

The Haste of Sin, the Slowness of Salvation: An Interpretation of Irenaeus on the Fall and Redemption

JEFF VOGEL*

The aim of this article is to show how Irenaeus incorporates patience into the economy of salvation, both in his understanding of the mission of the incarnate Son and in the life of the church. Haste, I argue, is at the root of sin for Irenaeus, while waiting is, in a certain sense, sin's countermeasure. In addition, I show that waiting never truly comes to an end for Irenaeus. It is the proper disposition of the human being with regard to God from the moment of creation to his or her full incorporation into the divine life.

According to Irenaeus, the fall is a mistake about means more than ends. Though God has always intended to give human beings a share in the divine nature, it is necessary for them to become accustomed to bearing it over time. Instead, they forfeit this opportunity by trying to become gods too quickly. They try to take what can only be given, to grasp what can only be graciously bestowed on them. In so doing, they commit a “solecism against the grammar of being,” to use a phrase of C. S. Lewis.¹ In other words, in their effort to take the divine life early, human beings render themselves unfit for participation in it, because the divine life is essentially only receivable. It proves elusive to all clutching, clinging, and clasping.

This graspingness is the fundamental problem in the way human beings comport themselves in relation to God. Though they have an original capacity to be incorporated into the divine life, they lose it through their impatience, what I call the “haste of sin.” Not wanting to be raised into it gradually, they try to achieve finality on their own, to engraft themselves into it forcibly. This desire to arrive at the end

* Jeff Vogel is a doctoral candidate in the Theology, Ethics and Culture program at the University of Virginia.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperCollins, 2001), 44.

quickly leaves them ill-disposed to partake of the glory of God. They want to close down when their proper activity is to be opened up; they want to be done with watching and waiting when participation in divine life involves holding out for an ever greater enrichment of one's being. In short, through their bid for divinity, human beings lose the very disposition that would enable them to receive the growth God intends to give them.

The first section of this essay considers the haste of sin. The second section looks at a single aspect of the recapitulative role given to Jesus Christ in Irenaeus's theology, namely, his submission to time. I will argue that, according to Irenaeus, the Son's effective counter to Adam's disobedience is to remain in a condition of receptivity throughout his entire life, to wait on God where Adam did not. It is not merely the Son's act of becoming incarnate that is redemptive, but his consent to the necessity of growth over time. Since it was this consent that proved to be too great for human beings, it was fitting that Christ should accomplish salvation through his own waiting and openness to the Father's will. Not any one event in the life of Christ, then, but his entire act of living in accordance with created nature, living with the ontological grain, so to speak, constitutes his saving work. The result of this life is the recovery for human beings of the capacity to participate in the life of God.

The third and final section notes that the salvation accomplished by Christ does not bring human beings immediately to a state of perfection, but restores them to the original trajectory given up in haste. Those who participate in Christ through faith are reestablished in a condition of waiting. I will examine the purpose of this continued waiting in the economy of salvation, arguing that it is the means by which the Spirit conforms those whom he indwells to the Son and joins them to the Father. In other words, the period between Pentecost and *parousia* is not an incidental aspect of the Spirit's mission, but an integral part of his glorifying activity.

This essay is deliberately called an "interpretation" of Irenaeus's teaching on the fall and redemption: I am not trying to provide a systematic account of his soteriology here, but only to highlight a single aspect of it. Others have undertaken the larger task.² My goal in the

² Two recent comprehensive works on Irenaeus are Bernard Sesboüé, *Tout récapituler dans le Christ: christologie et sotériologie d'Iréneé de Lyon* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000); and Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

ensuing discussion is to show how Irenaeus incorporates patience into the economy of salvation both in his understanding of the mission of the incarnate Son and in the life of the Church. In addition, I hope to show that, for Irenaeus, the waiting of human beings on God never truly comes to an end; it is, in fact, their proper disposition both in their earthly pilgrimage and in their participation in the divine life.

