

Bible Study # 69  
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### The Battle Against First-Century Heresies

This evening we **are going to be wrapping up some of the things from Paul's letters.** What we are covering is not directly a letter that Paul wrote. It is sort of a wrap up of the background with which he dealt and many things that were issues that arose. **We are going to deal with some of the battles against first-century heresies that the Apostle Paul had to carry out and that he certainly was a leading part in, and then going on from there.**

I wanted to start out by reading an excerpt from a book entitled *The Story of the Christian Church*. It is a book that gives a little bit of background and history. It makes a very interesting statement. Chapter 5 is entitled "The Age of Shadows, From the Martyrdom of St. Paul, 68 A.D., to the Death of St. John, 100 A.D."

He makes the statement in this book, "We name the last generation of the first century from 68 to 100 A.D. "The Age of Shadows," partly because the gloom of persecution was over the church, but more especially because of all periods in the history, it is the one about which we know the least. We no longer have the clear light of the Book of Acts to guide us, and no author of that age has filled in the blank in the history. We would like to read of the later work by such helpers of St. Paul as Timothy, Apollos and Titus, but all these and St. Paul's other friends drop out of the record at his death. For 50 years after St. Paul's life, a curtain hangs over the church through which we strive vainly to look, and when at last it rises about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church, in many aspects, very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul."

Now, that is quite an amazing and remarkable admission. When the curtain rises with the writings of the earliest church fathers in 120 A.D., the author says, '...we find a church, in many aspects, very different from the church of Peter and Paul.' The reason that the curtain rises on a church that is far different is because when the curtain rises, what is seen on stage is a different church. It not only appears to be different and it not only looks different—**it is a different church.** It is sort of an old conjurer trick. You see one thing and the curtain rings down; when the curtain rises, you see something

else. You are given the impression that one was changed into the other, when in reality, that was not the case.

The Church of God did not become a different church. A different church—this other group that had its beginnings at the time when Peter, Paul and other apostles passed from the scene—took over and became the visible professing "Christian" Church.

Let's get a little background on it. We will start out in Thessalonians because the earliest books Paul wrote were I and II Thessalonians. II Thessalonians was written in the fall of 50 A.D.

II Thessalonians 2:7-8, "For the mystery of lawlessness [KJV, "iniquity"] is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming."

The mystery of iniquity, Paul said, was already at work. Things would be held back in such a way that things would not fully emerge. The final wicked one (that man of sin), the final false prophet, is not going to come up out of the midst; he is not going to be revealed until the appropriate time. But Paul was explaining to the Thessalonians in 50 A.D. that the mystery of iniquity was already at work. The mystery of iniquity has to do with the mystery religion, the Babylonian Mystery Religion that works lawlessness. It works iniquity, and this was already at work.

In fact, let's go back a little further to the book of Acts. In Acts 8, we pick up the story of a man that we are introduced to later on in secular history. But we are first introduced to him in the book of Acts.

Acts 8:5, "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them."

Verses 8-11, "And there was great joy in that city. But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is the great power of God.' And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time."

Here, we are told that there was in Samaria a certain individual who was a great religious leader. According to verse 10, he was one who was acknowledged by the Samaritans as being the great power of God. He was a great religious leader of the Samaritans. He was one to whom they all gave heed. Everyone was impressed with

him; yet the source of his power and influence was not of God. It was of Satan. He was a sorcerer. He is known in history as Simon Magus.

“Magus” is the Greek word for “sorcerer.” It is the word from which our word “magician” derives. He is called Simon Magus or Simon the Sorcerer. Simon the Magician was the great religious leader of the Samaritans. We are told that when Philip came to Samaria and preached, Simon heard him and was deeply impressed. He was impressed by the message that Philip brought and by the miracles that he saw. Simon knew this was something more impressive than any of the tricks he had worked.

Verses 14-17, then the apostles came down. Peter and John laid hands on the brethren and they received the Holy Spirit.

Verses 18-23, “Now when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion [KJV, “lot”] in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.’”

Peter had some very stern words for this individual. Peter could perceive his heart and his attitude.

What did Simon seek to purchase here? Simon sought to purchase an apostleship. That’s what Simon is asking for. He is seeking to purchase the office of apostle.

