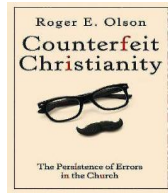


## **2025 Summer Virtual Study**



### **“Counterfeit Christianity”**

**By Professor Roger E. Olson**

#### **Session 2: The Mother of All Heresies: Gnosticism & Messing with Divine Revelation (Montanism and Marcionism)**

**July 15, 2025**

**7:30 PM**

#### **Session 1 Recap...**

In Session 1 of our study, we examined the historical significance of orthodoxy (theological, doctrinal correctness) and heresies (teachings, not just mistaken beliefs, that denies orthodoxy). It is important for Christians to study heresies – past and present – because we live in a world with “counterfeit Christianities” – that claim to be Christian, but are in serious conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ. By studying these heresies, believers can help protect the Christian church and help understand Christian doctrines better. Our focus will be on “ecumenical heresies”, teachings that violate the basic beliefs of all Christians. Since the second century, Christian theologians like Irenaeus and Tertullian have been dealing with heretical teachings and thought. Only by the spread of these heresies did it lead the Christian Church to formulate the formal, basic orthodox beliefs of the Church – first through creeds, and later through the canonization of Scripture. These orthodox beliefs – Jesus Christ is God and Savior; God the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit are of one substance (Trinity); Jesus is God incarnate; Jesus is equal with the Father as to his deity and equal with us as to his humanity; Jesus is fully human, fully divine; Salvation is by grace alone; Reality of miracles, especially the resurrection of Jesus; Jesus’s death on the cross reconciled God and humanity – an “atoning” death; Jesus Christ will return to earth; Creation out of nothing; Humans being created in God’s image and likeness; God’s sovereignty over history; the Church as the body of Christ, and Original sin – helped protect the mystery of God and prevent the spread of heretical belief.

## Opening Prayer

### Session 2 Video – “The Mother of All Heresies”

## What is Gnosticism?

*“Gnosticism is the perennial shadow side of New Testament, apostolic Christianity. It seems to have arise immediately, with the rise of Christianity itself, and has always existed and sometimes flourished around the margins of Christianity. The second century was its heyday; after the Roman Empire became “Christian” it went underground. Today it is making a strong comeback labeled as “New Age” or “esoteric” Christianity.*

- Modern example: 1997 – New Age guru Elizabeth Clare Prophet (“Guru Ma”) published a book entitled “Reincarnation: The Missing Link in Christianity” – her and her daughter, Erin L. Prophet, argues that Gnosticism was true Christianity and had been wrongly oppressed by the orthodox church; the missing link/secret was reincarnation

What are the tenets of Gnosticism?

- Greatly debated
- 1945 – discovery at Nag Hammadi – library of Gnostic manuscripts; many Gnostic gospels, most famous – Gospel of Thomas; published in the 1970’s – increased attention/interest to Gnosticism
- Much of what we know about Gnosticism comes from Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, who did great research into their beliefs as he wrote his theological treatise *Against Heresies*
- Some Gnostic leaders trace their “special knowledge – gnosis” back to Simon the Magician who is mentioned in Acts 8 – he attempted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from the apostles
- **SCRIPTURE FOCUS – Acts 8:4-25**
- Claim to have secret teachings of Jesus only given to the inner circle of disciples (Peter, James, John) and passed down from them to the Gnostic leaders (problem – Irenaeus was taught by Polycarp who was taught by John!)

- All matter is evil and the cause of sin; so, salvation is the escape from materiality by means of the discovery of one's own divinity (soul – secret knowledge – gnosis)
- Early Gnostic teachers – Valentinus, Basilides, Cerinthus, etc.

