

Lecture 6: The History of Heresy: Ebionites, Gnostics, Marcion, and Montanus

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 70 minutes

Christ and the apostles promised false teachers would come, and this lecture watches them arrive. Busenitz surveys the great early heresies and shows how each forced the church to articulate the truth more clearly, and how nearly every one of them has been regurgitated as a modern cult. Satan, he argues, rarely invents; he relabels.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

The apostles saw it coming

The New Testament is thick with warnings: false prophets known by their fruits, savage wolves not sparing the flock from Paul's own farewell at Miletus, doctrines of demons in the latter times, ears itching for comfortable teachers, mockers following their own lusts. Believers were told to examine everything carefully, and elders are qualified precisely by the ability to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict. Studying the history of error is part of obeying that charge.

02

The Ebionites: the Judaizers' heirs

The Ebionites, first named in the second century, carried the Judaizers' program forward: Justin Martyr reports they held the law of Moses obligatory for Christians, and Irenaeus, first to use the name, likely a wordplay on the Hebrew for poor, wrote against them. They went further than legalism: they denied Christ's deity, the Trinity, the virgin birth, and substitutionary atonement, teaching adoptionism, that Jesus became God's Son at his baptism, and used an altered Gospel according to the Hebrews. Almost everything we know of them comes from the church's replies, since their own writings perished.

03

Restorationism: the old errors come home

Busenitz traces a nineteenth century American pattern he calls restorationism: groups spun off around the Second Great Awakening claiming to have recovered a primitive Christianity lost since the apostles, among them the Churches of Christ, Mormonism, Seventh day Adventism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostalism. Seventh day Adventism, reintroducing dietary law and Sabbath keeping, is in his telling an Ebionite hybrid reborn on American soil.

04

Docetism: the first Christological heresy

Before the deity of Christ was ever attacked, his humanity was. Docetism, from a word meaning appearance, taught that Jesus only seemed to have a body, since Greek dualism held matter evil and spirit good. John answered it directly: the Spirit of God confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh, and the spirit that will not is antichrist. Deny the incarnation and the gospel collapses, for a sacrificial death must be a real death and a mediator between God and men must be a real man.

Gnosticism: salvation by secret knowledge

Full grown Gnosticism, second and third century, wrapped docetism inside a mythology: an unknowable supreme divinity, cascading emanations called aeons, and salvation not from sin but from the evil physical universe, attained by secret knowledge, passwords for the ascent through the spiritual realms. In the Valentinian version Irenaeus fought in his five volume *Against Heresies*, the aeon Sophia falls, her castoff thought bears the Demiurge, an ignorant creator identified with the God of the Old Testament, and the docetic Christ passes through Mary like water through a tube to awaken the enlightened. Paul's phrase fits: knowledge falsely so called.

Mormonism as American gnosis

Even the secular critic Harold Bloom called Mormonism a purely American gnosis. Busenitz reads from Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse: few rightly understand God's character; within man is a spark of divine intellect co-equal with God; a multitude of gods emanated one above another; God was once a man, and man may become a god. Emanated deities, divine sparks, celestial marriages peopling new worlds, and Smith's Masonic ties to secret knowledge: the parallels to ancient Gnosticism run deep.

Marcion: cutting the Bible in half

Marcion, son of a Christian bishop, taught that the wrathful God of the Old Testament was a different and lesser being than the loving heavenly Father of the New, anticipating the modern new atheist caricature. He therefore rejected the whole Old Testament and kept only an edited Luke and edited Paul, scissoring out everything favorable to the Old Testament, which left him mostly his own ideas. Scripture itself refutes the split: the Old Testament's God is described above all by lovingkindness, and the New Testament's God judges sin and punishes evil. Same God, one Bible.

Mani and the two realms

Third century Manichaeism blended Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Gnosticism into a dualism of a realm of light and a realm of darkness locked in eternal struggle, with no omnipotent good and each person a battlefield of both. Busenitz's metaphor for all such syncretism: a glass of water with poison stirred in; the truth mixed in does not purify the poison, the poison contaminates the whole.

Monarchianism: relieving the tension the wrong way

Scripture teaches both that there is one God and that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, three distinct persons. Monarchianism could not hold both and denied the second. Its adoptionist form made Jesus a man promoted to sonship; its modalist form, championed by Sabellius, made Father, Son, and Spirit successive masks of one person: Father in the Old Testament, Son in the Gospels, Spirit now. The fathers called modalism *patripassianism*, for it entails that the Father suffered on the cross.

Why modalism fails, and where it lives now

At Jesus's baptism the Son stands in the water, the Spirit descends, and the Father speaks: three at once, impossible for a God of one mode at a time. To whom did Jesus pray? And baptism is into the one name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Modalism survives today in Oneness Pentecostalism, a controversy that resurfaced when T. D. Jakes, long associated with Oneness groups, was platformed at the Elephant Room. The orthodox path holds both truths and rests the harmony in the mind of God rather than denying either.

Montanism: the New Prophecy

Montanus of Asia Minor, with the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla, announced the age of the Paraclete and delivered ecstatic prophecies he claimed were the Spirit's own binding words, prophesying in the first person as the Spirit. The church rejected the movement: its trance possession was not how the Spirit works; Christ's promise of the Spirit's guidance belonged to the apostles; its prophecies failed, Maximilla foretold nothing after her but the end, and died in 179 with history continuing; it damned non-adherents as unspiritual; and some Montanists slid into Sabellianism. Busenitz draws the parallels to modern Pentecostalism point by point.

