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Unity and Diversity in Irenaeus as Paradigm for Contemporary Lutheran Ceremonial Consensus

Jon D. Vieker

Missouri Synod Lutheranism is facing a ceremonial, and consequently, an ecclesiastical crisis. A recent article understatedly but aptly described the Missouri's contemporary situation: there is "much disagreement in our church on the topic of worship."¹ In this context, a key confessional text is Article X of the Formula of Concord, which examines the question whether or not, during times of persecution, the Lutheran confessors could yield to demands to reintroduce ceremonies that were true adiaphora, that is, neither commanded nor forbidden by God. Both the Epitome and Solid Declaration of Article X quote the words of the second-century church father, Irenaeus of Lyons: "Disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith."²

This study examines the historical and theological tension between the unity of faith and diversity in ceremony in the theological writings of Irenaeus, as well as his role as "peacemaker" in the Quartodeciman Controversy. By examining the historical and theological background of the Irenaeian and Lutheran confessional saying, "Disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith," a paradigm for ceremonial consensus among Missouri Lutherans today will emerge.³

¹Sean Parker, "Worship Wars: Traditional vs. Contemporary Worship. What's Right? And, Is Anyone Wrong?" *Reporter*, November 22, 1996.

²*The Book of Concord*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 493 (hereafter Tappert). One may see FC Ep X, 7, FC SD X, 31, and AC XXVI, 44.

³Toward that end, the Missouri Synod resolved at its 1998 convention, as noted in *Proceedings* . . . (Res. 2-10; 1998): "that the Commission on Worship bring together a forum representing the diversity of practices within the

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Irenaeus and the Rule of Truth: Unity in Doctrine

Irenaeus and His Historical Context

Irenaeus came from Smyrna in Asia Minor, having once sat at the feet of Polycarp.⁴ Although the dates of both his birth and death are uncertain, he served most of his life in the Gallic Church of the west, centered principally in the city of Lyons (Roman Lugdunum).⁵ About A.D. 177, the church of Lyons suffered a severe persecution. Shortly thereafter Irenaeus journeyed to Rome as presbyter emissary to visit Eleutherius, bishop of Rome.⁶ It was some time after his return to Lyons that Irenaeus wrote the only two works that have survived: *Against Heresies: On the Detection and Refutation of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*, a substantial work written to refute second-century Gnosticism; and *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a much briefer apologetic work couched in catechetical form.⁷ The threat of Gnosticism, however, served as the central backdrop for much of Irenaeus' thought and writing, and it was in the face of this potent heresy that Irenaeus first coined the phrase "the rule of

Synod . . . for the purposes of increasing understanding, building consensus in our doctrine and practice of worship, and providing input to the Commission on Worship as it develops guidelines for worship . . ."

⁴Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, 3. 3, 4 (hereafter *AH*); as published in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996 reprint), 1:416 (hereafter *ANF*); and published in the original Greek and Latin in Norbert Brox, translator and editor, *Fontes Christiani*, 5 volumes of *AH* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993-97), 8/3:34 (hereafter *FChr*).

⁵Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 9-10.

⁶Although Irenaeus never used the title "bishop" of himself, it is likely that he was consecrated during this visit (Frank D. Gilliard, "The Apostolicity of the Gallic Churches," *Harvard Theological Review* 68 [1975]: 30).

⁷Donovan, *One Right Reading?* 10. *AH* survives in Latin, with much of it found also in various Greek fragments. Without this work, we would know little about second-century Gnosticism today. The *Proof or Epideixis* was only recovered in 1904 in an Armenian translation (Donovan, *One Right Reading?* 19).

truth."⁸

The Rule of Truth and Scripture

Although the phrase the rule of truth⁹ finds no direct literary parallels in the New Testament, the "emphasis on the transmission of authoritative doctrine . . . found everywhere in the New Testament . . . is clear enough."¹⁰ In the face of the Gnostic threat, Irenaeus sought to confess authoritative and apostolic doctrine. The result was one of the earliest recorded instances of extensive postapostolic apologetics. For example, Irenaeus repeatedly points out the endless contradictions apparent in Gnostic cosmology and soteriology. He notes that as one begins to question this Gnostic teacher or that, such teachers "convict themselves, since they are not of one mind with regard to the same words." Christians, on the other hand, follow "the one and only true God," "possess His words as the rule of truth [*regulam veritatis*]," and "all speak alike with regard to the same things . . ."¹¹ Thus, for Irenaeus, the unity of the Scriptures and the unity of confessing those Scriptures were bound inseparably together. Such unity meant that the church throughout the world could speak the same of God, Christ, Creation, the Holy Spirit, and every other Christian doctrine because the Scriptures spoke unanimously of them.

