

CHAPTER 3

HOW WE VIEW KNOWLEDGE DIVIDES US

Introduction

When tragedies overtake us, the first word that often comes to mind is “Why?” This is especially true when the tragedy is of human origin as in the case of the Littleton shooting. There is no limit to the number of answers given each from a different point of view. However, to sort out the correct answer, we must be able to understand what we are saying. Even when we use the same words, we may not be saying the same thing. Words must have a context to have meaning. By learning to understand the context of other people, we learn to communicate in ways they can understand and to receive their messages consistent with what they mean by them.

One of the first contexts to understand and one most often overlooked is our perspective of life itself. By this I mean our philosophy of life. An interesting result of many tragedies where lives have been disrupted is how radically different one’s perspective of life is following the tragedy, particularly when there is a great loss of life and personal property.

This book is not meant to be a philosophical treatise, and so what is presented here is very concise. Yet, I believe that a simple presentation of some of the basic philosophies of life will assist us in our dialogue as we seek to answer the question, “Why?”

There are basically three categories of philosophy which govern our lives: our philosophy about knowledge, our philosophy about existence, and our philosophy about behavior. These are three perspectives from which we view life. We all hold some views in each of these areas even though we may not be able to explain them at any given moment in time. Still they govern our lives. These philosophies may exist simultaneously and may even contradict each other. Jim Leffel in an article on postmodernism writes:

Affirmative postmodernists are more difficult to describe because they are active in so many diverse causes. Indeed, eclecticism (borrowing from a variety of worldviews) and an ability to maintain even contradictory positions simultaneously are common among affirmative postmodernists. They argue that self-contradiction isn't a problem once we remove the modernist burden of rational consistency."¹

Postmodernists are not the first to hold contradictory ideas. Such contradictions have been around for a long time. In this section on philosophies that divide us, we will see that these three broad areas of philosophy are often very contradictory and yet many have ascribed to them for centuries. The ability to live by contradictory philosophies is primarily the fruit of cognitive dissonance thinking referred to in the last chapter on communication.

Through cognitive dissonance we become masters at defending our philosophies despite the contradictions. Having divergent philosophies alone is not what causes divisions between us. It is how we use these philosophies against each other that causes problems. For every perceived conflict between us, there is a ready-made philosophy by which we justify continuing the conflict.

THE GAME: “I Know Something You Don’t Know”

“I know something you don’t know” is a common playground taunt of children. What really makes the person being teased angry is when this is followed by “And I’m not going to tell you.” The next step in the game is, “You are not smart enough to understand.” To reinforce the effects of this game, children often create new words or give old words new meaning.

In the Littleton incident, it was reported that the “in crowd” taunted members of the Trench Coat Mafia. In return the response of those being taunted was to talk back in German. It is obvious that the purpose was not to communicate in a language familiar to both sides but to use language to further separate them. This is not to excuse the “in crowd.” The point is that communication was breaking down on both sides. The most obvious indicators of this breakdown were on the part of the group perceived as outcasts. They developed both verbal and non-verbal ways of sending messages that were not meant to be understood but meant to further divide.

The rules of the game

This game “I know something you don’t know” is painful for those who are being discriminated against. I experienced it as a young person both at school and at home. In grade school I noticed that others treated me as if I were different. I was usually the youngest and biggest in the class. Taunts of “dummy” were hurled at me on the playground. This carried over into the classroom. We give this game special names today. We call it “learning

disabilities,” “fetal alcohol syndrome,” and other high-sounding names. I do not mean to imply there are not some identifiable problems with learning in some children. However, research has shown that many children classified as having learning disabilities are often some of the brightest. The problem is that they do not learn the same way others do or the way the school system requires them to learn. Labeling these children can be very detrimental to helping them overcome their problems and, when the labels stick, can isolate the child even more from those with whom they need healthy relationships.

One day when I was in junior high, my class was invited to join the high school in a college prep assembly. The teacher asked all the students who planned to attend college to raise their hands. They would be given the privilege of attending the assembly. I raised my hand along with the rest of the class. As I was leaving the classroom the teacher took me aside and asked, “You’re not going to college are you?”

This game was played at home on the farm as well. As I worked in the fields alongside the hired men and other family members they teased me calling me “Slow Moe.” The memory of those taunts is still very painful today. I can appreciate how others feel when they receive this sort of treatment.