Creation and Fall

The relevant passage for this reading of the fall begins in *Against Heresies* IV.38.1, where Irenaeus establishes why Adam and Eve were not perfect from the very start:

If, however, anyone says, “What then? Could not God have exhibited man as perfect from the beginning?” let him know that, inasmuch as God is indeed always the same and unbegotten with respect to himself, all things are possible to him. But created things must be inferior to him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But inasmuch as they are not uncreated, for this very reason do they come short of the perfect. Because, as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline.³

Irenaeus seems to offer two different answers to his interlocutor's question here. The first is simply to write imperfection into the very definition of “createdness,” which renders the challenge to God's omnipotence meaningless. Insofar as it can be said of anything that it was once “recently created,” just so that thing lacks the perfection of always having been. Furthermore, to have been brought into being entails a lack of the freedom of self-determination that characterizes only what is uncreated. While human beings have freedom of choice, and in this bear a certain resemblance to God (IV.37.4-5), only that which is “always the same and unbegotten” possesses the perfection of not depending on what is other than itself for existence. Therefore, in

³ Unless otherwise noted, I am following the English translation of this work by A. Robert and J. Donaldson in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1884). All subsequent references to this work have been embedded in the text. The critical edition I have consulted throughout is *Contre les hérésies* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 10 vols.).

order for God to have created anything at all, it was necessary that it be imperfect in this sense—for even omnipotence cannot bring into existence something uncreated.

With this answer, however, Irenaeus may be speaking about a different kind of perfection than a reasonable person might assume was meant by the interlocutor's question.⁴ In other words, the question is not "Why aren't created beings uncreated?" but "Why are they subject to temptation?" or "Why must they be made to grow over time?" Irenaeus offers what looks to be an answer to these latter questions at the end of the passage: human beings are not given perfection from the beginning because, being of recent origin, they are "unaccustomed" (*insueta*) to and "unexercised" (*inexercitata*) in bearing it. This comes out more clearly a little later in the text: "God had the power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it" (IV.38.2). Here, Irenaeus seems to back away from his first answer. It is not that coming into being is itself an imperfection—which turns out to be something of a tautology—but that the condition of the creature of recent origin is such that, were it given the perfection of un-created being, it could not hold on to it. Being newly created, Adam and Eve were too weak to bear the fullness of perfection; they could only mature into God-bearers over a period of time.⁵ The questioner might want to know why even this must be so, but Irenaeus does not say. Unlike the Gnostics, whose penchant for speculation is a frequent object of his criticism (II.28, V.20.2), his consistent practice is to avoid such abstract questions.

Given this original incapacity of human beings to hold on to perfection, God's purpose is to grow them over time: "For from the very fact of these things having been created, it follows that they are not

⁴ For a discussion of the different senses of "perfect" being used in this passage, see Robert F. Brown, "On the Necessary Imperfection of Creation: Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* IV, 38," *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, 28 (1975), 17-25.

⁵ Irenaeus may have been influenced on this score by Theophilus of Antioch, who maintains that God was justified in forbidding Adam to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge because Adam "being yet an infant in age, was on this account as yet unable to receive knowledge worthily" (*To Autolycus* II.25, trans. Marcus Dods in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867]). See G. Ruiz, "L'enfance d'Adam selon Saint Irénée de Lyon," *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique*, LXXXIX/2 (1988), 102.

uncreated; but by their continuing in being throughout a long course of ages, they shall receive a faculty (*virtutem*) of the uncreated, through the gratuitous bestowal of eternal existence on them by God” (IV.38.3). Again,

Now it was necessary that man should in the first instance be created; and having been created, should receive growth; and having received growth, should be strengthened; and having been strengthened, should abound; and having abounded, should recover; and having recovered, should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord. For God is He who is yet to be seen, and the beholding of God is productive of immortality; but immortality renders one near to (*proximum*) God (IV.38.3).

