

# GNOSTICISM

## Introduction

When Jude writes in his Epistle, ‘Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints’ (Jude 3), he expresses a need that has arisen over and over again in the history of the Church. False teachers arise seeking to draw away disciples after themselves, and to subvert that faith. The history of Christian thought and teaching is mirrored by the sinister history of heresy. This is because ‘the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Corinthians 2:14). Heresies come fundamentally from man, and reflect the way that the natural man would *like* God to be, rather than the way God actually is. This is both the source of heresy and the reason for its appeal.

By heresy we mean not merely teaching that departs from the Bible, but teaching that departs from the Bible in such a way as to overthrow the fundamentals of the Faith; teachings that it is impossible for a true Christian to teach. In this way, heresy must be distinguished from error, teaching that is still false, but which can be held by true believers; the evangelical Arminianism of the Wesleys would be an example of error, while Arianism is an example of heresy. Both are wrong, but only the latter, which denies the deity of Christ, is ruinously wrong.

It is a notable fact that almost all of the really major heresies arose in the early centuries of Church history; today they are merely recycled in modified forms and in new combinations. This means that the history of heresy is a profitable study for us, both in helping us to see which errors to avoid, and in helping us to meet challenges that face us today. In this series, therefore, we will consider several of the most important heresies in the history of the Church, primarily from a doctrinal rather than a historical perspective, although history and doctrine cannot be separated.

## The Earliest Heresy

The first heresy to face the Church was that of the Judaizers, who taught that ‘Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved’

(Acts 15:1). This was the challenge faced by the Church in the Book of Acts, and is dealt with extensively in the New Testament, especially in the Epistle to the Galatians and the Epistle to the Hebrews. By making the entire Ceremonial Law of the Old Testament necessary to salvation, the Judaizers subverted the finished work of Christ, so that Paul wrote, ‘Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing’ (Galatians 5:2). And we should not imagine that this heresy merely belonged to the time of the early Church; not only does it have a counterpart in the teachings of the Church of Rome, but the Seventh-Day Adventists have many affinities with it, and in some offshoots of the modern Messianic Jewish movement, particularly those who go under the umbrella label of the ‘Hebrew Roots Movement’, fall squarely within the Judaizing camp.

### **Gnosticism**

Gnosticism may be said to have been the second great heresy faced by the Church. The name comes from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning ‘knowledge’, and states the distinguishing tenet of Gnosticism; salvation is for the Gnostic primarily a matter of acquiring and using secret knowledge. Not only has Gnosticism influenced a number of cults and false teachers in the recent past, but a modern form of full-blown Gnosticism is being actively promoted, not least by the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*. During the period of Dan Brown’s novel’s popularity, it was almost impossible to ride on a train in the UK without seeing someone reading it, and although the film of the book did not perform as well as the book itself, its opening sold out at some locations.

The so-called Gnostic gospels, such as *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Judas*, have been touted by some as authentic sources that correct the Canonical Gospels, and in all a great deal of excitement has been generated by Gnosticism in the world, to the point where there are those who are claiming that the Gnostics were the true Christians. For all these reasons, it is helpful for thoughtful Christians to know what Gnosticism was.

### **Definition**

Defining Gnosticism is not an easy business, because for all that Dan Brown suggests, in fact Gnosticism is an umbrella term, rather like ‘Anabaptist’ in the era of the Reformation, which covers a multitude of sects holding to a variety of teachings, often contradictory to each other. There never was a single ‘Gnostic movement’, instead there were groups known by such names

as Sethites, Valentinians, Carpocratians, Cainites and so on and so forth. Nevertheless, there are three basic teachings that all Gnostics held to, and which therefore form a useful working definition of Gnosticism.

### *God*

The first of these is the teaching that God is transcendent but not immanent; in other words that the true God is so unlike man, so different from us, that he cannot be known by us, and that he cannot be involved with the creation. Of course it is quite true that God *is* transcendent; he is not a part of the creation, nor is he confused with the creation, but is separate from it. At the same time, he is *also* immanent; he is present in, and at work in, creation. The error of the Gnostic in this is not in what he affirms, but in what he denies. Almost all heresies are founded in a distortion of truth, where a *part* of the truth is taken as if it were the whole.

