

SI: This fall we’re looking in detail at one chapter of Bible—Hebrews 13

It’s a series of short instructions

about how we ought to love one another as brothers.

We’re at the seventh instruction. Hebrews 13:9

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.

INTRO: Let me start by telling you three church stories.

First story:

Several years ago a pastor friend of mine had a problem.

There as a woman in his church, a very bright, articulate woman, who was an advocate of homeschooling. She had published a book on the subject.

She was a leader of the homeschooling community in the St. Louis area.

It was a cause she believed in and she was a tireless promoter. All ok so far.

But then she began to argue that homeschooling was the answer to all the problems of society, and of the family, and of the church.

Those who chose homeschooling for their children were serious, sober Christians.

Those who chose public, private, or Christian schools were not.

Families who admired her began to flock to my friend’s church.

They began to agitate for the church to take a vocal, pro-homeschooling stance.

Second story:

Another pastor I know, an older man, had an elder in his church

who was an outspoken political conservative.

And as this elder became more and more alarmed by moral and political decay in America, erosion of constitutional freedoms, and so forth,

he began to urge his pastor to address these matters in his sermons.

At the time there was a well-known TV preacher

who had made his mark dealing with political issues in his sermons.

This elder was always comparing his pastor to this TV preacher.

See how Dr. So-and-so does it on TV. Look what huge audience he has.

He’s not afraid to address the important issues.

This is where the church has to take a stand today.
Eventually this elder gathered around him a group of like-minded people
and they began to agitate to get rid of their old pastor, so they could get right man.

Third story:

An acquaintance of mine, a believer who lives in another state,
called me a number of times in distress about his church.

He said, every few months there's some new emphasis, and that's the big thing.

Everybody gets on the bandwagon.

It might be personal finances and budgeting.

That will be the push. We'll have sermons on biblical view of money.

We'll have classes and accountability groups, people getting out of debt.

And then it will be health and dieting.

Sermons on how our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, food is an idol.

There will be exercise classes popping up.

Everybody's honoring God by eating right and losing weight.

Then it will be a push to have good marriages.

There will be another sermon series and marriage retreats and conferences.

Then it will be big missions emphasis.

We'll have missionary speakers and special collections and short term mission

teams with feel-good video reports of church members holding orphans.

And then there will be a political season where the emphasis is on being an
informed Christian citizen and praying for government leaders.

He said: How can you criticize any of that stuff? It's all biblical and practical.

But on the way home from church my wife cries and says:

I just want to hear the Gospel.

“Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.”

When you read that, the tendency is to think it means weird stuff.

Don't believe the Mormons when they tell you Satan is Jesus' spirit brother.

Don't believe Scientology that says you have an extraterrestrial alien soul
with supernatural powers, just like Tom Cruise.

But that's not what this verse is concerned about.

Diverse and strange teachings doesn't mean bizarre things. Doesn't mean cults.

It means teachings incompatible with grace alone. Teachings in competition
with the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

And that can be anything, even good things, even biblical things

that are raised to such a level of importance that God's grace alone is eclipsed.

That's what the very next phrase in the verse says:

For it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods.
Grace strengthens our hearts. Salvation by faith alone strengthens our hearts.
Not foods. Foods refers to food laws of the Old Testament.
Nothing wrong with food laws. They're the Bible for goodness sake.
But when they become the big deal in the life of a church, what happens?
Next phrase tells us: "which have not benefited those devoted to them."
No benefit. Quite the opposite. Did you notice common thread in three stories?
Division. Failure of brotherly love. Grace unites. Strange and diverse don't.

Let's work this out in more detail under three headings:

The origins of strange and diverse teachings

The appeal of strange and diverse teachings

The answer to strange and diverse teachings

MP#1 The origins of strange and diverse teachings

There's a term we sometimes use. The term is "legalism" or "legalistic."

Over the years I've heard a number of you say you came from legalistic churches.

Let's define legalism. It will help us get a handle on this passage.

There are two kinds of legalism. The first is what might call legalism proper.

Legalism proper says that you are saved by faith in Christ plus works,
and that you are kept saved and remain saved by faith plus works.

Churches that teach that are usually up front about it.

The Catholic church says, saved by faith plus participation in sacraments.

The Church of Christ says, saved by making profession of faith, baptism (theirs).

And in their theological systems, you stay saved by doing, not doing certain things.

Most of you here who say you grew up in a legalistic church were not actually
in a church that formally and officially taught faith plus works.

But there is a second form of legalism. I'll call it legalism lite. (Miller Lite)

Legalism lite affirms Gospel. Affirms saved by faith in Christ alone, not works.