The whole chain of events that leads to the vision of God that deifies begins with the creature’s willingness to receive growth. In this way, waiting on God is the proper discipline of human beings. As Khaled Anatolios puts it, “For both Athanasius and Irenaeus, the human being exists insofar as it is receptive to the divine. The quintessential human vocation as well as the proper domain for the exercise of human freedom is thus precisely to remain within that receptivity.”⁶ God does not withhold perfection from human beings out of miserliness. Rather, the very act of having to wait for it is productive of the faculty by which they are able to bear it. The patient expectation characteristic of waiting is the training that prepares human beings to receive divine life.⁷

If the human vocation is to abide in a condition of receptivity, to “await the time of increase,” sin consists in the refusal of this

⁶ Khaled Anatolios, “The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius,” *Studia Patristica*, XXXVI (2001), 467.

⁷ Augustine makes a similar claim in his fourth homily on 1 John: “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing (*sanctum desiderium*). What you long for, as yet you do not see; but longing makes in you the room that shall be filled, when that which you are to see shall come. When you would fill a purse, knowing how large a present it is to hold, you stretch wide its cloth or leather; knowing how much you are to put in it, and seeing that the purse is small, you extend it to make more room. So by withholding the vision God extends the longing, through longing he makes the soul extend, by extending it he makes more room in it. So, brethren, let us long, because we are to be filled.” “Homilies on 1 John,” IV.6, in *Augustine: Later Works*, trans. John Burnaby (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1955), 290.

condition. Impatiently, human beings want “to be even now like God their creator,” when, on account of their created nature, they can only be “at length gods” (*tunc demum dii*). Not content first to hold the “rank of man,” and then afterwards to share in the glory of God, they want to attain to the latter straightaway (IV.38.4). In the Genesis story, Adam and Eve are shown trying to take what God was going to give them anyway once they were capable of keeping it. In their impatience, they cut themselves off from the life of God, by forsaking the very condition necessary to participate in it. In due time, they would have become accustomed to bearing perfection, but their lunge for immediate completion closed them to the operation of the life-giving Spirit. Since it is the vocation of human beings to come to bear God, this closure alienated them from their own true being (V.1.1).

This original act of haste, which plays itself out in every human being, is the root of sin. Attributing the fall to haste does not necessarily contradict the more traditional description of original sin as pride, though it implies it is only partially correct. The haste of sin is finally a desire for closure, a wish to be done with waiting, which can manifest itself as much in the decision to settle for far lower than what is intended for one as in a grasping after what is higher. The uniting factor in both cases is the desire no longer to be liable to the operation of another.⁸

An attitude of haste characterizes the Gnostics’s scheme of salvation, at least as it is presented by Irenaeus. This is evident in their rejection of the unity of the two testaments; their division of human beings into three stratified classes; and, above all, in their doctrine of Christ, which Irenaeus describes as docetic: “For they will have it that the Word and Christ never came into this world; that the savior, too, never became incarnate, nor suffered, but that he descended like a dove upon the dispensational Jesus; and that, as soon as he had declared the unknown Father, he again ascended into the pleroma” (III.11.3). The problem with the Gnostic account of the incarnation, what makes it so myopic, is that it does not respond to the haste of sin, but mimics it. It is a “snatch-and-grab job,” one that is unresponsive to the particular burden that has overwhelmed human beings since Adam. The Valentinian Christ does not submit to time. He has no history, no part in the hope of Israel that builds and swells throughout the

⁸ See also Sebastian Moore, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989).

Old Testament. His abandonment of the “dispensational Jesus” at the key point of the story is a failure to meet and resist the temptation to break out of time succumbed to by Adam and Eve. The salvation accomplished by this hasty Christ does not address the root cause of humanity’s alienation from God.

