

“GNOSTIC TENETS & BELIEFS”
IT’S HISTORY & LASTING AFFECTS

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GNOSTIC TENETS IT'S HISTORY & LASTING AFFECTS

I. INTRODUCTION – EXPLANATION

The Greeks had excelled in knowledge and wisdom, higher than any before. Philosophy to the Greek mind was the highest expression of the intellect of man. They created outstanding universities, such as the ones in the cities of Athens and Alexandria. It was a culture which generated a class of gifted philosophers second to none. What was a byproduct of this philosophical culture? It was the birth of a broad religious movement which became known as Gnosticism. Even though this movement was broad and difficult to define as a religious system, it did have a great affect on the early church and left vestiges or methods which are with us to this day. “Nowhere were the influences of religious and philosophical syncretism in early Christian thinking demonstrated more obviously than in the loose assortment of movements conventionally known as ‘Gnosticism.’”¹ It was this syncretism which opened the door for partnerships which would become part of the church.

This article will briefly reflect upon the origin of this movement, its relationship to the early and growing church, and remnants that are yet found in Christianity today; not necessarily regarding Gnosticism as a whole, but Gnostic tenets.

II. GNOSTIC SEEDS – BEGINNINGS

Alexandria, Egypt, a creation of the Greek Empire, was called by some, ‘the shining pearl of the Mediterranean Sea; the beacon which radiated its culture and heritage to the then known world’. It was here that the Septuagint was born; it was here that a rival to the church in Antioch was born. “Truly was Alexandria ‘the mother and mistress of churches’ in a benign sense of a nurse and instructress of Christendom...”² The heart of Christianity may have been beating yet in Antioch, but Alexandria became the intelligentsia.

Alexandria had a fascinating appeal to the early Bible scholars, for it was the center of progressive thinking. Its emphasis on wisdom and knowledge far surpassed all other cities, for even the west looked to Alexandria “...its hands and arms stretched forth towards the sunrise for further enlightenment.”³ There can be no doubt that “Alexandria...was the meeting place of philosophy and Christianity.”⁴ Alexandria, Egypt, also became one of the great light houses of Gnostic thought in the early centuries of the church.

Gnostic tenets varied from teacher to teacher, but the most common and shared beliefs were: a demiurge creator, logos as a lesser god, special knowledge and wisdom for the enlightened, absorption back into the Pleroma, the denial of a blood sacrifice, dualism, syncretism, asceticism, and the use of allegory. Qualben gives Philo the Hellenized Jewish theologian credit for spreading the leaven, “the prominent early Gnostic leaders – Cerinthus, Basilides, Valentinus, and others – were Jews, who in turn received their main Gnostic tenets from Philo Judeas...”⁵ To this, Schaff agrees that Gnosticism came together “in the educated circles of ...Alexandria, and in the system of Philo...”⁶

¹ Ivor J. Davidson, John D. Woodbridge and David F. Wright eds. *The Birth of the Church, Volume One* (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 2004), 163.

² The Ante-Nicene Fathers, “Clement of Alexandria,” (Grand Rapids Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 223.

³ Ibid., 165.

⁴ J.W.C. Wand, *History of the Early Church* (Great Britain: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1937), 148.

⁵ Lars P. Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1942), 74.

⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1910), 88.

The Gnostic elitists with their superior philosophy quickly spread their leaven into the newly forming church. "Gnosticism seems to have grown up concurrently with Christianity in a similar environment... There were many teachers in the Hellenistic world, each in his own way combining religious, mythological, and philosophical ideas. Christianity added a new ingredient to a ferment already at work."⁷ The result was a number of the early orthodox theologians such as, Irenaeus and Tertullian who confronted these heresies and challenged the Gnostic's Greek mythological ideas of the Old Testament God, and their corrupted view of Jesus Christ. The Gnostics refused orthodoxy; for they considered themselves the enlightened ones. Valentinus a well known Gnostic, professed a special apostolic sanction through an initiate of the Apostle Paul, by the name of Theudas. The Orthodox Church father Irenaeus wrote this regarding the Gnostics.

They consider themselves "mature," so that no one can be compared with them in the greatness of their gnosis, not even if you mention Peter or Paul or any of the other apostles.... They imagine that they themselves have discovered more than the apostles, and that the apostles preached the gospel still under the influence of Jewish opinions, but that they themselves are wiser and more intelligent than the apostles.⁸

Irenaeus also claimed that the Gnostics bragged about the number of writings they possessed, and that they had won a wide circulation. There was no other choice; the struggling Orthodox Church rejected these Gnostics as heretics.

