

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Irenaeus on the Authority of Scripture, the ‘Rule of Truth’ and Episcopacy (Part 2)

R J R Paice

The Function of Bishops

One of the first occurrences of the description of the function of a bishop is in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses*, where it forms part of a comparison with Gnostic false teachers (III.iii.1; p. 415)¹:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Church, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about.

The bishops in this succession are responsible for preserving continuously the apostolic tradition (III.iii.2; p. 415:

Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized by the two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops.

The bishops ‘expound the Scriptures to us without danger, neither blaspheming God, nor dishonouring the patriarchs, nor despising the prophets’ (IV.xxvi.5; p. 498). In other words, they teach from the Scriptures, regarding them as having their own authority, and do not question or overthrow them. There is a

repeated stress on their teaching the doctrine of the apostles. In III.iii.3 (p. 416) Irenaeus lists the succession of Linus as an example, and concludes:

In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth.

The emphasis on the doctrine of the apostles is seen elsewhere:

But Polycarp also was instructed by the apostles and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true [III.iii.4; p. 416]. From all such persons, therefore, it behoves us to keep aloof, but to adhere to those who, as I have already observed, do hold the doctrine of the apostles, and who, together with the order of priesthood (presbyterii ordine), display sound speech and blameless conduct for the confirmation and correction of others. [IV.xxvi.4; p. 497].

There are a number of issues about which there is more debate. As well as the handing down of apostolic doctrine, there is also a stress on ecclesiastical constitution (ordination and succession). Often succession is mentioned as well as apostolic doctrine, for example in II.iii.3 (p. 416):

Soter having succeeded Anicetus, Eleutherius does now, in the twelfth place from the apostles, hold the inheritance of the episcopate. In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us.

The ecclesiastical tradition is said by many to be as important, if not more important, than 'the preaching of the truth' for the definition of episcopacy. For instance, Kirk argues that Irenaeus 'added to Hegesippus's insistence on the

position of the bishop as an authoritative and recognized teacher the argument from his special status as an ordained teacher'.² Kirk goes on: 'But there is more—something not found in Hegesippus or Tertullian—a new emphasis on the sacramental charisma received in ordination, as a supernatural guarantee of authentic apostolic teaching which can be secured by no other means.'³ Kirk at one moment says that there is some sacramental means of succession and yet on the following page appears to deny that this is the power of the bishop, drawing a parallel between the succession of local bishops in Irenaeus's day and the modern Roman Catholic 'Papal Succession': '*charisma* is viewed as attached rather to his having become bishop (for which proper election and consecration are both necessary) than to the means by which he became bishop; to the office itself rather than the sacramental entrance to the office'.⁴ Kirk emphasizes the *charisma veritatis* (gift of truth), saying: 'The pre-Nicene bishop was recognized to have a special charisma, a "prophetic" function of accurately voicing dogmatic truth according to the tradition of the particular local society to which he and his fellows all belonged.'⁵

Yet there is no evidence for such a view in Irenaeus's writings. The ecclesiastical constitution is mentioned alongside the handing down of apostolic teaching because episcopacy was how apostolic teaching had been handed down in the Church, and was the means by which Irenaeus viewed that teaching as continuing. Episcopacy is the means by which he perceived the transmission of apostolic teaching would be perpetuated and for this reason it is mentioned. Irenaeus sees succession not as part of the truth but as necessarily attendant to it for two reasons. First, succession is important because it demonstrates an unbroken link with the doctrine of the apostles. The Church can demonstrate this through its bishops, whereas the Gnostics cannot, having only recently appeared on the scene. Second, the Gnostics claim that they are teaching the truth. Yet if they are, one should expect the apostles to have taught the same doctrines. They did not.

Therefore Irenaeus's appeal to succession is a pragmatic argument in the polemical situation against the Gnostics: the bishops are closest to the apostles because the apostles' doctrine has been handed down from bishop to bishop, in direct succession from the apostles. It is for this reason that bishops are regarded as having a special authority, rather than there being an inherent quality in the office.

