



## **In Search of Modern Gnostics** by Sellers S. Crain, Jr.

*All Scriptures and comments are based on the **New King James Version**, unless otherwise noted.*

The terms Gnostic and Gnosticism may not be familiar to many people, except for preachers and probably serious students of history. Neither of these two terms is used in the Bible, but the evidence of their presence in the early church is very clear. The **Oxford Dictionary** defines Gnosticism as "a prominent heretical movement in the second century Christian Church, partly of pre-Christian origin." The Greek word Gnosis means "to know." The **Oxford Dictionary** continued saying Gnosticism means "having knowledge ... emphasized personal spiritual knowledge over orthodox teaching, traditions, and ecclesiastical authority." The word Gnosticism is said to have been first used by Henry More (1614-1687), an English poet and philosopher of religion. The Greek adjective gnostikos, "leading or pertaining to knowledge," was used by Plato to describe the cognitive or intellectual dimensions of learning as opposed to the practical.

While some say the movement began in the late first or early second centuries, there is clear evidence that it existed in pre-Christian eras around 200 BC. It is also pointed out that there were evidences of Gnostic style teaching among Jewish scholars before Christ came. The facts prove that the principal elements of Gnosticism were derived from Jewish speculations. The founders of Gnostic schools and Gnostic systems are designated as Jewish by early church fathers. The ancient age of Jewish Gnosticism is shown in the following statement:

There is no doubt that a form of Gnosticism existed in Judaism before it invaded Christianity or Judeo Christianity." (*Gnosticism*, Joseph Jacobs, Ludwig Blou, **Jewish Encyclopedia**).

Some speak of Christian Gnosticism. The man given to be the founder of Christian Gnosticism was Valentinus who was born around 100 AD. Others adamantly insist there is no such thing. They say Christianity and Gnosticism are "mutually exclusive systems of belief, and the principles of Gnosticism contradict what it means to be a Christian." It puts knowledge in a place which can only rightly be occupied by faith.

It came from outside the church and worked its way into the church being a corruptive influence [and] Christianity was perverted by learning and speculation. (Henry M Gwatkin, **Early Church History**, p. 73)

There were many different groups of Gnostics that arose within early church history, and they were all branded as heretics. Books containing Gnostic doctrine were rejected by those who determined which books of the Bible should be included in the canon. Three principals of the Gnosticism in the second Century were the speculative and philosophical, ritualistic and mystical, and practical and ascetic. Although

differences of doctrine did exist between these groups, they shared some basic common beliefs. Prominent among them:

1. Spiritual knowledge was superior to faith and was the special possession of the more enlightened who had a "higher truth" known only to them. They are a privileged class higher than other people because they have a deeper knowledge of the Supreme hidden God. This knowledge does not come from the Bible, but it is acquired on a higher mystical level.
2. A separation of spirit and matter with matter being the source of all evil. This belief resulted in a separation of spirit and flesh. What is done in the body cannot affect the real life that exists in the spiritual realm only.
3. There is a denial of the nature and personality of God. Since all matter is evil, they say the creator or Artificer of the world was an evil deity called the Demiurge who is distinct from the Supreme God
4. A denial of the humanity of Jesus. Since flesh is evil Christ could not have been born in a fleshly body. Either He was like a phantom that was seen but did not actually exist, or the Spirit of God came upon the man Jesus at His baptism, left Him on the cross, and returned to resurrect Him from the dead.
5. A denial of the free will of man. A divine spirit is trapped within humans, but not all are capable of unleashing it. Salvation is for those possessing the superior knowledge.
6. Asceticism was the means of access to God, and one had to punish the body to mortify the flesh to reach the spirit.
7. Syncretism which combined misunderstood Christian doctrine with elements of oriental, Jewish, and other religious doctrines and practices.
8. The Old Testament was ascribed to the Demiurge, who was seen as the god of the Jews.

There is scriptural evidence that Gnostic teaching had invaded the church before the end of the first century. In the church at Colosse, Paul warned them to:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the traditions of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (**Colossians 2:6**).

He taught against the worship of angels (**Colossians 2:18**). Gnosticism taught that angels were emanations from the fullness of Deity, and the higher of them are more spiritual. The lowest of them were in the world of men and matter. The highest were to be worshipped, and they could bridge the gap between God and man. There is also evidence of the denial of Christ's humanity being taught by false teachers (**Colossians 2:4, 9-10**). Of these false teachers, Paul wrote that they were "intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind" (**2:18b**).

