

# *Theology Matters*

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## **The Problem With Marcion: A Second-Century Heresy Continues to Infect the Church**

**by Randall E. Otto**

In the second century the great Christian apologist Tertullian wrote against the heretic Marcion and the divinity he espoused in words that ring with relevance for today:

What a prevaricator of truth is such a god! What a dissembler with his own decision! Afraid to condemn what he really condemns, afraid to hate what he does not love, permitting that to be done which he does not allow, choosing to indicate what he dislikes rather than deeply examine it! This will turn out an imaginary goodness, a phantom of discipline, perfunctory in duty, careless in sin. Listen, ye sinners; and ye who have not yet come to this, hear, that you may attain to such a pass! A better god has been discovered, who never takes offense, is never angry, never inflicts punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, no gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness! He is purely and simply good. He indeed forbids all delinquency, but only in word. He is in you, if you are willing to pay him homage, for the sake of appearances, that you may seem to honour God; for your fear he does not want. And so satisfied are the Marcionites with such pretences, that they have no fear of their god at all.<sup>1</sup>

This “better god” of the second-century heretic Marcion was a god who had nothing to do with law, wrath, or

judgment, but was instead only a god of grace, love, and acceptance. There are many yet today who believe in this god of the second-century heretic Marcion.

Marcion believed that the message of the gospel and the New Testament was simply love and grace, that there was no law or wrath in the God of Jesus Christ. Because the Old Testament often portrays him in terms of law and wrath, Marcion said that the God of the Old Testament was not the God of Jesus Christ, but instead another god who had nothing in common with Jesus and his God. Marcion thus espoused a dualistic view that said there are two deities, the Creator God of the Old Testament whose essential attribute is righteousness, and Jesus’ God of the New Testament whose essential attribute is acceptance. In order to sustain this view, Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and any portions of our present New Testament that did not cohere with his view of Jesus’ God as love. Hence, Marcion only accepted into his New Testament an edited corpus of ten of Paul’s letters and an altered version of the gospel of Luke.

### Table of Contents

“The Problem With Marcion”.....	page 1
“A Consideration of the Contemporary Version of the Nicene Creed” .....	page 9
Study of the Confessions .....	page 13

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It was the heresy of Marcion that moved the early church to conclude on the books that should be included in the New Testament canon, which task it largely completely by the end of the second century.<sup>2</sup> Marcion is always studied in seminary courses pertaining to the development of the New Testament canon, but his significance for hermeneutics (i.e., biblical interpretation), theology, and ethics is less often considered. This is not the dry stuff of dusty church history volumes. This heresy persists today and those who have not learned from that history will find the church doomed to return repeatedly to this conflict. As the translator of Tertullian's *Against Marcion* wrote in 1868, "If Marcionism is in the letter obsolete, there is its spirit still left in the church, which in more ways than one develops its ancient characteristics."<sup>3</sup>

The spirit of Marcionism is seen in the church where the Old Testament and its teaching on the nature and requirements of God are dismissed, where the concepts of law, wrath, and righteousness are minimized or disregarded altogether. The "ancient characteristics" of this heresy are manifested in aberrant and confused perceptions of God, salvation, and Scripture. Many in the church believe in a god "who never takes offense, is never angry, never inflicts punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, no gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness, [who] is purely and simply good." Many do not recognize all scripture as the written Word of God, but instead only accept those portions that fit with their view of God as non-judgmental and accepting of all. The ramifications of this view of God for soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) are an implicit universalism which says that all are accepted by God, regardless of whether they repent of sin. The very nature of the gospel is thus thrown into question, as is what people mean when they say they believe the gospel and are Christians. As Tertullian said, "this will turn out an imaginary goodness, a phantom of discipline, perfunctory in duty, careless in sin," effects all too readily seen in the contemporary church. The problem of Marcion is, therefore, real and relevant. As occurred in the second century, so today there are those who, as Irenaeus said of Marcion, "set forth, indeed, the name of Christ Jesus as a sort of lure, but in various ways they. . .destroy multitudes, wickedly disseminating their own doctrines by the use of a good name, and through means of its sweetness and beauty, extending to their hearers the bitter and malignant poison of the serpent, the great author of apostasy."<sup>4</sup> It behooves the church to consider, then, how the problem of Marcion is manifested today in contemporary views of God, Scripture, and salvation.

### **Marcion's View of God**

Marcion was a native of Sinope in Pontus of Asia Minor, a trading axis of the upper-Mediterranean and a crossroads of intellectual exchange. It was a place of religious syncretism, where the Iranian and Babylonian dualistic theologies of Mithra and Ahura Mazda existed alongside a Judaism that as a result of the Jewish revolts of 66-135 AD was indifferent toward the Law.<sup>5</sup> These factors combined to influence the system of Marcion, the son of a church

bishop. Marcion was eventually excommunicated by his father from the church, allegedly for seducing a virgin.<sup>6</sup> Marcion then made his way to Rome around 140, attaching himself to a local orthodox church. Apparently well off as a ship owner, Marcion made a large donation to the church which was rejected and returned once his heretical views were discovered.<sup>7</sup> In the next few years he systematized his views and began to organize his followers into churches that appeared to the untrained eye to be orthodox churches.<sup>8</sup> Though espousing a heresy, Marcion's churches had every appearance of being fully Christian. A contemporary of Marcion, the apologist Justin Martyr, said that "by the aid of devils, [he] has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies, and to deny that God is the maker of this universe, and to assert some other being, greater than He, [who] has done greater works;" notwithstanding, "all who take their opinions" from him were still "called Christians."<sup>9</sup> Many of Marcion's followers died alongside Christians in the persecutions. "They say that they have a multitude of martyrs for Christ; yet they do not confess Christ himself in truth."<sup>10</sup> Though Marcion was formally excommunicated in 144, he continued to propagate his heretical views, gather followers, and organize churches that in some places persisted into the fifth century. Strains of Marcion's heresy remain in the Church to this very day.

The basis of Marcion's system was dualism, a belief in two competing divine persons and principles. This system was set forth in his no longer extant work *Antitheses*, wherein he set forth the opposition of law and gospel, flesh and spirit, Old Testament Creator God and New Testament God of Jesus Christ. Although from the time of the early apologists, efforts have been made to locate the source of Marcion's dualism in Iranian speculation, Jewish cosmology, Gnosticism, and philosophers as diverse as Plato, Empedocles, and Epicurus, there can be little doubt that Marcion's views were largely derived from his peculiar reading of the Pauline epistles. The apostle Paul stated that God in Jesus Christ had overcome the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4), who Marcion construed to be the Creator God of the Old Testament. Paul wrote to Christians who were tempted to return to the rites and ceremonial practices of the Old Testament law, "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?" (Gal. 4:8-9). Marcion understood this to mean that the Old Testament God was not the God of salvation, but rather of enslavement. The many passages in the Pauline epistles which contrast God and false deities or the devil, spirit and flesh, gospel and law, were all taken by Marcion to entail a radical discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New.

Marcion thus believed that the Creator God of the Old Testament was a demiurge, a lower God who must be distinguished from the higher God of the New Testament, the "alien God" unknown prior to his revelation in Jesus Christ. The Creator God of the Old Testament was full of darkness and evil who enjoyed keeping people in slavery

to sin, which is why he gave them the law. The justice and judgment of this Creator God of the Old Testament was severe, harsh, and unbending. "There can be no doubt that Marcion identified *righteousness* as the *essential* characteristic of the Creator-God."<sup>11</sup> The Creator offered no redemption, but instead tyrannically demanded absolute obedience to the most minute demands which he would change arbitrarily in order to bewilder humanity. Adolf von Harnack summarizes Marcion's criticism of the Old Testament Creator-God in its two key aspects, cruel wrath and temporal fulfillment:

First, it was intended to bring to light the unmerciful "righteousness," harassing strictness and cruelties, passions, zeal, and wrath of the creator of the world; further, his evil partialities, pettinesses, and limitations; and finally his weakness and self-contradictions, his unprincipled whims, and his precepts and commandments which were so often ethically doubtful. This criticism reached its climax in the proof that he was even the "*conditor malorum*," the author of evil, the one who incites wars, is deceitful in his promises, and is wicked in his deeds. Second, this criticism was intended to show that all the promises of the creator of the world are earthly and temporal and, insofar as they were not altogether insupportable, had already been fulfilled in the history of the Jewish people or would yet be fulfilled there. For this reason also the promised Messiah is an earthly warrior-king who would actually yet come; but the prophecies that pointed toward him are not numerous, since most of them have already been fulfilled in David, Solomon, and others, and are falsely assigned to the future Messiah.<sup>12</sup>

Such a god was not only unworthy of worship, but one to be despised and condemned.

