

Gnosticism and its perceived influence on the church in Corinth

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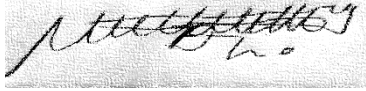
Abstract:

Gnosticism, a religious and philosophical movement in early Christianity, emphasized salvation through secret knowledge (gnosis) and the divine realm. Influenced by Platonism, Gnostics viewed the material world as evil and the immaterial realm as superior. Key components of Gnosticism include dualism, redemption through enlightenment, complex cosmology, and unique scriptural interpretations. Despite being deemed heretical by orthodox Christianity, Gnosticism persisted, influencing early Christian communities like those in Corinth. Scholarly interpretations highlight its syncretism with Greek, Jewish, and Eastern philosophies, adapting Christianity into a speculative system claiming superior knowledge. Paul's letters to the Corinthians address issues influenced by Gnostic beliefs, such as divisions, sexual immorality, and misuse of knowledge and freedom. He counters Gnostic elitism by asserting the true source of wisdom through the Spirit and advocating for moral integrity and communal responsibility.

Declaration:

I, Nyeko Lawrence, declare that this is my original work, is not plagiarized, and has not been submitted to any other institution for any award.

Signed

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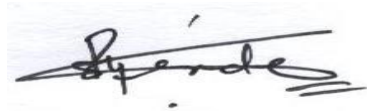
August 12, 2024

Rev. Capt. Nyeko Lawrence

Approval

This report titled the Gnosticism and its perceived influence on the Church in Corinth has been submitted by Nyeko Lawrence for examination with my approval as the University Supervisor, and it's now ready for presentation for the award of a Degree of Bachelor in Divinity of Uganda Christian University.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nyende', with a horizontal line above it and a double underline below it.

Date: 10th August 2024

Rev. Canon. Prof. Peter Nyende.

Dedication:

I dedicate this work to my mother who labored as a single mother in raising six children, educating us to completion of Uganda's advanced certificate education. Secondly, this work also recognized the contribution of Rev. Canon. Peter Nyende the principal of Carlile College Nairobi, identified my calling and allowed me to be equipped as a church army officer with untold sacrifice which laid a better foundation for Christian ministry, and a stepping stone for my academic journey.

Acknowledgements:

I do acknowledge the contribution of my research supervisor who tirelessly guided me throughout my research project Professor Peter Nyende. I also appreciate the physical spiritual, material, and emotional support rendered to me by All Saints cathedral church under the pastoral leadership of Bishop Wilson Kitara

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1. General Introduction:

This study aims to explore the influence of Gnosticism on the behavior and beliefs of the Corinthian church, prompting Paul's corrective teachings on the unity of body and spirit, moral integrity, and the significance of bodily actions in the Christian faith. To achieve these objectives, the research will first define Gnosticism, tracing its origins and major elements, and then examine its impact on the Corinthian community, specifically concerning knowledge, sexual sin, head covering, marriage, celibacy, and resurrection of the body.

This work points out significance of this study which lies in its contemporary relevance, emphasizing the need for moral integrity within Christian communities, rejecting Gnostic dualism, affirming the unity of body and spirit, and upholding the doctrine of bodily resurrection. These themes are critical in addressing modern ethical challenges.

1.1 Key Issues:

The rise of Gnosticism in the early Christian era introduced a set of complex and divergent beliefs that significantly impacted early Christian communities, particularly the church in Corinth. Gnostic ideologies, which emphasized esoteric knowledge, dualistic views of the material and spiritual realms, and a denigration of the physical body, led to a range of issues within the Corinthian church. These issues included divisions based on perceived spiritual superiority, justifications for immoral behavior, and conflicts over doctrinal and ethical matters. The presence of such beliefs resulted in a distortion of Christian teachings, undermining church unity and moral integrity.

Apostle Paul's response to the problems exacerbated by Gnostic influences was multifaceted. He addressed the Corinthian church's struggles with knowledge and wisdom, moral behavior, and the application of Christian freedoms by contrasting true Christian teachings with Gnostic

distortions. Paul's corrective measures included clarifying the nature of true wisdom, reinforcing the significance of the body and moral conduct, and guiding the responsible exercise of Christian liberty. His epistles aimed to restore doctrinal purity, promote unity, and ensure that Christian practice aligned with the gospel's core principles, countering the disruptive effects of Gnosticism on the early church.

