

HERMAN HANKO

CONTENDING
FOR THE

Faith

THE RISE OF HERESY
AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE TRUTH



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*Dedicated to the memory of
George Martin Ophoff,
who taught me the glory
of the Reformed heritage
and the importance of defending it*



“...and that ye should earnestly contend for the faith
which was once delivered unto the saints.”

—Jude 3



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PREFACE

In 1999 the RFPA published my *Portraits of Faithful Saints*. It became evident in the lives of those who fought a good fight that a significant part of their lives was taken up in the defense of the faith: what Jude calls earnestly contending for the faith once delivered unto the saints (Jude 3). The mark their faithfulness left on history was the example of a courageous battle against heresy and, frequently, their willingness to die in the battle for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Heresy has always been present in the church. It was present in the old dispensation when, already at Sinai, Israel worshiped a golden calf, which they said was the god who had delivered them from Egypt (Ex. 32:4). God's constant warning against false prophets could only have been due to the presence in Israel of men who were corrupting the truth, for example, in Deuteronomy 13:1–5.

The times of Christ and the apostles were no different. Christ repeatedly warned against the heresies of the scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees, who took away the key of knowledge (Luke 11:52) and crucified the Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

Paul frequently had to write his epistles to combat false doctrine: to the Colossians to ward off an incipient gnosticism; to the Galatians to defeat the Judaizers; and to the Thessalonians to correct errors in eschatology that they had learned from false teachers. Both Peter in 2 Peter 2 and Jude in his epistle warned against the evil men who were attempting to lead the church astray.

From the end of the apostolic era until the present, the church has never been free from the threat of false doctrine. Fighting false doctrine is so crucial a part of the church's existence in the world that to ignore it is to run the risk of not understanding church history at all. One cannot learn any-

thing significant about a man from whose biography has been omitted the most important events in his life. One cannot understand the history of the church militant without understanding her battles against false doctrine.

A striking feature of heresy over the ages is the reappearance of false doctrines that had been taught in earlier times. Solomon tells us that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9). This is true of heresy as well as every other event. Heresy may appear in new clothing, but it remains the same heresy against which the church has fought many centuries earlier.

We can, therefore, learn from heresy and from the battle that the saints fought against it; the heresies are always very much the same. The church's calling today is no different from the calling of the church in past years: "Be thou faithful unto death" (Rev. 2:10).

If we live in ignorance of the church of past years, knowing nothing of its struggles, battles, temptations, and heresies it faced, we will be at a terrible disadvantage in our own time when heresy rises in our own church or denomination. False doctrine will seem to us to be only a new insight into the truth, and we will lose the benefit of the experience and struggle as well as the victory of our brethren from earlier centuries. We will be an easier prey for the enemy.

Knowledge of the past will give us knowledge to use in our own battles, give us assurance that Christ preserves his church against all the attacks of the enemy, provide us with skill in defending our faith, and make us joyful in knowing more fully its great truths as the Spirit of our ascended Christ has led the church to confess them.

May God be glorified through the story of the defense of his truth, and may the church be thereby strengthened in her calling.

HERMAN HANKO
Professor Emeritus
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Protestant Reformed Churches

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, heretics have been present to trouble the church, to attempt to lead her astray, and to fight to destroy the church by robbing her of her dearest treasure and most important reason for existence.

The lives and teachings of these heretics are so closely interwoven in the life of the church that it is impossible to know anything about the church without knowing something of the heretics who periodically appeared and the false doctrines they proposed.

This book contains a series of biographical sketches of some of the church's most influential heretics; it describes the heresies they taught, and it gives some idea of what their role was in the larger picture of the history of the church. But before we actually get into the matter of writing about these heretics, it is well to say something about them in general and about the heresies they tried to pass on to the church.

A heresy is any teaching in the church of Christ that is contrary to Scripture and the doctrines established by creeds. The Greek word for "heresy" in the New Testament suggests that heresies create schism in the church. One attribute of the church is her unity; the unity of the church is the unity of the truth. Heresy destroys that unity.

The church has always made it her business to study the Scriptures. This studying has been done by all the members of the church, although especially by those who are in the offices of minister, elder, and deacon. The members of the church are, after all, though saints in Jesus Christ, also sinners as long as they are in this world. Sometimes in their study of Scripture they make mistakes in their understanding of God's word and begin to teach ideas that are not in harmony with Scripture.

There are several instances of such mistakes made by men in the past. Indeed, sometimes men taught wrong ideas that were even generally accepted in the church but that were proved wrong by later men of God who understood the Scriptures more perfectly. These mistakes are not really heresies.

