

Gospels Galore
Early Heresies
Donald E. Knebel
May 6, 2018

Slide 1

1. Last week, as we ended in about 125 A.D., Christianity had largely separated from its Jewish origins and had become religion in its own right.
2. But the beliefs that we take for granted today as defining Christianity were a long way from being accepted by all Christians.
3. Instead, as one author notes: **“Christianity in the opening decades of the second century was a movement beset with debate and conflict.”** Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* at 43.
4. Elaine Pagels writes: **“[D]iverse forms of Christianity flourished in the early years of the Christian movement. Hundreds of rival teachers all claimed to teach the ‘true doctrine of Christ’ and denounced one another as frauds.”** Pagel, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 7.
5. Today, we will talk about some of those conflicting beliefs and the people who articulated them, paying particular attention to the Gnostics and to the so-called “Church Fathers” who opposed them.

Slide 2

1. By the second century, groups of Greek-speaking Christians were located in Antioch, Syria, throughout Asia Minor, and in Alexandria, Egypt.
2. Bishops were located in the cities with the red dots.
3. None of these Christians was, in any sense, under the authority of the Latin-speaking Christians in Rome.
4. However, because Rome was the capital of the Empire, Christians from around the Empire came to Rome, bringing with them their often conflicting ideas.

Slide 3

1. One of the first to come to Rome was Marcion, a wealthy shipbuilder who had grown up in a church in Sinope, a port city on the southern edge of the Black Sea.
2. Marcion was **“by all counts one of the most significant Christian thinkers and writers of the early centuries.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 103.

Slide 4

1. Marcion had become familiar with at least some of the letters of Paul, including the one to the Galatians: **“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.”** *Galatians 2:21*.
2. Marcion had read also about the God of Moses in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures: **“I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of their fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”** *Exodus 20:5-6*.
3. Marcion did not believe the God of grace described in Paul’s letters could be reconciled with the God of vengeance described in the Hebrew Scriptures, who required adherence to his commandments.

Slide 5

1. In *Antitheses*, Marcion pointed to what he thought were other irreconcilable contradictions between the God described in the Hebrew Scriptures and God the Father described in the *Gospel of Luke*, with which he was also familiar.
2. For example, in *Genesis*, Adam and Eve **“hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.”** *Genesis 3:8*.
3. However, in *Luke*, Jesus even **“knew what [people] were thinking.”** *Luke 5:22*.
4. So he concluded **“[t]here were, in fact, two different Gods: the God of the Jews, who created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his harsh law; and the God of Jesus, who sent Christ into the world to save people from the wrathful vengeance of the Jewish creator God.”** Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* at 33-34.
5. **“None of the early leaders, Marcion thought, understood the message correctly.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 224-25.

Slide 6

1. Because of his beliefs, Marcion was asked to leave his church in Sinope.
2. He traveled to Rome in 139 A.D., where he donated 200,000 sesterces to the local church for use in its charitable work, an amount equal to the daily wages of 50,000 unskilled workers.
3. Marcion presented his conclusion that there were two Gods to church leaders in Rome, who rejected Marcion’s views in 144 A.D.
4. The church in Rome excommunicated him and returned his money.

5. Then Marcion did what thousands of people have done when they disagreed with the teachings of their church – he started his own church.
6. This inscription is from a Marcionite church in Syria.

Slide 7

1. Within six years, the number of Marcionites was about equal to the total in all other Christian groups combined and Marcionism became the main form of Christianity practiced in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, where Paul was especially popular.
2. The cities named in blue are those in which the views of Marcion prevailed in the second and third centuries.
3. Even though the views of Marcion are now regarded as heresy, “[o]f course, [Marcion] and his followers considered it the only true church.” White, *From Jesus to Christianity* at 410.
4. Marcionite churches existed until at least the fifth century.

