

Rod Dixon lives in Bullitt County, Kentucky with his wife and two children. Nestled in low, wooded knobs and know for its rural beauty, this region is a cut-through on the bourbon trail that winds through The Bluegrass. That pastoral setting, where one can smell rye and wheat mash in the air on the drive past, is the back drop for Dixon's characterized examination of faith and the imaginative life. "A Whiskey Maker's Catechism: The New Gnostic Gospel of Lester Caudill" is a wonderful deception, playing with religious analogs, academic referents, and narrative structures. Dixon weaves poetic prose, exploratory catechesis, and astute intellectual and spiritual inquisition into an eerie, meditative blend of fiction. The character of Caudill allows for both disguise and depth—there are no facades but the simplicities of the author's voice—while giving the creator of the document itself, Mr. Dixon, freedom to explore his own idiosyncratic faith, vision, and creative practice. Through Dixon acting as a posthumous editor of the mystic Lester Caudill, readers are invited to contemplate their own spiritual personalities and challenged—strangely—to go and do likewise. It's Dixon's meta-fictive orientation in this piece which cultivates and invites an absorbing theopoetic pitch, allowing readers to wrestle with it's rowdy and calculated invitation to discern the truth via subterfuge. Dixon's work has appeared in several places, including Red Rock Review, Euphony, and Edge. Once a founder and non-fiction editor at *Ontologica: A Journal of Art and Thought*, Dixon spends his days a researcher and developer for a non-profit serving the blind and visually impaired.

# The Whisky Maker's Catechism

The New Gnostic Gospel  
of Lester Caudill

*Rod Dixon*

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*And speaking waters touched my lips from the fountain of the Lord generously.  
And so I drank and became intoxicated, from the living water that does not die.  
And my intoxication did not cause ignorance, but I abandoned vanity,  
And turned toward the Most High, my God, and was enriched by His favors.  
And I rejected the folly cast upon the earth, and stripped it off and cast it from me.*

—*Odes of Solomon* Ode 11, trans. James Charlesworth

## A Guide

I only recall meeting my great-great uncle Lester Caudill once—at a funeral. He was short, hawk-nosed, unimpressive. He said something clichéd like, “The last time I saw you you were barely knee-tall.” I had no idea when he possibly could have seen me as a baby. The Dixons and Caudills had never been one for reunions, at least not my side of the bloodline. And as distant as many of my other paternal relatives were, double could be said of Lester.

I faked a smile. “Well, I’m grown now,” and that was that.

I never knew much about Lester. He left the mountains to attend college at Berea, Kentucky on the GI Bill. Got a degree in chemistry and later became an engineer for Jacob’s Well distilleries, where he pursued the perfection of Jesus’ first miracle—turning water into a beverage worth consuming. Lester built a house on a hill in Marion County, a replica of a medieval stone tower complete with stained glass windows. My grandmother called him an eccentric—his absence said what he thought of his kin.

I didn’t think anything of him after the funeral until three years after his own death. My Aunt, in the midst of a struggle against lung-cancer, threw herself into a genealogical project to collect and preserve as much as our family history as she could. She got a hold of some of his personal effects—several hand-written journals, an American Standard Bible underlined in pencil, and some theological books also marked up with lines and scribbled notes.

“I thought you might be interested in some of this,” she said to me one weekend at my grandparents, her face wan and hairless from another round of chemotherapy. “Some of his books were about those Quaker people you go to church with.”

I suppressed the obnoxious urge to correct her use of the word “church”—in my branch of the Religious Society of Friends we say “meet-

ing” and “meetinghouse”—and instead peeked inside, my interest baited by the thought of what I might find. One of the books in question was the anthology *Quaker Spirituality*, and I noticed to my delight he had underlined some of the very passages I had been struck by. What floored me, however, was the title written in black marker across the cover of one of his notebooks: *Notes toward a New Gnostic Gospel and Other Heresies*.

My family has certainly had its share of rebels. Lester’s grandfather—my great-great-great grandfather—William “Stiller Bill” Caudill, was a Confederate cavalryman and regionally notorious bootlegger, but I never knew of any religious rebels within the family. Other than myself, I don’t know of anyone who strayed past our families’ primitive Free Will Baptist roots. Unless you count my Uncle the Master Mason, but I don’t. Freemasonry only seems sinister because of its commitment to secrecy. In reality it’s largely a moral society that’s ethical premises are mostly in line with Jesus’.

The fact is, thumbing through that notebook of and confirming that it was what it purported to be—a dimly organized attempt at a modern statement of gnostic Christianity—shocked me. One of my relatives attempted this? It was inconceivable. Even more inconceivable was leaving it to be buried once again in the morass of Dixon and Caudill memorabilia. I asked my Aunt if I could take the box home, and she agreed with a shrug and wave of her hand.

I analyzed that notebook off and on for the next several months. It turned out to be an unfinished draft of what could have been something publishable, or at least worth reading. The text was organized topically at times, and at others not at all. Quoted passages related to panentheism were suddenly followed by digressions into soteriology—the study of effects and mechanics of salvation—then return again to the paradox of God’s immanent and transcendent nature. I did my best to decipher the glyphs of his tiny handwriting squeezed into the margins of his journals and books, and to rec-

ognize any logic in the places he underlined and starred, looking for patterns that might reveal his intentions for the *Gospel*. Like a necromancer, I reconstructed his ghost in my mind, so I could demand of it the arc of his vision.

“Why are you so obsessed with him?” my wife asked one cloudless winter night.

Our daughter screamed for me to look at the toy she was playing with. I put down a letter from the senior pastor of a Presbyterian church Lester had donated \$5,000 to years before. The church ran a tutorship program for adults working toward their GEDs, which was why he gave them the money. “He said, *I cannot say much positive of your theology,*” the pastor quoted of Lester hand-delivering the check, “*but I recognize the work of the Lord when I see it.*”

My wife was glaring at me now. “When I read his notes,” I told her, “I can see him locked up in his tower, trying to bring the Divine down to earth. He wrote all this down because he wanted someone to read this, to understand what was going on within him.”

She was unimpressed. I didn't tell her that I saw a lot of myself in Lester Caudill. Not just theologically—though there was that—but as a writer who secretly worried all his scribbling was for nothing. Sometimes, hunched over my computer working on this or that draft, I wondered if my daughter would one day comb through the work I'd leave behind. Would she rediscover me in between those lines? Not the image of me she held as a father, but as I really was and hoped to be. I sometimes pushed these thoughts into the future, willing her to one day search my work. To piece together the lows and ecstasies of my thoughts and dreams, so she could keep them alive.

How much harder must it have been for Lester, who never married or produced an heir? No one to agonize over his intellectual legacy now but me—a great-great nephew he barely knew. He was the eunuch of Acts 8, worrying who would “declare his generation.” I wasn't sure if that made me his Philip, but I knew I had to submerge myself in his words before the spirit

of the Lord swept me up and away as well—if for no other reason than to prove my own writing mattered.

The use of the term *gnosticism* as a descriptive is problematic, because it suggests a singular ideology when in reality it is more accurate to speak of *gnosticisms*. Some scholars have suggested chucking the term all together, to avoid confusion. Nevertheless, the various groups that are placed under the gnostic umbrella share common features. The common denominator of all gnostic ideologies is the importance of obtaining knowledge otherwise denied to society at large. This is actually the meaning of the Greek *gnosis*, to know. As modern gnostic Stephan Hoeller puts it, this is the promise of gnostic faith: Not that you can read or believe, but “know.” Not in the sense of facts or philosophy, but in terms of an experience of the Divine presence (“Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing”).

