

BIBLICAL LIFE COLLEGE AND SEMINARY

MARCION – THE HERETIC THE CHURCH FOLLOWS

CHURCH HISTORY SURVEY

HCH 501

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NORTH POLE, ALASKA

MARCH 10, 2007

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For my entire life I have been in church. Most of my formative years were spent in a Baptist church, where, for the most part the congregation truly loved God and sought after Him, both in their personal lives and within the community. The teaching was Biblically based and by the time I was a young adult I had a solid understanding of Scripture.

Following a few years of rebellion in my early adult years I returned to church. I went to a Brethren church for several years where the teaching had even more of an emphasis on the Bible than the Baptist church I had grown up in. During this time I also begin to seriously study the Bible myself. My knowledge of the Scriptures increased and people begin to notice; I then had opportunities to teach and preach.

I moved and over the next several years when to another Baptist church, a Free Methodist church, a Vineyard church, and an independent Charismatic church. Each church I selected because of their emphasis on Scriptural teaching and their heart for God and His work.

I have explained this not to impress anyone with my credentials, but to show that I had a solid conservative upbringing in the Protestant church, and that in every church I went to Scripture was considered the literal Word of God; the true guidebook for every Christian.

But a few years ago I begin to learn about the Jewish roots of the church and what

I discovered changed my whole view of Christianity and as a result, my own faith. I had a basic understanding that Christianity had come out of Judaism and that the Old Testament was Scripture with equal weight to the New Testament, but when it really came down to it I did not know much more about the roots of Christianity.

While I knew several of the Old Testament stories and was familiar with the Psalms and Proverbs, the bulk of the doctrine I had been taught and held to had come from the New Testament. My understanding of the Prophets was extremely weak; I did not even know the names for all of the Prophetic books. Worse yet, my understanding of the Torah was limited to the stories in Genesis and Exodus. I had absolutely no understanding of the theology of the Torah.

Sadly, much of the church is still riding in the same boat that I am only beginning to step out of. I have realized that the church as a whole has a very weak understanding of the Old Testament. The emphasis is heavily on the New Testament much to the neglect of the Old Testament. Evidence of this can be seen in nearly every committed Christian's Bible, the last quarter of the pages are well worn and dirty, while the first three-quarters are crisp and clean.

This is a tragedy because without the Old Testament we have a sword without a hilt. Except for Luke, who wrote about the history of the Church, all the writers of the New Testament were Jewish and wrote from their Jewish understanding of the Old Testament. Paul, who we get the bulk of New Testament doctrine from, was deeply educated in the Old Testament. And the early church used the Old Testament heavily:

Early Jewish converts relied on that collection for "proof texts," for evidence that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Moreover, the Jewish scriptures were evidence to Christians of the Almighty's earlier and continuing concern for humankind and provided a set of moral laws -- from which they could separate the distinctively ritual elements -- that were left incomplete in the teachings of

Jesus. The Jewish bible was the only fully-approved Christian scripture until Marcion appeared on the scene.¹

Once I realized how weak of an understanding the modern church has concerning the Old Testament I begin asking myself why this was the case. What I discovered was although there were several reasons for this, much of the disregard of the Old Testament found in the church today can be traced back to one man – Marcion the Heretic, a very important, though largely unknown, figure in church history.

While Marcion was not the sole source for the church essentially abandoning the Old Testament, he was the man who had the means and the will to lay the foundation for an anti-Old Testament bias that we still find in the church today. So to develop a better understanding of this important heretic in the following pages I will examine who Marcion was, what he taught, and the effect it had on the church.

