

early Christians believe? And why did they insist that only these beliefs were orthodox?

#### FAITH AND THEOLOGY

Many modern Christians would rather not discuss the central teachings of Christianity. They are not sure that ideas about religion—or theology—are all that important. "I love flowers," a minister once said, "but I hate botany; I love religion, but I hate theology." This widespread attitude often springs from good reasons. Theology can be dull, or much worse, it can be ruthless. In Christianity, however, the answer to bad theology can never be no theology. It must be good theology. God gave us minds, and he surely expects us to use them in thinking about his truth. Charles Williams, the English writer, was right: "Man was intended to argue with God." That means theology.

*Theology* comes from two Greek words: *theos*, meaning God, and *logos*, meaning word or rational thought. So theology is rational thought about God. It is not identical with religion. Religion is our belief in God and our effort to live by that belief. Theology is the attempt to give a rational explanation of our belief: it is thinking about religion.

When we err in our thinking we call it heresy or bad theology. Heresy is not necessarily bad religion, but like all wrong thinking it may lead to bad religion.

Heretics, in fact, served the church in an unintended way. Their pioneering attempts to state the truth forced the church to shape "good theology"—a rounded, systematic statement of biblical revelation.

Good theology we call *orthodox*—a term that always seems to stir emotions. As William Horden has said, some people hate the thought of being unorthodox. "For them orthodoxy, whether in politics, religion, or table manners, is the first necessity of life. To others, it is the most deplorable state into which a man can fall. It is equivalent to being stale, unoriginal, or just plain dull." In church history, however, orthodox Christianity is something purely denotative—referring simply to the majority opinion. It is that form of Christianity which won the support of the overwhelming majority of Christians and which is expressed by most of the official proclamations or creeds of the church. So catholic Christianity is orthodox.

Church history shows us that Christian theology is not primarily a philosophical system invented by men in the quiet of an academic study.

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### ARGUING ABOUT THE EVENT

MAHATMA GANDHI, the revered leader of India's independence, once said, "I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it were proved by someone that the man Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the Gospels were a figment of the writer's imagination. In the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for me."

Gandhi was a great man. But he was not—and never claimed to be—a Christian. Many people who profess to be Christians, however, approach Christianity just as Gandhi did. They try to separate *what* Jesus said from *who* Jesus was. They want to set aside the doctrine of a supernatural Jesus and exalt his ethical teachings. They find the beliefs of historic Christianity an embarrassment. They prefer to stress Christian behavior.

Early believers considered that move a betrayal of the faith. The gospel, they said, was good news about the Event. So beliefs were basic. Questions of behavior always followed confession of Christ as Lord and Savior. The early churches saw this so clearly that they made belief in who Jesus was a test of true Christianity.

Most Christians came to see that while Christianity had deadly external enemies—as the conflict with emperor worship demonstrated—a subtler and no less critical danger came from within, from the realm of ideas. If the Christian faith could be undermined by "another gospel" then its living power would be lost.

Catholic Christianity was both universal, in contrast to local, and orthodox, in contrast to heretical. We have traced the expansion of the Christian faith throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. And we have discovered why imperial authorities persecuted Christian believers. Now we want to take a closer look at the meaning of *orthodox*. What did the

Doctrines were hammered out by men who were on the work crew of the church. Every plank in the platform of orthodoxy was laid because some heresy had arisen that threatened to change the nature of Christianity and to destroy its central faith.

Since orthodoxy arose from the conflict of the gospel with error, we speak of its development. The idea of development in Christian doctrine may seem strange to those who believe firmly in God's revelation of himself through Christ, given once and for all. But theology, don't forget, is not synonymous with God's revelation itself; rather, theology is the human understanding of revelation and the effort to express it clearly in teaching and preaching. Theology is using our own language and our own way of thinking to explain God's truth. And we know that people belonging to different times and cultures simply think and speak in different ways.

