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1 Corinthians 2:12-16, English Standard Version.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

The New Gnostics.

I was a bit unusual as an academic. I had two very different areas of expertise. One of them was 3D modeling and animation. The other was database and information systems, and that's because this was a much more mature field when I was starting out. For many years, I taught students about digital information. One of the things I would cover in my courses was how to filter massive amounts of information to find just what you need – and then use it for some commercial, military, or scientific purpose. I think that although consciously, I was simply tired of the university and wanted to be a pastor, I think that subconsciously, I was influenced to leave the tech world because I had come to see our society as developing an extreme over-dependence on information, on human-engineered knowledge. It seemed that we felt that we had conquered the world simply by drowning each other in data. We were becoming compulsive about chasing down

countless bits of information, as if having all this data somehow gave us a purpose in life, one that wasn't reliant on pausing and listening to God for direction.

Today, I want to look at four short quotes, three of which are non-biblical and are written by an ancient cleric, and one that is from Paul's first letter to the nascent Christian church that he had formed in the city of Corinth.

Let's consider the first three. They are from someone called Irenaeus, from the City of Lyons in what is today France, although at that time, people in this port city spoke Greek. He is one of the so-called "church fathers" and is known as Irenaeus of Lyons. The church fathers are Christian writers who were extremely influential in early Christian thought and were active from about the year 100 to the year 900 A.D.. In other words, the lives of these writers did not overlap with the lives of the Apostles, but the church fathers were the ones who stepped forward to establish the theological and doctrinal roots of our faith. Most of us are not aware of this, but they were highly influential in forming the Christian Church, including the nature of church services, the organization of the clergy, the prayers and songs we use, and most importantly, how we interpret the Bible. Many of them are considered "apologists", which is a bit of an odd word. They didn't apologize for anything; this word means that they defended Christianity against so-called Christian people who twisted the faith in directions away from the teachings of Jesus. They also defended the faith from pagan persecutors. Irenaeus was one of these apologists. He was born around the year 130 and died around

the year 202. He wrote late in the second century A.D. and was thus one of the early church fathers. One of his biggest concerns were Christian Gnostics.

Gnostics believed that humanity is inherently evil, and that the physical world is corrupt. They were heavily influenced by an ancient Pagan faith that said that the earth and humans were created by an inferior god. Christian Gnostics spent their lives seeking secret, mystical knowledge; they believed that this knowledge was needed for salvation. They were elitists who believed that salvation was reserved only for the few who were deemed spiritually and intellectually worthy. In short, Gnostic Christians believed that Jesus saved humanity, not through his sacrifice, but through secret knowledge that he passed on to only a few people. Of course, we believe that Jesus forgives us and regenerates us through sacrifice, not knowledge. They claimed that there was some magical knowledge that Jesus himself passed down orally, not through the Gospels or the writings of people like Paul the evangelist. This was knowledge that only they, the Gnostics, along with Jesus, knew; these secret truths would lead to their eternal salvation, while those who remained ignorant would not be saved. It was always fuzzy just what they thought this knowledge was. It had to do with how to restore the universe to some perfect state. But the point was they could avoid the hard work involved in purifying themselves and becoming better people; all they had to do was get their hands on some secret information. Gnostic Christians also believed that since humanity was so inferior, Jesus was never a human in any way, shape, or form.

They thought that Jesus only appeared to be human, that his human side was an illusion.

They also believed that God would never enter into any lowly, physical thing on this Earth, so they didn't believe in the deep symbolism of communion in the way that we do.

They couldn't relate to the idea of seeing Jesus', that is God's, body and blood in bread and wine.

Let's look at what Irenaeus had to say. Interestingly, his name means "*the peaceful one*" - despite the fact that he was a fierce and relentless foe of Gnosticism. Our first quote from the writings of Irenaeus says this:

"Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself."

Irenaeus is saying that over-intellectualized faith tends to be carefully dressed up in fancy language to look like the truth but - that it's not the truth that Jesus taught.

Our second quote says:

"When we stand in the light it is not we who illumine the light and cause it to shine but we are illuminated and made shining by the light... God grants his blessings on those who serve him because they are serving him and on those who follow him because they are following him, but he receives no blessing from them because he is perfect and without need."

Irenaeus is striking out here at the elitism of this intellectual form of Christianity. He's saying that these people seem to think that they are the arbiters of what is truth, not Jesus, not God. He says that God blesses people simply because we follow his ways, not

because we have some special mystical knowledge. In other words, it's easy to know how to follow Jesus. The process might be hard, but the path is laid out clearly for us.

Our third quote says:

“For it is not needful, to use a common proverb, that one should drink up the ocean who wishes to learn that its water is salt.”

I like this one a lot. It's rather poetic. The point here is that we don't need special knowledge obtainable only by special people to recognize and understand the teachings of Jesus. Any person can, though Jesus, develop a relationship with God and learn, by emulating Jesus, to treat all people equally, with compassion and empathy, and with love. You don't drink the entire ocean to decide it's salty. It's far, far easier than that. And so is connecting with God.

