

Why won't the New Spirituality make us Overcomers?

The Gnostic Disconnect and Evangelical Immorality, Part One

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Much of church history is the record of Christianity being accommodated to pagan religion. This started early in the first century. “Christian” teachers attempted to adapt the faith to pagan religion in spite of Paul’s warning to the converted pagans in Corinth (2 Cor 6:15-16; 1 Cor 10:21).ⁱ The Gnosticism that was afflicting the early church reinterpreted the New Testament according to the religious world view of the pagan culture around them.ⁱⁱ

At the heart of Gnosticism is salvation through self-knowledge. Gnostic spirituality is dualistic; therefore it tends to denigrate the physical body. This is manifested in a particular bent—inner spirituality is set in contradistinction to outer spirituality. The Gnostic discounting of the physical body as spiritual resource is a vital topic in our series.

Gnostic spirituality champions going within, and in so doing it spiritualizes Christology and salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the woeful trade-offs of emphasizing the acquisition of self-knowledge by going within is that very little emphasis is put on the concept of sin.^{iv} Thus, we are not surprised that Gnosticism has historically edged its adherents toward a ‘license to sin’.

This tacit approval of moral laxness is derived from the worship of the creature rather than the Creator. In Gnostic spirituality, self-knowledge becomes equated with the knowledge of God. This is an inversion of the divine and the human in the spiritual realm. Paul says in Romans chapter one that this inversion, or ‘exchange’ produces sexual license and perversion (Romans 1:18-32).^v

Gnostic spirituality, disguised as revitalization, has been infiltrating our churches

What is the lure of Gnostic spirituality today? Like the counter-culture movements coming from the 60’s, Gnostic spirituality presents itself as an exciting religious challenge and alternative to today’s tired society with its stale religious expressions.^{vi} Why do we need to warn our church members of Gnostic spirituality’s allure? Peter Jones issues the following caution, “if we do not speak now, speaking out latter promises to be very costly.”^{vii}

All the way back in 1980 Carl A. Raschke, professor of religious studies at University of Denver, saw tell-tale cracks in the church’s foundation. He described an unforeseen cultural shift shaking the church’s foundation. He argued that Westerners are becoming Gnostics. He is not alone in his observations—other voices are warning that mainline churches are ‘regaining’ spirituality through the revival of Gnosticism without returning to Christian orthodoxy. “It is old time religion without old time theology and old time morals” writes Peter Jones.^{viii}

Neo-Gnosticism (the *new spirituality*) is pagan spirituality dressed in Christian terminology

The Church Fathers saw in Gnosticism a Christianized form of paganism.^{ix} In the early church, “Christian” Gnosticism was probably an attempt by dissatisfied Christians to reinterpret their faith in accordance with the dominant liberation movements of the day (Jones). History

repeats itself. Contemporary Gnostic Duncan Greenlees, in his independent evaluation of Gnosticism is interesting and incisive: “Gnosticism is a system of direct experiential knowledge of God...the soul and the universe; therefore it has no fixed dogmas or creed...in the early centuries of this era amid a growing Christianity it took on the form of the Christian faith, while rejecting most of its specific beliefs. Its wording is therefore largely Christian, while its spirit is that of the latest paganism of the West.”^x

In his landmark book, *Spirit Wars*, Peter Jones documents how Gnosticism (the ‘*new spirituality*’) has wormed its way into Christian religion. He postulates that we have entered a ‘post-heresy age’. In other words, where the new spirituality holds sway, contending for doctrinal truth is regarded as ‘unnecessary’. This mirrors early Gnostic texts which railed against the Church Fathers describing their polemical defense of orthodoxy against Gnosticism as ‘the myopic view of heresy hunters’. But, there is a deeper issue involved which is inimical to the doctrine of God. It should disturb us to know that “the real reason that human non-judgementalism in any form is becoming so fashionable in this age is that it makes the concept of a judging, avenging God seem ridiculous and anachronistic and implausible” (Jones).^{xi}

Throughout Church history Gnosticism has consistently served as a bridge for pagan spirituality to infiltrate Christianity.^{xii} This contemporary paradigm shift towards the *new spirituality* (Gnostic) involves new spiritual experience. In describing ancient pagans, theologian David Wells notes that they proceeded from the basis of their experience to understand the supernatural. So it is with the religious quest with our modern world. What we are witnessing today is an experience of spiritual liberation which is regarded as revelation and truly redemptive and revitalizing.^{xiii}

