

Beginnings of Dissent

Listed Scriptures

Gal 1; Col 2; 2 Pet 2; 1 Jn 2, 4; 2 Jn; Jude

Lesson Aim

- 1) To trace the beginnings of disunity within Christianity.
- 2) To understand the importance of keeping to the original and true teachings of Christ.

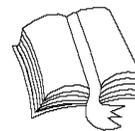
Memory Verse

"But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed."(Gal 1:8, 9)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Jn 14-15, Acts 8-9, 2 Tim 1

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D



Persecution was not the only crisis faced by the early church. There were internal struggles as well. Many epistles in the New Testament hint at conflicts within the church communities. Historical accounts show that these conflicts led to some groups breaking off from mainstream Christianity. They formed the opposition parties to the original groups and were named by mainstream Christians as heretics.

Groups of heretics emerged because many believers tried to understand the gospel in their own way, rejecting the teachings of the apostles. Some believers became impatient when the Second Coming did not seem to be imminent. Others

enjoyed power and authority in a splinter group that they did not have within the true church. There were those who refused to put away their sin and lust after they converted and willingly joined heretical groups that allowed them to continue in their sinful ways while claiming to be so-called believers at the same time.

As apostles like Peter and Paul were executed, believers began to lose the truth. Various interpretations of the teachings of Christ, and even those of the apostles, arose. Social pressures and persecutions also resulted in compromises to doctrines and beliefs. Hence, early Christianity was in a constant state of flux, causing many believers to leave the true teachings of Jesus Christ. It is important for us to understand what went wrong at the time, so that we do not let history repeat itself and leave the true teachings of God.

W A R M U P



You will need some floor space for this warm-up. A grid of 6 by 6 squares has to be drawn on the floor. Masking tape could be used to create the grid:

Start	1				
	2	3			
			4		
		5			
	6		9	10	11
	7	8			Finish

Before the lesson, the teacher has to think of a plan, going from the starting point to the finishing point. Students will have to move through the grid from the start point to the finish point. The teacher must plot a pattern, as shown in the example above. The numbers represent the order in which the student must step to cross from start to finish. Any order or sequence is fine, as long as the student is able to move from one spot to the next logically. The students must not see the order the teacher has.

Students take turns to step onto the grid. THERE MUST BE NO TALKING DURING THIS ACTIVITY UNTIL THE FINISH SQUARE IS REACHED. The first student steps on the start square and decides

which square to step on next. If it is the correct square (i.e., based on the pattern from the example above, from start square, the next one the student must step on is #1), the teacher nods, and the student decides on the next square. If it is the wrong square, the teacher tells the student to step off the square and move to one side of the grid. The second student steps on the starting square and moves. Anyone who had to leave the grid may help the person trying to move across by reminding the person which square to go on, based on their mistakes. For instance, if the student on the grid wants to move to a certain square that someone else knows is the wrong one, they can help by indicating to the student SILENTLY not to step on that square. The activity continues until someone reaches the end point. There could be a small treat for the students at the end.

If there is time, the teacher can then start the activity again by plotting another pattern, or dividing the students into two groups, with each group plotting a plan on the grid for the other. The group that reaches the end first will win.

After the exercise, discuss why successful groups were able to achieve their goal. Aim the conversation towards achieving a common goal, cooperation, helping each other, collaboration. Remind students of the success of the early church as recorded in Acts. These early believers were able to succeed in their lives of faith because they all practiced these same values. It was when they disagreed on what they believed in that the church began to fail. Groups began to propagate their own views on doctrines, in-fighting began within the church, and the truth was brushed aside to make way for human opinions. Our goal is to reach God after this life. Like the activity above, we cannot reach this goal alone. God is our main help, but He has also given us brothers and sisters to support us, so we may all keep to the true path. Many believers in the early church failed to achieve their goals in the end. In this lesson, we will try to learn from their mistakes.



Part 1

False Teachers

Unity within the church did not last long. False teachers arose quickly. In 2 Corinthians 11:13–14, Paul wrote of “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.” In Galatians 1:6–9, he raged against those who would pervert the gospel of Christ, stating categorically that whoever preaches a gospel other than the original truth will be accursed. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul identified threats to church unity. Doctrinal dissent was evident even at this early stage. Philippians 3:2 warned believers to beware! There were those who argued strictly for the legality of the law—the old debate of circumcision. Paul kept reminding believers that they should now worship in the spirit, rather than adhere to practices of the flesh.

