

Heresy - Part 3

The early church never enjoyed a golden age. According to the New Testament, a Christian is someone who believes, receives, and obeys the teachings of the Gospel (Romans 6:17). He knows that the Church is the pillar and ground of truth (1 Timothy 3:15). Before the New Testament canon was even closed, all major heresies were beginning to show their ugly heads. Already then, certain fundamental truths of the Gospel were rejected, injuring the unity of the Church.

It is wrong to say that early Christians were so devoted to their Lord and lived in such a wonderful harmony and peace with each other that they were not interested in the distinction between truth and error, between orthodoxy and heresy. It is impossible to read Galatians 1:8-9 or 1 John 2:22, or Hebrews 2:1-2 and fail to recognize that certain beliefs were viewed as nonnegotiable. The Church knew that outside the Gospel there is no salvation. The presence of false teachers in the early Church, their ongoing activities, and their increasing attraction in the last days is a clear teaching of Scripture.

New Testament

Our Lord was concerned about doctrinal purity. He warned His followers against the false prophets of His day. He told them that these people go around in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ferocious wolves. He also prophesied that false teachers would come in the future. The apostles made frequent references to heresy and heretics. Their epistles are directed toward every kind of problem within the Church from the doctrinal errors of Gnosticism, to instructions about social responsibility, to admonitions about sexual immorality.

The apostle Paul called false doctrine a "gangrene" (2 Timothy 2:17). When he addressed heresy in his letter to the Galatians, he did not mince words. The issues were too serious for niceties. The very salvation of the Galatians was at stake! The Galatian saints were warned. Some of them were already following a different Gospel (Galatians 1:6) and thereby seeking "to distort the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:7). God, through Paul, pronounced a curse on those who proclaimed a false Gospel (Galatians 1:9). Paul's great concern was the purity of the Church. He grieved over the sowing of jealousy, contentious behavior, and mutual distrust among believers. He repeatedly stated that divisions within the Church threaten her unity and hinder the spread of the Gospel. Paul lamented that his flock in Corinth was split by factionalism and heresies (1 Corinthians 11: 18-19). He worked hard to maintain the unity of the Church.

Paul compared the Church to a bride and Christ as the bridegroom (Ephesians 25b-32). Nothing should come between the bride and the bridegroom and spoil their beautiful relationship. The Church must remain faithful to her Lord. The jealous love of our Lord calls for His bride to keep pure until He comes for her in glory (1 Corinthians 6:17).

The Church must not commit spiritual adultery which results when those who claim to be God's people stop listening to what the Lord has said, follow false teachers, and turn to other gods (2 Corinthians 11:1-2).

John reminded Christians about the danger of false prophets (1 John 4:1). The problem of heresy over against orthodoxy, shows itself in 2 Peter 2:1, referring to false teachers who will "secretly introduce destructive heresies" in their denial of Christ. The epistles of Paul, John, and Peter clearly reveal early pressures on the Church to resist doctrinal error within her ranks. They also declare that we have no right to tamper with the Gospel, or to add or subtract from it. We must remain alert and valiantly guard the Gospel (2 Timothy 1:14).

Satan

Why do we see false teachings, factionalism, and other troubles within the Church? When the Gospel is preached, Satan opposes. Paul saw how his work for the Lord was continually frustrated by Satan. Satan is a wily antagonist and all his powers and forces are arrayed against the Church. As Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones puts it: "The confusion in the Christian church today is not merely the result of what is proudly called 'scholarship.' It is the fruit of activity of the devil. The Apostles were aware of it in the first century.

Christ is the King of Truth (John 18:37). He is the Truth (John 14:6). Satan is the father of lies, who hates the Truth. Hence, all false teaching originates in Satan (John 8:44). He is an expert at instigating false teachings. The apostle Paul said, "In later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons"(1 Timothy 4:1). Satan is the prince of darkness. Those who are in his domain walk in the spiritual night and can not see the truth. They believe a lie rather than truth.

Satan hates the Church. His sole object is to disturb the life of the church, to shake the confidence of Christian people, to spoil God's work in Christ. When we say Church, we say Christ. That is why Satan hates the Church. He knows how much Christ loves the Church. Consequently, Christians wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with spiritual wickedness and powers of darkness.

The devil is a determined foe. In his day, John Calvin saw the devil working hard to undermine the Church. Calvin noted that Satan brought in "false doctrines by the wagon load as soon as the gospel began to spring up." He warned that "everyone should be on their guard lest Satan should gain access to the flock and scatter it through their agency." But we can take heart. Satan may be at work but so is the Holy Spirit. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit the lie will never gain complete victory. However threatening the flood of lies may be, the truth struggles on and surfaces time and time again.

The Early Church

Wherever the early Christians spread the Gospel, Satan did his utmost to halt the advance of God's Kingdom. They were persecuted, driven from their homes, and deprived of jobs. Many sacrificed their lives for the sake of their Lord. For several centuries the Church was literally fighting for her very life.

Yet in the midst of all their ordeals, believers did not lose their vision of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Unity was their ideal (cf. John 17). It became obvious early in the history of the Church that the human reality did not always match the ideal. Although courageous and committed to the Lord and His Great Commission, the early Christians had their faults. They fell for temptations. They were sinners as well as saints. Lack of love and self-assertiveness led to divisions in Christian communities. False teachers led believers astray.

Many of the heresies of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries were doctrinal, concerned with the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, free will, grace, predestination, original sin, the sacraments, and so on. We should not be surprised by sin even in the lives of Christians. As G.K. Chesterton aptly remarked, "Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved."

Unity was under strain from a very early stage as power struggles emerged. But that did not diminish the importance of the ideal of unity. Despite the divisions and internal troubles, the early church fathers worked and prayed for unity. Cyprian's (Bishop of Carthage d.258 A.D.) overriding concern was to maintain unity. He spoke of the "mystery of unity." He associated this unity with the chastity, modesty, and purity of the Church as the Bride of Christ. He longed to keep the church pure for the sake of the Gospel. St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) emphasized preserving "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4: 3). He believed that the right way to behave is not to eject the schismatics themselves from the community but to drive the evil out of their views and persuade them to return to the fold.

Boundaries

The history of the early church relates her intense struggle with heresy. What gripping conflict! The foundations of the orthodox faith were shaking! The threat became so severe that it soon became apparent that something had to be done to safeguard the Gospel. Boundaries had to be drawn. Church leaders deemed it necessary to define orthodoxy. Unless this was done, any heretic could masquerade as having the truth. They held councils in order to clarify the Christian faith, to pinpoint heresies, and to protect people from believing them. Already in the second century, Irenaeus (ca. 115 - 202), wrote in *Against Heresies*, that Christians had a "rule of faith," a creed that stated what each Christian was required to believe.

A major crisis was caused by the Arian heresy in the fourth century. Arius, a priest at Alexandria, denied the divinity of Christ and the reality of salvation. The doctrine of the Trinity was also in dispute. A special early difficulty was to establish a Christian orthodoxy about the three persons in one God. An issue closely connected was what it

could it mean to say that "God became man" in Christ. The Council of Nicea, a new and dramatic procedure for dealing with the outbreak of heresy, was called in 325 A.D. Out of the refining fire of those theological conflicts have come creeds which we still confess today in our churches. The council of Nicea formulated a creed, now known as the Nicene Creed, which spelled out the orthodox Christian beliefs regarding the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ. It also defined the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. A revised version of the Nicene Creed was agreed on by the Council of Constantinople in 381. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 a definition of faith was agreed upon. They went on to list the heretical ideas their restatement of the creed outlaws and to insist that "since we have formulated these things with all possible accuracy and attention... no one is permitted to produce, or even to write down or compose, any other creed or to think or teach otherwise." Anyone who attempted it was to be deposed if a cleric or anathematized if a lay person. The Nicene Creed is still a touchstone or benchmark of right belief.

None of the great creeds of the Church were produced independently of what the Church thought and said in previous generations. The Creeds were attempts on the part of the Church to define, and to lay down, what is- true and what is not true. And in this way they were able to brand certain teachers as heretics. The Creeds were products of careful and prayerful deliberations in official gatherings of Church representatives. These representatives were convinced that when Christians assembled for the welfare of the Church, the Holy Spirit was also present and they could be sure of having divine guidance in reaching their conclusions.

Reformation

During the Middle Ages the West had only one Church. The 16th century brought about Reformation which repudiated the assumption that there was one visible church and that to be outside it was to be a heretic or a schismatic. The Reformation era made the question of heresy increasingly complex. It introduced a wholly different view of the Christian faith and ethics than the Christendom in the Middle Ages had taught.