An instance of this is Augustine's view of the sacraments. While Augustine was completely in harmony with Scripture in most of his teachings, especially when it came to his teachings on the doctrines of sovereign grace, he erred in viewing the sacrament of baptism as having itself the power of regeneration. This view was accepted by the church until the time of the Reformation.

But a heresy is different. One does not necessarily teach heresy when he sets forth a view born out of a less than full understanding of the truth. But once the church of which he is a part has shown a man that his view is wrong, that it is not in harmony with the teaching of Scripture, and that he should not, therefore, teach it—if he continues to teach it nonetheless, at that point he becomes a heretic.

Or if the church has already established a certain doctrine as being the teaching of Scripture, and if some man comes along and begins to teach something contrary to what the church has established as the truth of God's word, that man teaches heresy.

Heresy is, therefore, a teaching within the church of a doctrine contrary to what the church has officially declared to be the truth of the word of God.

It might be argued that this definition of heresy sets the declaration of the church above the word of God, but this conclusion is not true. The church is called to set forth the truth of the word of God against false doctrine, for only by doing this can the church successfully keep false doctrine from destroying the church. In fulfilling the calling to declare officially what Scripture teaches concerning the truth, the church is guided by the Spirit of Christ whom Christ promised to the church to lead her into all truth. While it is, of course, possible for a church at any given time to make a mistake in its declaration of what constitutes biblical truth, anyone at any time in the church—be he orthodox or heretic—has the right to challenge the church's decisions and call the church to compare a previous decision with Scripture. Heretics are especially bound to do this when they diverge from the church's teachings. Any decision of the church is subject to renewed study in the light of God's word.

How is it to be explained that heresy continually raises its head in the church?

If one would look at this question from the viewpoint of the man who himself teaches heresy, the question is somewhat difficult to answer. It is always possible for a man to make a mistake with respect to the truth and to teach something that is quite clearly wrong. Every man is sinful, and the imperfection of our natures makes heresy a distinct possibility. But when a man makes a mistake and the church points out that mistake to him, his obligation before God and the church is to confess that wrong, admit his error, and get clear in his own mind what the truth of Scripture is. This does not often happen. Man is too proud, as a general rule, to admit his wrong. He defends vigorously the error that he made, so that what was at first a mistake now becomes stubborn support of a wrong position. This happens repeatedly in the church.

Oftentimes men who are ministers of the gospel, professors in one of the church's schools or seminaries, or leaders in a certain area of the church's life deliberately begin to teach something that they know is wrong. They may do so in a very subtle way so that the heresy sounds as much like the truth as possible, but they make a conscious choice to teach something contrary to Scripture and the teachings of the church.

Why do they do this?

The reasons, I suppose, are legion. Perhaps they want to appear before men to be original theologians who come with new and amazing insights into the truth so that men will marvel at their intellectual prowess. Maybe they want to make a name for themselves as scholars whose masterful writings will appear in prestigious theological journals. Perhaps they simply want the preeminence within a congregation and choose to teach heresy as a way to gain a following.

But in every case, obviously, they consider themselves more important than the truth of God's word. They set themselves above the truth. The name, fame, reputation, and honor that they acquire for themselves are more important to them than God's truth and God's glory.

We must look at this matter of heresy from another point of view as well. Behind every heresy that lurks in the minds and hearts of men and that raises its ugly head in the church is Satan and his host of devils. They are the ones who sow the seeds of heresy and nourish these seeds until they become thorns and thistles in the life of the church.

Satan has his own reasons for bringing heresy into the church. He does so because he knows, better than men, that the surest and quickest way to destroy the church of Jesus Christ is through the introduction of heresy into her faith. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and

prophets, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20–22). That is, the truth, as it is centrally in Christ and as it is revealed through the apostles and prophets, is the foundation of the church. Take away the foundation, and the church collapses into a pile of rubble. The devil knows this.

Jesus referred to this idea when, in speaking of Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, he said that this confession was the rock on which he would build his church and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. The gates of hell batter that rock on which the church stands, but the church cannot be overcome.

The struggle within the church between the truth and the lie, between heresy and the confession of the faith of Scripture, is never an intellectual battle only; it is profoundly and intensely a spiritual struggle. The very existence of the church is at stake. On the outcome rests the continued presence of the church in the world. It must never be forgotten that the devil will not consider himself to have accomplished his sordid purpose in this world until he has obliterated the church.

The church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). That is, the church proclaims loudly the truth found in the Holy Scriptures, for that truth is the truth of God. As long as the church is in the world, a sharp witness of God and Christ is present, and Satan considers the existence of the church as a dangerous threat to his purposes.