Slide 8

1. At the time of Marcion, there was no list of writings considered authoritative by all Christians – each congregation decided for itself what, if any, writings to use.
2. Marcion came up with what can be thought of as the first “New Testament” for his church, in which he identified the writings he considered authoritative.
3. Those writings included only the *Gospel of Luke* and 10 letters attributed to Paul, not including *1* and *2 Timothy* and *Titus*.
4. Marcion’s version of *Luke* did not have the first three chapters of our current version, which describe the birth of Jesus and his baptism by John the Baptist.
5. Scholars disagree about whether Marcion eliminated those three chapters or whether they were written later and added to the version Marcion used.
6. Marcion did not think Jesus had ever been human, a belief known as “Docetism.”
7. He believed Jesus had simply arrived on earth, without having been born.

Slide 9

1. Valentinus was a contemporary of Marcion and a very influential Christian teacher and thinker.
2. Valentinus was born in about 100 A.D. and was educated in Alexandria, Egypt, where he learned of both Christian teachings and the teachings of the Greek philosophers.

3. Like Marcion, Valentinus went to Rome where, as a result of **“his charismatic presence and rhetorical power, he acquired a large following among Christians there.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 127.
4. Valentinus’ critics claimed he sought unsuccessfully to become the Bishop of Rome, a claim **“[f]ew historians believe.”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 39.

Slide 10

1. Like Marcion, Valentinus taught that the material world was created by **“an inferior and ignorant deity who erroneously imagined he was God Almighty.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 114.
2. The *Gospel of Truth*, named for its first few words, was written either by Valentinus or one of his immediate followers and sets out his basic beliefs.
3. The *Gospel of Truth* claims that the **“anguish and terror”** of the material world came about because of **“ignorance of [the existence of] the Father,”** by which **“error became powerful.”** *Gospel of Truth* 17 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 40.
4. As a result, the key to overcoming this error is through **“truth [which] is immutable, imperturbable, perfect in beauty.”** *Id.*

Slide 11

1. According to the *Gospel of Truth*, Jesus and his death on the cross provide that perfect truth: **“Jesus, the Christ, enlightened those who were in darkness through oblivion. He enlightened them; he showed them the way; and the way is the truth which he taught them. For this reason error grew angry at him, persecuted him, was distressed at him (and) was brought to naught. He was nailed to a tree (and) he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father.”** *Gospel of Truth* 17 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 40-41.
2. For Valentinus and his legions of followers, the death of Jesus **“brought salvation by delivering the truth that could set the soul free.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 128.
3. A passage in the *Gospel of Truth* suggests the Father keeps track of those who have accepted his truth: **“Those whose name he knew in advance were called at the end, so that one who has knowledge is the one whose name the Father has uttered. For he whose name has not been spoken is ignorant.”** *Gospel of Truth* 22 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 2.

Slide 12

1. The teachings of Valentinus about the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus drew upon Greek ideas of a perfect and immortal soul trapped in a perishable and corrupt body, with death with the correct knowledge allowing the soul to be liberated from the body.

2. The *Gospel of Truth* reflects this idea in its description of Jesus' death: **“Having stripped himself of the perishable rags, he put on imperishability, which no one can possibly take from him.”** *Gospel of Truth* 20 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 42.
3. Valentinus and his followers rejected as impossible the claim that Jesus' dead flesh had been resurrected.

Slide 13

1. Valentinus is the most famous and influential of a group of second and third century teachers later called “Gnostics” after the Greek word for knowledge who wrote a large number of documents based on their ideas
2. Gnostics, not all of whom were Christians, believed **“that somehow the pure light of heaven in the soul of man had become involved in this unpleasant business of matter and had to be redeemed.”** Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* at 51.
3. Like other so-called “mystery religions” of the time, they **“saw their salvation as a magical liberation from the flesh.”** Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* at 27.
4. Gnostics believed if they could obtain the right knowledge, their souls would be liberated from their bodies.
5. Christian Gnostics such as Valentinus believed Jesus had that secret knowledge and they set about trying to spread that knowledge in their writings.

Slide 14

1. Gnostic writings were typically thoughtful and well-reasoned.
2. As one author writes: **“What we know of the great Christian Gnostic teachers of the early second century suggests that they were sincere and significant interpreters of early Christian literature and traditions.”** Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* at 66.
3. Christian Gnostic arguments were based on texts also used by those who opposed them because those texts could support **“both Gnostic and orthodox forms of Christianity.”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 148.
4. One of the favorite writings of the Gnostics was the *Gospel of John*, which quotes Jesus as saying: **“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** *John* 8:32.
5. For Gnostics, Jesus as quoted in *John* was speaking directly at them.

