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### The Church and its Battle with Gnosticism

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**THE CHURCH AND ITS BATTLE WITH GNOSTICISM**

**A Thesis presented to the  
Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary**

**in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

**Bachelor of Divinity**

**by**

**Luther Paul Koepke, B.A.**

**Concordia Seminary  
April 15, 1941**

**Approved by**

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## FOREWORD

Everything genuine has its counterfeit. Things go by doubles -- substance and shadow -- to warn the unwary and check the thoughtless. In its simpler aspects this fact is familiar to all of us. We know the saint and his shadow the hypocrite; we know the doctor and his shadow the quack. Merchant and faker, truth and fallacy, illumination and illusion march together two and two everywhere -- the counterfeit always imitating the original.

In vaster, more sounding matters, we see that as the Christian Church has progressed through the ages, marching along side we find another column. The counterfeit marches along side, not to resist or offer battle, but to draw away from the true. Taking an individual, we see Judas the disciple of Christ walking with the Master, but his object and aim is far removed -- a counterfeit of a true disciple. In the history of the Christian Church we see heresies continually arising, not as a rule diametrically opposed to the true Church, but counterfeiting the true movement and offering similar things, but these are by quite another method and on much lower terms. In the anti-christ we see the counterfeit of the true Christ. This anti-christ does not announce his antagonism to Christ, but so closely counterfeits Christ, so skillfully impersonates him, that many people are deceived. Through these superficial similarities profound deception is worked.

As we look at Gnosticism we find it a counterfeit of the true and Christ-founded Church. To the people living at the height of the Gnostic heresy this erroneous teaching and Christianity must have seemed similar. Similar terms, and similar concepts, but Gnosticism offering these by a different method. Gnosticism came in similar garb, offered like benefits, but gave soul-destroying results.

To the ordinary person this heresy and Christianity may have looked alike, but those who knew the basic principles of both, immediately sensed the difference. Thus we find arising in the Christian Church certain men who set out to battle this deceiver and the deceptive doctrines. In the incipient stages of Gnosticism, we find the writers of the New Testament fighting the heresy. At the height of the Gnostic error we see Christian leaders putting forth every effort to stamp out and destroy the heresy. The task all along was not a simple one. / Truth and high principles are never achieved without a powerful struggle against the spurious. So we find the Church and its battle with Gnosticism a hard-fought struggle. Holding high the standards of true Christianity we see the leaders of the Church fight Gnosticism until the <sup>ex</sup>counterfeit has been left all but completely extinguished. The battle with Gnosticism was an arduous one, it was well fought, / it well deserves to be considered.

## CHAPTER I

### EARLY TRACES OF Gnosticism

The name Gnostic is derived from the Greek word "gnosis" which means knowledge, enlightenment, and sometimes science. <sup>1</sup> This, by the Gnostics, was used of knowledge in a special sense, referring to an inner and deeper knowledge of the mystery of existence not accessible to the vulgar, and a source of pride to the initiated. <sup>2</sup> Among the majority of the followers of the movement, "gnosis" was meant more in the sense of revelation than of mere knowledge. The Gnostic sects lived in the conviction that they possessed a secret and mysterious knowledge. For this reason the esoteric character became basic in their beliefs, eliminating all who did not have the special revelation.

The character of the Gnostic beliefs dealt chiefly with the speculative and mysterious. The object was to solve the two great problems of all religious philosophy: How to account for the existence of evil; and how to reconcile the finite with the infinite. <sup>3</sup> In connection with what was seen in the world as evil, which seemed in direct opposition to God who is good, came the conception that there must be some intermediary beings who originally emanated from God, but now were more distant from him, and that they created

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<sup>1</sup> Qualben, L.P., A History of the Christian Church, New York, p. 70. Cfr. I Tim. 6, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, Adv. Haer., I, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Cheetham, S., A History of the Christian Church, 1894, p. 97.

this world with its evil. The question of evil was of all-absorbing interest to these men. The evil in the world as opposed to the good God was irreconcilable. The only reasonable manner of synchronizing these two principles was through a series of beings between the highest Good and evil. Therefore, the method of salvation of the Gnostics was this that the spiritual man must find his way back to God through these intermediary stages, finally arriving at God. In order to do this he must leave all that is material since material substance is evil and must come through the intermediary beings into his abode with the good. The special knowledge or revelation, then, to achieve this was the "gnosis" of the Gnostic sects.

This in brief, is the essence of the Gnostic tenets. The complete doctrine will be presented in detail in a later chapter. At present I wish to show the earliest traces of Gnosticism found in that period before these heretical doctrines reached their height in the second century. Gnosticism is rightly considered a post-Christ heresy, but traces are found in pre-Christian times as will be shown in this chapter.

The first trace of Gnosticism which is brought out as a reference to this particular heresy is found in Genesis. Here in the account of the fall of man the serpent came to Eve, "and the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing



good and evil."<sup>4</sup> Gnostics believe that this serpent was in reality a beneficent being, who raised mankind to the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>5</sup> They say that the knowledge (γνῶσις) here spoken of is that special revelation by which an individual can attain good being conscious also of the material evil which must be abandoned.

Another Biblical reference which is often cited as pertaining to Gnosticism is Ecclesiastes 3, 21: "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to earth?" This is considered as a warning against Gnostic speculations.<sup>6</sup> Other passages have been assumed as referring to Gnosticism in the Old Testament but it is difficult to prove that any of these have any direct bearing upon this particular heresy. However, if it is true that already at the time of the exile of the Jews, Gnosticism was beginning in the form of the mysterious and speculative religion of the Persians; then we can assume that the Church's battle with Gnosticism began at that time already for we have the repeated warnings and admonitions of the Prophets to the Jews that the Israelites should keep their doctrines pure and unadulterated from foreign influences.<sup>7</sup>

The origins of the various systems of the Gnostics

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3, 4. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Foakes-Jackson, F.J., The History of the Christian Church, New York, 1924, P. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Qualben, op. cit., 71.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Exilic and Post-Exilic Prophets of the Old Testament.

have been much disputed. Contemporary opponents of Gnosticism thought the beginnings lay in the Greek philosophy of religion which then put on a mystic disguise. In modern inquiries, however, the first glows of Gnosticism have been traced back to the Zoroastrian systems of the Zendavesta, to the Hebrew Kabbala, and to the teachings of the Buddhists. The very variety of these different systems shows that no individual one accounts for all of the phenomena; the influence of all also may be found in one or the other of the Gnostic systems. The antithesis of light and darkness reminds us of the Persian; the series of emanations from the divine essence recalls the Buddhist; the allegory resembles that of the Hebrew Kabbala. In cities like Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus these theories ran together and met with nascent Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The similarities between these ancient beliefs and Gnosticism are noted in the following paragraphs.

The doctrine of Zoroaster, the great religious teacher of Persia, is found in the Zendavesta the text and comment written at different periods, the earliest of which has been assigned to B.C. 1200-1000. It tells us that from Zarvana Akarana or Boundless Time two antagonistic principles emanated, Ormuzd the eternal Word of the Father, and his younger brother Ahriman. Between these a contest soon began by each principle putting forth emanations. First Ormuzd after

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<sup>8</sup> Cheetham, op. cit., pp. 96-98 passim.

creating the pure world by his Word, put forth the six Amshaspands of which he himself was the seventh. These were of both sexes and produced in turn the twenty-eight Izeds from whom came forth an indefinite number of Frarashis or ideas. Afterward his brother, Ahriman, who for pride and jealousy had been condemned to sojourn in darkness, put forth three series of evil spirits or Devs to oppose his rival. <sup>9</sup> In the contest with Ahriman, the word of Ormuzd was destroyed, but out of its scattered fragments, Ormuzd made man and woman whom he placed in the world which he and the spirits had created. <sup>10</sup> Ahriman, however, seduced the woman by a bribe of fruits and milk, and filled the world with noxious things. The Zendavesta predicts that in the days when evil shall seem triumphant three prophets shall arise, one of whom, called Saoshyant, shall restore all things to their original purity. <sup>11</sup>

After a discussion of the religion of Zoroaster, Foakes-Jackson says: "It is impossible not to be struck by the resemblance of some of the teaching of the Zendavesta to that of the Hebrew Scripture, nor to avoid acknowledging the great debt which Jewish theology after the Captivity owes to Persian Teaching." <sup>12</sup> I believe just the opposite

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Sophia in the system of Valentinus.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Creation of the world by Spirits in the Ophite system.

