

Justification within Recapitulation: Irenaeus in Ecumenical Dialogue

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Abstract: Justification has a relatively minor place in Irenaeus's thought. He discusses it particularly in his polemics against Gnostic approaches to the Scriptures and to the law. Justification typically serves for Irenaeus within a broader, participatory framework of salvation. When we take these aspects into account, unexpected ecumenical possibilities open up between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. One of the most important lessons from Irenaeus's discussion on justification, therefore, is that justification should not be treated as an insulated doctrine. Instead, it is an aspect of participation in Christ's recapitulation and as such serves to uphold and strengthen our deifying union with God in Christ.

Justification should not be treated as an insulated doctrine; rather, it is an aspect of participation in Christ's recapitulation and as such serves to uphold and strengthen our deifying union with God in Christ.¹ This is perhaps the most significant insight to be drawn from Irenaeus's exposition on justification. One reason we should not ask the doctrine of justification to do too much of the soteriological heavy lifting is its relatively minor place within Irenaeus's theology. Ben Blackwell rightly comments: 'Like many Greek fathers, Irenaeus does not use the language of justification frequently, nor does he find it necessary to explain it in depth when he does'.² Valerie Karras suggests that, more broadly, 'over a period of a couple of centuries that includes the theologically rich fourth century, most Greek Fathers don't talk much about δικαιοσύνη ("justification")

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- 1 I would like to thank Erin Doom and my other friends at the Eighth Day Institute in Wichita, KS for inviting me to present a lecture as part of their Florovsky Week in 2018. This article has its origin in the lecture I delivered on that occasion.
- 2 Ben C. Blackwell, 'Paul and Irenaeus', in Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson, eds., *Paul and the Second Century: The Legacy of Paul's Life, Letters, and Teaching* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 205.

or “righteousness”) except when exegeting a passage using that term’.³ Justification plays a muted role among the early Greek Fathers, including Irenaeus.

To be sure, the late-second-century Bishop of Lyons does devote one important section of his main work, *Against Heresies*, to the doctrine of justification,⁴ but even here it is not justification as such, but the role of the law, that is central. Irenaeus simply does not concern himself with the debates that would later rage in the Western church between Augustine and the Pelagians, between Catholics and Protestants, or between ‘old’ and ‘new’ perspectives on Paul. This is not to deny that Irenaeus addresses some of the same questions that would also come up in these later Western debates; it is fairly evident that he does. But we must recall that Irenaeus devised *Against Heresies* to do battle with the Gnostics, and that justification played a subordinate role within his broader theology of salvation.

Put differently, while I believe that Irenaeus does shed light on key questions regarding justification such as the relationship between faith and works, the Pauline ‘works of the law’, and the role of imputation in justification, he frames his approach to these issues not as part of a debate on the ‘mechanics’ of justification. Instead, over against the Marcionite separation between old and new covenants, Irenaeus presents a plea for unity: the redeemer God is also the creator God, so that we dare not introduce two (or more) gods; and the new covenant is the legitimate continuation and unfolding of the old, so that it would be erroneous to suppose that God saves his people differently today than he did in days of old.

Recapitulation and participation as framework for justification

Nowhere does this emphasis on unity come to the fore more clearly in Irenaeus’s thought than in his confession of Christ as the one who ‘unites all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph. 1:10).⁵ Irenaeus takes the verb used here for ‘uniting’ all things – ἀνακεφαλαιῶω in Greek, or *recapitulare* in Latin – as the starting-point for his soteriology (and also his doctrine of justification). It is Irenaeus’s theology of recapitulation (objectively speaking) and our participation

3 Valerie A. Karras, ‘Beyond Justification: An Orthodox Perspective’, in William G. Rusch, ed., *Justification and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement: The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), pp. 99–100.

4 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (*haer.*) 4.12–17. Quotations from books 1–3 are taken from *St Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger, ed. Walter J. Burghardt et al., *Ancient Christian Writers* 55, 64 and 65 (Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1991, 2012); quotations from books 4 and 5 are taken from *Irenaeus against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Co., 1885).

5 Throughout I use the ESV as my translation of the biblical text.

in God through Christ (subjectively speaking) that together form the proper framework within which to understand Irenaeus's doctrine of justification.

Attacking his Gnostic opponents for teaching 'that Jesus was the vessel of Christ',⁶ so that the Son of God never truly became the son of man,⁷ Irenaeus counters with a ringing affirmation that all created things are united (or, are recapitulated) in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ:

There is, therefore, as we have shown, one God the Father and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who comes through every economy and *recapitulates in Himself all things (omnia in semetipsum recapitulans)*. Now, man too, God's handiwork, is contained in this 'all'. So He also recapitulated in Himself humanity (*hominem ergo in semetipsum recapitulans*); the invisible becoming visible; the incomprehensible, comprehensible; the impassible, passible; the Word, man. Thus He *recapitulated in Himself all things (universa in semetipsum recapitulans)*.⁸

Three times the Bishop of Lyons echoes here the Pauline language of recapitulation. He treats it as the key to a biblical soteriology that is capable of defeating the Gnostic and Marcionite heretics. Irenaeus insists there is but one God the Father and but one Jesus Christ, rejecting the notion that the creator God would be different from, and presumably inferior to, the redeemer God; and also the idea that the human Jesus would be someone different than the divine Christ. The paradoxical language that Irenaeus employs – 'the invisible becoming visible; the incomprehensible, comprehensible; the impassible, passible; the Word, man' – alludes to the reality of the incarnation and to the corresponding impossibility of separating created, human existence from the being of God. In Christ, God has really and ontologically, not just nominally and externally identified with us.⁹

Irenaeus links recapitulation particularly to Adamic existence. Taking his cue from Paul's distinction between the first and the second Adam (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–2), Irenaeus treats Adam as a type or figure of Christ.¹⁰ In this way he ties recapitulation to the restoration of humanity in three ways.¹¹ First, he maintains that the *birth* of Christ recapitulates the creation of Adam: as Adam was created 'from untilled and as yet virgin soil', so also, 'since he is the Word

6 *haer.* 3.16.1.

7 *haer.* 3.16.3.

8 *haer.* 3.16.6.

9 The juridical element is muted in the Greek Fathers, including Irenaeus. The reason is that justification is encapsulated within a broader soteriology of recapitulation and deification, which is ontological in character. Valerie Karras, 'Beyond Justification', pp. 111, 115, exaggerates the opposition between ontological and juridical categories, however, when she argues that that the Greek Fathers operate only with ontological or existential categories and not with juridical categories.

10 *haer.* 3.18.2; 3.18.7; 3.21.10; 5.16.3. Cf. Blackwell, 'Paul and Irenaeus', p. 201.

