

Editor's note: We are going to give two parts of this four-part series, together because of an impending report from the Mission fields in Ghana that will be received upon the brethren's return from there on or about the 7th of January 2005, and will be the essence of our February report. For the time being we can only say they report ministering to a crowd of approximately 800, with 29 making a stand for the Lord at the time of ALTAR CALL!! PRAISE GOD!!

PART ONE

EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTISM

- THE GREAT HERESY

By Alan Knight

In the series that begins with this article, we will be examining surprising results from the latest historical research into Gnostic Christianity. Many readers will recognize the label Gnostic Christianity as the designation of a heretical Christian movement mentioned prominently in the New Testament, especially the epistle of John. Gnostic Christians were the first to teach many heresies that persist to this day, including eternal security (once saved always saved), predestination, and many more.

Why is this important? Included among these Gnostic teachings are doctrines that are being introduced into the Churches of God today, under the guise of Evangelical Protestantism.

What is the connection between ancient Gnosticism and Protestantism? Some of the most significant advances in Gnostic research have come from a more detailed understanding of how apostasy entered the apostolic church. In the first edition of my book, *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*, we presented compelling evidence that Gnostic Christianity was the main culprit in starting the downfall of the first-century church. That is essentially true. However, now we possess much more detailed information on exactly how it happened.

In fact, Gnostic Christianity was only the first of two waves involved in the downfall of the apostolic church. Gnosticism arose inside the church in the first century, but soon most Gnostic Christians left to form their own independent churches.

The second wave of apostasy was Roman Christianity. After the Gnostics left, Rome gradually took over leadership of the church. This culminated in a political alliance with the Roman emperors early in the fourth century, at which time the downfall of the apostolic era of the church was essentially complete.

Why is it important to distinguish between two separate waves of apostasy? Roman apostasy mixed biblical truth with Greek religion, just like Gnosticism, but it followed a different path of development, producing somewhat different results. What is important is that these original two waves of apostasy, and their similar but distinct heretical theologies, correspond to Protestantism and Catholicism, the two primary movements in modern Christianity today.

Soon after the first century, the Christian landscape began to look surprisingly like today, divided between numerous protesting Gnostic sects, and a monolithic, authoritarian Roman church. These two heretical Christian movements intensely fought and competed with each other. Virtually the entire world of Christianity was drawn into the contest. For any individual of that time desiring to be a Christian, it would be easy to think it was a question of deciding which of these two movements the true path is.

Once again, the importance of this is in its application to today. In like manner, today one of the easiest paths of deception is to think that finding true Christianity means choosing between these same two great Christian traditions.

This is one of the great issues facing Sabbatarian Christianity today. Are Sabbatarian's Protestant? Is Protestantism the true Christian heritage to which we should look?

Protestant-Gnostic Connection

It has long been obvious that Gnostic Christianity is strikingly more similar to Protestantism than Catholicism. Gnosticism emphasized individual liberty, rejection of law and personal guidance by the Spirit, compared to the authoritarianism of the Roman church. Some have suggested that Protestantism must have developed out of Gnosticism. But try as we might, we could find no compelling evidence of a direct historical connection between Gnosticism and the Protestant Reformation. Most Gnostic sects had died out by the sixth century, a thousand years before the Reformation. Then suddenly we realized it was staring us in the face all along. We just didn't recognize it for what it was.

Scholars have long known about the historical connection between Gnosticism and Protestantism. It's one of those things that rarely get talked about outside of scholarly circles. But there it was. There were historical events, well documented, through which Gnostic theology was reworked and handed down from Gnostic Christianity in the early centuries after Christ, to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Some of the new evidence is surprising. Gnostic Christians first preached the founding doctrines of the Protestant

Reformation, more than a thousand years before the Reformation. But now, in addition, we have substantial, solid evidence that the heresies of Gnostic Christianity, so roundly condemned in the New Testament, are the ultimate source from which the major Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin developed their theology.