Other apostles gave similar warnings. 2 Peter chapter 2 mentions false prophets and teachers secretly bringing in heresies. The whole chapter deals with the depravity and deception of these false teachers, and warnings of their awful end. The apostle John wrote of the last days, when the Antichrist will come (1 Jn 2:18–19). In this passage, we are told that even in John’s time, “many antichrists have come.” A major part of the book of Jude also deals with these false teachers infiltrating the churches.

These problems persisted until, by the turn of the first century, the truth taught by the apostles had largely been lost or distilled. The Holy Spirit no longer dwelled with the believers, and the world had to wait for almost two thousand years before people received the Holy Spirit again during the time of the Latter Rain.

a. Read 2 Peter 2:12–19. How does Peter characterize false teachers in this passage?

(1. Moral laxity. Peter described them as “spots and blemishes,” “having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls.”

2. They make empty promises. “Wells without water” is how Peter described them. “Clouds carried by a tempest,” they speak great swelling words of emptiness.” They show you rain clouds, but there is no rain. Their promises come to nothing.

3. Promise liberty while they are themselves slaves of corruption.)

b. 1 Jn 2:18–23 depicts the situation towards the end of the first century. Briefly describe, in your own words, what the believers are experiencing.

(False teachers appearing among the believers. “Went out from us”—began within the fold of the church, but later left (“they were not of us”). Denied that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. How would you feel under those circumstances? Confusion, consternation, ask church leaders what is true—accept any reasonable suggestion or view; main aim is to get students to imagine the chaos of the situation)

c. 2 John mentions one important doctrinal heresy. Can you find it?

(v.7: Those who claim that Jesus Christ did not actually come in the flesh.)

d. The book of Jude gives a graphic description of what false teachers were. Read v.12–13 and write down the four nature images he used for this purpose.

(clouds without water, carried about by the wind; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.)



Part 2

Heresies and Heretics

“Heresy,” Greek *haireisis*, can be defined as a belief or practice contrary to the orthodox doctrine, or an opinion contrary to what is normally accepted or maintained (*Oxford English Reference Dictionary*). The word usually refers to a group within a parent body that has sectarian views. There were many heretical groups within the early church, some of which survived for a long time. Three of these are described briefly below.



A. Gnosticism

Gnosticism is a term which refers to a variety of religious movements in the early Christian centuries. These movements stressed salvation through a secret “knowledge,” or *gnosis* (Greek). Many Christian theologians in the second century wrote against these movements, calling them heresies. It is difficult to confirm the origins

of Gnosticism. Some scholars think various groups affiliated to the movements were around before the beginning of Christianity. Another theory points a finger at Simon Magus as the possible origin.

The only record of Simon Magus in the New Testament is found in Acts 8:9–25. We read about a sorcerer who was recognized as a god by the locals until Philip preached the gospel to them. Even Simon was apparently converted and followed Philip in his missionary work. Later, Peter and John were sent to Samaria to lay hands on the believers so they could receive the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw the Holy Spirit descend upon the believers, he was amazed. He offered them money for the power to give the Holy Spirit, and was sternly rebuked by Peter. Simon repented and asked Peter to intercede for him so that God might forgive him.

This is the only account we have of this character in the Bible. However, later Christian writers mentioned Simon Magus. Justin Martyr, one of the prominent Christian writers, wrote that Simon was a native of Gittain Samaria. He was widely acclaimed to be a god. Simon was in Rome during the reign of Claudius (AD 41–54). Other important Christian writers and theologians considered Simon to be the source of later Gnostic heresies. However, Simon was not like later Gnostics because he actually claimed to be divine, and salvation could be gained through knowledge of himself alone rather than knowledge of oneself. Simon was followed by another Samaritan called Menander, who taught that if you knew him (Menander), you would not die. When Menander himself died, it became obvious that he was a false prophet! There were many well-known and even influential Gnostic teachers, but perhaps the most famous was Valentinus, who taught at Alexandria and later went to Rome (around 140 AD).

