

Early Church and Gnostic Error

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Gnosticism goes all the way back to the Tower of Babel and the mystery religions propagated by Nimrod and his wife. The one major benefit they had going for them at the time was that everyone on the earth spoke only one language (and I'm guessing it was Hebrew, but have no proof of that). The other asset was that everyone on the earth then lived in one place, on the plain of Shinar, which is where Nimrod began to build his "stairway to heaven," known as the Tower of Babel.

The term 'gnostic' is derived from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. Gnosticism was not a coherent or uniform set of beliefs. Indeed, the term is so hard to define that many contemporary scholars no longer find it useful. Yet the church fathers definitely referred to a set of opponents who emphasized a knowledge-based path to salvation. Apparently, this way of characterizing their adversaries made good sense to them. Therefore, while acknowledging that 'gnosticism' must be a broad umbrella term, we can still use it to describe an array of ancient movements that shared many common tendencies and features. And at least some of those features were on display in the Antiochene* religious environment of Ignatius' day.[1]

Gnosticism describes numerous paths allegedly designed to lead the officiant to God via secret *knowledge* as opposed to *works*. Gnosis - or knowledge - has been transformed so that today it often means *secret knowledge* that a person might come to possess through a greater awareness of the spiritual realm and the "ascended masters" (demons) who exist there and do their best to try to reach into this realm to people with open hearts and minds and who are agreeable to what they teach. The sad part of this is that regardless of the particular bent of the "ascended master," ultimately it can all be distilled down to similar goals, such as:

- god is within you
- you are god
- you must increase your divinity through *knowledge* to become fully god
- Gaia/Mother Earth is to be worshiped and honored
- The Bible has been seriously misunderstood
- Jesus is not THE God, but merely a god or "ascended master" in the spiritual hierarchy, etc

So whether it's referred to directly as Gnosticism or something else like spiritual enlightenment (or New Age thought), the goal remains the same: entrapment and failure of people. It's the exact same goal Satan used to tempt Eve and Adam in their fall and it unfortunately worked. It remains Satan's best approach in attempting to gain control of human beings and all of humanity: teasing us into thinking that we are gods.

If we consider the controlbalists who, because of seeming endless wealth, are able to exercise increasing control over global society, it is clear they believe that they *are* gods, put here to rule the world. Satan

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has blinded their thinking. This causes them to believe they are gods and that he - Satan (though they call him Lucifer) - is their guiding light to truth, freedom and ultimately eternal life. Because of this and the fact that they embrace these lies, they are more than willing to do his bidding. Working for Satan *pays* in this life, but that's where it ends.

Gnosticism ultimately leads to eternal destruction but because it caters to the insatiable desires of our fallen nature, it appears good to most people, making it easy to follow. No sacrifice is necessary for the human being who enters that path. Only promises of reward in this life are offered. Interestingly enough, when those promises do not come to fruition, the person often blames themselves for their failures and then endeavors to attack the problem with greater resolve and strength.

Contrast this with the average Christian, who when not receiving the response they wish to get from God in prayer, often does what? Blame God. Have you done that? I have, to my chagrin. Gnosticism asserts Self, glorifying its demands and desires. God expects us to *deny* Self, pick up that cross and follow Him regardless of outcomes. Of course, this is why Gnosticism is so acceptable and embraceable to most. It can be done without having to worry about the one and only God Almighty. It's a shortcut that ends in destruction.

It is as true today as it was true in the days of the early church fathers.

The evidence from the ancient Christian writers suggests that gnosticizing doctrines were being vigorously propagated in Ignatius' Antioch by credible teachers. If left unchecked, this movement could develop into the fully developed sects that we find later in the second century. Gnosticism in all its forms present a clear and present danger to the apostolic Christian.[2]

Ignatius was already sentenced to death at this point, yet continued to do battle against Satan's Gnosticism, which was beginning to hold sway in churches pastored by Bishop Ignatius.

On one hand, overly zealous Jewish Christians were calling for adherence to the law of Moses for salvation. On the other hand, the docetists denied the reality of the incarnation and advocated a Christianity that took the focus away from the cross and the empty tomb. And in between them was Ignatius: snatched from his congregation by pagan authorities and headed for an ignominious defeat through public execution - unless, perhaps, there might be a hidden opportunity here? Ignatius apparently thought so. He had resolved to make his death count for eternity.[3]

In spite of some of the best efforts of the early church fathers, this world continues to deal with all forms of Gnosticism, with many names. The extra-biblical *Third Letter to the Corinthians* warns of a resurgence of Gnosticism at the end of this age of grace. The early church fathers write of the many gnostic influences they had to deal with during their day (1st/2nd centuries).

