

Heresies: Ancient and Modern

Jesus Christ warned, “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many” (Matthew 24:4–5). He further warned, “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (verse 24).

Christ’s prediction proved true. False teachers began bringing their pernicious doctrines into the church within a few years after the first Christian congregations were established. Over time, some false teachers would claim to be the Christ, or Messiah, while others would come in Christ’s name, claiming to be His authoritative representative.

Jesus prophesied of those who would call Him “Lord” and claim to have prophesied, cast out demons, and done many great works in His name, but because of their lawlessness they would not be permitted to enter His Kingdom (Matthew 7:21–23). The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthian believers to watch out for anyone who came preaching “another Jesus whom we have not preached...or a different gospel which you have not accepted” (2 Corinthians 11:4). Paul explained to the Galatians that the perversion of the true gospel amounts to nothing less than “a different gospel,” and that anyone who preaches or practices such a “gospel” is to “be accursed” (Galatians 1:6–9).

In approximately A.D. 52, Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to avoid being apprehensive about the coming of Christ. He explained that the day of Christ’s coming “will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This “son of perdition,” Paul explained, would “exalt himself above all that is called God ...showing himself that he is God” (verse 4). This could mean that the future lawless one will actually claim to be God, but the expression “showing himself that he is God” is most likely Paul’s way of speaking of the lawless one’s self-exaltation above all that is worshipped.

Interestingly, though the lawless one will appear on the scene in the future and will be alive when Christ returns, the “mystery of lawlessness” that will produce this lawless one was “already at work” in Paul’s day (verse 7, emphasis added). The final apostasy (“falling away,” verse 3) and revelation of the lawless one will occur only after the removal of the restraining power that presently prevents the mystery of lawlessness from full manifestation (verses 7–8). The mystery of lawlessness, restrained but not extinguished, was at work in Paul’s day and has been at work in this world ever since. It has given rise to many antichrists and will bring forth the final Antichrist (1 John 2:18).

The mystery of lawlessness is not a single, organized system or well-orchestrated historical conspiracy; it is the sum total of the Devil’s efforts to thwart God’s plan for humankind. Since the true church is at the center of God’s program, Satan’s efforts are directly particularly, though not exclusively, at the church.

Many Antichrists

Many “antichrists” had come before the close of the first century. The Judaizers began spreading their heretical notions in the early years of the Gentile mission. They restricted salvation to the sphere of their own experience and understanding of the Mosaic economy, hence their insistence that Gentile converts to the Messianic faith be “circumcised according to the custom of Moses” (Acts 15:1). In other words, they believed Gentiles had to become Jews to be saved.

This early heresy was dealt with decisively at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), though it persisted for a good many years afterwards. The heresy was a serious threat, especially to “babes” in the Christian faith, but it could hardly be described as “lawless,” or antinomian. The problem was a wrong use of the law, not a rejection of the law as a rule of life—so Paul apparently had something else in mind when he warned of the “mystery of lawlessness” and of the “lawless one” who would appear in the last days.

Paul’s (and other New Testament writers’) use of the term “lawlessness” (an apparent reference to antinomianism, or “anti-law” doctrine) and John’s descriptions of “antichrists” who practice lawlessness and deny that Christ had come in the flesh (1 John 2:18–23; 3:4–10; 4:1–3) may point to an early form of Gnostic dualism, a religious system whose major features would be imposed upon the Gospel narratives and blended with Christian beliefs, thus yielding a different Jesus, another gospel, and a foreign spirit. The system, under the guise of “Christianity,” would emerge full-bloom in the second century.

Gnosticism

The “Christian” Gnosticism of the second and third centuries was not a unified movement. Beliefs among those identified as Gnostics varied considerably, but there were some common features among them. One of the most important features was their radical dualism, or belief that only God is good and everything else—the entire material creation—is inherently evil and is the work of an inferior god, or demiurge. God is the ultimate Reality, and human spirits are a part of that Reality. Unfortunately, many of these spirits, or sparks of divinity, are presently trapped in evil material bodies and bound to an evil material world.

