

On Pandemics By Fabien Pering

The desert is a formidable place. The harsh elements demand respect. It is a desert: dry heat, low humidity, and 100% sunlight with little natural reprieve of shade. The fragile nature of vegetation shows us the realities of desert life especially with the scarcity of water. Scattered animal bones serve as grim reminders that death awaits us all which have the breath of life. The pandemic has been a painful reminder of this same fact. It has left many with an arid soul akin to the seemingly lifeless desert and in need of the Breath of God. Irenaeus' conceptualization of the *virgin soil* and the *Breath of God* can teach us that we must take the pandemic seriously while also not being afraid of it.

The pandemic has caused a lot of fear. Some are afraid of dying from the virus or passing it along. Others are afraid governmental overreach and infringements of liberties. Fear has united everyone in the midst of much divisiveness. Fear has affected everyone spiritually through this time. Everyone has either had the virus or knows someone who has. They also know someone who has been in critical condition or has perished from it all together. More than that, the coronavirus shut down so many parts of life that it isolated people in need of human interaction. It affected churches, businesses, and schools and will have long term effects. True to its etymology, the pandemic has affected *all* people from all walks of life by creating fear in their hearts.

St. Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies* gives us a spiritual framework in which we can understand what is going on not only in the coronavirus pandemic but all pandemics. Irenaeus was a theologian and priest whose work helped form Christian doctrine. Many people in his church were influenced by Gnosticism, a system of belief that taught what to know to get to heaven. Irenaeus recognized how it diverted people from intimately knowing God. His writings teach us about the unity of the Trinity and His creation. Understanding who God is and the purpose of His creation through the scriptures is a natural starting point for anything, especially the fear caused by pandemics.

The focus of Irenaeus' writings is the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. His in-depth view of scriptural anthropology helps make sense of why pandemics happen. He provided a

biblical foundation for understanding the economy of God which is the interworking of salvation from sin and death.¹ He articulates how God’s plan for salvation was present from the very beginning of creation—a doctrine known as *recapitulation*.² Jesus Christ recapitulates, or summarizes, all of humanity in Himself from beginning to end and saves those who believe in Him from sin and death.

Following the lead of St. Paul in Romans 5:12-21, Irenaeus demonstrates the overall arc of salvation between Adam and Jesus Christ, the “new” Adam. Paul writes that all have sinned by one man and may receive salvation by another man. Adam is the one man in whom all people receive the same fate of death because of sin. The result of death through sin introduced thorns and thistles in the land and viruses that affect human health. Similarly, all people may receive salvation through the new Adam, Jesus Christ. Jesus reverses the effects of death through Adam by creating life. Paul writes that Adam is a *type* of the one to come.³ A *type* is an imprint of something like the imprint of a king’s signet ring on a letter. Likewise, Adam is the imprint of Jesus Christ from the beginning of time and tying the arc of salvation together.

The Irenaean concept of the *virgin soil* comes up within this context of Romans 5. Irenaeus differs from Paul by writing that Adam was formed out of *virgin soil*.⁴ The imagery was inspired by Genesis 2:5 which says that “God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground.” Then the Lord fashioned humankind from the dust of the untilled earth and breathed into him the breath of life.⁵ Eve was created by taking the rib out of Adam and forming her. Therefore, humanity was birthed out of the virgin soil.

This idea of the virgin soil is important to the overall understanding of the substance and salvation of humanity. Humankind is made of the same natural elements from the earth and given a Divine imprint. That means that humans can receive the fullness of God’s glory given by the substance of humanity in the virgin soil. Similarly, Jesus must take on the same nature of humanity in order to redeem it. Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection would be in vain if He had not been formed with the same flesh.⁶ Irenaeus overlays Adam’s formation from the virgin soil

¹ John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 144.

² Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 1.10.3.

³ Romans 5:14

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3.18.7.

⁵ Gen 2:7

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3.21.10.

with Jesus' formation in the virgin Mary to show continuity between the two.⁷ Jesus takes on human flesh through the virgin and offers salvation because of it.

Jesus Christ put on corruptible human flesh so that humanity might receive incorruptibility in Him. Jesus' flesh was susceptible to the same kind of viruses that afflict humanity today in the pandemic. The move of solidarity with humanity shows how God is with us in the midst of evil and death. God reveals the way of life in death through Jesus thereby subverting the evil schemes of the enemy. Jesus portrays the love of God for His creation through His death. It is that perfect love that casts out the fear of death.⁸

The pandemic should be taken seriously because it is destroying vessels of God's glory. Irenaeus' theological foundation has a biological implication in that the fullness of God's glory resides in human biology and physiology. Those who die without Christ do not reveal the fullness of God's glory. Christians must attend to both the physical and spiritual needs of those who live in fear so that they have the opportunity to shine forth His glory. Christian love brings healing to those who are suffering and glorifies God in whose image we are made. Not only should we take the pandemic seriously, but we should take all harmful and hurtful things to humanity seriously. Those things consist of but are not limited to: abuse, abortions, human trafficking, poverty, climate change, and war. These issues are to be taken just as seriously as anything else.

Two more layers exist in Irenaeus' writings on the virgin soil that help support our understanding of humanity's ability to receive the fullness of God's glory. The first layer is found in the contrast between the *animation* of Adam and the *vivification* of Jesus. Again, Irenaeus takes Paul's lead in this imagery found in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49. Paul makes another parallel deriving from the arc between Adam and Jesus. Paul writes that the first Adam became a *living soul*, and the last Adam became a *life-giving spirit*. The difference between the two is that the first is a reality for everyone and the second is a reality only for those who believe in Christ. If all humanity finds its origin in Adam, then all have the same kind of living soul. Everyone has been given lungs to breathe and the same kind of life within them. Alternatively, those who

⁷ Mary Donavon, *One Right Reading?* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), 88.

