



CONSISTENTLY IMPACTING OUR COMMUNITY

SCHOOL OF THE BIBLE

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Who were the Gnostics? What did they teach?

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The purpose of these notes are to assist in developing a proper understanding of the course presented. They are not a comprehensive evaluation of the material and are intended to supplement instruction given.

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The Gnostics were a number of different religious movements that posed one of the greatest challenges to orthodox Christianity in the second and third centuries. They

claimed to be Christian but were fiercely opposed by the early church fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertulian. They eventually disappeared from history. But their cause has been revived in recent years by a number of scholars, popular authors and organisations, who suggest that the Gnostics and their writings represent a genuine and perhaps even the most authentic variety of early Christianity. It is also suggested that the Gnostic writings can provide us with valuable additional information on Jesus, the apostles and the early church. So, what did they teach?

There was a wide variety of Gnostic movements and their teachings differed considerably, but there are certain themes common to them all. For full salvation a certain knowledge is necessary that is not to be found in the NT or in the ordinary preaching to be heard in the churches. This is a secret knowledge that was passed down orally from Jesus to certain enlightened teachers who in turn have passed it on to others. This knowledge teaches us about our true nature, the true God, and how to get back to him. All matter, the entire created world, is evil and was not created by the true God. It is the work of the Demiurge (craftsman, creator), an inferior deity, associated with Yahweh of the OT, who was vengeful, partial and sometimes cruel. Needless to say, all Gnostics agreed in rejecting the Old Testament and the religion of the Jews. Jesus came from the true God. He appeared, suddenly in Capernaum, in human appearance but not with a body of flesh and blood (how could he, seeing that all flesh is evil). Neither was he born of Mary. His mission was to impart knowledge, for man's chief problem is not sin but ignorance. By this knowledge those pneumatics, in whom sparks of divinity had become trapped in material bodies, could escape the bondage of evil matter and find their way back to divinity, travelling through spheres of planets and demonic realms, aided on their journey by the secret pass words and knowledge imparted by the Gnostic teachers. The orthodox teaching of the resurrection of the body was despised by all Gnostic teachers. The goal of their teaching was to escape from the evil mass of the body. Why would anyone want its resurrection?

One of the most successful of the Gnostic teachers was Marcion, who produced a less fanciful and more logical and systematic form of teaching. His churches spread widely and were a serious challenge to the regular, 'catholic' churches. Marcion was the son of a bishop, and became a wealthy ship owner. He moved to Rome and joined the church there in AD 140, but was excommunicated for his views in about AD 144. He distinguished between the true God and the creator God of the OT (the Demiurge, Yahweh of the Jews). He rejected the OT in its entirety and produced a canon which consisted of the gospel of Luke, purged of all references to the birth of Jesus and to God as creator, and ten letters of Paul, also purged of any positive references to the OT or God as creator. Marcion saw himself as a champion of Paul, and his radical distinction between the law (the OT, the Jews and their God) and grace (the good news brought by Jesus concerning the true God). Marcion's church was rigidly ascetic, condemning marriage and using water and bread at communion. Only those abstaining from sexual relations could be baptised.

In combating the false teaching of the Gnostics, the church fathers stressed the goodness of God's creation, though fallen through sin, the unity of the OT and the NT as the revelation of the one true God, and the reality of the incarnation, by which Jesus took a real human body of flesh and blood, died on the cross for our

redemption, and rose again on the third day as the first fruits of the resurrection of the just in the last day. They also maintained that the true gospel had been preserved in the orthodox, catholic churches, whose teaching could be traced back to the apostles themselves. The orthodox response is summed up in the well-known words of the Apostle's Creed:

I believe in God,
the Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ,
His only Son,
our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified,
died and was buried.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
from where he will come again
to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the dead,
and the life everlasting.