

6

BLIND ALLEYS OF FALSE FAITH

Colossians 2:8–23

Paul writes to Colosse as a concerned elder and loving shepherd caring for an endangered flock of young Christians. He already has explained his view of the supremacy of God in Jesus Christ and how this ought to be considered absolute for Christian thought and life. Now it is time for him to address forthrightly a major challenge to this view.

The Colossian church was in danger of being taken captive (2:8) by false teachers and carried off as a prize of war. The attacker was a **deceptive philosophy** (2:8) that was degrading the Colossians' view of the person and authority of Jesus Christ. While philosophy—the pursuit and love of wisdom—can be a noble thing, in this case it was acting as a deceptive alternative to the Christian faith as preached by Paul and the other original apostles of the Christ.

To participate with Christ in the fullness of God's salvation, insists Paul, one

must hold first to two core convictions that the philosophy gaining ground in Colosse did not embrace. These convictions are (1) Christ is the complete revelation of God within human history (2:9–10); and (2) Christ rules over all powers within God's created order (2:10–15). Accordingly, Paul's warnings are rooted in his central assumption that the person and work of Jesus Christ are sufficient for human salvation from sin and for vital growth in spiritual life.

1. Being Carried Away by False Teachers 2:8–10

Paul's Colossian letter is filled with allusions to the dangerous teaching in question. While the references to it would have been quite clear to the Colossian readers, they are less so now. The general landscape is visible; some of the details, however, are matters of speculation only. What is clear is that some new teachers were endangering the believers with hollow and deceptive ideas rooted in this world and not in Jesus Christ (2:8). They were saying that Christians have to go through certain "spiritual powers" to reach the Christ. Going this way meant recognizing, appeasing, and maybe even worshiping various powers. In response, Paul argues vigorously that Christ is the head over **every power and authority**

(2:10). The false teachers may think that God's rule over the church is mediated by angelic agents; in fact, the Lord himself mediates the divine human relationship, is directly accessible to believers, and alone deserves worship.

In a few generations this doctrinal danger in Colosse would be widespread and formalized into what we now call Gnosticism. By then the Christian movement would have developed three main lines of defense against it not available to Paul. They would be (1) established creedal statements to fight off false doctrine; (2) the official listing of recognized books of the Bible (closed canon), an assured source for identifying apostolic teaching; and (3) the episcopal office, recognized and authoritative leadership to control church life. Lacking these, at least in their later forms, Paul used personal influence and careful reasoning to block the great danger as it was already appearing in his day. Having reminded his readers of the central elements of the gospel (1:12–23) and defended his authority to teach and admonish his readers in light of the gospel (1:24–2:3), he now addresses the problem head on. For him, “the problem with bad ideas is that they result in distorted notions of Christ and what it means to follow him.”¹

The pattern of false teaching in question was removing Jesus Christ as sole occupant of the divine throne. The new thought was that Christ is not sufficient, not unique, only one among many manifestations of God, and that it is necessary to know and to serve other divine powers. How contemporary this sounds! It was a philosophy that was difficult for the average believer to understand. Apparently it included elements of astrology. People were assumed to be under the influence of stars, planets, and angels. Thus, people need a special knowledge beyond that of Jesus to be liberated from these influences. Since some were saying that Jesus is not the only link between the believer and God, it may be necessary to honor and even worship angels (2:18).

Paul rejects this teaching as a fundamental danger to the integrity of Christian faith. For those ancient Asians who were surrounded by a diversity of pagan religions and for we “moderns” who seem little changed in many ways, he insists that Christ is the key to all wisdom and knowledge and the source of all needed spiritual liberation. Only by being fully

¹ Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 98.

grounded in Jesus Christ will the Colossians or we be able to resist the allure of futile speculation and humanly devised belief systems. Some of the Colossians, however, were relying on human imagination and the **basic principles of this world** (2:8). The word *principles* (*stoicheia*) likely is better translated *elements*, referring to the classic four (earth, water, air, and fire). These were commonly considered frivolous and profane in Greek thought, misleading Christians into an ascetic lifestyle with strict injunctions against involvement with the material world that was being judged unspiritual.



LIFE CHANGE

Only by being fully grounded in Jesus Christ would the Colossians or will we be able to resist the allurement of humanly devised belief systems. Given the numerous allurements surrounding believers today, how can churches better ground their members in Jesus Christ? Is it too much to say that it is as important to encourage *mature discipleship* as it is to get a person saved in the first place? Learning how to be *in* the world without being *of* it is essential for

believers who hope to make a difference for Christ in the realities of our time.

According to Paul, salvation must not be thought of as something to be gained by what we do, but something that by sheer grace God offers in Jesus Christ. Salvation originates from who God is, not from who we are or what we do. The Jewish tradition apparently tended in the doing direction in Colosse. This tendency was a problem to the Christian community since it was being mixed with a Greek idea to form an unholy alliance. This idea loathed the human body as the seat of sin. Matter was said to be inherently evil and to be distinguished sharply from the purity of God. Many layers or grades of spiritual beings were said to exist between God and our material existence. The material must be disciplined vigorously. Degrading the body and reaching to these heavenly beings were thought essential doings of true faith. Rather than God's free grace having arrived directly in the flesh of Jesus Christ, said the false teachers, we must find our way to God through intense and dematerialized visions of a complex spiritual world.