The church of the second and third centuries found this true as it spread to new peoples with different ways of thinking. There were two main cultures, however—the Jewish and the Hellenistic (or Greek). The original disciples were Jews. But many of their early converts, as we have seen, were gentile proselytes of the Jewish synagogues. Thus, two sharply contrasting cultural backgrounds were obvious almost from the start. The two forces, Jewish and Hellenistic, represented two contrasting influences in the thought of the church.

To the Jewish Christian, God was one. He had been the God of the Jew for a long time. When they clearly recognized that he was also the true God of all men, they still accepted him as the personal God they had always known. He was recognized by his personal name, Jehovah or Yahweh. His unity was a personal unity.

To the Greek believers, on the other hand, the unity of God was an abstraction. They reached their ideas about God by philosophical refinement, by the processes of almost mathematical thought. No doubt the Hellenists accepted the personal attributes of God in their surrender to Christianity, but the more abstract, philosophical idea was in their blood. Thus, we can see how history and culture made a difference in the way the two peoples thought and spoke.

Since the first Christians were all Jews, they presented their message about Jesus in terms of the promised Savior of God's people: "Jesus is the Messiah (Christ)." In their preaching to Jews, the apostles emphasized the resurrection of Jesus more than his death because it demonstrated that the man executed as a criminal was nevertheless God's Messiah.

Following guidelines laid down by Jesus himself, the apostles pointed to

Old Testament passages that had been fulfilled in his career and in the beginnings of the church. "This is what was prophesied" was frequently on their lips. In describing Jesus they used Old Testament images. He was the Passover Lamb, the second Adam, the Son of David. He was the stone the builders rejected, but God chose him to be the "cornerstone" in the construction of his church.

#### FALSE GOSPELS

While relying almost completely on the language and concepts of the Jewish Scriptures, the apostles nevertheless drew sharp lines between true and false versions of the Christian message. They condemned rival gospels outright. In Galatians, Paul curses those who add Jewish legal requirements to the gospel. First John establishes this point: Christians must believe that Christ came "in the flesh." And 1 Corinthians fixes belief in the historical resurrection of Jesus as the indispensable basis of salvation.

During the apostolic period, church members encountered the central ruins of the faith in a number of ways. Although at first converts were often baptized in the name of Jesus alone, baptism in the name of the Trinity soon became standard practice. The Gospel of Matthew shows that baptism "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" was practiced in his day (Matt. 28:17-20). By Justin's time, the middle of the second century, converts at Rome were baptized as they answered questions about their belief in "God, the Father and Lord of the universe, Jesus Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and the Holy Spirit who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus."

Scholars have discovered summaries of the teaching of the apostles—1 Corinthians 15:3-4 and Ephesians 4:4-6 are examples—that indicate the first-century Christians formulated their beliefs and had a basis for resisting the errors they encountered.

They also sang their beliefs. From time to time the New Testament quotes one of these hymns. First Timothy 3:16 (NIV) is an example:

He (Christ) appeared in a body,  
was vindicated by the Spirit,  
was seen by angels,  
was preached among the nations,  
was believed on in the world,  
was taken up in glory.

Since the worship of Jesus was central, first-century Christians drew the line of irreconcilable difference through the doctrine of Christ. When we read the fourth Gospel carefully we recognize that the author is fighting on two fronts. One set of readers he has in view are not convinced that Jesus was in the full sense God. To them he points out that the life of Jesus can only be explained by the fact that in Christ the eternal Word of God has become incarnate. Toward the end of his Gospel he explains his purpose in writing: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31, NIV). In other words, he has to persuade some readers of Christ's deity.

John had other readers, however, who had to be persuaded of Christ's full humanity. They evidently thought of Christ as an appearance of God on earth in human form but without actual flesh and blood. Against these John points out how at the crucifixion of Jesus real blood and water flowed from his pierced side. Thus, John fights on two fronts, against those who thought Jesus was a mere man and against those who believed him to be a heavenly ghost.

