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A CHRISTIAN ANSWER TO MARCION OF PONTUS  
BY VICTORIAN AND INDIAN

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Central Academy, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

**Short Title: The Church versus Marcion**

by  
Carl William Swartz

June 1959

Approved by:

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BY TERTULLIAN AND IRENAEUS**

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**by**

**Carl Willard Beuschlein**

**June 1959**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. MARCION OF PONTUS . . . . .	1
Objectives and Limitations . . . . .	1
Rome at the Time of Marcion . . . . .	2
Marcion as a Christian . . . . .	3
Marcion as a Gnostic . . . . .	5
II. THE CHURCH'S DEFENDERS . . . . .	8
Tertullian of Carthage . . . . .	8
Irenaeus of Lyons . . . . .	10
III. THE ATTACK AND ANSWER . . . . .	13
Marcion's Scriptures . . . . .	13
The Church's Method of Defence . . . . .	16
Marcion's Two Gods . . . . .	19
The Defenders' One God . . . . .	21
Marcion's Christ . . . . .	23
The Defenders' Christ . . . . .	26
Marcion's Eschatology . . . . .	29
The Church's Eschatology . . . . .	31
Summary of Conclusions . . . . .	33
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	36

## CHAPTER I

### MARCION OF PONTUS

#### Objectives and Limitations

Gnosticism presented a vicious challenge to the early Church. She had no alternative except to answer or perish. Especially clouded in time are the activities and the theological system of Marcion of Pontus. Tertullian and his contemporaries considered Marcion's attack so serious that they collectively devoted volumes to a counterattack. The problem connected with this study was to determine how representative Christian writers answered this attack, what sources of authority they employed, and their treatment of specific points of doctrine.

Since the Marcionite Church was one of the first organized bodies to arise in the Church itself, her answer and refutation very well could have influenced her later teachings. This study then was important to illustrate and trace the development of the doctrinal formulations of the Christian Church today.

The scope of the Church's answer covers the whole field of theological thought. But because there are no existing sources of Marcion's theology, except those contained in the answers of Christian writers, and, because even these writers have been selective, the scope of this study was necessarily limited to the basic problems of God, Scriptures, Christology, and Eschatology. The thesis of this study was that the Church, through Tertullian and Irenaeus, had answered Marcion's attack thoroughly and decisively for the edification of the Church of Christ.

For the purpose of proving this thesis, this study presents a brief outline of Marcion's development and place in the Church; secondly, a brief sketch of the men who opposed him; finally, an antithetical presentation of the teachings of Marcion and the Church on Scripture, God, Christology, and Eschatology, in that order. This presentation was achieved by reconstructing Marcion's theology from the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian, and from a number of more recent evaluations of Marcion.

#### Rome at the Time of Marcion

In the last quarter of the second century after our Lord, Rome remained the metropolis of the ancient world, the capital of the great empire that embraced most of the known world. On her streets walked the merchants, officials, messengers, scholars and tourists of all countries. Among the Medes, Parthians, Ethiopians, Egyptians and Hebrews there existed a Christian congregation whose beginnings are shrouded in tradition. The Epistle to the Philippians<sup>1</sup> reports that early the faith of Christ had penetrated even into Caesar's own household.

In the second century, a constant stream of immigrants poured into Rome from the provinces, bringing with them, not only their skills and wealth, but also their local traditions and prejudices. The Church in Rome was a cosmopolitan body of many races and languages. Yet Greek, the lingua franca, remained the common language. Surrounded by the

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<sup>1</sup>Philippians 4:22.

pagan world and constituted of newly converted heathen, the Church did not always measure up to the Christian standard of morality. By this time the old generation of eye witnesses had passed away. The Old Testament, several epistles and gospels were in use in the worship services. This period of Church History was marked by unsettlement in political status, moral norm and theological chaos. Pressed from within by flux and from without by a surge of quasi-Christian and syncretistic Oriental religions, the Church in Rome had yet another burden to bear, another challenge to accept. From within her own ranks there arose the questioning mind of Marcion of Pontus, a reforming spirit.

#### Marcion as a Christian

History presents Marcion as a character full of contradictions and difficulties. It is no wonder that Tertullian, his chief opponent, introduces him by a comparison of his character with the ferocity and deceptiveness of the Euxine Sea, on whose shores he was born. Tertullian writes:

Nothing, however, in Pontus is so barbarous and sad as the fact that Marcion was born there, fouler than any Scythian, more roving than the wagon-life of the Sarmatian, more inhuman than the Massagete, more audacious than an Amazon, darker than the Pontic cloud, colder than its winter, more brittle than its ice, more deceitful than the Ister, more craggy than Caucasus.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that Tertullian considered Marcion a serious threat to the Church, for he devoted five books in refutation of his teachings.

Born in Pontus, at an unknown date, Marcion appeared in Rome about

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<sup>2</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, Volume VII in Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), pp. 2f.

140. His background still remains a mystery and a highly controversial subject. Tertullian states that he was a Christian who lost the God whom he had found by the extinction of his own faith.<sup>3</sup> Marcion was first a deserter and then a heretic. This may mean that Marcion was a Christian before he came to Rome. Many early Church Fathers, among them Epiphanius, hold the view that Marcion's father was a Pontic Bishop, and that he himself excommunicated his son for the seduction of a girl. This may be a charge manufactured to put Marcion's character in a bad light. There are two reasons for accepting the latter judgment. The first is the admittedly weak argument from silence, the silence of such witnesses as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius and Rhodo. The second is that this charge is out of harmony with what we otherwise know of Marcion's life. Tertullian himself contrasts the continence of Marcion with the license of his pupil Apelles.<sup>4</sup> This evidence, however, does not deny the possibility of this accusation.

Marcion seems to have been a mariner of some sort. Tertullian even calls him a ship master.<sup>5</sup> Many fanciful interpretations of this title have been offered, such as, he was called this because he led many souls from the ship of the Church. But it appears more logical to accept the plain designation of this title. When Marcion joined the

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Tertullian, Prescription Against Heretics, Volume XV in Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), p. 35.

<sup>5</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., VII, 200.