After I was discharged from the Navy, I returned to the family farm. I still believed that the problems in the family from earlier years were primarily my fault and endeavored to try harder. Yet the taunts continued. Finally I decided that my only recourse was to go to college. It was then that I realized the

seriousness of this game. When I announced my intentions, my adopted parents told me I was not smart enough to go to college. I literally ran away from home one more time.

Where do young people learn the game of “I know something you don’t know?” They learn it from adults. Throughout human history, mankind has used knowledge or the withholding of knowledge to divide. It is a short step from believing that someone else does not know to believing that they cannot know. When this circle of logic—or rather illogic—is complete, it is called Gnosticism. The word comes from the Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning “to know.”

In general, Gnosticism is the belief that some people are better than others because of what they know. We are using the title “Gnosticism” to refer to any knowledge that man claims to have learned on his own apart from God. In Gnosticism, knowing certain things is the path to salvation. Throughout history, this kind of knowledge was called “mysteries.” When the Bible talks about “mysteries” it is always referring to a truth that was formerly hidden but has now been revealed by God.² When men use the term, it often means something unknowable, hidden, or secret.

Belonging to secret organizations with mysterious rituals has intrigued mankind since the Garden of Eden. My adopted parents were members of several organizations that used passwords and engaged in secret rituals. One organization met every month. As a child, I was taken to these meetings and left to sit in the women’s lounge until the secret portion of the meeting was over. I

was never allowed to see what went on in those meetings but could hear sounds that seemed strange because of the secrecy. They probably were no more mysterious than individuals marching across a hardwood floor in a cavernous room but to a child the sounds were foreboding.

Each Gnostic sect uses their own set of rituals to heighten the mysteries they claim to possess. To those who hold them, these mysteries may be earthy or supernatural knowledge. The salvation they claim to provide may be freedom from poverty, freedom from physical ailments, or psychological and emotional freedom. Some claim to be able to solve all of life's problems or societies ills through their superior knowledge.

Because this knowledge is acquired through human means, it is subjective knowledge. Subjective knowledge without objective verification can be very divisive because the one who thinks he holds the key to that knowledge sets himself up to judge others who do not hold the key. In our day, Gnosticism covers the full spectrum of human philosophies but most often is viewed in contradistinction from any objective or supernatural knowledge or revelation. However, the tide is turning. and we find more and more individuals and groups claiming some special power to receive mysterious truth from some hidden force in the universe.

The origin of Gnosticism can be traced back to the time of the first century church and beyond. It can also be found in both Jewish and Greek philosophy before Christ. It might have been part of what the Bible refers to as the

confusion of languages in the account of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

Moses records God's words, "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech."³ This judgment came because the people were seeking to find their own way into heaven apart from the one true God of the universe.

Gnosticism probably even goes back to the fall in the Garden of Eden when Satan began to put a spin on God's words when he questioned, "has God said?"⁴ We cannot put all the blame on Satan because Eve also put her spin on God's words when she misquoted Him. She even put words into God's mouth He never said when she told Satan God had forbidden them to "touch" the fruit.⁵

In our relationships and communication with each other we tend to garble the message by adding our own meaning to words. The next step is to create an apparent chasm between us by deciding that, since the other person does not understand our encoded message, they are not as smart as we are or as good as we are. We might even carry it further and decide that they are not as important as we are or not important at all so we can dismiss or even eliminate them.

The process of dividing into Gnostic groups may start innocently enough as a silly prank but soon it snowballs into an avalanche of hatred and recrimination. The Christian church, historically, has been as guilty of Gnosticism as the rest of the world. Toward the end of the first century after Christ, roots of this harmful philosophy were creeping into the church. John wrote his gospel and his three epistles to counteract this philosophy. Therefore his gospel account of Jesus,

written perhaps as late as 90 AD, is so different from the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They wrote their gospels approximately 30 years before John wrote his. In John's day many were teaching that to be saved one needed to be initiated into some mysterious truth, truth that only a few were able to understand.

While there were many forms of Gnosticism in John's day, one of the early commonalities among different Gnostic sects was that there were two parts to the universe: matter and spirit. They taught that matter is evil and spirit is good. To them, salvation was the ability to move from the material world into the spiritual world through some mysterious truth available only to a few. This was accomplished through knowledge (gnosis). By extension, they taught that not everyone was able to move from the material world to the spiritual world because not everyone was able to understand the mysteries.