Irenaeus does not have an ‘essentialist’ view of episcopacy: the gift of truth is required as well as the succession of the episcopate. But what is the gift of truth? In IV.xxvi.4 (p. 497) having mentioned some heretics, Irenaeus writes:

From all such persons, therefore, it behoves us to keep aloof, but to adhere to those who, as I have already observed, do hold the doctrine of the apostles, and who together with the order of priesthood (*presbyterii ordine*), display sound speech and blameless conduct for the confirmation and correction of others.

Sound speech and the gift of truth are not automatically the properties of those in succession, since Irenaeus thinks it necessary to mention them as distinct and in addition to the order of the presbyterate. Those who earlier were described as having the gift of truth, are here described as holding the doctrine of the apostles, the truth. Therefore it is not unreasonable to surmise that the gift of truth is the gift of teaching apostolic doctrine.

In IV.xxvi. 1 (p. 497), Irenaeus has argued for a biblical theology:

that anyone who reads the Scriptures will find Christ throughout all of them, Old and New Testaments. He ends with a citation of Matthew 13: 52—the Lord discoursed with his disciples after His resurrection from the dead, proving to them from the Scriptures themselves, ‘that Christ must suffer, and enter into His glory, and that remission of sins should be preached in His name throughout all the world’. And the disciple will be perfected and [rendered] like the householder, ‘who bringeth forth from his treasure things new and old’.

He then goes on (IV.xxvi.2; p. 497):

Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.

Irenaeus mentions the gift of truth and the office of the episcopate separately here which indicates that the gift of truth and the episcopate are two distinct

concepts. Possession of the episcopal office does not guarantee possession of the gift of truth, the doctrine of the apostles. This would be confirmed by the concern that Irenaeus has for the orthodoxy of the teaching of the bishops. Speaking of the apostles' successors, he writes, in III.iii.3 (p. 415):

For they [the apostles] were desirous that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men; which men, if they discharged their functions honestly would be a great boon [to the Church], but if they should fall away, the direst calamity.

Here there is an implicit acknowledgement that it is possible for a person currently operating as a bishop to fall away from orthodox doctrine and practice. This came near to a reality when Valentinus almost became bishop of Rome. If Valentinus had become bishop, it would have been the direst calamity for the Church, for there would have been someone teaching Gnostic heretical doctrines within the Church, and not only that, but in a position of influencing his contemporaries and those of subsequent generations. Rather than discharging his responsibility to pass on apostolic doctrine to the next generation, he would have been enshrining heresy.

Exposition of Passages Where the Three Concepts Occur Together

We have seen from the relationship between Scripture, rule of truth and bishops that the rule of truth is based on Scripture, and that bishops need to follow the teaching of Scripture. Further light may be shed by studying the comparatively small number of passages where the three concepts occur together: I.ix.4 (p. 330); III.ii.1 (p. 415); III.ii.2 (p. 415); IV.xxvi.2 (p. 497); IV.xxxii.1 (p. 505); and V.xx.1 (p. 547). There is only one passage where all three concepts occur together: IV.xxxiii.8 (p. 508).

Scripture and Rule of Truth

In I.ix.4 (p. 330), to lampoon the Gnostics' own synthesis of biblical texts, Irenaeus creates a similar synthesis of disjointed texts from the writings of the classical author Homer: Then, again, collecting a set of expressions and names scattered here and there [in Scripture], they twist them, as we have already said, from a natural to a non-natural sense. In so doing, they act like those who bring forward any kind of hypothesis they fancy, and then endeavor

to support them out of the poems of Homer, so that the ignorant imagine that Homer actually composed the verses bearing upon that hypothesis, which has, in fact, been but newly constructed; and many others are led so far by the regularly-formed sequence of the verses, as to doubt whether Homer may not have composed them.

The Gnostics, in other words, do not use the Scriptures with integrity in sourcing their doctrines. They give their chosen Scriptures a meaning which is not the natural and normal sense of the words from the original contexts. Irenaeus says that they do this because they want to put forward their own ideas and use a text to justify themselves. The material itself is Homer and so the presentation has the appearance of being Homer but is in fact not Homer:

Of this kind is the following passage, where one, describing Hercules as having been sent by Eurystheus to the dog in the infernal regions, does so by means of these Homeric verses, for there can be no objection to our citing these by way of illustration, since the same sort of attempt appears in both:

“Thus saving, there sent forth from his house deeply groaning.” Od., 10.76. “The hero Hercules conversant with mighty deeds.” Od., 21. 26. Eurystheus, the son of Sthenelus. descended from Perseus.” Il., 19. 123. “That he might bring from Erebus the dog of gloomy Pluto.” Il., 8. 368. “And he advanced like a mountain-bred lion confident of strength. Od.,6. 130. “Rapidly through the city, while all his friends followed.” Il., 24. 327. “Both maidens, and youths, and much-enduring old men.” Od., 11.38. “Mourning for him bitterly as one going forward to death.” 96 Il., 2. 328. “But Mercury and the blue-eyed Minerva conducted him.” Od., 11. 626. “For she knew the mind of her brother, how it laboured with grief.”96 Il.,2.409.

The satire is clearly Irenaeus’s own creation. Sentences have been plucked from different places in different works and ordered to form a story.

Now, what simple-minded man, I ask, would not be led away by such verses as these to think that Homer actually framed them so with reference to the subject indicated? But he who is acquainted with the

Homeric writings will recognize the verses indeed, but not the subject to which they are applied, as knowing that some of them were spoken of Ulysses, others of Hercules himself, others still of Priam, and others again of Menelaus and Agamemnon. But if he takes them and restores each of them to its proper position, he at once destroys the narrative in question. In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them. For, though he will acknowledge the gems, he will certainly not receive the fox instead of the likeness of the king. But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.

Irenaeus rhetorically asks who would be so credulous as to believe that what he has before him was equivalent to the sense of Homer's writings. He asserts that it is only someone who is totally unacquainted with Homer's works who might be deceived. Those who do know Homer will identify the individual verses but will know that they are taken out of context and misapplied. This can be proved by returning the verses to their original context: the synthesis does not survive, for it is not inherent to the works themselves. So it will be for the person who knows the rule of truth which he came to know through his baptism, Irenaeus says:

he will know that the texts which the Gnostics are using come from the Scriptures, but will realize that the Gnostics' mishandling of them produces something very different from the Scriptures themselves. Just as with Homer, if the individual texts are returned to their rightful places, the doctrine propounded by the Gnostics is shown not to be in the texts, but merely their own invention. The rule of truth shows up the spurious summary of the Scriptures supplied by the Gnostics. However, it is Scripture which is supreme rather than the rule of truth, for the rule of truth only has authority because it is an accurate summary of the themes of Scripture in the right order.

Similarly in III.ii.1 (p. 415) the rule of truth and Scripture are discussed:

When, however, they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. For [they allege] that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but viva voce: wherefore also Paul declared, 'But we speak wisdom among those that are perfect, but not the wisdom of this world'. And this wisdom each one of them alleges to be the fiction of his own inventing, forsooth; so that, according to their idea, the truth properly resides at one time in Valentinus, at another in Marcion, at another in Cerinthus, then afterwards in Basilides, or has even been indifferently in any other opponent, who could speak nothing pertaining to salvation. For every one of these men, being altogether of a perverse disposition, depraving the system of truth, is not ashamed to preach himself.

Irenaeus is discussing what happens when the Gnostics are challenged in their use of the Scriptures by an orthodox interpretation. They do not, in fact, regard Scripture as authoritative, because when their interpretation is challenged, they question the authority of the Scriptures. They claim that knowledge of their oral tradition is needed for the correct interpretation. Thus the highest order of truth resides in the person who claims to possess the oral tradition, rather than the Scriptures themselves. Irenaeus says that each of the Gnostic leaders 'is not ashamed to preach himself' and is guilty of 'depraving the system of truth'. The 'system of truth' then presumably equates to what is contained in the Scriptures. The 'system of truth' is subordinate to the Scriptures, because it is a summary of them. Interestingly the passage speaks of the Gnostics saying that the Scriptures are doubtful and truth cannot be 'extracted' from them—presumably part of their polemic against the Church's rule of truth.