What the heresies accomplished

None of these movements went to waste in God's providence. Montanus's claim of new inspiration pressed the church to recognize and circulate the apostolic canon; Marcion's scissors forced clarity about which books carried authority; the Gnostics and modalists forced precise confession of the incarnation and the Trinity. Rome's persecutors made no distinction, and Montanists sometimes died beside the orthodox; Tertullian himself, disgusted by what he saw as worldly compromise, defected to Montanist strictness, a story the course will return to. Error, answered faithfully, sharpened the church's grip on the truth.

SCRIPTUREINTHISLECTURE

Matthew 7 · Matthew 28 · John 14 · Acts 20 · 1 Thessalonians 5 · 1 Timothy 4 · 2 Timothy 4 · Titus 1 · 1 Peter 3 · 2 Peter 2 · 1 John 4 · Jude

KEYTERMS

Ebionites

Second century heirs of the Judaizers who bound the law of Moses on Christians and denied Christ's deity, the virgin birth, and the atonement.

Adoptionism

The claim that Jesus was a man adopted as God's Son, at his baptism or ascension, rather than the eternal Son.

Docetism

The teaching that Christ's body was only an appearance; the first Christological heresy, aimed at his humanity.

Gnosticism

A family of movements offering salvation from the evil material world through secret knowledge, built on Greek dualism.

The Demiurge

Gnosticism's ignorant creator of the physical world, blasphemously identified with the God of the Old Testament.

Marcionism

Marcion's two god system that rejected the Old Testament and kept only a scissored Luke and Paul.

Manichaeism

Mani's third century blend of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Gnosticism: light and darkness in eternal, evenly matched struggle.

Modalism (Sabellianism)

The denial that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons, making them successive modes of one person; alive today in Oneness Pentecostalism.

Montanism

The New Prophecy of Montanus: ecstatic, binding new revelation in the Spirit's own voice, rejected by the universal church.

COMPREHENSION CHECK: FOURTEEN QUESTIONS

1. What did Paul warn the Ephesian elders would happen after his departure?
 - A. The church would be moved to Rome
 - B. Savage wolves would come in, not sparing the flock
 - C. Persecution would end
 - D. The temple would fall
2. The Ebionites were the theological descendants of whom?
 - A. The Sadducees
 - B. The Judaizers
 - C. The Stoics
 - D. The Samaritans
3. What is adoptionism?
 - A. The church adopting Gentile converts
 - B. The claim that Jesus became God's Son at his baptism rather than being the eternal Son
 - C. The practice of adopting orphans
 - D. Adopting the Old Testament canon
4. What does Busenitz mean by restorationism?
 - A. Rebuilding church buildings
 - B. Nineteenth century groups claiming to restore a primitive Christianity lost since the apostles
 - C. The Reformation itself
 - D. Restoring the Latin liturgy
5. Which aspect of Christ did docetism deny?
 - A. His deity
 - B. His real, physical humanity
 - C. His resurrection appearances
 - D. His teaching ministry

6. In Gnosticism, what saves a person?
 - A. Faith in Christ's atonement
 - B. Secret knowledge enabling escape from the material world
 - C. Keeping the law of Moses
 - D. Baptism
7. Who is the Demiurge in Gnostic myth?
 - A. The highest unknowable God
 - B. The ignorant creator of the physical world, identified with the Old Testament's God
 - C. An angel of light
 - D. The Gnostic name for Christ
8. Which teaching of Joseph Smith does the lecture set beside Gnostic emanations?
 - A. That God forbids images
 - B. That a multitude of gods emanated one above another, and man may become a god
 - C. That the canon is closed
 - D. That matter is an illusion
9. What did Marcion do with the Old Testament?
 - A. Translated it into Greek
 - B. Rejected it entirely as the book of a lesser, wrathful god
 - C. Made it the only Scripture
 - D. Allegorized every chapter
10. Why did the fathers call modalism patripassianism?
 - A. Because it exalted the patriarchs
 - B. Because it entails that the Father himself suffered on the cross
 - C. Because it began in Rome
 - D. Because it denied the passion entirely
11. Which biblical scene makes one mode at a time impossible?
 - A. The feeding of the five thousand
 - B. Jesus's baptism, with Son, Spirit, and Father all present at once
 - C. The call of Abraham
 - D. The fall of Jericho
12. In which modern movement does modalism survive?
 - A. Eastern Orthodoxy
 - B. Oneness Pentecostalism
 - C. The Churches of Christ
 - D. Seventh day Adventism
13. Why did Maximilla's prophecy discredit the New Prophecy?
 - A. She recanted
 - B. She foretold that only the end would follow her, and she died in 179 with history continuing
 - C. She joined the Ebionites
 - D. She never prophesied publicly

14. What good did God bring out of Marcion's and Montanus's errors?

- A. The church abandoned prophecy studies
- B. The church was pressed to recognize and defend the true apostolic canon
- C. The Old Testament was shortened
- D. Persecution ended sooner

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 B · 3 B · 4 B · 5 B · 6 B · 7 B · 8 B · 9 B · 10 B · 11 B · 12 B · 13 B · 14 B

TALKITOVER

1. Busenitz says Satan rarely invents new errors, he relabels old ones. Which modern teaching you have encountered matches one of tonight's ancient heresies, and how would you answer it from Scripture?
2. The modalists denied one biblical truth to relieve the tension with another. Where are we tempted to shave down a hard doctrine to make it easier to hold, and what does it cost?
3. Tertullian fled worldliness in the church and landed in a heretical strictness. How does a Christian resist compromise without swinging to an opposite error?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

John's test for every spirit, from his first letter: the Spirit of God confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh.

GOFURTHER

The lecture's own commendations: Bryan Litfin's *Getting to Know the Church Fathers* on Irenaeus and the Gnostics, Nick Needham's *2,000 Years of Christ's Power* on Montanism, and Stephen Nichols's *For Us and for Our Salvation* on the Christological battles.

Lecture by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/historical-theology-1-6