The God of the New Testament, on the other hand, had been unknown until the revelation made in Jesus Christ. This alien God is a higher God who redeems as a free gift of his love. Marcion characterized this higher, alien God as supremely *good*, as *goodness* itself, and primary and perfect *goodness*. As altogether good and therefore loving, he was considered incapable of becoming angry or condemning anyone. His justice was the justice of love that accomplished the redemption of all in Christ Jesus.

Marcion's reading of the Pauline epistles was clearly idiosyncratic, an easy prey for acute apologists such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Origen, among others. They showed from the Old Testament how the God manifested there is regularly spoken of as "good" (Ps. 73:1; Lam. 3:25, e.g.). They also made clear that the Creator God must necessarily be the same as the God manifested in Christ by reason of the manifold Old Testament allusions and explicit citations concerning him in the New Testament. Moreover, these apologists show how goodness cannot be separated from justice into two gods. Tertullian explained the necessity of God's judgment to the demonstration of his goodness:

We dread the Creator's tremendous threats, and yet scarcely turn away from evil. What, if He threatened not? Will you call this justice an evil, when it is all unfavourable to evil? Will you deny it to be a good, when it has its eye towards good? What sort of being ought you to wish God to be? Would it be right to prefer that He should be such, that sins might flourish under Him, and the devil make mock at Him? Would you suppose Him to be a good God, who should be able to make a man worse by security in sin? Who is the author of good, but He who also requires it?<sup>13</sup>

The essence of God's very character is holiness—righteousness and goodness cannot, therefore, be separated.<sup>14</sup> While distinctions may be made in the metaphysical and moral attributes of God, the idea of goodness entails perfection in both. "In our ascription of goodness to God the fundamental idea is that He is in every way all that He as God should be, and therefore answers perfectly to the ideal expressed in the word 'God'.<sup>15</sup> It is because God is holy, righteous and altogether good that he demands his people be holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2, 20:7, cited in 1 Pet. 1:16). The sinner in himself is unable to comply with these good (i.e., just and righteous) demands of this one and holy God, but in his goodness (i.e., love, grace, and mercy) he has provided in Christ for the forgiveness of his people, chosen "before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:3).

The questions Tertullian raised concerning the nature of God are fundamental to theology in the church today. What kind of God is being preached in Presbyterian pulpits? Is it the God of orthodox Christian faith and the Reformed confessions, "abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty?"<sup>16</sup> Or is it "Marcion's god: tolerant of evil, encouraging wrong, wheedling about his grace, prevaricating in his goodness?"<sup>17</sup> The extent to which what Scripture calls sin is diluted (or deleted) from the pulpit and what Scripture declares evil is commended is the extent to which the heretical god of Marcion is being proclaimed and not the God of historic, orthodox Christian faith. The goddesses of feminist theology and the god that accepts sexual perversion are only the most blatant examples of the heretical deities who are being proclaimed in the name of Christ and leading others astray. These are all versions of "the better god who never takes offence, is never angry, never inflicts punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, who forbids all delinquency, but only in word," as Tertullian observed. This god may let people do whatever they want and freely accept their "justice-love," but this is not the God of orthodox Christian faith. The true God commands the obedience of all and will judge those who refuse to repent of what Scripture clearly calls sin.

The effect of proclaiming and believing in Marcion's weak and indifferent god is moral and spiritual weakness and indifference. "If you do not fear God as being good, why

do you not boil over into every kind of lust?," asked Tertullian.<sup>18</sup> Because many in the Church today have imbibed a Marcionite view of the God of Jesus Christ and believe they are accepted regardless of how they think or live, they have indeed boiled over into lusts of every kind. This raises questions as to the nature of the salvation to which they lay claim.

### Marcion's View of Salvation

Marcion's dualism was thoroughgoing and based ultimately on his radical distinction between the law and the gospel. He saw no goodness in the God of the Old Testament, but only judgment stemming from the imposition of law. On the other hand, the God of the New Testament was altogether good, because he had nothing to do with law, but was accepting of all and did not judge. Once again, this radical disjunction follows from Marcion's idiosyncratic reading of the Pauline epistles. Paul does speak of "a righteousness from God, apart from the law" made known in Christ, but it is the righteousness "to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (Rom. 3:21). This demonstrates again the continuity that exists in the righteous demands of the one God of both covenants. While "we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law," this does not in any way nullify the law, Paul says, but rather confirms it (Rom. 3:31) as the righteous expectations of God for his people. While the law does reveal to humanity its sin (Rom. 3:20) and its curse of death (Gal. 3:10) so that no human can be justified by the law (Gal. 3:11-25), this does not mean the law is defective; instead, it means human beings are defective, i.e., enslaved to sin. "What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature," God sent Christ to do in the likeness of sinful humanity "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4). The flesh is hostile to God's law and will not submit to it (Rom. 8:7), but those who walk in the Spirit will fulfill God's law, not in order to be justified, but because they are already justified. Thus, while "Christ is the end of the law" as a means of justification for everyone who truly believes (Rom. 10:4), "the law is holy and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12) and is enacted by the one living in the Spirit in demonstration of justification.

Reformed theology has always maintained the interrelation of law and gospel, not the opposition of the law and gospel.

The Churches of the Reformation from the very beginning distinguished between the law and the gospel as the two parts of the Word of God as a means of grace. This distinction was not understood to be identical with that between the Old and the New Testament, but was regarded as a distinction that applies to both Testaments. There is law and gospel in the Old Testament, and there is law and gospel in the New.<sup>19</sup>

The law is fundamentally the revelation in Scripture of God's expectations for humanity. The Second Helvetic Confession says, "The will of God is explained for us in the law of God, what he wills or does not will us to do, what is good and just, or what is evil and unjust. Therefore we confess that the law is good and holy."<sup>20</sup> The law shows sinful humanity what God's holiness commands, revealing the innate depravity and utter inability of anyone to come unto God or do any spiritual good apart from his grace. The law thus convicts sinners of their condemnation and need, which by the Spirit's enabling grace moves them to repent of their sin and seek God's mercy in Christ. The law is essentially the means of grace unto repentance and the gospel is the means of grace unto faith in the salvation God has provided in Christ, which results in a life of new obedience to the law through the transforming power of the Spirit.

