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Know the Heretics

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INTRODUCTION

Why Heresy?

The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable . . . It is always easier to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own.

— G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

Who is Jesus? Is he divine? Is he human? How does he relate to the God of the Old Testament? How do the divinity and humanity of Christ relate to his work in saving humanity? How is the fact that Christ was both human and God connected to how he rescues humanity? What does that rescue look like? How does Jesus save — by example or by some supernatural intervention?

These are the questions that the leaders and thinkers of the early church wrestled with after the time of the apostles. And as you might imagine, the answers were far from clear-cut. Over the course of the first few centuries, a large number of theories were developed to try to explain all that the Bible has to say about God and humanity. But not all of these explanations were equally well grounded — many of them owed too much to the spirit of the times or cut out essential

parts of the Bible in order to make the explanation fit. This book is the story of those theories — what they were and why they did not become a part of mainstream Christianity. Some believe that these theories were rejected because the institutional church was unwilling to be open minded; however, although I have tried to represent them as fairly as possible here, I am taking the position that they were rejected because they simply did not measure up to the beliefs that were accepted in the end.

The main terms I will use throughout this book for the different sides are “orthodoxy,” for the mainstream doctrines, and “heresy,” for the theories that were not accepted.

What Is Orthodoxy?

Orthodoxy (literally “right teaching”) is the word that most scholars use for mainstream Christianity. But as you might imagine, every group thinks that it has the right teaching! What’s more, the groups that we will be describing as orthodox were not always those who had the support of the institutional church, the smartest thinkers, or the greatest influence. During the Arian controversy (chapter 7), for instance, not only did most of the clergy take the heretical side but the state persecuted the group that we are going to refer to as orthodox. A similar thing happened during the Monothelite controversy, when the heresy was contained to a small group but happened to include the emperor and the highest church officials. So orthodoxy and heresy can’t be measured by the number of bishops or intellectuals — or numbers, period — who embraced a given theory.

Because we aren’t basing our definitions of orthodoxy on how these groups viewed themselves or on an objective category like number of supporters, a cynical interpretation might be that orthodoxy is the teaching that succeeded and heresy the teaching that lost out. In this view, modern Christianity is more or less an accident. We believe that certain theories are better not because they are truer but because we happen to have inherited them. (Much like saying

that if a Christian had been born in India, he would have been a Hindu; if Arianism had won out, we would all be Arians and think that Arianism was more faithful to the Bible.) We'll come back to this view in a bit, because it deserves a detailed response, but suffice it to say that I believe that God is active in the world and is interested in preserving his revelation, his truth, and his church, even though his revelation may be misunderstood or ignored, the truth may be doubted or questioned, and his church may go through some dark and puzzling times.

In the end, I will define orthodoxy as follows. Orthodoxy is the teaching that best follows the Bible and best summarizes what it teaches — best accounts for the paradoxes and apparent contradictions, best preserves the mystery of God in the places where reason can't go, and best communicates the story of the forgiveness of the gospel. For each heresy that we discuss, I will try to demonstrate why the orthodox position best accounts for the Bible's teaching and why it was a good thing that the church chose it.

What Is Heresy?

Heresy can be a fighting word. Traditionally, a heretic is someone who has compromised an essential doctrine and lost sight of who God really is, usually by oversimplification. Literally, heresy means "choice" — that is, a choice to deviate from traditional teaching in favor of one's own insights. But that sense of the word has been lost. To some people today, heretic suggests a rebel — someone with courage, the kind of person who can think for himself and stand up to the institutional church. Some Christians simply use the word to refer to anyone who doesn't agree with their particular version of Christianity. In modern parlance, the word heretic usually means that you aren't in the club, but it's not the sort of club you would want to be in anyway.

There have been times when the church has taken extreme measures to punish innocent dissidents by labeling them heretics. Even

so, giving heresy a positive meaning is worrisome. The concept of heresy is a valid one. It's true that the church has often been too quick to brand a new leader or idea as heretical, sometimes to its later embarrassment — the way that the Catholic Church handled Galileo's idea that the earth revolves around the sun is a classic example — but in many instances, a legitimate heresy has threatened to confuse ordinary believers simply because of the speculations of an influential thinker. It is often a fine balance between allowing free exploration of who God is and reasserting what we can know for sure, and in the cases presented in this book, the exploration went so far as to distort our understanding of God as he has revealed himself to us.