11 I discuss Christ's recapitulation as the second Adam in greater detail in Hans Boersma, 'Redemptive Hospitality in Irenaeus: A Model for Ecumenicity in a Violent World', *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002), pp. 216–19.

recapitulating Adam in Himself, He rightly took from Mary, who was yet a virgin, His birth that would be a recapitulation of Adam'.¹² Christ's birth from Mary is thus a recapitulation of the creation of Adam. Second, Irenaeus highlights the *obedience* of Christ in the face of temptation. It was necessary for the Son of God truly to become the son of man, insists Irenaeus, for 'if humankind had not overcome the enemy of humankind, the enemy would not justly have been overcome'.¹³ Three times, Jesus quoted the law against the adversary's temptation, so that his obedience checked and reversed Adam's disobedience. Thus, Christ 'in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things (*omnia recapitulans recapitulatus est*), both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam'.¹⁴ It is Christ's obedient resistance to temptation that constitutes his faithful recapitulation of Adamic life and so the reversal of the Adamic fate. Third, Irenaeus also includes Christ's *suffering and death* within the purview of his theory of recapitulation. The bishop expresses this perhaps most poignantly when he comments: 'And the sin that was wrought through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree, obedience to God whereby the Son of man was nailed to the tree'.¹⁵ It is Christ's obedient suffering and death on the cross that cancel out Adam's disobedience in Paradise.

Although it has already been implicit so far, I nonetheless should explicitly make the point that for Irenaeus Christ's recapitulation of Adam is inclusive in character. By that I mean that recapitulation is not something that takes place outside us, apart from us, yielding a righteousness that would then notionally or forensically be imputed to us. What Christ does in his recapitulation, ontologically affects us. Just as we are all included in the first Adam, so too we are all included in the second Adam. By taking on human flesh, the second Adam establishes a real connection with us, and it is that real link that enables us, through adoption, to share in Christ's sonship. Irenaeus asks rhetorically:

Really, in what way could we be partakers of filial adoption, unless we had received through the Son participation in Himself; unless His Word, having become flesh, had granted us communion (*communio*) in God? For that reason He also came [that is, lived] through every age, restoring to all the participation (*communio*) in God.¹⁶

Christ's recapitulation establishes a real or ontological bond with humanity. As the second Adam, he enters into *communio* with us. In no way, therefore, should we think of the link between Christ and humanity as merely an external or

12 *haer.* 3.21.10.

13 *haer.* 3.18.7.

14 *haer.* 5.21.1.

15 Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching (Epid.)*, 34. I use the edition translated and edited by Joseph P. Smith, *Ancient Christian Writers 16* (New York: Paulist Press, 1952). Irenaeus also uses the typology of the tree in *haer.* 5.16.3; 5.17.2–3; 5.19.1.

16 *haer.* 3.18.7; square brackets original.

nominal connection. Recapitulation (from the perspective of what Christ does, objectively) and participation (in terms of our subjective transfiguration in and through Christ) are real, ontological categories. And also in the subjoined doctrine of justification, a forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness has no place in Irenaeus's teaching.¹⁷ We are restored to communion with God inasmuch as Christ's recapitulation has forged a bond of communion between us and himself.

For Irenaeus, then, Christ's recapitulation unites us to God. The reason is that the Son of God has become the son of man, in order that the sons of men might share in the Son of God and through this adoption might be divinized. Repeatedly, Irenaeus spells out this connection between adoption and deification:

For the Word of God became man, and He who is God's Son became the Son of man to this end, [that man,] having been united with the Word of God (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τὸν λόγον χωρήσας; *commixtus Verbo Dei*) and receiving adoption, might become a son of God. Certainly, in no other way could we have received imperishability and immortality unless we had been united (*adumati*) with imperishability and immortality.¹⁸

Adoption through communion with Christ implies, in turn, participation in God and, therefore, deification: 'Unless the human race had been united (συνηνώθη; *conjunctus*) with God, it would not be partaker of imperishability'.¹⁹ Recapitulation thus points beyond external or legal categories. As Ben Blackwell puts it: 'This incorruption is not merely an item transferred from God to humans, nor death merely something destroyed. Only through union with God, communion with God, and participation in God are the divine attributes of life and incorruption enjoyed.'²⁰ Communion with God implies, on Irenaeus's understanding, participating in divine characteristics, most notably life and incorruption.

So, it is by virtue of Christ's recapitulation that the sons of men are adopted as sons of God and share in the divine life. Still, we need to ask: does this imply that *all* are included in Christ's recapitulation of the first Adam? In some sense, to ask the question is virtually to answer it. Irenaeus never tires of explaining

17 D.H. Williams, though he does not discuss Irenaeus per se, similarly argues: 'Instead of mitigating the contributions of the pre-Augustinian legacy, we may rather observe the ways in which it may serve to balance the Protestant insistence that the doctrine of justification is expressed only as the imputation of an alien or external righteousness to the sinner'. D.H. Williams, 'Justification by Faith: A Patristic Doctrine', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57 (2006), p. 667.

18 *haer.* 3.19.1; square brackets original; cf. 3.10.2; 3.16.3. Blackwell, 'Paul and Irenaeus', p. 201, points out that Irenaeus arrives at this exchange formula, along with the link between adoption and resurrection, by combining Gal. 4:4–6; Rom. 1:3–4; and Rom. 8:14–17.

19 *haer.* 3.18.7.

20 Ben C. Blackwell, 'Two Early Perspectives on Participation in Paul: Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria', in Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Constantine R. Campbell, eds., *In Christ' in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), p. 338.

that all are included.²¹ All the saints who lived prior to the incarnation are saved by virtue of Christ's recapitulation. Christ went to Hades to preach the forgiveness of sins for those who had believed in him and had announced his coming. All these, explains Irenaeus, 'are not justified of themselves, but by the advent of the Lord'.²² It is Christ who manifested himself in theophanic appearances to the patriarchs, including Abraham, so that they were able to put their faith in the coming of the Lord. Appealing to John 8:56, Irenaeus comments on Christ manifesting himself to Abraham:

He said to the Jews: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he should see my day; and he saw it, and was glad' [Jn. 8:56]. What is intended? 'Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness' [Rom. 4:3]. In the first place, [he believed] that He was the maker of heaven and earth, the only God; and in the next place that He would make his seed as the stars of heaven. This is what is meant by Paul, [when he says,] 'as lights in the world' [Phil. 2:15]. Righteously, therefore, having left his earthly kindred, he followed the Word of God, walking as a pilgrim with the Word, that he might [afterwards] have his abode with the Word.²³

According to Irenaeus – and here the entire pre-Nicene tradition will follow him – it is the Son of God who in the theophanies appeared to the patriarchs.²⁴ When Abraham put his faith in the Word that appeared to him, his faith was imputed to him for righteousness (Rom. 4:3; cf. Gen. 15:6).²⁵ And Abraham is

21 Cf. Karras's comment about Orthodox theology in general: 'Orthodoxy understands justification in Christ as restoring to *all* humanity the potential for immortality and communion with God lost in the Fall. This is because all human beings share the human nature of Jesus Christ, which was restored in the resurrection' ('Beyond Justification', p. 115).

22 *haer.* 4.27.2.

23 *haer.* 4.5.3. In this reference I have only added the square brackets with biblical references.

24 *haer.* 4.5.3. See Bogdan G. Bucur, 'Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective', *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008), pp. 67–93; Bogdan G. Bucur, 'The Early Christian Reception of Genesis 18: From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 (2015), pp. 245–72; Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God: Augustine's Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 11–97.

