
Divisions in the Early Church

Divisions and Heresies in the Church During the Lifetime of St. Paul

It would have been well if the inward love and harmony of the Church had really corresponded with the outward manifestation of it in this touching ceremony. But this was not the case, even while the Apostles themselves poured out the wine and broke the bread which symbolized the perfect union of the members of Christ's body. The kiss of peace sometimes only veiled the hatred of warring factions. So St. Paul expresses to the Corinthians his grief at hearing that there were "divisions among them," which showed themselves when they met together for public worship.

The earliest division of the Christian Church into opposing parties was caused by the Judaizing teachers, of whose factious efforts in Jerusalem and elsewhere we have already spoken. Their great object was to turn the newly converted Christians into Jewish proselytes, who should differ from other Jews only in the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. In their view the natural posterity of Abraham were still as much as ever the theocratic nation, entitled to God's exclusive favor, to which the rest of mankind could only be admitted by becoming Jews.

Those members of this party who were really sincere believers in Christianity, probably expected that the majority of their countrymen, finding their own national privileges thus acknowledged and maintained by the Christians, would on their part more willingly acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah; and thus they fancied that the Christian Church would gain a larger accession of members than could ever accrue to it from isolated Gentile converts: so that they probably justified their opposition to St. Paul on grounds not only of Jewish but of Christian policy; for they imagined that by his admission of uncircumcised Gentiles into the full membership of the Church, he was repelling far more numerous converts of Israelitish birth, who would otherwise have accepted the doctrine of Jesus.

This belief (which in itself, and seen from their point of view, in that age, was not

unreasonable) might have enabled them to excuse to their consciences, as Christians, the bitterness of their opposition to the great Christian Apostle. But in considering them as a party, we must bear in mind that they felt themselves more Jews than Christians. They acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah, and so far they were distinguished from the rest of their countrymen; but the Messiah himself, they thought, was only a "Savior of His people Israel;" and they ignored that true meaning of the ancient prophecies, which St. Paul was inspired to reveal to the Universal Church, teaching us that the "excellent things" which are spoken of the people of God, and the city of God, in the Old Testament, are to be by us interpreted of the "household of faith," and "the heavenly Jerusalem."

We have seen that the Judaizers at first insisted upon the observance of the law of Moses, and especially of circumcision, as an absolute requisite for admission into the Church," saying, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved."

But after the decision of the "Council of Jerusalem" it was impossible for them to require this condition; they therefore altered their tactics, and as the decrees of the Council seemed to assume that the Jewish Christians would continue to observe the Mosaic Law, the Judaizers took advantage of this to insist on the necessity of a separation between those who kept the whole Law and all others; they taught that the uncircumcised were in a lower condition as to spiritual privileges, and at a greater distance from God; and that only the circumcised converts were in a state of full acceptance with Him: in short, they kept the Gentile converts who would not submit to circumcision on the same footing as the proselytes of the gate, and treated the circumcised alone as proselytes of righteousness. When we comprehend all that was involved in this, we can easily understand the energetic opposition with which their teaching was met by St. Paul.

It was no mere question of outward observance, no matter of indifference (as it might at first

sight appear), whether the Gentile converts were circumcised or not; on the contrary, the question at stake was nothing less than this, whether Christians should be merely a Jewish sect under the bondage of a ceremonial law, and only distinguished from other Jews by believing that Jesus was the Messiah, or whether they should be the Catholic Church of Christ, owing no other allegiance but to Him, freed from the bondage of the letter, and bearing the seal of their inheritance no longer in their bodies, but in their hearts.

We can understand now the full truth of his indignant remonstrance, "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing." And we can understand also the exasperation which his teaching must have produced in those who held the very antithesis of this, namely, that Christianity without circumcision was utterly worthless. Hence their long and desperate struggle to destroy the influence of St. Paul in every church which he founded or visited: in Antioch, in Galatia, in Corinth, in Jerusalem, and in Rome. For as he was in truth the great prophet divinely commissioned to reveal the catholicity of the Christian Church, so he appeared to them the great apostate, urged by the worst motives to break down the fence and root up the hedge, which separated the heritage of the Lord from a godless world.