This book is a case study of fourteen major events when the church made the right call — not for political or status reasons (though politics and status sometimes played a part) but because orthodox teaching preserved Jesus' message in the best sense, and the new teaching distorted it.

As Christianity grew and spread, it increasingly came into contact with competing belief systems such as paganism, Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, and others. Inevitably, teachers arose who attempted to solve the intellectual difficulties of Christian faith and make it more compatible with other philosophical systems. In this way, many of the heresies that arose had to do with the identity of Jesus Christ as he related to the God of Israel.

It should be made clear that most of those dubbed heretics were usually asking legitimate and important questions. They weren't heretics because they asked the questions. It is the answers that they gave that are wrong. They went too far by trying to make the Christian faith more compatible with ideas that they already found appealing, especially those of pagan Greek philosophy. Others struggled with Jesus' claims to be both sent from God and one with God. The reactions of the religious leaders in the New Testament to Jesus' claims underline the difficulty of this revelation and point to later struggles about Jesus' identity.

The following briefly describes the answers given by some of the thinkers we will cover in more detail in this book:

Marcion: The God of the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament are two different gods.

Docetists: Jesus only appeared to be human.

Arius: The Son was a created being of a lower order than the Father.

Apollinarius: Jesus' divine nature/*Logos* replaced the human rational soul in the incarnation. In other words, Jesus' "pure" divine nature replaced the "filthy" mind of a typical human.

Sabellius: Jesus and the Father are not distinct but just "modes" of a single being.

Eutyches: The divinity of Christ overwhelms his humanity.

Nestorius: Jesus was composed of two separate persons, one divine and one human.

Whereas orthodox Christianity answers Jesus' question to Peter — "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29) — by affirming that Christ was both God (the Creator of the universe, the Lord of Israel) and human (an average Joe, yet without sin), these heretical thinkers answered the question differently. As we will see, their challenges caused a tragic amount of controversy among Christians in the early centuries of the church. However, with each new heresy, the church was forced to study the Scriptures, wrestle with intellectual problems, and articulate more clearly the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 rsv).

Does the Bible Mention Heresy?

The Bible itself seems to presuppose a right and a wrong interpretation of Jesus' coming and the nature and character of God, as it uses strong language against false teachers who promote doctrines that

undermine the gospel. As historical theologian Bruce Demarest notes, “the NT expresses serious concern for ‘false doctrines’ (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3) and places the highest priority on maintaining ‘the pattern of sound teaching’ (2 Tim. 1:13; cf. 1 Tim. 6:3). Scripture urges Christians to be alert to doctrinal deception (Mt. 24:4) and to avoid heresy by carefully guarding the pure content of the gospel (1 Cor. 11:2; Gal. 1:8).”¹

In Galatians 1:9, Paul uses the strongest words possible against those who distort the gospel, writing, “If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!” And the apostle Peter warns against “false teachers among you [who] will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Peter 2:1).

As is clear from the New Testament, the apostles were not afraid to call out heresy when they saw it. If a teaching or practice threatened the integrity of the gospel, it was strongly condemned (as in the case of Peter and the circumcision party described in Galatians 2). However, heresy was a weighty charge that was not made lightly, nor was it used whenever there was theological inaccuracy or imprecision. (Think of the response to Apollos in Acts 18:24–28.)

