

CHOOSING TEMPTATIONS WISELY: A LINE BETWEEN ALLOWING NO  
TEMPTATION AND ALLOWING ALL TEMPTATIONS

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## **Abstract**

“Temptation leads to sin; therefore avoid temptation.” This maxim, in whatever form it may appear, has received much more representation than the view offered herein, that temptation cannot always be avoided and sometimes leads to good things. Since temptation can be resisted, the event of being tempted is not itself sin. Since good things can come from situations that temptation also accompanies, such as stronger faith and the spreading of the gospel, putting oneself willingly into a situation in which temptation is certain is not always ill-advised. Sometimes it is quite appropriate. This thesis will not attempt to justify sinning in the name of some good cause, but it will attempt to justify knowingly and deliberately enduring temptation when the sinner expects to resist the temptation and when his intention is something God-pleasing that is, as it were, impeded by the temptation. God encourages flight from sin, but He also encourages prayer and promises help when temptations come.

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## Introduction

Almost any American's anecdotal evidence would suggest that the majority of drivers regularly exceed the posted speed limit. The stereotypical reaction to a highway driver spotting a vehicle that even resembles the typical shape of a police car is to apply the brakes, or, at the very least, to check the speedometer. Even passengers in a vehicle often point out the presence of a law enforcement vehicle if they think the driver did not see it. They assume that the driver is currently speeding and should adjust his speed to avoid being pulled over. If everyone speeds, why do Christians still choose to drive, knowing that they will be tempted to break the law, and likely succumb to the temptation?

Almost every food and beverage can be abused. Whether because of sugar content, fat content, calorie content, or alcohol content, anything that can be consumed can be consumed too much. Since people tend to eat and drink at least some things that taste good to them, the claim that many people are tempted to overindulge in certain foods and beverages is valid. Why, then, do Christians continue to eat if they will be tempted to overeat? Given that nourishment is a requirement to stay alive, should not Christians consume only water and tasteless foods in order to eliminate temptation?

Every person who has ever lived, whether Christian or Muslim or atheist, whether recognizing it or not, whether admitting it or not, has faced temptation. The Christian Church has recognized temptation as a constant force that attacks all people in various ways. Different members of different church bodies (or the same church bodies) have not, however, always agreed on exactly what temptation is or how to handle it.

Joseph is often cited as a biblical example of how to react to temptation:

After a while [Joseph's] master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused. . . . And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house (Ge 39:7,8a, 10-12).

The aspect of Joseph's behavior often stressed is that he refused even to be with his master's wife to avoid the temptation of sexual immorality. His action of running out of the house often supports the idea that the best way to handle temptation is to run away from it. In Paul's final instructions in one of his epistles, he gives a very broad command that is also quoted

as grounds for the practice of trying to stay away from temptation: “Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Ti 5:22).

The above scenarios show the ultimate end of actively trying to avoid every temptation. The question is often asked, “Why would you willingly put yourself in temptation’s way?” The questioner expects an admission that one should certainly not put himself in the way of temptation. The questioned should rather reconsider his action because of the temptation involved. But should he? Certainly a fine general principle to hold is to avoid every temptation. But that principle is too black and white for what happens in the world. God’s people, if they are not in denial, will find true that all Christians do willingly put themselves in temptation’s way. A God-pleasing fine line must exist between allowing no temptations at all (this lifestyle would result in something similar to monasticism, though probably more extreme and less possible) and being naïve enough to think that no temptation is dangerous.

After defining temptation, including the various roles different parties play, that temptation is unavoidable will be clear. Two options will be manifest: still trying to avoid all temptations despite the impossibility of such effort and actively choosing with prayer and wisdom which temptations to allow to occur. This author will argue that the latter choice is preferable, more in line with Scripture, and more practical.

The concepts of orthodoxy and orthopraxy are important. Neither doing the right things for the wrong reasons nor doing the wrong things for the right reasons is God-pleasing. The meeting of orthodoxy and orthopraxy at temptation is essentially the thrust of this entire effort. Such a meeting with regard to certain specific temptations will be discussed, including sexual desires and entertainment that depicts sin. Finally, practical insight is the goal. If intentionally allowing certain temptations is preferable to doing all one can to avoid any temptation, how does one choose temptations wisely?

## Literature Review

A simple Internet search on temptation will yield millions of results. A few of them are deep studies of what exactly temptation is. Many of them are blogs and chatrooms dedicated to asking or answering how best to avoid temptation. Others are more positive, specifically encouraging the resistance of temptation, but these are much less common. A neutral web search, such as “how to handle temptation” will yield many more results dedicated to fleeing temptation than fighting it. One such website used categorical sentences to advise people regarding temptation: “The Bible does not tell us that we should fight against temptation. It says we should run away from the things (and the people) that tempt us. Don’t be so foolish as to think you can stay in the situation but not give into temptation.”

Readily available online sources are parallel to other scholarly research. Philosophers want to analyze temptation, as Kees Waaijmann does in his article in the *Journal of Empirical Theology*, thoroughly contemplating a biblical spiritual anthropology. Theologians want to define temptation. Jellerma Dirk’s title “The Threshold of Temptation” suggests a desire to pinpoint the exact moment a temptation occurs. Such precision in dealing with a universal issue is admirable. Practical pastors, in their books and on their websites, want to avoid temptation. At least, they certainly want their readers to avoid it. Donald Deffner, a former seminary professor, wrote a book about struggling with temptation, but representatively, it does not address the issue of intentional exposure to temptation.

Naturally, temptation carries with it a negative connotation. It is seen not as opportunity, but as a blockade. Of course, temptation very often leads to sin. Literature has done an excellent job explaining the dangers of temptation and the ways to defend against it. The typical study of temptation is certainly not without its merit; in fact, doctrines of temptation among various church bodies are not sources of great strife. But temptation does not always lead to sin. What lacks in much research is the recognition that temptation is something to which a Christian can willingly expose himself without necessarily committing sin.

Even dogmatic texts tend not to discuss the inevitability of temptation as a reason not to flee from it in certain circumstances. As a result, common view of temptation is that it is essentially sin. Even the thought of intentionally exposing oneself to temptation sounds wrong and potentially burdens consciences. This thesis intends not to vindicate temptation altogether as

if it were not something dangerous, but to examine it carefully and suggest how a Christian can in good conscience expose himself to temptation. He does not desire the temptation itself, but some other good to which the temptation is an obstacle. These benefits are often ignored or undermined in good and legitimate efforts to emphasize the gravity of temptation. Such is the case in Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor Brug's essay on gambling and Eastern Mennonite Seminary associate dean Sara Wenger Shenk's article on cohabitation.

Little has been said about temptation that should be taken back. The above named authors and works have done well, and the established paradigm is good, but perhaps it is incomplete or disproportionately focused. That temptation in general is a dangerous threat to the life of every Christian is not to be denied, but in that danger is also opportunity.

## Defining Temptation

First, establishing a working definition of temptation is important to this study. In order to benefit from any study, the audience must understand the language and concepts set before them. The definition of temptation could conceivably be an entire study in itself, but for this purpose it will be treated briefly and understood henceforth. Since the goal is that Christians think about and handle temptations correctly, one must understand what temptation is and be able to recognize it when it is present.