Undoubtedly, defending the goodness of the flesh is the primary concern of Irenaeus throughout *Against Heresies*. Thomas Weinandy puts this well: “To a degree that would be considered irrationally obsessive by the Gnostics, Irenaeus possessed a childlike enthusiasm and delight in the materiality of the material, the physicality of the physical, and the bodiliness of the bodily. He insisted that God did indeed create man from the dust and slime of the earth. In a real sense, Irenaeus loved mud.”⁹ According to Irenaeus, the denial of the flesh of Christ is the one thing that unites all heretics (III.11.3). However, in his dispute with the Gnostics about the flesh, Irenaeus is also engaged in a dispute over the value of taking time—an issue that, though not separable from the fleshliness of human beings, is not simply identical with corporeality. It is not only the grossness of matter that offends the Gnostics, but the burdensomeness of waiting on God, the lack of finality that characterizes creaturely existence. Consequently, where Irenaeus maintains that the role of the creature is to grow over time, that the human being is made fit to participate in the divine life only through patient endurance, his opponents declare that the true Gnostic already possesses the desired state of perfection: “On this account, they tell us that it is necessary for us whom they call animal men, and describe as being of the world, to practice continence and good works, that by this means we may attain at length to the intermediate habitation, but that to them who are called ‘the spiritual and perfect’ such a course of conduct is not at all necessary” (I.6.4). Those who have already attained to perfection have nothing to gain by ascetic discipline. The salvation they preach consists merely in coming to know the perfection that they possess eternally.

Like their account of the Incarnation, or lack thereof, their description of the true Gnostic repeats the haste of sin: it lays claim to an immediate divinity. In this regard, the teaching of the Gnostics, when divested of its mythological accretions, is a textbook example of the temptation besetting human beings generally, namely, to stop waiting

⁹ Thomas Weinandy, “St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*: The Importance of Being Human,” *Logos*, 6:4 (2003), 18.

on God. As I have already shown, Irenaeus holds that a divinity laid claim to is falsely named—for the divine nature is something that can only be received. While every human being is created with the ability to grow into the life of God, no one has an immediate kinship with the divine nature. This accrues to human beings only over the course of time, as they persist in a condition of openness and receptivity. For Irenaeus, the temporality of the human condition is not unrelated to one's ability to share in God's life: it is the very act of waiting on it, of not grasping at it, that accustoms one to receive it. In the next section, I look at how this is borne out in the life of Jesus Christ.

The Mission of Christ

According to Eric Osborn, Irenaeus's theology is governed by two things: a passion for truth and a sense for beauty and proportion.¹⁰ The former can be seen in his painstakingly thorough rebuttal of Valentinian teaching in the first two books of *Against Heresies*. The latter manifests itself above all in his readiness to see the fittingness of the acts of God throughout the economy of salvation. In Hellenistic literature, the concept of “the fitting” (*to prepon*) refers to the timeliness, seemliness, or appropriateness of something—the use of an image in a poetic work, a rhetorical flourish in an oration, the behavior of a person in a particular circumstance, and so on.¹¹ For Irenaeus, God's activity throughout the various economies spanning from the creation to the consummation is fitting in that it is always both expedient for the creatures who benefit from it and beautifully arranged. Describing the recapitulative work of Christ, he writes, “With him [the Son], nothing is incomplete or out of due season, just as with the Father there is nothing incongruous. For all these things were foreknown by the Father; but the Son works them out at the proper time in perfect order and sequence” (III.16.7). Elsewhere, Irenaeus portrays God as an artist at work in creation, whose patience and inventiveness incorporate the disobedience of human beings to produce an even greater work than if they had not sinned; conversely, the impatience of human beings with the particular form that God's salvation takes causes them to “harden and reject his artistry” (IV.39.2-3).

¹⁰ Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 18.

¹¹ Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 18-20.

The fittingness of the time of the appearance of Christ in history is known only to the Father, though the long period intervening between the creation of the first Adam and the second reveals God's forbearance. On the other hand, Irenaeus insists that the appropriateness of the Incarnation itself, the Word's coming in the flesh, is discernible to the eyes of faith. If the disobedience of Adam resulted in the loss of his capacity to receive the life of God, it could only be restored by one who was like him in every way, that is, by a human being. It could not be forcibly returned to the human race, but had to be accepted from within. While Irenaeus frequently talks about Christ as the model of the true human being, whose behavior is to be imitated by his followers, Christ's central role in his theology is to be the man who receives from God, undoing the disobedience of Adam and reorienting humanity to God. The Son's act of taking on flesh alone was not sufficient to accomplish this. One could say that taking on flesh was the condition of the possibility of his recapitulative work—which accounts for Irenaeus's vehement defense of the reality of the Incarnation against the Gnostics—but not that it was enough to recover for humanity the capacity to receive God. If it is haste that alienates human beings from God, insofar as it leaves them ill-disposed to receive divine life, a fitting salvation would have to undo this impatience. Christ also had to submit to time, to grow into perfection. Hans Urs von Balthasar has stated this well:

God intended man to have *all* good, but in his, God's time; and therefore all disobedience, all sin, consists essentially in breaking out of time. Hence the restoration of order by the Son of God had to be the annulment of that premature snatching at knowledge, the beating down of the hand outstretched toward eternity, the repentant return from a false, swift transfer into eternity to a true, slow confinement in time.¹²

In becoming incarnate, the Son took on the entirety of the human condition. He entered into the flow of time,¹³ and became subject to

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1994), 37.

¹³ J. T. Nielsen notes that the salvation envisioned by the Gnostics does not occur at a particular point in time, but is a timeless event in the pleroma. J. T. Nielsen, *Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus* (Assen, Neth.: Van Gorcum & Comp., N.V., 1968), 60.

waiting on God for his own increase. Unlike Adam, however, whose bid for divinity was an attempt to break out of time, Christ remained in the posture of receiver throughout his entire life. It is this basic difference of disposition towards God between the first Adam and the second that differentiates them. Christ acted otherwise than fallen human beings at every point; he waited where they did not, and, in so doing, reversed the “chronicle of disobedience”¹⁴ begun in the garden of Eden. Whereas Adam’s refusal of the condition of waiting rendered him incapable of receiving the life of God, and therefore exposed him to the mortality and corruptibility inherent in changeable nature, Christ was never alienated from the Father’s will, not even in Gethsemane, where the Father’s will diverged from his own. In the event of the cross, Christ’s receptivity with respect to the Father reached its climax. His death confirmed his willingness to wait on the Father in an irrevocable way, his refusal to grasp and take life for himself.

Only in submitting thus could the Son counteract the tendency towards haste that has affected human beings since Adam. It is for this reason that Irenaeus insists on the need for Christ to have passed through every stage of human existence. His willing endurance of conception, birth, baptism, growth to maturity (which for Irenaeus means his arrival at old age), his subjection to temptation, betrayal, and, finally, even death—all of which occurred without sin—together constitute the saving act of God in Christ. Rowan Williams notes that, for Irenaeus, the “event of Jesus remakes humanity by its enactment of archetypal human situations in such a way as to direct them Godward.”¹⁵ It is true that key events in Christ’s life stand out against the background for Irenaeus, especially as they lend themselves to beautiful type/antitype pairings. However, it seems fair to say—given his emphasis on the necessity of creaturely growth—that Irenaeus considers the ordinary time of Christ’s life to be equally significant for human redemption. Christ did not accomplish salvation episodically but continuously, in the entirety of his earthly existence. It is a saving life more than anything else.

¹⁴ Weinandy, “St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*,” 28.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (Boston, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1991), 30.

By living and dying in a condition of receptivity, Christ was made capable of being fully possessed by the Spirit of God.¹⁶ He was the “second Adam” in the very strict sense that he was the only truly “living man” since the original creation, the only one in whom openness to the operation of the Spirit was total. As Irenaeus says, “where the Spirit of the Father is, there is a living man” (V.9.3). The Spirit was able to dwell in and with Christ precisely because he did not grasp after it, but allowed it to come upon him freely and to lead him throughout his earthly life. For Irenaeus, this complete indwelling of the Spirit in Christ’s humanity is the ultimate goal of the incarnation of the Son.¹⁷ From the abundance of his own indwelling or anointing by the Spirit, the Son gives the Spirit to those who participate in him through faith. As Irenaeus writes, “The Lord, receiving this as a gift from his Father, does himself also confer it upon those who are partakers of himself, sending the Holy Spirit upon all the earth” (III.17.2).¹⁸