⁸ 1 John 4:18

believe in Jesus Christ give up that breath and receive the *life-giving spirit*.⁹ Those who surrender their breath and believe in Christ have fullness of life in the Spirit.

Irenaeus further illustrates Paul's point by using different words; 'God breathed life into Adam which *animated* him.' He continues the parallel by writing "...in order that just as in the animated we all die, so also in the spiritual we may all be vivified."¹⁰ The animation of human beings means that they are given fullness of life and vigor. They are able to think and work. This is the lesser degree of life in which there is only the temporal element present.¹¹ The greater degree of life is found in the fullness of the spiritual life in Christ. He vivifies the life of humanity to not only the temporal but the eternal and heavenly one.¹²

It is interesting that the coronavirus affects the breath of life given to humanity. Poor oxygenation has left people struggling to hold onto their God given breath without the hope of the eternal breath. That hopelessness feeds into the fear gripping the hearts of humanity. Several ways exist to help them have another chance to repent and receive Christ. One way may be to help people decrease preventable underlying health issues like obesity or pulmonary diseases. Another way may be to wear a mask and get vaccinated. These small acts of kindness show forth the love of Christ who gave up his rights and liberties for the sake of humanity. We are called to lay down our animated life so that others might know everlasting life. The only place that we can learn that kind of love is in the Church, the bride of Christ.

The church is the locus of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Humanity learns to give up their breath through baptism. We are born into eternal life through baptism in the church. Those who are baptized go down into the water to die and come up with everlasting life. The decision to be baptized is therefore an act of dying to oneself by giving up the animated soul. The Christian life is then marked with the same kind of action of willingly giving up our breath for the sake of another. It is also in the church that we learn to give thanks to God for Jesus' love in the Eucharist. The liturgy forms Christians to give up their life for another just like Jesus. Irenaeus draws another parallel from John 12:24 which says if a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it bears much fruit. He writes that the bread that is made from the fruit of the grain will

⁹ 1 Cor 15:45

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 5.1.3.

¹¹ Behr, 153

¹² *Ibid.* 154

¹³ Behr, 175.

ultimately be used in the Eucharist.”¹⁴ The death of Christ in the ground produces much fruit and we become like Him.

The second layer closely follows the first. Irenaeus draws an arc from death to life within the vivification of the Spirit. Those who operate only out of the animated life must return the breath of life back to God. In essence, they must die and be buried in the ground forever. Irenaeus uses the sign of Jonah to illustrate this point.¹⁵ Just as Jonah was swallowed up by the whale and was spit out alive, so also was Christ swallowed by death and spit out alive. He was spit out having conquered death.

The sign of Jonah captures Christ’s obedience to the Father. He shows humanity that the way of everlasting life is through obedience to God. That work consists of giving up our breath of life to receive His Spirit. Death will find all those who dwell bodily in this life. However, just as Christ died and rose again because of His obedience, so will all those who believe in Him. The fruit that comes from the virgin soil is the fullness of God’s glory in humanity. Irenaeus writes that “the glory of God is the living human being, and the life of the human being is to see God.”¹⁶ The culmination of salvation for Irenaeus is that humanity is united with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the first fruit of this arc of salvation and Christians are the harvest who come after him.

“Whom then shall we fear?”¹⁷ “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”¹⁸ These words from Scripture illustrate the reality of life with God. There is nothing more sublime than the presence of God Almighty in human flesh. Nothing else matters than to see creation in the fullness of its intention. There is nothing to fear since the sting of Death has been eliminated.

Fear is not necessary since we have already died in the new Adam. In fact, there is nothing that we should be afraid of because Christ has defeated Death. Many people have been driven to fear for their lives, even those who have an everlasting life. Irenaeus challenges humanity to trust God with their breath thereby glorifying Him in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 5.2.3.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3.20.1

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 4.20.7.

¹⁷ Ps 27:1

¹⁸ Romans 8:35

There is a spiritual war going on that is seeking to kill, steal, and destroy the image of God by taking away our *animated* life. Destroying this life hinders the ability of obtaining Christ's *vivifying* and eternal life. Those who only have this temporal life are clinging to it as a precious gift. They have not yet realized that they must give it up to receive that which does not perish. The gift of everlasting life is a spiritual inheritance that is stored for us in the heavenly places in Christ.

It is in the church that we learn to live free of fear. The Christian response to the pandemic is of love for others not of fear or condemnation. Many Christians are living in fear and are thereby stuck living on the temporal plane of this life. They are not seeing the pandemic through the spiritual lens of Jesus Christ. It has resulted in fear and shame on those who cannot see the hope in God. Transcending the temporal plane leaves behind the mess of politics that would not save us in the first place. We are most effective in the world when we live in obedience to the Father like Jesus Christ. Living in obedience breathes life into our desert like souls and puts on the flesh of Christ.

Irenaeus' conceptualization of the virgin soil and the breath of God teaches us that we must take the pandemic seriously while not being afraid of it. The hope of glory leads us to live fearlessly in the face of death. Thanks be to the Father for Holy Spirit who breathes life into those who want life in the new Adam, Jesus Christ the Vivifier of souls.

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