1.2 Key Objectives:

Understanding Gnostic Ideologies: The section aims to explore and define Gnosticism by examining its core beliefs, including dualism, redemption through special knowledge, complex cosmology, and unique scriptural interpretations. It seeks to clarify how these beliefs contrast with mainstream Christian doctrines and their implications for early Christian communities.

Assessing the Impact on the Corinthian Church: This objective focuses on how Gnostic beliefs influenced the Corinthian church, particularly concerning issues of knowledge, spiritual maturity, moral behavior, and church unity. It evaluates how Gnostic views led to divisions, moral laxity, and the misapplication of Christian freedoms, and examines how Paul addressed these issues in his letters.

Evaluating Paul's Corrective Measures: The study aims to analyze Paul's responses to Gnostic influences and problems within the Corinthian church. This includes his teachings on wisdom, the body, and Christian liberty, as well as his efforts to restore church unity and purity. The objective is to understand how Paul's instructions provided solutions to the challenges posed by Gnostic ideologies which includes;

Gnosticism's dualistic worldview, contrasted the material and spiritual realms, featuring a complex cosmology with divine emanations culminating in a transcendent God. Gnostics often interpreted Christian scriptures allegorically, diverging from mainstream doctrines. Despite being deemed heretical, Gnostic ideas persisted, impacting early Christian communities.

In Corinth, Gnostic teachings emphasized esoteric knowledge and spiritual elitism, leading to divisions and rivalries. Paul addressed these issues, emphasizing true wisdom through God's Spirit, not human intellect. He stressed unity under Christ and critiqued divisions over leadership. Gnostic views on sexual immorality, considering the material body inconsequential or evil, led to lax sexual ethics. Paul opposed this, asserting the body's sanctity and condemning immorality, addressing marriage, celibacy, and sexual purity.

Gnostic challenges in Corinth offer valuable lessons for contemporary Christian communities. Paul's emphasis on unity, moral integrity, and holistic Christian existence provides a framework for addressing modern ethical dilemmas. His teachings on the bodily resurrection affirm both spiritual and physical dimensions in God's redemptive plan, challenging believers to uphold biblical truths amidst contemporary challenges.

In conclusion, studying Gnosticism in 1 Corinthians illuminates historical theological debates and offers practical insights for modern Christian communities. Understanding Gnostic influences helps contemporary believers draw from Paul's teachings to foster unity, uphold moral integrity, and embrace a holistic Christian faith and practice.

2. Gnosticism.

This section shall explore the definition of Gnosticism stating its essence, proponents, core tenets, and key components such as dualism, redemption through enlightenment, complex cosmology, and unique scriptural interpretation.

Gnosticism is a religious and philosophical movement that emerged in the early centuries of Christianity, particularly within the Mediterranean world. Nyende Peter states that, *‘the term "Gnosticism" derives from the Greek word "gnosis" (γνώσις), meaning "knowledge." Gnostics believed that salvation was attained through acquiring secret knowledge or spiritual insight that revealed the true nature of reality and the divine realm.’*¹ This movement arose from a worldview similar to Platonism, which saw the world as dualistic, comprising both material and immaterial realms, with the latter considered superior. Gnostics similarly viewed the material world as inherently evil, created by a lesser deity known as the Demiurge, and believed that deliverance from this realm could only be achieved through special knowledge. This wisdom could be mystical, magical, or philosophical, depending on the specific Gnostic sect.²

Gnosticism is characterized by several key components: dualism, redemption through enlightenment, complex cosmology, and unique scriptural interpretation. Gnostics believed in two distinct realms: the evil material world and the good divine realm, and taught that humans were trapped in the physical world by cosmic powers like the Demiurge. They believed that individuals needed special knowledge to free themselves from this material existence and return to the divine realm. Their cosmology often involved a hierarchy of divine beings or emanations, with the supreme God being unknowable and transcendent. Gnostics often interpreted Christian scriptures allegorically or metaphorically to uncover hidden spiritual

¹ Prof. Peter Nyende. *Class notes BTSDT*, Jan 2023.pg. 2

² D. T. Runia et al. (2012). *"Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography 1997-2006."*

meanings, sometimes rejecting mainstream Christian doctrines in favor of their interpretations.³

Despite being labeled heretical by orthodox Christian leaders and eventually marginalized, Gnostic ideas and texts continued to circulate. Some adherents applied Gnosticism to the gospel, viewing it as a form of wisdom. Consequently, Christian Gnostics were prone to Docetism, denying the human nature of Jesus Christ, who they believed only appeared to be human. This concept of wisdom and the belief in the evil nature of matter significantly influenced early Christian communities, such as those in Corinth.