One dictionary's definition of temptation is "the act of enticing or alluring to do something often regarded as unwise, wrong, or immoral." A man-made meaning is an adequate place to start because, as with many theological concepts, the Bible does not provide a tidy definition of temptation. In fact, the Old Testament does not use any particular word for temptation, even though it does narrate situations about or containing temptation quite often. The phrase *וַיִּסְתֵּאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה* appears in the context of the LORD's instructions to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Ge 22:1). KJV renders the Hebrew phrase "God did tempt," but most English translations suggest "God tested." The Hebrew root *נסָה* occurs only in the Piel and as a noun. Its meaning usually has to do with tests, trials, and proving things. Many scholars suggest that God does test His people for the purpose of revealing the quality of their character. God does not need to know it, but often the person is not completely aware of his own level of sanctification or faith.<sup>1</sup>

Many forms of the word "tempt" do occur in the New Testament, however, often in descriptive settings. In the synoptic gospels the devil is said to tempt Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Three times the devil makes suggestions phrased as commands. In each case if Jesus would take the devil's advice, He would sin. Evangelist Luke finally narrates that the devil "finished all this tempting" (Lk 4:13). Thus temptation can include the devil making suggestions and commands with the sole

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<sup>1</sup> Kees Waaijman, "Temptation: The Basic Theological Structure of Temptation," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 5 no 2 (1992): 86-94.

<sup>2</sup> "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Mt 4:1).

"At once the Spirit sent Him out into the desert, and He was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan" (Mk 1:12,13).

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (Lk 4:1,2).



purpose of causing the target to sin. Indeed both Matthew and Paul label the devil “the tempter” (Mt 4:3, 1 Th 3:5), suggesting that tempting is something he does regularly, enjoys, and succeeds at. The devil is also implicated in situations in which he is not physically present or audibly speaking: “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Co 7:5).

Though the devil is certainly actively involved in much temptation, he is not the only one. Martin Luther, in his definition of the Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, identifies three tempters: “the devil, the world, and our flesh.”<sup>3</sup> “The world refers to ungodly things and people. The state of the world since the fall into sin is much different than what God created. The world is a cesspool of sin. Mankind shuns God and shows apathy toward His will. Indeed, “Everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 Jn 2:16). James agrees with Paul that God is not the source of temptation: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone” (Jas 1:13). The apparent conflict between what James here says and what the gospels clearly say about the Son of God’s temptation will be addressed later.

“Our flesh” is the final source of temptation. The term refers to the sinful nature that each person has inherited from his parents since the fall. People do not even need an outward force to commit countless sins, much less to be tempted to sin. “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Ge 6:5). Sadly the forces are cumulative; Satan and other sinners intentionally or inadvertently appeal to the sinful nature of all. Peter wrote, with specific regard to false teachings, “For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error” (2 Pe 2:18).

Before positing a working definition of temptation, one distinction must be made. The Bible evidently speaks of temptation in a narrow sense and a wide sense. In the narrow sense temptation *includes its result*. This theory of two different senses harmonizes three biblical

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<sup>3</sup> David P. Kuske, *Luther’s Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), 308.

principles that seem unable to coexist. The Bible clearly states that Jesus is the Son of God, that He is truly and fully divine. The Bible also tells in detail how the same Son of God, namely Jesus, was tempted by the devil in the desert. Finally, the Bible claims in no uncertain terms that God can neither tempt nor be tempted. Either Jesus is not God or God can be tempted or Jesus was not tempted. Or the Bible writers had different senses in mind when they used the word “tempt.”

The word in the original Greek is *πειράζω*. It is used rather similarly to the Hebrew *נסָּה*, but also quite regularly in the New Testament as a term for how Satan, the world, and the sinful flesh attempt to get people to sin. But they do not always succeed. In the narrow sense temptation includes its negative result. It immediately presupposes that the tempter will succeed, that the tempted one will not be able to resist the temptation. The context of James 1 demands this narrow sense. The statement that God cannot be tempted with the result that He gives in to temptation is quite accurate. Jesus was tempted, but He did not sin; He resisted the temptation. Another explanation is that Jesus was tempted according to His human nature. Just as God is immortal, yet Jesus died according to His human nature, so also God cannot be tempted, yet Jesus was tempted according to His human nature. To be sure, the Bible does not contradict itself as entertained above. Two explanations were given why it does not. Even if one prefers the latter, however, he cannot dismiss the former, that temptation occurs in both a wide and narrow sense. James continues after making the claim that God cannot be tempted by saying, “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (Jas 1:14,15). Clearly James is describing a temptation that cannot be resisted, or rather, that *is* not resisted. This temptation assumes sin on the part of the person being tempted.

Many Bible passages do seem to indicate that temptation is a rather hopeless situation, something to be avoided at all costs. Jesus asked His closest disciples to “watch and pray so that [they would] not fall into temptation” (Mk 14:38). Multitudes of Christians routinely pray the Lord’s Prayer according to the Bible’s command, a prayer that includes, “Lead us not into temptation” (Mt 6:13). Clearly those who utter such a request want no part of temptation. Paul also seems to suggest that with temptation comes the foregone conclusion of sin when he writes, “I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless” (Ga 6:1).

Although temptation is spoken of in the Scriptures with a narrow sense, assuming the negative outcome of sin, clear passages do indicate that temptation can be resisted. When speaking of temptation does not assume and include a negative outcome, the effect is the wide sense of the term temptation. The most obvious evidence of this wide sense is the temptation of Jesus. Anyone who confesses that Jesus lived a perfect life without sinning must also confess that He resisted temptation, for the synoptic gospels each record the devil tempting Him in the desert. Similarly, consider the writer to the Hebrews: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (He 4:15). One might insist that Jesus was an exception, that the term temptation really does assume and include failing to resist the temptation. The theory would be plausible because Jesus is exceptional in many ways, one of the most notable characteristics being His total holiness and nonexistence of sin, but the wide sense of temptation is not only applied to the Son of God.

“Because [Jesus] Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). Very important in the understanding of this verse is the form of the participle translated “those who are being tempted.” The Greek is *τοῖς πειραζομένοις*, a present passive participle. Some translations<sup>4</sup> do the English reader a service by employing the present passive progressive. Jesus is not only able to help those people who get tempted at unspecified times, but He is able to help people through their temptations as they are being tempted. Even the Vulgate translates not with a participle parallel to the Greek, but with a relative clause for the sake of clarity: *eis qui temptantur*.

Since the Bible’s claim that Jesus helps people who are being tempted is obviously true, the idea that temptation always assumes a failure to resist the same cannot be true. What would Jesus’ help do otherwise? Paul writes, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Co 10:13). God’s Word clearly speaks of temptation in a wide sense wherein the final outcome, whether the tempted will resist or succumb, is left ambiguous. This sense will be employed henceforth unless

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<sup>4</sup> “...those who are being tempted” (ESV).

“...when we are being tested” (NLT).

“...those who are being tempted” (CEB).

noted otherwise. Formally, let the following suffice as a definition of temptation: “any situation in which a person may be deceived or led astray into false belief, any situation in which a person may be led astray into despair, any situation in which a person may be led astray into great and shameful sins.”<sup>5</sup>

Three different parties deserve consideration regarding roles in temptation: God, man, and Satan. Although the temptation is simply to quote James again, “God cannot be tempted” (Jas 1:13), even a cursory glance at the Bible suggests that God plays some part somewhere in the realm of temptation. The Creation account in Genesis relates how God created a perfect world without sin. A holy God cannot be the source of evil; it is entirely incompatible with His essence. Yet nothing that exists was not created by God. “The heavens and the earth” (Ge 1:1), *הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ* is a technical term for everything that is, the universe. God created angels within the first six days, and the devil was evil in the Garden of Eden. Something that an entirely good God created good became evil. This is a hard truth to comprehend, but it is a truth nonetheless.

