Irenaeus and Continuance

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Abstract

Conditional immortality, also known as annihilationism, asserts that salvation involves being granted immortality, while damnation entails the cessation of life and personal existence at the final judgment. Many adherents argue that the Bible supports this view but add that its legitimacy also depends on whether it was taught by the earliest Christian theologians, ensuring it reflects intentional apostolic doctrine rather than later interpretive assumptions. Historically, the third to fourth century Christian writer Arnobius of Sicca is often identified as an early proponent of conditional immortality, lending credence to its acceptance as a tolerated minority view in early Christianity. Increasingly, however, modern defenders argue that the second-century church father St. Irenaeus of Lyons also supported this perspective, citing passages from his *Against Heresies* as evidence.

This article systematically examines Irenaeus's teachings on human nature, the soul, and final punishment, engaging with modern conditionalist interpretations and opposing arguments for eternal torment. Building upon Chris Date's prior work, which analyzed a single chapter of *Against Heresies*, this study evaluates Irenaeus's entire extant corpus, including fragments and related writings by his contemporaries. By situating Irenaeus's theology within its historical and theological context, this article argues that conditional immortality was central to his understanding of resurrection and final judgment.

Part 1: To Be Continued (Or Not?)

Introduction

Irenaeus, writing in the second century, is the earliest theologian to have left a comprehensive discussion of Christian doctrine. His seminal work, *Against Heresies*, systematically refutes the teachings of various Gnostic groups while articulating a vision of orthodox Christianity. In the text, he addresses key topics such as human nature, the resurrection, and final judgment. Modern conditionalists (i.e., those who hold to conditional immortality) argue that his treatment of these themes demonstrates that he intended to teach their view.

Only two major texts from Irenaeus have been passed down to us. *Against Heresies* was occasioned by disputed doctrines of many teachers, collectively called Gnostics. Irenaeus began by trying to list their doctrines, but quickly (in book 2) turned to explaining Christianity so that he could contrast it to their doctrines, producing in the process the first thorough discussion of Christian doctrine (even if it's not as systematic as would later be penned by Augustine). He also wrote a short document named *A Demonstration of The Apostolic Teaching,* and although some other very interesting documents have been lost to the ages, there are a small collection of sentences or paragraphs allegedly written by him as part of larger writings; one such fragment which is

attributed by some to his now-lost work *On the Resurrection* may cast some light on this topic as well.

Close Context: The Salvation of Man

This section sets the foundation by summarizing Chris Date's blog post titled "Deprived of Continuance," a good example of a conditionalist presentation built on Irenaeus's language. He quotes from *Against Heresies* 2.34.3 as follows:

> He thus speaks respecting the salvation of man: "He asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest him length of days for ever and ever;" indicating that it is the Father of all who imparts continuance for ever and ever on those who are saved. For life does not arise from us, nor from our own nature; but it is bestowed according to the grace of God. And therefore he who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him, and give thanks to Him who imparted it, shall receive also length of days for ever and ever.

Irenaeus frames this grant of continued existence and "length of days forever" as "concerning the salvation of man," establishing the claim that this is actually about the final fate of the saved. Date examines Irenaeus's view of the converse, those who are judged as wicked, from *Against Heresies* 2.34.3, exactly as quoted in Date's blog post:

> It is the Father of all who imparts continuance for ever and ever on those who are saved … [who] shall receive also length of days for ever and ever. But he who shall reject it … deprives himself of [the privilege of] continuance for ever and ever … shall justly not receive from Him length of days for ever and ever.

It is from this theme, "Deprived of Continuance," that Date titled his blog post. The quote as edited by him emphasizes that it weighs both the positive and negative side of salvation; what humans are saved from as well as what they are saved into. These passages are naturally what conditionalists focus on; it appears that both the salvation of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked is founded on granting or denying embodied life and existence forever.

Turning to the larger corpus, Irenaeus has recorded some related thoughts in two other passages, one interpreting the "he asked life of thee" quote, Psalm 21:4, and the other examining the distinction between God's active causation of salvation and His passive allowance of condemnation. In the *Demonstration of The Apostolic Teaching* paragraph 72, he interprets the Psalm as Messianic:

> …the prophet declares that after dying and rising again He was to remain immortal, (saying) thus: "He asked life and thou gavest (it) him, and length of days for ever and ever." Now what is this that he says, He asked life, since He was about to die? He proclaims His resurrection from the dead, and that being raised from the dead He is immortal. For He received both life, that He should rise, and length of days for ever and ever, that He should be incorruptible.

So Irenaeus sees this as twofold: first, continuance of the present life; and second, as an eternal continuance granting the vastly greater gifts of immortality and incorruption for ongoing life. Just as in the *Demonstration of The Apostolic Teaching* Irenaeus uses that verse as an affirmative prophecy of two things that will happen to Jesus, so also in this passage of *Against Heresies* he uses it as an affirmative prophecy of what will happen to those who "give thanks to Him who bestowed [brief temporal life]," as opposed to the denial of such continuance (let alone length of days forever) to those who "prove themselves ungrateful." Date's argument comports well with its immediate

context, addressing the salvation of man as giving to man life and immortality in all of his parts, and the lack of salvation as the denial of continuance in existence like that possessed even by inanimate objects. It follows, then, that from his *Against Heresies* passage, Irenaeus believes that resurrection including immortality and incorruption is given only to Jesus and those who are resurrected in His likeness (that is, only to believers). This puts Irenaeus directly against eternal torment as it's expressed in documents like the Catholic Catechism, which says "*Q: what is 'rising'?* A: God … will definitively grant **incorruptible life** to our bodies;" and "*Q: who will rise?* A: **All the dead** will rise, '... **those who have done evil**, to the resurrection of judgment.'"[1] Similarly, the original text of the Belgic Confession claims, "**The evil ones** will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and **shall be made immortal**— but only to be tormented…"[2]

Theme: Punishment is Passive, Salvation is Active

Irenaeus elaborates elsewhere on the distinction seen above in *Against Heresies* 2.34 between God's active causation of salvation and His passive allowance of punishment. In *Against Heresies* 5.27.2, he emphasizes the apostate's active role in rejecting God, stating that "He inflicts that separation from Himself which they have chosen of their own accord." However, since "separation from God is death," this self-chosen separation results in a divine punishment: "death, darkness, and the loss of all the benefits which He has in store." Far from redefining death to mean mere separation, Irenaeus means it as the end of life, but wishes to emphasize God's passive role in allowing it to emerge from free choice.

To clarify, Irenaeus's phrase "separation from God is death" can be likened to saying that separation from oxygen is asphyxiation—where the second term describes the inevitable result of the first, rather than redefining it. Thus, the punishment for sin is primarily rooted in natural consequences: those who reject God's life-giving Spirit experience death as the loss of life itself. Irenaeus affirms this understanding in *Against Heresies* 2.34.3, where he writes, "those who, in this brief temporal life, have shown themselves ungrateful to Him who bestowed it, shall justly not receive from Him length of days for ever and ever."

In addition to natural consequences that befall the ungrateful, Irenaeus also acknowledges deserved, proportional retribution that is due for specific sins. In *Against Heresies* 2.34.1, he writes that "[each class of souls] receives a habitation such as it has deserved, even before the judgment," and in *Against Heresies* 4.36.6, he affirms that "the most righteous Retributor metes out [punishment] according to their deserts." While Irenaeus does not explicitly elaborate on the nature of these deserved punishments, his statement in *Against Heresies* 5.27.2 — that the wicked "experience every kind of punishment" — suggests that the possible scope of these punishments is enormous, but the actual specifics would be tailored to the sinner's actions, as determined by God's perfect judgment. This unifies Irenaeus's systematic insistence that God punishes only passively with his occasional statement that God punishes according to what is deserved while accounting for the language of "[experiencing] every kind of punishment."