6. Gnostics also saw in the teachings of *John* support for their view of the primacy of the spirit over the flesh: **“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.”** *John* 6:63.
7. *John* also supported the Gnostic view of the non-physical resurrection of Jesus, reporting that Jesus was able to appear suddenly in a room with locked doors and that his disciples did not immediately recognize him. *John* 20:19, 26; 21.
8. Some scholars have argued that the author of *John* was either a Gnostic or drew on Gnostic sources.

Slide 15

1. Scholars have long known about Valentinus and the Gnostics from the writings of their second and third century opponents, who tried to destroy Gnostic writings.
2. An extraordinary twentieth century discovery revealed many of the original Gnostic writings, some not seen for more than a thousand years.
3. This is an area near Nag Hammadi, along the Nile River in the middle of Egypt.
4. In 1945, farmers digging here found a jar containing 13 leather bound books containing more than 50 different Gnostic writings, including *Gospel of Truth*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, *First Apocalypse of James*, *Second Apocalypse of James*, *Apocalypse of Peter*.

Slide 16

1. A previously unknown Gnostic text found at Nag Hammadi usually called “*A Treatise on the Resurrection*” reflects the Gnostic idea that the soul is captured in a flawed material body, yearning to be set free.
2. Whether Valentinus wrote this short document is not clear, but most scholars believe it reflects his ideas.
3. According to *A Treatise on the Resurrection*, at death “[w]e are drawn to heaven by [Jesus], like beams by the sun, not being restrained by anything.” *A Treatise on the Resurrection* 45 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 55.
4. Reflecting the Gnostic belief that the body is corrupt and weighs down the soul, *A Treatise on the Resurrection* teaches that **“the afterbirth of the body is old age, and you exist in corruption. You have absence as a gain. For you will not give up what is better if you depart.”** *Id.*

Slide 17

1. The *Gospel of Judas*, found in Egypt in the 1970s, reflects similar Gnostic thinking.
2. Jesus tells Judas he will exceed all the disciples because he **“will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”** *The Gospel of Judas* at 43.
3. Jesus asks Judas to betray him so his immortal spirit can be liberated from his material body.

Slide 18

1. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* began to circulate in the early second century and includes stories about Jesus’ childhood.
2. There is evidence it was used in churches in the Middle East at least into the seventh century.
3. In one of the stories, Jesus was five years old when he made 12 sparrows out of mud on the Sabbath and brought them to life by simply speaking to them. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 58.
4. Interestingly, the same story is found in the Quran, in which Jesus says: **“I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, that I determine for you out of dust the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with Allah’s permission”** *Quran* 3:49.
5. We will talk more next week about how unorthodox Christian teachings influenced Islam.

Slide 19

1. The *Proto-Gospel of James* identifies Mary’s parents as a wealthy man named Joachim and his wife Anna. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 64.
2. Roman Catholics have accepted its claim that Anna was the mother of Mary and honored Anna in this Crusader church in Jerusalem.
3. The *Proto-Gospel of James* reports that when Mary was in the cave just after giving birth to Jesus, a woman, apparently a midwife, who did not believe a virgin could have a child **“inserted her finger in order to examine her condition”** and assured herself that Mary was, in fact, a virgin. *Id.* at 70.
4. As a result of her doubt, she reports **“my hand is burning, falling away from me.”** *Id.*

5. The *Proto-Gospel of James* was so popular that about 150 copies have been found.

Slide 20

1. The *Gospel of Peter*, discovered in Egypt in 1886, blames the decision to crucify Jesus on Herod and the Jews and completely exonerates Pontius Pilate. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 17-24.
2. It also includes a description of the actual resurrection of Jesus, in which the cross itself walks and talks. *Id.*
3. The *Gospel of Peter* was more popular than the *Gospel of Mark* during the early days of the church and reflected growing anti-Semitism. *Id.*

