

2nd Century Heresies (1)

Marcionism

Introduction

As we have studied the Church Fathers, we have continually alluded to their commitment to preserving the Apostles' Doctrine and strong opposition to false teachings that arose and began to flourish as the second century progressed. One of the most prominent originated from a man named Marcion ... whose followers became known as Marcionites.

The Marcionites

Marcion of Sinope in Pontus (northern Turkey) was born in the late first century. It is said he was the son of a bishop who disfellowshipped him over his immorality.⁴⁰ After repeated failed efforts to be reconciled with his father, Marcion moved to Rome around the year 140. Upon arriving there, he made a significant financial donation to the church. The elders refused to accept him into fellowship, forbidding him communion and denying his request to be a presbyter.⁴¹

Upon Marcion's rejection by the church in Rome, he became a follower (and later, a successor) of Cerdo of Syria, who had an "unsettled" relationship with the church there. Cerdo seemed to have been in and out of the church in Rome, but often, was often associated with the propagation of false doctrine and when he was, he was disfellowshipped from the church. Cerdo would then repent and be welcomed back, and then the process would repeat itself. After some time, Marcion became the leader of Cerdo's followers and started his own church. It is thought that he wrote a book outlining his beliefs and in 144, presented this to the elders of his congregation in Rome.⁴² It was immediately rejected and Marcion removed himself and his followers from orthodox Christianity. The elders returned his financial donation. Rome became his base of operations. But he quickly spread his beliefs across the Empire. Tertullian identified Marcion as a wealthy and well-traveled shipbuilder, and this might explain his ability in organizing groups of followers of every age, social rank, and background. It is said that his churches were stable and well organized.

⁴⁰ Hippolytus (*Syntagma* ap. "Epiphanius, *haer.* 42). Modern scholars dismiss the claim due to efforts to discredit him by those opposed to his doctrines. See Clabeaux, John J. "Marcion." Edited by David Noel Freedman. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol. 4, p. 514.

⁴¹ It is thought that Marcion had been a presbyter in Pontus, serving alongside his father, and had been deposed because of his illicit relationship with a virgin. See Salmon, George. "Marcion." Edited by William Smith and Henry Wace. *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*. London: John Murray, 1877–1887, Vol. 3, p. 81.

⁴² *Antitheses* is Marcion's only known original work. It has been lost. It contrasted passages in the Jewish Scriptures with what Marcion believed to be the true canon ... in order to emphasize the distinction between the two gods and their respective messages of law and gospel. (Schmidt)

Marcion was regarded as *the* central heretical threat of the mid to late second century. Some believe that in his followers may have nearly surpassed his adversaries during the 160's – 170's. Justin said his followers were spread throughout the Empire. His opponents included Dionysius of Corinth, Irenaeus of Lyons, Theophilus of Antioch, Philip of Gortyna, Tertullian at Carthage, Hippolytus and Rhondo at Rome, Clement, and Origen at Alexandria. For a while, their churches existed side by side. At one point Cyril of Jerusalem warned his followers not to be misled to a Marcionite church when entering a city to find a place of worship.

Marcion's Teaching

Marcion believed the only legitimate apostle was Paul. To him, all the other apostles had diluted and changed the true teaching of Jesus. His key theological position revolved around the separation of law and gospel. This distinction led him to teach in the existence of two separate gods: one being the creator-god of the Jews and the Jewish Scriptures; the other being the god (unknown until this time) who sent Jesus. He reasoned this from Paul's writing in Galatians, where he believed Paul was making a complete separation between law and gospel. He got there by Paul's identification of the law with the elements of the world (Galatians 5.12) and Jesus freeing believers from the curse of the law (Galatians 3.13). He also found Luke 6.43 helpful in disseminating his doctrine when Jesus made His remarks concerning the two trees – one corrupt and one good. He believed the two trees in that passage referred to two gods. Marcion believed the creator-god was a harsh, imperfect, and punitive law giver who invented good and evil and therefore was responsible for all the sin and problems in this world. *According to Marcion, the deficiencies of the creation point to a deficient creator.* The only hope of deliverance came from the god who sent Jesus with the message of the gospel.⁴³ Jesus was a revelation of the “eternal,” “transcendent,” and “absolutely good” God. Jesus was superior to the creator-god of the Old Testament.⁴⁴

Here are some of the contrasts he made:

- The creator is “a judge, fierce and warlike . . . Joshua conquered the holy land with violence and cruelty; but Christ prohibits all violence, teaching mercy and peace.”
- The creator says, “love the one who loves you and hate your enemy; Christ says: Love your enemies.”
- The prophet of the creator (Moses) stretched out his arms in order to kill many people in war (Exodus 17.11-13), the Lord stretched out His hands on the cross to save people.

Marcion believed Jesus was not a part of creation and that he was fully divine, while only seeming to be human. He rejected the virgin birth of Jesus and taught that Jesus did not literally suffer and die on the

⁴³ This is an adaptation of an excellent summary of Marcionism by: Schmidt, Charles J. “Marcion.” Edited by John D. Barry, David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, Douglas Mangum, Carrie Sinclair Wolcott, Lazarus Wentz, Elliot Ritzema, and Wendy Widder. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

⁴⁴ Ernesto Martínez, Aquiles. “Marcion (ca. 100–ca. 160).” Edited by Justo L. González. Translated by Suzanne E. Hoeferkamp Segovia. *The Westminster Dictionary of Theologians*. Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p. 233.

cross, but only seemed to do so.⁴⁵ Jesus simply appeared in the world as an adult. Marcion did not deny Jesus' death, however. While Jesus took on the appearance of flesh when he came to earth, he maintained that until the crucifixion, at which point he left it. But Marcion still believed that by his death Jesus would save the souls that believed in him.