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[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church 997-999, fetched 01/15/2025 from https://www.catholiccrossreference.online/catechism/#!/search/997-999

[2] Belgic Confession, the future tense of "shall be made" conforms with old Latin and original French (as opposed to some modern English renditions which say "being immortal"); English fetched 01/15/2025 from https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/BelgicConfession.pdf

Irenaeus's understanding of death itself as a form of punishment also reinforces this distinction between God allowing consequences and intending them for themselves. In *Against Heresies* 3.23.6, he provides an explanation of death's institution as both a natural and deserved consequence, and a boundary for sin:

> Wherefore also He [God] drove him [Adam] out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.

Here, death is not simply a separation but a cessation: the end of animate life. It disables sin by depriving the flesh of animation and the soul of its breath, ultimately bringing both to an end — the flesh when the body dies, but body and soul together at the judgment. The means God chooses to impose this is not typically actively killing humans, but rather withholding any ability to extend their life either indefinitely or forever, a passive imposition. Likewise, Irenaeus's purpose "so that man … might begin to live to God" clarifies that God imposes death not merely to end sin by ending man (although this is the natural result if man does not repent) but also to motivate man to repent before death ends his ability (see also Ecclesiastes 12:1ff "remember your creator … before" the body slowly loses its capabilities). Death, therefore, is a deterrence to those only tempted by ingratitude; an incapacitation to the unrepentant; complete retribution for shunning God; and restitution to any harmed by one's sins — and yet it is not an alien imposition, since apart from divine action humans by nature live only a "brief temporal life" and must therefore expect an end.

Finally, it is significant that Irenaeus applies this principle not just to humanity in general but in *Against Heresies* 3.23.8 also to Adam specifically. Irenaeus holds as dogma[3] that Adam himself was so affected by God's imposition of death and offer of the gospel that he repented and was saved. This underscores the dual purpose of death: to bring sin to an end while offering man the opportunity and motivation to turn back to God.

Broader Context: An Individual's Body versus Reincarnation

The immediate context of "the salvation of men," then, works with Date's argument. It remains to answer why its chapter *(Against Heresies* 2.34) begins with a discussion of the intermediate state. In response, the chapter is actually embedded in a broader discussion of the life of humanity, how the soul and body work together in the grand plan of salvation, ordering for each person begetting, life, the death of the body, the intermediate state of the soul, and for all humans gathered together at the end of the age, the final judgment. This is taught in the immediately preceding text, *Against Heresies* 2.33.5, which says:

> God … [confers] **its own proper soul on each individual body**… And therefore, when the number is completed, [that number] which He had predetermined in His own counsel, **all those who have** been **enrolled for life [eternal] shall rise again, having their own**

[3] Literally as dogma: he condemns Tatian by name for denying this.

> **bodies, and having also their own souls, and their own spirits, in which they had pleased God**. Those, on the other hand, **who are worthy of punishment, shall go away into it, they too having their own souls and their own bodies**, in which they stood apart from the grace of God. Both classes shall then cease from any longer begetting and being begotten, from marrying and being given in marriage; so that the number of mankind, corresponding to the fore-ordination of God, being completed, may fully realize the scheme formed by the Father.

So the point of discussing the intermediate state was not that Irenaeus was focused on it; it was elaborating God's plan to bring each enumerable unique person, as a whole body and soul, from their own life up to the day of judgment where they will be numbered and judged *en masse*; this being said in order to oppose the doctrines of reincarnationists who think that souls don't have their own body and therefore there is no judgment for a whole person as body and soul, let alone for all humans together. And although a modern reader's attention is drawn to the chapter break at which Irenaeus begins discussing the intermediate state, the original text has no known chapter breaks; rather, Irenaeus logically passes from discussing the final judgment to discussing how the soul is preserved for that judgment and in what its final salvation (or punishment) consists, at which time the righteous are given life forever and the wicked are deprived of continuance. And both points work together to explain the difference between reincarnation and Christianity, while keeping the emphasis on the eternal punishment as privation of all good things, not on temporary conditions like those experienced on the day of judgment or in the intermediate state — a question important enough to Irenaeus to put it early in the scope of his entire work.

Theme: the Soul and Spirit

In the above quote of *Against Heresies* 2.33.5, Irenaeus states that the righteous are raised whole with body, soul, and spirit; while of the wicked he mentions only body and soul. It turns out that this is not an accident but a systematic part of his anthropology and soteriology, and will cast a good deal of light on other passages in his work, and serves as a unifying theme for this paper. Irenaeus dives into detailed discussion of this in *Against Heresies* 5.12.2 (emphasis added):

> For the breath of life, which also rendered man an animated being, is one thing, and the vivifying Spirit another, which also caused him to become spiritual. … breath is indeed given in common to all people upon earth, but that the Spirit is theirs alone who tread down earthly desires. … The Spirit [is] peculiar to God which in the last times He pours forth upon the human race by the adoption of sons; but [he shows] that breath was common throughout the creation, and points it out as something created. Now what has been made is a different thing from him who makes it. **The breath, then, is temporal, but the Spirit eternal. The breath, too, increases [in strength] for a short period, and continues for a certain time; after that it takes its departure, leaving its former abode destitute of breath. But when the Spirit pervades the man within and without, inasmuch as it continues there, it never leaves him.** "But that is not first which is spiritual," says the

> apostle, speaking this as if with reference to us human beings; "but that is first which is animal[4], afterwards that which is spiritual," in accordance with reason.

This distinction explains why Irenaeus describes the wicked as approaching judgment with only body and soul, while the righteous approach with body, soul, and spirit. It also explains *Against Heresies* 2.34.4 saying that "the soul herself is not life, but partakes in that life bestowed upon her by God … by the participation of life the soul became alive; so that the soul, and the life which it possesses, must be understood as being separate existences." In his anthropology, the soul depends on an external source for life: the temporal "breath of life" granted to all humans, or the eternal Holy Spirit, given to Christians who walk faithfully in Him and from whom He "never leaves."

The temporal breath renders natural humans inherently finite in life, and when their breath departs at death, they are deprived of life as a complete person. Irenaeus underscores this in *Against Heresies* 5.6.1: "[n]either is the soul itself, considered apart by itself, the man; but it is the soul of a man, and part of a man." While the soul remains animate in the "invisible place allotted" (2.34.1, 5.31.2) until judgment, it is not the whole person. By contrast, the righteous, walking in the Spirit, are granted life forever. Irenaeus continues in 5.6.1 by interpreting 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "may your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless." Only those with the Spirit of God remaining in them, preserving faith and righteousness in this life and, having grown in the holiness appropriate to the dwelling of God (*Against Heresies* 5.6.2), are given life and continuance forever.

Irenaeus's omission of the spirit in discussions of the judgment of unbelievers is deliberate, highlighting their temporal existence. Deprived of the Spirit, they lose the breath of life without receiving an eternal replacement, leading to their ultimate loss of life and continuance.

An Examination of a Fragment

One more source is worth examining: the challenge is that this is a fragment, not a complete document, and this will present evidence that it has been misinterpreted when being reconstructed.[5] This is from the Schaff collection of church fathers' writings, which takes it from the Roberts-Donaldson English Translation's section titled "Fragments from Lost Writings." Reconstruction requires help from the Latin/Greek collection by Harvey (in which it is numbered Fragment 12).[6] To avoid a bit of speculative reconstruction[7] that was added to the Latin by its editor, Harvey, and copied into the English unfortunately without any marking, it will be presented in two parts, removing the entire speculative addition (unfortunately also removing two Latin words of the surviving text which are not translatable apart from speculation). The first part begins, emphasis added:

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[4] This is a direct rendering of the Latin found here, "animale" according to Harvey 1858; but of course Irenaeus' original Greek, now lost, would have read psuchikos or "soulish," as does his 1 Cor 15:46 source.
[5] Credit for this find is due to Megan Bohun who posted it in our Facebook group. I admit I read right over this one on first reading! https://www.facebook.com/groups/rethinkinghell/posts/8920646274719174/ (viewing this post requires membership, apply at facebook.com/groups/rethinkinghell).
[6] Follow this link to the page containing the Latin: https://www.google.com/books/edition/Sancti_Irenaei_Libros_quinque_adversus_h/D2E7AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22nos+igitur+et+corpora+resurgere%22+irenaeus&pg=PA481&printsec=frontcover
[7] In Schaff, this is shown in a footnote saying "This sentence in the original seems incomplete; we have followed the conjectural restoration of Harvey (that is, the editor of the Greek/Latin collection linked above)."