Cerinthus, Basilides, Marcion, Valentinus, Ptolemy, Theodotus, and Numenius were some of the Gnostics that were considered heretics. By the end of the 4th century AD, the Gnostics had been rejected with all of their heretical teachings, and writings. The majority of their writings were destroyed. What has been known of the early Gnostics for the past 1,600 years has been discovered from the writings of their adversaries. That was until 1945, when Gnosticism arose from the earth after a supposed 1,600 year burial at Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

Yet, despite the early church's rejection of the Gnostics and their beliefs there were Gnostic practices that were kept alive in orthodoxy. "In some cases, especially that of Gnosticism, they never did disappear, and essentially Gnostic ideas of one sort or another have continued to plague Christian thinking in almost every age."⁹ And what are three Gnostic ideas that have plagued the church? *Allegorical* interpretation of Scripture; *Ascetic* practices of lifestyle; and *Syncretistic* methods of education and theological development; this author believes that these three, allegory, asceticism and Syncretism have been a problem in the church even to this present day.

III. Gnostic Vestiges – The Bearers of

Despite orthodoxy's rejection and condemnation of the Gnostic teachers and leaders, there were Gnostic tendencies that remained in the Church due to philosophy's strong influence in the early Church's Bible scholars, and that is most recognized in the Eastern Church of Alexandria. As mentioned previously, the Alexandrian Church became the intellectual mind of Christendom.

The first of these vestiges is that of allegorical interpretation. According to Davidson, "Allegorical exegesis was common in antiquity... and it had been widely applied... both by Jewish and Christian writers, especially Philo and Clement, whose concern was to find deeper meanings... fueled by Platonist assumptions that invisible, heavenly truth was necessarily represented in veiled or shadowy form in ordinary human language."¹⁰ Ferguson states this regarding Philo the Alexandrian Jew, "The allegorical method of interpreting sacred literature was adopted by the Jewish philosopher Philo of

⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), 308, 309.

⁸ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random house, 1979), 21.

⁹ Davidson, "The Birth of the Church," 188.

¹⁰ Davidson, "The Birth of the Church," 260, 261.

Alexandria...who harmonized the Mosaic religion with philosophy.”¹¹ Observably, Alexandria was a hotbed of such influences as Philo of Alexandria. His expertise in this form of interpretation had wide ranging affects, not only on the Gnostics of Alexandria but also the early church fathers and the school that was established there.

The Epistle of Barnabas is an excellent example of an early 1st century Apostolic Father who employed the allegorical interpretive method as a means of understanding the Scriptures. According to Roberts-Donaldson, “The writer of this epistle is supposed to have been an Alexandrian Jew of the times of Trajan and Hadrian.”¹² Clement of Alexandria ascribed this epistle to Paul’s companion; while Origen considered it to rank among the inspired scriptures. It’s obvious that in Alexandria, allegory was never questioned as a means of a proper hermeneutic, but embraced as the logical means.

The Alexandrian church in its early stages was dominated by true Gnosticism. “The principal figures in Alexandrian Christianity during the first two-thirds of the second century were more gnostic than catholic in their doctrine – Basilides, Isidore and Valentinus, for example.”¹³ It was later in the second century when orthodoxy gained ground on the devout Gnostics. “Not until the last third of the [second] century do we have clear evidence that catholic Christianity establishing its predominance in Alexandria... with the...great catechetical school...leaders Pantaenus, Clement and Origen – and some of them were suspected (not without reason) of being unduly influenced by gnostic speculation.”¹⁴ It was these later scholars who established a theological school in Alexandria, further strengthening its philosophical influence on the church.

Pantaenus who was converted from Stoicism was the school’s first leader. His successors were Clement of Alexander, and Origen, Clement’s student. Under Origen, the school reached its pinnacle. The school produced many great writers such as, Africanus, Dionysius, Gregory, Eusebius, Athanasius, and Didymus. “Arius was also a catalyst in this institution...”¹⁵ Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem was also taught in this school under Clement. It was in this school of Alexandria where allegorical interpretation, ascetic tendencies, and syncretism grew and thrived. The two great theologians who fueled these practices were Clement and Origen.

