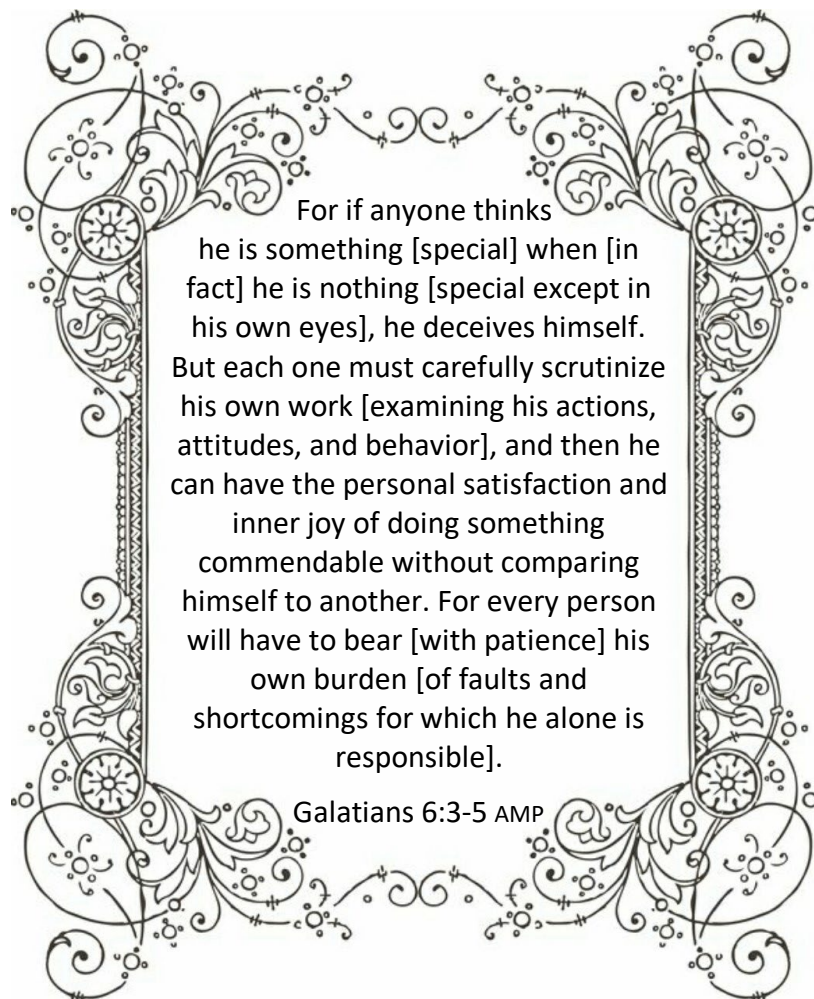


Chapter 3

The Seven Deadly Sins: Heresies that Nearly Destroyed Christianity

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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS: HERESIES THAT NEARLY DESTROYED CHRISTIANITY



The word “heresy” . . . is the English version of the Greek noun *hairesis*, originally meaning nothing more insidious than “party.” It is used in this neutral sense in Acts 5:17, 15:5, and 26:5.

Early in the history of the first Christians, however, “heresy” came to be used to mean a separation or split resulting from a false faith (1 Cor. 11:19; Gal. 5:20). It designated either a doctrine or the party holding the doctrine, a doctrine that was sufficiently intolerable to destroy the unity of the Christian church. In the early church, heresy did not refer to simply any doctrinal disagreement, but to something that seemed to undercut the very basis for Christian existence. Practically speaking, heresy involved the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Christ—later called “special theology” and “Christology.”

Harold O. J. Brown¹



It’s been almost 2000 years since Jesus established His church at Pentecost in ad 30. From the very earliest days of His ministry, Jesus warned us about the dangers of false prophets who teach heretical doctrines to the unsuspecting church. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus forewarned: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves”* (Matthew 7:15). And Jesus was not the only one who warned the church about those who would be purveyors of heresy. The Apostle Paul later reminded the Elders of the Ephesian church: *“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them”* (Acts 20:29-30).

In addressing what are called “the Great Heresies,” it is important for us to recall that heresies usually represent what Alister McGrath has called “a failed attempt at orthodoxy,”² an attempt to make sense of the Bible that fails to take into account the full richness of the Biblical revelation; rather than being outright repudiation of the Bible. The result is that a part of the truth is treated as the whole of the truth, and thus becomes an untruth. The reason for this is not that the Bible itself is unclear, but that “untaught and unstable men” twist it to fit their own worldly thinking.