Heretical and the Early Church

Following the apostles, the early church maintained that heresy means directly denying the central orthodox beliefs of the church. Early church credal statements codified orthodoxy into a widely accepted form. Even before important Christian beliefs such as the canon of Scripture (list of books in the Bible) and the Trinity had been carefully articulated, the mainstream of Christian believers and leaders had a sense of the essential truths that had been handed down from the apostles and the prophets, and passed along to each generation of Christians through Scripture, sermons, and baptismal creeds. Before the developments at Nicaea and Chalcedon regarding

the proper beliefs about the Trinity and the dual natures of Christ, the early church possessed what is known as the “rule of faith.” To quote Demarest again, “The early church defended itself against heretical teaching by appealing to ‘the rule of faith’ or ‘the rule of truth’, which were brief summaries of essential Christian truths . . . The fluid ‘rule of faith’ gave way to more precise instruments for refuting heresies and defining faith, namely, creedal formulations such as the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon and the Athanasian Creed.”²

The New Testament speaks frequently about false teaching and doctrine. For the early church, heresy was merely teaching that stood in contrast to the right belief received from the prophets and the apostles in the Scriptures and put into written formulas in the rule of faith and the creeds. The early church formed an accepted and received statement of what is true and essential to the Christian faith. The rule of faith gave birth to more precise statements of the essentials of the faith, such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.³ These widely accepted formulations of the essential “right doctrine” (orthodoxy) handed down from the apostles were crucial for combating heresy.

It is important to note, however, that the early church did not consider every potential wrong belief to be heretical. Rather, only those beliefs that contradicted the essential elements of the faith were to be labeled heresy, not disagreements on nonessential doctrines.

Unlike some churches today, the early church did not stipulate all of the minor beliefs that its members should hold, nor did it consider mere disagreement to be heresy. Significant leaders in the early church wrote about heresy as a corruption of right doctrine rather than merely an alternative point of view:

Origen: “All heretics are at first believers; then later they deviate from the rule of faith.”⁴

Irenaeus urged Christians “to avoid every heretical, godless and impious doctrine.”⁵

Tertullian said that “to know nothing in opposition to the rule of faith is to know all things.”⁶ He also said that “the philosophers are the fathers of the heretics.”⁷

Clement of Alexandria said that heresies are a result of self-deceit and a mishandling of the Scriptures.⁸

Cyprian said, “Satan invented heresies and schisms with which to overthrow the faith, to corrupt the truth and to divide unity.”⁹

Not All Theological Errors Are Equally Serious

Because there is always some room for mystery and speculation, both the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions have been careful to distinguish three “zones” between strict orthodoxy and outright heresy. In Catholicism, to bluntly deny an explicitly defined church doctrine is heresy in the first degree — for example, a severe contradiction, like saying that Christ is not God. A doctrine that has not been explicitly defined by one of the church’s articles of faith but diverges from the received majority view is considered an opinion approaching heresy (*sententia haeresi proxima*) — for instance, to say that Christ can be found in other religions. One who holds a position that does not directly contradict received tradition but logically denies an explicitly defined truth is said to be erroneous in theology (*propositio theologice erronea*). Finally, a belief that cannot be definitively shown to be in opposition to an article of faith of the church is said to be suspected or savoring of heresy (*sententia de haeresi suspecta, haeresim sapiens*).¹⁰

Similarly, the Reformed tradition has traditionally distinguished three kinds of doctrinal error related to fundamental articles of the faith:¹¹ (1) errors directly against a fundamental article (*contra fundamentum*); (2) errors around a fundamental or in indirect contradiction to it (*circa fundamentum*); (3) errors beyond a fundamental article (*praeter fundamentum*).

The point is that historically both the Roman Catholic tradition

and the Reformed tradition have understood that not all theological errors are equally serious. Theological historian David Christie-Murray distinguishes between orthodoxy, the body of Christian belief which has emerged as a consensus through time as the church reflects on Scripture; heterodoxy, Christian belief which differs from orthodoxy; and heresy, belief that diverges from orthodoxy beyond a certain point.¹²

It is important to bear these distinctions in mind as we discuss heresy, since there are those who think that heresy is anything that does not agree with their own interpretation of Holy Scripture. These people fail to differentiate between the primary and secondary elements of the Christian faith and make every belief they have into a pillar of Christianity. So, on this view, if someone disagrees with them about the millennium, about infant baptism, about the role of women in ministry, or about the nature of the atonement, they are quickly labeled a heretic. While such impulses can be well intentioned, sometimes because Scripture reveals a great deal about God's workings, the church of the New Testament walked the line between holding fast to some convictions and being flexible about others.