We shall not be surprised at their success in creating divisions in the Churches to which they came, when we remember that the nucleus of all those Churches was a body of converted Jews and proselytes. The Judaizing emissaries were ready to flatter the prejudices of this influential body; nor did they abstain (as we know both from tradition and from his own letters) from insinuating the most scandalous charges against their great opponent.¹ And thus, in every Christian church established by St. Paul, there sprang up, as we shall see, a schismatic party, opposed to his teaching and hostile to his person.

¹ We learn from Epiphanius that the Ebionites accused St. Paul of renouncing Judaism because he was a rejected candidate for the hand of the High Priest's daughter.

This great Judaizing party was of course subdivided into various sections, united in their main object, but distinguished by minor shades of difference. Thus, we find at Corinth that it comprehended two factions, the one apparently distinguished from the other by a greater degree of violence. The more moderate called themselves the followers of Peter, or rather of Cephas, for they preferred to use his Hebrew name. These dwelt much upon Our Lord's special promises to Peter, and the necessary inferiority of St. Paul to him who was divinely ordained to be the rock whereon the Church should be built. They insinuated that St. Paul felt doubts about his own Apostolic authority, and did not dare to claim the right of maintenance, which Christ had expressly given to His true Apostles. They also depreciated him as a maintainer of celibacy, and contrasted him in this respect with the great Pillars of the Church," the brethren of the Lord and Cephas," who were married. (1 Cor. 9:5) And no doubt they declaimed against the audacity of a converted persecutor," born into the Church out of due time," in "withstanding to the face" the chief of the Apostles. A still more violent section called themselves, by a strange misnomer, the party of Christ.²

These appear to have laid great stress upon the fact, that Paul had never seen or known Our Lord while on earth; and they claimed for themselves a peculiar connection with Christ, as having either been among the number of His disciples, or at least as being in close connection with the "brethren of the Lord," and especially with James, the head of the Church at Jerusalem. To this subdivision probably belonged the emissaries who professed to come "from James," (Gal. 2:12) and who created a schism in the Church of Antioch. Connected to a certain extent with the Judaizing party, but yet to be carefully distinguished from it, were those

² Such appears the most natural explanation of the "Christ" party (1 Cor. 1:12). As to the views held by some eminent commentators on the passage, it is a question whether they are consistent with 2 Cor. 10:7. Surely St. Paul would never have said, "As those who claim some *imaginary communion* with Christ belong to Christ, *so also do I* belong to Christ."

Christians who are known in the New Testament as the "weak brethren." (Rom. 14:1,2; Rom. 15:1; 1 Cor. 8:L7; 9:22) These were not a factious or schismatic party; nay, they were not, properly speaking, a party at all. They were individual converts of Jewish extraction, whose minds were not as yet sufficiently enlightened to comprehend the fullness of "the liberty with which Christ had made them free." Their conscience was sensitive, and filled with scruples, resulting from early habit and old prejudices; but they did not join in the violence of the Judaizing bigots, and there was even a danger lest they should be led, by the example of their more enlightened brethren, to wound their own conscience, by joining in acts which they, in their secret hearts, thought wrong.

Nothing is more beautiful than the tenderness and sympathy which St. Paul shows towards these weak Christians. While he plainly sets before them their mistake, and shows that their prejudices result from ignorance, yet he has no sterner rebuke for them than to express his confidence in their further enlightenment: "If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal this also unto you." (Phil. 3:15) So great is his anxiety lest the liberty which they witnessed in others should tempt them to blunt the delicacy of their moral feeling, that he warns his more enlightened converts to abstain from lawful indulgences, lest they cause the weak to stumble. "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no meat while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." 1 Cor. 8:13) , "Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty, only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." (Gal. 5:13) "Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died." (Rom. 14:15)

These latter warnings were addressed by St. Paul to a party very different from those of whom we have previously spoken; a party who called themselves (as we see from his epistle to Corinth) by his own name and professed to follow his teaching, yet were not always animated by his spirit. There was an obvious danger lest the opponents of the Judaizing section of the Church should themselves imitate one of the errors of their antagonists, by

combining as partisans rather than as Christians; St. Paul feels himself necessitated to remind them that the very idea of the Catholic Church excludes all party combinations from its pale, and that adverse factions, ranging themselves under human leaders, involve a contradiction to the Christian name." Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized into the name of Paul" ?" , Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed? " (1 Cor. 1:13 and 3:5)

