

# *The Apologist*

## *Who were these false teachers?*

**Gnostics**. Although Gnosticism did not blossom fully until the second century, these interlopers may have fired “the opening shots in the fateful struggle between the Church and Gnosticism,” according to J.N.D. Kelly, who sees “Gnostic colouring” in their libertinism and suspects they embraced Christological heresy.<sup>6</sup> “Gnosticism was perhaps the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first three centuries,” according to the popular Christian website gotquestions.org. Influenced by such philosophers as Plato, Gnosticism is based on two false premises: A dualism of spirit (good) and matter (evil); therefore, anything done in the body, even the grossest sin, bears no true consequences because real life exists in the spirit realm only. An elevated knowledge, a “higher truth” known only to select individuals. “Gnostics see themselves as a privileged class elevated above everybody else by their higher, deeper knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> No doubt this “secret knowledge” denies either the deity of Jesus or His full humanity, undermining His finished work on the cross and changing the gospel message. Jude’s reference to dreaming (v. 8) perhaps suggests that the false teachers claim to receive Gnostic dreams and visions. By reviling angelic powers, they demonstrate their rejection of the material world created by the Demiurge (a lesser god often seen as malevolent) since, in Gnostic thinking, angelic powers helped created the physical world. Finally, Jude’s mention of Cain (v. 11) may indicate the false teachers are part of the Gnostic Cainite sect that lived immorally.

**Libertines**. These sexually immoral people bow to no authority and recognize no moral absolutes. Jude exposes them as ungodly, promiscuous, doctrinally unstable, dreamers, defilers of the flesh, despisers of authority, blasphemers, brute beasts, and the list goes on. These false teachers, while offering little evidence of Gnostic Christology, nevertheless deny Christ’s Lordship by the way they live. It’s likely they revile angels, not because they feel superior to them, but because angels, as mediators of the law, uphold moral standards that confront their antinomian lifestyles. They are, in some respects, the life of the church party. They show kindness to gain an edge, flatter to reduce opposition, and ply false humility to marshal support. They are all smoke and mirrors, writing checks no one may cash. Jude calls them waterless clouds, fruitless trees, wild waves of the sea, and wandering stars. When some discerning folk catch wind of their game, they quickly turn into discontented grumblers. Like the enemies of the cross Paul describes to the Philippians, “their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things ...” (Phil. 3:19).

**Pneumatics**. These ecstatic seers claim to receive heavenly visions, thus they despise angels because they fancy themselves above them as spiritual elites. Just as the angels who sinned (v.6) breached their created boundaries to inhabit earth, the pneumatics, through ecstatic visions, try to transcend their created sphere of the physical realm to participate in the heavenly world. With a strong emphasis on grace and the Holy Spirit - but little spiritual maturity to match - they see themselves as exalted above angelic beings.

**Judaizers.** The term “Judaizer” is used in a theological sense to describe the opponents of Paul and Barnabus at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), as well as “false brothers smuggled in” to preach “another gospel” in the churches of Galatia (see Gal. 2:4, 12; 6:12). In this sense, the term refers to Jewish Christians who seek to induce Gentiles to observe Jewish religious customs, limiting the admission of Gentiles into the covenant people of God through circumcision and keeping the ceremonial law. Insisting that “Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved!” (Acts 15:1), these professing believers, who belong to the party of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), pose a serious threat to the gospel of grace and the universality of the Christian mission. As R. David Rightmire explains, “Paul’s Galatian epistle portrays the Judaizers as having come from the Jerusalem church to his churches in Galatia, stressing the need for Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the law, both for full acceptance by God (legalism) and as the basis for Christian living (nomism). They understood keeping the law not only as the means by which the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant could be appropriated, but also as the regulative guide for Christian life within that covenant relationship.”<sup>8</sup>

