

Whatever Happened To Gnosticism? Part Two: Defining Gnosticism

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Gnosticism is difficult to define because it comes in so many flavors and interpretations. By itself, it is not a separate denomination or religion but a religious philosophy. It is a framework from which to explain the nature of God, creation, good and evil, man, and the purpose of life. Gnostics tended to focus exclusively on the inner life of the spirit, which they clearly differentiated from material life.

Author R.V. Young, in his book *Harold Bloom: the Critic as Gnostic*, summarizes Gnostic teachings this way:

The Gnostics' teaching places the origin of evil, of pain and suffering, in the conditions of the *material creation*; salvation involves *overcoming ignorance* and escaping these external conditions by *finding divinity within*. . . . The Gnostic finds the beginning of the path to salvation in the *realization* that the world is a great imposture, a prison of pain and frustration. His escape lies in *recovering the intrinsic good within himself*, the principle of illumination that he shares with other enlightened spirits. . . . What makes it possible for the self and God to commune so freely is that *the self already is of God*. (Emphasis ours throughout)

Gnosticism contained only a few core beliefs, but as long as they were adhered to, they could be infused into any number of religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and even Islam (the Gnostic form of which is known as *Sufism*). The Gnostic concepts are typically traced back to the religions of Persia and India (Zoroastrianism and Hinduism), but they have been added to and modified over time, especially as they became entrenched in Greek culture. As Plato's writings are full of Gnostic concepts, he furthered the cause of the Gnostics tremendously.

Today, Jewish mystics practice a religion known as *Kabbalah*, a Gnostic version of Judaism. Its most famous spokesperson right now is none other than Madonna, but other celebrated practitioners include Demi Moore, Britney Spears, and Mick Jagger. Kabbalah—a Hebrew term that literally means "receiving"—holds that it is the "soul" of the Torah, and that the secrets of life are hidden within its text. It also uses and tries to give the true meaning of the Jewish "Oral Law." Thus, it takes elements of Judaism and arranges them according to secret knowledge about the nature of God, good and evil, and the origin and destiny of man. Its adherents believe that they have found enlightenment, even as they live notoriously debased lives.

Galatian Gnosticism

Paul penned the book of Galatians because church members in Galatia were turning away from the true gospel and had embraced a false one (Galatians 1:6-7). Early on, Paul had to establish his credentials—that the gospel he preached did not have its source in any man, as Gnostic ideas do, but had come directly from Jesus Christ (verses 11-12). The Galatians were returning to the "weak and beggarly elements" (Galatians 4:9), referring to the demonism they had been involved in prior to their conversion (verse 8). The Gentile Galatians were observing certain days, months, seasons, and

years that had nothing to do with God's holy days (verse 10), but were part of a system that elevated rites and ceremonies above the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, even while paying lip service to Christianity.

Paul addresses a philosophy that venerated the Torah—and went so far as to teach that one could be justified by works of the law—but also involved astrology and receiving revelations from angels (Galatians 1:8). Because of the belief that the spirit of a person was trying to get back to heaven, worship of angels and astrology was a common tenet of Gnosticism, since angels and the patterns of stars and planets were believed to hold keys to this spiritual journey. Contrary to popular assumption, Paul does not condemn God's law in Galatians but a corrupt system that was severely affecting the church. That Gnostic system happened to include an emphasis on the Old Covenant at the expense of Jesus Christ's life, death, and teachings.

Gnostic Christians borrowed the idea of redemption through Christ, but rather than believing that He redeemed them from *sin*, they believed that He would redeem them from *matter*—that is, from the flesh, which they considered to be inherently evil. At the core of Gnosticism is the belief that *knowledge*, typically secret knowledge—knowledge from angels, from the stars and planets, from the ancients—was the path to holiness and salvation. They believed that the path of redemption was through knowledge, and that the worst evil was *ignorance*.

Thus, they did not endeavor to overcome sin but ignorance. If they could just become wise enough, they reasoned, sin would not be a problem because they would be more *spiritual* than *physical*. Obviously, they overlooked man's incurably sick heart (Jeremiah 17:9), and the struggle that a person must undertake to overcome it. The Gnostics believed that the solution was found in greater understanding, rather than in a Savior and High Priest who justifies and guides us through a process of sanctification. In essence, *Gnostics would rather learn than submit*.

What is more, the knowledge that the Gnostics sought always originated in something other than God and His Word. We know that knowledge itself is not the problem. In the Bible, knowledge is generally presented as a good thing. God goes so far as to say that Israel is "destroyed for *lack of knowledge*" (Hosea 4:6). However, the knowledge He means is the knowledge of Himself and of His way of life, not knowledge as an end in itself.

In the New Testament, Paul tells the congregation at Rome that Israel has "a zeal for God, but not according to *knowledge*" (Romans 10:2). Israelites like to think they are serving God, but the way they go about it is contrary to the instructions that God gave them. Jesus Himself says that eternal life is to *know* God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3), by which He means the *experience* of an intimate relationship with the Father and the Son, something the Gnostics would never accept. They believed that a spiritual and thus pure God would have nothing to do with what they considered to be entirely evil matter and flesh. They did not care that God called His physical creation "good"—even "very good"—for they still saw it as corrupt, a prison from which to be liberated.

