

“Jerusalem Meets Rome and Finds Babylon: A Study in Church Purity”

Fall 2022-Spring 2023

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The Heresy of Gnosticism – Various Scriptures

I. Gnosticism

A. Definition

1. **Gnosticism** comes from the Greek word γνωστικός (*gnōstikós*), meaning ‘*having knowledge.*’ It is a collection of ancient religious ideologies and practices originating from the first century A.D. among early Christian and Jewish sects who were labeled ‘gnostics’ by their opponents.
2. Ligonier Ministries - Undoubtedly the most dangerous error in our day, however, is that of Gnosticism, a worldview presenting a complex panoply of errors, afflicting non-Christians as well as Christians. It represents the temptation of the natural man to cook up speculative schemes that free him from any awareness of personal sin and guilt and offer him an inexpensive salvation. Gnosticism is hard to describe in a few words, but one can mention two common elements: secret lore and elitism. Ordinary people may make do with simple faith, but the Gnostic knows the secrets and belongs to a spiritual elite.

B. Origin, and Beliefs

1. Though full-blown Gnosticism began in about 140 AD, its prominent founders within the Christian community included Simon Magus (the Samaritan magician found in the Book of Acts), Basilides of Alexandria, and Valentinus of Alexandria. It has its source in “gnosis” or special knowledge (sole truth) that has been revealed and transmitted secretly to the initiates of the sect.
2. These groups emphasized the acquisition of *gnosis* (personal spiritual knowledge) which took primacy over Gospel teachings, traditions, and ecclesiastical authority. They believed the element of salvation to be direct knowledge from a higher divinity, experienced as intuitive or esoteric insight. Gnosticism generally presents a distinction between spiritual transcendence and being blinded by the material universe which is believed to be an obstacle to a higher consciousness. Gnosticism often avoids the concepts of sin and repentance, but rather promotes enlightenment through unveiling ‘secret knowledge.’
3. General characteristics of Gnosticism include:
 - a. They believed in salvation through gnosis, or knowledge, not through faith. They often believed that Christ was a revealer of the hidden knowledge necessary for salvation.
 - b. Gnostics believed in a body of secret instructions given to the apostles by Christ, and would point to New Testament verses such as Mark 4:33-34 (parables) or 1 Cor 2:6-7 (wisdom) as indicators of the existence of such a body of knowledge.

- c. Some Gnostics viewed Christ as a great prophet, but not as being divine
- d. Many Gnostics believed in Dualism, or the view that there are two Gods of equal power in the Universe - one evil (who created the world and all material things), and one good (who created all spiritual and heavenly things). The "evil" God was often associated with the Old Testament God (Satan). The battle between the good god and the evil god was often expressed in terms of the battle of the Kingdom of Light vs. Kingdom of Darkness.
- e. Some Gnostics believed that the soul (created by the "good god") was lured (by the "evil god") into the transitory physical body. Hence, the goal of humankind is to escape from the evil physical body and return to the godhead, or become one with the "good god". As a result, some Gnostics believed that one's soul could go through multiple iterations in an impure physical body (reincarnation).
- f. The Gnostics believed that there was revealed truth to be found in many religions ♣ Since the "evil" god created everything worldly or material, the Gnostics believed that all material things are evil. Two practices came out of this view.
 - i. One was an extreme form of asceticism – denial of the flesh –
 - ii. and the other was antinomianism. Antinomianism basically states that, since the body is inherently evil, but the soul is pure, it doesn't matter what you do with your body (sort of the "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" view of 1900 years ago).
- g. Some Gnostics believed that there were different spiritual levels of human beings. Those on the highest level were guaranteed salvation; those on the lowest level were denied salvation, and everyone in between had to fight for salvation. (Works)
- h. Some Gnostics believed in Docetism which viewed that Christ was a pure spirit, not a flesh and blood human being. This view comes out of the dualist viewpoint that matter is created from the "evil" god, thus a manifestation of the "good" god could never exist in a carnal, fleshly form. It should be noted that Paul himself vigorously refuted these misinterpretations of his theology. Some examples include:
 - i. Col 2:20-23, which is probably a refutation of asceticism, was used by Gnostics as a justification of antinomianism, the aforementioned "sex, drugs, and rock & roll" view
 - ii. Some Gnostics said that Paul's embrace of predestination (Rom 8:29-30) was a validation of the Gnostic view of multiple levels of believers (or levels of spirituality) Early Gnostics also misused the writings of John the Apostle (who also vigorously refuted the misuse). Some examples include:
 - iii. John's statement "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32) was viewed by some Gnostics as validation of the "salvation through gnosis" viewpoint.
 - iv. Because John uses the imagery of light vs. darkness (John 1:1-14), the Gnostics tried to find a dualist tone to the passages

- v. The Gnostics tried to find validation for their view of a body of secret knowledge passed on by Christ to the apostles in John 20:30 and John 21:25 Irenaeus (c. 180 A.D.) makes reference to the Gnostic misuse of John in his *Against Heresies*: “Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus *a 2nd century Gnostic], making copious use of that according to John, to illustrate their conjunctions, shall be proved to be totally in error by means of this very Gospel...” (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 11)
4. Ligonier Ministry - Gnosticism is probably one of the most common heresies in all of Christendom. Some theologians have observed that the New Age Movement, which bears significant influence throughout Western civilization, is a modern-day form of Gnosticism.

C. Refutations:

1. Salvation

- a. Col 1:4-5 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel,
 - i. The letter is to the saints – all the believers in the church
 - ii. They had faith the truth of the Gospel
- b. Col 1:12 giving thanks to the Father who has qualified **us** to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.
- c. 1Jo 2:24-25 Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that He has promised us--eternal life.
- d. 1Jo 2:29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.
- e. 1Jo 3:7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.
- f. 1Jo 3:10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.
- g. 1Jo 5:11-12 And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

2. The Person of Christ

- a. Col 1:15-16 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.
- b. Col 1:19 For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell,
- c. Col 2:9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;

- d. 1Jo 1:1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-- the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.
- e. 1Jo 2:22-23 Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.
- f. 1Jo 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.
- g. 1Jo 5:1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.
- h. 1Jo 5:10 He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.
- i. 1Jo 5:20 And we know (*eido*) that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know (*ginosko*) Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

3. Mystical Knowledge

- a. Col 2:2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ,
- b. 1Jo 2:20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.

4. Asceticism – denial of the flesh

- a. Col 2:16-17 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.
- b. Col 2:20-23 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations-- "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using--according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

5. Antinomianism

- a. Col 3:5 Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.
- b. Col 3:8 But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.
- c. Col 3:23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,
- d. 1Jo 1:6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.
- e. 1Jo 2:3-4 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.
- f. 1Jo 2:8-10 Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.
- g. 1Jo 3:4-5 Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin.
- h. 1Jo 3:8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.
- i. 1Jo 3:23-24 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.
- j. 1Jo 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

6. Dualism – See the Person of Christ and Antinomianism