



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 5 – Establishing the Truth against False Teachings

Satan attacked the early Christians by means of persecution and slander, but he did not stop there. The devil was also slyly introducing false teachings into the churches to turn the Christians away from saving faith in Jesus Christ. One of the first heresies to trouble the early churches was Gnosticism. Traces of gnostic teachings are found already in the New Testament letters, particularly in Paul's letter to the Colossians, the first letter to Timothy, and the first letter of John. The term "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word for "knowledge". The Gnostics claimed to possess a secret knowledge of divine things that others did not have. It seems that Paul was referring to them when he wrote to Timothy that he should avoid **"the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge"** (1 Timothy 6:20).

The Gnostics claimed that all material things are evil and that only spiritual things are good. In their view God created a number of spiritual beings, but one of these spiritual beings turned away from God and created the world and material things. This, of course, is contrary to Scripture, which plainly declares that God Himself is the Creator of all material things, and that everything was very good in the beginning before Satan introduced sin into the world. Since, in their view, material things are evil, the Gnostics could not teach that Christ had a physical body, even though Scripture says that the Word (the Son of God) became flesh and was human in every way. They taught that Jesus did not really have a human body, but He only seemed to have a human body. This false teaching is called Docetism (which comes from the Greek word meaning "to seem").

As far as how they lived, the Gnostics followed two divergent paths. Some believed that since the spirit is imprisoned in the body, the body and its passions need to be controlled. Rules were drawn up to keep the body under control. It seems the Colossians were troubled by such teachers who made rules about food and drink and promoted the worship of angels. Paul called such practices **"self-imposed religion"** (Colossians 2:23) and **"doctrines of demons"** (1 Timothy 4:1), for these teachers forbade marriage and commanded people to abstain from certain foods. But Paul wrote: **"Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving"** (1 Timothy 4:4). It is also written: **"Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled"** (Hebrews 13:4).

On the other hand, some Gnostics argued that since the spirit was all that mattered, they could let the body follow its own desires, that is, it did not matter what they did in the flesh. It seems that in his letter Jude may be referring to these libertines, **"who turn the grace of**

our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ... These dreamers defile the flesh” (Jude 1:4, 8).

One of the false teachers who followed gnostic ways was a man named Marcion. Marcion founded his own church, which lasted for several centuries. Since he believed that the world was evil, he claimed that the one who created the world was evil. To Marcion the God of the Old Testament was not the God of Jesus. He rejected the Old Testament as the Word of God, and accepted only some of the New Testament books, mainly the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. Marcion rejected all the New Testament references to the Old Testament as insertions made by Jews.

There were some among the Christians who recognized the false teaching of Marcion and the Gnostics. They knew that Jesus Himself gave His full approval to the Old Testament as the authentic Word of God. They also began to draw up a list of authentic New Testament books that had come from the apostles and their assistants. The four Gospels and the book of Acts were quickly accepted as authentic, as well as most of the letters of Paul and Peter and John. In fact, the letters of Paul were already accepted as Scripture by Peter, and Paul quoted one of the four Gospels as Scripture also. These early Christians were able to distinguish between what was genuine and what was not genuine. They rejected the Gnostic writings.

It was at this early time also that the various congregations began to draw up early creeds that summarized the authentic Christian teachings. What we know as the Apostles’ Creed was put together in Rome in its basic form already around the year 150 AD. Other congregations had similar creeds. Such creeds separated the true-teaching Christians from the false-teaching Gnostics and Marcionites, who were unwilling to subscribe to the teachings confessed in these creeds. It seems that these creeds received their shape from Jesus’ command to His disciples that they should baptize the nations **“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (Matthew 28:19). Those who were to be baptized confessed their faith in the words of the accepted local creed. Eventually the the Apostles’ Creed as we know it became standard in all the Christian congregations.

The Gnostics and Marcionites claimed that their writings were just as authentic as those of the true Christians. “The Gnostics claimed that they had some secret access to that original message, through a succession of secret teachers... The church at large claimed to be in possession of the original gospel and the true teachings of Jesus” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 65).

The Christians were able to prove, however, that the congregations that were founded by the apostles and their associates had preserved the teachings of the apostles and had handed down their authentic teachings to the leaders of the churches who came after them. The lists of the leaders of the congregations were carefully preserved, so that any of the larger congregations founded by the apostles could present a list of their bishops (spiritual overseers) that went back to the beginning of their congregations. This is the way they

established that the teaching of their churches was truly apostolic, since the apostles had handed down the true teaching to the bishop that followed them, who in turn passed this teaching down to the next bishop, even to the second and third centuries. In some cases, these congregations probably still had the original manuscripts of the original writers. These original manuscripts were copied over and over again by hand so that they could be distributed to other congregations around the Roman world. Early translations were also made into other languages that were in use at that time. "The orthodox church of the second century could show its connection with the apostles in a way in which Marcion and the Gnostics could not" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 66).

The Apostles' Creed

(as it is found in *the Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 21-22)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to hell. On the third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into the heavens. He is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic (universal) Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Questions:

1. List some of the teachings of the Gnostics.
2. What was Marcion's view of the Old Testament?
3. What did Marcion try to eliminate from the New Testament books?
4. How did the Christians determine which books were truly from God?
5. What do we know about the origin of the Apostles' Creed?
6. How did the Christians prove that the Gnostic writings were not authentic?
7. Who is responsible for all the false teachings that threaten the truth?