The law is thus imperative to recognizing God's holy expectations. Without law, there cannot be a genuine recognition of sin or of need for true repentance. Thus, by doing away with the law, Marcion did away with sin, for "sin is not taken into account when there is no law" (Rom. 5:13). "Marcion emphasized Rom 5.13 as the explanation of 5.12, 19: It is the *aemulatio* [jealousy] of the Creator, as expressed in the law, that brings about the disobedience of man and the 'death that reigned from Adam to Moses'. But in Marcion's thought, 'sin' in the sense of a guilt-accruing or punishable transgression is unknown."<sup>21</sup> Sin, according to Marcion, was imposed on human beings by an evil God through the law. "He is a sinner not in virtue of being a descendant of Adam, but because he is a child of the lesser God."<sup>22</sup> Marcion believed that the God of Jesus Christ had done away with the law and thus with any recognition of sin. Hence, without the law, Marcion and his followers were no longer conscious of sin (Rom. 3:21; 7:7-8). "In contrast with Paul, Augustine, and Luther, Marcion is a stranger to the consciousness of sin."<sup>23</sup>

There is little question that a Marcionite view of sin has infected the Church. There is a tacit antinomianism afoot amongst liberals implying that baptism into Christ frees one from the demands of the law in order to do anything one wishes.<sup>24</sup> This has nowhere been more evident than in the discussions held on the amendments pertaining to the requirements for the ordination of officers of the church. Those who politic for a loosening of the historic standards of the church have based their views largely on the subjectivity of personal experience, that they feel good about their aberrant sexuality and believe God must therefore accept it, despite the fact that Scripture categorically condemns such behavior. No explanation was offered for how one could affirm homosexual or any other extra-marital practice when Scripture explicitly condemns it (Gen. 19:5; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10). Instead, proponents of lessening the standards laughed off such condemnations as vestiges of a bygone era (of a bygone God?) and stressed instead the need to be loving, just and welcoming.

"What did Jesus say about homosexuality?," was commonly asked, as though his silence on this issue

implies his affirmation of it. This again tacitly presumes the Marcionite view that Jesus and the gospel stand in contradiction to the law and the prophets. The words of Jesus printed in red ink in so many Bibles have no greater value than the rest of God's Word printed in black. The first words recorded of Jesus in the earliest gospel testify to the centrality of repentance to the gospel: "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk. 1:15). There can be no good news to believe unless one believes the bad news that he is condemned in his sinful state. "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Lk. 13:5).

"Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ."<sup>25</sup> By the grace of true repentance the sinner recognizes his sinfulness "as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God," so that he "grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments."<sup>26</sup> There can be no genuine conversion without the true repentance of the sinner. The dying of the old self in repentance means, the Heidelberg Catechism says, "sincere sorrow over our sins and more and more to hate them and to flee from them" (Q. 89). True repentance does not justify and vindicate what Scripture calls sin, but demands the turning away from such. Grace granted by the Holy Spirit in the new birth effects "a strong desire to live according to the will of God in all good works," which are only those done "out of true faith, in accordance with the Law of God, and for his glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on the traditions of men" (Qs 90-91).<sup>27</sup> Opinions of "justice-love" that oppose God's love as revealed in his law thus stand condemned as works not done out of true repentance and saving faith. True love for God is demonstrated in the keeping of his law from a heart and life transformed by the efficacious grace of the Holy Spirit.

"Evil for Marcion is not so much moral as physical evil; not sin so much as suffering. Marcion was more concerned over the ugliness and misery of man's environment than the ugly passions of man's heart."<sup>28</sup> Because evil was largely physical, Jesus could not have been fully human; for Marcion, he only appeared to be human. This ancient heresy was known as *docetism*, from the Greek *dokeō*, meaning "to seem." Jesus only *seemed* to have a human body; in reality he did not and therefore he only *seemed* to die on a cross and be raised from the dead. While Marcion spoke of the death of Christ as purchasing the salvation of those who believe, the nature of this death was suspect, since Christ did not have an actual body.

Marcion spoke of Christ's death in terms of a purchase from the Creator. He acquired those who were not his by means of being put to death by the Creator. The point of Christ's death, therefore, "was not so much to make possible the forgiveness of sins as to cancel the Creator's claims upon his creatures."<sup>29</sup> By Christ's death, believers were freed from the demands of the Creator's law. While Marcion and many of his followers lived very ascetically,

his view of salvation meant the believer "needs no standards of what is moral and no justification for it."<sup>30</sup>

Marcion was basically a universalist as to the extent of salvation. Thus Harnack says, "Because the good God intended to redeem sinners, he brought his redemption *to the whole of humanity*. He knows no partiality for *one* people but brings a universal redemption."<sup>31</sup> There were two important exceptions, however, to this universalism. First, it was only the soul that was redeemed, not the body. "According to what Marcion taught about matter and the flesh, the decision could not be in doubt for him: only the soul is saved."<sup>32</sup> Marcion thought the flesh contained nothing essential to humanity. Second, those who renounced the Creator by faith in the new God of Jesus Christ were saved, as were those rejected by the Creator in the underworld. According to Marcion, in the underworld there were the Creator's outcasts as well as his righteous ones. By his descent into that underworld after his death, Christ was said to have freed those who had not surrendered themselves to the Creator's law, whereas those who had lived according to that law were left unredeemed.<sup>33</sup> The consequences of this are utterly astounding: all who had ever lived contrary to God's law were redeemed by Christ, while those upheld in the Bible as paragons of faith were denied entrance into God's kingdom.

Salvation will be the attainment only of those souls which had learned his doctrine; while the body, as having been taken from the earth, is incapable of sharing in salvation. In addition to this blasphemy against God Himself, he advanced this also, truly speaking as with the mouth of the devil, and saying all things in direct opposition to the truth,—that Cain, and those like him, and the Sodomites, and the Egyptians, and others like them, and, in fine, all the nations who walked in all sorts of abomination, were saved by the Lord, on His descending into Hades, and on their running unto Him, and that they welcomed Him into their kingdom. But the serpent which was in Marcion declared that Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and those other righteous men who sprang from the patriarch Abraham, with all the prophets, and those who were pleasing to God, did not partake in salvation.<sup>34</sup>

The vestiges of such a view of salvation remain today. The Sophia cult's disdain for the broken body and blood of Jesus demonstrates a quasi-docetic view of Christ, since salvation is not dependent on his actual death on the cross. The insistence by feminists, pro-choicers, and gays that they may do what they want with the body demonstrates the Marcionite view that salvation does not pertain to the body. In developing "*with utmost consistency the religion of inwardness*,"<sup>35</sup> Marcion paved the way for the prevalent view among liberals that religious experience is subject not to the objective norm of Scripture, but is instead validated by personal subjectivity. Having been freed from law through Christ, the Marcionites of today believe they need not fear any judgment by the God of the Old Testament, but instead may exalt a host of deities or reimagine God as they themselves wish. The Marcionite view of salvation as

freedom from all divine commands, as an inward experience with no affect on the body, and as universal acceptance regardless of repentance or faith aptly characterizes much of what is called “Christian” today.

### Marcion’s View of Scripture

Marcion was a pivotal influence in the development of the New Testament canon. Although some have been so bold as to say, “Marcion is primarily responsible for the idea of the New Testament,”<sup>36</sup> this seems overstated. “Much controversy still surrounds the exact role of Marcion in relation to the process.”<sup>37</sup> Overall, it seems best to say that the idea of a compilation of New Testament books into a canon, that is, a normative standard of authority (Greek, *kanōn*), was endemic to and patterned after the Church’s acceptance of the Old Testament, which was never in question. The Church’s recognition of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the promises made in the Old Testament to Israel for a consummate prophet, priest, and king elicited the need to record his teachings and deeds as well as those of his specially authorized representatives, the apostles.

Marcion was the first person known to have published a fixed collection of New Testament books. His understanding of the gospel, however, required that his collection be a truncated version of the New Testament canon. Not only did he reject the Old Testament, but he also maintained that the original apostles had corrupted Jesus’ teaching with a mixture of legalism. Only Paul had truly understood the gospel and for this reason the Pauline epistles were central to Marcion’s New Testament. For Marcion, “the apostles are neither more nor less enlightened than other men, Paul (because of his special revelation) being the only exception.”<sup>38</sup>

Even Paul’s letters were not without accretions of law, thought Marcion. It was for that reason that he altered even the corpus of ten Pauline letters that he accepted.<sup>39</sup> He therefore removed from Paul’s letters anything that appeared to contradict his dualistic system, attributing it to a Judaizing editor. Even the book of Galatians, which Marcion believed provided the strongest case for his perspective and which was thus the first epistle in his New Testament, was beset with purported corruptions which had to be removed, such as the mention of Abraham as the father of all who are justified (Gal. 3:6-9) and the continuity of relationship between law and gospel (Gal. 3:15-25). Marcion’s edition of Romans lacked 1:19-2:1; 3:21-4:25, all of chapters 9-11 except 10:1-4 and 11:33-36, and everything after 14:23. The idea of establishing the law through faith (Rom. 3:31), the importance of Abraham in Romans 4 and the concentration of Old Testament proof-texts in chapters 9-11 were all incompatible with Marcion’s view and so were excised. In addition to his alterations of the text, Marcion also supplied each book with a “prologue” in which he subtly portrayed the character of the book from his vantage point.

