

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Gnostic Worship

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1

Americans are often accused by foreigners of expressing a “greasy familiarity,” even with people they have met for the first time. Similarly, there is a greasy familiarity inherent to Gnosticism, based on the belief that we have direct and immediate access to God whenever and however we want. Whenever the children in the public school pray to whomever and however, God has to hear, and whenever sincere people gather in a building to worship according to their own personal tastes and opinions, God is impressed that we took the time and cared enough to worship from our hearts. It was real, and we were vulnerable, honest before God. Greasy familiarity.



Calvinism is the fundamental enemy of the American Religion. This is argued in nearly every recent work on the subject. Harold Bloom cites Swiss theologian Karl Barth and Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen as two major antagonists of American Gnosticism. Similarly, Anne Douglas, Philip Lee, and Wade Clark Roof, flanked by a host of historians, all argue that the repudiation of Calvinism led to the feminization of religion and culture.

Ann Douglas, professor of English at Harvard and Columbia University, in her latest book, on New York City in the 1920's, writes,

Calvinism...had suffered ‘the most spectacular defeat in the history of American religious life.’...The Calvinists’ liberal nineteenth-century descendants insisted that God was less a father than a mother, ... an ‘indulgent Parent’ (the term is that of the clergyman Noah Worcester), offering love, forgiveness, and nurture to all who seek Him. The Connecticut theologian Horace Bushnell, known as the ‘American Schleiermacher,’ explained that true religious experience meant falling back ‘into God’s arms,’ pressed to the divine breast, ‘even as a child in the bosom of its mother.’

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God, she says, became “well behaved, even domestic.”¹ In her provocative book, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Douglas demonstrates that Calvinism was unseated by an Arminian and Gnostic tidal-wave that refused to believe any longer in the value of matter, the depravity of the self, helplessness in salvation, total dependence on divine sovereignty, freedom, or mercy. Just as the mainline evangelicals failed to stand by J. Gresham Machen in his struggle for the Presbyterian Church during the 20's, and only rose up in defiance when theological error finally created moral compromises, many of today's evangelicals are ready to attack the blatant Gnosticism of “Sophia” worship in the mainline churches, while less obvious but equally disastrous forms of Gnosticism plague the evangelical world itself.²

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It would seem that the critics of modern American religion are basically on target in describing the entire religious landscape, from New Age or liberal, to evangelical and Pentecostal, as essentially Gnostic. Regardless of the denomination, the American Religion is inward, deeply distrustful of institutions, mediated grace, the intellect, theology, creeds, and the demand to look outside of oneself for salvation. This, of course, has enormous implications for the Christian life and worship, as well as theology.

In this article we will first pursue the major Gnostic trends in Christian worship, then analyze these trends in the light of Scripture, concluding with suggestions for disentangling ourselves.

A LIGHTNESS OF BEING

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) predicted that the “death of God”—that is, the end of any serious theological consciousness in Western society, would lead to “a rain of gods,” a combination of nihilism (belief in nothing, cynical despair) and “a new Buddhism.” By turning from the external (God, the world, other selves, an objective and historical atonement, and resurrection) to the internal spirit, Americans especially have created an atmosphere of incredible “lightness,” an airy existence of anti-material, spirit-like

¹ Douglas, Anne (1995). *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 240.

² See Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An Old Heresy for the New Age* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), for a helpful popular survey of the wider cultural influences of Gnosticism, particularly in liberal cultural and ecclesiastical groups. For our purposes, we have focused on the Gnostic threat within evangelicalism.

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existence. Jackson Lears speaks of the “weightlessness” of human existence in the modern world, and David Wells has effectively made this point.³

We see this in the modern world, where light technique has shoved aside heavy truth, and where pragmatism, an intuitive, immediate “flash of insight” way of problem-solving, is valued over wisdom, an accumulated wealth of insights from the family, the church, and books from those who have long since passed from this world. It is a lightness and rootlessness that is apparent in the replacement of neighborhoods with planned tracts of homogeneous, quickly erected, cheap homes with imitation marble, brick and other light and inexpensive replicas of heavy things. It is seen in the superficiality of our conversation, in the suspicion of tradition, institutions and authority.

