

Heresies

The Bible is a unique thing. It's not really a book, as we today know books, although since the invention of the printing press, it's printed as a book. It's a collection of writings, known in earlier times as "the Scriptures." And it's not really just text, written words, either. It's more than that, though exactly what it is I find difficult to express: It's a revelation from God to His beloved human creatures, using language, in a permanent form. And I was about to add, in a form that we can understand, but that's the problem. Understanding. For a host of reasons, the Scriptures are not all that easy to understand. It takes work on our part, plus the illuminating ministry of God Himself, to rightly understand His revelation. And the Scriptures are where we meet God. Because they are supernatural, given to us as a mediator, it's in the Word that we encounter God. Because of the importance of Scripture, God has had to see to it that we know what the texts say.

The Scriptures aren't written as we would write them today. They were written in an earlier era using formats, ideas, words and phraseology not familiar to us today. Yet they contain matter essential for us to know, doctrinal truths, for example. This is why the Church has had to grapple with theological issues since its early days. What exactly are the truths found in Scripture? The best way to figure out what's right is for someone first to get it wrong. Because of the profound effect of sin on our thinking, if it weren't for the (unobtrusive) work of the Holy Spirit guiding the early church leaders into Scriptural truth, we'd have *everything* wrong—and be celebrating it. And even today, we still get lots wrong. So we need to know about heresies.

A heresy is a belief or doctrine that, one way or another (such as by a council of theologians), the Church evaluated and determined to be false, as in, not true. Following are the most classical ones, first those that deal with God, and then those that deal with Christian life and practice. I'll try to show how those heresies, though ancient, affect us today.

1. **Arianism.** Arius (270-336 AD) alleged that Christ Jesus was not deity. He was a created being, Arius claimed, not the eternal Son who is co-equal to the Father. This heresy was opposed chiefly by Athanasius and was condemned at Nicea in the year 325. Arius' problem was simply the inability to understand how Jesus uniquely could be one person yet have two natures. We need to be humble and accept the plain testimony of Scripture, even if the explanations we crave escape us. How does this matter to us today? I suspect most of us understand the atoning work of Christ, but we pursue our self-absorbed lives indifferent to the fact that Jesus is Creator of all that exists, the wise and just Ruler of the cosmos, the ultimate Judge of all beings, and the very life we have as believers. We live as Arians.

2. **Docetism.** This view posits the opposite of Arianism. It claims that Jesus only *seemed* to be human. He appeared to be human, but He wasn't really. Apollinarius claimed that Jesus didn't have a human mind or a human soul, so this belief is sometimes therefore called Apollinarianism. Those imbued with Greek philosophy at the time embraced this view because they presumed that for the ideal to become material was demeaning; it was unthinkable. At Constantinople in 381 this docetic claim was held to be heretical. How does this heresy matter to us? A key reason (not the only!) for Jesus' humanity was to express obedience. Adam didn't obey God, so someone of Adam's race had to. Jesus came as the 2nd Adam, fully obedient to the Father. So must we, if we're followers of Jesus, be obedient to God's revealed will. It's the fullest expression of true humanity.

3. Several other heresies erupted in the early Church era having to do with the nature of Christ's Person. These include **Nestorianism**, **Eutychianism**, and **Adoptionism**. Nestor denied that Christ was a single Person, God and man. His problem was an inability to see the two natures existing together perfectly united, without a wall dividing them. The 3rd Council at Ephesus in 431 condemned this heresy. Eutychianism, named for Eutyches, claimed just the opposite of Nestorianism, viz, that Christ really had only one nature consisting of a hybridization of his deity and humanity, a third kind of thing not fully one or the other. His humanity could not be distinguished from His deity. The 4th Council at Chalcedon condemned this view in 451. Jesus is a unique Person; let's know Him as He is revealed to be in Scripture and not try to mold him into something of our imagination because we don't understand how He could be what we aren't. Jesus' Person is humanity united with deity; and if we're in Christ, we likewise retain forever our humanity while participating in deity (deification, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the receipt of Jesus' life), but not actually becoming gods. Adoptionism came a few centuries later, and it also was condemned. It's essentially a variant of Nestorianism. It claims that Jesus is the eternal Son, but as a human He was adopted by God as the Son, perhaps at His baptism. In other words, so it was claimed, it was because of what He did that He became Son of God. We too err in this, supposing that we should at times serve God by giving out tracts, thus making us His servants. No! We're his servants *by nature* (if we're in Christ), and as His servants we hand out tracts.

What's key here is this: Christ Jesus is one Person in two inseparable natures, fully human and fully divine. "One Person" means that what can be said of His human nature, for example, can be said of His Person. The eternal Son of God lives a

completely human life (but one that's apart from sin). So, He suffers, He grieves, He loves, and He obeys. He *had* to have both a human and a divine nature, so that He – *and He alone* – can take us to God. Otherwise, all humanity would be lost forever.