Why then the use of the loaded term gnostic, when the word *mystic* would point toward the exact same experience? Though I can’t answer for Caudill with 100% certainty, I think his use of the term is a conscious acknowledgment of not only his willingness, but expectation that faith must exceed strict tradition if it is to be relevant in the modern age. Orthodox mystics expect that their spiritual experiences will confirm tradition and Scripture, while the gnostic anticipates the possibility of having to move beyond both (Elaine Pagels *The Gnostic Gospels*).

Gnosticism’s claim to esoteric knowledge is arguably its most offensive feature in relation to our Western sensibilities of egalitarian political correctness. In a culture where a popular historian equates the voice of the people with the voice of God, claims to exclusivity are rarely popular.<sup>1</sup> But hyper-equality is hard to square with Jesus’ claim that his is the narrow way. Look at what he said to the multitude that followed him:

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<sup>1</sup> See the conclusion to Thomas Cahill’s *Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science, and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe* for just such a claim.

When a great multitude came together, and people from every city were coming to him, he spoke by a parable. “The farmer went out to sow his seed. As he sowed, some fell along the road, and it was trampled under foot, and the birds of the sky devoured it. Other seed fell on the rock, and as soon as it grew, it withered away, because it had no moisture. Other fell amid the thorns, and the thorns grew with it, and choked it. Other fell into the good ground, and grew, and brought forth fruit one hundred times.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Luke 8:4-8)

Jesus understood that access to opportunity doesn't confer the ability to make use of it. We all indeed carry a seed of Divine planting, but that hardly means everyone will tend to it.

The Ecclesia Gnostica, possibly the most visible modern-day Gnostic church, lists fourteen points of doctrine in its “An Introduction to the Ecclesia Gnostica.” It isn't in agreement with every gnostic tradition within Christianity, but it contains most of the usual commonalities, and as such provides an excellent frame of reference. In summary, these doctrinal points claim that:

- A divine monad (God) emanated multiple spiritual beings before the creation of the physical universe.
- The material world was created by one of these lesser beings, usually referred to as the Demiurge.
- Humans are the handiwork of this less significant creator, but contain a “spark” of the original divine source.



- Though physical reality often blinds us to the existence of this divine spark, we can be awakened to its existence. This awakening is referred to as gnosis.
- The original divine monad has sent messengers to humanity in order to aid them in the process of gnosis. The greatest of these is Jesus Christ.
- Continual spiritual practice can lead humanity gradually toward a greater awareness of and unity with the true God, liberating us from the flaws of this reality.

As I layout the implicit and explicit theology in Caudill's *Gospel* below, the points of unity and divergence from these doctrinal points will hopefully become apparent.

### **The person of Jesus and the Messianic-spirit**

Caudill makes a distinction between the human Jesus and the living Messianic-spirit, but formulation of the Messiah is more than the stereotypically liberal one—influenced by Abelard's theory of Moral Atonement—which takes Jesus to be a Jewish Buddha and little more. Though great attention is paid to Jesus' teachings on love, this is still very much the Anointed One who stands at the door, knocking (Revelation 3:20).

### **God in the World**

Some of the early gnostics practiced asceticism on account of their belief that all physical matter was contagiously corrupted, a fact which has left many gnostics, both ancient and modern, prone to spiritual escapism. Citing the Genesis account, Caudill defends the sacredness of creation, and appears to support the notion of panentheism, which holds that God is, paradoxically, as much a part of the world as It is separate from it. In this sense, God is both

totally other and, as Meister Eckhart said, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The usual elements of Gnostic cosmology—Archons, Aeons, etc.—are almost entirely absent in Caudill's writing. The outstanding exception is the Demiurge, who Caudill interprets as a metaphor for the jumble of contradictory notions about God bequeathed to us by our parents and culture—the lesser gods of our existence. Caudill wouldn't argue with the notion of the voice of the people being the voice of a god, as long as he could add that it is the voice of an illusory god who is “dumb and blind.”

In this sense, Caudill's theology is influenced by Valentinian gnosticism. Valentinians had no problems with the orthodox assertion that God is one, and that this One was the creator of the cosmos. The difference between the orthodox and Valentinians was that the latter distinguished the common representations of God as Warrior-King and Judge from the actual reality those metaphors pointed to (Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*).

Its unfortunate Caudill doesn't dwell on the concept of the Demiurge at greater length, because it's a rich topic to explore and, contrary to what one might think, isn't as far from the Biblical view of reality as it may seem at first blush. While it is true that no mainstream Jew or Christian would ever dare to go as far as some of their gnostic contemporaries did, claiming that the creator God of the Jewish Scriptures was actually a demonic figure, the Biblical view is often in agreement with the notion that other, lesser gods do indeed exist, and that the world is under the power of evil forces. Consider the 82<sup>nd</sup> psalm, wherein God finds the gods who rule the world to be guilty of failing to promote justice.

God presides in the great assembly. He judges among the gods. “How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the weak, the poor, and the fatherless. Maintain the rights of the poor and

oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy. Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked. They don't know, neither do they understand. They walk back and forth in darkness. All the foundations of the earth are shaken. I said, You are gods, all of you are sons of the Most High. Nevertheless you shall die like men, and fall like one of the rulers.”

Or consider 2 Corinthians 4:3-4,

Even if our Good News is veiled, it is veiled in those who perish; in whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the Good News of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn on them.

The “god of this world” here is a reference to Satan, who Jesus also claims is the ruling force of our reality (John 12:31).

### **Antipas**

I was uncertain which section of this review to place Antipas in, debating on whether to treat her separately or lump her in with the gnostic motifs above. A case could be made for her as Caudill's version of the gnostic *Sophia*, who is wisdom incarnate. But Lester refers to her as a messenger—the meaning of the word *angel*—so who knows. She is an enigma—a holy ghost weaving her way in and out of Caudill's spiritual life.

Lester's visions, almost always recounted in third-person, remind me of the Shakers. Both in their unique emphasis of the feminine aspects of Christ and God—perhaps this is what Antipas symbolizes—and the period of Shaker history called The Era of Manifestation. The Era was a period of spiritual revival in which several Shakers, mostly young women, were visited by spirits calling the Believers back to their religious roots. Many were unable to express their ecstatic experiences fully in words, and used art instead. Lester is

likely doing something much the same by writing his own visionary accounts in a more distant narrative form. Sometimes space must be created between an individual and their religious experiences in order to make sense of them.

The heart of Shaker theology is the experience of the Second Coming of Christ inwardly in one's self, an idea that resonates with Caudill's own thought. There were two Shaker communes in Kentucky, both of which are restored and now ran as a living historical record of the people who lived and worshiped there, and both an hour-and-a-half drive from where Lester lived.

They are amazing places to visit. My wife and I go to the one at Pleasant Hill once a year. You can feel a palpable spirit of peace among the rows of shade trees, plain buildings, and stretches of stone walls that lounge across the hills. The last time we were there, walking along a hot gravel path and brainstorming biblical names for our second child, I told my wife visiting Pleasant Hill was the most depressing of our annual rituals.

"Why depressing?"

"Because these people embodied their faith and now it's just a glorified B&B," I spit on the ground. "It's a relic. *Come and look, everyone. On this spot here in 1849 Christianity was once lived.*"

"But it can still move people."

I've tried to hold on to that notion throughout my work on this project—that fragments of the past have the power to change us still.

### **Messiah as Seed, Light, and the Kingdom of Heaven**

Some may knock Caudill's almost interchangeable use of the terms *Seed*, *Light*, and *Kingdom of God* as a symptom of slipshod thinking, but I think it reveals more about inadequacy of language to succinctly capture the reality of the religious experience than a lack of clear thought on his part.

Messiah is *Seed* in the sense that, though his presence may start small, can grow into something mighty. The Messiah is the bringer of *Light* who dispels

the darkness of ignorance. *Kingdom of Heaven* is used here in the same sense as it is in *The Gospel of Thomas*, as a state of being that in some degree can be realized here and now. There is much understanding to gain from meditating on Caudill's description of the human soul as an undisciplined mob, compared to his alternate phrase for the Kingdom—coming under the rule of God.

