THE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE

Gnosticism

Millions of people today unknowingly hold Gnostic beliefs that are central to the transgender debate.

Depiction of Abraxas, a Gnostic deity and symbol.

Gnosticism presents a radically self-centred alternative gospel. Instead of pointing to Christ, Gnosticism proclaims that salvation comes from inside, finding your true identity within. It denies the goodness of the Creator and the glory of his creation. It denies the Incarnation, the resurrection and the need for redemption.

Gnosticism sets itself against true Christianity at every point. It has been described as the ultimate heresy. This false teaching was faced by the Church in the second and third centuries AD.

But far from being ancient history, Gnostic beliefs are rife today. Of course, not many people call themselves Gnostics. But their approach to issues such as transsexualism is clearly rooted in Gnostic thought. Understanding Gnosticism and the Christian response to it will encourage and equip believers to stand firm.

The physical universe, viewed by Gnostics as bad. *Credit: NASA*

KEY BELIEF: *Spiritual is good, physical is bad*

Gnosticism covers a wide range of ideas, but one key Gnostic teaching is that the spiritual is good and the physical is bad. In their radical rejection of creation and the body, Gnostics see salvation as escape from "matter" – the physical world. This extreme dualism stands in complete opposition to biblical Christianity, and Christians need to be alert to similar thinking in our own culture and even in the Church.

What are Gnostic beliefs?

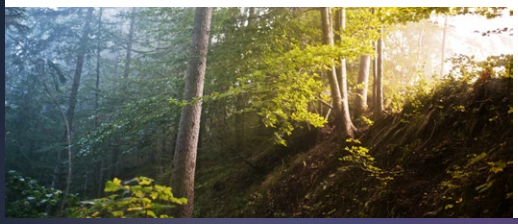
Creation

GNOSTICS: CREATOR IS BAD SO CREATION IS BAD

The physical world is "a mistake", the work of a bad or stupid god, the Demiurge, who is much further down the divine hierarchy than the supreme being.[1]

The Demiurge is the god of the Old Testament and is to blame for making an evil world, full of suffering. The supreme god, however, is only interested in the non-physical spiritual reality.[2]

The visible world is bad or meaningless, and no wisdom or truth can be gleaned from it.[3]



BIBLE: A GREAT GOD MADE EVERYTHING VERY GOOD

There is only one God, and he is the Creator of all things. After creating this world "very good" (Genesis 1:31), he is still intimately involved. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without him (Matthew 10:29).

Since the Fall the world has been beset by suffering and evil – even creation groans under the curse (Romans 8:22). But the source of this evil is man's sinful rebellion against God, not the physical world itself.

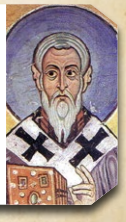
God sustains the world in his common grace, and creation still displays his glory (Psalm 19:1). God's power, wisdom and beauty are clearly perceived in the things that are made (Romans 1:20).

The Christian's future hope is physical as well as spiritual: one day God will usher in the new heaven and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

Church Fathers taking on the Gnostics

Ignatius: (c. 35-108)

"I want to forewarn you not to get snagged on the hooks of worthless opinions but instead to be fully convinced about the birth and the suffering and the resurrection [of Christ]".[4]



Justin Martyr: (c. 100-165)

"These persons seem to be ignorant of the whole work of God, both of the genesis and formation of man at the first, and why the things in the world were made".[5]

Irenaeus: (c. 130-202)

"These men... overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretence of knowledge, from Him who founded and adorned the universe".[6]

Tertullian: (c. 155-240)

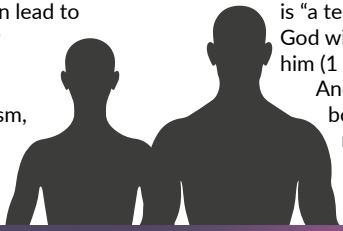
"Now, if His death be denied, because of the denial of His flesh, there will be no certainty of His resurrection... Similarly, if Christ's resurrection be nullified, ours also is destroyed."[7]

The body

GNOSTICS: YOU ARE NOT YOUR BODY

The body is part of the material world, so is "contemptible".[8] It is a worthless shell, which imprisons the true self – the "precious" spirit within.[9] The human spirit is a 'divine spark' from a greater divine being than the Demiurge.[10] Someone's 'inner person' is separate from and more real than their physical body.

