

Smoky Mountain Reflections January 2014

Happy New Year. As we begin this New Year I would like to use my reflection articles in the coming months to examine five historic heresies. Legalism, Gnosticism, Arianism, Pelagianism, and Socinianism are five errors or departures from biblical truth that just refuse to die. All modern departures from biblical truth (either directly or indirectly) fall into one of these five categories. I chose two commonly parroted phrases to begin the series: "All paths lead to god" and "There is nothing new under the sun." The first phrase is a clear heresy and the second is a sound biblical truth found in the ninth verse of Ecclesiastes chapter one. Heresies are like viruses that infect sound doctrine and grow within the church, attacking biblical truth and sound practices. So before we discuss the five historic types, we must first define 'heresy'.

Heresy: A doctrine or practice contrary to clear biblical truth. This is of course, a confessional Lutheran definition of this word. Some will argue that "clear biblical truth" is a topic for debate and I will refer that debate to my Reflection in November of 2013 (now #15 SMR Apologetics) when I discussed the topic of Hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation. So what biblical truth does the statement "All paths lead to god" depart from? The biblical principal of exclusivity. This is a clear principal taught throughout scripture. It is the first commandment, and Christ himself claimed this exclusivity in John 14 verse 6 "***I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***" The issue of exclusivity is offensive in our postmodern society. Interestingly, those who condemn this principal as too exclusive....exclude those who hold this view, while claiming to be inclusive of all....except of course those who are too exclusive. If that seems a bit circular, illogical, and ridiculous to you...welcome to the club.

Now that we know what a heresy is, let's look at the five historic heresies and their many permutations, or various methods of expression. We will then see that when the devil seeks to deceive God's people he just repackages his same old lies. "There is nothing new under the sun." We examine and understand heresy so that we can clearly understand the many ways Satan tries to lead us away from God so that we can in essence protect ourselves from these false doctrines and practices, just like a vaccine protects us from a virus. The first and oldest of the heresies is **Legalism**, which made its first appearance in the Garden of Eden when Eve added to God's instruction by saying they should not touch the fruit. God said they shall not eat of it, but He did not prohibit touching. I find it interesting that this first form of legalism could be seen as laying the ground work for the first real sinful act of disobedience. When we create our own rules it leads to confusion which leads to sin. The early Christian church dealt with this heresy in the form of the **Judaizers**. Again, the problem with this form of heresy is that it makes rules where God does not and in so doing drives a wedge between God and man. It could be said that this is what all heresies do, but each one does it in a different way. With legalism, you end up with rules that are works you must do in order to be saved or have access to salvation. In the case of the Judaizers, they required circumcision, in essence saying that you had to first become Jewish in order to become a Christian. This shifts the work of salvation away from Jesus and puts it on our shoulders. We see St. Paul and the other Apostles working hard to root out this heresy in the early Church in the book of Acts and in many of Paul's epistles, especially Galatians. They came together specifically to deal with this question in Acts 15. We know from Romans 4: 5 & 6 that we are justified objectively by works outside of ourselves in the person and work of Christ. "***5. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, 6. just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works...***" All of chapter four is a good read on how we are made righteous and justified before God.

We see legalism sadly alive and well within Trinitarian Christianity today in many forms. They are man-made rules that are not biblical. For example, the idea that some form of penance is required for forgiveness, or that some form of decision on my part is required for a heart troubled by its own sinful nature to be given the gift of faith, turning Baptism and the Lord's Supper into works of obedience, or requiring speaking in tongues as evidence of faith. Whenever we require a rule or activity that is not based on a clear biblical doctrine, as I pointed out earlier with the doctrine of exclusivity, we fall into the same legalistic trap Eve did when she put words in God's mouth about touching the fruit. Blessings, see you next month when Gnosticism and Arianism will be our topics of discussion.
In Christ, Pastor Portier