When the self-focused Gnostic spirituality is seen in light of its pagan roots it is truly appalling. What is most unnerving is that most moderns ignorant of this pagan background find this spirituality attractive.^{xiv} By way of contrast, in orthodox, or biblical Christianity there is a deep connection between spirituality and holiness—the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of holiness (Rom 1:4). But the *new spirituality* is headed down a different path—it employs various pagan methods of spirituality. “Gone are traditional Christianity’s emphasis on sin, guilt, and retribution; instead we are *empowered* toward co-creatorship and welcomed to continual renewal on a continuous great ‘non-Judgment Day’” (Jones).^{xv}

The spirituality of Gnosticism promised believers a cult of knowledge of human freedom. Many were seduced by the glittering half-truths of salvation without sacrifice, redemption without repentance, and triumph without crucifixion (Jones). “How many then as now fell knowingly or unknowingly into the power of the great seducer? How many will rise up now and warn our spiritually upbeat generation of its foolish ways before it is too late?”^{xvi}

Our premise in this series is that the *new spirituality* is shot through with elements of Gnostic spirituality. Some of these Gnostic elements are intensely subtle because they are camouflaged as vibrant spirituality.

We have isolated nine standout attributes of the *new spirituality*:

1) In the *new spirituality* spiritual life is motivated by self-knowledge rather than holiness. After 1960, the veneration and fulfillment of self, replaced an assessment of self which revealed

personal moral failure in need of rectification. The new ideology has taken command, *we can find meaning only to the extent that we can get in touch with the self*. Self-expression and self-exploration have eclipsed self-control (Titus 2:11-12). In the absence of theology, the mystical and the individualistic have created the soil of the therapeutic. The therapy perspective, which is inherent in the *new spirituality* says, “Tell me about self, how to know myself.” Theology says, “Tell me about God and how to know Him and please Him.”^{xvii}

2) The *new spirituality* adheres to a form of esoteric or ‘inner’ spirituality which tends to discount the physical body as the believer’s chief spiritual resource. This involves the false dichotomy (dualism) of pitting an inner spirituality against an outer spirituality—‘only the heart matters’. Gnostic spirituality discounts the importance of the body in serving God. Paul affirms that, “the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body” (1 Cor 6:13b). Therefore, those who say, “Jesus doesn’t care what I do with my body as long as I have Him in my heart” are dead wrong. In thought and practice, the greater the Gnostic *disconnect* between the spirit and body, the wider the potential entry point for immorality.

God expects our body-soul unity to operate as one in our walk, worship and service. Our Redeemer has purchased every genuine believer; He owns us and has the rightful claim to every square foot of our life. “For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20). There are no separate compartments—the body and soul operate together so that our Christianity cuts across all of life. This biblical mindset is essential to a unified and obedient Christian experience.

A Gnostic-like disconnect is re-emerging in the church today. The attitude of ancient Gnosticism was, “Since they had received divine knowledge and were enlightened, it didn’t matter how they lived in the body.”^{xviii} Modern *antinomian Gnostics* place a low level of significance on the material body. “Only the heart matters,” is part of a “grand divorce” that justifies severing personal behavior from absolute standards of divine design, truth, beauty, and morality. Body and soul are viewed as separate, disjointed entities. Therefore, whatever happens to one doesn’t affect the other. Consequently, the new Gnosticism touts that what a person does with his or her body does not impact one’s spirituality. Scripture puts this to the lie; for the deeds of the body dramatically affect the soul (Eph 4:17-19). The body expresses the desires and loyalties of the soul (Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 5:9-10). The deeds of the body reveal who our master is, and reveal who or what we serve; God or idols (Rom. 6:15-22).

3) There is a tendency to seek the experience of Jesus in a way not mediated by the Word of God. The Jesus of the *new spirituality* (or Gnostic spirituality) is an entirely congenial Jesus whose imminence (personal, near) completely overshadows His transcendence. And, with that implicit denial of His transcendence, comes a disregard for His Lordship, wrath, justice, and role as Judge (See Revelation 1:12-18 for a description of Christ’s majesty).

