

Part II - Heresy versus Orthodoxy ..... 1  
 THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE ..... 1  
 HERESY AS THE STIMULANT TO ORTHODOXY ..... 2  
 THE EARLY HERESIES ..... 3  
 JUDAISM - ..... 3  
 HELLENISM - ..... 4  
 MARCIONITES - ..... 5  
 MONTANISM - ..... 5  
 SCHISMS (or splits) - ..... 6  
 Biographical Sketches ..... 6

**Part II - Heresy versus Orthodoxy**

"Seeds of Truth"

**THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE**

The Canon of Old Testament Scripture was first formalized by Council in the late 4th century and included several Apocryphal works. This is most likely because of the familiarity with the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) and not the Hebrew. The Jerome Bible includes many of the Apocrypha and Talmudic writings but it should be noted that Jerome himself was opposed to their inclusion. The Hebrew Bible used by the Jews was well-established in the first century and was limited to the 39 books that we now have. No other writings were ever quoted with the phrase, 'as the Scripture says.'

As for the New Testament, Paul's epistles circulated as a unit from as early as AD 80 and while we find evidence from the late second century of the other New Testament books, including the Four Gospels, we also find Christian writers citing other works, as for example Clement's letters and those of Hermas. We do the same today in quoting from Spurgeon and Whitefield.

The criteria used to establish which books would be used to instruct the church were really very much the same as those used during the Reformation:

- 1) Self-authentication: They are unique on their face, having a profound effect on the people who read them. Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Hilary, Victorinus, and Augustine are some of those early Christians who were drawn by hearing or reading God's Word itself.
- 2) Early use in worship: The Books or letters were used in worship in Apostolic Times. Paul told the churches to use his letters to instruct (Col.4:16). We have already heard Justin Martyr's description of the early services and the use made of Apostolic writings.
- 3) Apostolic Ties: The fundamental test of authenticity was a text's connection with an Apostle. Was the text written by an Apostle or by someone with very close ties to an Apostle? Early worshippers recognized that the Apostles had a unique relationship with the Lord. Clement of Rome wrote, "Christ is from God and the Apostles from Christ... The Church is built on them as a foundation." (1 Clement 42)<sup>1</sup>

Eusebius, famed Christian historian and Bishop of Caesarea from 314 until his death, tells us that when Mark and Luke had published their gospels, John finally took to writing his

<sup>1</sup> Shelley, Bruce *Church History in Plain Language* (Word, Inc., Waco, 1982), p. 77.

own. He had relied entirely on the spoken word prior to that time. The three gospels already written were in general circulation and copies had come into John's hands. He welcomed them and confirmed their accuracy, but remarked that the narrative only lacked the story of what Christ had done first of all at the beginning of his mission.<sup>2</sup> Eusebius also attests to the veracity of John's 1st Epistle as being that of the Apostle John, and he accepts 1st Peter as also valid. These he calls 'Recognized' works. There is a class of disputed but familiar works which includes James, Jude, 2nd Peter, and 2nd and 3rd John. Among the 'spurious' books he places Acts, the Shepherd, Revelation of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Teachings of the Apostles, and the Revelation of John, although he says many include it in the Recognized books, as do they Hebrews.<sup>3</sup> All other writings are tossed out as written by heretics. Recognizing his own deficiencies, however, Eusebius defers to future historians who may stumble across earlier writers than he was able to find and so lay to rest the doubts he expresses.

What caused the church to specifically enumerate the writings which were to be regarded as true Scripture was a series of heretical attacks on church teachings and authority in the late 2nd century, especially by Marcion. This son of a Bishop was anti-Semitic and a preacher of strict asceticism. To cut away any hint of Jewish roots in the Gospel, Marcion taught that the harsh God of the Old Testament was different than the God of Love in the New Testament. He produced his own Bible in which no Old Testament writings were included, and those of the New Testament were 're-interpreted' for clarity's sake. The church's response in selecting the NT Canon is surprising because the books chosen were from very early times the same 27 books that we now hold.<sup>4</sup> They were first listed in an Easter letter written by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in 367. This list became accepted definitively as Scripture in the East that year, and then in the West, at Councils held in Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397, the same list was published and accepted (we'll come to the East/West split next week).<sup>5</sup>

Is this then conclusive? Not absolutely, but neither should the choices be casually disregarded. "By no means do all men seek God, and the certainty of the divine origin of Scripture is given only to those who do. This situation guarantees that debate about Scripture will go on." We can see, however, that the question of divine origin leads to an assumption that anyone who claims to take God seriously but the Bible lightly is engaged in a deception.<sup>6</sup> The preaching of the Gospel cannot be long effective if God's Law, revealed in Scripture, is in any way toyed with or made secondary to human ends.<sup>7</sup>

