

Have you ever run into the pietistic idea that the Biblical worldview is primarily about what happens in our heart, rather than something that applies to all of culture and the world?

Have you ever heard someone say that “Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a relationship,” where the person who says this is wishing to de-emphasize the corporate and structural connotations that come with the term ‘religion’?

Or they might say something like, “I consider myself a very spiritual person, but I’m not into organized religion.”

Have you ever come across the idea that there is a complete discontinuity between what happens in this world and what will happen in the age to come?

Have you ever come across the notion that institutional religion and/or religious rituals are at odds with genuine heart-felt faith, and that whatever we give to the former is less we have left over for the latter?

Have you ever heard someone argue that Christians shouldn’t raise their hands in worship or make the sign of the cross on themselves since worship is more spiritual if it doesn’t involve the body?

Or they might say something like, “The ‘real you’ is the spirit inside and not your body.” (the body is “just a shell” or “death is healing”)

Have you ever encountered the notion that God isn’t concerned with how we treat the created world?

Have you ever heard someone say that certain kinds of music are evil because the rhythms appeal to our body rather than to our spirit or soul?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, then there is a high probability that you have been exposed to some form of Gnosticism or its derivations. In fact, you may even have some Gnostic ideas yourself without realizing it. The fact is that Gnosticism tends to be so pervasive that it tinctures our thinking in so many areas, even influencing how we read the Bible.

Summary of Gnostic theology

We can summarize the main tenants of Gnosticism as follows:

Doctrine of Creation: The created world is corrupt precisely because it is material. That which is physical is inherently non-spiritual.

Doctrine of the Fall: Man’s fundamental problem is not that he is a sinner but that he is material.

Doctrine of Christ: Jesus merely appeared to have a material body (Docetism). The human and physical element in the person of Christ is a deceptive appearance. As church historian J.N.D. Kelly put it in *Early Christian Doctrines*, “Because in general they disparaged matter and were disinterested in history, the Gnostic (in the narrower, more convenient sense of the term) were prevented from giving full value to the fundamental Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Word.” In some versions of Gnosticism, such as the one reflected in the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus did have a physical body but He wished to escape from it.

Doctrine of Salvation: Salvation lies in escaping from the material world to a realm of pure spirit. This is attained through private gnosis/knowledge offered by Jesus – a gnosis that awakens a divine spark within the individual.

Doctrine of the Church: The people of God are the enlightened elite who have obtained the *gnosis* necessary for salvation. This stood in sharp contrast to the institutional or visible church.

Doctrine of the World: What happens in the world is of little to no importance.

Doctrine of Revelation: True revelation comes through a secret oral tradition handed down by the apostles, in contrast to the open, public tradition of the universal church embedded in the sacred writings.