Winners and Losers

As this philosophy developed, mankind was divided into three groups: the pneumatics, the psychics, and the hylics. Concerning this division, Alexander Renwick writes:

The Gnostic claimed special esoteric or secret knowledge. It could be possessed only by that section of humanity which was "pneumatic," or spiritual. They alone were inevitably led back to the realm of light of the Supreme God. There was a second class of men, those who were only "psychic" and could not get beyond faith. The prophets and other good Hebrews belonged to this class but they must be eternally in the sphere much inferior to that occupied by those who had "gnosis." A third class represented the overwhelming mass of human kind. They were merely "hylic" (i.e., subject to matter) and their case was utterly hopeless for they were in endless bondage

to Satan and their own lusts, and their end was to be completely destroyed. Here was one of the worst features of Gnosticism, the elevating of a limited number into a specially privileged class, and the consigning of the vast majority of mankind to unredeemable destruction.⁶

Gnosticism took two opposite directions in its application to everyday life. Since they held the view that physical life was evil, one application was to deny the needs of the physical body. This is known as asceticism. The other direction was that since the physical life was not a part of the higher existence, what was done in the physical life was of no consequence. This led to the practice of licentiousness or the freedom to indulge the physical body at will.

By the second century after Christ, the philosophy of Gnosticism took on added meaning as it was applied to the way the Bible was interpreted. A man by the name of Origen (AD 185-254) devised a method of interpreting the Bible called the allegorical method. In his method he saw three levels of meaning—the literal, the moral, and the spiritual. This meant that there were multiple meanings in the Bible. What the interpreter saw in the text was more important than what the author meant by what was written. This led to a very subjective approach to interpreting the Bible called “allegorical interpretation.”

Paul Tan, in his book *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, gives us an excellent description of this approach to interpretation:

In early church history, there arose a group of interpreters (known as the “allegorists”) which saw a multiplicity of senses and meanings in the Scriptures. They regarded the literal words only as a vehicle for arriving at the hidden, more spiritual, and more profound sense of Scripture. “What was more natural, more in keeping with all of creation,” reasoned the allegorists, “than that God should have

concealed a spiritual message in crude material language...Interpretation, therefore, lay in discerning the spiritual meaning of the text hidden beneath the letter, which could often for all practical purposes be discarded.”⁷

The allegorists not only affirmed the concept of multiple sense in Scripture, but also decreed that the hidden, deeper sense is the real one...the Alexandrians and other church fathers practiced allegorism to the hilt, and the fanciful exegeses they produced “make one part of our mind laugh and another part groan.”⁸

Allegorizing was a handy tool for the Gnostics to promote their mysteries in the early church. To them what the author of the Bible meant was not as important as the mysterious truths they found through this subjective approach. Allegorical interpretation continues to be popular in many branches of Christendom today. This Gnostic aberration was a major factor that led the church and the world into what historians call “the dark ages.” For centuries, church leaders used this method of interpreting Scripture to elevate themselves above the commoners and to subjugate the masses.

Over twenty-five years ago when I first began to study Gnosticism and tried alerting others to its dangers, I was usually met with scorn or, at the very least, a raised eyebrows. Who would ever believe that? I no longer receive this response. While Gnosticism as a broad-based philosophy never died out, the name fell into disuse being replaced with various other titles.

This widely divergent philosophy is everywhere today. Any group or sect that believes that their knowledge is mysterious or unknowable to others or that salvation is through knowledge is practicing Gnosticism. It is prevalent in much of what is called the New Age Movement. Many forms of atheistic humanism are

branches of the early false philosophy called Gnosticism but without the concept of god. In effect, humanism sees man as the ultimate source of knowledge, hence, I place this belief system under the head of Gnosticism because it is a knowledge apart from God's revelation. A recent search of the term on the Internet demonstrated that many sects are once again openly identifying themselves as Gnostics.

The most poignant example of Gnosticism today that comes to mind is the Heavens Gate Cult that captured the attention of the world a few years ago. Thirty-nine individuals in a mass-suicide pact took their own lives as the comet Hale-Bopp past the earth. Among the many strange beliefs of this group was the belief that they were about to move from the realm of earth to a higher level of being. They believed that there are two levels of existence on earth, one higher than the other. A third level could only be experienced when they shed their earthly bodies. The method by which they believed they moved from a lower level to a higher level was through knowledge which only they could comprehend.

