

THE NEW TESTAMENT DEFINITION OF HERESY
(OR WHEN DO JESUS AND THE APOSTLES
REALLY GET MAD?)

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG*

Despite our contemporary “information explosion,” the compartmentalization of modern scholarship leaves some intriguing gaps in the secondary literature. Numerous church historians and systematic theologians have chronicled the debates between “orthodoxy” and “heresy” for just about every major doctrine and era in the life of the church.¹ Countless NT studies have analyzed what we can infer from the apostolic texts about the nature of the false teachers and false teaching combated in the first century.² But I have been unable to locate any study which both surveys the major NT data, fully abreast of the most recent biblical scholarship, and compares them with contemporary discussions about the boundaries of evangelical faith, conversant with the recent literature in that arena as well. A short paper like this one can only scratch the surface in tackling such an integrated task, but even preliminary efforts would seem important.

I. THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

This study will presuppose the historical reliability of the Gospels and Acts³ and thus speak of events in the lives of Jesus and his contemporaries

* Craig Blomberg is professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, P.O. Box 100,000, Denver, CO 80250-0100.

¹ From an evangelical perspective, see esp. the historical overview by Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984). Much briefer, but still helpful from an evangelical systematician’s perspective is Robert M. Bowman, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). The classic liberal study impinging on the NT is, of course, Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). A balanced response is found in H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London: Mowbray, 1954). Good examples of studies of specific periods or developments include Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976); David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985); and John Dart, *The Jesus of Heresy and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

² These are often conveniently summarized in a subsection of commentary introductions, with bibliographies. Representative examples of specialized studies include Fred O. Francis, *Conflict at Colossae* (Missoula: SBL, 1973); David Hill, “False Prophets and Charismatics,” *Bib* 57 (1976) 327–48; Luke T. Johnson, “II Timothy and the Polemic against False Teachers,” *JRS* 6 (1978) 1–26; and Hans C. C. Cavallin, “The False Teachers of 2 Peter as Pseudo-Prophets,” *NovT* 21 (1979) 263–70.

³ See my book, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987); and Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (ed. Conrad H. Gempf; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1989).

as well as the theological emphases of the four evangelists. Thus, in chronological sequence, we begin with John the Baptist.

1. *John the Baptist.* From John's perspective, certain Jewish leaders represented the major example of false teachers whom he encountered. In Matt 3:7, he addresses "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" as a "brood of vipers" who are in danger of imminent judgment (vv. 9–10) if they do not begin producing "fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8).⁴ John's warning appears to go largely unheeded, however, for in Luke 7:30 we read, "But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John."

In an age appropriately sensitive to the horrific anti-Semitism that characterized various eras of Church history, we do well to remind ourselves that nowhere do the Gospels condemn all Jews, all Jewish leaders, or even all members of one of the leadership sects.⁵ In fact, they present positive models in each of these categories—most notably Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and the Pharisees who warn Jesus about Herod's plotting against him (Luke 13:31). Nevertheless, we do perceive a general trend among Pharisees, Sadducees, and the scribes of both groups to reject the claims of both John and Jesus.

The flurry of research into first-century Palestinian Judaism that the last generation of scholarship has produced continues to debate vigorously the precise theologies of this movement, but the following generalizations seem secure. First, a major swath of Jewish belief can fairly be described by what E. P. Sanders dubbed "covenantal nomism"—that is to say, obedience to the Law was viewed as the means by which ethnic Jews maintained favor with God and membership in the covenant into which they believed they were born.⁶ Second, an important minority strand of Jewish thinking applied this same logic to Gentiles desiring to convert to Judaism, so that what Protestants have classically called "legalism"—performing good works in order to "be saved" in the first place—is by no means absent from first-century Jewish thought, even if not as dominant as a survey of post-70 rabbinic literature might suggest.⁷ Third, one important manifestation, though scarcely the only one, of both covenantal nomism and legalism involved an emphasis on the matters that have been called the "badges of national righteousness"—circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, the dietary laws, the temple cult, and so on—external religious activities that clearly set Jews apart from their Gentile neighbors.⁸ Thus, as we seek modern analogies to these false teachers, we must look not merely for classic legalists—those who would require a ritual like baptism or a spiritual gift like speaking in tongues as

⁴ Quotations from Scripture follow the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁵ See esp. Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner, eds., *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

⁶ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

⁷ See esp. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001).