We know from other sources that both of these "heresies" existed in the first and second centuries. The first position was held by a Jewish-Christian sect known as the Ebionites. They taught that Jesus was a mere man who by his scrupulous obedience to the Law was "justified" and became the Messiah.

The opposite position was called *Docetism*. The word comes from a Greek verb, "to seem." Some bright theologian has suggested we call it *Seemism*. The title comes from their teaching that Christ was not really a man, he was a spectral appearance. He only "seemed" to suffer for man's sins since we all know divine phantoms are incapable of dying.

The Event—God in flesh—has always struck man as religious nonsense. History shows how tirelessly man schemes, searching for some substitute explanation. One of his most popular devices is to lift the story out of time and present it as an "eternal" truth, some mystery of the universe, a myth that explains the way things really are.

#### MEN WHO KNEW

In the early church the most ambitious attempt to reshape the gospel along these "spiritual" lines was Gnosticism. One could hardly call Gnosticism a movement; it lacked a unifying cause. It was more like a variety of

movements, each one offering some way of enlightenment prescribed by a guru, a philosopher who possessed the *gnosis* or knowledge of the way of life. This special knowledge of the spiritual world posed a major threat to apostolic Christianity.

Strong feelings often flared between orthodox Christians and the Gnostics. On one occasion, according to Polycarp, a student of John the disciple, the apostle was entering the baths at Ephesus. Inside he saw Cerinthus, a well-known Gnostic, preparing to bathe. John, presumably garbed in a towel and a sour expression, rushed outside without taking a bath.

"Let's flee," he said, "before the baths fall in. Cerinthus the enemy of the truth is inside."

All the Gnostic schools tended to develop along the same lines. Along with apostolic Christianity they accepted the idea of salvation, the idea of a supreme deity, and the idea of heavenly beings at work in the universe. Such common beliefs help explain why Gnostics lingered around the edges of the church during the second century and why many of them found their way in. In entering, however, Gnostics intended to purify these basic ideas from what they considered the low and crude interpretations that a "materialistic" Christianity had somehow introduced.

The basic belief of the Gnostics was what we call *dualism*, that is, they believed that the world is ultimately divided between two cosmic forces, good and evil. In line with much Greek philosophy, they identified evil with matter. Because of this they regarded any Creator God as wicked. Creation by a deity, they felt, was not so much impossible as it was indecent. Their own Supreme Being was far removed from any such tendency to "evil."

Since the ultimate deity could have no contact with the material world, the Gnostic explained creation by a series of emanations. If we think of God as a kind of sun, these emanations would be sunbeams, extensions of his own nature, yet distinct. These supernatural "powers," however, were capable of producing other inferior "powers" until they had fashioned, as Charles Bigg, the Oxford scholar, once said, "a long chain of divine creatures, each weaker than its parent," and came at last "to one who, while powerful enough to create is silly enough not to see that creation is wrong." This was the God of this world, the God of the Jews.

The exact relationships of the series of emanations differed in the different gnostic schools. But they agreed that somehow the pure light of heaven in the soul of man had become involved in this unpleasant business of matter and had to be redeemed.

The gnostic liked the idea of the good God sending Christ so they thought that the Ultimate Deity sent one of his subordinate "powers" called "Christ" into the world to free men from the chains of matter. Christ, however, could have no real contact with matter so at the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth, or therabouts, the Christ descended into him; then at the arrest of Jesus, or therabouts, it withdrew. What was scourged and slain was not it.

Other gnostics used different arguments to escape from the dilemma of a human Savior. One group insisted that Jesus did not really have a body at all; it was a clever hallucination—the same heavenly ghost idea we saw in Docetism. In any case Gnostics agreed that the "Christ" could not be his man.

Thus we have what a modern Christian must think a striking surprise. The first major rest to faith in the Event was not denial of Jesus Christ's deity; it was rejection of his humanity.