The Pauline party (as they called themselves) appear to have ridiculed the scrupulosity of their less enlightened brethren, and to have felt for them a contempt inconsistent with the spirit of Christian love. (Rom. 14;10) And in their opposition to the Judaizers, they showed a bitterness of feeling and violence of action,³ too like that of their opponents. Some of them, also, were inclined to exult over the fall of God's ancient people, and to glory in their own position, as though it had been won by superior merit. These are rebuked by St. Paul for their "boasting," and warned against its consequences. "Be not high minded, but fear; for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee." (Rom 11:17 22)

One section of this party seems to have united these errors with one still more dangerous to the simplicity of the Christian faith; they received Christianity more in an intellectual than a moral aspect; not as a spiritual religion, so much as a new system of philosophy. This was a phase of error most likely to occur among the disputatious reasoners (1 Cor. 1:20) who abounded in the great Greek cities; and, accordingly, we find the first trace of its existence at Corinth. There it took a peculiar form, in consequence of the arrival of Apollos as a Christian teacher, soon after the departure of St. Paul. He was a Jew of Alexandria, and as such had received that Grecian cultivation, and acquired that familiarity with Greek philosophy, which distinguished the more learned Alexandrian Jews. Thus he was able to adapt his

³ See the admonitions addressed to the "spiritual" in Gal. 5:13,14,26, and 6:1-5.

teaching to the taste of his philosophizing hearers at Corinth far more than St. Paul could do; and, indeed, the latter had purposely abstained from even attempting this at Corinth. (1 Cor. 2:1)

Accordingly, the School which we have mentioned called themselves the followers of Apollos, and extolled his philosophic views, in opposition to the simple and unlearned simplicity which they ascribed to the style of St. Paul. It is easy to perceive in the temper of this portion of the Church the germ of that rationalizing tendency which afterwards developed itself into the Greek element of Gnosticism. Already, indeed, although that heresy was not yet invented, some of the worst opinions of the worst Gnostics found advocates among those who called themselves Christians: there was, even now, a party in the Church which defended fornication (see 1 Cor. 6:9 20) on theory, and which denied the resurrection of the dead. (see 1 Cor. 15:12) These heresies probably originated with those who (as we have observed) embraced Christianity as new philosophy; some of whom attempted, with a perverted ingenuity, to extract from its doctrines a justification of the immoral life to which they were addicted. Thus, St. Paul had taught that the law was dead to true Christians: meaning thereby, that those who were penetrated by the Holy Spirit, and made one with Christ, worked righteousness, not in consequence of a law of precepts and penalties, but through the necessary operation of the spiritual principle within them. For, as the law against theft might be said to be dead to a rich man (because he would feel no temptation to break it), so the whole moral law would be dead to a perfect Christian;⁴ hence, to a real Christian, it might in one sense be truly said that prohibitions were abolished. But the heretics of whom we are speaking took this proposition in a sense the very opposite to that which it really conveyed; and whereas St. Paul taught that

⁴ This state would be perfectly realized if the renovation of heart were complete; and it is practically realized in proportion as the Christian's spiritual union with Christ approaches its theoretic standard.

prohibitions were abolished for the righteous, they maintained that all things were lawful to the wicked." The law is dead" (1 Cor. 6:12) was their motto, and their practice was what the practice of Antinomians in all ages has been." Let us continue in sin, that grace may abound," was their horrible perversion of the Evangelical revelation that God is love." In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision." (Gal. 5:6)" The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." (2 Cor. 3:6) Meat commendeth us not to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we eat not are we the worse; (1 Cor. 8:8) the kingdom of God is not meat and drink." (Rom. 14:17) Such were the words in which St. Paul expressed the great truth, that religion is not a matter of outward ceremonies, but of inward life. But these heretics caught up the words, and inferred that all outward acts were indifferent, and none could be criminal. They advocated the most unrestrained indulgence of the passions, and took for their maxim the worst precept of Epicurean atheism," let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." It is in the wealthy and vicious cities of Rome and Corinth that we find these errors first manifesting themselves; and in the voluptuous atmosphere of the latter it was not unnatural that there should be some who would seek in a new religion an excuse for their old vices, and others who would easily be led astray by those "evil communications" whose corrupting influence the Apostle himself mentions as the chief source of this mischief.