Marcion utilized this same method with the only gospel he accepted, Luke. Why he chose Luke is unclear, but it may be that he believed it had some association with Paul.

Marcion’s edition of Luke began with 3:1 and then removed all the subsequent material relating to John the Baptist’s ministry and his baptism of Jesus, the genealogy of 3:23-38 tracing Jesus’ ancestry back to Adam and through Abraham and David, and the temptation narrative (4:1-13), since they demonstrated the continuity and validity of the Old Testament. Since Marcion could not tolerate the idea of Jesus preaching in a synagogue that he was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (4:16-30), Marcion removed this as well. Thus, Marcion’s edition of Luke began with our 3:1 and then continued with 4:31, with alterations he deemed necessary continuing thereafter.<sup>40</sup>

There can be little question that Marcion’s early foray into textual criticism was driven by hermeneutical interests sustaining his dualistic views. Some have thus questioned his honesty in artificially joining sentences which in the text lay far apart in order to bring out an entirely different idea and frequently turning an idea into its exact opposite by the addition or subtraction of syllables or words. “We should not take it amiss in those who stood nearer to Marcion when under the impact of his spiritual significance they were more doubtful of his honesty than of his rationality and therefore more often accused him of audacious forgery than of fanatical blindness.”<sup>41</sup>

Commentators on Marcion often mention the continuing discomfort of some in the Church with the Old Testament. The Lutheran pastor Hemchand Gossai has well said that the church is content with simply having the Old Testament “being there” without having it form the basis for the teaching of the New Testament. “The Old Testament is not seen to be the Word of God,” and “where this is the perception of the minister, it is inevitably transmitted to the laity.”<sup>42</sup> The result is a theology that is bereft of its firm foundation, with leaders who do not know the basis for the faith. Though they may pay lip-service to the canonical authority of the Old and New Testaments, the reality is they have discounted those portions that do not suit their preconceived notion of what God and the gospel ought to be.

The totality of Scripture is not viewed as authoritative by many who exercise leadership in the Presbyterian Church. All who are ordained in the church affirm “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” (G-14.0207b., 14.0405b.[2]). Notwithstanding, the “Call to Covenant Community,” issued by the Covenant Network of Amendment A promoters and supported by Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, Voices of Sophia, and other liberal “inclusivists,” speaks of “the process of discerning God’s Word in the words of scripture.” This is implicitly the Marcionite procedure, which denies as authoritative and canonical that which fails to support one’s theological or ethical predispositions. Every confession in the *Book of Confessions* says that Old and New Testaments in their entirety are the unique and authoritative written Word of God and as such are the only rule of faith and practice.

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.

And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either addressed to or taken from the same.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, while the “Call to Covenant Community” acknowledges the importance of “the faithful reading of the Bible by those who seek the Holy Spirit,” one cannot help but wonder how *their* “faithful reading” can be so at odds with those by whom the Holy Spirit has spoken throughout church history in the formulation of the confessions and ethical stance of the church and who continue to uphold those fundamentals yet today. It is hard to avoid the impression that the “process of discerning God’s Word in the words of scripture” is being driven by hermeneutical interests in opposition to the Holy Spirit’s voice in the church throughout history and yet today. Indeed, the way Scripture is treated by proponents of alternative lifestyles in the church is often a travesty. What is worse, that methodology is carried out with greater subtlety than Marcion’s more flagrant excision of whole portions of Scripture. Thus, Gossai rightly says, “what we face in the church today, with respect to the value and use of the Old Testament is decidedly more dangerous than Marcion’s design,” since today “the indifference to the value and relevance of the Old Testament leads to the interpretation of the New Testament in a vacuous state.”<sup>44</sup> The danger is that people will embrace the views of God, the gospel, and Scripture for which Marcion was rightly condemned.

## Conclusion

The church today is infected with vestiges of an ancient and very subtle disease, the heresy of Marcionism. God is viewed by many as accepting all people and as tolerating all evil. He is, therefore, not feared, but instead is invoked through the name of Christ by a host of political operatives in the service of other deities, resulting in the leading astray of many. The gospel is viewed apart from law, grace apart from sin, faith apart from repentance, and Christ apart from his bodily nature. He who came to save and transform the entire person and the whole of culture for his glory is reduced to a subjective idea of acceptance. Finally, Scripture is viewed as bearing witness to God by the Marcionite method of abandoning the Old Testament and all portions of the New Testament that do not agree with a God of complete acceptance.

Just as Marcion “might have been teaching for years without being recognized as a false teacher,”<sup>45</sup> there are those in the church today who have been teaching for

many years without having their false teaching exposed. While they may view their work of changing the church’s historic teaching as “evangelism,”<sup>46</sup> they are leading people astray. “Far from segregating themselves, sectlike, from the great church, the Marcionites constantly sought to exert a missionary influence upon that church and to absorb the whole of Christendom.”<sup>47</sup> May the God of orthodoxy preserve his church from the problem of Marcion.

1. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.27 (Ante-Nicene Fathers 3:292 [hereafter ANF])
2. Brooke F. Westcott says, “from the time of Irenaeus [c. 130-c.200] the New Testament was composed essentially of the same books which we receive at present, and that they were regarded with the same reverence as is now shown to them” (*A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* [London: Macmillan, 1896], 7). More recently, Brevard Childs says there is “a remarkable consensus among modern scholars” that “by AD 200 the four gospels were widely reckoned as Scripture on a par with the Old Testament along with a corpus of Pauline letters” (*The New Testament as Canon* [Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994], 18). Other letters were debated for some time thereafter.
3. Peter Holmes, “Preface by the Translator,” Tertullian, *Against Marcion* (ANF 3:269-270). In an article entitled “Marcion strikes again” (*Concordia Journal* 12 [1986]:42-43), Horace Hummel chided the Lutheran’s Concordia Publishing House for its decision to drop the Old Testament reading from the Every Sunday Bulletin Series, a decision that was later rescinded. Cf. also “The Ghost of Marcion” (<http://www.iahushua.com/~gatesofeden/marcion.htm>).
4. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 27.4 (ANF, 1:353).
5. R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 25.
6. The allegation was made by Hippolytus (c. 170-236) who, according to Adolf von Harnack, (*Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* [Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1990], 16) made similar charges against other heretics using the language of seduction figuratively of the virgin church. Because this allegation is not repeated by any of the other apologists who wrote against Marcion, Harnack believes the seduction “does not deserve any confidence” as literal immorality. Since, however, Marcion had not yet formulated or promulgated his heretical views, it is hard to see how he could be said to have “seduced” the virgin church at this early juncture. Taking the words figuratively thus assumes an anachronism in Hippolytus’ report.
7. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.4 (ANF 3:349), *On Prescription Against Heretics* 30 (ANF 3:257).
8. So close was the resemblance between orthodox and Marcionite practice that the fourth century bishop Cyril of Jerusalem warned catechumens, i.e., those being instructed in the faith, against wandering into a Marcionite place of worship by mistake (*Catechetical Lectures*, 18.26 [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 7:141; hereafter NPNF]).
9. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 27 (ANF, 1:171).
10. Eusebius, *Church History* 5.16.21 (NPNF, 1:233).
11. Harnack, *Marcion*, 69.
12. *Ibid.*, 58. Although it is outside the scope of this study, these two elements were also pivotal parts of the early dispensationalist theology propounded by C. I. Scofield, who said that people in the Old Testament were saved by obeying the law and that Christ’s intention of establishing an earthly kingdom was postponed by the crucifixion. Cf., e.g., William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 17-23, 30-37; Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Swengel, PA: Reiner,