In the church, we see this lightness of being even in the architecture. The church growth movement, merging these Gnostic influences with marketing, rids churches of all of that heavy stuff. The building is designed for utility, not for worship. The goal is to create an atmosphere of neutrality and comfort for the people, not to evoke a sense of divine transcendence for worshippers. After all, “It’s just a building.” Gone, too, are the sharp lines, rough edges, carved wood and heavy furniture (especially the pulpit and communion table), for they cannot as easily be moved out of the way to make room on the stage for the performers. This lightness is further served by the church growth worship committee’s decision to not only get rid of the rough, masculine edges of the architecture, and bathe the stage in warm mauve and turquoise light, but to get rid of the Word, sacraments and discipline—the very marks of a true church. In fact, *Newsweek* reported some months back, that a Lutheran Church in Phoenix had managed to pare the service down to twenty minutes simply by getting rid of the sermon and the sacraments!

Most contemporary evangelical churches do not go this far with the church growth emphasis, but the general trend is toward a different tone, a different content, and a different goal. Traditionally, the goal of the Protestant sermon was to afford an opportunity for God himself to address his people through the Law and the Gospel. The content, therefore, was driven by the divine command to preach the truth of God’s Word, and to teach the people the great doctrines of Scripture. Therefore, the tone was dictated by the part of the divine address which the minister happened to be expounding. In contemporary preaching, the goal is to meet the felt needs of the self by providing spiritual technology, and the tone is always, therefore, congenial, happy, informal and-

³ For the best exposition of the loss of transcendence in evangelical faith and practice, see David F. Wells, *God In The Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). He offers surveys of evangelical clergy demonstrating widely-held beliefs in the innocence of the self and an inward, experiential orientation.

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above all, friendly. It has not been improperly described as “church light,” and it is this lightness of being, the weightlessness of it all, that characterizes Gnosticism in every age.

Take the communion ware, for example. It is no coincidence that the traditional Protestant churches—the ones with heavy brick, stone or wood, sharp edges architecturally, and a chancel instead of a stage—also tend to serve Communion in heavy chalices as part of a “common cup,” with real wine. Meanwhile, the contemporary churches that are given to lightness in other areas offer individual, light plastic cups to each person seated in the pew (or, more likely, theater seat). Even the large, heavy pulpit Bible, set aloft on the high, heavy pulpit, is substituted with the roaming “D. J.,” who would not think of interrupting his intimacy with the audience by referring to a Bible and written sermon notes.

4

NARCISSISTIC EXPRESSIVISM

In art, there is such a thing as German Expressionism. In painting, it is thick, bold (even garish) strokes of bright reds and blacks, depicting the nihilistic despair and anger of existentialism. It is interesting, but quite noisy.

There is something similar in popular American culture. When Alexis de Tocqueville, a French commentator, came to America in the early 19th century, he observed of Americans, “To escape from imposed systems” is their goal, and to “seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them...So each man is narrowly shut up in himself, and from that basis makes the pretension to judge the world...Thus the Americans have needed no books to teach them philosophic method, having found it in themselves.”⁴

When this Gnostic individualism and narcissism (self-worship) met 19th century Romanticism and Transcendentalism, the expressive self was center-stage. After all, Emerson declared of himself, “I see all the currents of the universe being circulated through me; I am a part and parcel of God.” Walt Whitman added his narcissistic anthem, “The Song of Myself.” But when Transcendentalism met the 20th century therapeutic revolution, nothing would ever be the same again. We see this in its most banal form in the TV talk-show, where self-expression is the goal of everyone, from the host to the guests, and the audience equally. Everyone believes that his or her own personal feelings on the subject are more valuable than the collective intellectual wisdom of the ages.

⁴ de Tocqueville, Alexis (1988). *Democracy In America*, trans. and ed. by J. P. Mayer and G. Lawrence. New York: Harper and Row, 429.