Therefore, we need to remind ourselves that a heretic is someone who denies the nature of the Godhead—and thus are guilty of proclaiming a false Doctrine of Christology—as they teach instead, for example, polytheism or unitarianism in denial of historic

¹ Brown, H.O.J. (1984). *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2.

² McGrath, A. (2009). *Heresy*. London: SPCK, 13.

trinitarianism. Such false teachers also proclaim a false Doctrine of Soteriology as they deny salvation is by grace alone—that we are saved by grace alone (*Sola Gratia*), through faith alone (*Sola Fide*), in Christ alone (*Solus Christus*). Not only do such teachers twist the deity of Christ, they also reject the authority of Scripture, denying as they do *Sola Scriptura*, another of the Five Solas of The Reformation. Obviously, heresy is a real problem.

David Hartman writes that “there is legitimacy to the concerns raised by some regarding the number of self-identified evangelicals who, for instance, are abandoning Scripture’s clear teaching on sexual ethics and the nature of marriage. This is very disheartening because Ephesians 5 makes it clear that marriage and sexual ethics are defined by the gospel. These are, therefore, gospel issues.”³

Of the hundreds of heresies that have affected the church over the centuries, there are seven that we will cover in the next seven chapters that are without a doubt the worst of them all.⁴ Hence the title: “The Seven Deadly Sins: Heresies that Nearly Destroyed Christianity.” Some of these have reappeared in different forms over the years, yet all have had a lasting effect upon orthodox Christianity. The fact of the matter is that every one of these seven deadly heresies still exist today!

Just as Joseph told his brothers following the death of their father, Jacob, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20a), we see that Yahweh regularly takes what is meant for evil and turns it for our good. History demonstrates that to be true. Over and over again, God has used the heresy of heretics to strengthen the orthodoxy of the orthodox.



“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

George Santayana⁵



³ Hartman, D. (November 14, 2017). “How God Can Use Heresy for Our Good.” Louisville: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. <https://cfc.sebts.edu/faith-and-culture/how-god-can-even-use-heresy-for-good/> (retrieved November 13, 2024). David Hartman, PhD, writes for The Center for Faith & Culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he serves as an adjunct professor.

⁴ The reader is reminded that Gnosticism, which is covered in detail in Chapter 2 of this book, is the granddaddy of all heresy and is the direct antecedent to of these next seven.

⁵ Santayana, G. (1905). *The Life of Reason*.

GOD HAS USED THE HERESY OF HERETICS TO STRENGTHEN THE ORTHODOXY OF THE ORTHODOX

Hartman presents the following examples from history:

The Canon of the New Testament. In the early church, a man named Marcion (c. 80-144) began teaching that the God of the Old Testament was a distinct god from the Lord of the New Testament. As result, Marcion began cobbling together his own canon of sorts with edited books of the New Testament and theologically unorthodox prologues to his highly-edited texts. In short, Marcion was setting himself up to establish a formal canon of books which reflected his heretical system.

The presence of Marcion's canon served as an accelerant to the process already at work in the orthodox church to establish which New Testament books were authoritative. Orthodox leaders asked questions regarding a book or letter's authorship (Was it written by an apostle?), theology (Does this fit with the rest of the Bible theologically?) and catholicity (What do the churches tied to the apostles say about these books?). Marcion did not establish the orthodox canon of Scripture, but the presence of his heretical canon sped up the process by which the orthodox canon of Scripture was recognized.

In a strange way, God used Marcion's heresy for our good.

The Council of Nicaea. Not long after Marcion arose another popular heretic named Arius (c. 256-336). He began teaching that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God but was a creature. As his doctrine began to spread, there was a need to formally confront this heresy in an official fashion. Therefore, the Council of Nicaea was convened in ad 325 to reaffirm the historic position that Christians believe in the eternality and full deity of Jesus Christ.

The end result of that council was what we know today as the Nicene Creed. This creed proposed nothing new in the realm of Christian orthodoxy; it merely memorably summarized what orthodox Christians already believed. The heresy of Arius did not result in the formulation of Nicene orthodoxy, but it served as an impetus to convey biblical theology in as brief and as clear of a statement as possible.