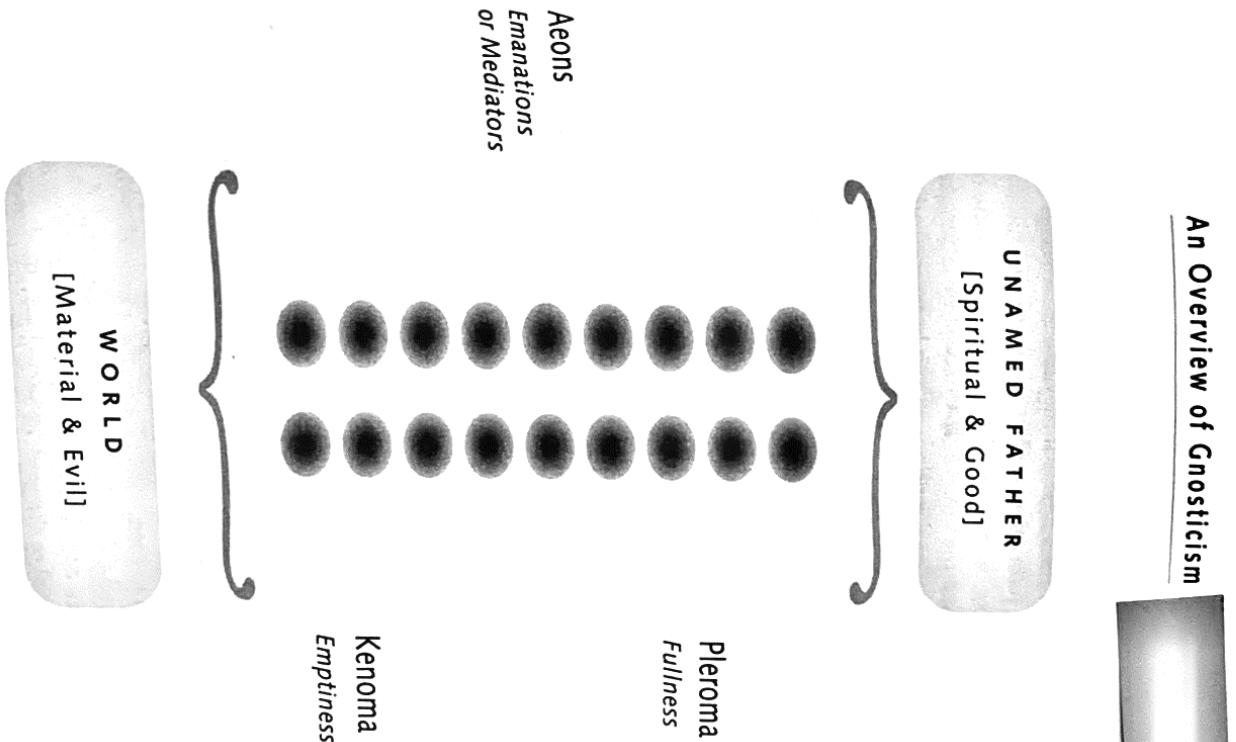
Compared with apostolic Christianity, Gnosticism was full of surprises, not the least of which was a strange doctrine of "predestination"—for lack of a better term. Many gnostics recognized a kind of proletariat and bourgeoisie of heaven. The lower spiritual class lived by faith and the upper class, the illuminated or the perfect, lived by knowledge. Still a third group, the spiritually disadvantaged, were not capable of *gnosis* under any circumstances. Some capricious deity had created them without the capacity to "see" even under the best guru.

THE DANGERS OF KNOWING

Gnosticism holds an important lesson for all Christians who try to disentangle the gospel from its involvement with "barbaric and outmoded" Jewish notions about God and history. It speaks to all who try to raise Christianity from the level of faith to a higher realm of intelligent knowledge and so increase its attractiveness to important people.