While human beings have a natural potential to grow into the likeness of God, they forfeited this capacity in Adam; they closed themselves off to the activity of the Spirit, whose mission, according to Irenaeus, is to join or fit (*aptaret*) them to the Father (III.17.2). The Spirit is the incorporating agent, the hand of the Father that does the gathering up. Closed off from the Spirit, human growth was stunted; human beings were frozen in a merely animal state, left rushing headlong after their lusts and desires (V.8.2). According to Irenaeus, Jesus Christ proved a site where the Spirit of God could once more dwell among human beings and work to join them to the Father: “wherefore the Spirit also descended upon the Son of God, made the son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with him (*cum ipso adsuescens*) to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ” (III.17.1).

¹⁶ While Irenaeus occasionally speaks of one’s “possession of the Spirit,” he also says that the Spirit possesses and inherits human flesh and blood (*Against Heresies* V.9.4).

¹⁷ The idea that Christ’s mission culminates in the coming of the Spirit is repeated frequently by later writers, especially in the East. Paul Evdokimov, *L’Esprit Saint dans la tradition orthodoxe* (Paris: Les Editions Du Cerf, 1969), 89.

¹⁸ Anatolios, “The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius,” 474.

In the person of Jesus Christ one finds the means by which the capacity to grow towards God has been restored to humanity, the model of how to receive this growth, and the end result of the process of growing. Christ is for Irenaeus the “template for man’s restored being,” as James G. M. Purves puts it.¹⁹ He writes, “The potential that lay within Adam and Eve was never properly realised; yet the process of man’s growth was fulfilled and completed in and through Jesus Christ, whose humanity was unfailingly sustained through the whole process of life to reach its fulfillment in Christ’s glorification and exaltation.”²⁰ What is revealed in Christ is not only the proper disposition of the human creature with regard to God, but the goal towards which this openness to the Father leads, namely, glorification. Christ is not only the man who waits on God for growth, but the first person in whom this growth is fully realized. Prior to his coming, the likeness of God into which human beings are created to grow was not known, which is precisely what tempted them to lunge for immediate completion, causing them to “lose the similitude” to God (V.16.2). With the coming of Christ, however, both the process and the goal of human growth have been rendered permanently visible to human beings.

The Son’s consent to receive from the Father throughout his life, and especially in the passion, reversed the haste of sin. If Christ had been unwilling to submit to the time of human existence—if, as the Gnostics imagined, he had come and gone as he pleased—his salvation would not have been fitting; it would have been neither expedient nor beautifully arranged. As it is, his life and death were characterized by a refusal of this haste, a rejection of the temptation to lunge and grasp at premature completion. He submitted to the Father’s will uninterruptedly—to the point of suffering and death—and, in this, “recapitulated” the human race, remade it from within. According to Irenaeus, Christ reoriented humanity to its divine end and opened it once more to receive life from the Holy Spirit—the topic of the third and final section of this essay.

¹⁹ James C. M. Purves, “The Spirit and the *Imago Dei*: Reviewing the Anthropology of Irenaeus of Lyons,” *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 68:2 (1996), 107.

²⁰ Purves, “The Spirit and the *Imago Dei*,” 106.

Salvation as Appropriation of Christ's Way of Waiting

The recapitulative work of Christ recovers for human beings what they had lost in Adam: the capacity to “be according to the image and likeness of God.” As I showed in the previous section, this recovery involves a renewed receptivity to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For Irenaeus, it is through faith in Christ that one is enabled to receive the same life-giving Spirit that directed him throughout his life (V.9.3). As Weinandy writes,

Having recapitulated the whole of our sinful history on the cross and transforming it by his sacrificial act of love, the resurrected Jesus becomes the first man to obtain the perfect image and likeness of God, for it is the risen humanity of Jesus that most fully manifests the Son’s divine likeness to the Father. Through faith and baptism the Christian comes to partake of this risen life through the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that molds and fashions us into the image of Jesus, and in this way we take on the likeness of Father as his children.²¹

The Spirit’s work consists of fashioning human beings into the image of Jesus Christ, who is in turn the perfect expression of the Father. However, this entails reestablishing them in the condition of receptivity that Adam gave up. In other words, Christ’s recapitulative work does not bring human beings immediately to a state of perfection (which they still have not become capable of bearing) but recovers for them the capacity to grow into it. Those who have faith in Christ are not miraculously advanced to the end of their growth, but returned to their original trajectory, healed of what Simon Tugwell calls their “false grown-upness.”²² Christ “commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam, namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God, that we might recover in Christ Jesus” (III.18.1). As Purves writes, “The restoration which is brought about in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ, in whom

²¹ “St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*,” 29-30.

