

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 4 – THERE’S GOTTA BE MORE. OR IS THERE?

INTRODUCTION

In this lecture I am going to introduce you to a very ancient and complicated belief structure. Someone might ask, “Why bother if these ancient heretics are dead?” And the answer is that these heretics are dead but the heresy isn’t. This heresy was experienced by the Church in the 1st Century, but it wasn’t until the 2nd and 3rd Century that it had a name and became full-blown. It is alive and well in our modern culture. It is called Gnosticism.

“The Gnostics were followers of a variety of religious movements in the early Christian centuries which stressed that people could be saved through a secret knowledge (*gnosis* in Greek). The clearest evidence for these movements, collectively known as Gnosticism, comes in Christian writings of the second century. These viewed the Gnostic groups as heretical perversions of Christianity.”¹

The first Gnostic was Satan: “*For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” (Genesis 3:5, ESV). Satan tempted Adam and Eve enticing them to ignore what God “actually said” to seek a higher plane of knowledge.

Most of our knowledge of the Gnostics rested solely on such early writers as Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian etc. “In 1946 a priceless cache of twelve Coptic codices and fragments was discovered ear Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt . . . The collection, which deposited in A.D. 400, contains about fifty works.”² These are the infamous but heretical Gnostic Gospels. If you remember the movie The Da Vinci Code, it was based on one of these Gnostic Gospels.

It might surprise you to know that Gnosticism is flourishing today. Type ‘gnosticism’ or ‘gnostics’ into any Search Engine and you will be surprised what you come up with. You will find everything from established places of teaching and worship to rock bands.

WHAT IS GNOSTICISM?

I will warn you that this movement is so complex that even the most distinguished writers have difficulty boiling down all its idiosyncrasies into a concise statement. This study will simply take a wide angle, overview of the movement.

“The Gnostic movement has two salient features that appeal to countless minds in every age, i.e. the claim to present a secret lore [knowledge], explaining otherwise incomprehensible mysteries, and the

¹ Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 98

² Ibid, Page 98

assertion that its secrets are accessible only to the elite-thus by implication defining as elite all who take an active interest in them.”³

“The adherents of Gnosticism regarded gnosis (secret knowledge), rather than faith in Christ or observance of the law, as the way of salvation. The saving “knowledge” involved a revelation of the true nature both of the self and of God. For Gnostics, self-knowledge is knowledge of God.”⁴

Some of the modern-day proponents of Gnosticism define their belief this way: “Gnosis is the power of receiving and understanding direct revelation from God and the transformation of the whole man into a spiritual being by contact with him.”⁵ The Gnostics believed in one superior supreme God. This god was so lofty and holy they could not imagine that he would create a universe out of matter. This god spawned emanations (called *aeons*) or spiritual beings. One count is that 325 *aeons* came from this god. One would produce another. Down the list of spiritual beings there became an aeon, a godlike spirit they called the Demiurge. He created the Universe. Being an evil god, he created an evil universe. Therefore, everything created, everything human, all material/fleshly substance is evil. Only spirit is good. One saving grace was when this evil god created mankind there was found to be a little spark of divinity in humans. The Gnostics that tried to embrace Christianity believed that this evil god, Demiurge, was also the god of the Old Testament: mean and cruel. (NB: you’ve probably heard of the dichotomy between the god of the OT and the god of the New!) They believe in a Christ-like spirit who came to earth to save humans – but the salvation was elevating them away from what is earthy and material, so they live and learn in a spiritual dimension.

So, the Gnostics would have rejected anything earthy, human, material like orders of service, institutions like the church, bread/wine for communion, the Bible, baptism, human teachers, etc. etc. (That might sound familiar to you?)

WHERE IS MODERN GNOSTICISM?

Modern day Gnosticism is essentially seen in the contemporary new age movement. One of the most popular and influential gnostic teachers is Oprah Winfrey. Her book, *The Secret*, which has been translated into 50 languages and sold over 30 million copies is an expression of this belief. Modern Gnosticism or the New Age Movement has invaded all sectors of life including the Church. The Christian Church has been invaded by mysticism.

Mysticism is the belief that superior spiritual knowledge can be attained through contemplation, self-awareness and mysterious esoteric experiences, trances, dreams and visions, etc.

³ Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 44

⁴ - Holcomb, Justin S., *Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2)* (p. 35). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁵ <https://www.amazon.ae/Gnosis-Light-Translation-Apocalypse-Contained/dp/1169232558>.

HOW DID THE CHURCH ENGAGE GNOSTICISM?