All of these metaphors, though incomplete in themselves, point toward the truth of the mystic's inner experience of communion with the Divine. The gnostics referred to this experience as "The Bridal Chamber." The metaphor of the religious life as a marriage runs throughout the New Testament, and Caudill uses a Rufus Jones excerpt on page 50-51 to explain what such a marriage entails.

### **New Birth**

If our relationship with God is a marriage, what is the fruit of its consummation? Probably the most apt metaphor used here to describe communion with the Messianic-spirit is rebirth. Caudill quotes the letters of the apostle Paul often here and at length, so to better understand his thought, I think it prudent to analyze Paul's. The apostle uses two phrases which are more or less synonymous with rebirth: "new creation" and "new self" or "new man." Though he only uses both these terms a handful of times, they describe the thought at the center at Paul's theology: by being baptized into Christ's death we also participate in Christ's resurrection (Romans 6:4).

Law cannot transform us, it only reveals what is expected of us, which is why Paul goes to such pains to set faith and works in their proper order. If we could make ourselves righteous and holy entirely out of our own effort we would have reason to boast, but Paul says we can only boast in what God has done for us (Galatians 6:14-15).

External behaviors and symbols—e.g., bodily circumcision—are nothing compared to the change that occurs in the character of our being when we

are in right relationship with God. When our heart is made of stone—under the first Adam/in sin/still the old self, pick your metaphor—we think in a worldly and selfish way.

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their hearts; who having become callous gave themselves up to lust, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you did not learn Christ that way; if indeed you heard him, and were taught in him, even as truth is in Jesus: that you put away, as concerning your former way of life, the old man, that grows corrupt after the lusts of deceit; and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, who in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of truth. (Ephesians 4:17-24)

What's interesting is that, according to Paul, while sin certainly distances us from God, it isn't sin that initially causes the gap, but rather the opposite: it is our enmity toward God that leads to sin in the first place (Romans 1:28-31). Our divorce from God puts us outside God's wise and divine rule, and in His absence we devise harsh and selfish worldly wisdom. But when we allow God to work in us—in Caudill's terminology, when we enter the Kingdom of God—our minds are gradually renewed and no longer see things in a worldly way (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). But most of all, it is a righteous relationship with God that distinguishes the new creation from the old (Colossians 3:5-11).

## Salvation

For Caudill, the righteous relationship allowed by rebirth is itself a level of salvation. His thought—or at least my understanding of it—proposes two kinds of salvific realities—the one in the here and now, and the one in the hereafter.

In terms of salvation in the present reality, his is the traditional Christian understanding of atonement, meaning “at-one-ment” with God. Where Caudill differs is in the theory of how this atonement is accomplished through the Son of Humanity. The church has never settled on one definitive atonement theory, though the most popular among Christians today is the theory of Penal Substitution—the belief that Jesus paid the price for the sins and evils of humanity, thus satisfying God’s sense of justice. Caudill’s atonement is more gnostic in nature. In his view, humanity’s problem isn’t that its sin offends God’s sense of justice, but that humanity is ignorant of its divine heritage. Sin is the symptom, not the disease. The historical Jesus provides us with the model for what a spirit-led life looks like, while the inner, undying Messiah provides us with the direction and ability to live that type of life ourselves. This is accomplished by dying to the old self, which is defined by its estrangement from God, and rising as a new creation, which as a citizen of the Kingdom seeks to love both God and neighbor.

This level of salvation is exclusive—some will wrestle with God and taste a slice of the Kingdom in this life, while others will not. It’s important to point out this wrestling with the divine is not limited to Christians. The Messiah is the true light that enlightens every man (John 1:9), and as such is available to everyone, whether they are outwardly knowledgeable of Christianity or not.

Where the here-and-now salvation is limited, Caudill’s view of salvation in the hereafter appears more inclusive, though I’m reluctant to call it universal. The question, which Caudill implies with an almost off-hand comment, is

how big do we imagine God's mercy and love to be? Is ours a God who will only bend the rules for a few people that meet the requirement of believing the right doctrinal point—a works salvation if I've ever heard one—or a God who wishes to reunite with all creation?

### **Authority**

New religious expressions often start with a spirit of creativity that, in part because of its intensity, is nearly impossible to sustain for any lengthy period of time. In the name of stability traditions develop, bureaucracies are formed, and scripture is recorded. With the religion institutionalized, the prophets are replaced by priestly classes who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Gnostic tendencies, like any mystical impulse, are an attempt to pull the movement back to its unpredictable, spirit-led roots.

The struggle then is between the Apollonian priestly caste and the Dionysian mystics, or in the words of the apostle Paul, between the letter, which kills, and the spirit, which gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Caudill never questions the inspiration of some Scripture, the fact that the vast majority of his citations are from the canon tells us just how much respect he had for the Holy Bible. But the use of outside sources alongside Scripture—with no apparent hierarchical difference between the two—is telling. Inspired texts are valuable, certainly he says, but only insofar as they lead the reader beyond ink on the page and into their source. This is the minority view, as religious institutions and the people that inhabit them have rarely been keen on accepting the truth that God does not dwell in temples built by human hands (Acts 7:48).

But religious institutions have their place and strengths, a fact Caudill largely ignores. His reasoning for this can perhaps be found in a passage he underlined in a text written by an adherent of the religious tradition I myself am a part of—The Religious Society of Friends.



The perennial justification for Quakerism lies in its energetic assertion that the kingdom of heaven is within us; that we are not made dependent upon any outward organization for our spiritual welfare. Its perennial difficulty lies in the inveterate disposition of human beings to look to each other for spiritual help, in the feebleness of their perception of that divine voice which speaks to each one in a language no other ear can hear, and in the apathy which is content to go through life without the attempt at any true individual communion with God. (Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds*)

Caudill's utter neglect to discuss religion in organized terms is an attempt on his part, I suspect, to force anyone taking his ideas seriously to depend on themselves spiritually, and thus forcing them inward into an encounter with the divine. It is the religious equivalent of teaching a child to swim by shoving him or her into a pool. While I can appreciate the place Caudill is coming from, he ignores Jesus' statement that is when two or more come together that he is present, not one. We need the letter as a point of reference to judge our experiences of the spirit by, as much as we need our brothers and sisters in Messiah. If for no other reason, because they are the ones who, when we think our head is in the third circle of heaven, will tell us it is really up our ass.

Likewise, it is precisely here that I find myself the most critical of Lester Caudill's theologizing. A religion dedicated entirely to reason will suffer from perpetual staleness and rigidity, but much of Christian history is an account of the abuses and dangers of passion. And it was no less than the apostle Paul, one of the New Testament's loudest proponents of the centrality of the *experience* of the spirit, who insisted that the most dramatic spiritual gifts are the least important (1 Corinthians 13 and 14). The problem isn't Caudill's failure to recognize this—he's aware. It's that he doesn't seem to take it seriously

enough to explicitly admit that religion's optimal position is to sustain the creative tension between order and chaos, rather than falling too far into either one.

As mentioned above, Caudill's *Gospel* was in poor shape organizationally speaking. In fact, I can't say within any degree of certainty that he ever had any intention of sharing it with the outside world. The catechistic, question-answer format certainly fits something meant for public consumption, but there's always the chance that he was only recording an ongoing mental dialogue, questioning his own doctrine in an attempt to hone it. Though I think the latter unlikely, it's a possibility I can't discount.

If it was his intent to someday publish this material, it's actually better that the responsibility fell onto my shoulders rather than his alone. Having an editor present the manuscript to the public seems less pompous than proclaiming it entirely from the seat of his own judgment.

