

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9)

Immortality of the Soul and Gnosticism

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 26-Jun-04; Sermon #673

The majority of my last sermon in this series centered on the meaning of the word "cosmology." Cosmology is essentially the study of the world—even as biology is the study of life, and theology is the study of things pertaining to God. For the overwhelming majority of people on earth, the study of cosmology is informal. That is, nobody goes to school to pursue it. Rather one's cosmology results from a process that occurs more or less naturally, as one goes through life experiencing all sorts of information that is filtered through one's mind and becomes part of one's thinking. Thus, it influences our decision-making.

What is produced from cosmology is one's worldview. That is, the point or perspective from which one perceives life and its events within, and impacting upon, one's own environment—and therefore one's decision making as to how one will act, or react, to events.

It is constantly undergoing subtle adjustments that alter one's decision-making as we age, experiencing a wide variety of the events of life. For instance, if one marries and then has children, those events will in all probability force major adjustments to one's worldview. That is something that is easily seen, but that is how the process works.

If one becomes convinced that the world was not created but rather all things have evolved through natural processes, then it effectively eliminates God, angels, and demons from one's thinking—vastly altering the authority of laws, and therefore ethics and morality because then there is no authority higher than man.

However, there are some people who make the study of cosmology into a formality. Some of these people have had vast impact upon others' cosmology and their worldview because they influence people's views through their conclusions given in lectures and in writings. This happened in many ancient lands through the centuries prior to Christ's birth. But we are most interested in what happened in and to ancient Greece—which produced such men as Orpheus, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Ptolemy.

These men were all dead long before Christ began the church. However, they had great impact on it through their philosophies that they developed, wrote and lectured on. People believed their false teachings and carried them into the church whenever they

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

were converted. The false concepts had to be dealt with, and this resulted in much of what we read in the Epistles.

It is helpful to know that their ideas were held not only by Gentile converts but also Jewish ones as well. These men systematized Greek thinking into philosophies that were attractive to human nature. They were believed and became part of people's faith. And it is very important for us to know that many of these teachings are still believed; and they are practiced today, because they are part of modern Christianity's doctrinal base.

Those ancient philosophers, and their philosophies, and their religions included a form of evolution, the immortality of the soul, eternal security, purgatory, what we might call "Calvinistic predestination," reincarnation, astrology, antinomianism, and progressive revelation. They strongly believed that man came from heaven, calling it home, and would return there following death.

Even though they may have never heard of the Bible, their cobbled together doctrines—even including somewhat altered versions of biblical truth heard from generation to generation from their ancestors and right on down through because their ancestry went right on back to Shem, Ham, Japheth, and Noah too (just like everybody else's). Their ancestors went through the experiences of Genesis 10 and 11, just like the Israelitish peoples did.

We are going to look at a couple of scriptures that we looked at in a previous sermon, in Jeremiah 10, because we are going to develop the thought here a little bit.

Jeremiah 10:1-2 Hear you the word which the LORD speaks unto you, O house of Israel: Thus said the LORD, "Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them."

The exact events that precipitated Jeremiah writing this, I do not know. But there is a principle here. One is that the heavens meant a great deal to the people that we would call "pagans" back in those days.

Romans 1:18-23 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who [suppress] the truth in unrighteousness, because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has showed it unto them. For the invisible things of Him from

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse. Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

The Greeks, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians were all very interested in studying the heavens: (1) in astronomy and (2) in its ridiculous and ludicrous, nonsensical, occultic stepchild—astrology. This is one of the major places that their thinking jumped the track of reality.

Notice that it says when they observed and studied into the creation—in this case it was the structure of the universe... By "in this case," I mean what we are pursuing in this sermon. They became vain, or futile, in their reasoning. They suppressed clearly seen evidence of the Creator God, and that resulted in their foolish minds being darkened.

A question then: If their foolish minds were darkened, of what value then were their writings? Of what value then were their lectures? I cannot give you the actual steps that lead to their conclusions, but I can give you their conclusions.