Clement never reached the heights of his successor, Origen. Clement claimed that Christians were the ‘true Gnostic,’ and it was such influence which propelled Origen to seek higher levels of spiritual understanding. “The most common means of achieving this is by use of allegory.”¹⁶ On a different note according to Freedman, Allegory was a means in which Alexandrian theologians also sought to preserve the integrity of the biblical text against accusations regarding seemingly irrational scriptures. “Moreover, the allegorical method proved to be the best way of preserving the sacredness and integrity of the biblical text against any critique of the Bible’s crude or apparently nonsensical passages... Thus, the allegorical method must be seen as serving a particular set of theological convictions.”¹⁷ The criticism of seemingly crude texts could then be dismissed due to the higher interpretive nature of allegory.

Not only did Origen practice allegorical interpretation, but also asceticism and syncretism. “What Origen did was to extend the range of allegories possibilities...”¹⁸ more so than his predecessors, yet it is unique that when it came to certain portions of scripture Origen took them very literally,

¹¹ Ferguson, “Backgrounds of Early Christianity,” 357.

¹² www.earlychristianwritings.com/info/barnabas.html, (accessed March 11, 2011).

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 420.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 420.

¹⁵ Camden M. Cobern, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ‘Alexandria’* (Bible Library V.6, CD-ROM: Ellis Enterprises), 1988.

¹⁶ Davidson, “The Birth of the Church,” 260.

¹⁷ D. N. Freedman, 1996. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol. 3* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 434.

¹⁸ Davidson, “The Birth of the Church,” 261.

especially in the case of becoming a physical eunuch for Christ. It was his ascetic tendencies which led to such an act.

The next remnant of Gnosticism is that of ascetic practices. This vestige was a forerunner to that of monasticism. “The process of spiritual ascent was deemed to take a variety of forms. Most Gnostics believed that the material was escaped by some kind of asceticism, and they taught an abstinence from sexual activity and marriage as a way to subdue bodily appetites and concentrate the soul upon higher realities.”¹⁹ Self Denial which was a common practice in certain philosophical circles became a part of Gnosticism and the Church. An interesting and very possible connection may be made between Gnosticism and monasticism, due to the Nag Hammadi discovery.

In Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the discovery included thirteen stunning papyrus codices containing fifty-two sacred texts, once thought to be destroyed by Christianity are mainly Gnostic in content. “The discovery of these documents has radically revised our understanding of Gnosticism and the early Christian church... The discovery... has provided impetus to a major re-evaluation of early Christian history and the nature of Gnosticism”²⁰ But regarding the discovery itself, experts believe that the codices date somewhere around 350-370 AD, while the writings date as early as 150-170 AD. And it is believed that they were possibly buried by a *monk* from a nearby *monastery*. This discovery proves a possible connection between fragments of early Gnosticism and that of the 4th century monastic church.

The last of these vestiges under consideration is syncretism. Reflecting back to both the allegorical method and ascetic practices one easily recognizes the problem of syncretism. Tertullian, from the early western church recognized the problem with the syncretistic methods of Gnosticism, “Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy... What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition.”²¹

It must be realized that in some manner these three tenets are intricately interconnected; allegory, finding the deeper spiritual meaning, being aided by ascetic practices of ridding oneself of the fleshly appetites, while studying, blending and building upon previous scholars and philosophers works.

IV. Gnostic Fruit – THE CONTINUATION OF

It did not take many years before these three Gnostic ideas became embedded in the Christian tradition. “The Hellenistic philosophical developments ... found their climax in Neoplatonism.”²² Neoplatonism originated in the same thought world as Origen. “This philosophy [Neoplatonism] was the background of the work of the Cappadocians in the fourth century and through them influenced Greek Orthodox theology, and it was decisive in the intellectual development of Augustine and so through him had a great impact on the medieval Latin development.”²³ The Alexandrian tendencies of Origen and Neoplatonism now expanded into new territories in the west. “Eventually, the allegorical method developed into the leading approach to the Bible in the early Church, both East (Greek) and West (Latin), while the Antiochene approaches which promoted a literal or historical reading of the Bible (such as Theodore’s five books *Adversus Allegoricos*) disappeared altogether.”²⁴ Others continued to

¹⁹ Davidson, “The Birth of the Church,” 166.