“To the churches at Corinth and Colossae, Paul battled the Gnostic heresy with a robust Christology — teaching about the person and work of Christ. His solution to their abhorrent views of the body, the resurrection, and salvation was to point them to the supremacy of Christ in his incarnation, life, death, and victorious resurrection.”⁶

As this embryonic form of Gnosticism attacked the Colossian church, Paul wrote in Colossians 2:8–10 (ESV):

“⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

When Paul wrote “and you have been filled in him”, he meant as other translations make it plain: “you are complete in Him.” You cannot add to Jesus. If you are in Christ, there is no special knowledge you need apart from Jesus. The Judaizers tried to add Jewish religious practices to Jesus. The Gnostics tried to add pagan, mystery religions to Jesus. Both are heretical.

But these people taught that Jesus could not take on flesh because anything material is evil. “Since matter is evil, Jesus did not come in the flesh or suffer. Instead, Jesus was pure spirit, and he merely mimicked the appearance of a man in order to show how flimsy the material prison really is.”⁷

The Apostle John addressed this Gnostic heresy particularly in his 1st letter: “*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.*” (1 John 4:2–3, ESV)

In fact, John also assures his readers that if they are in Christ, they have no need of special knowledge apart from Christ and His apostolic message (i.e., the Bible). “*Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore, we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.*” (1 John 2:18–21, ESV)

⁶ - Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (pp. 39-40). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁷ - Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 36). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

You see the Gnostics rejected the Scriptures because they were material words on a material page written by human authors. In a nutshell, the Gnostics rejected the plain, objective Scriptures for a secret, revealed, mysterious knowledge revealed to them in an exalted experience and given only to the elite who achieve that experience.

WHERE MIGHT WE SEE GNOSTICISM ENCROACHING THE CHURCH?

There are several signals in the modern western church to cause us concern. Gnosticism or Christian mysticism shows up in several ways:

The first area to be concerned is found in movements that may be called charismatic. Any movement that seeks knowledge through inner voices, dreams, visions, ecstatic experiences and finds them superior to the Bible and creates a community where there are some who are the elite having experienced this is nothing short of ancient Gnosticism revived. Anyone who places personal intuition and spiritual experiences above the inspired, written, authoritative and infallible Word of God is dangerously ill.

Whenever you find teachers looking for hidden meanings in the Bible, beyond the historical, grammatical work of study, you are in danger. Allegorical interpretations of Scripture (e.g. Priscilla Shirer). Seeing hidden number clues and the like, are all efforts to transcend the human experience and operate in the world of mysticism.

Spiritual exercises such as yoga or contemplative prayer are supremely dangerous. Contemplative prayer is the new thing in evangelical circles. Once a pagan exercise it crept into the early Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics and now finds itself in an acceptable place, even among popular teachers like Beth Moore.

The view that you must get as many people – as many as possible praying for a certain thing, so that God will be moved to act, is nothing short of New Age mysticism. New age mysticism teaches that the Universe is moved by the spiritual union of minds. There are Christian mystics who assume that enough people are praying in unison God is obligated to answer accordingly.

Repetitive mantras in our singing and praying are nothing short of a mystical ideology. When emotional feelings and emotional worship is seen as more spiritual than using God-given mental acumen it becomes dangerous.

Many Christians today having brought up on a diet of “read your Bible, pray every day” have become dissatisfied. “There has to be more,” they cry. They look for the spiritual high that can come from mystical experiences. They look for something new, but **the truth is that when it comes to truth there is nothing new.** It has been delivered to us through the Incarnate Word and the Inspired Word. One is God in flesh and the other is God-breathed literature.

FINAL WORD

Mysticism or Gnosticism is highly speculative and subjective. It is very individualistic, inward, anti-institutional, anti-intellectual. It is repulsed by a faith-based reliance on God incarnated in Jesus and the inspired authorship of the Scriptures. Hear this from Peter:

A. We will neither escape the corruption in this world nor will we gain anything pertinent to life and truth by ecstatic, mysterious, mystical experiences. Peter is clear: *“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.”* (2 Peter 1:3–4, ESV).

B. There is no mystical experience that trumps the Word of God, the Bible. *“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”* (2 Peter 1:16–21, ESV)

As for the Gnostics, the most prolific writer Irenaeus wrote, “Such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge.”⁸

“The Gnostic Saviour, therefore, is entirely different from the Christian one. For the Gnostic Saviour does not save. Gnosticism lacks the idea of atonement. There is no sin to be atoned for, except ignorance be that sin. Nor does the Saviour in any sense benefit the human race by vicarious sufferings. Nor, finally, does he immediately and actively affect any individual human soul by the power of grace or draw it to God . . . Gnosticism knows nothing. The Gnostic Saviour has no human nature, he is an æon, not a man; he only seemed a man.”⁹

⁸ - St. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* (p. 23). Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁹ Arendzen, John. "Gnosticism." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 6. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909 quoted in St. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition.

You cannot add to what Christ promises in the Gospel; and you cannot add to the life-transforming truth contained in the Scriptures – the written Word of God.