Evangelicalism and Antichrist

This new evidence in turn has led to a more accurate understanding of New Testament prophecy about the end time. Take, for example, the significance of antichrist for the end time. There are indications that prophecies of antichrist are fulfilled in part by a single individual. However, the apostle John in his first epistle says there is not just one antichrist, but rather "many antichrists have come" (1 John 2:18). Later he talks about the "spirit of antichrist," and says that in his time, in the first century, "it is already in the world" (1 John 4:3, NRSV translation).

The problem is that John's epistles are talking about Gnostic Christianity. Virtually all scholars recognize that John was referring to the Gnostic doctrine of Docetism in the many passages where he talks about heretics who say that Jesus did not come in the flesh (for example 1 John 4:3 and 2 John 7). This was a Gnostic teaching that Christ is a spirit that combined with a human man, Jesus, and that the spirit of Christ did not totally control Jesus. Therefore, they reasoned, you cannot fully trust Jesus' earthly ministry. Instead, Christians should selectively examine the gospel accounts of Jesus, and pick out only those individual parts they judged to be spiritual.

This was the first century, and Roman Christian apostasy had not yet appeared on the scene. Therefore if John says there already were many "antichrists, and he identifies Gnostic Christianity as already promoting the spirit of antichrist in the first century, then apparently antichrist cannot be solely a Catholic phenomenon as many mistakenly believe.

In fact, if Gnostic Christians were the first to promote antichrist theology, and Protestantism is a latter day manifestation of Gnostic theology, then shouldn't we expect to find the "spirit of antichrist" in Protestant theology as well? Indeed, our latest research demonstrates that Evangelical Protestantism, the largest, and most respected, conservative branch of American Protestantism today, is one of the primary manifestations today of what the apostle John calls the spirit of antichrist. This will be fully explained in a later article in this series.

Why is that important? It truly is very important, because Evangelical Protestantism is behind most of the crisis in Sabbatarian Christianity today. Evangelical theology played a central role in the rejection of Sabbatarian Christianity by the World Wide Church of God. And its role in subverting the true church continues. Many Sabbatarian churches today praise and honour evangelicalism. The Church of God Seventh-Day openly advertises itself as an evangelical institution.

In this series of articles we will be laying out the evidence for the terrible heresies, including the Protestant spirit of antichrist, which is behind evangelicalism. This is a topic that needs a fair and full airing, as we today indeed are on the brink of crisis and chaos, which, I believe, relates primarily to evangelical Protestantism and its Gnostic inspired heretical theology.

Gnostic Origins

It is surprising how many concepts and doctrines in Protestant theology today mirror ancient Gnosticism, in addition to eternal security and predestination. Space limitations prevent a full review in this first article, but here is one interesting example.

Many are turned off by the concept of eternal security (once saved always saved) because it seems so unfair. Anyone who wants to can exploit it to indulge in any sin and still be saved. Protestant theologians counter by emphasizing that Christians will be punished for disobedience. You will still be saved, they say, but at least your reward in heaven will be reduced.

Today some Protestant theologians take that to the point of arguing there are two tracks to salvation. Those who follow good conduct will be rewarded in heaven by being allowed into the presence of Christ and the Father. Those who habitually engage in evil conduct and never repent, supposedly will still be saved and go to heaven, but they will never be allowed to personally meet or see Jesus and the Father.

Some point to Revelation 3:21 as proof - "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne..." That, they claim, does not mean we have to overcome to be saved, only that the better Christians who do overcome sin will be given the special privilege of being in Jesus' presence in heaven, at his throne.

This is the same idea originally preached in various forms by Gnostic Christianity in the early centuries after Christ. Valentinian Gnostics, for example, taught that there are two classes of Christians. They considered themselves the better class, more spiritual and more able to resist sin. They worshipped on Sunday, which they called the Eighth Day, and considered it a more spiritual practice. Therefore at death they believed they rise to the eighth level of heaven. Here they are married to Christ and ultimately enter into the presence of the Father.

Valentinian Gnostics considered orthodox Christians the more inferior class. Supposedly they are more troubled by sin, which is why they need rules and regulations to help them be good. Orthodox Christians also worshipped on the

seventh day, so at death these inferior Christians rise only to the seventh level of heaven. There they spend eternity with Yahweh, the God of the Jews. Thus these supposedly inferior Christians are punished by never directly experiencing the presence of Christ and the Father.

