

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 10

I. THE PAULINE CORPUS

- a. Apart from the collection of the gospels, the next question to be resolved had to do with how the **epistles** of the Apostles themselves ought to be treated.
- b. Paul himself encouraged the churches of Colossae and Laodicea, two neighboring cities in the Lycus valley of Phrygia, to **exchange** letters which they had received from him. *Col 4:16 And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. KJV*
- c. We do not know by whom or in what place the first edition of Paul's collected letters (called a **corpus**) was produced. As for the place, Ephesus, Corinth and Alexandria have each been suggested.
- d. What is important is the fact that from the early second century onward Paul's letters circulated not singly, but as a **collection**. It was as a collection that Christians of the second century and later knew them.
- e. The oldest surviving copy of the Pauline corpus is the Chester Beatty manuscript, written about **AD 200**. Of this codex, 86 folios or large sheets of paper, folded once in the middle, making two leaves or four pages of a manuscript exist.
- f. It evidently did not include the three Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus); on the other hand, it did include **Hebrews**, which comes second in its sequence of letters, between Romans and 1 Corinthians.
- g. A Pauline codex of the same date coming from Rome would not have included **Hebrews** because the Roman church did not recognize Hebrews as Pauline until the fourth century.
- h. His letter to the churches of Galatia was evidently sent in one copy, with the final paragraph written in his own **hand**. This copy would have been taken from one church to another, but some churches may have made a transcript of it before passing it on. *Gal 6:11 Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. KJV*

II. FROM TWO COLLECTIONS TO ONE

- a. The gospel collection was authoritative because it preserved the words of Jesus. The Pauline collection was authoritative because it preserved the teaching of one whose authority as the apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles was **acknowledged** as second only to the Lord's.
- b. The bringing together of these two collections into something approximating the New Testament as we know it was facilitated by another document which linked the one to the other. This document was the **Acts** of the Apostles.
- c. However, bringing together the Gospel accounts and Paul's letters and marrying them to the Old Testament also proved to be significant crises. This crisis was instigated by **Marcion**, a native of Pontus.

III. MARCION AND HIS TEACHING

- a. Marcion was born about **AD 100** at Sinope, a seaport on the Black Sea coast of Asia Minor. His father was a leader in the church of that city, and Marcion was brought up in the apostolic faith.
- b. Marcion is the **first** person known to us who published a fixed collection of what we should call New Testament books. Others may have done so before him; if so, we have no knowledge of them.
- c. Marcion felt that Judaism was evil and, therefore, he hated the Jewish Scripture. He **rejected** the Old Testament, as having no relevance or authority for Christians. His collection was therefore designed to be a complete Bible.
- d. Of all the apostles, the one who appealed to him most strongly was **Paul**, to whom he became passionately devoted. Ultimately, he concluded that Paul was the only apostle who preserved the true teaching of Jesus in its purity.
- e. He embraced Paul's gospel of justification by divine grace, apart from legal works. Paul's refusal to allow any element of law-keeping in the message of salvation was taken by Marcion to imply that not only the Old Testament law, but the Old Testament itself, had been **superseded** by the gospel.
- f. The gospel, he believed, was an entirely new teaching brought to earth by Christ. He thought that the law and the prophets were unrelated to Christ, and if some passages in Paul's correspondence suggested otherwise, it was because of the misinterpretation of **Judaizers**.
- g. Marcion remained in communion with the Catholic Church so long as he lived in Asia Minor. In the hope of finding a more positive response from the more enlightened churchmen of **Rome**, he made his way to the imperial capital around AD138.
- h. In Rome, he made a significant donation of **money** to the church. He believed that his understanding of the gospel and its implications was so self-evidently right that he could not believe that it would fail to be equally self-evident to any unprejudiced hearer.
- i. But the Roman churchmen were so disturbed by his doctrine that they not only **rejected** it but even returned the money he had presented to the church.
- j. Not only did Marcion regard Paul as the only faithful apostle of Christ; he maintained that the original apostles had **corrupted** their Master's teaching with an admixture of legalism.
- k. In his teaching, he **distinguished** the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New. This distinction of two deities, each with his independent existence, suggests the influence of Gnosticism at the root of Marcion's ideas.
- l. The God who **created** the material universe, the God of Israel, was (he held) a totally different being from the Father of whom Jesus spoke. The Father was the good and merciful God of whom none had ever heard until Jesus came to reveal him.