Verse 21, Paul said, “you have neither part nor portion in this matter.” What does that mean? That expression is used one other time in Scripture.

Acts 1:15-20 is the story of how Judas had committed suicide and there were only 11 out of the 12 apostles left. There was a need to round out the number to 12 because 12 was the foundational number, the number of organized beginnings. They were going to choose a 12<sup>th</sup> member. This is prior to the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 21-22, it needed to be someone from among the group that had followed and heard Jesus from the beginning of His ministry.

Verses 23-24, they narrowed it down to Justus and Matthias and prayed and asked God’s guidance.

Acts 1:25-26, “to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the 11 apostles.”

They cast (KJV, “gave forth”) their lots, and the lot fell upon Matthias that he might take part of the ministry and apostleship. The term “part” has to do with “a part of the ministry,” and “lot” has to do with “an apostleship chosen by lot.”

When Simon was offering money, Peter understood what he wanted. He wanted the office that Peter held. Peter said, ‘You have neither part nor lot in this matter. You don’t have any part in our ministry and apostleship. You haven’t been chosen by lot to share a part in our ministry or apostleship because your heart is not right in the sight of God. You had better repent because I know what you are thinking in your heart. You had better repent of the thought of your heart that you may be forgiven. I see in you, Simon, I perceive that you are in the gall of bitterness. You are poisoned with bitterness and you are in the bond of iniquity.’

Simon was the slave of lawlessness. Simon was the great religious leader of the Samaritans. He was the one to whom all of the Samaritans paid heed, from the greatest to the least. He was someone who was acknowledged and recognized by the Samaritans. He was looked to as though he were some great one. They said he was the power of God.

In this particular book that I have here, *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius was a Catholic historian in the fourth century A.D. at the time of Emperor Constantine and gave a history of the time until him. It has a chapter in the book devoted to Simon Magus. He talks about Simon on page 63:

“Simon, however, we have understood to have taken the lead in all heresy; from whom also, down to the present time, those that followed his heresy, still affected the modest philosophy of the Christians. From this, however, they appeared again to depart and again to embrace the superstitions of idols, falling down before the pictures and statutes of this selfsame Simon....”

At this time, the Catholic Church hadn’t yet fully adopted some of those things.

Did you read the article on the Pope this morning? He’s been to Portugal and he met with the last of the three little Portuguese children who saw the vision of Fatima back in 1917.

There's one of them left—an elderly lady who is a nun there near Fatima in Portugal. The Pope met with her privately. There is a statue of Mary there at Fatima and this statue is crowned. The bullet that the Pope was struck with at the assassination attempt years ago has been placed there in the crown of this statue at Fatima as an offering of devotion, giving thanks to this idol for having delivered him and spared his life. That's the whole sense of it. They had a big deal. The bullet is up there in the crown because she is being given the credit for having saved his life. He came to consult this elderly nun who had seen this apparition in 1917. That's been almost 75 years ago. These sorts of things are interesting.

Eusebius mentions how Simon was the one who brought in and encouraged his followers (calling themselves Christians) to embrace the superstitions of idols, falling down before pictures and statues.

A lot of you have come out of a background where you are not unfamiliar with people falling down before pictures and statues. We see a lot of that. You can drive down the road and people have these little shrines in their yards. They have a little covering for the idols to sit under so they won't get wet.

He also says of Simon Magus on page 62, "The faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, having now been diffused abroad among all men, the enemy of salvation devising some scheme of seizing upon the imperial city for himself, brought thither Simon, whom we mentioned before. Coming to the aid of his insidious artifices, he attached many of the inhabitants of Rome to himself in order to deceive them. This is attested by Justin who was one of our distinguished writers, not long after the times of the apostles...." He continues talking about Simon.

There is an article on Simon the Sorcerer in the old 11<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Encyclopedia Briticana*. It labels that he was the father of the Gnostics—Gnosticism sprung out from him.

Let's understand a little bit about the Samaritans themselves, of whom Simon was the religious leader even prior to his adoption of Christianity. In II Kings 17, we read of what we term the "Samaritans." Originally, Samaria was the capital city of Northern Israel. It was where the northern ten tribes were. Northern Israel sinned against God, and God let the Assyrians come in and take them into captivity.

