

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## A Biblical Guide to Orthodoxy and Heresy

ROBERT M. BOWMAN, PHD

1

For most Christians today, the challenge of learning how to discern [orthodox](#) from [heretical doctrine](#) has apparently not been faced. Either they treat [doctrine](#) as minimally important and so regard charges of "[heresy](#)" as rude and unloving, or they treat doctrine as all-important and so regard anyone who disagrees with them in the slightest as a heretic. In short, most believers seem to think either that there are almost no heretics or that almost everybody outside their own little group is a heretic.

The cause of doctrinal [discernment](#), then, is in serious jeopardy. Although [anticult](#) and discernment ministries are mushrooming everywhere, many of them operate on the basis of an excessively narrow understanding of [orthodoxy](#). Consequently, such groups are charged deservedly with "heresy hunting" and discredit the practice of doctrinal discernment. At the other extreme — and often overreacting to such heresy hunters — are those within the Christian community who reject any warnings of heresy among professing Christians.



In this two-part article I will attempt to set forth a balanced approach to the issue of doctrinal heresy. In this first part I will present a biblical case for the practice of discerning orthodox from heretical doctrines. In the second part I will offer guidelines for doctrinal discernment.<sup>1</sup>

In order to make this article as useful as possible, I will avoid making references to specific heretical or [suborthodox](#) groups, doctrines, and practices. This is so it may be

---

<sup>1</sup> "A Biblical Guide To Orthodoxy And Heresy" was originally published in *the Christian Research Journal* as a two-part article. It is reproduced here in its entirety. For your convenience, Scripture links have been provided to the Bible Gateway's online text of the New International Version. = off-site link. Terms are defined in Apologetics Index.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

read without conflict by persons in religious groups which discourage reading literature that criticizes their beliefs. In addition, I will avoid quoting and citing sources other than the Bible so that what I say can stand as much as possible on its own. A [bibliography](#) of recommended reading will be provided at the end of Part Two.

My own theological convictions are those of Protestant evangelicalism. Most of what I have to say in this article, however, is compatible with other Christian traditions as well.

2

## The Necessity of Doctrine

The words "doctrine" and "doctrinal" have become pejorative terms for many — like **indoctrinate** or **dogma**. Even many evangelical Christians, who do affirm certain doctrines, pay little attention to doctrine beyond a certain minimum.

Of the many objections to Christian doctrine, five may be singled out as especially influential. Doctrine is often said to be

1. irrelevant
2. impractical
3. divisive
4. unspiritual
5. unknowable

The importance of doctrine can best be shown by presenting positive answers to these charges.

## The Relevance of Doctrine

In popular thought doctrine has to do with insignificant matters that are irrelevant to most people. Although doctrine can be trivialized, Christian doctrine is extremely relevant to all people. Christian doctrine (i.e., the teachings of Scripture) answers the fundamental questions of life -- questions such as who God is, who we are, and why we are here ([Ps. 8:3-8](#); [Heb. 11:6](#)). How we answer these questions decisively shapes the way we live. To ignore them is to go through life blithely unaware of what is really important.

Doctrine is particularly important because a sound proclamation of the gospel of salvation depends on an accurate understanding of what that gospel is, what salvation is, and how salvation is received ([Gal. 1:6-9](#); [1 Tim. 4:16](#)). Nothing less than our eternal

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

future depends on it. I do not mean to imply that we must all become theologians and experts on every fine point of doctrine to be saved. But the church as a whole must take great care that it faithfully proclaims the *true* gospel, and every Christian has a stake in the matter. I will have more to say on this point a little later.

It is true that some doctrinal issues are less important than others. One of the most crucial functions of Christian theology, and one of the most neglected, is to sort out the really important — the *essential* — from the less important and even the irrelevant (cf. [Rom. 14](#)).

Thus, handled properly, doctrine is very relevant to human life, and pursuit of sound doctrine should therefore be the concern of every person at least to some extent.

## The Practicality of Doctrine

It is common in our day to assert that practice is more important than theory — that [orthopraxis](#) (doing right) is more important than **orthodoxy** (believing right). But this assertion is itself a theory — something people think and then say, and then try to put into practice. The fact is that what we *think* determines what we *do*. Thus, doctrine — as something we think — affects what we do, and so has practical significance.

It should be recognized, of course, that the practical effects of doctrine have limits. Doctrine does not always or solely determine our actions, since people often act on desires or concerns contrary to the doctrines they hold. For example, someone may believe as doctrine that lying is wrong, but selfish or prideful thoughts may take precedence over doctrinal convictions and lead the person to lie. The practicality of doctrine is found not in determining our practice, but in *informing* it — in giving us the knowledge with which, by God's grace, we can do the right thing.

The point is that we should regard *both* knowledge *and* practice as important. Ultimately, what is important is that a person truly live in obedient fellowship with God and experience His love; in that sense, *of course* practice is more important than doctrine. But God Himself has made it clear that He uses doctrine to further that practical goal in our lives ([1 Tim. 1:3-7](#); [2 Tim. 3:15-17](#)).

