

{ LECTURE 5 }

THE HISTORY OF HERESY: *Ancient Errors and the Roots of Modern Cult Groups*

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Early Christian Cults

Ebionism (first century)

- Theological descendants of the Judaizers, who taught that Christians were required to follow the Mosaic Law
- Saw themselves as distinct from Pauline Christians and Gnostic Christians; though later Ebionite groups were influenced by gnosticism
- First mentioned in the second century; apparently connected to Judaizers who defected from the Jerusalem Church after the Jerusalem Church relocated to Pella
- Most of what we know about them comes from the early church fathers, who wrote polemics against them (because they were considered heretical)
- According to Justin Martyr, the Ebionites believed that the Law of Moses was obligatory for all Christians. Ireneaus was the first to use the term “Ebionite” to describe this group.
- Origen suggests that the name comes from the Hebrew word “evyon” which means “poor.”
- They denied the deity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the death of Jesus as an atonement for original sin
- Believed that Jesus was adopted as the son of God when he was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, and therefore could become the messianic king-priest of Israel
- Held to an altered “Gospel according to the Hebrews” which has traditionally been associated with a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew.

Gnosticism (second and third centuries)

- Taught that the material realm was evil; only spiritual is good
- Pursuit of mysticism or “special knowledge” as the central goal of life
- Depicted creation as a mythological struggle between competing forces of light and dark (dualism)

- Believed in a supreme and unknowable monadic divinity; and the introduction by emanation of further divine beings, which are nevertheless identifiable as aspects of the God from which they proceeded
- The progressive emanations are often conceived metaphorically as a gradual and progressive distancing from the ultimate source, which brings about an instability in the fabric of the divine nature

What Was Gnosticism? (from Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*):

[p. 38] – The term “Gnostic” is derived from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. Gnosticism was not a coherent or uniform set of beliefs. Rather, it was an array of movements that shared many common tendencies and features. Central to Gnosticism is the belief that the sect’s sacred texts and teachers could provide access to secret “knowledge” about how the universe really operates. . . . [O]ne aspect of Gnosticism [was] its teaching known as “docetism”. Docetism is the belief (held by virtually all Gnostics) that Jesus did not really come to us in the flesh, but only seemed to come in a physical body. His flesh was actually a ghostly apparition.

[p. 85] – What exactly did the Gnostics believe? Their myths seem so ridiculous to us today that we can scarcely believe anyone would ever have embraced them. But we must acknowledge that for many ancient people, Gnosticism offered an attractive alternative to orthodox Christianity. Spiritual seekers were drawn to its seeming intellectualism and mysterious insights into the cosmos. [For example,] the Valentinian Gnostics believed there was a heavenly “Fullness” which consisted of thirty angelic beings called Aeons. The Aeons always came in male-female pairs. . . . These conjugal pairs emitted lower Aeons, and the last of these emissions was Sophia (Wisdom). But Sophia became passionate, and wickedly longed for the highest Father apart from her own consort. Though she was eventually healed from her grievous action, her evil “Thought,” which had given rise to her sin, was cast out of the Fullness like an aborted fetus. This shapeless Thought took on a personified form named Mother Achamoth. She was in a hopeless state until the “Christ” came to her and enabled Achamoth to bring forth substances from within herself. One of the beings she brought forth was the Demiurge. He was the ignorant creator of the entire physical world in which we live. In many Gnostic accounts, the Demiurge was equated with Yahweh, the Jewish God of the Old Testament, who foolishly thought he was the one true God. Only the enlightened Gnostics “knew” he was actually a corrupted being, far inferior to the goddess Sophia. . . .