The Resurrection of the Dead was denied in the same city and by the same party; nor is it strange that, as the sensual Felix trembled when Paul preached to him of the judgment to come, so these profligate cavilers shrank from the thought of that tribunal before which account must be given of the things done in the body.

Perhaps, also (as some have inferred from St. Paul's refutation of these heretics), they had misunderstood the Christian doctrine, which teaches us to believe in the resurrection of a spiritual body, as though it had asserted the reanimation of "this vile body" of "flesh and blood," which "cannot inherit the kingdom of God;" or it is possible that a materialistic

philosophy⁵ led them to maintain that when the body had crumbled away in the grave, or been consumed on the funeral pyre, nothing of the man remained in being. In either case, they probably explained away the doctrine of the Resurrection as a metaphor, similar to that employed by St. Paul when he says that baptism is the resurrection of the new convert; (Col. 2:12) thus they would agree with those later heretics (of whom were Hymeneus and Philetus) who taught that the Resurrection was past already.

Hitherto we have spoken of those divisions and heresies which appear to have sprung up in the several churches founded by St. Paul at the earliest period of their history, almost immediately after their conversion. Beyond this period we are not yet arrived in St. Paul's life; and from his conversion even to the time of his imprisonment, his conflict was mainly with Jews or Judaizers. But there were other forms of error which harassed his declining years; and these we will now endeavor (although anticipating the course of our biography) shortly to describe, so that it may not be necessary afterwards to revert to the subject, and at the same time that particular cases, which will meet us in the Epistles, may be understood in their relation to the general religious aspect of the time.

We have seen that, in the earliest epoch of the Church, there were two elements of error which had already shown themselves; namely, the bigoted, exclusive, and superstitious tendency, which was of Jewish origin; and the pseudo philosophic, or rationalizing tendency, which was of Grecian birth. In the early period of which we have hitherto spoken, and onwards till the time of St. Paul's imprisonment at Rome, the first of these tendencies was the principal source of danger; but after this, as the Church enlarged itself, and the number of Gentile converts more and more exceeded that of Jewish Christians, the case was altered. The catholicity of the Church became an established

⁵ If this were the case, we must suppose them to have been of Epicurean tendencies, and so far different from the later Platonizing Gnostics who denied the Resurrection.

fact, and the Judaizers, properly so called, ceased to exist as an influential party anywhere except in Palestine. Yet still, though the Jews were forced to give up their exclusiveness, and to acknowledge the uncircumcised as "fellow heirs and of the same body," their superstition remained, and became a fruitful source of mischief. On the other hand, those who sought for nothing more in Christianity than a new philosophy, were naturally increased in number, in proportion as the Church gained converts from the educated classes; the lecturers in the schools of Athens, the "wisdom seekers" of Corinth, the Antinomian perverters of St. Paul's teaching, and the Platonizing rabbis of Alexandria, all would share in this tendency. The latter, indeed, as represented by the learned Philo, had already attempted to construct a system of Judaic Platonism, which explained away almost all the peculiarities of the Mosaic theology into accordance with the doctrines of the Academy. And thus the way was already paved for the introduction of that most curious amalgam of Hellenic and Oriental speculation with Jewish superstition, which was afterwards called the Gnostic heresy. It is a disputed point at what time this heresy made its first appearance in the Church; some⁶ think that it had already commenced in the Church of Corinth when St. Paul warned them to beware of the knowledge (Gnosis) which puffeth up; others maintain that it did not originate till the time of Basilides, long after the last Apostle had fallen asleep in Jesus. Perhaps, however, we may consider this as a difference rather about the definition of a term than the history of a sect. If we define Gnosticism to be that combination of Orientalism and Platonism held by the followers of Basilides or Valentinus, and refuse the title of Gnostic to any but those who

⁶ This is the opinion of Dr. Burton, the great English authority on the Gnostic heresy (*Lectures*, pp. 84,85) We cannot refer to this eminent theologian without expressing our obligation to his writings, and our admiration for that union of profound learning with clear good sense and candor which distinguishes him. His premature death robbed the Church of England of a writer who, had his life been spared, would have been inferior to none of its brightest ornaments.

