

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of the downloadable “622 service” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader's notes
- Paper, pens
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: NAME THAT HERESY

Write out an obscure word from the list below, and ask each teen to write a made-up definition of the word on a piece of paper without showing anyone else. (Don't let them look up the words!) Collect the papers together, and add to them the actual definition. Read the definitions out and have the teens vote on which is the real one. Whoever makes the most correct guesses wins.

Each of the words below relates to a false teaching that confronted the early Church, a theme which will be explored in today's lesson. It may become obvious after the first few words that this is the theme, so in order to enable your teens to write convincing alternatives, you may wish to start by telling them what the theme is! Please note that the definitions provided are extremely simplified for the sake of the activity.

- Montanism – A sect of the second century that believed in new prophetic revelations.
- Quartodecimanism – The custom of celebrating Easter at a different time from the rest of the Church.
- Marcion – A man who said the Old Testament God and New Testament God were totally different beings.
- Valentinus – A man who taught a system of belief which claimed the human body was evil.
- Donatism – A movement that claimed the sacraments were invalid if performed by a priest who had sinned.
- Arius – A man who did not believe in the deity of Jesus.
- Pelagianism – The view that people can earn salvation by their own efforts.

FOR LARGER GROUPS, HAVE TEENS BREAK UP INTO PAIRS OR SMALL GROUPS. FOR VERY SMALL GROUPS YOU MAY WISH TO ADD AN ADDITIONAL TWO OR THREE FALSE DEFINITIONS.

622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order for service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK'S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: THE ABILITY TO REASON

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- What does “critical thinking” mean?
- Do you think Christians have a reputation for being “critical thinkers”? Why or why not?
- Where does the ability to reason come from?
- Who would prefer that we not use this ability?

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

A few things worth pointing out (if they don't otherwise arise during the discussion):

- Generally speaking, “critical thinking” means using our mind to analyze issues in an objective and reasonable way. It means being willing to look at something from various angles in order to arrive at the truth.
- It's very likely that your teens will say that Christians are perceived as not being critical thinkers. We live in a world that dislikes organized religion, adherence to an ancient creed and scriptures, not to mention the very idea of faith. But many of the saints of the Church were great thinkers, schooled in philosophy and rhetoric, whose theological writings engaged with the issues of their day, and continue to impact the Western world today.
- God created human beings with the ability to think rationally, and he invites his people to “reason together” with him (Isaiah 1:18). While Christians do not regard human reason as the highest authority, we do regard it as a gift from God to be used well. However, like many of the other gifts that God has given to us in creation, human beings are able to misuse it in ways that can be destructive. (Think perhaps of the diabolical genius that enables the creation of weapons of mass destruction).
- Challenge your teens to consider advertisers. These are people who want to send them a message, and would prefer that they not use their critical thinking skills to look too closely at those messages. For example, an advertiser sending the message that we “deserve” a certain product probably doesn't want us to stop and consider their motive for sending us this message (their own profit), or whether it is true, or whether it will ultimately satisfy. But we can also ask the same question of teachers, politicians or even leaders in the church. That's not to say that any or all of these are “bad people”. However, anyone who wishes to exert influence over us without accountability is likely to want us to set aside our ability to reason – so we ought to keep it in good working order!

THE LESSON: WITH HEART, SOUL, MIND AND STRENGTH

Lessons 13-42 follow a slightly different format from previous lessons. The story of the saint being studied is interspersed with verses from scripture that provide added perspective. You may prefer to read the lesson text aloud together as a group, or ask the teens to read it silently to themselves.

“You are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.” (Philippians 1:7)

Throughout the first and most of the second centuries, early Church writers were concerned with addressing specific issues as they arose, including frequent outbreaks of persecution against believers. But towards the end of the second century, a number of false teachings had arisen with such comprehensive doctrinal systems that the teachers of the Church recognized the need to set out a much more complete explanation and defence of right Christian belief. Among these teachers were Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen and Irenæus of Lyons.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” (Romans 1:16)

Irenæus was the son of Christian parents, born in the year 130 (or thereabouts), and he grew up at Smyrna in modern-day Turkey. As a young man, he sat under the teaching of Polycarp and had a deep admiration for that bishop's pastoral heart.

In those days the south of France was a great mission field, where the eastern Church was sending evangelists to share the good news. Irenæus, who was well-educated and eloquent, was among those sent to serve under the first bishop of Lyons, where he was then invited into ordained ministry. But while Irenæus was away on an errand in Rome, persecution broke out back in Lyons and his bishop was killed. Upon his return, Irenæus was called to replace him, becoming the second bishop of Lyons.

