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Heresies Real and Imaginary



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"That's Todd. Todd's got it all figured out. Fortunately, Todd is not God."



I recently received an e-mail message from a conservative Presbyterian pastor on the East Coast charging me with "rank heresy" because I had written an essay on Razormouth¹ calling for greater celebration in the Lord's Day meeting, arguing that God's love and justice are equally ultimate in his Being, repudiating the idea of a "covenant of works," and chiding certain Christians for not loving one another enough (My critic's letter seemed to verify my last point!). I wasn't sure whether my response should be amusement or annoyance (maybe both). I've given years of my life to defending the historic Christian Faith,² and "heresy" is one charge of which I never thought I'd be the object.

The word translated "heresy" or "heresies" in the New Testament of the King James Version means a "private, unauthorized character of a [religious] school or party."³ It is sometimes translated "sect." It denotes a party spirit and implies schism within, or separation from, the larger legitimate body. The Bible predicts heresies within the church (1 Corinthians 11:19), but it boldly condemns them (Galatians 5:20; 2 Peter 2:1).

In the patristic church, heresy came to mean the deviant teachings that contributed to this sinful schism. Gnosticism, Arianism and Monophysitism were all early heresies that the

ecumenical creeds (like the Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, and Chalcedonian) were written partly to refute. Heresy had—and has—a rather precise historical meaning: any teaching contrary to the core received tradition of the Church, outlined in those early creeds. It also was thought to have a rather precise eternal consequence: hell (if you don't believe this, read the Athanasian Creed!). Orthodoxy, or "right belief," is heresy's opposite.⁴ Christianity demands certain beliefs; it is not just a "lifestyle"; you can go to hell if you don't *believe* certain things (or if you *do* believe certain *false* ones). This is why charges of heresy, and not only heresies themselves, are so serious.

CHARGES OF HERESY

This spring an orthodox Presbyterian minister, a godly and faithful and knowledgeable man, mounted his pulpit to accuse with heresy Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, Douglas Wilson, and other pastors who were publicly trying to arrive at a consistent understanding and practice of the biblical doctrine of the covenant. He specifically labeled them "heretics" and "betrayers of the Reformation." Oddly, in his widely distributed audiotape of the sermon, he did not appeal to any objective *historical* criterion by which these men should be considered heretical.

But there can be no heresy if there is no objective meaning for it. In historic orthodoxy, spelled out in the ecumenical creeds, we have a criterion of orthodoxy—and therefore, by implication, of heresy. Heresy is what deviates from orthodoxy, and orthodoxy is found in the early ecumenical creeds. Heresy is not a matter of mere personal disagreement—however vigorous that disagreement.

To argue that folks are heretics because they disagree with us (or our church) is simply to express an opinion—and often a rather arrogant one at that. Heresy is a matter for the Church—not a few individuals, even smart ones—to decide (Titus 3:9-10; cf. Matthew 18:15-19). The fact that we dispute someone's views, even quite fervently, does not warrant our labeling them heretical.

The church has always embraced what Thomas Sowell, in another context terms the "constrained vision."⁵ Knowledge is not something that springs mainly from the minds of a few bright people; rather, it is widely disbursed in the minds and hearts of Christians today, and from our knowledge of what was in the minds and hearts of those who have died in the Lord—in the words of the patristic Church: that which is believed "everywhere, always, by all."⁶ One Christian, even a very intelligent or devout or zealous one, does not possess the ability (or warrant) to label another a heretic. The Church, with its wide consensus, does possess this ability and warrant. The universal Church (and not merely one segment of it, much less one denomination or a local church) is the earthly operational gatekeeper of orthodoxy and heresy; it has responsibility for men's souls.

THE BIBLE AND HERESY

What about the Bible? Is it not ultimately authoritative in determining heresy? Indeed, it is. The critic mentioned above *did* quote from the Bible to buttress his charges, but we should recall that quoting the Bible will not *by itself* solve the issue of heresy: the Arians (like today's Jehovah's Witnesses) were fond of quoting many Bible verses to prove their view that Jesus is not equal to God.⁷ Orthodoxy is necessary precisely because heretics appeal to the Bible, not because they *do not* appeal to it. The Bible (not the Church) is the source of its own interpretation,⁸ but that interpretation must be visibly and publicly recognized in ecclesiastical consensus—or else one man's orthodoxy is another's heresy. Otherwise, we'd all end up anathematizing everybody who disagrees with us. (Come to think of it, this is just what some Christians do!)

This is *not* to say that one should not appeal to the Bible in proving charges of heresy, only that such appeal is not sufficient *if it does not account for how the vast majority of Christians historically have interpreted it*. This is why Charles Hodge can state, "[F]or an individual Christian to dissent from the faith of the universal Church (*i.e.*, the body of true believers), is tantamount to dissenting from the Scriptures themselves."⁹ To

dissent from the orthodox interpretation of the Bible, he is asserting, is to dissent from the Bible itself, because orthodoxy summarizes the central Biblical Faith.

