

## An Overview of Gnosticism

Gnosticism was an error that crept into the early church during the first three centuries of its existence. Many elements of this dangerous doctrine are still embraced in the church today.

Introduced by Gentile Greeks and Romans, it was a worldview that sought to escape from the evil "material world" back into the pure "spiritual world" of heaven. Rather than viewing the natural world as the domain of God, Gnosticism sees it as a cesspool of evil and suffering; a prison from which we must escape. And discovering "gnosis", (greek for "knowledge"), is the answer. Gnosticism could be translated "knowing-ism".

**Gnosticism teaches dualism:** That the whole of creation is divided between the pure, holy world of the spirit, and the evil, impure world of matter.

**The Gnostic Understanding of Salvation:** To a Gnostic, man's problem is not sin, but the dilemma that he is a good spirit imprisoned in an evil body of flesh, and confined further in an evil world of matter.

Even worse, he does not know it. Salvation is achieved when the man awakens to his true condition and begins learning spiritual secrets, and having spiritual experiences that will enable his good spirit to escape the dark world of flesh and matter, and reenter the pure heavenly realm of the spirit.

In the eyes of a Gnostic, the Creator God of Genesis is an arrogant, but inferior God who created the evil world of matter, who imprisons man in an evil body and who employs every trick in the book to keep man ignorant of his desperate condition. (*"You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."*) Conversely, the serpent in the garden is seen as the true hero, since he is the one showing man the way to freedom - through eating from the tree of the knowledge ("gnosis") of good and evil.

Gnostics believe that Jesus did not come into the world as a man, but only as a spirit who looked like a man. Their reasoning is that if he came as a man, then he was no different than us, a good spirit trapped in an evil body, and thus He could not help us. But the problem with the Biblical Jesus is that he did indeed come in the flesh. (*"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* - John 1:14) In denying this important truth of the incarnation, Gnostics assert that Jesus must have only "appeared" to have a physical body, (this is an early form of Gnosticism called "*Docetism*"). Therefore Gnostics avoid the language of "Jesus Christ", (the God-man), and - believing Jesus to be *only* a Spirit - employ the term "the Christ Spirit." (If you happen upon a devotional or so-called "Christian" book that speaks about "the Christ Spirit", it's almost certainly Gnostic at its root).

## Gnosticism's Influence in the Church:

**Gnostic influences often draw modern Christians to assume that:**

- Creation is separated between spiritual and natural. Spiritual realities and activities like praying, worship, and church activities have greater value, than "natural" activities like honest labor, service, and creativity have little or no worth.
- Earth itself does not matter: In fact, the Gnostic Gospel focuses on making a way for us to escape the earth and return to heaven.
- Spiritual experiences ought to be sought as a means of grace. And with each spiritual experience, (being "slain in the Spirit", "holy laughter", "gold dust", "angel feathers", etc.) we become increasingly "more spiritual."

- The natural world itself is “evil.” No... When God made the world He said it was good. The problem is that in Genesis chapter three Adam turned his back on God and ceded control of the world to the Evil one. Jesus came to take it back.

**The truth is, the world is both spiritual and natural.** It cannot be neatly separated. Neither human beings, nor any other part of God's creation can be dissected into "spiritual" and "secular."

Worship, for instance is both a spiritual and a natural activity. A spirit cannot sing, shout, stand, clap, etc. It takes a body to do those things. When we respond to God's beauty, truth and character we are doing something that is both spiritual and natural. It isn't necessary “spiritualize” the experience by swaying, shaking, or even closing our eyes. While those things may be a part of our worship, they are not necessary to turn the experience from “natural” to “spiritual.” Nor are we called to enter into another “spiritual” dimension, (*“Lets all come into God's presence!”*) We already live in God's presence! (Psalm 139:7-10). And we worship God from the place of reality, with our feet firmly planted on the earth, and our hearts focused on the realities of heaven. All that's truly necessary in worship is to focus our heart, soul, mind and strength on the goodness and beauty of God. There is no need to "zone-off" into another “spiritual” place. We should rather offer up songs, shouts, praises, and rejoicing as a spiritual / natural act of obedience and love.

