

13. A SPIRIT OF ERROR I: GNOSTICISM

Have you ever seen a row of recently planted young trees? The trunk is still small and delicate. How different from old trees with their roots firmly planted deep into the ground; with their solid trunks and spreading branches. The roots of the young trees are not deep and strong; the young trees have no solid trunks and thick branches yet. How will they fare? They'll be fine when the sun shines, and the weather is beautiful. But when howling storm winds sweep over the fields, when the hail comes clattering down, what then? Then those fragile trunks are tossed to and fro, in danger of blowing right out of the ground. And yet...?

The odd one may get blown over, but most of them will survive. The next day the storm has blown over, and those tender trees stand there



The storm winds force the roots deeper into the ground.

more robust than ever as the winds forced the roots deeper into the ground

This is just an example to show how the fledgeling church is often like a young tree. It's beginnings are so small and insignificant. How will she fare?

Terrible storms swept over Christ's congregations. Terrible persecutions caused the Christians to be tossed to and fro. Yes, at times it seemed as if the powerful gales would destroy Christianity. The blood of thousands of martyrs soaked the earth. And yet the church was not defeated.

On the contrary! Despite the storms of persecution, it grew!

Christianity was not only threatened by horrific persecutions, other storms also tried to destroy that young and delicate plant. Satan tried every trick to wipe Christianity from the face of the earth.

With those "other storms" I mean the many false teachings which snuck into the church. In this chapter, I will tell you something about one of the errors called:

GNOSTICISM.

Gnosticism?

What a strange word; never heard of it! What does it mean? I'll try to make it clear. I won't tell you everything about it; I'll just mention the main ideas because you need to know something about it, as it really tossed the churches to and fro at that time.

Soon after most of the apostles died the martyr's death, some people started teaching strange doctrines.

We read in the Bible that God created heaven and earth in six days. We all know and believe that because God's Word says so. But at that time some people said:

"Oh, no, we don't believe that. God can't create an evil world. Other gods, inferior gods have created this wicked world, and inferior gods have also created the bodies of men."

How foolish!

Where did those people get that nonsense from? We do not read *that* in the Bible!

Those false teachers went even further.

They said: "God didn't create peoples' bodies. He only created their soul, which is without sin, and that *perfect* soul is held captive by that *sinful* body."

But we know that inferior gods don't exist. There is only *one* God. That God has created body *and* soul. Both were good, but through sin, both soul and body have become sinful and depraved. That's what the Bible tells us, and *that's how it is!* But those Gnostics did not believe that.

They said:

"No, the soul is good, and the body is evil. The evil body imprisons the good soul. But God most high, Who dwells in heaven, sent Christ to deliver that good soul from that sinful body. Christ shall bring that perfect soul back to heaven."

But that is not true, either!

Indeed, the Lord Jesus came down to this sin-cursed earth, but He did not come to rescue a perfect soul from a sinful body; He came to suffer and to die for His people. He came to die the death of the cross, which had been cursed by God. He came to deliver His people from the guilt and stain of sin. God punished Christ so that God's people would live forever with body *and* soul. That is what the Bible teaches, *and that's how it is!*

Those wicked Gnostics said:

"No, no, the evil bodies shall die, and they shall *remain* dead. The sinful bodies will not be raised from the dead, but will stay in the grave forever. The good souls will go to heaven where they will marry the angels and so find happiness there".

Is that true?

Of course not, this is a wicked lie. The bodies of God's people will most certainly rise on the day of judgment. Those children of God will then glorify God with *body and soul*.

Both Enoch and Elijah are already in heaven with a glorified body!

Neither will God's children marry angels. That is nonsense. Christ teaches us that there is no marriage in heaven.

Not only God's people but also the unbelievers shall one day rise with body and soul. Hell will be their eternal destination. That's what the Bible teaches, and *that's how it is!*



'Elijah is in heaven with a glorified body'

Do you see that the Gnostics were utterly wrong and brought the strangest errors into the church?

But really, no one believed that, did they?

Unfortunately, yes! Thousands and thousands of people did! Thousands of Christians thought that the Gnostics proclaimed the truth. They honestly believed that this was the true religion!

But how could this happen?

Well, the pagans also believed in many gods. They also believed in good and evil spirits. Many pagans had become Christians. But when Gnosticism reared its ugly head and taught that there were a high god and lower gods, that made sense to them; they were familiar with that way of thinking as it tied in with their old beliefs.

Gnosticism, that wicked doctrine, was pure paganism, but they 'Christianised' that pagan doctrine a bit. That's why many so-called Christians believed those wrong, unscriptural things.

The Gnostics even began to write and publish books, and then said that Mark or Paul or Peter had written that book. They wrote various of these so-called 'Gospels' and 'Apostle novels'. Many false writings came into existence which were said to be true. In that way, the Gnostics tried to distort the Bible, the true Word of God. Corrupt bible books were written and presented as authentic!

That was *extremely* dangerous!

Had that attack been successful, the devil would have triumphed. Then the entire doctrine of salvation would have been corrupted. That was a very devilish attack on God's Word.

Thankfully, this didn't happen.

That attack failed.

The Lord made sure of that: He watched over His Church. God preserved His Word, the Bible.

Faithful ministers seriously warned against the doctrine of the Gnostics. When those ministers got a copy of such a counterfeit, false bible, they said:

"No, Peter did *not* write this so-called 'Book of Peter'.

The Gnostics wrote this book!

Away with it! That book does not belong in the Bible!"

And if they got a book titled: 'Acts of Paul', then they said:

"Paul did *not* write this book.

The Gnostics wrote this book!

Away with it! That book does not belong in the Bible!"

Thankfully, the Lord decreed it in such a way, that wise, God-fearing men appeared during that dangerous time. Men who could separate the true from the false Bible books.

Precisely during *that* period, the Bible, as you have it at home, was put together and confirmed as the *complete* Word of God. No new books can be added or taken from it. The 66 Bible books together are called the 'Canonical Books'. This term means that at that time, the Bible was 'canonised', meaning 'closed'.

They rejected the false doctrine of the Gnostics and confirmed the faithful books which make up our Bible as we still have it today.

The devil's attempt to destroy God's Church failed. Gnosticism was so dangerous because it was half pagan and half Christian.

The church cannot be destroyed. Though the struggle was severe, the truth will always overcome. This struggle strengthened the church

because she learned to understand the true doctrine better.

I hope you understand this difficult chapter.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the Gnostic error about creation.
2. What error did the Gnostics teach regarding the soul and body?
3. According to the Gnostics, why did God send Christ into the world?
4. What did Jesus come to do on this earth?
5. What shall occur in the resurrection regarding the soul and body?
6. What did the Gnostics teach regarding the resurrection?
7. Why did Gnosticism appeal to pagans wishing to embrace Christianity?
8. What are the 'canonical' books?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Find one text in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament to prove that man is born depraved.
2. Read 1 Corinthians 6. What does Paul write concerning the body. Does this agree with the Gnostic view? Explain.
3. What does the Lord Jesus say about marriages in heaven? See Luke 20. What did the Gnostics teach?
4. How did the Gnostics attempt to change the Bible? What does Revelation 22 say regarding any changes to the Word of God? What warning does the Holy Spirit give to those who tamper with His Word?
5. What are the apocryphal books? (See Belgic Confession of Faith)

How are they to be used?