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In many ways, the church is becoming patterned on this talk-show approach. Recovery and self-help groups, discipleship groups, and other small groups, are often more important than the worship service-which is understandable, if the regular service is simply a larger gathering of these small groups! We share our experiences, or our personal testimony, and this often becomes the center of discourse. Imagine telling such a group, "I'm sorry to interrupt the time of sharing and fellowship, but we won't be having testimonies anymore. Instead, we're going to talk about the historical saving acts of God, especially the saving life, atoning death, and justifying resurrection of Jesus Christ, and how the Holy Spirit applies these benefits through Word and sacrament." We have been so transformed by this world's way of thinking that the transformation of the mind by the Word will at first appear to be utterly unrecognizable.

5

Like the Gnosticism of old, the "Song of Myself" narcissism pervades modern thinking, including the thinking of the church. Since the church building itself is designed to make me comfortable, and the liturgy and sermons are calculated to satisfy my "self," and the songs are increasingly centered around my feelings, experiences and longings, it is not a very large step from there to the expressivism that marks so much of contemporary praise. Some approaches are more modest, insisting that individual selves be allowed to express themselves in their own unique (i.e., individual) way, being vulnerable and honest before God. Others push this narcissistic expressivism to the limits, insisting that the expression of joy means unplanned services of emotional release through laughter, roaring, clapping, dancing, or exhibiting other personal emotions. Inhibitions are part of the carnal stifling of the spirit (they say it stifles the Holy Spirit, but they really mean their own). Structured services are like physical structures and institutions, words, sacraments, and doctrines in general. Each self must be free to express its unique identity, and exhibit the ecstasy of intimate, immediate encounters with God.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE VERY WORST KIND

If we could simply recover the apostolic and Reformation sense of divine sovereignty and transcendence, much of contemporary Gnosticism would be recognized as heretical. But just as liberalism was known for its emphasis on divine immanence (closeness) rather than his transcendence ("otherness"), evangelicalism has inherited that serious charge.

Essential to this Gnostic orientation is the immediacy of the divine-human relationship. At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther contrasted "the theology of glory" (held by Roman Catholics and Anabaptists) with "the theology of the cross" (held by the apostles and the reformers). Every person, Luther said, is a mystic deep-down. We all want to climb a ladder into God's presence-whether it's a ladder of experience and emotion, or a ladder of merit (If you do this, I'll do that, steps to victory, etc.), or a ladder

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of speculation (I'm going to figure God out apart from his public self-disclosure in Scripture). Luther called this the human longing to see "the naked God." It is a theology of glory because it despises the shameful humiliation of Christ's way of saving sinners—both his own humiliation and ours. It is too high and lofty, too spiritual to be satisfied with a Redeemer-God who became flesh, a true human being, suffered for our sins, and rose again for our justification, leaving us with his Holy Spirit and nothing but a book, some water, and some bread and wine. But like Paul, Luther determined to know nothing but Christ and him crucified even though the "super-apostles," as Paul called the Gnostics in Corinth, insisted on something higher and more exciting ([1 Corinthians 1, 2](#)).

6

We automatically assume that having a personal relationship with God is a good thing. We invite people not so much to confess that they are helpless sinners, spiritually dead and enemies of God, who need to turn from self to rely on Christ alone for salvation, but instead we push them more to enter into a personal relationship with God by experiencing a direct encounter of rebirth. In Scripture, it is not always a good thing to be close to God.

As early as Genesis 3, we find the first couple created in God's image, fleeing from God's presence. The last thing they wanted was a personal relationship with God, because their rebellion had placed them in a different relation to God. Where he was before a close friend, now he was an angry judge. It was only when God caught up to them, stripped them of their pretenses to righteousness (the fig leaves), and clothed them with the bloody skins of an animal sacrifice (pointing forward to Christ), that they were no longer afraid of being close to God.

Later, Cain and Abel disagreed over worship-styles. Abel believed that it was dangerous to approach God in a way that was attractive, comfortable or reasonable to the seeker, and offered the first-born of his flock in sacrifice, as God commanded in anticipation of his offering of his only-begotten Son. Cain could not figure out why God would need a bloody sacrifice, so he decided to be vulnerable, and honest, bringing God something better than that which he commanded. He brought flowers and a fruit basket, probably not unlike an FTD floral arrangement—"When you care enough to send the very best." But it was not what God commanded, and Cain was rejected by God. It was his jealousy for Abel's acceptance by God that Cain became the first persecutor of the church, and Abel became its first martyr.

