

Faith of our Fathers

A Tour Through Church History

Class #3 – The 1st Century Culture & Some 2nd Century Heresies

The 1st Century

I. The benefits of Roman rule

- Widespread peace (*Pax Romana*)
- Reliable & accessible transportation (road, ship)
- Common language

II. The influence of Greek culture

- Split between the “sacred” & the “secular”
- Widespread pessimism about reality in general & truth in particular
- Merging of philosophy & religion
- Growth of “hero” worship (“Mithraism”)



The 2nd Century

The Main Heresies

A. Ebionism

- Circumcision required
- Paul was a sell-out, an apostate
- Deny deity & virgin birth of Jesus
- Jesus didn't suffer or die
- Jesus was adopted by God at his baptism

B. Gnosticism

- Special knowledge required to attain deeper/true insight
- Creation is the result of a disaster
- The elect have a divine spark within them which progressively loses memory of its heavenly home
- Salvation = soul released from matter

C. Montanism

- Montanus received special words from God & was a mouthpiece/prophet of God
- Emphasized outward ecstatic experiences
- Large following of women
- Christ's return to earth was imminent

D. Docetism

- Rejected full humanity of Jesus

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

1 John 4. 1-2

E. Marcionism

- The God of the OT was not the Father-God of Jesus Christ
- OT not inspired or reliable; only part of Paul and Luke's gospel were inspired
- Deny goodness of created world

For Marcion, there was a fundamental contradiction between law and love, righteousness and grace. He thought that true Christianity was flawed by the incompatibilities at the heart of its teaching. His solution was radical. Nothing less than a restatement of faith would do, and for Marcion that restatement had to focus on what for him was the essential gospel: the love, mercy and compassion displayed in the life and teachings of Jesus. This, for him, was all that was necessary, it was the blueprint for a new and pure humanity. There was no other truly Christian foundation for belief or morality.

What Marcion couldn't bear was the note of judgment that went along with the preaching of the Christian message, the warnings that came with the teaching of the law, the call to obedience and the threat of hell. For Marcion, the picture of God given in [Exodus 20:18-20], a God whose presence is manifest in thunder and lightning and smoke on the mountain, was simply unbelievable. A God who makes his people tremble with fear, a God with whom they are afraid to communicate, could not be the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, passages like this seemed to him to cast doubt on the central claim of the gospel. As he saw it, the Christianity of his day needed purging so that the pure gospel could be received in all its radical simplicity and appeal to the heart (75).

Angela Tilby, Heresies & How to Avoid Them

How did the early church respond?

- **Key men:** the Apostolic Fathers (Polycarp, Ignatius, Clement, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus)
- **Key writings**, which defended the faith & laid down key doctrines & practices
 - Apostle's Creed, Didache
 - Apologia (Justin Martyr)
 - Against Heresies (Irenaeus)

The Church derived actual profit from the appearance of Gnosticism, but only in an indirect way. It learned to mark off clearly the limits of divine revelation, and to determine the relation of the Old Testament to the New. Moreover, it became keenly alive to the necessity of drawing up short statements of the truth, based on current baptismal formulas, which could serve as standards of interpretation (Rules of Faith). There was also a very evident doctrinal gain. Christianity was now first conceived as a "doctrine". The intellectual element in the Christian religion was emphasized, and this marked the real starting-point for doctrinal development. The Christian idea of God was rescued from the mythological speculations of the Gnostics. The Church came into conscious possession of the truth that God is the Supreme Being, the Creator and Upholder of the Universe, the same in the Old and in the New Testament. Over against the Gnostic tendency to regard Jesus Christ merely as one of the gods, His unique character as the Son of God was emphasized, and at the same time His true humanity was defended against all kinds of docetic denials. The great facts of His life, His virgin birth, miracles, sufferings, death, and resurrection, were all maintained and set in clearer light. Moreover, the doctrine of redemption through the atoning work of Christ was put forward in opposition to the speculations of the Gnostics; and the universal receptivity of men for the Gospel of Jesus Christ was stressed in answer to Gnostic exclusiveness and pride.

Louis Berkhof, *Perversions of the Gospel*