## **HERESY AS THE STIMULANT TO ORTHODOXY**

With the Canon relatively fixed, the question of its interpretation remained a matter for controversy within the church, and between church bodies. The intellectual melting pot of the Middle East led to many new ideas permeating the basic teachings of Hebrew theology. What follows is a brief outline of some of the major heresies which created unrest during the formative years of the church. These heresies were not necessarily considered heretical at the time, but the

---

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius *The History of the Church* (Penguin, N.Y., 1981), p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Eusebius, p. 134

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Jackson, p. 61

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Shelley, p. 83

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Jackson, p. 59

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Jackson, p. 57

ramifications of these ideas made it very clear in later years that the free-spirited discourse of ideas had to stop. The church was being forced to develop its dogma after the fact and in direct response to ideas which undermined the authority of Scripture and the understanding of Christ's work on the cross. Even in our own time, while we may agree on the words used in the Scriptures, we do not often agree on their meaning, or on the events and persons they refer to, or even on the application we are to make from them.

The sampling of heresies below shows how easily the church found itself in dispute. They had no systematic theology to use as a guideline to Biblical interpretation, no commentaries, no texts on hermeneutics. Instead, church elders relied on the basic truths of Scripture, their knowledge of the character of God, and their experience of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

With those firmly fixed in their minds they began an analysis of the teachings of church leaders to determine orthodoxy and heresy. Even when we look to Scripture today, the method of interpretation we use is not as important as the motive for interpretation. We should approach Scripture with the intent to discern God's will for our life, to discern how to live the life of faith consistent with Christ's teachings. And we should not go beyond what is written in Scripture trying to fill in the blanks.

The heresies of the first three hundred years are heresies of the West and primarily concern the Christian walk, morality and ethics. The heresies of the East, which we will study in the post-300 periods, tend to be more concerned with theological correctness than with application.

## **THE EARLY HERESIES**

### *JUDAISM -*

The issue confronted is whether Christianity should remain within Judaism or become an independent and distinct religion. If it remains within Judaism then,

1. Circumcision is a prerequisite to salvation for men.
2. Obedience to Jewish Law is necessary including Sabbath and Kosher requirements.

### *Objections:*

1. It denies salvation by faith through Christ's Atoning sacrifice.
2. It undermines obedience inspired by love and thankfulness rather than reward.

**A. Nazarenes** - Taught that Jesus was Messiah whose teachings supersede Moses and the Prophets, but those of Jewish descent must still obey the law.

**B. Ebionites** - Taught that Jesus was only a man, even if a prophet and spokesman of God. Some accepted Jesus' virgin birth. Others said he was born of the union of Joseph and Mary but then Christ descended on that offspring at his baptism in the form of a dove. The Christ departed the man prior to his crucifixion and resurrection.

*HELLENISM -*

The absorption of Greek philosophy into Christian theology, especially the distinction between spirit and matter, most commonly referred to as DUALISM.

**A. Platonism** (following the teachings of Plato) and NeoPlatonism (new Platonism or Platonism ver. 2) Using the philosophy of Plato to analyze and restate Christian Truth: flesh and matter are evil while pure spirit is good. The impetus for its development is that it affords an explanation for continuing sin in the lives of Christian converts.

*Aberrations of Platonism-*

1. Christ was spirit, not flesh, and therefore didn't suffer on the cross.
2. The resurrection is spiritual, not physical and therefore takes place daily.
3. Sex is evil, food is evil, drink is evil, etc.
4. Asceticism and mysticism are paths to true righteousness.

**B. Gnosticism** - Prominent founders within the Christian community include Simon Magus (the Samaritan magician found in the Book of Acts), Basilides of Alexandria, and Valentinus of Alexandria. It has its source in "gnosis" or special knowledge that has been revealed and transmitted secretly to the initiates of the sect.

*Offshoot:* Manicheanism. Augustine was a Manichean for 9 years (374-383).