That the battle for the truth is a fight for the very existence of the church means also that the battle is spiritual. The greatest issues are always at stake. The eternal destinies of men are being decided, for in the confession and defense of the truth lies everlasting salvation, while in heresy and its promotion lie spiritual destruction and everlasting damnation. No battles in any war ever fought are as important as the battles fought in the defense of the faith on the battlefields of the church.

God is sovereign in everything and therefore no heresy can trouble the church without the will of God. Even Satan is under God's control and can do nothing without God's will.

Why does God so rule that heresy comes into the church, bringing with it all the pain and suffering that church struggles involve?

Although there are several answers to this question, we need only be brief, for the themes involved in this question are going to be the chief themes in the following chapters. The church throughout history has in it carnal and wicked seed. These come into the church from the outside, or they are in the church because even among the children of believers, not all that are of Israel are true Israel.

If they were permitted to continue to maintain their heresies with the church, they would so weaken the church that her position would become increasingly precarious. Heresy also forces the carnal element to reveal itself because it is forced to take a position in favor of heresy. If the church is faithful in repudiating heresy, the church undergoes purification and reformation. It may lose members—something distasteful to those who are not committed to the truth—but from struggle a stronger church emerges.

More importantly, it is always against heresy that the truth of the word of God is developed in a positive way.

There are, I think, two sides to this matter.

Generally speaking, the people of God are too spiritually lazy to be busy with developing the truth for its own sake. If no heresy ever appeared as a storm on the ecclesiastical horizon, the church would bask in the sunshine of peace and quiet, and the truth of God's word would go undeveloped. Heresy acts as a goad to push the church out of complacency and spiritual lethargy. When the truth is threatened, God uses the very threat of heresy to show his people that the existence of the church itself is in danger and that the church had better get to work to search the Scriptures so that the attacks of heresy may be fought off with the weapons of God's truth.

Christians are also called to live antithetically in the world. God has so ordained that their life in all respects is always a certain No to that which is wrong, and an emphatic Yes to that which is right. We cannot live any differently than that. We cannot serve God in any other way. When it comes to matters of the truth, we cannot say our Yes to the truth without first saying No to heresy. That is the way we serve God. It has been so ordained by God himself.

Therefore, heresy is always the spur to the development of the rich and glorious truth of Scripture. The weapons of spiritual warfare are not manufactured in the ivory towers of theological speculation; they are hammered out on hastily prepared forges set up right on the battlefield, where the din and noise of the conflict can be heard on every side.

All that the church is spurred on to do is through the power of the Spirit of truth, whom Christ promised and who leads the church into all truth. (See John 14, 15, and 16, which mention the Spirit of truth five times.) This Spirit works through the church in such a way that she defends the heritage of the church in the past, repudiates heresy, casts out heretics, and develops further the truth of the word of God.

To study the heretics is no virtue in itself. To study them with a view to seeing how in every case heresies resulted in a church stronger in the

faith as it became more knowledgeable in the truth is to participate in an exciting and glorious endeavor.

Tolerance is the password in today's church world. Tolerance is stretched to the point where every heresy, ancient and modern, is allowed to remain in the church. The consequence is that the church slides rapidly backward into deeper and deeper apostasy. And tolerance or error very soon becomes intolerance of that church where the truth is truly confessed.

More importantly, the witness to the glory of God is stained until it is obliterated entirely and Christ removes that church from his candlestick (Rev. 2:5).

PART 1

ANCIENT PERIOD (100–476)

Contenders for the Faith and Historical Events

Promoters of Heresy

Death of apostle John c. 100	100	Marcion c. 110–c. 160
Tertullian c. 145–60–c. 220–40		Montanus c. 185–c. 254 Origen c. 185–c. 254 Sabellius birth and death unknown; excommunicated 220 and 260 or 261
Partition of Roman Empire into west and east 285	250	Arius c. 250–336
Reign of Constantine the Great over the Roman Empire 306–37 Edict of Milan officially tolerated Christianity in Roman Empire 313	300	Apollinaris c. 310–c. 390
Council of Nicea 325		
Augustine 354–430	350	Pelagius c. 354–c. 420–40 Cassianus c. 360–c. 435–48
Council of Constantinople 381 Synods of Hippo and Carthage approved canon of Scripture 393–94		Celestius c. 380–c. 429
Sack of Rome 410 Nestorius chosen patriarch in Constantinople 428 Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorianism and Pelagianism 431	400	Nestorius c. early 400s–c. 450 Faustus c. 410–c. 490
Council of Chalcedon 451	450	
Fall of Rome 476	476	



MARCION: FIRST BIBLE CRITIC

INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures are the word of God in which is found the truth of God as God makes himself known in Christ. Therefore, the Scriptures are the source of all the church knows of God and of his Christ. Take away the Scriptures, and the church has nothing. Rob the church of the Bible, and the church ceases to exist. All of the truth that was later to come under attack is found only in Scripture. No individual attack has to be made against any one doctrine if the Scriptures themselves are destroyed.