I mentioned, a little bit earlier, a man by the name of Ptolemy. He was a second century B.C. Greek, living in Alexandria, Egypt; and he played a large role in systemizing Greek thought regarding the heavens. The Greeks concluded that the earth was the center of the universe, and around it revolves seven planets. The planets (in their picture of the structure of the heavens) included the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. That was as far out as they could look with the unaided eye.

To them, beyond the planets was the realm of the stars. And thus, in their cosmology was the realm of the earth, and above that the realm of the seven planets, and above that the realm of the stars. The word "planet" in Greek literally means wanderer. Because the planets moved their positions in relation to the earth, the Greeks concluded that above the earth was the realm of seven constantly moving wanderers consisting of the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

Because the planets moved their position in relation to the earth, the Greeks concluded that above the earth was this realm of seven constantly moving wanderers and that that

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

area in their cosmology was unstable. That is a key word here. It was unstable. It was moving.

But beyond the realm of the planets was the realm of the stars, and that was to them a realm of stability because with the unaided eye, and not having the instrumentation that we have (like telescopes), to them they were not moving. They were fixed.

They began to make some very interesting conclusions from this. In their hierarchy of beliefs, the stars then were a realm of peace and stability. But as one approached the earth from outer space, the stability gradually decreases. Instability became the norm—with Earth being a place of utter instability, chaos, and conflict. (So far, so good. I think that—without God's Word—you would have to conclude that maybe they were right.)

But take notice of the numbers "7" and "8." We will not go too much further, but those numbers are going to become very important for the formation of a couple of very important modern-day doctrines. Just so you understand that this is where these doctrines had their roots—in their interpretations of the numbers "7" and "8." That is, seven planets consisting of one realm, and the eighth realm (the area of the stars)—one realm being an area of instability, and the other being a realm of stability.

Do not forget that these people believed in astrology, and that they had theorized (besides these things) a large pantheon of gods and demons that appear in the mythology that they produced. They believed—without a shred of proof, and only on the basis of their very limited knowledge—that the realm of the planets (especially that area between the moon and Earth) was a realm of supernatural demonic powers influencing life on Earth. This is one of their heretical teachings that actually had a small amount of biblical truth to it, but it is twisted just enough to allow it to seem plausible; but it is still, nonetheless, untrue.

Jude 6 And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

Right there, in God's Word, it says that the angels left their first estate. We know, from other parts of the Bible, that their "first estate" was Earth. Now, we will combine this—just ever so briefly—with something that Paul wrote, which we are all very familiar with.

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Ephesians 2:2 Wherein in time past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience.

The Bible confirms that Earth is the demons' first estate, and Paul refers to Satan as "the prince of the power of the air." So you begin to see a vague connection between their conclusion and what the Bible actually says. There is no doubt that Satan and his demons influence life, but that influence is not coming from the stars and the planets. The demons are right here with us. This is where they went wrong. They are not up in the heavens.

It is right here that we are beginning to see that the ancient study of the heavens and several widely held notions by the ancients are brought together. Remember that I said earlier that there were notions handed down from generation to generations and simply accepted as true. Astrology is one of them. The immortality of the soul is another. Like astrology, they had absolutely no proof for it either, but believed it anyway—even as people do today. Are we any different really?

We know where that idea, that concept, came from. It came from "the father of lies" who convinced Adam and Eve with his very first sermon to mankind that immortality was natural and inherent to them. He said to them, "*You shall not surely die.*" That is the same thing as saying, "*You are immortal.*"

We know the truth. But at that time it was not like mankind must be *given* everlasting life. Satan convinced Adam and Eve that they already had it! Just remember and parallel this with what you know people believe today. They believe that immortality is inherent. Did you ever read the obituaries? Everybody is going to heaven! And you know that there is no more proof of that today than there was to the ancients.

I am just trying to make a "hook" so that you can see something obvious. That is, that what those people believed (at the time of Christ, and before the time of the Christ) is still held as true today. This is just one of the more obvious ones. There are many, many, many doctrines of modern Christianity that were just as wrong when the apostles wrote about them. There is nothing new under the sun.

And maybe it comes as a shock to us to know that what we see today is exactly what the apostles were writing against in the first century. It might have a slightly different name, but it is there; and nothing has changed. If it were not that way, the Bible could not be applied to every generation that lives.