Several scholars have defined Gnosticism in different ways. Dr. Gwatkin described it as a blend of oriental philosophies with the idea of redemption through Christ, adapted by various sects with influences from Judaism, Hellenism, or Christianity. Dr. Orr characterized it as a fusion of Christian ideas with Greek, Jewish, and Persian speculations, claiming special knowledge that the average believer lacked. Neander saw it as an attempt to integrate elements of contemporary mental culture into Christianity, emphasizing theoretical knowledge.⁴

Kevin Corrigan and Toumas Rasmus in their essay state that, *'Gnosticism fused elements from Greek and Roman philosophies, such as those of Plato and Philo, with Eastern religions, particularly those of Persia and India, to introduce a higher knowledge into Christianity. Dissatisfied with the simplicity of the gospel, a section of the early church sought higher advancements, which made Gnosticism a significant threat from within.'*⁵ Sources of Gnosticism include Platonism, which influenced its philosophical form; Zoroastrianism, which

³ Urban C. von Wahlde. (2015). *Gnosticism, Docetism, and the Judaism of the First Century*

⁴ Kevin Corrigan, & Tuomas Rasmus. (2013). *Gnosticism, Platonism, and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honor of John D. Turner*. Brill

⁵ D. T. Runia et al. (2012). *"Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography 1997-2006."*

contributed dualistic speculations; and possibly Indian Buddhism, which emphasized the antagonism between matter and spirit.

Alexandrian philosophy, particularly through Philo, attempted to harmonize Greek philosophy with Hebrew religion. Philo's interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures through Greek philosophy introduced ideas such as the Logos, an intermediary between God and the material world, which resonated with Gnostic teachings. Zoroastrianism contributed the dualistic view of good and evil powers, with the material world as a battleground between these forces.⁶

Dr. Gwatkin argued that Gnosticism transformed Christianity into a philosophy through learning and speculation, claiming secret and mysterious knowledge derived from primitive Christianity and guarded as a secret. This knowledge was seen as superior to faith and was believed to be essential for salvation. Gnosticism emphasized the separation of matter and spirit, viewed matter as the source of evil, and proposed a Demiurge as the creator of the material world. It denied the true humanity of Christ, promoted asceticism or licentiousness as means of spiritual attainment, and combined various misunderstood Christian doctrines with elements from oriental and Jewish sources.⁷ Overall, Gnosticism sought to introduce higher knowledge into Christianity, presenting a complex and speculative system of thought that significantly influenced early Christian theology and practice.

Therefore, this study defines Gnosticism as a religious and philosophical movement that emerged in the early Christian centuries, characterized by beliefs in dualism, redemption through secret knowledge, complex cosmology, and unique scriptural interpretations, influencing early Christian communities despite being labeled heretical.

⁶ Marksches, C. (2022). *Genesis 1 and the Beginnings of Gnosticism. Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity*, 26(1), 25-44.

⁷Walter Schmithals (1971). "Gnosticism in Corinth, An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians."

3. Problem of Gnosticism and Paul's instructions.

This section deals with key gnostic ideologies, and how it affected the church in Corinth, which focuses on knowledge, God's wisdom and spiritual maturity, denigration of the body and justification immoral behavior as spiritually inconsequential that led to sexual immorality, division based on freedom and headcover, and how Apostle Paul dealt with some of these issues to offer corrective Christian sound doctrines.

3.1 Knowledge at Corinth:

Gnostic ideologies often emphasized esoteric knowledge (gnosis) as the key to spiritual enlightenment, leading to a sense of superiority among those who claimed to possess it and caused division and rivalry among their followers.⁸ This emphasis on knowledge is addressed by Paul in several passages. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul contrasts human wisdom with the wisdom of God, emphasizing that the message of the cross is considered foolish by worldly standards but is the power and wisdom of God for those who believe. He writes, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 8:7-11, Paul acknowledges that some possess knowledge, but warns that "knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). He cautions that this knowledge can lead to arrogance and cause harm to weaker believers. Lastly, in 1 Corinthians 13:2, Paul underscores that without love, possessing all knowledge is meaningless, reinforcing the idea that love is superior to knowledge.

