

Doctrine of Gnosticism

Preface

1. Gnosticism is not directly mentioned by name in the New Testament. Nevertheless its leaven constituted a most serious peril to the apostolic church.

2. In the 2nd century that strange movement, partly intellectual, partly fanatical spread with the swiftness of an epidemic over the church. It is therefore of high importance to gain an understanding of the nature of its Christian influence. Most expositors agree it was Gnosticism referred to be Jude in Jude verses three and four.

Jude 3 I had begun a pastoral letter to you when it was reported to me that certain ungodly men had crept into your local assembly spreading false doctrines. I therefore felt obliged to address this matter with a special admonition and exhort you that you earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered not only to you but to saints all over the empire.

Jude 4 Certain heresies have abounded in many of our local assemblies turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ.

2.1. Let's see what we can learn about Gnosticism.

3. This is not easy. The difficulty in dealing with Gnosticism is that it was not a homogeneous system of either religion or philosophy, but embraced many widely diversified sects holding opinions drawn from a great variety of sources. The infinitely varied shapes render it almost impossible to classify, or even to give an account of their leading ideas, without raising objections.

Definition

1. Regarding the general definition of Gnosticism a few authorities may be cited. In his book *Early Church History*, Dr. Gwatkin has written:

“Gnosticism may be provisionally described as a number of schools of philosophy, oriental in general character, but taking in the idea of a redemption through Christ, and further modified in different sects by a third element, which may be Judaism, Hellenism, or Christianity. The Gnostics only embraced the idea of redemption through Christ, not the full Christian doctrine, for they made it rather redemption ... from matter, rather than a redemption of mankind from sin.”

2. Dr. Orr writes in his book *The Early Church*:

“Gnosticism may be described generally as the fantastic product of the blending of certain Christian ideas-particularly that of redemption through Christ with speculation and imaginings derived from a medley of sources. It involves, as the name denotes, a claim to ‘knowledge,’ knowledge of a kind of which the ordinary believer was incapable, and in the possession of which ‘salvation’ in the full sense consisted. This knowledge of which the Gnostic boasted, related to the subjects ordinarily treated in religious philosophy; Gnosticism was a species of religious philosophy.”

3. Neander in his book *Antignostikus* has described Gnosticism as "the first notable attempt to introduce into Christianity the existing elements of mental culture and to render it more complete on the hitherto rather neglected side of theoretical knowledge;

“it was an attempt of the mind of the ancient world in its yearning after knowledge, and in its dissatisfaction with the present, to bring within its grasp and to appropriate the treasures of this kind which Christianity presented. Gnosticism originally incorporated many existing tendencies; it is an amalgam into which quite a number of different elements were fused. A heretical system of thought, at once subtle, speculative and elaborate, it endeavored to introduce into Christianity a so-called higher knowledge.”

4. It was grounded partly on the philosophic creed in which Greeks and Romans had taken refuge.

4.1 For a long time the pagan beliefs in the panoply of gods had ceased to be considered legitimate truth by thoughtful men. Hercules, Zeus, Juno, Hera, Poseidon, Odysseus, Cupid and Eros had been displaced by various creeds derived from philosophical speculation. One such popular creed was Gnosticism.

5. An attempt was made to effect an alliance with Christianity. A section of the church was dissatisfied with the simplicity of the gospel, and sought to advance to something higher by adopting various current speculations. It soon threatened the church from within.

Nature of Gnosticism

1. Gnosticism is Christianity perverted by speculation, born of dissatisfaction. The intellectual pride of the Gnostics distorted the gospel into a philosophy.

1.1 The clue to the understanding of Gnosticism is given in the word from which it is derived-**Gnosis**, "knowledge."

2. To the Gnostic the great question was not, "What must I do to be saved?" but "What is the origin of evil?" "How is the primitive order of the universe to be restored?" The Gnostic believed that in the answers to the latter two questions, there was redemption.

3. Gnostics lived in the conviction that they possessed a secret and mysterious knowledge; in no way accessible to those outside the Gnostic fraternity, which was not to be proved or propagated, but believed in by only the initiated. Its secrets were anxiously guarded and thought to be beyond the average believer.

4. Their knowledge was thought to be derived directly from the Savior Himself and His disciples and friends, with whom they claimed to be connected by a secret tradition. It was laid out in mystic writings, which were only in the possession of their fraternal order.