Though this group of heresy-hunters often say they're motivated by concern for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, their practice of labeling every diverging belief as heresy has the opposite effect. Rather than making much of right belief, they minimize its importance by making, for example, the mode of baptism to be as important as the divinity of Christ. When everything is central, nothing is.

Is It Even Appropriate to Speak of Heresy?

In a modern, pluralistic society, it can be hard to imagine a "wrong" or "dangerous" interpretation of a religion, as long as it does not encourage violence or hurt to others. This is particularly true when it comes to a book like the Bible, which everyone agrees has a few

parts that are difficult to understand. For this reason, more and more scholars are arguing that it is no longer appropriate to speak of heresy and orthodoxy in the early church. Instead, they argue, there were a number of early Christian groups who all took Jesus' words to mean different things. According to this theory, the Christianity that modern people practice is simply the descendant of one of these early groups that happened to win out — the other early Christian groups are heretical from *its* point of view, but from *their* point of view modern Christianity would be heretical. (This is a scholarly version of the historical accident view mentioned in the section on orthodoxy.)

This idea was most famously promoted by Walter Bauer, a twentieth-century scholar of early Christianity who wrote about his theory in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* in 1934. Bauer argued that there was really no such thing as objective heresy in the early church. Rather, according to his thesis, the Roman church labeled its own view of Christian doctrine orthodoxy while calling others who did not hold to their own views heretical. Bauer argued that these heretical forms of Christianity actually preceded so-called orthodoxy. According to him, there were many early Christian movements that we know of today as heretical that were actually practicing some form or another of legitimate expression of devotion to Christ. Thus, heresy is not a concept to be viewed in contrast to truth or right doctrine; rather heresy is any view that opposes the political interests of the church and as such needs to be stamped out.¹³ Orthodoxy is merely that which has been advanced by the Roman church as correct in order to facilitate some sort of oppressive control over those who would thwart their expansive efforts.

There is much to be said against this view. Bauer's thesis has been shown time and time again to be false. In reaction to Bauer, Canon H. E. W. Turner argued in his book *The Pattern of Christian Truth* that early Christians held to three fixed, nonnegotiable elements of faith: (1) religious facts such as God the creator and the divine historical redeemer Christ; (2) the centrality of biblical revelation; and (3) the creed and the rule of faith.¹⁴ That is, early

Christians, though marred by sin and susceptible to error, were ultimately concerned with truth about God, not politics.

In fact, it is the historical redeemer (rather than myth), the centrality of the Bible (over pagan philosophy), and the traditional creed (rather than innovation) that distinguished the orthodox from the heretics. An important question regarding heresy is whether there is really a tradition that leads back to Jesus Christ. The ancient Christians took great pains to establish such a connection; they were interested not simply in propagandizing other groups but in upholding what they believed to be their authentic inheritance, based on real events that had made a difference in the world. “To my mind,” Ignatius of Antioch declared less than a century after Christ, “it is Jesus Christ who is the original documents. The inviolable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith that came by him. It is by these things and by your prayers that I want to be justified.”¹⁵ It was vital for Ignatius and others like him to preserve the story of Christ as it had been passed down to them. As will be seen, most heretical groups were not particularly interested in doing likewise.

Why Do We Need to Learn about Heresy?

Core Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the nature of Christ, and which books should be included in Scripture were developed through the early church’s struggles with heresy.¹⁶ When teachers began to lead movements that were blatantly opposed to the apostolic tradition, the church was forced to articulate the essential elements of the faith.

The history of heretics, heresies, and the orthodox leaders who responded to them can be disheartening. Why learn about arguments over what sometimes seems like theological minutiae? There are two major reasons. The first is that while there is certainly ambiguity in the Bible, the Creator of the world has decided to reveal himself to us and even to live with us. It is important to honor that revelation. When we find this revelation distasteful and try to

reshape God according to our preferences, we are beginning to drift away from God as he really is. Imagine a friend who ignores the parts of you that he or she doesn't like. Is that a deep relationship? Ambiguity or not, uncomfortable or not, it is vital that we are obedient to what we *can* know about God.