Marcion – The Man

While much of what is written about Marcion comes from his opponents we can still get a fairly good picture of the man. He came from a wealthy and religious family, as documented in the Catholic Encyclopedia:

Marcion was son of the Bishop of Sinope in Pontus, born c. A.D. 110, evidently from wealthy parents. He is described as *nautes*, *nauclerus*, a ship owner, by Rhodon and Tertullian, who wrote about a generation after his death.²

Note that his father was a bishop. Around this time the position of bishop still had the meaning of leader of a church or group of churches and because of the regular

¹ Herbert Christian Merillat, “The Gnostic Apostle Thomas,” <<http://members.aol.com/didymus5/ch9.html>>, Accessed March 3, 2007.

² J.P. Arendzen. *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume IX* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) Available from Internet, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09645c.htm>>, Accessed March 3, 2007

persecution the church was experiencing at this time it is fair to assume that his father was a committed Christian and that Marcion grew up in a dedicated Christian home.

It is possible that in his youth he was involved in an illicit affair, which caused a split with his father. The Catholic Encyclopedia says this of that event in Marcion's life:

Epiphanius (Haeres., XLII, ii) relates that Marcion in his youth professed to lead a life of chastity and asceticism, but, in spite of his professions, fell into sin with a young maiden. In consequence his father, the bishop, cast him out of the Church. He besought his father for reconciliation, i.e. to be admitted to ecclesiastical penance, but the bishop stood firm in his refusal. Not being able to bear with the laughter and contempt of his fellow townsmen, he secretly left Sinope and traveled to Rome.³

If Marcion's father did reject him in this manner, it would give an emotional basis for the development of his particular heretical theology, which we will soon see favored a loving Father God over a judgmental God.

Very soon after arriving in Rome in AD 140 Marcion fell in with a Gnostic teacher by the name of Credo who believed that:

The God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament was unknowable; the latter had been revealed. The former was sheer justice; whereas the God of the New Testament is loving and gracious.⁴

Marcion latched onto Credo teaching, while at the same time establishing himself within the church, both with his words and his money. Within four years the faith of his father and the teachings of Credo came to a head publicly:

At the end of July, 144 CE, a hearing took place before the clergy of the Christian congregations in Rome. Marcion ... stood before the presbyters to expound his teachings in order to win others to his point of view. For some years he had been a member of one of the Roman churches, and had proved the sincerity of his faith

³ Arendzen.

⁴ H. Dermot McDonald, "Marcion," in *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 102.

by making relatively large contributions. No doubt he was a respected member of the Christian community.

But what he now expounded to the presbyters was so monstrous that they were utterly shocked! The hearing ended in a harsh rejection of Marcion's views; he was formally excommunicated and his largesse of money was returned. From this time forward Marcion went his own way, energetically propagating a strange kind of Christianity that quickly took root throughout large sections of the Roman Empire and by the end of the 2nd century had become a serious threat to the mainstream Christian Church. In each city of any importance the Marcionites set up their church to defy the Christian one.⁵

Marcion – The Teachings

What was this “strange kind of Christianity” that Marcion espoused? We have already touched on Credo’s teaching which separated the God of the New Testament from the God of the Old. But since he was not a Gnostic like his teacher (though he has been accused of this) and because of the Biblical roots of his childhood, Marcion needed to develop a Biblical theology to support his claims. To accomplish this end, Marcion first attacked the usefulness of the Old Testament for Christians:

The Old and New Testaments, Marcion argued, cannot be reconciled to each other. The code of conduct advocated by Moses was 'an eye for an eye', but Christ set this precept aside. Elisha had had children eaten by bears; Christ said, 'Let the little children come to me'. Joshua had stopped the sun in its path in order to continue the slaughter of his enemies; Paul quoted Christ as commanding, 'Let not the sun go down on your wrath'. In the Old Testament divorce was permitted and so was polygamy; but in the New Testament neither is allowed. Moses enforced the Jewish Sabbath and Law; Christ has freed believers from both.