⁸ See esp. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990). The concept of "national election" must be balanced with an equally prevalent remnant theology—see now Mark A. Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

a prerequisite for Christian salvation, but also for nomists—those who define the Christian life primarily in terms of the observance of a long list of “dos and don’ts” rather than as a vibrant, living relationship with Jesus, in which God’s moral absolutes are internalized. Moreover, we must beware of ethnocentrists—those who somehow privilege their own ethnic or national identities in their understanding of God’s plans for this world.⁹

2. *Jesus*. The vast majority of Jesus’ encounters with people whose teachings or practices he opposes involve this identical cross-section of Jewish leadership. If we begin with Mark, most likely the oldest of the Gospels, we first encounter significant opposition in the pentad of conflict or controversy stories that span Mark 2:1–3:6 and parallels.¹⁰ Clearly a central concern is Christological. The Pharisees and scribes do not accept Jesus’ implicit appeals to divine authority in forgiving sins, in eating with society’s notorious sinners and in assuming the role of “Lord of the Sabbath” (2:27). Matthew’s additional observation that twice in these contexts Jesus appealed to Hosea 6:6 (“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”—cf. Matt 9:13, 12:7) demonstrates a priority for what the church would later call the “moral law” above the “ceremonial law.”¹¹

Portraying perhaps the harshest interchange between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in all the Synoptics, Mark 3:22–30 and parallels depict certain scribes who accuse Jesus of exorcising by the power of the devil. After pointing out how self-defeating this would be, Jesus in turn implies that his accusers come perilously close to committing an unforgivable sin—blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. The context enables us to define this sin fairly precisely as being so out of touch with the true God of the universe as to attribute patently obviously divine manifestations to the power of God’s arch-enemy.¹² This exchange should make us extraordinarily cautious about using the language of diabolical influence on a fellow Christian, since to do so mistakenly places us in the identical position of those Jesus warned against unforgivable blasphemy.

Mark 7:1–23 and parallels introduce us to the next major conflict between Jesus and certain Jewish authorities. This time the controversy involves issues of ritual purity and the dietary laws. Even if Mark 7:19b (“In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean”) reflects a Markan parenthesis, not fully understood until after the episode of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, clearly Jesus is being portrayed here, at least retrospectively, as having abrogated not merely various oral laws of the Pharisees but even one large category of the Mosaic Law.¹³ Little wonder he received such criticism—either Jesus speaks as only God can to revoke what previous Scripture had

⁹ Cf. the excellent collection of sermons on Galatians by Roy Clements (*No Longer Slaves* [Leicester: IVP, 1997] 14), who speaks of “legalists, racialists, and nomists.”

¹⁰ On which, see esp. Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980).

¹¹ Or, as I described it in my *Matthew* (NAC [Nashville: Broadman, 1992] 157), “the priority of interpersonal relationships over religious ritual.”

¹² Cf. now Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 284.

¹³ See esp. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 228–30.

seemed to cite as irrevocable or he has blasphemously transgressed fundamental Jewish boundaries.

We should not be surprised, then, as we come to the last week of Christ's life, to find the polemic at a fever pitch. In clearing the temple, Jesus refers to it as a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17 par.), perhaps best understood with C. K. Barrett as implying a "nationalist stronghold."¹⁴ Jesus' brief warnings against the hypocrisy of many scribes in Mark 12:38–40 are narrated in considerably greater detail in Matthew 23 as a series of passionate invectives against both Pharisees and scribes, who cannot discern "the more important matters of the law" (v. 23) and who burden others with responsibilities they themselves are not prepared to shoulder (v. 4). They exemplify the temptations of religious leadership in every time and place—those who prefer outward show and the attention of others to true godliness and who set up elaborate casuistries to justify their self-centered attitudes and behavior.¹⁵

A very different kind of opponent emerges in Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Mark 13 pars.). Verses 5–6 and 21–23 both predict that many will emerge as false Messiahs, including some who will claim to be Christ returned to earth.¹⁶ But unless such a person has just descended from heaven in a worldwide, publicly visible event, gathering his elect from throughout the cosmos, his claim must be rejected (vv. 24–27).

