

THE DAWN OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

The Second Century (Continued III)

Rev. Karel Coppock

MARCION: flourished 140 to 160 A.D.

Another, equally pernicious and long lasting heretical teaching was that of Marcion, who developed a large following in Rome, and whose “church” (he ordained bishops) lasted for at least two centuries, existing as a rival to the real thing. Marcion, whose father was bishop of Sinope in Pontus, knew Christianity from an early age. But he profoundly disliked both Judaism and the material world. As you can see, he had some Gnostic traits. And was stridently anti-Jewish. About A.D. 144 he went to Rome and joined the Church there where he made a huge donation and proceeded to gather a following. When it became clear that his teaching contradicted the universally accepted teaching of the church, his money was returned to him, and he left the Church and formed his own.

Teaching of Marcion

- Two gods: Since the material world was evil in Marcion's eyes, he had to figure what to do about its creator, and came to the conclusion that the **Creator of the Old Testament was not the same god as the God of the New**. For him there were two gods: Jehovah, of the Old Testament who was an evil, stern, and warlike judge, and the other, the Father or Supreme God of the New, a gentle, mild, kind, and supremely good god: .
- The Supreme God's purpose was for there to be only a spiritual world; however, the evil Jehovah god, by accident or however, managed to make this material world and place mankind in it. He is vindictive, arbitrary, wrathful, and...he did indeed inspire the Old Testament.
- The Father god of Christians however, is not vindictive, but loving. This God requires nothing of us, but rather gives everything freely, including salvation. This God does not seek to be obeyed, but to be loved. It is out of compassion for us, Jehovah's creatures, that the Supreme God has sent his Son to save us. But Jesus was not really born of Mary, since such a thing would have made him subject to Jehovah. Rather, he simply appeared as a grown man during the reign of Tiberius. Naturally, at the end, there will be no judgment, since the Supreme God is absolutely loving, and will simply forgive us.
- Scriptures: So where does that place us so far as the scriptures are concerned? The Old Testament, or Hebrew scriptures were simply set aside. They were the words of an inferior god and should not be read in church.
- Marcion made a list of the books he considered valid from what we call the New Testament today—books circulating in the churches of his day, as in the days of the Apostles--but excluded 3 of the 4 Gospels, only **retaining Luke**, which he heavily edited, taking out any references to the Old Testament. He also retained **the 10 epistles of Paul**, which he also edited, taking out all Old Testament quotes. He claimed these quotes were later interpolations, the handiwork of Judaizers seeking to subvert the original message. He took out all references to Bethlehem and Nazareth, the narratives of the Annunciation to Mary, Christ's baptism, the temptation, and the genealogy. Jesus, of course, was not a Messiah announced ahead of time in the Old Testament.
- Incidentally, Marcion's teaching still holds significant attraction in the world today.

October 9, 2011

Think of the writings of Richard Dawkins, and his book, the God Delusion, “one of the most successful works of atheist apologetics in recent years (Heresy, Alister McGrath, page 131). The God that Dawkins does not believe in is 'a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully’” (Dawkins, page 31).

What is wrong with this teaching?

Creation is evil; our bodies are evil...this would have been the death of science before it was even invented. (Cf., India and China where science did not develop, but where similar ideas as to the material world were current in religious philosophy.) It would also have debased marriage. There is no truth if there is no judgment. Jesus comes randomly, without any preparation of God beforehand; history becomes meaningless. Evil is found elsewhere than the heart. How does one repent of the material world, except in asceticism? The incarnation is eliminated, and hence, God's loving closeness to us; the work of atonement for us is unnecessary, etc. Prejudice against the Jewish race...; Jesus' own teaching that he was the fulfillment of the Law, is discarded.

Paul, 1 Timothy 4:1-5 “*The Spirit clearly states that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.*”

TEACHERS, THE APOSTLES CREED AND THE APOLOGISTS

So how did the Church respond? The Church, finding itself surrounded, not only by persecution, but by false teaching of this kind, **taught**. They founded schools and published books, to repudiate the Church's internal Gnostic enemies. They made a cogent exposition of orthodox faith, writing extensively. As we don't have time to examine their writing in detail, I'll simply list the most important names of the second century.