In his effort to reconcile Christ and the gospel with the science and philosophy of his day, the gnostic denied the Event and lost the gospel. Just as nineteenth-century defenders of the faith tried to present Jesus Christ in terms of evolution, so the gnostic interpreted the Savior in light of the fascinating ideas of the enlightened men of his day. But the attempt to tie the gospel to the latest theories of men is self-defeating. Nothing is as fleeing in history as the latest theories that flourish among the enlightened, and nothing can be more quickly dismissed by later generations.

An Overview of Gnosticism



AeONS  
Emanations  
or Mediators

Kenoma  
Emptiness

Pleroma  
Fullness

WORLD  
[Material & Evil]

If the gnostics had triumphed, Christians would have surrendered their priceless heritage from Judaism. The robust message of Christianity to all men would have shriveled to a discussion by a chosen few, and Christ would have ceased to be the model human, the second Adam. He would have been lost among the many gods of the mystery religions.

Orthodox Christians found the gnostics very difficult to combat. In arguments they always claimed that they had some secret information denied their opponent. Jesus, they said, had passed on this information to the gnostic teachers of his time and had hidden it from the materially blinded Jews who founded the church. If this line of argument failed, gnostics would appeal to a special revelation from heaven to prove their point.

Yet Christians rose up to cast out the gnostic heresy, and in doing so they clarified their own orthodox convictions. The best summary of early Christian beliefs is what we call The Apostle's Creed, to this day repeated every Sunday in many churches. It was not written by the apostles—in spite of its title—but appeared first as a baptismal confession in second-century Rome. Scholars call the early version of it The Old Roman Creed:

I believe in God Almighty  
 And in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord  
 Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
 Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried  
 And the third day rose from the dead  
 Who ascended into heaven  
 And sits on the right hand of the Father  
 Whence he comes to judge the living and the dead.  
 And in the Holy Ghost  
 The holy church  
 The remission of sins  
 The resurrection of the flesh  
 The life everlasting.

The Creed is obviously built upon belief in the Trinity. Yet it does not strictly speaking, develop the Trinitarian doctrine. It nowhere seeks to explain the three-in-oneness of God. Its central concern is how God relates to the world and to men.

First, the Creed affirms belief in "God Almighty." A later version adds "Maker of heaven and earth." Thus, it repudiates the gnostic idea that the created world is evil or the work of an evil god. This material world is good and worthy to be used and enjoyed by man.

"There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God," is the way C. S. Lewis, the widely read Cambridge professor, put it in his *Mere Christianity*. "God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it."

Next, the Creed affirms belief in "Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord: who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried."

Many a modern man has been stopped by the phrase "born of the Virgin Mary." He cannot believe in the virgin birth. But ironically, to the early gnostics, the problem was not *Virgin*: it was *born*. Modern man sees a red flag because he hears "born of the *Virgin Mary*"; the gnostic saw a red flag because he heard "*born* of the *Virgin Mary*." This phrase, however, together with the ones about crucifixion and burial, was the church's way of underscoring its belief in the complete humanity of Jesus.

In orthodox Christianity redemption came not by some secret knowledge of spiritual realms but by God's action in history. The Son of God entered time, was born of a virgin, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was buried. That is not *gnosis*: that is *Event*.

Finally, the phrase in the Creed, "the resurrection of the flesh," is aimed at the gnostic. It stressed that man is a whole; he is not divided as the gnostic taught, into a good soul and an evil body. The body, said orthodox Christians, is no burden to be discarded. It is God's gift to man for life on earth and for the life to come.

Man needs salvation not because he is imprisoned in a body but because he willfully chooses his own way rather than God's way. Man's evil is not in his body; it is in his affections. He loves the wrong things.

This affliction is so deep, so basic to man's life on earth, that only a special Savior can free him from himself. That is why catholic Christianity insists that Ghandhi and all who agree with him are wrong. Man does not need a teacher. He needs a Savior.

#### *Suggestions for Further Reading*

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.

Johnson, Robert Clyde. *The Meaning of Christ*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958.

Kelly, J. N. D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. New York: Harper, 1978.