Why was Paul so concerned about such thinking in Colosse? First, it brought into question the actual incarnation (fleshing)

question the actual incarnation (fleshing) of God in Jesus. John elsewhere identifies as antichrist any thought that Jesus Christ had not come in the flesh (1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7). Next, assuming that the body is inherently evil usually leads either to immorality (it matters little how one uses what is of no inherent value) or to the opposite, a rigid asceticism that denies normal satisfaction to natural physical desires. Honor is granted to the most restrictive people who think they are gaining by doing. Finally, the usual outcome is a fractured fellowship, a church with many common believers and a few who think they are the spiritually elite. To the contrary, Paul insisted that mature Christian faith is available to all (Col. 1:28) and that divisive differences among Christians have been wiped out in Jesus Christ (3:11).

How often Christians have devalued God's creation, fallen into an arid legalism, and measured spiritual maturity by a lack of "worldliness" as this was judged by the self-righteous ones. This approach usually means an excessively inward spiritual focus that undercuts significant Christian impact on public life. Paul contends that the secret is in a person, not in a philosophy. True faith centers in Jesus Christ and relationship with Him. Believers

must resist all those who would **deceive you with fine-sounding arguments** (2:4). True Christian life is not primarily affirming doctrinal propositions, achieving intense spiritual visions, or gaining some specialized religious knowledge. It is knowing Jesus Christ as Lord of all, including oneself, and coming to **fullness in Christ** (2:10). This does not mean that we can "be sloppy in our thinking.... Right thinking [however] does not make us righteous, only the cross can do that; but right thinking—right in the sense of being hard, honest, clear, disciplined—is essential if we are going to communicate the gospel effectively to a huge segment of the world."²

The Colossian heresy was especially tempting to sensitive believers who wished to go on "to perfection" in their spiritual lives. It presented itself as an advanced opportunity for spiritual maturity, but it actually led to a misguided spiritual elitism. Christian believers were being wrongly urged to reach upward for a progressive "wisdom" (*sophia*) and "knowledge" (*gnosis*), to explore hidden mysteries by successive spiritual initia-

²Maxie D. Dunnam, *The Preacher's Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), p. 360.

tions until they reached their perfection (*teleiosis*). Christian baptism was said to be only the beginning of the Christian journey; the rest of the way involved putting off material things by practicing an ascetic regimen that led to the mysterious world of the truly spiritual—attained only by a few.



WHAT OTHERS SAY

True Christian life is not primarily affirming doctrinal propositions, achieving intense spiritual visions, or gaining some specialized religious knowledge. It is knowing and gratefully accepting Jesus Christ as Lord of all, including of oneself, and coming to maturity in Christ. Martin Luther's famous *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) makes clear that the Christian is justified before God by grace through faith alone. The believer is completely free of any need to establish worthiness before God through ceremonial, legal, or moral works. Christians, of course, are to serve the work of Christ in this world, but without any thought of self-justification by means of such work.

Paul certainly was committed to a high

level of spiritual maturity for believers, but he insisted that those who are in Christ should seek their maturing in Him, not elsewhere. All the necessary wisdom and knowledge for Christians reside in Christ and are readily available to all faithful and seeking people (2:3). Holiness is the goal, and going on to spiritual maturity is not optional. The central concerns are how one defines holiness and how one proposes to achieve the grand goal.

2. The Real Circumcision 2:11–12

Some in Colosse were teaching the necessity and effectiveness of certain religious practices—like the historic practice of physical circumcision—for the mature spiritual life of Christians. Paul counters this teaching. Just as the fullness of deity dwelled bodily in Jesus, believers are to come to fullness of life **in Christ** (2:10). It is in Jesus Christ that true circumcision comes, a circumcision **done by Christ** (2:11). As one is buried in baptism, so one is raised to new life in Jesus Christ. If someone claims to be super-spiritual because of meticulous adherence to some religious practice, that believer is to be reminded that new life comes in the power of the Spirit and solely on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (2:13–15).

For the Jews, circumcision was the traditional symbol of identity with the people covenanted with God for salvation. Paul's word to his non-Jewish readers is that access to this covenant is now open to all people who are in Jesus Christ. The word translated **putting off** in [2:11](#) has the sense of stripping off one's clothes. In contrast to the Jewish practice of foreskin removal, the Christian rite of passage is done by Christ who cuts off **the sinful nature** of those who are in Him. Jewish opponents to Paul's mission of converting Gentiles to Christ centered in their criticism of his not insisting that the converts become outwardly Jewish as well as inwardly Christian.

According to Paul, circumcision only becomes meaningful for a convert to Christ when that person sheds the unregenerate nature and is enabled by the grace of God to experience something of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By His cross Jesus has freed us from the demands of a law that we could never fulfill; by baptism believers are marked as the covenant people who belong to God and no longer to **the powers and authorities** ([2:15](#)). Special Christian rites like baptism have an important role to play in Christian life. Even so, Paul was concerned that in Colosse certain mandated

religious practices had been invested with transformational power, thus substituting them for trust in the all-sufficient work of Christ. In fact, insists Paul, the true Jew is the one who experiences the circumcision of the heart accomplished by Christ's Spirit rather than by Judaism's "circumcision of the heart" ([Rom. 2:28–29](#)). The true Christian is the one baptized into the redemptive results and transforming power of the work of Jesus Christ.