²² Simon Tugwell, *Prayer: Living with God* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1975), 37.

both the Son and the Spirit have a work to do, is the restoration of man to the process of realizing his potential, the potential which God decrees to be realized in his Son incarnate, Jesus Christ.”²³ The church does not manifest the world at the height of its maturity, but the world returned to its original infancy, so to speak, though with this exception: the image of God has been sealed in humanity once and for all in the life of the incarnate Word (V.16.2). Followers of Christ have before them irrevocably the image into which they are to grow. The length of the “time of increase” remains indefinite, but the goal, the *telos*, is no longer unknown. They are able, at last, to begin.

The Christian’s experience of the Spirit is in accordance with his or her restoration to the condition of waiting through faith in Christ. Irenaeus writes, “But we do now receive a certain portion of his Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed (*paulatim assuescentes*) to receive and bear God” (V.8.1). The “little by little” of the Spirit’s action is in no way incidental to his mission of conforming believers to the image and likeness of Christ. As the life of Christ was characterized by waiting on and receiving growth from God, and just so ended in glorification, so, too, are Christ’s followers returned to such a condition by the indwelling of the Spirit. Irenaeus draws on the apostle Paul’s image of the “earnest” or “down payment” of the Spirit to depict the simultaneity of current participation and continued waiting (see 2 Cor. 5:5). Irenaeus writes, “This earnest, therefore, thus dwelling in us, renders us spiritual even now, and the mortal is swallowed up by immortality” (V.8.1). Those who are in Christ are already able to cry “Abba, Father,” as Christ himself did. They are already “adopting the quality of the Spirit” (V.9.3). On the other hand, they continue to await the “complete grace of the Spirit” (*universa Spiritus gratia*), which they will receive only at the resurrection. The full bestowal of grace at that time will “accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God” (V.8.1).

Some might fear that the description of the Christian state of life as one of “waiting” detracts from a proper focus on Christ’s presence in the Spirit, and thus overlooks the salvation already accomplished in Christ’s death and resurrection. But this misses the whole point. It is through their continued waiting through the Spirit that the members

²³ Purves, “The Spirit and the *Imago Dei*,” 110-111.

of the Church receive the growth originally intended for them, the capacity for which was recovered in Christ's life and death. It is by establishing the Church in Christ's way of being in the world, his way of waiting, that the Spirit works out the salvation accomplished in his life and death. This is the cooperation between the two hands of God: Christ recapitulates all things in himself (*omnia in semetipsum recapitulans*; III.16.6), restoring to human beings the capacity to grow into the image and likeness of God, and the Spirit gathers creatures into himself (*complectens hominem in semetipsum*; V.8.1), thus realizing in them the potential recovered by Christ. Their incorporation into the divine life begins even now, paradoxically, through their continuance in expectation. For it is through their openness and patience that the Spirit conforms them to the way of being of the Son.

D. Jeffrey Bingham has noted how Irenaeus's emphasis on the expedience of waiting might address the issue of the continuing delay of the consummation:

[The] delay of *parousia* has not resulted in a realized eschatological fixation, nor has it softened the passages which urge caution concerning letting down one's apocalyptic watch. Instead, waiting becomes an essential mark of the devout human creature. If Irenaeus is answering the concern of the delay, his reply is that God has built delay into the very nature of salvation history, but also eventually, fulfillment.²⁴

