

St. Irenaeus: The Church's Conflict with Gnosticism

The Rise of Gnosticism

Commentary:

Gnosticism is a hodge-podge of all kinds of religions of the world at the time of Christ and on into the 5th Century. Even Judaism and our Christianity can be detected in this belief. The Christian Fathers consider Simon Magus of Acts 8:9-24 as the source of it. We met Simon in our study of the Book of Acts last year. Chapter 8 records the evangelism of the Apostle Philip to the Samaritans where he baptizes many yet the Holy Spirit had not come upon them. Peter and John came to lay their hands upon them and they all received the Holy Spirit. Then Simon asked Peter and John for the power to give the Holy Spirit with an offer of money. Peter replied that God could not be purchased with money and asked Simon to repent of his "wickedness for I see you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." According to St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, "All who in any way adulterate the truth and do injury to the preaching of the church are the disciples and successors of Simon the magician of Samaria." Obviously Simon was not able to make a complete change and soon thereafter he went back to his magical arts and became a bitter enemy of the church.

The conflicts with early Gnostic thinking and Christianity revolved upon the separation of Christ from Jesus thereby denying the Incarnation, bodily resurrection and the Eucharist. Again in our Study of First Corinthians, especially chapter 15, we see St. Paul is dealing with doctrinal heresy since some said there is no resurrection of the dead. This is an example of Gnostic thinking that had permeated some church members during Paul's time. He took no time to confront and correct it. As he said, "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.....And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" (See First Corinthians 15: 12-17)

Irenaeus claims that St. John wrote his gospel against a Gnostic named Cerinthus, a syncretist of Jewish origin from Alexandria who tried to harmonize Judaism with Platonism and Christianity. Of course, St. John's Gospel focuses heavily on the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Basic Gnostic Tenets

- 1) Full grown Gnosticism of the second century could be characterized by: (check)
___salvation through knowledge ___denial of the Incarnation
___disregard sexual morality ___spiritual people ___Hebrew God of scripture
is inferior divine being ___denial of the resurrection
- 2) T or F. Gnostics produced books and letters like the Christian Gospel.
- 3) In Gnostic thinking the highest deity is an Unknown God above the
_____.

- 4) Gnostics even used Orthodox theological negative prescriptions of God in a _____ way.

Jewish and Christian Gnostics

Commentary:

After the two Jewish-Roman Wars, a mood of despair spread through the Jewish diaspora. Soon certain Jews taught that there were two Gods – one creator of the world and another above it. This teaching went against the traditional teaching of an Unknown God and a Messiah to save the Jewish people from the rest of the world.

The greatest Gnostic of all time is Valentinus, a Christian Gnostic influenced by St. John's Gospel. He used images like truth, logos and life.

- 5) T or F. Basic Gnosticism is a dualist movement which denies overcoming evil and a creator of the universe.
- 6) It totally denies the first article of the Christian _____.

St. Irenaeus' Doctrinal Debates

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi papers in 1945 confirmed the reliability of St. Irenaeus' historical arguments against this heresy. He was born in Asia Minor (Smyrna) and died in Lyons of Gaul (AD130-200). He was impacted by the life of St. Polycarp who had been a disciple of St. John and others who had seen the Savior. He studied under Justin Martyr at his school in Rome. From Rome he went to Gaul where he was ordained presbyter in AD 164. In AD 177 he was sent to Rome to plead to the Bishop Eleutherius to support Montanism and the persecution of churches in Gaul. Later he was made Bishop of Lyons in AD 177/8) succeeding Pontinus who was martyred.

- 7) A charismatic movement under Montanus claimed the gift of glossolalia or _____.
- 8) Among its best known converts was _____.
- 9) The movement died because _____.
- 10) How would you respond to those who say that Christ is not coming a second time?

- 11) Today we have a modern type of Montanist called Pentecostals. From what you learned in the Book of Acts regarding glossolalia what would you say about it and this group?