In order to give secret wisdom to the spiritual Gnostics, the Demiurge (Yahweh) is said to have given birth to a son who was filled with the spiritual seed of Mother Achamoth. This son was the “Christ” who passed through Mary without taking a body from her. He was just like water flowing through a tube. The Gnostics often said the “Christ” inhabited the body of the man Jesus of Nazareth, but his body was not made of real flesh. . . . The docetic Christ who possessed the illusion of a body came into the world to teach spiritual precepts that only the enlightened Gnostics would be able to comprehend. Through the purging action of his revealed knowledge, the Gnostics would eventually make their way up into the Fullness as purified spirits.

Mormonism – Modern-Day Gnosticism?

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Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 99, 123:

The God of Joseph Smith is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics, prophetic sages who, like Smith himself, asserted that they had returned to the true religion. . . . Mormonism is a purely American Gnosis, for which Joseph Smith was and is a far more crucial figure than Jesus could be. Smith is not just 'a' prophet, another prophet, but he is the essential prophet of these latter days, leading into the end time, whenever it comes

Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet," (online article, <http://www.gnosis.org/ahp.htm>):

Harold Bloom's coupling of Joseph Smith to the Gnostic tradition has aroused animated disagreement among students of Mormonism and Gnosticism alike. . . . Nonetheless, Smith did apparently espouse themes familiar to Gnosticism-- prominent among them being his affirmation of the reality and necessity of continuing, individual revelation as the source of salvific knowledge. Joseph Smith and his religion eschewed theology in favor of the dynamic process of revelation. The result was best summarized in what Bloom remarked to be "one of the truly remarkable sermons ever preached in America", a discourse delivered by the Prophet on April 7, 1844. Known as the King Follett Discourse, it was Joseph's last major address to his church, presented just ten weeks before his death at age 38.

"There are but very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God," he began. "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend their own character." Within humankind there is an immortal spark of intelligence, taught the Prophet, a seed of divine intellect or light which is "as immortal as, and coequal with, God Himself." God is not, however, to be understood as one and singular. Turning to Hebrew and an oddly Kabbalistic exegesis of the first three words of Genesis (an exegesis probably taken directly from the Zohar), Smith pronounced there are a multitude of Gods emanated from the First God, existing one above the other without end. He who humankind calls God was Himself once a man; and man, by advancing in intelligence, knowledge—consciousness—may be exalted with God, become as God.

Marcionism (second century)

- Started around A.D. 144 through the teachings of Marcion of Sinope
- Marcionism taught that the teachings of Christ (Marcion differentiated between Christ and the human Jesus) were incompatible with God of the Old Testament.
- Marcion held to a canon that included ten books from Paul and one gospel (the Gospel of Marcion), but he rejected the Hebrew Old Testament and the other books of the New Testament.
- As a result, he saw a clear distinction between the law and the gospel, the flesh and the spirit, works and faith, and so on.
- He taught that the God of the Old Testament (whom he viewed as righteous and wrathful) was not same as the God of the Gospel who is love and mercy.
- He was the son of a bishop, and was later excommunicated by his father for his heretical views
- Marcionites viewed the God of the Old Testament negatively and derisively, believing him to be angry, malicious, and sadistic.
- Marcion further taught that Christ was not the Jewish Messiah, but rather a spiritual entity sent by a previously unknown God—called the Stranger God, or the Alien God.
- Christ essentially came to undo what the evil “god” of the Old Testament had done.



Marcion of Sinope

Manichaenism (third century)

- Manichaenism was founded in the third century by Mani, who reportedly was born in Babylon, in western Persia (modern-day Iraq/Iran)
- Characterized by dualism (in part, because it was highly influenced by Zoroastrianism)
- Mani taught that there were two realms: light and darkness. The realm of light was good and peaceful, while the realm of darkness was evil and in chaos.
- The current state of the universe was explained as an attack by the realm of darkness on the creation of an emanation from the realm of light.



Mani

- Manichaenism was very ecumenical, seeking to include all faiths under one umbrella.
- Mani taught that there is no omnipotent good power; but rather a dualistic struggle between good and evil.
- In each person, the good part (the soul of light) warred against the evil part (the body of darkness). Salvation comes from identifying oneself with one's soul.