It may surprise readers to learn that the Islamic idea of the nature of Allah was almost certainly derived from Muhammad's interactions with Gnostics on desert caravans; Islam does not believe that man can know Allah, and indeed the Muslim view of heaven is surprising to a Christian in that the vision of God is completely absent from it. While there is a great deal of evidence that Muhammad had contact with heretical groups, including Gnostics, there is none to speak of that suggests that he knew anything worth mentioning of true Christianity.

The various Gnostic groups all agreed that the true God is not directly involved in the creation, but that he interacts with men by means of angelic intermediaries *alone*. These intermediaries, known as *Aeons*, were regarded as proceeding from God, and Christ was regarded by the Gnostics as one of these Aeons. On the other hand there were the evil *Archons*, the spiritual rulers that some Gnostic teachers spun complex tales about, such as *The Hypostasis of the Archons*.

### *Dualism*

Influenced by various popular philosophies, the various Gnostic groups taught a matter-spirit dualism, in which matter was regarded as evil and spirit as good. It followed from this that the good God could not have created a material universe, but that the material universe must be the work of some other being, lower than God. This being was called a *Demiurge*, and depending on the Gnostic group, was regarded as either malevolent or merely

stupid. Many Gnostic groups regarded the God of the Old Testament as this Demiurge, because of his interest in the creation. Certainly, they reasoned, he could not be the true God. In some versions of Gnosticism, the Demiurge rose to the status of a malevolent lesser 'second god', who set himself against the true God. These versions of Gnosticism could very easily come to see the Old Testament as not merely irrelevant and false, but outright wrong, and the Cainite Gnostics taught that the 'villains' of the Old Testament, such as Cain and the Sodomites, were in fact the true heroes, turning the Old Testament narratives on their heads.

Gnostics believed that human spirits were in some sense fragments of the divine, though what that meant, and whether all people or only some possessed such spiritual fragments were points on which they disagreed. Some taught that there were two or three types of men, and that (of course!) the Gnostic was of the highest type, which is why he or she responded to the Gnostic teaching.

Matter itself, to the Gnostic, was necessarily and intrinsically evil, it was a bad thing and the source of all evil. Thus the material universe itself was a bad thing, and the Gnostic sought release from it. The idea of death as a 'release' from a bodily prison, leading to an eternal spiritual existence is really a Gnostic view, not a Christian one.

From this affirmation of the intrinsic evilness of matter, it also followed that the Incarnation could not possibly have happened; God, or even a good spiritual being, could not have truly taken to himself humanity. How the Gnostics denied the Incarnation varied between the groups; some affirmed a form of Adoptianism, others taught what is known as *Docetism*.

Adoptianism is the teaching that the man Jesus was 'adopted' by God as his Son; that he was not born the Son of God, but became so. In the Gnostic version, which can be found in the so-called *Gospel of Judas* as well as other Gnostic writings, the Christ-Aeon came upon the man Jesus at his Baptism in Jordan, and left him before the Cross, so that it was basically a discarded tool that was crucified. Some Gnostics taught that the man Jesus was the Demiurge's Messiah, but was 'hijacked' by the Christ-Aeon, who then engineered his destruction to thwart the Demiurge's plan.

The more common Gnostic view of the 'incarnation' is that known as *Docetism*, from the Greek *Dokein*, to appear to be. This is, in brief, the idea

that Christ's physical being was nothing but an illusion, like a hologram in a modern science-fiction TV series. Indeed, reading the Gnostic writings, science-fiction is the parallel that most often comes to mind, and not just because one episode of the original *Star Trek* was entitled 'The Return of the Archons'! Gnostics would tell a story in which Jesus and one of the disciples would be walking along a sea shore, and the disciple would look back and find that Jesus left no footprints – because he had no body! In a Docetic Christology, there is obviously no place for a real Crucifixion at all, and so the Docetic teachers said that Jesus was not in fact crucified, but it was made to appear that he was – the very idea that is found in the Muslim Qur'an! What is more, the common Muslim understanding that Jesus was taken out of the place where he was arrested and that someone, perhaps Judas, was made to look like Jesus and crucified in his place, comes straight out of the Gnostic writings. Though Islam is definitely *not* Gnostic, it owes a debt to the Gnostics that can be well documented.