At Mount Sinai, after God led his people out of Egyptian bondage, the Law was given to Israel. God chose Israel, not because of her righteousness, but because of his free mercy ([Deuteronomy 9:4-6](#)). No nation could own Yahweh or be owned by him apart from a formal arrangement—a covenant. It was hardly as if God was everybody's friend and they just didn't know it yet! God was the enemy of the nations, and only befriended Israel by

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means of a covenant, through earthly means of grace (Word and sacraments promising a coming Savior). Even Israel could not approach God on its own terms, as we see at Mount Sinai. God instructed Moses that, as in any covenant or treaty, a mediator was needed. God did not have a personal relationship with each Israelite, but was the father of the nation. "You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him" ([Exodus 18:19](#)). Notice the legal, courtroom language here. The people cannot relate to God directly; they need a lawyer, and Moses is that mediator. Finally, the people were fully assembled at the foot of the Mount.

7

We read the account from Exodus:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the Voice of God answered him. The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the LORD said to him, 'Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish' ([Exodus 19:16-22](#)).

After God delivered the Ten Commandments at the top of the mountain, Moses returned to the people below. "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die'" ([Exodus 20:18-19](#)). First, we learn that staying at a distance because of fear is the normal reaction to being in the presence of God. Gnostics have no place for fear, as Marcion declared the Old Testament God unloving, and insufficiently warm and friendly. They want a direct encounter, and this kind of distance, requiring a mediator, is unbearable to them. They want to be able to find God directly, but here they are warned not to "force their way through to see the LORD" lest "many of them perish." The people were so conscious of the Creator-creature distinction, not to mention their own sinfulness in the presence of Absolute Holiness, that they did not want a direct encounter! They did not want a theology of glory. "You speak to us and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us or we will die." So much for, "He walks with me and talks with me"!

Nadab and Abihu were Aaron's pride and joy. These two sons were consecrated to God's service, *summa* grads from seminary, and their whole lives were devoted to the pious

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worship of God as Israel's priests. One day, they decided in their great zeal to offer a ceremony that was not commanded. "So fire came out of the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Moses then said to Aaron, 'This is what the LORD spoke of when he said, "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.'" Aaron remained silent" ([Leviticus 10:1-3](#)). In this same text, God demands, "You must distinguish between the holy and the common," while the mystical tendency is to regard everything as sacred. The self, alone, meditating on heavenly things, is just as sacred as the public worship of God through Word and sacrament, according to Gnosticism. But Nadab and Abihu serve as lessons to us all. God did not make allowances for sincerity. "But their heart was right," was not a sufficient argument. We recall how God killed Uzzah, one of the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant, when he stretched out his hand to keep the Ark from falling ([1 Chronicles 13:9-13](#)).

One of the best examples of the theology of the cross versus the theology of glory is found in Genesis 28, "Jacob's Ladder." Although in Sunday school we used to sing of this ladder as if we were climbing it, the text itself says the very opposite. In Jacob's dream, God is standing at the top, and angels are ascending and descending the ladder. God is making all of the promises, and all of the moves. Jacob's response when he awoke is instructive. "He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'" Thus, he named the spot "Beth' El," "The House of God." When we come to the New Testament, Jesus makes the bold announcement, "'You shall see greater things than that.' He then added, 'I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man'" ([John 1:50-51](#)). Jesus was Jacob's ladder! He was Beth' El, the House of God, the temple that would be destroyed and then rebuilt (raised) after three days! Throughout the Scriptures, God is only approachable through a human mediator, and he only saves in human history, using human words, and physical earthly elements. Those who attempt to worship God in their own way, find him as much a consuming fire in the New Testament as in the Old ([Hebrews 12:29](#)). "But that's the Old Testament!", Gnostics will say. Yes, but while much changes in the administration of the covenant between the two testaments, one thing remains the same: The covenant of grace still requires a mediator. We cannot approach God directly. Just as God struck down Nadab and Abihu, so he killed Ananias and Saphira in his presence ([Acts 5:1-11](#)).