4. **Modalism**, and a few others. These heresies have to do with the nature of God or the Trinity. **Modalism** claimed that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely three different modes of existence of the one God. It denies the Scriptures that clearly reveal that God exists as three distinct Persons. They each exhibit the characteristic features of personhood, share one will, and exist as a unity in a bond of love, joy and peace. Other heresies have emerged thru the centuries regarding the Trinity. **Marcionism** was an early (2nd century) radical heresy alleging that the God of the Old Testament was a different being from the God of the New Testament, that the God of the Old Testament had nothing to do with the Gospel. It was heretical, but became a very successful heresy then and even today people still embrace it (“the God of the O.T. is a tyrant, full of wrath and violence, demanding salvation by works, whereas the N.T. God is compassionate and loving and kind and extends grace.”). Marcion sought to detach Christianity from its roots in Israel, as most Christians thoughtlessly do today. He was fiercely anti-semitic and antinomian. Marcionites (of both then and now) want and believe in a Gospel of love and compassion, and that's all. No judgment, no demands. Most modern evangelicals are functional Marcionites.

Subordinationism claims that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not co-equal with the Father, but are subordinate with respect to their nature or role, or both. This belief still exists today among certain theologians who (supposedly) find a parallel in the subordination of women in the church. **Socinianism** appeared much later but it too denied a Trinity as well as the deity of Christ. Socinians believed Jesus was a human being who was inspired by God. **Monarchianism** holds that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all the same being; this heresy is known today as Unitarianism. Other more modern heresies regarding God's nature abound:

Deism came into existence a few centuries ago, alleging that God created the cosmos but is totally indifferent to it. Deists reject God's providence, His imminence and His redemptive work. Too many Christians pursue life as if God were a Deist-type of Being, indifferent to the intimate personal relationship with God into which the Gospel calls us. “Process theology” claims that God is continually undergoing change, he is “becoming” something he wasn't before. Certain modern, “Open Theism” theologians believe that God doesn't know the future in detail and so is surprised at and/or reacts to what human creatures do. And of course there's Atheism, which is really a hatred of God, not a belief that God doesn't exist (although atheists make that claim). Pantheism holds that there is no transcendent God but that God exists in and/or is identified with nature. Tritheism holds that there are three gods and not one God in three Persons.

We must be humble and accept our creaturely finiteness; God is an infinite Being and our understanding of Him (He wants us to know Him!) must be limited to what He has revealed in Scripture. Let's get what's key about Trinitarian belief: God subsists as three distinct Persons *in relationship*, and He calls us through the Gospel into relationship with Himself. We can love Him if we know Him, and we know Him thru His unique revelation, Scripture.

5. **Gnosticism**. This bizarre, complicated 2nd century heresy claims that we're saved by having special, spiritual knowledge taught by a Jesus who wasn't really human and who didn't really die, so that we can escape this evil, material world to unite with a transcendent god. To have secret, esoteric, supposedly life-giving knowledge is appealing, only privileged people would have it. Gnostics claimed that we inhabit a lower world of matter and flesh (but not made by God), and that we can escape it by embracing certain teachings (myths and speculations) and move to a higher order of existence, a true, immaterial or spiritual reality. They taught that the Scripture have deeper meanings, and knowing them transports us to a superior, god-like state. It was because Gnostic texts were circulating that the Church had to nail down exactly what was canonical, and what wasn't. We have a form of Gnosticism today, found in science and psychology, in the many cosmogonies on offer, in trans-genderism, in the Masonic lodge, in woke-ism and elsewhere. The problem is, knowledge, that is, knowledge entirely of human invention, substitutes for what God has revealed. Gnosticism's duality of evil (the physical world) and good (the spiritual) soon changed into Manicheism. And a lot of people today foolishly hold Manicheist ideas about the physical world and what's spiritual. That's nonsense. There's nothing intrinsically evil about that which is physical. In the resurrection, after all, we'll have . . . a body!

6. **Pelagianism**. This 4th century heresy claimed that we are saved by our own unaided decision to believe in Christ. Pelagius asserted that sin is no hindrance to the exercise of faith. We do sin, he said, but we don't have in us any innate “sin nature,” so we can do good or do bad, obey God or not. We have been given free will and we use it to believe the Gospel, or not. Augustine opposed Pelagius, saying that human depravity affects our will as well as our minds and affect, so we cannot believe in Christ without a prior work of grace by God to change us. Orthodox Christianity today mostly follows Augustine, rejecting Pelagianism as heretical. Semi-Pelagianism holds that man *does* have an innate sin nature, yet still has

sufficient capacity to exercise faith, and so this isn't a heresy. Arminians are semi-Pelagian. Calvinists reject semi-Pelagianism and strictly follow Augustine. Many evangelicals live as Pelagians. We mute the biblical doctrine of election and withhold from God the gratitude He deserves. In pride, we suppose ourselves like little gods with a free will, autonomous, able to live as we please, instead of humbly living according to His sovereign call and enablement. If we're believers, we're not passive: We exercise our will to obey Scripture, to mortify the sin nature, to grow in the faith, and to yield to the Spirit.

