenaeus validated these tenets of orthodoxy by virtue of their genuine apostolicity. For this reason Irenaeus repeatedly reminds his reader that the Gospel was “handed down” from the apostles. It was utterly important for Irenaeus that a church could trace its spiritual lineage back to the apostles—a lineage that all the true churches, diversely scattered across geography and cultures, could claim. Unity in diversity was a function both of belief and of spiritual heritage.

V. IRENÆUS ON THE METANARRATIVE OF SALVATION

Irenaeus's confrontations with the heretical sects of his day to a large degree dealt with their readings of Scripture. The Valentinian Gnostics, the Marcionites, and the Ebionites all justified their beliefs by their readings of Scripture. Some of them even claimed some kind of apostolic lineage.⁵⁵ Irenaeus also claimed theological lineage from the apostles, but his proto-orthodox reading of Scripture was quite different than those of his interlocutors. Irenaeus thus sought a standard by which to refute heretical readings while vindicating his own. Irenaeus's solution was to read all of Scripture through the rubric of the *regula fidei*, which functions as the hypothesis to the whole of Scripture.⁵⁶ His argument against the Valentinian Gnostics, in particular, is that they distort the Scriptures to support their own false notions. In a famous passage, Irenaeus compares the Gnostics' interpretation of Scripture to someone who takes a mosaic of a king and rearranges the jewels into the shape of a fox.⁵⁷ Their readings are erroneous precisely because they contradict the overall narrative of creation and salvation in Christ. Conversely, if one reads

⁵⁴ However, Elaine Pagels argues that Irenaeus's differentiation between orthodoxy and heresy dealt more with practices than with beliefs, and that Irenaeus's claims to orthodoxy were not as widely held as he envisaged; cf. “Irenaeus, the ‘Canon of Truth,’ and the *Gospel of John*: ‘Making a Difference’ through Hermeneutics and Ritual,” *VC* 56 (2002): 339–71. In my estimation, Pagels does not take into proper account the central role of the verb *πιστεύω* in Irenaeus's definition of the proto-orthodox church (*Haer* 1.10.1), nor does she recognize the thoroughgoing continuity between the core beliefs of Irenaeus and of those who “passed down” the apostolic tradition to him (see discussion below).

⁵⁵ Cf. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the NT*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 11.

⁵⁶ *Haer.* 1.9.4.

⁵⁷ *Haer.* 1.8.1.; cf. 1.9.4.

Scripture according to the *regula fidei*, he will arrive at Scripture's proper meaning and perceive the beauty of the king—a possible allusion to seeing and worshipping Christ.⁵⁸ Irenaeus's arguments against the Marcionites, Ebionites, and others are primarily shaped around their selective readings of Scripture. Marcion accepted only Luke and the Pauline writings, the Ebionites accepted only Matthew, and an unnamed sect rejected John's account.⁵⁹ Irenaeus's reading, on the contrary, read Scripture in the context of the whole of Scripture—which for Irenaeus was the OT, the four Gospels, the epistles and John's Apocalypse.

Irenaeus's "ruled" reading—through the rubric of the *regula fidei*—is akin to a canonical-narrative reading. It is canonical in that it takes into account the whole counsel of Scripture, or, in Irenaeus's parlance, all of the "dispensations of God"⁶⁰ and the "teachings of the apostles."⁶¹ It is narrative in that it is guided and guarded by an overarching storyline of creation and redemption, namely, the rule of faith. Recent theological reflection in the West has recaptured the value of a metanarrative reading of Scripture.⁶² Irenaeus demonstrates that such a hermeneutic was present in the second century. To a certain extent, Irenaeus's ruled reading employs an extra-scriptural tradition in order to interpret Scripture properly.⁶³ But Irenaeus's rule for reading is also inherent to Scripture itself. As John Behr notes, Irenaeus's "tradition" has a strong "scriptural texture" to it.⁶⁴ One might even argue that Irenaeus's "tradition" was the content of apostolic teaching that in Irenaeus's day was nearly enshrined in written Scripture.⁶⁵ Irenaeus's rule of faith is a summary of the apostles' teaching shaped into a storyline of redemption, and this functioned as the

⁵⁸ Cf. Hågglund, "Die Bedeutung der 'regula fidei' als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen," *ST* 12 (1958): 1–44; cf. Nathan MacDonald, "Israel and the OT," 290 n. 28.

⁵⁹ *Haer.* 3.11.7–9; it is uncertain whom he has them in mind, but he mentions that they reject that portion of John's Gospel where the Paraclete was promised to everyone; cf. Steenberg and Unger, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies Book 3*, 150 n. 58.