Protestant Legalism

In just a few centuries Protestant theology, which began as an attempt to solve the legalism of medieval Roman Christianity, has come full circle. In the end, Protestant salvation today is just as legalistic! How can that be?

In the second edition of *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*, we examine how Charles Stanley, one of the best known evangelical preachers today, explains Christian salvation as a legal technicality. It is the legalistic nature of salvation, he claims, that allows Christians to commit any sin, even wilfully, and not lose salvation.

Stanley's argument is that Jesus's sacrifice provides "forensic" forgiveness from sin. The term forensic means "judicial" or "legal." In other words, when God forgives us he wipes the slate clean, declaring us legally "not guilty." That is a true Christian doctrine. But how evangelical Protestantism applies that is surprising, to say the least.

Stanley compares salvation to a marriage contract. If we are legally married, he says, we remain in a legally married state even if we leave our mate. Even if we move in with someone else, we are still legally married until a court legally dissolves the marriage. His point is that our marital state is determined legally, whether or not we continue to act as though we are married to our mate.

In the same fashion, he says, we are legally saved at the moment we accept Jesus. The legal state of salvation has nothing to do with whether we ever act like a saved Christian. As Stanley puts it "...we do not become saved by acting saved. Neither do we become unsaved by acting unsaved."

This new, evangelical Protestant legalism is like two prisoners standing before a judge. Consider this scenario: Both prisoners have been found guilty of murder. The judge lectures on the horrifying evil of murder and then, sentences the first man to eternal torture in hell.

The judge begins to lecture the second man. But this one has a lawyer who raises an objection on technical grounds. This man, the lawyer points out, came forward in church at the age of six and gave his heart to the Lord. He never actually repented, and has wallowed in sin ever since. He is now a convicted serial rapist and murderer. He stands before the court smirking and still has not repented. But the law is the law this man is "legally" saved.

"Oh says the judge, "in that case I can't touch you. Enter into the bliss of heaven."

Protestant theology is full of the strangest contradictions, much of which perpetuates the same theology first preached by Gnosticism in the early centuries after Christ. Is it just me? Am I missing something? Or is Protestantism in its own way just as legalistic and filled with error as its Roman cousin?

In the next instalment of our series, we will examine the founding concepts of Protestantism and how they led to such radical conclusions. Protestant teachers commonly claim the foundation of their religion is justification by faith rather than works. If that were true, then I think we might be justified in calling ourselves Protestant. Unfortunately, there is much more to it. What really was involved is both surprising and shocking. You don't want to miss the next instalment, where we review "Protestantism 101", the real story behind Protestant theology and its connection with the ancient heresies of Gnostic Christianity.

For the fullest account of these historical issues, including the scholarly evidence explained in layman's terms, order the second edition of *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*. A special discount price of \$12 plus \$2 shipping and handling is available to readers of the *Missouri Watchman*. Send orders to the author, Alan Knight, 1917 Mt. Hamilton Dr., Antioch, CA 94531. Address email enquiries to aknightld@earthlink.net. (The second edition is 421 pages and retails for \$23.45.)

PART TWO

PROTESTANTISM 101

By Alan Knight

Why make such a big deal about Protestantism? Most of us have been taught that prophetic warnings against false religion, in Revelation and elsewhere, apply mostly to Catholicism. Isn't that the real danger?

In Matthew 24 Jesus warns against Christian apostasy, and concludes with a statement that it will be so slick and convincing that, if possible, even the elect will be fooled. How does that apply to us today, at this moment in time?

Here is the point: Are Sabbatarian Christians in our situation today likely to be fooled when the Pope claims he has the right to change anything in the Bible? On the other hand, are we likely to be fooled by the radically liberal churches who openly preach that anything goes, from homosexuality to free love? I think not. Sabbatarian Christians easily recognize how wrong that is. So what in our world today is so slick and superficially good that we might be fooled by it?