- 12) What was the Quartodecimen controversy about and what was Irenaeus' attitude about it? _____

Valentinus and Marcion Gnostic Systems

Valentinus was born in Egypt of Greek origin around AD100. He converted to Christianity, studied in Alexandria, moved to Rome and was very popular there. Chosen to be a bishop in Rome he was rejected and turned against Christianity.

Marcion was born near the Black Sea. His Father was leader in the Christian community. He was a ship owner and very rich man. In Rome he became an active member of the church and gave a large sum of money.

- 13) Valentinus would take the _____ and adjust the words to support his doctrine.
- 14) T or F. Valentinus would interpret the Gospels in an allegorical way including Christ's miracles.
- 15) Marcion was excommunicated for he insisted that God in the Hebrew text was the author of _____.
- 16) His movement with bishops, priests and deacons survived to the _____.
- 17) Marcion omitted the first two chapters of Luke's gospel which made for denying the _____.

St. Irenaeus as Theologian, author of "*Against Heresies*"

Commentary:

He opposed the Gnostic view of a secret body of knowledge transmitted to a chosen few versus a public apostolic tradition of the Christian faith handed over to many. For him, "Christ is the origin and very content of the tradition and the church is the continuation of Christ." Gnostics separate themselves and cut –off from communion with Christ. Only in the Church is communion with Christ possible. His doctrine of recapitulation helped develop a later doctrine of the deification of man or "Theosis". He believed that the Word of God, Christ, came to restore the union between God and humanity so that what was lost in Adam was recovered (recapitulated) by Christ. Since the Gnostics do not believe in the Incarnation and bodily resurrection, how could they celebrate the Eucharist? "If flesh were not to be saved, the Word of God would not become flesh." He drew the boundary between Gnosticism and Christianity by excluding Gnostics from the church. He was a man of great authority, of peace and of unity in the church.

St. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215)

Commentary: A contemporary of Irenaeus, Clement pushed for the truth similar to Justin Martyr having a positive attitude of philosophy. He was a great teacher in the catechetical school of Alexandria. He confronted the Gnostic and pagan mindsets. Like Justin he could integrate the Jewish Old Testament and the Greek philosophical mind leading them both to Christ. Clement left Alexandria during the persecution of Emperor Severus (AD202) taking refuge in Cappadocia.

Conclusion

Among the religions of the Greco-Roman world Christianity emerged as a distinct community in the first two centuries. The church was supported by a number of apologists who helped form the theological doctrines that explained the Faith of its people under constant harassment and duress in the Roman Empire. Public reading of the Gospels in the churches as evidenced by Justin Martyr's writings gave evidence of the authority of these books and a witness to Jesus and the faith of the church. Couple this with his description of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the house churches and you have a powerful argument for Orthodox Christianity today as "The Ancient Church of Jesus Christ, the Apostles and the Martyrs." These ancient Martyrs and Apologists presented concrete proof of the early structure in church worship, belief system (Trinitarian Theology) and organizational structure (bishop, priest, deacon). All of this has been recognized in recent years as a proper formula for Orthodox evangelism. Witness what we have seen in the books recently published – "From Baptist to Byzantium" by James Early and years ago (1987), "Becoming Orthodox" by Peter Gillquist.

The Apologists and early Martyrs are given great honor by the church throughout the centuries as they should be! They set the ground work for the formation of what we have today. These early Christians helped begin the formulation of theological doctrines so necessary to combat the heresies of their time. This text explains how important they really are to our church and our survival over the ages. All of them helped set the stage for the Third Century which brought about the Ecumenical Councils which explained our belief as expressed in a Creed or "Rule of Faith" and St. Athanasius' spearheaded and confirmed the Canon of the 27 books of Holy Scripture.

This was a very worthy study adding to our understanding of the church and its battle with outside forces. We see all types of religious thinking today that is of Gnostic or pagan origin. The truth is still the challenge for people today. America is even more diverse than ever before. This condition is making the truth even more challenging. May we Christians have the strength and wisdom to make Christ real in the life of people in today's world. This is our type of martyrdom.

Our Orthodox world is that Christ is the Messiah and...

"...He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose Kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit the Giver of life who proceeds from the Father; who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets....."

+++++++The End+++++++