- 1978), 39-98. While dispensationalism has modified these views considerably in rapprochement with covenant theology, the radical discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments is still fundamental to its hermeneutic.
13. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.13 (ANF, 3:307-308).
  14. A. H. Strong contends forcefully for holiness as the fundamental attribute of God (*Systematic Theology* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907], 295-303). L. Berkhof says, "It does not seem proper to speak of one attribute of God as being more central and fundamental than another; but if this were permissible, the Scriptural emphasis on the holiness of God would seem to justify its selection" (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941], 73).
  15. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 70.
  16. Westminster Confession, 2.1 (*Book of Confessions* 6.011), citing Exod. 34:6-7, Heb. 11:6, Neh. 9:32-33, Hab. 1:13; Ps. 5:5-6, Nah. 1:2-3 (all passages which Marcion would have conveniently refused to accept).
  17. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.22 (ANF, 3:288).
  18. *Ibid.*, 1.27 (ANF, 3:292).
  19. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 612.
  20. Chapter 12 (*Book of Confessions*, 5.080).
  21. Hoffmann, *Restitution of Christianity*, 212-213.
  22. *Ibid.*, 215.
  23. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948), 104. Blackman does well to criticize Harnack for saying that Marcion anticipated Luther's law-gospel and faith versus works perspective. Marcion, he says, empties and despiritualizes this distinction into the mythology of two gods.
  24. Gerard S. Sloyan says, "It is a basic tenet of nineteenth-century theological liberalism that in Christianity the Law was completely superceded by love. Whatever else may be said of this view, it is not one that squares with the NT data." Rather, "the law of Christ was a law of love because the Sinai dispensation had been a law of love" (*Is Christ the End of the Law?* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 56). While liberalism has evolved since the nineteenth century, its essential tenets have remained the same.
  25. Westminster Confession of Faith 17.1 (*Book of Confessions* 6.081).
  26. Westminster Confession of Faith 17.2 (*Book of Confessions*, 6.082).
  27. *Book of Confessions*, 4.089-091.
  28. Blackman, *Marcion and his Influence*, 106.
  29. *Ibid.*, 102.
  30. Harnack, *The Alien God*, 89. Marcion's strict asceticism derived from his disgust for the Creator. He forbade sexual intercourse and marriage and insisted that eating, drinking, and all contact with the created order should be limited as much as possible so as to destroy and defy the works of the Creator (*ibid.*, 96-97).
  31. *Ibid.*, 82.
  32. *Ibid.*, 89.
  33. The "descent" clause occurred for the first time in the baptismal formula that became the Apostles' Creed around 390. Its original intention was to explain the burial of Christ, which phrase it originally replaced. Its appearance with the burial seems to have first occurred in statements of the heretical Arians around 360. "While the intention behind the original insertion of the article is dubious at best, and while it is apparent that the meaning originally denoted by the descensus has been altered by its conjunction with the burial, the church has generally continued to hold to the article, this despite the fact that no consensus has been or apparently can be reached on its meaning. To include such a mysterious article in the creed, which is supposed to be a summary of the basic and vital tenets of the faith, seems very unwise" (Randall E. Otto, "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 [1990] 150, cited with approval by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 594).
  34. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 27.3 (ANF 1:352).
  35. Harnack, *The Alien God*, 3.
  36. John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942), 31.
  37. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 19.
  38. Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity*, 229.
  39. It is probably less the case that Marcion refused to accept the Pastoral Epistles as that he simply did not know of them. So F. F. Bruce (*The Canon of Scripture* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988], 138-139), who observes that this was evidently the case with the Chester Beatty codex of Paul's letters (P46), dated c. 200.
  40. Bruce's chapter on Marcion has these and other details (*Canon of Scripture*, 134-144).
  41. Theodor von Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (1888), 1:625f., 717, cited by Harnack, *The Alien God*, 47.
  42. Gossai, "The Old Testament: a heresy continued?," *Word & World* 8 (1988):150.
  43. Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 1 (*Book of Confessions* 5.001); cf. also Scots Confession, chap. 19 (3.19), Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.2; even with its Barthian undercurrents, so also The Confession of 1967, I.C.2 (9.27).
  44. Gossai, "The Old Testament: a heresy continued?," 154.
  45. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament*, 12.
  46. The More Light Churches Network has merged with the Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns to further its effort to "convert" the church to its views. "The Rev. Jane Spahr, an evangelist hired by the Downtown Church in Rochester, N.Y., to educate the denomination on gay and lesbian concerns, is laying the groundwork for local congregations to hire what she calls 'regional evangelists.'" (*News Briefs, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.]*, No. 9818 [June 19, 1998], 11-12). A coalition of ten New York City Presbyterian churches, called Presbyterian Welcome, has already hired a part-time "regional evangelist" from the United Church of Christ, the only denomination to approve of the ordination of openly practicing gays and lesbians. The fact that the Presbyterian Church has recently entered into full communion with the United Church of Christ, recognizing its ministers as having equal standing in this church, will likely result in more of these hirings.
  47. Harnack, *The Alien God*, 99.

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# The Proposed Contemporary Version of the Nicene Creed

1 We believe in one God,  
2 the Father, the Almighty,  
3 maker of heaven and earth,  
4 of all that is,  
seen and unseen.

5 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
6 the only Son of God,  
7 eternally begotten of the Father,  
8 God from God, Light from Light,  
9 true God from true God,  
10 begotten, not made,  
11 of one Being with the Father;  
12 through him all things were made.  
13 For us and for our salvation  
14 he came down from heaven,  
15 was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
16 and became truly human.  
17 For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
18 he suffered death and was buried.  
19 On the third day he rose again  
20 in accordance with the Scriptures;  
21 he ascended into heaven  
22 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
23 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
24 and his kingdom will have no end.

25 We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
26 who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
27 who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
28 who has spoken through the prophets.  
29 We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.  
30 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
31 We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
32 and the life of the world to come. Amen

## A Consideration of the Proposed Contemporary Version of the Nicene Creed

by Stephen Eyre

It appears that our denomination is getting the message that indeed theology does matter. I attended the 1997 and 1998 General Assemblies. Both years, I observed the committees assigned to deal with theological issues.

In both 1997 and 1998 the theology committees received overtures calling for a retranslation of the Heidelberg Catechism to remove the answer to question 87. That answer makes an explicit statement about homosexuality as sin.

I was impressed at the skill displayed in politics and debate by the theology committees at both General Assemblies. The advocates for removing the statement from the Heidelberg Catechism identifying homosexuality as sin cloaked their position by appeals for a more accurate and contemporary translation. Both years, the motion for a new translation made it out of the committee and onto the floor of the General Assembly. However, both years the motions were defeated on the floor of the Assembly.

In addition to the Heidelberg Catechism, there was a motion both years to place a new translation of the Nicene Creed into our *Book of Confessions*. As with the Heidelberg, the motions made it out of committee. The difference was that the motion for a new translation of the Nicene Creed was passed on the floor of the GA. (There was one difference between the actions of the two committees on the Nicene Creed. The first year, the committee pondered a parenthesis around the filioque clause. They decided not only to remove the parenthesis but the entire clause as well! Thankfully, when the Nicene Creed came up for consideration the second year, 1998, the clause had been replaced and the parenthesis removed.)

As a result of the 209<sup>th</sup> General Assembly's action in 1997, a Special Committee on the Nicene Creed was appointed by the Moderator, Patricia Brown. After the Special Committee on the Nicene Creed reviewed the proposed translation, they brought it back to the 210<sup>th</sup> General Assembly which then affirmed the work of the Special Committee on the Nicene Creed and sent it to the presbyteries for a vote. Two-thirds of the presbyteries must approve the new version for it to replace the Traditional version in the *Book of Confessions*.