Marcion advocated asceticism and believed that avoiding sex frustrated the creator-god. They became vegetarians primarily, although fish was permitted.⁴⁶ Fasting was ordered on Saturday. One Marcionite was said to, in his hostility to the words of the creator-god, refused to wash his face in water, but used his own spittle. He administered baptism only to the unmarried or abstinent. Married followers were regarded as *catechumens*⁴⁷ and encouraged to be baptized just before their death. For those who died before they could be baptized, it is thought that baptism for the dead was practiced. Water was substituted for wine at the Lord's supper.⁴⁸ In setting out to organize his own church, something which he called "the True Church," he came up with a system of term limits for church bishops, placed women into prominent leadership roles, and reduced the separation between clergy and laity.⁴⁹

Marcion's Canon

Due to what he called the efforts of Judaizers, Marcion believed the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) had been corrupted. He rejected all the Old Testament, claiming they belonged only to the Jews. He accepted only the authority of:

- The 10 letters of Paul: Galatians, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon, and Colossians.
- A specific version of the gospel of Luke known as the Euangelion.

He believed the other letters and writings had been corrupted. Jesus had put an end to the law, but false teachers tried to bring it back through Judaism. Any teaching that was Jewish was disavowed.

Conclusion

So, what happened to Marcionism? The time of Marcion's death is unknown. It is thought he died during the reign of Anicetus. After his death, his followers broke up into sects. Their strict practices and

⁴⁵ This is also called Docetism, a theological outlook that maintains that Jesus did not take on a physical body, and thus only appeared to live a bodily existence and to die on the cross. This belief emphasized the divinity of Jesus while denying the importance of his bodily life on earth. It rejects the possibility that Jesus experienced the breadth of human existence, including pain, eating, drinking, and hunger. It denies Jesus' virgin birth, crucifixion, and bodily resurrection. See Brown, Derek. "Docetism." Edited by John D. Barry, David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, Douglas Mangum, Carrie Sinclair Wolcott, Lazarus Wentz, Elliot Ritzema, and Wendy Widder. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

⁴⁶ Salmon, p. 82.

⁴⁷ A *catechumen* is a person who has been instructed or catechized, in preparation for the ceremony of baptism. Married Marcionites who refused baptism until they had agreed to separate from their spouse.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, E. "Marcion (c. 80–c. 160)." Edited by Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, and T. A. Noble. *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*. London; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016, p. 550.

⁴⁹ Clabeaux, Vol., 4, p. 515.

numbers were a formidable threat to the church. Many of them suffered as martyrs . . . just like their orthodox contemporaries. By the end of the 3rd century, many Marcionites were absorbed into Manichaeism.⁵⁰ In the fourth century and the coming of Constantine's official sanction of Christianity, the Marcionite freedom to worship ended. Constantine forbade their worship publicly and privately. Their churches were to be handed over to the *Catholic* church and private homes used for their worship were confiscated. Constantine's edict said:

"Victor Constantinus, Maximus Augustus, to the heretics.

"Understand now, by this present statute, ye Novatians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Paulians, ye who are called Cataphrygians, and all ye who devise and support heresies by means of your private assemblies, with what a tissue of falsehood and vanity, with what destructive and venomous errors, your doctrines are inseparably interwoven; so that through you the healthy soul is stricken with disease, and the living becomes the prey of everlasting death. Ye haters and enemies of truth and life, in league with destruction! All your counsels are opposed to the truth, but familiar with deeds of baseness; full of absurdities and fictions: and by these ye frame falsehoods, oppress the innocent, and withhold the light from them that believe. Ever trespassing under the mask of godliness, ye fill all things with defilement: ye pierce the pure and guileless conscience with deadly wounds, while ye withdraw, one may almost say, the very light of day from the eyes of men. But why should I particularize, when to speak of your criminality as it deserves demands more time and leisure than I can give? For so long and unmeasured is the catalogue of your offenses, so hateful and altogether atrocious are they, that a single day would not suffice to recount them all. And, indeed, it is well to turn one's ears and eyes from such a subject, lest by a description of each particular evil, the pure sincerity and freshness of one's own faith be impaired. Why then do I still bear with such abounding evil; especially since this protracted clemency is the cause that some who were sound are become tainted with this pestilent disease? Why not at once strike, as it were, at the root of so great a mischief by a public manifestation of displeasure?⁵¹

Despite being outlawed, the sect did remain in some form through the 5th-7th centuries . . . some saying as late as the 10th . . . but during those times several efforts were made to convert their followers back to orthodox Christianity.

⁵⁰ Manichaeism was begun by Mani (216-276) whose beliefs formed into a radical offshoot of Gnosticism. His followers practiced severe asceticism and vegetarianism.

⁵¹ Eusebius of Caesaria. "The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine." *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Translated by Ernest Cushing Richardson. Vol. 1. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890.