

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Biblical Studies 115, Heresy II

Gnosticism: Shortly after the early church dealt with the problem of Legalism, Gnosticism which actually predates Christianity took on a Christian form even while the church was still dealing with Legalism. The word Gnosticism comes from the Ancient Greek “gnosis” meaning knowledge. This heresy first shows up in a number of ancient religions which taught that people should shun the material world and embrace the spiritual world. Gnostic ideas influenced many religions, including Christianity. Gnosticism is basically a pendulum swing away from the first heresy, legalism. Where the Judaizers combined Jewish practice with Christianity, Gnosticism combined pagan philosophy with Christianity. The Judaizers were holding on to the past, while Gnostics broke with the past looking to be attractive to the society of their day.... sound familiar?

Ancient Gnosticism is hard to pin down. It requires a “special knowledge” but that special knowledge is never clearly defined, much like today’s New Age movement (which is already decades old, so it is no longer new and therefore has faded from popularity like all fads). Christian varieties of Gnosticism did not really come into full form until sometime in the second century. That is when things such as the Gnostic gospels show up. Christianity survived Gnosticism by confronting it head-on. Many of the early church fathers fought for Biblical truth, laying down their lives rather than compromising their faith in Christ by mixing it with Paganism.

Gnosticism made numerous claims over the years, and as one version was squashed by the church, another would pop up in its place. However, most forms of Gnosticism fall into three categories. Dualism claims that everything in the universe is reducible to two fundamental realities, for example Good & Evil or Flesh & Spirit. Syncretism is the merging of two different systems of belief, for example, modern day Unitarian Universalism, or the beliefs of many Americans who claim to be Christian but will say "all paths lead to God". The last category is Docetism, which claims that Christ only appeared to be human. Modern historic critics make a similar sort of claim when they try to explain away all of Christ’s miracles with human reason, making him an aberration of a collective consciousness or the creation of a deluded individual or individuals. Modalism is another variation of Docetism reasoning that God can only be in one place at one time so he manifests himself as father or son or spirit but not all three at the same time.

Next, we have Arianism: which shows us how heresy can arise from within the church. During a climate of tolerance after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, Arianism became a movement within the church before anyone rose up to oppose it. This is one of Satan’s favorite tactics; disguising himself as an angel of light. Arianism is an attack on the deity of Christ. The Arians claimed that Jesus Christ was a created being, higher than humanity, but less than truly God. The Gnostic attacked the church from outside the church, but Arianism brought false doctrine to the church from within. Arius was the heretic for whom this doctrine is named. He devised a view of Christ that made Him a created being, neither divine nor truly human, but a mediator between God and humanity. According to Arius, Christ was the firstborn of all creation, higher than other creatures, but a creature nonetheless. This is exactly what modern Jehovah’s Witnesses teach. Jehovah's Witnesses use the very same arguments Arius did.

The Nicene Creed was the church’s response to Arianism, but it marked the beginning, not the end, of the controversy in the church. After their doctrine was condemned by the council, the Arians pleaded for tolerance, and they succeeded in infecting the church worldwide with their doctrine. Emperor Constantine was frustrated when the Nicene Council was not successful in quelling the Arian controversy, because he wanted harmony in the church to promote harmony in his land. Arianism became so popular that only one man ended up standing against it—Athanasius (the same Athanasius after whom the Athanasian Creed is named).

Although Athanasius stood alone against the majority of the church in his day, his arguments won out, because he employed Scripture skillfully and persuasively to demonstrate the error of the heresy. This episode is a classic example of why Scripture, not majority opinion, is the first and last test of every doctrine. This is why we hold to the Book of Concord as the clearest exposition of biblical truth.

In Christ Pastor Portier