The practical importance of Christian doctrine, then, is great indeed. Doctrine enables us to develop a realistic view of the world and of ourselves, without which we are doomed to ineffectual living ([Matt. 22:23-33](#); [Rom. 12:3](#); [2 Tim. 4:3-4](#)). Doctrine can protect us from believing falsehoods which upset people's faith or lead to destructive behavior ([1 Tim. 4:1-6](#); [2 Tim. 2:18](#); [Tit. 1:11](#)). Doctrine also prepares us to minister to others ([Eph. 4:11-12](#)).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Unity of Doctrine

Perhaps the most common criticism people voice about doctrine is that it divides people. And indeed, doctrine — in the history of Christianity as in other religions — has often been allowed to divide people in reprehensible ways. But in a crucial sense doctrine is intended to *unite* people.

While it is true that doctrine inevitably divides people, this is not something that can be avoided. People *think* different things, and they *do* different things on the basis of their differing beliefs. What is undesirable, however, is that doctrine should divide people who ought to be together, or that divisions should be expressed in wrong ways. That is, doctrine should not divide faithful Christians from one another, preventing them from having fellowship together. Nor should doctrine lead people to hate or mistreat people who hold different doctrines than they do.

The Bible commands Christians to divide themselves from false teachers or heretics on the basis of doctrinal factors ([Rom. 16:17](#); [2 John 9-11](#)). In doing so, they are to *stand together in unity* against heresy ([Eph. 4:12-13](#)). Thus, taking a stand against heresy can promote genuine Christian unity.

As Christians mature together in their understanding of biblical doctrine, they become more united as their thinking becomes shaped more and more along the same lines ([1 Cor. 1:10](#)). Moreover, a balanced understanding of doctrine can help Christians divided by doctrinal differences to be reconciled as they learn which points are minor or unsound and which are not ([1 Tim. 6:3-5](#); [Tit. 1:9-14](#)). It turns out that shallow understanding of doctrine easily promotes disunity among Christians, while deepening understanding of doctrine tends to foster greater Christian unity.

## The Spirituality of Doctrine

Although some people regard the pursuit of doctrinal accuracy as an unspiritual intellectualism, sound doctrine is actually very important to sound spirituality. Christian doctrine teaches us about God, His purposes and will for our lives, what we are like spiritually apart from God's grace, how God's grace changes us — in short, everything we need to know in order to pursue true spirituality ([Rom. 6:17-18](#); [1 Tim. 1:5, 10](#); [2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)). Doctrine provides external, objective controls for our inward, subjective experiences so that we may discern genuine spirituality from fraudulent, artificial, or even demonic spirituality ([Col. 2:22-23](#); [1 John 4:1-3](#)).

In pursuing an accurate understanding of Christian doctrine, we are fulfilling one aspect of God's greatest commandment — that we love God with all our “minds” ([Matt. 22:37](#)).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This commandment surely implies that we should take great care and make every effort to conform our beliefs and convictions to the truth (cf. [Rom. 12:2](#)) — and this means doctrine.

Something should also be said here about the relationship between *doctrinal* discernment and *spiritual* discernment. In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks more than once about spiritual discernment. The spiritual person discerns all things, including the things of the Spirit of God, which can only be discerned spiritually ([1 Cor. 2:14-15](#)). The members of the congregation were to exercise discernment concerning the prophecies that were delivered in the church ([1 Cor. 14:29](#)). And some Christians are specially gifted to discern evil spirits from the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor. 12:10](#)). On the basis of these and other passages, some Christians have thought that discernment never has anything to do with the exercise of the intellect. In their view, one discerns between good and evil in doctrinal as well as practical matters simply by listening to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit.

By no means do I wish to disparage the work of the Holy Spirit in giving Christians discernment. Certainly all Christians must depend on the Holy Spirit to illuminate their minds that they may clearly see the difference between good and evil, truth and error. And many Christians who are ill-equipped to study doctrine in depth are remarkably discerning.

It would be a mistake, however, to pit spiritual discernment against doctrinal discernment. For one thing, the view that discernment is purely spiritual is itself a doctrine. Moreover, such a sharp separation of doctrine and spirituality assumes a dichotomy between the mind and the human spirit. Since this assumption is also a doctrine, the whole argument is self-defeating. There are also biblical reasons to reject a dichotomy of mind and spirit (which I will not elaborate here).

For another thing, the Bible also encourages Christians to use their knowledge of Christian doctrine in discerning truth from error and good from evil. The classic example of this is [1 John 4:1-3](#), where John commands us not to believe everyone claiming to be speaking by God's Spirit, but instead to apply a doctrinal test (belief in the full humanity of Jesus Christ) to those making such claims. Similarly, in [2 John 9](#) we are told to watch ourselves and not be deceived by anyone who "does not remain in the doctrine of Christ." In 1 Corinthians, Paul not only speaks of *spiritual* discernment but also presents *doctrinal* arguments in answer to the heretical belief that "there is no resurrection of the dead" ([1 Cor. 15:12-19](#)).

