

Sunday, February 13, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 22 The “Christian” Middle Ages: The Paulicians and the Silver Vain of Truth

Review of the Pilgrim Church Concept

- “The union of Church and State was in all times looked upon by many of the Lord’s disciples as contrary to His teaching; but whenever the Church had the power of the State at its command, it used it for the forcible suppression of any who dissented from its system or in any way refused compliance with its demands, and great numbers through indifference or interest or fear yielded at least an outward obedience.” (Broadbent, 63)
- “There were, however, always some who could not be induced to do this but who still endeavored to follow Christ, keeping the teaching of His Word and the doctrine of the apostles. These were continually objects of persecution.” (Braodbent, 63-64)
- “True histories of these have been obliterated as far as possible. Their writings, sharing the fate of the writers, have been destroyed to the full extent of the power allowed to their persecutors. Not only so but the histories of them have been promulgated by those in whos interest it was to disseminate the worst intentions against them in order to justify their own cruelties. In such accounts they are depicted as heretics, and evil doctrines are ascribed to them which they repudiated. They are called “sects,” and labels are attached to them which they themselves would not acknowledge.” (Broadbent, 64)
- “They usually called themselves Christians, or Brethren, but numerous names were given to them by others in order to create the impression that they represented many new, strange, and unconnected sects, opprobrious epithets being applied to them to bring them into disrepute. It is therefore difficult to trace their history.” (Broadbent, 64)
- “What their adversaries have written about them must be suspect; words from their own lips wrung out by torture are valueless. There is however, in spite of these hindrances, a large body of trustworthy evidence, continually being added to by further investigation, which shows what they were and did, what they believed and taught.” (Broadbent, 64)
- A group called the Paulicians is one such group.

Standard View of the Paulicians in Church History Books

- “Heretical Sects” is the title of Chapter 12 in Volume 4 of Philip Schaff’s esteemed *History of the Christian Church*. Schaff devotes an entire section of this chapter to discussing the “heretical beliefs” of the Paulicians.
- Please critically consider the following quotations:
 - “The Monothelites, the Adoptionists, the Predestinarians, and the Beregarrians moved with the limits of the Catholic Church, dissented from it only in one doctrine, and are interwoven with the development of catholic orthodoxy which has been described in the preceding chapter. But there were also radical heretical sects which mixed Christianity with heathen notions, disowned all connection with the historic church, and set themselves up against it as rival communities.” (Schaff, 573)

- “They were essentially dualistic, like the ancient Gnostics and manichaeans, and hence their Catholic opponents called them by the convenient and hated name of New Manicheans; though the system of the Paulicians has more affinity with that of Marcion.” (Schaff, 573)
- It is important to notice the following aspects of Schaff’s thinking:
 - He judges who is heretical and who is not based on where they stand in light of Catholic orthodoxy.
 - He considers the Catholic Church “historic Christianity.”
 - He proves Broadbent’s point that dissenting groups were labeled by their opponents (i.e., Gnostic, Manichean, dualistic, Marcionite) with names they had not chosen from themselves.
- Schaff goes on to state, “The doctrines and practices of the Paulicians are known to us only from the reports of their orthodox opponents (those with an agenda against them) and a few fragments of the epistles of Sergius. They were a strange mixture of dualism, demiurgism, docetism, mysticism and pseudo-Paulinism, and resemble in many respects the Gnostic system of Marcion.” (Schaff, 576)
- So the only reason why we should consider the Paulicians heretics is because they disagree with Catholic Orthodoxy. Furthermore, the only proof we have according to Schaff is the testimony of Catholics with whom the Paulicians disagreed.
- Kenneth Scott Latourette comments on the Paulicians in a section of his *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500* under the title “Minority Movements Branded as Heretical by the Orthodox.” (299)
 - “They called themselves simply Christians and the designation Paulician was given them by their enemies.” (Latourette, 299)
- Jonathan Hill, author of *Zondervan Handbook to the History of Christianity* discusses the Paulicians in a section labeled “New Heresies.” While Hill admits that the Paulicians remain poorly understood he does not hesitate from repeating the party line regarding these saints calling them Manicheans, Gnostic, and Nestorian. (Hill, 150)
- Andrew Miller agrees with Broadbent. Miller states the following regarding the Paulicians, “The doctrines, character, and history of the Paulicians have been subjects of great controversy; but they have not been allowed to speak for themselves to posterity. Their writings were carefully destroyed by the Catholics, and they are known to us only through the reports of bitter enemies who branded them as heretics. . .” (Miller, 353)

Who Were the Paulicians?

