

GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is a system of false teachings that existed during the early centuries of Christianity. Its name came from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. The Gnostics believed that knowledge was the way to salvation. For this reason, several writers of the New Testament condemned Gnosticism as false and heretical.

Paul emphasized a wisdom and knowledge that comes from God and does not concern itself with idle speculations, fables, and moral laxity (Col 2:8-23; 1 Tim 1:4; 2 Tim 2:16-19; Titus 1:10-16). John, both in his gospel and in the epistles, countered heretical teaching, which, in a broad sense, can be considered Gnostic.

Teachings of the Gnostics: The Gnostics accepted the Greek idea of a radical dualism between God (spirit) and the world (matter). According to their worldview, the created order was evil, inferior, and opposed to the good. God may have created the first order, but each successive order was the work of anti-gods, archons, or a demiurge (a subordinate deity).

The Gnostics believed that the earth is surrounded by a number of cosmic spheres (usually seven) that separate man from God. These spheres are ruled by archons (spiritual principalities and powers) who guard their spheres by barring the souls who are seeking to ascend from the realm of darkness and captivity that is below to the realm of light, which is above.

The Gnostics also taught that man is composed of body, soul, and spirit. Since the body and the soul are part of man's earthly existence, they are evil. Enclosed in the soul, however, is the spirit, the only divine substance of man. This "spirit" is asleep and ignorant; it needs to be awakened and liberated by knowledge.

According to the Gnostics, the aim of salvation is for the spirit to be awakened by knowledge so the inner man can be released from his earthly dungeon and return to the realm of light where the soul becomes reunited with God. As the soul ascends, however, it needs to penetrate the cosmic spheres that separate it from its heavenly destiny. This, too, is accomplished by knowledge. One must understand certain formulas that are revealed only to the initiated.

Ethical behavior among the Gnostics varied considerably. Some sought to separate themselves from all evil matter in order to avoid contamination. Paul may be opposing such a view in 1 Tim 4:1-5. For other Gnostics, ethical life took the form of freedom to participate in all sorts of indulgences. Many reasoned that since they had received divine knowledge and were truly informed as to their divine nature, it didn't matter how they lived.

Such an attitude is a misunderstanding of the gospel. Paul, on a number of occasions, reminded his readers that they were saved from sin to holiness. They were not to have an attitude of indifference toward the law. They had died to sin in their baptism into Christ (Rom 6:1-11) and so were to walk "in newness of life." John reminded the Christians that once they had been saved they were not to continue living in sin (1 John 3:4-10).

These Gnostic teachings also had a disruptive effect on fellowship in the church. Those who were "enlightened" thought of themselves as being superior to those who did not have such knowledge. Divisions arose between the spiritual and the fleshly. This attitude of superiority is severely condemned in the New Testament. Christians are "one body" (1 Cor 12) who should love one another (1 Cor 13; 1 John 1:1-5:21). Spiritual gifts are for the Christian community rather than individual use; they should promote humility rather than pride (1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4:11-16).