> We therefore have formed the belief that [our] bodies also do rise again. For although they go to corruption, yet they do not perish; for the earth, receiving the remains, preserves them, even like fertile seed mixed with more fertile ground. Again, as a bare grain is sown, and, germinating by the command of God its Creator, rises again, clothed upon and glorious, but not before it has died and suffered decomposition, and become mingled with the earth; so [it is seen from this, that] we have not entertained a vain belief in the resurrection of the body. But although it is dissolved at the appointed time, because of the primeval disobedience, it is placed, as it were, in the crucible of the earth, to be recast again; **not then as this corruptible, but pure, and no longer subject to decay**: so that to each body its own soul shall be restored; and when it is clothed upon with this, it **shall not experience sorrow, but shall rejoice, continuing permanently in a state of purity**, having for its companion a just consort, not an insidious one, possessing in every respect [...][8]

This perfectly comports with orthodox teaching on Christian doctrine on the resurrection (whether conditionalist or eternal torment), and fits Irenaeus well. The next part, separated by a grammatically confusing glitch which the collection's editor attributes to a few missing words, runs:

> [...][9] shall not receive bodies diverse from what they had been, **nor delivered from suffering or disease, nor as [rendered] glorious**, but as they departed this life, in sins or in righteous actions: and such as they were, such shall they be clothed with upon resuming life; and such as they were in unbelief, such shall they be faithfully judged.

Harvey's speculative addition removes a grammatical irregularity, but it also introduces express contradictions. The extant text speaks, on the one hand, of each person's soul raised in his or her glorious body (singular) without sorrow, and, on the other, of a singular mass of people with non-glorious bodies (notice the switch to plural bodies) not delivered from suffering. It makes little sense to propose, as Harvey's reconstruction implies, that these are the same. A more plausible resolution is that the first part describes the resurrection of each righteous person with glory, honor, and incorruption (as in Romans 2:7). Some intervening text may have been lost, which I propose would have clarified the second part, identifying "the wicked" as a singular group collectively raised with "bodies [not] delivered from suffering and disease, nor glorious"—that is, the same corruptible bodies they died with, expressly unglorified, to be given over to judgment.

Although modern theology (as reflected in the two confessions quoted above) often speaks of a general resurrection of all flesh and all with immortality, there is actually no explicit Biblical support for this notion. Instead, passages such as John 5:28-29 suggest a single moment when all people emerge from their tombs, yet with two distinct resurrections: a "resurrection of life" and a "resurrection of judgment." Other texts, such as Luke 20:35, emphasize the exclusivity of "being found worthy to attain to the resurrection." Revelation 20, meanwhile, depicts two resurrections separated by a significant span of time. 1 Corinthians 15 is often quoted to support a universal resurrection to immortality, but it can be read as speaking only of the righteous — those who, per 1

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[8] Within this ellipsis I place the Latin words from the original document "omnino recipiet," which have no clear translation without the addition of speculative words. That phrase means "[something] will receive perfectly/exactly [something]", but while Harvey makes a grammatically smooth reading by inserting "The things pertaining to it, it will receive exactly," the result of that insertion is actually a contradiction between the two passages which will be discussed in the main text.

[9] See previous note; also, the following verb "shall not receive" would take a singular subject, either implied or part of the omitted text.

Corinthians 15:2, are saved as opposed to those who do not hold fast to the gospel. It is even plausible that the passage never addresses the unrepentant except by implied exclusion, as the language about "enemies" only directly mentions "powers." In Irenaeus's summary of the faith, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching* 42, he confirms the uniqueness of the resurrection of the righteous:

> For such is the state of those who have believed, since in them continually abides the Holy Spirit, who was given by Him in baptism, and is retained by the receiver, if he walks in truth and holiness and righteousness and patient endurance. For this soul has a resurrection in them that believe, the body receiving the soul again, and along with it, by the power of the Holy Spirit, being raised up and entering into the kingdom of God.

This conceptual distinction between two resurrections finds a vivid articulation in the *Demonstrations* of St. Aphrahat of Syria. In *Demonstration* 6.18, Aphrahat offers a strikingly similar depiction of the divergent fates awaiting the righteous and the wicked:

> Again he said:—Suddenly as the twinkling of an eye, the dead shall rise incorruptible and we shall be changed. And they who shall be changed shall put on the form of that heavenly Adam and shall become spiritual. And those who shall not be changed, shall continue 'animal' in the created nature of Adam, namely, of dust; and shall continue in their nature in the earth below. And then the heavenly shall be caught up to heaven and the Spirit that they have put on shall cause them to fly, and they shall inherit the kingdom that was prepared for them from the beginning. And they that are animal shall remain on the earth by the weight of their bodies, and shall turn back to Sheol, and there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This distinction underscores not only the duality of resurrections but also the qualitative difference between the two outcomes: one marked by spiritual transformation, elevation, and incorruption, the other by earthly descent, decay, and ultimate judgment.

Aphrahat's vision aligns closely with Irenaeus's theological framework, reflecting a strand of early Christian eschatological thought traceable to Ignatius and other early fathers. By distinguishing between the transformed, heavenly destiny of the righteous and the untransformed, earthbound fate of the wicked, Aphrahat mirrors biblical themes found in passages like John 5:28–29, Luke 20:35, and Revelation 20. His depiction also directly supports this alternative to the now traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15.

Irenaeus's surviving works reflect a similarly structured theology that places the Spirit at the center of immortality and incorruption. For Irenaeus, the glorification of the body and the eternal life of the soul depend entirely on the Spirit's participation — a theme consistently affirmed in *Against Heresies*. As he writes in *Against Heresies* 5.12.2, only bodies in which the Spirit participates are made immortal. This concept is elaborated further in *Against Heresies* 5.9.4, where Irenaeus interprets Paul's statement that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50). Against the Gnostic denial of bodily resurrection, Irenaeus affirms the orthodox Christian view that the body partakes in salvation:

> If, however, we must speak strictly, [we would say that] the flesh does not inherit, but is inherited … the flesh cannot by itself possess the kingdom of God by inheritance; but it can be taken for an inheritance into the kingdom of God. For a living person inherits the goods of the deceased; and it is one thing to inherit, another to be inherited. […] What, therefore, is it

> that lives? The Spirit of God, doubtless. What, again, are the possessions of the deceased? The various parts of the man, surely, which rot in the earth. But these are inherited by the Spirit when they are translated into the kingdom of heaven. For this cause, too, did Christ die, that the Gospel covenant … might constitute them heirs of His property, when the Spirit possesses them by inheritance. For he who lives inherits, but the flesh is inherited. In order that we may not lose life by losing that Spirit which possesses us, the apostle, exhorting us to the communion of the Spirit, has said, according to reason, in those words already quoted, "That flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."

Irenaeus's reasoning ties seamlessly into his broader theology. With his assumptions about the Spirit's role in granting life, the conditionality of immortality becomes clear. Only through participating in the Spirit can a repentant sinner's body be inherited into the age to come, transformed into an immortal, spiritual body rather than remaining a merely "soulish body" animated by the soul alone (as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15). Believers themselves become the eternal dwelling place and the temple of the Spirit, ensuring the redemption of both body and soul as promised in "our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23).

Closing: Irenaeus and the Conditionalist Framework

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Irenaeus's theology is deeply rooted in the concept of life and immortality as divine gifts reserved for the righteous. His systematic understanding of human nature, resurrection, and final judgment portrays salvation as the active bestowal of incorruptible life, while punishment is framed as a passive deprivation of all good, including continued existence. This aligns seamlessly with the conditionalist perspective, which emphasizes the dependence of the soul on God for life and the ultimate cessation of the wicked in judgment.