Slide 21

1. Some of the Gnostic gospels emphasize the importance of Mary Magdalene, considered to be a reflection of the importance of women among the Gnostics.
2. For example, the *Gospel of Phillip*, found at Nag Hammadi, describes the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus: **“Wisdom, whom thy call barren, is the mother of angels, and the consort of Christ is Mary Magdalene. The [Lord loved Mary] more than all the disciples, and he kissed her on the [mouth many times].”** *Gospel of Phillip* 55 in *Lost Scriptures* at 42.
3. In the *Gospel of Mary*, Peter is reported as not believing that the resurrected Jesus first appeared to Mary.
4. Levi responds to Peter: **“But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.”** *Gospel of Mary* in *Lost Scriptures* at 37.
5. The *Gospel of Mary* also presents the Gnostic view of the resurrection.
6. Mary reports to the other disciples she had communicated with the resurrected Jesus **“in a vision”** and asked Jesus whether she was seeing him **“through the soul or through the spirit.”** *Id.* at 36.
7. Jesus replied: **“He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which is between the two – that is what sees the vision”** *Id.*

Slide 22

1. The *Gospel of Thomas*, found at Nag Hammadi, includes 114 numbered sayings it identifies as **“the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.”** *Gospel of Thomas* in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 126.

2. Consistent with Gnostic teaching, Saying 1 says: **“Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.”**
3. Although the exact identity of “Didymos Judas Thomas” is not clear, many associate him with the Disciple Thomas, who had to be shown the wounds of Jesus before he would believe Jesus was no longer dead.
4. This association is based on *John 20:24*, which notes that **“Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.”**

Slide 23

1. Approximately 80 of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* are very similar to those in the New Testament.
2. For example, Saying 20 says the disciples asked Jesus what the kingdom of heaven was like and he said to them: **“It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky.”**
3. In *Mark 4:31-32*, Jesus gives an almost identical answer to the same question: **“It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”**
4. Some scholars believe the *Gospel of Thomas* may have been written by people who had actually heard Jesus speak and may be more accurate than the traditional Gospels.
5. The Jesus Seminar included the *Gospel of Thomas* in *The Five Gospels*.

Slide 24

1. Others point out that many of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* are not like anything in the traditional Gospels, which they assert means it was not based on the actual sayings of Jesus.
2. For example, Saying 56 says: **“Jesus said, ‘Whoever has come to understand the world has found (only) a corpse, and whoever has found a corpse is superior to the world.’”**
3. Saying 70 says: **“Jesus said, ‘That which you have will save you if you bring it forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you [will] kill you if you do not have it within you.’”**
4. To most Christians today, these strange sayings make no sense and one recent author notes the **“incorrigibly distasteful features of a great deal of Gnostic thought.”** Hart, *Atheist Delusions* at 141.

5. But some argue the reason the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* do not make sense today is that we have not had almost 2000 years of teachings explaining what they mean and basing a theology on them.

Slide 25

1. In the *Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter*, found at Nag Hammadi, Peter reports talking with a laughing Jesus as nails were driven into **“his fleshy part.”** *Apocalypse of Peter* 81 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 377.

2. The laughing is said to come from **“the living Jesus,”** now separated from his dying body. *Id.*

Slide 26

1. Another *Apocalypse of Peter*, discovered in 1887 in the tomb of a Christian monk, was considered part of the New Testament during the late second century.

2. It contains extraordinarily graphic imagery of the hell to which people were destined if they did not follow the teachings of Jesus. *The Apocalypse of Peter* in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 280.

3. Among many similar punishments, men who commit adultery **“shall be hung by their loins in that place of fire, and they shall say one to another, ‘We did not know that we should come to everlasting punishment.’”** *Id.* at 283.

4. Many of Christianity’s current images of hell come from this document.

5. Looking at the *Apocalypse of Peter*, Bart Ehrman writes: **“There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that, far more than the glories of heaven, it was the tortures of hell that convinced potential converts.”** Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* at 154.

Slide 27

1. During the second and third centuries, writers whose views were closer to those of most Christians today began writing detailed attacks on the Marcionites and the Gnostics.

