

Appendix A

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: PSEUDO-CHRISTIAN CULTS

Religious freedom is one of the greatest blessings of traditional American liberty. A natural consequence of religious freedom, however, is the proliferation of homegrown religious movements, many with questionable underpinnings. It is no wonder, then, that nineteenth- and twentieth-century America gave birth to several pseudo-Christian cults. While there are others, three of the more popular groups are Mormons (all branches), Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists. But cults have existed from the very earliest days of the Christian Church.

Early Cults

For fourteen hundred years, Israel's prophets had foretold a Messiah who would usher in an everlasting kingdom of righteousness, peace and perfect knowledge, "They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine" (Isaiah 29:24 KJV).

So why didn't Jesus' coming to earth resolve all doctrinal problems once and for all? Because He is in fact coming twice—the first time He came as a child, the next time, He will come as the Eternal King. These two events are separated by what Christians often call the Church Age, the age we live in now. Jesus indeed inaugurated His messianic kingdom as our Savior while He was on earth the first time, but this kingdom will not find *ultimate* fulfillment until He returns the second time as Eternal King. In our present Church Age, then, we struggle with what theologian George Eldon Ladd describes as the "already" but "not yet."

The resurrection of Jesus was a completely unexpected event. It means nothing less than that an event belonging to the Age to Come has occurred in history. This again means that the transition from this age to the Age to Come will not occur in a single apocalyptic event at the end of history, but in two events, the first of which has ushered in a new age—the messianic age—while the Age to Come remains future. While the resurrection of the dead remains an event at the last day, in the resurrection of Christ this eschatological event had already begun to be unfolded. The "halfway" point is passed. The early church found itself living in a tension between

realization and expectation—between “already” and “not yet.” The age of fulfillment had come; the day of consummation stands yet in the future.¹

Jesus did clear up much misunderstanding while on earth the first time. And He promised that the Holy Spirit would be with His disciples and remind them of everything He had said to them (John 14:26). We have the proof of that in the four recorded Gospels. But in this present Church Age mankind still has the tendency to misrepresent and distort truth—and to believe and follow such distortions. The time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14) has not fully come—yet. The apostle Paul tells us explicitly that distortions of the gospel even in his own day were imminent.

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. (Acts 20:29–31)

I want to take a quick look at three aberrant groups from these early days of the Christian church, but keep in mind that there have been many others throughout Christian history. It is interesting that two of these groups, the Ebionites and the Marcionites, took exactly opposite positions.

Ebionites. The name *Ebionite* is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “poor.” Hence they were known as “poor men.” The Ebionites were comprised of Jewish Christians who maintained that Christians had to keep the Mosaic law. Early stages of this position are clearly portrayed throughout the book of Acts. The primitive church struggled to understand and accept what God was doing with Gentile believers in Christ. As time went on, however, the Ebionites developed even more extreme positions which distanced them further and further from the rest of the church. They used only one Gospel, that of Matthew. And they completely rejected the writings of the apostle Paul, since he insisted that the Mosaic law was completely abolished by Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Many Ebionites also rejected the virgin birth and divinity of Jesus, teaching that He was the natural child of Mary and Joseph. They held that He became “Christ” only when the Holy Spirit lighted on Him as a dove at His baptism, but that this Christ departed from Him before His crucifixion, since they taught that Christ—the Messiah—could not suffer. While Gentile membership in Christian churches continued to rise, the Ebionites declined, and eventually they faded away

¹ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 332.

altogether. But at their height, they were a considerable problem for the mainstream church.²

Marcionites. A man named Marcion arrived in Rome about AD 140. He was excommunicated in 144 for his erratic teaching. Marcion then created his own religious system that was opposed to and competed with genuine Christianity. In stark contrast to the Ebionites, Marcionites rejected everything Jewish, and were quite successful at gaining converts. As a consequence, they were much more of a threat to the early church. Marcion's primary tenet was that the gospel of Christ was completely a gospel of love, to the absolute exclusion of law. As a result, he rejected the Old Testament completely, claiming that the Old Testament God was a God of law, and could therefore have had nothing to do with the God of Christ. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was contradictory, fickle, capricious, ignorant, despotic and cruel. He felt that the apostle Paul was the only early leader to understand this by correctly repudiating the Jewish law. And so he excluded from his canon all early Christian writers with the exception of edited versions of ten of Paul's letters and an edited version of the gospel of Luke. He had a pretty small Bible! Also in contrast to the Ebionites, Marcion promoted a view of Christ that completely denied His humanity and virgin birth. This view claimed that Jesus only *appeared* to be human—He simply *appeared* in the Capernaum synagogue one day and began preaching His gospel. (Called a "Docetic" view. *Docetic* comes from the Greek word *dokeo*, meaning "to think, seem or appear.") Marcionites were eventually absorbed into other heretical movements, but at their peak they proved a formidable adversary to the early church.³

