

## LESSON THREE – Docetism – Gnosticism – Marcionism

### Docetism

- A Jewish sect called Ebionites flourished in the early centuries of the church. They believed Jesus was just a human, born of Mary and Joseph and not the Son of God.
- Most of the early church had the opposite problem, they struggled to understand how Jesus could be human.
- It seemed impossible that anything good, pure, spiritual and divine should mix with anything ugly, evil, dirty and dying.

### **Jews demand signs and Greek look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. – I Corinthians 1:22-23**

- Docetism, which derives from the Greek verb “to seem” or to “appear,” taught that Jesus was totally divine and that He only appeared to be human. He seemed to have a human body, but was not subject to any kind of human experience. He was never hungry, thirsty, tired, nor was he physically born, and did not physically suffer and die.
- Docetism was not linked to a particular leader or representative. It was more of a tendency among some in theology.
- Docetism was usually found within adherents to Gnosticism and Marcionism but it was not limited to those groups.
- Docetism helped make Christianity more acceptable to the pagans that were influenced by Greek and Persian dualistic thought that viewed flesh as evil.
- The very thought of God incarnating as a man was unthinkable and offensive. Jesus experiencing weakness as a baby, requiring food and drink to survive, being spat on, beaten and crucified was simply ridiculous and beneath a great and spiritual God, who transcends everything.
- The apocryphal Gospel of Peter illustrates the Docetic view of Christ sufferings. He only appeared to suffer during His crucifixion.
- The root of Docetism was the desire to make Christ more palatable to a world that sees the cross as foolishness.

### **Any Docetic view of the humanity of Christ snaps the lifeline between God and man, and destroys the relevance of the divine acts in Jesus for men and women of flesh and blood.<sup>1</sup>**

- Only one who is truly God and truly man can serve as mediator between God and humanity.

**Had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. - Hebrews 2:17**

## Gnosticism

**Gnosticism comes from the Greek word, “gnosis,” which referred to immediate experiential knowledge that comes from acquaintance in contrast to propositional or factual knowledge.<sup>2</sup>**

- Gnosticism was not a well-defined assembly in competition with the church; rather it was a vast and unstructured movement that existed both within and outside Christianity.
- There was a group in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century who named themselves Gnostics, meaning those capable of attaining knowledge and then the knowing ones.
- Gnosticism has become a blanket term for a mood and attitude toward the world and its origin.
- The religious Gnostic movement was categorized by instinctive knowledge of the origin, essence, and ultimate destiny of the spiritual nature of human beings.
- The principal authors who discussed Gnosticism were Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Epiphanius and Hippolytus and until 1945 these writings were the main source for Gnostic historical information and most of this writing was polemical.
- In 1945, at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, a collection of twelve codices written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century were discovered. These collections contained mostly Gnostic works in a Coptic translation.

**Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, three different sources for Gnostic thought were postulated:**

- 1. The view of the church fathers that Gnosticism was a Christian heresy, resulting from Christians explaining their faith to themselves and their neighbors in philosophical terms, has had modern scholarly support.**
  - 2. The opposite view, presenting Gnosticism as essentially a non-Christian movement (some tracing it to Persia) – representing the despairing, syncretistic mood of late antiquity that reconstructed a philosophical world view from the old myths and gods, and in the process adopted a veneer of Christianity that in turn provided a model for Christian intellectuals to interpret their faith – was advocated by the history of religious school of interpretation and continues to have many supporters.**
  - 3. A less commonly held view that Gnostic speculation began in Jewish circles, perhaps as an effort to find eternity when the kingdom of God did not come (e.g., aeons as “ages” of time in apocalypticism became cosmic components of the divine plethora in Gnosticism), has found renewed support as a result of the Nag Hammadi documents.<sup>3</sup>**
- Some Gnostic ideas predate Christianity, but a complete Gnostic system has not been identified prior to Christianity.
  - The expressions of Gnosticism combated by the church fathers were Christian heresies.
  - Nag Hammadi writings show a proximity of Gnosticism to Judaism.

- The debate over the origin of Gnosticism points to elements that went into the developed Gnostic systems of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. These contained pagan, Jewish and Christian components.

**Many Gnostic speculations can be explained as arising from reflections on the early chapters of Genesis. Certain developments in Judaism may be seen as a background to the emergence of Gnosticism; the influence of dualistic thinking, esoteric speculations, personification of Wisdom, and intermediary beings found in developed angelology.<sup>4</sup>**

- Many things in the New Testament, especially the writings of John and Paul, proved susceptible to Gnostic interpretation.
- Each Gnostic teacher took various elements and put them together according to the Gnostic way of thinking in order to construct their own system.
- Each Gnostic teacher had their system of thought for representing reality. What held each Gnostic community together was its myth of origins, the sense of group identity and the in-group language.