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- m. As in the teaching of most gnostic schools, the God who made the material world was an **inferior** deity—inferior in status and morality alike—to the supreme God who was pure spirit.
- n. The gnostic depreciation of the material order was echoed in Marcion's **refusal** to believe that Jesus entered human life by being 'born of a woman'.
- o. Marcion, unable to convince the Catholic Church of the truth of his message, withdrew from the Catholic fellowship and established a church of his own. This church **survived** for several generations.
- p. However, his church could not keep its numbers up by simply incorporating the children of existing members, because **celibacy** was obligatory on all its membership.

IV. THE ANTITHESES

- a. Marcion provided his followers with an introduction to what he called the Holy Scriptures. Called, **Antitheses**, he set out the incompatibility of law and gospel, and of the Creator-Judge of the Old Testament and the merciful Father of the New Testament.
- b. By employing a simple **twist** of Scripture, he claimed that the mission of Jesus Christ was hidden from the god of creation. This is seen in his translation of Col. 1:26 in which he said: 'the mystery hidden for ages from the god who created all things'. *Col 1:26 Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: KJV*
- c. The Marcion controversy caused the church to **respond**. When Marcion formed his canon of the New Testament Scriptures, the church was forced to give attention to the problem of what books were canonical and thus authoritative for doctrine and life.
- d. Dealing with Marcion's errors also led to the development of a short **creed** which could be memorized by the faithful to test orthodoxy in the face of heresy.
- e. In addition, publically dealing with Marcion enhanced the **bishop's** prestige because emphasis was placed on his office as a center of unity for the faithful against heresy. This in turn led to the later rise to prominence of the Roman bishop.
- f. The urgency of the need to refute Marcion also led polemicists such as Tertullian, Iranaeus, and Hippolytus to engage in a literary defense of Orthodox Christian faith in response to the **gnostic** ideas he promulgated.

V. VALENTINUS AND HIS SCHOOL

- a. While **Marcion** is the first person known to us who published a well-defined collection of what later came to be called New Testament books, the question remains open whether he was actually the first to do so or something else was already in existence.
- b. **Tertullian**, commenting on Marcion said, "There are two ways of nullifying the scriptures. One is Marcion's way: he used the knife to excise from the scriptures whatever did not conform with his own opinion."
- c. Valentinus, on the other hand, accepted the New Testament as handed down, but **perverted** its meaning by his method of misinterpreting it.
- d. Valentinus was contemporary with Marcion: he came from Alexandria in **Egypt** and lived in Rome from about AD 135 to 160. Like Marcion, he was in communion with the Church of Rome when he first came to the city.
- e. Over time Valentinus worked himself into a position of influence and had reason to expect that he might become bishop of Rome. Were it not for his style of Alexandrian **interpretation** of Scripture he might have been elected Pope.
- f. He probably owed to his Alexandrian training to his love for **allegorical** interpretation, but his thinking developed along mystical and gnostic lines to a point where he broke with the church and became the founder of the Valentinian School.
- g. Instead of emphasizing a **grammatical**-historical interpretation of the Bible, he built upon the already existent allegorical system of interpretation that has plagued Christianity since its inception.
- h. This type of interpretation is based on the supposition that Scripture has more than **one** meaning. Using the analogy of man's body, soul, and spirit, Valentinus argued that Scripture had a literal, historical meaning that corresponded to the human body.
- i. But, in order to derive the true meaning, one must look deeper for a hidden moral meaning that corresponded to the soul and an underlying spiritual meaning that only the more spiritually **advanced** Christians could understand.
- j. The system of interpretation grew out of a technique employed by Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, who tried to link Judaism and Greek philosophy by finding the **hidden** meanings in the language of the Old Testament that could be related to Greek philosophy.
- k. Instead of being concerned with the meaning **intended** by the writer of Scripture for those to whom he was writing, and instead of the intended application to present circumstances, the Alexandrian school always sought hidden meanings.
- l. This method of interpretation has done much harm to the cause of correct interpretation of Scripture that has resulted in absurd and often unscriptural theological ideas and outright **heresy**.

VI. Application

- a. Do you think that you are capable of creating God in your own image?
- b. We've seen how both Marcion and Valentinus fell victim to error and heretical belief because of their departure from the orthodox understanding of Scripture. What keeps you from creating your own private interpretation of Scripture?