

## SOME USEFUL TERMS

ANTICHRIST--In the New Testament the term occurs only in the epistles of John. The antichrist is an enemy of God; and in these books it refers to human teachers who had left the church. These antichrists deny the incarnation and Christ's deity, and they are identified as deceivers. The concept of the antichrist appears in the New Testament under other names (false Christ, e.g.) in Matthew, Mark, Revelation, and II Thessalonians, where the figure is armed with satanic power.

*from Holman Dictionary of the Bible*

GNOSTICISM--the collective name for many greatly varying sects that believed that matter is essentially evil and spirit good, and that God is infinitely divorced from the world. Good/evil is just one of the many dualities employed by this belief system.

Where Judaism and Christianity emphasize the role of faith and works in salvation, and teach salvation of both body and spirit, gnostics taught that the soul's salvation depended on the individual possessing quasi-intuitive knowledge (*gnosis*) of the mysteries of the universe and of magic formulas. This perspective thus denigrated the importance of the physical world, including the body itself, leading to a duality of either asceticism or libertinism; and sometimes leading to a division among believers when one faction claimed superiority over the rest.

*from Holman Dictionary of the Bible*

Gnosticism fundamentally rejected Jewish theology about the goodness of creation and the creator God. Instead, it taught that all matter is evil and has its source in an evil creator god who fell from and betrayed the true God. Humans are trapped in the material world/human body. To provide salvation, the ultimate God sent a redeemer, often identified as Christ. But because the material world is evil, Christ only appeared to be human (see Docetism below). Christ provides salvation by delivering secret revelations to his true followers. It is this knowledge that is crucial. Those who possess it have a divine spark within, leading them to ultimate salvation.

*from Scholer, Christian History & Biography*

"The real motivation in gnosticism is theodicy, explaining why a God who is good would make a world like this, filled with so much evil, suffering, and death. The gnostic answer is that God didn't make this world; it was a lesser and wicked deity who made the world, and the good God comes to save people from the world of bodies and matter."

from Wright, *New Testament & Its World*

DOCETISM--an ancient Christian heresy--one of the earliest--taught that Jesus' physical body was an illusion. That meant that Jesus' crucifixion was illusory as well. Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and only seemed to die on the cross. The docetists taught that Jesus was pure spirit, incorporeal, so he could not have done the kinds of earthly things real people do, the most earthly of all being to die.

from *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*

The rationale behind docetist thinking was that the material world is too base for God to have actually entered it. Death, especially death on a cross, is too undignified and messy for God in Christ to have experienced. The realm of the spiritual is pure and holy, whereas the material world is impure and unholy. God belongs to heaven and could have had nothing to do with the crass world of humans. So Jesus must have been an immaterial spirit that God sent to communicate with us; he could not have been a flesh-and-blood human being like the rest of us. Thus, docetists in effect denied the incarnation.

from Snyder, *Christian Century*