3. *Distinctively Matthean contributions.* It is often assumed that the harsh polemic between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Matthew reflects conditions in his allegedly late-first-century church, as Christianity and rabbinic Judaism break from each other, each competing for recognition as the true legacy of pre-70 Judaism. Matthew is then also assumed to be combating "Christian" antinomians as false teachers *within* his community.¹⁷ Be that as it may, there clearly are passages unique to Matthew that warn against false teachers quite different from anyone mentioned in Mark. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions against those who say to him, "Lord, Lord," but do not do his heavenly Father's will (Matt 7:21). Some of those will even have prophesied in his name, performed exorcisms and worked other miracles (v. 22). But Jesus on Judgment Day will say to them, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (v. 23). Neither church leadership nor miraculous powers guarantee that a person is a true follower of Jesus. The same kind of false teacher appears to lie behind the parable of the ten bridesmaids (25:1–13; note esp. the language of v. 12: "I don't know you," addressed to those who had called Jesus κύριος, "Lord," v. 11). Antinomian threats seem to account as well for Jesus' harsh warnings to those

¹⁴ C. K. Barrett, "The House of Prayer and the Den of Thieves," in *Jesus und Paulus* (ed. E. Earle Ellis and Erich Grässer; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 16.

¹⁵ Cf. Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 535–59.

¹⁶ Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Word, 2001) 305–6, 323–34.

¹⁷ On the circumstances of Matthew's community, see esp. Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992).

who would cause a fellow Christian to sin (18:6–9) and for the so-called parable of the sheep and the goats (25:31–46), irrespective of the specific interpretation adopted of that notoriously controversial text.¹⁸

4. *Distinctively Lucan emphases.* Much of the dynamic between Jesus and various Jewish leaders remains the same as we move from Mark and Matthew to uniquely Lucan texts. Classic examples include the account of Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50) and the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector (18:9–14). A close parallel to the Matthean warning against antinomians appears in Luke 13:24–30. The major new emphasis in Luke involves his inclusion of Jesus' warnings against certain Jewish leaders who are also rich. The uniquely Lucan material in the Sermon on the Plain includes woes against those socio-economically wealthy (6:24) who also persecute the righteous (v. 26). Also unique to Luke is the triad of parables on the right use of riches—the rich fool (12:13–21), the unjust steward (16:1–9), and the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31), the latter two sandwiching an explicit Lucan comment on how certain Pharisees “who loved money” were listening to and sneering at Jesus (v. 14). While the Bible never condemns wealth *per se*, I have demonstrated elsewhere that neither does it ever acknowledge someone to be truly a member of the people of God who is wealthy and not simultaneously generous and compassionate in his or her use of that wealth.¹⁹

II. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

By dividing John from the Synoptics, I am not suggesting that it is any less historical.²⁰ But in a survey that essentially is sketching a NT theology of false teachers, it makes sense to treat John separately owing to his numerous theological distinctives.

As with Matthew, many scholars assume John's strong polemic between Jesus and various Jewish leaders reflects end-of-the-first century tensions between the Johannine community (probably in Asia minor) and local Jewish synagogues that, among other things, have begun to expel Christian Jews (thus e.g. John 9:22 and 16:2).²¹ Here such a theory dovetails better with the external evidence we have for the composition of John than it did with Matthew.²² Without following the lead of many who reject a historical basis in the life of Christ for the disputes John portrays, we may well be

¹⁸ For a full history, see Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches* (NSBT; Downers Grove: IVP, 1999); on Luke specifically, see pp. 219–27.

²⁰ Indeed, I have elsewhere recently made a robust defense of John's historicity, in *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002).

²¹ The classic study is that of J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

²² See any of the standard NT introductions for the external evidence.

meant to do a little “mirror reading” and see situations in his own church as providing impetus for these emphases in his Gospel.