The second reason is related to the first. When we have a flawed image of God, we no longer relate to him in the same way. Think of the way that you might have related to your parents when you were growing up. Even if you didn't necessarily understand the reasons behind boundaries they set for you in childhood, they look a lot different when you are confident in your parents' love than when you fear or resent your parents. It is surprising how much our beliefs about God impact our daily lives, which is partly what makes theology such a rewarding (although difficult and dangerous) discipline.

It cannot be repeated enough that (as the old cliché goes) those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. Moreover, as C. S. Lewis warns, if we remain ignorant of the errors and triumphs of our history, we run the risk of what he calls "chronological snobbery," the arrogant assumption that the values and beliefs of our own time have surpassed all that came before. Lewis writes, "We need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age."¹⁷

Learning how Christians throughout history have wrestled with the tough questions of our faith gives us a valuable perspective and keeps us from assuming that our own know-how, pat answers, or inspiring platitudes are best suited to solving the problems of the world.

Know the Heretics

This book aims to provide an accessible overview of some of the major heresies throughout the Christian tradition. It is not intended as a comprehensive guide to *all* heresies — there are far too many for anything less than an encyclopedia to cover them all. Nor is this book meant to offer any kind of systematic theory of the nature of heresy and orthodoxy. Rather, I hope that after reading this book you will come away with a greater understanding of the main heretical figures and ideas that have most impacted the history of Christianity.

This book is designed to be read by individuals or used in a group setting. My hope is that this book will complement longer works such as Alister McGrath's *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*. His book is about heresy in general and touches only briefly on specific heresies and heretics.

The chapters are brief and to the point. For each heretic, I present the historical background, the heretical teaching, the orthodox response, and contemporary relevance. Because some readers will prefer to look at just a few specific issues, I have tried to strike a balance between letting each chapter stand alone and building the narrative of the “progression of doctrine.” Recommended reading for further study and discussion questions are included at the end of each chapter.

Further Reading on Heretics and Heresies

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JUDAIZERS

The Old Rules Still Apply

Historical Background

One of the earliest heresies in the church is known only from the New Testament. As everyone knows, Jesus was a Jewish man, and most of his early followers were Jewish as well. In fact, there are some statements that suggest that his mission was a purely Jewish affair; for instance, consider how he says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17), and, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). But mixed with these Jewish statements are several instances when he heals non-Jews and sends his disciples to spread the message of his coming to the peoples surrounding Israel.

As long as those coming to Christ were circumcised¹ and followed the customs of the Jewish law of the Old Testament, there was no issue about Jewishness or non-Jewishness. But when uncircumcised Gentiles started following Christ, the church became divided on what Christ had intended. Did he mean that Christianity was to be an updated or expanded version of Judaism, in which the laws of the Old Testament were now to be applied to converted non-Jews? If not, what was the connection between Christ and the Old Testament — how could the new followers still be heirs of the promises that God

had made to the Jewish people? Certain Jewish believers wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised and to follow Jewish customs if they were to be saved and considered their equals in Christ. These early Jewish Christians have come to be known as the Judaizers.

Heretical Teaching

There are three major incidents with Judaizers in the New Testament. One is Paul's criticism of Peter for eating with Gentiles (non-Jews) in Acts 11, a second is the first church council in Acts 15, and the last is the confrontation between Peter and Paul in Galatians 2. From these three incidents, we can gather the basics of the Judaizing heresy.

The first incident occurs in Acts 11. In Acts 10, the apostle Peter receives a vision in which all foods are declared clean, contrary to Jewish law.² He interprets this vision to mean that all people, "clean" and "unclean" or "Jew" and "Gentile," are meant to be included in God's kingdom, and the Holy Spirit leads him to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius to put this new plan into practice. However, when Peter returns to Jerusalem from the house of Cornelius, a group known as the "circumcision party" (the Judaizers) is upset with him: "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" (Acts 11:2–3 RSV).

The circumcision party seems to be an established group by this point, because the reader is expected to know who they are without any explanation. The criticism that Peter faces here for eating with an uncircumcised believer will reappear later from the other side of the fence; Paul will criticize him for *refusing* to eat with uncircumcised believers. (As a side note, this wishy-washiness fits well with the descriptions of Peter in the gospels.)

