

Whatever Happened To Gnosticism? Part One: False Knowledge

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During the last few years, an increasing number of movies and books have introduced and emphasized a major heresy that the true church had to contend with during the first century. The present-day heresy is not in exactly the same form as was its counterpart during the years following Christ's death, yet there nevertheless seems to be a resurgence and a growing popularity of the various philosophies generally known as *Gnosticism*.

We do not hear much about Gnosticism in the news, and we typically give it little thought. In terms of theology and doctrine, we concentrate on many other controversial points, relegating Gnosticism to an ancient, long-dead heresy. However, we would be remiss to assume that Gnosticism has no relevance to us today.

After all, Gnosticism was the predominant source of heresy when the New Testament was written. The books of John, I Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, I and II Timothy, Jude, and I John all combat various elements of Gnosticism. Even the book of Revelation cites a couple of Gnostic beliefs and practices, referring to "know[ing] the depths of Satan" and "the Nicolaitans" (Revelation 2:6, 15, 24).

Gnosticism is clearly not some minor biblical issue. Given that the Bible is timeless and has never been more applicable than here at the end time—when knowledge is increased, and faith is lacking (Daniel 12:4; Luke 18:8)—perhaps Gnosticism is a greater threat now than we might think!

Gnosticism in Vogue

Gnosticism is not mentioned by name in the Bible, with one possible exception, I Timothy 6:20-21:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is *falsely called knowledge*—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen. (Emphasis ours throughout)

The *Amplified Bible* makes these verses clearer:

O Timothy, guard and keep the deposit entrusted [to you]! Turn away from the irreverent babble and godless chatter, with the vain and empty and worldly phrases, and the subtleties and the contradictions in what is falsely called knowledge and spiritual illumination. [For] by making such profession some have erred (missed the mark) as regards the faith. . . .

Paul warns Timothy about "the *subtleties* and *contradictions* of what is falsely called *knowledge* and *spiritual illumination*." The word translated "knowledge" in most translations ("science" in the King James Version) is the Greek *gnosis*. Literally meaning "to know," it forms the root of the word *Gnosticism*. It is possible, even probable, that Paul refers to Gnosticism here, since both of his letters

to Timothy contain warnings against false teachers bringing in foreign concepts that were undermining the faith of church members.

Remember, however, that his warning is against a particular type of *knowledge* that induced some members to stray from the faith, knowledge that was subtle and yet contradictory. That it was contradictory is interesting because Gnosticism not only contradicts the truth, but within Gnostic beliefs there are also many contradictions.

This past summer, tremendous buzz surrounded the movie version of Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code*. *The Da Vinci Code* is part of the popular revival of Gnosticism—even though it may not be recognized as such. Its underlying premise is that *secret knowledge* concerning the life of Jesus Christ has been repressed through the millennia and can only be uncovered by interpreting esoteric symbols and riddles. The story also blasphemes the true nature of Jesus Christ—a common element of Gnostic teachings—by proposing that He fathered a child by Mary Magdalene, and that a "divine" bloodline exists today.

The *Da Vinci Code* is not alone in its promotion of spiritual illumination by means of secret knowledge. *The Matrix*, released a number of years ago, is heavily laced with Gnosticism. (This is not a recommendation to see it, as it is a very violent movie containing a clever mix of truth and error.) Among its prevalent themes is that what happens in the mind can be entirely different from what happens in the body, and that the mind has to be "freed" to be able to accept truth. The main character has his mind opened to the knowledge of what human life "really" consists of and how it can be transformed for the better by gaining more power of the mind.

More recently, Walt Disney produced *National Treasure*, a film that introduces Freemasonry to the younger generation. Freemasonry is a prime example of Gnosticism; in fact, the *g* in the Masonic symbol does not stand for *God*, but for *gnosis*—that is, knowledge. Freemasons are initiated into secret knowledge and various mysteries through the teaching of more advanced Masons. Its symbolism and esoteric knowledge draws its adherents in, modifying their worldview. The Freemasonry in *National Treasure* is presented as exciting but harmless, with the "secret knowledge" dealing with various clues that would lead to an old and immense treasure. (Dan Brown is said to be working on another book, *The Solomon Key*, believed to be about Freemasonry.)

Many college fraternities and sororities—known as "Greek societies"—make use of symbols, rites, and ceremonies that originate in the same ancient "mystery religions" from which Freemasonry and the notorious "Babylonian Mystery religion" arose. The Greek societies, as well as the ancient mystery religions, have "outer mysteries," which the public may be privy to, as well as "inner mysteries," which are gradually imparted to initiated members. They even have a "high priest" or "high priestess" who conducts the ceremonies and rituals. Truly, Gnosticism is alive and well right now in various forms.

Gnostic "Gospels"

Recently, the newly-discovered *Gospel of Judas*, an example of what is called a "Gnostic gospel," has made headlines worldwide. It was not written at the same time as the four canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but rather appeared a couple of centuries later. The *Gospel of Judas* contradicts the true gospel accounts by asserting that Judas Iscariot was actually the hero, who had been given *secret knowledge* that the other disciples did not possess.