Rejection of the body can lead to one of two extremes: either strict asceticism, avoiding 'contamination' with the physical, or reckless hedonism, seeing no point in keeping the body pure.[11]



BIBLE: YOU ARE BODY AND SOUL

Our bodies are intrinsic to us, and are designed in wisdom and love by our good Creator, to serve and glorify him. We are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

Yes, sin has tragically brought illness and death (Romans 5:12). But bodily life itself is nothing to be ashamed of. The believer's body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit", and we honour God with our bodies by living in obedience to him (1 Corinthians 6:19; Philippians 1:20).

And far from being a useless shell, the bodies of believers will be raised again to new life forever (1 Corinthians 15).

Men and women

GNOSTICS: MALE-FEMALE DISTINCTION IS A CORRUPTION

The distinction between men and women should be rejected because it is part of the useless creation order. The ideal is androgyny – a synthesis of male and female, and so neither one nor the other.[12]

The outworking of this ranges from goddess worship to saying women need to become men to be saved.[13] But the common theme is seeing the male-female distinction as defective, part of the fallen world of death; we must escape it if we are to find true life.[14]

> *"When you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female… then you will enter the kingdom."*
>
> **Gnostic gospel of Thomas**[15]

BIBLE: MALE-FEMALE DISTINCTION IS GOD'S GOOD DESIGN

Genesis 1:27 says: "in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them". God deliberately made men and women as different and interdependent. They are equal, but not the same: each sex has its own distinct role to play in God's design for family, society, and church.

Implications of a Gnostic view of the body

GENDER IDENTITY

Since 'the real you' is what you feel deep inside, the 'inner person' overrides all external factors – including objective biological reality.

So the transgender movement claims that 'gender identity' doesn't necessarily align with birth sex. A person can look within to 'write their own script' – whether that's male, female or some other option – regardless of their body.

But God in his wisdom created mankind male and female, body and soul. Sexual identity is written into every cell in our bodies as part of his creation design. Our bodies are intrinsic to who we are and in reality there is no such thing as 'gender identity' separate to biological sex.

HUMAN VALUE

If a living human body is insignificant and only the 'inner person' is valuable, the sanctity of human life is on shaky ground. Human worth would then depend on something 'within', such as self-awareness or knowledge.

Often today's medical ethics assumes that a human being starts and stops being a 'full person' based on mental capacity. So the unborn child is regarded as not yet a person and the individual with advanced dementia may be viewed as no longer a person.

But human life is uniquely precious as created in God's image. Our significance derives from this, not from our 'quality of life', age or capability. In Psalm 139 David thought of himself as a person before birth, praising God who knit him together in his mother's womb.

MARRIAGE

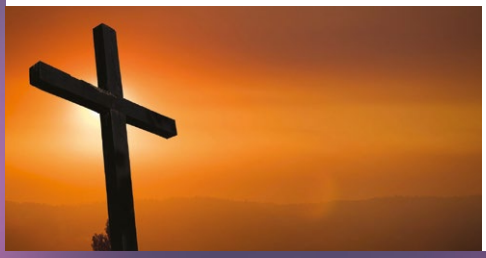
In today's society, marriage is defined by feelings. The complementary natures of men and women are irrelevant. Marriage becomes a disembodied and subjective relationship between any two (or more?) people. At its core this is a Gnostic-like view, exalting the 'inner self' over physical reality. And it means that marriage is malleable, with same-sex marriage being just one logical consequence.

But God grounds marriage in his creation. It is defined as being between a man and a woman and forms the foundation for family and society. Marriage is the framework within which love can thrive and children can be raised. God also gives human marriage as a picture of the ultimate marriage between Christ and his Church.

Christ

GNOSTICS: CHRIST NEITHER FULLY GOD NOR TRULY HUMAN

Christ is just one heavenly being among many others.[16] He was from the supreme god, but certainly wasn't equal with God. And Christ was not truly human.[17] He may or may not have had a physical body (a "container"[18]), but he certainly didn't die on the cross or rise again from the dead.[19]



BIBLE: CHRIST IS FULLY GOD AND FULLY MAN

Jesus Christ is eternal God – the Word who was in the beginning, who was with God and who was God (John 1:1). And Scripture reveals that 2,000 years ago he became fully man.