In contrast to the church's unified confession grounded in the

⁸R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*, The Library of History and Doctrine (London: SCM Press, 1962), 75.

⁹Gerald Bray ("Authority in the Early Church," *Churchman* 95 [1981]: 50) notes: "The term in fact was well known to any student of Roman law; a *regula* was a short summary of the contents of a statute, and in legal terms it possessed the same authority as that statute in so far as it faithfully reproduced the spirit of the original. This neat device made it possible to consult the whole corpus of Roman law without reading every word on each occasion, and it greatly speeded up the conduct of business. One can see immediately the relevance of this to Christian teaching; the *regula fidei* provided a short summary of scriptural teaching by which doctrine could be measured, though its own authority rested on that of the underlying text."

¹⁰J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longman, 1972), 8-9.

¹¹AH 4. 35, 4; ANF 1:514; FChr 8/4:294.

sure words of Scripture, Irenaeus observes the Gnostic penchant for taking words and their meanings completely out of context. For example, in one section, Irenaeus describes the Gnostic use of ancient Greek poets and concludes that "he who is acquainted with the Homeric writings will recognize the verses [the Gnostics quote] indeed, but not the subject to which they are applied . . . knowing that some of them were spoken of Ulysses, others of Hercules himself, others still of Priam, and others again of Menelaus and Agamemnon." Clearly, the Gnostics twist the words—whether they were of Scripture or of pagan poetry—to fit their own pattern of teachings. Nevertheless, Irenaeus maintains that

. . . he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth [τὸν κανόνα τῆς ἀληθείας ἀκλινῆ ἐν ἑαυτῷ] which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures. . . . 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 [τῆς ἀληθείας σωματίῳ], he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.¹²

For Irenaeus, the rule of truth was received "by means of baptism," perhaps a reference to catechesis in the Scriptures prior to baptism. Likewise, such "truth" formed a "body of truth," which was dependent upon interpreting the words of Scripture accurately and within their original contexts. The Gnostics, however, did not follow such hermeneutical principles, and so came unglued from the true meaning of the Scriptures, that is, they separated themselves from the "rule of truth."

Apprehending the rule of truth required no secret knowledge. Indeed, "these things are such as fall under our observation, and are clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures." Likewise, a clear and unambiguous interpretation and teaching of the Scriptures was crucial for the

¹²AH 1. 9, 4; ANF 1:330; FChr 8/1:196.

“body of truth [*veritatis corpus*]” to remain entire and without contradiction.¹³ Thus, for Irenaeus, a unified Scripture and its plain meaning were to serve as the source and norm for the “rule of truth.”

The converse is the case for the Gnostics. Indeed, “to apply expressions which are not clear or evident to interpretations of the parables, such as every one discovers for himself as inclination leads him, is absurd. For in this way no one will possess the rule of truth [*regula veritatis*].”¹⁴ The Gnostics then go beyond the absurd, for in addition to failing to believe that the Scriptures agree with the “rule of truth,” they are quite content to live with the contradictions inherent in their cosmological system. They hold

discordant opinions as to the same Scriptures; and when the same identical passage is read out, they all begin to purse up their eyebrows, and to shake their heads, and they say that they might indeed utter a discourse transcendently lofty, but that all cannot comprehend the greatness of that thought which is implied in it . . .¹⁵

The “secret” knowledge of the Gnostic religion was, in fact, so lofty that it had to be guaranteed by an “oral tradition” apart from the Scriptures. For the Gnostics allege

that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but *vivâ voce* . . . 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. . . . For every one of these men,

¹³Outler, “The Sense of Tradition,” n. 20. He continues (17): “It is only as we recognize the unity of Scripture—by acknowledging Jesus Christ as its center—that we can begin to understand the meaning of its various parts. If, however, a person denies the unity of the Scriptures—or the centrality of Christ within Scripture—the interpretation of Scripture can only be arbitrary and notional. This is what makes men heretics and what makes heresy so grievous an error.”

¹⁴AH 2. 27, 1; ANF 1:398; FChr 8/2:220.

¹⁵AH 4. 35, 4; ANF 1:514; FChr 8/4:294.

being altogether of a perverse disposition, depraving the system of truth, is not ashamed to preach himself.¹⁶

Thus, for Irenaeus, anyone who departs from and thus compromises the unity of doctrine inherent in the "rule of truth," preaches himself and not Christ. And any oral tradition that departs from the truth of the "written documents" of Holy Scripture is an individualistic fiction, which does not pertain to salvation in Christ. The end result of such a course is a rule of truth that exists nowhere and is thus of no use to anyone.