Church in Rome, he gave 200,000 sesterces as a gift, showing that he was indeed a rich man. He also was admittedly a great traveler. Tertullian frequently mentions his sea voyages. It cannot be determined whether these were merely business trips or missionary journeys. Perhaps they were both.

By the year 144, Marcion was excommunicated from the Church in Rome.<sup>6</sup> The reason for his dismissal is not sufficiently clear. It is known that Marcion was a zealous student of Stoicism, but this would not necessarily be a reason for excommunication.

After his excommunication, very little is known about Marcion's life and his ultimate fate, except that he traveled very often.

Marcion, the Stoic, saw that the church had been struggling with Judaic elements, and needed reforming. His method of reform was a critical-historical approach to the whole of the Christian Tradition.

#### Marcion as a Gnostic

As a theologian, Marcion is often called a Gnostic. Before Adolph V. Harnack, the majority of historians were content with this judgment. Harnack was the first famous scholar to question Marcion's Gnosticism. The difficulty in deciding this question is complicated by an ignorance of what Gnostic exactly means. A superficial comparison would yield a denial of this name to Marcion. Gnostics erred in adding to the faith. Marcion erred in subtracting from it. Gnostics diluted Christianity with foreign elements. Marcion selected a fragmentary interpretation.

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<sup>6</sup>Tertullian, Against Heretics, op. cit., XV, 35.

Marcion belongs to the prophets, not the intellectuals. His literal mind could not accept allegory. His dualism is less metaphysical than exegetical. In his approach to theology Marcion was guided by a soteriological interest, not speculative. All his emphasis is on faith, not knowledge. In his methodology, Marcion was definitely separate from the Gnostics, but finally he arrived at the same conclusions. His first impetus came from Gnostic teachers. Hippolytus claims that Empedocles was the real author of Marcion's system.<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus traces the Gnostic influence to Cerdo, who was in Rome at the time that Marcion was a member of the Church in Rome.<sup>8</sup> R. S. Wilson interprets this influence very slightly:

His Gnosticism, such as it was, is a veneer, which, as we shall see, is at points visibly separate from his main teaching, and may not improbably be ascribed to the influence of his teacher Cerdo.<sup>9</sup>

H. E. Turner also minimizes this Gnostic influence:

If Cerdo supplied some of the tools, it was Marcion who began and carried through the job. If his encounter with Cerdo may have given a certain impetus, it was Marcion himself who determined the course of his journey.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, though Marcion was influenced at first by Gnosticism, his development and use of Gnostic approaches was unique. Marcion disregarded speculative philosophy and clung to literalism. Marcion develops a

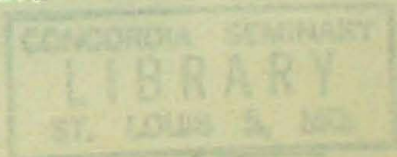
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<sup>7</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., VII, 201.

<sup>8</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Volume XLII in The Library of Fathers, edited by John Keble (London: James Parker and Co., 1872), p. 210.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Wilson, Marcion, a Study of a Second-Century Heretic (London: J. Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1933), p. 78.

<sup>10</sup>H. E. Turner, The Pattern of Christian Truth (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., Ltd., 1954), p. 118.



redemptive theology. His starting point is not metaphysics, but experience. As R. S. Wilson correctly asserts:

Marcion accepts the Christian tradition and starts from experience. . . . the good news, the Gospel, had made such an impression on him, that he was sure that this God was a new God and a strange God.<sup>11</sup>

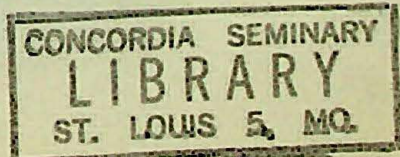
It is true that Marcion resembled the Gnostics very closely in his exegesis, or rather, his eisegesis. The selection of his material was made for this purpose, but he found it impossible to hold together elements of the thoughts of the New Testament that his theology could not recognize.

The greatest difference between Marcion and the Gnostics lies in their primary concerns. Marcion had begun to work for reform. He was not interested in mystic associations or esoteric cultism as were the Gnostics. Hence his approach, though grounded in Gnostic teachings, took a unique, almost contrary form of expression. Gnosticism had raised the main question of what authentic Christianity was. Marcion's answer was personal morality. In the words of A. Harnack: "The anti-nomianism of Marcion was ultimately based on the strength of his religious feeling, on his personal religion as contrasted with all statutory religion."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Wilson, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>12</sup>Adolph V. Harnack, History of Dogma, translated from the Third German Edition (Boston: Little and Brown Co., 1902), I, 282.



## CHAPTER II

### THE CHURCH'S DEFENDERS

#### Tertullian of Carthage

Attacked by one of her own fold, the Church, at first, reeled under the blows of this new danger. Marcion was gathering followers, stealing the sheep of Christ. <sup>(14)</sup> Turner explains:

His appeal, if wide and immediate, was in principle dependent upon the failure of the Church to offer a more satisfactory alternative. <sup>✓</sup>Instinctively the Church felt the need for a counterblast, and for a generation her ablest minds set themselves to frame a reply.<sup>1</sup>

One of these able minds was Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus of Carthage. From his intimate knowledge of the proceedings of the Elders of Rome against Marcion and Valentinus, it is often supposed that he was a presbyter of the Roman congregation. Historically this cannot be substantiated. Because he was educated in Roman Law and Stoic philosophy, Tertullian is the first important Christian writer in whom both of these elements appear as determinative. He was probably born between 150 and 160, the son of a centurion, according to Jerome. His conversion may have occurred about 180. Wit, violence in temper, sarcasm, all lent themselves to his denial of any worth whatsoever in either Platonism or Gnosticism. "What have Athens and Jerusalem in common, the Academy and the Church?"<sup>2</sup> he writes.

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<sup>1</sup>H. E. Turner, The Pattern of Christian Thought (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., Ltd., 1954), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Tertullian, Prescriptions Against Heretics, in Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers, edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), IV, 7.

