

Historical Theology: Gnosticism

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Five benefits of heresy

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For the full article go to <https://trinitybiblechapel.ca/good-can-heretic-bring/>

First, heresy brings truth to the fore. Acts 15

Second, heresy sends people to the Bible. Acts 17:11

Third, heresy shows the true Christians. 1 John 2:19

Fourth, heresy forces the Church into unity.

Fifth, heresy serves future generations. The theological controversies of past generations serve the Church for perpetuity. For example the Nicene Creed of 325 AD was forged in theological controversy. Arianism ravaged the Church, and it had to be repudiated. Nicaea did just that. It clarified orthodoxy. 1700 years later, it still serves us well.

Gnostics, Gnosticism

“A movement divided into many sects, all claiming to be the true Christians, but holding basic doctrines which contradicted Catholic* teaching. Gnostics maintained that the universe of space, time and matter was evil, created not by God but by an inferior being called the “demiurge”. They denied the incarnation and physical resurrection, and usually abstained from meat eating and sex. Gnosticism as a pseudo-Christian movement probably began in the 1st century AD and became a serious rival to Catholic* Christianity in the 2nd.” (Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 1, The Age of the Early Church Fathers, 1st to 6th Century*, Christian Focus Publications, 2016, pp. 411-12)

***Catholic** – “From the Greek *katholikos*, “universal”. Early Christians called themselves Catholic to distinguish them from unorthodox groups like the Gnostics. In early Church usage, a catholic was simply a member of the universal Church of Christ, believing the same doctrines as all other true Christian throughout the world. The later term “Roman Catholic” is quite different; it can be used to describe either (a) the Western Church after the great East-West schism of 1054, or (b) that part of the Western Church which rejected the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.” (Ibid. pp.407-08)

“The name *Gnosticism* is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge”. According to the Gnostics, they possessed a special, mystical knowledge, reserved for those with true understanding. That knowledge was the secret key to salvation.” (Justo L Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1, The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Revised and Updated, HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, p.70.)

Historians disagree about when Gnosticism began. The Early Church fathers all agreed that Simon the Magician (Acts 8:9-24) was the source of the alternative Gnostic version of Christianity. (Needham, p. 101)

In 1945 an Arab peasant of Nag Hammadi (in Egypt) discovered a large earthenware jar buried on a mountain, containing an important collection of ancient Gnostic documents, which enable us to see from the Gnostic’s own writings what they believed. (Ibid.)

Although it wasn’t until the 2nd century when the movement had grown and had become a threat to the church, we see that the apostle Paul in Colossians 2 and the apostle John in his first epistle write against certain Gnostics ideas.

Colossians 2:8-10, 16-23

1 John 1:1-3; 4:1-6

“When we think of *Gnosticism* or a *Gnostic movement*, we must not think of one single united organization or philosophy. There was a huge and astonishing variety of different gnostic groups. However, they shared a number of basic beliefs in common. They all claimed that they possessed a special knowledge...of spiritual truth which was not available to the ordinary Christian.” (Needham, p.102)

It was said that Jesus had taught this special knowledge to His apostles and they had taught to the Gnostics. Without this secret knowledge one could not understand the gospel correctly.

General characteristics of Gnosticism include: by Robert C. Jones 2001
<http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/heresy/heresy.pdf>

- 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.
- 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 or 1 Cor. 2: 6-7 as indicators of the existence of such a body of knowledge.

- Some Gnostics viewed Christ as a great prophet, but not as being divine
- 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. 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.
- 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).
- 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. One was an extreme form of **asceticism** – denial of the flesh – 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).
- 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.
- Some Gnostics believed in **Docetism*** which viewed that Christ was a pure spirit, not a flesh and blood human being.

*Docetism – "From the Greek *dokeo*, "to seem". The belief that Christ only seemed to be human, that He did not really have a body of human flesh. Docetism stemmed from the view that flesh and physical matter were evil, or the source of evil; therefore the Savior could have no contact with it. All Gnostics were Docetic." (Needham, p. 409)

Modern Day forms of Gnosticism:

Mystical, Experience Oriented, Spirituality less focus on the objective truth of the Gospel and the Word of God

Scripture refuting Gnosticism:

Authority of Scripture - 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21

The Nature of God – The LORD is good - Psalms 100; 119:68

Creation – Genesis 1-2; Colossians 1:16-17; 1 Timothy 4:1-5

Incarnation – John 1:1-4, 14; Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 2:14-18; 1 John 1:1-2; 4:1-4; 2 John 7

Resurrection – 1 Corinthians 15

Salvation – John 14:6; 19:30; Acts 4:12; Romans 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 2:8-9