Chief Beliefs of Gnosticism

1. The following may be regarded as the chief points of the main Gnostic systems:

2. A claim on the part of the initiated to a special knowledge of the truth, a tendency to regard knowledge as superior to faith, and as the special possession of the more enlightened.

2.1 Ordinary Christians were thought not to possess the secret and special truths.

2.2 The essential separation of matter and spirit, the former of these being essentially evil, and the source from which all evil has arisen.

2.3 An attempt, at the solution of the problems of creation and of the origin of evil, was the conception of a Demiurge, i.e., the creator and controller of the material world as distinct from a Supreme Deity.

2.4 God was thought to work by means of emanations extending between God and the visible universe. They thought God could not work within an evil environment such as an evil world, therefore, his agents called emanations were sent out to collectively provide a solution.

2.5 A denial of the true humanity of Christ, (the Gnostic looked upon the earthly life of Christ and especially on His sufferings on the cross as unreal); even today this belief system is called Docetism, an early heresy that Christ was not a real person.

2.6 A true Gnostic denied the existence of a Supreme God, and the denial of the free will of man.

2.7 The teaching, on the one hand, of asceticism as the means of attaining to spiritual communion with God, and, on the other hand, an indifference to the acts of man led ultimately to an indifference to rampant licentiousness so prevalent among many Gnostic groups.

2.8 A syncretistic tendency combined certain more or less misunderstood Christian doctrines with various elements of the Greek/Roman panoply, Judaism and various eastern religions.

2.8.1 Rather than Christ being the only way, the Gnostic saw the merging of various religions as an act of a rational and orderly God.

2.9 The Scriptures of the Old Testament were ascribed as an emanation from the Demiurge or inferior creator of an evil world and not the true God.

2.9.1 These ideas soon attacked the early Church. In early Gnostic literature the Apostle John was singled out as a special opponent of Gnostic heresies.

3. Gnosticism in the Christian Church

3.1 In the New Testament and the Apostolic Age

3.2 The germ of Gnosticism in the Christian church made its appearance in the apostolic age, and is referred to by Paul in several of his epistles, notably in that to the Colossians, 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus. Early Gnostic literature describes the resistance and criticism of the Apostle John at the end of his career. Gnosticism is also referred to by the apostle Peter in 2Pe 1:16 as “cunningly devised fables.”

3.2.1 In Colossians a great deal is said regarding false teaching. Their speculations led to the worship of angels in contrast to the worship of Christ. They taught esoteric exclusiveness wholly opposed to the universality of the gospel, and to doctrines injurious to Christian freedom. These tenets are identical with the more fully developed Gnosticism of the generation succeeding and following.

3.2.2 Their false teaching continued the same errors pervading the early Gnostic mind: namely, that there could be no connection between the highest spiritual agency that is God and gross corporeal matter.

3.2.3 Some were so bold as to claim God could not create such a worldly mess, therefore emanations had to be used. Examples of what developed were endless but included such emanations as: Adam, Moses, Christ, Buddha, the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormons, Gandhi, Joseph Smith, Mohammed and the writings of Mary Baker, Patterson, Glover, Eddy. From this damaging error, that sin is inherent in the material substance of the body, the only way by which perfection could be reached was to punish the body and thus self-flagellation became a tenant of Gnosticism.

3.2.4 Through the infliction of pain and the mortification of the flesh the pure spirit of man might become like God. This idea was apparently borrowed from certain tenants of various eastern religions. This ascetic tendency insidiously reappears century after century in distorted forms of Christianity.

3.2.5 Many ascetic practices were afterward taught by various Gnostic sects not only in Colossae but apparently in Laodicea and Hierapolis. In the book of Colossians Paul urged that his letter to the local church located in Colossae be read in the local churches at Laodicea and Hierapolis.

3.2.6 The methods which Paul adopts is not so much to demolish error, as to establish the contrary truth of the Gospel that in Christ dwells not merely some or even much of the fullness of God, but all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; Christ the God of providence, the upholder of all things, in whom matter and all creatures and all events "consist" and have their being.

3.2.7 Peter in his 2nd epistle to the Christians in Asia Minor cautions against "cunningly devised fables."

2Pe 1:16 For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

4. Christ the Reconciler has reconciled us unto God through His sacrifice on the cross. Gnostic error crumbled into decay and vanished until the 20th century when it again made a feeble attempt to capture a heretical following.