However, in today's world we don't call it Gnosticism. This broad term encompasses many different branches, whether it's Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Baha'i, or any cults recognized as being part

of Christianity like Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventism, etc, and of course New Age (with all its offshoots of "ascended masters," aka demons), and many others.

It is clear that many forms of Gnosticism have forced its way into the visible Church, with New Apostolic Reformation (or NAR, the latest version of the Charismatic Movement), leading the way in many congregations today. Too many Christians seem unaware of these problems, even in their own churches. The best thing to do if this becomes the state of your church is to leave for another, more biblical attuned body of believers. I can almost guarantee that your presence would have no effect on changing that church.

In the case of Ignatius and the churches in Antioch during this day, apparently the main issue was over *Christology*. As noted, there were two factions, which created a rift. Those who wanted to push the law of Moses (Christ was not enough for them), and those who pushed a more *human* Jesus and downplay His *deity*. The latter did so because of the Greek influence of the time that leaned toward Gnosticism. Without realizing it, both groups downplayed His deity by emphasizing the person's need to pursue *works*. This is the very heart of Gnosticism as it constantly (in all its forms), defines a path of salvation that includes either works, knowledge or both, while setting aside faith in Christ alone for His completed work on Calvary's cross in full payment (propitiation) for our sin and failure. In the end, it leads to complete destruction apart from God, not life eternal.

But because this aspect of Gnosticism is somewhat difficult for the average person to see, those involved in it fail to understand that they have actually *denied* the very Savior whom they say they worship. Jesus is *fully* God and *fully* man, having both natures. The life He lived was a model for the way we should live but have no capacity to do so no matter how much secret *gnosis* we gain. It comes only by submitting to Him at every turn, just as He submitted to the Father at every turn. In this way, we gain power to overcome through our faith in Him.

The purpose of Jesus' life was to save and set the prisoner free. He needs nothing from us except our full devotion to Him and His will *after* we embrace salvation. Though we should certainly endeavor to submit to Him and live His will consistently or not prior to our physical death, our failure to live perfectly does not diminish our salvation. We remain saved all because of Him and His ability to keep us in that state. The reason we seek to follow His will in all things is due (hopefully), to a growing love for Him and a greater appreciation for what He has accomplished for us; something we have no capacity to do. Anything less than that is purely *legalistic*.

Let's also recall that both docetists and Gnostics had a seriously wrong view of Jesus' physical body. They actually believed He did *not* have a human body, which of course, set them at odds with those who were pushing for more obedience to the Mosaic Law, as well as those in the Church who clearly believed Jesus was human in every way.

But the docetists and Gnostics, who did not believe Jesus was truly human, were then able to disregard what He accomplished in this life, including His death for our sin. These individuals were bothered by that and so, disregarded and ignored it.

Jesus was instead a revealer of mystical sayings about the supernatural realm. The divine *res gestae*** was meaningless for them; God's actions in history counted for nothing. Both christological errors had harmful consequences: they located salvation somewhere other than the cross. And so the immature believers were caught in the middle, pulled this way by legalists and that way by docetists. The church in Antioch lacked the unity that comes from a true understanding of who Christ really was and what He accomplished...In trying to find a solution to this pastoral dilemma, Ignatius went to the Bible. In particular, he went to the writings and theology of the apostle Paul.[4]

It is amazing to me that error, once gaining access inside the visible Church by Satan and his fallen angels, never ends up being truly eliminated. Jesus Himself warned us of this problem in His parable of the wheat and the tares planted together in the same field (**Matthew 13:24-30**). The landowner - God - had his servants plant the wheat. Satan came along with his servants and planted tares. After discovering the problem, the servants came to the landowner and asked him if they should pull up the tares. The landowner said not to, but to wait until the harvest. Why? Because when the tares were fully grown, the difference between the tares and the wheat would be starkly obvious. As such there would be no danger of accidentally pulling up the wheat *with* the tares. Obviously, this will not take place until the judgment, but it *will* take place.

In the meantime, our job is to know and understand the truth of God's Word, which takes effort on our part. We need to be "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,*" (**2 Timothy 2:15** NKJV). Without consistently doing this, we might have salvation, but we have no means of standing against the many errors that Satan uses to infiltrate churches, in his calculated (though limited), attempts to keep people from receiving eternal salvation.

[1] *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, Bryan M. Lifesten, p 28

[2] *Ibid*, p29

[3] *Ibid*, p 29

[4] 36-37

*Antiochene was essentially the dominant theology of the church in Antioch. It stressed less of Christ's divinity and more of His humanity and emphasized living morally.

**from the Latin meaning "*things done*" or "*things accomplished*"