Irenaeus consistently distinguishes between body, soul, and Spirit, emphasizing the transformative role of the Spirit in granting eternal life to believers. For Irenaeus, the soul's survival beyond bodily death is temporary and contingent, with eternal life conferred solely through union with God's Spirit. In contrast, those who reject this grace are denied "continuance for ever and ever," ultimately ceasing to exist. These theological insights not only clarify Irenaeus's position but also illuminate a broader framework in which life, immortality, and judgment are inseparably tied to God's will and human response. This foundation sets the stage for deeper engagement with contemporary critiques and an exploration of Irenaeus's theological legacy.

Part 2: In The Spirit of Discussion

The previous sections established Irenaeus's theology as supporting conditional immortality, presenting it not as an isolated concept but as a consistent framework within his systematic theology. This part addresses modern interpretations of Irenaeus, focusing on how contemporary scholars engage with his writings and their implications for the doctrine of final punishment.

Of particular interest are critiques of Chris Date's interpretation of *Against Heresies*. These critiques propose alternative readings that align Irenaeus with the traditional doctrine of eternal torment. By examining these arguments and the texts they reference, this section seeks to clarify Irenaeus's actual position and its theological coherence.

Direct Engagement: Shepherd

One such critique comes from Jerry Shepherd, who challenges Date's interpretation of *Against Heresies* 2.34.3. Shepherd contends that Irenaeus contrasts immortality as life in God's presence with a "merely sensate existence" for the unsaved in eternal punishment, a teaching he attributes to Justin Martyr's influence. This raises two key questions: Does Irenaeus's text support Shepherd's interpretation? And how does Irenaeus's theology compare with the views of Justin Martyr and others who explicitly affirmed eternal torment?

This section focuses on the first question by examining the cited text, leaving the comparison with Justin Martyr and his students to the next section. Shepherd's claim appears untenable when assessed against *Against Heresies* 2.34.3, which makes no reference to closeness with God or positive experiences in His presence. Instead, it addresses the duration of existence. To ensure a thorough analysis, consider Irenaeus's exact language (emphasis added):

> For as the heaven which is above us, **the firmament, the sun, the moon, the rest of the stars, and all their grandeur**, although they had no previous existence, **were called into being, and continue** throughout a long course of time according to the will of God, so also any one who thinks thus respecting **souls and spirits**, and, in fact, respecting all created things, will not by any means go far astray, inasmuch as **all things that have been made had a beginning when they were formed, but endure as long as God wills** that they should have an existence and continuance.

At the outset, Irenaeus compares "souls and spirits" to inanimate objects such as "the sun, the moon, and the rest of the stars." He asserts that both have a beginning and endure only "as long as God wills that they should have an existence and continuance." This comparison makes no mention of divine favor or relational closeness with God. Instead, it establishes a foundational point: the sheer fact of existence, and any extension of it in time, is contingent upon God's will.

This reasoning aligns with the broader context of *Against Heresies* (see the discussion of *Against Heresies* 2.33.5 in the previous section) where Irenaeus argues that the number of people present at the judgment will equal the total number begotten throughout human history. Souls, like the moon and stars, continue in existence, in their case because God wills their presence for the purpose of being gathered together at the final judgment. Thus, the continuance being described relates solely to existence, not to life in the sense of divine blessing or communion with God.

Irenaeus further elaborates in *Against Heresies* 2.34.4:

> When God therefore bestows life and perpetual duration, it comes to pass that even souls which did not previously exist should henceforth endure [for ever], since God has both willed that they should exist, and should continue in existence.

So Irenaeus explicitly qualifies this claim: continued existence forever applies only to souls on whom God has conferred both life and perpetual duration. Souls granted life but not perpetual duration are excluded from this category; and indeed the translator has inserted the bracketed phrase "[for ever]" here exclusively because of the context affirming that condition. Furthermore, in the preceding paragraph, Irenaeus says that the ungrateful person does not receive continuance to length of days forever, providing a concrete example of souls with life but not perpetual duration.

Shepherd does not directly present additional arguments, but he cites three passages that he believes contradict the conditionalist interpretation of Irenaeus. All these passages argue that the soul is not mortal; for the sake of brevity, this response will address one representative example. In *Against Heresies* 5.7.1, Irenaeus states:

> **Now the breath of life is an incorporeal thing. And certainly they cannot maintain that the very breath of life is mortal.** Therefore David says, "My soul also shall live to Him," just as if its substance were immortal. Neither, on the other hand, can they say that the spirit is the mortal body. What therefore is there left to which we may apply the term "mortal body," unless it be the thing that was moulded, that is, the flesh, of which it is also said that God will vivify it? **For this it is which dies and is decomposed, but not the soul or the spirit.** For to die is to lose vital power, and to become henceforth breathless, inanimate, and devoid of motion, and to melt away into those [component parts] from which also it derived the commencement of [its] substance. But this event happens neither to **the soul, for it is the breath of life**; nor to the spirit, for the spirit is simple and not composite, so that it cannot be decomposed, and is itself the life of those who receive it.

This passage explicitly denies the mortality of the soul, a stance that contrasts with modern conditionalist emphases. However, the difference arises largely from the nuanced way early Christians spoke about mortality. For instance, Theophilus of Antioch describes Adam as "neither … immortal nor yet mortal … but capable of both,"[10] reflecting a view in which "mortal" means strictly the inevitability of death, not mere possibility. Similarly, Irenaeus's affirmation that the soul survives bodily death to experience the intermediate state suggests that for the saved, the soul will never die, and for the unsaved it will not die until the Judgment (*Against Heresies* 2.34.1). By this nuanced definition, the soul is not "mortal" because it is not certain to die, though neither is it immortal.

Even without this nuance, Irenaeus's statement here does not contradict his earlier claim that "the soul herself is not life, but partakes in that life bestowed upon her" (*Against Heresies* 2.34.4). Instead, both reflect his broader effort to refute Gnostic claims and defend the immortality of the flesh granted by God. In Irenaeus's anthropology, the body is corruptible, while the soul is incorruptible but still dependent on something else for its life. The soul's participation in eternal life is not by transformation, as the body requires, but by union with the Holy Spirit and the immortal body. Thus, while the soul does not necessarily die, Irenaeus denies that every soul will live forever.

Irenaeus's definition of "to die" in this passage centers on the loss of vital power, while the subsequent descriptions — becoming breathless, inanimate, and decomposing — he discusses in

[10] Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus* 2.27

light of his topic, the body. His statement that the body "dies and is decomposed" clarifies this distinction; decomposition follows death but is not an intrinsic part of dying. Unlike the body, the soul and spirit can not decompose, but the soul can become inanimate due to its life being temporal, and both soul and spirit can be denied continuance in existence. However, when the soul loses its life, when the temporal breath of life runs out of time, it also loses its ability to sustain personal identity and human personhood. This aligns with Irenaeus's broader teaching that all created things including soul and spirit depend on God's will for continuance.

Direct Engagement: Alvarado

George Alvarado has written a series of responses to Rethinking Hell, two of which engage directly with Chris Date's article on Irenaeus. In his first response, Alvarado alleges that Date and Rethinking Hell "conveniently only quote (out of context) parts of" Irenaeus's chapter while ignoring other relevant material. His proposed solution is to paste the entire chapter into his article, apparently to provide the fuller context. Alvarado claims that in the quoted section, "Irenaeus is simply stating that he believes that the soul can go on forever, and that it does not have to die with the body."

Irenaeus and his opponents both accept the soul's survival after bodily death as an axiom, using it as a foundation for their respective arguments. Therefore, the primary focus of the passage does not lie in the claim "that it does not die with the body." And conditionalists agree that the soul can live on forever (that is, as a possibility, specifically limited to the saved), so neither is that a response. Alvarado's analysis notably omits the more critical statement from a later paragraph of the same chapter, quoted by Date, where Irenaeus states "concerning the salvation of man" that the grateful will be given life forever, while the ungrateful will be deprived of continuance. It should require no further explanation that a statement made "concerning the salvation of man" is directly relevant to the final fate of humanity. Moreover, the assertion that the ungrateful are deprived of continuance has nothing to do with the soul's survival after bodily death. When all of those are put together, it follows that Irenaeus's disagreement with the reincarnationists is that the salvation of man does not imply cycles of rebirth until the soul reaches eternity, but rather implies God giving man eternity through immortality of the body and continued existence of the soul forever — or not.