3. The "Powers" Are Dethroned [2:13–15](#)

Paul proceeds to show the folly of any course of action based on a wrong theological premise. Failing to hold to the full supremacy of Jesus Christ as the **Head** ([2:19](#)) is to base life on some self-made religion. Exposed as powerless are the malign forces that once were believed to control human life. These powers, whatever they are or were, have been disarmed, made a **public spectacle** ([2:15](#)), and triumphed over. Through the death, burial, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus, victory is now achieved over sin and death ([2:12–13](#), [3:1](#)).

Idolatry has been a persistent problem for the people of God. Often an image is created, allowing the worshiper to assume that more direct access to God is thereby gained. One of the Ten Com-

mandments speaks against any such images because they tend to draw worship to themselves and distort the perception of the true God. Idolatry at its core “is a religious disguise for self-centeredness. Idols are projections of the human will. They represent attempts to make God less transcendent, less elusive, less sovereign and free, more at the beck and call of human interests.”³ Paul feared for the Colossians in this regard and warned them to shy away from every alternative to direct access to God, through the Son by the Spirit. All such alternatives are exposed for what they are—nothing but dangerous diversions. The warning of Paul is much like chapter 46 of the prophet Isaiah who ridiculed the helpless “gods” of Babylon and announced on behalf of God, “To whom will you compare me or count me equal?... I am God, and there is no other” (Isa. 46:5, 9).

One should not think that belief in mysterious spiritual powers belongs only to the ancient world. We should heed Paul’s warning against **fine-sounding** religious words (2:4) that actually are only Christless myths shaped by a secular culture. Religious fads are always alluring

³C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church* (Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian University Press, 1990), p. 87.

Earle L. Wilson, Alex R. G. Deasley, and Barry L. Callen, *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007).

to a hurting and gullible public. Christian teaching and preaching should not pander to people’s fears and preferences, but be Christ-centered without apology. Believers need to cultivate critical minds that can distinguish between fascinating falsehood and solid biblical teaching. Television therapists of the soul often convey popular psychologies and quasi-religious notions that attract good ratings and sell expensive products. What these people tend to do, however, and all that they can do, is push clever soothing of troubled psyches; they cannot convey the forgiving and recreating grace of God in Jesus Christ.

4. Stay Out of Reverse Gear 2:16–23

Moving back into legalism is viewed by Paul as a serious reversal of the liberation gained in Jesus Christ. There are no principalities or powers that need to be placated constantly by severe self-denial. Whatever once stood against us with its legal demands has been dethroned, canceled, set aside, and nailed to the cross of Jesus (2:14). The key question posed to those tempted to slip back into reverse gear is “Why?” Why do you choose to live as if the world is still in charge? Why do you submit to mechanical and unnecessary regulations? Why are you fooled into serving things that are unable to solve the

problem of self-indulgence, but in fact only give the appearance of promoting deep spirituality? Why do you voluntarily move backward into the old captivity when the forward thrust of the freeing Christ is so graciously available?



KEY IDEAS

Christian teaching and preaching should not pander to people's fears and preferences, but be Christ-centered without apology. Believers need to cultivate critical minds that can distinguish between fascinating falsehood and solid biblical teaching. Here are a few fascinating falsehoods popular among today's Christians:

- Health and wealth always follow faith and faithfulness.
- The nation of one's citizenship is the special apple of God's eye.
- What one "feels" is as crucial as what one believes.
- Participation in church life is optional; "I go only where and when I feel the need and find my personal wants addressed directly."

For Paul, true Christian faith is not

rigorous compliance with religious rules of self-denial, but active faith in Jesus Christ and an embracing of the enabling grace found in life with Christ's Spirit ([Rom. 14:13–18](#)). Any brand of believing that features a laundry list of negatives rather than positive paths to personal transformation is as spiritually deluding as it may be attractive. The bottom line, of course, is not a devaluing of discipline in the Christian life, but a deep Pauline concern. The concern is about any kind of religious practice, good as it may be, that promotes self-righteousness and supplants Christ's central importance for human salvation. Christian faith must not bow to any legalism that offers convenient rungs in a ladder said to allow one to climb spiritually and thereby increasingly please God.

Paul is not anti-Jewish; he was himself a well-trained Jew who was rejoicing in the fulfillment of his cherished tradition through the coming of the long-expected Messiah. Even so, he was strongly opposed to any recourse to mandated Jewish practice that replaced the core conviction of Christian faith—the superiority of Jesus Christ in all things. To grow spiritually, a believer is to be constantly open to God, as God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Believers are to be con-

stantly instructed, inspired, and established by the Spirit of the Christ.

No human efforts can ever attain what God already has graciously provided in Christ. While focused Christian devotion and discipline are vital indeed, they should not be understood as means of acquiring God's grace, but as means of incorporating and implementing that grace in all of life. There should be a measure of self-denial so that a believer is not shaped by the world. Having said that, it is equally important to realize that success and growth in Christian living are always because of the sheer grace of God. John Wesley taught a proper balance. Faithful attention to baptism and the Lord's Supper, for instance, provides an established means of grace, a means less for the *being* and much more for the *well being* of believers and the church. In other words, "the outward practice is never the bringer of salvation, but it does signify and is able to nourish that salvation."⁴

True Christian spirituality lies in a maturing relationship with Jesus Christ. The idea of a careful stewardship of life is certainly affirmed by Paul. What he is concerned with is the nature of religious motivation. Proper motivation roots in