²⁰ THE Gnostic Society Library, *An Introduction to Gnosticism and The Nag Hammadi Library*, <http://www.gnosis.org/library.html>. (Accessed March 11, 2011).

²¹ William C. Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 43, 44.

²² Ferguson, “Backgrounds of Early Christianity,” 391.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Freedman, “The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol. 3,” 435.

embrace these three tenets, not only keeping them alive, but also allowing them to become a part of the accepted traditions of the Orthodox Church.

The following section will note key people or movements through the centuries that kept these three traditions (Allegory, Asceticism and Syncretism) alive in the church until our present day. The idea is to demonstrate how these three tenets were well accepted and promoted through the centuries.

Augustine, who was familiar with Philo's writings, never condemned Philo's use of allegory. He criticized Philo for not being Christ/Church centered in his use of allegory. Through allegory Augustine synchronized Neo-Platonic tendencies with Christianity, just as Philo did with platonic thought in Judaism. Yet Augustine established a theological framework to the allegorical method more so than those before him. "Therefore, it would be wrong to count Augustine among the propagators of an uncritical allegorical method in biblical interpretation... the influence of Augustine on the later biblical exegesis of the Latin Middle Ages was enormous."²⁵ But even though Augustine placed restriction on the use of Allegory, he never the less kept it alive for generations to come.

Augustine was also inclined to the monastic life and aided in the development of monastic communities. This lifestyle fit well with what Neoplatonism considered the philosophical life; a life of study, meditation and discourse. By this time, monasticism seemed to be well accepted, and after Augustine the development of monasteries greatly increased. In Augustine the Gnostic tenets were preserved in the medieval church.

Following Augustine, the early medieval development of biblical interpretation came from the monasteries. The 5th through 8th century monks' method of interpretation was dominated by allegorical methods. Cassiodore of the late 5th century is an example. "The commentaries that Cassiodore wrote... show him to be an heir of the allegorical exegetical tradition."²⁶ Cassiodore also became head of a flourishing monastic community. Gregory the Great of the late 6th and early 7th centuries who was strongly influenced by Augustine is another example. "[He] was a master of this approach to the Bible and one of the chief illustrators of the advantage of allegoresis."²⁷ Not only did Gregory promote allegorical interpretation, he also promoted monasticism while advancing superstition and security found in the church; "... the history of monasticism has to take note of his influence on medieval ascetic practice..."²⁸

John Scotus Erigena of the 7th century is an example of philosophical speculation and syncretism. He was an individual thinker with a broad system of belief; "and his influence on the future lay mostly in his having introduced earlier Eastern Theology in the medieval West."²⁹ The 10th century witnessed Remigius who contributed to the renewal of monastic life that was losing authority; along with his allegorical interpretations of Genesis and Psalms. Allegorical interpretation was so accepted during this time period that Isho bar Nun of the 12th century, was considered unique due to his literal historical method of interpretation. Russian theologians also embraced the allegorical method as witnessed in Cyril of Turov and Hilarion of Kiev among others. Also, Ibn Gabirol, a 12th century Jew, "...followed the tradition of Philo in bringing together Judaism and Platonic Philosophy..."³⁰

Yet during the reign of allegorical interpretation, scholasticism questioned and challenged the use of this interpretive method. But despite the challenge, Thomism could not prevail over the scholars' affection for the allegorical method in the religious realm. "In fact, here allegorical readings increased even further and continued to challenge theologians to fight back."³¹

²⁵ Ibid., 436.

²⁶ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought, Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 70.

²⁷ Freedman, "The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol. 3," 437.

²⁸ Gonzalez, "A History of Christian Thought," 71.

²⁹ Ibid., 137.

³⁰ Gonzalez, "A History of Christian Thought," 238.

³¹ Freedman, "The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol. 3," 437.

The blossoming 13th century also resulted in a new form of asceticism; instead of retreating to a monastery, the ascetics remained with the populace in order to teach. This century also witnessed the translation of various philosophical works which opened the door to previous philosophers; leading to greater speculations and syncretism, resulting in the renaissance periods which opened up a greater door to classical philosophy and other numerous works of those outside the church. Syncretism once again was alive and well. The greatest evidence was witnessed in philosophical rationalism which was a response to the previous generations control over knowledge (The Dark Ages).