Monarchianism (second century)

- Monarchianism (also known as Monarchism) teaches that God exists as a singular ruler. It thus conflicted with the doctrine of the Trinity, and was rejected as heretical by the church in the second century.
- Two versions of monarchianism included Modalism and Adoptionism. These were various attempts to explain the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—while still maintaining the oneness of God's Person.
- Modalism (or Sabellianism) teaches that God is one person who appears in different modes at different times and for different purposes. These modes (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) have appeared at various times throughout history. This view has also been called Patripassianism because it taught that God the Father suffered and died on the cross.
- Adoptionism teaches that Jesus is not co-eternal with the Father, but rather was adopted by God (and granted divine status). Jesus became the Son of God on account of His perfect life and works. He was adopted by the Father at the time of His baptism, or in some views at the moment of His ascension.

Montanism (second century)

- Mid second-century movement, known as the "New Prophecy;" it was named after its founder, Montanus. Its most famous proponent was the church father, Tertullian, who converted to Montanism toward the end of his life.
- The Montanists believed their prophecies were new revelation that fulfilled the teachings of the Apostles
- They encouraged ecstatic prophesying and taught strange doctrines through prophecy
- The Montanists taught that Christians who fell from grace could not be redeemed or restored to the church
- The prophets of Montanism spoke in the first person on God's behalf, rather than in the third person. For example, Montanus prophesied, "I am the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete" (according to Didymus, *De Trinitate*, III, xli)

- The Montanists emphasized a strict version of holiness, church discipline, and apocalyptic living. They emphasized chastity, including forbidding remarriage. (Their emphasis on holiness was largely what appealed to Tertullian about their movement.)
- Some early church leaders claimed that the Montanists were modalists, but Tertullian denied this charge.

Novatianism (third century)

- These followers of Novatian taught that Christians who had been baptized but had subsequently denied the faith during persecution could not be forgiven or restored to the church.
- These lapsed Christians, known as the *lapsi*, were received by the mainstream church. Novatian set himself up as a rival bishop in Rome, and as a result he and his followers were excommunicated.
- He is considered an “anti-pope” by the Roman Catholic Church.
- Novatian’s followers were known as *Novationistis* by the orthodox church. But they referred to themselves as the “katheroi” or “pure,” because they separated themselves from the lax standards of the mainstream church, which they thought had grown corrupt.

Donatism (fourth century)

- Similar to the Novationists, the Donatists disagreed with the mainstream church over whether or not believers who defected under the persecution of Diocletian should be restored to the church.
- The Donatists rejected priests who were more accepting of the spiritual defectors. Some of them (including priests) had even turned on fellow Christians or allowed sacred documents to be burned. The Donatists referred to such people as “traditors” (“people who had handed over”) because of their defection.
- The primary opponent was Augustine, who taught that priests should be respected for their office even if their personal character was questionable.

Summary Chart (parallels Phil Johnson's article below):

Name	Century	Primary Error	Historical Proponents	Nature/ Character	Modern Traces
Judaizers	1st	Attacked justification; added works to grace as necessary for salvation	legalistic former-Jews in the early church	legalistic; blended OT Judaism with Christianity	7 th -Day Adventists; Roman Catholics
Gnostics	2nd	Attacked the humanity of Christ; denied that Jesus really came in the flesh	various early heretics; gnostic gospels	mystical; blended paganism with Christianity	most New-Age religions; Mormonism
Arians	4th	Attacked the deity of Christ; denied the doctrine of the Trinity	Arius and his followers	anti-Trinitarian; denied the full deity of Christ	Jehovah's Witnesses
Pelagians	5th	Attacked the primacy and sufficiency of God's grace in salvation	Pelagius, Coelestius, and their followers	man-centered; denied depravity; elevated free will above divine sovereignty	Charles Finney and his followers
Socinians	16th	Attacked both the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of Christ	Lelius and Faustus Sozzini	rationalistic; a combination of the worst of all heresies	Theological Liberals; Open Theists; Unitarians