Even within the Old Testament, Marcion found contradictions. God commanded that no work should be done on the Sabbath, yet he told the Israelites to carry the ark around Jericho 7 times on the Sabbath. No graven image was to be made, yet Moses was directed to fashion a bronze serpent. The deity revealed in the Old Testament could not have been omniscient, otherwise he would not have asked, 'Adam where are you?' (Genesis 3:9). Marcion, therefore, rejected the entire Old

⁵ Glen Davis, “The Development of the Canon of the New Testament Marcion and the Marcionites,” <<http://www.ntcanon.org/Marcion.shtml>>, 1997. Accessed March 3, 2007.

Testament.⁶

It is important to note here that while Marcion believed that the Old Testament was not relevant for Christians and had issues with supposed contradictions, he did not reject it as false. Instead in Marcion's world view "the Old Testament is true enough, Moses and the Prophets are messengers of the Demiurge [World Maker or Old Testament God], the Jewish Messiah (sic) is sure to come and found a millennial kingdom for the Jews on earth, but the Jewish messiah (sic) has nothing whatever to do with the Christ of God."⁷

Marcion viewed Christianity as a unique religion, entirely separate from Judaism. To him Judaism was a foreign to Christianity as the polytheism of the Greeks or the animism of the barbarians. In Marcion's mind, while Judaism was based on truth, it was based on a truth distinct and separate from the truths of Christianity.

Jesus and Paul had taught the pure truths of Christianity, but it had been hijacked by the Jews who had corrupted Christianity in both its practice and its texts. Because of this conclusion Marcion felt radical steps needed to be taken:

Marcion wished to purge Christianity of its pervasive Jewish influence and took Paul's somewhat ambivalent rejection of "the law" to a logical conclusion. The Jews' sacred books, he taught, were of no concern to Christians. If the Jews wished to worship their ancient tribal god, that was their affair. But the God who smote and slaughtered Israel's enemies, threatened his own worshipers with dire punishment if they were disobedient, prescribed circumcision for males and odd laws for the governance of daily life, and described himself as jealous, could not be the God of Christians.⁸

Besides completely rejecting the Jewish roots of Christianity, Marcion felt it necessary to purge the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures, of their Jewish pollution. (This bears

⁶ Davis.

⁷ Arendzen.

⁸ Merillat.

great similarity to the modern Jesus Seminar). In the process of doing this he became the first person to develop a clear New Testament canon, though greatly truncated from the one we are familiar with:

He accepted the following Christian writings in this order: Gospel according to Luke, Galatians, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Romans, I Thessalonians, II Thessalonians, Ephesians (which Marcion called Laodiceans), Colossians, Philemon, Philippians; but only after pruning and editorial adjustment. In his opinion the 12 apostles misunderstood the teaching of Christ, and, holding him to be the Messiah of the Jewish God, falsified his words from that standpoint. Passages that Marcion could regard only as Judaizing interpolations, that had been smuggled into the text by biased editors, had to be removed so the authentic text of Gospel and Apostle could once again be available. After these changes, the Gospel according to Luke became the *Evangelicon*, and the 10 Pauline letters, the *Apostolikon*.⁹

Additionally Marcion believed that Jesus was not the real incarnation of Christ, but only a manifestation of the loving Father God. Because of this belief, his dualist belief in Old Testament and New Testament Gods, and his rejection of much of Scripture he was often accused of being a Gnostic, even by his contemporaries. But this is incorrect:

Though generally seen as one of the most important leaders of the somewhat loosely defined movement known as Gnosticism, he did not share some of the main premises of other Gnostic sects. He believed in salvation by faith rather than by gnosis; he rejected the Gnostic emanation theory; and he sought truth in his own truncated version of the New Testament.¹⁰

By dismissing him as a Gnostic the early church might have let the wolf remain outside the door. Though the church excommunicated him, Marcion went on to become the bishop of a parallel church that rivaled and in some cases overshadowed the true church. His heretical teachings took root within Christian communities in part because of their similarity to Christianity and in part because some of the early church fathers had

⁹ Davis.