Marcion attempted to destroy Scripture, and he did it in much the same way that higher critics of Scripture still do it today. That is why I call Marcion the first Bible critic.

MARCION'S LIFE

Although the date of Marcion's birth is not known, it seems as if he was born shortly after the beginning of the second century. The apostle John had not been dead very long when Marcion entered the world, and Polycarp, the first martyr of the post-apostolic era and a friend of John, knew Marcion. Already in 139 Marcion was found in Rome spreading heresy.

Marcion was born in Sinope in the province of Pontus in Asia Minor, a city on the shores of the Black Sea. Proselytes from Pontus had been in Jerusalem on Pentecost, and converts may well have been responsible for bringing the gospel to this area. Marcion was born into a Christian family, for his father was a bishop (minister). Tertullian, a third-century church father, says that Marcion was a riverboat pilot.

Although almost nothing is known of his early life, there is some evidence that Marcion became a Christian only after long study, but that he was, soon after admission to the church, excommunicated by his father for

teaching wrong doctrines. Apparently his father remained suspicious of him even when he later confessed his wrong, for his father refused him readmittance when he applied.

In about the year 139 Marcion went to Rome. There is some dispute among historians as to the precise order of events. Some say that he was refused admission to the church of Rome upon his arrival in Rome. Whether this refusal was because reports from Sinope had reached Rome or because Marcion was quick to promote his ideas in this city, it is impossible to tell. Others say that he was a member of the church for a while but was constantly the center of controversy and was excommunicated once again. They point to a story that Marcion gave the church in Rome 100,000 *aes-tertii* (Roman money) when he was admitted to membership, but the whole amount was returned to him when he was excommunicated.

Polycarp, who probably met Marcion while he was still in Asia Minor, called him “the first-born of Satan.”¹ Indeed it was true that his heresies were deadly poison.

Marcion founded a church separate from the apostolic church and had considerable influence on many who flocked to him and joined his movement. In fact, his sect spread throughout the Mediterranean world as far east as Syria and Palestine. His church survived until the sixth century, a strong testimony to his influence.

Marcion was an extremely able man, skillful in presenting his ideas in the best possible light, charismatic in his influence on others, and a sufficiently profound thinker to construct something of a system of thought. But he was extremely bold and forward and was much like many today who think that they alone possess the truth. His views were so obviously contrary to the truth that none of the orthodox had any difficulty in detecting his heresy.

It must be remembered that the church was in her infancy and had, as a result, no systematic doctrine, no confessions, no body of truth to which to appeal in its defense of the faith. Not even the Apostolic Confession was in existence as yet. This lack may have been the reason that the orthodox of Marcion’s day were more fearful of him and his influence on people than they were of those who persecuted the church.

MARCION’S HERESY

The heresy Marcion taught was an open and blatant attack on Holy Scripture. He took it upon himself to decide which books were to be included in Scripture and which were not. He concluded that the entire Old Tes-

tament and most of the New Testament that had not been written by Paul ought to be excluded. When he had finished with the New Testament, he had left only the epistles of Paul and a truncated gospel of Luke, which, he thought, had been written by Paul. In fact, Marcion did not even accept all the epistles of Paul as canonical because he denied the Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

Of course, there were reasons for his position. He had a certain “theology” that revealed his presuppositions, and on the basis of these, he rejected huge parts of God’s word.

For one thing, Marcion held to some gnostic ideas.² But it was particularly his view of God that was corrupt. He believed that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were two different and irreconcilable powers in the universe. The God of the Old Testament was the God of the law: harsh, critical, severe in judgment, and cruel in punishment. The God of the New Testament was the God of the gospel: kind, compassionate, loving, and merciful to those who do not measure up to his standards. Hence the God of the Old Testament was the author of suffering and misery in the world, while the God of the New Testament was the fountain of all that is good.

It is striking that in some modernistic circles a similar view of God is still taught and the Old Testament similarly rejected. But it is obvious that whether in the second century or in the twenty-first century, this view is an open attack on Scripture as the word of God.

THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE

God used the heresy of Marcion to prod the church into an extremely important aspect of her calling: to define carefully the doctrine of Scripture and to set down which books belong to the Bible and which books do not. Up to the time of Marcion, the church had not done this. The church’s failure to do this was not neglect. There had been no need. The canon was only closed about four decades before Marcion when the apostle John completed the book of Revelation. Without a great deal of thought, the church had accepted the writings of the apostles as infallibly inspired.