II Kings 17:6, "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel

away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes."

If you look at a map, it's up in the area between the Black and the Caspian Sea. It's up in the area above Turkey and Iraq and the southern part of the Soviet Union that is between the Black and Caspian Sea. They were a little further south than that. They were down in the area where Iraq, Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union come together, all this area in here. They settled them in that northern area, from whence they subsequently migrated across the Black Sea, then up the Danube and the Rhine and into the heartland of Europe at the appropriate time. This is where he settled Israel.

Verses 7-15, the children of Israel sinned. It goes through and recounts all the things that they did.

Verse 16, "So they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, made for themselves a molded image and two calves, made a wooden image and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal."

Verses 23-24, "until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away from their own land to Assyria, as it is to this day. Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities."

In the process of this, there was a lag of time. What happens when you depopulate an area? Very quickly it becomes overgrown; wild animals begin to reproduce, multiply and invade areas that formerly were villages and fields. You have an area laying for a matter of a few years time, pretty well depopulated because they didn't just load them up on train cars, take them all out and show up next week with a new batch. We are looking at a period of several years of depopulation—of moving them out. There was some lag time, and then colonists began to move in.

Verses 25-26, the lion population had increased and there were wild animals that came in. The people were superstitious and they decided the problem was that they did not know the manner of the god of the land. They needed instruction.

Verse 27, "Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, 'Send there one of the priests whom you brought from there; let him go and dwell there, and let him teach them the rituals of the God of the land.'" Now, what kind

of job is he going to do? He is one who helped to get them into trouble to begin with. The whole reason they went into captivity to begin with was because they weren't serving the true God. They had been worshipping the golden calves.

They brought in all these Babylonians and then a renegade priest to teach them how to serve the god of the land.

Verse 28, we are told, "Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the Lord." You know he was going to do a good job of it.

Verse 29, notice, "However every nation continued to make gods of its own, and put them in the houses of the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities where they dwelt."

Verses 32-34, "So they feared the Lord, and from every class they appointed for themselves priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away. To this day they continue practicing the former rituals; they do not fear the Lord, nor do they follow their statutes or their ordinances, or the law and commandment which the Lord had commanded the children of Jacob, whom He named Israel."

He says they feared the Eternal and served their own gods.

Verse 41, "So these nations feared the Lord, yet served their carved images; also their children and their children's have continued doing as their fathers did, even to this day." What did they do? They continued the same old Babylonian Mystery Religion, but they changed it by introducing the name of God into it. Now they were calling it by the name of the God of Israel. Now they were utilizing the name of YHWH—the name of the God of Israel, the Eternal God, but they kept the same old pagan customs. They just sort of "baptized" them. It's kind of like "there's nothing new under the sun."

The same old idolatry is being practiced in a lot of places. You find that the only thing that was changed was the name—the virgin of Fatima (Our Lady of Fatima) in Portugal and down in Mexico, they have the virgin of Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe). If you go back to the ancient Indians—the Aztec—the area of Guadalupe was a great religious center, and they had a goddess they worshipped there. When the Spaniards came in, the Indians had this big religious shrine in Guadalupe and they were

worshipping the goddess. So the Spaniards just let them keep doing the same thing; they just changed the name. Now, they were not paying homage to the goddess of Guadalupe but to the virgin of Guadalupe. They just kept the same thing, identified it with Mary, and went right on along. They let them keep doing the same old pagan superstition; they just called it by God's name.

In Rome, they continued to observe Saturnalia, the pagan festival that was observed there at the winter solstice. But instead of calling it Saturnalia, they thought "Christmas" had a little better sound to it—the mass of Christ. They said, 'We will do the same things; we will have it at the same time. We will have many of the same customs and things associated with it. We will just change the name. Also, we won't call it Lupercalia anymore; we will call it St. Valentine's day.' What does a saint have to do with little cupids shooting arrows at people?—And all this sort of things.

To set the stage, you have the Samaritans (who were Babylonians) who continued to practice their pagan religion, but now they introduced the name of God—the true God—the God of Israel. They used the right name for the wrong things.