### *Salvation by Knowledge*

The chief identifying characteristic of Gnosticism is, as the name itself suggests, the idea that salvation is primarily a matter of acquiring esoteric knowledge, a form of 'enlightenment.' This *Gnosis* consisted in knowing both the true nature of the universe, and the truth of the Gnostic's real identity. Those Gnostics who believed that only some people possessed true divine spirits believed, of course, that this 'fact' was part of the saving *Gnosis*. The Gnostic was thus part of a spiritual elite, superior to all other men. If sin is actually the defilement of matter, it follows that salvation is the realisation that the true 'I' is the pure spirit, and not the defiled body.

## **THE APPEAL OF GNOSTICISM**

Gnosticism appealed, and still appeals, to people for a variety of reasons. Though never a large movement, it had an influence above its size, and has revived over and over again in Christian history in a bewildering variety of forms.

### *Sin and the Body*

One part of Gnosticism that appeals to people is that it reduces sin to a necessary function of the material body, which is in any case 'not the real me'. It provides a convenient way to escape the reality and the guilt of sin by saying, 'well, of course I can't help it, but you know, it's not really me that

sins.’ While some Gnostics were ascetics, living on vegetarian diets and mistreating their bodies, while abstaining from marriage and forbidding their followers to marry, but others, principally the Carpocratians, taught that the body should be indulged, and that indulging the body does not in any way affect the pure spirit within. Ascetic Gnostic sects commonly taught that the asceticism was only for an elite within the sect.

### *Escape*

Related to this element of the appeal of Gnosticism is that it forms a means of escape from the world. This world, it tells its adherents, is a mistake; it ought not to be. I should not be in this world, the Gnostic says, and the real me is a fragment of divinity. The Gnostic sees escape from the body to a purely spiritual existence as the true goal of life. In the light of this, the statement often made (at times even by Christians!) that the body that is laid in the ground is ‘not the real person’ is seen as not in fact Christian, but closer to Gnosticism in that it regards the body as not ‘the real person’. The Christian must affirm that the body is *part* of the real person, though there is another, spiritual part, that is in death separated from the body, with which it shall be for ever reunited at the resurrection of the dead.

### *Elitism*

By assuring its adherents that they are specially enlightened people, Gnosticism panders to human pride. The appeal of being part of an elite must not be underestimated; from cliques at school to societies like the Freemasons, people love to have on up on those around them, and to be ‘in’ on something that others are outside of. Gnosticism, with its teaching of salvation by secret knowledge, appealed to the same desires as the ancient mystery cults and modern flying-saucer cults. The Gnostic could look down his nose at mere ordinary Christians around him and think, ‘if you only knew what I knew.’ Like a modern schoolboy who has convinced himself that he has super-powers, he says to himself, ‘I am not as other men are, I know that the real me is *in my essence* different from the common lot of men about me.’ Like the schoolboy, he is deluding himself.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF GNOSTICISM**

### *The New Testament*

While the full-blown Gnostic sects with their mind-boggling cosmologies

and lists of Aeons and Archons did not develop until after the New Testament was completed, what has been called a 'Proto-Gnosticism' can be easily identified as an antagonist in several New Testament Epistles. I John is clearly written against something that can only be an early form of Gnostic teaching, and the Colossian Heresy appears to be another form of the same teaching. Both II Peter and Jude, which share many similarities, are addressing the same Proto-Gnostic teachings, and some expositors have even found in John's Gospel polemic against Gnostic-type heresy.