On the webpage hosting Alvarado's essay (linked above), a commenter raises this point with a detailed argument. Alvarado dismisses the critique by directing the commenter to a later essay that neither quotes Date nor addresses Irenaeus's statement about the ungrateful being deprived of continuance. Instead, this essay simply asserts, after referencing other passages, "What else are we to assert? That the body and soul will experience an eternal punishment that is not annihilation!" This approach is fundamentally circular, as it assumes the conclusion — that eternal punishment excludes annihilation — without engaging with the specific passage that challenges this interpretation. Notably, Date's article is titled "Deprived of Continuance," underscoring the importance of this phrase to his interpretation of Irenaeus. Given that Alvarado's primary critique of Date hinges on the claim that "Chris only quotes pieces of the Irenaeus' work" [sic], it is a material omission that Alvarado fails to address the passage Date highlights as central to his argument.

In his second article addressing Chris Date's interpretation of Irenaeus, George Alvarado critiques Date's claims by closely analyzing Irenaeus's language in *Against Heresies* 4.39–40.

Alvarado draws particular attention to Irenaeus describing final punishment as a place, citing the following passage:

> Submission to God is eternal rest, so that they who shun the light have a place worthy of their flight; and those who fly from eternal rest, have a habitation in accordance with their fleeing.

Alvarado highlights the terminology of "place" and "habitation," and further underscores words such as "inhabiting" and "abode" in another quote from the same passage:

> So those who fly from the eternal light of God, which contains in itself all good things, are themselves the cause to themselves of their inhabiting eternal darkness, destitute of all good things, having become to themselves the cause of [their consignment to] an abode of that nature.

In these chapters, Irenaeus explicitly connects this place to the "furnace of fire" (referencing the final judgment described in Matthew 13) and the "outer darkness," making it clear that he is addressing the final judgment rather than a temporary intermediate state. Alvarado's argument is thus well rooted in the observation that a place described as eternal, in which individuals inhabit, dwell, and abide, implies the co-eternity of its inhabitants with that place. This challenge is a reasonable one, and its premises are true.

But an equally reasonable counterclaim emerges: the passage is deeply metaphorical, employing imagery such as "light" to represent the presence of God's goodness and "darkness" to signify its absence. The terms "habitation" and "abode" align with this metaphorical framework, symbolizing the final state caused by separation from God, that is, destitution of all good things. Crucially, Irenaeus elsewhere identifies continuance in life and existence as among the good things bestowed by God, implying that the loss of all good things includes the loss of life itself.

To support the claim that this language is metaphorical, it is necessary to examine the immediate context. In *Against Heresies* 4.38.1, Irenaeus begins an extended metaphor comparing humanity to infants who cannot yet consume strong food or endure bright light. This metaphor underscores the transformative role of partaking in God's likeness to attain immortality. He writes:

> [the Lord] came to us, not as He might have come, but as we were capable of beholding Him. He might easily have come to us in His immortal glory, but in that case we could never have endured the greatness of the glory; and therefore it was that He, who was the perfect bread of the Father, offered Himself to us as milk, [because we were] as infants. He did this when He appeared as a man, that we, being nourished, as it were, from the breast of His flesh, and having, by such a course of milk nourishment, become accustomed to eat and drink the Word of God, may be able also to contain in ourselves the Bread of immortality, which is the Spirit of the Father.

Here, the "bread of immortality" is clearly identified as the Holy Spirit, not literal bread or even the Eucharist, reinforcing the metaphorical framework. In the next paragraph, which concludes 4.38, Irenaeus transitions to a more direct teaching:

> For these, [the dumb animals], bring no charge against God for not having made them men; but each one, just as he has been created, gives thanks that he has been created. For we cast blame upon Him, because we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods; although God has adopted this course out of His pure benevolence, that no one may impute to Him invidiousness or grudgingness. He declares, 'I

> have said, Ye are gods; and ye are all sons of the Highest.' But since we could not sustain the power of divinity, He adds, 'But ye shall die like men.'"

To ensure there is no misunderstanding, Irenaeus explains this progression with straightforward seriousness:

> For it was necessary, at first, that nature should be exhibited; then, after that, that what was mortal should be conquered and swallowed up by immortality, and the corruptible by incorruptibility, and that man should be made after the image and likeness of God, having received the knowledge of good and evil.

This chapter consistently conveys the same message found throughout Irenaeus's writings: not a description of two separate places for humanity, nor a fate of mere separation plus survival, but rather two distinct outcomes: in one, those who submit to God are drawn into His likeness and attain immortality. In the other, those who rebel against God, unable to bear His sight, cannot even see His likeness (cf. 1 John 3:2; Colossians 3:3–4). Lacking the capacity to partake in God's eternal nature, they remain temporal and eventually cease to live.

Irenaeus reinforces this message in *Against Heresies* 4.39.4, where he explains:

> [God] prepared fit habitations for both, kindly conferring that light which they desire on those who seek after **the light of incorruption**, and resort to it; but for the despisers and mockers who avoid and turn themselves away from this light, and who do, **as it were, blind themselves**, **He has prepared darkness** suitable to persons who oppose the light…

Here, Irenaeus explicitly identifies the metaphorical "light" as "the light of incorruption," granted to those who seek it. By contrast, the "darkness" prepared for those whose turning from God's gentle revelation in the flesh of Jesus is (in a simile, "as it were") blinding themselves, must correspond to mortality, corruption, and death. Mortality and death, therefore, are the literal realities underlying the metaphorical "abode" described earlier.

This interpretation aligns with similar biblical imagery, such as the "eternal home" in Ecclesiastes 12:5. Furthermore, it encompasses all the consequences of rebellion against God, portraying the abode of darkness as a place not for life but for its absence — a permanent reminder of judgment, much like Hinnom in Jeremiah 31:40, which serves as an eternal memorial named "the valley of corpses and ashes."

Turning to *Against Heresies* 4.28.2, Alvarado observes Irenaeus stating that the punishments revealed in the New Testament are "not only temporal, but rendered eternal." In the same second article, Alvarado interprets this passage to conclude: "Irenaeus semantically links the ideas of punishment, eternity of the fire, the wrath of God, and the increased and enduring nature of the punishment as greater and more enduring than the kinds that were given to cities like Sodom and Gomorrah."

In fact, the passage Alvarado references does not compare the eternal punishment to Sodom's past punishment by fire from heaven. Rather his use in *Against Heresies* 4.28.1 is: "It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the judgment than for that city which did not receive the word of His disciples." Alvarado misreads this comparison, construing it as a contrast between Sodom's temporal destruction and the rebels' eternal punishment. But Irenaeus is comparing the relative severity of punishments experienced during the future day of judgment — a "day" being a finite event — with no mention of either eternal punishment or Sodom's historical destruction.

Although Alvarado's interpretation is thus disqualified, the question remains: What does Irenaeus mean by stating that the punishments are "not merely temporal but rendered eternal"? To answer this, a closer examination of the passage in *Against Heresies* 4.28.2 is necessary:

> …we are directed not merely to abstain from evil actions, but even from evil thoughts, and from idle words, and empty talk, and scurrilous-language: thus also **the punishment** of those who do not believe the Word of God, and despise His advent, and are turned away backwards, is increased; **being not merely** temporal**, but rendered also eternal**. For to whomsoever the Lord shall say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire," these shall be damned[11] for ever…

Having ruled out the possibility that the temporal punishment referenced here pertains to Sodom's temporal destruction, it remains to determine what Irenaeus intended by comparing "those who despise His advent" with others who experienced lesser and temporal punishment. To find the answer, one must turn to the preceding chapter, *Against Heresies* 4.27, which contextualizes the contrast.