*Aberrations of Gnosticism-*

1. Salvation is the freeing of spirit from flesh.
2. Salvation is attained by teaching revealed truth through "mysteries" which return the individual to pure spirit in stages (mysteries were ceremonies with mystical effects on participants).
3. Christian and Jewish writings are purely allegorical and must be properly interpreted by one with special knowledge to reveal the underlying truth.
4. Other teachings of Jesus exist outside of written Scripture, entrusted to those with the hidden knowledge for transmission orally to deserving initiates.
5. God is not a being with personality but is the all-permeating 1st Principle, 1st Cause and True Love without form.
6. Satan is the God of the Old Testament (called Demiurge) and the creator of the world of matter.
7. Gnosticism minimized the historical elements of Scripture, Christ's actual existence and crucifixion and physical resurrection as a man, the tangible and historical participation of God in the lives of his people individually and in the life of Israel as a nation.

**C. Pantheism** - "God" is an all-inclusive phrase describing Nature without personality and that life-force which resides innately in all things.

*Offshoot:* Modalism in which God emerges from the abstract whole of his being to take on the attributes of a man, father/creator, or Holy Spirit as his present "mode" of being.

*MARCIONITES -*

Marcion was a native of Sinope, a seaport in Pontus on the south coast of the Black Sea and home of the famous cynic Diogenes. He was the son of a wealthy bishop and he was raised as a Christian. He went to Rome in 138 or 139 and joined a church there where he taught his unorthodox views. He gained a following but was consequently cut off from the communion table. He split the congregation when he left with his followers. Teachings:

1. Nature is Dualistic.
2. The God of the Old Testament was evil.
3. Marcion rejected any secret body of knowledge or allegorical interpretation of Scripture.
4. The Demiurge created men and their souls.
5. A second God, hidden until Christ's coming, is the God of Love.
6. The God of Love undertook to rescue men he didn't create and owed nothing to from the Demiurge.
7. The God of Love revealed himself in Jesus who was not born of men through the Demiurge, but was only a phantom who seemed to be a man. This was called docetism from the Greek meaning "to appear." An offshoot of this teaching is called Modalism in which God appears or acts in 3 different modes, revealed one at a time as Father, Son or Holy Spirit and then he returns to his abstract whole. See Pantheism above. Sabellius was a proponent of Modalism and he was excommunicated by Bishop Calistus of Rome in 220.
8. Sexual union was forbidden.
9. Marriage was rejected.
10. Martyrdom was prized.
11. Salvation comes by faith alone.

Marcion was an organizer and gathered his followers into churches. He assembled probably the first authoritative collection of early Christian writings which later came into Eusebius' possession. These are the only source we have for our knowledge of the first three centuries of the church.

*MONTANISM -*

c.156-172 Montanus was raised in Phrygia in Asia Minor and his movement is sometimes called the "Phrygian" movement. Its teachings include,

1. Revival of prophets and new revelation.
2. Asceticism, fasting, celibacy, and martyrdom as path to righteousness.
3. An early end of the world.
4. Imminent second coming of Christ.
5. The New Jerusalem would be an ideal society located ... at Phrygia, of course.
6. Speaking in tongues is the sign of salvation.
7. There will be a millennial reign of Christ (a belief called "Chiliasm").

The most prominent adherent to Montanism was Tertullian of Carthage (150-225). Tertullian was the son of a wealthy pagan who converted to Christianity in his late thirties. He was widely read in history, philosophy, and Greek, and he practiced law at Rome. He wrote a major treatise against Marcion and was a hero of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (200-258).

Tertullian was alienated by the changing face of the majority church and he became a Montanist late in life perhaps in pursuit of the original vitality of the Christian faith. Tertullian remained critical of the majority church until his death, speaking out against authoritarianism, cliquishness, and centrism.

*SCHISMS (or splits) -*

**A. Novation Schism.** Novatian was a presbyter of the Roman church. His followers voiced dissatisfaction with lax moral practices and with the lenient treatment of those who denied the faith during the persecutions of the church. Novatian began a parallel church structure by appointing his own bishops. His opponents included Calistus, Bishop of Rome, who taught that no sin is unforgivable if the sinner is genuinely contrite. He also pointed to the parable of the wheat and the tares to describe the composition of the church as a whole which was not to be pre-judged by its participants. Other famous opponents included Stephen, Bishop of Rome, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, Clement of Alexandria (-215), and Origen of Alexandria (182-251).

*Aberrations -*

1. There is no forgiveness of sins after salvation -OR-
2. There is no forgiveness of "deadly sins" after salvation.

The deadly sins as Tertullian defined them: idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, fornication, false-witness, and fraud. The definition of deadly sins became an instant hit and everyone began his own list of the "big 7." Scripture teaches there are no better or worse sins, and the unforgivable sin is the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit by identifying Him with Satan (Matt.12:24-31) or by worshipping Satan despite complete knowledge of the freedom offered through Christ (Heb.6).