One of the startling discoveries at the scene of the suicide was that many of the men had been castrated. This ominous aspect of this group ties back to Origen. Origen practiced a severe form of asceticism including having himself emasculated to live what to him was a more pious lifestyle.⁹

Many young people become involved in Gnostic-type groups through various means. Much of its influence is subtle and probably harmless. Yet because of

the prevalence of mind control through cognitive dissonance in many of these groups, there is a point at which a line is crossed. In its extreme forms, Gnosticism is extremely dangerous. In its milder forms it continues to create havoc in society because of its tendency to separate groups of people and to prevent the meaningful dialogue necessary to overcome conflicts among those groups.

Refusing to Play the Game, I know Something You Do Not Know

One way the Christian community can help in the dialogue taking place because of the Littleton tragedy and others around the world is to clearly delineate between the gospel message and the false teaching of salvation through knowledge or Gnosticism. The Christian gospel teaches that salvation comes through a personal relationship with the Self-revealing God Who desires a relationship with all mankind. John writes, “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.”¹⁰ Paul warned the church at Corinth regarding the practice of Gnosticism, “knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.”¹¹ To the church at Colossae he wrote:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day--things which are a {mere} shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on {visions} he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all {refer} {to} things destined to

perish with use) -- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, {but are} of no value against fleshly indulgence¹² (Italics mine).

John, in his gospel, was careful to separate salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ from the false teaching that salvation comes through knowing some esoteric knowledge. He was not changing the gospel message but was seeking to purge the message of the evil and divisive philosophies that many were adding to it in his day.

To counteract the false dichotomy of Dualism in which the material world is evil and the spirit world is good, John emphasized the physical body of Jesus. The first miracle Jesus performed was the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana.¹³ Thus Jesus put His stamp of approval upon the material element, wine, and the physical relationship of marriage. This is not to say that Christians should engage in the use of alcoholic beverages today. There are good reasons for abstaining from drinking alcohol today because of the abuse of alcohol in America. What Jesus was teaching by this miracle was that wine is not inherently evil as in the teaching of Dualism.

Another way John counteracted the teaching of Gnosticism was to avoid the use of abstract concepts such as faith and wisdom, which by then carried Gnostic connotations. For example, the word knowledge (gnosis) is not found in his gospel. The reason John avoided reference to abstract concepts is because the Gnostics gave their own twisted meaning to these concepts and used them

to elevate themselves above others. The gospel is not meant to exclude anyone based on his or her inability to know some abstract truth. Those who teach this are teaching a false gospel.

The Greek term, *gnosis*, occurs only twice in the four gospels, both in Luke's gospel. The first time was in conjunction with the prophecy concerning John the Baptist. The Baptist's father, Zacharias, praised God for the birth of his son saying, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; To give to His people {the} knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins"¹⁴ (Italics mine). God used John the Baptist to introduce Jesus as the Savior of the world. Salvation through Jesus Christ is not through knowledge as an abstract idea or even some mysterious knowledge. It is Salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus as savior. This is obtained by being born of God.

Knowledge versus Knowing

The second and last time the Greek term, *gnosis*, is used in the gospels is Luke 11:52 where Luke records Jesus' words, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering."¹⁵ These lawyers were also called scribes. They were men schooled in the Old Testament who used their subjective interpretation of the Old Testament to elevate themselves above the people, forcing the people to come to them instead of leading them to God. In this way they were preventing others from coming to a personal knowledge of God.¹⁶ By

setting themselves up as the final arbiter of truth, they were denying the existence of objective absolute truth.

Wherever there is a denial of absolute truth, Gnosticism is present. A denial of absolute truth is warp and woof of the overall process of rejecting God and any responsibility to Him. Paul writes:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.¹⁷

One important noun John uses over and over in his gospel is “truth.” John writes

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.¹⁸

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.¹⁹

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, {then} you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."²⁰

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."²¹

"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come."²²

From this we see that truth regarding salvation is not abstract. It is concrete and knowable. It is found through having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as revealed by God in the Bible. When a person comes into a personal

relationship with Christ through being born of God, God gives that person the Holy Spirit to enable him or her to understand the truth. Men can know a lot of facts about the universe around them but not know the truth about those facts.