But that just gets you in the door. If you are going to be a serious Christian,

if you are going to have a dynamic, full, real, committed Christian life,

if you are going to be serious for Christ and not have any doubts—

Then, there are other things you have to do or not do. And out comes the list.

Every church or every Christian with this sort of legalism lite has their list.

Those who don't follow the items on the list, well, I'm not saying they aren't

Christians and won't be saved in the end, but not really committed.

That's what the strange and diverse teachings are in this verse—legalism lite.

And first on the list for serious Christians was “foods.” The verse says: “it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods”
I’ve already mentioned what that was. It was Old Testament food laws that God gave the nation of Israel to prepare them for the coming of Christ. Christ’s coming fulfilled those laws, made them no longer mandatory for believers. Jesus made that clear, the Apostles did too.

Was it wrong for Jewish believers in Christ to continue to keep food laws and eat kosher as a custom and as tribute to their religious heritage? Certainly not. Paul himself, 30 years after Christ’s resurrection, went into Jerusalem temple and fulfilled certain Old Testament vows and sacrifices. He did it in full acknowledgement that these things were always about Jesus Christ. But that’s not how some Jewish believers were handling them. One of the persistent problems in the early church that was that some Jewish believers in Christ were telling Gentile believers in Christ—you really need to be keeping these food laws and doing other things like circumcision if you are serious about being a Christian. Do you see how this works? Yeah, you can be saved by faith in Christ and grace. But you need more than faith and grace to move ahead, have to do this other thing

We studied Colossians a couple years ago. That was the issue Paul dealt with in his letter to that church—legalism lite. They were all over the map when it came to the list of things being advocated. Some were saying: Have to do Jewish things to be serious Christian. Have to get back to the traditions, to the old ways. Others who were saying, the way you move to higher spiritual level is by joining our exclusive, elite, Bible study where we get into the deep things. That idea actually came out of the pagan Greek culture, something popular at the time called mystery religions that practiced secret meetings with secret knowledge.

Food was a big deal in the Colossian church too. Foods should and shouldn’t eat. There’s nothing new under the sun. Think what a big deal food has become to many Americans. Whole Foods is not just the name of a grocery store, it’s a concept—wholeness, righteousness, that comes from consuming approved natural, organic, sustainable stuff. Now imagine believers buying into that and Christianizing it.

Here’s the point: Strange and diverse teachings come from all directions. That means we’re all susceptible. Because we all have our particular bents. Some of us love tradition and ritual, some of us love novelty and innovation.

Some concerned world doesn't influence church, some church relevant to world. Some of us better at criticizing, guarding, some better at accepting, supporting. That means we are all susceptible to elevating particular practices or doctrines or causes or programs and making them essential to the Christian life in a way that only Jesus and the cross are essential.

I'm not a novelty guy.

You're never going to get me turned on by the latest conference or book or Christian movement or make me think that's what the church needs.

But I could be tempted by someone who argues that this tradition, or that historic practice or system is the key to being truly spiritual church.

Some of you have opposite tendency. We need each other.

That leads to the next point:

MP#2 The appeal of strange and diverse teachings

You can look at the church 2,000 years ago, you can look at the church today and at every point in between, and you will find example after example of diverse and strange teachings.

No one intends to minimize or marginalize grace.

They start out wanting to push themselves and their church to a higher level. But sooner or later this or that thing they are advocating, this cause, this program becomes the major focus, and Christ and the cross and grace alone recede into the background.

It's sincere. But it lacks dependence on the very thing that matters most—the grace of Christ mediated to us through his word and Spirit.

So back to this question: What's the appeal? Here a few key reasons.

1. Pride.

Emphasizing a particular program, cause or list as key puts us in the driver's seat.

It's something that we can do. Can talk about grace. But we do it.

There was a popular conference speaker several years ago who produced enormous notebooks with principles that covered virtually every situation in life.

It was all backed up with Bible verses and citations.

Although his motives were good and many things he said were true—

the program implied that all you had to do was apply the principles and the steps. But Jesus says, Without me you can do nothing.

2. Pride again.

We are always looking for ways to judge ourselves better than others.

Scratch below the surface of strange, diverse teaching often you will find an appeal to spiritual elitism, rather than genuine Christian humility, longing for holiness.

Reformed folks, Calvinists often guilty of making theological precision the key.
And what is often lurking under the surface is spiritual elitism.
It feels good to be theologically superior to Arminians.
I once heard an old Presbyterian minister say that when some people become Calvinists, you need to lock them in a room for 10 years.

