

## **Orthodoxy and Heresy**

This lesson is entitled “The Rule of Faith: Orthodoxy and Heresy.” The prayer for today will be from Clement of Alexandria. We have met Clement several times, particularly in the last lecture because Clement is one of the most important of the apologists of the early church and a very influential church father. This prayer, which is in the study guide for this lesson, is an interesting one. For one thing, he uses some unusual names for God such as “teacher” or “instructor,” and “charioteer of Israel.” These are names for God we may not normally use, but they are not inappropriate names for God. Notice as well that when Clement is praying about what it means to have come into the Lord’s Church he says that we have “sailed tranquilly over the billows of sin.” This does not seem to me to be quite the right way to say it. At least I have not sailed tranquilly over the billows of sin. But we will pray it anyway. In the words of Clement I suppose there is a certain tranquility, a certain rest—I know there is—that we experience even in the midst of struggles with temptation, sin, and suffering. So we will think of it that way as we pray these words from Clement. Notice how he struggles to express in words the doctrine of the Trinity. We have not yet come to the Council of Nicea, which happened about 100 years after Clement of Alexandria, when the church was able to put together its faith in the doctrine of the Trinity in ways that commended themselves to most Christians. But at this point Christians were still struggling to express that doctrine. We do not fully understand it but at least we have words we can use, orthodox words the church has approved of after the Council of Nicea. But as I said, this takes place a long time before the Council of Nicea. With those words about the prayer we will now pray. Join with me as I read these ancient words from Clement of Alexandria.

*Be gracious, O Instructor, to us Thy children, Father, charioteer of Israel, Son and Father, both in one, O Lord. Grant to us who obey Thy precepts, that we may perfect the likeness of Thy image, and with all our power know Him who is the good God and not a harsh judge. And do Thou Thyself cause that all of us who have our conversation in Thy peace, who have been translated into Thy commonwealth, having sailed tranquilly over the billows of sin, may be wafted in calm by Thy Holy Spirit, by the ineffable wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day; and giving thanks may praise, and praising thank the Father and Son, Son and Father, the Son, instructor and teacher, with the Holy Spirit, all in one, in whom is all, for whom all is one, for whom is eternity, whose members we all are, whose glory the heavens are; for the all good, all lovely, all wise, all just one. To whom be glory both now and for ever. Amen.*

As we come to this lesson today we will talk about some of the heresies that arose in the second century that caused great concern for a long time in the early church. One modern writer has spoken of the second and third centuries as “a time of productive confusion” in the history of the church. As I have been talking about early church history we do see a good bit of that confusion. But these people were pioneers, leading the way in doing the great work of defending the faith, stating the faith, and living the faith. We honor them for that even though they made many mistakes. It was a time of productive confusion. This is certainly true in the area of doctrine. What should Christians believe? How should they express their faith? What is right and what is wrong? There were many ideas floating around. Some ideas that called themselves Christian—not Jewish or pagan, but variations of Christianity—began to develop. The church had to try to decide what really is allowable, what is true and what is not. Gradually there was an answer to that question. We call that answer “orthodoxy,” the orthodox position of the church. “Orthodoxy” means “right belief.” And we call everything else heresies. Originally that word simply meant “an opinion,” “a party,” or “group.” But eventually it came to mean something that is wrong, something that is opposed to true teaching.

The question is often asked, which came first? Did orthodoxy come first, followed by the heresies? Or did the heresies arise first and then the church in response to the heresies moved to create what we call orthodoxy? One modern scholar has put it this way, “In early Christianity there was no such thing as orthodoxy but only different forms of Christianity competing for the loyalties of believers.” This scholar believed that there were many ideas out there and finally some of those ideas won. Either the ideas of the Roman church, which became the strongest, were imposed on the entire church or, in some way certain ideas won. So in his point of view the heresies come first. There were many ideas and then gradually one idea became called orthodoxy. In that particular way of reading history the orthodox are simply the winners and the heretics are the losers. I describe that not because that is my view but because I want you to see that this question is one that people have given much thought to. The early church fathers did not view it that way. The early church fathers said that orthodoxy came first and then the heresies. The heresies were the innovations, the new things. Orthodoxy was not. Eusebius of Caesarea put it this way, “Orthodoxy does not have a history. It is true eternally. Heresy has a history, having arisen at particular times through particular teachers.” You can date the beginning of Montanism and Marcionism and these other heresies that we will talk about. But orthodoxy does not have a beginning. You cannot date it. Orthodoxy is eternally true and heresies come later, according to Eusebius.

