

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Heresy in the Early Church

HAROLD O.J. BROWN, PHD

“There is nothing new under the sun,” the Preacher wrote (Eccl. 1:9). According to Professor Klaus Haacker of Wuppertal, Germany, one of the primary sources of error in theology is the desire to say something new. As a teacher of theology for a score of years, I have noticed this: It is extremely hard for a theologian today to say something that is not either borrowed from an earlier, orthodox writer or heretical. Indeed, even the newest heresies, sometimes presented as the latest discoveries in biblical scholarship, usually turn out to be plagiarized from earlier heretics.

As a young student of theology, I determined to delve into church history and find the time when the Christian faith was pure and undistorted, the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The difficulty soon became apparent. Even in the New Testament itself, we find evidence that there were disputes about doctrine among believers. Was there never a time when all Christians knew right Christian doctrine? Was there never actually a faith “once for all delivered to the saints”? How could a third-, sixth-, 16th-, or 20th-century Christian know what to believe when even in the New Testament we see evidence that heresy was present alongside of solid doctrine, almost from the very birth of the church? There is indeed a faith once delivered to the saints.

It is a curious fact about Christianity that it is the only major religion many of whose paid, full-time priests, prelates, and professors spend much time and energy trying to show that it is false and should be totally changed or perhaps even abandoned. Buddhists do not do this; neither do Hindus. Muslims certainly do not, or if they do they do not live long. This shows, I believe, that the religion of Scripture, historic, biblical Christianity, is obnoxious to the Prince of Darkness, so that he makes a point of tempting the professors and priests of Christianity to undermine their own doctrines.

In my book *Heresies*, I follow the practice of the early Christians in defining as heresies only those doctrines or teachings that change the nature of the faith so fundamentally that it no longer can be trusted to be saving faith. There are three principal concepts dealt with in the New Testament that can be defined as heretical in this sense. Curiously enough—or perhaps not so curiously, if we recall the Preacher’s words above—these three New Testament problems persist.

They are (1) legalism (often called Judaizing in the days of the early church), which can also be called salvation by works or works righteousness; (2) the opposite concept of

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

antinomianism; and perhaps most significant for our own day (3) the curious complex of fantastic ideas and doctrines that goes by the name of Gnosticism.

Paul confronted each of these in several epistles, notably Romans, Galatians, and Colossians. John also deals with Gnosticism in his first two letters. In Galatians 1, Paul warns against deserting the One who called us for “a different Gospel, which is really no Gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6–7 NIV). In the context of the epistle, it becomes evident that he is speaking of the tendency to add works to the Gospel of justification by faith in the finished, once-for-all work of Christ. In our own day, in which there is licentiousness on all sides, some Christians drift toward legalism, though Paul warns explicitly against it in his parody, “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” (Col. 2:21). Roman Catholicism is particularly prone to this error, although it certainly is not limited to Catholics.

Others, however, fall into the concept of antinomianism, probably a greater danger for Christians today. We can express it thus: “Once saved, anything goes.” Paul asks ironically, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1). And of course he counters this in a number of places, including “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), and “neither circumcision [keeping the Law] nor uncircumcision [ignoring the Law] avails anything; but [what counts is] a new creation” (Gal. 6:15).

One is not saved by works, but a faith that produces nothing is no evidence that one has become a “new creation” in Christ. Modern varieties of this antinomian error are found in some Protestant circles that believe a simple verbal profession of faith will save one, without reference to the kind of *conversio cordis* (conversion of the heart) that produces evidence in a transformed life. Many individuals take refuge in this kind of antinomianism, which is so convenient for those who wish to go on sinning without worrying about the consequences.

Undoubtedly the most dangerous error in our day, however, is that of Gnosticism, a worldview presenting a complex panoply of errors, afflicting non-Christians as well as Christians. It represents the temptation of the natural man to cook up speculative schemes that free him from any awareness of personal sin and guilt and offer him an inexpensive salvation. Gnosticism is hard to describe in a few words, but one can mention two common elements: secret lore and elitism. Ordinary people may make do with simple faith, but the Gnostic knows the secrets and belongs to a spiritual elite. Paul criticizes this (in Col. 2:18, for example). It is typical of the Gnostics to honor Christ in a way, but to deny that the historic, human Jesus is the one “name under heaven ... by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). They say Jesus was but one manifestation of “the Christ”; there were others, and there will be still more.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Although full-blown Gnosticism was not yet in evidence at the time he wrote, John argued against this incipient tendency in the first two of his New Testament letters (for example: 1 John 1:1–2; 2:22–23; 5:1).

The Gnostics believed in an incredible variety of spiritual beings. Most Gnostics taught that the material world is unreal and the body is unreal or evil. There is a recent parallel to Gnosticism in Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science and a very contemporary parallel in the New Age movement.

Obviously, I could say more, and indeed have done so in *Heresies*. But the important thing about these "heresies" is the fact that they are not just permissible variations, options, or choices, but by their very nature so undermine Christian faith that they may well render salvation unattainable for the one who makes the mistake of embracing them.

Harold O.J. Brown was a theologian, scholar and professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Reformed Theological Seminary.

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