The account of Job gives some insight into God’s role. The opening chapter details a dialogue between the LORD and Satan. An important detail to take away is that the LORD sets some guidelines that Satan must respect.<sup>6</sup> As noted before, God also helps Christians to avoid and overcome temptation. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Mk 14:38) is, of course, a command to pray to God for help. Again, “[Jesus] is able to help those who are being tempted” (He 2:18). To quote what has unfortunately become something of a cliché, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Ro 8:28). God’s role in temptation is not causing it but allowing it to occur, helping those who believe in Him to avoid it and resist, and causing it to work for the good of His kingdom. Jeske summarizes well in his commentary: “While God indeed allows, and sometimes even may send, hardships upon His children, His purpose in that is always good: to test their faith as genuine and to draw them closer to Him, away from this sick and dying planet. God never, ever, wants His children to choose evil.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kuske, 308,309.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Job 1:6-12, 2:1-6.

<sup>7</sup> Mark A. Jeske, *People’s Bible Commentary: General Epistles* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 16.

Regarding Satan's role in temptation, a few points are worth repeating. As shown above, Satan is an originator of temptation. Indeed the first sin was a result of his temptation, but he is not the only source of temptation. Sinful human nature certainly has in itself the capability of causing its host or another person to sin. An often expressed maxim is that Satan works harder to tempt believers than unbelievers. The underlying assumption is that unbelievers tend to tempt themselves plenty. Also worthy of reiteration is that Satan's power does not equal or exceed God's power. Though he may tempt and cause much evil, he can do nothing beyond what God in His wisdom and power allows.

As for man's role in temptation, just as he is simultaneously saint and sinner, he is also both unable and able to resist temptation. "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (Ro 8:7-8). Paul describes a hopeless situation to the Romans and to the Ephesians: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (Eph 2:1-2). But Paul also describes what happens to sinners who by God's grace come to faith in Him. Immediately after the bleak picture Paul paints in Romans 8, the apostle writes, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (Ro 8:9). The same man described a constant struggle between the old Adam that cannot serve God and the new man who is empowered to lead a God pleasing life.

What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (Ro 7:15-20).

Martin Luther described the same struggle in his Catechism. When he proposed a meaning of baptism for daily life, citing Romans 6 he wrote, "Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by *daily* contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should *daily* arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" [emphasis added].<sup>8</sup> Luther was describing an ongoing effort when he spoke of reborn Christians' daily walk. Sinners do have a choice when temptation confronts them. The old

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<sup>8</sup> Kuske, 237.

Adam always yields to temptation and chooses to sin. The new man always resists and chooses to serve God.

## **Avoiding Temptation**

Since the definition of temptation includes situations in which a person *may* be led into sin, avoiding temptation altogether seems very difficult. Consider the World Wide Web. So many people have on demand thousands of images and videos that are, at best, possibly lust-provoking, at worst, illegally pornographic. One need not risk viruses and other potentially unwanted computer programs in order to satisfy his lust. He need only perform a simple image search. Alcohol use and abuse are glorified as much, if not more than as much as they are discouraged. Temptations to overconsumption abound, subliminally in advertisements and openly in the mouths of peers. Those under the legal age for alcohol consumption face pervasive temptations to drink from friends, from of age adults, and from societal pressure. Freedom of speech, which certainly should not be revoked, gives people the legal right to endorse sinful habits almost where and whenever they please, thus creating unlimited temptations for both strong and weak Christians.

Think again of the opening scenario. To gauge how many people regularly exceed posted speed limits while operating an automobile is difficult. Estimated statistics do exist, usually isolated instances of specific highways, that indicate a high volume of drivers exceed the speed limit. Statistics also exist that correlate speeding and fatal traffic accidents. Obviously, a blanket number does not exist for the percentage of the population of the world that regularly speeds, but evidence does suggest that many do speed, even a majority. Ponder your own experience. From your vantage point, do people speed? This author, having grown up in a large urban area, would testify that in the same area the average speed in a 35 mile per hour zone is closer to 50 than to 40. Certain small towns are famous, or infamous, for issuing tickets to those who speed, even exceeding the limit by just one mile per hour. If you know of such a town, you know what the tendency is. It is to travel at exactly the posted speed limit (certainly not below!) until reaching

the town's outer limits. The phenomenon of universal speeding indicates that the average person is likely tempted to break the law whenever he gets behind the wheel of an automobile.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, even driving is not something that crosses the lives of all people, not even all people in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Nor were the apostles' and prophets' consciences bothered (or not bothered) by white speed limit signs. Perhaps a temptation even more universal and timeless is that of unrighteous anger. Righteous anger does exist; otherwise a sinless Savior could not have been attributed the same state. Jesus was angry at stubborn, faithless hearts<sup>10</sup> and at the ungodly activity in the temple.<sup>11</sup> In the same way the Old Testament contains numerous references to God's anger, such as Ex 4:14, in the context of Moses offering the LORD excuses not to be His prophet.<sup>12</sup> Human anger, however, is often condemned in the scriptures because under normal circumstances it is not righteous. Paul encourages his audience to get rid of it in Ephesians<sup>13</sup> and in Colossians.<sup>14</sup>

How could one never be tempted to become angry? Any reasonable person would confess to having been angry in his life. Almost any Christian would admit to harboring sinful anger at one point or another. Naturally, then, everyone has been tempted to be angry in an unrighteous manner or for unrighteous reasons. In concession, the burden of proof is on the party that supposes that all people have been tempted to unrighteous anger. While no proof for that specific assertion is possible, a very basic understanding of human nature is all one needs to confirm the claim's truth.

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<sup>9</sup> Although some maintain that speeding is not necessarily sinful because of the risks of driving too much more slowly than present traffic, the argument is flawed. The more traffic that is present, the slower it goes. The fastest one can drive is when no traffic is present to set the average speed. When people are on a highway at a time of very light traffic, do they go faster or slower than normal? This author, for one, has yet to witness a person claim to drive more slowly than normal when the traffic is minimal because "it's finally safe enough to drive as slow as the speed limit."

Finally, a relatively small increase in statistical safety does not necessarily justify a blatant disregard for the law. Laws are made to affect most people positively, not all people. But the people who do not directly benefit from the law do not have an excuse to break it. One could argue that turning left or proceeding straight at a red light is not dangerous when no other vehicle is present. Of course not! Perhaps the speeding pandemic is more of a dulling of conscience than a careful consideration and balance of law and safety.

<sup>10</sup> "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said..." (Mk 3:5).

<sup>11</sup> None of the evangelists specifically state that Jesus was angry (Mt 21, Mk 11, Lk 19, Jn 2), but His actions clearly depict His mood.

<sup>12</sup> "The LORD's anger burned against Moses" (Ex 4:14).

<sup>13</sup> "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Eph 4:31)

<sup>14</sup> "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips" (Col 3:8).