In summary, for Irenaeus the unity of the rule of truth is firmly grounded in the unity of the Scriptures. As the Scriptures speak with one voice of God, Christ, creation, and all other doctrines, so the rule of truth provides inflection and timbre to that voice, as it were, giving shape to the words of Scripture as they are delivered into the ears of the faithful. Consequently, there is no room for extra-biblical and individualistic doctrinal claims or speculations, as with his Gnostic adversaries. For Irenaeus, where Scripture does not speak, neither does the rule of truth give voice.

The Rule of Truth and Tradition

One may perceive, however, a kind of uneasy tension in the thought of Irenaeus when it comes to "tradition," especially in the matter of "oral tradition." Indeed, for Irenaeus a kind of oral tradition may hold a salutary use within the church catholic. For example, Irenaeus remarks concerning Clement, that he was "in the third place from the apostles," that "he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them," and that he "might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and the tradition before his eyes [τὸ κήρυγμα τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τὴν παράδοσιν πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν ἔχων]."¹⁷ Clearly, this describes something not only written, but also delivered orally through the preaching of the church. As Irenaeus lists the

¹⁶AH 3. 2, 1; ANF 1:415; FChr 8/3:28.

¹⁷AH 3. 3, 3; ANF 1:416; FChr 8/3:32-34.

Roman episcopate down to his own day, he concludes:

In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition [*ecclesia traditio*] from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth [*veritatis praeconatio*] have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith [*unam et eandem vivificatricem fidem esse*], which has been preserved in the church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth [*et tradita in veritate*].¹⁸

Notice how for Irenaeus, "preaching" and "tradition" run almost interchangeably—the κήρυγμα and παράδοσις both declaring together the one truth contained in the Holy Scriptures. Just as the Scriptures are received by the church as a unit, so the preaching of the truth contained therein and the confession of that truth in the rule of truth are handed down from one generation of apostolic teachers to the next. Such unified "preaching" and tradition have global implications.

In another well-known passage, Irenaeus observes that "the church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. . . . For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same."¹⁹ In spite of a plethora of languages, when it comes to doctrine, the church throughout the world speaks with "only one mouth," passing on from one generation to the next only the tradition she has received. Amazingly, even in spite of a range of ability and eloquence among the teachers of the church throughout the world, the talented can add nothing to the "rule of truth," and the less-talented can take nothing away. "For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one,

¹⁸Bengt Hägglund, "Die Bedeutung der *regula fidei* als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen," *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958): n. 35.

¹⁹AH 1. 10, 2; ANF 1:331; FChr 8/1:200.

who can say but little diminish it."²⁰

Irenaeus goes on to demonstrate the strength of such a unified apostolic tradition in the rule of truth by noting that even barbarians in distant lands, who have no written language or Scripture, nevertheless confess the same "ancient tradition [*veteram traditionem*] as the church throughout the world."²¹ Thus, the Gnostic heresy and any other heresy preached would be self-evident even to unlettered barbarians, who, though they might lack the written Scriptures, yet, because of thorough catechesis in the rule of truth and faithful apostolic preaching, would be wise enough to reject such heresy. For indeed, it was through the oral proclamation of the gospel alone that they learned of Christ and were sustained in their faith.

In summary, there is no tension between the written Scriptures and the oral tradition or rule of truth in the thought of Irenaeus. Tradition simply confesses and confirms the truth of Scripture. The rule of truth is not a rule by which to measure the truth. Rather, the rule of truth is the rule that is the truth, that is, "the true rule." In spite of language, culture, literacy, or talent, the rule of truth delivers the truth of Scripture into faithful hearts. For Irenaeus, it is the organizing interpretive principle for all of Christian teaching and preaching.

The Rule of Faith governs right exegesis, and the Scriptures (the object of the exegesis) explain the Rule of Faith. Logically this is a circular argument, but in practice the relationship Irenaeus understands between the Rule of Faith and the Scriptures is not so much circular as

²⁰AH 1. 10, 2. ANF 1:331; FChr 8/1:200. W.C. Van Unnik, "An Interesting Document of Second Century Theological Discussion," *Vigiliae Christianae* 31 (1977): 203: "... the terminology employed [here] is a variation of a form of speech, well-known to Irenaeus and his contemporaries: the combination 'not to add to, not to diminish from' is a mark that the integrity of something is safe-guarded, that it is inviolable and sacrosanct. In other words: the christian faith as received from the apostles being always one and the same cannot in any way be changed by man's eloquence or parsimony of words."