2. Elaine Pagels suggests the attacks were motivated by a desire of church leaders to retain the loyalty of their congregations in the face of popular competitors.

3. Because Gnostics taught that salvation comes from having a personal understanding of the divine, she argues Gnosticism **“offer[ed] nothing less than a theological justification for refusing to obey the bishops and the priests!”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 38.

4. Eventually, the power of the organized church succeeded in quashing the views of the Marcionites and Gnostics and destroying most of their writings.

5. Although the writers who attacked the views of Marcionites and Gnostics are considered “Church Fathers,” some of them came to be regarded as heretics as well.

Slide 28

1. Justin was born in about 100 A.D. in Samaria in what is now Palestine.
2. After studying philosophy, he became a Christian and went to Rome, where he learned about the persecution of Christians for not worshipping Roman gods.
3. As we discussed last week, Jews were not subject to Roman laws requiring that citizens worship Roman gods because Judaism was considered an ancient religion.
4. In a letter addressed to Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius now called the “*First Apology*,” Justin argued that Christianity was a descendant of Judaism and should be entitled to the same respect.
5. He explained how a typical Christian service was conducted: **“On the day which is dedicated to the sun, all those who live in the cities or who dwell in the countryside gather in a common meeting, and for long as there is time the Memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read.”** *First Apology* 67 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 55-56.
6. The “writings of the prophets” were the Hebrew Scriptures, showing the connection between Christianity and Judaism.

Slide 29

1. Justin was in Rome at the same time as Marcion, who was teaching that the Hebrew Scriptures were irrelevant to Christians, the opposite of what Justin was arguing.
2. In the *First Apology*, Justin argued that Marcion’s teachings that God the Father was not the God of the Jews was inspired by the devil and had **“caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies.”** *First Apology* 26, 58, in <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>.

Slide 30

1. For Justin and other second and third century Christian writers, the Gnostic teaching that an immortal soul leaves the body at death to join Jesus in heaven was **“subversive of the very essence of Christianity”** because it denied the unique saving power of Jesus. McConnell, *The Evolution of Immortality* at 48.
2. In his *First Apology*, Justin argued that Christians **“expect to receive our own bodies again, even though they may be dead and buried in the earth.”** *First Apology* ch. 18, 19 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 52.

3. He explained that it was no more difficult to imagine a person could be resurrected from a body dissolved in the earth than it is to imagine a baby can be created from a drop of semen. *Id.*
4. For Justin, the decayed flesh was like a seed that could sprout a new body. *Id.*

Slide 31

1. Irenaeus was the Bishop of Lyon in what is now France.
2. In about 180 A.D. he wrote *Against Heresies*, attacking the views of Marcion and Valentinus and their followers, as well as others he considered to be heretics.
3. Like Justin, Irenaeus rejected the Gnostic view of the resurrection, saying it would be much easier for God to recreate a human being from his or her once-living bones than to have created Adam from dirt. *Against Heresies* 5, 3, 2 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 99.
4. Irenaeus accused Marcion of being **“proved a blasphemer of the only existing God, who had “mutilated the Gospel according to Luke.”** *Against Heresies* 3, 11, 7; 1, 27, 2 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 91.
5. Irenaeus also attacked the Ebionites we talked about in the first session, Jewish Christians who believed that Jesus was a mortal who had been adopted by God as the Messiah at the time of his baptism and followed Jewish law to the letter.
6. Irenaeus wrote that Ebionites **“repudiate[d] the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law”** and **“persevered in the observance of those customs which are enjoined by the law.”** *Against Heresies* 1, 26, 2 in <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103126.htm>.

Slide 32

1. To counter the various beliefs he deemed heresies, Irenaeus wrote a statement of belief similar to what many Christians recite today: **“For the Church . . . has received from the Apostles and from their disciples the faith in one God, Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them; and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who announced through the prophets the dispensations and the comings, and the birth from a Virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Jesus Christ our Lord.”** *Against Heresies* 1, 10, 1 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 84-85.
2. The recitation that God the Father was also the Creator was directed against Marcionites.
3. The recitation of the bodily ascension of Jesus to heaven was directed against Gnostics.

