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Irenaeus of Lyons

“Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself.”

“When we stand in the light it is not we who illumine the light and cause it to shine but we are illuminated and made shining by the light... God grants his blessings on those who serve him because they are serving him and on those who follow him because they are following him, but he receives no blessing from them because he is perfect and without need.”

“For it is not needful, to use a common proverb, that one should drink up the ocean who wishes to learn that its water is salt.”

1 Corinthians 2:12-16, English Standard Version.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

Sacrifice, not knowledge.

I was a bit unusual as an academic. I had two very different areas of expertise. One of them was 3D modeling and animation. The other was database and information

systems. For thirty-five years, I taught students about digital information. One of the things I would cover in my courses was how to search through the massive amounts of information available on the Internet to find just what you need – and then use it for some commercial, military, or scientific purpose. One of the reasons I eventually decided to leave the university where I was a professor was that I had come to see our society as developing an extreme over-dependence on information, on human-engineered knowledge. It seemed that we felt that we had conquered the world simply by drowning each other in data.

Today, we have four quotes, three of which are non-biblical, and one that is from Paul's first letter to the nascent Christian church in Corinth. Let's consider our first three. They are from someone called Irenaeus, from the city of Lyons in what is today France, although at that time, people in this port city spoke Greek. He is one of the so-called "church fathers". These are Christian writers who were extremely influential in early Christian thought and were active from about the year 100 to the year 900 hundred. In other words, the lives of these writers did not overlap with the lives of the Apostles, but the church fathers were the ones who stepped forward to establish the theological and doctrinal roots of our faith. Many of them are considered "apologists", which is a bit of an odd word. They didn't apologize for anything; this word means that they defended Christianity against

Christian people who twisted the faith in directions away from the teachings of Jesus. They also defended the faith from pagan persecutors. Irenaeus was one of these apologists. He was born around the year 130 and died around the year 202. He wrote late in the second century and was thus one of the early church fathers. One of his biggest concerns were Christian Gnostics, whom we talked about last week. Gnostics believed that humanity is inherently evil and that the physical world is corrupt. They were heavily influenced by an ancient Pagan faith that said that the earth and humans were created by an inferior god. Christian Gnostics spent their lives seeking secret, mystical knowledge; they believed that this knowledge was needed for salvation. They were elitists who believed that salvation was reserved only for the few who were deemed spiritually and intellectually worthy. In short, Gnostic Christians believed that Jesus saved humanity, not through his sacrifice, but through secret knowledge that he passed on to only a few people. Of course, we believe that Jesus rescues through sacrifice, not knowledge.

They claimed that there was some magical knowledge that Jesus himself passed down orally, not through the Gospels or the writings of people like Paul the evangelist. This was knowledge that only they, the Gnostics, along with Jesus, knew; these secret truths would lead to their eternal salvation, while those who remained ignorant would not be saved. It was always fuzzy just what they thought

this knowledge was. It had to do with how to restore the universe to some perfect state. But the point was they could avoid the hard work involved in purifying themselves and becoming better people; all they had to do was get their hands on some secret information. Gnostic Christians also believed that since humanity was so inferior, Jesus was never a human in any way, shape, or form. They thought that Jesus only appeared to be human, that his human side was an illusion. They also believed that God would never enter into any lowly, physical things on this earth, so they didn't believe in the deep symbolism of communion in the way that we do.

Let's look at what Irenaeus had to say. Interestingly, his name means "the peaceful one", despite the fact that he was a fierce and relentless foe of Gnosticism. Our first quote says the following: *"Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself."* Irenaeus is saying that over-intellectualized faith tends to be carefully dressed up to look like the truth but that it's not the truth that Jesus taught. Our second quote says: *"When we stand in the light it is not we who illumine the light and cause it to shine but we are illuminated and made shining by the light... God grants his blessings on those who serve him because they are serving him and on those who follow him because they are following him, but he receives no blessing from them because he is perfect and*

without need.” Irenaeus is striking out here at the elitism of this intellectual form of Christianity. He’s saying that these people seem to think that they are the arbiters of what is truth, not Jesus, not God. Our third quote says: *“For it is not needful, to use a common proverb, that one should drink up the ocean who wishes to learn that its water is salt.”* I like this one a lot. The point here is that we don’t need special knowledge obtainable only by special people to recognize and understand the teachings of Jesus. Any person can, though Jesus, develop a relationship with God and learn, by emulating Jesus, to treat all people equally, with compassion and empathy, and with love.