Now, he went one step further in that confrontation with Adam and Eve, in that Satan said it is not that God-quality life must be created in man. Rather, it is imprisoned within him from birth; and it must be released. Satan said to them, "*You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.*" The implied conclusion is "*You will thus be in a position to set the standard, not having to be concerned about what God says.*"

There is an alternate translation to that verse. It is a slight change. From what my source (a commentator) said, it can read "*that you shall be as God*"—singular. It changes the interpretation slightly. The implication then is that Satan was saying, "*Like God, you have a fixed moral nature.*" That implication is true. However, what he left out is that their fixed moral nature would be fixed in sinfulness—not like God's, which is fixed in righteousness!

If you are going to be God, you have to have a fixed moral nature in righteousness. But Satan just left that out of his explanation. And this teaches us something that is very important—that one never gets the full truth from Satan. It always has a little twist to it that makes it untrue.

Adam and Eve passed these things on to their progeny. Thus, Satan's first great deception became the cornerstone doctrine of apostasy and paganism; and that is why God put this episode in its prominent position—right at the very beginning of the Book! And, as people begin reading from Genesis 1, they are going to run across these exceedingly smooth lies right at the beginning of their reading—in order to be warned. It is that important.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is the cornerstone doctrine of all paganism. "*You shall not surely die*" and "*You shall be as gods.*" That is, "*You do not have to be given immortality, you already have it.*" And "*You have a fixed moral nature.*" "*Fixed and senseless,*" which he left out. (Really tricky.)

Now, it is helpful to understand that the Hellenistic and Jewish worlds had a great deal of contact with each other long before Christ ever walked the earth. It began when Alexander the Great's armies conquered the Middle East, including Judea, in the fourth century B.C. Hellenism then strongly influenced Judea for almost 200 years. (That is a long time! America is only 228 years old.)

And, at that same time, the Greeks were also introduced to the Scriptures, and the Jews were introduced to Hellenistic philosophy; and many Jews—typically (just like the Israelites of old)—were attracted to many of their concepts and blended them in with the Scriptures.

The Greeks were very proud of their culture and very aggressive at promoting it among the Jews. This is not unusual. Conquering nations always try to impress their culture on those who are defeated. Is that not what we are trying to do in Iraq, right in this present day? Did we not do this to Japan and Germany, following World War II? The British did the same thing in India, the French in Africa, the Dutch in the East Indies. The Muslims are attempting to militantly impress their extreme radical religion upon one nation after another through their organizations like al-Qaeda, Hamas, and the Palestinian Authority.

The Greeks did that to the Jews. Why in the world do you think they destroyed the temple? To cut the Jews off from their religion, and impress the Greek culture upon them. And they were very successful.

When the true church began, where did it begin? It began in Judea, which had been heavily influenced by Hellenism. Gnosticism became blended with Hellenism, and Gnosticism became blended with Judaism; and the Jews then brought it right into the church. Like virtually every other Israelitish religion, Judaism at the time was a syncretism of truth and error. What came out of that was a religion that was very, very dangerous to the church. Do you know why? It looks very good to casual observation.

An essential thread of Greek philosophical and religious teaching is a simple dualism. This is a third key element to their philosophical and religious teaching. Number one: Their cosmology with its worldview, which included astrology. That is the number one element. Number two was the teaching of the immortality of the soul and "*You shall be as gods.*" And number three sort of completed the "trinity"—and that is dualism.

We have to understand (This is important!) that this is still prevalent today in modern Christianity. So let us explain dualism a bit. If you ask a member of the churches out there whether they believe what I am about to describe for you, I am certain that they would say "Absolutely not." And yet they practice it in their conduct, not knowing where it came from.

Listen to this definition of **dualism**. It comes from my Reader's Digest Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary. (Notice the word "theory.") Dualism is: *The theory that the universe is composed of two principles, as mind and matter. The theory that man's body and mind are two different entities, but intimately correlated and interacting. The theory that there are two eternal and opposing principles or beings, one good and the other evil.*

Now, typically, there is a bit of truth within that but a whole lot of error as well. But let us

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

go on. The Greeks divided the universe into matter and spirit. They determined that matter is bad, but spirit is good. This concept is false right on the face of biblical truth.