We have to think about that critically as well. I think we need to be a little more nuanced in our answer to this question. Certainly I do not think we should say the heresies came first, that there were just lots of ideas out there and somehow the church decided to take some of those and reject others. Nor can we go the other way and say orthodoxy was always there just as it comes to be held eventually in the church. Eusebius said, “Heresy is the work of the devil to darken the radiance of the universal and only true Church.” So in his view truth is always there, and the devil is busy trying to create some kind of confusion by bringing in these heresies. This is a rather negative view of the role of the heresies, and certainly that is true. Saint Augustine, though, saw it somewhat differently. Augustine said, “The rejection of heretics brings into relief what God’s church holds and what sound doctrine maintains.” Augustine certainly saw heresies as bad and destructive, but also as having a place in God’s providential plan for the church. The church holds truth but perhaps not clearly, not expressed directly and explicitly, until the heresies attack. Then the church is forced to discover its own truth, to put into words the truth it has held.

I think we could look at it this way. There was orthodoxy, but it was implicit orthodoxy, which was not fully spelled out, not understood or stated clearly. An example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. Christians believed that Jesus was God. They knew the Father was God. They believed the Holy Spirit was God. But they had not yet come to understand their faith. That is, they did not yet understand how they could believe that each of these persons is God and yet there could only be, as they also believed, one God. That will come because of heresies that develop and force the church to try to understand what it already believes. I illustrate it this way: “orthodox”—that implicit, early orthodoxy—is there from the very beginnings of the church, based on the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. But then the heresies come in. Then in response to the heresies, “orthodoxy” now is underlined. It is clearer. It is more fully understood and adequately defined.

With that introduction, let us look at the three most important heresies that came into the church in the second century: Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism. Gnosticism is something we need to think about for a few minutes because it plays a very significant role in the history of the church. There were various types of Gnosticisms. Some related more to Judaism, some were anti-Christian. But many of the Gnosticisms were “Christian” Gnosticisms. Thus a Christian heresy developed—people who held to some variety of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a very dangerous opponent of orthodox Christian faith

because it threatened to suck Christianity into the general amalgamation of religious views, a process that, as we have already said, was going on at that time in the Roman world. Syncretism was a major issue, and religions tended to put together features from other religions to create a syncretistic faith, mixing in the teachings of the philosophers and producing something that was considered better. The Gnostics certainly were doing this. Gnosticism was also intellectually sophisticated and attractive to many people. It drew on certain elements of Greek philosophy: love for knowledge, depreciation of the physical and of the human body. These were ideas that were out there in intellectual circles. I suppose we could get a sense of this by thinking of modern professors in the universities saying, “Well, science tells us such and such...” Science now is thought to be the final authority—not the Bible or tradition, but science. The professors back in Alexandria and Athens and other places in the Roman world would hold up this Gnostic faith in that way. “Gnosticism teaches such and such...” It was dangerous because it was considered intellectually up-to-date and modern. It was also very diverse. There were many, many kinds of Gnosticism. It was a broad title that included many religious ideas that had certain things in common but very different approaches. Gnosticism was dangerous, diverse, and difficult. It was hard to handle this religion. The church fathers wrote many books against the Gnostics in order to try to answer the Gnostic religion, which was attractive to many people and was drawing many Christians into its ranks. Aurenius said, “Gnosticism is like the mythological Hydra.” Hydra was the snake with many heads. When you cut off one head two more grew to take its place. You could answer one point of Gnosticism but others would come up.