Conservative (evangelical) Protestantism today espouses much biblical truth. These are the people who are warning that American culture has lost its way; that we need to return to biblical values to preserve the nation. These are the people who are protesting the removal of the 10 commandments from our schools and courthouses. There is so much about Evangelical Protestantism with which we agree; yet, hidden beneath these many good values, lies a strange world of perverse ideas condemned by the New Testament.

Founding Principles of Protestantism

The Protestant Reformation was based on two primary doctrines eternal security (once saved always saved) and predestination.

Both of these doctrines are highly controversial. Even some mainstream Christian preachers today are scandalized by it and condemn them as heresy. It's not hard to understand why. Eternal security means Christian conduct is totally optional. Christians "should" learn to be good in at least some general sense. But we have the option to be as evil as we want and still be saved. According to some, you don't even have to repent. After conversion a Christian can, literally, demonstrate not one single act of good conduct for the rest of his life and still be saved.

Is that really the foundation of the Protestant Reformation? Consider the words of Martin Luther himself. In 1521 he wrote a letter in which he boasted of the Protestant doctrine of eternal security, with the following words: "Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your faith in Christ be stronger.... No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery a thousand times each day." (Letter #99, Saemmtliche Schriften, August, 1521)

Why would anyone invent such horrendous doctrines? It is mind boggling, to be sure. Yet this is one of the primary foundations of Protestantism, from the beginning of the Reformation in the sixteenth century to the present day.

Why Eternal Security?

The Protestant Reformation evolved as a reaction against the abuses of medieval Roman Christianity. When understood in that light, there actually is a logical rationale, however faulty it might be behind the doctrine of eternal security.

Rome actually teaches a much more orthodox view of man's role in salvation than Protestantism. They taught that salvation is a cooperative undertaking between man and God. Man has free will and is able to choose between good and evil. God enables and assists man's efforts, but man must first choose to accept God's grace, and then exert some effort in pursuit of salvation.

Over time, however, this initial, fairly sound reasoning got out of hand. Soon they began to believe that man can accumulate good works, including the good work of contributing money to church projects. It was as though good works could be collected and stored up in an account. You could then draw on that store of merit to cancel the negative effect of future sins.

Eventually this evolved into the practice of selling indulgences. They were called indulgences because a contribution to the church could be made in anticipation of "indulging" in sin in the future. The "contribution" to the church, in other words the price of the indulgence, would be set at an amount designed to earn sufficient merit to cancel the negative effect of the specific sin you had in mind.

How was the Reformation to deal with such perverted medieval theories of merit and indulgence? The solution worked out by the early Protestant reformers is simplicity itself. The entire Roman theology about works rested on one single idea that man plays a cooperative role in salvation. Therefore, if you can say that man plays absolutely no role in salvation that nothing man does, either good or bad has any effect on salvation then all the legalism of Roman theology collapses on the spot.

Unfortunately, however, the Protestant cure for Roman legalism led to even worse theological problems. If nothing you do affects salvation, then it logically follows that you have the option to be as evil as you want and still be saved. You can urge people to not take that option, but the fact remains the option to be as evil as you wish is necessary to support the technical rationale on which Protestant theology rests. And there you have it — eternal security, once-saved always-saved.

Eternal security is necessary merely in order to support the radical concept of man's absolute non-participation in salvation. But that is not the end of the story. Given that starting point, Protestantism found itself caught in many more philosophical traps, including predestination.

Predestination

If man literally plays no role in salvation, then he can't even choose to accept God's offer of salvation. Why? Because choosing and saying yes to Jesus means participating in salvation however small that participation might be. But that only leads to more problems. If a man cannot choose to accept Jesus, then how can anyone become a Christian and be saved?

Once again it seemed there was such a simple answer. If only God can make us choose Jesus, then apparently man has no free will. So, simply accept that as true and integrate it into your theology. And that is how predestination came to be.

Predestination says that before the world began God knew the names of every human being who would be born, and he individually picked every person he wants to save. Once chosen they will be saved, whether they want to or not. Those not chosen are condemned to hell even before they were born, and there is nothing they can do about it.

On what basis does God choose those he wants to save? God knows everything that will happen in the future, they reasoned, but he can't choose on the basis of what kind of person he knows they will someday become. Otherwise we would contribute something to being chosen. So, they said, it has to be arbitrary. That is the only way they could preserve the philosophical purity of their original, radical idea that man plays no role in salvation.