As Jesus was "Jacob's ladder," so he is the true "Ark of the Covenant," but even the social riffraff could say of him, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" ([1 John 1:1-2](#)). Unlike Uzzah, they could touch him and live. John's epistle, written especially against the ancient Gnostics who

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denied that God could actually become flesh (good Spirit vs. evil matter), announces that the God who could not be seen without the experience leading to the death of the viewer, was in fact heard, seen and touched-not by our spiritual ascent, but by God's physical descent. It is not by our escaping the earthly, physical, historical realm in an ascent to Glory, but by God's descent in flesh that many could see God and live! Even Moses could not see God and live! Furthermore, if Moses was a good mediator between God and Israel, though he was a sinner himself, surely someone who was himself both God (the offended judge) and man (the offending race) could perfectly and savingly represent sinners.

If God had been formed in Mary's virgin womb, without a fully human nature, Mary could not have survived the experience. If God the Son had not clothed himself in flesh, his glory would have instantly turned Pharisee and fisherman alike to ash. But instead, prostitutes approach him; thieves repent, and sinners eat with him. In the Gospel of John, we see God playing the bartender at a wedding reception ([John 2:3](#)), and screaming in outrage over the unnatural horror of death ([John 11:38-44](#)). Gnostics would have read these texts in utter disgust. First, Jesus was affirming the goodness of creation by turning water into wine at a party. This is hardly the ascetic spirituality that characterized Gnostic abhorrence of the world. Further, for the Gnostic, death was terrific because it meant the escape of the spirit from the prison-house of the body. It was hardly something to lament! The resurrection of the body was, for the Gnostic, hell rather than heaven.

"He who has seen me," Jesus declared, "has seen the Father" ([John 14:9](#)). Israel was taught to seek God only in anticipation, by types and shadows, not by direct encounters. It was by the historical incarnation of God the Son that the world came to know God, and it is only as sinful creatures approach God through the mediation of this God-Man, through the prescribed means of grace (Word and sacrament), that they can expect a father rather than a judge. The "naked God" that Luther said inspired the mystics, was actually "the consuming fire" ([Hebrews 12:28](#)), and the only way of finding salvation instead of judgment was through the "clothed God," Jesus Christ. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life," Jesus declared in John 6, to the bewilderment of his audience as well as John's (primarily Greeks). What a crude, earthly religion! So much for ascending the heights through super-spiritual encounters! If one is to be saved, one must accept the death of individualism, inwardness, emotional and experiential ladders of ecstasy, merit and speculation. "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for [Gnostic] wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God" ([1 Corinthians 1:23](#)).

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THE WAY OUT OF GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism became such a great threat to the ancient church because it appealed to the “felt needs” of a Greek culture, basically reinterpreting Christianity in the light of pagan philosophy. St. Augustine, and others who became Christians in that time and place, repudiated the Gnosticism they had once whole-heartedly embraced, and for many of them, the influences continued to linger until their death. Similarly, we have reconstructed Christianity as a system of psychological well-being and moral uplift. The necessity of earthly means of grace (word and sacrament) has been rendered unintelligible by a mystical spirituality in which the self has direct, immediate access to God. Not only are words despised in our culture (and in our church-culture), the Word—Jesus Christ, the God Man, who mediates between the sinful creature and a holy God—is seen more as the Master, the Guide, the Example for the self’s intimate relationship with and experience of God. Like those who gave up everything—including what they perceived as relevance—in order to tell the truth, we too must repent of our worldliness, our accommodation to the spirit of the age.

To do this, we must first recapture the great battle-cries of the Reformation. First, “Scripture Alone!” We do not find God in our hearts, in our experience, or in our ideas. He finds us, and the way he finds us is through printed speeches that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, become words of life, raising us from spiritual death. This means that we have to study the Word of God, understand the great acts of God in history and their redemptive significance, and accept them as the only way of entering into a personal and communal relationship with God. An exclusively subjective and inward focus should be regarded as a sin, just like adultery and murder, of which we must repent.