### **The Keys/Heart of Gnosticism**

- 1. Gnosticism was not just a set of doctrines, it was more of an ethos – an attitude toward reality, especially time and matter (M.E.S.T. – matter, energy, space, time).**
  - a. Disillusionment with history, profound desire to escape time.
  - b. Negative attitude toward matter.
  - c. Many trace the emergence to the failure of apostolic promises, especially the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.
- 2. Gnosticism divided people into two groups – those spiritual people capable of higher knowledge and wisdom, and those “physical ones” so deeply embedded in their bodies and the world that they could not understand the “gnosis” and not candidates for Gnostic recruitment.**
- 3. Doctrine: Gnostics believe that sin arises from the body that is a “tomb” of the soul/spirit that is a “spark” of the divine or God that has forgotten its true divinity.**
  - a. *Soma sema – “body tomb”*
  - b. *Sin is not freely chosen but a condition linked with embodiment.*
  - c. *Salvation must be liberation from the embodiment.*
- 4. Doctrine: Gnostics believed that salvation, liberation from embodiment, comes through the realization of the true divinity of the soul or spirit, which comes through receiving the hidden wisdom, secret knowledge, gnosis of a Gnostic teacher.**
  - a. An initiate would attach oneself to a teacher. Over time the initiate would gain increasing knowledge that was not for everyone. The initiate would eventually use it to escape from the sinful body and the soul would ascend to the spiritual realm.

5. **Gnostics did not have a single, unified belief about Christ. However, they all agreed that Christ was truly human. Instead, Christ was a “heavenly redeemer” sent by the pure, spiritual God to teach the secret wisdom to the spiritual people ready for the knowledge. This “spiritual redeemer” had to travel through “aeons” (levels of spirit) between God and the world conquering opposing powers (“archons”). Jesus was the human appearance of Christ to teach humans.**
6. **A second Gnostic Christology divided Jesus Christ into two beings – one merely human (not at all divine) and one divine/heavenly (purely spiritual).**
  - a. Some second century Gnostic groups required initiates to “curse” Jesus, to demonstrate their spiritual wisdom. This showed they understood “Christ” was not “Jesus” – Jesus was merely a human vehicle of the heavenly redeemer Christ.

## **Christian Responses to Gnosticism**

1. First, building on Judaism and Hebrew Scriptures, Christians believed that God is the creator of everything and therefore nothing is in and of itself evil.
2. Second, Gnostics blamed sin on a condition over which they had no control – until becoming a Gnostic. Enlightenment became the path to salvation. According to apostolic, orthodox Christianity sin is not a fate/condition but a choice for which a person is responsible.
3. Gnostics had to deny the incarnation and resurrection – both past and future. Jesus couldn’t because only appeared to be human (*Docetism – Jesus only appeared to be human but was not really and truly human.*) For Christians, the resurrection is an orthodox belief.
  - a. Much of the New Testament and 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian literature aimed at affirming Jesus’ true humanity.
  - b. **SCRIPTURE FOCUS – 1 Corinthians 12:3, Hebrews 4:14-15**

- c. Apostle's Creed – "born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate"
4. Maybe the worst for the early Church was the idea that the human soul is a "spark of God" – of the same substance of God and therefore divine. According to Christian teaching, the original sin was desire to be like God, to be God for ourselves – "idolatry of self". The Gnostic appeal was in Christians' eyes idolatry.
5. Irenaeus's response – *"Against Heresies"*
- a. Against Valentinus – Polycarp's encounter with Cerinthus
  - b. Three Arguments: IF the Gnostics carried on secret teachings from Jesus to an inner circle of his disciples (like John), he would know it through Polycarp. So, they were invented.
  - c. Second, Teachings are ridiculous! Elaborate mythologies, strange names, etc.
  - d. Third, IF Jesus is not human, there is no salvation. Jesus' overcoming temptation was just as important as death on cross. Incarnation was just as important.