“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)

In spite of the obvious dangers involved in his new role, Irenæus did not keep a low profile. He wanted the people of Lyons to come to know God as the loving Shepherd who was at work in history, seeking to draw them into closer communion with himself.

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

While on two occasions, Irenæus urged Rome to show leniency with groups that were at odds with church teaching on minor points (such as when to observe the feast of Easter), other teachings in circulation at that time were far more harmful, and Irenæus expended great effort opposing them.

***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your mind and with all your strength.”***

(Mark 12:30)

In the preface to his book, “Against Heresies”, Irenæus wrote: “Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself.”

“Gnosticism” was very popular during that time, and it was misleading many of the people in Lyons. It taught them that the material world was evil and that Jesus did not have a real human body. Some of its followers became extreme ascetics, while others became libertines. But in addition to drawing people into harmful ways of living, Gnosticism contradicted a right Christian understanding of creation, the incarnation and the resurrection. A second heresy causing great concern was taught by Marcion and took Gnosticism a step further, by claiming that the Creator-God of the Old Testament was himself bad, and an entirely different God from that of the New Testament. Marcion went so far as to put forward his own idea of a canon of scripture – complete with his own edits to the texts, so that the writings would line up with his teachings.

Irenæus was a gifted thinker and writer, but he was also a faithful shepherd. He recognized that these false teachings had the potential to lead believers away from their true Shepherd. He knew they needed to be given tools with which they could recognize and stand up to false teachings. Irenæus challenged the heresies of his day head-on. He appealed to the teaching of the apostles and the scriptures, and provided a thoughtful explanation of Christian doctrine in a time when it was desperately needed.

Later accounts tell us that Irenæus was martyred in 202, during persecution that broke out under the Roman emperor Septimius Severus.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | IRENÆUS OF LYONS, “AGAINST HERESIES” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | GERARD SAMPSON, “LAYMAN’S BOOK OF SAINTS”.)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they’ve just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- How do you think Irenæus regarded the ability to reason?
- Did anything strike you as familiar about the heresies opposed by Irenæus?
- What were some of the courageous choices Irenæus made?
What do you think motivated him to do those things?
- What can we learn from Irenæus’ example?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *Irenæus was a great thinker, who not only used his mind to defend the faith, but wanted others to be equipped to do the same. He was certainly no anti-intellectual!*
- *Ecclesiastes 1:9 says that “there is nothing new under the sun”, and history has shown that many of the same heresies tend to crop up again and again, even though the Church had responded to them authoritatively many centuries before. For example, it is not uncommon to hear people justify immoral living by saying that God is only concerned with the spiritual and not what they do with their body (just like some of the Gnostics). It’s also not uncommon to hear people suggest that the Old Testament God is “angry” whereas the New Testament God is loving (just like the followers of Marcion).*
- *Leaving his home and beloved teacher Polycarp for the mission field in Gaul (or what is now southern France), certainly took courage. It also took great courage to accept the position of bishop in that place after the previous one had been martyred. This was not a risk-free job. Furthermore, rather than keeping a low profile, Irenæus*

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

evangelized boldly and spoke out clearly against the heresies of his day, all of which took a great deal of courage. Irenæus was not motivated by a zeal to create his own brand of theology nor to get into philosophical fights for no reason. Like his mentor Polycarp, Irenæus had a pastoral heart and was motivated by his desire that believers be rooted in orthodox Christian teaching, and led into a closer communion with their true Shepherd.

- *Irenæus’ pastoral heart, courageous witness and defence of the faith is an example for believers of every age. We can also seek to be as discerning as he was in differentiating between odd beliefs that are not harmful and those that are truly incompatible with orthodox Christianity. He is an example to us of what it looks like to love God with the whole heart, soul, mind and strength.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON’T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU’LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY “AT-HOME CHALLENGE” IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER](http://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER).)

Review today’s lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Irenæus that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you’ve chosen. Close your time of reflection with a prayer of gratitude for the witness of Irenæus.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

O God, our heavenly Father, who didst raise up thy faithful servant Irenæus to be a Bishop in thy Church and to feed thy flock: We beseech thee to send down upon all thy Bishops, the Pastors of thy Church, the abundant gift of thy Holy Spirit, that they, being endued with power from on high, and ever walking in the footsteps of thy holy Apostles, may minister before thee in thy household as true servants of Christ and stewards of thy divine mysteries; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A BISHOP, P. 312)

CLOSING PRAYERS (622 AGAIN)

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE “PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS” SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU’RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the “Grace”, the final prayer in the booklet.