Of course there would have been ways around that if an editor hadn't been a part of the picture. Lester could have taken a page right out of the gnostic playbook and released the *Gospel* pseudonymously. The gnostics, as with many other ancient writers, were fond of attributing their works to spiritual celebrities, clothing their manuscripts with the weight their names carried—the apostles Paul, Thomas, and Peter all had books pseudepigraphically attributed to them. Even the alleged authorship of the canonical gospels is a matter of questionable tradition—the books commonly referred to as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written anonymously. Lester could have “found” the manuscript of some spiritual thinker, fictional or real, and credit them with the creative work. People have an easier time swallowing things when some figure with at least the pretense of authority pronounces them legitimate.

I can't say there's anything terribly original within Caudill's notes, save his interpretation of the Demiurge perhaps—and the mysterious Antipas who

appears throughout—but I think his *New Gnostic Gospel* important all the same. If for no other reason, because reading it may encourage others to attempt this exercise their selves—sitting down and writing out a clear and detailed summary of their beliefs in the form of an inner-dialogue. Parroting what we’ve been told is one thing, but sitting down and asking *Do my beliefs line up with my experience of the Divine?* is something wholly other. Caudill’s *Gospel* forces the reader to acknowledge that if they haven’t at least heard a whisper of the still, small voice within, then they have nothing authentic to bring to the conversation. I’m reminded of Margaret Fell, who wrote:

In the Year 1652 it pleased the Lord to draw him (George Fox) toward us...he spoke...as followeth:...How that Christ was the Light of the world and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this Light they might be gathered to God...And then he went on and opened the Scriptures, and said, “The Scriptures were the prophets’ words and Christ’s and the apostle’s words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord...You will say, Christ saith this, and the apotles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?” This opened me so that it cut me to the heart...and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, “We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves.”

We can memorize every verse of the Bible, but if we don’t have a relationship with the spirit of Truth, then all we have are empty words. Sacred books can be forgotten, tongues can be stopped, prophecies can fail, bodies can decay—but the Light of Life and Love will never cease.

But I think there is more to value than that. Within Caudill's thoughts and notes is a Christianity worth getting excited about. Though there is much to flesh out, his is a vision of a faith that is:

- Comfortable with mystery
- Mystically personal in its relation to God
- Free thinking
- Spirit-led
- Open to risk
- And most importantly—centered in the Law of Love

This is his distilled, modern gnostic Christianity. And it's through his *Gospel* that Lester Caudill, that whisky wizard, points back at us from the grave, demanding of us not what we believe, but what we *know* of our Lord.

Rod Dixon  
Louisville, Kentucky  
July 2011

## Lester Caudill's *Notes Toward a New Gnostic Gospel and Other Heresies*

*Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy.  
Nor his accepted brethren—whom, tyrant, he calls free—lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale  
religious lechery call that virginity that wishes but acts not!  
For every thing that lives is Holy.*

– William Blake, Chorus to “A Song of Liberty”

### **Who was Jesus?**

He is the *Messiah*, the Anointed One (Mark 8:29).

### **Anointed with and for what?**

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:16-19)

As with many of Jesus' words, this passage has physical and spiritual applications. When we are freed of our spiritual poverty and blindness, and our captivity in sin (which are really all the same thing: our separation from God) then we will be able to give aid and freedom to our brothers in sisters that are oppressed by the corrupt powers and systems of our world. It is only with

God's help, however, that we have any hope of freeing the captives for good, rather than perpetuating the same mistakes for future generations to face further down the pike. As Thomas Merton writes, the individual wishing to change the world without doing so from a living centeredness in the Messianic-spirit will constantly find their work tainted by the "contagion" of their own ego and prejudices ("Contemplation in a World of Action").

### **Is there a difference then between the man called Jesus and the Messianic-spirit?**

Jesus was a man born of Jewish parents. His genealogy (traced back through his father's side!) only goes back to Abraham (Matthew 1:1-16). The more fanciful family tree contained in Luke takes his bloodline back to Adam, but notice that the two genealogies do not match even one generation back. Where Luke lists Joseph's father as Eli, Matthew lists it as Jacob.

The Messianic-spirit (referred to by John as the *Logos*) however, is said to have existed eternally. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

The notion that Jesus possessed two natures within himself that were intimately united often causes a lot of confusion for people. They incorrectly diagnose it as a schizophrenic theory, when they really mean something closer to multiple personality disorder.

But they are only troubled because they mistakenly think of the human personality as a singular entity, when it is more analogous to a confederacy. You do not believe me? Try praying silently for the next ten minutes. You will soon discover that the individual you think of as *you* is really a multitude. There is the you that wants to pray. Then there is the you that thinks about other ways you could better utilize your time, like by watching TV. There is the you that feels guilty and frustrated because you are incapable of focusing on your prayer. There is the you that wants to recall the lyrics from the last

song you heard on the radio while driving home from work. Our psyche's are not unilateral institutions. Inside all of us are a fragmented mob of impulses, and the pieces constantly vie for the seat of power.

**Tell me about one of the fragments of your own personality.**

He was in the process of crossing the desert when he awoke to find Antipas waiting just outside the mouth of the cave he had taken shelter in. Her eyes glowed in the light of the fire.

"I need a drink," he told her, as if it had been seconds since they last spoke, rather than months.

"You have dedicated your life to crafting a shadow of that which you truly thirst. Rise up! The living spirit is within your grasp."

He had been walking the wilderness for longer than he could remember, with no idea how far he had travelled, or how much further was left to go. Nothing for months but sun, sand, and silence. The word of encouragement she brought was not one he wanted to hear, and he told her has much.

"Nothing has caused more confusion than the overemphasis on the title *Christos*," she said, as if he had asked. "It turned Jesus from an example to be followed into an object set aside to be admired from afar."

Antipas rose above him, her black habit fluttering emptily. She was a disembodied head in a robe, the train of which seemed seven miles long. "A more useful term is the *Son of Man*. As in: the sum of what humanity can hope to become." ("The Antipas Fragment").<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Antipas is a contraction of *Antipater*, which is commonly translated as "like the father," but literally means "opposite the father." No record of such a manuscript exists outside of Lester's notes. I suspect it was a work of fictional mysticism Caudill was in the process of writing. The value of such a practice may be lost on some, but it is one the gnostics—who understood that truth can exist outside of factuality—would appreciate. As a writer I imagine fictional characters up all the time. I write detailed histories about them. I give them emotions, thoughts, and subconscious tendencies, all in order to make them appear more real. Sometimes I even write things in their voice and pass that off as the product of a real person.

**Are you saying we can all be sons and daughters of God?**

As many as are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God, and are capable of being complete as God is complete (Romans 8:14; Matthew 5:48).<sup>3</sup>

**Should we expect this kind of unity with God to actually happen to anyone besides Jesus?**

God Almighty I should think not. Jesus is Messiah, High Priest, Son, and Lord. Still, there is as much danger in setting one's sights too low as there is setting them too high.

**What of salvation?**

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

**How did Jesus, while alive, say he would be there for his disciples after death?**

“I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, that he may be with you forever,—the Spirit of truth, whom the world can't receive; for it doesn't see him, neither knows him. You know him, for he lives with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16-17).

**Does this mean the Word, or the Light of Messiah, or the Rule of God is an internal reality?**

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But the lack of factuality in the mouthpiece's words doesn't affect the spirit of truth behind them. —Ed.]

<sup>3</sup> [To put Lester's thoughts on perfection in a more concrete frame, Jesus only mentions one specific way that people can be like God the Father—by loving evil individuals as much as good ones (Matthew 5:43-48). —Ed.]



Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that God's Spirit lives in you, that Jesus is in you (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 13:5)? Ignore anyone who claims it necessary to bring the Anointed down from heaven. Stay clear of those who claim the Lord's blessing must be bought; named and claimed. Reject any who would descend into the abyss and pull Jesus up like a fish drawn out from darkness. There is no need to fret here or there. The Word is at hand, waiting to spill out of your mouth. It calls out from within you like the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the pathway of the Lord."