In mid-career Tertullian's views changed. Disgusted with the laxity in discipline which revolted his legal mind, Tertullian was attracted to the rigor and enthusiasm of Montanism. Eventually he became its great theologian. This would have discredited a lesser man. Yet Tertullian, by his vehemence, his personality, the bulk of his writings, his own personal life and his emphasis on sin and grace, forced even a grudging recognition of his greatness from the orthodox teachers.

His Five Books Against Marcion, with a few trivial exceptions, are not violated by his Montanism. The departure of this sect was related more to points of morality and discipline than to points of doctrine. Though opposed to Rome, especially to the Roman clergy, Tertullian remained a zealous advocate of the catholic faith.

Tertullian is often compared by historians with Luther. There are, no doubt, points of similarity, especially in temperament. Tertullian was a rare genius, fresh but angular, boisterous, full of glorious fantasy, witty, full of keen analytic judgment and polemical ability, but lacking in clearness, moderation, and logical development.

To say merely that Tertullian was a prolific author would be an understatement. He wrote in both Greek and Latin on almost every subject of concern to the Church. Only thirty-one of his works, however, are extant. Of these, the work around which this thesis is centered, his Adversus Marcionem, happens to be the best authenticated, especially its date. Tertullian mentions the fifteenth year of Severus, the year 207. No doubt, this work was not issued all at once, but in parts. P. Schaff summarizes it in this way:

It is of a general character and lays down the fundamental principle of the Church in dealing with heresy. Tertullian cuts off all errors and neologies at the outset from the right of legal contest and appeal to the holy Scriptures, because these belong only to the catholic church as the legitimate heir and guardian of Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

This is the basic approach of Tertullian against Marcion. This is his prescription, or cutting the ground out from under the feet of the Pontic Reformer. Tertullian asks what the truth really is and who its guardian is. His answer is the Scriptures and the Church.

### Irenaeus of Lyons

The second able mind, Irenaeus, was also trained in the classical style. Born in Asia Minor between 130 and 135, Irenaeus became a disciple of Polycarp. Even more than Tertullian, Irenaeus was acquainted both with the Old and New Testaments and the heretical literature of his time.

In 177, when Photinus, pastor at Lyons, was martyred, Irenaeus, already a missionary in the same area, took the dangerous position. After the persecution ceased, heresies closed in upon the Church. It was at this time, the later period of his life, that Irenaeus set out to refute the Gnostic heresies by means of polemical writings. All of these writings show a comprehensive knowledge of sources and Gnostic writings. Unfortunately, the bulk of these writings has been lost at an early date. Only two of the many works that he wrote in his native Greek are extant. His Adversus Haereses, the most important of the two,

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<sup>3</sup>Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), II, 831.

has been preserved in a Latin translation only.

The Adversus Haereses is composed of two parts. The first part deals with the detection of Gnosticism. Here Irenaeus sketches in much detail the Gnostic systems of Simon Magus, Menander, Saturnil, Basilides, Carpocrates, Cerinthus, Cerdon, Marcion, Tatian and many others. The second part includes Books II to V and consists of his coming to grips with individual systems of Gnosticism. A partial outline would be as follows:

Book II. A refutation of Marcion from reason.

Book III. A refutation from the doctrine of the Church on God and Christ.

Book IV. A refutation from the sayings of the Lord.

Book V. The Resurrection which all Gnostics denied.

Because of its frequent and wearisome repetition, this work is thought to have been written intermittently. In the Preface to the third book, Irenaeus states that he had already sent out the first two books to a friend and that the others would follow.

The second work of Irenaeus which has survived is called, The Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching. This work has little to add in demonstrating this thesis and therefore is only mentioned in passing.<sup>4</sup>

Like Tertullian, Irenaeus held to a legalistic view of morality. His writings against heretics is a combination of a philosophical and Scriptural repudiation of all the Gnostic heresies known to him. Unlike Tertullian, Irenaeus shows his wider knowledge of Scripture in his many

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<sup>4</sup>Johannes Quasten, Patrology (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1951), I, 287-93, passim.

quotations and incisive exegesis. Of his death we know nothing definite.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Albert Newman, A Manual of Church History (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1933), I, 248-51, passim.

Verbalism points out that Harnack first based his dualistic approach on the passage of Scripture. Whether Harnack found his solution here, or used this passage as a convenient basis for a dualistic interpretation is a moot point. From what is known of his background and general patterns of thinking, the latter attitude is probably more correct. Verbalism explains

How Harnack was misled the first lines of his counsel from the double passage of our Lord's saying, which has reference to human beings and not divine ones, wherein he declared of those examples of a good man and a corrupt man . . .

Applied with Greek text, Harnack applied the passage above to the New Testament and concluded that it was still. From the other end of the story, he concluded that there must be another text. This example points out Harnack's strong approach to Scripture. He rejects all alleged interpretations and accepts only a literal reading. By this point he differed radically from most of the scholars of his time. The whole Old Testament also seems to Harnack merely a historical record, as H. S. Turner aptly points out. Turner writes, in short, only that he had no quarrel with the Old Testament as a record of historical

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<sup>5</sup>Verbalism, Journal of Theology, 1933, p. 107. The Christian Fathers, edited by Alexander Duff and James MacGillivray (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), VII, 2.