adopted their systems, no doubt we must not place the Gnostics among the heretics of the Apostolic age. But if, on the other hand (as seems most natural), we define a Gnostic to be one who claims the possession of a peculiar "Gnosis" (i.e. a deep and philosophic insight into the mysteries of theology, unattainable by the vulgar), then it is indisputable that Gnosticism had begun when St. Paul warned Timothy against those who laid claim to a knowledge (Gnosis) ⁷ falsely so called. And, moreover, we find that, even in the Apostolic age, these arrogant speculators had begun to blend with their Hellenic philosophy certain fragments of Jewish superstition, which afterwards were incorporated into the Cabbala. ⁸ In spite, however of the occurrence of such Jewish elements, those heresies which troubled the later years of St. Paul, and afterwards of St. John were essentially rather of Gentile than of Jewish origin. So far as they agreed with the later Gnosticism, this must certainly have been the case, for we know that it was a characteristic of all the Gnostic sects to despise the Jewish Scriptures. Moreover, those who laid claims to "Gnosis" at Corinth (as we have seen) were a Gentile party, who professed to adopt St. Paul's doctrine of the abolition of the law, and perverted it into Antinomianism: in short, they were the opposite extreme to the Judaizing party. Nor need we be surprised to find that some of these philosophizing heretics adopted some of the wildest superstitions of the Jews;

⁷ Neander well observes that the essential feature in Gnosticism is its re-establishing an *aristocracy of knowledge* in religion, and rejecting the Christian principle which recognizes no religious distinctions between rich and poor, learned and ignorant. (*Church History*, sect. 4) So in Hippolytus's recently discovered *Refutation of Heresies* we find that some of the earlier Gnostics are represented as interpreting the "good ground" in the parable of the Sower to mean the higher order of intellects.

⁸ Thus the genealogies mentioned in the Pastoral Epistles were probably those speculations about the emanations of spiritual beings found in the Cabbala, at least, such is Burton's opinion. And the angel worship at Colossae belonged to the same class of superstitions.

for these very superstitions were not so much the natural growth of Judaism as engrafted upon it by its Rabbinical corrupters and derived from Oriental sources. And there was a strong affinity between the neoPlatonic philosophy of Alexandria and the Oriental theosophy which sprang from Buddhism and other kindred systems, and which degenerated into the practice of magic and incantations.

It is not necessary, however, that we should enter into any discussion of the subsequent development of these errors; our subject only requires that we give an outline of the forms which they assumed during the lifetime of St. Paul; and this we can only do very imperfectly, because the allusions in St. Paul's writings are so few and so brief, that they give us but little information. Still, they suffice to show the main features of the heresies which he condemns, especially when we compare them with notices in other parts of the New Testament, and with the history of the Church in the succeeding century.

We may consider these heresies, first, in their doctrinal, and, secondly, in their practical, aspect. With regard to the former, we find that their general characteristic was the claim to a deep philosophical insight into the mysteries of religion. Thus the Colossians are warned against the false teachers who would deceive them by a vain affectation of "Philosophy," and who were "puffed up by a fleshly mind." (Col. ii. 8, 18.) ² So, in the Epistle to Timothy, St. Paul speaks of these heretics as falsely claiming "knowledge" (gnosis). And in the Epistle to the Ephesians (so called) he seems to allude to the same boastful assumption, when he speaks of the love of Christ as surpassing "knowledge," in a passage which contains other apparent allusions ³ to Gnostic doctrine. Connected with this claim to a deeper insight into truth than that possessed by the uninitiated, was the manner in which some of these heretics explained away the facts of revelation by an allegorical interpretation. Thus we find that Hymeneus and Philetus maintained that "the Resurrection was past already. We have seen that a heresy apparently identical with this existed at a very early period in the Church of Corinth, among the free thinking, or pseudo

philosophical, party there; and all the Gnostic sects of the second century were united in denying the resurrection of the dead.