The proposed replacement version of the Nicene Creed, commonly referred to as the Ecumenical Version, was produced by The English Language Liturgical Consultation in 1988. The ELLC, constituted in 1985, was charged with preparing contemporary translations of thirteen basic liturgical texts. The Ecumenical Version of the Nicene Creed was one of those thirteen basic texts. In making their translations, they used the following guidelines:

- I. In order to avoid pastoral disruption, only necessary changes should be made.
- II. Language for human beings should be inclusive.
- III. Since these texts are intended for use in worship, the ease with which they can be said, heard, and sung should be an essential element of revision.
- IV. Language should be contemporary, intelligible, and dignified.

As we consider replacing the Traditional version of the Nicene Creed in the *Book of Confessions* with the "Ecumenical Version," it might be helpful to keep in mind that the Ecumenical version is already used by the PC (USA) in the *Presbyterian Hymnal* which contains both the Traditional and the Ecumenical translations. In addition, the *Book of Common Worship* uses the Ecumenical version throughout. However, neither the *Presbyterian Hymnal*

nor the *Book of Common Worship* has confessional status. A two thirds vote would give the Ecumenical version confessional status by replacing the traditional one now in the *Book of Confessions*.

As they bring forth the Ecumenical version for our vote, The Special Committee on the Nicene Creed has made known that they believe the term "Ecumenical Version" is a misnomer. According to the Committee, both the Traditional version and the Ecumenical version are translations of the original texts and both are expressions of the tradition of the church coming to us from the Councils of Nicea, 325 and Constantinople, 381 and both versions are used ecumenically. The difference between the two is simply that of an older versus a more contemporary translation.

As we consider the proposed version of the Creed we must ask how extensive are the changes to the Nicene Creed and what differences do they make? It was the intention of the appointed the Special Committee on the Nicene Creed to be faithful to historical orthodox theology. As I cast my vote on these changes, I want to be confident that some clandestine group is not using cloaking devices that allow them to slip their agenda into the historical orthodoxy of Nicea.

Although the intention of The English Language Liturgical Consultation was to make minimal change, by my count there at least thirty differences. The accompanying chart offers a comparison between the Traditional and Ecumenical versions.

### Initial Observations

Some changes update language. "Sitteth" and "proceedeth" are changed to "seated" and "proceeds" (line 22,26).

Some changes involve the capitalization of a word. In the Traditional version "Maker" to "maker" in the new (line 3). "The Lord and Giver of Life" concerning the Holy Spirit becomes "the Lord, the giver of life" (line 25). "Church" becomes "church" in the Contemporary version (line 29).

For the purpose of meter and ease in reading there are deletions of the "and" at the beginning of some sentences. On the other hand there is the addition of "We believe" to the second section (line 5). "And in one Lord Jesus Christ" in the Traditional version becomes "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ" in the new (line 5). "And we believe in the Holy Spirit" becomes "We believe in the Holy Spirit" (line 25). "And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church" becomes "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church" (line 29).

There are changes in the use of some prepositions. "God of God" and "Light of Light" are changed to "God from God" and "Light from Light" (line 8).

Other changes involve deleting or changing words:

- \* “The only begotten Son of God: becomes the “only Son of God” (line 6)
- \* “Very God of Very God” becomes “true God from true God” (line 9)
- \* “being of one substance with the Father” becomes “of one Being with the Father” (line 11).

There appear to be a couple of changes for the sake of gender sensitivity:

- \* “for us men and our salvation” becomes “For us and our salvation” (line 13)
- \* “And was made man” is changed to “and became truly human” (line 16).

Then there are changes which add words or delete them

- \* In the phrase the “only begotten son of God” “begotten” is dropped and becomes “the only son of God” (line 6).
- \* In the phrase “He suffered and was buried” the word death is added to become, “He suffered death and was buried” (line 18).

## Reflections and Questions

I support a contemporary translation that will make the creeds we have more accessible. But apart from making the language more contemporary and easier to read, What do the changes mean and how will they affect our theology? What follows is not an exhaustive reflection. My first purpose was simply to consider selected phrases for gaining insight into the approach and purpose of the translators. I also intended to look at significant phrases that have a bearing on the historic doctrinal issues addressed by the Nicene Creed.

Let us look a little more deeply.

The Contemporary version has “God the Father, the Almighty” while the Traditional version has “God the Father Almighty” (line 2). According to the commentary on the new translation, “the Almighty” picks up on the significance of the Greek word *pantocrator* which is a noun and not adjective. While this may be true, the translation “the almighty” seems to shift the dynamics of this first section on God the Father.

Was not the intention of the framers of the Nicene Creed to portray God as the Almighty Father, not as the Father in one role and the Almighty as an additional one? Another way to ask this is, Does the new translation perhaps break the internal structure and rhythm of the Creed around the one God who is the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?

The change of from “Maker” in the Traditional to “maker” in the Contemporary seems to have no significance as far as the Greek is concerned. Greeks did not use upper and lower case letters. Does it have a significance in our understanding and use of English?

“Of all that is, *seen and unseen*” replaces “of all things *visible and invisible*” in the Traditional (line 4). Is there any substantive change in meaning when “visible and invisible” are replaced with “seen and unseen”? What may be more worth pondering in the preceding phrase, is the change from the Traditional phrasing “*of all things* visible and invisible” to “*of all that is, seen and unseen.*” The Traditional word phrasing strengthens the affirmation that nothing exists that God did not create.

One of the historic purposes of the Nicene Creed was to combat the Arian heresy that Jesus Christ was a created being. The word they chose, “begotten,” for Christ’s relation to the Father, was intended to make a distinction from the process of physical birth. The Traditional translation uses the word begotten three times, the Contemporary uses it twice. According to the commentary on the Contemporary translation “It was thought sufficient to use “begotten” twice in English: it was dropped in line 6 as unnecessary and retained in line 7 to distinguish the truth conveyed by the Greek from any idea that the Son was created in time, or alternatively born in eternity.” Is it in fact sufficient?

Dropping “only begotten” leaves us with “the only son of God” in line 6 in the Contemporary translation. Of all the changes in the Creed, this one gave me the greatest concern. Does this new translation adequately protect the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, that there will never, can never be, any other only begotten Son of God?

Continuing with issues of Christ’s generation, “Eternally begotten” replaces “begotten before all worlds” in the Traditional translation. The Contemporary translation picks up nicely on the Greek text, which says that Christ existed before the ages—before time “*pro panton ton aionon*” and not merely before all worlds were created.

“God from God,” and “Light from Light” in the Contemporary version replaces “God of God” and “Light of Light” (line 8). The word “from” is a reliable translation of the Greek word “*ek*” which is commonly translated as “from” or “out of.” “Very God of Very God” in the Traditional becomes “True God of True God” (line 9). The use of the word “True” is a better choice than “Very” for contemporary believers and is a fine translation of the Greek.

Another of the crucial issues addressed by the Nicene framers concerned the nature of Christ: Was he or was he not God? The Nicene articulation of this in the Greek was the word *homoousios*. How best to translate this into English? The Traditional translation used the word “substance.” The Contemporary translation uses the word “Being.” Which is better, “Substance” or the Contemporary translation “Being?” In this case “Being” is perhaps a better translation.

In addition to his deity, the framers of the Nicene Creed addressed Christ’s humanity. What does the Contemporary version lose and or gain by seeking to be gender sensitive and changing “was made man” in the

Traditional version to “became truly human?” One of the central battles of orthodoxy during the first four centuries when the church was clarifying our Christology was that Jesus Christ did not merely take on the form of a human being as the Docetists advocated, but that he was truly human. In this regard the Contemporary translation is faithful to Nicene orthodoxy. It clearly says “he became truly human.” On the other hand Jesus did not only become a human, he became a male. Does this formulation “became human” lay down a land mine that might perhaps explode in some future theological debate? Perhaps.