I Timothy 4:1-5 Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils [demons]; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats [or, foods], which God has created to be received with thanksgiving to them which believe and know the truth. [Now notice verse 4.] For every creature of God is good [not evil, as the Greeks concluded], and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

Now, we did not even have to go to the New Testament. We could have gone to Genesis 1:31, where it says:

Genesis 1:31 And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.

"**Very good**"—not evil, as the Greeks concluded as part of their dualism. "And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." Within the context, every thing He made in relation to earth is matter. And matter, they determined, is temporary and unstable; and therefore temporary things are bad, evil. This has really perverse results.

Conversely, eternal things are stable and good according to Greek dualism. How about demons? Are they stable? Are they good? The twists are beginning to show. This is a dominant thought in their philosophies though; and it has sneaked into the Christian church, where elements of it remain to this day.

Once this was accepted, it was very easy to divide man into body and soul—two parts. The body is temporary and evil, and the soul (that they already concluded was immortal) was therefore good. There is not a shred of truth in that, but just simply human reason coming to a conclusion that is at odds with what God says.

Now listen to this quote from Plato, from his *Phaedo*: "*The soul is the very likeness of the divine—immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable.*" Plato viewed the body as a temporary house in which the soul is imprisoned. He wrote

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

also: "*The soul employs the body.*"

They reach these conclusions without any submission to the Creator's Word. But do not get it into your mind that they had no knowledge of the Creator's Word. We just read, in Romans 1, that "when they knew God..." Who do you think Paul is talking about there? He is talking about the Gentiles, as well as the Israelites. They did not acknowledge Him as God.

Do you know, brethren, that they knew about Yahweh? Do you know what their conclusion about Yahweh was? They could look in God's Word and see that Yahweh created the earth. And they looked at the earth, and looked at all the chaos and confusion; and [concluded] therefore that Yahweh was evil. You talk about getting things twisted! But that was a conclusion that was part of their dualistic thinking.

Let me give you a common application of how elements of dualism destroy. There are many people calling themselves "Christian" who carelessly think that it matters not what or how much they eat. Think about this. They will eat anything that crawls, moves, or whatever. You name it—shrimp or whatever. Thus they fail to take care of either a relationship with God or their bodies. I would say that, in fact, it is highly likely that most of them obey very few laws of health. Life is lived as if there is no connection between what is believed spiritually and what one does physically.

Do you grasp the practical affects of what the Greeks believe? They believe that each person is actually two radically different beings belonging to different realms. And, thus, the destruction or misuse of the body does not mean a thing, since its destruction or misuse cannot destroy the soul. Indeed, to them the ultimate destruction—death—simply frees the soul from the body. And that therefore introduces it, frees it, and opens its way to its true being. Thus, Plato concluded: "*The soul goes away to the pure, the eternal, the immortal and unchangeable to which she is kin.*"

I am going to put that in modern terminology. He said that, at death, the soul goes to where it came from. Have you ever read obituaries, or heard one say that the Lord called the deceased "back home," or that the deceased has "gone home" to be with the Lord? Do you begin to understand where that came from? Is that thought prevalent in modern Christianity today? Where did they get that? It is NOT in the Bible. That is Greek theological belief that stems from the immortality of the soul. "*And you shall be as gods.*"

Are you beginning to see where their belief leads to? In other words, according to them our real "home" is somewhere out there. We have been sent here, and we are going to

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

go back there.

John 3:13 [Jesus said:] "No man has ascended up to heaven, but He [one person] that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven."

So the belief that mankind came from heaven, and returns there following death, came right out of Greek philosophy—not the Bible. Thus, the taproot of the "going to heaven" doctrine is exposed! It came from the Greeks. They were not the only ones. We are just more concerned about them. The Babylonians believed essentially the same thing, and so did the Egyptians.

Now, let me ask you a question. This is number nine of this series of sermons, and the topic of this series is: **Does it really matter what we believe?** Are we free to pick and choose the doctrines that we are going to believe—thinking they will take us into the Kingdom of God, prepared for that? No.