- “From the time of Mani the churches of believers who called themselves Christians, thus distinguishing themselves from others whom they called “Romans,” had always been accused of being Manicheans, though they declared that they were not and complained of the injustice of attributing to them doctrines they did not hold.” (Broadbent, 65)

- The name Paulician was frequently given to these churches. “The persecutions to which they were subjected and the systematic destruction of their literature hide from us all but occasional glimpses into their history, though what remains is sufficient to show that there were in those wide regions of Asia Minor, Armenia, around Mount Ararat and beyond the Euphrates, churches . . . who kept the teaching of the apostles—received from Christ and contained in the Scriptures—in an unbroken testimony from the first.” (Braodbent, 66)
- In 653, after the Muslim conquest of Syria, an Armenian deacon returning from captivity amongst the Muslims became the guest of a man named Constantine in the village of Mananalis near Samosata. (Miller, 353-354)
- In response to Constantine’s hospitality, the deacon gave him a manuscript containing the four gospels and the epistles of Paul. Rumors abound regarding Constantine’s religious background i.e., trained Gnostic, Manichean, member of the established Greek church. However, upon studying the manuscript, Constantine renounced his religious past and set about restoring apostolic Christianity. (Miller, 354)
- Constantine changed his name to Silvanus (after Paul’s companion) and began preaching for nearly thirty years in a place called Cibossa, Armenia. Silvanus had many converts from amongst the Catholics as well as the Zoroastrian religion. Over time his group became sizeable enough to attract the attention of the Emperor and an edict was issued in 684 AD against Constantine and the Paulician congregations. (Miller, 355)
- “The execution of the decree was entrusted to an officer of the imperial court, named Simeon. He had orders to put the teacher to death, and to distribute his followers among the clergy and in monasteries, with a view to their being reclaimed.” (Miller 355)
- “Simeon placed Constantine—the chief object of the priests’” revenge before a large number of his companions, and commanded them to stone him. They refused, and, instead of obeying, all dropped the stones with which they had been armed, excepting one young man; and Constantine was killed by a stone from the hand of that heartless youth—his own adopted son Justus.” (Miller, 355)
- Meanwhile, Simeon was so affected by the testimony of what he witnessed that after talking the Paulicians he converted to their faith. After spending three years at the imperial court, Simeon left his earthly position returned to Cibossa under the name Titus and became the successor of Sylvanus. (Miller, 355)
- Five years after the martyrdom of Constantine, Justus betrayed the Paulicians again. He went to the bishop of Colonia, and reported the revival and spread of the so-called heresy. The bishop communicated his information to the Emperor Justinian II., and, in consequence, Simeon, and a large number of his followers were burnt to death in one large funeral pile. (Miller, 355)
- Justinian would not succeed in wiping out the memory of the Paulicians. Influenced by the blood of the martyrs and a new succession of teachers congregations arose from their ashes spread over all the adjacent regions. (Miller, 355)

- The Paulicians as well as similar groups rejected the use of icons and images in their worship. They received a bit of reprieve from their persecution under the reign of Leo the Isaurian who in 726 issued the first edict against the worship of images. He followed this by a campaign of forcible destruction of images and the persecution of those who held them. (Broadbent, 69)
- “The iconoclastic movement brought a respite to the persecuted brethren of Asia Minor, but when (AD 842), under the Empress Theodora, the supporters of images had triumphed, it was determined to exterminate the “heretics” who had so consistently and powerfully proclaimed that images, pictures, and relics were valueless, and had maintained a spiritual worship and the priesthood of all believers.” (Broadbent, 72)
- “Systematic slaughter, beheading, burning, drowning, began afresh under the Empress Theodora’s orders and continued for many years. But it failed to shake the steadfastness of the believers. It was claimed that between the years 842 and 867, the zeal of Theodora and her inquisitors had brought about the death of 100,000 persons.” (Broadbent, 74)
- Broadbent and Ruckman both report that many Paulicians politically and militarily aligned themselves with the Muslims due to the ferocity of the persecutions against them by the established church. (Broadbent, 77; Ruckman, 303)
- Under severe persecution many Paulicians migrated across the Bosphorus Strait into Bulgaria and the Balkan mountains and from thence into northern Italy, Yugoslavia where they produced Christians called Waldenses and Albigenses. (Ruckman, 304)
- In Volume III of his legendary *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Edward Gibbon states the following regarding the Paulicians:
 - “Three different roads might introduce the Paulies into the heart of Europe . . . Under the Byzantine standard the Paulicians were often transported to the Greek provinces of Italy and Sicily; in peace and war they freely conversed with strangers and natives, and the opinion were silently propagated in Rome, Milan, and the kingdoms beyond the Alps. It was soon discovered that many thousand Catholics of every rank, and of either sex, had embraced Manichain heresy; and the flames which consumed twelve canons of Orleans was the first act and signal of persecution.” (Gibbon, 310-312)
 - “The visible assemblies of the Paulicians, or Albigeois, were extirpated by fire and sword; and the bleeding remnant escaped by flight, concealment, or Catholic conformity. But the invincible spirit which they had kindled still lived and breathed in the western world. In the state, in the church, and even in the cloister, a latent succession was preserved of the disciples of St. Paul, who protest against the tyranny of Rome, embraced the Bible as the rule of faith, and purified their creed from all the visions of the Gnostic theology.” (Gibbon, 310-312)
- Spanning a period of time from about 600 AD until the 14th century with a few lingering into the 18th century Gibbon considered the Paulicians the first reformers who scattered over the West the seeds of the reformation. (Gibbon, 302)