Scripture and Bishops

Immediately following the passage discussed above, Irenaeus discusses Scripture and bishops. The word presbyter is used, but given that Irenaeus mentions succession, he would appear to be discussing bishops, III.ii.2 (p. 415):

But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying that they

themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth. For [they maintain] that the apostles intermingled the things of the law with the words of the Savior; and that not the apostles alone, but even the Lord Himself, spoke as at one time from the Demiurge, at another from the intermediate place, and yet again from the Pleroma, but that they themselves, indubitably, unsulliedly, and purely, have knowledge of the hidden mystery: this is, indeed, to blaspheme their Creator after a most impudent manner! It comes to this, therefore, that these men do now consent neither to *Scripture* nor to tradition.

Irenaeus is clearly narrating from his own experience of countering the different arguments of the Gnostics in conversation. He reveals what their response is when orthodox Christians draw attention to the fact that apostolic tradition comes down through the episcopal succession:

the Gnostics claim to be more knowledgeable than the bishops and even the original apostles themselves. The Gnostics subsume Christ and the apostles into their own system.

Irenaeus concludes that the Gnostics submit neither to Scripture nor to tradition. One should note that Irenaeus's first recourse is to the Scriptures in the previous paragraph (III.ii. 1; p. 415).

It is only when the authority of the Scriptures is not acknowledged by the Gnostics that Irenaeus then goes on to argue on the basis of Church tradition (III.ii.2; p. 415). This structural feature demonstrates the priority of the Scriptures over episcopacy in Irenaeus's thought. He appeals to tradition because it comes from the apostles. Scripture and bishops interrelate again in IV.xxxii.1 (p. 505). Irenaeus quotes the teaching of a certain presbyter, a direct successor to the apostles, demonstrating that the orthodox faith was exclusive and set. The presbyter refers to people who tried to introduce new doctrines and who concealed their own beliefs. He contrasts such people with the following:

But if any one believes in [only] one God, who also made all things by the Word, as Moses likewise says, 'God said, Let there be light: and there was light;' and as we read in the Gospel, 'All things were made by Him; and without Him was nothing made;' and the Apostle Paul [says]

in like manner, 'There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, who is above all, and through all, and in us all', this man will first of all 'hold the head, from which the whole body is compacted and bound together, and, through means of every joint according to the measure of the ministration of each several part, maketh increase of the body to the edification of itself in love. And then shall every word also seem consistent to him, if he for his part diligently read the Scriptures in company with those who are presbyters in the Church, among whom is the apostolic doctrine, as I have pointed out.

He discusses presbyters and the Scriptures. Irenaeus, in discussing unity in the Church, says that if anyone holds to the one apostolic faith (one faith, one Lord, one baptism), that man will be a force for unity. That person needs to read the Scriptures together with the other presbyters: it is a corporate task. This shows that all the presbyters together must sit under the Scriptures. The authority which the presbyters have, comes not from within themselves but from the Scriptures they study.

Bishops and Rule of Truth

The relationship of bishops and the rule of truth is covered in IV.xxvi.2 (p. 497). We need, however, first to examine section IV.xxvi. 1 (p. 496), which lays the groundwork:

If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling (*vocationis*). For Christ is the treasure, which was hid in the field, that is, in this world (for 'the field is the world'); but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ, since He was pointed out by means of types and parables. Hence His human nature could not be understood, prior to the consummation of those things, which had been predicted, that is, the advent of Christ. And therefore it was said to Daniel the prophet: 'Shut up the words, and seal the book even to the time of consummation, until many learn, and knowledge be completed. For at that time, when the dispersion shall be accomplished, they shall know all these things.' But Jeremiah also says, 'In the last days they shall understand these things.' For every prophecy, before its fulfilment, is to men [full of] enigmas and ambiguities. But when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come

to pass, then the prophecies have a clear and certain exposition. And for this reason, indeed, when at this present time the law is read to the Jews, it 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; but when it is read by the Christians, it is a treasure, hid indeed in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men, and showing forth the wisdom of God and declaring His dispensations with regard to man, and forming the kingdom of Christ beforehand, and preaching by anticipation the inheritance of the holy Jerusalem, and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall arrive at such excellency as even to see God, and hear His word, and from the hearing of His discourse be glorified to such an extent, that others cannot behold the glory of his countenance, as was said by Daniel: 'Those who do understand, shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever.' Thus, then, I have shown it to be, if any one read the Scriptures. For thus it was that the Lord discoursed with, the disciples after His resurrection from the dead, proving to them from the Scriptures themselves 'that Christ must suffer, and enter into His glory, and that remission of sins should be preached in His name throughout all the world'. And the disciple will be perfected, and [rendered] like the householder 'who bringeth forth from his treasure things new and old'.