If one could avoid every temptation, he would also have to avoid something that occurs some ten thousand times a day: thinking.<sup>15</sup> “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed” (Jas 1:14). Since the sinful nature is one source of temptation, many temptations originate not outside a person, but within. How can a person avoid the temptations that occur inside his own mind? By the time he realizes he is thinking sinful thoughts, he does not remember failing to resist the temptation to have the thoughts. Conversely, he who thinks a pure thought does not remember consciously resisting an impure thought. As given as it is that a person will think sinful thoughts, more given is that the person will be tempted to think sinful thoughts.

Subjective perceptions and data aside, what does God’s Word reveal? Rather than remaining silent on the issue, the Scriptures fully support the position already advanced mostly by reason, that temptations cannot be avoided. Certainly temptation can be avoided, but one cannot avoid all or every temptation. Regarding the thoughts that sinners entertain in their minds, King Solomon wrote, “You know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others” (Ecc 7:22).

James 1 is useful yet again, for the Greek word the inspired writer used is *ἕκαστος*. The translation “Each one is tempted” (Jas 1:14) certainly does represent the original accurately, but a few nuances of the Greek strengthen the point. The word *ἕκαστος* often precedes a genitive of the whole<sup>16</sup> (examples footnoted), narrowing its scope, or functions as an adjective by modifying a noun<sup>17</sup> (example footnoted), also narrowing its scope. In the context of James 1, not only is an adjective or partitive genitive that would limit *ἕκαστος* absent, but also missing is any word or concept that would obviously limit it. No nearby genitive or agreeable (masculine singular) noun can conceivably be supplied again to *ἕκαστος*. As a result, the pronoun is not limited; indeed it is

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations* (Dallas: Bible Communications, 1998), 2960.

<sup>16</sup> “Laying His hands on each one [*ἐκάστῳ αὐτῶν*], [Jesus] healed them” (Lk 4:40). In this case the genitive limits “each” to a group already established, namely, people of various kinds of sickness brought to Jesus within a reasonable proximity of Simon’s house.

“God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them [*ἐν ἕκαστον αὐτῶν*], just as He wanted them to be” (1 Co 12:18). In this case the genitive clearly limits “every one” to parts in the body.

“For you know that we dealt with each of you [*ἐνα ἕκαστον ὑμῶν*] as a father deals with his own children” (1 Th 2:11). In this case the genitive limits “each” to the group being addressed.

<sup>17</sup> “Each tree [*ἕκαστον δένδρον*] is recognized by its own fruit” (Lk 6:44). Obviously the point is that trees, not any conceivable thing, are recognized by their fruit.



unlimited. The opposite, yet parallel “no one” [μηδεις] of verse 13<sup>18</sup> only strengthens the innate meaning of “each.” Not one person should claim that God tempts, but the fact is *every single* person is tempted. The “armor of God” that Paul mentions in Ephesians 6 is for protective purposes, not preventive purposes. The language suggests that temptation is not avoided, but nullified, ineffective.<sup>19</sup>

A Bible teaching that not all Christians agree on, but that is very plainly proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, is the concept of total depravity. It means that all people are bad, contrary to what some so-called Christians believe, contrary to what all people would naturally like to believe about themselves. “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins” (Ecc 7:20). Consequently, if the term temptation sometimes presupposes a failure to resist it (according to the narrow sense defined above), who could find a man on earth who is never tempted to sin?

The writer of Lamentations also assumes sin to be a part of every person’s life: “Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins?” (La 3:39) If no one has the right to complain about the repercussions of sin, then no one is without sin. Even unborn infants are sinful, as King David testifies: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5).

No one is exempt from the effect of original sin. Everyone has inherited from his parents a natural hostility toward God and all things holy. Instead, all people of all time have been favorably disposed toward sin. It is truly all they know or care about. The reality of civic righteousness does not prove that people have some natural good in them. It simply proves that everyone knows that a higher power demands adherence to a certain code of conduct. “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Is 64:6).

Even though original sin, which requires no temptation, just existence, is an undeniable teaching of the Bible, that one must be tempted to commit actual sin in order to sin makes sense.

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<sup>18</sup> “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me’ ” (James 1:13).

<sup>19</sup> The emphasized words and phrases indicate that the armor of God’s purpose is defense, not avoidance: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can *take your stand* against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to *stand your ground*, and after you have done everything, to *stand*. *Stand firm* then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the *readiness* that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can *extinguish* all the flaming arrows of the evil one (Eph 6:10-16).

Recall that the temptation very often does come from within. Another undisputable teaching of the Bible is that everyone does commit actual sin. What follows is that no one can possibly resist every temptation he faces. Therefore, no one can possibly avoid every temptation.

## **Choosing Temptations**

A definition of temptation has been established. Avoiding all temptation has been shown to be impossible. When one realizes this, essentially two choices emerge. One can either try to avoid every temptation, knowing that he will not succeed, or one can try to select which temptations he allows and which he tries to avoid.

The first option is not to be ridiculed simply because it sets an impossible goal. Do not many Christians try to be like Christ, Whose perfection is impossible to imitate? “Setting the bar high,” even too high, is a cultural way to curb laziness and force oneself to exert maximum effort. If no one attempted the impossible, no Christian man would ever get married, for what man can love his wife “as Christ loved the church” (Eph 5:25)?

The Bible does not explicitly demand that Christians avoid every temptation. Some might consider the command implied by passages such as, “Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Ti 5:22) and Jesus’ warning to His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk 14:38). Grey areas, however, should not be considered black and white. The prostitute Rahab was commended and rewarded for her actions toward the Israelite spies, including willful deception to her own king. “By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient” (He 11:31). Similarly, Jesus encouraged people to suspend the requirements of the millennia-old Sabbath law when He asked the Pharisees, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” (Luke 14:5). The LORD’s prophet Joel’s message was “rend your heart and not your garments” (Joel 2:13). God is not interested so much in outward actions as He is interested in what is in the heart. Sometimes one is stuck in a hard situation and must break the law or do something unbecoming in the name of love. So many situations could illustrate the point, some more unlikely than others. Allow one. Suppose on a very hot day you are walking through a parking lot and you see an unaccompanied baby in a car. The windows are all closed, you are the only other person in sight, and you have heard many horror stories about forgotten children. After yelling to get someone’s attention for a

minute, still no one is around. You break a window to get the child out and take him to your car and turn on the air conditioning. As you try to decide whether to call the police or the store, suddenly a police officer appears in front of you. Does the officer tell you that you are under arrest for burglary and kidnapping or does he commend your Good Samaritan act? Who would even consider such actions to be the result of temptation?

In order to attempt to avoid every temptation, one would have to refrain from everyday activities, as already demonstrated. One would have to relinquish relationships with friends, coworkers, and even family members. The number of career paths from which to choose would diminish greatly. Food choices would change. The ways in which such a lifestyle would alter basic living is extreme. The essence of monasticism is similar, though the goal is not necessarily to eliminate temptation. Ultimately the etymology of the term is the Greek word *μόνος*, “alone.” Is constant solitude what God desires? “Where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20), Jesus said. He encouraged unity among His followers. The same was true when He instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. The concept of the fellowship of believers is not at all foreign to the Bible. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” (Ps 133:1) Finally, how does one spread the gospel in isolation? “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Jesus’ command is clear, and it requires interaction with unbelievers, which brings risks of temptation.