Again, we find the Colossian heretics introducing a worship of angels," intruding into those things which they have not seen:" and so, in the Pastoral Epistles, the "self styled Gnostics" (1 Tim. vi. 20) are occupied with "endless genealogies," which were probably fanciful myths, concerning the origin and emanation of spiritual beings.⁹ This latter is one of the points in which Jewish superstition was blended with Gentile speculation; for we find in the Cabbala,¹⁰ or collection of Jewish traditional theology, many fabulous statements concerning such emanations. It seems to be a similar superstition which is stigmatized in the Pastoral Epistles as consisting of "profane and old wives" fables;" (1 Tim. 4:7) and, again, of "Jewish fables and commandments of men." (Tit. 1:14) The Gnostics of the second century adopted and systematized this theory of emanations, and it became one of the most peculiar and distinctive features of their heresy. But this was not the only Jewish element in the teaching of these Colossian heretics; we find also that they made a point of conscience of observing the Jewish Sabbaths¹¹ and festivals,

⁹ According to the Cabbala, there were ten Sephiroth, or emanations proceeding from God, which appear to have suggested the Gnostic eons. Upon this theory was grafted a system of magic, consisting mainly of the use of Scriptural words to produce supernatural effects.

¹⁰ St. Paul denounces the tradition of men (Col. 2:8) as the source of these errors; and the word Cabbala means tradition. Dr. Burton says, the Cabbala had certainly grown into a system at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem; and there is also evidence that it had been cultivated by the Jewish doctors long before.

¹¹ This does not prove them, however, to have been Jews, for the superstitious heathen were also in the habit of adopting some of the rites of Judaism, under the idea of their producing some magical effect upon them; as we find from the Roman satirists. See also some remarks on the Colossian heretics in our introductory remarks on the Epistle to the Colossians.

and they are charged with clinging to outward rites (Col. 2:3, 20), and making distinctions between the lawfulness of different kinds of food.

In their practical results, these heresies which we are considering had a twofold direction. On one side was an ascetic tendency, such as we find at Colossae, showing itself by an arbitrarily invented worship of God, an affectation of self humiliation and mortification of the flesh. So, in the Pastoral Epistles, we find the prohibition of marriage,¹² the enforced abstinence from food, and other bodily mortifications, mentioned as characteristics of heresy.¹³ If this asceticism originated from the Jewish element which has been mentioned above, it may be compared with the practice of the Essenes, whose existence shows that such asceticism was not inconsistent with Judaism, although it was contrary to the views of the Judaizing party properly so called. On the other hand, it may have arisen from that abhorrence of matter, and anxiety to free the soul from the dominion of the body, which distinguished the Alexandrian Platonists, and which (derived from them) became a characteristic of some of the Gnostic sects.

But this asceticism was a weak and comparatively innocent form, in which the practical results of this incipient Gnosticism exhibited themselves. Its really dangerous manifestation was derived, not from its Jewish, but from its Heathen element. We have seen how this showed itself from the first at Corinth; how men sheltered their immoralities under the name of Christianity, and even justified them by a perversion of its doctrines. Such

¹² Which certainly was the reverse of the Jewish exaltation of marriage.

¹³ St. Paul declares that these errors shall come "in the last days" (2 Tim. 3:1); but St. John says "the last days" were come in his time (1 John 2:18); and it is implied by St. Paul's words that the evils he denounces were already in action; just as he had said before to the Thessalonians, "the mystery of lawlessness is already working" (2 Thess. 2:7), where the peculiar expressions "lawlessness" and "the lawless one" seem to point to the Antinomian character of these heresies.

teaching could not fail to find a ready audience wherever there were found vicious lives and hardened consciences. Accordingly it was in the luxurious and corrupt population of Asia Minor, ¹⁴ that this early Gnosticism assumed its worst form of immoral practice defended by Antinomian doctrine. Thus, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul warns his readers against the sophistical arguments by which certain false teachers strove to justify the sins of impurity, and to persuade them that the acts of the body could not contaminate the soul, "Let no man deceive you with vain words; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience." (Eph. 5:6) Hymeneus and Philetus are the first leaders of this party mentioned by name: we have seen that they agreed with the Corinthian Antinomians in denying the Resurrection, and they agreed with them no less in practice than in theory. Of the first of them it is expressly said that he (1 Tim. 1:19,20) had "cast away a good conscience," and of both we are told that they showed themselves not to belong to Christ, because they had not His seal: this seal being described as twofold "The Lord knoweth them that are His," and "Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2 Tim. 2:19) St. Paul appears to imply that though they boasted their "knowledge of God," yet the Lord had no knowledge of them; as our Savior had Himself declared that to the claims of such false disciples He would reply, "I never knew you; depart from me, ye workers of iniquity." But in the same Epistle where these heresiarchs are condemned, St. Paul intimates that their principles were not yet fully developed; he warns Timothy (2 Tim. 3) that an outburst of immorality and lawlessness must be shortly