Rather than pitting spiritual and doctrinal discernment against one another, we should see them as two sides or aspects of the same activity. True spirituality includes a submission of the mind to the teachings of the Bible, and sound doctrine includes the

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

belief that our knowledge of the truth is dependent on the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Thus in true discernment at its best, the *whole* Christian draws upon his God-given knowledge of biblical doctrine in sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

## The Knowability of Doctrine

Some people avoid studying Christian doctrine because they are convinced it is too difficult or complex to grasp. While small children, the mentally retarded, and certain others may be admitted to be incapable of understanding doctrinal matters, the vast majority of adults — young and old — are able to understand much more than they have bothered to learn. Every individual is responsible to acquire doctrinal knowledge as their mental faculties, educational level, and opportunities allow.

Scripture commands all Christians to learn doctrine. Generally, removable *spiritual* impediments — not irremovable *intellectual* ones — prevent Christians from advancing in doctrinal understanding ([Heb. 5:11-14](#)). Christ has given teachers to the church to assist believers in learning doctrine ([Eph. 4:11](#)). Obviously, such teachers must master doctrine on a level beyond most other Christians, but they do so for the purpose of imparting as much truth as possible to the rest of the members of the body of Christ.

Sound doctrine is difficult enough to require honesty and discipline, yet easy enough that — with the exceptions mentioned previously — all who seek God's grace and commit themselves to the task can learn it ([2 Pet. 3:16-18](#)).

## Doctrine and Salvation

In discussing the relevance of doctrine, I mentioned that a person's salvation can depend to some extent on doctrinal understanding. Since this point is so often contested in our day, it deserves closer attention.

Almost everybody who acknowledges Jesus Christ in some way will agree that those who completely and explicitly reject Jesus Christ are lost. Many people find it difficult, however, to believe that some might sincerely think themselves to be following Jesus Christ and yet, due to heretical belief, be lost. Jesus Himself promised, "Seek, and you shall find" ([Matt. 7:7](#)); should not those who seek for Christ find Him? And do not many sincere members of groups which evangelicals label heretical truly want to find Christ? They may read the Bible more studiously than many an evangelical church member; they may express an ardent desire to know God and obey Him; they may zealously proclaim the message of Christ as they have been taught it. Are they not, therefore, seeking Christ, and will they not, then, in accordance with His promise, find Christ? And if so, how can salvation depend on doctrinal beliefs?

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

These questions may be answered by keeping the following biblical principles in mind.

1. **Not everyone who acknowledges Jesus as Lord will be saved.** This follows directly from Jesus' own words in [Matthew 7:21](#): Simply acknowledging that Jesus is Lord does not guarantee a person's salvation. The acknowledgment might be mere lip service, as demonstrated by refusal to obey Him as Lord ([Luke 6:46](#)). Or someone might call Jesus "Lord" and not mean the same thing as what the Bible means by it. This leads me to a second principle.
2. **Many who claim to acknowledge Jesus actually believe in "another Jesus," and are either deceived or deceiving.** This follows directly from [2 Corinthians 11:4](#). Many who speak of faith in "Jesus" have an understanding of who and what Jesus is that differs so much from reality that in truth they do not have faith in the real Jesus at all. If a person thought Buddha was another name for Moses, we would not normally consider him a Buddhist, no matter how piously and moralistically he lived out his belief in "Buddha. " Similarly, someone who denies the biblical view of Christ should not be identified as a Christian, no matter how religiously he follows his belief.

Some people who believe in "another Jesus" are no doubt insincere, and Paul warns of "deceitful workers who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ" ([2 Cor. 11:13](#)). I like to think the best of people, even people with whom I have serious disagreements. But I have become acquainted with a few persons about whom I have had to conclude, reluctantly, that they are simply liars. These people know on a conscious level that the message they proclaim is false.

On the other hand, some people, even members of Christian churches, can be "led astray" ([2 Cor. 11:3b](#)) by such deceivers. Thus, it is possible for sincere people, even people who were part of the fellowship of true Christians, to be deceived into following "another Jesus." Not that such people are perfectly innocent — rather, they are like Eve who, though deceived by the serpent ([2 Cor. 11:3a](#)), was guilty of sin and held accountable by God ([Gen. 3:1-6, 13-16](#)).

3. **Those who are zealous in religious matters are not necessarily saved.** In [Romans 10:2](#) Paul says of his Jewish brethren who rejected Jesus, "They have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." Zeal, of course, implies sincerity — that is, the mental state of believing that what one is promoting is based on truth. The Jews who rejected Jesus were for the most part zealous, and therefore sincere in this sense — but they were still lost (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1). Their zeal was, in particular, for a right standing with God — but they sought it on the basis of their own works, as if salvation was by works,

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

rather than receiving the righteousness which was available in Christ through faith ([Rom. 9:30-10:4](#)).

[Matthew 23:15](#) addresses zeal of another kind — zeal in seeking converts. The Pharisees were extremely zealous in missionary work, but all they succeeded in doing was leading more people into their error. Zeal in witnessing or evangelizing does not indicate that a religious group is God's people.

8

4. **No human being truly seeks for God unless God's Spirit draws that person; therefore, those that appear to seek for God but do not come in God's way are not seeking for God at all.** In [Romans 3:11](#) Paul quotes [Psalm 14:2](#) to the effect that "there is none who seeks for God." Sin has so perverted the desires of all human beings that none of us, by our own natural wishes, is looking for God. This is because "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God" ([Rom. 8:7](#)). Of course, some people do seek for God, otherwise God would not call upon us to seek Him ([Isa. 55:6](#), etc.). But when people seek God, it is only because God has first "sought" them and drawn them toward Him by His grace ([Luke 19:10](#); [John 6:44](#); [15:16](#)).