Again, God used Arius' heresy for our good.

The Reformation. Every year on October 31, Christians celebrate the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. That was the memorable day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany. Then, under the leadership of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others, there was a reclamation

of scandalous grace in the church. While this had been brewing for some time with the work of John Huss (c. 1369-1415) and others, the Reformation officially became a revolution when Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* were later published.

Who do we have to thank for raising the ire of Luther? Among a few notable figures stands John Tetzel (c. 1465-1519), a man who sold indulgences—get-out-of-purgatory-early passes—to enrich the Vatican. Luther witnessed both the spiritual and financial abuses of the people and this sent him over the edge. As children of the Reformation, we have benefitted from the acceleration of the Reformation by the evil work of Tetzel and others.

Once again, God used Tetzel's heresy, ultimately, for our good.⁶

A SHORT EXCURSUS

Before we dive deeply into the Seven Deadly Sins (i.e., Heresies) that have tormented the Christian church for these many centuries, I wish to present a few thoughts about two very obvious heresies that are not included in this list: The Judaizers and The Gnostics.

The Problem of Judaizing

Judaizer is an extrabiblical term for those who acted like Jews and/or sought so to influence others, based on Paul's charge that Peter's attitude would force Gentiles "to Judaize" (Gr. *ioudaizein*, "to live like Jews," Galatians 2:14).

Commentaries refer to men as Judaizers who sought to enforce Jewish circumcision and other legalisms upon Gentiles, e.g., the "false brethren" who wanted to bring the whole church into the bondage of the law (Galatians 2:4), and those who taught "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul attacked Judaizers in Galatia who "would force you to be circumcised" (Galatians 6:12). In a few places (Acts 11:2; Galatians 2:12; Titus 1:10) "they of the circumcision" seems to refer not to Jews generally but Judaizers specifically (*cf.* esv's "circumcision party").

It seems likely that they may have taught that one had to become Jewishly legalistic to receive grace, and did teach that one had to live legalistically despite grace. The Jerusalem

⁶ Hartman (2017).

council (Acts 15; perhaps Galatians 2:1–10?) supported Paul as over against those who carried their scruples to the extreme of Judaizing.⁷

One should understand that the Judaizers claimed to be Christians. They supposedly accepted the deity of Christ and believed in the necessity of His death and resurrection. For these reasons they were accepted into the local churches as genuine brethren. The issue of their salvation and convictions did not surface until the gospel penetrated the pagan Gentile world. At that time they argued that physical circumcision was essential to gain divine justification.⁸

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Identity of the Judaizers. In attempting to understand the Judaizers, we cannot begin by assuming a common identification between

- (1) the “false apostles” of Corinth, who claimed to be both “apostles of Christ” and “Hebrews,”⁹
- (2) those whom Paul had in mind as adversaries to the Gospel in Rome, who would “cause dissensions and difficulties” in that church,¹⁰ and
- (3) the heretics of Galatia.

Although it is probable that a basic similarity unites all these Pauline opponents in such scattered localities as Galatia, Corinth, and Rome, the identification of the Judaizers must depend primarily upon their description in the letter where their activity is most clearly evident; i.e., Galatians. Nor need we be detained in consideration of the merits or improbabilities of Lütgert’s and Ropes’ “two-front theory” in identification of the opponents in Galatia.¹¹ Whether there were legalists and libertarians in Galatia or only legalists, at least there were those who proclaimed a so-called Jewish-Christian legalism; and it is only with the legalists that we are here concerned. Nor does it seem at all possible that such legalistic influence as was exerted on Paul’s converts came only from the local synagogue—i.e., that Paul’s opponents were simply Jews advocating Judaism. The Christians of Galatia, who before their conversion had spurned the full ministry of the synagogue, were not now prepared to render greater due to the Jewish practices than their own Apostle taught them—unless they had been encouraged to do so by Christian

⁷ Alcorn, W. A. (1975). “Judaizers.” In C. F. Pfeiffer, H. F. Vos, & J. Rea (Eds.), *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*. Moody Press.

⁸ Gromacki, R. (2002). *Stand Fast in Liberty: An Exposition of Galatians*. Kress Christian Publications, 191.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:13, 22.

¹⁰ Romans 16:17.