### *Outside the New Testament*

Tradition (which must always be treated with a certain amount of care) claims for Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24) the dubious honour of having been the first Gnostic leader, and names his successor Menander. Whatever may be the truth behind this tradition, it obscures the fact that Gnosticism is an umbrella label, and that ideas that became lumped together under the Gnostic label almost certainly arose in various places through the speculations of a variety of unstable men. Two of these men, active in the early part of the second century, were a Syrian named Saturnilus, and an Egyptian named Basilides. Combining the philosophical speculation of the Greeks and the luxuriant imagination of the East, these men wove imaginative and often bewildering myths around their complex speculations of aeons and archons.

Valentinus, active in Rome slightly later, during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-61), was more restrained in his imagination, in part no doubt because of the different setting in which he operated, but also more systematic in his thought. He was perhaps the 'classic' Gnostic, teaching that the Demiurge was not evil, but a mere blunderer, created by an erring aeon. Valentinus taught that salvation was a matter of enlightenment, and that the Christ-Aeon had come in the appearance of a body to show that way of enlightenment.

The great opponent of Valentinus was Irenaeus of Lyons, perhaps the first of the great Christian theologians. Despite being a bishop in Gaul, Irenaeus was in fact Greek. Appointed to his see in the wake of persecution in 177, he soon found Gnostic teachers causing trouble in the churches, and set himself to answer and expose their false teachings. The result was a book now known as *Against Heresies*. Written between 180 and 189 AD, it is a *tour de force* of orthodox writing, and secured its author a well-deserved place as a theologian

and defender of the faith.

### *Marcion*

The other great Gnostic teacher was Marcion, born in about 85 AD in Sinope, in Asia Minor. He was the son of a Bishop, and himself a rich merchant. In about 139 AD he came to the city of Rome. With his wealth and connections, he was initially welcomed by the Church in the city, but soon began to show signs of heresy. Though not a full-blown Gnostic, Marcion's teaching showed many of the characteristics of Gnosticism, such as the idea that the supreme God is unknowable, a dualism between matter and spirit, a succession of intermediate entities between God and man, salvation by esoteric knowledge, and locating evil in matter. To Marcion, the Demiurge was a malevolent 'second god', and that Demiurge was the God of the Old Testament. As a result of this teaching, Marcion rejected the whole of the Old Testament, and created for himself and his followers a drastically pruned version of the New Testament consisting of an edited version of Luke's Gospel and edited versions of Paul's Epistles. Notably, Marcion began his 'Gospel' at Luke 3, a sign that he denied the Incarnation. We may regard Marcion as the father of the 'higher critics'; proceeding from his theories as to what the original teaching of the New Testament must have been, he then edited the documents to fit and proclaimed that he had recovered the 'original form' when he had in fact merely done to them what Procrustes did to his guests, fitted them to his own bed.

Marcion was opposed by the great mind of the Latin Church, Tertullian of Carthage, who also wrote against the Valentinians. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and the other Apologists, ensured that the Gnostic twisting of the Scriptures was seen for what it was, and while Gnosticism survived well into the fourth century and beyond, it never thrived, and eventually withered away, apart from a few obscure groups in equally obscure areas of the Middle East.

### *Later Gnosticism*

Although the early 'Christian' Gnosticism withered away, it represents a type of speculation that appeals to certain people, and so similar groups have sprung up over and over again in Christian history. In the middle ages. The Paulicians arose in the East in the 7th century, the Bogomils in Bulgaria in the 10th century, and the Cathars in France in the 12th century, all espousing dualism and teaching a salvation by esoteric knowledge. In the ferment of the



Reformation, certain wild spirits among that varied group known variously as the Anabaptists or the Radical Reformation revived Gnostic-type teachings. Baron Swedenborg, in the 18th century, was as Gnostic a teacher as could be imagined. In the 19th century, Mary Baker Eddy's 'Christian Science' movement was only the most prominent of a number of so-called 'Mind Science' sects, which also include the Unity School of Christianity, many of which survive to this day. And of course there are modern Gnostic sects that take advantage of the internet to spread their teachings.