Now we move about 700 years down in history and we come to the Samaritans in Acts 8. We find their religious leader, a man who was acknowledged by all of them as the great power of God, who used the name of God and paraded as God's representative—a man by the name of Simon the Sorcerer. He believed when Philip preached. He was really impressed by what Philip had to say. And, he wanted to buy an office of apostle. Peter recognized what was going on, rebuked him for it, and said he was in the bond of iniquity. He was a slave to lawlessness.

II Thessalonians 2:7, "For the mystery of lawlessness [KJV, "iniquity"] is already at work...." We find that the mystery of iniquity was already at work. The mystery religion, the Babylonian Mystery Religion that promoted lawlessness was already at work. This was at the time Paul wrote II Thessalonians. We are looking at perhaps 17 years after Simon's encounter in Acts 8.

Let's notice a little bit of the other things Paul has to say.

Galatians 1:6-7, "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." Here,

Paul is writing two or three years after he wrote II Thessalonians and he is talking about churches having another gospel being preached, which he says is not another gospel (in the sense of an alternative that is just as good), but it is a perversion of the true gospel.

There are other places. Let's go back to II Corinthians 11.

II Corinthians 11:13-15, "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness...." Here, we are told there are false apostles, deceitful workers who are transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.

That's what Simon was doing. Simon was a false apostle. He transformed himself into an apostle of Christ. He didn't go around saying, 'I am a false apostle and I am here to preach a false gospel to you. You guys loosen up because I want to deceive you.' He appeared as an angel of light. Satan appears as an angel of light. Paul was discussing a problem now extant in the mid-50s A.D., when there were false apostles who were preaching a false gospel.

Verse 4, "For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it." The false gospel is going to be tied in with the mystery of iniquity. It's going to be tied in with the mystery religion, with iniquity and lawlessness. We see the stage that Paul was dealing with.

It had reached that point by the time Peter was dealing with the subject in the late 60s A.D.

II Peter 2:1, "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction." Peter was talking about the fact that there were false apostles and false prophets who were going to come in among God's people. He describes these individuals.

Verse 15, "They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness."

Notice back in the book of Jude, which was written approximately the same time that Peter was writing II Peter.

Jude 3-4, "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness [lawlessness] and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jude admonished Christians of his day to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered.

By the late 60s A.D., we are seeing an escalation. It started out that Paul said the mystery of iniquity was already at work. A couple of years later, he said, 'There is a false gospel, and I am amazed that you are being turned aside to another gospel so quickly.' A couple of years later, he tells the Corinthians there are false apostles out there claiming to be the apostles of Christ when they are not. He said that shouldn't shock them because Satan claims to be what he is not. By the time we pick it up a dozen years later, Peter is talking about false prophets. Jude told the Church to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered. Certain men had crept in unnoticed who were seeking to turn the grace of God into lawlessness.

The whole issue ultimately involved the law of God. You can have matters of peripheral questions on various things that are not fully clarified. But when you start talking about the law of God, then you are talking about something fundamental. You are not talking about a minor technical point somewhere that someone is attempting to understand. You are talking about the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath and the holy days. You are talking about the fundamental law of God. They were attempting to turn the grace of God into lawlessness, to equate grace with doing away with the law and to claim that the law is not in force and effect any longer.

John had to deal with the issue. By the time he was writing 30 years later, he was discussing the matter of what had to be dealt with throughout I, II and III John.

I John 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Many false prophets had gone forth.

I John 5:2-3, John added a little later, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not

burdensome.” We find that the issue involved the law of God.

II John 7, “For many deceivers, have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.” I will make a little comment about the issue they were disputing.

Verses 10-11, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”

Verse 12, “Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.” He had other things to say, but he didn’t want to put it in writing.

III John 9-10, “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.”

Now, by the end of John’s life, the situation had deteriorated to the point that the visible church that was emerging was actually being controlled by false prophets—individuals who didn’t want to accept the authority of John and the original apostles.