25 Cf. Irenaeus's comment a little further on:

Since, therefore, Abraham was a prophet, and saw in the Spirit the day of the Lord's coming, and the dispensation of His suffering, through whom both he himself and all who, following the example of his faith, trust in God, should be saved, he rejoiced exceedingly. The Lord, therefore, was not unknown to Abraham, whose day he desired to see [Jn. 8:56]; nor, again, was the Lord's Father, for he had learned from the Word of the Lord, and believed Him; wherefore it was accounted to him by the Lord for righteousness. For faith towards God justifies a man (*haer.* 4.5.5).

for Irenaeus just one (Pauline) instance of a patriarch being justified by faith in Christ: Christ spoke with all the patriarchs,²⁶ and they were all justified by faith and had the righteousness of the law in their hearts.²⁷

Those who after Christ's coming in the flesh put their faith in him are likewise included in his recapitulation and likewise participate in God's righteousness. After commenting that Abraham walked as a pilgrim with the Word,²⁸ Irenaeus goes on to write that those who follow Abraham's example are similarly saved by faith in Christ: 'Righteously also the apostles, being of the race of Abraham, left the ship and their father, and followed the Word. Righteously also we, possessing the same faith as Abraham, and taking up the cross as Isaac did the wood [Gen. 22:6], follow Him'.²⁹ From one perspective, then, all are included. Christ's recapitulation is the fulcrum of the entire story of redemption. Recapitulation saves all who belong to Christ, both before and after his incarnation.

At the same time, these Irenaean reflections on Abraham make clear that the bishop complements the objective element of recapitulation with a subjective aspect: we are called to make Christ's recapitulation our own. This tension between the objective (christological) aspect of recapitulation and the subjective (anthropological) element of participation or deification comes out beautifully when Irenaeus comments that Christ came 'to save all people through himself; I say all who would again be born to God'.³⁰ It is true that Christ makes himself present objectively through recapitulation, but it is equally necessary – and indispensable – for those who have witnessed him to put their faith in him and to follow him.³¹ That, after all, is what Abraham did. In that sense, we could say: for Irenaeus, Christ's recapitulation includes only those who *want* to be included, those who put their faith in Christ.³²

26 *haer.* 4.1.10.

27 *haer.* 4.16.3.

28 *haer.* 4.5.3.

29 *haer.* 4.5.4.

30 *haer.* 2.22.4.

31 While a strict application of the logic of recapitulation might lead to universalism, Irenaeus nonetheless insists on a final judgement with eternal consequences. Cf. Terrance L. Thiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993), pp. 161–2.

32 Karras, 'Beyond Justification', p. 116, comments: 'Whether or not human beings avail themselves of the redemption and restoration offered in Christ is dependent on how they exercise their human freedom by responding positively to union with Christ'. In general terms this seems right to me – though for Irenaeus the language of 'offered' may be too limiting with respect to Christ's work of recapitulation – as if he merely made it *possible* for us to be united with Christ. For Irenaeus, it is precisely by uniting himself with human nature in the incarnation that he saves us. The result is that Irenaeus is genuinely paradoxical: recapitulation saves all (objectively) but participation is equally dependent on active human participation (subjectively) in faith and works. Cf. the discussion in Hans Boersma, *Violence Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 126–32.

Justification: continuity and discontinuity with the law

It is at this point that we must begin our reflections on the inner workings of the doctrine of justification – keeping in mind our earlier caveats (1) that it lies encapsulated within the broader framework of recapitulation and participation; and (2) that Irenaeus does not develop the doctrine of justification at length and that when he does discuss it, he does so in the course of his treatment of the law in the service of his broader anti-Gnostic and anti-Marcionite train of thought. Our discussion of Abraham has already made clear that Irenaeus follows Paul in treating Abraham as the primary example of one who put his faith in Christ and so was justified. Faith is what justified Abraham, and we, following Abraham's faith, can also have our faith counted 'for righteousness' (*ad justitiam*).³³

Irenaeus discusses Abraham here as part of his argument that one and the same God makes himself known in both old and new covenants. Making his way toward the section where he discusses justification in greater detail than anywhere else – chapters 12–17 of book 4 – Irenaeus thus starts building his case against Marcion: by pitting the new over against the old, Marcion places Abraham with the old and thus cannot avoid excluding him from salvation. Marcion and his followers, by separating the God of the new covenant from the God of the old, 'exclude Abraham from the inheritance', charges Irenaeus directly.³⁴ This implication of Marcion's teaching is particularly reprehensible in Irenaeus's eyes because it is Abraham and his faith that Christ champions in the new dispensation (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:28),³⁵ and of course Marcion's separation also makes nonsense of Paul's argument that by faith we are children of Abraham.

The Bishop of Lyons faces a difficulty, however. The main argument he wants to make is an argument for unity. He does this resolutely, without hesitation or qualification: 'All things . . . are of one and the same substance, that is, from one and the same God'.³⁶ One and the same God, therefore, is the author of both covenants: 'One and the same householder produced both covenants, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who spake with both Abraham and Moses'.³⁷ Christ, the Word of God, initiated both covenants, according to Irenaeus. This is a radical argument for unity: Irenaeus does not simply maintain that one and the same *God* produced both covenants, but makes bold to argue that *Christ* is the one who did so. Christ, therefore, is the author of the old covenant – he is the one who spoke with Abraham and authored the law of Moses.

This intrepid argument could, however, backfire on Irenaeus. After all, does not the Apostle Paul link our faith back to that of Abraham – *bypassing* the law of Moses – precisely in order to problematize the law, which he seems to suggest was

33 *haer.* 4.5.5.

34 *haer.* 4.8.1; cf. 1.27.3. Cf. Joseph B. Tyson, 'Anti-Judaism in Marcion and His Opponents', *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1 (2005–6), p. 200.

35 *haer.* 4.8.1.

36 *haer.* 4.9.1.

37 *haer.* 4.9.1.

added just by way of parenthesis, as an interlude, 430 years after Abraham (Gal. 3:17)? But to link our faith with that of Abraham along with the suggestion that the law is simply abolished and done away with would add fuel to the Marcionite fire. Clearly, Irenaeus cannot go there. As a result, he enters upon a carefully calibrated theological discussion of the law and its function, one that avoids both the Scylla of Marcionite Christianity and the Charybdis of a Jewish Christianity.

In line with the overall concern of *Against Heresies*, the line of argument in chapters 12–17 is anti-Marcionite in character. Irenaeus explains that one author is behind both covenants³⁸ and that the Scriptures anticipate the coming of Christ.³⁹ As we will see, Irenaeus then narrows his discussion, focusing on the role of the law and arguing that the laws of nature – as reflected in the Decalogue – both preceded the law of Moses and continue in force after the coming of Christ, so that the Mosaic law (particularly in some of its ceremonial details) is no longer in force as an external, prescriptive code. The positive side of this argument (the permanence of the laws of nature) shores up the continuity between old and new covenants and thus serves to counter Marcionite Christianity; while the negative side of this argument (that the law has, in some sense, been abolished), holds at bay a Jewish type of Christianity, which fails to recognize the progress of the history of salvation.