**If it is true that we have access to an inner Messiah as the above passage attests, do we have evil in us as well?**

Antipas was next to him on a ridgeline, both of them looking down into a holler of thorn bushes below. He immediately recognized it from his childhood. An ugly sore of a place that was both amusing and bitter to recall.

"My brother Henry described this place to me when I was a boy," he told her. "It was deer season, and I was struggling to find game. Henry said there was a ridge where the deer hid and no hunter ever went, because the only passable route up to it was through this valley of thorns. 'Only the bravest hunters would dare it,' he said.

"I took the bait. I followed his directions and waded through that mess the next day. When I got home my skin was slashed from shoulder to toe, my flannel shirt ruined, my legs covered in chigger bites. I wanted to bust out when Henry laughed at me. He could not believe anyone was fool enough to buy it."

Antipas said nothing, her face unreadable. The land beneath them looked as nasty as ever. He thought of the day his family received the telegram that Henry's bomber had been shot down over France. His mother's legs gave out while reading it. She sat on the floor and sobbed unapologetically, like a child.

The connection had occurred to him before, but it seemed significant to him at this moment that his brother's unfulfilled passion to become a master bootlegger was the inspiration for his own decision to learn the science of distillation.

"Do you know what it is?" Antipas asked, her green eyes on the holler below.

"My past."

"Your soul," she corrected, though the distinction was lost on him.

He thought of Korea, where he had been an artilleryman. He never saw the bodies, but he knew what a shell that size did. He smashed strangers and an entire countryside to pieces because that was what he got paid to do. Because a godless, Red mass of oppression threatened everything good in the world, and the only way to defeat a strongman was to beat him with his own weapons. Or so he believed then.

"I don't want to go down there."

Though there was nothing maternal about her, he considered Antipas to be more feminine than any other woman he had ever known. Not because of the power underneath her silence (though there was that) but because he sensed at the center of her a mystery he would never penetrate.

"God must be worshipped in truth as well as spirit," she said.

Her response startled him, but she was right. It was easy to rail against the failures of the Cains, Judases, and Constantines of the world. How much harder it was to admit: *It is I who has been the betrayer. I am the one who is lost.*

The only other choice was failure. He set his face forward, toward the briars, carefully making his way down the lumpy ridge, knowing he would never draw closer to God if he refused to come to terms with who and what he was.

**What of the Kingdom of God? Is this strictly an outer reality, or an inner one as well?**

The Kingdom is within you (Luke 17:21), and when you wake up to that fact you will call out like Jacob, “Surely the Lord is here, and I knew it not” (Genesis 28:16).

**So does Messiah have no physical presence in the world?**

When I fought in Korea (a sin I beg forgiveness for daily) the Red Cross set up a field hospital not far from our encampment. It was a sanctuary in a land beset by madness, for none who came to them for help were turned away. There were no enemies there, only the saved, the dead, and the dying.

My XO hated their all-comers policy, but when he found out the head doctor was an American, he was furious. It did not help anything that his fiancée back home had recently written to tell him the marriage was off and that he had been drinking heavily and sleeping very little since then. I drove him out in one of the jeeps from motor pool so he could tell the doctor off, the morning steamy with the smell of *gomguk* and summer mist. I stood off to the side while they argued. In a tent across from us, a nurse searched for a vein to insert an IV on a woman covered in dirt. Half her hair was burnt off, and one side of her face looked like it had taken a load of birdshot. I was surprised by the lack of blood. Face wounds are usually a mess.

“You’re aiding the enemy,” my XO shouted.

The American doctor pinched the bridge of his gin-blossomed nose. “This is a hospital. We don’t have enemies, only patients.”

“You don’t have enemies? America is at war. We’re surrounded by enemies.”

The doctor’s eyes were flashes of lightning dancing across clouds. With more pluck than I could have mustered, he said his citizenship was in heaven, and left the lieutenant to figure it out for himself.

I looked at the sadness on the doctor's face as he passed, and my heart suddenly knew that the spirit of the Messiah was as much a part of the world as it ever was. As the faithful we manifest Messiah's physical presence in the world. This does not mean that the parts of that body will always agree or express their faith in the same manner, because they do not. It means as long as there are people loyal enough to live out his vision, the Messiah will always be walking the earth, healing the sick, laying a hand on the shoulder of out-cast.

I knew something else that day. I saw it in my XO's pale, hung-over face. He didn't kill the man, but that doctor was already dead in his heart.

**Some Christian, especially gnostic, sects have claimed matter is evil, but the above passages seem to disagree with this view. What more do you have to say of God in the physical world?**

In God we live, move, and have our being. Of him, through him, and to him are all things (Acts 17:28; Romans 11:36).

**So the physical world isn't entirely evil, that is, something to be rejected and/or escaped?**

God saw what He had made, and what do you know, it was good (Genesis 1:31).

**I thought the gnostics believed the Demiurge created the cosmos, a lesser being than the true God of the Universe. Is the God of creation something we must move beyond in order to reach the God?**

Like with any good myth, nothing but mischief is wrought by the individual that takes its story or symbols too literally, but there is a truth for us in the myth of the Demiurge. The foundation of our inner-reality, that is, our psychological perspective of the world, is a mash of cultural jetsam, hearsay, the

(conscious and unconscious) intentions of our parents, and accident. The creator of such a world would be better described as blind and dumb than the Source of all that is good.

The roots of the word itself point us in the right direction: Demiurge from the Greek *dēmiourgos*, literally meaning the “worker of the people;” the laborer of the mob. I am reminded of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “Democracy.”

*In great centers we shall aliment the most cynical prostitutions, and massacre logical revolts...ours will be a ferocious philosophy...rabid for comfort.*

Yes, that describes the soul ruled by the whims of culture quite well.

So indeed, we must go beyond our conceptions of the Creator that arise as a result of conditioning and the dumb circumstances of birth. The Demiurge is our false conception of Divinity that, though it has no objective reality, appears frightfully godlike in our subjectivity. We worship the Demiurge when we accept the mores of our society without question, and when we transfer our own failings and hang-ups on to the Divine One. We see this at work Old Testament, where the depiction of God oscillates at times between a jealously angry parent and a capricious murderer. It is this false image that must be surpassed to reach “the God above God” (Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*).<sup>4</sup> We do that in part by looking to the Anointed One, who according to Paul “all the fullness<sup>5</sup> [of God] was pleased to dwell in” (Colossians 1:19).

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<sup>4</sup> [For a long time I didn’t want anything to do with Christianity. Not the New Testament, not even Christ himself. This mainly as a result of the behavior I observed—and endured—of people claiming the title “Christian.” Then I heard the living Messiah speak. I was arguing with a former co-worker who said a recent tidal wave—that had fallen on the Pacific like the tower of Siloam—was God’s way of punishing unrepentant Muslims. Outraged I said, “That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing Jesus talked about.” But before I could continue, I felt a voice say plainly in my heart, HOW IS IT THAT YOU KNOW WHAT I HAVE OR HAVE NOT SAID? YOU NEVER GAVE ME A CHANCE. It was the truth—I had let others define Jesus for me rather than letting him teach me himself. —Ed.]

<sup>5</sup> [The word translated as “fullness” is *pleroma*. See note #7 for more on the significance of the term. Frankly, I find Lester’s assertion that communing with the fullness of God is simp-

And who is able, through his love, to fill us with that fullness as well (Ephesians 3:19).

But do not despair; refinement is the hand that crafts all things great. Even whisky starts as a mess so dreadful it is referred to as *wort*. It is the process its elements endure that transforms them into something of value.