Heresy implies an accepted *interpretation* of the Bible by the Church—orthodoxy, in other words. Teachings outside the bounds of this orthodoxy are treated as heretical. To say something *else* is heretical is to create a *new* orthodoxy unapproved by the Church. The Church does not have a right to determine orthodox doctrine, but it does have a right to *recognize* it—just as it does not have a right to determine the biblical canon, but it does have a right to recognize it. Doctrines not delineated as central to orthodoxy may be important, but dissenting from them does not make one a heretic.

Examples: Christians who deny consubstantiation may not be Lutherans, but they are not heretics, either. If a woman repudiates predestination, she is no Calvinist, but neither is she a heretic. To disallow all baptism except adult baptism by immersion sets one outside the bounds of the Reformed faith, but not outside the bounds of the Christian faith. To embrace the present validity of *all* the spiritual gifts of the New Testament may be very wrong, but it is not heretical.

This is another way of saying that some doctrines, though important, are not central to the Faith.

“HERESY INFLATION”

A grave problem with playing fast and loose regarding charges of heresy is that it dilutes *real* heresy in the comparison. Most of us have heard of the controversial Bishop John Shelby Spong (Episcopal), who denies the resurrection of Christ—and much else of the Christian faith. From the standpoint of historic Christianity, he is *objectively* a heretic. If we classify with him those whose views we oppose strongly but who stand within the Christian faith, we mitigate the evil of Spong’s heresy. (A good friend calls this “heresy inflation.”)

In short, if Schlissel is a heretic, Spong may not be so bad after all.

Doctrines that constitute denominational *distinctives*, like certain ones in Reformation churches, are not, properly

speaking, issues of heresy or orthodoxy. Take “monergism” in soteriology, for instance. Reformation churches believe that God *alone* saves sinners, and that men do not cooperate with God in salvation. This is, and always has been, a minority view in the universal Church;¹⁰ but this should not unduly alarm Protestants, because, despite its importance, it is not an issue touching Christian orthodoxy. In short, you can be an Arminian and still be an orthodox Christian, albeit a badly mistaken one! Protestants are (on this point) in a distinct minority in our position, but that does not mean we are heretical. However, it also means that for a Protestant (or other) church or denomination to elevate its own *distinctives* (like this one) to the status of Christian orthodoxy and anathematize all who disagree is to impose on the Church an alien definition of orthodoxy—and heresy. This is perhaps almost as bad as the opposite error—widening the bounds of orthodoxy to include those (like Spong) who deny the faith. Heresy *inflation* and *deflation* are perhaps equally serious errors.

THE HEALTH OF CREATIVITY

None of this is to say that theological “creativity” is always a bad thing. Let us recall that had our patristic fathers not speculated, we would never have had (humanly speaking) the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.¹¹ Had Luther not creatively probed, we would never have had the Protestant idea of justification, which to that time had never been held by any Christian anywhere.¹² Creative theologizing as patient, prayerful reflection on the Bible in light of new issues is a good thing—if it’s kept within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.¹³

Preterism is a good example. Jay Adams, Gary DeMar and Ken Gentry are partial preterists—they hold that many (but not all) prophecies pertaining to Christ’s Second Coming were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. They do hold to the orthodox view of Christ’s *future* physical coming. But “consistent” preterists deny this vital doctrine—they are heretics, because they disavow (and usually expressly so) certain doctrines at the core of Christian belief.

TWO VITAL COMPONENTS

In considering all of this, we must recognize two vital components of the Church: *unity* and *purity*. Orthodoxy tends beautifully to preserve both. It says, "Within my bounds, there is room for wide disagreement and speculation, while the saints maintain mutual love and respect." But orthodoxy equally says, "Outside my bounds, there can be no objective, historical Christianity." When we lose orthodoxy, we lose the *purity* of the Church. When we invent new orthodoxies, we lose the *unity* of the Church. Ironically, by threatening the unity of the Church, those who falsely cry "heresy" come very close to *committing* heresy as understood in the Bible—creating a new sect in isolation from the Church.

Let's level our theological guns at real, not imaginary, heretics.

Author

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Notes

1. At <http://www.razormouth.com/cgi-local/npublisher/viewnews.cgi?category=all&id=1018256218>
2. Andrew Sandlin, editor, *Keeping Our Sacred Trust* (Vallecito, California: Chalcedon Foundation, 1999).
3. G. Nordholt, "Elect, Choose," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

- 1975, 1986), 1:535.
4. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984).
5. Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 1987).
6. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 333.
7. Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 191-200.
8. Gerhard Ebeling, "'Sola Scriptura' and Tradition," *The Word of God and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 127.
9. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:184.
10. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth [1937], 1969), 203-24.
11. G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK [1936], 1952).
12. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification—The Beginnings to the Reformation* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1986), 186-87.
13. I agree here with James Orr: "The history of dogma criticizes dogma; corrects mistakes, eliminates temporary elements, supplements defects; incorporates the gains of the past, at the same time that it opens up wider horizons for the future. But its clock never goes back. It never returns upon itself to take up as part of its creed what it has formally, and with full consciousness, rejected at some bygone stage," *Progress of Dogma* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 17. N. T. Wright captures this idea quite well: "For me orthodoxy is like doing higher mathematics. It is continually discovering new ways to move forward, while still holding to the accepted affirmations which are themselves central," "Interview with N. T. Wright [Part 1]." (*Reformation and Revival Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1 [Winter 2002], 119 (emphasis supplied).