Because the church had not defined the canon, some different opinions were held among the churches and saints on some relatively minor matters. Some held that other books were canonical, such as the epistles that Clement of Rome and Barnabas had written to various churches. Others questioned whether some books in the canon ought to be included.

This does not mean that the church had no idea of what the canon of

Scripture was. It is a testimony to Scripture's inspiration that from the beginning of her history, the church recognized that some books were inspired and others were not. The church had, of course, the Old Testament Scriptures, and prior to our Lord's earthly ministry, the Old Testament church had determined the Old Testament canon. Our Lord recognized this decision of the church by referring to those Scriptures as God's word (Matt. 11:13; Luke 16:16).

The history of the formation of the New Testament canon was briefly this. Almost as soon as the gospels were written, they were considered canonical and grouped together as such. Because the book of Acts carried on the history of the gospels, it too was considered canonical. When Paul's epistles were written, a *Corpus Paulorum* (Collection of Paul's Epistles) was soon circulated in the churches as writings inspired by God, and they were accepted as such by the whole church from the time they were written. Very early in the second century 1 John and 1 Peter were also accepted as canonical. Because the book of Revelation had been written by John, it was also received. But questions remained among some concerning a few other books. No one was sure who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews, and its canonicity was considered doubtful by some. The books of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude were not universally accepted, although the fact that they were not always mentioned in connection with the other books of the New Testament was because of the church's practice of including them with 1 Peter and 1 John. But since the canon of Scripture was not a source of controversy, no one gave much thought to disagreements on the matter.

Then came Marcion and his terrible heresies, and he launched his attack at a vulnerable point. It was as if through him God was saying to the church, "It is important that you study this question carefully and determine which books were inspired by me and which books were not."

A consensus quickly developed in the church on the disputed books. Marcion was condemned and his followers excommunicated. By the end of the second century, disagreement over the questions had ceased and all accepted the present canon.

In 352 Athanasius, bishop of the church in Alexandria, sent a pastoral letter to all the churches throughout the entire known world in connection with the date on which Easter was to be celebrated. In this letter he listed the sixty-six books of the canon, as we confess them today, to be the word of God. And in 393 and 397 the synods of Hippo and Carthage officially fixed the canon for the new dispensation.

Before the canon was finally fixed, the church had to settle a dispute

over the criteria by which a book could be judged as canonical or non-canonical. For example, some thought that either an apostle or one closely connected to an apostle had to be an author for a book to be canonical. The canonicity of some books was questioned because the church was not certain that they had been written by apostles. But the church actually used the same criteria mentioned in the Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 5, namely, the objective testimony of the books themselves and the subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of his people. The former refers to the evidence the canonical books carry in themselves that they are inspired by the Spirit; the second criterion refers to the testimony of the Spirit of truth whom Christ promised to the church as the Spirit who would lead the church into all truth (John 14:17; John 15:26; John 16:13).

The objective testimony of Scripture itself was important. By this, the church meant that the Scriptures in every part *claim* to be authored by God. The proof for divine inspiration is not in only three or four texts, but is on every page of Holy Writ. That objective testimony of Scripture itself—the claim that Scripture makes for itself—is sealed on the hearts of those who believe by the Spirit of truth.

Since the eighteenth century, the higher critics of Scripture have followed in the footsteps of Marcion and have troubled the church with heresies similar to Marcion's. They, too, have their "theology" on the basis of which they pass their own judgments on Scripture. Their theology is a denial, to a greater or lesser degree, of the inspiration of sacred Scripture as the sole work of God the Holy Spirit and an insistence that Scripture, in whole or in part, is the word of man. This position is the direct development of their teaching that Scripture includes a human element alongside the divine. If Scripture is, in whole or in part, the word of man, then man can judge which part of Scripture he accepts and which part he rejects. That wicked men do this is not surprising. It is a sad but undeniable fact that higher critical views of Scripture have, more or less, infiltrated almost every seminary in the United States and abroad.

It was important for the church to establish which books were of God, because no possible development or defense of the truth could be made until this was done. God in his wisdom led the church to set the canon of Scripture first, for Scripture was to be the foundation of all the other truths the church would later confess. God's Scriptures are the rule of faith and life. God's word is the fountain from which all truth flows as a mighty stream. God also used Marcion's heresies as the occasion and the goad for the church's development of the truth concerning Scripture.

GNOSTICISM: SYNTHESIS RELIGION

INTRODUCTION

There was a heresy in the early church so serious, so deadly, and yet so attractive that the church was engaged for many decades in a life or death struggle to overcome it. That heresy was known as gnosticism.

It was more like a movement than a departure from the truth on one specific point. It never resulted in a split of any significance in the church, nor were those who held this error of one united party. As a movement it could, perhaps, be compared with the “feminist movement” found in many denominations, which has its own theory about the place of women in society and which presses its own agenda. But one would never call “feminism” a separate church. So it was with gnosticism.