Let us continue to develop this idea that I started with the illustration of the body. Regarding the thought about taking care of one's body, to them it did not matter. That is, one does not have to be concerned about taking care of it—because, under dualistic belief, it is physical; and therefore its value is virtually nil.

Does it matter, then, what we believe? The practical ramifications become even more serious—because spiritually, if believed, it effectively renders sin (failing to hit the mark; going out of the way; failure to submit to the Creator's laws) as being of no consequence. Why? All of these acts are done in the material flesh, and therefore, mean nothing to the eternally pure soul.

Now, what we are beginning to see are the vague elements of **antinomianism**. That is, anti-law. All of this is tied to the immortality of the soul. All of this is tied to dualism. Even though a modern person might not perceive the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the same way as the ancients, it still has an affect—whether subtle or obvious—on one's thinking, attitude, and conduct by making the person give less consideration to the consequences of his actions.

If one already has immortality, why resist the flesh's pull towards sin? Why be wary of, and resist, Satan? Why refuse to go along with the ways of this world? Why devote one's life to growing and overcoming, to study and other means of coming to know God and His truth? Why should one make the effort if one already has eternal life?

Thus, the vastly different perspectives and approaches to death that are exhibited by Christ and Socrates. Do you remember that sermon I gave, way back before the Days of Unleavened Bread and before Passover, in which I looked pretty extensively into what Christ did in the face of death and what His attitude towards it was—as compared to Socrates? What a difference between the two!

If I can put it this way, death was really respected by Christ. He did not want to have to face it. To Him, it was a major enemy that was to be fought 'tooth and toenail' and, in a sense, to give one's life in resisting it. But Socrates blithely went after it, and even committed suicide in order to possess it, because to Socrates death was a friend. To Christ, it is an enemy—the last enemy to be destroyed. What made them take such radically different approaches? One had truth. The other did not.

I Corinthians 6:19 [Notice what Paul says here.] What? Know you not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is in you, which you have of God, and you are not your own?

The body is the temple of God's Holy Spirit; and, as such, it is the closest part of God's "very good" creation to each and every one of us. And God, at the very beginning of the Book, charges us with the responsibility to dress and keep it to the very best of our being. This body that we have is the part of God's creation that is closest to you and me, and we are charged to take care of it.

Do you believe this? Do you take care of your body, or carelessly leave things to chance with the hope that your genes are good. Because of human nature—man is an inveterate gambler—is ever willing to take a chance that it will not happen to him, and ever willing to put off doing the right thing until it is more convenient.

It is no wonder, brethren, that Satan began his attack against God's plan and His purpose with this doctrine of the immortality of the soul. It cleverly deflects God's purpose for human life. Satan has been extremely successful in subtly turning mankind aside with this doctrine, containing its hidden dualism component.

How many religions out there in the world, calling themselves "Christian," believe that they already have an immortal soul? Almost every one of them! I know some groups that know that we do not have an immortal soul. The Jehovah Witnesses know we do not have an immortal soul, because they believe what the Bible says about that. But the overwhelming majority accept that as a given, and it is subtly working against them like a cancer in the spiritual aspects of their lives.

Unfortunately, many in the first century church did not disregard Greek thinking either. But, as long as they lived, the apostles held to the revealed truths of God's Word and fought the unending onslaughts of the philosophical and religious systems of their day. Their story is told in the Epistles.

What we are looking at here is the beginning of what became known as **Gnosticism**. If you are studying—especially in Protestant commentaries of various kinds—you will occasionally notice references to Gnosticism. However, at this point there are two things that I feel are important for us to understand about Gnosticism.

The first one is to know that Gnosticism was NEVER an organized religion. It was not what we would call today a denomination or a corporate group. It was merely a variety of philosophical and religious concepts and opinions brought into the church through the conversion of its members.

And those opinions did not end with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. They included other philosophical anti-God conclusions that were devastating to God's purpose for them, but the people foolishly did not dump those concepts when confronted by the truths of God's Word that contradicted their philosophical beliefs.

