

Heresies

The Real-Life Impact of Theology Gone Bad

Lesson 1: Marcionism

Acts 15:1-6

[15:1] But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." [2] And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. [3] So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. [4] When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. [5] But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

[6] The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter...

Galatians 2:11-14

[11] But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. [12] For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. [13] And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. [14] But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

What do you observe from these two passages? What do these disagreements have in common?

J. Gresham Machen observed an important difference in Paul's reaction to two different rivals. In Philippians, we see his reaction to those who proclaim the gospel for the purpose of hurting Paul. In Galatians, we see his reaction to religious leaders with a different message.

"In Rome, Paul was tolerant, because there the content of the message that was being proclaimed by the rival teachers was true; in Galatia he was intolerant, because there the content of the rival message was false." Machen in Christianity and Liberalism, 27

I. What is heresy? Can a heretic be a Christian?

Heresy must not be confused with unbelief. Heresy always arises from within the context of faith itself. It will always retain some appearance of Christianity, yet some aspect of it will contradict its essence.

Orthodoxy (lit. "right belief") means conforming to the faith expressed by the creeds of the early Church.

It might seem arbitrary and abstract on the surface. Is it just a way of separating the good people from the bad? What is the difference between a heretic and a member of another denomination? What makes a Marcionite a heretic and a Methodist part of the family?

Alister McGrath provides a **helpful rubric** given that the essence of Christianity is the redemption by Christ. He notes that heresy will:

- “1. be interpreted in such a way that Christ cannot effect the redemption of humanity; or
2. be interpreted in such a way that humanity—the object of justification—cannot be justified, properly speaking.”

This will be a helpful guide in examining each heresy. We will begin with why the heresy is attractive, but these two points will helpfully expose its danger.

II. Dangers of Being the Heresy Police

The danger of studying heresies is not becoming a heretic. The danger is becoming self-righteous.

D.T. Niles *“Before you can really understand any religion you have to be tempted by it.”*

- The best way to guard yourself from self-righteousness as you encounter heresy and the best way to reclaim a heretic is to sympathize with them.
- Orthodoxy is toxic when our motives for holding it are to make ourselves feel superior or to condemn others. The path to this toxicity is to hold an orthodox view only because it is “right” (acceptable, respectable, approved by others).

III. The Importance of a Confessional Faith

- While it is dangerous to believe something only because it is what the approved authorities hold, it is also dangerous to devalue to authoritative role creeds and confessions should play in our faith.
- We need the humility to believe that the Holy Spirit works in others beyond ourselves. Submitting to the wisdom, godly insights, and creedal consensuses protects us from repeating similar errors.

Canon questions: Should the gospel be our criteria for what is in the Bible and what should be kept out?

IV. Marcion

- Native of Sinope, a seaport in Pontus, on the south coast of the Black Sea.
- He is reported to have been the son of a bishop and raised a Christian
- He came to Rome a wealthy ship-owner in AD 138 or 139. This was soon after the violent Bar-Kokhba revolt which decimated Jewish nationalism in Israel and led to a context of anti-Judaism.
- He began teaching and gathered a large crowd. In AD 144 he was cut off from the church's communion. He took others with him to form a separate church.



VI. Marcion's Motivation

- Have you ever found the violent narratives of the Old Testament morally challenging? Have you struggled to reconcile them with the message of Jesus?
- Are you ever embarrassed by passages of wrath, justice, and vengeance seen in the OT, like Exodus 20:5 *"a jealous god, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation"*?
- Doesn't the God of the OT seem radically different than the NT?
- Doesn't the gospel free us from the law? Aren't we saved by faith not works? Isn't it the very point of Jesus and Paul to battle the Jews?

Marcion was deeply concerned with the salvation of men by faith in the gospel.

He insisted that the Church had obscured the Gospel by seeking to combine it with Judaism. He maintained that the God of the Old Testament and of the Jews is an evil God.

Marcion believed that Paul understood this gospel, especially in the sharp law/gospel contrast. He made a collection of Paul's writings, editing out elements he felt were later corruptions. He also accepted an edited version of Luke. He was drawn to Paul's teaching that contrasted law and gospel, wrath and grace, works and faith, flesh and spirit, sin and righteousness, death and life.

Marcion is not trying to be a prophet or founder of a new sect but wants to go back to Scripture and find truth. He believes there are Jewish corruptions in the NT. There was a tendency in the early church to turn Christianity into a new moral doctrine and thus overlook the idea of the gospel of grace.

Many atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists agree with Marcion's examples of the Bible's atrocities. Wouldn't removing those elements be a better defense of the faith and result in more conversions?

Some Christians today call themselves "New Testament Christians" basically affirming Marcion's perspective.

VI. Heretical Views

1. Canon: Only ten selections from the Gospel of Luke, and only ten of Paul's letters (1&2 Timothy and Titus excluded). Marcion also excluded the entire Old Testament and the other 16 New Testament books.

2. Christ was not truly human. If he was born, he would have been placed under the authority of the Creator God. This would deny Christianity's 'newness.' He believed that Christ appeared as a grown man.

3. Christ was not a Jewish Messiah but a spiritual entity sent by the One God to reveal the truth about existence, and allowing humanity to escape the earthly trap of the Creator-God.

Other elements of Marcionism:

Marcion is often (probably mistakenly) lumped in with the Gnostics. They were both dualistic, seeing a sharp contrast between matter and spirit. We'll cover these aspects next week when we look at Gnosticism.

1. Members were forbidden any sexual activity; married couples would have to separate and remain chaste.
2. Martyrdom was prized.
3. Problem of evil seems to have been a primary concern for Marcion.

"Recalling the words of Jesus that a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, he argued that a world which contains the suffering and cruelty which we see all about us must be the work of some evil being and not of a good God." Lattourette 126

VII. What Is Lost with Marcionism?

1. Is the Law really our problem? What is our problem? Can liberation from the flesh really solve it?
2. How would removing the God of the OT affect the meaning of the Cross?
3. Where does the NT gospel need the OT?
4. If Christ is not human, what affect does that have on our ability to receive his work?
5. How can we rightly qualify the freedom we have in the gospel?

VIII. Canon Revisited

1. What criteria should we use to determine the canon of Scripture?
 - a. Consistent with the gospel: What about James?
 - b. Apostolic authenticity: What about other lost apostolic writings?
 - c. What the Church says: Is the church over the Bible? Which Church?

2. Marcion provided the first list of books in AD 140 that "should be" the NT. But, he helped the Church recognize this was an important step. Letters and Gospels were already being collected, the Church just had not come out with a statement.

In AD 170 Muratorian Fragment was discovered with a list

- Gospels: Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John
- Acts
- Letters of Paul to churches: Corinthians (2), Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, Thessalonians (2), Romans
- Letters of Paul to individuals: Philemon, Titus, Timothy (2)
- Jude, John (2)
- Wisdom of Solomon(!)
- Revelation of John
- Revelation of Peter(!), questionable

Shepherd (or Pastor) of Hermas, good but not be read in church

Very little controversy about these, and almost no outside books get added. Very soon other canonical books are affirmed.

Not until AD 367 Athanasius lists the 27 NT books we have today. It never really is disputed after that.

3. Who creates Scripture?

- The Church does not make the Bible; the Bible makes the Church. We only recognize the inspiration.