

Perversions of the Gospel

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Louis Berkhof was born in Emmen, Netherlands October 13, 1873. His later education came from his studies at Calvin College and Seminary; Princeton Theological Seminary (B.D., 1904), and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago (1904-06). He pastored two congregations of the Christian Reformed Church denomination in Grand Rapids, Michigan from (1900-1906). From that time he began his long teaching career at Calvin Seminary; exegetical theology (1906-14); New Testament exegesis (1914-26), dogmatic theology (1926-44), and during this latter period of teaching, became president of the seminary (1931-44). He was the author of many books both in Dutch and English; the most well known being his *Systematic Theology* and the companion volume *History of Christian Doctrine*, from which this article is taken.

In the second century the Christian religion as a new force in the world, revealing itself in the organization of the Church, had to engage in a struggle for existence. It had to guard against dangers from without and from within, had to justify its existence, and had to maintain the purity of doctrine in the face of subtle error. The very existence of the Church was threatened by State persecutions. The first persecutions were entirely Jewish, due to the fact that the Church was largely limited to Palestine, and that the Roman Government for some time considered the followers of Christ as a Jewish sect and therefore regarded their religion as a *religio licita*. But when it became apparent that Christianity laid claim to a universal character, thus endangering the State religion, and that the Christians largely disregarded the affairs of the State and refused to join in the idolatrous worship of the Romans, and particularly in their emperor worship, the Roman government inaugurated a series of persecutions which threatened the very existence of the Christian Church. At the same time Christianity had to suffer a great deal from the written attacks of some of the keenest minds of the age, such as Lucian, Porphyry, and Celsus, men of a philosophical bent of mind, who hurled their invectives against the Christian religion. Their arguments are typical of the philosophical opposition to Christianity throughout the centuries and frequently remind one of those employed by rationalistic philosophers and higher critics in the present day. But however great these dangers from without were, there were even greater dangers which threatened the Church from within. These consisted in different types of perversions of the Gospel.

I. JEWISH PERVERSIONS

There were three groups of Jewish Christians which revealed a Judaistic tendency. Traces of them are found even in the New Testament.

[a] *The Nazarenes.* These were Jewish Christians who adopted the tenets of the Christian religion. They used only the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, but at the same time recognized Paul as a true apostle. In distinction from other Jewish sects they believed in the divinity and the virgin birth of Jesus. And while they bound themselves in practice to a strict observance of the law, they did not demand this of Gentile Christians. "They were", as Seeberg says, "really Jewish Christians, whereas the two following groups were only Christian Jews."

[b] *The Ebionites.* This sect really constituted the continuation of the Judaistic opponents of the Apostle Paul and was of a Pharisaic type. Its adherents refused to recognize the apostleship of Paul, whom they regarded as an apostate from the law, and demanded that all Christians should submit to the rite of circumcision. They had a Cerinthian view of Christ, which was probably due to their desire to maintain the Old Testament monotheism. Both the divinity of Christ and His virgin birth were denied. In their opinion Jesus distinguished Himself from others only by a strict observance of the Law, and was chosen to be the Messiah on account of His legal piety. He became conscious of this at the time of His baptism, when He received the Spirit, which enabled Him to perform His task, the work, of a prophet and teacher. They were reluctant to think of Him as subject to sufferings and death.

[c] *The Elkesaites.* This group represented a type of Jewish Christianity marked by theosophic speculations and strict asceticism. While they rejected the virgin birth of Christ and claimed that He was born as other men, they also spoke of Him as a higher spirit or angel. They regarded Him as an incarnation of the ideal Adam, and also called Him the highest archangel. Circumcision and the sabbath were held in honour; there were repeated washings, to which a magical cleansing and reconciling meaning was ascribed; and magic and astrology were practiced among them. They had their secret doctrines respecting the observance of the law. Their movement was probably an attempt to gain general recognition for Jewish Christianity by adapting it to the syncretistic tendencies of the age. In all probability the Epistle to the Colossians and First Timothy refer to this heresy.

2. GENTILE PERVERSIONS: GENTILE-CHRISTIAN GNOSIS

In Gnosticism we meet with a second perversion of Christianity. It had this in common with the Judaistic sects, that it conceived of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, and between their respective religions, as one of opposition. Its original form was rooted in Judaism, but it ultimately developed into a strange mixture of Jewish elements, Christian doctrines, and heathen speculative thought.