When people therefore appear to be "seeking God" — when they study the Bible ([2 Pet. 3:16](#)), attend meetings, pray, change their lifestyles, attempt to obey the commandments, even speak of their love for God and Christ — yet persist in worshipping a false God, or honoring a false Christ, or following a false gospel ([Gal. 1:7-9](#); [2 Cor. 11:4](#)), we must conclude that they were not really seeking *God*. Rather, they may have been seeking spiritual power, or security, or peace of mind, or warm relationships, or knowledge, or excitement, or anything other than simply God. And in saying this, I am *not* claiming that all genuine Christians on the other hand have sought purely and simply after God. No, our testimony as Christians must be that we were also following our own divergent path when God sought us, stopped us in our way, and led us up a new and narrow path leading to salvation in Jesus Christ ([Matt. 7:13](#)).

5. **Anyone who truly desires to know the truth about God and His way of salvation above all else can and will be saved.** This is the other side of the coin from the previous point. Jesus promised that "the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" ([John 6:37](#)). However, we must come to the *true* Jesus on *His* terms. Judas came to the true Jesus, at least outwardly (actually, Judas did not know who Jesus really was), but he did not come on Jesus' terms and was consequently lost ([John 17:12](#)). The cost of abandoning heresy is usually great — the loss of friends, the embarrassment of admitting error, the threat of the heretical teachers that all who leave their teaching will be lost. But salvation



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

is available for anyone who by God's grace puts truth (and the One who is truth) above these things.

## Defining Heresy and Orthodoxy

So far I have argued that we ought to distinguish between truth and error in doctrine. Now I wish to address the question of orthodoxy and heresy more directly. What is orthodox doctrine, what is heretical doctrine, and what's the difference?

9

### *Inadequate Approaches*

It is tempting to say that whatever doctrine is biblical is orthodox and whatever doctrine is not biblical is not orthodox. But this is too simplistic. For example, assuming that only one of the several views (there are at least four) on the Rapture is biblical, it does not follow that the views that are not biblical are therefore heretical. There are some doctrines which, while not in agreement with the Bible, are not so wide of the mark that they must be regarded as heretical.

Another approach that has been taken is to measure doctrines by the doctrinal confessions of some particular denomination. This is fine so long as what is being determined is not orthodoxy but confessional fidelity. That is, if someone wishes to be an ordained minister of a particular denomination, that denomination is within its rights to ask that such a person agree with its doctrines. If someone does not (e.g., if someone disagrees with the denomination's position on speaking in tongues or predestination), then that person should not expect to be ordained in such a denomination. Given the present diversity of denominations, this should be expected.

On the other hand, it is lamentable that the church has allowed itself to be divided over nonessential issues. Thus, adherence to a denomination's particular distinctives should not necessarily be made the test of Christian orthodoxy. Of course, some of the doctrinal stands taken by a denomination may be basic to orthodoxy (e.g., a confession of the deity of Jesus Christ). In such cases, the denomination's confession and orthodoxy coincide.

What, then, should be the standard of orthodoxy? And how should it be determined? Perhaps most troublesome: *Who* should determine the standard?

Certainly I do not claim to have any particular authority to determine by what standard orthodoxy shall be judged. I claim no special anointing beyond that which all Christians have ([1 John 2:20, 27](#)). I make no claims to apostolic or prophetic authority. I am not even an ordained minister. Who, then, am I to judge who *is* and *is not* orthodox? Who am I to call anyone a heretic?

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

My answer to these questions is twofold. First, *I am a Christian*, and as such have a responsibility to avoid heresy. I can hardly do so if I do not have some idea as to what heresy is. Second, *I am a teacher*, called by God to the ministry of teaching my fellow Christians sound doctrine. That gives me no special authority or mantle of divine sanction, and I would not want anyone to assume that whatever I say is true. But it does mean that God has given me a special responsibility, and if I am faithful He will use me to guide other believers into a more complete and accurate understanding of His truth. If I am truly faithful, those who are open to God's truth will know that what I say is true — not because I say it, but simply because I have led them to see what has always been in God's Word, the Bible.

## *Toward Definitions*

What, then, is orthodoxy, and what is heresy? First of all, I wish to point out that the term "orthodoxy" is not in the Bible. That does not mean that the concept itself is unbiblical, but that we cannot read off its meaning from biblical texts.

The words "heresy" and "heretic" *are* in the Bible, and are used in somewhat varying senses. The Jews called Christianity a "heresy" ([Acts 24:14](#)), probably meaning they considered it a sect under God's condemnation. But Paul referred to the various factions among the Corinthian Christians as "heresies," that is, "divisions" ([1 Cor. 11:19](#)). Here he seems to regard some of these divisions as distinguishing true believers from false believers, but other divisions as simply unfortunate expressions of sinful disunity among Christians, without suggesting that all who belonged to these different factions were lost. Elsewhere, though, Paul referred to "heresies" or divisions as works of the flesh ([Gal. 5:20](#)) and said that a "heretic" — a man causing divisions in the church — is perverted and self-condemned ([Tit. 3:10-11](#)). Finally, Peter speaks of destructive "heresies" in the sense of doctrines which deny Christ the Lord ([2 Pet. 2:1](#)).