⁴ Barry L. Callen, *God as Loving Grace* (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel, 1996), p. 330.

real character renewal in Christ and results in conduct that reaches out in love to the neighbor. Nothing created should be substituted for the Creator. Nothing that is not Christ-centered is finally effective or worthy. A veneer of spirituality is no substitute for the transforming work of Christ on the cross and the ongoing work of the Spirit in the believer's heart. Holiness is the clear goal of Christian life and can come into being only if freed of false restraints. Mere "religion" is never adequate.⁵

Note that the liberty to which Paul refers is the opposite of license and the miserable individualism whose highest ambition is to do just what it likes. The intent of Paul's comments to the Colossians is on behalf of "the fullest, deepest and most watchful holiness. He wants his Colossian converts above all things to be holy, that is, to live a life yielded all through to their Redeemer, who is also their Master."⁶ The reality has come in Christ. Ritual observances designed to

⁵ See Barry L. Callen, *Authentic Spirituality: Moving Beyond Mere Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic and Paternoster Press, 2001; Lexington, Ky.: Emeth Press, 2006).

⁶ Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossian Studies* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), p. 204.

“keep the flesh in subjection” may have the appearance of wisdom, but in themselves they are of little value in checking **sensual indulgence** (2:23). The goal is to live *in Christ* and thus to become *like Him*. Herein is true holiness.

II. GNOSTICISM

The very term “Gnosticism” is problematic. It comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which referred to immediate experiential knowledge that comes from acquaintance in contrast to propositional or factual knowledge.

There was a group in the second century who called themselves *Gnostikoi* (“Gnostics”), meaning “those capable of attaining knowledge” and then “the knowing ones.” But beginning with Irenaeus, Christian heresiologists extended the term to cover opponents in the church in whom they discerned some commonalities yet who had different systems of thought.

So it is well to remember that “Gnosticism” has become something of an umbrella term for what was more a mood and attitude toward the world and its origin (and even these attitudes varied) than a single solution to the problems that some persons felt. That is, Gnosticism was more a movement than a consistent approach.

The religious movement of Gnosticism was characterized by an intuitive knowledge of the origin, essence, and ultimate destiny of the spiritual nature of human beings.

A. Sources for Study

The study of Gnosticism was long hampered by the fact that our main sources of information were the anti-heretical writers of the church. The principal authors who discussed Gnosticism and preserved Gnostic material were Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius. The Gnostics were also known from the writings against them by the Greek philosopher Plotinus.

Even where these authors preserved quotations from Gnostic writings, these were often out of context and always used for a polemical purpose. It is usually the case in history that losers are known only from descriptions by their opponents, and few persons would like to be remembered only for what their enemies say about them.

Some supplement to what the anti-heretical church fathers said was available from a few original Gnostic works preserved in Coptic, from the Hermetic writings (a pagan form of Gnosticism), and from later Manichaean and Mandaean sources (two movements indebted to earlier Gnosticism).

This situation changed dramatically with the discovery, in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, of a collection of twelve codices (plus other sheets) written in the fourth century and containing mostly original Gnostic works in a Coptic translation. The publication of these works in critical editions and reliable translations have made them the prima-

ry focus for the study of ancient Gnosticism.

The Nag Hammadi collection can be broadly grouped into five categories of writings (see [chart](#)). Of these the most important are the first two, (1) those closer to original “Gnostic” thought—to which the names “Sethian,” “Barbelognostic,” “Ophite,” or others are given and which may represent variations within one school or distinct systems—and (2) those from the Valentinian school.

The accounts of the church fathers give something of the mythical structure of the Gnostic systems, but the new Nag Hammadi documents give more of the living spirit and the methods of interpretation that were employed. The one class of sources helps interpret the other.

B. Question of Origins

Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, three different sources for Gnostic thought were postulated:

1. The view of the church fathers that Gnosticism was a Christian heresy, resulting from Christians explaining their faith to themselves and their neighbors in philosophical terms, has had modern scholarly support.
2. The opposite view, presenting Gnosticism as essentially a non-Christian movement (some tracing it to Persia)—representing the despairing, syncretistic mood of late antiquity that reconstructed a philosophical world view from the old myths and gods, and in the process adopted a veneer of Christianity that in turn provided a model for Christian intellectuals to interpret their faith—was advocated by the history of religions school of interpretation and continues to have many supporters.
3. A less commonly held view that Gnostic speculation began in Jewish circles, perhaps as an effort to find eternity when the kingdom of God did not come (e.g., aeons as “ages” of time in apocalypticism became cosmic components of the divine pleroma in Gnosticism), has found renewed support as a result of the Nag Hammadi documents.

SOME WORKS FROM THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY

(1)Sethian Works

(a)Some concentrating more on the myth of origins

Apocryphon of John

<p><i>Apocalypse of Adam</i> <i>Hypostasis of the Archons</i> <i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i> <i>Trimorphic Protennoia</i></p> <p>(b)Others relating to the ascent of the soul <i>Zostrianos</i> <i>Allogenes ("The Foreigner")</i> <i>Three Steles of Seth</i></p> <p>(2)Valentinian works</p>
<p><i>Gospel of Truth</i> <i>Treatise on the Resurrection</i> <i>Tripartite Tractate</i> <i>Gospel of Philip</i></p> <p>(3)Works from the Thomas tradition in Syria</p>
<p><i>Gospel of Thomas</i> <i>Book of Thomasthe Contender</i></p> <p>(4)Hermetic works</p>
<p><i>Asclepius</i></p> <p>(5)Other works, including non-Gnostic Christian moral/wisdom writings</p>
<p><i>Teachings of Silvanus</i> <i>Sentences of Sextus</i></p>

There seem to be elements of truth in all three interpretations. Some of the ideas in Gnosticism were older than Christianity, but a complete Gnostic system has not been identified prior to Christianity. Some expressions of Gnosticism, especially those combated by the church fathers, were Christian heresies. Some of the Gnostic systems known from the Nag Hammadi writings show a proximity to Judaism, if not indeed a Jewish origin.

