

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

# The Gnosticism of

# Modern Evangelicalism

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(Acts 8:4-24)

## The Historic Roots of the Gnostic Virus

Gnosticism was birthed as a pseudo-Christian heresy in the mid-first century by Simon Magus, a Samaritan sorcerer ("magus" means magician) of astonishing ability (Acts 8:4-24). Appropriately, the church fathers referred to him as the progenitor of all heresies. This turned out to be an amazingly accurate prophecy. Accompanied by his consort Helen and thirty or so disciples, he captivated crowds with special revelations, esoteric insight, and "signs and wonders." So impressive was his reputation as a miracle worker and teacher that the Romans erected a statue in his honor, dedicating it: "To Simon, the Holy God." Indeed, most of his fellow countrymen regarded him as "their first God and worshipped him as such" (Arland Hultgren, *The Earliest Christian Heretics*, 17).

The early church fathers were strongly impressed that demonic empowerment was responsible for Simon's unusual abilities. No doubt due to his blasphemous prediction that, like Christ, he would rise on the third day following his burial, the early church saw Magus as fulfilling Christ's warning in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" and in Matthew 24:24, "there shall arise many false Christs and false prophets." Eventually, Simon's followers became known as gnostics because of the "special knowledge" (*gnosis* in Greek) that was supposedly imparted to them through Christ and His apostles (of whom Simon, of course, claimed to be the foremost). Acts 8:13 records his "conversion experience" and baptism by Philip (about AD 40) after which "he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done" (Acts 8:13). Blazing the trail for millions of gnostics to follow through the ages, after making a "decision for Christ" and cloaking himself in the robe of brotherhood, this wolf in sheep's clothing immediately

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began the process of syncretizing the teaching of Greek mystics and pagan philosophers (mostly Plato) with his unique revelations. He attempted to blend this mixture with the teachings of the apostles, whom he doggedly pursued from one village to another as darkness follows light. Unlike today's evangelical gnostics, he was soundly condemned by the true church (Acts 8:18-23):

The ancient defenders of the Christian faith regarded [Simon Magus] as the heresiarch par excellence, the incarnation of evil, who in his own way succeeded in spreading the discord of heresy. Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, 147.

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Why was Simon considered *the* primary enemy of the Faith, indeed, as the very incarnation of evil, more even than Caesar? Why were the apostles so vehement in their condemnation of his many followers who so earnestly claimed to be fellow "Christians" (1 Tim. 1:3-4, 4:1-7, 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; Jude 1:4-19; 2 Pet. 2; 1 Jn. 1:3-10, 2:4-11, 2:18-29, 3:7-10; 4:1-6, 5:1-12; Rom. 1:21ff.; 2 Jn. 7-11; 1 Cor. 14:37)? Incidentally, in addition to these Scriptures, a number of Bible scholars suspect that the "servants of Satan" for whom the apostles reserved their fiercest condemnation were not just "Judiazers," but *gnostic* Judiazers. This theory fits well with Paul's clear attack on the loose morality found in Corinth which was clearly not a trait of a legalistic Jewish party, but which was easily attributable to the gnostics, notorious for flip-flopping between rigorous asceticism and outrageous libertinism.

A primary reason the apostles and, later, the church fathers singled out gnostics as "public enemy number one" (above even their pagan persecutors) is precisely because gnostics considered themselves, and represented themselves to be, brothers in Christ (albeit with abilities of superior revelation and a "higher knowledge"). The early church, struggling to establish its doctrinal boundaries, regarded gnostics as more dangerous than their Roman persecutors who targeted the physical body, but left the church's body of orthodoxy alone. In contrast, heretics professed beliefs that attempted to render crucial doctrines impotent. The New Testament authors (especially Peter, Timothy, Paul, and Phillip) fought gnostics as though they were heretics and schismatics and recognized their considerable abilities to detract from the gospel and redirect its focus (to say nothing of destroying the unity of the church):

"The most dangerous gnostics were those who had, intellectually, thought their way quite inside Christianity, and then produced a variation which wrecked the system.... Paul fought hard against gnosticism, recognizing that it might cannibalize Christianity and destroy it." Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, 7.

Paul realized that any restatement of key doctrines by gnostics would eventually direct the faithful away from *the outward, world-redeeming, servant-steward mission* of the church

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— a mission they held as a sacred trust — and direct them inward toward themselves — self-knowledge (gnosis) and spiritual perfection, just like many modern pietists, who stress personal religious experience over the objective realities of the Christian Faith.

Validating the apostles' concern, the gnostics were (and their modern heirs are no less artful) masters at restating or recontextualizing the gospel. As *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* notes: "Gnostics were perceived as *leading Christians astray* by manipulation of words and the twisting of Scriptural meanings" (444). Historian Richard Tarnas observes that gnostics were "especially abhorrent to church authorities, because they controverted matters so close to the heart of Christianity" and he cites Gnosticism's "indifference to the world" (another pietist distinctive) as a major concern to the early guardians of Christ's world-changing message (*Passion of the Western Mind*, 183). After all, if Christ had not commissioned the church with power and authority to disciple (and thus redeem nations — Matthew 28), *what was Christianity really all about? How would it be differentiated from Gnosticism's dualistic preoccupation with an individualized salvation — which was disconnected from the rest of God's creation? A salvation committed to a strictly inward, privatistic piety driven by spiritual perfectionism, directed by a subjective "inner light" and culminating in an escape from the world they so disdained?* The NIV Topical Study Bible, in commenting on the "preponderance of many antichrists" in 1 John 2:18, informs us that the term antichrist "referred to any person who opposes Christ or who dispossess Christ" (1405). In other words, to offer a "reversal" of Christ's gospel or to substitute another (dispossessing) message for Christ's is to be antichrist. We need to keep this distinction in mind as we examine how this theme unfolds in our present-day churches and how, once again, the ancient enemy has twisted Scripture to redefine the historic Christian mission. As Philip Lee poignantly observes, "Suddenly, we find ourselves not with a slightly altered Gospel but with an anti-Gospel" (Phillip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 28).