### **Can one's religion be a true religion if it doesn't involve interaction with the external reality?**

Pure religion is this: to visit the afflicted and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27). Consider your religious life as an electrical circuit. You move up and inward to commune with the Light, but the circuit is not complete until you bring part of the Light back down with you and out into the world. This is what Jesus means in *The Gospel of Thomas*:

When you join the two into one, and when you make the internal like the external, and the external like the internal, and what is above like what is below...then will you be under God's rule. (22, Author's translation)

Better yet, consider your religious life a barrel of whisky. There is indeed a great and mysterious process that must take place internally. It must age within the solitary depths of inward-darkness. This is not a safe process; it is combusive. There will be expansion, loss, and we are not complete until we are poured out and swallowed.

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ly a matter of moving past the false god of cultural conditioning to be grossly insufficient and his earlier good ol' boy defense of creation with the Genesis proof-text downright trite. If the world were nothing but sunshine and butterflies this might suffice, but it isn't. The traditional gnostic explanation for evil in the world—that the Creator god is a second, lesser god who was either ignorant or ethically ambivalent—while unsettling, is far more plausible given the brutish nature of existence. While astonishingly intricate, there is little in creation that suggests an ethically superb designer. Indeed, let us train our eyes on “the God above god,” but that requires accepting far more than what Lester suggests. —Ed.]

**How did Jesus react when people attempted to make him the central point, as opposed to his message and example?**

“It came to pass, as he said these things, a certain woman out of the multitude lifted up her voice, and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which nursed you!’

“But he said, ‘On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it’” (Luke 11:25-28).

**So our behavior and relationship with God is more important than what we intellectually believe about God?**

I had a vision once in prayer, after my angel had left me for good and I had finished crossing a kind of spiritual desert. I knelt before the enthroned Messiah. A golden cloud shrouded him, so that all that was visible was one sandaled foot. I wanted to feel that foot between my hands and bless it with my lips, but on the floor between us lay a bloody robe. I crawled over it to get to him, but when I took hold of his foot I was so covered in gore I inadvertently got some of it on him. Aghast, I apologized for my clumsiness, but Jesus stopped me with a word.

IT WAS NOT BY REASON OR UNDERSTANDING, BUT BY BLOOD THAT YOU WERE FREED.

Certainly there was intellect involved in Jesus’ ministry, but his greatest lesson was one of sweat and blood, which is to say his life. He lived an existence of divine obedience, and thereby laid down an example for us all.

We should apply our minds in examining our faith, but often we use our intellect more to hide from the demands on the Good News, rather than to come into them. I have done this many times in my own life while reading the Sermon on the Plain. *Surely Jesus cannot actually mean for me to never resist evil with violence*, and so I construct an elaborate mental argument to make Jesus’

words mean the opposite of what they say. "*Enemies*" must mean here *gossips and office rivals, not those who would actually take my life*, and other such nonsense.

The real problem is not that I think Jesus words wrong (though at times I may indeed have my doubts) but that keeping the Sermon on the Plain as my guide and rule would mean living a life that looked more like, well...his. And the thought of that fills me with terror.

The matter is quite simple. The bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world? Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the Church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, priceless scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament. (Søren Kierkegaard)

The people who resisted Jesus the most consistently were the religious experts and zealots of his day. They thought they knew God in their minds, but their hearts were too fat to recognize the Truth working wonders in front of them. Their faith in their own knowledge blinded them to the labor of the spirit in their own reality. As the Lord's own brother wrote: even demons know that God is one (James 2:19). They shudder in that knowledge, yet it does them no good in the end.



You want to know God? Go beyond these letters, the constructs in your mind, and enter into the life of flesh, sweat, neighbors, sorrow, joy, enemies, surprise, clinging misery, and yes, blood. How long before you let go of your written words? They are but a temporary measure, a shadow of Heavenly things [Hebrews 8:5]. You seek God, life, salvation? Read the Word in your heart.<sup>6</sup>

**What then is salvation?**

To know God and Jesus the Messiah (John 17:3).

**Okay, but if it is not by intellectual beliefs, how will we be recognized as members of the body of the Messiah?**

By the love we have for one another. This is how we will be known as his disciples (John 13:34-35).

**Obviously love is more important than correct theology, what else does Jesus have to say of the importance of love?**

When asked what the greatest command of all was, Jesus said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. A second likewise is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:35-40).

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<sup>6</sup> [I'm not sure if Lester is primarily speaking here to the reader, or himself. Did he feel the long shadow of the written word hanging over his head already? Its false whispers of permanence—its dangerous tendency to appear as a tower leading up into, while functioning as a hedge of separation from, the very reality one claims as an author to be committed to exploring. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Great Divorce*, the danger every artist faces is losing sight of the subject and falling in love with the telling. —Ed.]

I may reverse Babel; master quantum physics; have enough faith to move Madison Avenue to the Appalachians; give my farm and savings account to the poor; but without love, I have nothing. For the law is fulfilled in a word: love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3; Galatians 5:14).

### **What about attending church and Christian rock concerts? Surely that's as important?**

If God were speaking to Amos today, he would say:

*I despise your Christmas feasts. I cannot stand the empty promises of your stadium-filled revivals. I will not accept your offerings of Christian bric-a-brac, Jesus t-shirts, and bumper stickers. Take away the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your electric guitars. But let justice roll on like rivers, and righteousness like a mighty stream* [Amos 5:21-24].

This, then, is our religion. "To feel that which God begets in our hearts preserved alive by God, to be taught by him to know him, to worship, and live to him, in the leadings and by the power of his Spirit" (Isaac Pennington, Undated letter to unknown correspondent).

### **Is the Light of God present only in a chosen few, or all humanity?**

By God's grace, the light that enlightens everyone has come, bringing salvation to us all (John 1:9; Titus 2:11).

### **Is it possible then that's God's promise of salvation extends beyond professing Christians?**

Our trust is in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, *especially* those who believe (1 Timothy 4:10). Did not the apostle Paul congratulate the Greeks for their recognition of an unknown God, and proceed to acknowledge that God is "not far from each one of us?" (Acts 17:23-27) Was this not what the Lord meant when he said to Jonah, If you can have pity on

a plant, which you did nothing to make grow, should I not have pity on an entire city of heathens who can't discern their right from their left hand? (Jonah 4:10-11)

Our conception of God's love is too small; we would do well to listen more to the William Penn's of the world.

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers.

### **What then is salvation?**

"This then is salvation—when we marvel at the beauty of created things and praise their beautiful Creator" (Meister Eckhart).

### **What is the relationship between being born anew and entering the Kingdom of God?**

"Most certainly I tell you, unless one is born of water and spirit, he can't enter into the Kingdom of God! That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew'" (John 3:5-7).

### **Does being born anew mean believing things about either Jesus, the Messianic-spirit, God, or the Bible?**

Faith is best described as a form of trust. Crying "Lord, Lord" is not enough to enter the kingdom (Matthew 7:21), and believing things *about* Jesus is not the same as believing enough *in* him to order your life on his vision. I have never been married, but I have attended my share of wedding ceremonies. My great-niece was married just a few years back. It was a dreary Catho-

lic affair, with nothing to drink afterward but cheap wine and cheaper beer. I dozed off halfway into the Mass, but I know that the groom did not ask the bride if she believed everything she had ever been told about him, but if she would join herself to him in order that the two may become one. As Rufus Jones wrote:

Christ for the (Christian) mystic is the Eternal Lover, the Bridegroom of souls. He is the crown and culmination of divine revelation, and in His life and person He has forever made visible and vocal in our world the mind, the will, the heart, the character of God. He is an eternal manifestation of God, striking his being into bounds at a definite period of history, being born in human form in time and space, living a life of limitless love and forgiveness and going the way of the cross in unspeakable agony of suffering that He might forever show the consummate way of the spiritual life, and finally triumphing over defeat and death in a resurrection which proves Him to be a new type and order of spiritual life. He is thus the head of a new race, the first of a new series, the founder of a new Kingdom, the revealer of a new way of living. His divine love wooing, pleading, appealing, enduring all things, suffering with those who sin, and sharing the common tragedies of life with us, is the power unto salvation for all who understand and see its significance. To be saved, then, would be to live by the impact and inspiration of His life, to feel the appeal of His personality, the contagion of His spirit, the drawing force of His unspeakable love, the operation of His invisible and eternal presence within, making the old life impossible and recreating in the inner man a new will, a new heart, a new mind and a new natured self, so that the old self with its instinctive tendencies no longer lives, but Christ at the center as the force and spring of action, makes all things new. (The Later Periods of Quakerism)

**What emphasis does Paul put on being born anew?**

“We were buried therefore with him through baptism to death, that just like Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

“But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but what counts is a new creation” (Gal 6:14-15).