4. The recitation that Jesus was born was directed at the Docetists, who claimed he was not human.
5. The recitation that Jesus was the Son of God was directed at the Ebionites, who believed that Jesus was born of a natural relationship between Joseph and Mary.

Slide 33

1. Irenaeus expressly attacked the Gnostic followers of Valentinus, who **“make copious use of the Gospel of John to illustrate their conjugations, [and] will by that very Gospel be proved to have said nothing rightly.”** *Against Heresies in The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 91.
2. Irenaeus also attacked the many Gnostic gospels in circulation and gaining widespread support among Christians, saying the Gnostics **“really have no gospel which is not full of blasphemy.”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 17.
3. He concluded there were only four authentic Gospels: **“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either greater or fewer in number than they are. Just as there are four regions of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and since the Church is disseminated over all the earth, and the pillar and mainstay of the Church is the Gospel, the breath of life, it is fitting that she have four pillars, breathing immortality on every side and enkindling life in men anew.”** *Against Heresies in The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 91.
4. Because Irenaeus believed *Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John* had been written by original followers of Jesus, he concluded that only they were authoritative.
5. Gnostics rejected the idea that the only authoritative gospels were those written by the original apostles, believing **“that they had gone far beyond the apostles’ original teaching.”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 21.

Slide 34

1. Irenaeus also taught that the traditions of the church in Rome should be given special consideration because of his erroneous belief the church in Rome had been founded by Peter and Paul and led ever since by an unbroken chain of bishops.
2. These teachings of Irenaeus can be seen as the beginning of the special authority claimed by the church in Rome and its bishop, today called the “pope.”
3. Although Irenaeus gave equal authority to Paul and Peter, the church in Rome later focused largely on Peter because Marcion, whom it had determined to be a heretic, had relied primarily on Paul for his beliefs.
4. As a result, **“Paul had become the apostle of the heretics.”** Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* at 63.

Slide 35

1. Tertullian was born in North Africa in about 155 A.D.
2. He traveled to Rome, where he became a lawyer and converted to Christianity in about 190.
3. For Tertullian, the resurrection promised by Jesus meant that **“what might be buried and rise again [is] this flesh, suffused with blood, built up over bones, interwoven with nerves, entwined with veins.”** *The Flesh of Christ* 5 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 144.
4. Tertullian taught that **“the flesh shall rise again”** upon the return of Jesus. *The Resurrection of the Dead* 1 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 148.
5. Writing in Latin, he rejected the Gnostic claim of the immortality of the soul as an idea that **“even almost all heretics accept.”** Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* at 4.
6. He argued **“that anyone who denies the resurrection of the flesh is a heretic, not a Christian.”** *Id.* at 5.

Slide 36

1. Early in the third century, Tertullian wrote a five-volume treatise against what he considered the heresies of Marcion.
2. In response to Marcion’s claim that the Creator God of the Hebrew Scriptures was not the God of the Gospels, Tertullian wrote: **“Christian truth, however, has distinctly declared, ‘If God be not one, He does not exist.’”** *Against Marcion* 1, 3, 1, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 138.
3. Tertullian also proposed a way of determining who was a heretic: **“I say that my [Gospel] is the true one; Marcion says that his is. I affirm that Marcion’s is adulterated; Marcion that mine is. How shall it be settled between these two, except on the grounds of time – by ascribing authority to that which is found to be more ancient and by assuming corruption in the case of that which is convicted of being the more recent.”** *Against Marcion* 4, 4, 1, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 140.
4. Because Tertullian claimed his views could be traced back to the earliest followers of Jesus, he claimed that the views of Marcion were necessarily heresies. *Id.*
5. Like the Gnostics, Marcionites were not persuaded that the earliest followers of Jesus were the only sources of truth.