Beliefs of the Paulicians

- Once again Schaff articulates the standard party line regarding the Paulicians.
 - Dualism was their fundamental principle. The good God created the spiritual world; the bad God created the sensual world. The former is worshiped by the Paulicians, i.e., the true Christians, the latter by the “Romans” or Catholics.
 - Contempt for matter. The body is the seat of evil desire, and is itself impure.
 - Docetism. Christ descended from heaven in an ethereal body, passed through the womb of Mary as through a channel, suffered in appearance, but not in reality, and began the process of redemption of the spirit from the chains of matter.
 - The Virgin Mary was not the “mother of God”
 - They rejected the Old Testament and the Epistles of Peter. They regarded Peter as a false prophet, because he denied his master, preached Judaism rather than Christianity, was the enemy of Paul (Gal. 2:11) and the pillar of the Catholic hierarchy. . . . At a later period, however, they seem to have confined themselves, like Marcion, to the writing of Paul and Luke. . . (Schaff, 577)
- Now here comes the real reason why Catholics and Roman Catholic sympathizing Protestants like Schaff consider the Paulicians heretics.
 - “They rejected the priesthood, the sacraments, the worship of the saints, the sign of the cross, and all externals in religion. Baptism means only the baptism of the Spirit; the communion with the body and blood of Jesus Christ is only a communion with the word and doctrine.” (Schaff, 577)
- In Volume III of Neander’s *Church History* we learn the following regarding the beliefs of the Paulicians.
 - “Indeed, they went so far on this side as to wholly reject the outward celebration of the sacraments. They maintained that it was by no means Christ’s intention to institute the baptism by water as a perpetual ordinance, but by baptism he meant only the baptism of the Spirit. . . .” (Neander, 263)
 - “As they rejected outward baptism, so they seem also to have rejected altogether the outward celebration of the Lord’s Supper; probably understanding the Lord’s supper spiritually and symbolically of the communion with Christ, as the bread of life that came down from heaven.” (Neander, 589)
- Even Ruckman a committed Baptist is forced to concede the following:
 - “The real problem was that the Paulicians rejected the Catholic priesthood, the Catholic sacraments, the worship of relics and crosses, and they thought the “one baptism” of Ephesians 4:5 was the Holy Spirit putting the believer into Christ: they were the Stamites and Bullingerites of their day. At the worst they were at

least five times as Scriptural as any bishop or archbishop in the ruling church.”
(Ruckman, 304)

- Gibbon reports that Constantine (Silvanus) attached himself with peculiar devotion to the writings and character of St. Paul. (Gibbon, 302)
- Neander tells us that the Paulicians “gave special weight to the authority of the apostle Paul; and his epistles must have been considered by them as the main sources of the knowledge of Christian doctrines.” (Neander, 268)

Concluding Remarks

- The Paulicians represent a silver vein of truth running through church history all the way back to message, ministry, and writings of Paul. Originating in Asia Minor where Paul began his apostolic ministry. These saints were labeled Paulician because of their affinity for Pauline authority over Catholic claims to be the heirs of St. Peter.
- As with Marcion we need to consider who is calling them heretics and for what reasons. The charge that they reject the gospels and the Old Testament is one of the lies our enemies tell about us.
- Their rejection of all things Catholic, belief in justification by grace through faith, rejection of all forms of water baptism, and stance on Pauline authority lead me to conclude that these saints were our spiritual forbears.
- It is these saints from the east (Syria, Asia Minor, Eastern Europe, and Byzantium) who believed, preached, and died for the true text of the New Testament. The sheer number of copies alone existing in this text line compared with the Western Latin text is proof of the extensive evangelistic and teaching ministry these saints conducted.

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