Gnostic works at Nag Hammadi with no explicit Christian features may point to Gnosticism as at first or as also a non-Christian movement, but not necessarily, for if these works could be read by Christians, they could as well have been Christian compositions.

A middle-of-the-road view would be that Gnosticism and Christianity grew up

together but from different sources. They had some interactions in the first century and developed into defined forms as separate religions in the second century.

Some contemporary writers make a distinction between “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism,” employing the former term for the wider atmosphere congenial to a Gnostic way of thinking and the latter for the developed systems of thought.

As A. D. Nock put it, “Apart from the Christian movement there was a Gnostic way of thinking, but no Gnostic system of thought.” He continued, “It was the emergence of Jesus and of the belief that he was a supernatural being who had appeared on earth which precipitated elements previously suspended in solution.”

The fully developed Gnostic systems that we know from the church fathers and that are reflected in the Nag Hammadi library, whatever their antecedents, belong to the second century. It was Christian Gnosticism that made an impact, for the Neo-Platonists regarded Gnosticism as a Christian deviation; Gnostics to them were Christians with a kind of claim to be intellectuals characterized by a passionate dualism and extreme anthropocentricity.

To say that Gnosticism is non-Christian in origin is not necessarily to say that it is pre-Christian. Whatever the points of contact between Christianity and Gnosticism, the former statement can be affirmed; the latter is not confirmed.

C. Components of Gnosticism

The debate over origins points to the elements that went into the developed Gnostic systems of the second century. These contained Jewish, pagan, and Christian components.

Many of the Gnostic speculations can be explained as arising from reflections on the early chapters of Genesis. Certain developments in Judaism may be seen as a background to the emergence of Gnosticism: the influence of dualistic thinking, esoteric speculations, personification of Wisdom, intermediary beings found in developed angelology. Hence, many now look to the milieu of heterodox Judaism or specifically to Jews in rebellion against their religious heritage for the origins of Gnosticism.

Greek philosophy provides another large component in Gnosticism. Neopythagorean influences may be seen in the negative evaluation of matter, ascetic practices, and speculations about the cosmos. Some speak of Gnosticism as “Platonism run wild,” because of the statements in Plato developed by the Gnostics: a remote supreme being and the soul as immortal and in bondage to the body. Pagan analogies may also be found in the Hermetic literature and the *Chaldaean Oracles*.

Many things in the New Testament, especially Paul and John, proved susceptible of Gnostic interpretation, so that some modern scholars see these New Testament authors as employing Gnostic thinking in formulating their own ideas.

Although we have continued the common practice of speaking of Gnosticism as if it were a single entity, this was hardly the case. Each Gnostic teacher took these component elements and put them together according to a Gnostic way of thinking in order to construct his own system. Thus there is a great variety in the details of the systems of different Gnostic teachers. Gnosticism was an aggregate of a series of individualistic responses to the religious situation made by teachers who did not think of themselves as eccentric.

D. Common Features of the Gnostic Myths

Each Gnostic teacher had his own system of thought for representing reality. What held each Gnostic community together was its myth of origins, the sense of group identity, and the in-group language.

The main features of the various myths were as follows: (1) the original divine element produced other spiritual principles; (2) a “fault” occurred in the divine, spiritual world; (3) as a result matter came into existence; (4) some of the pure spiritual nature was planted in (some) souls; (5) a “redeemer” revealed the way of escape out of the material world for the divine element; (6) the soul passes through the realms of the world rulers in its return to its spiritual home. ✎

The Gnostic attempt to explain the problem of evil posited a fall in the divine world, in deity. This effort to “kick upstairs” the problem of evil was a notable, but ultimately unsatisfying, solution to one of the difficult human philosophical questions.

The way of dealing with this question was one expression of the Gnostic, especially Valentinian, use of the partly poetical, partly philosophical concept of “metaphysical correspondence.” Applying the Platonic idea of earthly realities as imitations of the world of Ideas, Gnostics saw the components of the pleroma as equivalent to the totality of the spiritual nature of humanity. There is a heavenly counterpart of the soul. Accordingly, the Gospel narratives were read as reflections of the drama that took place in the heavenly world.

Thus, in spite of its dualism, “The gnosis of Gnosticism involves the divine identity of the *knower* (the Gnostic), the *known* (the divine substance of one’s transcendent self), and [the] *means by which one knows* (gnosis as an implicit divine faculty to be awakened

and actualized)” (Bianchi).

E. Principal Teachers

The anti-heretical writers of the early church traced “Gnosticism” to Simon Magus, “the father of all heresies.” This genealogy of heresy in the church fathers looks artificial, being influenced by various succession lists employed in antiquity, and the account in [Acts 8](#) does not suggest that Simon held any particularly “Gnostic” teaching.