The principle of recapitulation (or, we could say, of typology)⁴⁰ holds these poles of continuity and discontinuity together. Irenaeus's theology of recapitulation works on the assumption that Christ is the great archetype on which the various scriptural types are modeled. Thus, although *chronologically* the second Adam follows the first, *theologically*, for Irenaeus, the second Adam precedes the first. As Irenaeus famously puts it: 'For inasmuch as the Savior existed beforehand, it was necessary that what was to be saved should also exist, so that the Savior would not be something without a purpose'.⁴¹ Adam as a type was patterned on Christ as the archetype. Adam was created in the image of Christ, who in turn was the original, true image of God.⁴² On Irenaeus's

38 *haer.* 4.9.

39 *haer.* 4.10–11.

40 Recapitulation serves not only as the *soteriological* key in Irenaeus's thought, but also as the *interpretative* key: Christ as the archetype is typologically or figuratively foreshadowed in the Scriptures. See the discussion in Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), pp. 13–17.

41 *haer.* 3.22.3.

42 Cf. *haer.* 5.16.2:

For in times long past, it was *said* that man was created after the image of God, but it was not [actually] *shown*; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image man was created. Wherefore also he did easily lose the similitude. When, however, the Word of God became flesh, He confirmed both these: for He both showed forth the image truly, since He became Himself what was His image; and He re-established the similitude after a sure manner, by assimilating man to the invisible Father through means of the visible Word. (Brackets original)

understanding, therefore, the incarnation is not dependent on sin. While Irenaeus does employ the juridical language of remission and justification, this discourse lies anchored within a broader perspective: ever since creating Adam, God aimed at human maturation or participation in Christ and so at a deifying union with God. The juridical element merely serves to get the initial project of 'Christification' back on track.

If, theologically speaking, the second Adam precedes the first, then Irenaeus has every reason to see Christ as always already present in the Scriptures of the old covenant. They testify of Christ, argues Irenaeus with an appeal to John 5:39 (cf. 5:46). Indeed, claims the Bishop of Lyons, 'the Son of God is implanted everywhere throughout his [i.e., Moses's] writings'.⁴³ Christ, Irenaeus claims elsewhere,

is the treasure which was hid in the field, that is, in this world (for 'the field is the world' [Mt. 13:38]); but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ, since He was pointed out by means of types and parables (*διὰ τύπων και παραβολῶν; per typos et parabolos*).⁴⁴

The Son of God speaks with Abraham and eats with him, gives Noah the dimensions of the ark, inquires after Adam, brings judgement on Sodom, directs Jacob on his journey and speaks with Moses. Similarly, the Scriptures (as well as the prophets and other righteous men) anticipate and announce the coming and passion of the Son of God.⁴⁵ The continuity or unity of the old and the new is predicated on the Word of God being the author and the content of both.

The typological connection between old and new (with Christ being the archetypal reality always already present in the ancient Scriptures) allows Irenaeus not just to posit continuity but also discontinuity. After all, the archetype is greater than the types that foreshadow it. This means that the recapitulation principle functions to hold, at one and the same time, Marcionite opponents (who only accept the new) and Jewish antagonists (who simply insist on the old) at bay.⁴⁶ Christ's work of recapitulation implies both continuity and discontinuity.

How exactly Irenaeus understands the element of discontinuity is important, for it is here that he makes some of the key decisions in connection with justification. The first thing to observe is that Irenaeus in no way opposes faith

43 *haer.* 4.10.1.

44 *haer.* 4.26.1.

45 *haer.* 4.10.1–3.

46 When in *haer.* 4.26.1 Irenaeus has made the point that Christ is the treasure hidden in the Scriptures (cf. Mt. 13:44), he quite naturally proceeds with an anti-Jewish argument. To the Jews, he claims, the law is 'like a fable; for they do not possess the explanation of all things pertaining to the advent of the Son of God, which took place in human nature'.

to works. The two invariably go together. They did so for Abraham, they did so under the Mosaic dispensation, and they still do so in the new covenant. To be sure, a caveat is in order. We already saw Irenaeus highlighting faith in connection with Abraham. Referring to Romans 4:3, Irenaeus explains that Abraham believed God and that his faith was imputed to him for righteousness.⁴⁷ Faith in Christ is key to one's justification. Irenaeus repeatedly argues along with Paul (Rom. 3:30) that God justifies both the circumcised and the uncircumcised through faith.⁴⁸ Each time, the Bishop of Lyons uses this as evidence that there is only one Father; he justifies people through faith in both the old and the new covenants. We may even go so far as to suggest that in an important sense, justification, for Irenaeus, is by faith alone (*sola fide*). It is faith, not any of our actions, that initially unites us to Christ.

Irenaeus does not, however, play off this faith against love or a Christian walk of life. After mentioning justification by faith in *haer.* 4.5.3, he immediately proceeds to discuss the righteous walk of life, both of Abraham and the patriarchs and of Christian believers, in a passage that we already encountered earlier:

Righteously (*δικαίως*; *juste*), therefore, having left his earthly kindred, he [i.e., Abraham] followed the Word of God, walking as a pilgrim with the Word, that he might [afterwards] have his abode with the Word. Righteously (*δικαίως*; *juste*) also the apostles, being of the race of Abraham, left the ship and their father, and followed the Word. Righteously (*δικαίως*; *juste*) also do we, possessing the same faith as Abraham, and taking up the cross as Isaac did the wood, follow him.⁴⁹

Irenaeus sees Abraham, the apostles, and the believers all 'righteously' following the Word. Indeed, since the patriarchs had the Decalogue written in their hearts, loving God and neighbor, 'they had the righteousness of the law in themselves (*habebant in semetipsis justitiam Legis*)'.⁵⁰ Irenaeus even makes the comment that 'the Lord did not abrogate the natural [precepts] of the law, by which man is justified (*justificatur*), which also those who were justified by faith and who pleased God, did observe previous to the giving of the law'.⁵¹ Similarly, on one of the few occasions where Irenaeus actually speaks of forgiveness, in the context of a discussion of the healing of the paralytic (Mt. 9:1–8), Irenaeus makes a point of arguing that the forgiveness and the healing of the paralytic were intertwined. The paralysis was a 'consequence of sins',⁵² so that 'by remitting

47 *haer.* 4.5.3.

48 *haer.* 3.10.2; 4.22.2; 5.22.1.

49 *haer.* 4.5.3–4; second pair of square brackets original.

50 *haer.* 4.16.3.

51 *haer.* 4.13.1. Irenaeus may have in mind the uncircumcised who follow the natural law (cf. Rom. 2:27).

52 *haer.* 5.17.2.

sins, He did indeed heal man'.⁵³ Irenaeus does not isolate forgiveness from renewal.⁵⁴

Justification by faith, not by the law

Irenaeus's argument, therefore, is not that of the Reformation against Catholic teaching. He does not oppose justification by works as such (though he repeatedly speaks of justification by faith and never really talks about justification by works).⁵⁵ Rather, he specifically opposes justification by *certain kinds* of works: works of the law. In other words, for Irenaeus it is not faith versus works per se, but faith versus the law.