New Age popularizer Helen Schucman in her book, *A Course in Miracles*, writes the following: “You would be surprised, I think, to know how much of the New Age movement centers on Christ consciousness. Many Christian churches are seeing that direct spiritual experience [unmediated by the doctrines of Scripture] offers a ‘revitalization’ for modern Christianity.”^{xix} This author finds Peter Jones’ warning about a ‘different Jesus’ to be most

sobering: “Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you. This is a fatal pitfall of creating Jesus in our own image.”^{xx}

Holy Scripture imbues upon us that God’s holiness is fundamental to who He is, what He has done, and what He will do. The key to it all is that we have lost God’s *otherness*; His holiness and transcendence.^{xxi} David Wells continues in giving us a very devastating warning: Evangelicalism has settled on God’s immanence; interpreting His immanence as friendliness (utter congeniality)—[as friendliness] with our temporal, man-centered values drawn from the present cultural environment.

4) There is a tacit denial of a very clear and specific definition of sexuality and the precise Biblical commands of purity. The church today is increasingly unable to address the question of sexual ethics clearly.^{xxii} In Holy Scripture sexual sins are called sins against one’s own body because they sin against the image of God in the body created for monogamous heterosexual sex. But the *new spirituality*, whether people realize it or not, stands above the moral absolutes of right or wrong.^{xxiii} Thus, Gnosticism has an antinomian bent; for the objective, external moral law of God is regarded as having been abrogated, not serving to shape the believer’s conduct.

Church history reveals that profligacy was not uncommon among Gnostics. Some Gnostics engage in sexual license as the Church Father’s document in their writings, as a way of shaking their fists at the Creator of normative sexuality (Jones).^{xxiv} Speaking of libertine (antinomian) Gnosticism, Epiphanius says, “They never have their fill of copulation; the more indecent one of their men is the more praiseworthy they consider him.”^{xxv}

5) There is a discounting of the daily sacrifices necessary for personal holiness and character. God’s holiness carries with it the demand of exclusive loyalty to Him. The biblical gospel imbues us with the truth that the experimental knowledge of God’s holiness should move us to awe, obedience, fervent prayer, ongoing repentance, and submission.^{xxvi} Paul instructs Timothy: “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but *rather* in speech, conduct, love, faith *and* purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Tim 4:12). And, “. . . pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim 6:11-12b).

Progress in personal holiness is hard work; it takes daily sacrifice. Colossians 3 tells us how to replace our idols. We are to set our minds on things above. Christ must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart than your idol. That is what must replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot your idol and fail to plant the love of Christ in its place the idol will grow back. Rejoicing and repentance must go together.^{xxvii}

How do we rewire our desires, patterns, attitudes, and emotions? Well it requires what is called the spiritual disciplines. They include private prayer, corporate worship, mutual edification, discipleship, and scripture meditation. These disciplines take cognitive knowledge and make it into a life-shaping reality in our hearts, imaginations, and affections. Spiritual disciplines are basically forms of worship, and it is worship that is the final way to replace the idols of your heart. This takes time and energy—and that is the polar opposite of the *new spirituality’s* self-focused passivity that wishes for instant successes in sanctification.^{xxviii}

6) The new spirituality places an emphasis on experience which is viewed as self-validating and therefore authoritative. The great danger lurking in the *new spirituality* is that its Gnostic bent has more to do with dimensions of experience than with belief in Scriptural truth claims.^{xxix} Subjective religious experience can never be a legitimate substitute for objective Bible doctrine. Theology is our biblical worldview which supplies the values, ethics, convictions, and identity from which our choices flow—it is God’s self-revelation giving us what we need in order to live a God-ward life. Theology is therefore never merely abstract, theoretical, or propositional—it always translates into behavior. God’s great plan for believers is transformation into the image of God in Christ by means of God’s truth believed and obeyed (Jn 17:17).

7) The soul-body dichotomy in Gnostic spirituality leads to the denial that one’s spirituality defines ones sexuality. Heretical spirituality *does* tend to produce broken or sinful sexuality (Note Romans chapter one). Sex abstracted from its Creator is still religious—it is a kind of spirituality (see 1 Corinthians 6:15-20). If humanity serves as your religion, then sex becomes an act of worship (Jones). “But, if God is the object of your worship, then romantic [marital] love becomes an unmistakable pointer, a rumor of transcendence as loud as we hear on earth.”^{xxx}

Sexual union is a whole-person activity. Spirit, soul, body are engaged in the activity of sexual union. This is also true of sexual disobedience (Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:15-18ff.). The warning about sexual immorality is that the person, “sins against the body.” In Romans chapter one, God gave over to sinful desires; to shameful lusts; to a depraved mind. This is a solemn warning of physical death; ultimate judgment; and final spiritual death. The antinomian mindset (which can be a door to licentiousness) sows to pretended autonomy from the God who made us. As a consequence, it leaves that most fundamental relationship in tatters.^{xxxi}