Since God desires a clean heart, that should be the Christian’s focus. Good works and obedience to God’s law come out of that, not the other way around. A Christian tries to please God with his action, not with his actions. Sometimes the big picture is more important than numerous infinitesimal images. People tend to avoid “ends justify means” policies, both in secular affairs and in theology, but is it not sometimes a good maxim? Is that not exactly what Jesus advocated in suspending the Sabbath regulations? What complicates matters is how often the end truly is pure and godly, rather than secretly self-serving.

Better than trying to avoid every temptation is to determine which temptations one will allow. For example, the person whose daily work is largely unsupervised may be tempted to steal from his employer, take unauthorized breaks, or even neglect certain duties. What should he do? Should he request more supervision? Should he offer to pay for an improved surveillance system? Should he seek employment elsewhere? Should he do nothing, supposing that his faith

is strong enough to overcome the temptations? This author is certainly not so naïve as to believe people can experience any temptation regularly without succumbing if their faith is strong enough. But neither is he cynical enough to believe that many Christians do not continually resist sinful urges with the Holy Spirit's help.

To be sure, the vast majority of temptations that a Christian experiences are present with or without his permission. Then why purposefully add more? Sometimes putting oneself in a position accompanied by temptation is necessary in order to show love, both for other people and for God. One must not ignore the words of Jesus, urging His followers to pray that temptation be far away. One must not fool himself into thinking he is stronger than he is. Temptation often starts as a small thought that gradually becomes an overpowering fantasy. Sometimes temptation slowly gnaws at the conscience so that something that was once repulsive and evil is now desirable and wholesome. The case has been made that sometimes entering a situation that involves temptation is necessary or “worth it,” but if no good can come out of the situation, the only good choice is to avoid it.

### **Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy**

Following orthodoxy and orthopraxy is necessary in choosing which temptations one allows. Fortunately, orthodoxy tends to be comparatively obvious to those who hold God's Word to be true and inerrant. The word comes from two Greek words, ὀρθός and δόγμα. The former, an adjective, means “straight” and was used in Ancient Greek and in the New Testament similarly to the way its translation is used in modern English. It refers either to actual physical straightness or to figurative straightness, that is, propriety, absence of corruption. BDAG defines δόγμα as “a formal statement concerning rules or regulations that are to be observed.”<sup>20</sup> Orthodoxy, then, is a system of correct formal statements of rules and regulations. Simply put, it is right teaching.

Orthodoxy's importance is self-evident. Just as in mathematics a true circle's ratio of circumference to diameter is always the irrational number designated  $\pi$  or “pi,” so also when the Bible speaks in absolutes, no discussion can occur. Since the biblical account claims Jesus did

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<sup>20</sup> W. Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 254.

not stay in the grave beyond the third day, that He rose is the right teaching. Since the Bible records the words of the LORD saying that He does not change,<sup>21</sup> God's immutability must be a part of orthodoxy.

Sadly, "those who hold God's Word to be true and inerrant" as phrased above make up a relatively small number. Common are efforts to remove the supernatural from the Bible. The Scriptures are said to be moral lessons not to be taken literally. Internal and external evidences for the dates of composition for different Bible books are ignored and undermined in order to explain prophecy. Most common is a simple denial that the writers, whoever they were, actually wrote the thoughts of a divine being. But in order to follow orthodoxy as it pertains to temptation, one must acknowledge the Scriptures as absolutely true, good, and universally normative. John's longest epistle places great emphasis on sound belief, using words such as "liar" and "antichrist"<sup>22</sup> for those who lack it.<sup>23</sup>

The opposite of orthodoxy, of course, is heterodoxy. The Greek ἕτερος is an adjective meaning "other." Sometimes it assumes only two options or choices, as in its relevance to sexual preference. Other times it refers to any alternative from a pool containing an undefined number. Heterodoxy is any teaching that is not orthodox. Obviously, a "different teaching" does not in itself constitute a wrong teaching, but its contrast with the only right teaching does. What is heterodox and what is orthodox can be and has been debated to the point of nausea for millennia. The intent of this effort is not to join that fray. It assumes an understanding of orthodoxy as adhering to the teachings of the Scriptures, which are the very words of the only true divinity, the Triune God.

Orthopraxy, combining ὀρθός and πρᾶγμα, is right practice. BDAG defines the latter as "that which is done or to be done."<sup>24</sup> The professor of pastoral theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary advocates a "biblical middle road principle" of which the apostle Paul first wrote, using the ὀρθ- root: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles [ὀρθοτομοῦντα] the word of truth" (2 Ti

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<sup>21</sup> "I, the LORD do not change" (Mal 3:6).

<sup>22</sup> "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son" (1 Jn 2:22)

<sup>23</sup> Frank Stagg, "Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy in the Johannine Epistles," *Review & Expositor* 67 no 4 (fall 1970): 423-432.

<sup>24</sup> Arndt et al., 858.

2:15). Of course no manual, divine or otherwise, exists that details how to handle every given situation in a God-pleasing manner, but orthopraxy involves using principles of Scripture to make decisions in tough, grey areas.<sup>25</sup> Although both Paul and Schuetze wrote for the young pastor, the same steps to exhibiting orthopraxy can be applied to all Christians as they consider temptations: which they will try to avoid and which they will face.

Lastly, heteropraxy, is “other practice.” Again, when that to which “other” is other is straight or right, “other” becomes crooked or wrong. God has endowed His creation with minds that possess an incredible prowess for thinking. Mankind has a unique capability of rational thought that allows for informed decision making. Countless biblical proverbs are dedicated to singing the praises of wisdom, such as, “Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (Pr 4:7). In King Solomon’s introduction to the book he describes wisdom’s purpose. Only fools embrace heteropraxy.

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline (Proverbs 1:1-7).

Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are necessary. The former without the latter results in antinomianism and hypocrisy. “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” (Jas 2:15-16) Orthopraxy without orthodoxy, on the other hand, is useless. The absence of orthodoxy negates what would be orthopraxy, for “without faith it is impossible to please God” (He 11:6).

What actually happens when orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and temptation meet in a single location? Though temptation’s staggering success rate rightly stigmatizes it, fleeing it is not always necessary, often even heteropractical. “It is characteristic of certain more sensational—however mundane—sins that they are overpowering.”<sup>26</sup> The temptation toward these sins should be avoided in most circumstances, but “God makes sure that each time a believer encounters a particular temptation he can count on it falling within his own ability to endure. For the believer,

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<sup>25</sup> John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Principles of Pastoral Theology* (used by permission, 2012), 1-9.

<sup>26</sup> Jellema R Dirk, “The Threshold of Temptation,” *Reformed Journal* 29 no 5 (May 1979): 3.

even the weakest believer, there is always a way of escape.”<sup>27</sup> Where orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and temptation converge, there is strengthening of faith and the furthering of the kingdom of God. Resisting temptation forces one to ponder his relationship with his Savior as it grows closer. Putting oneself in the path of temptation can be an expression of unselfishness, an effort to bring others out of temptation.