In articulating his position, Irenaeus focuses on three aspects. First, he reiterates over against the Marcionites that the law itself was never a problem in the first place. God is the one who gave it, and so 'the law does indeed declare the Word of God from the Father'.⁵⁶ Even if the law does not perfectly set forth God's will (since, as we will see, it accommodated the Israelites' immaturity), it nonetheless was God's own, good gift to his people. Irenaeus, therefore, does not object to the law as such. Instead, he objects to specific traditions the Jews subsequently added to the law. As he discusses Jesus's healing on the Sabbath of a bent-over woman unable to straighten herself (Lk. 13:10–17), Irenaeus points out that 'the law did not prohibit men from being healed upon the Sabbaths' and merely prohibited 'servile work' and 'worldly business'.⁵⁷ Similarly, Irenaeus presents a detailed explanation of how it is that the disciples acted in line with the law of Moses when on the Sabbath they ate some of the grain of the fields (Lk. 6:1–5).⁵⁸ What this shows, according to Irenaeus, is that the Lord 'did not make void, but fulfilled the law'.⁵⁹ Irenaeus points out that Jesus chastised the Pharisees for breaking the law while at the same time adding the so-called 'tradition of the elders': 'Desiring to uphold these traditions, they were unwilling

53 *haer.* 5.17.3.

54 As part of a broader argument that numerous patristic notions anticipate the Reformation teaching of justification, Nick Needham quotes a section from *haer.* 5.17.4 in support for his view that 'Irenaeus interprets the nonimputation of sin as the remission and forgiveness of sin and debt'. Nick Needham, 'Justification in the Early Church Fathers', in Bruce L. McCormack, ed., *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006), p. 32. Needham overlooks, however, Irenaeus's linking forgiveness with healing, and he fails to allude either to the underrepresentation of forgiveness in Irenaeus or to his broader understanding of righteousness in believers' lives.

55 To be sure, as we just saw, Irenaeus does mention 'the natural [precepts] of the law, by which man is justified (*justificatur*)' (*haer.* 4.13.1; square brackets original).

56 *haer.* 5.21.3.

57 *haer.* 4.8.2.

58 *haer.* 4.8.3.

59 *haer.* 4.8.2.

to be subject to the law of God, which prepares them for the coming of Christ'.⁶⁰ Irenaeus explains Paul's comment that the Jews sought to establish their own righteousness while not submitting to God's (Rom. 10:3) as referring, not to an attempt to earn one's own salvation – a common reading within Protestant thought⁶¹ – but to the practice of adding to the law the 'tradition of the elders', which he says 'they had invented', and through which 'they made the law of God to none effect'.⁶²

Second, Irenaeus argues at some length that circumcision, Sabbath, and sacrifices have all been abolished. Circumcision and Sabbath were never meant as the completer of righteousness'.⁶³ Instead, both functioned as 'signs' (*signa*) (Gen. 17:11; Ex. 31:3) that 'were not unsymbolical' (*non sine symbolo*): circumcision of the flesh typified (*praefigurabat*) spiritual circumcision (Col. 2:11), and the Sabbaths taught symbolically that we should continually be consecrated to God (Rom. 8:36) and abstain from avarice (Mt. 6:19), while awaiting the eternal rest of God.⁶⁴ Irenaeus appeals to Abraham, Lot, Noah, and Enoch, who were all justified without circumcision or Sabbath.⁶⁵ God never really wanted the sacrificial system, argues Irenaeus, since – having in himself 'all the odour of kindness, and every perfume of sweet-smelling savours' – God has no need for sacrifices.⁶⁶ The Bishop of Lyons quotes numerous biblical passages in support of his conviction that God does not desire offerings but wants a sacrifice of obedience or of praise instead.⁶⁷

60 *haer.* 4.12.1.

61 *haer.* 4.12.4. Calvin, *Comm.* Rom. 10:3, contrasts the righteousness of men ('that which they derive from themselves, or believe that they bring before God') with the righteousness of God (which people put on 'when the righteousness of Christ is imputed to them'). Cf. also John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), pp. 191–5.

62 Michael Jin Choi, in an argument that tries to pit Irenaeus over against the new perspective on Paul, argues that Irenaeus objects to 'zeal or self-achievement apart from God'. Michael Jin Choi, 'Irenaeus on Law and Justification', *Expository Times* 130 (2018), p. 58. Choi appeals to *haer.* 4.11.4, where Irenaeus argues against 'those who pretend that they do themselves observe more than what has been prescribed (*plus quam quae dicta*), as if preferring their own zeal (*diligentiam suam*) to God Himself, while within they are full of hypocrisy, and covetousness, and all wickedness'. However, it should be clear that what Irenaeus has in mind with people's 'own zeal' is the addition of human tradition (*plus quam quae dicta*), so that this zeal is problematic inasmuch as it is their own. Nowhere does Irenaeus allude to the danger of 'self-achievement'.

63 *haer.* 4.16.1.

64 *haer.* 4.16.1.

65 *haer.* 4.16.2.

66 *haer.* 4.14.3.

67 Irenaeus quotes 1 Sam. 15:22; Pss. 40:6; 51:17; 50:9, 14–15; Isa. 1:11; Jer. 6:20; 7:2–4, 21–4; 9:24; Isa. 43:23–4; 66:2; Jer. 11:15; Isa. 58:6–9; Zech. 7:9–10; 8:16–17; Ps. 34:12–14; Hos. 6:6; Mt. 12:7 (*haer.* 4.17.1–4).

Irenaeus is not content negatively to show from Scripture that God does not need sacrifices, but he goes out of his way to make clear that in many of these passages God positively enjoins something else – a righteous way of life that cares for the poor, the stranger, and widows and orphans. Irenaeus concludes: ‘From all these it is evident that God did not seek sacrifices and holocausts from them, but faith, and obedience, and righteousness, because of their salvation’.⁶⁸ According to Irenaeus, then, God wants faith and obedience, not sacrifices. And he then goes on to explain that the Eucharist that the church sacrifices to God consists of God’s own gifts.⁶⁹ In this way, God ‘takes our good works (*bonas operationes nostras*) to Himself for this purpose, that He may grant us a recompense of His good things’.⁷⁰

Throughout this discussion, Irenaeus treats circumcision, Sabbath, and sacrifices as identity markers.⁷¹ He speaks of circumcision as something that allowed others to recognize the ‘race of Abraham’ (*genus Abrahae*).⁷² And he maintains that faith and obedience – which he sees as following the law of liberty (*libertatis lex*)⁷³ – abolish these Mosaic regulations.⁷⁴ For Irenaeus, the question of justification is closely tied up both with hermeneutics and with ecclesiology: it is not those who circumcise, observe Sabbath and offer sacrifices, but those who through faith (and obedience) identify with Christ, that read the Scriptures aright and will be saved.⁷⁵

Irenaeus’s opposition to law observance is not limited, however, to the identity markers of circumcision, Sabbath, and sacrifices.⁷⁶ These Mosaic

68 *haer.* 4.17.4. The phrase ‘because of their salvation’ (*propter illorum salutem*) is ambiguous. Depending on how one renders *propter*, Irenaeus may either mean that God sought faith, obedience and righteousness because they *had* been saved or in order that they *might* be saved.

69 *haer.* 4.17.5; 4.18.5–6.

70 *haer.* 4.18.6.

71 James D.G. Dun and N.T. Wright both treat the Pauline ‘works of the law’ (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10 – which they argue refers to circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws – as Jewish identity markers, so that Paul’s rejection of justification by works would be an ecclesiological statement: the Christian identity marker would be faith rather than ‘works of the law’. See James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 111; N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), pp. 116–17.

