

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF FIRST JOHN
Analysis Of The Heresy Exposed And Background For The Study
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I. INTRODUCTION

1. One of the special objects for which 1st John was written was to counteract the errors of the dangerous, deadly heresy of the day, later known as Gnosticism.
 - a. There were three sects whose heretical teachings began to influence the churches in the latter part of the 1st century: The Ebionites, followers of Ebion; The Docetics; and Cerinthians.
 - b. All three of these sects were involved in a denial of both the deity and the humanity and even the reality of the fleshly body of Jesus Christ while on earth in one way or another.
 - c. Some, if not all, also possessed a false concept of sin and fellowship with God.
 - d. Some in the churches of Christ were afflicted with and preaching this heresy.
2. Another great object of the Epistle was to make clear to the readers the distinguishing features which characterize those who are born of God in contrast to those which mark the children of the evil, and this because of the false concept of sin which was involved in this heresy. These characteristic center around three great truths concerning God:
 - a. God is light, chs.1,2.
 - b. God is love, chs.3-5:5.
 - c. God is life, chs.5:6 to end.
3. The children of God have fellowship with Him in respect to each of these, in contrast to those who are children of the devil.
 - a. Light symbolically stands for righteousness.
 - (1) Those who have fellowship with God do righteousness “as he is righteous.”
 - (2) Sin is spiritual darkness, and is utterly incompatible with God and fellowship with him who is light.
 - b. Fellowship with God, in regard to his nature as love, produces love one toward another, in contrast to the spirit which was manifested in Cain and continues in the world.
 - c. The “life” which God imparts is in his Son. Only those who have the Son have the promise of this life.
4. This Epistle, then, is justly called “the Epistle of eternal life.”

II. DISCUSSION

A. THIS HERESY INVOLVED AND INCLUDED PARTS AND PARTIALS OF THE ERRONEOUS THEORIES OF THREE DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT KNOWN AS EBIONISM, DOCETISM, AND GNOSTICISM.

1. This heresy grew out of the erroneous ideas of the Ebionites, the Docetics, and a man named Cerinthus who taught a corrupted form of Christianity and who spread his errors chiefly in Asia Minor.
2. Gnosticism, whether of the Docetic or the Cerinthian brand, was an admixture of paganism, Judaism and corrupt Christianity.
3. The Docetics and the Ebionites are the forerunners of the Gnostics.
4. Docetism was, in fact, only a form of Gnosticism – but a form which played a most important part in the general movement of Gnosticism. Its prominent teachers are reckoned among the Gnostics.

B. A BRIEF SUMMATION OF THE ERRORS OF THE HERESY OF THAT DAY WHICH LATER CAME TO BE KNOWN AS GNOSTICISM.

1. The Gnostics claimed for themselves a superior knowledge, a knowledge higher than that of ordinary believers, the ordinary Christian, because of some kind of initiation into the mysteries of the universe that gave them an exclusive insight into its deep and hidden secrets.
 - a. The word “Gnostic” is derived from the Greek *gnosis*, knowledge, and they were so designated because of their claims to superior knowledge.
 - b. On a practical level these false teachers claimed to have reached such an advanced stage of spiritual experience and knowledge that they were ‘beyond good and evil’.
 - c. They maintained that they had no sin, that is, not in the sense that they had attained moral perfection, but in the sense that what might be sin for people at a less mature stage of inner development, was no longer sin for the completely ‘spiritual’ man. For him ethical distinctions had ceased to be relevant. The false theories thus combined a new theology with a new morality.
 - d. The theory, in its practical aspects, was especially pernicious because its adherents were led into a course of conduct essentially wicked and vile in nature.
 - (1) Inasmuch as they claimed anything and everything material, including their physical bodies, to be of necessity

evil, they concluded that their spirits were independent of them, and thus undefiled by them.