It may be there was a confusion between the Simon of [Acts 8](#) and another Simon, who was a Gnostic; or [Acts 8](#) may not tell the whole story; or Simon was on his way to becoming a Gnostic, and his followers later may have become Gnostic.

At any rate, the attribution of Gnosticism to Simon may point to a Samaritan origin, to which some now look. The teaching later ascribed to Simon does have features of Gnostic schemes in that it includes a fall from divinity and a descent of a heavenly power (Simon himself) to bring salvation.

Seemingly contradictory reports are given of the teaching of Cerinthus, reported to have been opposed by the apostle John in Ephesus. The earliest surviving report (Irenaeus) puts Cerinthus in the Gnostic orbit: A lower Power and not the Supreme God made the world; Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary who exceeded other persons in righteousness and wisdom; the divine Christ descended on him in the form of a dove at his baptism and flew away before his crucifixion, so the Christ remained an impassible spiritual being.

A slightly later report made Cerinthus a teacher of Jewish millennialism and attributed the book of Revelation to him. A way of reconciling the seeming incongruity of these pictures of Cerinthus is that he anticipated Marcion by saying that the Jewish expectation of a messianic kingdom on earth was a correct reading of the Old Testament prophecies, but Christ revealed the unknown Father and a spiritual salvation.

SOME TEACHERS JUDGED HERETICAL				
Name	Date	Place		
Simon Magus	⚡ First century	Samaria and Rome		
Menander	⚡ End of first century	Samaria and Antioch		
Cerinthus	⚡ End	of Asia Minor		

		first century	
Saturninus	ⲓ	Early	Antioch
		second century	
Carpocrates	ⲓ	Early	Alexandria
		second century	
Basilides	ⲓ	Early	Alexandria
		second century	
Valentinus	ⲓ	Second century	Alexandria and Rome
Ptolemy	ⲓ	Second century	Rome?
Theodotus	ⲓ	Second century	Alexandria?
Heracleon	ⲓ	Second century	Italy?

Irenaeus traced a line leading from Simon to Menander to Saturninus and Basilides. To Saturninus he ascribed a compact summary that corresponds to the principal elements of the basic Gnostic myth: The unknown Father made the various levels of angelic beings; seven of these angels made the world and the first man. The God of the Jews is one of these angels. The Christ, who is incorporeal, came only in appearance in order to overthrow the God of the Jews and to save good human beings. His followers renounced marriage and procreation and were vegetarians.

Carpocrates too affirmed that the world was made by angels, who were far inferior to the unbegotten Father. Jesus was born of Joseph like the rest of men, but because of his purity of soul, power from above came upon him, enabling him to escape the world rulers. Souls which are like Jesus' soul also receive power to escape the world rulers and may even become stronger than Jesus' disciples or indeed Jesus himself.

Carpocrates's followers called themselves "Gnostics," but they had features unlike others known as Gnostics. They taught reincarnation and in contrast to the asceticism

in regard to sexuality (characteristic of other Gnostics) were libertines, engaging in sexual immorality. Carpocrates's son, Epiphanes, defended promiscuity on the basis of a "law of nature" that made all things common property.

Basilides had a much more elaborate cosmology than other teachers who sought to combine Christianity with Gnostic speculations. The unengendered Father (or "the non-existent God," i.e., the God beyond existence, in another version) engendered various spiritual qualities and from them produced "powers, principalities, and angels," one set of each for all the 365 heavens. Among the heavenly beings was an Archon who was God of the Jews. The unengendered Father sent his firstborn Mind (or Intellect) to free those who believed in him from the power of the beings who made the world. This emissary corresponds to Jesus, who worked miracles but did not suffer. Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross, was ignorantly crucified in his place, while Jesus, taking the appearance of Simon, stood by and laughed at them and then ascended invisibly to the Father who had sent him. Salvation belongs only to the soul, not the body. His followers were ready in times of persecution to deny that they were Christians, since they, like the angels, are not able to suffer.

Of those the church fathers called "Gnostics," by far the most influential teacher was the religious genius Valentinus, who was a Christian reformer of Gnostic theology. Valentinus was educated in Alexandria, and after teaching there, went to Rome, where he was active in the church. Reportedly disappointed in his hope to be elected bishop, and meeting much opposition to his teaching, he dropped out of sight.

Very little that is certainly from Valentinus remains, but it has been suggested that the *Gospel of Truth* found at Nag Hammadi is a sermon of his. Valentinus was more explicitly "Christian" than his Gnostic predecessors, but he also more fully appropriated the language of Plato.

Moreover, Valentinus's mysticism modified Gnostic mysticism by understanding salvation as coming through *gnosis*, knowledge of (or experiential acquaintance with) the savior, the self, and God. His myth of origins starts not with an original monad (the ultimate single entity) but with a pair of first principles, the Inexpressible (Depth) and Silence. Using agricultural language, Valentinus says that they produced other dualities to constitute the first ogdoad ("eight"); from it proceeded twenty-two other powers, making a total of thirty aeons in the *pleroma* (fullness [of the spiritual universe]).

One of these aeons (named Sophia, the Greek word for Wisdom, in other versions of the myth) revolted and engendered Christ and a shadow (matter). Christ returned to the *pleroma*, and the rebellious "mother" emitted the Demiurge (the creator). Jesus was

an emanation from the Christ or from other aeons of the pleroma. Earthly entities such as humanity and the church were thus seen as reflections of spiritual realities.