²¹AH 3. 4, 2; ANF 1:417; FChr 8/3:40.

dialogical. In the happy formulation of Rowan A. Greer, "text and interpretation are like twin brothers; one can scarcely tell the one from the other."²²

Irenaeus and the Quartodeciman Controversy: Diversity in Ceremony

A Brief Overview of the Quartodeciman Controversy

Although for Irenaeus, the rule of truth represented a global and unanimous confession of a unified Holy Scripture, we also see in Irenaeus an acknowledgment of and tolerance for diversity in liturgical custom and form in the church. Thus, in the Quartodeciman Controversy of the second century, Irenaeus played a major role as "peacemaker" in a controversy where there were no apparent doctrinal issues at stake, but where disagreement over apostolic custom seriously threatened to divide the church.²³

The Quartodeciman Controversy, also known as the "Paschal Controversy," emerged over this question: should Christians celebrate the resurrection of Christ on the date of the Jewish Passover (whichever day of the week it might fall on), or on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover. The "Quartodecimans," or "fourteenthers," so-called because they held to the "fourteenth day of Nisan" as the day of Passover prescribed in Exodus 12, maintained the former position, while Rome and the rest of the church catholic maintained the latter.²⁴ Likewise, the Quartodeciman observance seemed to emphasize the death of Christ, whereas the catholic observance emphasized the

²²Donovan, *One Right Reading?* 11; citing Rowan A. Greer, "The Christian Bible," 107-109 in James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, LEC 3 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 157.

²³Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1916-1924), 2:210 and following.

²⁴Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 5. 5, 8 (hereafter *HE*); in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996 reprint); hereafter *NPNF2*.

resurrection of Christ.

The controversy played out in three stages. The first occurred between 150 and 155 when Polycarp visited Anicetus, bishop of Rome, and the two agreed to disagree on this issue, yet departed in peace with each other. The controversy broke out again in a second stage about 170 between Melito of Sardis and Apollinarius of Hierapolis without any apparent resolution. This stage does not directly concern our study. The final stage, however, developed in the last decade of the second century when Victor, bishop of Rome, sought to excommunicate Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, and any others who failed to observe the Roman date for celebrating Easter. Widespread conflict was the immediate result, and Irenaeus played a significant role in its resolution.

The Account of Eusebius

The only existing account of Irenaeus' role in the Quartodeciman Controversy comes from Eusebius in Book 5 of his *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*.²⁵ Eusebius begins by describing the third stage of the controversy, in which Victor of Rome demanded that Polycrates of Ephesus and the other Quartodecimans conform to the Roman date for celebrating Easter. Eusebius describes the Quartodeciman minority as consisting of "the parishes of all Asia," who, "from an older tradition" [ἐκ παραδόσεως ἀρχαιοτέρας], held that the fourteenth day of Nisan was the day that should be observed "as the feast of the Savior's passover." He concludes:

It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom [ἔθος] of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice [ἔθος] which, from apostolic tradition [ἀποστολικῆς παραδόσεως], has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the

²⁵HE 5. 23-25; NPNF2 1:241-44; MPG 20:489-510.

resurrection of our Savior.²⁶

The contrast here is between the "older tradition" of the Quartodecimans in celebrating the Pascha on the fourteenth day of Nisan, and the "apostolic tradition" observed by the rest of the world in celebrating it on the Lord's Day following. Consequently, because there was no agreement as to when to celebrate the festival, there was likewise no agreement as to when to terminate the accompanying prefestival fasting. When the festival began, the fasting would end. However, if some began the festival several days before the others, their celebration would begin while others were still fasting.²⁷ Thus, two different traditions or "customs" [ἔθος] were in conflict with each other, yet both were very ancient, even "apostolic."

Christians began to see this as a problem. Eusebius continues by noting that a number of "synods and assemblies of bishops" were held and by "unanimous decision" resolved that "the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's day." The parishes of Gaul, over which Irenaeus was bishop, were among those who concurred with this decision.²⁸

The decision, however, was not completely unanimous, for Eusebius goes on to note that "the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates" resolved to hold on to the custom handed down to them, that is, the Quartodeciman observance.²⁹ In defense of their practice, Polycrates wrote a letter to Victor that states the case for the Quartodecimans by rehearsing the sacred formula for having properly kept a tradition: "We observe the exact day;

²⁶HE 5. 23, 1; NPNF2 1:241; MPG 20:489-492.