¹⁴ Both at Colossae and in Crete it seems to have been the Jewish form of these heresies which predominated. At Colossae they took an ascetic direction; in Crete, among a simpler and more provincial population, the false teachers seem to have been hypocrites, who encouraged the vices to which their followers were addicted, and inoculated them with foolish superstitions (Tit. 1:14; 3:9); but we do not find in these Epistles any mention of the theoretic Antinomianism which existed in some of the great cities.

expected within the Church beyond anything which had yet been experienced. The same anticipation appears in his farewell address to the Ephesian presbyters, and even at the early period of his Epistle to the Thessalonians; and we see from the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude, and from the Apocalypse of St. John, all addressed (it should be remembered) to the Churches of Asia Minor, that this prophetic warning was soon fulfilled. We find that many Christians used their liberty as a cloak of maliciousness; (1 Pet. 2:16)" promising their hearers liberty, yet themselves the slaves of corruption;" (2 Pet. 2:19)" turning the grace of God into lasciviousness;" (Jude 4) that they were justly condemned by the surrounding Heathen for their crimes, and even suffered punishment as robbers and murderers. (1 Pet. 4:15) They were also infamous for the practice of the pretended arts of magic and witchcraft, (Rev. 2:20; cf. Rev. 9:21; 21:8; 22:15) which they may have borrowed either from the Jewish soothsayers and exorcisers, (see Acts 19:13) or from the Heathen professors of magical arts who so much abounded at the same epoch. Some of them, who are called the followers of Balaam in the Epistles of Peter and Jude, and the Nicolaitans (an equivalent name) in the Apocalypse, taught their followers to indulge in the sensual impurities, and even in the idol feasts of the Heathen. ¹⁵ We find, moreover, that

¹⁵ Such, at least, seems the natural explanation of the words in Rev. 2:20; for we can scarcely suppose so strong a condemnation if the offence had been only eating meat which had once formed part of a sacrifice. It is remarkable how completely the Gnostics of the second century resembled these earlier heretics in all the points here mentioned. Their immorality is the subject of constant animadversion in the writings of the Fathers, who tell us that the calumnies which were cast upon the Christians by the Heathen were caused by the vices of the Gnostics. Irenaeus asserts that they said, 'as gold deposited in mud does not lose its beauty, so they themselves, whatever may be their outward immorality, cannot be injured by it, nor lose their spiritual substance.' And so Justin Martyr speaks of heretics, who said 'that though they live sinful lives, yet, if they know God, the Lord will not impute to them sin.' And Epiphanius gives the most horrible details of the enormities which they practiced.

these false disciples, with their licentiousness in morals, united anarchy in politics, and resistance to law and government. They” walked after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despised governments.” And thus they gave rise to those charges against Christianity itself, which were made by the Heathen writers of the time, whose knowledge of the new religion was naturally taken from those amongst its professors who rendered themselves notorious by falling under the judgment of the Law.

When thus we contemplate the true character of these divisions and heresies which beset the Apostolic Church, we cannot but acknowledge that it needed all those miraculous gifts with which it was endowed, and all that inspired wisdom which presided over its organization, to ward off dangers which threatened to blight its growth and destroy its very existence. In its earliest infancy, two powerful and venomous foes twined themselves round its very cradle; but its strength was according to its day; with a supernatural vigor it rent off the coils of Jewish bigotry and stifled the poisonous breath of Heathen licentiousness; but the peril was mortal, and the struggle was for life or death.