You know how they did that? How can you get by doing something like that? How do you excuse it? There are a couple of techniques they used. One technique was an ingenious doctrine they came up with known in history as the “two-church theory.” The “two-church theory” was the idea that there are two sets of rules—one for Jews and one for Gentiles. The theory was that Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter and John and the others were the apostles to the Jews. And, yes, the Jews continued to keep the law and continued to observe the Sabbath; that was alright for them to do at that time. But those things never pertained to anybody except the Jews. The Gentiles said they were not under the law and that Paul said they didn’t have to obey any of those things.

This was the line of reasoning that began to be used. They said, ‘The law doesn’t apply to us. We are Gentiles; they are Jews. Sure the Jerusalem Church keeps the Sabbath. That’s fine. Let them do it. But they are Jews and we are not. We don’t need to do that. So, if John writes something, we don’t have to receive that. John is not the apostle to the Gentiles. Sure, he was one of the twelve, but what he says really doesn’t

apply to us because we are Gentiles. He’s kind of old and everything.’

The theory gained great vogue among the followers of Simon in the latter first century and second century. Then, once they got control, they did away with the “two-church theory” and said everybody had to conform to what they were doing. They said, ‘I don’t care, even if you are a Jew, you have to quit keeping the law.’

I want to read to you some interesting quotes from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon who was a famous historian of the Roman Empire. He has some interesting things to say about the early church. He deals with some of that. I will read a little bit of Gibbons. Notice the progression.

Chapter 13, “The ancient and popular doctrine of the Millennium was intimately connected with the second coming of Christ. As the works of the creation had been finished in six days, their duration in their present state, according to a tradition, which was attributed to the prophet Elijah, was fixed to 6,000 years. By the same analogy, it was inferred that this long period of labor and contention, which was now almost elapsed, would be succeeded by a joyful Sabbath of 1,000 years, and that Christ with the triumphant band of the saints and the elect who had escaped upon earth till the time appointed for the last and general resurrection.”

Now, that sounds like a summary from some of our literature. We have had articles that said something similar. He was writing back in the 1700s. He was writing a history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. This particular chapter was called “The Triumph of Christendom in the Roman Empire.” He is writing about the early church. He says this is what the early church taught. It is a matter of history.

The idea of the doctrine of the Millennium, or 6,000 years, is not something Mr. Herbert Armstrong invented. That was something the early church was teaching. That was a matter of secular history. Here was a secular historian who was not a part of the true Church. He was a part of the Church of England, writing over 200 years ago. He was writing that this is what they taught. Notice what he says.

“The assurance of such a Millennium was carefully inculcated by a succession of fathers from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, who conversed with the immediate disciples of the apostles, down to Lactantius, who was a preceptor to the son of Constantine. Though it might not be universally received, it appears to have been the

reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers; and it seems so well adapted to the desires and apprehensions of mankind, that it must have contributed in a very considerable degree to the progress of the Christian faith. But when the edifice on the church was almost completed, the temporary support was laid aside. The doctrine of Christ's reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism."

So there was a progression of changing it and getting away from it. It changed from acceptance to toleration, to branding it as anathema and ready to persecute them.

Gibbon has a number of interesting things. He says, "When we discover that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is omitted in the Law of Moses...From these specious and noble principles, the philosophers who trod in the footsteps of Plato deduced a very unjustifiable conclusion, since they asserted not only the future immortality, but the past eternity of the human soul..."

He talks about the Gnostics. We will discuss the Gnostics a little bit. The term "Gnostic" is the Greek word for "knowledge" or "we know." The concept of the Gnostics really stemmed from Simon Magus. The Gnostics had a very great impact in the first century. In fact, a lot of the issues we read of in the New Testament in terms of Paul and John's epistles have to do with refuting the Gnostics.

Now, Gibbon has some comments to make about the Gnostics. "The Gnostics blended with the faith of Christ many sublime but obscure tenets, which they derived from oriental philosophy and even from the religion of Zoroaster concerning the eternity of matter, the existence of two principles and the mysterious hierarchy of the invisible world."

We find that the Gnostics sort of blended in, as he says, the faith of Christ with many sublime but obscure tenets. In effect, the Gnostics utilized a technique of interpretation called "allegory." Now allegory is important to understand because this was the way that the truth of God or the law of God was explained away. The word "allegory" comes from a word in the Greek language which means "to speak in riddles." The concept of allegory was that something doesn't really mean what it says—it is an allegory, simply a riddle to teach a spiritual truth. The reason allegories came in and came to be used so prevalently was because the religion of the

ancient Greeks was contained in the mythology written by Homer.