3.2 God's Wisdom, Spirit, and Maturity:

In 1 Corinthians 2:6-13, Paul challenges the Gnostic-like emphasis on hidden wisdom and spiritual elitism by focusing on the genuine source of understanding and maturity. He refers to a wisdom revealed by God's Spirit rather than that of this age or its rulers. Paul adds that this

⁸ Walter Schmithals. January 1, 1971. *Gnosticism in Corinth, An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians*; Abingdon Press. USA.

wisdom was hidden and destined for Christians' glory, and it was revealed by the Spirit, who knows God's profound things. "What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 3:12). This chapter refutes the Gnostic claim to have exclusive knowledge by declaring that true wisdom comes from God and is accessible to all Christians through the Spirit, fostering spiritual maturity and unity.⁹

The early church in Corinth experienced significant divisions, often fueled by rivalries and claims of superior wisdom or spiritual status, reminiscent of Gnostic elitism. Paul addresses these divisions extensively in 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21. He urges believers to be united in mind and thought, warning against boasting about human leaders. Paul emphasizes that he and Apollos are merely servants through whom the Corinthians came to believe (1 Cor 3:5). He critiques the Corinthian tendency to align with specific leaders, a practice that parallels Gnostic tendencies to follow particular teachers claiming special knowledge. By reminding the Corinthians that Christ is not divided and that all leaders are accountable to God, Paul seeks to dismantle the foundations of their divisions and promote unity.¹⁰

Divisions in the Church (I Cor 1.10-4.4.21): Gnosticism concepts and beliefs that uphold wisdom and knowledge caused division in the church in Corinth. The report reached Paul that there was quarreling amongst members of the church in Corinth (1.11) due to the clusters in the church in Corinth (1.11-13). These camps which brought contention in all likelihood are caused by a misunderstanding of the apostolic message and its messengers. Had they understood the apostolic message, their common allegiance would have been Christ and therefore there would be unity. The church in Corinth mistook the messengers of the gospel to be orators who were associated with wisdom because they were taken to be speaking, and

⁹ Walter Schmithals (1971). *"Gnosticism in Corinth, An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians."*

¹⁰ F. Stagg (1972). *"Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians."*

passing on wisdom. Nyende's class note states *'It is not a coincidence that in 1 Corinthians 1-4.21, the predominant word group is sophos (wise) and sophia (wisdom); together they appear 16 times! It is because Paul argues in relationship to it as one of the problems in the church.'*¹¹

Some believers in Corinth thought that the gospel was wisdom, and those who proclaimed it as orators (i.e. teachers of wisdom), while others might have thought that oratory was wisdom itself, i.e. eloquent wisdom. This explains why they formed camps around whom they considered the more superior orators for they saw them as having more wisdom. *'Paul not only addressed the view that gospel messengers were of eloquent wisdom but also that the gospel was wisdom. Σοφία and words of σοφίας were integral to Gnosticism, and so we can conclude that Gnosticism was the leading cause of the division problems in the church at Corinth'*¹² Said Nyende.

3.3 Sexual Sin:

Sexual sin influenced by Gnosticism believed (5.1-13): A man's sexual relations with his father's wife. Word had gone around that someone was having sexual relations, πορνέο, with his father's wife.¹³ Paul was astonished since this was not found even among the nations, ἔθνησιν – usually translated as “pagans” or “heathen”: “I hear reports of sexual immorality among you, immorality such as even pagans do not tolerate: the union of a man with his father's wife” (1Cor 5:1). Nyende states *'Taking pride in such sexual relations, the problem was not just the gravity of the sexual immorality but the inability of the Corinthians to act on it as well as their taking pride in such sexual vices.'*¹⁴

¹¹ Prof. Peter Nyende. *Class notes BTSDT*, Jan 2023.pg. 2

¹² Prof. Peter Nyende. *Class notes BTSDT*, Jan 2023.pg. 4

¹³ Andrew David Naselli. (2017). *Is Every Sin outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan*. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 136(4), 969–987. <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1364.2017.200020>.

¹⁴ Prof. Peter Nyende. *Class notes BTSDT*, Jan 2023.pg. 17

Gnosticism must have motivated the pride in sexual sin involving a man and his father's wife. It was possible that gnostic members of the Corinthian Church considered such an act as a sign of spirituality, as opposed to their material activities, which were influenced by evil. Gnosticism and the legalization of sexual immorality. Later, Paul addressed sexual immorality more broadly (6.12-19), objecting to the view that the body was insignificant and would be destroyed in the end because of its relationship, as the Gnostics believed, with evil. This is sufficient evidence to conclude that Gnosticism had a significant impact on the church in Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, Paul confronts a case of egregious sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, which may have been influenced by Gnostic beliefs that denigrated the body and justified immoral behavior as spiritually inconsequential. He calls for the excommunication of the offending individual to maintain the church's purity, stating, "Expel the wicked person from among you" (1 Cor 5:13). This decisive action underscores the importance of moral integrity and the seriousness of sexual sin, countering any notion that such behavior is permissible for those claiming superior spiritual knowledge.

