

### 3. The Ascetic ideal

Probably it was only natural that in worlds with so much of the evidence of depravity that men would look for systems of escape. Asceticism is such an ideal. The concept is to leave the world as we know it and live on a detached plane. To do this well, one must first deny the necessity of the present world or the validity of the life it offers. One must view all that it presents as being shadowy and having no sense of real fulfillment. The denial process is closely followed by a substitute...the substitution of a life style that is more likely to afford the sort of release that is sought. (Sorry about the broken type--just a bit of typewriter trouble and I hope it is over.) Asceticism has always offered "answers" in this area and usually they are found in the denying of the bodily needs and fleshly demands. Since Christianity is a faith that tends to remove itself from the world, the early influences of ascetic ideals were bound to be found in it at some point. The three most common were:

#### a. Gnosticism

As discussed earlier the material things were bad and one must have delivery from them. Anything physical is inferior and must be abused out of existence for the spiritual to show forth.

#### b. Neo-Platonism

Viewing matter much as did the gnostics, the Neo-platonists added the flavor of meditation and making oneself one with God through spiritual uplifting. To both of these bodies God was really unknown so when they talk of being taken to him or committed to him it is a very mysterious business with no objective discussion basis.

#### c. Manicheanism

The flesh is best dealt with by much flagellation, self denial and the following of ritual standards that call for great rigour. Since only a few can attain to the sort of life required, the many are called upon to be observers and "wishers."

You do not need to be a genius to see how some of these ideas had appeal to Christians who knew they were in the world but did not want to be part of it.

### 4. Early Christian Understanding

A few random thoughts anchored in the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas.