

Heresy [2]

Heresy: What Is At Stake?

Who is a Christian? Can we call those who reject the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith - Christians? Liberal theologians say they believe in God, but what is unclear is why they do so and what they mean by God. They seem to take pride in how far they can push the "theological" envelope, as if the departure from orthodox theology is a guarantee of daring and originality. One can cite numerous examples of church leaders who consider themselves "progressive" and "saviors" of the church.

In 1984 David Jenkins, the Anglican bishop of Durham, England, delighted the press, as any heretical bishop will, and gave some spectacular headlines with his denial of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Jenkins said that the Resurrection was not a single event, "but a series of experiences." Jesus was raised up, that is, "the very life and purpose and personality which was in him was continuing."

In the 1990s the Episcopalian bishop Spong, infamous for his passionately held liberal convictions, saw passages in the Gospels portraying Jesus of Nazareth "as narrow-minded, vindictive, and even hypocritical," and "guilty of what we today would surely call anti-Semitism." He also made headlines when he ordained gay, lesbian and bisexual priests in his diocese. He also favors abortions, the ordination of women, and the blessing of homosexual relationships.

Recently, United Methodist bishop Joe Sprague of Chicago questioned the eternal deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His bodily resurrection, and His atonement for the sins of the world. The bishop may profess tolerance toward a host of anti-Christian ideas, but he has no patience with his critics. He calls them "narrow-minded," "theologically bankrupt," and tools of the "well-heeled religious right."

In *Gagging God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Dr. D.A. Carson wonders how the self-confessed liberal David Edwards can be called a Christian. He notes that this instructed and thoughtful theologian explicitly rejects the Fall, denies that human beings have any need for an atonement provided by a divine/human redeemer, discounts belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus, and concludes that "everything" in the Gospel of John "must be questionable." Carson rightly comments that in Edward's case, "We are not in the realm of quibbling about the precise definition of inerrancy; we are in the realm of those truths without which Christianity is no longer Christianity."

But this departure from orthodoxy in the name of liberalism is neither original nor progressive. It reflects the 20th century self-conscious revolt against authority. Liberal academic theologians revolted against the authority of Scripture. Their theology became more of a philosophical exercise for solving intellectual problems than a careful examination of the history of doctrine and the faithful study of the infallible Word of God. To study theology in liberal institutions was to enter a spiritual wilderness. Evangelical theologian Dr. John Stott tells of his own sad experience at Cambridge. He writes, "When I was myself an undergraduate at Cambridge during World War II, the Divinity

School was entirely liberal in its orientation. I believe there were no evangelical believers in any British university post related to Theology."

Who Are Heretics?

The term "heretic" is applicable to individuals or groups, to laymen or pastors. The term "heresy" has not been uniformly specified from age to age and from group to group. Therefore, we must obviously hesitate to stigmatize someone as a heretic or immediately call someone heretical when there is a disagreement about a specific doctrine. Care must be exercised as there is much confusion what is meant by heresy. Let me give some examples. The Roman Catholic Church defines a heretic as "any baptized person who, retaining the name Christian, pertinaciously denies or doubts one or another truth believed by the divine and catholic faith."

Is the Salvation Army heretical because they don't baptize converts? Merja Merras, Lecturer in the Orthodox Theological Faculty, University of Joensuu, Finland, seems to say so. He says that if a group should arise within the church which does not baptize, totally rejecting the value of water baptism, and which yet insists that its members are Christians and God's children "they are heretics from the point of the church, and I do not see any reason why we cannot declare this openly."

Is apartheid heresy? I never agreed with apartheid. But I find it ironic that the World Council of Churches (WCC), which has among its members some very theologically liberal denominations and institutions, issued several resolutions of condemnation of apartheid as "a sin which, as a fundamental matter of faith, is to be rejected as a perversion of the Gospel." And right in step with the WCC, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared in 1982 that the approval of apartheid by the South African Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) was heresy.

To add to the confusion about who is heretical, Michael Ramsey, archbishop of York and later archbishop of Canterbury, denounced English fundamentalism (evangelicalism) as at once "heretical and sectarian." He also insinuated that Dr. Billy Graham was a heretic. He said that Graham's evangelicalism was "emphatically not that of the Bible." According to Ramsey, Graham's theology represents "a fixation of distorted elements from the Bible without the balanced tradition of scriptural truth as a whole."

In our time the words "orthodoxy" and "heresy" are distasteful to those theologians heavily influenced by classic liberalism, postmodernism, relativism, radical feminism, and religious pluralism. Nevertheless, we must not hesitate to distinguish truth from error. The battle for truth has been with us since the Fall. And the turbulent history of the church shows that the longer error is tolerated, the easier it is to compromise the truth. But if we believe in objective truth, however cautiously and imperfectly we may think we grasp it, we automatically leave place for a distinction between truth and error, and thus for a distinction between orthodoxy and heresy.

What Is Heresy?

What is heresy? Obviously, it opposes orthodoxy, which is a fixed, enduring, unchanging body of truth which is to be believed and obeyed. Hence, it is a departure from orthodox teaching which threatens church unity. In the early church heresy was viewed as a form of blasphemy, as it exposed the true faith to contention, even error. For these early Christians, a person or group that believed and taught false doctrines was a very serious matter because it violated Christ's word (cf. John 14:6).