¹¹ W. Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1919); J. H. Ropes, *The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929).

preachers claiming a fuller Christian message. These Pauline opponents in Galatia cannot be viewed as any other than those claiming to be Christians.¹²

Marvin Wilson observes that some Christians protest when any call is made for non-Jewish believers to return to the Jewish roots of early Christianity, for such a return seems like Judaizing, which Paul battled. In Bible times, Judaizers were gentile converts who followed the religious practices and customs of Judaism. Let us look at this allegation more closely and seek to sort out some of its implications.



Diversity among Early Believers. Believers in the early church had no one position on the precise relation of Jewish law to gentile believers. Some early converts held to antinomianism (literally “against law”). But Paul, especially in the book of Romans, refutes the notion that once one comes to a right standing with God by faith, one no longer has an obligation to the law but is free to live as one pleases. Other gentile converts held to the moral code of Judaism but were not bound to any ceremonial laws. These believers were most likely influenced by the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews from the diaspora who were of a more liberal spirit and persuasion. A third, even stricter, group from the Jerusalem church appears to have upheld the whole teaching of the law except for circumcision. But the strictest group of gentile converts in the upholding of Jewish law were the so-called Judaizers.

Unquestionably influenced by the party of the Pharisees, these gentiles submitted to the entire law, including circumcision (cf. Acts 15:5). The Ebionites, a Jewish-Christian sect which flourished for several centuries after ad 70, are most likely a continuing reflection of the Judaizing movement. An ascetic group, committed to poverty as a lifestyle, the Ebionites upheld the whole Jewish law but rejected Paul’s letters on the grounds that he was an apostate from the law.

Not Bound but Free. Today, it is one thing for a non-Jew to be bound by *halakhah* (Jewish law)—to observe certain rituals, ceremonies, and customs. For example, one may feel compelled or obligated, as a necessary part of one’s Christian experience, to observe Sabbath, dietary laws, or the practice of circumcision. But the early church never imposed any of these Jewish ritual practices on non-Jews. Thus if a non-Jew does feel compelled to observe certain Jewish practices, that compulsion may be interpreted as Judaizing.

It is another thing, however, for one to be free as a Christian and not subject to bearing responsibility for the “yoke of the law” (cf. Galatians 5:1), yet to observe some Jewish practices. For example, when a non-Jew adopts moral and ethical values, social and

¹² Longenecker, R. N. (2015). *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (Second Edition). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 194-195.

spiritual ideals, and an overall orientation toward life and the world that is Hebraic, this is not Judaizing. Or a non-Jew may choose voluntarily to conform to certain observances, celebrations, or customs which are both Jewish and rooted in Scripture. Such practice is not necessarily Judaizing. Following a meaningful biblical custom is far different from being bound by a required practice.

To those in the modern church concerned about the dangers of Judaizing after almost two thousand years of de-Judaizing, we would pose these questions:



- ☞ Is it Judaizing to seek to reconstruct certain aspects of the first-century Jewish context of the New Testament and early church?
- ☞ Is it Judaizing to investigate the life and teachings of Jesus through Jewish eyes?
- ☞ Is it Judaizing to find personal fulfillment by adopting a perspective on God and one's neighbor that emerges from the teachings of the Hebrew prophets?
- ☞ Is it Judaizing to resonate positively to a Jewish pattern of worship, music, and celebration of special events in life?
- ☞ Is it Judaizing to find in modern Israel—within its people and the historic land itself—that for which you deeply care, a veritable laboratory filled with spiritual and historical meaning?

To each of the above questions we would answer an emphatic NO!

Judaizing in Bible Times. The Bible itself has little to say about Judaizing. The only Old Testament reference to Judaizing is found in Esther 8:17. Here the Hebrew verb *yahad*, “to become a Jew” or “to profess oneself to be a Jew,” is used of those gentiles in Persia who adopted the Jewish way of life out of fear for Esther’s decree which permitted the Jews to avenge themselves on their enemies (Esther 8:13). The Septuagint (the ancient, authorized Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) uses *loudaizō*, “to Judaize,” in this passage, and adds that they became circumcised, which would normally imply conversion. In this circumstance, however, they may only have pretended to be Jews in order to save their own lives by identification with the Jewish cause.