72 *haer.* 4.16.1; cf. 3.12.11. Cf. Matthew J. Thomas, *Paul’s ‘Works of the Law’ in the Perspective of Second Century Reception* (Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), p. 199.

73 *haer.* 4.34.4.

74 Cf. *haer.* 4.16.5: ‘These things, therefore, which were given for bondage (*servitutem*), and for a sign (*signum*) to them, He cancelled (*circumscripsit*) by the new covenant of liberty’.

75 Cf. Irenaeus’s polemic against ‘Marcion and his followers when they [seek to] exclude Abraham from the inheritance’ (*haer.* 4.8.1; brackets original).

76 Irenaeus uses the expression ‘works of the law’ only once (*haer.* 4.21.1), and he gives no indication that only, say, circumcision, Sabbath, and sacrifices are to be considered ‘works of the law’.

requirements are merely the most obvious indications that the Mosaic law *as a whole* has been rendered inoperative – at least, in terms of its external, prescriptive character.⁷⁷ This is the third key element of Irenaeus's opposition to justification by the law. One cannot be justified by the Mosaic law, because in an important respect the whole thing has been abolished. God 'does not wish those who are to be redeemed to be brought again under Mosaic legislation', insists Irenaeus, 'for the law has been fulfilled by Christ'.⁷⁸ The reason he gives for this supersession of the law is the gift of the Spirit under the new covenant, in which the Lord writes the law on people's hearts (cf. Jer. 31:31–4).⁷⁹

Again, Irenaeus does not suggest that the law itself was problematic. It was simply part of God's pedagogy in maturing humanity and became superfluous once God had reached the purpose of his training. Irenaeus believes that after the advent of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, we no longer have 'need of the law as pedagogue'.⁸⁰ the pedagogical process of maturation has arrived at its climax once the new covenant has been introduced.⁸¹

Irenaeus's treatment of redemptive history as a pedagogical process is closely linked to the way he treats justification. Adam and Eve were created as infants, and it is only through a long history of training, culminating in Christ, that they would attain to maturity and immortality in the vision of God.⁸² This pedagogical approach features prominently when Irenaeus discusses the role of the law. For Irenaeus, salvation history is not marked by steady or consistent progress. On his reading, the law, while it is God's own gift to his people, marks a regression of sorts. Prior to the law, the patriarchs 'had the righteousness of the law in themselves',⁸³ and so they had no need for a law to restrain them. 'But when this righteousness and love to God had passed into oblivion' in Egypt, the disobedient had to be restrained, and God therefore gave specific laws that

77 Choi, 'Irenaeus on Law and Justification', pp. 56–8. correctly points out that in *Epid.* 35 and in *haer.* 4.34.2, Irenaeus takes Paul's 'law' in Rom. 3:21 and 4:13 as referring not to specific identity markers but to the Mosaic law as a whole.

78 *Epid.* 89.

79 *Epid.* 89–90.

80 *Epid.* 96.

81 Irenaeus also mentions that the law made the Israelites aware of their sins. He explains that the law 'put a burden on humankind, which had sin in itself, and showed humans to be deserving of death. For since the law was spiritual, it merely manifested sin, but it did not get it out of the way' (*haer.* 3.18.7). In line with this, Irenaeus speaks of the 'condemnation' of Christ that was 'merited by the disobedience' (*haer.* 3.19.3). But nowhere does he use the Pauline term 'pedagogue' (Gal. 3:24) for this function of the law in the old covenant. I should perhaps also note that Irenaeus makes no mention of the convicting role of the law for new covenant believers (which in Reformed theology is often called the *usus elencticus* or *usus paedagogicus*).

82 Cf. *haer.* 3.22.4; 4.20.5; 4.38.1–4; *Epid.* 14–15. See further Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), pp. 401–4.

83 *haer.* 4.16.3.

regulated what love for him and for one's neighbor ought to look like; the Decalogue thus 'prepared man for His friendship'.⁸⁴ The law thus became necessary when the Israelites lapsed into idolatry:

When they turned themselves to make a calf, and had gone back in their minds to Egypt, desiring to be slaves instead of freemen, they were placed for the future in a state of servitude suited to their wish, – [a slavery] which did not indeed cut them off from God but subjected them to the yoke of bondage.⁸⁵

So, while Abraham had not been in need of the law, the Israelites coming out of Egypt were slaves, and as such they did need the law as 'bondage' (*servitus*) until Christ would come to set us free.⁸⁶

The pedagogy of the law comes to the fore particularly when Irenaeus explains that in various stages God was 'accustoming (*assuescens*) man to bear His Spirit'.⁸⁷ With regard to the law and the subsequent coming of Christ, Irenaeus comments that

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 [Lk. 15:22–3]. Thus, in a variety of ways, He adjusted (*componens*) the human race to an agreement with salvation . . . And the Word, passing through all those [men], did liberally confer benefits upon His subjects, by drawing up in writing a law adapted and applicable (*congruentem et aptam*) to every class [among them].⁸⁸

84 *haer.* 4.16.3.

85 *haer.* 4.15.1; brackets original. Cf. *haer.* 4.16.5: 'The laws of bondage (*servitutis*), however, were one by one promulgated to the people by Moses, suited for their instruction or for their punishment'.

86 Cf. *haer.* 4.13.4:

But this is our Lord, the Word of God, who in the first instance certainly drew slaves to God, but afterwards He set those free who were subject to Him, as He does Himself declare to His disciples: 'I will not now call you servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends, for all things which I have heard from My Father I have made known' [Jn. 15:15]. For in that which He says, 'I will not now call you servants,' He indicates in the most marked manner that it was Himself who did originally appoint for men that bondage (*servitutem*) with respect to God through the law, and then afterwards conferred upon them freedom.

87 *haer.* 4.14.2. God's accommodation to the Israelites' servile character implies, according to Irenaeus, that the law is less than perfect. He mentions that 'Ezekiel the prophet, when stating the reasons for the giving of such a law, declares: "And their eyes were after the desire of their heart; and I gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments in which they shall not live" [Ezek. 20:24–5]' (*haer.* 4.15.1).

88 *haer.* 4.14.2; square brackets added only for text reference.

The Mosaic law was thus a form of bondage (*servitus*) that fitted the people's servile attitude. Jesus, explains Irenaeus, explicitly makes the point that the law of divorce was 'on account of their hardness (*duritiā*) [of heart]' (cf. Mt. 19:7–8).⁸⁹ The purpose of this and other laws was that the Israelites might 'learn to love Him with the whole heart'.⁹⁰ In short, for Irenaeus the law was a gift of God suited to the immature, servile character of the ancient Israelites and from the beginning was meant to be superseded once the divine pedagogy would have reached its aim.

The language of 'bondage' (*servitus*) draws attention to the external and restrictive character of the Mosaic law. In no way does Irenaeus suggest that this external bondage of the law implied legalism, in the sense of a system that requires one meritoriously to establish one's own salvation.⁹¹ The reason we no longer need the law today is simply that its aim – love of God and love of neighbor – has been reached. On this point, the new perspective on Paul marks a constructive retrieval of the patristic approach to the law, one that moves us beyond the dilemmas of the Reformation.⁹² It is this love, insists Irenaeus, that both Jesus and Paul continue to teach (cf. Mt. 22:40; Rom. 13:10; 1 Cor. 13:13).⁹³

89 *haer.* 4.15.2.