Gnosticism. "Gnostic" is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." Early forms of Gnostic religion actually preceded Christianity. Certain strands of Gnosticism found a strong affinity with Christianity, and Gnostics soon attached themselves as parasites to early Christian churches. But they were in fact opposed to orthodox Christianity, holding that a special, secret knowledge was required for salvation. The source of this special knowledge was either a secret tradition supposedly handed down by the original apostles, or a direct revelation from God to the particular founder of their sect.

In general, Gnostics taught that certain humans had been born with a seed or "spark" of divinity from God. Salvation, therefore, amounted to awakening from the ignorance of this reality through their secret knowledge and

² Cross, *Dictionary*, pp. 870–871. See also Chadwick, *The Early Church*, pp. 38–40, and Latourette, *History*: vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500*, pp. 120–121.

³ Cross, *Dictionary*, pp. 438–439. See also Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 23, and Latourette, *History*: vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500*, pp. 125–128.

associated rituals. This secret knowledge would then fan their divine spark into flame, with the full realization that they themselves were divine! Christ's purpose in coming to earth, they taught, was to bring this secret knowledge.

Gnostics also taught that this present material world is entirely evil, and that Christ, therefore, could never have had an earthly, physical body. Along with the Marcionites, they were proponents of Docetism, the belief that Christ only *appeared* to be human. Gnostic "Christianity" was an altogether different religious system, merely incorporating Christ and Christian Scriptures as useful props. Early Christian writers referred to Gnostics as heretics. Today we would call them cultists.

History tells us that today's New Age movement really isn't new at all—it is merely warmed over Gnosticism. It perpetuates the divine "spark" concept by their "god in you" teaching. Therefore, you don't *need* God—you *are* God! How different this is from the fallen nature of mankind as portrayed in the Bible!

Gnosticism, as one the most insidious enemies of the early church, helped force the church to clearly define its doctrines and Scriptures, and to put boundaries around both. The Gnostic influence helps us understand the apostle John when he says,

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: *Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. (1 John 4:1–3)

Many deceivers, *who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh*, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. *Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son*. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (2 John 7–11)

It's clear that John was combating an early form of Gnostic Docetism, doesn't it? And as he says in 2 John, those who distort the truth do not have God, but those who continue in the truth have both the Father and the Son. Just as New Age teaching has infiltrated many Christian churches today, Gnostic teaching could be found in many churches of the first and second

centuries. But as the early church became better informed, Gnostics had no choice but to begin meeting separately.⁴

The Early Christian Response: Define Doctrine & Scripture

Heretical sects went largely unchecked by the church in those early days. But eventually the opposing movements forced Christians to define both their doctrine and Scriptures. One of the first church fathers to do so was Irenaeus, who wrote *Against Heresies*, condemning Gnostic teaching and affirming genuine Christian Scripture.⁵ So why did the early church feel a need to come down so hard on those with opposing viewpoints? Because the gospel of Jesus Christ “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). However, when the gospel is distorted through false teaching, it loses its power to save.

The gospel’s integrity must be preserved for it to retain its saving power. The churches of Galatia serve as an example. Paul had founded these churches on the basis of the true gospel of Christ. But while he was away, the gospel was being distorted by false teaching. Paul says that this distorted teaching resulted in the Galatians actually “deserting” Christ and “turning to a *different* gospel—which is really no gospel at all.” He was adamant: “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal. 1:6–8).

The ministry of the apostles was vital because they could be relied on for the accurate gospel of Jesus Christ—the radically new message of forgiveness of sins through faith in His name. Not only had they been eyewitnesses of His ministry, they had also been commissioned by the King as His special emissaries to preach His gospel. Their commission did not come from a legally transmitted authority; Jesus had “cancelled the written code [the law]...he took it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). Rather, it was based on God’s sovereign *grace* whereby He *gifted* them to be special messengers of His new covenant. The fact that they had been eyewitnesses of His ministry would guarantee the accuracy of the message. Jesus assured them of this when He said, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26).