**B. Donatists** - Responding to the Diocletian Persecution (c. 303-305) and the subsequent appointment of a bishop of Carthage who had broken faith during the persecution, a group of Carthaginians chose a counter-bishop who in 316 was succeeded by Donatus from whom the schism took its name.

The Donatist adherents were primarily North African and non-Latin and the split may well have been exacerbated by racial tension. When the Christian Emperor Constantine called a synod under pressure from the Donatists (who by then had appointed some 270 bishops), those of the "Catholic Church" refused to attend. Constantine tried to compel attendance by force but later gave up that method. A newcomer named Augustine tried to act as mediator between the feuding groups but failed. The Donatists remained independent until the Vandals sacked Rome.<sup>8</sup>

***Biographical Sketches***

**Tertullian** (c.160-c.220) - A Latin church father and apologist, born in Carthage, North Africa of heathen parents. His father was a man of rank in proconsular service. He was groomed for politics with a wide-ranging education including Roman law. In about 195 he embraced Christianity with deep conviction. The rest of his life was devoted to defending the Christian

---

<sup>8</sup> . Latourette, Kenneth *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* 5 vol. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1970), I pp. 120-139.

faith against heathen, Jew and heretic, and to studying and pursuing the strictest morality of life. Tertullian was married and considered Christian marriage a very high and noble state.

In 197, only two years after his conversion, he wrote an apology in Latin called "Against Marcion" in which he refuted Gnosticism and the Marcionite variations on that theme. Then in 206 he cast his lot with the Montanists. He considered their discipleship and their teachings to be nearer to the primitive church than those the Catholic Church was practicing at the time. Even then there was a yearning for a first century church and to return to the old days! The Catholic church was teaching that the Canon was closed, that prophetic revelation had ceased, and that the extraordinary gifts of the Apostolic Age had died with them. The reformed church has not altered that stance at all.

Tertullian's great ability in speech and prose were used to challenge what he perceived as compromise and worldliness in the Catholic church, and to defend Montanist Puritanism. His phrases were often vindictive and designed to produce shame and remorse in his audience. He was an ardent teacher and defender of pure Christianity and bitterly attacked the heretics and false teachers in the church. He opposed infant baptism and made the first statement of the trinity in "Against Praxeas."<sup>9</sup>

**Origen** (pronounced: or'i jen) (c. 185-254) - Christian writer and teacher, born of Christian parents in Alexandria and educated there. His father, Leonidas, was martyred in the persecution of Septimus Severus in 202. Origen had to go to prison and suffer for his faith with his father, but his mother restrained him. All family property was seized and the family went into poverty. Origen supported his family by teaching classical Greek scholarship and literature and by copying manuscripts. When he was 18, his scholarship and piety led to his appointment as a catechist, one who instructs others in preparation for baptism. He reopened the Catechetical School which had been closed after Clement's departure. He visited imprisoned Christians and maintained the School even during periods of persecution. He was an ascetic and became a eunuch in 210.

Origen wrote commentaries on nearly all the books of the Bible, many papers on doctrine and many other works that might be classified as inspirational or application oriented. One his most famous volumes was called the HEXAPLA, a Bible in six columns, six languages. He wrote the first systematic theology called "De Principiis" in which he developed his allegorical system of interpretation. He also wrote an apology against the pagan Celsus who had accused Christians of being weak minded and weak willed.

Origen believed in universal salvation (as opposed to election), the subordination of Christ to the Father, and souls which exist prior to their embodiment at birth.<sup>10</sup> After forty years of service he was ordained in Palestine about 230 by a couple of friendly bishops. This infuriated the bishop of Alexandria who viewed the act as a "flagrant disregard of his jurisdiction." The bishop then had the synods banish Origen from his see and depose him from the priesthood. Long after his death Origen would be labelled a heretic by ecumenical council.<sup>11</sup> Origen retired

---

<sup>9</sup> Moyer, Elgin S. *The Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church* (Moody Press, Chicago, 1981), p. 396.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 309

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Latourette, I p. 151

to Caesarea in Palestine where he opened another theological school. During the Decian persecution he died from maltreatment in prison.<sup>12</sup>

**Polycarp** (c.69-c.155) - A church father born at Smyrna. He was a disciple of the Apostle John, a friend of Ignatius, and a teacher of Pothinus and Irenaeus. One of his still-existing letters written to the church at Philippi makes many references to various parts of the New Testament and speaks of Paul's earlier epistle to that church, giving us external corroboration of the integrity of the New Testament. About 155 in Smyrna he was martyred. When asked to recant and live, he is reputed to have said, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He hath done me no wrong. How can I speak evil of my King who saved me?"<sup>13</sup>