<sup>11</sup> Dawson, M.M., The Ethical Religion of Zoroaster, 1931.

<sup>12</sup> Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., p. 124.

to be true. The prophets of exilic and post-exilic history of the Jewish people were continually attempting to keep the Jewish doctrine clear of foreign influences. I would rather say that the similarities which do occur came from the Zendavesta taking certain ideas from the Jewish theology and incorporating these into the Zendavesta.

The second religious cult which definitely shows traces of early Gnosticism is Buddhism. The doctrines of Buddhism were promulgated in India in the sixth century before Christ by Sakya-Muni, also called Gautama. It is a philosophy rather than a religion, distinguished by lofty morality, the sublime self-sacrifice inculcated by its teacher, its rigid asceticism, its view that the highest end is the peace of Nirvana, or freedom from all desire to exist, and its practical denial of the existence of a personal God. Though Buddhism has never established itself in Europe, it made its influence felt in the Christian Church by means of Gnosticism especially at Alexandria. <sup>13</sup>

The third early trace of Gnosticism is found in the Jewish Kabbala. Tradition assigns the composition of the Kabbala to the angels at the time of the fall of all mankind. More moderate admirers of this writing ascribe it to Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Simon ben Jochai A.D. 100-200, while according to the sober facts it was compiled as late as A.D. 1300, by Moses da Leon. The theories, however, are ancient, some

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 126.  
Cfr. Rhys, T.W., Buddhism, New York, n.d.  
Cfr. Schopenhauer on Nirvana.

being undoubtedly earlier than the Christian era.

The system of the Kabbala is briefly as follows; God is Boundless Time and is called En-Soph. He can only be described as non-existent, but the ten Sephiroth emanate from him. These emanations taken together form the Adam Kadmon or Primal Man. From the Sephiroth proceed the four worlds, each of which is a reproduction of the others. The first world, Aziluth is inhabited by immaterial beings; the second is the world of creation; the third the world of Formation; the fourth the lowest world which the devils under Samael inhabit. Man is formed on the model of Adam Kadmon and has three souls borrowed from the three worlds. He was clothed in skin because of his transgression, but eventually was redeemed from bondage of the flesh. The law, like man, was originally perfect and spiritual, but it has been clothed in the garment of narrative. To extract its true meaning, it is necessary to observe a number of hermeneutical rules and especially to discover the numerical value of the letters of each word. <sup>14</sup>

Although traces of Gnosticism can be found in other speculative religions before the advent of Christian times the three mentioned serve to show that some of the fundamental ideas were prevalent before Gnosticism reached its height.

The mysterious character of these various beliefs experienced at certain cities like Alexandria the same treatment as the old Egyptian myths had received at Memphis or On.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 124-125.

The plain sense of Homer as well as that of the Old Testament was said to conceal a hidden meaning of spiritual truth veiled in allegory. Unrestrained allegory is essentially Gnostic in its contempt for realities. To these men the facts of Homer's narrative and the facts of the history of Abraham were equally unimportant compared to the truths they were supposed to inculcate. Thus we see in the development of the Gnostic systems that the circumstances of our Lord's life on earth began to vanish and in its place a phantom teacher instructed mankind about Aeons and heavenly powers.

Although these early traces of Gnosticism are found, it is proper to say that the Gnostic sects were the result of the contact of Christian principles with the current ideas of the first century; and every Gnostic system was an attempt to blend Christianity with the theosophical speculations of the age. The speculative philosophy of the East has always held a fascination for the practically minded West, and it exercises periodically a dominating influence. <sup>15</sup>

The period before and immediately after Christ was not a world that was carefree and frivolous. It was rather a time of great concern over the issues of life and death, it was a period of serious search for a way of salvation. Men felt their lives enveloped in mystery and in multitudinous ways dread powers of the universe disturbed and frightened them. The old popular gods were outgrown and were thought

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<sup>15</sup> Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., p. 122-123.

of as weak and puerile. As we look below the surface we find that there existed religious societies and associations almost everywhere: societies like the Essenes, or Orphic Circles or the Pythagorean brotherhoods, or mysteries of Mithras, all of whom believed that they were twice born souls and were in possession of a genuine purification and of deliverance from this material body.<sup>16</sup> Besides these cults there were beginning to appear new types of esoteric societies professing to find another way of salvation, salvation by discovery of the "great secret", revealed through magical knowledge or "gnosis" which was set in contrast to faith which was assumed to be on a lower level.<sup>17</sup> This early Gnosticism, then, found during and immediately after Christ is described as follows:

This Gnosticism seems to have been a highly complex religio-philosophical movement of antiquity, bearing in its current the vital forces of East and West -- a movement never definitely organized into a single school or church and never clearly systematized as a philosophy or a theology. It rather represents gentile peoples in their quest for redemption; a dualistic world-view unwilling to rest in permanent division, inquiring minds that refused to believe the riddle of the universe was insoluble, lost souls crying out for salvation, human hearts hungry for divine fellowship, good life that felt clear intimations of its immortality, serious minds seeking some rational interpretation of man in his relation to the cosmos. The Gnostic teachers and preachers announced the good news of a divine revelation, but

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, R., The Church's Debt to Heretics, New York, 1924, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

secret within the esoteric circle of the initiated, a revelation of heavenly realities and of the passwords by which the soul of the illumined might surely escape its superhuman foes in its ascent from the material and the temporal to the spiritual and the eternal. Over against the simple Hebrew truce in Providence, the Gnostics offered a highly speculative cosmology in which the supreme deity was far removed from an evil world. Creation itself has been a mistake, and the distance between God and man was covered only by a series of emanations, moving ever farther from the heavenly throne down to the female deity whose defection gave rise to the creation of man in whom a bit of heaven was imprisoned in the mass of earth. Salvation was really the escape of this divine spark and its return to its proper heavenly home. <sup>18</sup>

As the foundations of Gnosticism were laid in these times and since these doctrines were being promulgated by certain sects, we find that soon after Christ's death, during the apostolic era, these heretical doctrines are spoken against. The Apostles saw the beginnings of this false teaching and immediately opposed them. Gnosticism in its explicit form was not yet on the stage but the Apostles, especially Paul, are quite evidently confronted with a drift or wave of thought which belongs to the general complex. Paul refers ironically on various occasions to "gnosis" and he frequently contrasts true knowledge with false and boastful "gnosis." <sup>19</sup> At the time of the Apostles, then, the real battle with Gnosticism begins.

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<sup>18</sup> McNeill, Spinks, Willoughby, Environmental Factors in Christian History, Chicago, 1939, p. 115.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, op. cit., p. 34.



### GNOSTICISM IN APOSTOLIC TIMES

The signs of incipient heresy are not wanting as evidenced by St. Paul's epistle written about A.D. 63 from Rome to the Colossian Church. That this heresy was Judaic in character is evident from such a passage as, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink or in respect of a feast day, or a new moon, or a sabbath."<sup>20</sup> That this epistle contains many elements referring to Gnosticism may be seen from the way in which St. Paul dwells on such words as wisdom (σοφία), understanding (ἐννοεῖς), knowledge (γνῶσις) (ἐπιγνώσις), and by the implied condemnation of any intellectual exclusiveness in the words of Col. 1, 28.<sup>21</sup> In Col. 2, 8 Paul warns the people, "Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world." He further warns his readers of substituting "shadows" for real things, of being robbed of the prize of faith by adopting a form of "voluntary humility", of "worshipping angels", and of intruding into those things which no man hath seen, vainly puffed up by the understanding of his fleshly mind."<sup>22</sup>

Also by the condemnation of the worship of the worship of angels and the repeated assertions that Christ is above all heavenly thrones, lordships, powers, and authorities,

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<sup>20</sup> Col. 2, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> Col. 2, 18.

and that the pleroma or fulness of divine perfection dwells in him does the Apostle exclude any other thing, he says, "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions, or principalities, or power; all things were created by him, and for him." <sup>23</sup> The word πλῆρῆς is used repeatedly in order to exclude any idea of other creatures or spirits having a part in the acts.

| Another phase of Gnosticism at Ephesus which was fought against was the false teaching which laid great stress upon asceticism. St. Paul warns, "Let no man judge you in meat or in drink," and again, "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ ... why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances." <sup>24</sup> Paul shows that the false teachers were laying stress upon the wrong things. Some of the Christians most likely were taking up ascetic practices and humiliating ceremonies in the hope that they would thus be able to free themselves from the malevolent power of hostile angels or demons. <sup>25</sup>

There must, furthermore, be some specific significance in St. Paul's use of the Greek word Pleroma which is usually translated as fulness. It occurs twice in the Epistle to the Colossians. <sup>26</sup> This word "Pleroma" holds a very important place in many of the Gnostic systems, where it has a technical

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<sup>23</sup> Col. 1, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Col. 2, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, op. cit., 23.