In our day, Gnostics tell us that all truth is relative. In this way they avoid submitting to the truth. Through high-sounding rationality, they put themselves above truth and become judges of truth. Like the lawyers in Jesus' day, they are robbing this generation of the knowledge of the truth.

By declaring all truth relative and placing themselves above truth, modern day Gnostics place their opinions above everyone else's, including God's opinion. In this way truth is manipulated to their advantage. Morality is determined by the situation. This is called situational ethics. The term Gnostic still applies because the situational ethicist manipulates knowledge in much the same way that ancient Gnostics did. Yet even today Gnosticism continues to evolve at breakneck speed. About the time we begin to understand their methods and reasoning, they change.

For the past several decades, American culture has been conforming to what some have termed Modernism. To deny any semblance of objective truth, modernists taught that:

Humans are purely material machines. We live in a purely physical world. Nothing exists beyond what our senses perceive. Humans are self-governing and free to choose their own direction. People should be 'rationalistic optimists' who depend only on the data of their senses and reason.²³

The crowning achievement of modernism with its emphasis upon self-government and individual freedom, is the U. S. Constitution and a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The pendulum is now swinging in the opposite direction from modernism to what is called, “postmodernism.” In postmodernism:

Humans are cogs in a social machine. We are primarily social beings. People are the product of their culture and only imagine they are self-governing. There is no such thing as objective rationality (that is, reason unaffected by bias) in the sense that modernists use the term. Objective reason is a myth.²⁴

Postmodernism suits the concepts of globalism and one world government.

A clear understanding of God’s revelation refutes postmodernism. The Bible is very specific in its teaching regarding knowing the truth. There are two terms translated “to know” in the Greek New Testament. The first is ginosko (the verb form of gnosis) and the second oida. As with any word in the New Testament, the meaning of these two terms must be learned from the contexts in which they are found. For our purpose, we need to see that ginosko suggests coming to know, knowing by experience, and hence a relationship between the one who knows and what is known. On the other hand, oida suggests perception and hence knowledge acquired with or without any personal relationship with the object known. Ginosko would correspond closely with what we call subjective knowledge. Oida would correspond to objective knowledge and is the term used when referring to divine revelation.²⁵

Instead of seeing humans as purely material machines as the modernist does or as cogs in a social machine as the postmodernist does, God declares that He is the ultimate source of truth. Any knowledge that we possess that is consistent with His truth has been made known to us by His will through divine revelation. This truth exists apart from us as human beings, and we are given the opportunity to experience this truth through our relationship with God through Christ. The salvation of the Bible comes through our relationship with God who is ultimate truth and not through knowledge which can be manipulated by men. Therefore, both our perception of truth (oida) and our relationship to truth (ginosko) come from God. What is important is not how much knowledge we have but the validity of this knowledge. This is good news because it ensures that salvation is available to anyone who will receive His Son, Jesus Christ. John writes:

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.²⁶

Here we see that eternal life comes through a personal relationship with Christ and not through knowledge. Since this is true, what role does the act of believing play in salvation? To answer this, it is important to notice how John distinguishes between individuals who believe something momentarily and those whose act of believing demonstrates a permanent change in their character. In other words, their character reflects what they believe.

Early in Jesus' ministry in John chapter 2 and verse 23, John notes, "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing."²⁷ The verb tense he uses here suggests action at a moment in time without reference to beginning or end. Greek grammarians call this "point" or "punctiliar" action.²⁸ John clarifies this kind of believing with the following statement, "But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man."²⁹ These individuals who believed were not necessarily saved because they believed. In fact, this is the dilemma presented and answered by John's gospel—how is it possible that some believed but did not possess eternal life?

The type of believing in John 2:23 contrasts with the type of believing mentioned in the prologue of the gospel. In chapter 1 and verse 12 John writes, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, {even} to those who believe in His name."³⁰ Here the type of believing implies an attendant change in character consistent with what is believed. The grammatical construction in the original language describing this change of character is called a Present Active Participle.³¹ It is a verbal idea used as an adjective describing the character of the individual.

John is consistent in this use of the Present Active Participle in his gospel and for the most part reserves the Present Active Participle to refer to individuals whose actions reflect their inner character. Some of these verbal

ideas are: believing, receiving, following, hearing, abiding, and living. In instances where these verbal adjectives are used, they could accurately be translated, believers, receivers, followers, hearers, abiders, and liverers.