[a] Origin of Gnosticism. There are indications in the New Testament that an incipient Gnosticism was already making its appearance in the days of the Apostles. There were heretical teachers even then who drew their immediate impulse from Judaism, engaged in speculations respecting angels and spirits, and were characterized by a false dualism, leading on to asceticism on the one hand, and to an immoral libertinism on the other hand, who spiritualized the resurrection and made the Church's hope the object of derisive mockery; Col 2:18ff; I Tim 1:3-7; 4:1-3; 6:3 f; II Tim 2:14-18; Tit 1:10-16; II Pet 2:1-4; Jude 4,16; Rev 2:6, 15, 20f. There was also a tendency to religious philosophical speculation, which appeared especially in the heresy of Cerinthus, who distinguished between the human Jesus and Christ as a higher spirit which descended on him at the time of his baptism and left him again before the crucifixion. John indirectly combats this heresy in his writings, John 1:14; 20:31; I John 2:22; 4:2, 15; 5:1, 5,6; II John 7.

From the early part of the second century these errors assumed a more developed form, were openly proclaimed, and at once had an amazingly wide circulation. This can be understood only in the light of the general syncretism of the period. There was a widespread religious unrest and a surprising eagerness to absorb all possible religious ideas, and to generalize and harmonize them. Western religions had ceased to satisfy, and Eastern cults, diligently propagated by itinerant preachers, were eagerly embraced. The great aim was to gratify the thirst for deeper knowledge, the desire for mystic communion with God, and the hope of securing a sure path for the soul in its ascent to the upper world at death. It is no wonder that this tendency attached itself to Christianity, which seemed to address itself to the same task with marked success. Moreover, it found support in the claim of Christianity to be the absolute and universal religion. It may be said that Gnosticism mistakenly sought to elevate Christianity to its rightful position, that of universal religion, by adapting it to the needs of all, and by interpreting it in harmony with the wisdom of the world.

[b] The essential character of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was first of all a *speculative movement*. The speculative element was very much in the foreground. The very name *Gnostikoi*, adopted by some of its adherents, indicates that they laid claim to a deeper knowledge of divine things than could be obtained by common believers. The Gnostics grappled with some of the deeper problems of philosophy and religion, but approached them in the wrong manner and suggested solutions totally at variance with the truths of revelation. Their two greatest problems were those of absolute being and of the origin of evil, problems not of Christian but of heathen religious thought. They developed a phantastic cosmogony, in which they borrowed freely from oriental speculation, and with which they sought to combine the truths of the Gospel. Undoubtedly, they were serious in their attempts to make the Gospel acceptable to the educated and cultured classes of their day.

In spite of its speculative character, Gnosticism was also a *popular movement*. In order to sway the masses, it had to be something more than mere speculation. Therefore attempts were made in special associations to popularize the general cosmical theory by symbolic rites, mystic ceremonies, and the teaching of magic formulas. In the initiation into these associations strange formulas and rites formed an important part. These were supposed to form a necessary and effective protection against the power of sin and death, and to be a means of gaining access to the blessedness of the world to come. In reality their introduction was an attempt to transform the Gospel into a religious philosophy and into mystic wisdom. Yet Gnosticism claimed to be Christian in character. Whenever possible, it appealed to the words of Jesus explained in an allegorical way, and to a so-called secret tradition handed down from the times of the Apostles. Many received its teachings as genuine Christian truth.

Gnosticism was also a *syncretistic movement* within the sphere of Christianity. It is still a matter of discussion, whether the Gnostics were Christians in any sense of the term. According to Seeberg Gnosticism was pagan rather than Gentile Christian. It addressed itself to the solution of problems that originated in the religious thought of the heathen world, and merely gave its discussions a somewhat Christian colouring. Apparently it placed a high estimate on Jesus Christ as marking the decisive turning-point in human history, and as a teacher of absolute truth. Harnack speaks of it as “the acute Hellenizing of Christianity”, and calls the Gnostics “the first Christian theologians”. Prof. Walther is more correct, when he says that Gnosticism is “. . . a stealing of some Christian rags to cover heathen nakedness”. This corresponds with the description of Seeberg when he speaks of it as “an ethnicizing of Christianity”.

[c] The main teachings of Gnosticism. We cannot discuss the various Gnostic systems, such as those of Valentinus and Basilides, but can only briefly indicate the teachings of Gnosticism in general. A trait of dualism runs through the whole system and manifests itself in the position that there are two original principles or gods, which are opposed to each other as higher and lower, or even as good and bad. The supreme or good God is an unfathomable abyss. He interposes between Himself and finite creatures a long chain of aeons or middle beings, emanations from the divine, which together constitute the Pleroma or fullness of the divine essence. It is only through these intermediate beings that the highest God can enter into various relations with created beings. The world is not created by the good God, but is the result of, probably, a fall in the Pleroma, and is the work of a subordinate, possibly a hostile, deity. This subordinate god, is called the Demiurge, is identified with the God of the Old Testament, and is described as an inferior, limited, passionate, and vengeful being. He is contrasted with the supreme God, the source of goodness, virtue, and truth, who revealed Himself in Christ.