Thus, while still speculative, it is not implausible to suggest that behind the inclusion of Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1–15) lies a group of “secret” Jewish believers in the synagogues in and around Ephesus that John is encouraging to confess Christ openly. A similarly conservative group of Jewish Christians no longer in the synagogues may explain why John goes out of his way to stress the presence of apparent believers among the Jewish crowds and even within the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem throughout Jesus’ public teaching there (e.g. 7:31, 46).²³ It is indeed puzzling to read about apparently genuine Jewish believers who “put their faith in” Christ in 8:30, only to have some of that same group attempt to stone him before the chapter ends (v. 59)! Stephen Motyer’s recent monograph does an outstanding job of rendering the second half of John 8 historically plausible and theologically intelligible; at least by v. 45 the audience has substantially narrowed and partially changed.²⁴ But a recognition of John’s concern for true believers to demonstrate that faith by perseverance during the increasingly hard times that his church was experiencing in the 90s also goes a long way toward explaining the inclusion of this material. The same applies to the distinctive (though not unique) Johannine emphasis on the crowds who fall away (see throughout chap. 6) and on Judas’ treachery (see esp. 6:70; 13:10–11, 18–30).

III. THE BOOK OF ACTS

The same Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to death in the Gospels’ passion narratives understandably re-emerges as the first major opponent of the fledgling church in Jerusalem (Acts 4–5). It was not just Jesus’ personal claims—both theological and ethical—that the Jewish leadership found dangerous. His disciples are replicating his ministry with the same threatening, supernatural power.²⁵ The stoning of Stephen and the persecution of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians more generally (while the apostles, representing Hebraic Jewish Christianity are allowed to remain in Jerusalem, Acts 6:1–8:3) does suggest some unevenness in the awareness and implementation of the most radical implications of Jesus’ message.²⁶

But while the book of Acts speaks of Jewish opposition to the gospel throughout its narrative, internal problems in the young Christian community emerge as well. Ananias’s and Sapphira’s severe judgment (5:1–11) proves particularly troubling to the modern reader, as do Peter’s harsh words to Simon the magician after his apparent conversion, rendered more literally by J. B. Phillips’s paraphrase than in most translations as “To hell with you and your money” (8:20)! Both narratives disclose that it is not

²³ For both groups, see esp. Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 51–61.

²⁴ Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), esp. 160–210.

²⁵ On the numerous ways the apostles in Acts replicate Jesus’ ministry in Luke, see esp. throughout Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

²⁶ See esp. Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 1–29.

merely the misuse of money that is involved, but it is interesting to note, in keeping with Luke's redactional emphases, that a covetous desire for money proves a key part of the deceit in each episode.²⁷

In Acts 12, we find the first recorded NT example of God's judgment on someone who makes no pretense of being a follower of Christ. Herod Agrippa accepts acclamation as a god and is smitten by an angel with worms, so that he dies (vv. 21–23). The final miracle of judgment in the book of Acts also targets an unbeliever, "a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus" (13:6). He is only blinded, not killed, and that only "for a time" (v. 11). But both narratives clearly point out the seriousness of dabbling with the most blasphemous beliefs and practices of pagan religion. Tellingly, both men claimed to be Jewish, having the advantage of knowing what theologians today call God's "special revelation," which in turn made their behavior that much more inexcusable.²⁸

Acts 15, of course, narrates a watershed in the first generation of Christianity with its presentation of the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem. The most serious doctrinal issue that threatened to blow the early church "sky high" was whether Gentiles coming to Christ had to keep the Jewish Law, with circumcision as its initiation rite, in order to be saved (v. 1). Here appears the first explicit reference to what Paul in his epistles will term "Judaizing" (see Gal 2:14)—Jewish Christians employing classic legalism, probably followed up with covenantal nomism. As J. Louis Martyn has suggested, in light of Israel's deteriorating relations with Rome and the growing emergence of a "proto-Zealot" faction, it is probable that these Jewish Christians represented a wing of Judaism that was even more "fanatical" than the religion as a whole or than the opposition Christ had encountered during most of his life.²⁹ Fortunately, at least the leadership of the church clearly adjudicated against the Judaizers and in favor of *sola gratia* (see esp. Acts 15:10).³⁰

The inconsistencies of communicating messages in the first-century empire create some other inadequate belief systems in Acts, which the early Christians must correct, though doing so without the rancor exhibited in some of the previous narratives surveyed. Priscilla and Aquila take an effective preacher, Apollos, aside and explain "to him the way of God more adequately" (18:26). Paul encounters apparent believers in Ephesus, who in fact know only John's baptism and have never heard of the Holy Spirit (19:1–7); here a more full-orbed presentation of the gospel from its beginnings proves in order.³¹ Finally, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, Paul predicts what the epistles will demonstrate frequently

²⁷ Cf. further Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches* 165–67, 169–70.