In the end, sadly, that means billions of people are born on earth who are pre-selected (predestined) to fail. It doesn't matter how good they become. There is nothing they can do about it, and God will not lift a finger to help them. They will die, go to hell and be tortured forever, for no other reason than they lost out in a grand cosmic lottery before the world began.

Today millions of evangelical Protestants still believe in predestination, all because many centuries ago a handful of theologians could not find a better or more balanced mechanism for solving the problem of medieval Roman legalism.

Gnostic Origin of Predestination

Calvin and Luther borrowed this radical solution from an ancient Roman theologian who lived more than a thousand years before the Reformation. As explained in the second edition of *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*, he in turn developed his theology from the many Gnostic teachings prevalent in his time. Many Gnostic groups divided humanity into separate groups, some predestined to be saved and some predestined to fail.

Many are surprised to learn that this radical theology was taught by Martin Luther as well as John Calvin. Luther wrote a treatise on predestination, titled *On the Bondage of the Human Will*, which he later claimed to be his most important work.

The Saved Heathen

As we have seen with apostate Christianity so many times before, plugging one theological hole only leads to more problems. In this case, Reformation theology backed itself into a corner where it was forced to deny that God loves all mankind.

God's love for all mankind is one of the great themes of the New Testament, for example John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son...." Predestination theology, however, denies this.

The problem stems from this. If God does not choose to save you, then he can't love you. Why? Because if he loves someone then that implies he wants to save them. And if he wants to save you then he has to save you. If God does the whole thing, then there is nothing to stop him. Theoretically, whatever he wants has to happen.

So now they are stuck with the idea that God loves only those he has predestined to be saved. But somehow they must invent a way to harmonize that with the many New Testament passages that say God loves the "world," that he loves "all men," etc. What about the famous scripture John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...."

Part of the solution was to argue that the biblical phrase "all men" does not really mean every individual. Instead, they reasoned, it only means all nations and tribes of mankind. In other words, God loves only certain select individuals from all nations and tribes, and these are the people he predestines to be saved.

Unfortunately, once again, that only leads to additional layers of contradiction. The problem is that even today there are areas of the world where there are hardly any Christians. And if you go back only 50 or 100 years, a large part of the nations and tribes of the earth had never heard the gospel and there were no Christians among them. How were they to reconcile that with their explanation that God loves and saves select individuals from all tribes and nations?

The only solution some could find was to argue that being saved has nothing to do with accepting Jesus! (I am not making this up! This is fully documented in our second edition of *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*.) After all, if you don't have to ever do one good deed in your entire life, as eternal security claims, then why should you even have to accept Christ to be saved? The only thing that really matters, after all, is being chosen and predestined.

Thereby some conservative Evangelical Protestant theologians, primarily in certain Baptist denominations today, argue there are Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, and even primitive natives practicing witchcraft in the jungle, who have been chosen by God, predestined, and they will be saved. Though they never hear the name of Jesus, they supposedly have been given a new heart, and at least they experience a longing for the saviour of whom they have never heard.

The famous Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, late in his career, has embraced a form of this doctrine.

The New Lawfulness

Believe it or not, predestination theology has a substantial following inside Sabbatarian Christianity! Indeed, the infiltration of predestination theology is one of the most dangerous developments within the world of Sabbatarian Christianity today.

How can that be? Very few Sabbatarian Christians actually believe individuals are predestined to be saved or lost before they are born. However, predestination theology is a package of many doctrines, and Sabbatarian churches, especially those that openly embrace evangelical Protestantism, have adopted a substantial part of that package.

Predestination is based on the original Reformation idea that God does everything involved in salvation. Man has no free will and contributes nothing to the process. That is why it is God who must choose who is to be saved. But the basic idea that it is God who does everything, applies to much more than just choosing who is to be saved.

What makes predestination theology so attractive to Sabbatarian Christians is that, unlike eternal security, it claims man must demonstrate some good works in order to be saved. In the classic Protestant theology of predestination, God causes you, at least initially, to experience a change of heart and perform at least some good works. But since God makes this happen solely on his own, you get no credit for it and so salvation is not compromised by human works.