From this survey it is evident that a "heresy" in biblical terminology could be merely an unfortunate division among Christians, but in a stricter sense is a divisive teaching or practice destructive of genuine faith and deserving of condemnation. The looser sense corresponds roughly to our modern denominations, while the stricter sense applies most clearly to groups which reject basic Christian doctrines and set themselves apart from the historic church in its many forms. But a "heresy" in the latter sense can have its start, at least, within the church. Whenever heresies in this strict sense arise, Christians are called to separate themselves from those who persist in holding them.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

We may therefore define "heresy" in the strict sense as:

---

*a teaching or practice which compels true Christians to divide themselves from those who hold it.*

---

11

Note the difference here: a "faction" or heresy in the looser sense is an unfortunate division separating Christians from one another, and Christians are called to do whatever they can to overcome these divisions ([1 Cor. 1:10](#)). But a heresy in the stricter sense is a division separating Christians from non-Christians (or, at best, from Christians who are persisting in grave error), and Christians are called to draw the line and refuse to have spiritual fellowship with those who cross over it. This is not to say that Christians should not show genuine love, compassion, and personal respect for heretics; too often in church history "heretic" has been a hate-word.

How, then, should we define "orthodox"? We might define it as

---

*whatever teachings and practices are sufficiently faithful to Christian principles that Christians should accept as fellow-Christians those who adhere to them.*

---

To put it simply, whatever religious teachings and practices are not heretical are orthodox, and vice versa.

Notice that we have not said that all members of churches which teach heresy are lost. This is no more true than saying that all who are members of churches which teach orthodoxy are saved. In saying that people are heretics, or that they are following heresy, we are not pronouncing judgment on their eternal souls. We *are* saying that if they follow those heresies consistently, they will certainly be lost. Conversely, in saying that someone is orthodox we are not saying that they are necessarily true Christians with the assurance of eternal life. We *are* saying that if they follow orthodox doctrine as the basis of their life (and thus trust in Christ alone for right standing before God) they will be saved.

## ***Aberrational Christianity***

It might seem that doctrinal discernment should be a fairly cut-and-dried procedure of determining whether a doctrine is orthodox or heretical. After all, we have defined

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

orthodoxy and heresy in such a way that they cover all possibilities. Either a doctrine is such that those who hold it should be accepted as Christians (in which case it is orthodox), or it is not (in which case it is heretical). This might seem to imply a black-or-white approach in which all doctrine is either completely orthodox or completely heretical.

Although doctrinal discernment would be a lot neater and simpler if this were the case, unfortunately things are more complicated — in at least two distinct ways. First, a single doctrine is never held in isolation from other doctrines, but rather is always part of a system or network of beliefs held by a person or group. And sometimes that system of beliefs includes many doctrines which are orthodox as well as some which are heretical. For example, a religious group might hold that the Bible is the Word of God, that there is only one God, that Jesus was born of a virgin and rose from the dead, and yet deny the deity of Jesus Christ. Such a group's belief *system* is heretical, even though it contains many true beliefs. Moreover, a group's heretical beliefs generally lead them to misunderstand or misapply even those true beliefs they do confess, since the beliefs tend to be interdependent and thus mutually affect one another. Thus, one of the tasks of doctrinal discernment is to sort out which beliefs in a heretical system are actually heretical, which are not, and how the nonheretical beliefs are misapplied because of the heretical system in which they are held.

The second sort of complication to be noticed is that people often hold conflicting beliefs. Because people are often inconsistent, in some cases they may hold to orthodox beliefs but also hold to beliefs that undermine or contradict their orthodox beliefs. The difficulty presented in such cases is to sort out whether the belief system is basically orthodox or not.

For example, many professing Christian groups today confess belief in one God, but also speak of human beings (usually Christians in particular) as being in some sense "gods." This verbal contradiction may or may not betray a real contradiction in the substance of their beliefs. Making matters even more difficult is the fact that these different groups mean vastly different things by calling believers "gods." In some cases it is evident that they really do not believe in one God at all. In other cases it is clear that they are using the word "gods" of believers in a figurative sense such that their confession of one God is not contradicted at all. In still other cases a real tension exists, and it is difficult to avoid concluding that the group in question holds conflicting views.

In order to accommodate this phenomenon, it is helpful to speak of religious doctrines which undermine or are in tension with a group's orthodox beliefs as **aberrational**. Holding such aberrational views is a serious problem, and those who do so must be considered as being in serious sin and should be treated accordingly. Specifically, those

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

advocating such errors should not be allowed to teach or minister in the church, and those refusing to keep such aberrant views to themselves should be [excommunicated](#).

The charge that a person or group's beliefs are aberrational is a serious one that cannot be made easily. It is arguable that at one level any incorrect belief is at tension with or undermines orthodox beliefs. By aberrational, however, I am referring only to false beliefs which do serious damage to the integrity of an orthodox confession of faith.