The second major appearance of the circumcision party comes during the first church council, which is described in Acts 15. In that instance, Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch, where they "gathered the

church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). However, “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question” (Acts 15:1–2).

Here the ideas of the circumcision party become clearer. In Acts 11, the circumcision party criticizes Peter, but does not explain why eating with an uncircumcised believer is a big deal. In Acts 15, we see that these men who came from Judea specifically connect the act of circumcision with salvation. The Gentiles must be circumcised like Jews or they “cannot be saved” (Greek *sozo*, used for salvation throughout the New Testament). The passage continues with Paul, Barnabas, and the others appointed to accompany them going to Jerusalem to discuss the matter: “When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:4–5).

Two things are worth noticing here: circumcision is mentioned again as the prerequisite to salvation, and it is some believers (that is, people inside the church rather than another sect) who were formerly members of the Pharisees who are stirring things up. The circumcision party is openly interested in forcing non-Jewish Christians to observe Jewish customs, with the most prominent customs being those that clearly separated Jews from the surrounding culture: often circumcision, though issues like calendar observances (for example, Sabbath) and food laws seem to be on the agenda as well.

However, the best-known encounter with the circumcision party occurs later, in Galatians, where Paul coins the term “Judaizer.” The

word *Judaizer* is found only once in the entire New Testament, in Galatians 2:14, where Paul rebukes Peter (Cephas) for no longer eating with Gentiles when certain Jews arrive in Antioch. For a traditional Jew, eating with a non-Jew made him “unclean” — not morally evil, but what we might think of as “dirty.” Peter is implicitly endorsing the circumcision party, and Paul calls him out: “When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas [Peter] in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs [in the Greek, “Judaize”]?’” (Gal. 2:14).

Depending on the English version, the underlying word is translated in slightly different ways: “live like Jews” (ESV, NASB), “follow Jewish customs” (NIV), “follow the Jewish traditions” (NLT).³ However, the gist of the word is the same.⁴ It is found in some other literature outside the New Testament, as well, where it indicates living like a Jew.⁵ The issue here is not simply that Peter was following his native customs but that he was sending the message that it was following those customs that reconciled Gentiles with God. As one scholar writes, “Paul’s opponents were not merely insisting on the nationalization of Gentiles into Israel as a prerequisite for fellowship in the church, but were strenuously insisting that their very salvation rested on obeying the law.”⁶ Thus, Paul saw Judaizing conduct as “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14).

But the Judaizers drew their beliefs not from pagan philosophy or exotic religious ideas but from the actions of God in earlier times. God had commanded his chosen people to practice circumcision. He had given them laws that were to mark them out as a chosen people. Had God changed his mind?

Orthodox Response

The determining factor in the orthodox response was that God himself seemed to have discarded the old categories of Jew and non-Jew; furthermore, he had given the church ample indication of this

change by giving the Holy Spirit to non-Jews without converting them to Jewish practices first. In Acts 10, when Peter saw that the Holy Spirit “had been poured out even on Gentiles” (v. 45) — none of whom was circumcised — his response was, “So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” and the response of those to whom he recounted this was to acknowledge, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:17–18). Later, at the Council of Jerusalem, Paul makes a similar case: “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8–9). Therefore, human opinions had to give way — the Gentiles were just as Christian as their Jewish counterparts.

In his later encounters with Judaizers, Paul gives a more detailed response as to why the Jewish law is not mandatory for salvation. Gentiles are equally Christian because Jesus, as a person, is a better version of the elements that the Judaizers find appealing in Old Judaism. Since both groups have Jesus, they already have everything that the Old Testament pointed toward: “[The old practices] are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Col. 2:17).

Christ is the Chosen One, and his people the true remnant that God has spared from the destruction of the rest: “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:5–6).

Christ is the true circumcision, the sign that God owns us: “[A] person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God” (Rom. 2:29).

Christ is the true Sabbath, and we find peace when we come to him: “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the

people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his" (Heb. 4:8–10).

Christ is the true guilt-offering, for which our sins are forgiven: "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Heb. 9:13–14).