The Contemporary translation has “he suffered death and was buried” where the Traditional has “he suffered and was buried.” The Traditional is more literal in reflecting the Greek. However, the addition of death makes clear that both in the meaning of the Greek word and in the context of his crucifixion, the suffering addressed here is in direct relation to his death, not merely to the suffering he had to endure in relationship to birth and ministry in a sinful world.

### Conclusions

I have three concerns:

- \* The phrase “the Father, the Almighty.” Does this reflect a subtle change in the way we express the nature of God? Is he the Father

almighty or the Father and the Almighty one?

- \* The dropping of the phrase “only begotten.” I do not think the theology of the Creed is damaged, but the older version makes the point of Christ’s uniqueness even more strongly.

- \* The change of “made man” to “became human.” While this reflects the intention of the Nicene Fathers, it also may open up problems over gender issues in the future.

Much of the new translation work is good. In most cases, it makes the intent of the Greek clearer and does produce a contemporary version that reads well. My analysis did not produce any concerns that will prevent me from voting “yes” for the proposed Contemporary version of the Nicene Creed.

We should, however, continue to ask ourselves: What problems does the Contemporary version resolve and what potential problems might it create?

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## Nicene Creed Comparison

Contemporary Version	Traditional Version
2. “the Father, the Almighty	2. “the Father Almighty
3. “maker”	3. “Maker”
4. “Of all that is,”	4. “of all things. . .”
4. “seen and unseen”	4. “visible and invisible”
5. “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ”	5. “And in one Lord Jesus Christ”
6. “the only Son of God”	6. “the only begotten Son of God”
7. “eternally begotten of the Father”	7. “begotten of the Father before all worlds”
8. “God from God”	8. “God of God”
8. “Light from Light”	8. “Light of Light”
9. “true God from true God”	9. “Very God of Very God”
11. “of one Being with the Father”	11. “being of one substance with the Father”
12. “through him all things were made”	12. “by whom all things were made”
13. “For us and for our salvation”	13. “who for us men and our salvation”
14. “he came down from heaven”	14. “came down from heaven”

15. “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary”	15. “and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary”
16. “and became truly human”	16. “and was made man”
17. “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate”	17. “and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate”
18. “he suffered death and was buried.”	18. “He suffered and was buried”
19. “On the third day he rose again”	19. “and the third day he rose again”
20. “in accordance with the Scriptures”	20. “according to the Scriptures”
21. “he ascended into heaven”	21. “and ascended into heaven”
22. “and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”	22. “and sitteth on the right hand of the Father”
23. “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead”	23. “And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead”
24. “and his kingdom will have no end”	24. “whose kingdom shall have no end”
25. “We believe in the Holy Spirit”	25. “And we believe in the Holy Spirit”
25. “the Lord, the giver of life”	25. “The Lord and Giver of Life”
26. “who proceeds from the Father and the Son”	26. “who proceedeth from the Father and the Son”
27. “who with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified”	27. “who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified”
28. “who has spoken through the prophets”	28. “who spoke by the prophets”
29. “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church”	29. “And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church”
30. “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins”	30. “one baptism for the remission of sins”

**Study of the Confessions**

**Study 6:  
The Centrality of the Cross**

by Rev. Theresa Ip Froehlich

One of the greatest hymns of the church is “Lift High the Cross.” Its greatness lies in its ability to focus the worshipers’ attention on the crux of Christology: the cross of Jesus Christ. The words highlight the centrality of the cross, the real substance of the gospel: “For Thy blest Cross which doth for all atone, Creation’s praises rise before Thy throne. Lift high the Cross, the love of Christ proclaim, Till all the world adore His sacred name.”

The earth and the other planets orbit around the sun, thus making the sun the center of their orbits. In the same pattern, all aspects of Christian theology orbit around

Christology, the doctrine of the person of Christ. Christology is the touchstone of theology because how one regards the person of Christ determines every other facet of theology. Contemporary theologian I. Howard Marshall rightly claims, “By their Christologies ye shall know them.”<sup>1</sup>

**Crisis of Christology**

In an age of linguistic ambiguity, we can no longer safely assume that when a thousand people use the word “Christ” they all mean the same person. It has now become necessary to define the meaning of “Christ” in much the same way the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) found it necessary to define the content of the word “Christ” by writing the Nicene Creed.

Contrary to the spirit of the Nicene Council which adopted a unified, orthodox view of the person of Christ, the spirit of our age seems to favor the dictum of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600): “There is in the universe neither center nor circumference.” The result is a plethora of Christologies.

This theological pluralism is exalted as the virtue of diversity: each one is free to choose any planet around which one wishes to orbit and continue to call oneself “Christian.”

This theological confusion has created the crisis of Christology, requiring those who profess faith in Jesus Christ to articulate in a fresh way the doctrine of the person of Christ.

## Sources of Competition

In our day and time there are several reigning paradigms that compete with biblical Christology. These paradigms are popular worldviews that misrepresent or depart from Scriptural teachings, exaggerating the optimism about human nature and trivializing the person of Jesus Christ. Luther strongly rejected this trivialization of God, “Man is not ‘able by nature to want God to be God;’ indeed, he wants himself to be God and he does not want God to be God.”<sup>2</sup>

These competing paradigms seek the allegiance and loyalty of professing Christians, recruiting them to ignore the sun and to orbit around other competing planets. These competing ideologies include universalism, relativism, reductionism, experientialism and humanism.

### (1) Universalism

This ideology promotes the concept that salvation is available to and effective for all regardless of faith in Christ.<sup>3</sup> All roads lead to Rome and all religions lead to heaven. Since Christ died for all, all shall be saved regardless of the absence or presence of saving faith. All people being entitled to salvation, diversity and inclusivity are enshrined as dogmas.

### (2) Relativism

This worldview gives Jesus Christ some respect, but when other sources of authority, such as the dominant cultural trends, the scientific community, and the individual’s rights and entitlements, clamor for our attention, our views of Jesus Christ must be revised to accommodate these other sources of authority.

### (3) Reductionism

This is a truncated view of Jesus Christ which accepts Christ as Savior but not as Lord. An example is liberal theology which “places a high premium on personal autonomy and freedom. It is characterized by an appeal to interior norms, such as conscience and religious experience. It is disposed to view Jesus as a moral ideal or symbol of divine love instead of a sin-bearer and mediator. It sees the value of religion mainly in its ethical and social fruits.”<sup>4</sup>

### (4) Experientialism

Human experience, instead of divine revelation in Christ and Scripture, is the final authority. Human experience, whether it is spiritual, moral or mystical, determines the

kind of Christ who commands human attention and allegiance. Christ therefore becomes a religion textbook that is subject to revision at all times.

### (5) Humanism

Christ is not seen as a personal Savior who lived in a particular time and place and at a particular moment in history accomplished a particular work of salvation on the cross. Instead Christ is a “salvation principle;” salvation is not a crisis of faith but a process of personal development. “The Bible tends to be treated as a text book on religious and moral evolution.”<sup>5</sup> The orientation of humanism is not so much theological as psychological-anthropological.

## The Core of the Gospel Message

The above worldviews all compete for the title “Gospel”; they all claim to be the good news for humankind. How does one discern which gospel message is truly “the good news?”

The litmus test for the Gospel message lies in the doctrine of atonement. The meaning of the cross is “the pivotal doctrine in Christian theology.”<sup>6</sup> To eliminate the atonement, the cross, is to erase the Gospel message altogether. The apostle Paul sums up the Gospel message in a nutshell, “. . .we preach Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23). He also writes these clear teachings about the heart of the Gospel message, “But now a righteousness from God. . . comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. . .through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. . .God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:21-25).

The New Testament teachings on Christ and his cross contrast with liberal theology. Liberal theology teaches that salvation, properly speaking, does not lie in the cross of Christ but in his person and his exemplary life. It also teaches that the purpose of the incarnation is the deification of man, the imparting of Christ’s divine nature to humankind. Christ came as a human being in order to be a transforming leaven, and the resulting transformation constitutes redemption.

Indeed, Marshall is correct in his claim, “By their Christologies ye shall know them.” In the same vein, one can also claim, “By their doctrine of Atonement ye shall know them.” Echoing this, James Denney regards the Atonement, not the Incarnation, as the “center of gravity” in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

## The Meaning of the Cross

Consistent with the New Testament emphasis on the atonement, the catechisms and confessions assign the “center of gravity” to the cross. Through his cross and resurrection, Christ the Victim emerges as Christ the Victor, winning victory over sin, death and the devil. Christ was given as a ransom price to the prince of darkness in exchange for the souls who are barred from

fellowship with God (1 Timothy 2:6; 1 Corinthians 1:17; Hebrews 2:14).

This exchange transaction is the pivotal transaction which purchased salvation for humankind. The catechisms and confessions teach several characteristics of this historic transaction of exchange:

#### (1) Eternal Exchange

The transaction that took place on the cross was a final exchange, a once-and-for-all transaction. God intends the new covenant to be final, permanent and eternal. There is no other transaction necessary to restore humans into fellowship with God.<sup>8</sup> “Christ died for sins once for all, and the man who believes in Christ and His death has his relation to God once for all determined not by sin but by the Atonement.”<sup>9</sup> The one historic sacrifice of Christ made on the cross is good for all people at all time (Hebrews 9:12, 13:20).<sup>10</sup>

#### (2) Exclusive Exchange

Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The exchange transaction he accomplished on the cross is the only transaction capable of securing for us the forgiveness of sins. No other exchange is effective for the same purpose. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). God is willing to turn away his wrath (propitiation) and annul our guilt (expiation) solely on account of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.<sup>11</sup>

#### (3) Exact Exchange

##### \* Exact Price

The death of Jesus Christ, signified by his blood, constitutes the exact price paid as penalty for our sin. It is not so much the presentation of an exemplary life, but the termination of life, the infliction of death that atones by paying the exact price.<sup>12</sup> This explains why Jesus said, “It is finished” as he was breathing his last breath on the cross.

##### \* Costly Exchange

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ represents the death of the innocent for the sake of the guilty. “The salvation which Christ effects is not thought of as brought about with effortless ease. On the contrary, it is purchased at great cost, at the price of His blood.”<sup>13</sup> For this reason, to regard Jesus Christ as a mere moral example is hopelessly inadequate because it trivializes the tremendous cost of the exchange.

#### (4) Substitutionary Exchange

Christ’s death is not a mere representation, but it is also a substitution.<sup>14</sup> He not only died “on behalf of” all humankind, but he also died “in place of” all humankind. “When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). He bore “the wrath of his Father which sinners had deserved” so “that we should be absolved.”<sup>15</sup> Denney writes, “God condones nothing: His mercy itself is of an absolute integrity. He is a righteous God, even in justifying the ungodly; and the propitiation which he sets forth in Christ Jesus, dying in His sinlessness

the death of the sinful, is the key to the mystery. Once more, is not the word which spontaneously rises to our lips to express this the word substitution?”<sup>16</sup>

#### (5) Necessary Exchange

The atoning death of Jesus Christ is a necessary and indispensable sacrifice. His death is not optional for two reasons. First, humans are unable to break their own captivity and second, God’s holiness and justice require an exact price to be paid for human unholiness. The New Testament writers regarded the death of Christ as necessary for the forgiveness of sins so that his death is not just incidental to, but integral to the establishing of the new covenant.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the writer of Hebrews clearly states that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).<sup>18</sup> Denney also asserts that when Christ contemplates his identity as the Messiah, “the divine necessity for a career of suffering and death is primary.”<sup>19</sup> To deny the necessity of the atonement is to deny God’s holiness and human depravity; it is also to deny our utter dependency on God for salvation. The denial of the necessity of the atonement amounts to “putting Christ out of the Christian religion altogether.”<sup>20</sup>

#### (6) Purposeful Exchange

When Christ died on the cross, he not only made the forgiveness of sins available to humankind, but he also opened a way for women and men previously under the control of sin to come under the new ownership of Christ to live new lives as new people (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:22-23; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ paid the price for these express purposes:

\* To set us free from slavery to sin so that we may become slaves to God;

\* To change our old identity of “slaves to Satan” to our new identity of “sons of God”;

\* To empower those previously made powerless by sin to live the new life in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).<sup>21</sup> Morris explains the purpose of redemption clearly and eloquently: “The redeemed are paradoxically slaves, the slaves of God, for they were bought with a price. . . Believers are not brought by Christ into a liberty of selfish ease. Rather, since they have been bought by God at a terrible cost, they have become God’s slaves, to do His will.”<sup>22</sup> For this reason, substitution is not merely an external transaction “which stops when it sees the wages of sin borne by the Substitute. Rather it reaches its consummation only when the sinner has become one with the Substitute, and therefore has come to view sin with the same mind as his Substitute.”<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In the same way that Christology is the touchstone of Christian theology, the doctrine of the Atonement is the touchstone of Christology. The meaning of the cross defines our beliefs in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel message is truly good news only when the church of Jesus Christ faithfully preaches the cross as an exchange

transaction which is eternal, exclusive, exact, substitutionary, necessary and purposeful. This is the only basis for our "blessed assurance:" that Christ has indeed completed his transaction to purchase our freedom, and that we indeed have reason to hope for transformation.

### Questions

1. Why is the cross central to the Gospel message?
2. When the cross is not given its proper place in preaching, what problems can arise in these areas:
  - \* Assurance of salvation
  - \* Sanctification: Growing in holiness
  - \* Our day-to-day relationship with Jesus Christ
  - \* Our relationships with believers and non-believers
3. From your personal experience and your network of relationships, identify some examples of these worldviews: universalism, relativism, reductionism, experientialism and humanism.
4. Is it possible to profess faith in the Christ of Scriptures while at the same time embrace the competing worldviews? Why and why not?
5. Contrast the Nicene emphasis on theological unity and the 20th Century emphasis on theological diversity. In what ways do our cultural values of diversity and pluralism cause the church to compromise our preaching of the cross?

1. I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990) p. 11.

2. Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518, thesis 17.
3. John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989) Book III, Chapter 1.
4. Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Volume I, "God, Authority & Salvation," (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1978, p. 13.
5. Donald G. Bloesch, op. cit. p. 13-14.
6. Donald Bloesch, op. cit. p.141.
7. James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, (Connecticut: Keats Publishing Inc., 1981) Introduction.
8. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan 1980) p. 107.
9. James Denney, op. cit. p. 293.
10. Heidelberg 4.037, 4.066, 4.080; Westminster 6.047; SC 7.025;1967Confession 9.08.
11. Scots 3.09; Heidelberg 4.029, 4.037; Second Helvetic 5.108; Westminster 6.043, 6.055, 6.056, 6.068, 6.079; SC 7.021, 7.033; LC 7.146, 7.154; Barmen 8.10, 8.11.
12. Leon Morris, op. cit. p. 119, 124.
13. Leon Morris, op. cit. p. 300.
14. Scots 3.09; Second Helvetic 5.071, 5.076; LC 7.181; 1967 Confession 9.08, 9.14; Brief Statement 10.21 lines 21-22.
15. Scots 3.09.
16. James Denney, *The Expositor*, Sixth Series III, p. 449. Quoted by Leon Morris, op. cit., p. 302
17. Leon Morris, op. cit., p.107-108.
18. Scots 3.09; Heidelberg 4.012, 4.040; SC 7.025; Brief Statement 10.3 lines 20-22, 39.
19. James Denney, op. cit., p. 31.
20. James Denney, op. cit., p. 320
21. Scots 3:13; Heidelberg 4:086; Second Helvetic 5:114, 5.115; Westminster 6.077, 6.082, 6.088; Brief Statement 10.4 lines 72-76.
22. Leon Morris, op. cit. p. 54.
23. Leon Morris, op. cit. p. 304.

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