

## Wolves and Heresies

### Review: Courageous Witness

- Despite opposition, Christianity expanded tremendously in its first three centuries:
  - By the year 300, nearly 10% of the Roman Empire was Christian.
  - In the same year, Christianity became the official religion of the nation of Armenia in the East.
  - In the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century (200-300), Christian missionaries were sent from Alexandria to India.
  - By the year 347, a bishop had been appointed for the Church in Ethiopia.
- Such expansion was not due to celebrity pastors, but to suffering martyrs and regular believers sharing their faith in everyday life: “It was anonymous Christians, not the officially constituted leaders of the Christian communities, who were primarily responsible for Christianity’s spread.” (Alan Kreider)
- Regarding the methods of evangelism, there was no “silver bullet”:
  - Because of persecution, churches did not use their worship services to attract new people; evangelism happened outside of Sunday worship services.
  - Like Jews and Cynic philosophers, some Christians took advantage of public forums when available (Acts 13.14-15, 16.13, 17.19-21). The ancient world was accustomed to such “open-air preaching.”
  - The most common channels of evangelism, however, were the ordinary: hospitality, relationships, integrity in business dealings, sexual purity, and compassion – even toward outsiders.
- “The enthusiasm to evangelize which marked the early Christians is one of the most remarkable things in the history of religions. Here were men and women of every rank and station in life, of every country in the known world, so convinced that they had discovered the riddle of the universe, so sure of the one true God whom they had come to know, that nothing must stand in the way of their passing on this good news to others.” (Michael Green)

### The Definition of Heresy

- “Heresy” is not the same as making a simple mistake about the teaching of the Bible.
- The Greek noun *haeresis* comes from the verb *haireomai* “to choose”; heresy involves intentionality:
  - Heresy is denying central truths of the gospel – and refusing to repent.
  - Heresy is soul-destroying stubbornness: choosing our opinions over Scripture’s clear word.
- The apostles predicted that heresies would come upon the Church:
  - “After my departure fierce wolves will come in... from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Acts 20.29-30)
  - “...there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” (2 Pet. 2.1)

### The Ur-Heresy: Gnosticism

- Foundational premise: physical matter is bad and spiritual substance is good. Thus taught:
  - The true God created a world of spirits, but the physical world was created by a bad spirit.
  - Human souls are like raindrops of God, but they are imprisoned in our physical bodies.
  - “Sin” is forgetting our true deity. “Salvation” is escape from the body and the physical world.
  - “Salvation” comes by knowledge (Greek *gnōsis*): if we remember and struggle against our prisons.
  - For this to happen, a spiritual messenger must come into this physical world to reveal the truth.
  - Some Gnostics said Jesus was this messenger, but denied that he had a true body (1 Jn. 4.2-3).
  - They denied Jesus came to die for our sins. Rather, they claimed he came to remind us of our deity.
- Major Problems:
  - *Creation*: Denied that God created the world, and that the world God created was good.
  - *Sin*: Denied human guilt before God; claimed humanity’s problem was ignorance.
  - *Incarnation*: Denied that Jesus became fully human; claimed he only appeared to have a body.
  - *Salvation*: Denied the need to pay for sins; claimed salvation by knowledge (cf. Gen. 3.5).

**The Über-Heretic: Marcion of Sinope<sup>1</sup>**

- The son of a Christian bishop, Marcion lived 100-160. He embraced an adapted form of Gnosticism:
  - God the Father of Jesus was NOT the same being as YHWH, Creator of the physical world.
  - YHWH is arbitrary and vindictive, whereas the Father of Jesus is loving and non-judgmental.
  - Jesus was not born of Mary (since this would subject him to YHWH), but appeared as an adult.
  - Jesus had no physical body, and in the end there will be no judgment: the Father will just forgive.
- Regarding Scripture, Marcion taught:
  - The OT, being inspired by YHWH, must be rejected entirely.
  - Because all of the apostles except Paul fell into Jewish errors, even the NT was full of errors.
    - Thus created his own “Bible” containing a version of Luke’s Gospel and ten letters of Paul (excl. 1-2 Timothy and Titus), edited to omit the birth narratives and quotations from the OT.
- Marcion was more dangerous than other Gnostics because he organized his own church with its own bishops and its own “Bible.” His movement malingered for a long time.

**Trinitarian Heresies (*Doctrine of God*)<sup>2</sup>**

- *Modalism*
  - Taught that Father, Son, Holy Spirit were NOT three persons, but 3 “modes” in which God appeared.
  - Taught that sometimes God appeared as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Holy Spirit.
  - Understood the unity of God and the full deity of Father, Son, and Spirit, but denied distinct persons.
  - Criticized by Tertullian, who taught that God is a “Trinity,” “three persons... yet of one substance.”<sup>3</sup>
- *Arianism*
  - Arius lived 250-336. Taught that the Son of God was NOT eternal, but the first and highest creature.
  - Received a lot of support among the laity, some bishops, and even a few later emperors.
  - Condemned at Council of Nicaea (325), but not vanquished until Council of Constantinople (381).
  - Major opponent was Athanasius of Alexandria, who was exiled 5 times when Arianism held favor.

**Christological Heresies (*Doctrine of Christ*)<sup>4</sup>**

- *Nestorianism and Eutychianism*
  - In a controversy surrounding whether Mary could be called “Mother of God,” Nestorius preferred the term “Mother of Christ” – since a human nature could be born, but the divine could not be born.
    - Accused of denying the unity of Christ’s person and condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431).
    - Denying these accusations, some churches separated into the “Church of the East” that carried the gospel into Arabia and Asia, getting at least as far as central China by 635.
  - Eutyches denied the distinction between the divine and human in Christ by teaching that Christ’s deity either absorbed or fused with his humanity. Either way denied Christ’s full humanity.
- These questions continued to vex the Church until the Council of Chalcedon (451).

**Pelagianism: Anthropological and Hamartiological Heresy (*Doctrine of Man and Doctrine of Sin*)<sup>5</sup>**

- Pelagius denied that Adam’s sin is passed on to us. Rather, every person is born in the same condition as Adam: free from guilt, free from pollution, and able to choose good or evil.
- Adam and other people have set us an evil example, but there is no “original” sin inherited from Adam.
- Even our sin does not affect our ability to choose good or evil. We have the ability to turn back to God.
- Opposed by Augustine of Hippo, who insisted original sin makes us slaves until God changes our hearts.
- Pelagian views condemned by Church synods in Carthage (418) and Orange (529).

<sup>1</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, revised ed., vol. 1. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 73-74.

<sup>2</sup> Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 92 (Modalism), 184-192 (Arianism), and 199-207 (Athanasius).

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 299-302. For Nestorianism, see also “Nestorius” in Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 457-458.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 131-139