Irenaeus is arguing for a biblical theology: that the whole of the Scriptures, Old as well as New Testament, speaks of Christ. He adapts the word of Matthew xiii, 44 saying, 'Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field'. Irenaeus acknowledges that the Old Testament is hard to understand, but says that when the things prophesied there came to pass, the meaning of the prophecies becomes clear. He says that it is for this reason that when the Old Testament law is read to the Jews 'it is like a fable'—it has a sense of unreality about it. But when a Christian reads 'it, because he knows its focus and fulfilment is Christ, he delights in it and values it'. Irenaeus quotes Luke 24:26 and 47, of the resurrected Christ 'explaining to' his disciples that he was the fulfilment of the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures. It is on this Christocentric understanding of the Scriptures that he proceeds to discuss bishops and the rule of truth:

Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church,

those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father. But [it is also incumbent] to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever, [looking upon them] either as heretics of perverse minds, or as schismatics puffed up and self-pleasing, or again as hypocrites, acting thus for the sake of lucre and vainglory. For all these have fallen from the truth. And the heretics, indeed, who bring strange fire to the altar of God—namely, strange doctrines—shall be burned up by the fire from heaven, as were Nadab and Abiud. But such as rise up in opposition to the truth, and exhort others against the Church of God, [shall] remain among those in hell (*apud inferos*), being swallowed up by an earthquake, even as those who were with Chore, Dathan, and Abiron. But those who cleave asunder, and separate the unity of the Church, [shall] receive from God the same punishment as Jeroboam did.

Our section begins, ‘Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters in the Church’. The ‘wherefore’ gives a strong and explicit link to the previous section, where he has been arguing that the disciple who has a Christocentric study of the Scriptures will benefit from them and grow in holiness (‘be perfected’.) He now says that a necessary consequence is to obey the presbyters in the Church. Why is this? The reason is that it is the Christians, not the Gnostics or the Jews, who know that the focus of the whole of the Scriptures is Christ and thus have the true understanding of the Scriptures. The presbyters, being the leaders of the Christian Church, should therefore be the ones who are obeyed, not those outside of the Church, who do not know what they are talking about. The authority of these presbyters does not derive from themselves, or from the nature of their office, as we have seen, but from their correct understanding of the Scriptures. Irenaeus reminds his readers that the Church’s presbyters possess an unbroken succession from the apostles as he has demonstrated, they stand in an unbroken line of teaching. The presbyters have also received the succession of the episcopate (thus we can read ‘presbyter’ as bishop). Irenaeus states that they have received the ‘certain gift of truth’ from God, rather than from men. Succession is regarded here as important, but one should note that the episcopal succession from the apostles appears to be separate from the ‘certain gift of truth’: ‘it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in

the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth'.

It is implied that it is not sufficient to receive merely the episcopate but also the gift of truth. Only those who have both should be obeyed. It is likely that Irenaeus had in mind the possibility that the gift of truth and episcopal succession could come apart, succession becoming merely institutional, rather than being wedded to a succession of apostolic doctrine. After all, the Gnostic, Valentinus, had very nearly become a bishop in Rome: if he had, the line of apostolic doctrine would not have continued in him, although he would have been made a bishop correctly under the institutional or ecclesiastical procedures.

Bishops and the rule of truth are also discussed in V.xx.I (p. 547):

Now all these [heretics] are of much later date than the bishops to whom the apostles committed the Churches; which fact I have in the third book taken all pains to demonstrate. It follows, then, as a matter of course, that these heretics aforementioned, since they are blind to the truth, and deviate from the [right] way, will walk in various roads; and therefore the footsteps of their doctrine are scattered here and there without agreement or connection. But the path of those belonging to the Church circumscribes the whole world, as possessing the sure tradition from the apostles, and gives unto us to see that the faith of all is one and the same, since all receive one and the same God the Father, and believe in the same dispensation regarding the incarnation of the Son of God, and are cognizant of the same gift of the Spirit, and are conversant with the same commandments, and preserve the same form of ecclesiastical constitution, and expect the same advent of the Lord, and await the same salvation of the complete man, that is, of the soul and body. And undoubtedly the preaching of the Church is true and steadfast, in which one and the same way of salvation is shown throughout the whole world. For to her is entrusted the light of God; and therefore the 'wisdom' of God, by means of which she saves all men, 'is declared in [its] going forth; it uttereth [its voice] faithfully in the streets, is preached on the tops of the walls, and speaks continually in the gates of the city'. For the Church preaches the truth everywhere, and she is the seven-branched candlestick, which bears the light of Christ.