Slide 37

1. Montanus, a convert to Christianity from the town of Pepuza in west central Turkey, taught that there was no need to refer to any of the existing gospels and other writings because he and others were prophets who could speak the truth on behalf of the Holy Spirit.
2. In the middle of the second century, Montanus and two women followers would go into a trance and speak as the Holy Spirit, claiming to be the Counselor Jesus had promised, who will **“teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”** *John* 14:26.
3. They taught that the end of the world was near and that martyrdom was something to be sought.
4. Because they believed that the Jews had rejected Jesus, they taught that Pepuza was the “New Jerusalem” and that Jesus would soon return to Pepuza to reign over the kingdom of God.

Slide 38

1. In about 210, Tertullian, the foe of Marcion and previously an advocate of the authority of the traditional Gospels, became the most famous follower of Montanus.
2. Tertullian thought that **“Montanism represented the pure church, uncorrupted by compromise with the world and endowed with the living presence and authority of the Spirit.”** Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* at 70.
3. Once a fierce opponent of views not based on official church teachings, Tertullian changed direction.
4. Based on the revelations of Montanus, Tertullian now **“refused to accept that contact with the deity could be conducted only through official church channels.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 136.
5. Breaking with Irenaeus and his own prior writings, Tertullian thought that requiring reliance on specific writings meant **“the Holy Spirit was chased into a book.”** Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* at 64

Slide 39

1. In arguing that Christians should be exempt from persecution as followers of ancient truths, Justin tried to persuade the Roman authorities that Christians were worshipping the incarnation of *Logos*, the ancient wisdom or reason of the Greek philosophers translated as “the Word” in the opening lines of the *Gospel of John*.
2. Justin argued that the Greeks had gotten this idea from the Hebrew Scriptures, which identifies “Wisdom” as the first of God’s creations. *Proverbs* 8:22.

3. He wrote: **“Those who have lived by the aid of *logos* are Christians even if they were adjudged atheists – such as Socrates and Heraclitus and their like among the Greeks, and among the barbarians [non-Greeks], Abraham . . . and Elijah.”** Justin, quoted by Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* at 55.
4. Justin wrote that *Logos* **“was born as a human being of a virgin, and given the name Jesus, and was crucified and died and ascended into heaven.”** *Id.*
5. Justin’s arguments were not persuasive and he was beheaded by Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 165 A.D., becoming known as Justin Martyr.

Slide 40

1. By identifying Jesus with the divine *Logos*, Justin Martyr was articulating the beliefs of most Gentile Christians after about 100 A.D. – Jesus was divine and in the nature of God.
2. But the Jewish Scriptures that many Christians, including Justin, also relied on to counter Marcion and the Gnostics, proclaimed that there was only one God. *Isaiah* 44:6; 45:18.
3. A Christian writer named Praxeas claimed that the worship of Jesus as a God by Montanists such as Tertullian amounted to the belief in three gods.
4. In writing a defense of his beliefs, Tertullian said Montanists **“do indeed believe that there is only one God; but believe that under this dispensation, . . . there is also a Son of this only one God.”** *Against Praxeas* 2, 1 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 154.
5. In explaining this idea, Tertullian first used the term “trinity” in Latin, writing: **“[T]he Unity is distributed in a Trinity. Placed in order, the Three are Father, Son, and Spirit.”** *Id.*
6. But Tertullian’s Trinity was not that of most Christians today because he did not equate Jesus with God, saying: **“Thus [Jesus] showed that the Son is other than the Father. He showed in the [Holy Spirit] a third degree, just as we believe that the Son is a second degree.”** *Against Praxeas* 9, 3 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 156.
7. Because he subordinated Jesus to the Father, Tertullian, who fought against claimed heresies, was later seen as a heretic when Jesus became seen as equal to the Father at the Council of Nicaea that we will discuss next week.

Slide 41

1. Origen of Alexandria was, according to Bart Ehrman, **“the most learned, prolific, and famous theologian of the first three Christian centuries.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 154.

2. As a young man, he traveled to Rome and became a prolific writer.
3. He wrote more than one thousand books trying to explain Christian beliefs and reject what he thought were false doctrines.
4. He confirmed the view of Irenaeus that “[t]he Church has four Gospels, but the heretics have many” *Homilies on Luke* in *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 201.
5. In the early third century, he wrote that Jesus was created by God and subordinate to God. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 155.
6. His views were later condemned as heresy “when orthodox thinkers in later centuries refined their categories and came to reject any notion of Christ’s subordination to God.” *Id.*
7. Later Christians also condemned Origen because of a statement in one of his writings that articulated the Hindu idea of the transmigration of the soul: “The soul has neither beginning nor end. [They] come into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defeats of their previous lives.”