A good example of the importance of this grammatical construct is that of a runner. If I observed a man running down the street, I might think he is a runner. However, if someone else who knew the man saw him running, he would know the man was not a runner but was merely in a hurry at that moment in time.

John is careful to tell us that the change from believing momentarily to being a believer does not come simply because someone knows something. He states categorically regarding Jesus' teaching, "What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony."³² In other words, no human being, in and of himself, is able to receive the gospel message. No one is saved simply by believing. Salvation does not come through knowledge. The ability to believe unto eternal life is the result of being born again.

John's full statement reads:

What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received (Present Active Participle) His testimony has set his seal to {this} that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him³³ (*Italics mine*).

The statement, "He who has received," could correctly be translated into English, "The receiver." The statement "He who believes" can correctly be translated "The believer." This correctly renders the verbal idea, which in the

Greek describes the character of the subject of the sentence. In this way John makes it clear that it is not some innate ability to receive the message that makes a person a child of God. It is the power of the Holy Spirit working in the life of the person who has a relationship to God.

This takes us back to the previous context in John chapter 3 where Nicodemus, a very knowledgeable Jewish teacher, still needed to be “born again.” Jesus told him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”³⁴ This was confusing to Nicodemus because he had been taught from childhood that knowing the Old Testament Scriptures was all he needed in order to be a part of God’s kingdom. In fact, Jesus goes on to say, being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit and no man can fully understand how the Holy Spirit works. Jesus said:

“Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”³⁵

Later in the chapter John writes, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life.”³⁶ Here we have another Present Active Participle. It could correctly be rendered into English “The believer in the Son has eternal life.” This is not a statement regarding how one obtains eternal life but a statement of fact regarding a believer. Jesus, Himself, told us how a person receives eternal life. He taught, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand”³⁷ (*Italics mine*). Eternal life is a gift given by the Savior.

Salvation is not acquired through some esoteric knowledge or even by believing the truth. The ability to believe is the result of salvation not the means of salvation. Because Gnosticism continues to mutate, Christians are going to need to know the difference to not be mislead. There is no power to save in the Gnostic gospel though many still believe in it and think they are saved.

Someone might object, “But doesn’t Paul say we have to believe in order to be saved?” Yes he does. In Romans 10:9 Paul writes, “...if you confess with your mouth Jesus {as} Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”³⁸ Notice the context. Paul is talking about the Jews who had knowledge—the knowledge revealed to them through God’s prophets—and still they were not saved. He writes:

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for {their} salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: “DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, “WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?” (that is, to bring Christ down), or “WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” But what does it say? “THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart”-- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus {as} Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same {Lord} is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.”³⁹

Paul expressed this same principle when he wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, {it is} the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”⁴⁰ Salvation is a free gift. That is what grace means. Faith is the channel through which we appropriate that gift. This faith is also part of that gift. It is totally illogical to assume that God would give us a gift and then not also give us the ability to receive it. On the other hand, it is equally illogical to assume that those who do not have eternal life are not saved because they do not have the ability to receive it. This raises a question. Does a person who is not saved have the ability to know the truth?

This question has been debated in theological circles for centuries. While the answer has eluded many scholars, it is simple. James, in his epistle clearly states that someone can believe the facts about Jesus Christ and still not be saved when he writes, “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.”⁴¹ Few would argue that the demons are part of God’s family. Yet they know who God is. They also know some things about God’s attributes and therefore tremble. Therefore, we conclude that salvation is not the result of believing. Believing unto eternal life is the result of being born again.

One might say that if salvation is not the result of believing but believing is the result of salvation, then those who are not saved must not be saved because they cannot believe. This is not the answer John gives in his gospel. He quotes Jesus, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that

whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”⁴² This is a well-known verse. In the same context, Jesus also taught:

“This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”⁴³

The term translated “loved” in the passage above is *agape* which expresses a choice. God chose to love the world and sent light into the world by which they might be saved. However, men choose to love darkness rather than light. Therefore, men could believe but they choose to not believe. Apart from new birth, men by nature choose not to believe. Believing is not a characteristic of those who are not born again but unbelieving is.

This same concept is repeated at the end of the verse quoted above where John writes, “But he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”⁴⁴ The Greek term translated “obey” is the verb *apatheo*. It literally means, “is not persuaded.” It is transliterated into the English as *apathy*. This is also a Present Active Participle. When we apply the same principle of Greek grammar here as we saw with *believe*, we see that the person by character is unpersuadable.