- (2) They contended that once regenerated, they were pure in spirit, and it mattered not what the body did, since it was inherently evil anyway because it was material.
- e. Those accepting the theory lived lives of unrestrained indulgence, on the ground that a jewel might lie in a dunghill and be just as much a gem as in the most costly case! That they were no more polluted by sin than gold is by the mire into which it might fall. That they were not thereby corrupted!
 - f. They argued that since all material things, including their physical bodies, were inherently evil, and that due to their superior knowledge and a thorough understanding of these matters, they were left free to indulge in any course of action which they preferred.
 - (1) That they were thus immune from the demands of the law of God, and that God did not, in their case, impute to them wrongdoing or condemn them even though their physical conduct was in conflict with his law.
 - (2) That they were still in fellowship with God despite the fact that they kept not his commandments, or that they walked in what John in 1Jno. Called “darkness.”
 - g. The ultimate aim of the Gnostic was to present a perfect solution to the great problem of the origin and destiny of the universe, and especially of the origin of evil, which involved a three-fold idea, and which was fundamental to all its speculations:
 - (1) A supreme being *unconnected* with matter, and incapable of being affected by matter.
 - (2) *Matter*, , eternal, the source of evil, and opposed to God.
 - (3) A series of beings intermediate between these two, i.e., between God and matter.
 - h. The Gnostics with whom John is contending in 1Jno. claimed a place in the church, and complained bitterly when this was denied them; and yet they generally spoke of Christianity and the Scriptures alone as sufficient to afford absolute truth, and not infrequently they assumed a hostile attitude toward it.
 - i. The sources from which they professed to derive their superior knowledge were:

- (1) Tradition, a tradition which they claimed Christ had communicated to a narrow circle of congenial spirits, the specially initiated ones, and by them transmitted to others.
 - (2) The Scriptures were only partially received among them.
 - (3) Other writings of highly enlightened persons belonging to particular sects.
 - (4) Even writings of the heathen poets and philosophers were much used by some.
- j. They believed in and practiced water baptism, and that in it, as in the baptism of Christ, the higher spirit was more abundantly imparted to them, and thereby the human spirit was emancipated from the power of the Demiurge. (dem'-- i.-- urge)
- (1) "In Gnosticism, etc. a heavenly being subordinate to the Supreme Being" – Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder.
 - (2) "Literally, a worker for the people; hence the maker of the world; the Creator; specifically, the name given by the Gnostics to the creator or former of the world of sense." – Web. New 20th Century Dict. Unab., 1950 edition.
2. The heresy with which we are confronted in 1Jno. sprung from a dualistic interpretation of the world, widely accepted in those days, which viewed matter as essentially evil and spirit as essentially good, which in turn influenced their thinking concerning the practice of sin, obedience to the law of God, and the nature and identity of Jesus Christ, as to whether or not he was the Son of God, whether or not he came in the flesh, and whether or not his body was actually real.
- a. Thus dualistic view of matter and spirit demanded there could be no peaceful co-existence between the two; in particular, it was unthinkable and impossible that there could be any direct relation between the supreme God, who was pure spirit and essentially good, and the material universe, which by definition was essentially and inherently evil.
 - b. The biblical doctrine of creation must therefore be jettisoned; the material universe must be regarded as the work of some inferior power of 'demiurge' – one of the supreme beings intermediate between the supreme God and matter.
 - c. Irenaeus says, "Cerinthus taught that the world (the material universe,ejd) was not made by the supreme God, but by a certain power (demiurge) separate from Him, and below Him, and ignorant of Him." (Hist. P.28)