Slide 42

1. Clement of Alexandria was an influential Christian thinker of the early third century.
2. He believed, like the Marcionites and other Docetists, that Jesus had not been human at all: “But in the case of the Savior, it would be ludicrous [to suppose] that the body, as a body, demanded the necessary aids in order for its duration. For he ate, not for the sake of the body, which was kept together by holy energy, but in order that it might not enter into the minds of those who were with Him to entertain a different opinion of him” Clement of Alexandria, quoted in *Lost Christianities* at 178.
3. On the other hand, in 190 A.D., a tanner named Theodotus gathered a congregation in Rome by using the logic of Aristotle and Euclid to prove that Jesus was “a mere man.” Freeman, *A.D. 381* at 58.
4. This was also the view of the Ebionites, the successors of the early Jewish Christians whom we discussed last week. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 90.
5. The Gnostics had their own formulation of the relationship between Jesus and God the Father.
6. A document found at Nag Hammadi called the “*The Tripartite Tractate*” states: “It is, then, only the Father and God in the proper sense that no one else begot.” *Tripartite Tractate* in *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 60.

7. Another Gnostic statement suggests later formulations of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus: **“The Savior was an image of the unitary one, he who is the Totality in bodily form.”** *Id.* at 93.

Slide 43

1. So, 200 years after the death of Jesus, there was no agreement among Christians about whether he was human or divine or perhaps both at the same time.
2. Nor was it clear, if Jesus was God, how that could be reconciled with the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures that there is only one God.
3. As one author says: **“It was unclear whether the Son and Spirit were inferior or equal to the Father, whether the Son’s divinity coexisted with his humanity or excelled it, how God was three and yet one.”** Moynahan, *The Faith* at 119.
4. The answers to those questions depended on which group of Christians was asked and each group was confident only it had the correct answer.

Slide 44

1. Next week, we will look at the establishment of so-called “orthodox” views when the Roman Empire accepted Christianity as a valid religion and began to insist that its beliefs be made standard throughout the Empire and those with different beliefs be officially branded as “heretics.”
2. We will also begin to see cracks developing between beliefs of the church in the east, centered in Constantinople, and the church in the west, centered in Rome.
3. Finally, we will look at the emergence of Islam as a response to the teachings of orthodox Christianity about the nature of Jesus.

References:

Akyol, Mustafa, *The Islamic Jesus* (St. Martin’s Press 2017)

Bokenkotter, Thomas, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (Doubleday 2005)

Ehrman, Bart, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford University Press 2003)

Ehrman, Bart, *Lost Scriptures* (Oxford University Press 2003)

Ehrman, Bart, *Misquoting Jesus* (Harper Collins 2005)

Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* (Simon & Schuster 2018)

Eusebius, *A History of the Church* (Penguin Books 1989)

Freeman, Charles, *A.D. 381* (The Overlook Press 2009)

Hart, David Bentley, *Atheist Delusions* (Yale University Press 2009)

Jurgens, William, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (The Liturgical Press 1990)

King, Karen, *The Gospel of Mary* (Polebridge Press 2003)

Kasser, Rodolphe, *The Gospel of Judas* (National Geographic 2006)

McConnell, S.D., *The Evolution of Immortality* (Macmillan 1901)

Moynahan, Brian, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (Doubleday 2002)

Pagel, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage Books 1979)

Robinson, James, *The Nag Hammadi Library* (Harper San Francisco 1988)

Shelley, Bruce, *Church History in Plain Language* (Thomas Nelson 2008)

Wade, Nicholas, *The Faith Instinct* (Penguin Press 2009)

Walker, Williston, *A History of the Christian Church* (Scribner 1985)

White, L. Michael, *From Jesus to Christianity* (Harper San Francisco 2004)