If you have ever read any of the old Greek mythology, you realize that it is sort of like one big soap opera in the sky. It was some pretty raunchy stuff. As the Greeks progressed and various philosophers rose, they were a little bit embarrassed that their religious works were nothing more than just tales of rape, pillage, adultery and fornication, and this goddess and that god, and all of these crazy things going back and forth. It was a little embarrassing that this was all they had by way of religious works. So the philosophers figured out that when Homer wrote these things, he didn't really mean that this happened and that happened; it was an allegory. It was simply to teach us about spiritual truths. It was to teach about truth, fear, anger, evil desire and knowledge. So they came up with the idea that these stories were allegories. They were to teach us about certain things about spiritual truths, and this became the popular way of the Greek philosophers explaining their own books. They sort of explain away everything that was embarrassing as an allegory. This spread and became a very popular method of interpretation.

It had its effect even on certain Jews. Philo, who was a Jew in Alexandria, Egypt, became a famous author. He really went in for allegories and applied a lot of it to the Old Testament. This was tailor-made for Simon and the Samaritans. The Samaritans paid lip service to accepting the first five books of the Bible and the Law of Moses, but they didn't really keep the Law. This was tailor-made.

The Gnostics adopted allegory. This is why it became the mystery religion. They said they had the key and you couldn't understand without their key. When you read it, all you're reading is a story about Abraham; you don't realize that it's not what it is talking about. It is teaching various "spiritual" things. The Gnostics really went in for this sort of thing. They blended these things together.

(This may not be word-for-word from the book:)  
"One example: The Gnostics had objections against the authority of Moses and the prophets. The objections were eagerly embraced and urged by the vain science of the Gnostics. As those heretics were, for the most part, adverse to the pleasures of senses, they morosely arraigned the polygamy of the patriarchs, the gallantries of David, these things, the conquest of the land of Canaan and the extermination of the unsuspecting natives. They were lost as to how

to do this, so what they did was the Mosaic account of the creation. The fall of man was treated with profane derision by the Gnostics. They would not listen with patience to the response of the deity after six days of labor, to the rib of Adam, the Garden of Eden and the tree of life and knowledge. So they treated these things as an allegory. And they said that the literal sense is repugnant to every principle of faith as well as reason, and they deem themselves secure and vulnerable behind the ample veil of allegory, which they carefully spread over every tender part of the Mosaic dispensation.”

What it amounts to is that if you treat the law as an allegory, then when it says, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” that doesn’t really mean you can’t work on the Sabbath. That’s just sort of allegory. They began to undermine the authority of Scripture by simply treating things as allegorical. You combine this with the so-called “two-church theory” and they had the basis of undermining the authority of the Bible.

The term “Gnostic” is a general term that is applied to heresy. It’s used primarily to designate the dualism between God and matter. Gnosticism tore away at the authority of the Scriptures by saying that the real meaning was allegorical. They taught that their initiates were no longer subject to the moral commandments. This was simply a continuation of the old mystery religion.

The primary goal of the Gnostic movement was to introduce a no-law doctrine and to attempt to wrest their own meaning from the Scripture, primarily from Paul’s writings. This laid the groundwork for much of what later became the Catholic Church. They laid groundwork. They would not literally accept any of the statements of Scripture. They would not accept the fact that Jesus Christ literally was God and that He was born as a human being to live as a human being. They denied many of these things.

There arose a number of heresies. It wasn’t just simply one heresy. There were a lot of heresies. There were all kinds of false doctrines and false ideas going on. What ultimately became the Catholic Church did not accept and absorb every one of them. It is simply an outgrowth of one set of heresies that was influenced in certain areas by other heresies. Certain elements of truth were clung to and certain elements of heresy were accepted. As the years went by, there were more changes and modifications. There were more acceptances of all sorts of paganism that came to be a part of it. Even many of the early Catholic

fathers would be amazed and flabbergasted at some of the things that are done today because they hadn’t gone that far.

