

CHAPTER 20

THE PARADIGM OF THE CROSS IN THE EARLY CHURCH II

PART II: EARLY HERESIES

Jessie Penn-Lewis sought to understand and teach the centrality of the Cross as a focus to counter some of the problems that developed during the Welsh Revival:

It is because we Christians get away from the “fixed point” of the Cross that we wander into all kinds of cul-de-sac places, where we lose the balance and right perspective of truth.¹

All heresies and errors in Christendom have been largely caused by Satan’s attempt to lead us away from a focus on the Person of Jesus Christ and His Cross and lead us into some type of sinful thinking or action. Satan seems especially active in blinding us to the paradigmatic aspects of the Cross and thus to keep us from truly becoming like Christ. This activity and purpose of Satan can be seen in the heresies of the early Church.

(a) Gnosticism and Marcion

Many Christian Gnostics believed that Jesus did not die on the cross, but rather only created the illusion he was being crucified. Marcion, like the Gnostics, taught that the death of Christ on the Cross was only a hallucination, since Jesus did not have a physical body.² In the Gnostic view, it is Christ’s teachings that are relevant, not his suffering and death.

. . . they [Gnostics] tended to denigrate the physical humanity of Jesus, and orthodox teachers such as Irenaeus by the end of the second century wanted to insist very strongly on the humanity of Jesus as an example for his followers, so it was very important to insist on Jesus as really suffering and dying on the cross because Christians were being called upon at that time to suffer and die as witnesses, as martyrs to their faith. And if with some Gnostics you could denigrate the physical suffering of Jesus, you might call into question that obligation to stand and to bear witness for the faith.³

A clear definition of a paradigm that Christian Gnostics sought to emulate is difficult to determine. Gnostics saw Jesus as a teacher of secrets; accordingly, they, too, became teachers, sharing with others their secret knowledge. They focused on man’s spiritual origin and destiny, rather on how Jesus lived His human life; their paradigm for their lives thus would have been a vague concept of their “real” identity as spirits, rather than a model of how they were to live out the nature of Jesus in their bodies, which they considered to be only evil. Their paradigms would have been varied, but did not necessarily include the significant aspects of Jesus’ nature, nor even what we would consider moral. Further, because Gnosticism grew out of Greek philosophy, they inherited the paradigms that were expressed by the Greek gods.

The following quote shows that Gnostics did not reflect the love and humility of Jesus towards those who did not agree with them:

. . . each group believed that it alone held the truth, and despised all other Gnostics and all other religions, which were but shadows of the truth.⁴

Although we would defend orthodoxy when it comes to the person of Christ as He lived out His life in Israel 2000 years ago, we find we are actually much like the Gnostics when we face what in reality we believe about the Christ Who we say lives within us. Like the Gnostics, we intellectually

¹Jessie Penn-Lewis, *The Centrality of the Cross* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 2000), 9.

²B.A. Robinson, “Gnostic Leaders Interaction Between Gnostic and Pauline Christianity”, Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, www.religioustolerance.org/gnostic3.htm.

³Elaine H. Pagels, “Gnostics and Other Heretics”, WGBH Educational Foundation, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/heretics.html.

⁴Collins and Price, *The Story of Christianity*, 42.

believe that Christ lives in us, but in reality this “Christ” is more of a teaching and concept rather than the nature of Christ that we see defined by the paradigm of the Cross. Often this Christ in us is a vague spiritual entity rather than the Jesus Who lived out the Cross in real physical terms. At the centre of our being is often a collection of teachings and our dedication to them, rather than a risen Lord, Who lives out in us the paradigm of the Cross with resurrection power. The teachings that we so passionately defend may be entirely orthodox and scriptural, but if we live with a dependence on our orthodoxy in our teachings about Jesus, rather than actually living dependently on the Person of Christ, Whose nature we see in the paradigm of the Cross, we are living out a version of Gnosticism.

(b) Arianism

Arians denied the deity of Christ, deeming it was blasphemy to worship Him as God. However, it is vital that, to focus on Jesus as a paradigm, one must worship Him in the perfection of His love and other attributes shown through His humanity. When anyone does not fully worship Jesus as God, he or she tends to worship other human gods—as the Greeks worshiped their gods or as many today worship human “stars”—and in the process become like these paradigms of behaviour and attitudes. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that many Arians expressed the opposite of the paradigm of the Cross; they dealt with their enemies using physical force rather than loving them and being willing to die for them. Arians seemed so committed in convincing others of their heresy that they did not seem to be concerned at all if they were following the paradigm of the Cross:

After the death of Constantine the Great, the Arians found means to ingratiate themselves into the favor of the emperor Constantinus, his son and successor in the east; and hence a persecution was raised against the orthodox bishops and clergy. . . .

In Egypt and Libya, thirty bishops were martyred, and many other Christians cruelly tormented; and, in A.D. 386, George, the Arian bishop of Alexandria, under the authority of the emperor, began a persecution in that city and its environs, and carried it on with the most infernal severity.

The persecutions now raged in such a manner that the clergy were driven from Alexandria, their churches were shut, and the severities practiced by the Arian heretics were as great as those that had been practiced by the pagan idolaters. If a man, accused of being a Christian, made his escape, then his whole family were massacred, and his effects confiscated.⁵

Again, we defend orthodoxy when it comes to the deity of Christ, but when we face what in reality we believe about the Christ within us, we find we are actually much like the Arians. Although, we can prove from Scripture the deity of Jesus, we find it hard to accept that deity truly resides within us. We accept that some of the attributes of the humanity of Jesus have become resident in us, but we seem to find it extremely difficult to truly accept that the divine glory of God actually lives within us. It seems commonly believed that the indwelling Spirit of God is able to give us some help and to guarantee that we will enter heaven when we die, but it seems to the majority of Evangelicals that Christ is only human within us, lacking the power of a deity to change us or to heal us physically or mentally.

Further, we can passionately preach the validity of worshiping Jesus as God, but spend so little time doing so, that we end up not giving time to focus on the aspects of Jesus’ nature that He showed forth in His passion and focusing more on other gods, such as money, success, sex, etc. We become what we worship, and the fruit of our lives often does not indicate that Jesus is the main focus of our worship.

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⁵John Fox, *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, www.freegrace.net/library/Fox_Martyrs/fox103.html (edited version by W.B.Forbush).