## CHAPTER III

### THE ATTACK AND ANSWER

#### Marcion's Scriptures

Tertullian points out that Marcion first based his dualistic approach to God on a passage of Scripture. Whether Marcion found his dualism here, or used this passage as a convenient basis for a dualistic interpretation is a moot point. From what is known of his background and general patterns of thinking, the latter estimate is probably more correct. Tertullian explains:

The unhappy man gained the first ideas of his conceit from the simple passage of our Lord's saying, which has reference to human beings and not divine ones, wherein he disposes of those examples of a good tree and a corrupt one; . . .<sup>1</sup>

Coupled with Isaiah 14:7, Marcion applied the passage above to the Creator-God and maintained that He was evil. From the other arm of the image, he concluded that there must be another God. This example points out Marcion's strong approach to Scripture. He rejects all allegorical interpretations and accepts only a literal meaning. On this point he differed radically from most of the scholars of his time. The whole Old Testament thus became to Marcion merely a historical record, as H. E. Turner aptly points out, "Marcion would, no doubt, reply that he had no quarrel with the Old Testament as a record of historical

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<sup>1</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, in The Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), VII, 4.

fact."<sup>2</sup> The antitheses which Marcion found in the Old Testament formed his basic approach to theology. Tertullian, seemingly quoting some material indirectly writes:

Marcion's special and principal work is the separation of the law and the gospel; . . . it is this very opposition between the law and the gospel which has suggested that the God of the gospel is different from the god of the law,<sup>3</sup> 37

This complete exclusion of the Old Testament from the pale of Christianity was not original, nor unique with Marcion. A. von Harnack adds the names of Ptolemaeus, the disciple of Valentinus, The Epistle of Barnabas, Aristides, and Justin.<sup>4</sup> To Marcion's way of thinking, the Old Testament portrayed a God entirely different than the God of the New Testament. Hence the use and the usefulness of the Old Testament ended with the coming of Christ. Marcion's Christ, however, had not been predicted in the Old Testament. H. E. Turner correctly observes:

His conception of prophecy is restricted either to straight prediction of historical events or to the forecast of a nationalistic Jewish Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

By this single step Marcion had hoped to destroy the validity of the Old Testament for the Christian Church, and thereby to have cleansed it from all Judaistic teachings.

Marcion also based his antitheses on experience. He had felt the

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<sup>2</sup>H. E. Turner, The Pattern of Christian Truth (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., Ltd., 1954), p. 169.

<sup>3</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., VII, 34.

<sup>4</sup>Adolph V. Harnack, History of Dogma, translated from the Third German edition (Boston: Little and Brown Co., 1902), I, 148.

<sup>5</sup>Turner, op. cit., p. 169.

love of God in his heart and life. The love which this God showed could in no way be reconciled to the stern and vengeful picture of God which the Old Testament gave him. His conclusion was that there must be two Gods.

The New Testament received the same type of treatment. The Church claimed a canon on which it could lean. Marcion also possessed such a canon. By his own claim, his canon alone had the Gospel. He attached no name to this gospel, but merely called it, *Εὐαγγέλιον*. This, he claimed, was the very Gospel that Paul had in mind whenever he mentioned the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, Marcion ascribed this gospel to the pen of Paul. His criterion of judgment was based on the letters of Paul, which he called *Ἀποστολικόν*. He found no other book in harmony with this Gospel of Paul. Even the Apostles, Marcion maintained, had not understood Christ. Therefore Christ had to inspire Paul in a special way. Yet even these specially revealed writings had been falsified, in part, by the Jews. It was Marcion's appointed task to rid Paul's letters of their Hebraistic accretions. (His canon, therefore, contained an expurgated edition of Luke's Gospel and ten Pauline Epistles, also cleansed. The other books of the Christian canon were omitted as being too Judaistic.) Marcion's reasoning for the omission of Peter prefigures, in a gross way, the thought of the Tuebingen School. Marcion resolved on the tensions between Paul and Peter, and therefore rejected Peter. In the writings of Paul, Marcion noted a dualism between the flesh and the spirit. But as H. E. Turner judges:

The Pauline dualism between flesh and spirit is in Marcion, but it is heightened and coarsened. He can echo verbally St. Paul's

indignant absit (sic) to the question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" but his refusal to hold the love and justice of God even in a healthy tension removes the one element which gives depths and significance to the cry.<sup>6</sup>

The Gospel of Luke was cleansed of any inference or reference to the Creator-God, and any connection between Christ and this God was severed by omission. For example, Marcion omitted chapters one and two entirely and began at chapter three, verse one, reading, "In the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar, God descended into Capernaum, a city of Galilee."<sup>7</sup>

There was yet another book in Marcion's canon, one written by Marcion himself. He did not claim canonical status for his Antithesis. This volume has not survived. Only fragments are quoted by his opponents. For example, Tertullian in Against Marcion, prepares to answer Marcion's antithesis between God and mammon.<sup>8</sup> Evidently, Tertullian had some sort of copy of these antithetical statements.

#### The Church's Method of Defence

The challenge given to the Church by Marcion's theology was taken up in a variety of ways. Each defender used his peculiar talents and viewpoints as weapons. In general, the Church was forced to express herself more clearly and forcibly, claiming--as did her opponent--an authority which could not be questioned. Harnack poses an interesting possibility:

Marcion, in all probability, was the first to conceive and, in a great measure, to realize the idea of placing Christendom on the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>7</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 364.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 314.

firm foundation of a definite theory of what is Christian--but not of basing it on a theological doctrine--and of establishing this theory by a fixed collection of Christian writings with canonical authority.<sup>9</sup>

To judge, on the basis of this observation, that Marcion gave the sole impetus to the formation of the canon, is not warranted. But that he contributed to its formation also cannot be denied. Tertullian constantly quotes Scripture as his authority. He also denies the heretics any right to the use of Scripture. This is his main approach in answering the exegesis of Marcion. Elsewhere he depends on logical reasoning to show the absurdity of the Marcionite position. A glance at the Scriptural Index of his works amply shows his use of the authority of Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments. Irenaeus too, uses essentially the same approach.

Four ways lay open to the Church to combat Marcion. The first is listed above; that is, to deny any Scriptural authority to the heretics on logical grounds. The second was to call a council to settle the matter. This was out of the question, because of the illegal status of the Church. The third was to claim an authority beside and, perhaps, even above the authority of Scripture. The Marcionites themselves claimed an apostolic authority. The fourth was to force the Church to assert that she was the one Church founded by the Apostles.<sup>10</sup> The defenders put great stress on the utterances of the Elders, simply because they bore the sanction of time. The closer one lived to Christ

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<sup>9</sup>Harnack, op. cit., II, 231.