## Gnostic Dualism

Historians agree that *the cardinal gnostic doctrine was its unmitigated dualism* which it adapted from the Platonic schools and attempted to syncretize with Christ's teaching. Contrary to the early church's teaching that God was committed to redeeming all His creation (*cosmos*); that all things God created were good (Gen. 1:31); that man's job was to steward God's creation, make it productive and enjoy its fruits (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:1-3), and to disciple (redeem) the nations (Mt. 28:18-20), dualism saw our present world as beyond redemption (*a la* premillennial dispensationalism) and, furthermore, viewed the physical or "non-spiritual" as essentially evil and, therefore, not worth redeeming. In its campaign to distort the early church's preaching, Gnosticism denied both the goodness of the original creation and the efficacy of Christ's sacrificial redemption, teaching that evil, not

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Christ, was controlling the physical world (Satan is not only alive, but in control of planet earth!). It is here that the gnostics executed their most egregious maneuver, *taking legitimate “Christian dualism”—a good, all-powerful King redeeming His territory from a defeated and inferior evil prince—and reversing it so that the King has lost the battle for His creation and must now fall back on an emergency evacuation of His defeated forces (the Rapture).*

*Gnostic dualism is a reverse Christianity; it is a defeatist, escapist, “bad news” gospel that the early church and apostles consistently referred to as antichrist.* This dualistic worldview that God’s physical creation (the world and all it contains) is evil, worthy only of destruction, and that only “spiritual” pursuits are of true value, has influenced vast sectors of nineteenth- and twentieth-century evangelicalism. To cite just one sobering example, it’s instructive to note the gnostic approach to interpreting the Old Testament. Magus devoted himself to exegeting the Old Testament to prove that its God, full of wrath, violence, and vengeance could not possibly be the God of love whom Christ taught about. His denigration of both the Old Testament and its God is frighteningly similar to the way many evangelicals disregard or downgrade (or, in the case of dispensationalists, outright dismiss) the Old Testament (and its harsh God with His unreasonable laws) in favor of the New Testament (and even then, with an unbalanced hermeneutic, selectively focusing on “people-friendly” attributes of love and grace). Whatever the rationale, the unstated implication is that the Trinity of the Old Testament has somehow changed their *modus operandi*, if not their very nature, rendering the Old Testament little more than an anachronistic curiosity. (Go to the head of Simon’s class.)

## Further Gnostic Distinctives

A number of gnostic distinctives increasingly form the basis for contemporary evangelicalism. These gnostic guideposts include:

- ***Subjectivism and Mysticism:*** The deification of one’s own subjective experience as the final arbiter of spiritual truth, a modern evangelical “sacrament” which has contributed to the self-idolization and “spiritual” narcissism so rampant in our evangelical world.
- ***Antinomian Individualism:*** A revulsion for church authority, doctrines, and creeds and a consequent enshrinement of the “inner light” leading to hyper-individualism. Its tendency toward theological elitism is perfectly mirrored in today’s “anything goes,” smorgasbord style of Christianity. Take what you like, ignore church doctrine and authority, simply move on to another “community” when your church fails to please you (or, heaven forbid, attempts to discipline you) and be sure to follow your “inner light” (most commonly referred to today as “the leading of the Spirit”). This intensely

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individualistic and subjective religious culture has no room for God's objective law-word, systematic theology, or the wisdom and boundaries developed by two millennia of Christian martyrdom, prayer, insight, and exegesis, as expressed in the church's historic creeds.

Gnosticism has survived to our present day by its ability to adapt, adopt, merge, or permeate and to employ whatever tack is most useful at a particular juncture. Due to its uncanny ability to "shape shift" and rapidly change tack in order to adjust itself to local church terminology and cultures, the only way for the early church to defend itself against this constantly mutating and difficult-to-identify spiritual virus was to establish clear boundaries of Christian orthodoxy (consisting of various creeds and doctrines, i.e., the dogma of the universal church). *To the extent that we as Christians ignore the creeds and confessions, remain ignorant of church history and orthodox doctrine, and are oblivious to the need for church authority, we open the gates wide to Gnosticism's latest deception.* As Harold O. J. Brown notes, "It [Gnosticism] has seldom gone by that name since the early centuries, but Gnosticism has continued to reproduce itself within Christianity and reappear from time to time in new guises" (*Heresies*, 39).

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Colonel Doner, Ph.D., started his career as a leader to youth service organizations in both high school and college. At the age of 25, he traveled to Africa to distribute food to hungry children. Forty years later he is continuing the same work. The author of several books, he has been interviewed on 60 Minutes, the Phil Donahue Show, ABC Network News and on numerous Radio Talk Shows. He or his work has been cited in numerous books and newspapers as well as in *Time* magazine, *Newsweek* and *Christian Life* magazines. He is also an ordained Minister and holds a Doctoral Degree in Christian Philosophy.

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