Beliefs

Although there were many different branches of Gnosticism, all believe in a sharp dualism. They believe in a transcendent God and an ignorant lesser god referred to as the demiurge. The demiurge was supposedly the god who created the cosmos, the god of the Old Testament. Some Gnostics taught that the creation itself was the result of a fall from *Sophia* (Greek for “wisdom”). Hence, all creation was evil, because all physical, material things were evil. However, some of the transcendent light (sparks of divinity) was trapped within the bodies of a few individuals. These individuals are destined for salvation, but they are unaware of this. When God sent down Christ as redeemer, salvation in the form of a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) was brought to Earth. The special individuals made aware of their special status. Upon physical death, the awakened “spirituals” were then able to ascend safely through the planetary regions controlled by hostile demons to be

reunited with the transcendent God.

Since Gnostics believed that salvation came through knowledge of one’s spiritual nature, some Gnostics concluded that any action taken by the body which houses these sparks of light would not affect salvation. All things physical were evil, but the light trapped within was not a part of this evil. It was not affected by anything the physical body did. As a result, Gnostics who believed this indulged in all sorts of very sinful behavior. For example, a Gnostic called Carpocrates urged his followers to sin. His son Epiphanes taught that promiscuity was God’s law. A group calling themselves the Cainites honored Cain and other villains in the Old Testament. Another group known as the Ophites worshiped the serpent for bringing “knowledge” to Adam and Eve.

Group Work

References to Gnosticism in the New Testament often warned believers against licentious and sinful behavior. Believers were also warned about Gnostic views of Christ. Can you find a few of these passages? Some of them have been mentioned above. (cf 1Cor 5:1–8; 2 Pet 2; 1 Jn 3, 4:1–6, 5:2; Jude)

B. Docetism

Docetism was another heresy connected to Gnosticism. It began in Hellenistic and oriental areas. The main idea was that matter—whatever is physical—is essentially evil, and the divine is incapable of suffering. This led to the belief that Jesus Christ was not really a man and that He only appeared to be so. This undermined the Christian beliefs of incarnation, atonement and resurrection.

Incarnation

If Christ was not really a physical human being, then Mary did not really give birth to a physical being, only one who appeared to be so.

Atonement

Christians believe that our sins are atoned for by the suffering and death of Christ. However, if Christ only appeared to be physically present, then He could not really have suffered or died. He only appeared to have suffered and died. Hence Christian belief in atonement is threatened.

Resurrection

Obviously, if Christ was not really physically present, He could not have resurrected. What the disciples saw must have been a form of projection of Christ, a kind

of spiritual manifestation, not really a physical being. This causes major doctrinal problems as Christians base their doctrine of salvation upon the belief that the risen Christ—the physically risen Christ—has conquered death by reversing the process of death itself through resurrection.

As in 2 John above, Elder John took great pains in all his epistles to dispute these heretical beliefs. The Gospel of John and 1 John both begin by drawing our attention to the “Word which became flesh.” John emphasizes the fact that the apostles have indeed “seen with our eyes,” “looked upon, and our hands have handled” (1Jn 1:1). This particular emphasis was necessary due to the challenges, not only from Docetism, but also from many Gnostic groups.

C. Montanism

Around the mid-second century AD, a new Christian convert named Montanus, who lived in a village at the border of Mysia and Phrygia, began to go into trances and utter strange sounds. Some believers warned against false prophets, possibly remembering Matthew 7:15, while others thought that he did have prophetic gifts. Two women who called themselves prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla, soon shared this ability to “prophecy in tongues.” Montanus soon proclaimed himself to be the chosen prophet of God. The main beliefs of this group were:

- a. The Holy Spirit is poured upon individuals, a signal that the New Jerusalem was arriving.
- b. A strong leaning towards the apocalyptic and eschatological focus in the Bible. Hence, Montanists believed in the imminent coming of the New Jerusalem.
- c. The believers of this sect were the “elite” who would prepare for the coming of New Jerusalem by leading ascetic lives (that is, practice severe self-discipline and abstain from all forms of pleasure) to the extent of withdrawing from the world.
- d. Taking part in special fasts to prepare themselves for the coming of the New Jerusalem.
- e. Expect and even encourage persecutions so that the church would be a purified Bride for Christ.

By around 230 AD, the group was virtually excommunicated. The Synod of Iconium refused to recognize the validity of the Montanist baptism. The movement continued underground, mostly in protest of the growing formalism and worldliness of the official church.

