

and in practice led to either an antinomian license or to asceticism, is also true; and therefore we cannot but sympathize with the zeal of the Bishop of Lyons, when he warns his flock against these 'wolves in sheep's clothing,' as he does not hesitate to call them. But while it is true that Gnosticism was fantastic in form, arbitrary in the interpretation of Scripture, full of intellectual arrogance, and dualistic in content, it was not, at least in its main representatives, either so unchristian or so irrational as Irenaeus alleges, nor can it be fairly stigmatised as a deliberate and wicked perversion of the "truth once delivered to the saints." When the Gnostics wrote there was no fixed body of Christian doctrine of which the Church was the custodian, and therefore no "heresy" in the later sense of deviation from the Catholic faith. Even in the age of Irenaeus the dogmas of the Church were still in process of formation, and, judged by the standard of the Nicene Creed, Irenaeus himself must be pronounced heretical. The Church afterwards accepted as orthodox those writers of the first and second centuries who employed speculation as a means of spiritualizing the Old Testament, without carrying their speculation so far as to construct a complete system, while it branded as heretical those thinkers who, employing the same method, aimed at completeness and reached conclusions at variance with later Catholic doctrine. Both classes of thinkers were under the influence of Greek ideas and Greek modes of thought, and both were trying to convert Christian faith into a philosophy of religion. In attempting to estimate the strength and weakness of Gnosticism we must discard the idea that it was a perversion of accepted doctrine, and view it as an honest attempt to show that Christianity was the ultimate and universal religion. The aberrations of the Gnostics were the natural and inevitable result of the acceptance of the Christian faith by men whose minds were already filled with Greek ideas of life, and who felt the need of harmonizing the knowledge they already believed themselves to possess with the new revelation. The Christian faith as proclaimed by our Lord involved a higher conception of the relations of God and man than that which had been reached even by the later Hebrew prophets, but its universal spirit was not yet freed from features due to its Jewish origin. The consequence was that by the primitive Jewish community of Christians it was held in a form which was coloured by tradi-