## THE GNOSTIC GOSPELS

The Gnostics were a movement founded on esoteric teaching, and so they produced a voluminous literature. Much of it has, like that of other ancient writers, including many of the Church Fathers, perished, but some has survived to the present day, and it is this literature which is the basis of modern interest in the Gnostics and their teachings. Most people in the West today have heard of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Judas* made headlines all over the world when it was published by the American National Geographical Society. But while most people have heard of this literature, it is equally true that most people have never read a word of it. Given that books like *The Da Vinci Code* have been consistently presenting these Gnostic texts as not only equivalent to the New Testament Gospels, but as having actually been rival contenders for a place in the Bible, this is all the more unfortunate, for as long as the content of these texts is unknown, people can make all sorts of outlandish claims about them without fear of contradiction. It is therefore all the more necessary that we take a brief amount of space to consider the actual nature of these documents.

To the average reader, the term 'gospel' suggests a narrative of the ministry of Christ, but this is emphatically *not* what the so-called Gnostic gospels are. As might be expected of a movement that emphasised esoteric knowledge, they are in fact great tractates of teaching, often presented as dialogue between Christ and a disciple, or as collections of the sayings of Jesus. Since Gnosticism is primarily about secret knowledge and not the saving work of God in history, the Gnostic gospels minimise historical content, and maximise didactic content.

The best known of these is the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, which purports to be 'the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas

Thomas wrote down.’ Probably composed in Syria in the second century, *Thomas* contains some material culled from the Canonical Gospels, and some truly bizarre sayings, such as saying 7, ‘Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man.’ Perhaps the last saying, number 114, is the most bizarre of all, and shows how surprising it is that modern Gnostics try to paint Gnosticism as feminist, ‘Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”’

*The Gospel of Philip*, a Valentinian document, contains many bizarre statements, such as, ‘God is a man-eater. For this reason, men are sacrificed to him. Before men were sacrificed animals were being sacrificed, since those to whom they were being sacrificed were not gods.’ *The Gospel of the Egyptians* illustrates the luxuriant mythology of the Egyptian Gnostics, when it begins, ‘The holy book of the Egyptians about the great invisible Spirit, the Father, whose name cannot be uttered, he who came forth from the heights of the perfection, the light of the light of the aeons of light,’ and goes on to speak of the origins of ‘Domedon Doxamenon’, of the ‘Thrice-Male Child’, of the ‘Ogdoads’, and the ‘Hidden, invisible mystery’ of the repeated vowels; of Aion and Yoel, and of a multitude of aeons with increasingly odd names.

In *The Gospel of Mary*, there is given a strange and mythological account of the ascent of the soul through the powers which it must know the right words to pass, and the Christian reader finds himself agreeing with Andrew in book when he says to Mary, ‘I at least do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.’ Which is no doubt the point, as Peter and Andrew in this book are no doubt representing the orthodox churches who did not receive the teachings of the Gnostics.

*The Gospel of Judas* is of relatively recent rediscovery, having been found in the 1970s, but only made public in 2006. Although its content has only recently become known, it is mentioned in early Church writings, and so its rediscovery should, in all common sense, be merely of interest to scholars of Church history. But the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* ensured that any newly discovered Gnostic gospel would be news, and so it proved. Despite

the hype, the book is as valueless as a source for anything other than the beliefs of the sect that produced it. Its references to ‘the immortal Aeon of Barbelo,’ and to Christians worshipping in large buildings with altars and priests, indicate both a developed Gnostic cosmology, and a form of Church life that came into being in the third and fourth centuries.

It will be seen from this necessarily brief survey that the Gnostic literature is nothing like the New Testament Canonical Gospels, and to regard them as ever having been contenders is to engage in historical revisionism of the most baseless sort. Not only does the content of these works differ markedly from that of the Canonical Gospels, but there is no evidence from antiquity that they were ever regarded by anyone as equal to those documents. Far from providing exciting and alternative historical accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, they can be seen on their faces to be later works presenting the teachings of small sects with no meaningful connection to the historical Jesus.