⁶⁰ οἰκονομία τοῦ θεοῦ; cf. *Haer.* 1.10.3.

⁶¹ Cf. *Haer.* 4.32.2, ἀπεδείξαμεν τῆς πᾶν ἀποστόλων διδασχῆς.

⁶² See, among others, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), esp. 48–56. N. T. Wright, in his seminal work *The NT and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), and in the subsequent volumes in the influential Christian Origins and the Question of God series, argues convincingly that the NT authors and early Christianity in general inhabited a storied worldview.

⁶³ Cf. Denis Minns, "Truth and Tradition: Irenaeus" in *The Cambridge History of Early Christianity*, vol. 1: *Origins to Constantine*, 261–73, esp. 268–70; T. L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus and the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 193–95; P. Hefner, "Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus," *JR* 44 (1964): 294–309; J. Ochagavia, *Visible Patris Filius: A Study of Irenaeus's Teaching on Revelation and Tradition* (OrChrAn 171; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1964), 193–205.

⁶⁴ John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.

⁶⁵ Annette Y. Reed argues that Irenaeus saw no such dichotomy between Scripture and tradition, but this dichotomy was developed in later Christianity; cf. "ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ," esp. 11–15; see also Denis Minns, "Truth and Tradition," 268–70. In my view, John Behr is more nuanced in identifying an interplay in Irenaeus between the two distinct entities of Scripture and tradition; cf. *Asceticism and Anthropology*, 31. Likewise, Michael J. Kruger (*The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the NT Debate* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013], esp. 155–62) demonstrates that by the late second century there was—alongside Irenaeus—a widely-recognized canonical core of NT Scripture.

lens through which to read Scripture. The teachings of the apostles would soon after Irenaeus's time become the NT canonical corpus.

Irenaeus inherited his "ruled reading" as a deposit given by those who came before him, and indeed this rule has its origins in the NT. One can find summaries of the *regula fidei* in Justin Martyr, *Epistle to Diognetus*, Polycarp, and Ignatius.⁶⁶ In the NT, the clearest example of the metanarrative outlining the whole of Scripture is Luke 24:44–47, where the risen Jesus explains to the apostles that the tripartite Jewish canon pointed to his death and resurrection and to the spread of that *kerygma* to the nations.⁶⁷ Irenaeus takes his cue from Luke 24:44–47 in *Adversus haereses* 4.26.1 and explains how no one can understand the OT oracles except through the rubric given by Jesus after his resurrection. Luke also portrays Paul as preaching "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), and it is quite likely that this refers to the metanarrative of salvation in the Scriptures (Acts 28:23).⁶⁸ Elsewhere Paul describes the "mystery" (*μυστήριον*) made known by the preaching of the gospel (Eph 1:9; cf. Rom 16:25–27), namely, the dispensation (*οἰκονομία*) of God's plan of salvation (Eph 3:9). This "dispensation" was foretold by the prophets and fulfilled by Christ. Irenaeus inherited Paul's language of *οἰκονομία* and frequently used the lexeme to describe God's unfolding plan in Scripture, summarized in the Rule of Faith.⁶⁹ In fact, Irenaeus's entire work *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* is a summary of the OT dispensations that pointed to the coming salvation in Christ.⁷⁰

In short, Irenaeus's "ruled reading" is deeply grounded in an interpretive framework that the NT authors provide as the "whole counsel of God." The apostles entrusted this hermeneutic to their followers, and it eventually reached Irenaeus by the mid-second century. In this way Irenaeus preserves an orthodox method of reading Scripture that comes directly from the apostles. This forms the basis of his theological reflection and it safeguards against heresy. As we saw above, this ruled reading of Scripture united Irenaeus with the global catholic church of his day.

VI. CONCLUSION: APPLYING IRENAEUS'S LEGACY TO CURRENT GLOBAL THEOLOGY

Irenaeus is not a perfect example to follow; he certainly has views that we might not want to emulate today. His chiliasm can be somewhat eccentric, his zoology is tainted by the misconceptions of his Greek contemporaries, and some of

⁶⁶ Cf. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 13, 42; *Ep. Diogn.* 7, 11–12; *Pol. Phil.* 2; Ign. *Smyrn.* 1.

⁶⁷ Luke 24:44–47 and the tradition from which he is likely drawing were very influential in the writings of the early second century, e.g. the *Kerygma Petrou* and Justin Martyr's sources; cf. Oskar Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-text Tradition: Text Type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (Leuven: Brill, 1987), esp. 228–42, 433.