²⁷Turner suggests (*The Pattern of Christian Truth*, 332): "The real difficulty probably lay elsewhere, in the presence at Rome of groups of permanent settlers from Asia Minor who maintained a liturgical tradition at variance with their local bishop. It could therefore be regarded as a problem domestic to the Church at Rome of peculiar delicacy as it involved her relations with other churches."

²⁸HE 5. 23, 2-3; NPNF2 1:241-242; MPG 20:492.

²⁹HE 5. 24, 1; NPNF2 1:242; MPG 20:493.

neither adding, nor taking away" [μήτε προστιθέντες, μήτε ἀφαιρούμενοι]. He then lists the pedigree of those who preceded him in the celebration of the Quartodeciman festival—among them the Apostles Philip and John, the bishop/martyr Polycarp of Smyrna, Thraseas of Eumenia, Sagaris of Laodicea, and Melito of Sardis.³⁰ Polycrates concludes:

All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel [κατὰ τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον], deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith [κατὰ τὸ κανόνα τῆς πίστεως]. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives [κατὰ παράδοσιν τῶν συγγενῶν μου], some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed the day when the [Jewish] people put away the leaven.³¹

Polycrates validates his listing of pedigree by invoking a threefold basis. First, he claims that the Quartodecimans are celebrating the Passover "according to the Gospel"—that is, according to the written Gospels, which all make special reference to the Passover in their respective Passion narratives. Here it appears that Polycrates is seeking to provide a biblical grounding and precedent for the Quartodeciman celebration. Next he appeals to "the rule of faith." Practically interchangeable with Irenaeus' "rule of truth," here it appears that Polycrates is appealing to the church's unified confession of the doctrines of Holy Scripture, that is, that there is nothing in observing the Quartodeciman tradition that opposes the doctrines that the church has always taught of Christ.³² Last (and self-professedly "least"), Polycrates appeals to "the tradition of my relatives," for seven of his relatives were

³⁰HE 5. 24, 2-5; NPNF2 1:242; MPG 20:493-496.

³¹HE 5. 24, 6; NPNF2 1:242; MPG 20:496.

³²Yet Ammundsen ("The Rule of Truth in Irenaeus," 579) observes: "I think it is the case with Polykrates of Ephesus. He says [Euseb. HE 5. 24, 6] that the great Christian leaders of Asia Minor kept Easter according to the Gospel, and the following according to the Rule of Faith probably means the same" (emphasis in original).

bishops, and he the eighth. And so Polycrates concludes his letter: "I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said 'We ought to obey God rather than man.'"³³

Polycrates shows no hesitation in facing those from within the church who would seek to remove him and the rest of the Quartodecimans from the catholic fellowship, for that is exactly what Victor then attempted to do upon receiving Polycrates' letter. Victor wrote his own letters, declaring the Quartodeciman churches to be unorthodox and all the brethren to be excommunicated.

The rest of the church did not concur. Eusebius notes that they implored Victor to consider "the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love." Chief among those urging such peace, according to Eusebius, was Irenaeus, who admonished Victor that he should not cut off those churches that "observed the tradition of an ancient custom" [ἀρχαίου ἔθους παράδοσιν ἐπιτηρούσας].³⁴ "... For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night."³⁵ Here Irenaeus describes the diversity of practice, even among the Quartodecimans with regard to fasting and also comments on the source of this diversity. "And this

³³HE 5. 24, 7; NPNF2 1:242; MPG 20:497.

³⁴HE 5. 24, 10; NPNF2 1:243; MPG 20:500. Here one might observe a distinction in Irenaeus' use of the word παράδοσις. Whereas elsewhere Irenaeus uses παράδοσις to designate the handing on of true Christian doctrine from one teacher to the next, here he modifies it with the addition of the words ἀρχαίου ἔθους ("ancient custom"). In other words, it may be inferred that a παράδοσις from the Lord (that is, a doctrine) carries a different weight and freight than a mere "ancient custom" (that is, a practice), in this case, which day to observe an annual celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

³⁵HE 5. 24, 12; NPNF2 1:243; MPG 20:500-504.

variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode."³⁶

As the form (ἔδος) was passed on from one generation to the next, it was not held onto with complete accuracy. Perhaps some aspects were lost; others were added. Variation in form, even among those with a common Quartodeciman practice (ἔθος) was the inevitable result, and then such variant streams of practice were subsequently adapted according to individual circumstances (ἰδιωτισμός). Irenaeus concludes pointedly: "Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith."³⁷