Even the millennium, an idea that Irenaeus took literally (consistent with his "love of mud"), is a beginning as much as it is an ending. The kingdom that results from the "revealing of the sons of God" at the resurrection is the "commencement of incorruption, by means of which kingdom those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually (*paulatim assuescant*) to partake of the divine nature" (V.32.1). The same activity of being accustomed to bear God that Adam gave up in the garden, that Christ restored to humanity, and that is going on even now in those inhabited by the Holy Spirit continues in the millennial reign of the saints. Bingham suggests that, for Irenaeus, this process of growing may continue even in eternal life: "So, even the fulfilling of

²⁴ D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Hope in Irenaeus of Lyons," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 76:4 (2000), 265-282, 281.

the hope of the creation leads to further hope. This is the nature of the economies and of the creature who must wait.”²⁵ In a passage that anticipates Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus writes, “For as God is always the same, so the human person in God will always progress towards God. God will never cease to benefit and enrich the human person, and the human person will never cease from receiving benefit and enrichment from God” (IV.11.2). Just as at the beginning of the world, so in eternity, the role of the creature is to wait on God for increase.

Conclusion

Throughout the foregoing discussion, I have examined the role of waiting in the theology of Irenaeus, a theology that Hans Urs von Balthasar describes as characterized above all by an “earthy patience with existence.”²⁶ In particular, I have tried to show that, for Irenaeus, waiting is the proper disposition of the human creature with respect to God, and that this disposition is abandoned in Adam’s hasty bid for divinity, and only recovered for humanity in the life lived by the “second Adam,” Jesus Christ. The original imperfection of human beings is not a flaw in creation, as the Gnostics supposed, or evidence of the creator’s grudging character. While human beings are created by God to share in his eternal life, they can only be taken up into it over a period of time, can only be “at length” divine. Waiting on God accustoms humanity to bear the divine nature, as it forms them into receivers, which they must be to partake of God’s own life.

Impatient with their own incompleteness, however, human beings try to break out of time and perfect themselves. By sinking themselves into those things they think will relieve them of the burden of waiting on God, they try to achieve a premature finality. This grasping after divinity is irrational because it removes them from the condition necessary to receive it and thus results in a declension from true being.²⁷ As Irenaeus puts it, this disobedience has “alienated us con-

²⁵ Bingham, “Hope in Irenaeus of Lyons,” 276.

²⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord II: Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1984), 50.

²⁷ Douglas Farrow notes that, “As Irenaeus sees it, through the fall our evolution has actually become our devolution. The Son does not appear at the middle of history, then, but at the end; not somewhere towards the top, but at the bottom.” Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 77. Christ’s coming does not result in a “general ascent of man” (75), but is a new beginning that must be accepted as at the original creation.

trary to nature" (*alienavit nos contra naturam*; V.1.1). According to Irenaeus, this haste is simply repeated in the Gnostic scheme of salvation, in which Christ enters and exits the human scene at will. In contrast, he insists that Christ must truly have lived, died, and been raised in the flesh. Irenaeus's tireless defense of the reality of Christ's Incarnation is of a piece with his emphasis on the temporality of deification. Though the major events of the gospel story each have a unique import, the haste of sin is not undone episodically, but in the Son's acceptance of the burden of time. It is in his waiting on God for increase and his openness to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that Christ has recovered for the human race the capacity to be taken up into God lost in Adam.

Finally, for Irenaeus the situation of waiting that obtains between Pentecost and parousia is an important part of the economy of salvation. Though Christ himself can be said to bring history to an end—insofar as he sums up all people and all times in himself, and receives in the resurrection the life of God intended for all human beings—the church is indwelt by the Spirit in such a way that waiting does not come to an end; there is waiting even at the end of the world. Little by little, the Spirit gathers up those whom he indwells, conforming them to the image of God sealed in the incarnate Word, and joining them to the life of the Father. The conformity of Christians to the Son consists above all in their acceptance of the time of increase, and their willingness to remain in the condition of receptivity. Irenaeus imagines this increase will continue forever; he does not envision the condition of waiting ever coming to an end. While the perfection of the uncreated is to be "always the same and unbegotten," it is the peculiar perfection of the creature never to stop growing.