²⁸ For other "Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution" in Acts, see the chapter so entitled by Brian Rapske in *Witness to the Gospel* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 235–56.

²⁹ J. Louis Martyn, "A Law-Observant Mission to Gentiles," *SJT* 38 (1985) 307–24.

³⁰ Cf. further Craig L. Blomberg, "The Christian and the Law of Moses," in *Witness to the Gospel* 397–416.

³¹ On which see esp. James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 83–89.

did occur: the emergence of false teachers, both externally and internally, who would “distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (20:30). We are not told the content of this false teaching but it is serious enough for Paul to label its proponents “savage wolves” (v. 29).

IV. THE EPISTLES OF PAUL

We will proceed with Paul’s letters in their probable chronological order, adopting the earlier date for Galatians.

1. *Galatians*. This fiery letter seems to provide the immediate background for the Apostolic Council described in Acts 15. If Matthew 23 contains the strongest sustained invective of Jesus against his most serious opposition, Galatians presents perhaps Paul’s harshest moments. Bypassing the customary thanksgiving, Paul launches immediately into the problem of believers turning to a “different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (1:6). It “perverts” the “gospel of Christ” and anyone who promotes it should be anathematized (vv. 8–9).³² Sadly, this kind of rhetoric has often been used by professing Christians to attack all those with whom they disagree, no matter what the issue. We must always balance Galatians 1 with 1 Corinthians 9, in which Paul labors to be all things to all people so that by all means he might save some (vv. 19–23).³³ Four observations help explain the force of his rhetoric here: (1) This language is no stronger than and even milder than much other Jewish and Greco-Roman rhetoric promoting religious truth; it would not have jarred the ancient audience as much as it does a modern one.³⁴ (2) Paul is not necessarily addressing the false teachers directly with this rhetoric, but warning his own converts about their insidious influence. (3) These are alleged Christians and Christian leaders promoting the heresy, who have every reason to know better. (4) Most importantly of all, this is an issue in which people’s very salvation is at stake. Paul never vilifies his opponents with such harsh language except where people’s eternal destinies clearly hang in the balance.

These same qualifications explain Paul’s equally direct challenge to Peter in 2:11–14 when he temporarily sides with the Judaizers. The package of legalism, nomism, and ethnocentrism that made key pharisaic leaders so inimical has intensified and triggers Paul’s sternest warnings as well. But Galatians also proscribes antinomianism (chaps. 5–6), whether because of an opposite faction in the Galatian church or simply because Paul recognized the pendulum could easily swing from one extreme to the other.³⁵ And Paul’s strong rebuke of Peter must be balanced by his counsel for correcting

³² The most detailed reconstruction of Paul’s Judaizing opposition appears throughout J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

³³ For this balance, see esp. D. A. Carson, “Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 9.19–23 and Galatians 2.11–14,” *Churchman* 109 (1986) 6–45.

³⁴ Cf. esp. Luke T. Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *JBL* 108 (1989) 419–41.

³⁵ For both possibilities, see F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 240.

apparent *adiaphora*—“you who are spiritual should restore that person gently” (6:1).³⁶ Unfortunately Christians have too often vilified one another on morally neutral or doctrinally minor issues rather than saving their most forceful rhetoric for the really serious ones.