**Nicolaitans.** Very little is known of this group apart from what we read in Rev. 2:6, 15. Jesus affirms the believers at Ephesus because they “hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans,” which He also hates (miseo - to abhor or find utterly repulsive), although no further details are given. Meanwhile, Christ calls the church at Pergamum to repentance because some “hold fast to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” Here, an association with Balaam (Rev. 2:14) seems to connect the Nicolaitans with those who eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. These same behaviors reflect Jezebel’s false teachings, described later in the letter to Thyatira (Rev. 2:20). There are two main views concerning the Nicolaitans. The first view holds that they are an early Christian cult that either follows or perverts the teachings of Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen as deacons by the congregation in Acts 6:5. The second view understands the designation “Nicolaitan” as denoting the error of creating an unnatural distinction between the clergy and the laity. Those who hold the second view point out that the name “Nicolaitans” is derived from the Greek word nikolaos, a compound word that means “one who conquers and subdues the people.”<sup>9</sup> In any case, evidence from Scripture and early-church leaders indicates that the Nicolaitans teach a doctrine of compromise; that is, total separation between Christianity and paganism is not essential. “It is significant that the ‘deeds’ and ‘doctrines’ of the Nicolaitans are only mentioned in connection with the churches in these two occultic and pagan cities [Ephesus and Pergamum]. It seems that the ‘doctrine’ of the Nicolaitans was that it was alright to have one foot in both worlds and that one needn’t be so strict about separation from the world in order to be a Christian. This, in fact, was the ‘doctrine’ of the Nicolaitans that Jesus ‘hated.’ It led to a weak version of Christianity that was without power and without conviction - a defeated, worldly type of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup>

**Wandering prophets or teachers.** Jude describes the false teachers as having come in by stealth, implying they have hidden their true character and motives. It also indicates they are outsiders, perhaps wandering prophets or teachers. “They are surreptitious and crafty, pretending to be godly members of the Christian church. Paul, similarly, criticized the Judaizers who had infiltrated the ranks of the church to spy out and destroy the liberty

of those committed to the gospel (Gal. 2:3-5).”<sup>11</sup> We may never know with certainty which of these errant groups -

Gnostics, Libertines, Pneumatics, Judaizers, Nicolaitans, or Wandering Prophets - Jude is describing.

But the text gives us a clear picture of their attitudes, demeanors, lifestyles, and tactics. They are ungodly, sneaky, promiscuous, dismissive of authority, blasphemers, profiteers, self-centered, grumblers, arrogant, flatterers - and clearly unbelievers (v. 19).

This harks back to the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as He warns of false prophets, whom He describes as wolves in sheep’s clothing. They may fool people for a while, but ultimately are known by their fruit - their doctrines and lifestyles. “Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?” He asks. “In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So you’ll recognize them by their fruit” (Matt. 7:16-20). Jude and his divine half-

**Consider just a few of the many apostolic warnings  
about interlopers in the body of Christ:**

**Acts 20:28-31**

Paul writes to the Corinthians about “false apostles, deceitful workers” who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ. He even refers to them, tongue-in-cheek, as “super apostles” (11:5; 12:11). And he urges believers not to be surprised that these intruders disguise themselves as “servants of righteousness” because Satan masquerades as an angel of light.

**2 Corinthians 11:12-15**

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**Galatians 1:6-9**

Paul expresses amazement that the Galatians have fallen so quickly under the spell of “some who are troubling you and want to change the gospel of Christ.” He singles out the Judaizers, who add traditional Jewish requirements such as circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath-keeping to Christ’s finished work on the cross (3:1-3).

**Colossians 2:8, 18-19**

John reminds his readers that “Antichrist is coming.” Meanwhile, “many antichrists have come.” They are known by their denial of Jesus as Messiah, and their denial of the Father and the Son, a clear reference to a skewed Christology.

**1 John 2:18-23**

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**1 John 4:1-6**

John further addresses the Docetists, who deny the full humanity of Jesus. “Every spirit [person claiming divine gifting for service] who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist.” (See also 2 John 7-11.)