90 *haer.* 4.15.2.

91 Choi suggests that when under the old covenant people did not turn to Christ, their religion turned to legalism ('Irenaeus on Law and Justification', pp. 60–1). Irenaeus, however, merely describes the problem as adherence to a system of 'bondage'; in other words, the problem is that of holding to an external guide after the internal gift of the Spirit has been made. Depending on one's definition, I suppose one may call this 'legalism', but in that case *all* obedience to the law under the old covenant would have to be termed 'legalism'; 'nomism' would be a better term to describe what Irenaeus has in mind. Irenaeus's objections to the law as 'external' do not imply a religion of 'self-achievement' ('Irenaeus on Law and Justification', p. 58) or an attitude in which people merely 'pay their dues' ('Irenaeus on Law and Justification', p. 60). Thomas, *Paul's 'Works of the Law'*, p. 200, rightly comments, therefore, that "'legalism" would not accurately characterize the significance of observing works of the law according to Irenaeus'.

92 After quoting Rom. 10:3–4, which includes the disputed statement that 'Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes', Irenaeus comments: 'And how is Christ the end of the law, if He be not also the final cause of it? For He who has brought in the end has Himself also wrought the beginning' (*haer.* 4.12.4). Irenaeus here posits that Christ is the one who gave the law and is also its goal and conclusion. N.T. Wright's rendering (*pace* the Reformation) is similar:

Thus 10:4, one of the most controversial verses in Paul (because *telos* can mean 'end' and 'goal,' and because Paul seems to mean some combination of the two with the weight on the latter), gives off its full resonances not within the Lutheran scheme whereby the law is a bad thing abolished in Christ, nor within the Calvinist scheme whereby the law is a good thing which Christ obeyed and thus procured 'righteousness' (works-righteousness, we note) to be then 'imputed' to those who believe, but within Paul's own Jewish framework of thought, the narrative of God and his faithfulness to Israel which has reached its destination in the Messiah. (Wright, *Justification*, p. 244)

93 *haer.* 4.12.2.

Irenaeus puts it perhaps most succinctly and clearly in his *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*:

Since, then, life has been given to us through this calling, and God has restored again in us Abraham's faith in Him, we should no more turn back, I mean, to the former legislation. For we have received the Lord of the Law, the Son of God; and through faith in Him we learn to love God with our whole heart, and our neighbour as ourselves; but the love of God is without all sin, and love of one's neighbour works no evil to the neighbour.⁹⁴

According to Irenaeus, now that we have the Lord of the law, we no longer need the external regulations and restrictions.

The law as a whole has been superseded; circumcision, Sabbath, and sacrifices in particular no longer pertain. Still, Irenaeus is careful how he articulates this abolition of the law. He insists, at least for the most part, that this supersession of the law does not pertain to the Decalogue. When Jesus quotes several of the Ten Commandments to the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:18) who turns out to be unable to give his possessions to the poor, Irenaeus explains that Jesus here simply teaches 'that they should obey the commandments which God enjoined from the beginning, and do away with their former covetousness by good works, and follow after Christ'.⁹⁵ By obeying the Decalogue one follows after Christ. It is this same Decalogue that the patriarchs already followed, even though they did not yet have it in writing. They 'had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbour'.⁹⁶ They followed the Decalogue by obeying the laws of nature. Apart from these 'natural precepts, which from the beginning He had implanted in mankind', one cannot attain salvation, insists Irenaeus.⁹⁷ The Decalogue thus functions for Irenaeus as an exception to the general rule that the law has been abolished. The reason is that the Decalogue is close to being identical to natural law and to the twofold love command that is the fulfilling of the law.

Even the Decalogue, however, has something of the law's external, prescriptive character. But rather than suggest that also the Decalogue is abolished, Irenaeus argues that it is extended or deepened.⁹⁸ When Jesus says

94 *Epid.* 95.

95 *haer.* 4.12.5.

96 *haer.* 4.16.3.

97 *haer.* 4.15.1. Cf. Thomas, *Paul's 'Works of the Law'*, pp. 196–7.

98 Irenaeus is not entirely consistent here. Because the Decalogue is nearly identical to the laws of nature, he insists on it being extended rather than set aside. But in *Epid.* 96, Irenaeus uses the Sermon on the Mount to argue that 'we have no need of the law as pedagogue' and that the law no longer tells us not to commit adultery, to kill, to covet, etc. The reasons he gives here are very similar to the ones he gives in *haer.* 4.17 for arguing that the sacrificial system is done away with. In other words, in *Epid.* 96 Irenaeus treats the Decalogue in the same way he treats sacrifices elsewhere – as an external prescription that is no longer needed.

that to look at a woman lustfully is already adultery (Mt. 5:27–8), that it's not just murder but even just anger that makes one liable to judgement (Mt. 5:21–2), and that we should not merely avoid swearing falsely but should not take an oath at all (Mt. 5:33–7), Irenaeus concludes: 'All these do not contain or imply an opposition (*contrarietatem*) to and an overturning (*dissolutionem*) of the [precepts] of the past, as Marcion's followers do strenuously maintain; but [they exhibit] a fulfilling (*plenitudinem*) and an extension (*extensionem*) of them'.⁹⁹ The extension, explains Irenaeus, is threefold: (1) we now must believe not just in the Father but also in his Son; (2) we must now not only say but also do; and, especially, (3) we must now not just abstain from evil deeds but 'even from the desires' after them.¹⁰⁰ What Irenaeus seems to have in mind is that the extension or fulfilling of the Decalogue takes us beyond its external, prescriptive character, so that much like Abraham, we again have the law written on our hearts.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

It would be difficult precisely to align Irenaeus's views with the approaches of Catholics, traditional Protestants, or adherents of the new perspective. To be sure, it is possible to make some observations that have a bearing on such discussions, and by way of conclusion I should perhaps begin there. First, Irenaeus does not hold to a forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness. When he uses the imputation language of Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6, it is clear that he holds that it is faith, not Christ's righteousness, that God imputes to us.¹⁰² In traditional dogmatic language, we could say that it is faith as our own inherent righteousness that Irenaeus believes God (juridically) imputes to us. In terms of this key issue between Catholicism and Protestantism, Irenaeus would unambiguously seem to side with the Catholic position.

Second, when we ask whether there is also a justification by works for Irenaeus, the answer is slightly more complex. Irenaeus almost entirely avoids the language of 'justification by works'. Nor does he distinguish clearly between

99 *haer.* 4.13.1; cf. 4.13.3. Cf. also 4.16.4: 'The Lord Himself did speak in His own person to all alike the words of the Decalogue; and therefore, in like manner, do they remain permanently with us, receiving by means of His advent in the flesh, extension and increase, but not abrogation (*extensionem et augmentum, sed non dissolutionem*)'.

100 *haer.* 4.13.1.

101 Irenaeus mentions that prior to Moses, 'the righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls' (*haer.* 4.16.3), and that with the gifting of the Spirit the promise of Jer. 31:33 (that God would write the law on people's hearts) has been fulfilled (*Epid.* 90). Irenaeus refers to this fulfillment when he mentions 'barbarians who believe in Christ' and have 'salvation written in their hearts through the Spirit, without paper and ink' (*haer.* 3.4.2).