2. *1 and 2 Thessalonians*. There is little of explicit false teaching addressed in 1 Thessalonians. The major doctrinal question on which these Christians need further instruction is eschatology, but Paul’s correction is entirely in the spirit of encouragement and edification (5:11). 2 Thessalonians discloses a more serious problem—some think the Day of the Lord has already come (2:2). This could have resulted from false teachers, but it is at least as likely that it merely reflected a misunderstanding of Paul’s first epistle.³⁷ An ethical problem has developed as well, increasingly explained today along sociological rather than theological lines: some are not working, probably trying to perpetuate the parasitic patron-client relationships they had prior to conversion.³⁸ One issue, therefore, worthy of dis-fellowshipping if not corrected, emerges in 3:10: “Anyone who will not work [i.e. is not *willing* to work] shall not eat”—with Robert Jewett, probably referring to the love feast and Lord’s supper.³⁹

3. *1 Corinthians*. This letter presents a veritable potpourri of problems facing this immature congregation. They have divided themselves into factions, focusing on human leaders (chaps. 1–4): they have failed to deal with serious sexual sin in the camp (5:1–13; 6:12–20); some are suing one another (6:1–11); there is a group promoting celibacy as normative for all believers (chap. 7); “weaker” and “stronger” brothers and sisters contend over idol meat, gender roles, the Lord’s supper, and spiritual gifts (chaps. 8–14); and some disbelieve the bodily resurrection of Christ (chap. 15). When one asks what, if anything, unifies these disparate problems, a fair consensus among recent scholarship replies: (1) alignments with rival house group leaders, themselves probably former well-to-do patrons still insisting on the Greco-Roman customs of reciprocity; (2) divisions among rich and poor more generally; (3) Hellenistic philosophical dualism, most recently and locally promoted by the Sophists; and (4) a triumphalist spirit that drastically misjudges the amount of spiritual maturity that the Corinthians have attained (see esp. 4:8).⁴⁰ All prove serious enough to require fairly direct and blunt confrontation.

³⁶ On which see esp. G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 185–86.

³⁷ So esp. I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 187. Despite the NIV, the Greek in 2:2 literally reads, “a spirit, word or letter, as through us, as if the Day of the Lord had come.”

³⁸ See the survey of recent approaches in Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 454–57.

³⁹ Robert Jewett, *Paul: The Apostle to America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 73–86.

⁴⁰ See my *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). More recently, cf. Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); and Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

4. *2 Corinthians*. Chapters 1–7 of Paul’s second letter to Corinth suggest that major improvements have been made on all of these fronts. But the last four chapters of the epistle point to a new, external threat—the arrival of Judaizers on the scene. Not surprisingly, Paul’s language in 2 Corinthians 10–13 rivals that of Galatians in severity. From Paul’s reply we may infer that Jewish Christians calling themselves apostles, but almost certainly to be distinguished from the Twelve, are severely critical of Paul (10:1–11); delight in comparing themselves favorably with other religious teachers in their world (10:12–18); preach a distorted gospel that Paul attributes to a “different spirit” (11:1–6); demand money for their ministry, presumably via the logic that “you get what you pay for,” in a way Paul eschews (11:7–12); can be called servants of Satan masquerading as angels of light (11:13–15); and boast in their credentials, including ethnic ones, which Paul can match but which he prefers to counter by reciting his unmatched catalog of sufferings (11:16–12:10). While quite different and even more dangerous than the Greco-Roman philosophies native to Corinth, because of their professing Christianity, these Judaizers similarly seduce the Corinthian congregation to adopt an unwarranted triumphalist spirit.⁴¹

5. *Romans*. No explicit false teaching looms in the background to Romans. The most relevant material for this survey is Paul’s expanded reflection on the strong and the weak in the context of debate over diet—this time perhaps with the Jewish kosher laws more in view (Rom 14:1–15:13) rather than food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8–10).⁴² Paul’s gentle appeal to both parties in the debate to accept one another, as in 1 Corinthians 8–10, provides an important counterbalance to his harsher rejection of doctrine or practice that impinges on one’s salvation. In general one senses that there are only a few very central issues for Paul that are not *adiaphora* like these issues of what one eats.⁴³

6. *The prison epistles*. Despite the tantalizing number of possibilities suggested for the false teaching at Colossae, a fair consensus has emerged that we have some uniquely home-grown combination of Judaizing and proto-Gnosticizing, perhaps with elements of local mystery religions and magical practices thrown in.⁴⁴ Ephesians provides even less evidence for specific false teaching, though Clinton Arnold has shown the pervasiveness of spiritual warfare as a unifying theme for the book, particularly in light of the use of magical papyri in Ephesus reflected in Acts 19:17–20.⁴⁵

Four potential opponents to the gospel may be inferred from Philippians. The two clearest include the rival teachers of 1:15–18, whose motives are

⁴¹ Cf. esp. D. A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

⁴² See e.g. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 826–33.