Take Christmas for example. Even the church at Rome didn’t popularly accept that until up into the fourth century. It was up into the fourth century before that even began to get acceptance in the church at Rome. Even some of the heretics of the second and third century would have been surprised at that one.

The widespread use of idols was something that only gradually gained prominence. It didn’t really begin to come in until the second century. In the third century it became more and more utilized.

The Gnostics took a blend of oriental mysticism. In other words, the Babylonian Mystery Religion took a blend of Judaism and the Old Testament, which they treated in an allegorical fashion. They blended those things together with the doctrine of Christ and came up with a hodge-podge. There were a variety of different things. But there was one thing that set the stage for a lot of problems. Just as the Jews had been dispersed to cities throughout the known world, so also, after the time of Alexander the Great, the Samaritans had been dispersed. There were large settlements of Samaritans in Rome and in Alexandria, Egypt.

Simon the sorcerer was the great religious leader of the Samaritans to whom they all gave heed from the greatest to the least. He was acknowledged as the power of God (Acts 8:9-10). When Simon and his followers (claiming to be Christians) came into these areas, they quickly gained influence—particularly in Rome and Alexandria where there was a sizable Samaritan population. Simon was acknowledged as the religious leader to the Samaritans.

These concepts of Gnosticism influenced many different ones, particularly certain Jews and certain ones even as a part of the Church. There were those who had accepted more truth and some who had accepted less truth. But there was a fatal flaw because there wasn’t an acceptance or a spirit of yielding to the authority of God’s Word in the literal sense. There was an absence of commitment to the integrity of the law of God. The real issue ultimately got back to the authority of the law of God.

There were various ones and various other things that came in to add to all of this “stir and mix.” There were Greek philosophies and the stoics who had their ideas. They had a great deal of public influence in the first century. They taught that man alone in his present state of existence

could achieve perfection. It was a concept of penance. The stoics really went in for that. They taught that there were things you could do. By some system of rigorous penance, you could bring yourself to perfection. When you take in that this is a general and popular concept of much of the Greek world and you add in the increasing influence of the Gnostics, you have a real mix. That sets the stage to completely misunderstand the role of the law of God in the plan of salvation because if you can save yourself, if you can do enough good things to outweigh the bad things, then why did Christ have to die? It strikes at the very root and core of Christianity. If you can atone for your own sins, why did Christ have to die? Why did He go through that? Paul admonished and warned Timothy of these concepts of knowledge falsely so-called.

I Timothy 6:20-21, “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it, some have strayed concerning the faith....” There were all these ideas floating around that were becoming more and more prevalent. It ultimately gave rise to the visible professing Christian Church. Yet there was also a different group.

In his history, Gibbons talks about some interesting things concerning the early Church: “The Jewish converts, who acknowledged Jesus in the character of the Messiah foretold by their ancient oracles, respected Him as a prophetic teacher of virtue and religion; but they obstinately adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors...They affirmed that if the Being who is the same through all eternity had designed to abolish those sacred rites, which had served to distinguish his chosen people, the repeal of them would have been no less clear and solemn than their first promulgation...that the Messiah Himself, and His disciples who conversed with Him on earth, instead of authorizing by their example the most minute observances of the Mosaic law, would have published to the world the abolition of those useless and obsolete ceremonies without suffering Christianity to remain during so many years obscurely confounded among the sects of the Jewish church. Arguments like these appear to have been used in the defense of the expiring cause of the Mosaic law...The history of the church of Jerusalem affords a lively proof of the necessity of those precautions and of the deep impression which the Jewish religion had made on the minds

of its sectaries. The first 15 bishops of Jerusalem were afterwards called the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundation which they presided, united the Law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ....” Now here’s an admission of secular history. The first 15 bishops of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews, and they united the Law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ. Here is a clear admission by a secular historian that the early New Testament Church, the Church that Jesus founded, the Church at Jerusalem, kept the law.