Irenaeus points out again that the Gnostics have appeared on the scene much later than the bishops who were left in charge of the churches by the apostles. The Gnostics are regarded as heretics because they are newcomers amongst those who call themselves Christians, their teaching is novel and comes from many sources. Thus there are many different doctrines, which are not uniformly held among them, and the doctrines are in themselves contradictory. The Church, on the other hand, has one source for what it believes (the apostles), and its doctrines are consistent within themselves and have been held continuously since the time of the apostles at all places that the Church exists and has existed. Irenaeus explains what is meant by 'the one faith': it is Trinitarian and it includes other aspects, which are foreign to the Gnostics, for example that those in the Church 'expect the same advent of the Lord, and await the same salvation of the complete man, that is, of the soul and the body'. Irenaeus deliberately stresses the resurrection of the whole person, over against the Gnostics who had a dualistic view of Man, that the physical was base, and the future life would involve the physical elements of life being done away with. Those of the faith also 'preserve the same form of ecclesiastical constitution'—presumably this is also a point against the Gnostics in that the Church is the same everywhere, whereas the Gnostics have local groups, each with their own peculiar doctrines.

That the Church is consistent in its doctrine is testimony to the fact that what it is teaching is true, Irenaeus says. Her bishops must give the same teaching as one another, in accordance with the apostles' teaching. For Irenaeus, therefore, the teaching of bishops is equated with that which is original, ancient and apostolic. Apostolic antiquity is the mark of truth and the measure by which a bishop is to be measured. If Valentinus had been made bishop, he would have taught Gnostic novelties, and would have, as a result, not been regarded as a bishop—he would not have had episcopal authority due to his false teaching.

Scripture and Rule of Truth and Bishops

There is only one passage where all three terms are mentioned, and therefore this is the most significant in analyzing the relationship between the three concepts, IV.xxxiii.8 (p. 508):

True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to

the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts [of God].

The whole of chapter xxxiii of book IV is concerned with 'the true spiritual disciple' and the various tasks that he is able to do—for example, judging false prophets (IV.xxxiii.6; p. 508). In the section immediately prior to ours (IV.xxxiii.7) Irenaeus says that the true spiritual disciple 'shall also judge those who give rise to schisms [...] who for trifling reasons, or any kind of reason which occurs to them, cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ'. Irenaeus is clearly speaking of those who claim to be reformers, because he remarks, 'For no reformation of so great importance can be effected by them, as will compensate for the mischief arising from their schism.' He goes on to say: 'He shall also judge all those who are beyond the pale of the truth, that is, who are outside the Church.' It is in this context that our passage regarding true knowledge comes. True knowledge is said to consist of three items: apostolic doctrine, the ancient constitution of the Church, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops. Due to the presence of the third of these items, the second item would not appear to refer to bishops, but to the fact that the true church is a universal church. The third item, that of bishops, is the one which receives extended treatment by Irenaeus. Bishops are said to be the means by which the Church in every place has been handed down. The Church has been guarded and preserved by 'a very complete system of doctrine', this neither being added to nor subtracted from. This system of doctrine then would seem to be an identifiable body of knowledge. True knowledge consists in reading the word of God 'without falsification'. Scripture is seen to be vital for all true spiritual knowledge: it is the supreme and unassailable authority, the concept above everything else, including rule of truth or bishops. True knowledge consists in 'a lawful and diligent exposition of the Scriptures'. Again, the Scriptures are given highest place.

Episcopal succession is not a source of doctrine in itself, but the means by which Scriptural doctrine is handed.