<sup>26</sup> Col. 1, 19; 2, 9.

meaning. The word may have been in frequent use in the nascent sects of Asia Minor when this Epistle was written, or it may equally well be that the later Gnostics took the word over from St. Paul into their own system.

Ephesians also clearly reveals the fact that the writer is shaping his message to battle a dangerous rival faith. The city of Ephesus was a great stronghold of Apostolic Christianity, and it was there that Gnosticism also had to be battled. This letter bears a strong resemblance to Colossians and earnestly upholds the superiority of Christ to all heavenly powers. <sup>27</sup> Here again Paul is counter-attacking those principles which are fundamental in Gnosticism. He also in this letter refers to the angels or demons as the "world-rulers of this darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places." <sup>28</sup> Paul is evidently hinting at the prevalence of errors similar to those at Colossae; but this letter being a circular epistle does not attack the false doctrine so directly as does its companion letter addressed to the church at Colossae. <sup>29</sup>

The word "gnosis" used in its technical and magical sense first appears in L Tim. 6, 20, the writer of which is plainly living in an atmosphere charged with new and dangerous teachings -- a teaching which he calls "profane babblings" and then names "gnosis", though he insists that this word, is falsely applied to the new brand of faith. The entire

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<sup>27</sup> Eph. 1, 20-23.

<sup>28</sup> Eph. 6, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., p. 151.

Epistle is concerned with this new and subtle danger which confronts the Church. "Old wives fables," "profane and useless" he calls the rival doctrines. "The endless geneologies which minister questionings" mentioned in chapter 1, 4 are quite obviously to be found in the Gnostic systems, while "the seducting spirits and doctrine of demons," "the hypocrisy of men that speak lies," branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron are just as certainly to be explained as references to these hated and dangerous opponents of the faith. <sup>30</sup> When this Epistle and others written by St. Paul were published the battle with Gnosticism was being sharply contested. <sup>31</sup>

On turning to the Johannine literature we find special stress laid on the fact that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" <sup>32</sup> and again in first John we see a reference which might be directly referred against the Gnostic tendencies, "Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God." <sup>33</sup> Again in second John verse seven we see this same idea expressed, "For many deceivers are entered into the world who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh." These references are seen to be against the Gnostic conception that Christ was not present in the flesh.

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Tim. 4, 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, op. cit., p. 32. Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>32</sup> John 1, 14.

In the little Epistle of Jude we find certain references and phrases which also seem to be against one of the Gnostic sects. The immediate use of the word ψυχικῆς which means "psychical men" for those who do not have the spirit, and thus are not pneumatical men," indicates an attack against some form of Gnosticism. These men are called "clouds without water, carried along by the wind," they are, "autum trees without fruit, twice dead and plucked up by the roots," they are, "Wild waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame," they are, "wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever." 33 These are the Gnostic men against whom the Apostle is contending.

The Nichocaitans, referred to in Revelation, were being founded at the time when the book was being written, later developed into a well known sect. These people referred to know the "deeps of Satan." We find such expressions as the "deeps of God" and the "Deep things." These men have a prophetic and apparently have a secret, mysterious wisdom or "gnosis." These references again are directed against the Gnostic tendencies becoming prevalent, and this is an endeavor to fight them off. 34

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33 Jude 12-13.

34 Rev. 2.6.15.

SIMON MAGUS

The references above to the various and diversified forms of Gnosticism, are found in the writings of the Apostles, showing that they were battling Gnosticism. Besides these, one Gnostic movement dimly and mysteriously in evidence in the New Testament is fathered by the famous Simon Magus of Acts eight who is called by all the early writers against heresies the founder of Gnostic theories.<sup>35</sup> He was called by the people of Samaria "the great power of God" and later, having accepted baptism, he tried to purchase the apostolic power. According to the early apologists, Simon claims to be a manifestation of "the Boundless Power of God." He was accompanied in his missionary travels by a woman who was called Ennoea, the thought of God and was believed to be a reincarnation of Helen of Troy. He held that the world is an emanation or series of evolutions from the Boundless Power. Through six stages or roots, each emanation was a reflection of the one before and grew poorer and weaker as it became farther removed from the Boundless Power. Everything has a double aspect, male and female, and everything is double in the sense that it is a union of the matter which is far below and is always and everywhere evil.

This Simon Magus is seen to be the founder and first

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<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., I, 23; Justin Martyr, Apology, XXVI, 56; Justin Martyr, Dialogus, C.; Hippolytus, Ref., VI, 72.

exponent of Gnosticism. We can definitely say that the Church's battle and condemnation of Gnosticism began when Peter tells Magus, "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gifts of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter; for thy heart is not right in the sight of God... For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." <sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, we see the battle against the false doctrine continuing throughout most of the New Testament writings since the phrases which we have quoted from the various Epistles show that the writers definitely had in mind some form of Gnosticism. The incipient Gnostic tendencies of Colossians and Ephesians are so clearly defined that there is little doubt that Paul was warning against this particular error. In the other Epistles mentioned we also see the fight against these Gnostic beginnings.

Although the battle with Gnosticism began as early as this, the height of the Gnostic teachings did not come until some time later. The movement began, as stated, with Simon Magus. He was followed by men like Meander and Cerinthus. After this the Greater Gnostics came to the fore such as Basilides and Carpocrates. The movement reached its culmination in Valentinus who took from the previous ideas and added his own characteristics and developed the greatest

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<sup>36</sup> Acts 8, 20-23.

of all Gnostic systems. Valentinus was active about 140-160 A.D.

The spirit of Gnosticism and of Biblical Christianity was separated by a deep gulf. The contrast between the profound simplicity and clear teachings of Christ; and the intricacy and bewildering complexity of the system of Valentinus stood out sharply. However, it was this very complex and esoteric character which made this teaching popular. Valentinus gained many adherents to his teaching.

The men who adhered to the fundamental doctrines of the Bible saw the danger in the speculative teachings. The real battle with Gnosticism came to the fore when these men fought the false conceptions of all Gnostics and especially those of Valentinus. The apologists of the Christian Church took up the fight against these heretical doctrines and it was men like Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, and especially Irenaeus who lead the battle. The writings of these men give us the teachings of the Gnostics and also the manner in which they refuted these errors.

The various Gnostic teachers had some differences in their doctrines but in general the basic principles are identical in all systems. By presenting the teachings of Valentinus in detail, I hope to show the character of Gnosticism and then give the manner in which the apologists active at the height of the heresy fought the errors.



## CHAPTER II

### FULLEST DEVELOPMENT OF GNOSTICISM

Upon entering into the ranks of the newly founded Christianity, Gnosticism found many followers to its tenets. The heretical sect grew and prospered. But on entering this Christian atmosphere, it also found an uncompromising, militant spirit which fought this erroneous teaching until it was put down and practically extinguished. The task of the young Church was twofold: To make it impossible for anyone to associate Gnosticism with Christianity, and to make it impossible for this heresy to survive or ever to rise again.

Bearing the brunt of the battle against Gnostic beliefs we find Irenaeus <sup>1</sup> who spent much energy in acquainting himself with the Gnostic beliefs and then refuting them. With an indomitable spirit of courage and resistance, yet with the

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<sup>1</sup>Irenaeus is generally supposed to have been a native of Smyrna. He was bishop of Lyons in France, succeeding Pothinus in 177. The dates of his life are generally given as 120-202 A.D. Irenaeus worked in the period of greatest Gnostic activity and took great pains to acquaint himself with the doctrine which he describes. He is the best and practically the only source of Gnostic tenets. Most of the doctrines of Gnosticism which I present are based on Irenaeus. His great work, Against Heresies was written between 182-188. Irenaeus had several peculiar ideas in regard to the life of Christ. He believed the Lord to be an old man and that Christ's ministry lasted for ten years. But though, on these and some other points, the judgment of Irenaeus is clearly at fault, his work contains a vast deal of sound and valuable exposition of Scripture, in opposition to the fanciful systems of interpretation which prevailed in his day.

patience and gentleness spoken of as being essential to the servant of the Lord, <sup>2</sup> Irenaeus fought the heresy which was undermining the Christian Church. The battle waged by Irenaeus was singularly successful.