**Are there other places in Scripture that speak of us being newly created through our relationship with the Lord?**

“I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my ordinances, and do them” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

This then is the covenant Yahweh will make, that he will carve his law in our hearts, and we will be his people (Jeremiah 31:33).

**And does not Jesus claim to be the initiator of the New Covenant during the Last Supper?**

He is the lifeblood of the New Covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of error (Matthew 26:28).

**Will everyone experience this rebirth and indwelling of the spirit?**

The seeds have been cast, so you tell me. Will they find thorns, or soil as rich and black as coal? Is there rain in your sky to nourish the sprout, or a murder of crows to swallow it up? (Luke 8:5-8)

### **That sounds elitist. I thought Jesus came for the benefit of all?**

Understand that the Son of Humanity wishes to gather all of us like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings before a storm [Matthew 23:37], and our hope is that all will things will one day be reconciled to their Creator, but you cannot force someone into a genuine change of heart any more than you can make good Kentucky bourbon out of Russian potatoes. Love means respecting the soul liberty of others, especially in times of difference.

### **What of salvation?**

He came to a clearing among the thorns and stopped to catch his breath, which rose up from his mouth in sweaty clouds. The moon was gone. Now there was only night and the pinpricks of stars that had shined a million years before.

“I’m thinking of learning Biblical Greek,” he told her, because they had been quiet for longer than he could bear.

“Why?”

“To better understand the Word.” A stupid question.

Anitpas’ face, the only exposed portion of what little flesh she had, glowed white like snow in darkness. Unlike the moon, she needed no light to reflect: she was pregnant with the source. Through the vines, he made out a block of solid color ahead, too light to be an ocean, too homogenous to be a landscape with any sort of life.

“Do you think you’ll understand their tongue better than the people of Jesus’ own day?” she asked.

“Of course not.” He pushed on, intrigued by what lay ahead.

“Yet they considered the cross foolishness all the same.”

He stopped, hung his head.

“The Word of salvation isn’t a book,” she said, and together then came out of the thorns to the edge of a desert. It stretched out further than he could make out, but he sensed its seeming endlessness in his guts.

“You have to be kidding.”

Antipas moved ahead, the edge of her robe dragging the sand and marking her wake. “Everyone who wishes to encounter God spends time in the desolate places. You need a space with no distractions, no babble to hide behind. It has always been this way. Out of the silence the still small voice will speak, and then you will know the Word.”

She disappeared, leaving the murmuring wind his only companion and guide.

### **In which lies more authority, then: Scripture, or the inner-Messiah?**

I believe the doctrine...(that the “Word of God” is Christ, not the Bible, and that the Scriptures are profitable in proportion as they are read in the same spirit which gave them forth) to have been a most valuable equipoise to the tendency in other Protestant sects to transfer the idea of infallibility from the Church to the Bible. Nothing, I believe, can really teach us the nature and meaning of inspiration but personal experience of it... [W]e may all have such experiences if we will but attend to the divine influences in our own hearts. (Caroline Stephen, *Strongholds of Quakerism*)

God does not live in houses crafted by human hands (Acts 7:48). This is as true for cathedrals made of crystal as it is for books bound in leather. Stuffing God into boxes is like observing a lion in a cage: you may study its attributes, and strut fearlessly about it, but you will know nothing of the lion’s true nature anymore than you will the fullness of God (*pleroma*).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [In Caudill’s draft *pleroma*, Greek for the fullness of God, is written next to this line of text. The term was an important one for gnostics and the apostle Paul alike, who uses it in Colos-

**Surely you cannot think that it is the spirit who is the ultimate guide and rule. Was not the law recorded and the Ten Commandments carved for a reason?**

The law was a Saturday-night babysitter, and we are adults now (Galatians 3:24; 1 Corinthians 13:11). In Messiah we have not just been released from the law, but are dead to it. We died to the law, “so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter” (Romans 7:4-6).

**But the Bible is the Word, left to us by God, as a guide and teacher.**

The author of *The Gospel According to John* writes that the Word existed from the beginning of creation (1:1), which obviously rules the Bible out for the office. God has given us better than a history book: He has given us a Son, the resurrected preacher, the everlasting prophet whose word rises in our hearts like the morning star [2 Peter 1:19]. The living hear him, while the dead can only spread his fame.

*And why are they deaf to this Word?* Because it does not live in them. They search the Scriptures, because they think that in them they will grasp eternal life; but they are what testify about *him* (John 5:38-39).

**This all sounds dangerous. What is to stop people from doing something crazy when they are drunk on the spirit?**

“I came to throw fire on the earth. I wish it were already kindled” (Luke 12:49).

Robert Barclay, in his *Apology*, counters the argument that it is dangerous to place primary authority in the spirit over scripture with three points of note. First, the fact that people have committed evil acts while claiming sanction of the spirit only proves that people can be evil and dishonest, not that

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sians 2:9, “For in him all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.” For the gnostics, *pleroma* is the totality of God with which we seek reunification. —Ed.]



the spirit cannot be trusted. Second, no one agrees on what scripture says, and yet all claim their ideology as “biblical.” His third point I’ll quote at length.

For what have the Papists pretended for their many massacres, acted as well in France as elsewhere, but tradition, Scripture, and reason? Did they not say, that reason persuaded them, tradition allowed them, and Scripture commanded them, to persecute, destroy, and burn heretics....And are not the Protestants assenting to this bloodshed, who assert the same thing, and encourage them, by burning and banishing, while their brethren are so treated for the same cause? Are not the islands of Great Britain and Ireland (yea, and all the Christian world) a lively example hereof, which were divers years together as a theatre of blood; where many lost their lives, and numbers of families were utterly destroyed and ruined? For all which no other cause was principally given, than the precepts of the Scripture....We must kill all the wicked, said those Anabaptists, that we that are the saints may possess the earth. We must burn obstinate heretics, say the Papists, that the holy church of Rome may be purged of rotten members, and may live in peace. We must cut off seducing separatists, say the Prelatical Protestants, who trouble the peace of the church, and refuse the divine hierarchy, and religious ceremonies thereof. We must kill, say the Calvinistic Presbyterians, the profane malignants, who accuse the Holy Consistorial and Presbyterian government, and seek to defend the Popish and Prelatic hierarchy; as also those other sectaries that trouble the peace of our church. What difference I pray thee, impartial reader, seest thou betwixt these?

Is their danger in placing final authority under the spirit? Of course. It requires great powers of discernment to distinguish the leadings of Truth

from our own delusions and hang ups. But the second birth Jesus described to Nicodemus was not the birth of letters in stone, safe in their permanency. Our rebirth is into the spirit which, like the gale of Job's storm, blows where it pleases, and none can say from where it comes or to where it may lead (John 3:8).

The trouble facing many of today's faithful is that, though they claim to worship the same God as Jesus, in reality they worship the same gods nearly all middle class Americans adore: Safety and Stability.