Conclusion and Contemporary Application

The presenting issue with regard to the contemporary Church is that there is a tension between what some bishops teach and what Scripture teaches. There is thus a debate as to whether Scripture or bishops should take precedence in the clash of authorities. We were keen to discover Irenaeus's views on bishops that would be apposite to this debate, and whether he is cited fairly 'as a defender of Episcopal supremacy'. We saw that although in Irenaeus' day the canon of Scripture was yet to be closed, he had a strong view of canonicity, citing all that we have in the New Testament as divinely inspired, bar the minor letter of Philemon. Irenaeus rejected documents which were later than the apostolic period, including the Gnostic documents.

The 'rule of truth' is referred to in different ways and appears with different combinations of components. Yet there is a clear core of components which are the main elements of the Christian faith as found in Scripture. The rule of truth forms one unchanging coherent system, against which can be measured the shifting sands of the Gnostics. The opinions of modern liberal bishops could be said on this basis to be more Gnostic than Christian: they change with each generation and the doctrines presented do not form a coherent whole. The rule of truth does not just make use of Scripture (for the Gnostics do that) but it makes use of Scripture in the right way, following Scripture's own internal plotline and sense. An example of a contemporary use of Scripture in such a 'Gnostic' manner can be observed in the article for the Easter, 2000 edition of Australia's leading current affairs magazine, *The Bulletin*, where the recently installed Primate of Australia, Archbishop Peter Carnley, makes use of Acts 4:12 to say

When St. Luke wrote that there is salvation in no one else, save Jesus Christ alone, he was not just comparing Jesus with other alternative religious leaders and rival religious systems. Indeed, if he had a vague idea of the existence of India at the fringes of his world, he probably had no idea of the existence of China at all, let alone of the teachings of the Buddha or Confucius. Mohammed was, of course, yet unborn. The modern questions of 'other religions' was for Luke miles away,

centuries off. Luke's teaching is not just that salvation can come only through Jesus by contrast with other religious leaders and systems but, rather, that salvation came to those in Jerusalem only through Jesus, their victim. Only from the victim can salvation really come to those with blood on their hands. Only a living victim, restored and vindicated, in other words, can be the bearer of forgiveness and acceptance of that unconditional and utterly unqualified kind that we call divine.⁶

He concludes his article by saying:

Clearly the first step on the way to transcendence is to value and see value in our very own victims and the victims of the society of which, perhaps as bystanders, we are a part—those with whom Jesus so closely identified. There is salvation in no one else; only via the victim can we be saved. Is it any wonder that this truth has been celebrated and proclaimed for 2000 years.⁷

The Archbishop uses Acts 4:12 to justify his belief that anyone 'can experience salvation through anyone who is a "victim"' Yet his exegesis does not follow the whole of Scripture's plot line and sense, where the theme of the Old Testament Scriptures is that there is one true God, and the theme of the New Testament is the same, with Jesus himself declaring, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

The rule of truth is a benchmark (I.ix.4) by which to judge teaching. The rule of truth, in other words, is a tool for the church to guard against error. It is not a creed, for it does not appear in a set order and form, nor is it composed from quotations of Scripture. Rather, it is composed from the doctrinal elements which are in and undergird Scripture, and is an accurate 'hypothesis' of Scripture. The rule of truth is a common concept in *Adversus Haereses* and is clearly important to Irenaeus who says that it should be retained and used polemically against beliefs which are not apostolic.

We found that bishops are a blurred concept in Irenaeus. The concept is used for those who are regarded as being in the line of the apostolic teaching, and who are responsible for that apostolic teaching continuing. This concurs with the Consecration service in the Ordinal of the Church of England where the Archbishop requires the bishop to be consecrated to assent to

the question: 'Are you ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to do the same?'⁸ According to Irenaeus, bishops 'expound the Scriptures without danger, neither blaspheming God, nor dishonoring the patriarchs, nor despising the prophets' (IV.xxvi.5; p. 498). In other words, proper bishops regard Scripture as authoritative and submit themselves to its authority. There are, however, today many bishops, who regard themselves as above Scripture, as the instances cited in the dioceses of Worcester and Newcastle demonstrate.