For the ancient Gnostics, salvation was not a way by which human beings could be reconciled with God; it was knowledge (hence the designation Gnostic, meaning “to know”) of one’s divine identity—an awakening, a deliverance from ignorance.

Gnostic dualism requires a radical revision of the Gospel narratives. First, the God-sent Savior could not be a flesh-and-blood human being because flesh and blood are a part of the material creation, which is evil; so biblical Christology had to be radically redefined. The Christ may appear to be human, but he is not. He could not have been crucified, so the “crucifixion of Christ” must have been a case of mistaken identity. Second, the divine self needs liberation through knowledge of its true identity, not “atonement” through deliverance from sin; so the purpose of Christ’s coming had to be radically revised. Third, since the divine self is temporarily trapped in the prison of an inherently evil body,

death is a friend, not an enemy; so the biblical concept of death as the “last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26) must be thrown out.

Fourth, God’s goal, according to Scripture, is the renewal of the cosmos—a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1; Romans 8:19–22). The Gnostic system, which sees the material creation as the work of an inferior god, must reject this goal. Fifth, biblical salvation includes “the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23). For the Gnostics, the goal is to escape the body, leaving the material creation behind to return to God, the ultimate spiritual Reality. The concept of a bodily resurrection is meaningless—perhaps despicable—in Gnostic thought. Sixth, the Gnostic perception of material things as evil requires a different understanding of morality, since morality is based on biblical (and natural) law, which teaches respect for and the proper use of the body and other material things.

According to New Testament scholar David M. Scholer, “Many church fathers, especially Irenaeus and Epiphanius, portrayed the Gnostics as immoral libertines, who indulged the body and its passions.... Many scholars doubt the accuracy of these portrayals, since none of the primary texts written by the Gnostics themselves indicate any tendency toward or approval of that type of lifestyle. Yet the church fathers may well have described what was a social reality for some Gnostics, and it is logically possible to understand that an ideology that believes that the body is fundamentally evil could lead not only to asceticism but also to indulgence of the body, since it is of no relevance for religion or morality” (The Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Development, p. 402, InterVarsity Press, 1997).

Other conservative biblical scholars agree with Scholer’s assessment. Some Gnostic dualists probably argued that since salvation pertains to the soul and the body is irrelevant, indulgence of the flesh (lawlessness) doesn’t matter. Others Gnostics—the majority—probably reasoned that since the body is inherently evil, all passions and pleasures should be suppressed. The former were lascivious, while the latter most likely forbade marriage and sexual relations, avoided meat and wine, and embraced poverty—but it is quite possible, even probable, that both extremes grew out of the same philosophy of dualism.

The Gnostics also believed in intermediary beings who inhabit the realm between God and the material world. Perhaps the apostle Paul was confronting an early form of Gnosticism in his epistle to the Colossians. He mentioned the “worship of angels” (Colossians 2:18), a possible allusion to an excessive emphasis on intermediary beings. He also mentioned “regulations—Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” (verses 20–21), a certain reference to the rigorous rules of asceticism.

All Gnostics did not share the same customs and did not adhere to a single creed or set of tenets. They varied considerably in religious practice and identified themselves by various names, but their dualism called for drastic reinterpretation or wholesale rejection of the apostolic doctrine of Christ and the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

The Gnostic movement lasted until the fourth century. To what extent its dualism with its emphasis on intermediary beings and asceticism (with lawlessness, or antinomianism, as a possible feature in some circles) affected the broader church is uncertain. What is certain is that strong opposition on the part of the early church fathers indicates that they saw Gnosticism as a serious threat to Christianity.