¹⁰ Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed., s.v. "Marcion." Available from Internet, <<http://www.bartleby.com/65/ma/Marcion.html>>, Accessed March 3, 2007.

dismissed Marcion as an irrelevant Gnostic, both of which caused the saints to drop their guards.

The result was that Marcion's heresies were not purged from the church but were further developed and refined by later heretics and even well-meaning Christians, with some long lasting consequences, which we will look at now.

Marcion – The Consequences

Marcion's teachings on law opposed to grace and New Testament separated from Old Testament have been detriments to the church over the centuries. The Apostle Paul and the early church fathers viewed the Law, or the Torah, and the rest of the Old Testament as vital for Christian doctrine and life. But Marcion's erroneous teachings gained a strong enough foothold within Christian belief to confuse Christians throughout the ages up to this present day.

In fact some of the major figures in Christianity that shaped much of our theology were influenced by Marcion:

The Roman Catholic monk Augustine championed Marcion's idea about grace, opposing God's Law and made them a significant part of his theology. At the time of the Reformation, men such as John Wycliffe, first to translate the Bible into English, and Miles Coverdale, the translator of the first printed English Bible, were heavily influenced by Augustine... The notion that grace was in opposition to Law was strengthened when the French Reformer John Calvin endorsed this position in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, which became the guide for the reformed churches of Protestantism. Although these reformers did a great work in the area of faith, their mistaken ideas concerning the replacing of Law with grace has been a source of much confusion, even to the present.¹¹

While it would not be fair to say that Marcion was the sole source for this error found

¹¹ Ronald W. Mosely, *Yeshua: A Guide to the Real Jesus and the Original Church* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 1996), 40-41.

in the teachings of Augustine and Calvin, he certainly was a significant cause for them developing the error. Marcion planted the seed that Augustine and Calvin watered.

Marcion did have at least one indirect positive effect on the Church. When he developed the first Biblical canon of the *Evangelicon* (truncated Gospel of Luke) and the *Apostolikon* (ten Pauline letters), there was a reaction within the church:

Marcion was very influential in the formation of the New Testament Canon even though his influence was a negative one. His most important contribution may have been to virtually guarantee that the Pauline Epistles would eventually enjoy the same status as the Gospels. Marcion's critics were forced to decide about the Pauline works and their relationship to the Gospels, which were already held in high esteem¹²

To counter the spread of Marcion's canon the church felt an urgent need to develop their own canon of Scripture and the reaction to Marcion was the first real, concerted effort by the true church to do this. While the Gospels had been largely accepted as Scripture early on Marcion's actions forced the church to look carefully at the remainder of the apostolic writings and consider what could be considered Scripture.

Conclusion

Marcion was a heretic that had a profound impact on the church. He came from a strong Christian background but being influenced by the Gnostics his Christianity was corrupted. His teaching on law opposing grace and the New Testament being entirely separate from the Old Testament had a profound and lasting affect on the church, influencing significant church leaders and misleading Christians even today.

One positive affect that Marcion did have on the church was that he forced the

¹² Cky J. Carrigan, Ph. D., "Marcion and Marcionite Gnosticism," <<http://www.ontruth.com/marcion.html>>, 1996. Accessed March 3, 2007

church to develop a canon of apostolic writings, which we have come to know as the New Testament.

Because Marcion's heresy was not eradicated from the church, we must still react to it today. The best reaction that we can have is to humbly seek God in the fullness of His Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. Those who teach need to begin to make a true effort to preach the whole Word of God.

There needs to be a realization within the church that the Law is good, it is the law of sin and death that is bad. A church that does not understand the Law is like a doctor that does not have a foundational understanding of medicine and anatomy. By trying to interpret the New Testament without the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings of Old Testament we are bound to teach error. The previously mention doctor would eventually get sued for malpractice, but we will eventually stand before the Judge of all to answer for what we taught. Thank God that we have mercy and grace because of Jesus Christ.

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