

## Early Church Heresies – 1. Gnostics

21/10/2007

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Do you remember the early computers? Large, slow, in air-conditioned and dust free rooms, rooms of girls typing punch cards, reels of tape etc. How quickly things change. How cheap they are. Now they are in mobile phones. Wave after wave of new and better technology sweeps through. There is constant pressure to keep updating.

Now imagine the Roman world about 100 years after Jesus. The fad is religion not technology. Wave after wave of newer and more exciting religions and philosophies sweep through.

The pressure was on to stay relevant and update, to adjust to or adapt. And it became a major headache for Christians, for they felt the pressure. Leaders wanted to stay in tune with the changes. Many did not, but they still had to answer people's questions about the new fads.

With great clarity 2 Peter 2:1-3 had said: *There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed, these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.*

But in the excitement and fast paced changes of life, the last thing some want to do is to listen to the old writings. After all, the new must be better.

So around 140AD, men like Valentinus, Basilides and Marcion adopted a new philosophy and adapted it to Christianity. They wanted to help people understand more about God, and they loved the veil of secrecy.

These men championed a Christian version of the movement called Gnosticism. We will hear more of Marcion next week.

This week we will briefly look at Gnosticism. A person who followed this form of teaching was called a Gnostic, which comes from the Greek word for knowledge. These people had a special secret knowledge.

We may never know the full extent of what their secret knowledge was, because they were kept secret, but some people at the time exposed some of their claims, and archaeologists have discovered some.

The movement was very diverse, with many different beliefs in various groups, sort of like trying

to describe the beliefs of the Australian Labour Party. In the ALP there are many factions, with varying ideas on how the economy, the social fabric and the running of a country should be. Yet they all come under the umbrella of the ALP.

Today I will only mention a few of the Gnostic beliefs, and I will by necessity have to be very general. But I do not want you to think that it was a straw enemy of Christianity, which was easily pushed over. The lure of this heresy is still sweet and deadly.

Underlying many of their teachings was the notion that the Supreme Father God is unknowable and undetectable by human senses, They did not believe anyone could know the supreme being. They drew heavily on Plato's hierarchy of the universe. At the top is God, being pure spirit and unknowable. Down from that spiritual height are different beings who were mainly spirit with some matter, then came beings with more matter and less spirit, until finally came things like rocks which were pure matter.

The Gnostics realized that the Old Testament presented a different view of God, and they falsely divided the teachings of Jesus from the Old Testament.

They claimed the Supreme God created a series of supernatural finite beings called Aeons. One was Sophia, a virgin, who gave birth to an inferior defective creator God, known as a demiurge (public craftsman). They claimed that this God of the Old Testament was inferior, fundamentally evil, jealous, rigid, lacked compassion and was prone to genocide. His incompetence caused our world to be created with major problems. So the world has evil not because of the fall, but because god made it.

The supreme God sent Jesus to fix up the mess. But, they claimed, the early Christians confused the message of Jesus. They claim Jesus spoke about the Supreme Father, not the Old Testament god. To them Jesus was not god, but a messenger with 2 messages, one secret and one public.

The Gnostics claimed the Christians only had the public part of the message, and were missing out on the secret knowledge of the true God. It was only when initiated into the Gnostic church that you discovered the truth of what Jesus taught in private.

To them, salvation was not about forgiveness of sins and avoiding hell by trusting Jesus. They claimed we need to be saved from our evil body.

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To them, we are saved when we discover the secret of our spiritual essence, that we possess a divine light or spirit. When our spirit leaves this body after death, this knowledge will guide our ascent through the heavens, so we can be united with God.

There were secret initiation rites. One Gnostic group made their newcomers crawl through a gutted out carcass of a bull, to represent new birth.

Gnostics were very influential in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and some lasted until the 400s.

So how could Christians accept such radical teaching? It is so vastly different to the clear reading of the Scriptures, so why accept this teaching?

Gnostics said Jesus revealed the Father. The Gospels say Jesus explained things to his disciples in private. They claimed to have the secret teachings, and they appealed to elitism. “Don’t be like those ordinary foolish Christians who take the words literally! Use your reason. Use your imagination. Come with us and be excited in worship and learn the key to living as a knowing Christian. Learn what Jesus really meant.”

It appealed to thinkers. It grabbed the imagination. It made Christianity more feasible for scholars. It avoided those awkward bits in the Bible, removed the Law (for it was evil), and gave a key to understand the message.

Christians tried to combat this heresy. In 180AD, Irenaus wrote a 5 volume work against heresies, dealing with the Gnostics. But even as he wrote, the excitement of the movement had worn out.

And as we will see next wk, more Christians were forced to consider what God had revealed and whether the OT was true or not.

I believe Gnosticism died out because its philosophy was faulty, the fad passed, and Christians took a firm stand in the truth of Jesus.

Yet Gnostic ideas have resurfaced through history. In the past few 100 years we have seen Rosicrucians hold similar teachings, some claim that Christian Scientists have Gnostic tendencies, and certainly the Mormons are given secret words, handshakes and grips in temple ceremonies, so that they may ascend through the various levels of the heavens to become gods and goddesses.

If we want to prevent more of this heresy, we need to be clear in knowing that our God has made himself known to us in Christ, and as 2 Peter 1 says:

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord JC, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. and we’ve heard the word of the prophets made more certain and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

Stand firm in the faith of Christ, confident that the God’s word (the word of the prophets) is true, and may grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.