<sup>10</sup>Irenaeus, Five Books of S. Irenaeus Against Heresies, in The Library of Fathers, translated by John Keble (London: James Parker and Co., 1872), XLII, 206-9, passim.

or the Apostles, the greater was his value as a witness.<sup>11</sup> A criterion for right understanding had to be found. This criterion was the Canon of Truth, the regula fidei, or the Baptismal Confession. Harnack sums up their stand in the following way:

The Old Catholic Fathers were convinced that their expositions contained the faith of the universal church and nothing else. This was the baptismal formula. They also required rationalistic proof for themselves and their followers.<sup>12</sup>

The content of this confession could be traced back through the bishops to the Apostles, and finally to the Lord Himself. The only weak link in this chain of authority was the bishop. Hence it is not surprising that the defenders emphasized the unbroken succession of bishops in mother churches.<sup>13</sup> These bishops had received the sure charisms of truth through succession. Therefore it could be maintained that their interpretation also was authoritative. The regula fidei gradually took on a greater measure of authority. In a single sweep this same regula, based on the teaching of the Church and the faith of the people, destroyed the validity of any appeal outside of the Church herself. The defenders, however, do agree to meet Marcion on the basis of Scripture, even on his own mutilated version.

Armed with the authority of Scripture and a canon of truth, the defenders attempt to show the corruptive influence of philosophy and

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<sup>11</sup>Tertullian, On the Prescription of Heretics, in The Anti-Nicene Christian Fathers, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), XV, 15, 19, 37, passim.

<sup>12</sup>Harnack, op. cit., I, 280.

<sup>13</sup>Irenaeus, op. cit., pp. 206-9.

the speculative element in Marcion's theology. In essence they say that Marcion's faith is based on speculation, not fact.

### Marcion's Two Gods

Marcion's attack on the unity of God sprang from various sources. In the first place, his experience contradicted the unity of God. In the words of his chief opponent, Tertullian:

Finding in Christ a different disposition, as it were--one of simple and pure benevolence--differing from the Creator, he readily argued that in his Christ had been revealed a new and strange divinity; . . . .<sup>14</sup> 42

To Marcion's experience of faith, God was a being of pure love and mercy, a savior, not a judge. In fact, God really punished no one, but relied on the persuasive power of love.

Secondly, various antitheses both in nature and in Scripture pointed out the duality of God to Marcion. Starting from the conviction of a basic antagonism between the Law and the Gospel, the Old Testament and the New, Marcion concluded that both could not have been given by the same God. The anger of the God of the Old Testament could not be reconciled with the love of the God revealed in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> To Marcion's mind they each originated in two entirely different Gods. Unlike Paul, Marcion tried to dissolve the tension between the mercy and the justice of God, by the simple expedient of positing two Gods.

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<sup>14</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>15</sup>J. Bethune-Baker, An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine (London: Methuen and Co., 1903), p. 82.

Convinced also of the existence of the invisible, Marcion saw an antithesis between it and the visible world. The Marcionites, therefore, from the basis of an irreconcilable dualism of spirit and matter deprecated the Creation and the Creator-God. Harnack believes that Marcion himself did not accept this conclusion in principle, but touched it lightly and drew from it certain inferences.<sup>16</sup> But Tertullian asserts:

Pressed by these arguments (sic) they exclaim: One work is sufficient for our god; he has delivered man by his supreme and most excellent goodness, which is preferable to the creation of all the locusts.<sup>17</sup>

In order to show their opinion of the Creator-God, the Marcionites ascribed to him the creation of worms, locusts, and all forms of lower life.

When Marcion read Matthew 5:17, he found a Scripture passage to fit his needs. Here he found Christ's own assertion that the purpose of His advent was not to fulfill the law and the prophets, but to destroy them. The old era was past, and a new had begun. To Marcion the old was a creature of the Creator God. Bethune-Baker summarizes Marcion's position in this way:

One was the God of the Jews, who made this world; the author of evil works, bloodthirsty, changeable--far from perfect, and ignorant of the highest things, concerned with his own peculiar people only, and keeping them in subjection by means of the Law and the terror of breaking it.<sup>18</sup>

The new era was the aeon of the God of love and of Christ, the creator

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<sup>16</sup>Harnack, op. cit., I, 271.

<sup>17</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>18</sup>Bethune-Baker, op. cit., p. 82.



of the immaterial universe above our world, Marcion's God.

### The Defenders' One God

Faced with Marcion's two Gods, the defenders set forth a certain list of proofs of a unity in a trinity. Tertullian makes use of the Canon of Truth to demonstrate that the Creation itself testifies to the unity of God. Any aimless speculations beyond this Rule end only in spiritual disaster and heresy. Tertullian merely rests his case on this point entirely on the authority of the Rule.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere he expands this point to include the proofs that God, because of His infinity, is incomprehensible, but has revealed Himself by the greatness of His works, the testimonies of our naturally Christian souls, and by the preaching of His prophets.<sup>20</sup> Here Tertullian has expanded his authority to include Scripture and experience. He adds a philosophical argument that, by the very definition of God, God is one. "God is not, if He is not one."<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus sees in the Old and New Testaments a progression, but a progression under one God.

One of the most important arguments offered by the defenders is their assertion that God cannot be known by metaphysical speculation, but only from revelation and experience. The effect of such an argument is such that it would destroy the very foundation of Marcion's dualism,

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<sup>19</sup>Tertullian, Prescription of Heretics, op. cit., pp. 16-19, passim.

<sup>20</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

by taking the argument into the sphere of faith entirely.<sup>22</sup>

Marcion had made much of the antitheses found in the attributes of God, especially God's justice and mercy. The defenders asserted that this tension is no proof for a dualistic concept of God. Against Marcion Tertullian says:

Where the just is, there also exists the good. In short, from the very beginning the Creator was both good and also just. And both His attributes advanced together. His goodness created, His justice arranged the world.<sup>23</sup>

They recognized that any attempt at relieving such a basic tension would result in a denial of the truth.