13

The sum of the matter is that doctrinal discernment is a difficult task -- one which requires sensitivity, a sense of proportion and balance, and a deep understanding of what is essential and what is not. New heresies and aberrations are constantly arising, as well as new insights into biblical truth, and discernment is needed to tell the difference. Thus, the task of doctrinal discernment is an ongoing necessity in the Christian church.

Having shown that doctrinal discernment is necessary, I have yet to say very much at all about how it is to be done.

**How do we discern truth from error, sound doctrine from unsound doctrine, orthodoxy from heresy?** How do we discern when a doctrine is fully heretical and when it is only aberrational?<sup>2</sup>

## Principles For Identifying Heresy

Discerning orthodoxy from heresy should be done on the basis of sound *principles*, each of which in turn must be based on the teaching of God's Word. I begin, then, by discussing four principles which the church ought to utilize as tools to identify and expose heresy. Although they are subject to misunderstanding and abuse, all four — properly interpreted — are valid and should be utilized together in doctrinal discernment.

- **The protestant principle.** Here I am not referring to an exclusively Protestant position, but rather to a principle that will be especially agreeable to Protestants (particularly evangelicals). According to this principle,

---

*the Bible alone is the written Word of God, and as such is the infallible, definitive standard in matters of controversy in the church.*

---

---

<sup>2</sup> In [Part One](#) of this two-part article I presented a case for doctrinal discernment as a necessary ongoing task of the church. In this concluding part I will suggest some guidelines for carrying out this task in a way that is faithful to Scripture.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This principle follows from the teaching of Jesus Christ Himself, who taught that while human tradition and religious leaders are fallible, Scripture is the Word of God and never errs ([Matt. 5:17-20](#); [15:3-9](#); [22:29](#); [John 10:35](#)). Since to be a Christian means, minimally, to be a follower of Jesus Christ, no person or group can claim to be truly Christian that does not at least acknowledge this special authority of the Bible.

I said that this teaching is not held exclusively by Protestants, though it is especially agreeable to them. Both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (the other two main branches of Christianity) teach that the church's traditions are infallible and authoritative, a teaching with which Protestants cannot agree. Thus, these branches of Christianity do not adhere fully to the protestant principle as defined here. On the other hand, Catholicism and Orthodoxy do teach that the Bible is the *norma normans* — that is, the norm by which all other norms are to be judged. Thus, at least in some sense, the view of all major Christian traditions is that Scripture has the final word. But evangelical Protestants have upheld this principle more consistently than Christians in the Catholic or Orthodox traditions.

On the other hand, liberalism — which began in mainline Protestantism and has virtually engulfed it, and which has now made significant inroads in Roman Catholicism — completely denies the protestant principle. Liberalism presumes to judge the teachings of the Bible according to the canon of human reason. Accordingly, it should be rejected as apostate by true believers of all major Christian traditions.

The protestant principle has often been summarized by the Protestant Reformation motto *sola scriptura* ("only Scripture"). Taken in its true sense, this means that only Scripture is an unerring verbal expression of the mind of God for the church prior to Christ's return. But this should not be interpreted to mean that truth can be found *only* in Scripture or that all traditions are based on falsehood. Nor should it be interpreted to forbid using words not found in the Bible to express biblical doctrine. For example, the idea that the Bible is a "canon," or rule of faith, is biblical — even though the word "canon" is not found in the Bible. The idea that God is "self-existent," meaning that His existence depends on nothing other than Himself, is biblical — even though the word "self-existent" is not in the Bible. This is an important qualification to the protestant principle, violated by many heretical sects.

• **The evangelical principle.** In Europe, "evangelical" is virtually synonymous with "Lutheran," and the principle I enunciate here will be especially agreeable to that tradition, though certainly transcending it. According to this principle,

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

---

*whatever is contrary to the gospel of  
Jesus Christ is to be rejected as heresy*

---

This principle is based directly on such passages as [Galatians 1:6-9](#) and [1 Corinthians 15:1-4](#). Here, "the gospel" refers not to the Bible in its entirety, but to its central message of reconciliation of human beings to God through the redemptive work of Christ.

This principle implies that not every misinterpretation of or departure from the Bible is equally damaging to authentic Christian faith. Misunderstanding the relationship between the Millennium and the Second Coming, for example, is not as serious an error as misunderstanding the relationship between faith and works. Denying that Jonah escaped alive after being inside a large fish for three days is not as bad an error as denying that Jesus rose from the grave after being dead for three days. Whether the errors are clear-cut or debatable from our perspective, it remains true that some errors are worse than others.

On the other hand, this principle can be misapplied by treating the gospel as a "canon within the canon" such that some parts of the Bible become more authoritative than others. While we may draw more directly on the Gospel of John or the Epistle to the Romans in our presentation of the gospel, our understanding of the gospel should be shaped by the entire Bible. Some extreme or aberrant groups have lost sight of this and have argued that only one part of the Bible — say, the Book of Acts — presents the gospel of salvation. Besides being contrary to the facts (e.g., Paul rehearses the basics of the gospel in [1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#)), such an argument undermines the unity of Scripture.