## Practical Temptation

To move from theoretical to practical, from abstract to concrete, consider sexual desire. On one end of the spectrum of simplicity is that those who never even risk the temptations of lust and other sexual immorality may never have met a member of the opposite gender. On the other end of the spectrum is that no one falls into lust or adultery or pornography or becomes a rapist or fornicator without being tempted. An article appeared in *Christianity Today* that contained multiple points of view concerning a specific situation. A dentist had evidently terminated his assistant’s employment because of her attractiveness. Tacit is that an affair did not occur. Unclear is whether either party actually expressed any interest in the other. The man removed a temptation, or a potential temptation, from his life. Some would and did commend him.<sup>28</sup> However, did the dentist exhaust all possibilities of minimizing the temptation? Would enduring the temptation and overcoming it have strengthened his relationship with his God? Would it have brought him closer to his wife? Could his perpetual fidelity to his Lord and to his bride have in itself been a witness of God’s faithful love to the assistant? One pastor’s response was “Jesus said ‘If your eye offend you, gouge it out,’ not ‘If you find your neighbor’s eyes to be too sexy, gouge them out.’”<sup>29</sup> This scenario, though all its details are not known, serves as a clear indicator that other options can sometimes be better than fleeing temptation as soon as it surfaces.

A rising phenomenon in American culture is the tendency for couples to cohabit. Cohabitation is when an unmarried male and an unmarried female live together. In a narrower

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<sup>27</sup> David M. Ciochi, “Understanding Our Ability to Endure Temptation: A Theological Watershed,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35 no 4 D (1992): 471.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Moon, “Should an Iowa Dentist Have Fired His Attractive Assistant?” *Christianity Today* 57 no 2 (Mr 2013): 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

sense, it refers to a romantically involved couple living under the same roof and enjoying the benefits that God has reserved for marriage. Conservative Christians have categorically labeled such situations as sinful, especially citing the Sixth Commandment. An often following question is “What if they do not have sexual relations while living together?” At this point the issue of temptation is undoubtedly introduced. Is it naïveté that thinks it can live with a romantic interest and resist sexual temptation with consistency and without an unhealthy level of actual consideration? Statistically, couples who begin to cohabit are already in a sexual relationship, but the fact that most who cohabit break the Sixth Commandment is not sufficient grounds to condemn cohabitation. Many studies show that cohabiters are at higher risk for divorce, abuse, and other unwanted situations,<sup>30</sup> and that the average cohabiter is “someone who is young, with low education and income, who values egalitarian gender roles and liberal values, and who has no religious affiliation.”<sup>31</sup> Correlations, however, do not prove causation. Other research exists that claims the negative effects of cohabitation are exaggerated.

Whichever studies better represent truth, something in the very nature of cohabitation must be clearly contrary to Scripture to keep it from being called an adiaphoron. In reality what makes cohabitation sinful are the attendant circumstances. Can a couple cohabit without temptation? If not, can they justify the temptation? Does enduring that temptation strengthen faith? Is it somehow a good witness to unbelievers? Does it refrain from testing God?<sup>32</sup> Is something worse than the temptation the result of not cohabiting? One might be prone to answer all these questions negatively, but only one scenario, however extreme, is required to suggest that cohabitation can be an acceptable and beneficial practice.<sup>33</sup>

As briefly noted above, sexual immorality is a sin that surfaces in many places in many ways. Can a Christian in good conscience enter a situation that could cause, foster, or be in any way conducive to lust? Take an engaged couple for instance. As they approach their wedding date, they may very well be tempted to commit the sin of premarital sex. Many succumb to the

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<sup>30</sup> Sara Wenger Shenk, “Cohabitation: What Is at Stake?” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 9 no 2 (Fall 2008): 25-32.

<sup>31</sup> Martha Gault-Sherman and Scott Draper, “What Will the Neighbors Think? The Effect of Moral Communities on Cohabitation,” *Review of Religious Research* 54 no 1 (Mr 2012): 47.

<sup>32</sup> “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Mt 4:7).

<sup>33</sup> Finally, temptation is not the only issue with cohabitation. Giving offense and living as though married are other common objections. In short, these are also grey areas that are beyond the scope of this effort. The point is that cohabitation, often considered an outright sin, is itself an adiaphoron *often* associated with sinful temptation and transgression, but not always.



temptation. Many already had months or years ago. Many resist the temptation. The Television Network TLC's *19 Kids and Counting* documents the lives of a large, Christian family. The family is well known for its conservative Christianity. Their practices include a strict chaperoning policy: a family member may not be alone with a romantic interest without chaperons present. The fact that such a policy is rare in culture does not mean it is not the right or best policy, but it fails to address the mind. Even if a couple were literally never alone with each other until after marriage, what would prevent the temptation of sexual immorality from entering their minds? Never dating. Possibly, never even seeing a member of the opposite gender. That one might be tempted to lust is easily justified by the prospect of marriage, a divine institution that serves as the paradigm for society. It models God's intention for sexuality and child-raising. Unfortunately, the populace has abandoned that intention in favor of a perversion that includes almost anything that anyone might want. Marriage also enables the keeping of the commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.<sup>34</sup> That is not to say that one should brazenly enter into any situation that contains any level of sexual temptation whatsoever, but it is to say that simply the threat of temptation, which still may not occur, is not always sufficient grounds to avoid the activity.

God does demand that not "even a hint of sexual immorality" be among His followers (Eph 5:3). Or does He? The Greek phrase that the NIV renders "there must not be even a hint of" is *μηδὲ ὀνομαζέσθω*. Literally it means "must not even be named." BDAG suggests that *ὀνομαζέω* can mean "be known" in the passive voice.<sup>35</sup> The NIV stands *completely alone* in the sense its translation offers.<sup>36</sup> Many translations suggest that no one should be able to accuse God's people of such sins.<sup>37</sup> Other translations simply state that no such behavior should occur among Christians.<sup>38</sup> A few translations forbid followers of Christ from discussing such sins.<sup>39</sup> Many

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<sup>34</sup> "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'" (Ge 1:28).

<sup>35</sup> Arndt et al., 714.

<sup>36</sup> On Biblegateway.com, a website that offers 50 English translations, only the NIV (and NIRV and NIVUK) translation suggests "hint" or anything similar.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. "But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints" (HCSB).

<sup>38</sup> E.g. "Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God's people" (NLT).

<sup>39</sup> E.g. "As God's people, you should not even talk about wrong living, any kind of wrong sex or wanting things you cannot have" (Worldwide English).

translations are ambiguous, forbidding either outside accusations or inside discussions of such sins. The most natural sense is that of HCSB, that God's people should have no reason to be accused of sexual immorality. Although the accuser can reasonably be expected to produce some shred of evidence, this principle does heighten the argument against most cases of cohabitation, but it does not affect temptations. A man who works with an attractive woman, if he is not tempted or keeps his temptation easily in check, cannot rightly be accused of sexual immorality. One cannot reasonably accuse an unmarried couple of sexual immorality based simply on the fact that they are an unmarried couple. Anyone can spread gossip. Therefore, with a strict literalistic reading of Ephesians, one could conclude that any person could cause any Christian to sin at any given time by accusing him of sexual sin, thereby causing it to be "named among them." The context of simple logic and literacy, however, demand that the accusations somehow be substantiated.