Because Marcion ascribed the Creation to one God and the Redemption to another, the defenders upheld the unity of the Creation and Redemption under one God. Creation itself attests to the basic fact that God is one. The ancients had received this knowledge by tradition from the first man. The prophets received the revelation from God. The unity of prophecy and fulfillment is seen in Christ. And, finally, the whole Church in all the world received this tradition from the Apostles themselves.<sup>24</sup> By this same method of proof, Irenaeus can assert that the Creator revealed Himself through the Son. Yet this line of argument would not convince Marcion. He could look out into the world and, seeing the misery and death there, would not be able to reconcile all this to the idea of God as a God purely of love, mercy, and goodness. To Marcion all creation was essentially evil. Tertullian

<sup>22</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, op. cit., pp. 143f.

<sup>23</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>24</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, op. cit., pp. 143f.

devotes Book II to proving to Marcion that the Demiurge is really the same God proclaimed by Christ and the Apostles. Creation, to the defenders, is of necessity good, because God is good, and has revealed Himself as such through Christ. The question of the origin of evil is left to God's unknown counsels by the defenders.

While stressing the unity of God against any and all dualistic economies, the defenders did not underestimate the Trinity. Tertullian, quoting the Rule, declares:

This one only God has also a Son, His Word, who proceeded from Himself, by whom all things were made. Him (we believe) to have been sent by the Father into the Virgin, and to have been born of her--being both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and to have been called by the name of Jesus Christ; Him to have suffered, died and been buried, according to the Scriptures, and, after He had been raised again by the Father and taken back into heaven, to be sitting at the right hand of the Father, that He will come to judge the quick and the dead; who sent also from heaven from the Father, according to His own promise, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son and in the Holy Ghost.<sup>25</sup>

By making the Canon of Truth, which is held from the Apostles, by quoting Scripture, by seeking what is believed everywhere by all, by the natural knowledge of God, the question of the unity of God is settled by the defenders, though not rationally explained.

#### Marcion's Christ

Marcion eliminated the first chapters of Luke's Gospel. The reason for this deletion will now become apparent. Marcion's God was a God of spirit, opposed to all matter, which, to Marcion's mind, was essentially evil. Christ, therefore, could not partake of matter. To

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<sup>25</sup>Tertullian, Against Praxeus, op. cit., p. 336.

Marcion, Christ was a phantom who assumed nothing from the Demiurge. He came down from heaven, and, after an assumption of an apparent body, began His preaching in the synagogue of Capernaum.<sup>26</sup> Tertullian characterizes Marcion's horror of the flesh with these words:

"Away," he says, "with that eternal plaguing taxing of Caesar and the scanty inn, and the squalid swaddling clothes, and the hard stable. We don't care a jot for the multitude of the heavenly host, . . . ."<sup>27</sup>

Marcion believed that he had sufficient Scriptural warrant for this view in Luke, Chapter Eight, where Christ seemingly denies the existence of His mother and brothers. Actually Marcion's point of departure is not the birth of Jesus, but His death. Pure spirit--as Marcion conceived of Christ--could not die. Therefore Christ's death was a sham. By this same line of reasoning, His birth also was a sham. Marcion thought of the womb as the "sewer of the illustrious animal."<sup>28</sup>

There yet remained one difficulty to overcome, the term "Messiah" was often applied in Scripture to Christ. Furthermore, Christ accepted this title. The Messiah, Marcion reckoned, was another creature of the just God, a warrior king of the Jews, who would establish an earthly kingdom of the just God. This Messiah was not Christ. At the time of Marcion he had not yet appeared. Jesus merely accepted this title by way of accommodation. To Marcion this was not a deception, and in no way contradicted the concept of a God of truth.

Tertullian maintains that Marcion, in some instances, even denied

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<sup>26</sup>Harnack, op. cit., I, 276.

<sup>27</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

the deity of Christ. He points out that if Marcion assumes the incorporeality of Christ, it is also logical to assume that God is a phantom.<sup>29</sup> This Marcion does not do. Tertullian, no doubt, is merely pointing out the error in Marcion's logic.

For the above reason, Tertullian calls Marcion a Docetist.<sup>30</sup> He does not claim that Marcion's Christ is a new mode of God's being. In fact, Marcion never, it seems, defines his Christ, except negatively. He is not the Messiah, neither the God-man. Whether or not this Christ was God appearing as Christ, or whether he was the Son of God remains an unanswered question. Harnack also calls Marcion a Docetist.<sup>31</sup> He also points out that this was Marcion's strongest expression of his abhorrence of the world.

It is a strange contradiction that Marcion can deprecate the flesh of Christ and still find benefit in His death. Tertullian points out, "If the worker were imaginary, the works were imaginary."<sup>32</sup> Christ really did not die. He did not suffer. He did not rise from the dead. Yet Marcion affirms that the sacrifice of Christ purchased the salvation of souls. By this sacrifice Christ purchased men from the Creator-God. Salvation is:

of our souls only, those souls which have learned his doctrine; but the body, because forsooth, it is taken from the earth, cannot possibly partake of salvation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 134f.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Harnack, op. cit., I, 276.

<sup>32</sup> Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, op. cit., p. 79.

From the evidence in the defenders, the position of Marcion is incomplete, or, at least, full of necessary contradictions. Some of these the defenders gleefully point out. If there existed any complete explanations, they have perished with the Marcionite Church.

#### The Defenders' Christ

Because the defenders begin from different points, each will be presented individually. In a marked degree, the Christology of Irenaeus is the influential teaching on which the other defender depends. His starting point is not a Logos doctrine founded in eternity, but, rather, he begins with the historically revealed Son of God. Indeed, Christ is eternal, and that alone is sufficient for men to know. Since Jesus is eternally with the Father, He alone knows the Father and is able to reveal Him. Christ as the Revealer of the Father is a basic theme in the theology of Irenaeus. This eternal Logos, at a point in history, became the historical Jesus, a real man with a body and soul and at the same time real God. Christ's passion and death were the passion and death of the God-Man, not just of the man alone. This is the great truth of Irenaeus for all mankind for the following reason:

For in what way could we have been able to be partakers of this adoption as sons, unless through the Son we had received from Him that communion which brings us to Him.<sup>34</sup>

By starting with the historical Jesus, Irenaeus departed from the usual method of the Apologists. Tertullian, however, remained in their traditional approach. To him the eternal Logos is a real subsistence

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 11f.

to which belong word, person, and power. The eternal Logos was an independent persona, begotten by God. It was Tertullian who coined and made much use of terms like substantia and persona in his doctrine of God. The Son is part of the Father's substance, a tangible revelation of the Father that was made man when born, assumed actual human flesh and soul without mixing His human and divine elements. Essentially Irenaeus and Tertullian, though starting from different points, agree on the person of Christ in all points, except one. Irenaeus believed that the Father and Son are coequal. Tertullian is a Subordinationist, who makes the Son the executive and minister of the Father; that is, a subordination because of function.