The three tenets of Gnosticism under discussion were still alive and well heading into the 16th century. The Reformation would change some of that. "... the influence of Antiochene hermeneutics would eventually re-emerge, especially in the Protestant Reformation..."³²

Despite the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church repeated the same error of the Rabbis centuries earlier. Traditions and practices continued to prevail over scripture. The teachings and practices of allegorical interpretation, asceticism and syncretism remain strong to this present day in the Roman church. (This article will now focus mainly on the Reformed movement and its heirs, due to its close connection to modern evangelical Christianity of which this author belongs).

The Reformers brought a new look, but did not eradicate the three tenets under discussion. Gonzalez notes that the Reformed movement following Calvin became stale; "Christian faith is much more vital than the disquisitions of scholastic theologians or the speculations of philosophers... rediscover[y of] the profound personal implications of the Christian faith"³³ was the result. The major reactions were rationalism ultimately leading to liberal theology; and Pietism, ultimately leading to future Christian movements worldwide. But forms of allegory, monasticism and syncretism may be traced throughout these various historical church movements, but they were never to be as strong as in the pre-Reformation Catholic Church.

Allegorical interpretation is the one of the three tenets which remained in Reformed Theology to some extent. Monasticism struggled at times due to its nature of impractical living; although forms of legalism have thrived throughout the modern church, and some would consider legalisms just as destructive as monasticism.

Syncretism of various philosophers and movements found a more welcome home in liberal or contemporary theology. Conservative theology although rejecting human philosophy for the most part still in some sense has relied on human rationalism in the development of Reformed Theology. Reformed theology in the use of allegorical interpretation must in some sense rely on rationalism as a means of interpreting the text. Rationalizing by use of allegory is a way of attempting to make sense of the enigmas found in the Scriptures. An example would be the doctrine of predestination, which led to the idea of double predestination. It rationalizes, if God has selected the saved, He must also have selected the lost. This is a rational approach to scripture!

V. CONCLUSION – REALIZATION

Allegorical interpretation of Scripture; Ascetic practices of lifestyle; and Syncretistic methods of education and theological development, at times intricately interconnected; at times standing alone, were able to survive through church history in one form or another, whether one calls them by these specific names or not. Yet, what does this mean for the twenty-first century Christian?

Allegorical Interpretation: The literalist can accurately declare, "Allegorical interpretation was *not* developed as a proper method of interpretation, but as a means to synthesize two different veins of

³² Freedman, "The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol. 3," 435.

³³ Gonzalez, "A History of Christian Thought," 301.

thought.” History proves that Philo fell into a trap when he placed Platonism on the same level as the scripture. The early church followed this example in its use of allegory, and that method of interpretation is still being used today by Bible scholars, whether called allegorical or metaphorical interpretation.

In the past century or so there are those who have strived to correct this error within the church by recalling and developing the early Antiochene method of interpretation; the *normal or literal, grammatical/historical* method of interpretation. *Normal meaning*: the reading of the word in its normal usage, recognizing figures of speech and symbolism when evident, but not seeking a hidden or mystical meaning of the text through metaphor. Words are taken for their actual meanings whenever, and wherever possible. It does not allow the exegete to manipulate the text to support preconceptions. *Historical meaning*: the exegete believes the original author had a real audience, and the word written to them was for them. The writings were by real people for real people experiencing real life. It recognizes the writer and recipients. What happens when this is not employed? Allegory, or spiritualizing, or the use of metaphors has allowed the church to become Israel in Covenant Theology.

Literalists, in similar fashion as the Antiochene theologians, have labored to consistently use the *normal/literal, grammatical/historical* method of interpretation of the scriptures. This has resulted in the recognition of natural divisions found in the Scriptures, for the most part corresponding with the biblically stated covenants. These distinctive time periods have been labeled dispensations. This method recognizes the uniqueness of Israel, and also the uniqueness of the church. It allows for a nation of Israel, despite their failures. It allows for the church, despite a future Messianic kingdom for Israel, all without confusion. What is Israel’s, remains Israel’s. The Bible is to be interpreted progressively from Genesis to Revelation.