We see many of these in the truths of the Epistles of the apostles, as they used the mind of Christ to confront the specious Gnostic beliefs; but many, many times the faithful teachings of the apostles were rejected. Thus, the way those converts looked at life after conversion was not a whole lot different from the way they looked at life before conversion—except that now they believed that they had a Savior. Thus, growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ was severely blunted.

There was a secondary affect in one of the major doctrines of the Christian church. That is, the doctrine of grace. I want you to look at just one place here. Probably in the next sermon we are going to be looking at the New Testament; and I am going to show you place after place where the apostles, especially Paul, were confronting Gnostic teaching. They are not labeled in the Bible "Well this is a Gnostic teaching." But we know, by comparing what they wrote with what we know about the Gnostics now, and we can put two and two together. The incredible thing, brethren, is that those same doctrines are being practiced today in what is called Christianity! It has never left the church!

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may about?

What did I just say, about five minutes ago? If you believe in the immortality of the soul, and if you accept dualism as a part of this, then sin becomes nothing to you. It really does not matter. And so sin abounds. But what did these people do? They then would claim the grace of God, and they would be free (they said) to do whatever they wanted in their body because the grace of God would cover it.

You are going to hear some amazing statements that the reformers—like Martin Luther, and John Calvin, and others who are named in the Bible—said about keeping God's law and about sin. Their Gnosticism will be exposed before you, and you will understand the difference between what we learned through Herbert Armstrong and what these people are out there preaching, and why Mr. Armstrong would get so excited about these things.

"Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" And look at verse 12, where Paul charges:

Romans 6:12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in the lusts thereof.

Why would he write such a thing? There were people in the church who were saying—for themselves, to justify themselves; and they were passing it on to others—*"It really does not matter if you sin."*

Romans 6:14-15 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under the law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.

To you, that really sounds weird. Why would you have to be told what Paul just told these people? You should not have to. But to the people out there, sin is for the most part not all that bad.

That is the first thing that you need to know about Gnosticism. It was NOT a denomination. It was merely a collection of beliefs that people brought into the church with them.

The second thing is that these people did not call themselves Gnostics. They called themselves Christians! That is incredible. Why is it incredible? The same thing is

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

happening today. These people are calling themselves Christians.

A Gnostic is one who knows. That is all it is. He is a person who knows. These people within the Church of God claim to be converted; but it is evidenced by their opinions that essentially they felt that they knew better than others, and God Himself.

Now, do you know what one of the most devastating beliefs was that came into the church through this philosophical teaching? It is what is called today—because it is still believed—**progressive revelation**. The modern spin-off of this doctrine is what gives individuals "the right" to believe and practice something different from what God's Word teaches, because they believe it is "right" for them in their situation. *"Ah, God surely would not require that of me."*

What this doctrine does is that it essentially makes plausible that the Lord is directly inspiring them. Have you ever heard people say, *"The Lord said to me,"* or *"While I was praying the other night, the Lord spoke to me telling me to do this or that"?* We all like to think that God does this, and indeed He does. But, if He does, He will never give anyone counsel that contradicts the letter and spirit of His Word. If He did, He would be contradicting Himself!

The Gnostic will ignore that and hold fast to his own heretical opinion. This kind of thinking is persuasive in modern Christianity. So much so, that Alan Knight in his book—"Primitive Christianity in Crisis"—calls modern Catholic and Protestant Christianity by the epithet "Hellenistic Christianity."

You heard me, at the very beginning of this series, giving you a major number of quotes from the Barna Report that clearly shows that evangelical born-again people feel free to reject clear biblical teaching in favor of their own opinion. Brethren, Gnosticism is alive and well, and unfortunately it is being followed; and it is dividing the true church today, even as it did in the first century.

Do you know what blew the Worldwide Church of God apart? It was the acceptance of some of these doctrines that came straight out of Gnosticism. Scads of people followed it! And the church scattered all over the place.

The Protestant variety, especially the evangelical aspect of it, is especially dangerous to us because we tend to feel somewhat more of a kinship with them than we do with Catholicism and the liberal, mainline Protestant groups. That sense of kinship exists because they give the impression of sincerely desiring to be righteous by means of Christ's righteousness and morals according to the keeping of God's commandments.