The redemption which Marcion championed, like his theology in general, was based upon a radical change in God. To solve this, Marcion created a new God. Irenaeus attempts to explain this apparent change from a God who condemns to a God that saves by asserting the unchangeableness of God. Only man with his needs has changed.<sup>35</sup> God expelled man from Eden and suffers him to die in order that the injury of sin may not remain forever. From time to time in the history of man, God has steadily increased the blessings showered upon him. To illustrate this point Irenaeus treats redemption under the image of four covenants by which God sought to win the race of man. The First Covenant of God contained the natural requirements of the Law. Essentially this covenant was in no way different than the Commandments of the Law of Christ. By it the Patriarchs were made righteous before God. As this Covenant

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<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, op. cit., Book III, passim.

faded in the minds and hearts of men, God saw fit to renew it on the slopes of Sinai in the Decalog. The purpose of this second Covenant was to prepare men to follow Christ. Thus all the prophets have prophesied for this very purpose. But the Decalog was diluted by its Pharisaic exponents and robbed of its chief content, love. With the appearance of Christ, the original moral law was restored in His teaching of love. The difference between the second and third covenants is the difference between speech and action, bondage and freedom, fulfillment and prophecy. The result that Irenaeus hopes to achieve is to prove to men that since Christ is the culmination of the long line of covenants and prophecies, and also their embodiment, it is therefore our duty to believe on the Son of God who has appeared in history. For with His appearance the Old Covenant, which had validity for only one nation, is now changed into a New Covenant, that is valid for all peoples. In his Montanistic period, Irenaeus added a Fourth Covenant, the Age of the Paraclete, which Seeberg judges as, "an attempt to establish a positive relation between the religion of the Old Testament and Christianity."<sup>36</sup>

It is evident that Irenaeus, by presenting salvation as a continuous act of God, culminating in the sending of His own Son, based his approach on the unity of God, as well as on His unity of purpose. The thread of God's love passes through history, only to be obscured by man. This is in direct antithesis to Marcion's two Gods with two antithetical approaches to man.

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<sup>36</sup>Reinhold Seeberg, Text-Book of the History of Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), I, 63.



Tertullian also sees salvation in a person who embraces all of history. Unlike Irenaeus, Tertullian emphasizes more the historical act and person of Christ. The Christ is the All-Embracing One. In Himself Christ enfolds the entire human race and all human life. By virtue of His humanity, Christ became a new progenitor like Adam. His obedience was the obedience which Adam owed to God. This perfect obedience Christ presented before God for man's disobedience. And by His blood, Christ redeemed man from the dominion of sin. Through the fellowship of Christ with man according to His humanity, man became reconciled to God. Tertullian definitely has a blood-centered theology of redemption. Against Docetism he stresses the real humanity of Christ, both in its representative aspect, and also in its validity for all men.

By virtue of His passion, Christ paid the obedience of all men, and now presents this payment before the bar of God's justice. Christ's purpose in saving mankind was to restore man's immortality. Through Christ man became again the image of God, the son of God, precious in God's sight. Man's pristine fellowship with God, destroyed by the sin of the first Adam, is restored by the death of the Second Adam. To a greater degree than Irenaeus, Tertullian bases his theology of redemption on the representative character of Christ's humanity. By doing this, he is in direct antithesis to Marcion's Christ, who battles for the essentially good spirit of man against the Creator-God and His material creatures. Tertullian's salvation is a salvation of man, while Marcion's salvation is a saving of man's spirit only.

#### Marcion's Eschatology

One of the inexplicable mysteries of Marcion's theology is his

teachings on the last things. Marcion could well say that man needed saving from the world, for it was material and therefore evil. But both the body and the soul of all mankind were the creations of the Cosmocrator. The good man strives to fulfill the Cosmocrator's laws; the evil does not. The decisive distinction then is how a man yields to the promptings of divine grace. In salvation the body of a man is left entirely out of the picture. Salvation is the saving of soul's only, for they are spiritual and therefore, essentially good. This, of course, involves a contradiction. If the soul is a creation of the Cosmocrator, then it too should be evil and foreign to the Good God. But Marcion failed to draw this conclusion. A reasonable explanation for this failure may be found in his demand for a strict asceticism.

Because of his antithetical dualism of body and soul, Marcion denied any resurrection of the flesh. Irenaeus comments: "Salvation will be the attainment of those souls which have learned his doctrine; while the body, as having been taken from the earth, is incapable of sharing in salvation."<sup>37</sup> Marcion contended that flesh was evil, but he did not conclude that man could therefore indulge in the evils of the flesh. Because of his Stoical background, no doubt, he rejected the flesh entirely, and also condemned marriage for the same reasons. McGiffert explains Marcion's position in this way: "To procreate the human race was to multiply the subjects of the demiurge and serve his interests. It was therefore doubly wrong."<sup>38</sup> To be consistent in this line of

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<sup>37</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>38</sup>Arthur McGiffert, A History of Christian Thought (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), I, 63.

thinking, Marcion could increase his churches only by conversion. Hence the Marcionites were militant evangelists.

Strangely, Marcion did make use of some kind of sacramental system, at least, Baptism. Tertullian sketches the conditions for Baptism in the Marcionite congregations as follows:

The flesh is not, according to Marcion, immersed in the water of the sacrament, unless it be free (sic) in virginity, widowhood, or celibacy, or has purchased by divorce a title to baptism, as if even generative impotents did not all receive their flesh from nuptial union.<sup>39</sup>

The ultimate goal of salvation for Marcion was freedom from the material, the return of the spirit to God, an escape from the reign of the Cosmocrator. What part the Sacrament of Baptism had in this plan is not clear. Perhaps it was merely an initiatory rite that showed the candidate's willingness to sacrifice.