Teachers of the Second Century:

- **Irenaeus of Lyons** was made bishop of Lyons (Gaul) in A.D. 178. He wrote extensively against false teaching. We still have two of his books: *Against Heresies*, (otherwise known as *Refutation of the So-Called Gnosis*) 185 AD; and *Demonstration of Apostolic Faith*. Among his arguments is that the teaching of the Gnostics was new; that it was not taught in the early church.
- **Pantaenus** founded a Catechetical School at Alexandria: in 180 AD he also visited the Mar Thoma Church on the west coast of India where he discovered the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, but little is known of him, except that he was widely loved and respected.
- **Clement of Alexandria:** he was a disciple of Pantaenus and flourished between 180-

October 9, 2011

200 AD; he died in 215 AD. He succeeded Pantaeus as head of the Catechetical school in Alexandria. He wrote *Exhortation to the Pagans*. He had a profound effect.

- **Hegisippus:** A second century Jewish Christian convert, he collected historical documents and traveled about assuring orthodox teaching in various churches around the Mediterranean world. His five volume history, though now lost except for a few paragraphs, was extensively used by Eusebius 150 years later.

Apostles' Creed or Symbol of the Apostles.

About this time as well, the *Apostles' Creed or Symbol of the Apostles* also began to circulate in an early form. Though most of the Creed was written in the 2nd century AD, some of the clauses we have today do originate from the 4th or 5th centuries. The present Creed, formulated around 450 is the end product of gradual development and may originally have been used as a pre-baptismal declaration of belief. But by and large, the confession of faith comes from the 2nd century and seems to be a direct refutation of false teaching.

QUESTION: Let's take a look at this. What in this statement might directly challenge either Marcionite or Gnostic teaching, or both?

APOSTLES CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

October 9, 2011

APOLOGISTS

Others teachers and writers took on the Church's pagan and Jewish enemies, through public debates and writings. (These we call today, **apologists**). Among the reasons they had to do this, was because of the kinds of things of which Christians were accused.

So teachers arose who publicly wrote to contest these calumnies. Among them were:

Apologists

- **Aristides:** in 138 A.D. wrote an apology that has recently been rediscovered.
- **Justin Martyr:** Wrote: *Apology I and II*, around 155-160 AD, and *A Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jewish rabbi. He made it through torture for his faith, but died shortly thereafter, in 165, having been denounced to the emperor by a man he had debated in Rome. Justin was a convert to Christianity, having searched through much philosophy before becoming a Christian. He attempted to show that the Logos of God through whom the universe was created, was the principle, as well, behind everything beautiful and worthy in pagan creation, thus attempting to build a bridge between Greek and Christian culture.
- **Athenagoras**, 177-180 wrote, *A Plea for Christians*, a treatise he sent to the emperor, arguing the truth of Christianity. You can find the whole document online. It is a remarkable document and well worth reading. Among other things, he shows the folly of the accusations of Christians eating babies hidden in loaves of bread when he writes: He also wrote a treatise called: *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.
- **Tatian**, one of Justin Martyr's students, and an Assyrian. He wrote, *An Address to the Greeks*; Tatian also wrote a harmony of the Gospels in 170 A.D., which is thought to be the first translation from the Greek of the Gospels into a local language, the Syriac language. He was proud to be an Asian. In his Address to the Greeks, he asks: “Where did the Greeks learn their astronomy?” he asks. “From Babylon in Asia. Their alphabet? From the Phoenicians. Their poetry and music? From Phrygia in Asia Minor. Their postal system? From Persia. In every way the East excels and most of all in its religion, the Christian religion, which also comes from Asia and which is far older and truer than all the philosophies and crude religious myths of the Greeks.” (Moffatt, Vol. 1, page 74).

Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, wrote *Three Books to Autolytus*, which dealt with the doctrine of God, the interpretation of Scripture, and Christian life.