We observed that what comes down through the bishops is the doctrine of the apostles, rather than the perpetuation of the office itself. The office is the servant of the apostolic teaching, being the vehicle by which the apostolic teaching can be handed down and can be traced in an unbroken line right back to the apostles. The *charisma veritatis* (gift of truth) we discovered was not a sacramental unction but a gift of teaching the doctrine of the apostles. Irenaeus said of the 'apostles' successors: 'if they discharge their functions honestly, it would be a great boon [to the Church], but if they should fall away, the direst calamity' (III.iii.3; p. 415). Irenaeus acknowledges as a possibility the situation where a bishop would not teach the doctrine of the apostles, and he describes that situation as 'the direst calamity'. Today that situation is commonplace, and it could be said that the situation in the Church is of the direst calamity. We perceived how the succession argument was a pragmatic one against the claims of the Gnostics who had new 'lines' of teaching, for the Gnostics did not use Scripture with integrity. The rule of truth, derived from Scripture, was an aid in discerning how Scripture was to be used. The Gnostics were their own highest authority, for they disregarded both Scripture and tradition, claiming to be more knowledgeable than even the original apostles.

Irenaeus, in countering the Gnostics, first appealed to Scripture. It was only when the Gnostics set Scripture aside, so that it could not be regarded as common ground on which to argue, that Irenaeus appealed to tradition. This demonstrated that Scripture was supreme for Irenaeus. Bishops were to read Scripture with other bishops, and sit under (as opposed to over) its teaching together. Irenaeus says that the man who holds to the apostolic faith in the Scriptures is a force for unity. That is the person who people should gather around. That is the person who should be the bishop. The problem in the

contemporary Church is that many bishops whom people are called to unite around do not hold the Scriptures as authoritative.

Irenaeus said that only Christians know that the focus of the Scriptures is Christ, and therefore those who possess the doctrine of the Scriptures should be obeyed as leaders of the Church because they have the authority of the Scriptures. One bishop does not decide what he will teach, or even what the Scriptures teach, but the collegiality that the presbyters are to enjoy is that of studying the Scriptures together. This serious study of the Scriptures required of the presbyters visibly demonstrates that they are to be under the authority of the Scriptures. Bishops are not a source of doctrine in themselves. To have a bishop teaching novelty (for example, promoting a change in the Church's view of homosexual practice) for Irenaeus would be a contradiction in terms, for the task of the bishop is to teach the same doctrines as taught by the apostles, and which have been taught by the apostles' successors until this point in the chain. The bishop is to ensure that the teaching is passed on accurately in the Church in his generation and particularly to his Episcopal successor. In no sense does Irenaeus promote independent Episcopal teaching authority, that the bishop may somehow adapt doctrines or teach new ones. Rather they are to hand down that which is apostolic, ancient and original. Bishops who regard apostolic teaching as subservient to the office of their own episcopate would not be regarded as bishops in Irenaeus's eyes: one wonders how much longer they should so be regarded in ours.

JAMES PAICE is Curate of All Souls, Eastbourne.

ENDNOTES

1. Note: we continue to employ the standard notation explained in Note 5 of Part 1.
2. Kirk, p. 209.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
6. Anglican Media Sydney, 'Background information on Archbishop Carnley's Bulletin article for overseas readers', 26 April 2000; <http://www.anglicanmediasydney.sn.au/bulletinsummary.htm> (29 May, 2000).
7. *Ibid.*
8. *The Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford, University Press, 1969 edition), p. 671.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1999).
- F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Glasgow: Chapter House, 1996).
- J. N. Geldenhuys, *Supreme Authority* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1953).
- R. M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- House of Bishops Occasional Paper, *Bishops in Communion: collegiality in the koinonia of the Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000); K. E. Kirk, *The Apostolic Ministry: Essays on the History and Doctrine of Episcopacy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946).
- K. E. Kirk, *The Apostolic Ministry: essays on the history & doctrine of episcopacy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946).
- J. Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948).
- B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: University Press, 1987).
- D. Minns, *Irenaeus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).
- A. Roberts, and J. Donaldson, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996 edn.).
- A. Rousseau, *Contre Les Heresies* (Paris, Sources Chretiennes, 1974).
- H. B. Swete, *Essays on the Early History of the Church and Ministry* (London: Macmillan, 1918).
- P. Schaff, and H. Wace, *A Select Library of the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers, Vol I. Eusebius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).
- J. V. Taylor, *Bishops on the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1994).