“But when numerous and opulent societies were established in the great cities of the empire, in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth and Rome, the reverence which Jerusalem had inspired to all the Christian colonies insensible diminished. The Jewish converts, or as they were afterwards called the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundations of the church, soon found themselves overwhelmed by the increasing multitudes that from all the various religions of polytheism enlisted under the banner of Christ and the Gentiles who, with the approbation of their peculiar apostle, had rejected the intolerable weight of Mosaic ceremonies, at length refused to their more scrupulous brethren the same toleration which at first they had humbly solicited for their own practice. The ruin of the temple, of the city and of the public religion of the Jews was severely felt by the Nazarenes...The Nazarenes retired from the ruins of Jerusalem to the little town of Pella beyond the Jordan where that ancient church languished above 60 years in solitude and obscurity....”

“But at length, under the reign of Hadrian, the desperate fanaticism of the Jews filled up the measure of their calamities and the Romans, exasperated by their repeated rebellions, exercised the right of victory with unusual rigor. The emperor founded under the name of Aelia Capitolina a new city on Mount Zion to which he gave the privileges of a colony, and denouncing the severest penalties against any of the Jewish people who should dare to approach its precincts, he fixed a vigilant garrison of a Roman cohort to enforce the execution of his orders. The Nazarenes had only one way left to escape the common proscription, and the force of truth was on this occasion assisted by the influence of temporal advantages. They elected Marcus for their bishop, a prelate of the race of the Gentiles and most probably a native either of Italy or of some of the Latin provinces. At his persuasion, the most considerable part of the congregation renounced the Mosaic Law in the practice of

which they had persevered above a century. By this sacrifice of their habits and prejudices, they purchased a free admission into the colony of Hadrian and more firmly cemented their union with the Catholic Church. When the name and honors of the Church of Jerusalem had been restored to Mount Zion, the crimes of heresy and schism were imputed to the obscure remnant of the Nazarenes, which refused to accompany their Latin bishop. They still preserved their former habitation of Pella, spread themselves into the villages adjacent to Damascus, and formed an inconsiderable church in the city of Berea... They soon received from the supposed poverty of their understanding as well as of their condition, the contemptuous epithet of Ebionites... He ventured to determine in favor of such an imperfect Christian, if he were content to practice the Mosaic ceremonies....”

He continues and talks a little bit about them. It’s interesting that even secular historians can see that the early Church was not at all the church that emerges from the shadows. The church that emerged from the shadows, the church that was identified as the Christian Church or as the Catholic Church, is a far different group than the people among whom Peter and Paul labored.

Groundwork was laid and the true Church was established. In Revelation 2 and 3, we have the outline of the history of the true Church of God. It is a great contrast with the outline that we find in Revelation 17 and 13 of a false church, a great powerful church. A great fallen woman is described in Revelation 17, called a great whore that sits upon many waters (vv. 1, 15), the one who rides the beast (v. 7). A great false church is descriptive of something totally different than that which Paul describes as the Bride of Christ.

What we have in the first century was a battle, a battle for the Bible or the truth of God. It was a battle for the law of God because the issues involved were ultimately not peripheral issues. They were not little things here or there. They involved a fundamental acceptance and adherence to the law of God, to observing the Sabbath, the holy days, to the basic law of God and the plan of God. As these things began to give way to all of the pagan ideas around, it was subtle. It didn’t occur at the “snap of a finger.” Within a period of time, the things that Paul warned about, the mystery of iniquity that he said was already at work (II Thessalonians 2:7), continued to work.

We find ourselves today as the successors of the Jerusalem Church, not the church at Rome,

not the church at Alexandria. We find ourselves as the spiritual descendants of the Jerusalem Church. It is important that we understand some of these things and how it set the stage. Even by the admissions of secular history, the church that emerged was far different than the Church that Jesus built. Various ideas and philosophies came in and served to subvert and undermine the authority of the Scriptures. When you undermine the authority of the Scriptures to determine our life, the way we should live, the things we should do and not do, then you subvert the very basis of God’s authority in our lives.

With these things, we focused a little bit on some wrap ups of Church history and some major influences in the first-century Church history.

Next Bible study we are going to start a brand new series. We are going to start into the Minor Prophets. We are going to go into some things about prophecy and the Minor Prophets in particular. The 12 Minor Prophets are short books, but an awful lot is packed in there. So the next Bible study will be the first Bible study of the new series on the Minor Prophets.