Marcion did make one last prophecy of the conditions that would prevail before the final day of battle between the Good God and the Evil God. (There was no such thing as a judgment day in his theology.) He predicted that violent attacks were in store for the church of the Good God on the part of the Jewish Christ of the future, whom Marcion called the Antichrist.

#### The Church's Eschatology

Such a denial of the importance of the body in life and salvation as Marcion championed provoked a storm of protest from Irenaeus and Tertullian. To deny the resurrection of the flesh was to deny the

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<sup>39</sup>Tertullian, Against Marcion, op. cit., p. 56.

resurrection of the Lord. This, in turn, robbed the Church of all her comfort and her proof for the validity of the crucifixion.

Both Irenaeus and Tertullian championed the resurrection of the flesh against Gnostic teachings. Irenaeus deduces for support, according to the Canon of Truth, the resurrection of Christ's body. The fellowship of the Third Covenant makes it a logical consequence that man's flesh too shall rise. In addition, Irenaeus adduces the indwelling of the Spirit in man's body. He writes: "If then even now hearts of flesh become capable of the Spirit; what wonder if in the resurrection they receive that life which is given by the Spirit?"<sup>40</sup>

His final proof is the Lord's Supper. After God has been invoked on the elements, it is the body and blood of Christ which is able to nourish man's flesh unto the end. Beyond this, Irenaeus holds to a millennialistic view.

Tertullian approaches this subject from another angle. The body must die. Hence when Scripture speaks of the resurrection, it is speaking of the body specifically. Death is an enemy of God, while Christ is God's own Son. Death, therefore, is under subjection to Christ. And when Christ promises the resurrection, He also has the power and authority to accomplish it. Furthermore, the denial of a fleshly resurrection is in reality a denial of the substance of the flesh. Nowhere does even so great a teacher as St. Paul make such a statement. The works that arise from the flesh are condemned, but not the flesh per se. This is Tertullian's line of argument directly

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<sup>40</sup>Irenaeus, Against Heresies, op. cit., p. 480.

against Marcion. He thought the subject so important and so greatly maligned that he penned an additional treatise, De Resurrectione Carnis.<sup>161</sup> In this work Tertullian argues that, from Scripture, it is foolish to degrade the flesh. For God Himself fashioned the flesh and blessed it with a soul. The power of God is fully competent to effect the resurrection. Nature provides us with sufficient examples and analogies, such as, the sun resurrecting the earth after the night. The flesh and the soul also work together as a unit in any and every act. Hence the judgment will call the soul into account as well as the flesh. This is amply stated in both the New and Old Testaments in a literal, not a metaphorical, sense. Prophets, Apostles, and Christ Himself attest to this fact. The session of Christ on the right hand of the Father in His incarnate nature is a guarantee of the resurrection of man's flesh. Christ's resurrection as the Second Adam is a pledge of man's resurrection. Tertullian uses the argument that, as Christ embraced all men in His passion and death, so also will He embrace all men in His resurrection.

#### Summary of Conclusions

Thus the Church's answer to Marcion of Pontus seems to be complete and decisive. Yet the history of the Church shows that many centuries were to pass before this Marcionite strain was eradicated from the Christian community. This would seemingly point to a failure on the part of the witnesses of the Church. Her answer was reasonably clear and rationally understandable, granting the assent to her presuppositions. On the whole, her position was adopted, as the spread of orthodox

Christianity and the resolutions of her councils demonstrate. Yet there remained fringe groups that contained and maintained Marcion-like elements in their theology. But this was not only to be blamed on Marcion. Rather, Marcion is an example of a spirit that was implicit in the Christians of this time. The concept of a metaphysical dualism antedates Marcion, especially in the line of Greek thought. And from the esteem that such Greek philosophy enjoyed during this period, we may conclude that it was a common element in man's thought.

Coupled with this influence factor is also the impact which Christianity had on the morality of the surrounding world. The Christian thinker of the second century could intellectually know what ethic Christianity demanded, but at the same time realize the great gulf that existed between the ideal and the real, as Marcion himself observed. Shocked by the immorality of the professing Christians, he might flee to the desert, or try to localize and rationalize the cause of evil in the flesh of man, and conclude that it must be mortified. We have seen the phenomenon of asceticism begin in this way, and also Marcion's radical dualism. Imbibed with Greek philosophy and following a course dictated by reason, man found someone or something else to blame for his evils.

Another possible factor in the seeming failure of the Church's answer may lie in the negative influence of apologetic itself. The Church's spokesmen could and did succeed in undermining the basis of Marcion's theology, and also succeeded in showing that Christianity had a more valid claim on faith, but they could not argue someone into this faith. This remained the work of God's Spirit, which was accomplished

in God's own time.

Marcion's attack was swift and serious, so serious that it took nearly seventy-five years to answer him. Yet the Church did answer every point of Marcion's theology, God, Christology, Scriptures and Eschatology by employing a counter-proposition method, by utilizing the authority of Scripture, Apostolic Tradition contained in the Regula Fidei. These methods of proof are extremely important to the Roman Church of today. A comparison in this area remains as an additional facet for study. Tertullian's answer in this battle already showed his greatness which later earned him the title of the Father of Latin Christianity. Even his terminology, which was determined not only by this controversy, became normative in Western Christianity to this very day.

In brief summary, the Church's answer to Marcion of Pontus was this: the Gospel, because it rests on revelation, is the sure manifestation of the supreme God, and its acceptance is life eternal. The essential content of this manifestation is the message of the resurrection and eternal life, then the preaching of moral purity on the basis of repentance toward God. Christ is truly the God-Man, the revealer of the Father. He has truly conquered the devil, and the dominion of sin and death. Renunciation takes place in the context of the immanent end, not the essential evilness of matter. Christ has committed to chosen men the preaching of His message. Hence their writings are God's own. Christ also protects their transmission and interpretation. Finally, Christianity is the one, true world religion. The Jewish nation was the world's preparation for Christ.

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