Early forms of gnostic teaching could be found in the apostolic church. It seems as if it was present especially in the churches of western Asia Minor. Paul warns against some early forms of gnosticism in his epistle to the Colossians, and the apostle John apparently had some early form of gnosticism in mind when he wrote his first epistle.

Gnostic teachings are difficult to understand and do not make much sense to our more modern minds. However, the devilry that gnostics perpetrated is easy to understand. Gnosticism was interested in a religion of synthesis. That is, it vigorously promoted the idea that the one true religion takes the best elements out of Christianity, the old Judaism, Greek philosophy, and Oriental mystical religions and puts them all together into one system of belief that everyone is able to accept. While gnosticism is a very old heresy, it is also very new.¹

VARIOUS GNOSTIC SECTS

Because gnosticism was a movement and not a heresy promoted by just one man or by a few men who worked together, the heresy also had many

different proponents who differed widely from each other in their views. Their differences were so great that they represented different kinds of gnosticism. Those, for example, who emphasized Judaistic ideas were called Jewish gnostics; those who were more under the influence of pagan and Oriental religions were called pagan gnostics; and those who tended to stress the truths of Christianity were called Christian gnostics.

For this reason it is impossible in this sketch to offer biographies of all the leaders; as a matter of fact, not much is known of any of them.

Valentinus was perhaps the best known and most famous of all the gnostics. But even his birthplace and origin are lost in the murky past. What is known of him is learned from others and cannot, therefore, always be proved. But the following facts concerning his life seem to emerge.

He was an Egyptian and had been trained in Alexandria, Egypt's most important city. This in itself is significant, for Alexandria was, by virtue of its strategic location, one of the most important trading centers in the Mediterranean world. It was the place where East and West met and where trade routes from the Orient crossed the trade routes from the distant parts of the Roman Empire. It was a busy, bustling city, noisy with the babble of many languages spoken by its traders: a meeting place of different cultures, religions, and races and a bubbling cauldron of clashing ideas and philosophies. It was the one place where one would expect a heresy like gnosticism to emerge.

Jews were also present in Alexandria, and the LXX or Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) had been prepared there before the birth of Christ. Christians were also present in the city in New Testament times, and the great Athanasius, the defender of the divinity of Jesus Christ, was bishop of the church there some 150 years after gnosticism had ceased to be a threat.

Valentinus went to Rome around 140 and stayed there until leaving for Cyprus in 165. Up to this point no one had had any reason to question his orthodoxy, but while in Cyprus he revealed his hatred of the church and became the leader of a heretical sect.

Valentinus was a man of great intellectual ability and vast oratorical powers. One story of an early church father says that his path to heresy was paved by disappointed ambition, for he had hoped to be chosen bishop of the church in Rome but had been passed over in favor of another.

Nothing more is known of him, and even these scraps are more than is known of most men who assumed leadership in the gnostic movement.

GNOSTICISM'S TEACHINGS

It is not possible, nor is it necessary, to give a complete sketch of the teachings of gnosticism in a short chapter. Nor would we be all that interested in these teachings, for they strike our ears as strange, esoteric, and hardly credible; we may very well wonder how it was that such a peculiar conglomeration of ideas could constitute a very real threat to the church. But such was the case.

In general, gnosticism was “a stealing of some Christian rags to cover heathen nakedness.”² It taught that God was the great unknowable, a being more like the Mohammedan Allah than the triune God of the Scriptures. The gnostic God was cold, impersonal, pure being.

The great question of gnosticism was how the creation had come into existence. This was indeed a puzzling question, because gnosticism taught that the “matter” of which the creation was made was inherently evil, that is, was itself, in its essence, The Evil.

To explain this material world, gnosticism taught that from God proceeded a long chain of emanating “aeons” that themselves were divine creatures (sometimes identified with God’s virtues), each proceeding from another, each weaker than its parent.

The church father Iranaeus, who fought fiercely against gnosticism, says in his description of what gnosticism believed that “the thirtieth and last of the aeons, wisdom, fell from the perfection of the pleroma [God] through an excess of passion, finally giving birth to a shapeless mass. And hence they declare material substance had its beginning from [wisdom’s] ignorance and grief, and fear and bewilderment.”³

The last aeon, therefore, was one “who, while powerful enough to create, was silly enough not to see that creation was wrong.”⁴ This aeon was sometimes called the “demiurge” and was identified either with the “Logos” of John 1 or the God of the Old Testament. This demiurge responsible for creation was, because of its own foolishness, imprisoned in the creation and needed redemption. In the entire creation, but especially in man, was this “spark” of divinity, which if freed would flow back to God to be eventually absorbed into the divine being.