Another phenomenon that can certainly involve much temptation is gambling. Most conservative Christians are unwilling to call the action itself a sin, or even to say that the attendant circumstances always make it a sin. However, in this author's experience, the stigma attached to gambling is much worse than that of legal recreational drug use. For example, Professor Brug, with great resemblance to a politician, labeled most gambling sinful and provided an extensive litmus test for what remained.<sup>40</sup> Is gambling more addictive than alcohol or nicotine? Is spending money on a night of fun with nothing to show for it worse than spending money on a night of fun with a headache and potential health risks to show for it? "If we oppose all gambling on the grounds that it provides strong temptations to sin, we must oppose drinking on the same grounds. If we oppose all gambling on the grounds that it is poor stewardship, don't we have to oppose smoking and many forms of luxurious entertainment on the same grounds?"<sup>41</sup>

Quite similarly to cohabitation, temptation is not the only issue. Maybe one cannot answer each of Brug's questions so that he can go ahead and gamble. Maybe most cannot. But some can. Some do not think of gambling as a means to gain more money; to them it is entertainment with a price tag, and much entertainment is not free. To some the price is set before the night begins, which is rarely the case in something as simple as going out to eat. They

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<sup>40</sup> John F. Brug, "Is All Gambling a Sin?" (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary: Essay File, 1974, October 7, 2014); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/BrugGambling.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

take along a certain amount of money. If it is all lost, the entertainment is over. The uncertainty of how long the money will last makes the games exciting and fun. They gamble only with like-minded people so as not to become a stumbling block. Whether any sort of personal fun or excitement can be good stewardship is not the thrust of this effort, but reason, along with virtually every Christian's behavior, for what they are worth, would suggest that it can be.

A final specific situation to consider is other forms of entertainment that depict or promote sin. Should Christians watch violent movies or play violent video games? Should Christians listen to the music of artists whose message is not wholesome? From the perspective of temptation, the first question is whether there is a risk. Many people subject themselves to entertainment that depicts and promotes sin but never commit the same sins. The 1997 motion picture *Titanic* was the highest grossing film of all time for twelve years. Surely many Christians saw the movie that is notorious for an extended scene of nudity. It also contains language that some find offensive, alcohol abuse, and sexual immorality. Many of those Christians did not subsequently abuse alcohol or fornicate. Therefore, if they were tempted, they resisted. Is asserting that many were not even tempted a stretch? Yet as already mentioned, not succumbing to temptation is not necessarily a good enough reason to engage in an adiaphoron. What good could come from a Christian watching *Titanic*? In a culture that rejects absolute truth, a person of orthopraxy is to be learned in the arts and interests of the world. A wise high school professor said, "If I didn't read [Harry Potter], I couldn't talk about it." He believed that reading the book series was unwise for a Christian at best, yet he read it. He did so in order to speak about a potential threat to Christians' faith in an informed manner. Did he read it with the knowledge that it could tempt him to sin? Yes.

Can a Christian enjoy such entertainment solely for enjoyment? Does he sin if he partakes for the purpose of education but finds joy in the process? A Christian should certainly not promote sin in any way, so he must ask himself, "Is it the sinful part(s) of this form of entertainment that gives me joy?" In the case of pornography, for instance, what other part is there? In the case of music, lyrical content could be an unfortunate accompaniment to an excellent blend of instrumental composition. So much more is in a movie than the glorification of sin, such as skilled acting, powerful special effects, involved character and plot development, and nostalgia. These and not the depiction and promotion of sin could be the reason a Christian

enjoys a motion picture. If a Christian enjoys aspects of a form of entertainment that do not promote sin, quite possible is that the sinful aspects do not tempt him at all.

In judging adiaphora, one author proposed four principles: confession of the gospel, continuity with the Church's tradition, contextual sensitivity for mission, and consensus of the church.<sup>42</sup> Arand was discussing how the church should approach adiaphora, but individuals would do well to note his principles, especially the third. For the sake of order, in no case may the gospel be compromised. If a situation arises in which one option is to undergo a circumstance accompanied by temptation, that option should not be chosen if it muddles the gospel. Such situations have more to do with church decisions than personal decisions. The same is even truer of the second principle.

Contextual sensitivity for mission is highly important for a church and for an individual. For example, a young Christian who pervasively resists his peers' pressure to consume alcohol underage, yet continues to be around them, may be insensitive. If he feels his faith is strong enough to overcome the temptation and thereby justifies his continued companionship with his friends and their bad influence, he may be sending them the message that Christians are really indifferent to sin. Sensitivity would mean repeated attempts to convince them of their sin and possibly refusal to be around when the group is drinking. Natural human behavior is to avoid situations in which nothing good can come. Similarly, orthopractical behavior is to avoid temptations that can produce no good.

The consensus of the church is certainly good to consider, but it should not be regarded as a binding law. The church tends to hold concrete principles. Naturally, it cannot provide insight for every possible situation, but many situations are greyer and more abstract than what would be convenient for a church's principles. Still, if the church has spoken, best is to listen and not deviate lightly. Standing on the shoulders of giants is a cliché that has its merit. Students of the Bible have put time and effort into determining what is best in most cases for the spiritual welfare of Christians. For example, the consensus of the church would warn against a group of lay people celebrating the Lord's Supper in a private home. The temptations involved would be elitism, lack of unity, and spite of the divine call. However, in an extreme event, celebration of the Lord's Supper without a clergyman could be appropriate. Perhaps the pastor of a congregation in a remote area is hospitalized and weather prohibits the service of a guest pastor.

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<sup>42</sup> Charles P. Arand, "Not All Adiaphora Are Created Equal," *Concordia Journal* 30 no 3 (JI 2004): 146-154.

Many things that the church does not regularly do or endorse involve temptation, but temptation alone does not prohibit their practice.

Biblical examples prove that the correct response to the prospect of temptation is not always to flee. In Luke 3, John the Baptist's message was producing fruit in keeping with repentance. He told some tax collectors who came to be baptized, "Don't collect any more than you are required to" (Lk 3:13). Tax collection was a profession known for its corruption. The Roman government was only interested in getting its own due. Tax collectors could easily get away with extortion. But John did not tell them to quit their job. Nor did Jesus Himself tell Zacchaeus to quit his job. After the Holy Spirit entered the chief tax collector's heart, the latter vowed to amend his ways. Although he would surely still be tempted to cheat and extort, he did not feel compelled to find a new career. He simply pledged to resist that temptation henceforth and make right the times when he did not. Jesus' response was, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham" (Lk 19:9).

Comparable to tax collecting is the phenomenon of modern day online shopping. Many websites did not or still do not collect sales tax on online orders, especially orders placed from a different state. The law is clear that citizens must report these amounts on their tax forms. Like speeding, the American government is hardly interested in enforcing this law in most cases. The result is that countless Americans, through greed, spite, or ignorance, steal from the government every year. This question almost sounds foolish, but it illustrates the point of the thesis: should Christians refrain from online shopping, knowing that they will be tempted to neglect reporting their purchases to the IRS?

Finally, countless Old and New Testament believers carried on lives that implicitly involved willingly entering situations in which temptation could be present. Joseph took a position that very likely had divine implications. Surely he was tempted to think of himself too highly at times. Anyone who handled offering money could have been tempted to take it. The celebration of the Lord's Supper, past and present, could be accompanied by a temptation to consume too much alcohol. Since temptation in its wide sense is not a sin in itself, consider the following principles for determining whether allowing a given temptation intersects orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

**1. Is orthodoxy at stake?** Sometimes allowing a temptation means sinning in some other way, even if the temptation at hand subsequently does not succeed. In other words, one must be

careful that he does not already sin in order to put himself into a position in which he might be tempted. Consider the child whose friends drink underage. Perhaps he can justifiably continue to be around them, but not if his parents clearly forbid him from such interactions. Nothing can justify compromising doctrine. Such a statement is obvious, but requires repetition and consideration. Putting oneself in the way of temptation for a good cause is different from intentionally sinning for a good cause.