7. **Donatism.** The 4th century saw another controversy emerge, the claim that those who minister the sacraments in the churches must be holy because, if not, what they do is invalid. Maybe not strictly speaking a heresy, this view caused deep schism among Christians, one that continues today. We need to include it here. Some Christians at the time viewed themselves as safeguarding the "holiness of God's Temple" until Christ's return regardless the personal cost from resisting secular authorities (and persecuted they were); others simply wanted to pursue a quiet, peaceful life, even if it meant cooperating with the godless authorities. So, the "hawks" and the "doves," the radicals and the compromisers; rivalry—*passionate* rivalry—within the Church. The Donatists were separatists, purists, "the true church," and loveless; all others were, in their radical view, compromised, worldly and unholy. Augustine tried to end it by pointing out that it's Christ whom we serve, and whom the sacraments point to, not ourselves. But, alas, such schisms and rivalries continue; the ghost of Donatus lives on in the church. We have today layer upon layer of controversial issues to keep us hopelessly divided, and each is absolutely certain of being on the right side, the side of truth. What we fail to grasp is that we're living in a penultimate era, an era of tumult and chaos, but one that, for the church, is also proleptic of a greater one to come, when we'll be glorified and holy, true and loving, just like Jesus.

8. **The Free Spirit controversy.** Deemed a heresy, this too is still an issue today. In the early 14th century, a certain woman wrote a book that clerical authorities found heretical. She argued that a believer can attain a state of perfection in which the person has no needs, instead having Christ's will replacing one's own. For claiming this, she was burned at the stake. The details of her position needn't occupy us. The point is, she saw no need of the church, nor theology, nor of Scripture. She believed that our soul can be freed from all these things so as to allow God's will to will in us; love takes over our will and we become a truly free spirit. This view is subversive: Let's call it spiritual elitism. It's also antinomianism (see below). God has ordained Scripture to be the mediator between us and Himself, with the gift of the Spirit to enable our understanding of things and our obedience to His will as it's revealed in the text. And "no needs"? Baloney, we all need forgiveness, continually. We certainly also need the church in which to express love. I encounter lots of professedly born again "free spirits" these days.

9. **Antinomianism** – This ancient (yet also current) heretical notion claims that it isn't necessary to obey the law of Christ—or any law of God. Just because we're saved by grace thru faith and have the promise of eternal life doesn't mean we're absolved of pursuing godly lives, which God has revealed in His Word we're to do. Christian liberty means Christ has freed us from the enslaving power of sin; it does *not* mean that we're free from the responsibility of obeying Christ. The term license is related to antinomianism, meaning freedom to live as one pleases. The opposite to license and antinomianism is obedience to Christ's teachings, instructions and commands. **Legalism** is obeying a standard, whether from Scripture or a human invention, to exalt oneself and/or to gain salvific merit. But adhering to a standard, especially the many laws that are in the Word of God, out of love for God and for His glory is never legalism.

10. **Montanism** is another ancient (late 2nd century, but still current today) movement within Christianity that is open to new revelation by the Holy Spirit directly thru prophecy and of having ecstatic experiences. Today, those who hold this belief are called continuationists (also, charismatics), because they suppose that the supernatural gifts (prophecy and tongues, for example) mentioned in 1 Corinthians are still operative. Cessationists in contrast insist that those specific gifts of the Spirit have been withdrawn, and that the New Testament canon is closed. Montanism is, at minimum, a severely misplaced set of values, and it's a false spirituality. It was regarded a heresy, and it's certainly unnecessarily divisive.

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Two things to conclude: (1) Are there new heresies today? Sure, but the Church has no means by which to identify, let alone condemn, them. We're in an era in which any and all ideas are tolerated if not adopted as true. But more important is this (2), orthodox belief is not religious intellectualism. That's an error as bad as heresy. Our beliefs are, to a large extent (and wrongly) what define us. What *should* define us and to which orthodox belief should point is the Person of Jesus. He is the greatest reality in all existence. And He invites us to join with Him to be taken to the Father for an eternity of blessing. Yes, we need to nail down and adhere to correct biblical doctrine, but that's so that we are correctly related to Jesus and living according to His will. He is life. He is truth. He is why we exist. May our thoughts and values, indeed our very lives, demonstrate our love for Him. Why? Because He is worthy. Nothing else matters.