The Incarnation is at the heart of the Christian faith, making redemption possible. Jesus could only take our place if he was a true and perfect man. He could only rise again, overcoming the death that was due us, if he was Almighty God. In short only a God-man could bridge the gap between us and God.

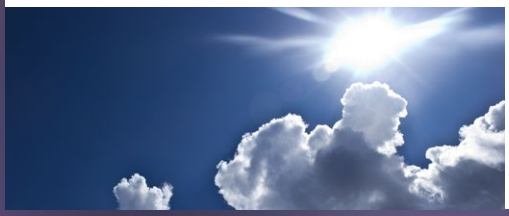
> *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh"*
>
> **John 1:1, 14a**

Salvation

GNOSTICS: SALVATION IS ESCAPING THE BODY

We are trapped in our bodies and the material world, so our fundamental need is to escape into the perfect, non-physical "essence".[20] The resurrection is spiritual, not of the body.[21]

The way to this salvation is enlightenment, affirming the divine spark within. Jesus is a 'revealer', who gives knowledge ('gnosis') of our true spiritual identity and divine origin.[22] This gnosis equips the chosen few to return to the realm of light after death.[23]



BIBLE: SALVATION IS FOR BOTH BODY AND SOUL

Every human being needs redemption from sin (Romans 3:23). By nature we are enemies of God and slaves to sin – without hope (Romans 6:20; Ephesians 2:12).

But our loving and wise Creator gave his Son to save lost sinners. Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection won salvation for all who put their trust in him (Romans 5:19; 8:1). Salvation comes through faith in him, not from looking within ourselves.

Scripture is clear that the result of faith is "the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:9). But salvation is not only of our souls. Ultimately we will be with Christ forever in a new creation with bodies like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21; Revelation 21-22).

GNOSTICISM: THE BACKGROUND

By the middle of the second century, Gnosticism was a major challenge for the Church.

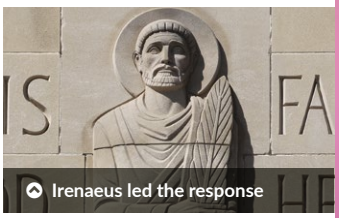
Gnostics' radically different beliefs were a particular threat because they were wrapped in Christian language and claimed to comprehensively answer life's key questions.[24]

Prominent Gnostic leaders were Marcion (active c. AD 140-160), Valentinus (active c. AD 117-138) and Basilides (active c. AD 137-154).[25]

The Early Church's response was in large part led by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (c. AD 130-202).[26] While Gnosticism was thriving around Lyons, Irenaeus preached the true Gospel. With a pastor's heart, he set out to slay the 'many headed monster' that was subverting the message of Jesus Christ and leading many astray.[27]

His major work, *Against Heresies*, shows a thorough knowledge of both the Bible and the Gnostic beliefs he was refuting. Until Gnostic texts were discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, it was one of the few sources about Gnostic beliefs.[28]

Tradition has it that Irenaeus was martyred on 28 June 202, but not before he was used by God to critically wound Gnosticism.[29]



Irenaeus led the response

One result of the Gnostic heresy was Christians becoming more careful to safeguard apostolic teaching. The Early Church creeds begin with God as Creator of all things, emphasise the Incarnation and end with the resurrection of the body to everlasting life.[30]

GNOSTICISM IN POPULAR CULTURE

Gnosticism was successfully rejected by the Early Church but never quite went away. It has enjoyed a revival in today's popular culture, not least in New Age thinking.[31]

Dan Brown's 'Da Vinci Code' suggests the Gnostic gospels contain truth about Christ that a power-hungry church concealed.[32] Gnostic ideas also play a key role in the many films that promote finding 'who you really are' and 'being yourself' as the path to true fulfilment.

Alister McGrath explains that Gnostic themes "chime in with contemporary ideals of self-discovery, self-awareness, self-actualization, and self-salvation, not to mention a dislike of any kind of authority, especially ecclesiastical".[33]

> *"The only true Christians were the Gnostics, who believe in self-knowledge, i.e. becoming Christ themselves, reaching the Christ within".*
>
> **John Lennon**[34]

References available at christian.org.uk/gnosticism-ref

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