Moreover, even seemingly less important errors can be symptomatic of outright heretical beliefs. For example, while some variant views on the Millennium are tolerable among Christians, other views should be regarded as heretical, such as the view that the Millennium will be a period in which unbelievers will be raised and given a second chance to save themselves by doing good works. Clearly this view is heretical because of its bearing on the doctrine of salvation. The belief that Jonah was not swallowed by a fish and then set free three days later might be symptomatic of a prejudice against all miracles. On the other hand, some Christians who freely confess that God could have done such a miracle hold that the Book of Jonah is a parable and was simply not intended as history. The latter view may be wrong, but it is not anti-Christian in the way the former view clearly is.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Finally, it should be noted that in mainline [denominations](#) heavily influenced by liberalism, the "gospel" has typically been reinterpreted and watered down to the point of no longer being the biblical gospel at all. The evangelical principle must always be tied to the protestant principle and not pitted against it, as is the case in liberal Protestantism.

- **The orthodox principle.** I call this principle the "orthodox" principle because it will be especially agreeable to Christians in the Orthodox (Eastern) tradition. According to this principle,

---

*the creeds of the undivided church should be regarded as reliable expressions of the essential truths on which they speak.*

---

This principle follows from the biblical teaching that the Christian faith was delivered once for all to the saints ([Jude 3](#)) and that the gates of Hades would not prevail against the church ([Matt. 16:18](#)). These texts (see also [Matt. 28:20](#); [John 14:16](#); [Eph. 4:11-16](#)) make it inconceivable that the whole church could establish *as normative* what is in fact aberrant or heretical.

Thus, the [creeds](#) formulated by the early church before it split into Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism, and accepted by *all three branches* of Christianity, should be regarded as reliable standards by which heresies may be exposed. Such creeds as the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds — which speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God (the [Trinity](#)), and of Jesus Christ as uniquely God and man (the Incarnation) — expressed the faith of all Christians when they were written, and have unified all Christians against heresy for centuries. They are therefore deserving of respect and should be honored as tools for identifying and exposing heresy.

Note that I am not saying that Christians cannot choose to disagree with some of the precise wording of these creeds. After all, they are not infallible, inspired documents. Nor am I saying that those churches which choose not to use the creeds, or which have little or no regard for creeds as such, are heretical. Rather, I am simply saying that a doctrine or belief should be regarded as heretical if it departs from the essential, substantial teachings of these creeds. I am therefore adopting a more flexible form of this principle than is actually held by Eastern Orthodox Christians themselves. I am also pleading with my anticreedal brothers and sisters in Christ to rethink their rejection of these fine expressions of orthodoxy.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

• **The catholic principle.** By "catholic" I do not mean specifically Roman Catholic, but simply "universal" (which is what the Greek word *katholikos* means). The notion of "catholicity" has been much abused, but it has also been ignored; both are unfortunate. The catholic principle is that

---

*any doctrine that contradicts what the church as a whole (in all times and places) has regarded as essential to the faith should be regarded as heretical.*

---

This principle also follows from the biblical teaching mentioned above that God will keep the whole church from heresy.

It should be noted that this principle is a generalization, not an absolutely definitive test. I say this because by the "whole" church I do not mean every last individual in the church, as if the dissent of one or a few professing Christians could negate a doctrine's status as "catholic." The principle rather seeks to uphold what the vast majority of those who have participated in the church's worship, in all its various branches and denominations, and who have upheld the faith as defined by the orthodox principle, have regarded as essential or basic to their faith.

Moreover, the catholic principle — properly understood — presupposes the protestant principle. That is, when we speak of "the church" in all times and places, we are speaking of that community of faith which regards the Bible as the supreme norm of its faith. We are thus excluding from the outset those segments of Christendom that have abandoned faith in the Bible as the Word of God. It has only been in the last two centuries that large segments of Christendom within both Protestantism and Catholicism have denied absolute biblical authority. And in the vast majority of such cases, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement have been rejected as well. These segments of Christendom must be regarded as apostate, having fallen away from the faith.

These considerations are helpful in making more precise the notion of appealing to the position of the "historic Christian church" as a litmus test of orthodoxy. What we ought to mean by this expression is the Bible-believing community of faith as it has existed continuously throughout the centuries. Those segments of Christendom which have introduced new doctrinal revelations, or which have rejected biblical authority, are by this definition not part of the historic Christian church.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Finally, note that not everything that has been believed by most Christians falls under the catholic principle, but only those things that the church has held to be *essential*. For the first fifteen centuries of church history, virtually all Christians held that the earth was at the physical center of the universe. But by no means does this make that erroneous belief part of the "catholic" or universal Christian faith. Here the "evangelical principle" is a valuable corrective to a possible misapplication of the catholic principle.

## Kinds Of Heretical Doctrine

Taking the protestant principle to heart, we next turn to the Bible — what kinds of heretical doctrine does it discuss and forewarn us about? The Bible makes frequent reference to false teachings and it is often within the context of refuting heresy that its positive doctrinal material is cast.

The Old Testament contains solemn warnings against anyone who prophesies or proclaims teachings in the name of any god but the LORD, Jehovah ([Deut. 13:1-5](#); [18:20-22](#)). This is the assumed context in which the New Testament teaching about heresies is framed.