Remedy for such sexual sin, the remedy for their immorality and inability to act to curb this problem was to discipline the one concerned with 'delivery to the Satan' in order that his flesh / body may be destroyed but his spirit saved in the last day (1Cor 5:2-5). More closely, inability to act meant, somewhat, a crisis of authority. Accordingly, Paul took charge and passed judgment on such a man as if he was there physically. So the 'delivery' of this man to Satan was under the leadership of Paul and in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor 5:3-4). The reason for judgment of this man to be delivered to Satan was not only his salvation but for the well-being (purity) of the Church (1Cor 2:6-8 and also 1Cor 2:9-12).

Permanent or temporary exclusion. There is no question that the man was to be removed from the Church, but was he to be permanently excluded and was the exclusion total or partial? What

was the degree of severity of the punishment? Did the discipline entail physical, material penalties including death? How is this ‘destruction’ of the flesh by Satan to be understood in relation to the saving of the spirit on the day of the Lord? Broadly speaking, there are two main views

Remedial discipline. They first understand this act of discipline to be remedial and, therefore, leading to the restoration of the man in question. Those holding this view understand the word ‘flesh’ (sarx) here to mean the destruction of its desires that lead to the sinful act under consideration. Consequently, those who hold this view see the exclusion of the man from the Church as subject to repentance, thus temporary.¹⁵ That is, if the man repents then he is to be readmitted to the Church. Also, those who hold this view, feel that Satan is at work outside the Church and therefore to be excluded from the church means to be in the hands of the devil. But they would understand being in Satan’s hand not in term of Satanic agency leading to death, a physical affliction or some other tragedy, but in psychological and emotional terms. So, it is understood that the isolation of the man will lead to sorrow and repentance. This is a modern view of the text and held by the minority in scholarly interpretation of 1Corinthians.

Salvific discipline. The second view holds that the discipline is for the salvation (not restoration) of the man. Those who hold this view understand the destruction of the man’s body by Satan to mean his death, eventually. This is seen as an act of mercy because in the end (the Lord’s Day) the man is saved from God’s judgment even though his body is destroyed. His exclusion, therefore from the church is permanent. This has been the view of the majority in the Church through history on this scripture and still, holds dominance in the majority of scholarly interpretation.

¹⁵ Prof. Peter Nyende. Class notes BTSDT, Jan 2023.pg. 17

Disassociation with believing sinners. This vice would corrupt the whole Church if it was not dealt with probably on account of social influence strengthened with the propensity of sexual sin amongst some of the believers:

Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1Cor 5:9-12).

However, the analogy of yeast is not limited to porneo, but to the way that were not of God (of which he mentions malice and evil), while that of unleavened bread is not limited to purity but other ways of God (of which he mentions sincerity and truth). But also, believers to disassociate with whom Paul mentioned included (5.9-11) the: the sexually immoral, covetous, Robbers, Idolaters, a reviler, and a drunkard.¹⁶

Paul further addresses sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6:12-19, countering any Gnostic claims that physical actions do not affect one's spiritual state. He argues that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and should be treated with honor. "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body" (1 Cor 6:18). This teaching directly opposes any dualistic separation of body and spirit, asserting that what is done in the body matters to God and has spiritual consequences.

3.4 Divisions on Head Cover in Worship:

In 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, Paul addresses issues related to head coverings in worship, which reflects underlying divisions and differing beliefs about gender roles and propriety within the church. He outlines principles of authority and propriety, emphasizing mutual respect and

¹⁶ Prof. Peter Nyende. *Class notes BTSDT*, Jan 2023.pg. 2

interdependence between men and women in the context of worship. This passage seeks to maintain order and unity in worship practices, countering any divisive tendencies that might arise from differing interpretations or practices influenced by cultural or Gnostic ideas.

3.5 Marriage and Celibacy:

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul discusses marriage and celibacy, responding to questions and beliefs within the Corinthian church that may have been influenced by Gnostic asceticism, which often viewed marriage and sexual relations as inferior to celibate life. Paul provides a balanced perspective, affirming the value of both marriage and celibacy. He advises that each person has their own gift from God and should live according to their calling. "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor 7:8-9). This approach validates both lifestyles, emphasizing personal calling and self-control.