Second, “Christ Alone!” We must reject the American Religion, with its belief in “God”—a uniquely American deity who has no theological definition. Whether worshipped by the liberals as the “Benevolent Spirit,” or by evangelicals as the mascot for America and moral virtue, or by charismatics as the power-source for higher spiritual experience, this idol must be pulled from every high place. When we say we believe in God, we (I mean, orthodox Christians) are talking about none other than the Trinitarian God who is known only in Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, there is no intimacy with God, but only fear of judgment. In his Harvard address, Emerson declared that one of the errors of Christianity is its “noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus.” The spirit of Jesus is clouded by an emphasis on his historical identity, he said. “The soul knows no such persons,” for Jesus taught “faith...in the infinitude of man.” As Roger Lundin observes, Emerson rejected Communion for this reason, since, as Emerson put it, it “tends to produce confusion in our views of the relation of the soul to God.” This focus on Christ places a second God between us and God. Jesus becomes our mediator, not in the sense that he

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communicates his saving work to us, but by communicating saving knowledge (gnosis), “in that only sense in which possibly any being can mediate between God and man—that is an Instructor of man. He teaches us how to become like God.”⁵ We must reject this orientation.

Third, “Grace Alone!” As a rambunctious kid, I used to try to defy the escalator at the mall by running up the “down” escalator, but as the saying goes, “the faster I went, the behinder I got.” Jacob’s Ladder is a one-way escalator, and it moves from God to us, not from us to God. We are not saved by being born again, by finding God, by making Jesus this or that, by finding the right techniques for conversion, or by surrender, but by Christ’s surrender for us outside center-city Jerusalem so long ago. This is applied to us not by our pushing the right buttons, but by God graciously condescending to give us life, and all of Christ’s benefits “while [we] were dead in trespasses and sins” ([Ephesians 1:5](#)).

Fourth, “Faith Alone!” We are justified-declared righteous-before God because of what Christ did for us and outside of us, not because of what we do, or even because of what the Holy Spirit does within us. Matthew Fox, repeating C. J. Jung’s warning, said, “one way to kill the soul is to worship a God outside you,”⁶ but Christianity insists that this was Satan’s first lie to the human race. When Melanchthon, Luther’s side-kick, became too introspective and inward, the great reformer would remind him, “Melanchthon, the Gospel is completely outside of you!” The great truth of justification is that all of our righteousness before God is external—a *iustitia alienum* or “alien righteousness.” It does not inhere within us, but is draped over us like a robe. Not only is God outside of us, all of our righteousness and holiness that makes us acceptable before God is outside of us as well. If we had been justified by love, by conversion, by being born again, by something that happens inside of us, we would have “something to boast about—but not before God” ([Romans 4:2](#)). The self is sinful, unholy and ungrateful, not innocent and needy. Salvation can only come by looking outside of ourselves. Many in our Romantic, Gnostic culture will say, “Deep down, so-and-so is a good person.” What they mean is, “If you get down into the soul, the self, the spirit of the person, there is good in everyone.” The “real Me” is good, whatever my actions might suggest otherwise. Yet the innocent self is a pagan myth. “But she has a good heart,” we often hear. Our hearts, however, are more sinful

⁵ Lundin, Roger (1993). *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. This is a superb treatment of Romanticism and literary theory from a Christian perspective.

⁶ Roof, Wade Clark (1993). *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 75.

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than our bodies, for they have already committed sins that have not yet required the compliance of our hands ([Jeremiah 17:9](#) and [Mark 10:11](#)).

The fifth battle-cry is “To God Alone Be Glory!”-an exclamation of praise more than a battle-cry. Gnosticism, as we have seen, is a powerful rival worldview to Christianity. The innocent self (the soul or spirit) was thrown into chaos (matter, history, time), and salvation comes through learning the techniques, rules, steps and secrets for escaping this material world. By contrast, Calvin declared, “The world is the theater of God’s glory.” While the Gnostics viewed salvation as a contest between the Good God of Spirit and the Bad God of Matter, Calvin warned, “The Manichees [medieval Gnostics] made the devil almost the equal of God” (1.13.1), like a tug-of-war between God and the devil. Although Luther had an acute sense of Satan’s activity, he declared, “The devil is God’s devil.” Like the ancient fathers, the reformers would have seen today’s spiritual warfare emphasis as a revival of Manichaeism.