{ ADDENDUM }

THE HISTORY OF HERESY *Five Errors that Refuse to Die*

by Phil Johnson

Introduction: In this seminar, we will look at five major heresies that have plagued the church again and again throughout history. Here are the five heretical groups we'll talk about: *the Judaizers, the Gnostics, the Arians, the Pelagians, and the Socinians*. We will deal with these in chronological order:

1. LEGALISM

The relationship of Christianity to the law of Moses has always posed some very difficult problems. A heretical brand of legalism, practiced by the Judaizers, posed a major and continual threat to the New Testament church even while Scripture was still being written. The apostles' war with legalism permeates the book of Acts and most of the epistles.

The Judaizers claimed that in order to become a Christian, Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and obey all the ceremonial and civil laws of Moses. This was a very compelling system for people who had grown up in Judaism, because they were conditioned from their infancy to view Gentile practices as unholy, unclean, and morally abhorrent.

The culmination of the legalism controversy, and the first major defeat for the Judaizers, took place in Acts 15. Notice what transpires here: "The apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter" (v. 6). There was much disputing (v. 7), and then Peter rose up and recounted what had occurred at the conversion of Cornelius (vv. 7–10). And Peter very clearly takes Paul's side (vv. 10–11): "Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."

Peter has honed in on the crucial issue: salvation by the grace of God. This is what was at stake. This first great controversy was a *soteriological* conflict. The issue was the gospel, and the doctrine of justification by faith in particular. That's why the apostle Paul wrote and preached so earnestly against the doctrines of the Judaizers: they were nullifying the very heart of the gospel message. If a person had to be circumcised in order to become a Christian, then that ritual work was a prerequisite for justification, and justification would not be by faith *alone*.

Scripture clearly teaches that we don't have to perform any religious ceremonies or legal obedience as a prerequisite to our justification. None of the works of the law can earn us any merit in God's eyes. All the merit that is necessary has been acquired for us by Christ. It is freely imputed to all who believe. As Roman 4:5-6 says, "To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. . . . God imputeth righteousness without works."

That's the gospel in a single statement. That's what the legalism of the Judaizers obscured. And that's why the apostle Paul fought this heresy with every ounce of energy he had.

2. GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the heresy of the Judaizers. The legalism of the Judaizers was a synthesis of Pharisaical Judaism and Christianity. Gnosticism was a blend of pagan philosophy with Christianity. The Judaizers stubbornly clung to the past; the Gnostics radically broke with the past.

So in many ways the error of the Gnostics is exactly the opposite of the Judaizers' heresy. As so often happens, the church swung from one extreme to the other. When the false teaching of the Judaizers met with resistance, it was as if Satan simply pushed the pendulum to the opposite extreme, and the result was Gnosticism.

Ancient Gnosticism is as hard to define as the modern New Age movement. Both are complex, not simple. Both suggest that Divine wisdom is hidden in a mystery revealed only to enlightened followers.

And it is this idea that gave Gnosticism its name. It's from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means "knowledge." Here is the central idea of all forms of Gnosticism: ***Gnostics believe that the key to saving truth lies in a hidden knowledge beyond what is revealed to us in Scripture.*** According to Gnosticism, "salvation" is a question of possessing the secret knowledge.

Christian varieties of Gnosticism did not really come into full form until sometime in the second century. And Gnosticism had the ability to mutate into new forms. As one version of Gnosticism would decline, another would arise to take its place. So Gnosticism continued as a very strong threat to the church for several centuries.

When Gnosticism first assaulted the church, Christianity survived only by confronting the heresy head on. Men such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr were willing to fight for sound doctrine—even to the point of laying down their lives for it.

There are three major errors common to almost all forms of Gnosticism: *dualism*, *syncretism*, and *docetism*.