Therefore, literalists recognize six central covenants in the scriptures; the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic and New. These covenants are clearly set forth in scripture, and are recognized as related to dispensations or economies, also distinguishing the conditions of each covenant; e.g. whether the covenants are conditional as the Mosaic; or unconditional as the Abrahamic, Davidic or New Covenant. “Fruchtenbaum wisely states that, “Dispensationalism believes that God made four covenants with Israel which are unconditional and eternal.”³⁴ If so, God will remain faithful, and will fulfill each promise which He has made to the nation of Israel. From the beginning, the Eastern Bible Scholars through Allegorical interpretation quickly excluded Israel. Grenz admits, “...Amillennialists conclude that promises originally given to Israel are fulfilled in the church. As a result of their attempt to apply this principle consistently, Amillennialists in contrast to premillennialists, traditionally are unsympathetic to expectations of a widespread eschatological conversion of Israel.”³⁵ How is this possible? It is through allegorical interpretation. Grenz honestly states, “The chief implication of this principle is the ‘spiritualizing’ [allegory] of many Old Testament prophecies, for such an appeal is in keeping with the New Testament usage of the Old.”³⁶

The simple question comes down to this; is God faithful to fulfill His covenant promises, or does He need His Word spiritualized in order to make sense of the seeming delays in His answers regarding those promises? Ironically, allegorical interpretation has the same results as 2,000 years ago; Israel once again has been completely forgotten by Replacement Theology as witnessed in the 2nd century Epistle of Barnabas.

Ascetic Practice: Legalism or Law keeping (a relation of asceticism) that was prevalent in the pre-Reformation Church has not gone away and is still in the church today. Again, a lack of distinctions between the *conditional* and *unconditional* Covenants; legalism tolerates conditions to be placed on

³⁴ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link In Systematic Theology*, (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1989) 334.

³⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 155.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

mankind's responsibility to God other than a once and for all saving faith experience through the New Covenant sacrifice of the Son of God; which creates a new heart in the sinner via the promises of the New Covenant. It allows for an undo emphasis to be put on man's fleshly efforts whether saved or lost. It also allows for an undo emphasis on cold legalism rather than a personal fellowship with God. Bible students who recognize the covenant distinctions argue that salvation is purely based upon the work of Christ, apart from the efforts of the sinner.

Syncretistic Methods of Theological Development: Syncretism in the pre-Reformation church was very evident, from the embracing of philosophical beliefs to the embracing of pagan practices. Both are quite evident in the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, is there evidence of this today in the non-Roman Churches? As mentioned earlier, Contemporary Theology has put a lot of energy into synchronizing philosophy with the scriptures. This is quite evident in the German theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries, but what about those who claim the 'sola scriptura' of our day? This student believes that their syncretistic weakness is not in embracing the philosophers, but in embracing philosophical rationalism as previously noted. Systematic Theology by the use of rationalism, especially the theological movements resulting from John Calvin's work have in some ways turned the Bible into an encyclopedia, resulting in extreme dogmatism and legalisms; and at times difficult to prove from the plain reading of Scripture. D.A. Carson notes the failure of systematic theology's sterility; "More often they are the atemporal categories of tradition, or the 'relevant' categories of praxis... we have come to an end of this kind of systematic theology."³⁷ Carson believes that Biblical Theology, contrary to Systematic is sensitive to the scripture's literal narrative and formulations while at the same time culturally applicable. By rationalism theologians have become as cold as unbelieving philosophers. If God meant the Scriptures to be in an encyclopedia format that would have been easy for Him to do; but much of the Scripture is in narrative form. The Gospels paint a beautiful picture of our Savior; not One who embraces cold legalisms and dogmas, but One who has come to seek and save the lost sinner by establishing a New Covenant. Calvary is the greatest expression of our God!

Christianity must be honest with its past. Christianity today has carried some of the unneeded baggage of the past into the present. Continual reevaluation and reflection upon biblical truth and practices must be foremost, not the philosophical teachings and doctrines of men; men who with good intentions have enabled unbiblical practices at times to prevail. As Carson notes, "Moreover, Christian thinkers have often mistaken their own tradition for the sum of all truth... If deconstruction helps some to overthrow the hegemony of *mere* traditionalism, let us be thankful."³⁸

Allegorical interpretation, ascetic practices (legalisms) and syncretistic methods are still alive in the church today. Let us note that the Bible was written progressively in a specific order, Genesis through Revelation with specific covenants and promises. We must look to the scriptures alone to teach us how to interpret, how to live holy, and how and what we are to believe. It is this writer's contention, that the three Gnostic tenets reviewed in this article never had this in mind to begin with.

³⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Christianity Confronts Pluralism (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 543.

³⁸ Carson, "The Gagging of God," 101.

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