⁶⁸ Daniel J. Brendsel argues persuasively that the NT contains its own interpretive key that is later developed into the Rule of Faith by Irenaeus and others; cf. "Plots, Themes and Responsibilities: The Search for a Center of Biblical Theology Reexamined," *Them* 35/5 (2010): 400–12.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Haer.* 1.10.1; 1.10.3; 3.12.11; 4.20.6–7; 4.33.10; *Epid.* 6.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Epid.* 6.

his views on the conception of children are almost laughable.⁷¹ But as a Christian historical figure who firmly grasped the evangel and maintained the apostolic tradition, Irenaeus has proven to be a valuable resource for the church throughout the centuries. In this article we have traced three aspects of Irenaeus's theology: the translatability of the gospel, unity in diversity, and the metanarrative reading of Scripture. These three theological commitments have far-reaching implications for global theology today. First, the gospel's translatability is a central facet of the Christian faith and should lead to culturally sensitive theological reflection. Translation is a helpful metaphor in that it implies that there is an exterior message penetrating into the receiving culture. Theological reflection is not so much discovering truths about God that were already within one's culture, but rather describing in one's own language the great truths of the gospel that have come to us *extra nos*. This is the pattern that Irenaeus defends by referring repeatedly to the gospel that was "handed down" by the apostles and believed in the whole known world of his time. The gospel's central themes can and should be translated into every language and culture. Furthermore, no culture should be elevated above another, for we were all in Adam and have all been incorporated into Christ by his saving work through his death and resurrection. The process of translation should be led by the Holy Spirit who was at work at Pentecost and who is still at work today, moving in the hearts of men to understand the mystery of the gospel.

Second, Irenaeus's commitment to unity while celebrating diversity is a timely call to the global church. The Lausanne Movement and the International Consultation for Evangelical Theological Education are evidences that the legacy in which Irenaeus stood continues to this day.⁷² Irenaeus's theology of unity in diversity, founded on the fourfold Gospel, is particularly relevant to the task of global theology. In an era of global Christianity, the task of theology is no longer in the hands of only the West. Even more, the global church has recognized that theologizing cannot be done *aculturally*. As a result, diversity is rightfully celebrated amongst the differing insights gleaned from the frontiers of theological inquiry, whether they come from the cultural contexts of the Global South or North. In such diversity, is there a common norm that unites the differing cultural contexts, a rule to which all are accountable to adhere? Whence the authority for such a norm? According to Irenaeus, there is such an authoritative core confession that must be maintained. In this age of post-colonialism, there is a reticence for missionaries or theologians of any culture to advocate a universal standard for theology or Biblical interpretation. Any attempt to do so could easily be misinterpreted as theological hegemony reminiscent of colonial oppression. However, Irenaeus's pre-Constantinian teachings, written from the perspective of a persecuted Christian minority in a pagan Roman Empire, are a timely reminder that as a global body we must contend for church

⁷¹ Irenaeus, like his Second Sophistic contemporaries, suggests that chickens could be impregnated by the wind (cf. *Haer.* 2.12.14)—a view shared by Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Aelian—and that the images a woman saw during intercourse would have an effect on the child conceived (cf. *Haer.* 2.19.5–6); cf. Second, "Cultural Geography," 26 n. 8.

⁷² Cf. <http://www.icete.edu.org>.

unity around our common confession—a confession that does not change whether it is preached by evangelists from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America or Latin America. Perhaps Irenaeus's own example—as an Asian Greek, ministering in Gallic and Latin-speaking Lyons while warning the Roman episcopacy against Valentinian Gnosticism—testifies to the value of the diverse global Christian communities challenging one other to remain faithful to the gospel. As a modern-day example, Thomas Oden has recently argued that current African theologies have great potential to enrich other regions of global theology—engaging, challenging, and reforming them.⁷³

Finally, the third upshot of Irenaeus's theology: the metanarrative of salvation is that core standard for reading Scripture and for theological reflection. This is a *supracultural* hermeneutic for Scripture because it does not submit the text of Scripture to the scalpel of the readers, but it places the whole world within the story of Scripture, originating in Adam and brought together under Christ's headship. It is encouraging to see recent systematic theologies weave the key doctrines of the Christian faith into the centripetal force of the metanarrative of salvation, namely, the gospel.⁷⁴ This article suggests that Irenaeus championed this important theological insight, and the global community of theological reflection would do well to follow in his footsteps.⁷⁵

⁷³ Cf. Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 101–40.

⁷⁴ Cf. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); and Michael J. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

⁷⁵ The author wishes to thank Jon Laansma and Michael Graves for their very helpful input on an earlier draft of this article.