How was this escape to be accomplished? The way was through *gnosis*—the Greek word for “knowledge”; hence the name gnosticism.

According to the gnostics, there are three kinds of people in this world: material people, who are beyond salvation; psychical people, who are capable of being saved although they lack the true *gnosis*; and spiritual peo-

ple, who are the “inner circle” or the “elite.” Those who possess true gnosis are therefore on the road to the liberation of the divine spark in them, which will fly heavenward to be absorbed into the being of God.

What role did Christ play in all this?

Obviously, Christ’s human nature could not be real, said the gnostics, because that which is material is inherently evil, and Christ was sinless. And so Christ’s human nature was only an illusion, a ghostlike wraith; it only seemed to be real. Out of gnosticism, then, rose docetism, a heresy that denies the reality of our Lord’s human nature and an error perhaps referred to in 1 John 1:1–3.

But neither was Christ a redeemer. Most gnostics thought of him in terms of that divine spark, which having created the world through some misstep, became imprisoned in the world. This divine spark was to be found in all men and could and would be liberated through the mystery of gnosis.

This whole theory appealed to many people and laid its claim on the masses for many years. Gnosticism especially appealed to men with its seductive promise of a mysterious knowledge through which redemption would come, along with the use of ceremonies and rituals supposedly enabling men to open the door to heaven and union with God.

The secret knowledge that was the key to salvation involved the way of freeing the divine spark in man. It was thought that this liberation of the divine could come about only by a denial and suppression of the body. But how was one to suppress the body? That was the question. To that question two answers were given, depending on what form of gnosticism one adopted. One way was that of asceticism, a mortification of the body through denying it food and drink, making it suffer, and thus “crucifying the flesh.” This idea was carried over into monasticism in the Romish church.

The other way, appealing to more adherents, was the way of giving one’s body over completely and totally to an indulgence of all the lusts and pleasures of the flesh. The more such total licentiousness was practiced, the more the body was said to be denied. Therefore, some branches of gnosticism became wickedly evil. It was the ultimate expression of “Let us sin that grace may abound” (Rom. 6:1).

GNOSTICISM’S MAIN CHARACTERISTIC

If one is at all acquainted with ancient Greek philosophy, one can easily detect the remnants of it preserved and modified in the gnostic system. If

one knows even a bit about the mysticism from India, China, and other parts of the Orient, one can see that such pagan religions influenced gnostic thinkers. Similarly, when one recognizes that a way gnostic leaders appealed to Christians was by preaching the teachings of Jesus, one can see that Christianity was intended to be a part of the gnostic system.

Gnosticism wanted a worldwide, eclectic religion to which everyone could agree and under the umbrella of which everyone could find a congenial religious shelter. It asked, “Why war over particulars and minute points when here is a religion that takes the best from every religion and makes one universal religion palatable to all?”

How could something like this appeal to so many in the church?

To answer this question, we ought to consider several things. Many if not most of the members of the church had come from heathenism and paganism and had not yet been fully taught in the Christian faith. Indeed, this was even true of some of the church fathers, who were reluctant to give up everything the philosophers had taught and that they had learned in the schools before their conversion. The inclination was to find good in all these things.

Gnosticism had some things about it that are always appealing to people, even members of the church. It spoke of a secret knowledge that one could attain and that would let one in on mysterious, esoteric things known only to a few: “inner circle” secrets. People are attracted to that sort of thing by virtue of its mysterious character.

Gnosticism also made skillful use of rituals and ceremonies, which always appeal to man’s baser instincts because it is spiritually difficult to worship God “in spirit and in truth.”

Gnosticism gave credence and support to the idea of tolerance in the area of religion. It taught that there is no need to insist on the unique character of the Christian faith since truth can be found in all religions, and it is possible to “get along” with many others whose faith differs from ours, for all have certain good points. In modern language it becomes a siren song that, although Arminianism may be defective theologically, it surely has this good that Calvinists lack: an enthusiasm and emphasis on holiness. That sort of a thing was appealing to the early church because it opened the door to the possibility of assuming a more tolerant position over against the culture of those early times. In this way it offered escape from persecution, which was the lot of the church.

One more appealing element in gnosticism, with its doctrine of aeons and its idea of salvation through the release in man of the divine spark,

was that it was clearly pantheistic. That is, it taught that all is God and thus men, or at least the divine in man, are God. Pantheism, in all the ages in which it has been taught, including today's New Age movement, is a direct lie of the devil. This lie was first uttered in paradise and continues to be the lie by which Satan deceives many: "Ye shall be as God." Eve and a bit later Adam were deceived. Countless throngs today are deceived in a similar fashion.