- *dualism* is the idea that everything in the universe is reducible to two fundamental realities
- *syncretism* is the merging of two different systems of belief
- *docetism* is a heresy that claimed Christ only *appeared* to be human

Though Gnosticism involves all kinds of errors, including soteriological ones, it introduced the problem of Christological error into the church. The epistles of John are written chiefly to answer incipient forms of Gnosticism, and the apostle John attacked the error primarily on Christological grounds.

3. ARIANISM

The history of Arianism is a case study in how heresy often arises from within the church. Arianism spread by quiet infiltration and gained strength through the personal charisma of the false teachers. It took advantage of a climate of tolerance. It developed to massive proportions before *anyone* rose up to oppose it. This is Satan's favorite tactic, disguising himself as an emissary of light.

Arianism was a flat-out attack on the deity of Christ. The Arians claimed Jesus Christ was a created being, higher than humanity, but less than truly God.

The gnostics had attacked the doctrine of Christ from the fringe of Christendom. Gnostic heretics were generally outsiders, people unafraid to attack the apostolic tradition and apostolic teaching. Their approach was to draw people *away* from the church and into their little factions. Arianism took a different approach, bringing the false doctrine right into the church. The Arian goal from the very beginning was to get the church to place the stamp of orthodoxy on their false doctrine.

Arius was the heretic who invented this doctrine. He devised a view of Christ that made Him a created being, neither divine nor truly human, but a mediator between God and humanity. According to Arius, Christ was a sort of demigod, the firstborn of all creation—higher than other angelic creatures, godlike—but a *creature* nonetheless. This is exactly the same doctrine held by modern Jehovah's Witnesses. And Arius used the very same arguments they use.

The Nicene Creed was the church's response to Arianism, but it marked the beginning, not the end, of the controversy in the church. After their doctrine was condemned by the council, the Arians pleaded for tolerance, broad-mindedness, and acceptance at the grass-roots level, and they succeeded to an amazing degree in infecting the church worldwide with their doctrine.

Emperor Constantine became frustrated when the Nicene Council was not successful in quelling the Arian controversy, and he became friendly with the Arians. Within the next fifty years or so, virtually all the leading bishops of the church embraced Arianism. Only one man stood against them: Athanasius. He refused to give up the fight against heresy. When people pointed out that the whole world was against him, he replied that he was against the world.

Over the long haul, Athanasius's arguments won out, because he employed Scripture so skillfully and so persuasively to demonstrate the error of the heresy. But the episode is a classic example of why Scripture, not majority opinion, ought to be the church's first and last test of every doctrine.

4. PELAGIANISM

The next great heresy in the church was Pelagianism. This error returned to the issue of *soteriology*.

It is a fact of history that every major error that has ever assaulted the Christian faith fits under one or both of two categories: they are either *Christological* or *soteriological*. Other forms of error have arisen, but all the truly dangerous heresies have attacked on one or both of these two fronts.

That's because heresy is most serious when it results in a different gospel or a different christ. The true church has always recognized that those who worship a false christ or preach a false gospel are not true Christians (Galatians 1:8–9; 2 John 10–11). It is as simple as that.

Pelagianism represented *a different gospel* of the most sinister kind. The first major proponent and the man who lent his name to this doctrine was Pelagius. His main opponent was Augustine.

The conflict between Pelagius and Augustine involved some of the very same issues Calvinists and Arminians argue over, and the history of this heresy shows how vitally important those issues are.

Pelagius was motivated by a concern to elevate human free will, because he was (wrongly) convinced that was the only way to preserve human responsibility. Augustine defended the sovereignty of God, because he (rightly) knew that was the only way to preserve the centrality of divine grace in salvation.

Probably the most notable aspect of Pelagianism *is its denial of original sin*. The Pelagians denied that Adam's sin resulted in any guilt or corruption to the rest of the human race. Pelagius believed that the human will must be free from all fetters or else people are not responsible for what they do. Pelagianism insists that if people are born sinners by nature—if sin is something we inherit—it would be unjust for God to hold individual sinners responsible for their sin.