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

And they desire to have a wonderful warm relationship with the Father and Son.

Now, I am not calling their sincerity into question. However, when one looks closer at their doctrinal foundation and their conduct, they are betrayed as to whom it is they are following—I might add, in almost every case—blindly. They just do not know it. They are in ignorance of what they are following. These people are often more zealous and sincere than the mainline Protestants. In many cases, they will even give us a run for the money in regard to trying to obey the tenants of their faith.

But their doctrinal base includes the immortality of the soul, eternal security, the trinity, dispensationalism, antinomianism, an ever-burning hell, going to heaven, progressive revelation, hybrid tongues-speaking—and not one of these doctrines is biblical!

How did these devastating teachings get into the church—through the Jews, or through the Gentiles? I do not know whether it can be established directly by Scripture, but the implication of Scripture points the finger at the Jews (not the Gentiles). We might tend to think, *"How can this be, since Gnosticism is of Gentile origin?"* Well, let us take a look at Acts 6.

Acts 6:1-6 And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look you out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayers, and to the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

Remember that I said earlier that Greece strongly influenced Judea for almost 200 years. In Acts 6, the church had barely formed. But did you take notice of the Greek names in verse 5? Also, up in verse 1, these people are called Grecians. But, if you look in the margin, the margin corrects it into Hellenists. These people with the Greek names were not Greeks. They were Jews with Greek names.

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

God did not call the first Gentiles into the church until Acts 10, when He sent Peter to speak to Cornelius and his family. These men then in Acts 6 with Greek names were Jews who had associated themselves with and believed Hellenistic teachings. They were Hellenists. What we see in this chapter is, I believe, the opening wedge—because these men were not the only ones who were Hellenists. A whole group of Hellenists Jews came before the apostles and said, "*Hey, our widows are not being taken care of.*"

Deuteronomy 12:29-32 When the LORD your God shall cut off the nations from before you, whither you go to possess them, and you succeed them, and dwell in their land: take heed to yourself that you be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before you; and that you inquire not after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? Even so will I do likewise." You shall not do so unto the LORD your God: for every abomination to the LORD, which He hates, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters have they burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: you shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

These verses cover a frequently stated principle of obedience. The Israelitish people were to walk the straight and narrow, and not inquire into how other nations worshipped their gods. They were neither to add to, nor take away, from what God decreed. The Israelites would do this only when there was a strong leadership like of a Joshua, or a David, or a Hezekiah, or a Josiah. Otherwise, their curiosity—their constant seeking of variety, their seemingly inborn "the grass is always greener" approach—led them astray throughout their entire history.

And many Jews, of the period before Jesus, searched into and accepted Greek philosophies and religion; and this same weakness is just as prevalent today. There are many Americans who have associated themselves with non-Israelite religions. Quite a number of Americans are of the Muslim faith. Others have delved into Hinduism and Buddhism, and New Age religions. Even ancient Druidism—with its witchcraft—has made a modern revival in the United States of America.

The patterns are still being followed. So I believe that Gnosticism first came into the church through the Jews, and there is a doorway to understanding that right in Acts 6—when God was still only, as it were, converting Israelitish people. He had not yet expanded the church to the Gentiles; so that when the Gentiles did become converted, they would find people within the true church—who were Jews—who were already believing beliefs that they had from their culture.

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 9) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

The apostles never succeeded in getting rid of it, and neither did Herbert Armstrong ever succeed in getting the deviations from the faith that was delivered to us out of the church either. It began dividing it in the 1970s. There are a lot of opinions about those things, but the principle is still there.

When Gentiles began coming into the church, the church was almost overwhelmed by these pagan beliefs. In the next sermon, we will begin to look at what the apostles wrote; and I think you are going to be surprised at how much Gnosticism is addressed—in what Paul especially wrote, but none of them are left out.

The whole book of Jude is aimed at Gnosticism. Who do you think those false prophets were that he was talking about, who were already in the church? It was them! And guess what they were teaching: The same things that they teach today and accept as coming from the Bible. But it did not come from the Bible. And it still does not.