

Gnosticism

One of the great underlying problems with much of the early history of the Church was a false doctrine called Gnosticism that controlled the thinking of most of the Gentile world in the days of the Apostle John. In a very real sense, the Church is still facing the error of Gnosticism to this day, for its basic teachings make up the core beliefs of most of the major cults of this day. Gnosticism, as a belief system, was and is complex and multi-faceted.

Theologians and historians describe Gnosticism as being **eclectic** and **syncretic**. Eclectic means that it *gathered teachings from many different sources*, and syncretic means that it *fused or added those various ideas into its teachings*. The Romans were notorious for being eclectic. Whenever they conquered a new people, they simply added their gods to the Roman pantheon of gods and stole any good ideas this people might have for their own use.

The Roman Catholic Church is notable for being syncretic. After emperor Constantine was "converted" to Christianity, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. All the pagan priests and practitioners had to become "Christians", so they simply got sprinkled and brought all of their old pagan beliefs over into Christianity. This is why Roman Catholicism has things like veneration of the saints and relics, prayers for the dead, and the sign of the cross. All of these things were fused into Christianity from paganism. Gnosticism, unlike Christianity therefore, was not fixed on eternal principles, but was free to change and adapt, which is why it is still around today and in many different forms.

The word "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word "gnosis" which means "to know". Gnosis is the same word from which we get our words "prognosis" (to know before) and "diagnosis" (to know through certain symptoms or because of certain observations).

Gnosticism was a part of set of ancient pagan beliefs known as "mystery religions". Each of these mystery religions had its own secret rituals and rites that only its members knew, hence the name "Gnostic". (Think of these mystery religions like our modern Masonic organizations, they were very similar.)

The basic belief of Gnosticism is **dualism**. By dualism, I mean that there are two totally opposite and completely equal forces in the Universe: good and evil, both of which are eternal. Good is viewed as being entirely spiritual, while evil was considered to be entirely physical. We know, of course, that this is an unscriptural view of the world, for only God is eternal (having no beginning nor an end). But the views of the Gnostics fairly permeated the Greek world just before and after Christ's first advent.

The Gnostics said essentially that the spiritual nature of man, his soul and spirit are good, but it is man's body that is evil. Salvation, to the Gnostic, was gained by causing the spirit to grow and the physical part of man to be done away with.

Now the Gnostics essentially came up with two drastically different ways of dealing with the flesh and making the spirit to grow. Paul encountered the two main groups of Gnostics in Athens according to Acts 17:18 "Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection."

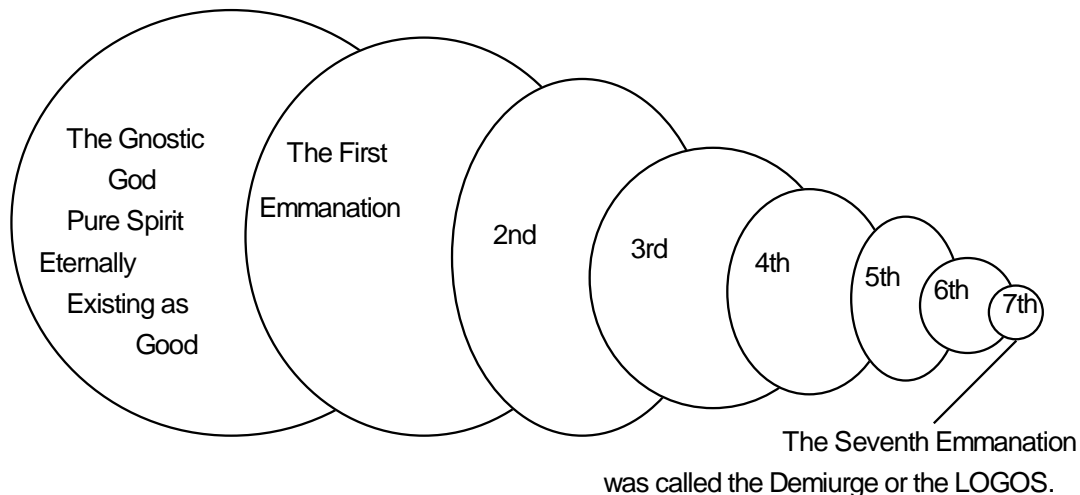
The Epicureans were by far the largest sect of Gnostics and it is easy to see why. They took their name from the chief teacher of the sect, Epicurus, who embraced the traditional Greek gods of Mt. Olympus and taught that like the early Greek gods, man's chief end was the pursuit of pleasure. If the flesh was evil, the thing to do was to burn it out by one long party after another. After a while, they reasoned, the flesh would tire itself out and die, leaving the spirit free to grow in eternity. This free life, free love, free food, free wine type of existence was very popular among the Greek population, as it is today among our modern Gnostics. (The hippies of the 60's thought they had come up with something new, but the new morality is the old Gnostic immorality reborn.)