## THE BIBLE AGAINST THE GNOSTICS

Gnosticism directly contradicts the Bible; this is of course not a claim that anyone who knew anything about Gnosticism and the Bible would deny, but it is important for us to present the contrast. Not only did the Gnostics reject the Old Testament *en toto*, but they also stood against the teaching of the New Testament, since there is a radical *continuity* between the two Testaments.

### *Creation*

Where the Gnostics denied a divine creation, the Bible begins by boldly affirming that, ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.’ The New Testament, far from repudiating this, affirms it in John 1:1-3, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.’ Colossians 1:16 emphasises that *all things* were made through Christ. Both Paul (Romans 1:25) and Peter (1 Peter 4:19) affirm that God is the *Creator*. And the Christian hope is not a disembodied existence, but the resurrection of the body (John 6:38-40; John 11:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), and a new heavens and earth (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

## ***God: Transcendent and Immanent***

Where the Gnostics taught a purely transcendent God, who has nothing to do with this world, The Bible everywhere teaches a God who is *both* transcendent *and* immanent. ‘Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord’ (Jeremiah 23:23-24). The implication of the text is that God is *both* near at hand *and* far off. The Psalmist reflects in Psalm 139:7, ‘Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?’ There is no-where that God is not! ‘He that hath seen me hath seen the Father,’ Jesus says. David Christie-Murray comments that in saying so, Christ was ‘bringing God into the room where he was speaking,’ while, ‘the Gnostics put him beyond the galaxies’ (*A History of Heresy* [Oxford, OUP, 1989] P. 32).

## ***The Incarnation***

The Bible is quite clear that in Jesus we have a real, and not merely a seeming, Incarnation: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,’ says John (John 1:14). Note that word *flesh*; he does not say ‘a man’, or ‘humanity’, but flesh, so that no way can be found around the text. Again, in Romans 9:5, Paul speaks of the Jewish people, ‘of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever.’ Once again, it is emphasised that Christ came ‘concerning the flesh.’

## ***A man there is, a real man***

Says Hart, laying the emphasis on this wonderful truth of the Incarnation, that Jesus is ‘God with us.’

Far from presenting, as Dan Brown claims in *The Da Vinci Code*, a human Jesus, the Gnostic gospels present one who is not truly human, while it is the Canonical Gospels that present a Jesus who is weary (John 4:6), who is born, who grows up (Luke 2:52), who is hungry, and thirsty (John 4:7), and who weeps (John 11:35), and of course who dies. It is this Man who is also God who is our ‘Great High Priest’, sharing our nature for ever. In I John 4:2 and 2 John 7, the great test of orthodoxy is the confession that Christ has ‘come in the flesh.’ To affirm this is to be of God, to deny it is to be of the spirit of antichrist.

## *Salvation*

The Gnostic Jesus is an enlightener, who comes with secret knowledge to impart to the Spiritual. But in the Bible we are told that, 'For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45), 'For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh' (Romans 8:3). Peter writes of Jesus, 'Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed' (1 Peter 2:24). Not in a secret room with a chosen disciple is the great saving work done, but openly, on a cross outside of Jerusalem.

*Where God, the mighty maker, died  
For man, the creature's sin.*

-Isaac Watts

## **CONCLUSION**

Theology is of vital importance. What we believe affects how we live, and it affects our eternal destinies. Since God is, then what we believe about him is of supreme importance. Gnosticism illustrates for us how far astray sinful man may go when he wanders from the Bible into myths of his own making. It reminds us of three vitally important truths; firstly the truth of God the creator, that indeed God made all things; secondly, the truth of the Incarnation, that the eternal Son of God took to himself true humanity, not simply a phantom appearance of humanity, and that he is the God-Man for ever now; and thirdly the truth of the cross, that there on Calvary, the Son of God died for the sins of his people.

*O wondrous love! To bleed and die,  
To bear the cross and shame,  
That guilty sinners, such as I,  
Might plead Thy gracious name!*

(John Newton)

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