12

Against Anabaptist and monastic escapism, Calvin called for worldly activity. Secular callings, considered sub-spiritual and less than God’s best in the medieval worldview, were deemed noble and godly. God created the world, and upholds it by his sovereign power. If God is in charge, and this is his world, who are we to despise it? Lee argues that Calvinism represents a “universal program of serving a sovereign God” through worldly activity and this is reflected in its contribution to education, the arts and humanities, business, law and human rights, and in the rise of modern science.

Through the Enlightenment, we lost our belief in God’s sovereignty, and in his involvement in the daily affairs of natural existence. It was as if God went on holiday after creating the world, and hooked the universe up to a machine, something like “automatic pilot.” Pentecostalism, at least in part, represents a Gnostic reaction to this worldview, but instead of proclaiming God’s involvement with the natural world (i.e., providence), it has bet all of its chips on God’s super-natural activity against the natural world (i.e., miracle, as they conceive it). We must recover the doctrine of providence and, with it, the sovereignty of God.

Furthermore, if we are to truly repent of the idolatries, we must reform our worship accordingly, or, as the Baptist put it, “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” ([Matthew 3:8](#)).

First, like the ancient fathers and the reformers, we must reform the public worship of God according to the Word. St. Paul warned against the godlessness of the last days when “men will be lovers of themselves...having a form of religion but denying its power” (2 Tm 3:5). The power of true religion is the cross, and it must be the center of our worship again. But just as Gnosticism can create a form of religion while denying its power, it can

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have “power” (so-called) while denying its form. In Gnosticism, form (like matter, structure and institutions) is earthly and unspiritual. Whenever we hear that the form of worship is merely a matter of taste or style, and is therefore neutral, it is the voice of Gnosticism. Christianity not only prescribes the substance of religion, but its form. The first of the Ten Commandments requires us to worship the correct God; the second, that we worship this God correctly. The way we worship is not neutral, as Nadab and Abihu learned after their innovative worship experience.

Word and sacrament must be recovered. Philip Lee pleads, “The unsettling truth is that no generation can simply inherit orthodoxy from a previous one. Orthodoxy must be consciously sought and achieved by a determined Church engaged in an active struggle with itself” (p. 218). Recent studies have shown that medieval Gnosticism prevailed in regions where the preaching was of the poorest quality. “What is required at present is nothing at all like a crusade or a witch hunt, for ‘we are not contending against flesh and blood.’ What could be more Protestant than to begin a new reformation with the preaching of the Word?” But this is not the preaching of “any ‘ol word,” but the Word of Law, judging our self-righteousness, and the Word of Gospel, offering us Christ’s righteousness: “The preaching within a Christian congregation, if it is to be the preaching of grace, will be liturgical preaching. That is, it will not be a lecture, an educational experience, a talking about the Gospel but rather a sermon (a word), a worshipful experience, a talking from the Gospel” (p. 224). The people will hear the Voice of God, as they did at Mount Sinai, but they will also hear his Voice from Mount Calvary.

Just as the word replaced the idea or image in the ancient Christian witness, and at the time of the Reformation, we will have to recover the word at a time when our culture is increasingly illiterate and bored by words. Jacques Ellul’s, *The Humiliation of the Word*, and Neil Postman’s, *Amusing Ourselves To Death* can help us think through these issues. Just as the Reformation refused to capitulate a religion of the Book to the image-based culture of the medieval world, and ended up, in the process, creating a print-oriented culture, a new Reformation must stick to its guns when it comes to the priority of the word, preached and read, come what may. Therein we will find healing for our souls.