**The main features of the various myths were as follows: 1) the original divine element produced other spiritual principles; 2) a “fault” occurred in the divine, spiritual world; 3) as a result matter came into existence; 4) some of the pure spiritual nature was planted in (some) souls; 5) a “redeemer” revealed the way of escape out of the material world for the divine element; 6) the soul passes through the realms of the world rulers in its return to its spiritual home.<sup>5</sup>**

**The Gnosis of Gnosticism comprises the divine identity of the knower or the Gnostic, the known or the divine substance of one’s transcendent self, and the means by which one knows. Gnosis as an implicit divine faculty to be awakened or actualized.<sup>6</sup>**

- The anti-heretical writers of the early church traced Gnosticism to Simon Magus, “the father of all heresies.” However, the account in Acts 8 does not suggest that Simon held to any Gnostic teaching.
- Cerinthus Gnosticism
- Saturninus Gnosticism
- Carpocrates Gnosticism
- Basilides Gnosticism
- Valentinian Gnosticism

**Those who came to be known as orthodox Christians concluded that the Gnostics denied the fundamental doctrines of Christianity:**

- 1. The identity of the Creator with the one supreme God. The Gnostics identified a lesser and at best morally ambivalent figure as creator.**
- 2. The goodness of the created order of the universe. Most Gnostics treated matter as bad.**

3. **The full incarnation of Christ. Although there were variations in Gnosticism, they did not have an orthodox view of how the divine Christ was related to the human Jesus.**
4. **Revelation in historical events. Gnostics relied on spectacular myths and secret traditions.**
5. **Redemption by the blood of the cross. Many Gnostics treated the cross as allegorical.**
6. **A resurrection of the body. For Gnostics only the soul would be resurrected.<sup>7</sup>**

- Despite the many fundamental errors in Christian doctrine, Gnosticism proved attractive to many.
- Gnosticism illustrates the danger of allowing outside systems of thought to be determinative of the fabric of Christianity.
- Another problem with Gnosticism is words and their definitions. Many had the right words but the wrong ideas or definitions.
- Gnosticism also serves as a warning against intellectual pride. Intellectual elitism is always a danger for those “in the know.”
- The Gnostic controversy demonstrates the importance of institutions. For all its failures through history, the institutional church has preserved the Christian faith.

## **Marcion**

- Marcion started from the distinctiveness of the Christian revelation and established a new church.
- His church rivaled the true church until the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Marcion has enough in common with Gnosticism to be included in the same lesson but enough differences to be looked at separately from Gnosticism.
- Marcion was raised in Sinope, Pontus. His father was reportedly a bishop. Marcion was a ship-builder and acquired considerable wealth.
- The false teaching Paul speaks of in Colossians may have been a part of Marcion’s religious background.
- The Bar Kokhba revolt in Palestine in the 130s AD likely influenced Marcion’s anti-Jewish sentiment.
- Marcion traveled to Rome and made a large donation to the church there. His teachings were rejected in 144 AD and his donation was returned.
- Marcion preceded to set up his own church and, in a few years, it was as widespread as the true church.
- Marcion rejected the Old Testament altogether and heavily edited the book of Luke and the Pauline letters (minus the Pastoral letters). He omitted and changed verses, often on a dogmatic basis.
- He wrote an *Antitheses*, presenting contradictions between the Old and New Testaments, in which his theology is set forth. We know the work primarily from the five-book response and refutation by Tertullian called *Against Marcion*.

**The following points reflect the basic views of Marcion as they can be reconstructed from the criticisms leveled against him by his opponents.**

- 1. There are two gods – the creator god and the redeemer god. Marcion’s dualism seems not to have been a metaphysical matter, but an inference from the human experience of the contradictions in life.**
- 2. Law and judgement belong to the creator (the Demiurge), and redemption is the work of the Father (the unknown or strange God).**
- 3. The Old Testament is the revelation of the creator. It predicts the Jewish Messiah (the Jews have read their Scriptures correctly). Jesus is not the fulfiller of the Old Testament (he came not to fulfill but to destroy the law). The Old Testament God worked evils, contradicted himself and delighted in wars.**
- 4. Jesus was viewed in a Docetic matter; he only seemed to suffer. Yet, his death was described as a purchase. Jesus’ resurrection was of his soul and spirit, and he raised himself.**
- 5. The physical birth of Jesus was a stumbling block for Marcion, so he began his Gospel in Luke 3 with the statement that in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Jesus “came down” from heaven “to the Galilean city of Capernaum.”**
- 6. Paul was the only true apostle. The twelve “Judaized,” so the Father had to call Paul to restore the true gospel, but even his epistles were interpolated by the Judaizers.**
- 7. Asceticism was emphasized. Sex was abhorrent. Water replaced wine in the Lord’s supper. Foods associated with sexual reproduction were forbidden – meat and milk products. Fish was the only protein allowed.**
- 8. Only the unmarried were baptized, except at the end of life. There were two levels of adherents in the Marcionite churches, the perfect and the imperfect.**
- 9. The followers of Jesus are not under the law. Salvation is by grace alone, and grace needs no law. Marcion’s views of sin and faith lacked Paul’s depth.<sup>8</sup>**
  - Marcion’s influence was considerable. The catholic church (not the Roman Catholic Church) with its creed, canon and episcopate were not the product of a reaction to Marcion; but reaction to him did strengthen certain tendencies already at work and so sped up the process of development of these practices.
  - Marcion’s asceticism was attractive as a fulfillment of Christianity and was one of the factors in the ascetic influence in orthodox Christianity.
  - The severing of Jesus from the Creator God was a great incentive to the orthodox thinkers to bring formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.
  - The church’s rejection of Marcion’s teaching demonstrated that it could not surrender its Old Testament roots and what the Old Testament taught on the oneness of God and the goodness of His creation.
  - Marcion’s similarities to the Gnosticism were the premise of an unknown god, distinct from the Creator, a dualism of matter and spirit, a docetic interpretation of Jesus, a negative attitude toward the Old Testament and a concern with the problem of evil in the world.