Let’s turn to our scriptural quote, from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a bustling, fast-paced, port city that sat on a small piece of land that connected the main portion of Greece to a peninsula called Peloponnesus. It was a place filled with cultural activities and advanced employment opportunities, as well as crime. In many ways, Corinth was much like America is today. About the time this letter was written, and although Paul and the people of Corinth didn’t know it, the city was nearing the end of its glory days. In this letter, Paul was trying to get the believers of Corinth, who gathered together in a number of small house churches, to understand that they must follow the ways of Christ, not the worldly ways of human beings.

In our passage, Paul writes: *“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”* Paul wants the Christians of Corinth to step away from the worldly influences of those who live around them. He wants them to look inside themselves, to connect with the Holy Spirit living within them, rather than relying on human knowledge.

You know what I think is the Gnostic problem of today? It’s not people who claim there is no God or that we will eventually understand everything through science. It’s not even the raw collection of data or the astonishing focus we have on building this gigantic digital network of information. The problem has to do with distraction. So many people are constantly on their phones, responding to texts. People will randomly surf the web for hours, watching videos, reading random news stories, perusing social media. Young people will spend countless hours locked into video games, responding to the demands of a computer. We don’t stop to focus on anything meaningful. What suffers are our spiritual practices.

I don’t think that people believe that spirituality is dated, that science and technology will replace faith. But I do think that technology is preventing us from finding quiet, personal time so we can focus on our spiritual sides. We face

astounding challenges. Back in the centuries just after Jesus left this earth, the early Christians had extremely little in the way of science and technology. They weren't saturated with digital information that made them think that surely, with all the data we have at our fingertips, humans alone must be able to understand everything. But even they struggled with this notion of faith, of trusting what we feel inside us. Even they succumbed to the belief that we could be all that we can be just by getting our hands on some data.

So, trust yourself. Trust God. Don't let anyone tell you that you need special knowledge to be valuable as a human. Don't let yourself get distracted by the ocean of web pages, Facebook pages, videos, Tweets, text messages, etc., etc. Take time to be calm, to be quiet and still, to contemplate the Holy Spirit within you. Let the Holy Spirit connect you to your Savior and to God.

You know, last Sunday as I stood up here, I was pretty dazed because I had been at the hospital until 5 A.M. I sat with a man for hours as his wife lay dying. They were both eighty-four and had gotten married when they were eighteen. He had taken her to the emergency room with what they thought was a minor problem. The ER doc fixed that, but they did some imaging and discovered that she had advanced heart disease. So, they admitted her to the hospital and put her in a room. Then her heart stopped. A series of nurses worked on her, until they

restarted her heart. But she simply wasn't going to make it. He told me about their lives, the places they had lived, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

This man turned out to be an accomplished engineer who had run a successful firm, designing and manufacturing complex electronics. He was the engineer's engineer, someone who knows far more about the guts of computers, what makes them tick at the microscopic level, than I do. But you know what he said? As he held his unconscious wife's hand, he told me that the most damaging invention ever created by humans was the computer. He said he hated computers, and he said it vehemently. He felt that technology was preventing people from using their minds. He said people don't think anymore. They just push information around for a living. The worst part, he said, is that everyone thinks they know so much, that they have all the answers, that anything at all that they want to figure out, they can just pull it off the Internet. No need to be creative.

This man who had seen the information age born and had made an extremely good living off of it bemoaned the fact that we weren't striving to understand anything anymore. You see, the Gnostics were doing something that in a certain sense is quite natural. They wanted to understand. But they were taking the easy way out. They were relying on shallow knowledge gained by humans

instead of doing the hard work of using their hearts and their minds to contemplate the mysteries of faith. They could have been using the amazing gifts that God had given them to connect with God. But that was too hard. That was too scary, because it would have caused them to have to admit that there was so much that they did not – and could not – know.

Don't let our ability to do amazing things with science and technology make you think we can replace God with human-made stuff. Find a quiet place to sit down. Do it every once in a while. Focus on the Holy Spirit inside you, then follow the Spirit outward, toward God. Let yourself connect with your creator. Don't insist on understanding everything. Just let yourself feel the God who created us, who wants nothing but the best for us, and who will one day explain everything like no human will ever be able to. There's nothing wrong at all with technology; I am myself an extremely heavy-duty user of the Internet. I have to fight every day to avoid the constant interruptions of digital devices. But don't get distracted, don't take the easy way out and think that we can understand everything by ourselves. Leave time to use your mind, your creativity - to pray. That's how we connect with God. Prayer. And yes, there is also some hard work that must be done to transform ourselves into truly Godly people who follow the compassionate, empathetic, and forgiving teachings of Jesus. And next week, we will talk about prayer. Amen.