Marcionism

Another second-century heretical movement believed by some to be connected to Gnosticism came to be known as Marcionism, named for its founder, Marcion, a native of Pontus in Asia Minor. Marcion was born in about A.D. 80 and began developing aberrant theological views fairly early in life. Later, partly due to the influence of a Roman Christian philosopher named Cerdo, Marcion's views would become a fully developed system of belief.

A council of elders in Rome excommunicated Marcion in A.D. 144 on charges of heresy. Marcion, believing his system of belief represented a restoration of the true faith, formed his own movement.

Marcion believed Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was a just but inferior god, and that the Father of Jesus Christ—the God of the New Testament—was a good God. With these ideas at the foundation of his belief system, Marcion edited the Scriptures, forming his own canon. He rejected the Old Testament entirely; threw out all the Gospels except an edited form of Luke's; and accepted ten of Paul's epistles, throwing out the pastorals. The purpose of Marcion's revisions was to rid Scripture of Jewish corruptions. He believed his edited version of the scriptural canon was the key that unlocked the mystery of the true gospel.

Marcion believed too much Jewish religion had been assimilated into the broader church's doctrine and practice. The good God of the New Testament, he believed, should not be confused with the inferior god of the Jews; nor should He be worshipped according to Old Testament ordinances.

Marcionism spread throughout the known world and became quite popular. Its popularity was due primarily to its anti-Judaism, which had already infected much of Christianity and was widespread among pagans. Other factors contributing to its popularity were (1) its solution to alleged contradictions in the Gospels and (2) its simple solution to the seeming paradox between the existence of evil and belief in a good God.

Many scholars believe Marcion was in some measure influenced by Gnosticism. He rejected the material world and the flesh, believing them to be inherently evil. He forbade sex, marriage, drinking wine, and eating meat. Like the Gnostics, Marcion believed that Christ did not have a material body.

While Marcionism was ultimately condemned by the broader church and stamped out, the very fact that such a bizarre belief system could be so well received among Christians

illustrates how powerful an influence a sentiment or prejudice—in this case, anti-Semitism—can be, and how such influences, if left unchecked, can lead to full-scale apostasy.

Montanism

Another second-century deviation that had considerable influence was an apocalyptic movement that began in a Phrygian village when a traveling preacher, Montanus, fell into a trance and supposedly began prophesying under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Later, Prisca (Pricilla) and Maximilla, two women who accompanied Montanus, began falling into trances and prophesying. They were said to be the embodiment of the Holy Spirit who inspired Montanus. Pricilla was eventually excommunicated for claiming that Christ appeared to her in female form.

The three traveled about, spreading their new brand of Christian experience. The movement grew; it came to be known as Montanism. Its greatest defender was Tertullian, who left what he called “the church of a lot of bishops” and was drawn into the movement, perhaps due to theological agreement on certain issues, particularly the Montanists’ view that Christians who fell into serious sin could not be restored.

Montanus prophesied the time of Christ’s return and identified a Phrygian village as the site of the New Jerusalem. His prophecies failed to come to pass; nevertheless, the movement persisted for several centuries. Many church leaders denounced it, denying that the Montanists were true prophets, even claiming that they had introduced into the Christian church pagan ecstatic prophecy. Indeed, ecstatic prophesying and ecstatic speech—“speaking in tongues”—were features of certain pagan religions, but it is doubtful that the Montanists were influenced by paganism.

Montanists believed the Second Coming was near. They strongly emphasized chastity, avoidance of sin, fasting, and church discipline. Remarriage was forbidden. They saw their movement as one of restoration and revival—a new movement of the Holy Spirit. The fact that such a movement could gain the approval of many believers and even influence a learned theologian of the caliber of Tertullian illustrates how a “little leaven leavens the whole lump.”