The message of the apostles was the gospel of Christ, transmitted orally at first, beginning at Pentecost. By the end of the first century their testimony had been committed to writing, which resulted in the books of our present New Testament. The church continued to have apostles as long as it had eyewitnesses of Christ. There were a number of other apostles beyond the

⁴ Cross, *Dictionary*, pp. 573–574. See also Chadwick, *The Early Church*, pp. 33–38, and Latourette, *History*: vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500*, pp. 123–125.

⁵ Cross, *Dictionary*, p. 713.

original twelve called by Jesus. We read about Matthias replacing Judas (Acts 1:21–26). In addition there were Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and James the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1:19). However, when all of these eyewitnesses died, so too did the office of apostle; no one left met the criteria. The apostles’ message had been successfully put in writing and transmitted to the next generation of church leaders. So what Paul told Timothy holds true even today, “The holy scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

The Reformation

By the close of the apostolic age, the Roman emperors were conducting severe and repeated persecutions of Christians and Christian churches. But in AD 312, the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity—little though he understood it. By the end of the century, Christianity was the religion of the Roman Empire. Being the favored religion rather than the persecuted one led to a completely different set of challenges. The church grew politically powerful—but increasingly corrupt in practice and doctrine. After many centuries, some people undertook to bring the church back to the truth through the Reformation.

Five slogans summarize the essence of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.⁶

1. *Sola Gratia*, “by grace alone”

Salvation comes by grace only, not through any merit on the part of the sinner. Thus salvation is an unearned gift. This doctrine is a response to the Catholic doctrine of merit.

2. *Sola Fide*, “by faith alone”

Justification (that is, becoming guiltless before God) comes through faith only, not good works, though in the classical Protestant scheme, saving faith will always be accompanied by good works. This doctrine can be summarized with the formula “Faith yields justification and good works” and is contrasted with the Catholic formula “Faith and good works yield justification.” This doctrine is sometimes called the material cause of the Reformation because it was the central doctrinal issue for Martin Luther.

3. *Sola Scriptura*, “by Scripture alone”

The Bible is the only inspired and authoritative Word of God and is accessible to all (that is, perspicuous and self-interpreting). This

⁶ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “The Five Solas,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_solas (accessed May 31, 2006). *Wikipedia* content is licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License.

doctrine is directly opposed to the teaching of the Catholic Church that scripture can only be authentically interpreted through Holy Apostolic Tradition by the Magisterium (that is, the Pope and bishops at church councils). This doctrine is sometimes called the formal cause of the Reformation because it was the underlying cause of disagreement over *sola fide*.

4. *Solus Christus*, “Christ alone”; sometimes *Solo Christo*, “by Christ alone”

Christ is the exclusive mediator between God and man. Neither Mary, the saints, nor priests (other than Christ himself) can act as mediator in bringing salvation. This doctrine is contrasted with the Catholic doctrines of the intercession of saints and of the function of priests.

5. *Soli Deo Gloria*, “Glory to God alone”

All glory is due to God alone, since salvation is accomplished solely through his works—not only the atonement on the Cross by Jesus, but even granting the faith which allows men to be saved by that atonement. The Reformers believed that human beings (such as the Catholic saints and popes) and their organizations (the Church) were not worthy of the glory that was bestowed on them.

The Reformers felt the truths expressed in these slogans were worth dying for—and many men and women were imprisoned and killed in ways we moderns consider barbaric—beheading, burning at the stake, etc.⁷ But these five biblical criteria still stand and can now be used to evaluate the doctrine and teaching of any group holding itself out as “Christian.”

Today

With this long history of error and correction, we should not be surprised that we continue to find cults among us today. Jesus told us that we would have such deceptions right down to the day He returns to earth. Speaking of the signs surrounding His second coming He said,

“False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time” (Matt. 24:24–25).

⁷ For additional reading on the Reformation, see Latourette, *History*: vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present, Reform and Expansion A.D. 1500–A.D. 1750*.

It is necessary for us Christians to be constantly on our guard, discerning truth from error. And so we take our place with the early church leaders and with the Reformers. We take a stand against any gospel that is really no gospel at all.