Having said all that I think we can, for the sake of simplicity, talk about three basic ideas that the so-called Christian Gnostics held. The first is dualism. The Gnostics believed that there were two powers, not one. They did not believe in a single God but in a good god and an evil god who were somewhat equally matched. They also believed it was the evil god and not the good god who created the universe because the universe is bad; it is full of sin and evil and trouble. This world is bad, the physical body is bad, and everything material is bad. Salvation is to try to escape being captured in the body and in the world and rise to the realm of the spirit world. An ancient philosopher has summed up the Gnostics this way, “The Gnostics think very well of themselves and very ill of the universe.” I think that is a very good summary. They did not like what they saw in the world. They believed creation is a kind of cosmic mistake created by a foolish god, a demiurge as they called him. And many “Christian” Gnostics identified this foolish god with YHWH, the God of the Old Testament, saying, “He is the one who made this mess in which we live, and he is not the same as the true, eternal God.” But when the demiurge created the world, the Gnostics believed, he accidentally put in the humans some spark of divinity. Thus even though we are part of this material world we have a divine nature that is related to that higher world. And salvation means escaping from the material world into the higher, spiritual world. How did they think we could do that? The Christian Gnostics said Christ would help us. They believed in Christ, but not in Christ as a real man.

The Gnostics were docetic in their Christology. That means they thought that Jesus only appeared to be man but He really was not. He only took the appearance or form of a body, but He is part of the spirit world. If He took a body then He would be trapped like the rest of us. So they saw Christ not as a real man but as divine spirit who came down to help us escape from our material bodies and enter the realm of the divine spirit. They did not think He did this by being crucified for us. The crucifixion had no relevance for the Gnostics. He helped us escape from our material bodies, they thought, by coming to teach us the secret way out of this entrapment and into the spiritual world, to help us find our way back. And that secret way is quite a struggle. If you read the Gnostics it is rather exciting reading in a way because to make that journey from this world up to that world you have to go through all kinds of traps and problems and encounters with the rulers of the various stages of that journey. One of the so-called Christian Gnostics of Alexandria said there are 365 different steps you have take, and you need some

secret word of secret knowledge for each of those steps in order to overcome the ruler of that eon and in order to advance to the next step. Other versions of Gnosticism did not have 365 stages, but they all had many stages. Paul Tillig in writing about this describes it this way: “What the savior, what Jesus does in Gnosticism, is somehow use white magic against the black magic of the planetary powers.” This was almost like a second century version of the popular American movie “Star Wars,” in which this spiritual creature against great odds is trying to make his way out of this world. This was a very dangerous journey but a necessary one to finally escape the world of matter and rise to the world of spirit.

Let me summarize all that. For the Gnostic, salvation is by knowledge. Not by faith, not by God’s grace, but by knowledge. Jesus is one of the sources of that knowledge. One of the church fathers said that the key text in Gnosticism was “Seek and you will find.” The Gnostics were always seeking, and they thought they could find the secret word, the password that would enable them to rise to another level. Perhaps you have heard of *The Gospel of Thomas*. It is being talked about a good bit these days. It is an early “gospel,” not one of the canonical Gospels. It was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. The people who promote the Jesus Seminar like to think of *Thomas* as the fifth gospel, using it along with the canonical Gospels in order to make their judgments as to what are the true and authentic words of Christ. The church has never accepted *The Gospel of Thomas* as a true Gospel. It is really a Gnostic gospel. But *The Gospel of Thomas* puts in Jesus’ mouth some of the things I have just been saying about Gnosticism. It is not a book that we accept as authenticate, but it is a book arising out of this heresy. It was written to give some legitimacy to the teaching of Gnosticism by saying that Jesus said certain things that have a Gnostic sound. It might seem that this is all very strange and archaic. But Peter Jones who teaches at Westminster Seminary in California has written a book called, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*. By that title he means that the New Age movement in the United States has many similarities to ancient Gnosticism. Gnosticism, a heresy of self-deification, has returned with a vengeance in the New Age movement according to Peter Jones. If you are interested in that topic, in seeing the links between ancient Gnosticism and this modern heresy, I would certainly commend to you the writings of Peter Jones.