3.6 Difficulties with Freedom Resulting from Knowledge:

In 1 Corinthians 8:9-13, Paul addresses the issue of freedom in relation to food sacrificed to idols, acknowledging that some believers possess knowledge that allows them to eat such food without guilt. However, he warns that this knowledge must be exercised with love and consideration for others who might be led into sin. "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor 8:9). This teaching emphasizes the responsible use of knowledge and freedom, countering any Gnostic tendency to act without regard for the spiritual well-being of others.

3.7 Abuse of Liberty and Privilege:

Liberty of the strong stumbling the weak. It seemed that some in the church at Corinth, there were those who were quite knowledgeable, had no problem with the eating of food that (to

their knowledge or not) had been offered to idols. The problem with this is that they did it without consideration of others who had problems with food offered to idols.

Love builds, knowledge puff up (8.1-3). Before Paul addressed the problem of liberty, he touched on a very important truth that love superseded knowledge (gnōsis). Love was precious and desirable because it built up people, while knowledge unless in the service of, or directed by, love made people proud: “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up” (8.1). According to Peter, ‘The verb oikodomei is from the word house (oikos) which then gives the analogy that one who loves builds up people as one who builds up a house as opposed to destroying them, which pride, not caring, does. Later in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul would talk more about the virtues of love.’

Nyende in his class lecture notes denotes that,

Sacrifices to idols (8.4-13). Paul then gets to the issue troubling the church at Corinth, eating of food “offered to idols,” eidōlothuton (8.4). The verb eidōlothuton—as opposed to hierothuton, which is the word for the worship of idols—denotes something that is given images (Acts 15.29, 21.25; Rev 2.14, 2.20), and is used regularly in the Septuagint (LXX) to signify the worship of other gods, i.e. idols, but YHWH the true living God. Concerning eating such sacrifices, those with knowledge knew the following two things.¹⁷

There is only one God and Lord. That the gods to whom such sacrifices were believed to be offered were not gods at all. There was only one God, the creator, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created (8.4-6). For this reason, such sacrifices had no significance (see below) because those supposed gods did not exist.

¹⁷ Prof. Peter Nyende. **Class notes BTS**DT, Jan 2023.pg. 2

Eating of sacrificial food is of no spiritual value. That sacrificial food did not benefit the one who ate it as was believed of sacrificial foods: “‘Food will not bring us closer to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we eat” (8.8). It was simply food for which God was to be thanked for its provision (10.30). We actually have a similar problem in Hebrew (Heb 13.9).

Greco-Roman Gods. The fact of the problem of food offered to idols points to the presence of gods in Corinth and major cities of the Roman Empire generally who were worshipped. We witness this in Acts where we have the mention when Paul is confused for the god Hermes, and Barnabas for Zeus by those they preached to in Lystra of the province of Lycaonia (Acts 14.8-18). Foreign divinities, is mentioned in Acts 17.18 as the outlook of philosophers who wanted to listen to Paul in Athens of the province of Achaia. The Greek god Artemis was worshipped in Ephesus (Acts 19.28).

3.8 Solutions to problem of liberty:

The strong should look after the weak (8.9–13). The passage concerns Christian liberty, specifically in terms of gods and sacrificial foods. It emphasizes that the liberty of a competent Christian should be tempered by charity for the lesser Christian, so that their consciences are not misled. Paul also tackles the subject of pagan sacrifices, claiming that they were offered to demons rather than God. Eating sacrificial food was considered a form of divine communion because it meant sharing the Lord's blood and flesh with demons.

The exercise of Christian liberty to eat idol flesh is context-dependent, as it may be incompatible with Christian liberty done in love if it involves idolatrous worship or impedes evangelization. A guide to utilizing Christian the guide for using Christian liberty is to seek God's glory by not offending non-believers, Jews, or Greeks, and by doing so, keeping a door open for their salvation.

Paul's life serves as an example of how liberty and privilege can be guided by love. He relinquished his rights to preach the gospel and win Jews and those outside the law. In a digression, Paul tells the Israelite that he could be disqualified from the race if he did not watch, highlighting the importance of being careful in obtaining spiritual privileges.

Peter states that, 'In a morally indifferent matter, the liberty of a knowledgeable Christian on idols and sacrificial foods needed to be regulated by love for the "weaker" Christian; which meant care for their consciences, thus not letting them stumble (1cor 8.1-13). In fact, causing the weak to stumble was in the final analysis sinning against Christ (8.12)'.