Had the Church's fate been subjected to the ordinary laws which regulate the history of earthly commonwealths, it could scarcely have escaped one of two opposite destinies, either of which must have equally defeated (if we may so speak) the world's salvation. Either it must have been cramped into a Jewish sect, according to the wish of the majority of its

Again, their addiction to magical arts was notorious. And their leaders, Basilides and Valentinus, are accused of acting like the Nicolaitans of the Apocalypse, to avoid persecution. Such accusations may, no doubt, be slanders, as far as those leaders were individually concerned. The increased knowledge of them which we have lately derived from the publication of Hippolytus's 'Refutation of Heresies' leads us to think of them as bold speculators, but not as bad men. Yet we cannot doubt that their philosophical speculations degenerated into the most superstitious theosophy in the hands of their followers. And the details furnished by Hippolytus prove that many of the Gnostics fully deserved the charges of immorality commonly brought against them.

earliest members, or (having escaped this immediate extinction) it must have added one more to the innumerable schools of Heathen philosophy, subdividing into a hundred branches, whose votaries would some of them have sunk into Oriental superstitions, others into Pagan voluptuousness. If we need any proof how narrowly the Church escaped this latter peril, we have only to look at the fearful power of Gnosticism in the succeeding century. And, indeed, the more we consider the elements of which every Christian community was originally composed, the more must we wonder how the little flock of the wise and good 1 could have successfully resisted the overwhelming contagion of folly and wickedness.

In every city the nucleus of the Church consisted of Jews and Jewish proselytes; on this foundation was superadded a miscellaneous mass of Heathen converts, almost exclusively from the lowest classes, baptized, indeed, into the name of Jesus, but still with all the habits of a life of idolatry and vice clinging to them. How was it, then, that such a society could escape the two temptations which assailed it just at the time when they were most likely to be fatal? While as yet the Jewish element preponderated, a fanatical party, commanding almost necessarily the sympathies of the Jewish portion of the society, made a zealous and combined effort to reduce Christianity to Judaism, and subordinate the Church to the synagogue.

Over their great opponent, the one Apostle of the Gentiles, they won a temporary triumph, and saw him consigned to prison and to death. How was it that the very hour of their victory was the epoch from which we date their failure? Again, this stage is passed, the Church is thrown open to the Gentiles, and crowds flock in, some attracted by wonder at the miracles they see, some by hatred of the government under which they live, and by hopes that they may turn the Church into an organized conspiracy against law and order; and even the best, as yet unsettled in their faith, and ready to exchange their new belief for a newer,” carried about with every wind of doctrine.” At such an epoch, a systematic theory is devised, reconciling the profession of Christianity with the practice of

immorality; its teachers proclaim that Christ has freed them from the law, and that the man who has attained true spiritual enlightenment is above the obligations of outward morality; and with this seducing philosophy for the Gentile they readily combine the Cabbalistic superstitions of Rabbinical tradition to captivate the Jew.

Who could wonder if, when such incendiaries applied their torch to such materials, a flame burst forth which well nigh consumed the fabric 1 Surely that day of trial was" revealed in fire," and the building which was able to abide the flame was nothing less than the temple of God.

It is painful to be compelled to acknowledge among the Christians of the Apostolic Age the existence of so many forms of error and sin. It was a pleasing dream which represented the primitive Church as a society of angels; and it is not without a struggle that we bring ourselves to open our eyes and behold the reality. But yet it is a higher feeling which bids us thankfully recognize the truth that" there is no partiality with God;" (Acts 10:34) that He has never supernaturally coerced any generation of mankind into virtue, nor rendered schism and heresy impossible in any age of the Church. So St. Paul tells his converts (1 Cor. 11:19) that there must needs be heresies among them, that the good may be tried and distinguished from the bad; implying that, without the possibility of a choice, there would be no test of faith or holiness. And so Our Lord Himself compared His Church to a net cast into the sea, which gathered fish of all kinds, both good and bad;

nor was its purity to be attained by the exclusion of evil, till the end should come.

Therefore, if we sigh, as well we may, for the realization of an ideal which Scripture paints to us and imagination embodies, but which our eyes seek for and cannot find; if we look vainly and with earnest longings for the appearance of that glorious Church," without spot or wrinkle or any such thing," the fitting bride of a heavenly spouse if it may calm our impatience to recollect that no such Church has ever existed upon earth, while yet we do not forget that it has existed and does exist in heaven. In the very lifetime of the Apostles, no less than now," the earnest expectation of the creature waited for the manifestation of the sons of God;" miracles did not convert; inspiration did not sanctify; then, as now, imperfection and evil clung to the members, and clogged the energies, of the kingdom of God; now, as then, Christians are fellow heirs, and of the same body with the spirits of just men made perfect; now, as then, the communion of saints unites into one family the Church militant with the Church triumphant.

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