The Authority of the Presbyters in Irenaeus’ Works

The inaugural address with which our friend Nils Dahl started his career as professor in Oslo, was entitled “Anamnesis”. Therefore it may be appropriate to begin this contribution to his “Festschrift” by some words of recollection, how our friendship began.

It was shortly after World War II. I was working on the conception of the church in the New Testament and had found a reference somewhere to a book by a Norwegian scholar on “Das Volk Gottes”. But it was not to be found in any of the Dutch libraries, owing to the war-circumstances, and it could not be ordered because of currency restrictions. So I wrote a letter to the author to see if he could help me in one way or another, and he most kindly did so in sending me a copy of his work. This present not only helped me in my thinking on the “people of God”, long before this expression became popular in the ecumenical vocabulary, but was and still is for me so valuable, because it was a clear token of the reality of that theme-word. Four years later we met in person at the St. Paul’s pilgrimage, organized by the Church of Greece in 1951. The memories of that great occasion stand out in my mind very sharply, also that meeting with Nils Dahl. He had not had the opportunity to be with us from the very beginning, but joined our party in Saloniki, dropping in as it were, out of the blue one after-noon and telling his story in that way that is so characteristic for him. Since then our friendship has continued through the years in spite of seas that separate us, being confirmed for ever in 1967 when I received the same Oslo-ring which he so well deserved in 1941.

These simple recollections have a deep meaning in my life. They fit in a way remarkably well in the pattern shaping this “Festschrift”, because the Church of the New Testament, that “people of God”, is for both of us not an abstract idea, but a living reality; and that reality exists and manifests itself in contact from person to person. This aspect had always been an essential feature of the Church of Christ. This is one of the reasons, but a weighty one at that, for choosing the topic of this contribution.

The church-father Irenaeus mentions on several occasions in his extant works, mainly in his “Adversus Haereses”, a group of predecessors whom he calls “the

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2 N.A. Dahl, Das Volk Gottes, eine Untersuchung zum Kirchenbewusstsein des Urchristentums, Oslo, 1941.
presbyters” (seniores, in the Latin translation). He refers to them and quotes their sayings. Whether they formed a “group” in sociological terms, is a question that may be left open for the moment. At any rate they were people of authority and ranked highly in Irenaeus’ esteem, since they formed a link with the apostles. Some names are mentioned which may be connected with these “elders”, but for the greater part they are anonymous.

The fact of their existence and importance is well-known and since the days of J.B. Lightfoot, A. Harnack and Th. Zahn—to mention only these giants in the field of New Testament and Patristic studies—much attention has been given to this important, but rather enigmatic group.\(^3\) Shadowy though they are, they seem to be key-figures in certain areas of the church in that age of transition, which is the 2nd century, still encompassed in many places by the clouds of historical darkness.

In all previous discussions of this subject one point that is, so it seems to me, of vital importance to determine the role these presbyters played in the thought of Irenaeus has been overlooked. It is the purpose of this paper to bring this to light.

Since Irenaeus introduced these presbyters by quoting certain of their sayings we will take our start at these passages. They have been collected in a very convenient form by E. Preuschen\(^4\) and in the German translation of G. Ficker.\(^5\) But for the object we have in view it will be important to look not only at the character of these sayings (without giving a detailed exegesis of their contents), but also at the context in which the reason why they are introduced. After having reached by that way a firm ground we may also look around to find other material to broaden our outlook and to come to a better understanding of the role these presbyters have played.

Preuschen’s collection opens with 5 passages, marked by the letters a–e, in which we hear the voice of an unnamed gentleman, called by Irenaeus κρείσσωνἡμῶν = superior nobis (Adv. Haer. I praef. 2; I 13,3; III 17,4). In one place the plural

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3 See G.G. Blum, Tradition und Sukzession, Studien zum Normbegriff des Apostolischen von Paulus bis Irenaeus, Berlin-Hamburg 1963, S. 188–195, where the older literature is also mentioned; J.G. Sobosan, The role of the Presbyter: an investigation into the Adversus Haereses of Saint Irenaeus, in Scottish Journal of Theology XXVII (1974), pp. 129–146 (the reason why these and other views are not discussed, is given at the end of this contribution).

4 E. Preuschen, Antilegomena, die Reste der ausserkanonischen Evangelien und urchristlichen Ueberlieferungen, Giessen 1901, S. 63–71 (text), 152–159 (translation).