The opening line of the *Gospel of Judas* demonstrates this secret knowledge: "The *secret account* of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week, three days before he celebrated Passover." This so-called gospel gives a quite different view of the relationship between Jesus Christ and Judas, and its defenders say that it offers "new insights" into Jesus' betrayal, and the nature and character of Judas. "New insights" is another common theme of Gnosticism.

Several years ago, another Gnostic gospel, the *Gospel of Thomas*, was all the rage in the scholarly community. Its opening lines also emphasize this secret knowledge: "These are the *secret sayings* that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. And [Jesus] said, 'Whoever discovers the *interpretation* of these sayings will not taste death.'" Notice that the emphasis is immediately on discovering an *interpretation* and on increasing *knowledge* as a way to eternal life. It contains nothing about salvation coming through one's relationship with God or even about living a godly life. In this Gnostic gospel, eternal life comes from the *secret knowledge* that will explain the obscure sayings.

Not only were the Gnostic gospels written long after the fact, but they are also full of statements that oppose the text of the Bible. For example, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus allegedly says, "If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits." Scholars say that Jesus is advocating "fitting in" and "being true to oneself," phrases often repeated these days.

In another place in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus is quoted as saying, "[Blessed is] the one who came into being before coming into being." This makes absolutely no sense to us, but it does make a kind of sense to Gnostics, who believe in a dualism of flesh and spirit. Thus, they understand that "Jesus" implies that the spirit could come into being before the flesh. Many Gnostics were followers of *docetism*, the belief that *Jesus* and *Christ* were two separate beings in one body. Docetists believed that the *man Jesus* was born, and that the pre-existing *god Christ* entered into Him when He was baptized and left again before He was crucified. This, then, is an example of coming into being before coming into being.

Also in the gospel of Thomas,

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us, how will our end come?" Jesus said, "Have you found the beginning, then, that you are looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is. [Blessed is] the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death.

Again, *knowing* something is shown as the antidote of death. In this case, another element of dualism is that every person has a little spark of God in him or her, and that we have an eternal spirit (or soul) that is trapped or imprisoned within a body of flesh.

Modern Gnostic Doctrine

Gnostics generally believed that all spirit was inherently stable and good (overlooking the fact that Satan and his demons are spirit and yet also unstable and evil), while all matter and flesh was inherently evil (contradicting God's statement in Genesis 1:31 that *everything* God had made was "very good"). Plato reinforced this belief, writing, "The soul is the very likeness of the divine—

immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable." He also declared, viewing the body as a temporary house in which the soul is imprisoned, "The soul goes away to the pure, the eternal, the immortal and unchangeable to which she is kin."

The Gnostic goal was to learn the secret knowledge that would allow the inner spirit to be released from the confines of the flesh, enabling it to rejoin God in the spirit realm. Thus, the Gnostics linked the beginning and end (often depicted in the figure of a snake swallowing its tail), because if a person could figure out how the divine spark was infused into the flesh in the first place, he could then reverse it and release the spirit. We find the same basic tenet in the modern doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and the widespread belief that our "home" is in heaven, and that we go to this home when we die.

At the end of the *Gospel of Thomas* appears this bizarre statement:

Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life." Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven."

If we ever encounter someone who teaches that a woman must become a man to enter God's Kingdom, the source of his doctrine should be apparent!

Ironically, despite this incendiary verse, the modern feminist movement actually leans heavily on various Gnostic texts to substantiate their ideas. While they do not care much for this line in the *Gospel of Thomas*, they typically pass it off by saying that, as an allegory of the inner transformation every woman must go through in order to find herself, it should not be taken too literally.

However, feminists who try to find their roots in ancient "Christianity" draw heavily upon the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Eve*, and the *Pistis Sophia* (variously translated *Faith Wisdom*, *Wisdom in Faith*, *Faith in Wisdom* or *Faith of Sophia*—the Gnostic "divine counterpart of Christ"). From these texts springs the idea of the "divine feminine" (or "feminine divine"), and many liberal Christian churches rely on them as historical "proof" of female apostles, supporting the argument that women can and should hold any church position.

Philip Jenkins, in *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*, notes: "Gnostic believers practiced 'equal access, equal participation and equal claims to knowledge,' to the extent of *allocating clerical functions by lot* at their ceremonies." This can be seen not only in the ordination of women, but also in the attitude of some Christians who argue that, since "we *all* have the Holy Spirit," we do not need any authoritative teacher or leader.

Satan convinces those with Gnostic leanings to disparage the God-ordained roles and hierarchy within the church of God (see Ephesians 4:11-16). While this egalitarian idea might appear on the surface to contain utopian goodness, the result is confusion, as doctrine becomes subjected to the lowest common denominator. Not surprisingly, such individuals typically believe that *they know better*—or more—than the rest of the church and particularly the ministry. God's pattern is to establish doctrine and leadership through those *He* chooses (see, for instance, I Corinthians 12:18 and I Timothy 2:7).