

The Modern Spirit of Marcion

There is perennial wisdom in the French saying, "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*"¹ Ancient heresies reappear in a new guise long after the demise of their original forms and exponents. The second-century teacher Marcion proposed that Christians abandon the Hebrew prophets and promote "a Gospel of the pure goodness and mercy of God."² The Church, under the leadership of Irenaeus, insisted that the writings of the prophets of Israel be retained in the canon as the essential background of the New Testament Gospel.

We wonder, however, whether contemporary evangelism does not demonstrate an alarming affinity with Marcion's de-Hebraizing of the Gospel. Does not the history of theology, in fact, give evidence of a struggle to be rid of the "awkward" testimony of Israel's seers as they point to a restored Jerusalem as the metropolis of a restored world? The Gospel as it fell from the lips of Jesus was anchored in the Hebrew prophetic vision of the restoration of the Kingdom of God on earth. If evangelism began with the words of Jesus it would fasten on Mark 1:14, 15 as its base, taking up the Kingdom of God as the key to Christian proclamation. In so doing it would follow the example of the writer to the Hebrews who traced the saving Message to the Word of the historical Jesus who later, as the risen Christ, was thought to be the source of the same Message through the ministry of the Apostles (2:3).

Current evangelistic method is to begin with Paul in Romans (again there is a parallel with Marcion whose canon included ten of Paul's letters but excluded the Gospels except for a part of Luke). The promotion of what is thought to be the Gospel of Paul results in a tendency to set Paul in opposition to Jesus. Paul is said to be the bearer of "the gospel of the grace of God," while Jesus was a preacher of the Kingdom. Such an antithesis (note again the parallel with Marcion's "antitheses") is discounted at once by Paul's equating of Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom with his own proclamation of the Gospel of grace (Acts 20:24, 25).

¹ "The more things change, the more they are really the same."

² J.W. Miller, *The Origins of the Bible*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1994,

If the Synoptic Gospels were taken as the basis of Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom, the Messiah would be seen as a herald of the impending, apocalyptic arrival of the theocracy for which men and women ought to prepare with urgency. The preaching of "this Gospel of the Kingdom" was assigned as the Church's task until the end of the age (Matt. 24:14).

Because evangelistic tracts begin with the death of Christ, rather than his own Gospel preaching, the Hebrew basis of Jesus' Kingdom Message is bypassed. It is customary for evangelists to draw verses almost exclusively from Paul's letters. Modern audiences, unlike Paul's whom he had tutored, lack a solid grounding in the Hebrew vision of the Kingdom assumed also by Jesus.

There are ways of getting rid of the Old Testament (even calling it the "Old Testament" suggests its disposability) without officially excluding it from the canon like Marcion. One can construct a grid and impose it on the text of Scripture, presenting a selection of "master texts" from a portion of the Bible only. These easily become a canon within the canon. Such, we suggest, is the Marcionite method which characterizes much modern presentation of the Gospel. The antidote to the problem is to reinstate the foundation of the Gospel in the covenant made with Abraham and its development in the prophets, culminating in its definitive statement in the Word of Jesus summarized as the gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 4:43; Matt. 13:19). In this way the unity of revelation is recovered and the fragmented Church may be rallied around the teaching of Messiah. What Paul least wanted was that his mission should supersede the missionary work of Jesus. But listen to offers of "the gospel" in public places and notice where the "Bible verses" come from. The spirit of Marcion is alive and well.

—By Anthony Buzzard