3. The appeal of zeal. Let me read you how one preacher expressed it.
I have discovered this new principle. I have found this new approach to be life changing. This is what you need; this is what every Christian needs. This is the solution to our problems. The lack of *this* is why the church is weak. If only Christians would get on *this* bandwagon the church would advance with great power and speed . . . How many times have we heard something like that just in our own lifetime. That's the way we advertise things in American culture in our day. Everything is revolutionary—from the new car to the new Christian book . . . (This is) the genius of the Devil who disguises himself as an angel of light and who can promote a false form of zeal and make it terribly impressive.

4. The difficulty of real Christian faith and life.
Growth in godliness both as an individual and as a church is long, hard labor.
It's running the race. This race is a marathon, not a sprint.
It's a lifelong walk with Christ through many dangers, toils, and snares.
So when someone says: Here's the key. This is it. We jump on it.

J.I. Packer's autobiography, tells how as a young Christian he bought into a popular teaching called the higher life movement.
Promised sustained victory over sin.
Key was to "Let go and let God." Don't struggle with sin.
Got him nowhere. Realized same churned up, immature young man.
Famous turning point. Discovery of Puritans, John Owen.
Nope, no shortcuts or silver bullets for dealing with sin.
Christian life is a fight to the end.

5. Conformity. Strange and diverse teachings that become popular in the church are often ways of helping Christians fit more comfortably into the culture—or they help us fit into a little Christian sub-culture.
American culture in our time is sexually promiscuous, and therapeutic—so religious programs in the church that emphasize accepting people just as they are, or that minimize theology, or accommodate the culture are going to appeal.

The flip side is that in some conservative Christian sub-cultures, the key is separation from the culture. Even criticism of the church and institutions.
Read some literature a while back, movement arguing that the reason for the

decline of the church in America is youth groups. Revival is getting rid of them. Strong emphasis on the family over everything else the path to revival.

The issue is not which of these are good and which are bad.

The issue is that each one makes the important point of the Christian life, for individuals or the church something besides grace alone, Christ alone.

They turn to this program or cause or emphasis for power to change the church rather than the power of Christ to deliver us from sin and raise us to new life, and to enable us to walk in love and obedience.

That brings us to the last point.

MP#3 The answer to strange and diverse teachings

How do we identify them? They always have some biblical backing.

How do not get taken in by them? They are appealing, for reasons just mentioned.

The short answer is Jesus.

But let's expand that a bit.

This verse comes at the end of the book of Hebrews.

What's Hebrews about? It's about the greatness and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

It proclaims Jesus to be greater than the angels, greater than Moses—our brother, our high priest, who has secured everything for our salvation.

So the life we are to live is a life of faith in Christ alone.

Just like all the great men and women of God in chapter 11.

They lived by faith in what they could not see, believing in the Messiah to come.

Every religious thing we do as Christians, whether Sunday worship or private acts of devotion or Bible study or acts of service and mercy useful only insofar as they promote our faith in Christ, our dependence on him, and our obedience to his commands.

That's the positive side of Hebrews.

Then there is a negative side.

Hebrews is a trumpet blast of warning that believers must never, never, never turn their backs on Christ by adopting any form of works righteousness, by substituting Jesus for any program or rituals or lists.

The particular temptation for the original audience of Hebrews was the very thing mentioned in verse 9—Foods, and all that implied, which was a return to the religious system of Judaism.

Not a return to the Old Testament.

Nothing wrong with the Old Testament. It's a religion of grace.

But a return to Judaism, which had distorted the OT laws and made them a program for righteousness. Don't do it, says Hebrews.

That all may be a little much, trying to summarize Hebrews in a few paragraphs,
so let's boil it down to a few key question.

The next time someone says with great passion

this is what the church must do in order to get where it needs to be.

This is what you must do if you're really going to make progress as Christian,
this book, this program, this cause, this practice, this doctrine—

Why don't you ask these questions.

Will this make me more dependent on Jesus,

or will this feed my pride and innate self-righteousness?

Does this magnify the grace of God,

or does it magnify human effort?

Will this promote brotherly love in my church,

or will it promote spiritual elitism and disappointment with people?

The answers might be positive.

This thing they are so passionate about may simply be a fresh way or fresh reminder
of how we are to live depending on Jesus and loving one another.

But if it does not promote Christ alone, God's grace, and brotherly love,
then it will not benefit those devoted to it.

So let's take this command to heart.

Let's try to be a church committed to grace, not foods.

Which is another way of saying, let's be Christ-centered in our life together.

None other Lamb, none other Name,

None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea,

None other Hiding-place from guilt and shame,

None beside thee!

Let's keep it that way.