This has an attractive side to it. What is so abhorrent about Reformation theology is its antinomian, licentious nature. Promising salvation to anyone who professes Christ, without repentance and regardless of any evil, is truly abhorrent. Classic predestination theology softens this by arguing that repentance and good works do play a role, though it is performed solely by God. In the past several decades, this positive side of predestination theology has made a substantial comeback under the name Lordship Salvation.

Lordship Salvation says that, in order to be saved, you must accept Jesus not only as your saviour, but also as your master (Lord). In other words, you must obey him as well as believe in him. The basic concept is very sound and biblically true, and this is what makes it attractive to Sabbatarian Christians. Yet there are very serious problems hidden under the surface. In fact, it is a very clever trap.

First, many claim that Lordship Salvation is not based on predestination. But that is categorically untrue. As we demonstrate in the second edition of *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*, John MacArthur, the man who began the Lordship Salvation movement some 20 years ago, is a dyed in the wool predestination theologian. He firmly embraces and preaches the doctrine of completely arbitrary predestination, before a person is born.

Because predestination is so abhorrent to a modern society that enshrines freedom of choice, predestination theologians today have learned to disguise and soften their preaching to make it more attractive. The idea that God arbitrarily picks people and forces them to become Christians is smoothed over with softer terminology. Classic predestination theology talks about "irresistible" and "forcible" grace. The basic idea, from the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, is that God forcibly makes conversion happen, and you literally have no choice in the matter. Today that terminology generally is replaced with references to grace that is 'efficacious' or 'effectual' But in the end it means the same thing.

What is so attractive about this to many Sabbatarian Christians is that it appears to support lawfulness and good conduct. But does it? Some of the basic ideas, such as God enabling and aiding us by the power of the Spirit, are biblical and true. But when taken to extremes, it becomes a serious evil.

One of the most serious problems is that it separates the development of godliness from belief and biblical revelation. Remember, in predestination theology it is solely God that does the work. It is a secret process operating from within. Whatever God wants, he will make happen within you. You have no part in deciding what good conduct should appear in your life.

Therefore, whatever naturally happens, apparently is what God wants. There is nothing you can do to increase or decrease what God is doing, since you play no role in the process. Therefore, if you naturally feel your good works should be volunteering at the local homeless shelter, and you also feel it is appropriate to divorce your cranky spouse whom you never could stand anyway, who is to say that is not from God? Whatever happens is what God is doing, because, after all it is imposed forcibly and solely by God.

This promotes the idea that any form of goodness is sufficient to be a Christian. And it opens the door to gradually sliding away from the definition of God's will in scripture. Indeed, this is exactly what is happening in some Sabbatarian groups that embrace evangelical Protestantism.

A leading minister of one such church today preaches that the Holy Spirit tells different things to different Christians, by this he justifies the fact some Christians adhere to the Bible Sabbath while others observe Sunday. The idea is that the rule of the Spirit in our lives may lead us into practices that differ from the Bible. But that is all right as long as there is some goodness in it, and as long as it is done in the name of Jesus.

How can you argue against that? If God imposes goodness on man without reference to his word and without even the slightest participation on your part, what does it matter whether you read or understand the Bible? What does it

matter what anyone believes? Remember, the basic theory underlying Reformation theology is you play NO part in salvation. So just lean back, think good thoughts, and let it happen!

This predestination package, often with the core idea of predestination of individuals conveniently removed, is indeed one of the most dangerous developments within the world of Sabbatarian Christianity today.

For the fullest account of these historical issues, including the scholarly evidence explained in layman's terms, order the second edition of *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*. A special discount price of \$12 plus \$2 shipping and handling is available to readers of the *Missouri Watchman*. Send orders to the author, Alan Knight, 1917 Mt. Hamilton Dr., Antioch, CA 94531. Address email enquiries to aknightld@earthlink.net. (The second edition is 421 pages and retails for \$23.45.)

Published by The Church of God
Headquarters at Oshawa, Ontario
thechurchofgod.info
postmaster@cogsd.org