8) In the *new spirituality* there is a tendency to discount or disregard the importance of systematic theology and Bible doctrine. Since experience is ‘king’ and theology is considered outmoded, it is not surprising that rational doctrinal thinking is supplanted by the intuitive. But, there is a great price to pay—loss of the knowledge of God. Without the theology of the full-orbed gospel, our grasp upon God’s essentially holy nature becomes non-existent. In that religious climate, professing believers want to ‘feel better’—but without ongoing repentance.

In this error the mystical replaces the true spirituality set forth in Scripture. Thus, Gnostic spirituality in its esoteric emphasis dislodges spirituality from morality and truth. Once these are severed from theology, it is easy to depict rational theologizing as dead, useless, and unspiritual. Gnostic spirituality would have us abandon theologizing—why, because non-rational spirituality is considered to be a foretaste of a Gnostic heaven (Jones). Contemporary writer Philip Lee believes that Gnosticism has returned in our day to disfigure Christianity.^{xxxii} Thus, as theology continues to be marginalized, Westerners will become increasingly Gnostic without any awareness of what is happening. In commenting on this deleterious trend David Wells warns that we may wake up one day and realize that we are worshipping ourselves.

9) And lastly, in the new spirituality, an appeal is made that Christ has freed the believer from an uncompromising external moral standard because now the Spirit’s leading supplies the believer’s ethics. Puritan Thomas Taylor provides the following reproof to this

kind of antinomian thinking, “To say we obey God by the Spirit without a law or a commandment is a mere nonsense: for is any obedience without a law? What can be more ridiculous than for a subject to profess obedience to his Prince, yet he will not be under any law.”^{xxxiii}

To assert that it is Christian liberty to follow our emotions and impulses is a form of bondage. The licentiousness born of antinomianism is just as enslaving as legalism. “Healthy Christian spirituality arises from careful meditation on the principles of the law of God combined with heart-felt consecration to do the will of God” (Rom 12:1-2).^{xxxiv}

The narrow way expounded by Christ is bounded by the guardrails of grace and holiness

Jesus described the narrow way that leads to life warning about the broad road that leads to destruction (Mt 7:13-14). The narrow way has two sets of ‘guard rails’ left and right which flow from the character of God revealed in His Word. On one side is the grace of God in the gospel of Christ, and on the other side is the personal holiness God requires of a true believer. Both of these guard rails must be observed if we are to faithfully navigate the narrow way.

When studying the history of the early church, it is clear that early religious opposition to the gospel came from Judaizing teachers who wanted to bring Gentile believers under the Law of Moses. This was an attempt to step over the guard rail of divine grace. But, as the church neared the second half of the 1st Century, the gospel faced corrupting influences from pagan forces. Doctrinal heresies, sexual immorality, and mystical *spiritualities* were afflicting the churches.

Jude verse 4 identifies the licentiousness which accompanied the *antinomian* heresy born of Gnosticism. A severe warning is issued concerning the destructive potential of false believers who corrupt the gospel by their immorality and who devastate local churches (vv. 5-13). Jude writes, “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

In the first century certain people in the church were turning the grace of God into a license for sexual immorality. The intent of the command in Jude 4 is unmistakable—if we are to obediently ‘contend earnestly for the faith’, then we must expose and reject the *antinomian* error with its licentiousness.

It is time to exercise biblical discernment and caring action

Now at the beginning of the 21st Century, as the Neo-Gnosticism of the *new spirituality* rears its head we must ask the question, “How dangerous is this trend, and what can we do about it?” The answer will come from knowing what the Scriptures say about heretical spirituality, as well as what God requires our response to be. Gnosticism was, and remains today, a formidable opponent to the faith ‘once for all delivered to the saints’.