⁴³ Cf. Leif Andersen, “Heresy and Church Discipline: What Are the Limits of Tolerance in the Church?” *EJT* 10 (2001) 13–23.

⁴⁴ See esp. Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

⁴⁵ *Idem*, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

bad but whose content is good, and thus Paul, perhaps surprisingly to us, can still rejoice. Conversely, Judaizers appear here, too, and come in once again for harsh rebuke (3:2–4:1). They may well have been quite sincere, but when the message is so wrong, it cannot be tolerated. Phil 3:18–19 may refer to these Judaizers' insistence on the dietary laws, but these verses may also somewhat more naturally be taken as referring to the more hedonistic practice of over-indulgence. Finally, Paul's imprisonment, probably in Rome, coupled with his warning against unnamed opponents in 1:27–30, could suggest the very beginnings of imperial persecution, or at least hostility from local non-Christian Roman supporters of the growing imperial cult.⁴⁶

7. *The pastoral epistles.* Bolstering support for Pauline authorship and a date no later than the 60s, Luke Johnson has demonstrated in detail how 1 Timothy affords striking parallels in its contents and opposition to 1 Corinthians; and 2 Timothy to Philippians.⁴⁷ Titus seems to contend against a uniquely Cretan version of the false teaching afflicting Ephesus in 1 Timothy, showing signs of a much younger and more primitive congregation on that island as well.⁴⁸ Once again, probably to our surprise, factiousness emerges as an excommunicable offense (Titus 3:10) that is self-condemning (v. 11).⁴⁹

V. THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Again, we may proceed in one probable chronological sequence.

1. *Hebrews and the general epistles.* The letter of James responds neither to false teachers nor to external persecution but does have to oppose an apparently lifeless orthodoxy among some of the churches addressed.⁵⁰ How often have purely doctrinal squabbles led to the same sterility in our midst?⁵¹ Hebrews probably reflects the growing temptation of Jewish Christians in Rome in the early 60s, near the onset of Neronian persecution, to apostatize, lapsing back into non-Christian Judaism to avoid harassment and, eventually, even martyrdom.⁵² 1 Peter is probably written from Rome

⁴⁶ For a concise survey of the debates, see Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 26–35.

⁴⁷ Luke T. Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996) 214. Cf. throughout *idem*, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

⁴⁸ Cf. throughout *idem*, *Letters to Paul's Delegates* 211–54.

⁴⁹ Presupposing that the process of disfellowshipping has followed all the steps of Matt. 18:15–18; see I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 338.

⁵⁰ Irrespective of the debate over whether James has a small number of specific congregations in mind—so e.g. Peter H. Davids (*The Epistle of James* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 28–34)—or is an encyclical to the entire Jewish-Christian diaspora—so esp. Richard Bauckham (*James* [New York: Routledge, 1999] 11–28).

⁵¹ Even James itself can be thus “intercepted” and emasculated of its force. See esp. Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

⁵² See esp. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1991) li–lxvi.

to predominantly Gentile Christians in what we would call western and central Turkey at about the same time, though the greatest hostility they face seems to come from locals, including former friends and family who cannot fathom their rejection of pagan practice (1 Pet 4:3–4).⁵³

Jude and 2 Peter have defied the best scholarly attempts to identify the teachings they oppose. Jude clearly stresses that “tolerance has its limits,”⁵⁴ a salutary reminder in an age of rampant pluralism, but few additional clues concerning the false teaching emerge. We learn more from both letters about the false teachers’ immorality than about their ideology. The two most recent detailed analyses of the opposition behind 2 Peter, by Jerome Neyrey and Daryl Charles, have made plausible cases for Epicureans and Stoics, respectively, as being in view.⁵⁵ That these philosophies are diametrically opposed each other on numerous points simply highlights how little we actually can conclude on this topic!

The epistles of John can be somewhat more precisely assigned, probably to the 90s, addressing various house churches in and around Ephesus. Colin Kruse’s recent commentary plausibly suggests that we should see a combination of elements, including emerging Gnosticism, docetism and Cerinthianism (themselves considerably overlapping), as defining the false teaching combated in these letters.⁵⁶ Key doctrinal tenets opposed would then include perfectionism, antinomianism, and an inadequate Christology.