Irenaeus urges peace, just as the various churches had lived for many decades in peace despite a diversity of paschal observance. To further substantiate his appeal for peace, Irenaeus then pleads with Victor to consider those who had occupied the Roman see before him, how they, though not observing the Quartodeciman Easter, "were nonetheless at peace with those who came from parishes in which it was observed." None were ever excommunicated "on account of this form" (ἔδος).³⁸ To clinch his case, Irenaeus then recounts a visit that his own teacher and bishop, Polycarp, once made to Anicetus, then Bishop of Rome:

And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated; neither

³⁶HE 5. 24, 13; NPNF2 1:243; MPG 20:504.

³⁷HE 5. 24, 13; NPNF2 1:243; MPG 20:504.

³⁸HE 5. 24, 14; NPNF2 1:243; MPG 20:505.

could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it as he said that he ought to follow the customs [συνήθειαν] of the presbyters that had preceded him.³⁹

Indeed, Polycarp and Anicetus had set a precedent as to how disagreement "a little about certain other things" should be dealt with. Although each, on the basis of weighty apostolic precedent, attempted to persuade the other to observe a different paschal practice, neither could consent to the other's "custom." Nevertheless, they "made peace." Both Polycarp and Anicetus recognized that their respective customs were not regarding teachings of the faith—not constitutive elements of the "rule of truth."⁴⁰ True "peace" was found only in the unity of a common confession of the truth and was to be enjoyed together in a joint celebration of the Lord's Supper. As Irenaeus concludes:

But though matters were in this shape, they communed together [ἑκοινωνήσαν], and Anicetus conceded the administration of the eucharist in the church to Polycarp, manifestly as a mark of respect. And they parted from each other in peace, both those who observed, and those who did not, maintaining the peace of the whole church.⁴¹

Indeed, the Bishop of Rome yielded his altar to the visiting Bishop of Smyrna as a mark of the fellowship (κοινωνία) they shared.⁴² In their teaching, and thus, in the Supper, they were

³⁹HE 5. 24, 16; NPNF2 1:243-44; MPG 20:505-508.

⁴⁰Roch Kereszty, "The Unity of the Church in the Theology of Irenaeus," *Second Century* 4 (1984):216. "Thus the attitude of Irenaeus on church unity is nuanced: he never stops insisting on unity in essentials, but he also insists on tolerating a difference in traditions which do not concern the 'one and the same faith.' . . . It seems that precisely his theology of unity based on the transcendent unity of God allows him a tolerance and acceptance of different customs where there was no danger to the unity of the faith. As he himself put it with admirable precision: 'the divergency in the fast emphasized the unanimity of our faith.'"

⁴¹HE 5. 24, 17; NPNF2 1:244; MPG 20:503.

⁴²Werner Elert (*Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, translated by Norman Nagel [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House,

one, even though they differed with regard to custom and form. And the result was that peace was maintained throughout the whole church.

Conclusions

Then and Now

Missouri Lutheranism's widespread ecclesiastical conflict mirrors the tension that resulted from the Quartodeciman observance during those final years of the second century. Then as now, the relationship between the unity of the faith and diversity of ceremony is a crucial factor in the debate. In the second century, the Quartodeciman call for diversity of ceremony was grounded in their own apostolically-based customs and forms, filtered through the first few decades of the postapostolic age. Today, however, the call for a widened diversity of ceremony is grounded in a perceived separation between "style and substance" and a desire to appeal to the various segments of an increasingly diverse and unchurched population.⁴³ Whereas the Quartodecimans looked back to their ceremonial tradition in order to substantiate their argument for diversity, modern cries for ceremonial tolerance and diversity in Missouri are essentially forward-looking in their justification. Such forward-looking manufacturing of a tradition is completely absent in the thought of Irenaeus and the church of the second century.

Of course, for the Gnostics of the second century, diversity of every sort was a given and, in fact, a desirable commodity. The various schools of thought tossed about from teacher to teacher

1966], 165-66) notes: "Anicetus' action therefore must be understood to bestow permission to celebrate the Sacrament. . . . What happened during Polycarp's visit is proof positive of enacted fellowship between the churches of Rome and Smyrna. Practiced altar fellowship is proof of the fellowship between the churches of Rome and Asia Minor."