In *Against Heresies* 4.27.1, Irenaeus enumerates the past judgments of God against figures such as David and Solomon. He states: "the punishment [declared] in Scripture was sufficient for the ancients in regard to what they did without the Spirit's guidance." He concludes: "The Scripture has thus sufficiently reproved him, as the presbyter remarked, in order that no flesh may glory in the sight of the Lord."

In *Against Heresies* 4.27.2, Irenaeus elaborates further:

> And it is for our instruction that their actions have been committed to writing, that we might know, in the first place, that our God and theirs is one, and that sins do not please Him although committed by men of renown; and in the second place, that we should keep from wickedness. For if these men of old time, who preceded us in the gifts [bestowed upon them], and for whom the Son of God had not yet suffered, when they committed any sin and served fleshly lusts, were rendered objects of such disgrace, what shall the men of the present day suffer, who have despised the Lord's coming, and become the slaves of their own lusts?

Here, Irenaeus contrasts two categories of sinners. The first includes David, Solomon, and other saints of old whose sins were punished lightly because they lived before the Spirit was given and before Christ's advent. Their punishments were temporal: they were addressed directly by God, shamed in His presence, and their sins recorded in Scripture for posterity. Yet, Irenaeus sees their sins as overlooked, as evidenced by Irenaeus's reference to Christ's descent into Hades: "It was for this reason [the repentance and forgiveness of David and Solomon mentioned immediately previously], too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him" (*Against Heresies* 4.27.2).

The second category comprises those who have encountered Christ, received the Spirit, and then turned away. For these individuals, Irenaeus argues, there will be no second chance. Their

[11] Keep in mind that "damned" has shifted in meaning; the underlying Greek and Latin still only mean to be condemned as in a court judgment, not to be tormented. The English usage, now largely archaic outside of religious contexts, carries vague implications of torment and is often employed idiomatically rather than theologically.

punishment is eternal because they have rejected the ultimate revelation of God and the gifts of the Spirit. Irenaeus underscores this by stating, “Christ shall not die again in behalf of those who now commit sin, for death shall no more have dominion over Him” (*Against Heresies* 4.27.2).

Irenaeus repeats the same teaching that the difference is the possibility of pardon in *Demonstration of The Apostolic Teaching* 56:

> How much better that we had been burned with fire before the Son of God was born, than that, when He was born, we should not have believed on Him. Because for those who died before Christ appeared there is hope that in the judgment of the risen they may obtain salvation, even such as feared God and died in righteousness and had in them the Spirit of God, as the patriarchs and prophets and righteous men. But for those who after Christ's appearing believed not on Him, there is a vengeance without pardon in the judgment.

This interpretation is further confirmed by Irenaeus’s comparison of the punishments of Old and New Testament apostates—those who canonically did not repent—and his conclusion that these punishments are equal. For Irenaeus, this equivalence demonstrates the continuity of divine justice across the Testaments and refutes the Gnostic claim of a dichotomy between the Old Testament God and the Father of Jesus. In *Against Heresies* 4.27.4, he provides a list of equal punishments:

> As then the unrighteous, the idolaters, and fornicators perished, so also is it now: … And just as then, those who led vicious lives, and put other people astray, were condemned and cast out, so also even now the offending eye is plucked out, and the foot and the hand, lest the rest of the body perish in like manner.

Irenaeus connects these judgments directly to New Testament rebels, observing that the justice meted out in both Testaments is consistent. He extends this parallel in *Against Heresies* 4.24.2, explicitly linking the punishment of heresy and rebellion:

> And the heretics, indeed, who bring strange fire to the altar of God—namely, strange doctrines—shall be burned up by the fire from heaven, as were Nadab and Abiud. But such as rise up in opposition to the truth, and exhort others against the Church of God, remain among those under the world, being swallowed up by an earthquake, even as those who were with Chore [Korah], Dathan, and Abiron. But those who cleave asunder, and separate the unity of the Church, receive from God the same punishment as Jeroboam did.

These examples—from Nadab and Abihu to Korah, Dathan, and Jeroboam—all culminate in death as the penalty for rebellion. Even in cases where the punishment seems less explicit, such as Numbers 16:33, where the earth swallows Korah’s rebellion and they “descend to Sheol alive,” the text confirms this as a penalty of death: “they perished from among the assembly.” This point is reiterated when Numbers 16:38 refers to the entire rebellion’s outcome as occurring “at the cost of their lives,” and the punishment of Jeroboam is summarized in 1 Kings 14:10 and 15:29 as the total destruction of his household. Irenaeus applies this equivalence directly to New Testament rebels, asserting that their punishment remains the same. This equality holds even though the old rebels “only” died: therefore it is not dying that makes a punishment temporal, but rather it is being forgiven.

By making this argument, Irenaeus addresses two key Gnostic claims. First, he refutes the notion of two separate deities — one harsher, the other kinder — by demonstrating that the same God enacts the same judgments across both Testaments. Second, he establishes that the

punishments of New Testament rebels are actually greater than those of Old Testament figures such as David and Solomon, not because the Old Testament figures only died, but rather because they were forgiven after their punishment. Together, these points dismantle the Gnostic claim that the Old Testament God is less kind than the Father of Jesus.

Moreover, Irenaeus's argument relies on the principle that the punishment for unrepentant sin is consistent between the covenants. This is exemplified in *Against Heresies* 4.20.8, where he states: "Moses declared that God was indeed a consuming fire to the people that transgressed the law, and threatened that God would bring upon them a day of fire." This argument for equality in divine justice cannot be reconciled with Alvarado's interpretation, which allows only inequality; but it fits conditional immortality perfectly. In a very real sense, the divine sentence of death read out at the Day of Judgment remands the whole person to the death they already died, while the divine verdict that declares the penitent sinner "righteous" formally repeals the previous event of death.

Part 3: Enduring Questions

The previous sections of this paper identified Irenaeus's systematic theology as supporting conditional immortality not as an exception local to one passage but as a rule, and carried out a discussion with modern critics of conditionalism. The rest of this paper is given over to fitting Irenaeus into the theological life of the church in light of his predecessors, teachers, contemporaries, and incorporation into later theology.

Tracing Irenaeus's Influences

Irenaeus of Lyons joins his predecessor, St. Ignatius of Antioch, in emphasizing the intimate connection between life, immortality, and union with God, reflecting a shared theological tradition among early Christian thinkers. Ignatius describes the Eucharist as "the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die but live forever in Jesus Christ" (*Ephesians* 20.2). This striking image resonates with Irenaeus's description of the bread and cup as conveying the promise of immortality: "For as the bread from the earth, receiving the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but Eucharist … so also our bodies, being nourished by it and deposited in the earth, and suffering decay there, shall rise at their appointed time" (*Against Heresies* 4.18.5). Both writers emphasize that participation in Christ (through the concrete means of the Eucharist) mediates eternal life to those united with Christ, presenting it as central to the Christian hope.

This shared Eucharistic theology directly informs their understanding of sin and its consequences. Ignatius warns, "Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be" (*Magnesians* 10). Similarly, Irenaeus asserts that separation from God results in death and decay: "If He were to withdraw Himself entirely, all things would utterly perish, and all existence would be at an end" (*Against Heresies* 2.34.3). For both, life is not an inherent property of human nature but a divine gift sustained by communion with God. Sin and unholiness, as acts of separation and ingratitude, lead naturally to the just outcome of ceasing to exist.

These parallels suggest that Irenaeus builds upon themes found in Ignatius's writings, integrating them into a broader theological framework. Ignatius's emphasis on the divine sustenance of life resonates with Irenaeus's fully developed anthropology and eschatology, in which life and immortality are gifts mediated through union with God. Whether or not Ignatius explicitly held a conditionalist view, his teaching aligns with the tradition that life, immortality, and judgment are inextricably tied to a repentant walk with God, a tradition that Irenaeus develops into a more systematic articulation of conditional immortality.