When did Jesus ever play it safe? Where would our faith be if Abraham had not been reckless enough to leave the safety of kin behind for the beckoning uncertainty of the desert? Though I think he took it too far, I am reminded of my grandfather, who handled serpents whenever he felt the anointment of the Lord's spirit come upon him. He was not at all the kind of man you would picture a serpent handler to be (assuming you already have a ready-made image of how such a person ought to be). He was quiet; wore glasses thick as jars. When anyone complained of a problem in their life, he was fond of saying, "God will open a way," and leaving it at that. But this mild man's faith could only be adequately expressed when he was surrounded by a din of tambourines and the drone of flickering tongues. I still remember seeing him one Sunday morning, amidst a sea of parishioners gyrating in the spirit, a snake in each hand, singing hallelujah.

### **What if we turn to the spirit and receive only silence as a reply?**

"There will be times when you look, but will not find me." (*Gospel of Thomas* 37, author's translation)

He came upon the scene of his neighbor Jack Dawkins' death on the way to work. Jack's truck smashed against an ash tree, man-sized hole in the windshield. No body visible, but the EMS workers moved with a slow non-

chance that told him all he needed to know. The paper said days later Jack was drunk when he died. He was out driving to cool off after a fight with his wife.

Lester had doubts about his work before, but this was his first full-blown crisis. It weighed on his mind and put an ache in his belly. He had said hello to this man's wife every week at the grocery; watched his kids march in last year's Fall Festival parade. Lester did not eat anything but crackers and coffee for days. How much destruction had he been complicit in? How many other families had he torn apart? In the war it was artillery shells, now he killed by the bottle.

A dream came upon him one night: a mass of people drowning in a honey-colored ocean. Eyes bulging, arms thrashing, then sinking down for good. There was Jack Dawkins, and there Jack's family. There were more people than he could count. And then he saw himself in the distance. Alone on a boat, pouring another barrel into the mix.

He prayed for guidance, but none came until Antipas appeared in a vision of darkness. He was at a loss and told her so.

"What does God want me to do?"

Antipas sat. "Perhaps there's a reason God hasn't explicitly told you."

"What does that mean?"

If she had been human she might have shrugged. "It means maybe you're better off not knowing."

He closed his eyes; changed tactics. "Is my work evil?"

"Is Christianity?"

"Of course not."

He answered too quickly. She moved forward and breathed into his eyes. A vision filled him: a field strewn with bodies, some with limbs still twitching, all painted with gallons of blood. Flowers grew up among them, but they were wilted and black with rot. In the middle of this, a judge in robes heard

the recitation of sins of a queue of people that stretched off past the horizon and passed sentence with pompous delight. A voice from the heavens spoke, "The fruit of Christendom."

He gasped, struggled to catch his breath as Antipas moved away. "Even in that field there may be a pearl worth redeeming."

"I don't know what to do," he told her.

"What is the Law of Christ?"

"Love God and neighbor."

She stood. "What other guide do you need?"

### **So Scripture has some use.**

The trap Protestantism has too often fallen into is mistaking scripture, which is a means, for an end. Read your Bible every day. You will find no better seed with which to sow the ground of your meditations and prayers. But do so in the knowledge that it is a map, not the territory which we seek, because the letter only kills when we forget that the life-giving spirit never ceased speaking. The ultimate value of Scripture is not found in its memorization, or by using intellectual acrobatics to force its disparate parts into a dishonest whole, or even (God forbid) in cracking a nonexistent code. The most sublime moment we can experience through a sacred text is when the words themselves fall away, and we are left alone with the Source of their inspiration.

Or have I gone too far? The same Anointed One who was hung up on a cross sleeps in you as if in a tomb. It is Scripture that allows us to recognize the work of his spirit, so that the rock inside us may be rolled back.

### **What next then? How do I make that first step toward *gnosis*?**

*The Gospel of Truth* says that, on the cross, Jesus became the fruit of knowledge that brings humanity back to God, as opposed to the original

which separated us from Him. We need only to reach up, pluck the fruit from the limb, and bury our teeth in the flesh.

*But how do we go about that in a practical sense?* During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provided his disciples with three spiritual practices to observe: charity, prayer, and fasting (Matthew 6:1-4, 5-15, 16-18). A lot of ink and breath has been wasted on making these simple exercises seem complicated. I will tell you the secret to keeping these disciplines successfully: Occasionally forgo food, give to the needy, and set aside time to settle into an inner silence from which you can wait upon the Lord. When you have learned to give of yourself, to deny your desires, and to wait with open heart, you will know more of God than a thousand sermons could ever convey.

*But why these specific practices?* Because they are acts of self-repudiation and submission. Only those able and ready to deny themselves are fit to take up their cross and follow.

An angel came to me in a vision (whose name I would not learn until years later when she returned during my prayers once more). She had no arms or legs, and was dressed entirely in black. A wind carried her to me like a kite, and in my visionary state I cried out, for I knew myself to be a ruined man. The wind was an unstoppable force of destruction, capable of scattering me like dust, which made her all the more terrifying a sight to behold.

“Do you wish to know me?” she asked.

“Yes,” I cried, for I knew her to be a messenger of the Lord; a direct link to the Holy One. To know her was to know Him.

She smirked. “To know me is destruction,” and the wind bore down and dissolved me back into consciousness.

Jesus said his burden was light, but do not believe him. What does it matter if the yoke is light when the cost to wear it is everything? We speak of being “saved in the blood,” but who is it we believe is being saved? The fractured little demiurge we call “I” on both our best and worst days? We are all

fields of wheat and weed. The crop will be rescued and set aside, but a fire waits for everything worthless in us.

I will say this of my own prayer life. I often imagine it is me nailed up on the cross, blood pouring out like whisky through the plugholes of a barrel. I do this do desensitize myself. If I playact it enough, then maybe I will have the brass to let it all go. Because I have calculated the cost of constructing this tower of faith, it is the boldness to pay that I fear I lack [Luke 14:28].

### **Please, just tell me, what is salvation?**

Shortly before America entered the Second World War, my older brother, Henry, attempted to become next in an ancestral line of bootleggers. He built a still in a cave on the side of a hill behind our house, and began the time-consuming process of converting corn mash down to the godawful elixir known as Moonshine.

Having all zeal and no real knowledge of the finer intricacies of the art, it was not long before his still blew up. Luckily no one was hurt, and Henry would have gotten away with it all, had it not been for the fact that the Letcher County sheriff was hunting in the holler below when it happened, and the explosion scared off the deer he was preparing to shoot.

We had to sale three good hens and the family radio (I was sore about that for months) to make his bail. Mom dressed me up in my Sunday's best; she wanted me to come along and see "the wages of empty-headedness." It took two hours for me to drive us there in a mule led cart, and my backside was sore by the time we arrived. Inside the jail, Henry was leaning against the wall of his cell, chewing on a fingernail with his eyes closed. When he heard Mom's voice he stood up and wrapped his hands around the misshapen iron bars.

"Stand back," the deputy told him, pulling out a ring of keys.

Henry obeyed with an uncertain step backward. The lock tumbled open with a click and the door rolled back with a harsh screech. Henry hesitated, then smiled, and walked forward.

Though he was liberated physically, it was clear the entire way home that something was not quite right with brother yet. An air of incompleteness hung over our trio like fog in the summertime. I caught Henry looking to mother, who kept her mouth shut, her eyes trained on the passing trees. Only the mule dared to break the silence with an occasional snort and sigh.

It was not until we reached the house hours later than mother wet her lips and said, “You’re an idiot Henry Wilcox.”

“I know.”

She looked him in the eyes, put her hand over his. “I will always love you, no matter what. But next time, I’ll leave you there to rot.”

Henry blushed. “Of course.” Then he smiled, and mother smiled, and I smiled, because none of us knew then the war was coming, and that she only had 18-months left to have him as a son, and I a brother.

It was years later, thinking back to that look of relief on Henry’s face, when I realized freedom and reconciliation were two words for the same event.