

Gnosticism

(A New Threat to Orthodox Christianity in the Early New Testament Era)

I. What is Gnosticism? It was a false doctrine of salvation that became a threat to Orthodox Christianity and flourished during the 2nd century AD.

II. What was Gnosticism's main feature? It's main feature was it's syncretism. This new religious system of thinking was a fusion of beliefs (e.g. Persian dualism, oriental mysticism, Babylonian astrology, Hellenistic philosophy, Christianity and practically every doctrine that circulated in the second century AD). The Gnostics would take any doctrine that they found valuable, without regard for its origin or the context from which it was taken. Because of the phenomenal growth that early Christianity displayed, Gnostics were drawn knowing that they could use parts of Christianity for their own advantage. The parts of Christianity that they liked they would adapt into their own belief system.

III. What was the threat to Orthodox Christianity? Because of the Gnosticism's "borrowing" process, early Christian doctrines were in peril of being corrupted (i.e., contaminated, dishonored, polluted, etc.). It became increasingly difficult to discern what was the "real" and what was the "fake" (counterfeit).

IV. Gnosticism and it's Doctrine of Salvation

1. promises to liberate the spirit (because):
 - a) the spirit is enslaved and needs to be liberated.
 - b) the spirit is enslaved in the body.
 - c) the body and the animal soul of human beings belong to the material world.
 - d) the material world (creation, matter, the elements, etc.) are evil, or no good.
 - e) the soul is useful only to give the body its life, desires, and passions (thus, the soul is no good).

2. the spirit
 - a) does not really belong to this world, but is a part of the divine substance.
 - b) (mythologically explained) it has fallen into this world and become a prisoner of matter.
 - c) it is then necessary to free the spirit from that prison.
 - d) this is achieved through knowledge (GNOSIS)... Hence the name, Gnosticism.

3. GNOSIS (a special illumination/revelation)
 - a) not mere information or learning.
 - b) this GNOSIS or enlightenment is a mystical illumination that comes from the revelation of the eternal.
 - c) therefore: knowledge is an understanding of the human situation, of what we once were and what we should become; and through it we can be freed of the bonds that tie us to the material world.
 - d) another way of saying this is, we are unable to know eternal truth by our own means, it is therefore necessary that a messenger be sent from the transcendent spiritual world to bring us this liberating revelation. This is where Christ plays out his role in Gnostic belief. He becomes the cosmic messenger of this mystical truth.

V. The Ethics of Gnosticism

1. Gnostic premise:
 - a) if whatever good there is in humankind is to be found only in his/her spirit, (and)...
 - b) the body is by nature evil.

2. then two conclusions may be drawn...
 - a) either one is to subject the body to strict discipline and live an ascetic life (or)...
 - b) whatever the body does makes no difference, for it cannot mar the purity of the spirit, and one may therefore indulge in whatever the body wants to do.

VI. When Christianity and Gnostic beliefs collide: Three Christian doctrines are threatened

1. the doctrine of Creation threatened

- a) Gnosticism did not attribute creation to the work of the eternal God.
- b) Creation according to Gnosticism was the result of an error committed by an inferior or ignorant being.
- c) According to Gnostic philosophy, all material or matter is worthless... more specifically is evil.

Analysis: The Judeo-Christian tradition affirms that all things made by God in the Genesis event was good, and even though (good) creation has been marred by chaos... God has not backed away, but is a God who still acts in the history of the world.

2. the doctrine of Salvation threatened

- a) According to Gnostic belief, salvation consist in the form of liberation of the divine and immortal spirit that is imprisoned within the human body.
- b) thus... According to Gnostic belief... the body is negative, a prison of the divine spirit that wishes to be released... therefore according to Gnostics, the body has no place in the salvation process.
- c) Over against this view, most Christians affirmed that salvation included the human body, and that the final fulfillment of God's plan for salvation will not take place without the resurrection of the human body.

3. the doctrine of Christology threatened

- a) if *matter*, and above all this matter which forms our body, is not the perfect product of divine will, but rather of some other principle that is opposed to that will, it follows that matter and the human body cannot serve as a vehicle for the revelation of the supreme God...
- b) therefore, Christ who came to make God known to humankind, cannot have come in the flesh!
- c) His body cannot have been a truly physical body, but had only the "appearance" of a body.
- d) His sufferings and His death were only an illusion... because it is inconceivable that the supreme God would give [Himself] up to the evil and destructive power of *matter*.
- e) thus, Gnostics are led to the Christological doctrine that is known as Docetism (from the Greek ὁ οὐκ ἔοι, ("to seem or suppose").

Orthodox Assessment: Over against this Gnostic theory, most Christians affirmed that in Jesus of Nazareth – in His body, in His life, His sufferings, His death, and resurrection – is to be found the saving revelation of God. It may be said that Christians saw Gnosticism, not as a different version of their own faith, but as an attempt to deprive the Christian faith of the very heart of its message.