QUESTION:

Let's take a look at Athenagoras' A Plea for Christians. What do you see here that helps you understand what Christians may have been up against so far as their opposition is concerned? Of what were they accused? [Hand out Athenagoras' Plea]

Some of the rumors circulating against Christians were these (Gonzales, pages 49-50):

October 9, 2011

- Christians gathered every week to celebrate a “love feast” to which only those having been baptized were admitted. They called each other brother and sister and referred to their spouses as their sisters. Joining these facts together, they were accused by the surrounding culture as joining in orgiastic celebrations in which Christians ate and drank to excess, put the lights out, and vented their lusts in indiscriminate and incestuous unions.
- Since Christians spoke of being nourished by the body and blood of Christ, and since they also spoke of him as a little child, some came to the conclusion that, as an initiation rite, Christians concealed a newborn in a loaf of bread, and then ordered the neophyte to cut the loaf. When this was done, they all joined in eating the warm flesh of the infant.
- Some also claimed that Christians worshiped an ass.

EXCERPTS FROM “A PLEA...”

“And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care, and then when it has passed into life, to kill it; (or on one hand) not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it. But we are in all things always alike and the same, submitting ourselves to reason, and not ruling over it.”

The MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

About 155, while the policy outlined by the emperor Trajan concerning Christians was still in effect, a bishop to whom I referred last week, met his death in martyrdom. His name was Polycarp. We are lucky enough to have the whole event recorded and preserved. Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna, in what is now Turkey, one of the churches mentioned in the book of Revelation. This is what happened.

A group of Christians was denounced and brought before the authorities for questioning. One of them was an old man named Germanicus. With pity for his old age, the authorities told him to take into account his age and recant rather than suffer torture. But Germanicus had just witnessed the torture of the other members of the group and replied that he had no desire to continue living in a world where such injustice occurred. And to show how much he meant it, he called to the beasts to come and get him. This provoked the crowd more which began to shout: “Down with the Atheists!” meaning, people who worshiped an invisible god. And then “Bring on Polycarp!”

When Polycarp heard of this, he followed the advice of his flock and went into hiding for several days; but after having changed hiding places several times, he finally decided that if he was discovered, it was the will of God and waited for his persecutors to find him. When they did, they attempted all the way to the authorities to persuade him to recant as did the proconsul who presided over the trial. First his judge told him to merely shout out: 'Down with the

October 9, 2011

Atheists!” (meaning, the Christians). Polycarp obliged by pointing at the crowds in the arena and shouting 'Down with the Atheists!'

Flustered, the proconsul reminded him that he was an old man and promised him that if he would swear by the emperor and curse Christ he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied: *“For eight-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?”*.

“Thus the dialogue went on. When the judge threatened him with burning, Polycarp simply answered that the fire that the judge could light would last only a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out. Finally, we are told that after he was tied to the post in the pyre, he looked up and prayed out loud: 'Lord Sovereign God...I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ...For this...I bless and glorify you. Amen” (Gonzales, page 44-5). And so the wood was lit, and so Polycarp died. He was 86 years old.

MARCUS AURELIUS emperor 161-180 A.D.

Incidentally, the Roman emperor who came to the imperial throne six years later in A.D. 161, was one of the most enlightened in Roman history. His name was Marcus Aurelius. He wrote a collection of Meditations which are among the literary masterpieces of the age. We might expect him to have been lenient with Christians. And yet, this emperor who was enlightened, humble, refined, dedicated to doing his task with simple dignity, kindness, freedom and justice; this man who was no lover of power was nevertheless a child of the age. He was superstitious, constantly seeking the advice of seers and offering sacrifices before every significant undertaking. When an endless string of **invasions, floods, epidemics and other disasters struck the empire** during his reign, he accepted the explanation floating about that these things were happening because the gods were angry with Rome for tolerating the presence of Christians, so, on the one hand, he attempted to revive interest in the Greek and Roman religion, and on the other, renewed persecution of Christians, to whom, the only reference he makes in his writings, is of being “obstinate.” Justin Martyr the apologist died during his reign, having been denounced by a philosopher he had bested in public debate in Rome.

Excerpts from Aurelius' Meditations.

QUESTION: Are then, Christians and enlightened pagans or atheists always, then, to be at odds? What do you think?