The church had a fierce battle on its hands against gnosticism, and it took more than a century before the battle was won.

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Why did God so govern in the affairs of men and saints that such an evil as gnosticism entered the church and threatened her very existence as the church of Christ? What was God's purpose? How did the church react and finally overcome the threat of gnosticism?

The first positive fruit of this great and terrible controversy in the church was this: the church was forced to give clear definition to her faith—to the truth that was her confession.

In the early life of the post-apostolic church, by virtue of the circumstances in which the church found herself, all the emphasis of her life fell upon the calling to live a holy and godly life that differed from the corruption of Roman civilization. All the emphasis fell on the need to live antithetically in the world, and all the thinking of the church was absorbed in this question: How does the Christianity that we have now embraced make our lives in every detail different from the wickedness of Roman culture? What is a Christian husband? May we be Roman soldiers after our conversion? How do we treat children? May we attend Roman shows? These and similar issues were on the top of the church's agenda.

Gnosticism, while certainly being an ethical system also, was primarily an intellectual system. One had to put on his thinking cap to understand the intricacies of its thought.

If Christianity was to defeat gnosticism on the battlefield of faith, it had to turn from ethical and moral questions to more basic questions involving the truth. What is the truth of God's word? What is the truth concerning God over against this cold and impersonal god of the gnostics? Who is Christ in distinction from this christ of the gnostics, whose human nature is only an illusion?

The Christian faith is exactly that: a *faith*, a system of doctrine, of doc-

trinal propositions that must be believed in order for a man to be saved. Faith is a unique way of life that is the necessary implication of what a Christian believes.

Gnosticism forced the church to begin thinking doctrinally. By doing this, the church came to realize that the only possible defense she had against gnosticism and the real claim that the Scriptures were making was *the unique character of the Christian faith*.

Gnosticism said that there is good in all religions. Gnosticism said that every religion is a way to God. Gnosticism said that the greatest religion unites all religions in some sort of spiritual hybrid under which all men can find a theological roof. Then the world will also be at peace.

But more and more it dawned on the church fathers who fought against gnosticism that the Christian religion was not like that. An absolute antithesis existed between the Christian faith and all other religions. Not only was the Christian faith the *only* true religion, but every other religion was totally false. If one believes the Christian religion, one will be saved because he believes the truth. If one believes anything else but the Christian faith, he will go to hell because he believes the lie. A mixture of lie and truth is the lie.

The reasons are clear why this vast and unbridgeable chasm exists between the Christian faith and all pagan thought and religion. Every pagan religion and every pagan philosophy is *man's invention*. It has its origin in man's sinful mind. It has in it no elements of truth, because there is no common grace to enlighten the wicked mind. It has no good about it, because there is no operation of the Logos of John 1 or of the Spirit operative in every man. Paganism is, in fact, the lie. It is the lie, not because wicked men who live far away from the gospel do not know about the truth and in their ignorance make mistakes, but because these men, thinking themselves to be wise and yet becoming fools, *change* the glory of the incorruptible God into images of their own imagination.

The Christian religion, on the other hand, has its origin in God—in God's mind and will. It is *revealed* and cannot be known apart from divine revelation. It is made known sovereignly by the Spirit in the hearts of God's elect because God hides his truth from the wise and prudent and reveals it unto babes, and this is his good pleasure. That truth, sovereignly made known, is the truth that saves.

The Christian is finally compelled, in faithfulness to God, to stand in the world and say, "What I believe is the only truth; what you believe is the

lie. What I believe opens the doors of heaven; what you believe is from hell and carries its confessors into that dark place.”

This takes a courage that few men have, but it is the courage of faith.

THE MEANING OF THE BATTLE AGAINST GNOSTICISM

The battle that the church fought against gnosticism is never over in this life. Today we have the same thing. A Reformed body in the Netherlands shut down its mission work to the Jews because it is claimed that Judaism is an acceptable religion. Reformed ecumenical bodies openly approve of Buddhism, Hinduism, and pagan worship. “Reformed” teachers openly teach that God has provided many ways to himself, that each is entitled to his own way to God, and even that the way of the fetish worshiper may be better than the Christian way.

The New Age movement tells the world exactly what gnosticism said. That movement creeps into churches, seminaries, and Christian schools; weak and wishy-washy teachers, often scared half to death by the accusation of being intolerant, openly espouse New Age ideas.

There can be no question about it: to take the stand that the church took against gnosticism is to invite persecution. Let it be, then. Anything else is the destruction of the church. If you will, the salvation of the church lies in her intolerance—intolerance of all that is contrary to God’s truth in Christ.

Our salvation lies in the truth of God’s word.