An exhortation from David Wells urging us to contend for the truth and hold a steady

course is a fitting way to conclude part one in this series. The death of theology has profound ramifications. The theological soul of the church is dying because the church has lost its capacity for Bible doctrine. This is a sign of creeping death. By imbibing modernism and rejecting theology, we have elected to cross over into a world in which God has no place, in which reality has been re-written around human yearnings, in which the Christ of Scripture has become redundant, and His Word irrelevant—thus, the Church must now find new reasons for its existence (David Wells).^{xxxv}

Wells notes that the consequences of marginalizing theology are deadly serious—shoving theology to the perimeter can make us vulnerable to idolatry posing as spiritual freedom. Increasingly, Christians live disconnected lives because there is a huge gap between what they say they believe and how they live. We may designate it as a *disconnect*, but Jesus called this disorder, ‘hypocrisy’—He reserved His most stern threats for hypocrites (Mt 23:13-35).

Our culture has become even more hardened by its rebellious commitment to autonomy. Because of Enlightenment principles and assumptions, morality has been increasingly divorced from theology. People treat ethics today as if morality can exist and be known apart from God. The Western concept of spirituality has encouraged a breach between spirituality and theology. In reality, theology is the foundation for all correct living, for living unto God, for the art of living to God’s glory (1 Tim 6:3ff.).

The truths we love, espouse, live by, defend, and proclaim are grounded in exegetical theology (the careful study of the Word of God). Thus, the study of theology ought to be a spiritual exercise. Ethics and doctrine are like Siamese twins, inseparable. Ethics constitute theology in action. Without theology to nurture our faith in God’s character as the source of morality, the professing believer becomes vulnerable to a subjective morality—this is the soft spot—the Achilles heel in the *new spirituality*. The consequences are deadly serious—in today’s relativistic climate, ‘inner spirituality’ (Gnostic) tends to trump the fixity of divinely established moral boundaries. Countless churching young people today regard the Bible to be a collection of optional bits and pieces of moral advice. This is the legacy left to us, and the legacy we will leave to the next generation if we dismiss or marginalize theology.

The answer is a whole-hearted return to theology—for it teaches us to *think doctrinally under the moral government of God*; thus theology assists in *uniting the heart* so that we manifest a life direction that has moral force and authority anchored in the grace and character of God (Ps 86:11-12). The study of theology produces single-mindedness by consolidating our heart’s desires around God’s character and purposes; thus theology develops a *passion for truth, and a passion to know God*.

Theology equips us to *contend earnestly for the truth* (Jude 3). A ‘pure gospel’ is worth defending. A mutilated gospel characterized by heretical spirituality produces broken lives. Theology equips us to defend the faith and to refute error (1 Tim 4:6; 6:3-4). Doctrine is foundational to biblical discipleship—it provides a diagnostic ‘lens’ to deal with the problems in a believer’s life which are blocking progress in sanctification.

The study of theology *equips us to love God with the entire mind, and it prepares us to live a life of universal obedience to God*. It teaches us to study ‘doxologically’ (in a spirit of worship). The study of theology gives us the truths of Christ’s supremacy—truths designed to stagger us, sanctify us, and to move us to awe and worship of God (1 Cor 1:30).

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*, p. 6
- ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 22
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 31
- ^{iv} Ibid, p. 56
- ^v Ibid, p. 60
- ^{vi} Ibid, p. 90
- ^{vii} Ibid, p. 95
- ^{viii} Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars*, p. 44
- ^{ix} Ibid, p. 66
- ^x Ibid, Greenlees in Jones, pp. 70, 72
- ^{xi} Ibid, p. 74
- ^{xii} Ibid, p. 173
- ^{xiii} Ibid, p. 210
- ^{xiv} Ibid, p. 211
- ^{xv} Ibid, p. 231
- ^{xvi} Ibid, p. 250
- ^{xvii} David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, pp. 159, 198-201
- ^{xviii} Ibid, p. 4
- ^{xix} Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars*, p. 46
- ^{xx} Ibid, p. 99
- ^{xxi} David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, pp. 300-301.
- ^{xxii} Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars*, p. 32
- ^{xxiii} Ibid, pp. 232-233
- ^{xxiv} Ibid, p. 240
- ^{xxv} Ibid, p. 244
- ^{xxvi} Ibid., pp. 135-138
- ^{xxvii} Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, pp. 171-172
- ^{xxviii} Ibid, 174-175
- ^{xxix} Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars*, p. 83
- ^{xxx} Peter Jones, *God of Sex*, pp.
- ^{xxxi} Ibid, pp. 151-153
- ^{xxxii} Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars*, p. 239
- ^{xxxiii} Ernest Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, p. 196
- ^{xxxiv} Joel R. Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, “The Puritans on the Third Use of the Law,” p. 570
- ^{xxxv} David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, pp. 300-301