

# 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 Iranaeus, 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 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.

### A Survey of Heresies

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Heart of the error</b>	<b>Chief historical proponents</b>	<b>Character</b>	<b>Modern proponents</b>
<b>The Judaizers</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> century	<b>soteriological</b> , adding works to grace as grounds of justification	a group of former pharisees in the Jerusalem church	legalistic, blending OT Judaism with Christian ideas	7th-day Adventists, Roman Catholics
<b>The Gnostics</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> century	<b>Christological</b> , denying the reality of the incarnation	various early heretics	mystical, blending paganism with Christian ideas	Most New-Age religions, Mormonism
<b>The Arians</b>	4 <sup>th</sup> century	<b>Christological</b> , denying the deity of Christ	Arius, several bishops	unitarian, denying the full deity of Christ and the Trinity	Jehovah's Witnesses
<b>The Pelagians</b>	5 <sup>th</sup> century	<b>soteriological</b> , denying the primacy and sufficiency of divine grace	Pelagius, Coelestius	anthropocentric, denying human fallenness, elevating free will above divine sovereignty; making the sinner responsible for his/her own salvation	Charles Finney and his heirs
<b>The Socinians</b>	16 <sup>th</sup> century	<b>soteriological/Christological</b>	Lelius and Faustus Sozzini	rationalistic, absorbing the worst elements of all heresies	Unitarians, Theological liberals, Open Theists