Gnosticism in Colossae

Colossians 2:8-10 gives another general definition of Gnosticism, as well as how to combat it:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the [divine nature] bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Paul writes of a *philosophy* like Stoicism, not a specific religion, such as Judaism. This is important to recognize, since in verse 16, Paul mentions the Sabbath and holy days, and it is commonly assumed that Paul condemns their observance. Yet, he does not—he warns against a philosophy that disparaged the feasting and joyous observance of the Sabbath and holy days. This is why Paul tells the Colossians to "let no one judge you" with regard to eating, drinking, or observing the weekly and annual Sabbaths—rather than what is commonly read into Colossians 2:16: "There is no reason to keep the Sabbath or holy days." Christians in Colossae were being pressured by the *ascetic* society around them, which would have looked down on their feasting.

This is confirmed in the rest of Colossians 2, which deals primarily with asceticism (see especially Colossians 2:21-23). Some branches of Gnosticism adhered to asceticism as a way to free the eternal spirit by living regimented, plain, and insular lives. (Conversely, some Gnostics went to the other extreme—practicing hedonism—believing that what they did with their bodies did not make any difference since only *spirit* mattered.)

Paul says that this philosophy and its associated doctrines were plausible, but they were not based on solid arguments. He calls them "vain deceit" (KJV) or "empty deceit" (NKJV). They may sound good, depending upon one's inclination, but they endanger church members. The apostle writes that they would be "spoiled" (KJV), which does not necessarily mean being "corrupted," but rather of being "plundered," hence the NKJV's use of "cheated." This empty philosophy would rob or cheat them of their faith, their hope, their understanding of God, their relationship with God, their vision, and the purpose that God is working out. Once introduced, it would begin to steal away all of their true, spiritual riches.

Paul also provides two possible sources of this unsteady philosophy: "the traditions of men" and the "rudiments of the world." Examining the "rudiments of the world" first will help to explain the traditions of men. Other translations call them the "elements of the world," the "basic principles of the world," or "the powers of the world." In using this term, Paul is referring to the demonic powers that make this world, this *cosmos*, what it is. The source of this philosophy of salvation through special knowledge is Satan and the demons.

This explains why, when we read the histories of various religions and their branches, the same patterns arise time and again. Man does not have it within himself to pass along accurately and dependably ideas that go back to the very beginning. With an incessant drumming, the powers of the world keep prompting men and women in the same vain deceits that directly contradict the truth about God and His purpose for mankind.

Humans certainly play a role in handing down these traditions. Sunday school teachers and theologians perpetuate the Gnostic myths of the immortality of the soul, of eternal consciousness, of progressive revelation, of each person having a spark of goodness within that just needs to be fanned into a flame, and of each soul or spirit existing before in heaven and returning there upon death. Men pass these traditions on to other men, but the powers of the spirit world keep these messengers on their track and blinded to the truth.

A Counter to Gnosticism

The last phrase in Colossians 2:8—"not according to Christ"—is a simple one, but it encapsulates what this is all about. Not a single branch of Gnosticism had the truth about Jesus Christ. That knowledge can be found only in God's Word.

At every turn, it seems, the main object of Gnosticism was to twist the nature of Christ. Some Gnostics believed that *Jesus* was a man, but that *Christ* entered into Jesus when He was baptized and left Him right before He died. Other Gnostics believed that Jesus did not really die—because, after all, if He died, then He was not really God. Others believed that He could not have been perfect and sinless because He created matter, which Gnostics believed to be evil. And there were also those who believed that Jesus Christ was a created being—an idea that is still affecting the fringes of the church of God today.

So if we want to counter Gnosticism, we must begin with the truth of Jesus Christ. Paul emphasizes this in verses 9-10: Jesus was the fullness of the divine nature in bodily form, and He is the head, the leader, the sovereign, of every principality and power. Though the Gnostics in their various views always twisted or denied some aspect of the nature and role of Jesus Christ, these truths brought out by the apostle are bedrock beliefs for true Christians.

Also foundational to countering Gnosticism is the truth that Jesus brought. To combat the false knowledge that threatens to plunder our spiritual riches, we must take the Bible as the complete and inspired Word of God, against which we can test any concept, tradition, doctrine, or philosophy, no matter how good it sounds on the surface. Gnostics would not readily accept the Bible as God's inspired revelation, or if they did, they also held that other ancient, secret writings were on par with Scripture, and could be trusted to provide greater insight.

In addition, Gnostics were also avid proponents of "progressive revelation," the belief that God is continuing to reveal His will to mankind, but with the implication that Holy Scripture is not as important as hearing directly from the spirit world. Thus, some today, while not entirely rejecting the Bible, believe that "God" is personally revealing things to them—things which often contradict what He has already given to mankind in His written Word.