⁴³One may see David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America's Mission Challenge* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988).

must have made it a nearly maddening enterprise for one such as Irenaeus to tie down and refute such teachings. In many ways, this kind of ideological diversity is not far from our current "postmodern" approach to epistemology, with no absolutes and a desire for "spirituality without truth."⁴⁴

With such a world view today, there are two simplistic paths Missouri may follow. The first is to allow the church and her worship to be conformed to the fluid epistemology of postmodernism. In such a scenario, little or nothing stays the same, and the goal of the worship service is to provide an appropriate comfort level for all who attend. Here the appeal is made primarily to the will and emotion instead of the intellect. The second simplistic path is that of repristination. Whether it is fourth-century eucharistic prayers, sixteenth-century hymnody, or 1950s worship from *The Lutheran Hymnal*, the goal of the service is to find solid grounding and security by doing things the way they used to be done, a romanticism that believes that things were once grand. Here the appeal is made primarily to the intellect.

A third path, more complicated but also more churchly, is the path of peace, once traveled by Irenaeus, the "peacemaker."

Unity in Doctrine

First of all, peace for Irenaeus was only possible through thorough grounding in Christianity's foundation—the Holy Scriptures and the confession of such Scriptures as proclaimed in "the rule of truth." This was no mere "text book theology," but a living, breathing, organic proclamation that flowed forth in the preaching and teaching of the bishops and presbyters. Such theology was, in its essence, a unity—a unified Holy Scripture and a unified "rule of truth." The goal was to teach and hand down no more and no less than what the apostles had

⁴⁴One may see Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994), 191 and following.

taught and handed down.

This same spirit animates authentic Lutheranism. The confessors at Augsburg concluded by acknowledging that "nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church catholic."⁴⁵ The compilers of the Book of Concord likewise spelled out their intention to confess only "the doctrine as the ancient consensus which the universal and orthodox church of Christ has believed, fought for against many heresies and errors, and repeatedly affirmed."⁴⁶ The true spirit of Lutheranism is, therefore, not sectarian in any sense of the word. Properly speaking, it does not even claim to be a "denomination." Rather, authentic Lutheranism claims to confess that which the universal church has always taught and confessed of the doctrines of Holy Scriptures. Thus, Lutheranism is truly the most "ecumenical" of confessions within the church catholic, for it seeks to ground its teaching and preaching in a unified Scripture and a unified confession of the faith.

If Missouri today would learn from Irenaeus or from her Lutheran fathers, she must first come to grips with the essential need for a unified confession of the faith in her midst. As with Polycarp and Anicetus, diversity in ceremony can never be resolved until unity in doctrine has first been achieved. Therefore, to strive toward unity around a commonly held confession of the faith among all her pastors and bishops would be the most crucial and beneficial first step toward arriving at any sort of ceremonial consensus.

The Role of Tradition

From the unity and peace enjoyed in a common confession of the faith flows the freedom to approach the role of tradition with regard to ceremony. Lutherans, however, may be uneasy

⁴⁵*Augsburg Confession*, Conclusion; Tappert, 95 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶Book of Concord, Preface; Tappert, 3.

with such a concept. The word tradition conjures up images of Roman Catholic private masses, rosary beads, and intercessory prayers to the saints. The Reformation rightly discarded these traditions because they were not in conformity with the Scriptures and the "rule of truth," to speak in Irenaeian terms.

Lutheranism, however, has historically retained a great number of traditions from its heritage in the western rite. The sign of the cross, bowing, chanting, a variety of vestments, candles, stained-glass, and the like are all salutary traditions inherited from the church catholic prior to the Reformation. Likewise, Lutheranism has even developed traditions of her own in her nearly five centuries of existence—the Lutheran chorale, congregational singing, and Lutheran confirmation, to name but a few. Of all these traditions, either pre- or post-Reformation, none are commanded or forbidden in Scripture; all are true *adiaphora*. And yet, these ceremonial traditions have proven helpful to the proclamation of the gospel throughout the history of Lutheranism.