The word heresy is derived from a Greek word meaning "to pick out, to choose" from the full truth. Consequently, heresy is not just a lack of knowledge, or a misunderstanding of some fine points of theology, or a limited insight into the Scripture. Far from suggesting personal originality or the daring discovering of new truth, heresy is a narrowing of the world to the things heretics arbitrarily decide to select from the riches of the Christian faith. The Spanish theologian Isidore of Seville (c. 560 - 636) explains that heretics are those who "holding perverse dogma, draw apart from the Church of their own free will." In *On Heresies*, Isidore stresses that heretics are those who not only think wrongly, but persist with determined wickedness in thinking wrongly. By contrast, an orthodox believer is "a man upright in faith" who is also living a good Christian life."

What Is At Stake?

Why should we be so concerned about heresy? Why take the time and effort to recognize, expose, and reject it? Heresy is not a trivial matter. It is a destructive power which threatens the church to her foundations. It mutilates and mutes her witness in a world so desperately in need of the Gospel. Heresy is cruel. It leads people astray. It leaves them without hope, with nothing to hang on to. And it does have eternal consequences! The doctrine of salvation is at stake when heresy is taught and accepted! From this perspective, I think of Dr. Karl Barth's (1886 -1968) devastating critique of 19th century Protestant liberal theology. He boldly denounced it as heresy. Bible teacher and author Arno Gaebelin (1861-1945), who had become disillusioned with the spread of liberalism within Methodism and left it, argued strongly that "modernistic" Christianity was "the most dangerous infidelity true Christianity had ever faced."

We should not hesitate to denounce liberalism. There is indeed so much at stake. The meaning of the cross of Christ has suffered a terrible decline due to liberal theology.

At the very heart of the Gospel is the proclamation that Christ died for our sins. Not His life but His death saves us. Christ died in our place. The only basis on which we can have any hope of standing in the presence of the God is the shed blood of Jesus Christ. In obscuring these Gospel truths, liberal theology is guilty of the worst possible crime against the Gospel.

The Biblical message is clear. If a theologian denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he forfeits the right to be called a Christian, "And if Christ has not been raised, our

preaching is useless and so is your faith And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:14,17)

The Reformed theologian John Gresham Machen (1881-1937) in *Christianity and Liberalism* clearly explained why he believed a liberal cannot be called a Christian. Machen carefully outlined the fundamental doctrines of the church, putting his heaviest emphasis on the substitutionary nature of the death of Jesus. It was liberalism's failure to understand this that made it a different religion. Machen did not view liberalism as partly Christian and partly non-Christian; rather liberal theology was to be seen as non-Christian, heterodox, and anti-Christian. The reason for Machen's bold statement was that he was convinced classic liberal theology unashamedly rejected and ridiculed belief in the supernatural Christ of the Scripture and the Scripture of Christ.

Our Response

How should Christians, who embrace and seek to obey the Word of God, respond to those who deny the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith? St. Augustine (354-430) discovered one positive side to heresy. He believed when heretics are disciplined, their expulsion from the church will benefit the faithful. He wrote, "For heretics spring from among those who, even though they are members of the Church fall into error. When they have been expelled, they are very helpful, not by teaching the truth, for they do not know it, but by awakening material - minded Catholics to seek the truth, and wise Catholics to unfold it. Thus many are awakened from sleep by the heretics to look on the daylight of God and to rejoice in it."

We must remain solid at the core while staying mushy at the edges. Christian scholars cannot attain infallibility in this life. The evangelical theologian Dr. Carl F. Henry notes, "Even the apostles had to confess their knowledge to be only in `part,' and even this knowledge includes elements that, while not beyond human understanding, await profounder clarification."

St. Augustine's observation that not every error is heresy is something almost universally agreed on in Christian history. In dealing with heresy, we must distinguish between what is essential and nonessential. In their time John Calvin and Herman Bavinck wrote about the fundamental and non-fundamental articles of the faith.

A recent example is membership in the Evangelical Theological Society. The members agree on the fundamental doctrines of the evangelical faith, but they do have some drastic differences. Furthermore, Reformed churches do accept as valid the baptism of a Roman Catholic. In other words, we must be cautious before we accuse someone of heresy. If we detect heresy, we should not immediately shoot from the hip and lay charges. We should do our "homework" and make sure we do not quote theologians out of context. Research the sources of apparent heretical statements. Get second opinions. Furthermore, it won't hurt to keep in mind that the church did not start in the 21st century. We can learn from the doctrinal struggles in the past. We can learn

from our Reformed forefathers, who by the grace of God remained faithful to the Gospel, and dealt with heresy. I also firmly believe in prayer for the errant. Scripture says that prayers are to be made "for everyone," which include those who hold false doctrine and oppose God's Word (1 Timothy 2:1). And humility is to characterize those who seek to restore one "caught in any trespass," whatever that sin may be (Galatians 6:1).

Dr. Schaeffer repeatedly stated that we can only address the errant with tears, warning them like a shepherd warns his sheep when they wander away. Schaeffer believed that if we can't have compassion for the erring, we should remain silent. "What God wants from us is not only doctrinal faithfulness," wrote Schaeffer, " but our love day by day. Not in theory, mind you, but in practice." Exercising love does not mean accommodating heresy. Schaeffer insisted the longer an error is condoned, the easier it is to compromise the truth. When the integrity of the Gospel and the Body of Christ is in immediate danger, we must have the courage to speak out, call a spade a spade regardless the cost.

Johan D. Tangelder
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