D. Research and Discussion

The two letters of Paul to the Thessalonian church are very much concerned with eschatological (end time) events. Interestingly, every chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to Christ’s second coming. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 2:19, 3:13, 4:13–18, 5:23–24. Take note of what Paul wrote regarding the second coming in each of these passages.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. Paul wrote this epistle because he was concerned that some believers may have misunderstood his earlier message in 1 Thessalonians regarding the coming of Christ. Ask the students to:

- a. Summarize what Paul wrote in this passage,
(Believers seem to be troubled about when the second coming of the Lord is to be expected. Paul clarifies that certain events must first take place—falling away, man of sin revealed, son of perdition exalting himself. Paul reminds the believers that lawlessness must first come with power, signs and lying wonders, and with unrighteous deception. After that, the Lord will consume them when He comes.)
- b. Think about how the believers at Thessalonica might have misunderstood Paul’s message on the second coming,
(Believers urged to wait for the Lord, the hope of all believers is to be in His presence at His coming, their hearts will be established for His second coming, the description of what will happen at the second coming, preserve themselves for the coming of our Lord—all these messages may sound urgent to the believers, as though the coming of the Lord is imminent; hence, their actions in preparation are extremely important.)
- c. Discuss how these misunderstandings might have influenced the spread of Montanism later on.
(Some believers may still have believed that the coming of the Lord was imminent. When Montanism spread to their area, they may have believed the “visions” of Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla.)

C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



- 1 Summarize the beliefs of the Gnostics.
- 2 Docetism teaches that the divine can never suffer physically. How did this teaching impact on the Christian belief in incarnation, atonement and resurrection?



Different Views

Most of us are very blessed in our lives. We live in countries where there are no religious persecutions. In North America, the social trend is towards religious tolerance (which means people try to accept that others may have different beliefs). Christian communities bend over backwards to preach tolerance towards other world faiths as well as philosophies. On the surface, such tolerance seems like a good thing. However, it means that anyone who insists on one correct way to salvation is then seen as intolerant or even fundamentalist. The word “fundamentalism” tends now to be linked to terrorist groups, a tag we certainly do not wish to have.

Imagine you are speaking to a person who has very tolerant views. How would you respond to his/her views?

1. **Your religious beliefs may be true for you but not for me. There is no absolute right or wrong when it comes to religion. Who is to say which religion is right?** (Isn't the statement: “there is no absolute right or wrong” an absolute belief? If so, then it is self-defeating in its attempt to claim that there are no absolutes. Religious beliefs must be based on what is true. This truth should not come from humans, as we are all subjective creatures. We tend to opt for what we feel comfortable with, what is convenient, or what we wish for, regardless of whether it is good for us. In order to find out what is the truth, we must therefore turn to God, from whom all truths come. If the truth comes from one source, there must only be one truth. How can there be a truth for you and a different truth for me? The Bible tells us that God says “You shall have no other gods before me”(Exodus 20:3). Jesus said, “He who believes in Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already” (John 3:18). It is therefore crucial that we find out what the real truth is according to God, not according to our subjective views.)
2. **All religions are pretty much the same.** (Religions actually have very different ideas about the afterlife and how to get there. Some religions teach about a heavenly afterlife while others deny that heaven exists. Yet others believe in the cycle of reincarnation. They can't all be right. Given that it is our lives at stake, we should find the right answer.)

3. **As long as I do the right thing, it doesn't matter what I believe in. God will accept me if I am a good person.** (It is not enough to be good. The Bible tells us that we have all sinned (Rom 3:23). No sinner is able to save himself no matter how “good” he is (Rom 3:20). A criminal cannot escape punishment just because he has done good things in his life. Salvation can only be gained by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8,9; Titus 3:5)

Teaching Tips

Leave a few minutes for students to plan for the fellowship. They may wish to check their progress in preparation with their group, or ask advice. See Lesson 1 Life Application section.

REFLECTION & PRAYER



Luke 21:12 tells us that in the last days, believers will be persecuted and thrown into prison. Verse 16 warns that even the closest family, relatives and friends would betray true believers, and some will be put to death.

Even though we are still safe from the frightening scenario described above, we know that Jesus Christ's words are true, and these things will come to pass. Even today, many of us are questioned by friends or family regarding our beliefs. We must prepare ourselves to defend our faith by striving to understand the Words of God and through prayer. Jesus Christ has promised us “a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist”(Lk 21:15). We must therefore depend on Him fully when we have to bear testimony to our faith. Let us pray together and ask God for understanding and wisdom.