## **Consequences of Gnosticism in the Church**

**Gnosticism robs God and his people in several ways:**

1. **It distracts God's people from the Kingdom:** Because it's focus is on heaven, Gnosticism promotes the idea of escaping from the world rather than partnering with God to see His Kingdom come to the world “as it is in heaven.”
2. **It robs the church of discipleship:** Since the point of Gnosticism is to escape the earth and make it safely to heaven, there really is no felt need for discipleship. Simply being “saved” is enough to secure heaven, so why bother with the long pursuit of becoming mature followers of Jesus.
3. **It devalues God's natural world.** Whole movements in the church over-emphasize supernatural miracles and activities like multiplying bread, miraculous healing, special manifestations, etc., while devaluing the natural aspects of the Kingdom: creativity, beauty, justice, and vocations. While the supernatural ought to be embraced as a normal part of the Kingdom, the Spirit of God is just as interested in the baker who makes bread and the farmer who grows wheat as He is in the miraculous manna that appeared for a season. Gnostic believers will often insist on a continuous diet of supernatural manna, while they downplay natural activities like work, play, and service. They speak of taking their place in the spheres of society but they sing of the day their spirit will be set free (from their body?) to join with the worship of the angels around the throne forever.
4. **It steals from, and diminishes worship.** Instead of taking the initiative of singing, shouting, dancing and rejoicing, as we are commanded to do, we passively wait for the Spirit to initiate our responses. For example, we wait for Him to come upon us and make us dance rather than taking the initiative and dancing before the Lord as we're commanded.
5. **It alienates** those who are not experiencing “*spiritual manifestations*” as they falsely conclude, “*There must be something wrong with me, since I'm not experiencing these things - shaking, shouting, etc.*”

6. **It falsely elevates those with manifestation ministries:** In the same way some feel wrongly alienated and defective, others will be falsely elevated to the status of "super Christian" because people fall down when they lay hands on them.
7. **Gnosticism promotes the false idea that "We need a fresh anointing"** No... Jesus Christ IS the anointing, and you have Him! 1 John 2:26-27
8. **It promotes the false idea that what God wants is "All of Jesus and none of me".** No... It is Christ IN you, and not Christ instead of you. Jesus was a MAN, he was God and man! If he wanted another being who was "all Jesus" perhaps he might have divinely "cloned" Jesus!
9. **It limits and prioritizes the Holy Spirit's work to supernatural manifestations.** It obsesses over special manifestations and exchanges discipleship for the constant pursuit of "spiritual experiences." Matthew 24:24 warns, "*False prophets, showing great signs and wonders will arise so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.*" Matthew 12:39 tells us, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign*".
10. **It minimizes the resurrection:** Seeking to be free from the body, and from the natural world, Gnostics stress a purely spiritualized eternity in "heaven." This is not Biblical Christianity, which anticipates the resurrection of our natural bodies and the Kingdom coming "*on earth as it is in heaven.*" "*I saw the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.*" (Revelation 21:2)
11. **Gnosticism implies that God is "holding out" on his people;** He is withholding His glory, His anointing, and His presence from his people. The truth is, He has already "*blessed us with EVERY spiritual blessing in Christ.*" (Ephesians 1:3) He has already given us "*...EVERYTHING pertaining to life and Godliness...*" 2 Peter 1:2-3 "*In Christ all the fullness of God lives in bodily form, and you are now COMPLETE through your union with Christ.*" (Colossians. 2:9) "*Christ has (already) become for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption.*" (Colossians. 2:9) As Todd White says, "Rather than calling out for "an open heaven" we ought to be an open heaven!"