**2. Can any good come from being in the situation that may lead to sin?** If the answer is no, the situation should be avoided, but many things qualify as good. The spread of the gospel is good, and it does often come with some temptations. In the name of spreading the gospel someone may educate himself on the sinful culture of the world, often risking temptation. Spreading the gospel may include the temptation to become angry with and hate people who reject the message and aggressively argue the faults of Christians. Caring for people's needs is good. Jesus encouraged this throughout His ministry on earth. Glorifying God is good and can take many forms, such as art, sport, and music. Pursuing any field of excellence can be accompanied by temptation. Personal satisfaction can be good, but it must not be at the expense of others or their faith, and it must not be sinful satisfaction. Finally, resisting temptation can strengthen faith if the resistance is not accompanied by spite and indignant submission to the law, but by acknowledgement of God's will and thanksgiving.

**3. Is this particular temptation likely to succeed?** This question has different meaning to every different person. Recovered and recovering alcoholics often refrain from drinking at all. They are unwilling to endure the temptation to overindulge because they know how susceptible they are. A responsible drinker who has never had the struggles of an alcoholic will consume one drink with little hesitation. One person is much more vulnerable to the greed associated with gambling than another person. Although no one can perfectly predict to which temptations he will yield,<sup>43</sup> a sinner's history and knowledge of himself are good indicators. Friends and relatives can also help. If every loved one doubts one's ability to resist a certain temptation, he ought seriously to reconsider. Do not "underestimate or toy with Satan's power to tempt."<sup>44</sup>

**4. Balance principles 2 and 3.** Even a temptation that is deemed low risk should not be endured if the good to come from the situation is very minimal. Being able to provide adequately

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<sup>43</sup> "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Je 17:9)

<sup>44</sup> Brug, 3.

for one's family is likely a good reason to keep a job that includes moderate temptation, especially if alternatives are scarce. However, refusing to be part of a situation in which the risk of temptation far exceeds the value of enduring it is not a sign of weakness, but of wisdom. Note well that the type of sin is not specified, only the level of risk involved.

**5. Is some other evil probable if the temptation is avoided?** This principle is really a subpoint of principle 2, but it is very important. Sometimes circumstances force choosing "the lesser of two evils." These situations are not terribly uncommon within the realm of temptation. Sometimes the only way out of one very tempting situation is a situation that is less tempting. Or perhaps someone's life or soul is in grave danger and the only way to help is to put oneself in temptation's way. Sometimes allowing a minor temptation can prevent someone else's major temptation. For example, if a friend wants a ride home from a local bar because he finds himself likely to get drunk and possibly commit adultery, the prospect of the possible temptation of speeding should not overcome the desire to help the friend out of his tempting situation.

**6. Would the temptation affect others?** Though one Christian can legitimately have an alcoholic beverage, eat highly addictive foods without becoming gluttonous, or gamble without greed, doing so in front of a weaker brother or sister<sup>45</sup> is unwise and unloving. "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. . . . Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God" (1 Co 10:24,32). When putting oneself in temptation's way means unfairly doing the same to others, the action should be reconsidered. How principle 3 applies to another person is often unknown.

**7. "Pray continually" (1 Th 5:17).** God wants to answer prayer. Although "lead us not into temptation is a very common prayer," God also promises to send help where temptations appear. Entering a temptation knowingly is not always testing God. Sometimes it is holding Him to His promise that He answers prayer and works sanctification in the lives of His followers.

Temptation can surely be a grey area. Even these principles cannot answer every question and determine the correct path in every situation, but they can help keep God's will in perspective. Temptation is a fact of life, and although it must be avoided in some cases, it cannot always be avoided, and sometimes it is a challenge to be taken on with boldness and wisdom.

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<sup>45</sup> This is not the person who insists that such activities are sinful for everyone, but the person who struggles to engage in such activities without sinning.

## Conclusion

Conservative Christian circles have largely considered temptation something to be avoided at all times. Following this logic through to its natural conclusion would yield a movement that endorses doing nothing, going nowhere, and trying not to think. Such lack of activity would not take the Great Commission seriously. However, the Bible clearly uses two distinct senses of the word temptation. The stigma of temptation is attached to its narrow sense, when assumed is that the temptation has succeeded. The wide sense, however, does not have any outcome in mind; it allows for resistance and overcoming. Therefore temptation is not tantamount to sin.

The extreme opposed to doing nothing for fear of giving in to temptation is an absence of concern with the power of temptation. It is blatant disregard for the implications of being in a tempting situation, not only for oneself, but also for others. Between these two extremes lies the line that is carefully choosing, to the degree that it is possible, which temptations one will undergo, with prayer and honesty of conscience. Not all temptations can be avoided. Since the world is full of sin, Christians, who are in the world but not of the world (Jn 17), must carry on their duties in an atmosphere of sin and temptation. They do this in a God-pleasing way by trying to obey God and avoid sin. In order to carry on Christian lives, they endure temptation, sometimes willingly. They don't want to be tempted, nor do they desire to sin, but when so much temptation is between a believer and his goal, finally he must still strive to reach it. As in a soccer game, backwards passes and sideways passes do occur, but players also make forward passes and attempt to dribble straight through the defense.

Many situations have been advanced to show that Christians do not try to avoid every temptation and that they should not. Various Bible verses indicate the same. In trying to determine which temptations are most dangerous and which situations accompanied by temptation are most profitable, orthodoxy and orthopraxy play a key role. Having the right teaching as a guide is a prerequisite to making good applications. Likewise making the wrong choices for the right reasons is to no avail. Orthodoxy is a guide to what a Christian does or does not. Orthopraxy is a guide within that guide, further limiting what and how a Christian acts.

Some practices that tend to bear negative connotations were considered in order to see whether vindication was in order, whether partial or complete. Cohabitation is not a sin in itself,



but it lends itself to much temptation. Theoretically, it could be a wholesome and beneficial practice, but temptation aside, it can also usurp the blessings of marriage and cause offense and lead others to sin. Cohabitation is itself a broad topic that rarely receives its due attention. Unfortunately, it is not a big enough part of temptation to treat adequately here either.

Gambling was also considered because of its negative overtones in culture. Although gambling can be done without the threat of temptation, again, other issues surface that raise further questions of its legitimacy. From the viewpoint of temptation, what is intriguing about gambling is that its reputation seems to put its partakers at a much higher risk of falling into temptation than alcohol consumption. Although this author's inkling is to blame culture, comparing and contrasting gambling and alcohol consumption would be worthy research.

Entertainment depicting sin was the last mini case study. Good uses for such entertainment that were stated include education and simple enjoyment. Entertainment *because of sin* would be different, but since sin is ubiquitous, everything anyone enjoys is tainted. Still, a Christian who likes something that contains sin does not necessarily find joy in that aspect of it.

Finally, seven principles attempt to guide believers when they must decide whether to enter a situation in which is temptation. More or fewer principles could have been proposed, but the process should neither be overthought nor underthought. Temptation is an aspect of life that should sometimes cause fright; it should not persistently terrify. If analyzed deeply enough, life could be considered a series of choices among multiple situations, most, if not all of which contain temptation. When is no temptation a threat? Never! A Christian can overcome temptations. God wants Christians to overcome temptations. Jesus helps Christians overcome temptations.

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