Remember that John has presented God as the Self-revealing God. This is what is meant in the prologue to his gospel (chapter 1 verses 1-18) by the repetition of the term, “Word.” God went to great lengths to reveal Himself to mankind. However, some refuse to be persuaded by His revelation for various reasons. The general reason is that men would rather remain in darkness rather

than receive the light. John records that some rejected Jesus because they wanted to cling to their own interpretation of the Bible rather than interpreting it as God had intended.⁴⁵ Others wanted someone who would be their earthly king and defeat their enemies, the Romans.⁴⁶ Still others did not want to lose their positions in society and feared men more than they feared God.⁴⁷

An interesting dialogue took place between Jesus and the Jews in John's gospel, chapter 8. He records:

As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, {then} you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak the things which I have seen with {My} Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from {your} father." They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? {It is} because you cannot hear My word. You are of {your} father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own {nature} for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why

do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear {them} because you are not of God.”⁴⁸

This dialogue marks the zenith of John’s gospel as far as his explanation of why some receive eternal life and others do not. In the first sentence of the above quote, the Greek verb translated “believe” is a point action verb, not a Present Active Participle. The second verb translated “had believed” is a grammatical construction we have not commented on thus far. Here reference is made to believing in past time with continuing result.⁴⁹ The past time was before the time of this conversation Jesus was having with them and the present time was the moment this dialogue took place.

Note that as the dialogue continues, these “believing” Jews begin to argue with Jesus. Eventually they persuade themselves that Jesus could not be telling the truth. Their own arguments which they used to refute what Jesus was teaching overpowered their act of believing which stemmed from what He had just taught them and what they had, at first, believed. They literally talked themselves out of believing. This is common when discussing the plan of salvation with many non-Christians. Their own arguments become more persuasive to them than God’s revelation and so they reject the free gift of eternal life Jesus offers to them. In this way, Satan is blinding their eyes so that they will not believe.⁵⁰ It is only when God interrupts this process of blinding and causes the light of the glorious gospel to shine unto them that they are able to believe.⁵¹

The good news of Jesus Christ is that anyone can receive Him if they will only allow God through His Holy Spirit and the Bible to persuade them. Salvation does not depend upon one's ability to understand the gospel. A small child can be saved. This is a wonderful concept. This is good news! No one becomes a Christian because they are smarter than someone else or because they know more than someone else. Paul wrote:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.⁵²

This does not exhaust all the points that could be made regarding how someone is saved. Other thoughts such as election and predestination are also important when discussing God's plan of salvation. Here we simply explain the difference between the false gospel of Gnosticism which limits salvation to those who have the ability to know some mysterious truth and the true salvation of the Bible that comes through being born again and having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

I have had the privilege of teaching on the college level for several years. I believe that it is important for me, as the instructor, to remember that knowledge and the ability to acquire it does not make one student better than another. In fact, many who have difficulty learning have difficulty because they are convinced they cannot learn. A teacher should be concerned as much with

teaching how to learn as teaching the subject itself. A student who has somehow come to believe he cannot learn often is hampered by his own thoughts about himself. This builds up stress. Stress is not a good teaching tool and, in fact, hinders the learning process. Therefore, I do my best to alleviate stress while at the same time challenge the student to new heights of learning.

You, the reader, do not have to understand everything I have just said about how a person is saved. For me to say that you do would place me in the category of a Gnostic. All you need to know is that Christ died for you and that He is alive today and wants to be both your Savior and Lord. You do not have to wait until your life changes. Any changes that come will come because of the power of God working in you and not because of your own effort. John writes, “What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has set his seal to {this} that God is true.”⁵³

If you believe right now that God is true, set your seal to it. What this means is that you place your signature at the bottom of the page of the contract. When my wife and I bought our house, we signed our name to the contract saying that we would from then on for the life of the contract meet the responsibilities in that contract. Do not make this analogy stand up and walk on four legs. We know that we have done nothing to merit salvation. We know that we can do nothing to save ourselves. We also know that we can do nothing to maintain this

salvation or work our way into heaven. What is important is that God's name is on the contract whereby He promises to save us and keep us in this life and afterward to receive us into His heaven. All we are doing is signing our names under His and thereby stating that we believe this. This is what Abraham did. Paul writes concerning Abraham, "(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, {even} God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist."⁵⁴ "...and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform."⁵⁵