## **Gnosticism after Gnosticism**

- Proto-Gnosticism – before 2<sup>nd</sup> century; True Gnosticism – 2<sup>nd</sup> century; Post-Gnosticism – after 2<sup>nd</sup> century; Neo-Gnosticism – Today
- Neo-Gnosticism – attempts to revive true Gnosticism, with certain alterations and additions (i.e. reincarnation)
- Historical Examples...
  - Albigensians/Cathars – Italian/French sect – 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century
  - "Esoteric Christianity" during the Renaissance – anything but pure Gnosticism, eclectic; claimed to carry forth ancient wisdom that was hidden except to a few; claimed time to make public in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries
  - Rosicrucianism – theology/spiritual worldview; several organized groups in Europe and North America – virtually identical with "Neo-Gnosticism"

## **Rosicrucianism and Neo-Gnosticism**

- Some Neo-Gnostics do not label themselves Rosicrucians, and vice versa
- Beginnings of Rosicrucianism is shrouded in mystery, intentionally (one meeting center in San Jose, California)
- Followers do not usually announce themselves publicly; recruit people through magazines and literature (pyramid with light rays emanating from the top; questions about life before birth, life after death, “higher self”; an invitation to correspond; meet with in phases/stages)
- First appeared in London in 1717 – neo-Gnostic Masons opened a Temple/Grand Lodge; taught by a mystery figure named Christian Rosenkrutz (“Rosycross”), popularized by physician Robert Flood
- Some argue connected to Freemasons
- Key teaching – Existence of the “higher self” – transcendent being of pure spiritual “light” that exists above all humans, connected to him or her by a “silver cord”
- View Christ as a teacher, but not as an incarnation of God in Jesus; claims their teachings predate Christ and Christianity

## **Another Neo-Gnostic Group – Theosophy**

- Blends Eastern mysticism with Western esotericism; seems more Buddhist than Christian
- Rudolph Steiner – offshoot – founded Anthroposophy – intellectual Rosicrucianism and mostly esoteric; movement includes a denomination called The Christian Community; disillusioned with the lack of emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ as Savior in Theosophy
- One offshoot of this movement – Waldorf School Movement, based its pedagogy on Steiner’s “Spiritual Science”

## **Echoes of Gnosticism in Popular Folk Religion**

- Many gospel hymns and songs contain lyrics that sound decidedly Gnostic (i.e. “like a bird from prison’s bars has flown, I’ll fly away...”)
- “Prison” – the body, “Bird” – immortal soul

- Folk Religion – informal, popular beliefs of people untutored in doctrine or theology – thrives on cliches, shallow theological thinking, “innocent” – echoes of Gnosticism
- One reason see echoes of Gnosticism is that shallow reading of the Bible can lead one to think it teaches that the body is sinful whereas the Spirit is good.
- Another reason is that in folk religion there is the natural tendency of sinful people (we all are!) to think of their “true selves” as divine
- Finally, there is misunderstanding of our religion – for example, misunderstanding that Christianity promises escape from life’s problems into a spiritual state of bliss through detachment from the world (echoes Gnostic-disdain for physicality, and need for escape)

### **Antidotes to Gnosticism**

- Gnosticism is not a direct threat to New Testament, orthodox Christianity today. Nonetheless, the ideas do pop up.
- But we need to stay attentive. What do we do?
  1. First look at ourselves and see what elements of Gnosticism infect our beliefs about creation, God, Jesus Christ, salvation, life/death.
  2. Christian leaders need to be alert to inroads of neo-Gnostic ideas seeping into the church and influencing the congregation.
  3. Focus on sound Bible Study. Focus on Paul’s frequent use of “flesh” meaning “fallen human nature”; the importance of incarnation – Jesus was fully human.

### **Questions to Ponder...**

1. Gnosticism was not just a set of doctrines; it was an attitude about time, matter, and who humans are in relation to God. Why might some people aspire to the “special knowledge”?
2. What does it say about Jesus that he was human AND divine?
3. Do you know Christians who believe in reincarnation? Do you know Christians who believe that the human soul is a divine spark?
4. How might Bible study and small group study help correct some of those deeply held, nonbiblical beliefs?