The world of matter as the product of a lesser and possibly an evil god, is essentially evil. There is found in it, however, a remnant from the spirit-world,

namely, the soul of man, a spark of light from the upper world of purity which in some inexplicable way became entangled in evil matter. Its deliverance can be obtained only through some intervention of the good God. A way of deliverance has been provided by the sending of a special emissary from the kingdom of light into the world of darkness. In Christian Gnosticism this emissary is regularly identified with Christ. He is variously represented, either as a celestial being appearing in a phantasmal body, or as an earthly being, with whom a higher power or spirit temporarily associated himself. Since matter is in itself evil, this higher spirit could not have an ordinary human body.

Participation in redemption, or victory over the world, was gained only through the secret rites of the Gnostic associations. Initiation into the mysteries of marriage to Christ, of peculiar baptism, of magic names, and of special anointing, by which the secret knowledge of Being was secured, formed the path of redemption. At this point Gnosticism became more and more system of religious mysteries. Men are divided into three classes: the pneumatic who constitute the elite of the Church, the psychic consisting of the ordinary Church members, and the hylic or the Gentiles. Only the first class is really capable of higher knowledge (*epignosis*) and thus obtains the highest blessedness. The second class may be saved through faith and works, but can only attain to an inferior blessedness. Those belonging to the third class are hopelessly lost.

The ethics, or moral philosophy, accompanying these views of redemption, was dominated by a false estimate of sensuousness, which resulted either in strict ascetic abstinence or in low carnality, born of the assurance that nothing could really hinder those who were favoured of heaven. There was asceticism on the one hand and libertinism on the other. The ordinary eschatology of the Church had no place in this system. The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was not recognized. When the soul was finally released from matter, it returned to the Pleroma, and this marked the end.

[d] Historical significance of Gnosticism. Even Gnosticism, however formidable an enemy of the truth, was not able to check the onward march of Christianity. Many were indeed swept along for a time by its daring speculations or by its mystic rites, but the great body of believers was not deceived by its phantastic representations nor by its alluring promises of secret bliss. In fact, Gnosticism was short-lived. Like a meteor it lit up the sky for a moment, and then suddenly disappeared. It was overcome by the direct refutations of the Church Fathers, by the preparation and circulation of short statements of the fundamental facts of the Christian religion (Rules of Faith), and by a more rational interpretation of the New Testament and a limitation of its canon, to the exclusion of all the false Gospels, Acts, and Epistles that were in circulation. Yet it did not fail to leave a lasting impression on the Church. Some of its peculiarities were absorbed by the Church and in course of time came to fruition in the Roman Catholic Church With its peculiar conception of the sacraments, its philosophy of a hidden God, who should be approached through intermediaries

(saints, angels, Mary), its division of men into higher and lower orders, and its emphasis on asceticism.

The Church also derived actual profit from the appearance of Gnosticism, but only in an indirect way. It learned to mark off clearly the limits of divine revelation, and to determine the relation of the Old Testament to the New. Moreover, it became keenly alive to the necessity of drawing up short statements of the truth, based on current baptismal formulas, which could serve as standards of interpretation (Rules of Faith). There was also a very evident doctrinal gain. Christianity was now first conceived as a “doctrine” and as a “mystery”. The intellectual element in the Christian religion was emphasized, and this marked the real starting-point for doctrinal development. The Christian idea of God was rescued from the mythological speculations of the Gnostics. The Church came into conscious possession of the truth that God is the Supreme Being, the Creator and Upholder of the Universe, the same in the Old and in the New Testament. The doctrine of the Demiurge and his creative activity was set aside, and the dualism of the Gnostics, making matter essentially evil, was overcome. Over against the Gnostic tendency to regard Jesus Christ merely as one of the aeons, His unique character as the Son of God was emphasized, and at the same time His true humanity was defended against all kinds of docetic denials. The great facts of His life, His virgin birth, miracles, sufferings, death, and resurrection, were all maintained and set in dearer light. Moreover, the doctrine of redemption through the atoning work of Christ was put forward in opposition to the speculative vagaries of the Gnostics; and the universal receptivity of men for the Gospel of Jesus Christ was stressed in answer to Gnostic exclusiveness and pride.

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