St. Aphrahat of Syria (b. 280 AD) also reflects certain parallels with Ignatius and Irenaeus. In his 22-part series *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat emphasizes the soul's dependency on the spirit for animate existence and highlights the unique role of the Holy Spirit for believers, contrasting it with the 'animal spirit' in unbelievers (*Demonstration* 8.23 cf. 6.14). However, while Irenaeus teaches in *Against Heresies* 2.34.1 that souls in Hades are sensate, Aphrahat asserts they are insensate, as the spirit resides with God during this period (*Demonstration* 6.14; 8.20). Aphrahat identifies this state of soul sleep as reflecting "the faith" and the universal teaching of the Church (*Demonstration* 8.20; 22.26). This discrepancy means that Aphrahat could not have derived this doctrine directly from Irenaeus's writings. Instead, this suggests the shared ideas between them, both the dependence of

the soul on the spirit and the resurrection to mortality (as noted earlier in discussion of *Fragment of Irenaeus* 12), were widespread enough in early Christian thought to be discovered without sharing specific writings.

Soon after Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria and his universalist contemporaries expanded discussions on final punishment by proposing that all souls would ultimately be reconciled to God. While Origen became a controversial figure, the debates surrounding him primarily focused on his speculative cosmology and the preexistence of souls, rather than his universalist theology. By contrast, Gregory of Nyssa, another prominent universalist, faced no such controversy and played a key role in shaping orthodox theology. The seventh ecumenical council (Nicaea II) praised Gregory as "the father of fathers," even as it reaffirmed the fifth ecumenical council's condemnation of universalism and Origen's speculative teachings.

This historical context suggests that early Christianity, particularly during the time of the first ecumenical council, maintained a degree of tolerance for diversity in eschatological views. Final punishment, though discussed, was not yet deemed central enough to cause division. When later theological developments led to the formal condemnation of universalism, these anathemas targeted specific doctrines, such as the denial of "punishment without end" (Nicaea II). Importantly, these condemnations left room for interpretations like conditionalism, which affirm punishment's finality while rejecting the necessity of eternal torment.

Athanasius of Alexandria, writing well after Irenaeus, begins with the same foundational principle that sin draws a person toward corruption and non-being. In *On the Incarnation* 4, he writes, perfectly in line with Irenaeus, that "the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again." Like Irenaeus, Athanasius underscores God's commitment to His creation, declaring: "It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself." Unlike Irenaeus, however, he always attributes this concern as due to God's own worthiness; he does not weigh any individual's misery or God's pity, or even God's affection toward any person.

So Athanasius has in effect added a new dimension to this tradition, one absent from the writings of Irenaeus. The outcome of this can be seen in *On the Incarnation* 9, where he writes: "through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all." He teaches that God could be credited with justice in decreeing the penalty of corruption leading to nonexistence, but could not ultimately carry it out because it would discredit Him as creator. Instead, through the Incarnation and the shared nature of Christ with all humanity in common, God causes man to share a universal resurrection to incorruption, thus utterly removing the penalty of death. But this does not directly imply universal salvation, and in fact Athanasius does not address it as salvation. In place of death, Athanasius asserts in *On the Incarnation* 56, is the wholly different penalty of "the eternal fire," which he explains at the end of his *Festal Letter* 3 to mean that the wicked "have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful. The last fire, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful."

The change of direction in the reasoning here is almost stunning; Irenaeus speaks of God's compassion and desire to save each and every person leading to actually saving those who appeal to Him from the fate they are in by nature, leaving those who separate themselves from God in exactly the same trouble all were in before; while for Athanasius, according to the consensus interpretation, God's self-motivated desire to remove death does remove the danger of corruption, but replaces it with a strangely opposite danger which Athanasius barely discusses.

Athenagoras of Athens, a contemporary of Irenaeus, offers a striking contrast to the view witnessed by Ignatius. His two surviving works include some of the earliest in-depth defenses of eternal torment. In *On the Resurrection of the Dead* 19, he argues that the limitations of a mortal body prevent adequate punishment for grievous crimes, presenting death as an obstacle to justice and necessitating resurrection to incorruptible bodies. This reasoning extends beyond Athanasius's view, which acknowledges death as an appropriate penalty for sin but deems it dishonoring to God as humanity's creator. In contrast, Ignatius and Irenaeus present death as the natural result of rejecting God, with torment understood as passively allowed due to being proportional to specific sins.

While Athenagoras and others contribute to the diversity of early Christian thought, Justin Martyr, as Irenaeus's teacher, occupies a unique position in this discussion. His influence on Irenaeus's theological framework, combined with the contested interpretation of his writings, warrant separate attention.

Teacher of Irenaeus: Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr, one of Irenaeus's key influences, presents a challenge to the claim that Irenaeus consistently taught conditional immortality. Justin made statements interpreted by many as affirming eternal torment, while others appear to support conditional immortality. Rather than attempting to resolve debates about Justin's personal beliefs, this section examines his explicit statements and their implications for those who heard and passed on his teachings.

In *First Apology* 8, Justin asserts that "the wicked [will exist] in the same bodies united again to their spirits, which are now to undergo everlasting punishment; and not only, as Plato said, for a period of a thousand years." This statement is often cited as supporting eternal torment, particularly by his student Tatian, though it was also plausibly appropriated by the conditionalist Arnobius of Sicca, who argued (*Against the Heathen* 2.14) that eternal capital punishment by prolonged torments inflicts a greater and more decisive penalty than Plato's concept of cycles of temporary punishment and eventual reconciliation with the Divine.

A similar idea appears in a more explicitly Jewish context in *Dialogue with Trypho* 103, where Justin writes: "We know from Isaiah that the members of those who have transgressed shall be consumed by the worm and unquenchable fire, remaining immortal." Again, his student Tatian used this to affirm eternal torment.

Conversely, in *Dialogue with Trypho* 6, Justin quotes the Christian philosopher who converted him, who articulates a view that aligns more closely with Irenaeus's expression of anthropology and theology:

> Now, that the soul lives, no one would deny. But if it lives, it lives not as being life, but as the partaker of life; but that which partakes of anything, is different from that of which it does partake. Now the soul partakes of life, since God wills it to live. Thus, then, it will not

> even partake [of life] **when God does not will it to live**. For to live is not its attribute, as it is God's; but as a man does not live always, and the soul is not for ever conjoined with the body, since, whenever this harmony must be broken up, the soul leaves the body, and the man exists no longer; even so, **whenever the soul must cease to exist**, the spirit of life is removed from it, and there is no more soul, but it goes back to the place from whence it was taken.

This passage makes pivotal claims suggesting that some souls have an end to life, using unconditional words like "when." This sheds light on the earlier statement from *Dialogue with Trypho* 5 (and see also the similar logic of *First Apology* 18), where the Christian philosopher declares:

> 'But I do not say, indeed, that all souls die; for that were truly a piece of good fortune to the evil. What then? The souls of the pious remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse, waiting for the time of judgment. Thus some which have appeared worthy of God never die; but others are punished so long as God wills them to exist and to be punished.'

This passage expands on the concept of sensation in the intermediate state, introducing the idea that the ones worthy of God never die, while the "others" are punished for a duration determined by God (and, by contrast to the righteous who "never die," would then die "when" God willed it). This framework challenges the wicked's assumption that all souls die, undermining their justification for immoral behavior, a theme found in Jewish texts such as the *Wisdom of Solomon*.[12]

Some note was already taken of Tatian, another student of Justin, credited with evangelizing Syria and translating the gospels into their language. Tatian, in his *Address To the Greeks* 8, makes a statement that appears to harmonize both kinds of claims that Justin made: "The soul is not in itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal. Yet it is possible for it not to die. If, indeed, it knows not the truth, it dies, and is dissolved with the body, but rises again at last at the end of the world with the body, **receiving death by punishment in immortality**. But, again, if it [the soul] acquires the knowledge of God, it dies not…" This expresses both ideas that Justin's teachings might convey: that the soul is not inherently immortal and may die, and that eternal torment is a reality, with body immortal and death somehow certain. His peculiar phrasing suggests that Tatian attempts to reconcile the conditionalist notion of personal sureness to die as Justin expressed it with the concept of eternal torment, resulting in a hybrid expression of the view of eternal torment found nowhere else in early Christian writings. Tatian's synthesis strongly implies that Justin taught both concepts to his students but left them unresolved, without offering a clear harmonization. In response, Tatian appears to have devised his own interpretation to unify these ideas.