## Gnosticism in Culture:

### Movies:

- **The Matrix:** Neo is living in a world of illusion and needs to "wake up" to the Matrix, and escape from it through special knowledge and experiences. The evil Agent Smith is a reflection of the Gnostic god of creation.
- **The Truman Show:** The Producer/God-figure in this film "creates" the Truman Show and actively works to keep Truman in ignorance of the fact that he is "imprisoned" on the set of reality TV. When Truman becomes "enlightened" to the truth, he escapes to the "higher" world of "reality." Again, the god-figure is an evil being who seeks to keep Truman in ignorance.

### Movements, Organizations & Religions

- **The Enlightenment:** This movement taught that sin is not man's problem. Ignorance is, and discovering truth will be our salvation.
- **Freemasonry:** There are thirty-three levels of secrets, (gnosis), that will progressively bring a person into spiritual freedom, complete with spiritual guides to lead the way.
- **Mormonism:** This cult has a gnostic understanding of Jesus, a dualistic concept of God, and secret initiation rites in the temple.

- **Christian Science:** This sect believes in escaping from the material world into the world of the spirit, and denying the body and pain as illusional.
- **Hinduism / Buddhism** teaches that the way of salvation is found in escaping the natural world and being absorbed into the world of the spirit.
- **Kabbalism and Hasidism:** These are "secret" forms of Jewish Gnosticism

*"Test all things, and to hold onto what is good." 1 Thes. 5:21*

## **The Apostle John and early forms of Gnosticism:**

The apostle John's writings, in both his gospel and his epistles, address this early form of gnosticism which began infiltrating the church towards the end of the first century. This is the group he warns about in 1 John 2:26 *"I am writing to warn you about those people who are misleading you."*

Remembering that these people denied that Jesus actually came as a man - in the flesh - John opens his epistle saying, *"We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the very beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes, we have seen it, and our hands have touched it. When this life became visible, we saw it; so we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us."* It was of utmost importance for the apostle to clarify that Jesus Christ was indeed a man; He was one of us!

Later, in chapter four of his epistle, John identifies the Gnostic denial of Christ coming "in the flesh" as an "antichrist" spirit. *"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;" (The Gnostics would steadfast deny that Jesus had come in the flesh). *"...and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world."* (1 John 4:2-3)*

The idea that sin is not the problem, and that enlightenment (gnosis) would impart salvation is why John continues in his epistle, *"If we say that we have not sinned, (this is what the Gnostics taught), we are fooling ourselves, and the truth isn't in our hearts."* (1 John 1:8) Then he continues *"But if we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away. If we say that we have not sinned, (as the gnostics do), we make God a liar, and his message isn't in our hearts."* This is exactly what the early Gnostics were teaching!

If we do not understand the Gnostic context of this epistle, we will be led to the mistaken conclusion that verse nine is intended for believers, and that each time we sin, we will remain unforgiven until confession procures our forgiveness. This is not supported by the rest of the New Testament writers.

The truth is, only the blood of Jesus secures forgiveness, and the blood of Christ was offered just once and for all time on the cross. (Hebrews 9:25-28, 10:8-10 & 14) Notice in these verses that God can be fully trusted to (a.) forgive, and (b.) take our sins away completely once and for all. The believer's confession is not that we have no sin, but that our sins are utterly and completely dealt with once and for all by the blood of Christ).

Remembering the Gnostics believe in a kind of spiritual hierarchy of enlightened individuals whose job it is to introduce younger initiates into the mysteries of the faith, (think Freemasonry or Mormonism), John goes on in chapter 2, verses 26 and 27 to assure his readers that *"I am writing this to you about those who are trying to deceive you"* (The Gnostics) *"But as for you, (believers), Christ has poured out his Spirit on you. As long as his Spirit remains in you, you do not need anyone to teach you."* *"But his Spirit teaches*

*you about everything, and what he teaches is true, not false. Obey the Spirit's teaching, then, and remain in union with Christ." Notice the relational answer to the problem: remaining in union with Christ, and not "discovering new hidden mysteries."*