Sacrifices and idolatrous worship (10.14-22). Later Paul addressed the question of food offered to idols in a way that reflected the following:

Pagan sacrifices demonic. That pagan's sacrifices offered to non-existent gods were actually offered to demons: "...No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God"

Eating sacrifices, a communion with deity. We mentioned that eating sacrificial food was communion with deity. Nyende in his class notes states that, *'This is most clear in Paul's mention of the altar (found in the temple) and rhetorically asking: "are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?" (10.19). For this reason, eating the Lord's Supper, the cup and the bread, was koinōnia, "a sharing" or "participating" (10.16-17), of the Lord's blood and body. The converse then would be true, i.e. eating pagan sacrifices was to share with the demons and thus become "partners" (koinōnous) with them (10.20).'*¹⁸

Tables and sacrificial meals. Tables were used in pagan's shrines for eating of sacrifices as is clearly pointed out in 1 Corinthians 10 .21 by Paul's comments on tables: "table of the Lord,"

¹⁸ Prof. Peter Nyende. *Class notes BTSDT, Jan 2023*.pg. 16

and “table of demons.” To underline the activity of eating, alluded to is preceded by the mention of drinking from the cup of the Lord and from the cup of demons. The cups signified drinking and thereby pointing to the taking of a meal at the table.

Christian liberty dependent on context (10.14-11.1). The exercise of Christian liberty to eat idol-meat depended on the particular situation: The eating of idol-meat was inconsistent with Christian liberty exercised in love if it involved participation in idolatrous worship (10.14-22). The eating of idol-meat was inconsistent with Christian liberty exercised in love if it would be an obstacle to evangelism (10.27-29).¹⁹

The guide for using Christian liberty was summed up in the criterion of seeking God’s glory by causing no offense neither to non-believers, Jews or Greeks, and by so doing keeping a door open for their salvation, nor to and to believers:

So, whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God just as I try to please to please everyone in everything Idol, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved (10.32)

Example from Paul’s life (9.1-10.27). Paul used his life to illustrated the use of liberty and privilege that was guided by love (1Cor 9.1-27). His position as an apostolic pastor entitled him financial support in the same way as a priest was entitled to share the sacrifices with those whom they served in the temple (1cor 9.1-14). But he relinquished his rights for the sake of preaching the gospel and winning Jews and those outside the law (1Cor 9.15-27).

3.9 A Digression (9.1-10.13);

¹⁹ Walter Schmithals. January 1, 1971. *Gnosticism in Corinth, An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians*; Abingdon Press. USA.

Lessons from the Israelites. Paul here takes a digression: He has just said that he could be disqualified from the race if he does not watch. He tells them that this happened to the Israelites who enjoyed spiritual privileges-baptism and the spiritual food (Lord's Supper). It could happen to them as well if they are not careful. Although with a particular structure and order, epistles are not academic treatises that are absolutely arranged in a logical sequence. They are more like sermons and running commentaries.

3.10 The Resurrection of the Dead:

In 1 Corinthians 15:12-14, Paul confronts doubts about the resurrection of the dead, likely influenced by Gnostic beliefs that devalued the physical body and its resurrection. He argues that the resurrection of Christ is foundational to the Christian faith, and if there is no resurrection, then not even Christ has been raised. "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor 15:14). By affirming the bodily resurrection, Paul counters any Gnostic spiritualization that denies the importance of the physical resurrection.²⁰

3.11 The Resurrection Body:

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 15:44-45, Paul elaborates on the nature of the resurrection body, addressing possible Gnostic skepticism about bodily resurrection. He explains that the resurrection body will be different from the natural body, being raised a spiritual body. "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44). This teaching affirms the continuity and transformation of the body in the resurrection, countering any Gnostic disdain for the material body and underscoring the holistic nature of Christian salvation.²¹

²⁰ Stagg, F. (1972). Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians. Review & Expositor, 69(3), 379–381

²¹ Stagg, F. (1972). Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians. Review & Expositor, 69(3), 379–381

4. Application.

The seriousness of sexual immorality and moral integrity: Paul's strong response to the case of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church underscores the importance of maintaining moral standards within Christian communities. In today's world, where moral relativism and shifting cultural norms often challenge traditional ethical boundaries, this passage reminds us of the enduring relevance of moral integrity. It highlights that sexual sin is not just a personal matter but has profound implications for the spiritual health and communal purity of the church.