Now let us come to a second heresy. It is similar to Gnosticism in some ways and was certainly influenced by Gnosticism. But this heresy created something that caused the church to really begin to consider clarifying its idea of the canon. You see, until the church was clear on what books it held to be the word of God it was very difficult to deal with heresies. *The Gospel of Thomas* was left out of the canon because it did not qualify, as we will see later. But until the church could make that clear it was an ongoing problem. The heresy of Marcionism was a heresy that prompted the Christian church to realize it had to move more quickly in solidifying its view of the canon. Marcion was the son of a Christian bishop in Asia Minor. He came to Rome in the middle of the second century. In Rome he began to develop his ideas. His view was a mixture of Christianity, Gnosticism, and Docetism. The hero for Marcion was Paul. F. F. Bruce has said that only Marcion understood Paul in the early church, and he misunderstood him. That is a rather bleak statement, but there is some truth to that because no one seemed to really grasp what Paul was all about until we get to Saint Augustine. But Marcion did at least see that Paul was against the law. But he misunderstood him by thinking that “the law” was the Old Testament. Paul was for grace and against works and the law. Marcion got that idea but did not fully understand it properly. He took some of Christianity and mixed it with Gnosticism. He held that the evil Old Testament God was the creator and that the true God was the Father, two gods. And the Old Testament God created a bad world, with insects and fierce beasts and sex and other things Marcion did not approve of. To Marcion, matter was evil and the flesh was abhorrent. Tertullian, perhaps jesting a little with Marcion in one of his writings, said, “And yet, O Marcion, in what way were you born?” The church fathers, Irenaeus especially, wrote much against Marcion. Irenaeus said, “By having two gods Marcion really has no god.” I think that is an important idea that the church fathers latched onto. If you

have two gods who are more or less equal, you really do not have any god because there is no one then who is the true and supreme God. Irenaeus said, “Marcion divides God into two and so puts an end to deity.” Like the Gnostics, Marcion also had a docetic Christ without human birth and without a material body. It is interesting that when he comes to take the Gospel of Luke, which he believes is the only authentic Gospel, he combines Luke 3:1 with 4:31 so that his “Gospel of Luke” begins this way: “In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, Jesus came down [from heaven] to Capernaum.” He leaves out everything about the virgin birth. We can see the Gnostic and docetic attitude expressed in this way of beginning Luke’s Gospel. The most important thing for us in our study of church history, I think, is that to support these ideas Marcion created a canon. He said, “These are the true books, and these others are not true books, so we can only use these particular books to base our teaching on.” Of course, with his ideas there was no Old Testament in his canon. Marcion accepted Luke, altered somewhat, and the ten epistles of Paul. He rejected the Old Testament and all the rest of the New Testament. Even though the orthodox Christian church did not accept any of Marcion’s ideas as true, you can see how this heresy helped to stimulate the church to really consider seriously the question of what the canon is. What books should we accept and what books should we not accept? We will see what the church did about this in the next lesson.

The third of these second century heresies is Montanism. Montanism began in Phrygia, an area of Asia Minor in the middle of the second century. In some ways Montanism does not really belong in the same list with Gnosticism and Marcionism. Gnosticism and Marcionism were clearly heresies, but Montanism was more difficult to identify and evaluate. But the church eventually considered Montanist teaching as a whole to be heretical as well. Let us look at the points of Montanism. There was a stress in Montanism on the Holy Spirit. By the time we come to the middle of the second century, prophecies had started to disappear in the church as well as the extraordinary miracles that we see in the New Testament, though some miracles and prophecies are reported in the early post-New Testament period. By the middle of the second century they seem to have gone.