102 *haer.* 4.5.3; 4.8.3; 4.16.3.

initial and continuing justification – the former perhaps being by faith only and the latter also by works.¹⁰³ Irenaeus does, however, speak of Abraham ‘righteously’ (*juste*) following the Word of God¹⁰⁴ and makes clear that both the patriarchs and we today have the ‘righteousness of the law’ written on our hearts.¹⁰⁵ Clearly, Irenaeus would not have had any difficulty accepting that God imputes also this righteousness to us – even if he does not use the language of justification by works. To be sure, the absence of ‘merit’ discourse in Irenaeus holds some significance. Unlike the later Catholic tradition, Irenaeus does not suggest that we merit eternal life condignly or properly.¹⁰⁶ Because the notions of recapitulation and participation form the broad framework within which Irenaeus expounds his doctrine of justification, our righteousness is always a (partial) participation in God. The language of condign merit does not fit well within such a participatory framework.

Third, the new perspective retrieves a genuine patristic insight when it describes Paul’s ‘works of the law’ as Jewish identity markers. For Irenaeus, the main identity markers are circumcision, Sabbath, and sacrifices. At the same time, however, for Irenaeus it is not *only* these three elements that are ‘works of the law’ and that function as identity markers. Rather, he treats the entire law (except the Decalogue) as an identity marker, and presumably he would have regarded *any* observance of the law as observance of works of the law (or, we could say, as an attempt to be justified by works of the law). For Irenaeus, it is faith (in Christ) and love (of God and neighbor) that mark the identity of Christians and that constitute true fulfillment of the law. In no way, then, does Irenaeus worry that Jewish law observance might imply reliance on human

103 The distinction between initial and ongoing justification plays an important role in ecumenical discussion. Reformation theologians commonly taught a ‘twofold righteousness’. John Calvin, for instance, recognizes a ‘works righteousness’, as long as one understands it as included under faith and subordinated to it. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion [Inst.]*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.17.9–10), and Martin Bucer speaks of a *secundaria iustificatio* as a result of works. See Brian Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer’s Doctrine of Justification: Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irenicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 178. Not surprisingly, the notion of a ‘twofold righteousness’ was the key to the agreement reached at the 1541 Regensburg Colloquy. See Anthony N. S. Lane, ‘Twofold Righteousness: A Key to the Doctrine of Justification? Reflections on Article 5 of the Regensburg Colloquy (1541)’, in Mark Husbans and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Leicester: Apollos, 2004), pp. 205–24.

104 *haer.* 4.5.3.

105 *haer.* 4.16.3; cf. 3.4.1.

106 Thomas Aquinas argues that we merit eternal life condignly, not ‘as regards the substance of the work, and inasmuch as it springs from the free-will’, ‘because of the very great inequality’. But he goes on to suggest that when we consider that the Spirit makes us ‘a partaker of the Divine nature’, we should understand eternal life as the outcome of condign merit (*ST I-II*, q. 114, a. 3).

achievement or merit.¹⁰⁷ The problem with law observance is, instead, (1) that it puts us back into an earlier, inferior stage of the divine pedagogy; and (2) that it would probably also entail the observance of additional manmade laws and traditions.

Everything I have said so far about justification by way of conclusion must be refracted through the lens the two key concepts of recapitulation and participation. Irenaeus, rightly I think, does not treat justification as the central category by which to understand salvation. The two key concepts are recapitulation (by which Christ, objectively, incorporates humanity in his salvific life) and participation or deification (by which we, subjectively, are conformed through faith and love to the character of God in Christ). Justification, in other words, while it retains a juridical aspect, is for Irenaeus one element within a broader soteriology, which as a whole is ontological in character. Our faith and righteousness enable us to share in Christ as the new humanity, the second Adam. And by sharing in Christ we are made alive and so rendered immortal; in other words, we are divinized as children of God. This means salvation is not an external or nominal affair but is a matter of real or ontological participation in the life of God.

The Western debates about justification would benefit, it seems to me, from a good dose of Greek patristic theology. At the least, it would take the sharp edges off some of the debates surrounding faith and works. Catholics would perhaps become somewhat more cautious about the language of meriting eternal life. The Christian pilgrimage of love is, after all, simply an initial participation in God's own character by virtue of Christ's recapitulation. In no way are works autonomous human achievements. Although Catholic theology recognizes this – it is important, for example, to recall that Aquinas speaks of condign merit in the context of deification – nonetheless, a preponderance of merit discourse may serve to highlight the juridical at the cost of the ontological. Justification (and the language of merit) should play only a subservient role in the doctrine of salvation.

Traditional Protestants have perhaps the most to gain from a retrieval of Irenaeus's understanding of justification. Forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness foregrounds a sensibility that is entirely legitimate – namely, that it is only by seeking refuge in Christ that we can be saved. But the logic of forensic imputation is not the right instrument to shore up this valid concern. After all, Paul does not use the language of imputation in connection with

107 Human achievement and merit are not the same. Irenaeus is a strong adherent to free-will. See, for instance, *haer.* 4.37.1–5; 4.38.4; 4.39.3. Cf. Hans Boersma, 'Accommodation to What? Univocity of Being, Pure Nature, and the Anthropology of St Irenaeus', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), pp. 287–8. Thus, the language of 'human achievement' may in some sense be appropriate to describe Irenaeus's understanding of salvation: Irenaeus is a synergist. But he does not suggest that we can merit our salvation.

Christ's righteousness but employs it to articulate the imputation of the righteousness of our own faith (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6).¹⁰⁸ Theologically, what is at stake here is the recognition that when God justifies us he transfigures us. The language of *simul iustus et peccator* is particularly troubling – at least, whenever it is meant to imply that Christ's righteousness simply covers over our own continuing sinfulness. Such a strictly forensic imputation is also at odds, I think, with some of the better Reformation insights, which recognize that it is by means of genuine union with Christ that we are justified and sanctified.¹⁰⁹ The focus on union with Christ would, if consistently maintained, lead to a retrieval of the Irenaean notions of recapitulation and theosis. Irenaeus, I think, had it right: justification is a subset of our deifying union with God in and through the recapitulation of humanity in Christ.

108 Cf. Gundry's laconic comment: 'If Paul had meant that the righteousness of Christ replaces our sins, we would expect him to have said so'. Robert Gundry, 'The Nonimputation of Christ's Righteousness', in Husbands and Treier, *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, p. 42.

109 For John Calvin, faith leads to union with Christ, which then gives the believer the twofold grace (*duplex gratia*) of justification and sanctification. J. Todd Billings rightly points out: 'Although the righteousness that the believers come to possess is formally external to themselves, Calvin uses the images of union, adoption, engrafting, and participation to describe this "wondrous exchange" so that the imputation is not from "a distance" but from union with Christ'. J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 106–7. The tension in Calvin's thought seems palpable at this point. After all, for Calvin, God's acceptance of us in justification 'consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness' (*Inst.* 3.11.2). It is not clear to me how this external justifying righteousness fits with Calvin's robust theology of union and participation.