2. *The book of Revelation.* As we come to the end of the NT, canonically and chronologically, we encounter the most serious Roman persecution to date—Domitian’s short-lived but intense insistence on emperor worship in the mid-90s.⁵⁷ The entire apocalyptic genre of Revelation reflects its setting of giving persecuted Christians encouragement that God is still sovereign and will ultimately avenge the injustices of this life. If Romans 13 can portray government as divinely established, Revelation 13 depicts some as demonically inspired. Both models have re-emerged throughout human history. The striking lament of the fall of the great, evil, “end-times” empire in Revelation 17–18 demonstrates that it reflected a blasphemous equation of religion and politics, combined with the greatest wealth, gained at the expense of subjugated people, in the known world of John’s day.⁵⁸ Thus the empire can be compared to both OT-age Babylon and NT-era Rome, while literally corresponding to neither. At the start of the twenty-first century,

⁵³ See e.g. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 7–10.

⁵⁴ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 463.

⁵⁵ Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude* (New York: Doubleday, 1993); J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

⁵⁶ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 14–27.

⁵⁷ There is a tendency today to play down the extent of this persecution, but this can be done only by rejecting the veracity of significant ancient external evidence. For details, see esp. Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 35–39.

⁵⁸ Cf. esp. J. N. Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (*JSNTS* 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

we scarcely need to look beyond increasingly godless Western expressions of capitalism for frightening parallels.⁵⁹

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The collection of false teaching and immoral behavior that NT authors most strongly oppose is an interesting one. A strong insistence on both the full deity and the full humanity of Christ naturally appears. Salvation by grace through faith, countering all forms of legalism, nomism, and ethnocentrism, proves central, but one must submit to the resurrected Jesus as total Master (Rom 10:9–10) and exhibit the fruit befitting repentance. The only absolutely crucial eschatological tenet is the fact of Christ's still future, visible return. With respect to what systematicians usually include under "sanctification" appears an insistence on keeping security and perseverance in balance, and on avoiding the twin errors of defeatism and triumphalism, including in its extreme forms perfectionism. After that, one is hard pressed to find further absolutely central theological tenets for which NT writers strongly contend.

At least as crucial as correct theology is correct behavior. The NT strongly opposes antinomianism, immorality more generally (especially in its twin, opposing manifestations of asceticism and hedonism), and a factious or a divisive spirit. It insists that stewardship of one's material possessions function as "exhibit A" of the good works that must necessarily flow from the life of one truly redeemed. It consistently places morality above ritual, an observation that should address us loudly in the current evangelical "worship wars"!

Our inspired authors clearly oppose non-Christian religions and their practitioners, but their dominant strategy is to call them to repentance via making the gospel as winsome as possible. The harshest rhetoric is almost always reserved for the ultraconservative religious insider who transgresses key boundaries, especially leaders who should certainly know better. By way of contrast, the last century of American evangelicalism has majored on creating extensive doctrinal statements to separate itself from outsiders, usually adding numerous *adiaphora* to more central matters. The ETS is a rare exception but, paradoxically, our doctrinal statement lacks any requirement for salvation. And when evangelical "lifestyle" statements have addressed ethical concerns, the lists have often proved quite different from NT vice and virtue lists.

In short, our tendency has been to fight our fiercest battles at the theological periphery of evangelicalism, where we believe the limits of tolerance have been exceeded. We rarely ask who in our midst may be equally misguided (and possibly even more dangerous) because they have drawn the boundaries too narrowly rather than too broadly. As Arland Hultgren's survey of the earliest eras of Church history reminds us, one can become

⁵⁹ Cf. esp. throughout Ricardo Foulkes, *El Apocalipsis de San Juan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

heretical by being either too broad-minded or too narrow-minded.⁶⁰ It would be a salutary exercise to survey the history of the ETS to see if we have *ever* addressed the second of these categories, having obviously addressed the first numerous times. It would be even more salutary as we *currently* wrestle with definitions of orthodoxy more generally to make sure that we address both extremes.

⁶⁰ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).