## **Messing with Divine Revelation: Montanism and Marcionism**

### **What is God's Word?**

- While this may seem like an easy question for Christians today – “Holy Scripture”, “Inspired Word of God”, etc. – the process of identifying and agreeing on the books to include in the Bible was very complicated
- No consensus existed until the late 4<sup>th</sup> century – Egyptian Christian bishop Athanasius circulated a letter in 367 AD in which all 27 books of the New Testament were listed
- While this list of 27 was not “new”, before 367 AD it had been debated; afterwards, almost universally accepted; also accepted 39 books of the Hebrew canon (22 in Jewish Bibles) as inspired; some Christians accepted more Old Testament books, became known as the Apocrypha – later thrown out of the Bible by Protestant reformers
- The canonization process of scripture was long and difficult; 3 criteria played into decisions
  1. A Book was written by an apostle or someone close to an apostle
  2. Christians wanted to know if a book was old; going back to the first century, and in general, and nearly universally accepted
  3. Christians judged disputed books by the content
- Some books got in that were widely disputed (3 John, Jude, Hebrews)
- In general, most books were universally accepted and believed to be inspired, while others were still debated
- Athanasius did not “create” the Biblical canon in 367 AD, he simply closed the process and brought the disputes to an end – this was a significant event for Christians and the Church (like the writing and affirming of the Constitution for the United States)
- “A basic Christian faith affirmation is that the Holy Spirit of God inspired these writings and led the early Christian churches to recognize them as inspired and authoritative for faith and practice.” (p. 60)
- Why 367 AD? Because the existence and push of heresies in the church...



## **Montanism Challenges the Canon**

- “Canon” means “rule or measure”; it is the measuring stick for our Christian faith; a collection of Christian writings that helps us do this
- In the early centuries of Christianity, there were writings in different regions that church saw as important and sacred that did not make it into the canon – the Didache (or “The Teaching”) in the Middle East, “Shepherd of Hermas” in Rome
- As the discussion began about having a closed “canon” of authoritative scripture, different regions approached it with either skepticism or acceptance – some used their sacred texts as their “canon”, others put more acceptance in charismatic movements or prophets who claimed to carry the authority of the apostles
- The question emerged in how do you judge the words or utterances of a prophet as true if you do not have an established canon to weigh or “measure” them against – many began to turn away from these prophets and rely solely on the writings
- Into this confusing period over “God’s Word” stepped a man named Montanus – live in Pepuza (city in Asia Minor); a convert to Christianity, traveled around the Roman Empire establishing his own churches based on his inspired prophecies – they were called “The New Prophecy” – perhaps the first schism in the Christian Church
- These new churches were rejected by the bishops of the Christian Church who were appointed by the apostles and the next generation of Christian leaders; saw Montanus as a self-appointed upstart, false prophet (not much else is known)
- One of Montanus’s main teachings – claimed the Holy Spirit took control of his vocal cords and “played” on them; so, the uttered prophecies he spoke were God’s own word and Christians ought to listen, believe, and obey
- Montanus rejected the exclusive claims of the bishops of apostolic succession, and he rejected any identification of God’s word with a book or books.
- During Montanus’s lifetime, there was no official canon, but there was an unofficial and widely recognized list

- Montanus did not reject all Christian writings, but did believe God's Word continues to be given through prophets, like himself
- The Church saw him as dangerous, and claimed he was a fanatic; they claimed he called his followers to join him in Pepuza to wait with him for the imminent return of Christ; encouraged his followers to be celibate, even if married; eventually two women prophets attached to him and prophesied with him
- If Montanus's followers had remained small, it would not have been a big deal; but his words struck a chord with many, especially that the Church was becoming stagnant, lost the Spirit; Church's real issue with him was that he claimed his prophecies were above critique and they were just as authoritative as the apostle's writings
- We do not know much about Montanus; but we do know more about later Montanism and the New Prophecy movement that lasted for a century or more and spread through the Roman Empire
- "Montanism" has come to be synonymous for an emphasis on inspired, authoritative prophecy that goes beyond scripture and claims to communicate "new truths" to be believed by all Christians
- Montanism contributed greatly to the demise of charismatic gifts among Christians; but also propelled forward the need for a closed canon