There is also a warning against asceticism which is the denial of personal pleasure including foods, sex, etc in order to obtain a higher spiritual plain. Paul wrote, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon sabbath" (**2:16**). Most of these relate to Judaism. This was also being taught in Ephesus. (**1 Timothy 4:1-5**)

The humanity of Jesus by coming in a fleshly body was very much in debate before the end of the first century. Those who John calls antichrist were teaching that Christ could not have come in the flesh which was in keeping with Gnostic doctrine. (**1 John 1:1-4; 2:22; 4:1-1-6; 2 John 7**) This doctrine was also evidenced in

Colossae (**Colossians 1:15, 22**), Rome (**Romans 1:3-4; 8:3-4**), Philippi (**Philippians 2:5-11**), and among the vacillating Jews to whom Hebrews was written (**Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:14-18; 5:7**).

It would be easy for us to assume that since the Doctrine of Gnosticism was ancient it no longer exists. However, we would be very wrong. Gnosticism is alive and well in the 21st Century.

*The Jehovah's Witnesses* for example believe that Christ was the "firstborn" of God's creation (**Colossians 1:15, 18; Romans 8:29**). The word "firstborn" means preeminence. They misunderstand these verses to imply Jesus was not an eternal being but was created by God. They go further with this by saying that He was the angel Michael who was given a promotion to become God's Son. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) do believe Christ came to earth with a physical body, but to deny His divinity is as wrong as to deny His humanity. Their doctrine says that Christ was the first spirit born child of God (Elohim) in the natural way with one of His many spirit wives. According to **The Gospel Principles**, the manual of the Mormon Church, He was "The first spirit born to our heavenly parents was Jesus Christ." Because of this they teach He "inherited the powers of godhead and divinity from His father; including immortality." Meaning, Jesus the Christ was not divine by nature, but He only inherited it. God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit are considered separate beings.

*Oneness Pentecostals* adhere to what was called *Modalism*, a doctrine by an early Christian heretic named Sibelius, which teaches the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are roles that the one God plays. In the Old Testament, He was Father, in the New Testament, He was the Son of God, and in the current age He is the Holy Spirit.

*Christian Scientist* believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, but He is not God. *Christadelphians* believe God alone is truly God, and Jesus is God's Son only in a relational sense. Anti-Christ are still among us.

The real challenge of Gnosticism was not so much organizational as it was intellectual. Its main appeal was to alienated intellectuals who yearn for a spiritual knowledge and experience beyond the ordinary. They were distinguished by an unethical loveless intellectualism. Another doctrine among Gnostics is evidence of that fact. It was an obvious arrogance brought on by their belief that they alone had a special relationship with the Supreme God and were the privileged ones to have superior spiritual knowledge. This knowledge was to them superior to faith and was the special possession of only the more enlightened.

Paul had much to say about people of this disposition. This attitude was most likely in his mind when he spoke of those to whom "the message of the cross was foolishness" and asked, "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" (**1 Corinthians 1:18, 20**). He condemned Christians in Galatia who had turned away from Christ "to a different gospel, which is not another, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." (**Galatians 1:6-7**) In his instructions to Timothy while he was laboring in Ephesus, Paul wrote of false teachers who were:

... Proud, knowing nothing, but obsessed with disputes and arguments over words from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suppositions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. (**1 Timothy 6:4-5**)

In his second letter to Timothy, he spoke of those who were:

... Traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.. [and added that they] were always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (**2 Timothy 3:4-5, 7**)

Another aspect of this attitude is seen in Paul's encounter with the wise philosophers of Athens on the Areopagus, who "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." (**Acts 17:19-21**)

In our world today, there are many individuals of unquestionable intellect and holding high degrees from prestigious institutions of higher learning. With this background, they believe themselves to be superior to others having obtained superior knowledge. They are skilled in theological manipulation and proficient in the vocabulary of words not known by others. They delight in bringing forth some new idea or doctrine which they perceive was unknown until they revealed it. All of which speaks of a Gnostic attitude of superiority. ***Having attended two seminaries, I concluded that they did not teach the Bible, but they taught what others taught or said about the Bible.*** Such education leads to the wisdom of men and not the wisdom of God.

From such turn away yourselves. (1 Timothy 6:5b)

— Sellers S. Crain, Jr, August, 2020