Rejecting Gnostic dualism and affirming the unity of body and spirit: Gnosticism, an ancient belief system that often denigrated the physical world and exalted the spiritual, influenced some Corinthians to justify immoral behavior as inconsequential to their spiritual status. Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 6:12-19 directly counter this dualistic view by affirming that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, what we do with our bodies matters spiritually. This is a critical lesson for the contemporary world, where secular philosophies and even some theological trends may downplay the significance of bodily action by slogan such as, 'God doesn't not want the physical body but rather the heart and spirit', in relation to spiritual life. By reflecting on these lessons, contemporary Christian communities can navigate issues of morality, sexuality, and spiritual discipline with a renewed emphasis on biblical teachings that uphold both personal holiness and communal purity. These teachings challenge us to confront cultural norms that undermine moral standards and to embrace a holistic understanding of human existence that integrates the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

In today's world, where secularism often challenges supernatural beliefs and where spiritual ideologies sometimes devalue physical existence, Paul's teaching on the bodily resurrection offers a powerful reminder:

Hope and Assurance: The bodily resurrection gives Christians hope beyond this life, affirming that our physical bodies will be transformed and glorified just as Christ's was. This assures believers of a future with God that encompasses both spiritual and physical dimensions.

Integration of Body and Spirit: Paul's emphasis on the resurrection body underscores the unity of body and spirit in Christian theology. This stands in contrast to dualistic worldviews that separate the material and spiritual realms. It encourages a holistic understanding of human existence where physical bodies are valued as integral to God's plan for redemption and eternal life.

Transformational Living: Belief in the bodily resurrection motivates Christians to live with purpose and moral integrity. It affirms the sanctity of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and calls believers to honor God with their bodies in the present life, knowing that these bodies will be resurrected and perfected in the future.

Therefore, the key lesson for the contemporary world from Paul's teachings on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is to embrace and affirm the bodily resurrection as a foundational truth of Christian faith. This truth provides hope, integrates our physical and spiritual existence, and inspires transformative living by God's redemptive plan.

Paul's teaching encourages respect for individual vocations and callings in life. It highlights that marriage and celibacy are not one-size-fits-all solutions but are to be discerned based on one's relationship with God and understanding of their gifts and desires.

Value of Self-Control: Paul emphasizes the importance of self-control in the context of relationships and sexuality. He acknowledges that sexual desire is natural but urges believers to exercise self-discipline and make choices that honor God and respect others. This resonates with contemporary challenges where sexual impulses and societal pressures often collide with ethical and moral standards.

Equality of Spiritual Worth: By affirming both marriage and celibacy as valid and honorable, Paul counters any hierarchy that might elevate one lifestyle over the other. This promotes a more inclusive and respectful community where individuals are valued for their contributions and commitments, regardless of their marital status.

Balanced Approach to Life Choices: Paul's approach encourages a balanced consideration of life choices, recognizing that both marriage and celibacy have their challenges and blessings. This perspective can help individuals today navigate cultural pressures and personal desires with wisdom and discernment.

Therefore, the key lesson for the contemporary world from this study is to embrace and respect individual calling and to prioritize self-control in matters of relationships and sexuality (1 Corinthians 7). This biblical teaching offers a framework for honoring diverse life paths and fostering a community where each person's journey is valued and supported by their God-given gifts and convictions.

Conclusion Therefore, Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians counter Gnostic ideologies by emphasizing the unity of body and spirit, moral integrity, and the importance of communal purity. By affirming that true wisdom and spiritual maturity come from God and that our actions, both physical and spiritual, have profound consequences, Paul offers timeless guidance for maintaining both personal holiness and community cohesion in the face of divisive and morally relativistic beliefs.

5. Conclusion.

This research work can deduce therefore that, Gnosticism posed significant theological and practical challenges to early Christianity. Gnostics' emphasis on secret knowledge, dualistic cosmology, and spiritual elitism clashed with orthodox Christian teachings, leading to divisions within communities like Corinth.

Paul's response, as documented in his letters to the Corinthians, serves as a critical theological and pastoral intervention against Gnostic tendencies. He emphasizes the unity of believers under Christ, critiques the elitism of Gnostic knowledge, and addresses specific ethical issues like sexual immorality and idolatry influenced by Gnostic ideas.

Furthermore, Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians highlight the centrality of Christ's redemptive work and the resurrection as foundational to the Christian faith. These teachings directly counter Gnostic beliefs that devalued the physical world and denied the bodily resurrection, affirming instead the holistic salvation of body and spirit through Christ.

In an academic context, the study of Gnosticism in early Christianity illustrates the dynamic interplay between emerging theological ideas and the efforts of early Christian leaders to establish doctrinal orthodoxy. It underscores the enduring relevance of these debates in understanding the development of Christian theology and the formation of early Christian communities in the Mediterranean world.

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