In the preface to his writings against heresies, Irenaeus gives us the reasons for writing against these heretics. <sup>3</sup> He says that these Gnostics set aside the truth and bring in lying words and vain geneologies by which they attempt to take captive the minds of the inexperienced. They overthrow the faith of many by drawing them away from God under the pretense of superior knowledge. This error, as any error, is never set forth in its true form or else it would be detected. On the other hand, this heresy is decked in an attractive dress so that forming an opinion from the outward appearance it seems attractive. Irenaeus says:

Lest, therefore, through my neglect, some should be carried off, even as sheep are by wolves, while they perceive not the true character of these men... and because their language resembles ours, while their sentiments are very different, -- I have deemed it my duty to unfold these portentous and profound mysteries... I do this, in order that thou, obtaining an acquaintance with these things, mayest in turn explain them to all those with whom thou are connected, and exhort them to avoid such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> II Tim. 2, 24-26. And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, Adv. Haer., I, 1-2. <sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, ibid., I, 2.

On entering the system of Valentinus we find such a mixture of heathen logic, Christian belief, speculative reasoning, and the Platonic teaching of perfect patterns existing in the wpiritual world, that we scarcely know where to begin in unravelling the matter. However, a reasonable point at which to start is the Gnostic teaching of God.

#### DOCTRINE OF GOD

The Gnostics held that in the invisible and ineffable heights above there exists a certain perfect, pre-existent Aeon <sup>5</sup> whom they call Proarche, Propator, and Bythus, and describe him as being invisible and incomprehensible. Eternal and unbegotten, he remained throughout innumerable cycles of ages in profound serenity and quiescence. There existed along with him Ennoa, whom Valentinus also called Charis and Sige. Sige, however, was no true consort of Bythus since he included in himself the idea of a male and female and was the one cause of all things. <sup>6</sup> At last Bythus

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<sup>5</sup> Aeon is derived from the Greek  $\alpha\iota\omega\acute{\nu}$  and seems to have been formed from the words  $\alpha\iota\omega\acute{\nu}$  meaning ever-existing or ever lasting.

<sup>6</sup> The English equivalents of the Greek for the Aeons are as follows: Bythus, Profundity; Proarche, First-Beginning; Propator, First-Father; Ennoa, Idea; Charis, Grace; Sige, Silence; Nous, Intelligence; Aletheia, Truth; Logos, Word; Zoe, Life; Anthropos, Man; Ecclesia, Church; Mixus, Mingling; Ageratos, Undecoying; Henosis, Union; Autophyes, Self-existent; Hedone, Pleasure; Acinetos, Immoveable; Syncrosis, Blending; Monogenes, Only-Begotten; Marcia, Happiness; Paracletus, Advocate; Pistis, Faith; Patricos, Ancestral; Elpis, Hope; Metricos, Metrical; Agape, Love; Ainos, Praise; Synesis, Understanding; Ecclesiasticus, Ecclesiastical; Maraciontes, Felicity; Theletos, Desierated; Sophia, Wisdom.

determined to send forth from himself the beginning of all things and deposited this production in Sige. She, having received this seed gave birth to Nous, who was similar and equal to Bythus and was able to comprehend him. This Nous the Gnostics also call Monogenes, and Father, and the Beginning of all things. Along with Nous, Bythus also produced Aletheia. These four, then, Bythus, Sige, Nous, and Aletheia constitute the first Pythagorean Tetrad and these dominate the root of all things.

Monogenes then produced Logos and Zoe. These two produced Anthropos and Ecclesia. After this Logos and Zoe produced ten other Aeons, Bythus and Mixis; Agertos and Henosis; Autophyes and Hedone; Autophyes and Marcia. Anthropos together with Ecclesia produced twelve Aeons, Paracletus, Pistis, Patricos, Elpis, Metricos, Agape, Ainos, Synesis, Ecclesiasticus, Marciotes, Theletos, Acinetos, and Sophia. These, then are the thirty Aeons of Valentinus and they are described as being wrapped up so to speak, in silence and known to none except the Gnostic teachers. They call this group the Pleroma and it is divided into an Ogdoad, Decad, and Duodecal.

The Propator or First-Father was known to Monogenes alone; to all the others he was incomprehensible, Nous

took pleasure in contemplating the Father and exalting and considering his greatness, while he meditated how he might communicate to the rest of the Aeons how great the Father really was. All the other Aeons wished to know of the Father but Nous was restrained from telling them by Sige.

Sophia, however, who was the latest Aeon, suffered a certain passion which consisted in a desire to search out the Father for she wished to comprehend his greatness. She soon discovered that the Father could not be comprehended. They describe the passion of Sophia as an amorphous substance which her female nature enabled her to produce.<sup>7</sup> When Sophia looked upon this substance she was filled with grief and perplexity. In this ignorance and grief material substance had its beginning. This material substance was placed outside the Pleroma while Sophia remained within.

After material substance had been placed outside the Pleroma, Nous with the prudent forethought of Erythus, gave origin to another pair, Christ and the Holy Spirit who were to prohibit any recurrence of Sophia's downfall. Christ instructed the Aeons and taught them that those who possessed a comprehension of the Father were sufficient in themselves. He also told them that the Father cannot be comprehended. The purpose of the Holy Spirit was to teach the Aeons that they all were equal and to lead the Aeons to a state of true repose. All the Aeons then came together and

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<sup>7</sup> This alludes to the Gnostic conception that in generation the male gives the form and the female Aeon gives only the substance. Hippolytus, Philosophie, VI, 30.

brought whatever was best in each and of greatest beauty and preciousness. The being produced as a result of this was Jesus, They speak of Jesus under the name Savior, Christ, Logos, and Everything because he was formed from the contributions of all. Angels were then produced of the same material and nature as Jesus to serve as his body guard. <sup>8</sup>

This, then, is the account given by the Gnostics of what happened within the Pleroma and how the Aeons were formed. They say that this knowledge has been openly revealed to only a few, and has been brought out mystically by the Savior through parables. They say that the Savior did no work in his first thirty years and this shows the Aeons at rest. <sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they declare that the thirty Aeons are plainly indicated in the parable of the laborers sent into the vineyard. <sup>10</sup> Some laborers are sent the first hour, others the third, others the sixth, others the ninth, and the last in the eleventh. If we add up the number of hours we get thirty and this definitely shows the thirty Aeons.

The production of the Duodecad is shown by the fact that the Lord was twelve years old when he disputed with the teachers, <sup>11</sup> and also that there were twelve apostles. The other eighteen Aeons are made manifest by the first two letters in his name I p s e d s. T e t s is ten, l t s is eight and in this manner the eighteen Aeons are portrayed. In like

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<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., I, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 3, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 20, 1-16.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 11, 42.

manner they say that the ten Aeons are pointed out by the Iota which begins his name, and for the same reason the Savior said, "one jot (Iota) or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." 12 The Gnostics moreover affirm that the Savior, also called Everything, is shown to be derived from all the Aeons by the following passage: "Every male that openeth the womb," 13 for he, being Everything, opened the womb. Again when Paul says, "And He Himself is all things" 14 he refers to the Savior coming from all the Aeons.

In battling this Gnostic conception of the Godhead, the apologists tried to show that the use of Scripture by these men was completely mistaken and perniciously false, and that their system would not hold up under logical reasoning.

Irenaeus begins his discussion against this false conception of God, by showing that there is but one God and the impossibility of its being otherwise, showing that he is not the fruit of a defect but is the only Father, alone containing all things in his existence. How can there be any other Fulness, or Principle, or Power, or God above Him since it is a matter of necessity that God, the Pleroma or fulness of all these should contain all things in His immensity, and should be contained by no one. If there is anyone beyond him then he does not contain all nor is he the Pleroma of all,

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12 Matt. 5, 18.