Catholics and Protestants were alike in agreeing that right belief is necessary for salvation. But they differed in their interpretation of heresy. Protestants defined heresy as a departure from the teaching of Scripture. Traditional Roman Catholics equated the teaching of Scripture with that of the church. Heresy for them was a departure from the church's teaching. Among the Protestants grew an increasing disagreement in what constituted right belief. A series of alternative Churches came into being and have continued in existence since the Reformation. Not all members of such communities have recognized each other as churches. Indeed the whole question "what is the Church?" was thrown into uncertainty by the Reformation.

For the Reformers, heresy was a serious matter. John Calvin called it an offense against God, the Church, and society. All Reformers rejected the label "heretics" for themselves. They thought of themselves as representing truth over apostasy. The major Reformers did not label the Roman Catholic Church per se as heretical. Calvin did note that in the Roman Catholic Church the signs of the true church - the Word rightly

preached, the sacraments rightly celebrated, and discipline faithfully exercised - were missing (Institutes IV, vii, 23).

For Martin Luther heresy was a "spiritual thing." At the time when the Roman Catholic Church fiercely persecuted Protestants and was employing torture through the Inquisition to expose men's secret thoughts, he declared, "We do not kill, banish, and persecute anybody who teaches other than we do. We fight them with the Word of God alone." Luther regarded the pope as the apostate of the New Israel and spoke of "the swarm of vermin in Rome," but he did not designate Catholicism as heresy.

During the Reformation the need to determine the doctrinal boundaries of the orthodox faith became exceedingly important. In response, the different sections of the Reformed Church drew up their Confessions of Faith, such as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.

In these confessions our forefathers stated as clearly as possible a summary of the great doctrines of the historic Christian faith as found in infallible Scriptures. They were convinced of the finality of the Gospel, and that it cannot be changed without altering the very character of Christianity. The confessions were drawn up for the same reason as held good during the earlier centuries. Church leaders, led by the Holy Spirit, and enlightened by Him, saw very clearly that they must lay down clearly on paper what is true and what is not true. They had to define their faith over against Roman Catholicism and also against certain heresies that were tending to rise even amongst themselves.

Today, we often hear complaints about the dated language of the confessions. The riches they contain are barely known because many think these 16th-century documents have little value for our time. But we should know and confess them. We need to preserve the confessions, in all their illuminating richness, which past generations have handed down to us. Devaluation of the confession greatly harms the Church. We need doctrinal clarity in our age of mass religious confusion. The plurality of errors and heresies that our generation confronts demands that lines be drawn - thoughtfully, humbly, but drawn nonetheless. And we need honesty in the Church.

Do we believe and live our confessions? The 19th-century Presbyterian theologian and church historian W.G.T. Shedd observed in *Calvinism: Pure & Mixed*: "Denominational honesty consists, first, in a clear unambiguous statement by a church of its doctrinal belief, and, second, in an unequivocal and sincere adoption of it by its members. Both are requisite."

Faith and Practice

It has been said that doctrine divides but good works unite. We do not dispute the need for good works. As crucial as correct theology is correct behavior. Good works must necessarily flow from the life of one truly redeemed. We cannot separate doctrine from life. Departure from the truth is not a greater sin than disobeying the law of God. That's

why heresy always had a wider meaning. It is not only a denial of revealed truth. It is also related to Christian life and conduct.

As Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones put it, "One of the first things you are to learn in this Christian life and warfare is that, if you go wrong in your doctrine, you will go wrong in all aspects of life." In other words, the Christian faith is more than a consent to certain truths but a response of faith to the Word of God. It means fully trusting the Lord, showing the Lord our love through doctrinal faithfulness to His Word, by following Him heroically without any reservations. Obedience to the Lord in faith and practice may well lead to controversy and conflict.

There always be some point of conflict or disagreement with the Christian message and the spirit of any age. As we discern the spirit of our postmodern age, the constant call for peace unaccompanied by a passion for truth will not in the end serve the Church. The time may come when the Christian witness will be costly - even in North America. The well-known hymn The Church's One Foundation was written in 1864 when British Christians were undergoing heart-searching concerning the nature of the Church and its authority. "Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed, By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed; Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up 'How long?' And soon the night of weeping shall be a morn of song." For two thousand years, the saints and the martyrs have cried "How long?" Let us cling to our Lord's promise, that soon, very soon, the night of weeping shall be the morn of song (cf. Revelation 22:20).

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