Let's turn to our last quote, a scriptural quote, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a bustling, fast-paced port city that sat on a small piece of land that connected the main portion of Greece to a peninsula called Peloponnesus. It was a place filled with cultural activities and advanced employment opportunities - as well as crime. In many ways, Corinth was much like America is today. About the time this letter was written, and although Paul and the people of Corinth didn't know it, the city was nearing the end of its glory days. Doom was on its way for this corrupt city. In this letter, Paul is trying to get the believers of Corinth, who are gathered in a small number of small house churches, to understand that they must follow the ways of Christ, not

the worldly ways of human beings. Paul writes:

“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”

Paul wants the Christians of Corinth to step away from the worldly influences of those who live around them. He wants them to look inside themselves, to connect with the Holy Spirit living within them, rather than relying on earthly, human knowledge.

Here is what I think is the Gnostic problem of today. It's not people who claim there is no God or people who believe that we will eventually understand everything through science and technology. It's not even the raw collection of data or the astonishing focus we have on building this gigantic digital network of information. The problem has to do with distraction, with creating a fast paced, demanding, chaotic world where for security, we cling to technology. People are constantly on their phones, responding to texts, reading email, watching short, meaningless info videos, and perusing social media. People will randomly surf the web for hours, watching YouTube, reading random news stories, shopping for stuff that if they had to drive somewhere for it they would never buy and would never need. Young people will spend countless hours locked into video games, responding to the demands of a computer. We don't stop to focus on anything meaningful. What suffers are our spiritual practices.

I don't think that people believe that spirituality is dated, that science and technology will replace faith. At least, not that many people actually believe this. But I do think that technology is preventing us from finding quiet, personal time so we can focus on our spiritual sides. We face astonishing challenges. Back in the centuries just after Jesus left this earth, the early Christians had virtually nothing in the way of science and technology. They weren't saturated with digital information that made them think that surely, with all the data we have at our fingertips, humans alone must be able to understand everything. But even they struggled with this notion of faith, of trusting what we feel inside of us. Even they succumbed to the belief that we could be all that we can be just by getting our hands on some special information.

Please, trust yourself. Trust God. Don't let anyone tell you that you need special knowledge, that you must be a master of technology to be acceptable as a human. Our society demands that we love and absorb all that is technical, but in truth it's just people trying to make money off of us. Don't let yourself get distracted by the ocean of web pages, Facebook pages, videos, text messages, etc., etc. Remember that you can ask Google to find things to read about your faith, but all Google does is look for words in documents. It's actually a stupid piece of software that just happens to have a huge database to search. Google cannot itself tell you anything about God. Take time to be calm, to be quiet and still, to contemplate the Holy Spirit within you. Let the Holy Spirit connect you to your faith, to the ways to be like Jesus in this world.

You know, a few years ago, on a Sunday morning as I stood delivering a message, I was pretty dazed because I had been at the hospital until 5 A.M. I had sat with a man for hours as his wife lay dying. They were both eighty-four and they had gotten married when they were eighteen. He had taken her to the emergency room with what they thought was a minor problem. The ER doc dealt with that, but they did some imaging and discovered that she had advanced heart disease. So, they admitted her to the hospital and put her in a room. Then her heart stopped. A series of nurses worked on her, until they restarted her heart. But she simply wasn't going to make it. While his wife passed away, this man held her hand and told me about their lives, the places they had lived, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

This man turned out to be an accomplished engineer who had run a successful firm, designing and manufacturing complex electronics. He was the engineer's engineer, someone who knows far more about the guts of computers, what makes them tick at the microscopic level, than I do. But you know what he said? As he put his hand on the forehead of his unconscious wife, he told me that the most damaging invention ever created by humans was the computer. I don't believe this in a literal sense, but he had a valid point. He said he hated computers, and he said it vehemently. He felt that technology was preventing people from using their minds. He said that people don't think anymore. They just sit in front of computers and push information around for a living. The worst part, he said, is that everyone thinks they know so much, that they

have all the answers, that anything at all that they want to figure out, they can just pull it off the Internet. No need to be creative. No need to be thoughtful.

This man who had seen the information age born and had made an extremely good living from it bemoaned the fact that we weren't striving to understand anything anymore. You see, the Gnostics were doing something that in a certain sense is quite natural. They wanted to understand. But they were taking the easy way out. They were relying on shallow knowledge gained by humans instead of doing the hard work of using their hearts and their minds to contemplate the mysteries of faith. They could have been using the amazing gifts that God had given them to connect with God. But that was too much work. That was too scary, because it would have caused them to have to admit that there was so much that they did not – and could not – know. It would have caused them to tackle ideas that they could never fully comprehend.

Don't let our ability to do amazing things with science and technology make you think we can replace God with human-made stuff. Find a quiet place to sit down. Do it every single day, even if just for a few minutes. Focus on the Holy Spirit inside you, then follow the Spirit outward, toward God. Let yourself connect with your creator. Don't insist on understanding everything. Just let yourself feel the God who created us, who wants nothing but the best for us, and who will one day explain everything like no human, no computer, will ever be able to. There's nothing wrong at all with

technology; I am myself an extremely heavy-duty user of the Internet and of software. I have to fight every day to avoid the constant interruptions of digital devices. But don't get distracted, don't be a new Gnostic, don't take the easy way out and think that we can understand everything by ourselves. Leave time to use your mind, your creativity - to pray. That's how we connect with God. Prayer. And there is also some hard work that must be done to transform ourselves into truly Godly people who follow the compassionate, empathetic, and forgiving teachings of Jesus. Amen.