Thus, Lutherans today need to recognize that, as with Irenaeus, it is a legitimate enterprise to appeal to the history of such customs and forms when making the case for or against retaining a particular ceremony. While the appeal to history certainly does not play on the same level as a direct appeal to, on the one hand, the Scriptures or, on the other, the Confessions of the church, nevertheless, such an appeal is also not a matter to be dismissed as having no consequence. The decision of whether or not to wear traditional vestments, for example, cannot be made simply on the basis of the Scriptures; neither can it be dogmatically made even on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions. Such traditions are purely matters of freedom—and yet, a freedom that lives and breathes and knows itself to live within the history of the church catholic. As C. F. W. Walther once wrote:

We have from the beginning spoken earnestly of good ceremonies, not as though the important thing were outward forms, but rather to make use of our liberty in these things. For true Lutherans know that although one

does not have to have these things . . . one may nevertheless have them because good ceremonies are lovely and beautiful and are not forbidden in the word of God. . . . We on our part have retained the ceremonies and church ornaments in order to prove by our actions that we have a correct understanding of Christian liberty, and know how to conduct ourselves in things which are neither commanded or forbidden.⁴⁷

The converse, however, is also true for Lutheranism. For just as Lutheranism historically has been slow to remove such "lovely and beautiful" ceremonies, so also it should exercise caution in importing ceremonies from other traditions, and it may appeal to history for or against such incorporation. The revivalism of nineteenth-century America and its modern legacy in the Church Growth Movement and neo-evangelicalism, for instance, should certainly inform us as to whether or not to use certain revivalistic musical forms in worship, how to order the service, or even the location from which the pastor preaches.⁴⁸ Again, all of these matters are true adiaphora in and of themselves, but the history and background of the various customs and forms of Lutheranism, as well as those from other traditions, are not completely indifferent matters. Thus, an historical sense of and appreciation for the catholicity (or lack thereof) of the church's various rites and ceremonies is essential to the Lutheran ceremonial enterprise.

Diversity in Ceremony

As with Irenaeus, the Lutheran Confessors recognized that rites and ceremonies need not be everywhere alike, and that such diversity, in fact, "stands together with" the unity of the faith. Within the history of Lutheranism, this tenet has played itself out to a remarkable degree. The plethora of hymnals and

⁴⁷C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, 2 volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:193.

⁴⁸Lawrence R. Rast Jr., "Charles Finney on Theology and Worship," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 62 (January 1998):63-67.

agendas in the history of German Lutheranism alone testifies to the fact that it has never been part of the spirit of Lutheranism to bring all Lutheran rites and ceremonies into complete uniformity. Especially in matters of ceremonial adiaphora, Lutheranism has led an amazingly free existence – all within the unity of a common confession.

And yet, within the various jurisdictions of each locality, Lutherans strove for uniformity in rite and ceremony. As with the local bishops and synods of the second century who decided for or against the Quartodeciman observance, so the Lutheran tradition has sought to maintain within various local provinces or synodical affiliations a common hymnody, order of the mass, and other attendant rites. It does this because such rites and ceremonies publicly testify to the truth as well as to error, assist the spiritual growth of the faithful and their instruction in the Scriptures, help safeguard purity of doctrine among God's people, and provide for good order and peace, evangelical decorum, dignity, reverence, and devotion in the gathering of the church.⁴⁹ Indeed, for many generations of Lutheranism the various provincial agendas served as the guides for how the church was to be run in that particular locality, not the later *Kirchenrecht* or Handbook.

The Missouri Synod finds itself at the receiving end of such a way of ordering the church. Within our own synodical affiliation, there has been for many decades a tradition of a common hymnody, order of the Lord's Supper, and other attendant rites. Although there has always been a certain degree of diversity in custom from congregation to congregation (just as there was a certain degree of variation even among the Quartodecimans), nevertheless, there has been a general commonalty in ceremony and rite. Such local diversity as well as a common synodical observance stood together with the unity of the faith for Missouri.

⁴⁹1 Corinthians 11:26; AC Abuses, 6; AC XXIV, 2-4; AC XXVI, 40; AC XXVIII, 53-55; Ap VII/VIII, 33, 40; Ap XV, 1, 13, 20; Ap XXIV, 3; Ap XXVIII, 15; Ep X, 1.

Toward Maintaining the Peace

In this era of "Worship Wars," however, synodical diversity in matters of rite and ceremony have become frayed at the edges. For some, the solution appears to be rebellion against anything that stands as official synodical hymnals and agendas. For others, the solution seems to be a rigid enforcement of synodical standards by appealing to the synodical *Kirchenrecht*. It is a sad commentary that as Missouri has come to rely less and less in recent years on the *ordos* of the church to give order to its life together, it has consequently begun to rely more and more on the words of the synodical Handbook.

The path toward peace that Irenaeus and the Quartodecimans once trod forms the path of peace for Missouri. Such a path begins with unity in doctrine, flows forth in the freedom of ceremonial diversity within the tradition of the church catholic, and is ultimately realized in the fellowship of the Lord's body and blood. As Luther once wrote to the people of Franconia:

I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Martin Luther, "A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord, 1525," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-85), 53:47.