## **Marcionism also Challenges the Canon**

- Marcion was a leader in Rome the same time Montanus was prophesying in Asia Minor; probably a Christian bishop who moved to Rome to be more influential
- In 140 AD, Marcion proposed two ideas that the Christian Church deemed heretical (most of what we know about Marcion comes from the treatise written against him by Origen)
- Marcion was not exactly a Gnostic, but some of his teachings overlapped
- Two main teachings...
  1. The God that Christians worship, the Father of Jesus Christ, did not create the world. Rather, the world was created by a demented god, whom he identified as Yahweh, the God worshipped by the Jews. (Marcion was violently anti-Jewish, not because he was anti-Semitic,

- but because he was angry for their treatment of Christians. In the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, leading rabbis had expelled Christians from the synagogues. Jews were then given special exemptions by the Empire from certain Roman laws. Marcion was bitter because these exemptions now did not apply to Christians.)
2. Best remembered for being the first Christian to propose a canon of Christian scriptures that would entirely exclude the Hebrew scriptures and any Christian writings that were “too Jewish”. It was a very short NT canon, only including Gentile writings – Luke and Acts (Luke was not a Jew) and edited versions of Paul’s letters.
- Marcionism has come to be used by Christians for any Christian attempt to exclude the Old Testament from the Bible. Usually this does not happen literally, but rather ignoring by acting or saying, “it is irrelevant to Christians.” (many German theologians, like Friedrich Schleiermacher, did this).
  - Marcion has gone down in Christian history as an early “arch-heretic”, one who almost derailed Christianity at its beginnings.

### **Roman Christians Respond to Marcion**

- 170 AD – “Muratorian Canon” – Christians developed what is believed to be the first official listing of books of the NT (doesn’t really state them, alludes to them)
- Response to Marcion – mentions Marcion as a heretic
- Writings that were listed as authoritative: the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), Acts, 13 letters of Paul, 1 and 2 John, Jude, Revelation, “Wisdom of Solomon”, “Revelation of Peter”, “Shepherd of Hermas”

### **Why Montanism and Marcionism are Heresies**

- Nobody claims that Montanus was out to destroy Christianity; just misguided; remember “heresy” had to do with the effects of their teachings on other Christians and especially on the church
- Montanus – support from Pentecostals and charismatics because of his emphasis on prophecy and the Spirit; Church’s response was probably an overreaction because of the suppression of prophecy and other “supernatural” gifts

- Why is he/it still wrong? Opens the door to confusion; without inspired and authoritative scripture, what is there to measure a prophet's words? How can he/she be judged?
- Many see Mormonism as a modern Montanism; the president of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism) is its chief prophet who can pronounce new truths, and it remains open to new revelations that add to scripture
- The Church can easily see the dangers of Montanism on the fringes of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement
- On the other hand, Marcion was a deeply spiritual man, but his fanatical views about Jews was dangerous to the Christian Church
- Marcion forgot the fact that Jesus was a Jew – ethnically and religiously
- Limiting scripture to Gentile writings also attempted to disconnect Christianity from its Hebrew heritage
- Marcion opened the door to “mutilating” the Bible; also overlooking the Bible – seeing what we want to see, not what God wants us to see

## **Modern Montanism**

- Montanism has been seen throughout Christian history
- Reformation – “the Spirituals” or “the Spiritualists” - challenged Luther and the reformers because they wanted the Church to be led by the Spirit, not by a book; Luther called them the “vermin”, he was emphasizing *sola scriptura* for the Protestant Reformation, and afraid this group would lead to anarchy
- 18<sup>th</sup> century – Swedish prophet Emanuel Swedenborg – published new revelations he received in visions/dreams – followers saw them as equal to scripture; many followers, one example was American agriculturalist, Johnny Appleseed (John Chapman), also Helen Keller; churches they attended are called “Church of the New Jerusalem”
- Joseph Smith – “*The Book of Mormon*”, “*The Pearl of Great Price*” – added these as equal to scripture; Church saw the followers and the New Prophecy movement of Mormons as following in the footsteps of Montanism
- Pentecostal Movement – Azusa Street Revival (1906) – Los Angeles – value modern prophecies as highly as scripture