13 Exodus 13, 20; Luke 2, 23.

14 Col. 3, 2.

for that which is beyond the Pleroma will be wanting to the Pleroma, or in other words, God will be lacking something. If, therefore, God lacks something he cannot be the Pleroma, fulness, of all things. If such then were the case that he is not the complete fulness. He would have a beginning, middle, and end with respect to those who are beyond him. And if he has an end with regard to those things which are below him, he also has a beginning with regard to those things which are below him, he also has a beginning with regard to those things that are above him. He, therefore, also would be bounded by those existences which are outside of him. And thus, the Pleroma is established and enclosed in some other, and is surrounded from without by another mighty being, who must of necessity be greater than the Pleroma since that which contains something is greater than that which is contained. Therefore, that which is greater and stronger must be God. Since, according to the Gnostics, there is something outside of the Pleroma into which descended that higher power being outside the Pleroma, will contain the Pleroma, and must be greater since it contains the Pleroma. If this higher power, then, is bounded, it follows that it also must have a beginning and an end. Thus we would never arrive at a complete and full existence since each one would be bounded. This would lead, as the Gnostic system does, to the conclusion that there is no one true God. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., II, 1.



From the Bible also we have proof of there being only one God. All the Apostles and prophets knew only one God. When, however, the Gnostics are shown from Scripture that their beliefs are wrong, they will turn and assert that the truth cannot be extracted from Scripture for they say that truth was not handed down by means of written documents, but by word of mouth and that this tradition was given in a greater degree to men like Valentinus. When the apologists referred to tradition and tried to show the Gnostics that they were wrong also on the tradition handed down to the presbyters, the Gnostics say that they are above the presbyters. Therefore, it comes down to this that the Gnostics cannot be pinned down either to Scripture or tradition. Irenaeus says they are "like slippery serpents trying to escape at all points." However, they must be opposed that if "perchance, by cutting off their retreat, we may succeed in turning them back to the truth."

On the basis of Scriptures it is shown that there is but one God. Moses gave testimony that there is but one God, when, after receiving the law from God, God says, "Give ear O ye heavens and I will speak."<sup>16</sup> David asserts of one God who is the creator and ruler of all when he says, "My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."<sup>17</sup> Christ confesses one God when he says, "I confess to thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth." Moses again says, "Hear, O Israel, the

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<sup>16</sup> Deut. 32, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 11, 25; Luke 10, 21.

Lord thy God is one God." 18

### CREATION

The Gnostics did not believe that the earth was created by a divine fiat of God, but that it was through a mishap that it came into existence. We have mentioned in the previous pages how Sophia, also called Ahamoth, tried to comprehend the Father but only suffered passion in doing so. This passion of Ahamoth was excludcd from the Pleroma and was without form or figure. Christ took pity on this passion and imparted figure and form to it. Having obtained form, passion strained to discover the light of the Pleroma which had forsaken her. Being prevented from returning to light, passion resigned herself and suffered grief on the one hand because she had not been able to attain the object of her desire, and fear on the other hand, lest life itself should fail her. All these feelings were associated with ignorance. This collection of emotions, then, suffered by the passion of Sophia, was the substance of the matter from which the world was created. All things owed their beginning to her terror and sorrow. From her tears, all that is of a liquid nature was formed; from her smile all that is lucent; and from her grief and perplexity all that is corporeal of which the world is made. 19

Three kinds of existence now had been formed; one from the passion which was matter; the second from the conversion

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18 Deut. 6, 4.

19 Irenaeus, op. cit., I, 4.

when Achamoth returned to the Pleroma, which was animal; and the third that Achamoth herself brought forth which was spiritual. Out of the animal substance, Achamoth formed the Demiurge who is the Father and King of all things. This Demiurge then was the creator of the seven heavens above which he exists. He also made the world and after this he created the earthy part of man, not taking him from this dry earth, but from an invisible substance consisting of fusible and fluid matter.<sup>20</sup> Afterwards he breathed into him the animal part of his nature. It was this animal part which was created after the image and likeness of Demiurge. The material part was very near God, but not of the same substance with him. The animal part was so in likeness to God that man was called the spirit of life. After all this was done, man was enveloped with a covering of skin, the outward flesh. This, then, is the kind of man whom they conceive of: he has his animal soul from Demiurge, his body from the earth, his fleshy part from matter, and his spiritual characteristics from the mother Achamoth.

Concerning these three kinds of substance, the Gnostics hold that all that is material must perish. All that is animal, since it is between material and spiritual, will pass to the side to which inclination draws it. Spiritual substance, united with animal, is the "salt and the light of the world." Animal men are instructed in animal matters

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<sup>20</sup> In the system of Basilides the angels are credited with creating the world. The angels of Basilides and the Demiurge of Valentinus are practically the same in order of emanation.

and do not have perfect knowledge. Christians are of this class. Good works are necessary to animal men in order to be saved. Spiritual men, however, have no need of good works because they are saved through their spiritual nature. Spiritual substance can never come under the power of corruption. This idea lead to evil lives on the part of Gnostics since they held that they could do nothing wrong.

In refuting this error, the apologists pointed out that those who maintain that the world was created by Demiurge or by angels err in this that they believe the Demiurge formed such a great creation against the will of God. This would simply imply that the Demiurge or angels are more powerful than God, or else that God did not care what was happening. Such a character we would not want to ascribe to God. If these things were formed inside the fulness of God then he surely would know what was happening. If they were done outside of God, then God is not the fulness and is not really God. If, however, these creations were not against the will of God, but were done with his concurrence and knowledge, then the Demiurge or angels will no longer be the cause since God created these angels. Just as we say that it is the man who cut the wood and not the ax, so we must hold that God's will was active in creating the world and the angels did not do it of themselves. Therefore we must come to the conclusion that God created the world and not Demiurge. <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus, loc. cit.

It is a peculiarity of the pre-eminence of God not to stand in need of other instruments for the creation of those things which are summoned into existence. His Word is both suitable and is sufficient for the formation of all things. John declares regarding him, "All things were made by him and without him was nothing made that was made." <sup>22</sup> Among "all things" our world must be embraced. David also tells us, "For he spake, and they were made; He commanded and they were created." <sup>23</sup> The formation of the world is given in Genesis 1,1, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

In the ideas of the creation of man being formed either spiritual, animal, or material, the Gnostics do not base their doctrine on anything definite, but so to say, "weave ropes of sand." They say that Christ pointed out these three types of men, the material when he said, "Shall I follow thee." The animal when he said, "no man, putting his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of heaven." The spiritual man is portrayed when he said, "Let the dead bury their dead, but go thou and preach the kingdom of God." <sup>24</sup> Again Christ referred to this when he said, "Make haste, and come down, for today I must abide in thy house." <sup>25</sup> These proofs, says Irenaeus, are in no way valid.

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<sup>22</sup> John 1, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ps. 33, 9; Ps. 148, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 9, 57-61

<sup>25</sup> Luke 19, 5.

## REDEMPTION AND CHRIST

In regard to their doctrine of redemption, the Gnostics are incomprehensible and each individual presents his views as he likes. The Gnostics say that those who have attained to perfect knowledge must of necessity be generated into that power which is above all. It is impossible to find admittance into the Pleroma without regeneration since this act leads them into the deep mysteries of Bythus. Baptism instituted by the invisible Jesus was for the remission of sins, but the redemption brought in by that Christ which descended on Jesus was for perfection.

Concerning Christ, they teach that he passed through Mary just as water flows through a tube. There descended on him at the time of his baptism, in the form of a dove, that Savior who belonged to the Pleroma and who was formed by the combined efforts of all the inhabitants of the Pleroma. This Savior was composed of four substances; Spiritual, since he came from Achamoth; Animal, since he was the Demiurge; Corporal, since he was formed; and Savior since the dove descended on him. He also did not suffer in any manner, and the spirit of Christ was taken from the man Jesus when he suffered and died. They distinguish between the man Jesus and the Christ which descended on him for a while.

The purpose of this redemption through Christ was to give a baptism for perfection. The baptism of John was for repentance, but the baptism of Jesus for perfection. They show that

this is the fundamental idea behind Christ telling the sons of Zebedee, "Can ye be baptized with the baptism which I shall be baptized with?"<sup>26</sup> The formula of baptism is important since through baptism the regeneration and redemption to perfection is achieved. One of the formulae reads as follows:

Into the name of the unknown Father of the universe -- into truth, the mother of all things -- into union, and redemption and communion with the powers, I baptize thee. <sup>27</sup>

Others use certain Hebrew words in order to bewilder those who are being initiated and say: "Basema, Chamosse, Baoenaora, Mistadia, Ruada, Kousta, Babophor, Kalachthel" which means absolutely nothing but some interpret it to mean, "I invoke that which is above every power of the Father, which is called light, and good Spirit, and life, because thou hast reigned in his body."<sup>28</sup> Redemption, then, consists in gaining a certain knowledge of these mysteries.

