Class 7 Summary – Marcionism

What is Marcionism?

Marcionism is the heresy which asserts that the God of the Old Testament has nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is named after Marcion, a wealthy ship-owner and son of a bishop, who died in about 160 AD. Marcion attached himself to the Church in Rome and then organized his followers as a separate community, achieving a widespread influence. He was opposed by many leaders of the early Church, including St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian at Carthage, and St. Clement and Origen at Alexandria. He was formally excommunicated in 144 AD.

Marcion’s achievement was to find an itch within the emerging Christian orthodoxy which he felt compelled to scratch. He revealed the nature of this itch in a book which he called “Antitheses”, which is best translated as “contradictions”. For him there was a fundamental contradiction between law and love, righteousness and grace. Marcion 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 blue print 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 the book of Exodus, 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.

Marcion was convinced that the cause of the contradictions in the Church’s message lay in the Old Testament and that Christianity could be freed from its errors only if it detached itself from its Jewish heritage. So he set out to prove that the Old Testament was indeed contradicted by the New, and that the character of God in the Old Testament was incompatible with the character of God proclaimed by Jesus. The God of the Old Testament, he claimed, was unworthy of Christian worship.

1. The Old Testament God was ignorant: Marcion pointed out that in the book of Genesis (1:9) God had to ask Adam where he was, proving that his knowledge was limited.

2. The Old Testament was immoral: for had not God rewarded David, who was adulterous greedy (2 Samuel 5-24)?

3. The Old Testament God was inconsistent: having forbidden the use of graven images he instructed the Israelites to erect a brass serpent on a pole (Numbers 21:8).

Marcion’s conclusion was that the creator God of the Old Testament was an inferior deity who had nothing to do with the kindly Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his view, the whole purpose of the mission of Jesus was to rescue us from the domination of the Old Testament God. So the answer for Marcion was to discard the Old Testament.

But then he had to go further because Jesus preached continuity with the revelation given to the Jews: he came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. For Marcion, this was simply unacceptable. The Savior simply could not have preached such a thing. The only explanation was that the Jews had somehow gotten a hold of the gospel texts and corrupted them. So thorough was the corruption of the Gospels that Marcion decided that only the Gospel of Luke did real justice to the Christian revelation, and even that needed editing! He accepted the letters of Paul, but, once again, edited out anything which suggested that the law might have been given by God and still had a part to play in the life of the redeemed. Thus Marcion drew up his simple, common-sense, down-to-earth version of Christian piety, edited of its contradictions. It was a testament, as he saw it, to the pure love and compassion of God in Jesus Christ.

In truth, Marcion was something of an intellectual bully; his radicalism, if accepted, would have destroyed the faith of the less confident members of the faithful. Marcion’s purified Christianity, for all its emphasis on love, was not without an element of hatred, particularly toward Jews. Marcion abhorred the favored status of the Jewish people; it was for him an example of the Creator’s sheer bad taste and lack of intelligence to select one human group for special attention. Marcion suspected that it was the Jews who had corrupted the New Testament, and so he dismissed any scriptural evidence, even in the writings of his favorites Saint Paul and Saint Luke, which suggested that the coming of Christ was a prophetic fulfillment of the old covenant. He had no room in his mind for the biblical text to have layers of meaning, for symbol or allegory. He had no sympathy for arguments like those of Origen who suggested that the exaggerations and contradictions of scripture are intended to point to truths which are beyond our capacity to grasp by common sense. Marcion, in other words, was a literalist. He rejected what he could not accept in the bible with the same kind of fervor and a lack of nuance as many Protestant reformers.

What Marcion really rejected was creation. He was appalled by sex and denigrated marriage. He could not bear the thought that Jesus had been born of a woman. To him, the messiness of sex and birth could only belong to the botched world of the Old Testament creator. His disgust for the material world lay behind his rejection of the Mosaic Law. His antinomianism (the belief that because of grace Christians do not have to observe moral law as defined by the Law of Moses) is not so much a license for freedom, as a rejection of a world in which moral choice and growth in virtue is required of human beings. Marcion thought the only goodness worth having was the one grounded in a spontaneous response to the love of Christ. He had no real interest in law as a divine gift given to enable people to live decently, and within proper boundaries as human beings. If you read any of the writings of Marcion you get the impression that he really wanted to be an angel, and not a human being. He would have preferred to be a pure spirit, not limited by the body and its needs. So it is not surprising to find that his image of the Savior also falls short of orthodoxy. Marcion’s Christ is a kind of angelic figure, not a true human being at all. In this way, Marcion’s views represent a form of Docetism, which was beginning to gain momentum at this time in the early Church.