- d. While Epiphanius says nearly the same, but asserts that Cerinthus taught that the world was made by angels.” (His. P.28).
3. This dualistic view of necessity adversely affected their teaching and practice regarding sin and the identity of Jesus Christ, which is as follows:
 - a. Basically, the theory regarded evil as ever-present characteristic of material things, including the human body, the flesh of man; and its advocates were, therefore, unable to accept the biblical doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus – the Word being made flesh – or the Word becoming flesh –both God and man – God with us – on the ground that they believed it impossible for sinless deity to occupy a material body.
 - b. To thorough-going dualists the problem was simply this: How could the true God indwell a human body of flesh and blood, the one being inherently good, the other, inherently evil?
 - c. Thus they denied:
 - (1) That Jesus was born of a virgin.
 - (2) The deity of Jesus.
 - (3) That he was the Son of God.
 - (4) The humanity of Jesus.
 - (5) That Jesus Christ was come in the flesh.
 - (6) That his human body of flesh and blood was real, but that it was only an imaginary one.
 - (a) It only *seemed* to be real (that is, some of them believed this about Jesus.
 - (b) That the body of Jesus was not real; it was only apparent.
 - (c) This had to be the case. Because since Christ is divine, he cannot be really human and have a genuine fleshly body.
 - (7) They were denying that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh; that he became man and continues to be man, the eternal Son of God; that he had become human for all the ages to come.
 - (8) While some denied the deity of Jesus; others denied his humanity. The former said that Jesus was not Christ; the latter, that Christ was not Jesus (more on this later).
 - (9) In fact, by saying that Jesus was a mere man, that he was not God in the flesh, they were actually denying that Jesus

was the eternal Son of God made flesh, according to God's eternal purpose, to reveal God and to save man!

d. They affirmed:

- (1) They could walk in "darkness"; that, in reality, they could walk in sin, or live a life of sin in the fleshly body, and still have fellowship with God.
- (2) That Jesus was a mere man, the son of both Joseph and Mary, born altogether as all other men are; but that he excelled all men in virtue, knowledge and wisdom, so that he was worthy to be chosen as the Messiah.
- (3) A distinction between the man Jesus and the Christ, claiming that Christ descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism and left him on the cross.
 - (a) That the supreme Logos united with the man Jesus at his baptism, but forsook him during his last sufferings, to reunite with him in the future kingdom of Messianic glory.
 - (b) That the man Jesus, the mere man, the son of Joseph and Mary, is to be distinguished from the 'Christ,' who descended on the man Jesus in the form of a dove after he was baptized, empowering him with miraculous power, but who left him before he died, so that Jesus suffered and rose again, while the Christ remained immune from suffering since he was a spiritual being.
 - (c) The sufferings were of the man Jesus, now left to himself; therefore, that the Christ was not, in fact, subjected to pain and death.
 - (d) In other words, they disjoined Jesus and the Christ.
 - (1) They denied that Jesus Christ "came by water and blood."
 - (2) They affirmed the water of Jesus' baptism, but denied the blood of the cross, because the spirit being, Christ, came on Jesus at his baptism but left him before his death on the cross.
 - (3) The Son of God, therefore, did not die on the cross; only the man Jesus died there!

C. OBVIOUSLY, 1JNO. IS DESIGNED TO DEAL WITH AND REFUTE THIS HERESY AS MANY PASSAGES THEREIN INDICATE.

1. In proof of the reality of the Lord's fleshly body, John offered testimony involving three of his five senses! He had **heard**, he had **seen**, and his **hands** had **handled** the Word of life, Jesus Christ the Lord, 1Jno.1:1-3.
2. In refutation of the wicked theories of being able to walk in "darkness" or in sin and still be fellowship with God, John repeatedly pointed out in the Epistle:
 - a. That only those who do righteousness are righteous.
 - b. That only those who are pure have hope.
 - c. That those who habitually sin are of the devil.
 - d. That those who walk in darkness have no fellowship with God, who is light and in whom is no darkness at all.
3. The Epistle is thus a clarion call to purity, a positive affirmation that those who are children of God have his "seed" in them, and cannot persistently continue in a life of sin because they are begotten – that is, they stand begotten – of God.
4. Take note of the following verses to see that John is dealing with and how he refutes this heresy: 1:5-10; 2:1-6; 2:22,23; 3:3-10; 4:1-3; 4:9; 4:15; 5:1; 5:4,5; 5:6; 5:9-13; 5:20.
5. Take special note of Ch.4:15 and its significance in this controversy: "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God."
 - a. To so confess Jesus is to confess his **humanity**, his **deity**, and his **reality**, all three of which were denied by one or the other of the heretics of John's day.
 - b. For instance,
 - (1) The Ebonites declared that Jesus was a mere man, thus denying his deity.
 - (2) One branch of the Cerinthian Gnostic maintained that his body was, for a time, occupied by an **aeon, eon**, ("an emanation or phase of the supreme deity"), called Christ.
 - (3) The Docetic Gnostic argued that he only appeared to possess a body, but was, in reality, only a shadowy phantom, thus denying his reality.