Christological Heresies

Other significant heresies that appeared in the early centuries of Christian history include Christological aberrations such as “adoptionism” and “modalism.” The early adoptionists—identified today as “dynamistic monarchians”—believed that Jesus, though miraculously conceived by the operation of the Holy Spirit, was a mere man who became the Son of God by adoption. This view is expressed in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which was written in about A.D. 150. “Modalistic monarchians,” by contrast, emphasized the full deity of the Son but denied that the Father and the Son were personally distinct. In the third century, Sabellius of Rome taught that God was one divine Person who projected Himself in three different modes—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the most famous of all the early Christological heresies was Arianism, named for Arius, a fourth-century Alexandrian theologian who denied the full deity of the preincarnate Christ. “There was a time when He [Christ] was not,” Arius famously said. He argued that Christ was a created being and the agent through whom God created the universe but was not God in the absolute sense.

Arianism took forms ranging from radical to semi-orthodox. It was so divisive that the emperor Constantine convoked an ecclesiastical council in A.D. 325 and called on the bishops of the church to settle the matter. In the end, Arianism was defeated, but only after a hard-fought battle.

Many other theological disputes arose in the subsequent centuries—and the consequences have been significant. While most of these issues were settled through one means or another, they did not just go away without affecting the beliefs and customs of historic Christendom.

Gnostic dualism, antinomianism, Christological heresies, and the wide array of disputes—from different doctrinal ideas to the clash over the use of images to cultural influences like Greek philosophy and pagan practices—played a significant role in shaping the doctrinal creeds and ecclesiastical traditions of the historic visible church. And, as the old saying goes, there’s nothing new under the sun. Today we see the same unscriptural ideas—the same patterns of apostasy, if you will—coming up again and again in various religious movements.

Old Heresies in New Packages

Marcion simply threw out those parts of Scripture he believed to be corrupted. Today, the liberal critics do essentially the same thing when they attempt to separate the “authentic sayings of Jesus” from the sayings His disciples supposedly put on His lips. Of course, the critics’ edits are based on their own preconceived notions, including their tendency to rule out the existence of the supernatural. Thus, neither Christ’s miracles nor His resurrection could have occurred.

But softer forms of Marcionism have also appeared in modern times. Many hyperdispensationalists accept the Old and New Testaments, but they divide the contents of Scripture in such a way as to make only a small part of it applicable to Christians. They establish a radical discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the church. Some go so far as to declare that only certain of Paul’s writings pertain to Christians today.

We also see softer forms of antinomianism today. The “once saved, always saved” advocates do not deliberately encourage sinful behavior, but their teaching that sinful behavior on the part of a true Christian can never sever his relationship with God is, nevertheless, a form of antinomianism.

A form of antinomianism is also seen in the view that the believer now relies completely on the influence and promptings of the Holy Spirit, and has no need of biblical law to inform him on godly behavior. This view resembles yet another form of antinomianism—the view that replaces biblical commandments with the sentiment of “love.” The result is that sentiment (often called “love”) takes precedence over the plain commandments of God, resulting in “justification” for all kinds of immoral behavior—couples living together as if married, so-called gay marriage, and euthanasia. Even taking a pro-abortion (“pro-choice”) stance is seen as “loving,” as it is opposed to those mean old Bible-thumping “fundamentalists” who oppose “reproductive rights” and “choice.” And then there are the modern modalists who, like the modalists of old, make God a solitary Person who operates through three modes; the modern Arians and adoptionists, who strip Christ of His full divinity and make Him a part of creation; the modern Montanists, noted for their emphasis on ecstatic prophecy and ecstatic utterance, or “speaking in tongues”; the modern Gnostics, who blend Christian beliefs with New Age spirituality; and on it goes.

An Old Admonition—Still Good for Today

There can be no doubt that the Christianity that has come down to us was in many ways shaped by the torrent of heresies, cultural influences, and theological disputes that have come and gone over the centuries. But—make no mistake—yesterday’s heresies never really went away. They have simply been brushed up a bit and repackaged—but they’re still with us. For this reason, the people of God today would do well to heed an old—but not outdated—admonition: “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to **CONTEND EARNESTLY** for the faith which was once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3, emphasis added)

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