Changing Strategy: An Analysis of Against Heresies

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During the second century CE, a broad variety of groups considered themselves to be “Christians” in the sense that each group claimed to be the true followers of Christ’s teachings. Yet these groups had different understandings of creation, accepted different Scriptures, and advocated different lifestyles. One extant work from this time period is Irenaeus’ Against Heresies. This text is Irenaeus’ five-book response to a request from other proto-orthodox “Christians” asking for a description and refutation of the Valentinians, another group of second century “Christians” whose belief system Irenaeus viewed as incompatible with his own. Though the request was for a refutation of the Valentinians, in the text, Irenaeus refutes a number of other “Christian” groups and promotes his own form of “Christianity” — a version of Christianity that was largely confirmed by the First Council of Nicea.

Against Heresies is pivotal in that it is an early example of proto-orthodox thinking. Irenaeus’ emphasis on Scripture and tradition as well as the clear distinction the church draws between orthodoxy and heresy still exist in Christianity. Furthermore, Against Heresies provides insight into the relationship between various second century “Christian” groups vying for supremacy. This research elucidates this relationship by exploring the change in Irenaeus’ strategy over the course of the five books of Against Heresies. While Irenaeus clearly views these five books of Against Heresies as interconnected, it is important to note that the books were not all written and sent at once. I argue that there is a shift in Irenaeus’ strategy over the course of the text. In Books I-III, Irenaeus is primarily interested in preventing current proto-orthodox “Christians” from converting to other forms of “Christianity.” In Books IV and V, however, Irenaeus focuses on converting those “Christians” he opposes to proto-orthodox “Christianity.”