Valentinus's followers were said to have branched into two schools, a Western (e.g., Heracleon and Ptolemy) and an Eastern (e.g., Theodotus and Bar Daisan or Bardesanes). Their own original contributions to biblical interpretation testify to the brilliance of Valentinus as a teacher. Heracleon wrote perhaps the first commentary on a New Testament book, the Gospel of John, and Ptolemy offered a three-fold scheme for interpreting the Old Testament Law, part coming from God himself, part from Moses, and part from the elders. The church fathers give fuller reports on his successors than on Valentinus himself.

It is often difficult to draw inferences from an intellectual system to the social realities in which it operates, and this is especially the case with Gnosticism. For example, the prominence of feminine elements in the pleroma of the Gnostics does not seem to have necessarily transferred to an equality of women in Gnostic communities.

Nevertheless, there were women teachers prominent in some Gnostic circles: for example, an unnamed woman of the Cainite sect, whose disparagement of water baptism called forth Tertullian's *On Baptism*, and Philoumene, a prophetess and teacher influential on Marcion's disciple Apelles.

Yet there does not appear to be any consistent line of greater openness to women's leadership among "heretical" churches, nor consistent hostility to women as women among the "orthodox."

F. Sample Gnostic Myths of Creation and Salvation

Two extensive elaborations of the basic Gnostic scheme have survived: one from the "Sethian" form of Gnosticism and written by an adherent, found in the *Apocryphon of John* (also known to Irenaeus in a slightly different version); the other from Valentinianism, the system of Ptolemy described in detail by Irenaeus.

According to the *Apocryphon of John*, the First Principle, "the Father of Everything," by means of the Second Principle, "Barbelo," filled up the divine world with emanations. The creator of this world is an evil Craftsman, "Ialdabaoth." The creation of Adam takes place in two stages: first, Adam is made only of soul; at the second stage a material shell encases him.

The *Apocryphon of John* is already a Christian version of the Gnostic scheme, for one of the spiritual beings is a pre-existent "Christ," and the content of the work is presented as a post-resurrection revelation of Jesus, yet the true revealer is Barbelo.

Ptolemy's elaboration of Valentinus's version of the Gnostic system is more explicitly "Christian," although "unorthodox," and seeks to give more orderly explanations to the picture of the spiritual world.

There is a doubling of higher and lower Christs and Wisdoms. The higher Christ is an emanation from Intellect and has the Holy Spirit as his consort; the lower Christ, or Jesus, also called Savior, is an emanation from all the aeons and descended on the Jesus who was born of Mary. The higher Wisdom, Sophia, was one of the thirty aeons; her passion for Depth (the perfect Father) gave birth to the lower Wisdom, Achamoth, who in turn gave birth to the Demiurge (creator of the world) and who became ultimately the spouse of Jesus the savior.

Human beings are in three classes—those who are material and will be lost, the psychics or ordinary Christians, and the spirituals or Valentinian Christians. The latter two receive different kinds of salvation.

G. Doctrinal Errors and Significance of Gnosticism

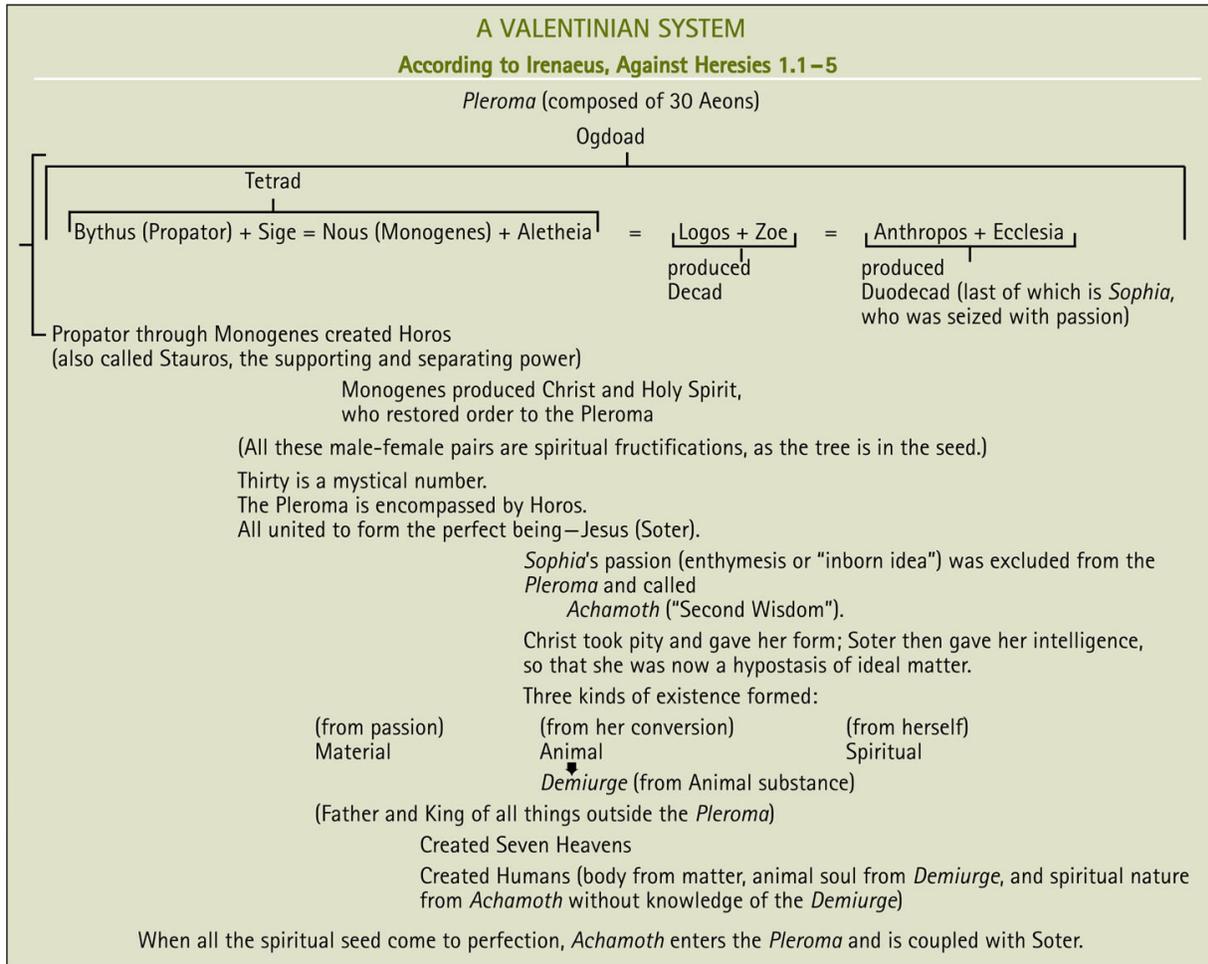
Contrary to the fashion in contemporary study to posit considerable variety in primitive Christianity (discussed further below), the reactions by many 2nd-century Christians to the teachings discussed in this chapter show that some fundamental doctrines were commonly regarded as basic to the Christian faith.