Other Gnostics represent as an essential part of redemption, an anointing with balsam for they say that the sweet odor from this oil is a type of that sweet odor of the things above. After a person has been anointed with this balsam he becomes an initiated one and speaks the formula: "I am established, and I am redeemed; I redeem my soul from this world, and from all things connected with it in the name of Iao, who redeemed his own soul in redemption in Christ who liveth."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mark 10, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., I, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., I, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., I, 21.

Some other Gnostics hold only a mixture of oil and water is effective and they say that after oil and water has been placed on the head of an individual he is redeemed. Still others say that these visible elements ought not be used and that the knowledge of the unspeakable greatness and mystery is in itself perfect redemption. The whole conception of the Gnostic redemption does not mean much and has no value except in the outward act. Baptism of some sort is really their redemption and they base these speculations on the passage, "And I have another baptism to be baptized with, and I hasten eagerly towards it." 30

Concerning the concept of redemption of the Gnostics and the idea that Jesus was merely a receptacle of Christ upon whom this Christ, as a dove descended, this doctrine then, was opposed to the fundamental and central doctrine of the Christian religion. The general character of Gnosticism is separated from Christianity by a deep gulf, never however, shown more prominently than in the teaching of the doctrine of redemption. As in all other points, Gnosticism had to be battled against, so also in this particular doctrine.

The Christian apologist fought this heresy on the basis of the Bible. John in his Gospel speaks of Christ as one and the same Word of God and he was the only begotten, and he became incarnate in the flesh for our salvation. He was Jesus Christ our Lord, the only Savior for all the world. Matthew, too recognized one and the same Jesus Christ, exhibiting

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<sup>30</sup> Luke 12, 50.



his generation as a man from the virgin Mary. Again the passage, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which is, God with us,"<sup>31</sup> it is clearly brought out that both the promise made to the fathers had been accomplished and that he himself was Christ the Savior. Matthew might have said, "Now the birth of Jesus was on this wise," but he says, "But the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise." Irenaeus says that this clearly shows that the Holy Ghost was anticipating against errors just as arouse here.<sup>32</sup> Also this Jesus Christ cannot be considered a mere man for we read, "Not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by the will of God, was the Word made flesh,"<sup>33</sup> and from this we cannot say that Jesus was one person and Christ another, but that both are the same and one. Paul in his writings brings out the same idea when he says to the Romans, "Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed forever."<sup>34</sup> And again to the Galatians Paul says, "But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that are under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."<sup>35</sup> This, says Irenaeus, plainly indicates one God, who did by the prophets make promise of the Son, and one Jesus Christ our Lord, who was of the seed of David according to His birth from Mary, and that Jesus

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<sup>31</sup> Matt. 1, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., III, 16.

<sup>33</sup> John 1, 13. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Rom. 9, 5

<sup>35</sup> Gal. 4, 4. 5.

Christ was appointed the son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead. In this manner, Irenaeus goes to considerable length, conclusively showing that Jesus is Christ and is the son of God.

All, therefore, says Irenaeus, are outside of the Christian dispensation who under pretext of knowledge understand that Jesus was one and Christ another. "Such men are to outward appearance sheep; for they appear to be like us, by what they say in public, repeating the same words as we do, but inwardly they are wolves... These are they against whom the Lord cautioned us when he says, 'For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an anti-christ. Take heed to them, that ye lose not what ye have wrought.'" 35

Opposed to the idea that it was Christ who descended on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, we find the Christian apologists stating that this was a visible descent of the Holy Spirit. It would have been within the power of the Apostles to state that it was Christ who descended on Jesus but they expressly tell us that the Spirit of God as a dove descended on Him. The reason for this descent was to give a visible proof that the Holy Ghost had come upon Jesus Christ, and that when Christ gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers, they would know by visible proof that he had the Holy Spirit.

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35 II John 7,8.

## SALVATION

Salvation in the Gnostic system also follows out of the false conceptions of the redemption. Redemption is knowledge of the Gnostic mysteries, and when all shall have come to this knowledge then Sophia shall enter the Pleroma completely and receive as her spouse the Savior. The spiritual men, being divested of their animal souls and becoming intelligent spirits, shall in an irresistible manner enter within the Pleroma, and be given as brides to those angels who are attendants of the Savior. The Demiurge will pass into the place of Sophia, in the intermediate dwelling. In this intermediate place also the souls of the righteous shall repose, but nothing of an animal nature will find admittance there. <sup>36</sup>

In the salvation the spiritual, material, and animal natures will not be found in one individual, but will constitute three kinds of men. The material goes, as a matter of course, into corruption. The animal, if it has chosen to do good, will find repose in the intermediate place but if it has done evil, into destruction. The spiritual men, having been disciplined and nourished here on earth shall attain perfection and be given as brides to the angels of the Savior. The animal souls which they possessed shall be at rest with the Demiurge in the intermediate place. Some of these animal souls are by nature good and others evil, they, however, did not leave the animal state to go over into the spiritual or material and so must remain at rest. Thus the Gnostics do not hold a resurrec-

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<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., I, 7.

tion of the body in salvation but the spirit alone takes part in it.

In opposing this view of salvation, the apologists asserted that man consisted of both soul and body. The soul and the spirit are certainly a part of a man, but are not the whole man, for the perfect man consists in the, "comingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded after the image of God." <sup>87</sup> The apostle says, "We speak wisdom among them that are perfect," terming those persons perfect who have received the Spirit of God and who through the Spirit of God do speak in all languages and he used Himself also to speak. If anyone took away the substance of flesh, and say that what is left of man is purely spiritual, what is left would not be the spiritual man, but be the spirit of the man or the spirit of God. The flesh which is a part of man is not a perfect anatomy of man, but is a part of man. Neither is the spirit of itself a man, but it is a part of the man. The comingling and union of all of these constitute the perfect man. The apostle speaks of the complete man when he says, "Now the God of peace sanctify you perfect; and may your spirit, soul, and body be preserved whole without complaint to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ." Now the apostle would not have prayed for these three if he were not aware that they would be reunited and should be heirs of the same salvation.

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<sup>87</sup> Irenaeus, Ibid., V, 6.

<sup>88</sup> I thess. 5, 23.

Christ also calls the body the temple of himself, "now ye know that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you." <sup>39</sup> He does not speak this of the spiritual man because with such a man he connects defilement, as when this temple becomes defiled with a harlot it becomes a member of the harlot and for this reason it is stated, "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy." <sup>40</sup> How then is it possible that this temple of God in which God dwells does not partake of salvation, but goes to destruction while the spirit goes to salvation, if God dwells in the temple?

Also in the matter of the resurrection we are shown that bodies also will rise. Just as Christ did rise in the substance of the flesh, and pointed out to his disciples the mark of the nails and the opening in his side which are tokens of the resurrection of his flesh from the dead so we are told in Scriptures that we will also rise, "But if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies." <sup>41</sup> These mortal bodies, then, cannot be souls, but they must refer to our corporeal bodies. This was the manner, in which the apologists proved that the Gnostic conceptions of only the spirit partaking a part in the salvation was entirely false.

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<sup>39</sup> I cor. 3, 16.

<sup>40</sup> I Cor. 3, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Rom. 8, 11.

### MINOR Gnostic DOCTRINES

In the preceding pages I have presented the chief doctrines of the Gnostics which opposed the Christian tenets. These were the doctrine of God, Creation, Christ and Redemption, and Salvation. These doctrines were presented as they were fostered by Valentinus and his followers. Gnosticism, however, had no definite standard and the opinions were so varied that it is difficult to point out any single tenet as being held by the Gnostic heretics in general. I wish to present briefly a few of the minor doctrines as held by various men.

Basilides and his followers returned to the Philosophy of the Persians and from this drew the principle that there are two beginnings, namely good and evil, from which everything sprang. They held that light and darkness were the origin of all things and that these existed of themselves and were not brought into existence by anyone. <sup>41</sup> They taught that the only way in which the supreme God could be defined is to say that he was not. This Not-Being made the world. The Holy Spirit acted as the boundry between the finite and infinite. After these were separated the work of creation began. This creation was performed by a series of Archons. <sup>42</sup>

Concerning Christ, Basilides held that Christ himself did not suffer death, but Simon the Cyrenian was compelled

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<sup>41</sup> Ayer, op. cit., 83.