Despite Irenaeus's close alignment with Justin's quotations from his teacher, Irenaeus does not appear to reference or adopt Justin's arguments that suggest eternal torment. For example, he does not attribute punishment to immortalized limbs, stating in *Against Heresies* 5.12.2 that unless the Spirit replaces the temporal breath, the body cannot remain alive. Nor does he engage in

[12] See especially the beliefs of the wicked that there is no life apart from the life of the flesh in Wisdom 2:1-5, leading to prosperity and riotous living at the expense of the weak in Wisdom 2:6-11. This is judged and they are sentenced in Wisdom 3:10 to exactly what their reasoning was (i.e. there will be no life for them), as opposed to the righteous who receive immortality that the reasoning of the wicked rejected. See also Wisdom 5, where the wicked lament the absolutely zero effect of their entire lives, leaving nothing.

comparisons with Plato's idea of a thousand years of pain before reincarnation, though he critiques reincarnationist arguments associated with Plato.

There is no evidence of a Christian source from which Justin might have derived his statements that Tatian takes to teach eternal torment. One possible parallel is a post-Temple-destruction Jewish tradition related to the surviving copies of the Targum Jeremiah, though the version extant today replaces Isaiah 66:24's undying worm with "their breaths shall not die," and concludes with the fiery punishment of the wicked ceasing when "the righteous say concerning them, 'we have seen enough;'" perhaps Justin and Trypho witness here to a different version of the Targumic tradition where those corpses or limbs are kept undying in the worm and fire, an idea fitting to Justin's demonstrated knowledge of variant texts together with his audience's expertise.

Unlike Tatian, Irenaeus's evident respect for Justin did not extend to adopting these aspects of his thought regarding eternal torment. There is no evidence that Irenaeus incorporated Justin's statements interpreted by Tatian as supporting eternal torment, nor relied on any sources from which such ideas might have been derived. Instead, Irenaeus consistently articulated a theology of eternal punishment that aligns with what Justin himself claimed to have been taught, as well as with the views reflected in the writings of earlier Christian thinkers. As Justin remained a layman rather than a church father, Irenaeus could be interpreted to have prioritized an ecclesial tradition in which conditional immortality was (or at least had been) prevalent. This interpretation aligns with the patristic sources discussed in Chris Date's articles and *Rethinking Hell Live* episodes, which highlight the early Christian emphasis on conditional immortality and the eventual loss of life for the wicked as foundational to their theology.

Modern Interactions

One of the most theologically developed views of hell in Christian tradition has come to be known as the "Augustinian" perspective. Joseph Ratzinger's *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* offers an excellent study of this view, which shares certain elements with Irenaeus's theology. Chief among these is the claim that the punishment of hell results from God allowing people to reject Him, rather than from God actively imposing pain. However, much like Athanasius, this view also asserts that God refuses to allow any of His image-bearers to be annihilated. Within this framework, the torments of hell are understood as both self-imposed rejection of the good God offers and the result of God's sustaining act of love, which preserves existence even for those who reject Him.

A recent development toward a more Irenaean perspective can be found in the work of Catholic scholar Paul Griffiths,[13] particularly in his book *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures*. As the title suggests, Griffiths proposes a form of conditional immortality, tuned to fit Catholic doctrinal requirements. Bruce McCuskey, a Jesuit scholar, provides a compelling review that compares Griffiths's book with Ratzinger's book. While McCuskey highlights notable thematic parallels between Griffiths's ideas and Irenaeus's theology, his most striking observation lies in his analysis of the metaphors used to describe divine-human interaction. McCuskey writes:

> For Ratzinger, the givenness of human existence is captured primarily by oral and aural metaphors. The dialogical call anchors his account. For Griffiths, the imagery is tactile:

[13] See also Griffiths, P. J. (2007). Self-Annihilation Or Damnation? A Disputable Question in Christian Eschatology. Pro Ecclesia, 16(4), 416-444. https://doi.org/10.1177/106385120701600403, downloaded 1/19 from https://afkimel.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/griffiths-on-annihilation.pdf

> ‘caress’ is the crucial term. The difference lies ultimately in the weight each set of images and metaphors gives to human and divine agency. One can call to another dialogically without that person exercising any intentional response. Hence, God can continually call us into being even if we ourselves never respond. A successful caress, however, must be accepted and ultimately returned. If performed without the willed acceptance of the one being caressed, a caress fails, as does one that does not evoke a response, even if simply that of acceptance.

While Irenaeus does not employ the metaphors of “call” or “caress” directly, his theology resonates with Griffiths's tactile imagery in its emphasis on active participative engagement between humanity and God. For Irenaeus, creation is a divine call to existence, but salvation is a relational and transformative process of communion that begins with God’s action but grows into active union with God. This concept is vividly expressed in *Against Heresies* 5.1.1, where Irenaeus writes of Christ:

> [He is] imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation, and bestowing upon us at His coming immortality durably and truly, by means of communion with God.

Likewise he writes of Christ’s work of theosis in *Against Heresies* 3.20.2:

> … that He might call man forth into His own likeness, assigning him as [His own] imitator to God, and imposing on him His Father's law, in order that he may see God, and granting him power to receive the Father; [...] that He might accustom man to receive God, and God to dwell in man.

These passages, among others, highlight Irenaeus’s emphasis on salvation as a process of growing in closeness to God, culminating in union with Him and participation in His life. This vision of salvation as relational and transformative echoes through Griffiths’s work, which revives the ancient Christian understanding of divine sustenance as essential to human flourishing — a theme foundational to Irenaeus’s theology.

Closing: Reading Irenaeus in Light of Life and Death

Let us conclude by hearing Irenaeus speak for himself, placing his thought at the forefront. In *Against Heresies* 3.20.2, he offers a profound passage that encapsulates many of the central themes explored here, with added emphasis to highlight its key ideas. This passage reveals how deeply these concepts are woven into the Christian message as Irenaeus understood and proclaimed it. It also underscores the theological consistency of his argument when viewed through the lens of his broader teachings on the end of sin and sinners as opposed to righteousness, love, and union with God.

> This, therefore, was the [object of the] long-suffering of God, that man, passing through all things, and acquiring the knowledge of moral discipline, then attaining to the resurrection from the dead, and learning by experience what is the source of his deliverance, may always live in a state of gratitude to the Lord, having obtained from Him **the gift of incorruptibility**, that he might love Him the more; for “he to whom more is forgiven, loveth more:” and that he may know himself, **how mortal and weak he is**; while he also understands **respecting God, that He is immortal and powerful to such a degree as to confer immortality upon what is mortal, and eternity upon what is temporal**; and may

> understand also the other attributes of God displayed towards himself, by means of which being instructed he may think of God in accordance with the divine greatness. For the glory of man [is] God, but [His] works [are the glory] of God; and the receptacle of all His wisdom and power [is] man. Just as the physician is proved by his patients, so is God also revealed through men. And therefore Paul declares, "For God hath concluded all in unbelief, that He may have mercy upon all;" not saying this in reference to spiritual Aeons,[14] but **to man, who had been disobedient to God, and being cast off from immortality, then obtained mercy, receiving through the Son of God that adoption which is [accomplished] by Himself.** For he who holds, without pride and boasting, the true glory (opinion) regarding created things and the Creator, who is **the Almighty God of all, and who has granted existence to all; [such an one,] continuing in His love and subjection, and giving of thanks, shall also receive from Him the greater glory of promotion, looking forward to the time when he shall become like Him who died for him**, for He, too, "was made in the likeness of sinful flesh," to condemn sin, and to cast it, as now a condemned thing, away beyond the flesh, but that He might call man forth into His own likeness, assigning him as [His own] imitator to God, and imposing on him His Father's law, in order that he may see God, and granting him power to receive the Father; [being] the Word of God who dwelt in man, and became the Son of man, that He might accustom man to receive God, and God to dwell in man, according to the good pleasure of the Father.

[14] Aeons, according to Gnosticism, are semi-divine beings.