**Cyprian** (c.200-258) - Bishop of Carthage in North Africa, born nearby. His father was a noble and wealthy Roman officer of high rank who gave Cyprian a good Greek education. He became a Christian in middle life, an ascetic, a Biblical student and a student of great men of the church, especially Tertullian. In 248 or 249, after only a year as a Christian, the church at Carthage made him a presbyter. The next year they asked him to take over the vacant office of bishop, which placed him at the head of the North African clergy. Apparently no one else wanted the job.

The period was one of internal splits and external persecutions. Cyprian went into seclusion for about 2 years to escape seizure, and to continue to urge the church by letter to remain faithful in the face of opposition. When the persecution ended, Cyprian was firm with those who had "lapsed" and broken faith with Christ. He demanded confession and unmistakable evidence of penitence, and then pardoned the fallen.

In 257 the emperor Valerian banished Cyprian, and then summoned him to Utica to stand trial. Refusing to deny the faith he was summarily executed. His most famous letter was entitled, "The Unity of the Church." In it he declared that the unity of the church rested on making the bishops the representatives of the Apostles, and on making the chair of Peter the center of episcopal unity: a papacy in other words.<sup>14</sup>

**Irenaeus** (c.155-c.200) - Bishop of Lyons, probably born in Smyrna in western Asia Minor. He apparently received a Greek education as a child and then received his Christian education under Polycarp. He may have been a missionary to Gaul and is reputed to have converted almost the entire population of Lyons. He had served as elder at Lugdunum for several years when Pothinus, bishop of Lyons fell victim to the persecutions under Marcus Aurelius. The next year Irenaeus was elected his successor.

Irenaeus' greatest literary work was "Against All Heresies" written in Gaul about 185. In that work he upheld Christ's incarnation as fleshly rather than spiritual, and he defended Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as historical fact. He had a Rule of faith, and he upheld apostolic succession as the basis for accepting the validity of church teachings. He did this to refute allegations by some pagans and heretics that the original teachings of the church had become corrupted by mixing in non-Christian teachings. He asserted instead that what had been passed on

---

<sup>12</sup> Loc. Cit. Moyer

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Moyer, p. 331.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Moyer, p. 108

from Christ to the Apostles had in turn been passed on faithfully and accurately in an unbroken line to the present church fathers.<sup>15</sup> He was the first of the church fathers to make full use of the New Testament in his writings and to show the unity of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>16</sup>

**Clement I (of Rome)** (c.30-100) - One of the earliest bishops of Rome and may have been the Clement mentioned by Paul in Phil. 4:3. He wrote an epistle to the Corinthians about 96 which is the oldest specimen of post-Apostolic literature. In it Clement quotes extensively from the Old Testament and mentions Peter and Paul frequently. It is most valuable for its information concerning the exalted position of the bishops or elders in the church and apostolic succession.<sup>17</sup>

**Clement of Alexandria** (c.150-c.215) -Father of the Eastern Church, born in Athens. He was converted in his later years and was strongly influenced toward an allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures rather than literal by Pantaenus, who was head of the catechetical school at Alexandria. When Pantaenus died in 190, Clement took over the school until driven out in 202 under the persecution of Severus. Origen and Alexander of Jerusalem were two of his pupils.

Clement was widely read in Greek Philosophy, Greek literature, Old and New Testament studies, apocryphal and questionable Christian writings, and in the writings of Gnostics and other heresies. He called his own philosophy "Christian Gnosticism,"<sup>18</sup> but the "gnosis" or knowledge that was gained as a Christian came by faith and not by reason. One who possesses such knowledge imitates God so far as possible, exercises self-restraint, loves God and neighbor, and does good not out of fear but out of love.<sup>19</sup> He emphasized ethics and moral obligations as the outworking of the Christian faith. His perception of Christ seems to show that he didn't think of Christ as a man, but as an apparent man. He gives no clear picture of his conception of the Holy Spirit, but did make it clear that he perceived Christ to be God made flesh. He believed, as did Tertullian, that every individual is free and is able to respond to God or to refuse to do so. He also believed only a single additional repentance was possible for a grievous sin after salvation.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Latourette, I p. 131

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Moyer, p. 204

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Moyer, p. 94

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Moyer, p. 94

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Latourette, I p. 148

<sup>20</sup> Loc. Cit.