III. CONCLUSION

1. John's insistence in the Gospel that "the Word was made flesh" (1:14) contradicts either form of the denial that Jesus Christ was both fully divine and fully human.

2. John regarded this heresy as a denial of all that was of any value in Christianity or the faith of Jesus Christ, and wrote this epistle (1Jno.) as a refutation of it.
 - a. Perhaps there is no document whose teachings would form a more effective and thorough antidote for the evils of our time, both in doctrine and life, than 1Jno.
3. This Epistle of five brief chapters sets forth in clear and pungent style the fundamental truths of Christianity
 - a. It sets forth these truths, not to construct a logical system of thought and thus satisfy man's speculative instinct, but combat moral error and thus help Christians in their lives.
 - b. It is truth applied to life.
4. The error John is refuting was a system of thought that lacked moral earnestness, which is also the central failure of our own time. What our day needs is not so much sharpened intellects, but quickened consciences; not so much logical acumen, but moral discernment.
5. Because God is light and in him is no darkness at all, thus God is a moral personality, John saw the world as a moral order, man as a responsible moral being, sin as guilt, redemption as moral and spiritual regeneration, and the Christian's life as the expression of love to God and man in deeds, not just words, which was contrary to the thought and action of the heresy with which he was dealing. Such a view as this is the deepest need of our times.
6. Notice some of the interesting characteristics of John's writings:
 - a. One is that he expresses profound thought in simple words.
 - (1) He uses such brief, but pregnant, words as light, life, truth, love, darkness, lie, and so on.
 - (2) These words express the realities of the moral and spiritual world, yet they are simple words.
 - (3) He did not engage in obscure language to express himself.
 - b. Another characteristic of his style is that he uses the method of contrast very effectively, regularly setting opposites over against each other and making clear the principle that he wants to show by giving its opposite.
 - (1) In this way he contrasts light and darkness, truth and error, God and the devil, sin and righteousness, love and hate, and life and death.
 - (2) He puts things in strong, emphatic terms. In discussing moral and spiritual principles he knows no middle ground. A thing is either white or black; he knows no intermediate colors.
 - c. Another characteristic of his style of writing is repetition.

- (1) He sets forth only a few ideas, but these he repeats over and over again.
 - (2) Twice in 1Jno. He says that God is love. Several times he gives love as the evidence that one is born of God.
 - (3) In the Gospel the idea that faith is the condition of possessing eternal life is repeated numbers of times. Thus, it is known as the “Gospel of Belief”.
- d. He also is fond of parallelism in his writings.
- (1) Sometimes his parallel statements use contrast; some are repetition.
 - (a) As an example of contrast, he says, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1Jno.1:5). Here the idea is repeated in the form of a parallel contrast.
 - (b) In the last three verses of Ch.1, there are three repetitions in parallel statements: V.8; V.9; V.10.
- e. Another characteristic is that he dwells on the moral and spiritual elements of the faith of Jesus Christ and his church rather than the external and the formal.
- (1) That is, he does not have much to say about the church and the ordinances, little about church officers and the conduct of public worship.
 - (2) He dwells on the union of the believer with God and Christ, on faith, obedience and love, and on prayer and knowledge.
 - (3) He deals with the abiding, eternal verities.
 - (4) And, I’m sure, he does this because of the heresy with which he is dealing.

Notes gleaned from:

Biblical, Theological And Ecclesiastical Cyclopeda, Vol. II, III

F.F. Bruce, The Gospel & Epistles of John

W.E. Vine, The Epistle of John

Guy N. Woods, Commentary On Peter, John & Jude

Walter T. Conner, The Epistle of John