Those who came to prevail as orthodox Christians concluded that the Gnostics, including Valentinians, denied some fundamental doctrines:

1. The identity of the Creator (whom the Gnostics made a lesser and at best morally ambivalent figure) with the one supreme God
2. The goodness of the created order of the universe (most Gnostics treated matter as bad)
3. The full incarnation of Christ (although there were variations in how the divine Christ was related to the human Jesus)
4. Revelation in historical events (rather than in speculative myth and secret traditions)
5. Redemption by the blood of the cross (the cross was treated allegorically even in Valentinianism)
6. A resurrection of the body (and not of the soul only)

It is no wonder that those who pioneered the development of orthodox theology rejected the teachings they associated with the rejection of these doctrines.

In spite of what their opponents discerned as fundamental doctrinal errors, Gnostic thought proved attractive to many. The Gnostic Christians represented an effort to interpret their faith in terms of the philosophical and religious climate of the day and so to wrestle with problems they perceived in the nature of the world and human existence.



Because of these concerns, Valentinianism especially influenced orthodox Christian thinkers in Alexandria in the development of their theology. One learns, sometimes imperceptibly, from one's opponents, and in refuting other ideas, one's own thoughts are advanced by absorbing elements from the viewpoints being rejected.

Gnosticism, furthermore, showed a concern with salvation. Although the means of achieving this was through knowledge, Gnosticism as a religion of redemption testified to the need of human souls for something beyond this world to satisfy their longings.

H. Lessons from the Struggle with Gnosticism

Although culture and philosophy always shape expressions of Christianity to some extent, Gnosticism illustrates the danger of allowing an “outside” system of thought to be determinative of the fabric of Christianity. ❖

The risk is one that has to be taken in attempting to relate the Christian faith to whatever culture one finds oneself in, but the results of such an extreme appropriation warn against moving from communication to acceptance. The threat of Gnosticism may not have been so much to orthodox belief systems as to identity (by reason of assimilation).

A related lesson has to do with the use of words. One may have the right words but the wrong ideas. The Gnostics were able to use the Christian Scriptures and conform to the Christian creed, because they gave these words a different meaning.

Gnosticism, furthermore, may serve a warning against intellectual pride. Individual Gnostic thinkers may indeed have been humble, but the Gnostic approach itself created different classes that placed the ones with the “true insight” in a special camp superior to ordinary Christians. Intellectual elitism is a danger always for those “in the know.”

The Gnostic controversy demonstrates the importance of institutions. In a broad sense the Gnostics may be said to have had a “church,” but they remained closer to the social organization of a school in which followers continued the teachings and practices of their teacher. Christianity, however, created stronger organizational bonds uniting its members.

For all its failures through history, the “institutional church” has preserved the Christian faith. And so it has been for all teachers and teachings that have endured: Unless an institution embodies and perpetuates an idea, the idea will fail.

The recognition of this reality in the second century, however, should not be given uncritically, for the acknowledgment that orthodox doctrine was preserved among the hierarchical church must be balanced by the acknowledgement that the “heretics” often preserved more biblical views about the freedom and ministry of the church

E. The Heresy Today

1. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when people try to combine Christian truth with other systems of thought.
2. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when people emphasize "correct" doctrine to the exclusion of personal relationship and lifestyle faith.
3. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when people turn Christianity into an exclusive intellectual eliteness.
4. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when religious people turn to asceticism or antinomianism.

-Bob Utley

<https://bible.org/seriespage/introduction-1-john>