<sup>42</sup> Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., 591.

to bear the cross in his stead. This Simon was transfigured so that he might be thought to be Jesus and was crucified through ignorance and error. Jesus himself took the form of Simon and stood by the deriding Simon. Those who know of this have been freed in spirit and it is not necessary that they confess him who was thought to be Jesus. Salvation is not of the body for the body is corruptable, but salvation is only of the soul. Basilides also taught the transmigration of the soul as an explanation of human suffering. Concerning all these matters the multitude of people cannot understand them, but only a very select few as perhaps two out of ten thousand. <sup>43</sup> Those who do understand are no longer Jews, neither are they Christians and it is not at all fitting to spread openly these mysteries, but they should be kept secret by maintaining silence. <sup>44</sup>

An idea which crept up in some of the Gnostics was the notion of Plato that as souls enter this life, each is forced to drink of the cup of oblivion by the demon who watches the souls. This is done before the soul enters the body and so each soul has no recollection of having lived before even though in reality it has had a previous existence.

Another group which held a difference of doctrine were the Ophites who, as the name implies were worshippers of a serpent. This name was given to the group by its own members. Their most striking doctrine was that the serpent who beguiled

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<sup>43</sup> Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ayer, op. cit., 87.

Eve was in reality a beneficent being who raised man to a knowledge of good and evil. In general their doctrines correspond to those of Valentinus, but we see in all phases of it the idea of the serpent as when they teach that Sophia herself became the serpent, and for this reason the serpent was called the wisest of all creatures.

These and many others are the minor sects which also played a part in the whole of the Gnostic movement. Each sect had its individual characteristics, but in general the basis was of the same nature. In general we may say of Gnosticism that it was post-Christian in origin. It was dualistic, bridging the gulf between the eternal good on one hand and evil matter on the other. It sought salvation through the purging of the human soul from the stain of matter, but this was to be only for the few who had been fortunate enough to acquire the secret knowledge which made its attainment possible.

#### EFFECTS OF GNOSTICISM

A movement such as Gnosticism which aimed at the very heart of Christianity could not enter and leave without putting its marks upon the Christian Church. Perhaps one would be inclined to think that a destructive doctrine such as this heresy was could leave nothing but detrimental effects in the wake of its course. This is indeed true in the case of the Gnostic heresy, but besides these results which were harmful, Gnosticism had its beneficial effects on the Church. In



Looking at the effects we note that in general, the harmful results were temporary while the beneficial effects were of a more lasting nature.

First and foremost among the true detrimental effects of Gnosticism was its adoption of the garb of Christianity. Many of the terms used were taken directly from the Church.

Not a few of the doctrines were to some extent based upon Scriptural principles. However, this form was used only for the purpose of deceiving followers into thinking that the Gnostic religion was similar to the Christian tenets. Gnosticism simulated the Christian sacraments, it represented Christ dualistically as the Savior of the World and it was so well camouflaged by the borrowed garb that it appeared to the unwary as a modification and refinement of Christianity. <sup>45</sup>

Another evil effect of this teaching was the sinful life to which it led in many cases. The two notions that knowledge is salvation and that matter is an evil power which must be shaken off as a condition for passing into the higher state, led some men to lead lives of high morality. More often it was the case, however, that the adherence to these principles led to licentious immorality. The body is evil anyway so why try to keep it from doing evil things. The Gnostics would say that he could let his body do anything so long as he kept his soul proudly apart since the soul was a separate organism with a character of its own. <sup>46</sup> Some of the Gnostic sects became

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<sup>45</sup> Qualben, op. cit., 74.

<sup>46</sup> Waterman, L., Ten Epochs of Church History, New York, 1898, p. 198-199

known for their immorality and licentious practises to the evils of which the newly initiated converts were subjected.

The effect of this Gnostic heresy which was most vicious was that it lead many of the followers from the Scriptural doctrine of salvation through Christ and substituted false ideas. This fact, then, that the adherents were outside the pale of the true church and through Gnosticism many souls were lost for eternity was the most harmful of all the effects.

As previously stated, the effects of Gnosticism were by no means wholly disastrous. The efforts of the Gnostics to construct a system that should explain all the varied and perplexing phenomena of the universe, led the Christian teachers to point out with more distinctness that their own position was firmly based on the teachings of Christ. The contest against such able scholars and men wo well acquainted with pagan philosophy as many of the Gnostic teachers were, led to a more systematic development of Christian theology and a truly Christian theology was developed. It was very largely due to the pressure of Gnosticism that art and literature were enlisted in the service of the Church. <sup>47</sup>

Further it was Gnosticism which gave the most decided impulse of consolidation of the Christians as a Church. Gnosticism itself was a religion of the isolated mind, of separate little circles. Lacking in homogeneity, in the sense of responsibility and continuity with the past, it was a free and individual matter. The Christian Church stressed just these

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<sup>47</sup> Cheetham, op. cit., 102.

points and began on an increasingly strong movement towards unity and firm and inelastic organization in doctrine and a definite canon of Holy Scriptures, a confession and rule of faith and an unbending doctrinal discipline. <sup>48</sup>

The Christian apologists pointed out that books and writings which the Gnostics were then using in support of their views were not the apostolic writings. The Christians said that only those books could be legitimately used which could claim actual apostolic origin and had been used continuously in the Church. The books which the Christian Church used had been in use for generations, but the Gnostic writings were unknown until comparatively recent times and were closely connected with the founders of the sect. Thus the Christian Church brought out the list of Books regarded as authoritative and these constituted the canon of Holy Scriptures. We can definitely say then that it was due to the battle with Gnosticism that the canon as we know it today was formed. <sup>49</sup>

The Apostle's Creed was also a beneficial effect rising out of the battle with the Gnostics. By the middle of the second century there were brief confessions in the Church which had already been used before as summaries of the Apostolic faith. These were attributed to the apostles although they varied in paraphrase and could not be fully restored, but the Apostle's Creed was brought out as a doctrinal standard of Christianity during this battle against Gnosticism. <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th ed., vol. 10, p. 455.

<sup>49</sup> Ayer, *op. cit.*, 117.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Qualben points out seven ways in which Gnosticism affected Christianity. The first he states as being the doctrinal standards which included the Apostles' Creed, the New Testament Canon, and the Apostolic office or historic Episcopate. The next was the formation of Christian dogma expressed in current philosophical terminology. The third was the elaborate liturgical service. The fourth was Christian asceticism which led to monasticism. The fifth was the paving of the way for the Catholic Churches' doctrine of predestination. The last effect is the continuance of some of the traces which are still found in present day religions. <sup>51</sup>

Concerning these effects we cannot say whether the benefits resulting from the heresy outweigh the damage which had been done to those individuals who were so unfortunate as to be caught by the web of deceit woven in such destructive a Gnostic heresy. We must admit that the Gnostic heresy brought out the militant spirit of Christianity battling for its right to exist as the true Church; we must admit that many individuals were led astray.

After Gnosticism had reached its culmination and after it had been fought against by the apologists of the Christian Church, it declined in its extent. However, we still find some of the traces of this heresy underlying the doctrines of a few religious bodies even in our present day.

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<sup>51</sup> Qualben, op. cit., 74-75.

## CHAPTER III

### PRESENT-DAY TRACES OF GNOSTICISM

In tracing the Church's battle with Gnosticism we <sup>note</sup> have noted how the Apostles fought against this heresy in its incipient stages by writing against it in the New Testament. As gnosticism reached its fullest development we ~~have seen~~ how the apologists of that period fought the spreading error with unrelenting courage and with great success. Although the influence of this Gnostic error has been checked to a very great extent we still find certain traces or tendencies in some false religious bodies today which exhibit identical traces to the Gnostic concepts. This is the case with the basic concept of Christian Science as we know it today.

Other religious groups have certain doctrines which, although we cannot say that they are identical, bear striking similarities to the theories advanced by Gnostic teachers. We have no basis for stating that these doctrines found their origin in the Gnostic system, but the similarities are so outstanding that we cannot help seeing the relation they bear to each other. It is difficult to find more than mere statements to the effect that a modern religious idea had its roots planted in the Gnosticism of former times, but by placing the Gnostic side by side with certain modern tenets we can see the resemblance. The first of these present-day religions which bears a similarity to Gnosticism is the Christian Science theology of Mary Baker Eddy.

