

Bad Medicine: The First Cult

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Special Speaker: Josh Kelley

CONSPIRACY THEORY

Everyone loves a conspiracy, if movies are any gauge: X-Files, The Matrix, Oliver Stone's JFK, Men in Black. All these movies give an alternate view of reality and play upon our suspicion of the official account.

- Conspiracy theories are scary, but exciting.
- They're the adult's ghost stories.

One of the more recent and popular conspiracy theories is found in "The da Vinci Code." It's a fiction, but it purports to be well researched. According to this story the Catholic Church has conspired to hide the truth about early Christianity:

- Jesus was a man, deified by Constantine, in the fourth century.
- Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.
- The Church excluded some books from the Bible, to hide the truth.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

In 1945, a collection of ancient books from c. 350 AD were found in Egypt, at Nag Hammadi. It included a book called "The Gospel of Thomas," a collection of sayings, ostensibly made by Jesus.

- Some of the sayings are exact quotes from the NT, some modified things Jesus said, and others were completely new.

As these books came to light, they caused quite a stir. Were they part of the Bible that had been lost? Maybe they were hidden by the church to protect their power!

WHO PUT THE BIBLE TOGETHER?

Q: Who decided which books belonged in the Bible?

Contrary to "The da Vinci Code," the NT was not put together by Constantine. Within the lifetime of people who knew the apostles, churches throughout Roman Empire had reached a general consensus on which books had been inspired by God.

The early church was very aware of books like the Gospel of Thomas. The reason the church rejected them is they perverted what Jesus and the apostles had actually taught.

- These books were from the first Christian cult, Gnosticism.
- That makes the Gospel of Thomas the first “Book of Mormon.”

It was not only the early church fathers that combated Gnosticism. The Apostles also opposed it; Colossian and 1 John were both written to fight early versions of Gnosticism.

WHAT IS GNOSTICISM?

It’s difficult to summarize Gnosticism, because there were so many versions of it, but at the risk of over-simplifying, here’s the basic idea:

1. All matter is evil. Only the spiritual is good. In fact the universe wasn’t created by God; it was created by a devil.
2. “Salvation” comes from gaining special, secret knowledge, allowing one to escape this world and go to the spirit realm.
3. Christ was a messenger from the spiritual realm who taught a select few this secret knowledge.

BAD MEDICINE

Gnosticism and its books disappeared for 1500 was not because of a conspiracy, but because they were discarded as a counterfeit.

But with the reappearance of the books, Gnosticism is also making a comeback. In fact, many of the theories in “The da Vinci Code” are simply variations of Gnostic teachings.

- Some Gnostic teachings have subtly infiltrated our culture.
- Some of them blatantly live on in the modern New Age movement.
- This stuff is contagious!

As we have learned in Romans, all humanity is sick. We are mortally ill with a sickness of our own choosing: sin.

Gnosticism, and its modern variations, attempts to heal this sickness, but their prescription is really some pretty bad medicine.

1. BAD MEDICINE: WE CAN PICK AND CHOOSE

Gnosticism was a mixture of Christian teachings, Jewish mysticism, eastern mystery religions, and Greek philosophy. It invited people to pick and choose their way to salvation.

The appeal is hard to miss. We don't want anyone else telling us what to do or what to believe. We like being in charge. This is especially appealing in our current culture of hyper-tolerance.

Q: Ever wonder why only doctors can prescribe medicine?

A: Not really. Left to ourselves, we would take codeine at the first sign of a headache and Prozac when our team loses.

These medicines are powerful and serve a purpose, but we lack the knowledge and perspective to self-prescribe. It's foolish to make life and death decision about things we are ignorant of.

- If this is true of our body, how much more our spirit?

Good medicine: When it comes to our eternal health, God's prescription is best.

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6 NIV

This absolute claim is very offensive to our world, but if we listen to the Good Physician, we will find that Jesus is the only medicine that can make us well.

2. BAD MEDICINE: SECRET KNOWLEDGE CAN MAKE US BETTER

Gnosticism emphasized finding special, secret knowledge. They said Christ revealed this to a select few. This secret knowledge was passed down to the insiders.

- Gnosis is Greek for knowledge.

Q: What would you think of a person who discovered the cure for cancer, but only revealed it to a select few?

God does not hide the cure for sin and death. He loudly proclaims it, making it available to any who would accept it.

But still, special knowledge is enticing, even for believers. If I know something that the masses don't - some special prayers, Greek definitions, end-time prophecies, genealogies - I feel just a little superior, and maybe even closer to God.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. 1 Corinthians 8:1-2 NIV

Aren't we are called to grow in knowledge and wisdom? Isn't part of maturity studying and learning God's Word? Paul is not against knowledge - his education allowed him to write half of the NT.

Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge... 1 Timothy 6:20 NIV

Paul is against "false knowledge." How can we tell the difference?

- False knowledge delights in the obscure.
- True knowledge delights in life change.

- False knowledge puffs up.
- True knowledge brings humility.

- False knowledge leaves us empty.
- True knowledge satisfies.

Good Medicine: God's simple, clear, and life changing knowledge can make us better.

3. BAD MEDICINE: WE DON'T SIN, WE'RE JUST IGNORANT.

Gnosticism taught that people didn't sin; their ignorance just entraps them in this evil material world.

A construction worker recently banged his mouth on a nail gun and hurt his tooth. A doctor told him to just use aspirin. It still hurt and his vision was blurry, so he went to a dentist.

They found the problem: [X-ray of nail in head]

- Aspirin won't help this one!
- That doctor had made a really bad diagnosis.

There are many teachings, groups, and philosophies out there that follow the Gnostic lead. They say there is no such thing as sin, only ignorance. This is a really bad diagnosis.

- When you're really sick, it's vital to get a good diagnosis.

... after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. James 1:15 NIV

This is a good diagnosis, not pleasant, but trustworthy. More deadly than a nail in the head, we all have sin deeply embedded in us. We need to be treated, not taught.

Good medicine: God's diagnosis points us to the cure.

4. BAD MEDICINE: WE NEED A TEACHER, NOT A CRUCIFIED SAVIOR.

Gnosticism was especially popular among the Greeks, who prized knowledge. To them the idea of a Messiah that died on the cross was repugnant.

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles... 1 Corinthians 1:22-23 NIV

They liked the idea of Christ as a teacher. He was simply a spiritual guide to show the way.

Last year Grace split her lip on a heating grate. I could have gone to my high school health teacher and learned about what happens to the body when it is hurt, or I could have taken her to the doctor.

- I didn't want to understand her cut; I wanted her to be well!

We've seen the diagnosis. Our sins are killing us. They are a sickness we chose.

- We need more than a teacher, need a cure.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:5-6 NIV

Good medicine: Jesus Christ, our crucified savior, is the cure for sin.

This is the glory of the gospel, better news than anything in Gnosticism: What we deserved was death, but what we got was life.