Our signature does not save us. Even our act of believing does not save us. We are simply affirming at this moment and from now on that He is true. This affirmation might be expressed through a prayer something like this, "Jesus, I believe in You and accept You as my Savior and Lord." This prayer will not save you but Jesus will. We might affirm this truth by writing in our Bible, today (month/day/year) I accept Jesus as my Savior. Even this act is not what saves us. It merely reminds us in the future of that moment when we set our seal to the truth of God. We might also affirm this truth by telling someone we love and trust that we have done this. Telling them does not save us but it will serve as a demonstration that we believe because of a changed nature, that we have been born again. In fact, it might be helpful if you did all three. This will not make your salvation any truer but will help in any future moment when you might be tempted to talk yourself out of the contract to which you have set your seal.

The difference between knowing God as the result of being born again and Gnosticism is that knowing God unites us while Gnosticism divides us. It is not knowledge—the possessing of it or the lack of it—that divides us. It is our attitude toward each other stemming from a wrong philosophy regarding knowledge that divides us. It is the conclusions we draw about each other that divide us. When we begin to think we are better than someone else because of what we know, we have become Gnostics. When the Christian church draws the conclusion that it is better than others because of what it knows it loses its place in society as an active part of the solution and becomes a part of the problem.

We cannot stamp out Gnosticism. Many have tried throughout history. When we think it has been eradicated, it sticks its ugly head up somewhere else. We can help to change the world by holding to a correct view of knowledge and by ceasing to play the game, “I know something you don’t know.” We can make a difference in our neighborhoods and our schools by not playing this game. In this way we can help those with whom we have a relationship rather than separate ourselves from them.

¹ Jerry Leffel, Contributor, *The Death of Truth*, ed., Dennis McCallum, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 48.

² Ephesians 3:4-7.

³ Genesis 11:7.

⁴ Genesis 3:1.

⁵ Genesis 3:3.

⁶ Alexander M. Renwick, *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison; Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 237.

⁷ Cited by Bruce Vawter, “The Fuller Sense: Some Considerations,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXVI, No. 1 (Jan., 1964), 87. Quoted by Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974), 37.

⁸ Tan quoting Baxter, *Strategic Grasp of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1968), p.37.

⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1953), 149.

¹⁰ John 1:4.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 8:1.

¹² Colossians 2:16-23.

¹³ John 2:1-11.

¹⁴ Luke 1:76-77.

¹⁵ Luke 11:52.

¹⁶ Matthew 23:13.

¹⁷ Romans 1:18-20.

¹⁸ John 1:14.

¹⁹ John 1:17.

²⁰ John 8:31-32.

²¹ John 14:6.

²² John 16:13.

²³ Jim Leffel, Contributor, *The Death of Truth*, ed, Dennis McCallum, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 21.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., eds., Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 346-347.

²⁶ I John 5:11-12.

²⁷ John 2:23.

²⁸ Aorist Active Indicative. Cf. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), 194.

²⁹ John 2:24-25.

³⁰ John 1:12.

³¹ Note Daniel B. Wallace's comment regarding the difference between the Aorist Active Participle and the Present Active Participle, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basic*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 621, fn.

³² John 3:32.

³³ John 3:33-36

³⁴ John 3:3.

³⁵ John 3:7-8.

³⁶ John 3:36.

³⁷ John 10:27-28.

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- ³⁸ **Romans 10:9.**
- ³⁹ **Romans 10:1-13.**
- ⁴⁰ **Ephesians 2:8, 9.**
- ⁴¹ **James 2:19.**
- ⁴² **John 3:16.**
- ⁴³ **John 3:19-20.**
- ⁴⁴ **John 3:36.**
- ⁴⁵ **John 5:16.**
- ⁴⁶ **John 6:15.**
- ⁴⁷ **John 3:36.**
- ⁴⁸ **John 8:30-47.**
- ⁴⁹ **Perfect Active Participle.**
- ⁵⁰ **2 Corinthians 4:3, 4.**
- ⁵¹ **2 Corinthians 4:6.**
- ⁵² **1 Corinthians 1:26-29.**
- ⁵³ **John 3:32-33.**
- ⁵⁴ **Romans 4:17.**
- ⁵⁵ **Romans 4:20.**