In looking at the basic concepts of Christian Science and Gnosticism we find that they are identical. The Gnostics stated that matter is not real, the only real thing is spiritual substance. From this followed many of their other beliefs such as the denial of a bodily resurrection and the spiritual salvation.

In Mary Baker Eddy's theology we find the same idea expressed; "The finite must yield to the infinite advancing to a higher plane of action, thought rises from the material sense to the spiritual, from the scholastic to the inspirational, from the mortal to the immortal. All things are created spiritually." <sup>1</sup> All things are created spiritually. Here we have Gnosticism fully portrayed. As in Gnostic teachings, so in Christian Science the spiritual is good and the flesh is bad. Man is dragged down by the imprisonment of his spirit in his body. After the spirit has been freed from the material body, a man will be perfected. / Christian Science teaches that matter is mere delusion fastened upon the spirit by the mortal mind which is a lower and a deceiving principle. Here then, enters the Science teaching of healing which states that the body is not real and therefore there is no pain or suffering of the body. The spiritual character of an individual must be elevated so much that the material body will not feel pain. Mrs. Eddy states; "You say that indigestion,

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<sup>1</sup> Eddy, M. B., Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, Boston, 1917, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> Waterman, L., Ten Epochs of Church History, New York, 1898, p. 198.

fatigue, sleeplessness, cause distressed stomachs and aching heads. Then you consult your brain in order to remember what has hurt you, when your remedy lies in forgetting the whole thing; for matter has no sensation of its own, and the human mind is all that can produce pain. As a man thinketh, so is he, Mind is all that feels, acts, or impedes actions." <sup>3</sup>

Also coming from this concept is the denial of the reality of sin. Sin is only an illusion of the mind due to the existence of matter. "Hence evil is not made and is not real. Soul is immortal because it is Spirit, which has no element of self-destruction. Is man lost spiritually? No, he can only use a sense material. All sin is of the flesh. It cannot be spiritual. Sin exists here or hereafter only so long as the illusion of mind in matter remains. It is a sense of sin, and not a sinful soul, which is lost." <sup>4</sup>

This purely spiritual existence is carried farther when we see that the resurrection of the body is denied and only a spiritual salvation exists which consists in the spiritual leaving the material body. <sup>5</sup>

In order to get an overview of Christian Science, especially as to those points which relate to Gnosticism we will briefly cover the chapter "Recapitulation" from Mrs. Eddy's book, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures.

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<sup>3</sup> Eddy, op. cit., 165.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>5</sup> Waterman, op. cit., 198.

man is the likeness of God, pure and eternal. Soul is not confined in man and never incorporated in matter. There is no life, truth or intelligence in matter. All is infinite mind and all is God for God is all in all. Spirit is immortal Truth, matter is unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness, therefore, man is not material but is spiritual.

The esoteric character of the Gnostic sects is also found in Christian Science to some extent although this is not such a well known doctrine. We find a few references to it in Mrs. Eddy's writing. "Only a limited number of students can advantageously enter a class, grapple with this subject and will assimilate what has been taught them. It is impossible to teach thorough Christian Science to promiscuous and large assemblies, or to persons who cannot be addressed individually." <sup>6</sup>

Thus we see that Gnosticism is not dead today. The basic principle of the non-existence of matter is at the foundation of present-day Christian Science. All the details of Christian Science may not be the same as Gnosticism, the outward make up may seem a little different as we view the two but basically Christian Science carries the traces of Gnosticism.

Besides the Christian Science religion of today we also find similarities to the Gnostic concepts in the Modernistic

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<sup>6</sup> Eddy, M.E., Rudimental Divine Science, Boston, 1917, p. 15.



tendency of today to make religion rational. The Gnostic sects stood for the general principle of Rationalism as opposed to the Christian principle of accepting the Scriptures as the source of divine revelation. The modern religions, as the old Gnostics, have a prejudice in favor of Rationalism as if religion must be rational and against traditional revelation as though the traditionally accepted truths are to be held in contempt. The distinction more nearly accurate in this case, would be that Rationalism is a method of ingenious fancy and Traditional religion a method of exact historical science.<sup>7</sup> The historical method appeals to an unbroken chain of testimony as to what Jesus Christ actually conveyed to his disciples and regards that as a religious necessity and infallibly true. The Rationalist asks whether a certain statement in religion is a satisfactory explanation to the inquirer's mind. The Rationalist has a right to claim that no man can really accept anything as true which actually antagonizes his conscience. On the other hand, the one who believes in Traditional Scriptures has just as much reason to suggest that if a divine revelation does not commend itself to a man's mind, the fault is as likely to be with the mind as with the revelation. A man's reason and conscience ought to be satisfied that a thing is true if there is sufficient historical proof that God has said it. This is the claim of the true Christian Church, this is the claim which Gnosticism

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<sup>7</sup> Waterman, op. cit., 196.

in every age has brushed aside; this is the claim which the rationalistic Modernist of our present day will not accept as being correct. <sup>8</sup> In the modern idea, then, that Scripture is not the basis of religious concepts, but that reason is the norm, lies the similarity of modern religion to the Gnostic teaching.

Another religious idea still prevalent today which we will not say is based on the Gnostic concept is not identical, but again we would say similar, is the Calvinistic concept of election. The followers of Calvin hold that the election of men is an absolute decree of God by which he predestines some men to salvation and others to damnation. The Gnostics held that only those who had received the special endowment to understand the mysterious character of their ideas could attain salvation. In the final analysis both amount to the same principle that certain people automatically are lost and others are saved. <sup>9</sup>

The last semblance of Gnosticism which we find still prevalent today is in certain phases of the Roman Catholic doctrine. The Gnostic concept of dualism with its disregard for matter either led to unrestrained immoralities or to asceticism in a high degree. This Gnostic asceticism, then, paved the way for the Catholic asceticism which became known as monasticism. The purpose of Gnostic asceticism was to show that matter really is not important but the spiritual is all

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<sup>8</sup> Qualben, op. cit., 75.

<sup>9</sup> Loc. cit.

is necessary. The Catholic asceticism was practised for the purpose of doing more to attain eternal salvation by leaving the material aspects of living. <sup>10</sup>

Another phase of the Catholic Church which Quaißen points out as emanating from the Gnostic ideas is the idea of the worship of Saints. The Gnostics had a series of intermediary beings. A true Gnostic had to pass through this series of intermediary beings in order to reach the ultimate good and the spiritual relationship with the highest being. In the Catholic Church we find a great number of saints. These saints can be appealed to for intercession with God. These saints have really attained a higher position than the ordinary individual and as such are appealed to by the ordinary man. In essence, then, the saints and the intermediary beings hold relatively similar positions since it is through the help of both that the individual of the particular religion hopes to achieve salvation. <sup>11</sup>

Especially do we see this carried out in the Catholic's idea of the worship of the Virgin Mary. The Catholics place Mary in a higher position than any other human being. They pray to her and ask her to intercede to God for them. The Gnostics held Sophia in an identical position placing her above all the other intermediary beings, and placing upon her the most honor and trust. Sophia to them was next to the highest being and as such was able to help them in their attaining the spiritual perfection. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Loc. cit.

Here, then, we have those tendencies which are today still active traces from the ancient Gnostic heresy, Christian Science has the identical basic principle that matter does not exist but that everything is spiritual. We find vestiges of Gnosticism in Modernism and also in certain Catholic doctrines of our present day. We even find a similarity in the Calvinistic doctrine of election. / These traces are not as prevalent as the second century, but nevertheless these tendencies must still be battled with the same vigor that has always marked the Church and its battle with Gnosticism.

## CONCLUSION

As we have viewed the Church and its battle with Gnosticism, we have shown how in the early stages this error was fought. We have seen how during the period of the fullest development this error was relentlessly attacked and how with men like Irenaeus in the fore, it was finally eradicated. However, the heresy still smoldered and in our present day it is burning again in the Christian Science Religion. Similarities to the Gnostic errors are still discernable in some of the other religions prevalent today.

In an overview of the complete study of this battle, I would say that the outstanding characteristic is the militant spirit of the Church, fighting courageously and with vigor for the eradication of the false and the deceptive.

If anything of practical value is to be drawn from this study for us, it can only be a firm resolve to fight those Gnostic conceptions which are still prevalent today, and any other such heresy as would counterfeit the true Christian Church. In doing this the false must be attacked at its roots and the greatest defense against the spurious is to know more about the genuine.

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