The Stoics were not quite as popular, but they did have a large following in the Roman Empire. The Stoics take their name (which means "porch dwellers") from the Painted Portico in Athens where the great Greek philosopher Zeno lectured. Zeno and his followers were pantheists who believed that the way to handle the physical body was to deny its cravings. They practiced rigid self-discipline, dieting, and even self-punishment designed to starve, beat, whip, and think their way out of the flesh. They tried as much as possible to suppress the emotions which they viewed as a product of the flesh. Many modern religions as well as the ancient cult of Roman Catholicism have brought elements of stoicism into their religions.

The Gnostics denied that God had anything to do the earth or man himself, because for the spiritual to involve Himself that which is physical is simply impossible in the Gnostic world view. But the world is here! So the Gnostics explained this world like this: God "broke off" a piece of Himself called an "emanation". The emanation might be best explained to our way of thinking to liken it to an angel created in the divine image with only slightly less power than God. In turn, the first angel created another angel or emanation from his spiritual substance which again was slightly less powerful than the original. This process occurred seven times, until the seventh emanation was formed. This emanation was called the "demiurge" and it was this "demiurge" which then arranged the physical universe out eternally existing matter.

This so called "demiurge" was called by another name by the Greek Gnostics, and this was the name which became such an issue in the first century. The Gnostic name for this seventh emanation was "the word". The devil is the great counterfeiter and he conceived the false Christ of Gnosticism to replace the Christ of the Bible. When the Gnostics first heard the Gospel and heard these words: " 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men. (John 1:1-4) ", they assumed that Christianity was a branch of their message, and so they slipped into the Church, and began twisting the doctrines of the Scripture from the inside to fit their Gnostic views. This was no problem for them as they were both eclectic and syncretic, but it was a real problem for the early church which is one of the reasons that John wrote his Gospel, and his Epistles.

The Gnostic Emmanations



The Gnostic view of Christ was that he was a created being, much in the same way that Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormon view Christ. They denied that he ever took upon himself a body or a human nature. But the Scriptures clearly taught that He did both, so they developed two different explanations for Christ. First, there was the Docetic form of Gnosticism. Docetic comes from the Greek word *δοκεῖν* which means "to seem", "to appear to be". This form of Gnosticism taught that Christ only seemed to be real, that His physical nature was only an illusion. They believed that Christ had no real body, but appeared as a phantom or a ghost which merely imitated human form. This view of Christ still exists in the teachings of

Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy in her so-called "Christian Science" cult.

John clearly is refuting this teaching in the very first words of his first Epistle when he writes:

1 John 1 1. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; 2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen [it], and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) 3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship [is] with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. "

And at several other places in the first Epistle John attacks this teaching of the Gnostics:

1 John 4:1. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. 2 Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: 3 And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that [spirit] of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world."

1 John 5: 6. "This is he that came by water and blood, [even] Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. 7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. 9 If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. 10. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son."

And John also deals with this false doctrine in his second Epistle when he writes:

"7. For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. 9 Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. 10. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into [your] house, neither bid him God speed: 11 For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds. "

The second form of the Gnostic error is called Cerinthian Gnosticism after its founder Cerinthus of Ephesus. Cerinthus was living in Ephesus at the same time John was, and his form of Gnosticism was even more dangerous than the Docetic variety. Cerinthus believed like all Gnostics that matter was evil and that spirit was good. But he rejected Docetic teaching. It was all too obvious that many still living in those days had actually seen the Lord Jesus Christ and touched Him. They knew He was real and that He had a very real body. Hence, Cerinthus said that Jesus was simply a man upon whom the spirit of Christ came at His baptism. It was the Spirit of Christ that allowed Jesus to do things He did during His earthly ministry. But then, on the cross, the Spirit of Christ departed from the man Jesus and let Him die alone in agony.