- Marcion's differences to Gnosticism were rejecting mythology, creating an organization for his followers, avoiding allegorical interpretation and engaging in textual criticism to deal with problems he found in the text.

## Montanism

- Montanism draws its name from Montanus, who along with two women, Pricilla and Maximilla, started a prophetic movement in Phrygia in either the 150s or 170s.
- The adherents to this movement called it the New Prophecy but its opponents called it the Phrygian heresy.
- Montanism spread from Asia Minor to Rome to North Africa. Critics of the movement claimed that Montanist prophecy involved a kind of possession and speaking in frenzied ecstasy.
- The Montanists saw prophecy and the spiritual gifts as the seal of apostolic Christianity. They believed the Holy Spirit of the Gospel of John was speaking in them and later opponents quoted Montanus himself claiming to be the Holy Spirit.
- Differences in practice soon began to develop between Montanism and the mainstream church. Their most famous convert, Tertullian, was fascinated by the greater rigorism of the movement and developed it further. He observed stricter fasting, prohibited remarrying even after the death of a spouse and forbid flight to escape martyrdom.
- Women's prominence in the movement continued to be important in later development. Women were permitted to hold church offices not allowed to them in the orthodox church.
- The dispute over prophecy involved the question of authority in the church. Montanists did not appear to have opposed the organization of the church, but only to have claimed a place for spiritual gifts as well. The church's response put the controversy in organizational and ministry terms. The appeal to the Holy Spirit was countered by the church in three developments:
  - 1. The first recorded synods of bishops were held in Asia Minor to consider the proper course of action in relation to the Montanists. Such meetings were comparable to the civil council that brought leaders of the imperial cult in the cities of a province together to discuss matters of common concern. These early meetings of bishops to discuss the working of the Holy Spirit laid the basis in the actual practice of the church for the theory that the Holy Spirit works through a council.**
  - 2. The source of authority in Scripture was emphasized. Montanist prophecy was not true prophecy by Biblical standards, it was argued, because it was ecstatic.**
  - 3. The bishops claimed to be the true spiritual leaders of the church, possessing the Holy Spirit by reason of their office. As bishops claimed apostolic and teaching authority in the church over against the Gnostic teachers, so the bishops countered that the Montanist appeal to prophets with their own possession of the Spirit. Thus, the early triad of the apostles, prophets, and teachers began to be centered now in the bishops.<sup>9</sup>**
- Montanism may be understood as a protest against the increasing worldliness and formality of the church.

- Montanism had several appealing features:
  1. **It represented itself as a return to primitive Christianity.**
  2. **It was a religion of emotional exuberance and less rigid organizational structures.**
  3. **It offered a direct revelation pertaining to what seemed to be a more committed manner of life.**<sup>10</sup>
- The excesses of Montanism brought discredit to the movement. It is a common for a reactive movement to swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme causing the opponents to more strongly confirm the practices the movement is reacting to.
- False teaching has always been around and it always will be around. As Christians we need to be diligent in our study of Scripture so we can have the discernment to distinguish true teaching from false teaching.
- This is one of the reasons why we study church history. It gives us a window into the past so we do not repeat the same mistakes others did and unintentionally fall into the same falsehoods and heresies they did.

**“For a time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but will have itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” – 2 Timothy 4:3-4**

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<sup>1</sup> Know the Heretics, Justin S. Holcomb, page 61, quote by T.F. Torrence, Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ

<sup>2</sup> The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 70

<sup>3</sup> Church History Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, pages 89-90

<sup>4</sup> Church History Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 92

<sup>5</sup> Church History Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 92

<sup>6</sup> Church History Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 93

<sup>7</sup> Church History Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 98

<sup>8</sup> Church History Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, pages 86-87

<sup>9</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, pages 101-102

<sup>10</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 102