Pelagianism therefore said the human will must be totally free—inclined to neither good nor evil—or else our choices cannot be free. And if our choices are not free, then we cannot be held responsible for what we do.

Pelagianism inevitably results in the purest form of works-salvation. Deny the fallenness of humanity, and you have in effect denied the need for divine grace.

Augustine saw this problem from the very outset, and he responded to the Pelagians by demonstrating *from Scripture* that the human will is not free in the sense Pelagianism taught; our wills are hopelessly bound by sin (Romans 8:7–8). Sinners are utterly helpless to change for the better apart from the working of divine grace in their hearts (Jeremiah 13:23).

The Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Pelagianism as utterly heretical. But as is true with every one of the major heresies we are discussing, the ruling of a council was not enough to end the threat of this false doctrine. Pelagianizing influences continued for the next hundred years. There emerged a modified Pelagianism, known as semi-pelagianism—which is virtually identical to modern Arminianism—and that doctrine was condemned by the Council of Orange in 529.

Still, Pelagianizing influences continued to assault the church. By the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent adopted a soteriology that is in effect semi-Pelagian.

In the Protestant Reformation, it was the Reformers who sided with Augustine in affirming the sovereignty of God, the necessity of divine grace, and the utter inability of fallen man to contribute to his own salvation. Roman Catholicism, especially from the Council of Trent on, has taught a kind of watered-down semi-Pelagianism.

Pelagian and semi-Pelagian influences have affected Protestantism, too, and continue to do so today.

5. SOCINIANISM

Socinianism is the culmination of heresy—an amalgamation of all the other heresies—and it is without a doubt the most widespread of all the heresies in our generation. Modern theological liberalism is nothing more than a variety of Socinianism.

The heresy of Socinianism was born almost immediately after the start of the Protestant Reformation. It takes its name from two Italians: *Laelius* and *Faustus* Socinus. They were disaffected with Roman Catholicism and originally identified with the Reformers, but unlike the true Reformers, the Socinians ended up rejecting virtually *everything* about the Catholic religion, including whatever was orthodox.

Since they rejected everything Catholic, the Socinians ended up with a doctrine that embraced virtually every serious error that had ever assaulted the church. Like the legalists and the Pelagians, they taught works-salvation. Like the Gnostics and the Arians, they were anti-Trinitarians. In fact, they denied not only the deity of Christ but also every miraculous element of Scripture. They blended the skepticism of the Sadducees with the humanistic rationalism of the enlightenment era, and that deadly combination is what gave birth to this heresy. Then they threw in the error of universalism to boot.

In effect, Socinianism did away with the authority of Scripture and made human reason the supreme authority.

Worst of all, they destroyed the meaning of the atonement. The Socinian argument against substitutionary atonement was simple: They claimed that the ideas of remission and atonement are mutually exclusive. They said sins can either be forgiven or they can be paid for, but not both. If a price is paid, they said, sins are not really “forgiven.” On the other hand, the Socinians argued that if God is willing to pardon sin, then no atonement-price should be necessary.

The subtlety of that argument still confuses many people. But it is completely contrary to what Scripture teaches about grace, atonement, and divine justice. Hebrews 9:22 demolishes the Socinian argument: “Without shedding of blood [there] is no remission [of sins].”

Why are these heresies important? Every cult and every false doctrine extant today has something in common with one or more of these five false doctrines. Here [below] is a chart that shows the pertinent facts about each of these heresies. Notice especially the column that lists modern proponents of each error. These are only samples. Every major cult and –ism borrows from these five heresies.

If we learn anything from church history, we ought to see how vital biblical discernment is, and we ought to understand how destructive such errors can be. Above all, we ought to gain an appreciation of how courage, persistence, and biblical skill are required to defeat the devil’s doctrines.