Gone With the Wind of Heresy?

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Solomon said, “there is no new thing under the Sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). If we apply that truth to modern-day Cults and ‘isms’ then we should be able to find historical precedents for the theologies they espouse. We may also learn something about why heresy arises.

From the earliest Old Testament times man’s understanding of spiritual things has been growing. God’s revelation of Himself and his relationship to man was progressively revealed. That means that the first intimation of a doctrine was in seed form which then developed into its full grown form in the New Testament. Therefore, today’s doctrines of the Trinity, salvation, last things, and many more, are as fully revealed as we will get this side of heaven.

The early disputes over the meaning and implications of these New Testament revelations wracked the Church with schisms. Those disputes had the beneficial effect of crystallizing the Church’s understanding and definitions of our doctrine. We call those definitions our creeds today.

In the history of heresy several reasons stand out as possible motivations to venture beyond the bounds of biblical orthodoxy. One is simple rebellion. Man’s sinful nature certainly explains why truth is denied, or corrupted, in many cases. Another cause is that scripture does not reveal everything. It is the existence of unanswered questions, or misunderstood answers, which motivates the skeptics of orthodoxy to tickle their ears with alternative answers. Another reason error occurred was that converts to Christianity brought into their faith much of the world view they held before becoming Christians. Today that would be akin to someone holding to evolution, becoming a Christian, and compromising the two beliefs with ‘theistic evolution’.

Common Threads - Legalism

Two millennia since Christ walked the earth we read about the heresies of Arianism, Montanism, Sabellianism, Nestorianism, Marcionism, Pelagianism, Gnosticism, Dynamic Monarchianism, Docetism, and Ebionism, among many others. The Church has always faced such influences away from orthodoxy. Is there some common thread in all these? Do they break down into fewer categories that will give us a head start in our discernment today?

If we begin with the New Testament we find that two primary influences were already affecting the Church. Paul addresses one that derives from Christianity’s Jewish heritage, that of the Judaizers. These were the legalists who, like the Pharisees who added to Moses, taught that belief in Christ

was primary but not sufficient. You had to also keep the law. Paul declared their teaching as anathema in Galatians.

One of the most persistent attitudes in religion is a carryover from our natural circumstance. “You don’t get something for nothing” is a popular truism. That is appropriate in our inter-human relations because it is the result of the Fall where man is to provide for his needs by the sweat of his brow. However, when brought into religion it is anathema. This is the most dramatic difference between Christianity and all other religions. Our salvation is a free gift. There is nothing we can do to merit it. But the human tendency is always to perfect ourselves until we can merit God’s favor. This was the first common thread in the development of heresies in church history.

The Old Testament Law was focused heavily on outwardly measurable standards of obedience. When the Law was transgressed the remedy was also outwardly measurable, the offering of a sacrifice.

The measures prescribed for obedience and the remedy for transgression were meticulously detailed outward acts. An example is the ceremonial law that defined what was clean and unclean, how one was defiled and how to purify oneself.

In the Old Testament God blessed Israel for its obedience. The blessings were frequently prosperity, health, and peace. When God cursed Israel for disobedience His curses were, many times, famine, disease, captivity, and war.

This heritage of outwardness, if you will, is what gave rise to Pharisaism in Jesus’ day and to the Judaizers that Paul denounced.

However, Christianity is an inherently inward faith. The focus is on what is in the heart, not on the outward appearance.

Legalism is strictly focused on the outward manifestations. Also, what is considered to be spiritual and unspiritual is frequently based upon a cultural interpretation of scripture, such as hair length.

Common Threads–Gnosticism

The gospel is simple. The most familiar statements from scripture make it plain and easy to understand.

However, it is also very deep. In that depth we encounter the mystery of the Trinity, the tensions between law and grace, the vagaries of fallen human nature, and the paradox of the incarnation.

It is in these mysterious depths that our sinfulness can work blunders turning the simple and straightforward into complex mystery. Most people, the vast majority of us, want the message we

hear from God to be plain so we can grasp it. In fact that is exactly what God has done.

The historical advantage we have of 2000 years of Church history is that we can look back and see the longevity of our present form of doctrine. That was not always true.

In the early Church many doctrines of the faith were contested by those coming from a Jewish or Hellenistic cultural milieu. When their discordant views became a problem in the Church it forced the Church to think through its doctrine and to state it as precisely as possible. This is where we got our earliest creeds, such the Nicene, Athanasian and Apostle's Creed.

C.S. Lewis said it was the shock of this controversy that caused our doctrine to "crystallize" (Mere Christianity).

The mysterious theological depths described above were the grounds out of which numerous errors arose in the early church. The most common of these arose out of Gnosticism.

The Gnostics held that God, being spirit, was so pure that He could not have direct contact with the material creation. It would defile Him to do so. Therefore He gave forth many "emanations" from Himself over time so that at some point far distant He could relate to the material world. This distant contact was Jesus, known to Gnostics as the Demiurge.

The Encyclopedia of Religion (Poplar Books) defines the term Demiurge as, "An old Greek term for a craftsman, literally a 'worker for the people.' In Platonic philosophy it was applied to the creator of the world, and in that sense it was used by the Gnostics to designate the inferior deity who had created the evil world of matter, in contrast with the supremely good god of the purely spiritual world whom Jesus had come to reveal."

When you apply the idea of the Demiurge to Christ you have a conflict with scripture. Because Christ is God manifest in the flesh and the Demiurge is a lesser deity a contradiction occurs.

This Gnostic view was so early in the history of the Church that the Apostle John refuted it in 2 John 7 when he said, "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh." He also attacked that view in John 1:1-3 where the Word (Jesus) is declared to be God (deity) and is the Eternal Creator of "all things."

Conclusion

The two common threads of heresy in the early Church came from the cultures in which Christianity found itself. Christianity arose out of Judaism (legalism) and spread into the Hellenistic culture (Gnosticism) of the Roman Empire. The tensions created by the clash of Christianity with these cultural milieus led to the list of heresies at the beginning of this article. We see many of the same ideas expressed in the cults we have today. As Solomon said, "There is no new thing under the

sun.”

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