Paul also uses the Judaizing controversy to address a broader issue — the idea that we have to work hard and be a good person, whatever that might look like to us. Instead, when we trust Christ, he draws us out of sin. He has set the standards and satisfied them, so we can rest. To choose works, Paul warns, is to reject Christ altogether, not just to take Christ as a helper: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:2–4).

Paul is quite passionate on the issue, and understandably so. Another response is found in Galatians 5:12: "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" Paul is so perturbed that he suggests castration for those who require circumcision for others — he made his point clearly. Thus, according to the apostle and the response drafted at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the Gentiles were in no way obligated to follow the restrictions of the law. They were free in Christ, who had fulfilled the demands of the law. Paul only exhorted the Gentiles to abstain from practices associated with pagan idol worship, not so that they might earn their salvation but as a response to the life-changing message of the gospel as God's free gift.

Paul's response to the teaching of the Judaizers is twofold: (1) salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ, not by anything

anyone does, and (2) Jews and Gentiles stand on equal footing before God in Christ. The law no longer serves to mark out the people of God the way it did in the past. The gospel of Jesus Christ is for the world — for everyone. The following are Bible passages in which Paul challenges the “works” model of his Judaizing opponents:

First, God saves people freely by grace (God’s supernatural intervention) through faith:

- “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).
- “He has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (2 Tim. 1:9).
- “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4–5).

And second, the gospel includes both Jews and Gentiles (and anyone who believes):

- “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (Rom. 3:29–30).
- “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16).
- “[F]or all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you

are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:27–29).

- "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the body by human hands) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:11–14).

Contemporary Relevance

Why does this matter today? The teaching of the Judaizers forced Paul to explain more precisely how we are saved by Jesus. God does not require us to carry out a certain command in order to restore our connection with him. Indeed, he calls us to carry out his orders as his children, servants, and creatures, but our obedience does not solve the problem of being separated from God. In fact, since obedience can become a point of pride, doing good can even be detrimental — we must sometimes repent of our virtues as well as our vices. Instead, it is the fact that God declares us to be chosen people or new creations that carries the final weight, since his word trumps all others.⁷ And we are declared to be God's chosen people when we trust in Jesus, meaning that we can rest.

Grace by faith *alone*, without other qualifications, is a central reason Martin Luther took issue with the Roman Catholic Church of his day, whose stress on responding correctly to God in actions threatened to drive believers to despair. While the issue can be over-emphasized to the neglect of other New Testament teachings, the

grace-centeredness and inclusivity of the gospel must never be lost. This issue was about Jews and Gentiles in the first century, but the heart of the problem was something more fundamental: we tend to prioritize what we do (works) over what God has done (grace). For these reasons, we are tempted to exclude those who do not behave the way we behave.

Thus, while the heresy of the Judaizers was put to rest by the apostle Paul in the first century, the Judaizers' ideas still permeate the church today. The issues are no longer circumcision or ceremonial uncleanness, but the question of how the law relates to salvation is still something that many Christians remain confused about. How are our actions connected to our salvation? Paul's exhortation to the Judaizers remains as important as ever. It is not by works that we are saved but solely by the grace of Christ. In fact, to add anything to the work of Christ for salvation negates God's grace. Paul says, "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Gal. 2:21 rsv). This means that the gospel is for everyone, not just those who lived according to the rules: "the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10:12–13).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean for the Christian faith if Judaizing rules the day? How does Judaizing undercut the gospel?
2. In what ways can Christians still operate today like the Judaizers?
3. Do you have a pet "work" that you believe others must do (or avoid) to enjoy God's favor more fully? Maybe you wouldn't say people are saved by it — because we know that is bad theology — but perhaps at times you feel or act like their status as "good Christians" is in jeopardy because of it?
4. Who might you be excluding from the gospel? Who is the person or group of people that you just cannot imagine being

in the fold, included in the “all” of Paul’s “you are *all* one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28)? How might God be challenging you to reconsider?

5. In what areas of your life have you hardened your heart to the free grace of God? Where are you under a yoke of slavery instead of finding the freedom that the love and grace of Jesus bring? In what ways have you been motivated by the grace of God?

Further Reading

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