Now, there can be two responses to this. There could be the response that many Christians have come to, that the Lord discontinued these things. They had served their purpose, and as the canon was eventually created the extraordinary miracles that were there to help undergird the canon and establish the beginnings of the church dropped off as did prophecies. That is one way to look at it, but that is not the way Montanists looked at it. Montanists said, “These things have ceased because the church has lost sight of the Holy Spirit. The church has become worldly. During a period of peace, a letup in the persecution, people have settled down. They do not really believe the power of God or in the work of the Holy Spirit anymore.” Montanists began to emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit. Montanis said, “The dispensation of the Son, Jesus, has now come to an end, and we are in a new age.” We could call that the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. The Montanists said that the Holy Spirit still speaks and the words He speaks should be understood as the words of God. Just as the Holy Spirit spoke through Paul He is still speaking now. Who is he speaking through now? Montanis would answer, “He is speaking through me, and a couple of my associates”—meaning Prisca and Maximilla, two prophetesses who worked with him in Asia Minor. Some of the oracles attributed to Montanis or Prisca and Maximilla sound pretty much like verses in the Bible that we know. But others of their oracles go far beyond, saying, “I am the mouthpiece of God.” On one occasion Montanis is supposed to have said, “I am the lord god omnipotent dwelling in man.”

So there was this emphasis on continuing revelations of the Holy Spirit. This comes very early in the history of the church. The second emphasis is on the end times. The Montanists believed in the imminent return of Christ. This expectation was apparently waning somewhat in the church. After all, it had been 100 years. It has been 2000 years now. But then it had been 100 years and Christ had not come

back. People were losing sight of the return of Christ, according to Montanis, so he began to put a great deal of emphasis on the return of Christ. “He is coming soon to set up His kingdom [of all places!] in Phrygia of Asia Minor, my hometown.” Montanism also stressed very strict discipline. If someone sinned, the Montanists believed that person could not be allowed to continue in the church. This was a stress on holiness and on asceticism, a rigid lifestyle.

There were many followers of Montanis, particularly in Asia Minor. In fact, in some towns in certain parts of Asia Minor everyone in the church became Montanists. Then it spread to North Africa, and many people there became Montanists. Those were the two centers of Montanism. The thing that really surprises us is that the church father Tertullian became a Montanist. People have puzzled over that all the way down to the present. Why would Tertullian join this branch of the Christian church? He thought of it, at least for a while, as a true expression of the church. In *The Spreading Flame* F. F. Bruce writes this:” A Dominican scholar once remarked to me in the course of a conversation about Tertullian that it was amazing that such an intelligent man as he should have been led away by a movement like Montanism. That is one point of view, but it might equally well be said that there must have been something of more solid worth in Montanism than is generally supposed since it appealed to such an intelligent man as Tertullian.”

I pretty much have to leave it there. I am not sure why Tertullian joined Montanism. The way I have presented it, which is the standard approach to Montanism as I understand it, it does not sound like something that would have appealed to someone as careful in his thinking as Tertullian. But perhaps Montanism was in some ways better than I have made it sound. Certainly there were some true concerns there: concern for holiness, for church discipline, a belief in the coming of Christ, concern that the church would not lose sight of the coming of Christ. Those are appropriate concerns that the Montanists may well have focused on. But it seems to me that the way they handled those particular issues led them into error.

I want to wrap this up briefly, and in the next lesson we will come back to what the orthodox church did in response to all this. The task of orthodoxy is clear. It is to state the faith. What do Christians really believe? You see how important it is to do that. And what books do we hold to be part of the Bible? And who has the right to say what is right and what is wrong? The church had to do that while realizing that what needed to be done could not, in one sense, be done perfectly and fully. Hilary of Poitiers in his book, *On the Trinity*, said, “The errors of heretics [...] force us to deal with unlawful matters, to scale perilous heights, to speak unutterable words, to trespass on forbidden ground, compelling us to err in daring to embody in human terms truths which ought to be hidden in the silent veneration of the heart.” The church has to do two things at once. It must see Christianity as a religion whose content can be defined with words, saying this is what it means to be a Christian. We hold these things. We have a creed. We say these words that set forth what we hold to be true. But it must do this without thinking that we have exhausted the mystery, that we have every single thing solved, that we have been able to cross every t and dot every i. With these heresies—Gnosticism, Montanism, and Marcionism—swirling about in the second century and winning converts, it was important for the church to state and defend its views to get to the place where “orthodoxy” is underlined and clear. The church did this in three ways: by creating a canon, by establishing a creed, and by moving toward government with bishops. In our next lesson we will look into all of that.

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).