If the Word is recovered, the sacraments must be as well. Calvin wanted the Lord’s Supper to be celebrated “at least once a week,” and preferred that it be given “every time the Word is preached.” It is, the reformers said, following Augustine, “the visible Word,” and although we cannot see or touch God in the person of Jesus Christ, as did the disciples, we can feed on his true body and blood through bread and wine. Communion is not, as Gnostics new and old have held, an unnecessary hindrance to spiritual worship, but its ordained means. Nor is it a mere memorial designed to move the emotions and excite the inner piety of the self. It is, in fact, not man’s action, but God’s. It is God giving

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his Son for the life of his people, the actual experience of the forgiveness of sins, the actual fellowship, or participation, in the true body and blood of Christ. Through it, with the Word and by his Spirit, he actually gives us what he promises in the Gospel. The same Jesus who said his flesh is true food, and his blood true drink (Jn 6) also declared, in his institution of the Supper, "This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat." Taking the cup, he said, "This is my blood of the new covenant" ([Matthew 26:28](#)). Through Word and sacrament, the believer-in connection with the whole church of all ages-is linked to the same Mediator who walked on the shores of Galilee healing the sick, raising the dead, and forgiving sins.

Paul demanded of the Corinthians, who trampled on this sacred feast, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" Drawing out the implications of this, Paul attacked the individualism and narcissism of Corinthian worship, influenced by the Gnostic, super-apostles: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" ([1 Corinthians 10:16-18](#)). The Shepherd of Hermas, an ancient church epistle, states that the Gnostics prefer a chair, while the orthodox Christians prefer a couch. Is the replacement of the pew with individual theater seats more than a coincidence? Do we really believe in "one holy, catholic and apostolic church" more than we believe in self? Are seeker services drawing people away from self to Christ as a body of the redeemed? Or are they actually oriented to collecting individual selves-consumers-for the purpose of private transformation? Do we expect to meet with God in mystical, individualistic encounters and experiences, or in his appointed means of grace? Do we really believe that God mediates his saving grace through simple earthly elements of water, bread and wine, and that his Word and Spirit take these ordinary elements and make them miraculous encounters with God on his terms? Or are our spirits stifled by such things? Does history matter? Theology? The preaching of the Word as the only avenue of divine speech?

Next, we will have to recover a doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It was he who was involved in Creation ([Genesis 1:1-2](#)), who brings divine judgment and salvation throughout redemptive history, and it was he who is sent by the Father and the Son to convince the world of its sin, and to bring sinners to repentance and faith ([John 16:5-16](#)). Ours is indeed the Age of the Spirit, but that is not in opposition to matter, institution, sacraments or Word. It is through these means that the Spirit reigns in the hearts and bodies of men and women. He gives new life, preserves believers in that life, and sanctifies them. The reformers were careful in keeping Word and Spirit together, in an indissoluble bond, and we must recover that united emphasis. It is the Spirit who makes the means of grace effective, and apart from his work, the church, the Word, and the sacraments have no more effect than addressing corpses in a cemetery.

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Finally, reformation will require not only the recovery of Word and sacrament, but, as the reformers insisted, church discipline as well. Although the Lutherans did not emphasize this point as much as the Reformed, both traditions insisted on recovering a genuine sense of what it means to be catholic. That does not mean *Roman* Catholic, but catholic in the sense that Calvin meant when he said, “We cannot become acceptable to God without being united in one and the same faith, that is, without being members of the Church.”⁷ Some evangelical groups are so suspicious of institutions and structure that they do not even have church membership. People come and go as they please, and since Communion is just a time of meditation and self-reflection, there is no oversight of the Lord’s Table, in spite of Paul’s warning (1 Corinthians 10-11). Like Linda, in Roof’s studies (p. 105), many evangelical boomers say that one does not have to go to church or derive one’s beliefs within the church. The church is merely a resource for personal and moral development. “From the Gnostic point of view,” Lee writes, “the structure and discipline of the Church stifled the spirit” (p. 158). Authority and structures can be abused by sinful pride and recklessness. However, the self is sinful as well, and checks and balances must be placed on us all. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the independent, sectarian spirit in American evangelicalism has shown itself to be the most divisive and anti-catholic force in the history of Christianity. If we are to be biblical Christians, not only must we approach God correctly, we must approach him together.

If we come to the true God in his way, through the cross and not through glory, we will experience a richness and a depth of communion with God that is impossible through our towers of spiritual babel. Our Mount Sinai will, because of Mount Calvary, be turned to Mount Zion:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded....But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God..., to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’ ([Hebrews 12:18-29](#)).

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⁷ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Isaiah*, vol. 2, p. 45.

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<https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/gnostic-worship>

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