Of course, this error was clearly unscriptural. It makes Jesus a sort of a two-headed monster, indwelt by God, and then deserted by Him when the going got rough, but it was an immensely popular explanation in Greece, which was largely Gnostic. John fiercely battled against this form of Gnosticism during most of his time in Ephesus. There is a famous story concerning his encounter with Cerinthus in the

public baths of Ephesus. (see the end of the Biblical Biography on John for the story) John's defense against this belief was spirited and powerful as evidenced by these major passages from his first two Epistles:

1 John 1 1. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; 2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen [it], and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) 3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship [is] with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

1 John 2:22 "Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. 23 Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: [(but) he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also]."

1 John 4:1. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. 2 Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: 3 And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that [spirit] of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world....9 In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. 10 Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son [to be] the propitiation for our sins..... 14. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son [to be] the Saviour of the world. 15 Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

1 John 5:1. "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. 4 For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, [even] our faith. 5 Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? 6. This is he that came by water and blood, [even] Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. 7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. "

2 John "7. For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. 8 Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. 9 Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son."

Gnosticism is dualistic, teaching that matter is evil and spirit is good, therefore, this philosophy led to two practical problems. First, there was a denial of sin. The Gnostics argued that when a man sinned, it was not actually the man, but his flesh that made him sin. It is almost as if the good man is trapped in an evil body. When a man committed some immoral act, he was not responsible for his behavior. Most

Gnostics believed that they simply could not control the body, and in fact, they should not even try to control the body. They believed that they had a spark of good in them, which when liberated from the body would allow them to be as pure as God. Hence the Gnostics developed two forms of dealing with the flesh as I have already mentioned: Epicureanism and Stoicism.

The Epicureans were known as antinomians. "Anti" means "instead of " and "nomos" means "law". Antinomians believed that there was no right and wrong, that every man had a spark of God in him, and that the way to deal with the flesh was to indulge it, feed it, pamper it, and so to burn it out. (This almost precisely describes modern theological liberalism.) This viewpoint was wildly and widely accepted in the Roman world and in Greece and it was the driving impulse behind the rise of Roman paganism with its immorality and decadence. John clearly attacks this tenet of Gnosticism in his first Epistle:

1 John 1:5. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. 8. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us [our] sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

1 John 2:1." My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for [the sins of] the whole world. 3. And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. 6 He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.....15 Love not the world, neither the things [that are] in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that [is] in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

1 John 5:16 If any man see his brother sin a sin [which is] not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. 17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death. 18. We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not. 19 [And] we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.

The Stoics, on the other hand taught that the flesh must be suppressed at whatever the cost. They practiced what is known as asceticism. They would fast, beat themselves with whips, deprive themselves of sleep, and live a life of good works in the deepest of poverty. When Constantine ordered his army to be baptized upon his "conversion to Christianity", this Gnostic practice was swept into the Church and the Roman Catholic monastic system was born. Many false cults and religions were born of this form of Gnosticism, not the least of which is the Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh Day Adventists. Paul deals with this error in Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians, and so John does not make an emphasis upon it here in his Epistles.

If the denial of sin was the first practical problem of the dualism of Gnosticism for the early Church, the second problem was probably far worse. This problem was a denial of the resurrection of

Christ, and the resurrections of the just and the unjust. Because they believed matter was evil, the Gnostics viewed death as liberation from evil. They built spectacular "necropoli" or cities of the dead to which they carried the bodies of the departed. They had a motto: "no return, and no reviving!"

But Christianity is built upon the reality of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And our resurrection is integrally tied to His resurrection. Paul dealt thoroughly with this error I Corinthians 15, and in I Thessalonians 4 and 5, but John also makes a slight mention of it in his first epistle when he writes:

1 John 3:1 "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. 2 Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. 3 And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."

Further Notes