- 1980's – Kansas City Prophets – reemphasis on prophecy; one leader claimed that he was Apostle Paul's successor
- 1970's through the 1990's – Tulsa, Oklahoma – another branch of Pentecostalism – “Word Faith” movement – emphasized prosperity and health through positive speaking; leader claimed to be receiving *rhema* (Greek for “word”) from God; difference between “logos” – past revelation; *rhema* – contemporary revelation; both equal

## **Modern Marcionism**

- *Marcionism* used to describe individuals or groups that want to expel Hebrew Scriptures from the Bible, or treat the OT as worthless
- No one in modern day think like Marcion that a demented or evil God inspired the Hebrew scriptures
- Germany – WWII – Nazi era – dismissed OT as too “Jewish”, driven by anti-Semitism
- Marcionism has to include someone denying the inspiration and authority of the whole OT and restricts “revelation for today” to the NT or even just portions of it
- 20<sup>th</sup> century - *Dispensationalist* Groups – interpretation of the Bible that regards it as containing different “programs” for salvation; God's way of salvation for the Jews was different than for the Gentiles (just one example); most believe that the Gentile church is “Plan B” because Israel rejected Jesus as the Messiah; after the rapture, God will deal with Israel; relegate Jewish writings in the Bible (i.e. Matthew, Hebrews, etc.) to secondary status; emphasize other writings
- 21<sup>st</sup> century – “popular Marcionism” – tendency to ignore the OT or select a “canon within the canon”; unconscious desire for the Bible to support already chosen and favored beliefs

## **Antidotes to Montanism and Marcionism**

- One way to avoid Montanism is to evaluate all messages, whether prophetic or not, by scripture, tradition, reason, and experience; reject messages that contradict scripture or add “new truths” to scripture
- God still speaks, but prophecies and contemporary messages from God cannot be given the same weight as scripture

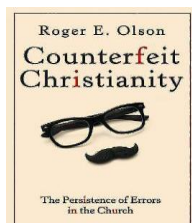
- Five criteria for Evaluating Contemporary Messages...
  1. “Christ Touchstone” – if a prophecy promotes Christ and not the prophet, it may be valid.
  2. “Apostolic Norm” – if the message is consistent with the gospel found in the apostle’s writings in the NT it may be valid.
  3. “Unity Criterion” – If a prophecy does not promote spiritual elitism or schism, it may be valid.
  4. “Sanity Check” – If a message does not require the sacrifice of the intellect and mindless acceptance of newly revealed teachings, it may be valid.
  5. “Messiah Test” – If the prophecy does not exalt some individual into an object of veneration, it may be valid.
- There is no test to replace discernment! (knowledge of Bible, guidance by the Spirit, accountability with fellow believers, logic)
- Best antidote to Marcionism – reverence for scripture, reading and study of all scripture, and preaching and teaching through all scripture (lectionary)

### **Follow Up Questions...**

1. In your opinion, why is having an agreed-upon canon of scripture important for your church? Why is it important to have Christian leaders steeped in both scripture and tradition?
2. Do you believe, generally speaking, that the Old Testament is as important or authoritative as the New Testament? How is the Old Testament important for Christian faith and practice? Are there parts of the Bible that you would like to ignore?
3. When persons say that God spoke to them, how do you evaluate what is said? No Christians wants the faith to be dead, so what is the role of the Holy Spirit in keeping faith vital?
4. Who are people who proclaim that they are prophets today? Are there people who believe that some modern prophecy goes beyond scripture and claims to be new truths from God?

### **Closing Prayer**

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**Session 3: Doubting the Deity of Christ**  
**(Chapters 5 and 6 in the Book)**

**Thursday, July 24 7:30 PM Facebook Live**

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