In the New Testament, the verb *loudaizō* (rsv “live like Jews”; niv “follow Jewish customs”) occurs only in Galatians 2:14. In this passage, Paul relates how he opposed Peter at Antioch because Peter refused to eat with the gentiles in the church there. By practicing social separation, Peter was in effect saying to these non-Jewish believers, “Unless you conform to Jewish dietary laws and a Jewish lifestyle, we cannot maintain

fellowship with you.” By his withdrawal, Peter, a Jew, was compelling these gentiles to Judaize—that is, to follow Jewish customs.

Jesus, however, had already instituted a change with regard to Old Testament regulations on clean and unclean foods (Mark 7:1–23; cf. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14). As “apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13), Paul was against imposing a strict Jewish dietary code on non-Jews. Such a requirement might have implied that the belief of non-Jews was defective in comparison with that of Jewish believers, that something else (i.e., conformity to Jewish custom) had to be added to their commitment of faith (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). Thus, Paul was opposed to Judaizing, for it had the potential of distorting salvation by grace alone and of being an argument for developing two separate assemblies—one for Jews and one for non-Jews.

Furthermore, in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth and through the new covenant set in motion by his death, the ritual and ceremonial aspects of Mosaic law were no longer technically binding. Yet they could have been of spiritual value for the gentile believers. That is, although they were not mandatory for a right relationship with God, they could have helped the gentiles to understand their faith properly. But again, it is important to stress that these laws were not prescriptive or obligatory. Rather, they were but shadows of the better things to come. Thus, Christians were now free from the responsibility of Jewish ceremonial ordinances (Acts 15:10; Galatians 4:3; 5:1).¹³

In summary, the Judaizers were a First Century faction that were guilty of Soteriological error because they added works to grace as the grounds of justification. They were chiefly a group of former Pharisees in the Jerusalem church and were legalistic and were guilty of blending Old Testament Judaism with Christian ideas. Modern proponents of the Judaizers include Seventh-Day Adventism and the Roman Catholic Church. One would also include any group that is legalistic by nature.

The Gnostics

Gnosticism was a Second Century heresy that was widespread, and its influence was—and still is—vast and unyielding. Gnosticism is truly “The Heresy That Will Not Die!” Because of the scope and influence of Gnosticism this tome devotes the entire second chapter to this granddaddy of all heresies. The heart of the error of Gnosticism is Christological in nature, denying as they did the reality of the Incarnation of Jesus the

¹³ Wilson, M. R. (2021). *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Second Edition). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 24-27.

Messiah. There were various early heretics that were the chief historical proponents of this heresy, which essentially was a mystical blending of paganism with Christian ideas.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Modern day proponents of Gnosticism will be found in most New Age religions as well as in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (i.e., Mormonism).

SEVEN SIGNIFICANT SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. **Definition and Danger of Heresy:** Heresy, derived from the Greek word *hairesis* (originally meaning “party”), evolved to signify doctrines or beliefs that undermine the unity and foundational truths of Christianity, particularly regarding the nature of God and Christ.
2. **False Prophets and Heretics:** Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul warned against false prophets and heretics, likening them to “ravenous wolves” who distort Scripture and lead believers astray.
3. **Heresy as a Distortion of Truth:** Heresies often arise from a partial understanding of biblical truth, where a fragment of truth is treated as the whole, leading to doctrinal errors that deny key principles like the Trinity, salvation by grace alone, and the authority of Scripture.
4. **Historical Examples of Heresy Strengthening Orthodoxy:** Throughout history, heresies like Marcionism, Arianism, and the abuses that led to the Reformation have paradoxically strengthened Christian orthodoxy by prompting the church to clarify and reaffirm its core doctrines (e.g., the Nicene Creed and the Protestant Reformation).
5. **Judaizers and Legalism:** Judaizers in the early church sought to impose Jewish legal practices, such as circumcision, on Gentile Christians, distorting the gospel of grace. Modern legalistic groups, like Seventh-Day Adventists and others, are seen as continuing this error.
6. **Gnosticism’s Enduring Influence:** Gnosticism, a Second Century heresy denying the incarnation of Christ, remains influential today, particularly in New Age movements and groups like Mormonism, blending pagan ideas with Christian concepts.

7. **God's Sovereignty Over Heresy:** Despite the destructive nature of heresies, history demonstrates that God has used them to refine and strengthen the faith of the church, turning what was meant for evil into good, as seen in the development of the New Testament canon and the Reformation.



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