In the New Testament, there are warnings about false prophets ([Matt. 24:11, 24](#); [2 Pet. 2:1](#)) — that is, those who make predictions in the name of God and whose predictions turn out to be false (cf. [Deut. 18:22](#)). There is also a warning about false apostles ([2 Cor. 11:13](#)). There are warnings about those claiming to be the Christ, or claiming that Christ has come, or that the Day of the Lord has come, or that the resurrection has occurred — when all these events will be so plain and conspicuous that no one will miss them ([Matt. 24:5, 23-27](#); [2 Thess. 2:1-2](#); [2 Tim. 2:16-18](#)).

There are also warnings about those who proclaim another Jesus or a different gospel, or who introduce a spirit other than God's Spirit ([1 Cor. 15:3-5](#); [2 Cor. 11:4](#); [Gal. 1:6-9](#)). The teaching that circumcision and keeping the Law are necessary for salvation is condemned ([Gal. 5:2-4](#); [Phil. 3:2](#)). On the other side, teaching that liberty in Christ gives us excuse for licentiousness is also condemned ([Jude 4](#)).

The denial of Jesus Christ's coming in the flesh is regarded as from the spirit of antichrist ([1 John 4:1-6](#)). There are warnings about people who cause dissensions by teaching doctrine directly opposed to what Christians already know to be true ([Rom. 16:17](#); [Tit. 3:10-11](#)). There are warnings about those who claim to love God but do not love God's people ([1 John 4:20](#); [5:1](#)), and who deliberately break away from the church on the basis of perverted doctrine ([1 John 2:19](#)). Finally, there are warnings against adding to or taking away from the words of prophetic Scripture ([Rev. 22:18-19](#)) or twisting the Scriptures ([2 Pet. 3:16](#)).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Looking over these warnings from Scripture, we may classify heresies into **six major categories**:

1. Heresies about *revelation* — teachings that distort, deny, or add to Scripture in a way that leads people to destruction; false claims to apostolic or prophetic authority.
2. Heresies about *God* — teachings that promote false gods or idolatrous distortions of the true God.
3. Heresies about *Christ* — denials of His unique Lordship, His genuine humanity, His true identity.
4. Heresies about *salvation* — teaching legalism or licentiousness; denying the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection; and so forth.
5. Heresies about the *church* — deliberate attempts to lead people away from the fellowship of true Christians; utter rejection of the church.
6. Heresies about the *future* — false predictions for which divine authority is claimed; claims that Christ's return has taken place; and the like.

Note that errors in any one of these six categories tend to introduce errors into the other five. Take, for instance, the heretical view held by many groups that the church became totally apostate in the early centuries and thus had to be "restored" in the last days. This doctrine implies **(1)** that Scripture is not a sufficient revelation, but needs supplementing or "explaining" by some authoritative teacher or publication. It also almost always serves as a basis for rejecting the early church's views of **(2)** God and **(3)** Christ. Since the Reformation is rejected as falling short of the needed restoration, **(4)** the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith is likewise rejected. And the doctrine of a restoration comes to dominate the group's views of **(5)** the future, as it requires them to view many or most biblical prophecies about the future as finding fulfillment in their own group.

We find then that an error in any area of doctrine can affect every other area. Therefore, although heresies tend to fall directly into one or more of these six major categories, heresies can in fact occur on virtually any doctrinal subject. For example, someone who teaches that angels should be worshipped is teaching a heretical view ([Col. 2:18](#)), even though the subject matter is angels. This is because worship of any creature completely cuts the heart out of any confession of God as the one God.

Nor should it be thought that the New Testament gives us a complete catalogue of all possible heresies. In our day there are literally thousands of clever distortions of Christian

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

theology that deserve the label heresy, and they can be seen as such apart from being explicitly anticipated and identified as heretical in the Bible. The Bible teaches us what is absolutely essential, enunciates principles as to what is basic to sound Christian faith and what is nonessential, gives us a wide variety of examples of heresies, and expects us to exercise *discernment* in evaluating new and controversial teachings when they surface.

Furthermore, it must be realized that as the church progresses through history and deepens its understanding of Scripture, heresies in general are becoming more subtle, more deceiving, more easily mistaken for authentic Christianity.

For example, modern-day heretics who reject the Old Testament are rarely as frank about it as the second-century heretic Marcion, who simply denied that the Old Testament was in any sense Scripture (he also discarded much of the New Testament). Instead, they adopt a method of interpretation which, while formally admitting that the Bible is God's Word, in effect makes the Old Testament irrelevant to the Christian, which is contrary to the clear teaching of the New Testament ([Rom. 15:4](#); [2 Tim. 3:16](#)).

In short, heresy is any doctrine which the Bible explicitly labels as destructive, damning error; or a doctrine which the Bible instructs is not to be tolerated in the church; or any doctrine which, even if not mentioned in the Bible, utterly contradicts those truths which the Bible indicates are essential for sound Christian faith.

Aberrational views can also be classified according to the above six categories. In each case, the aberrant doctrine seriously compromises the Bible's essential teaching in one or more of those six areas, although not outright denying it. For example, the practice of speculating on the precise date of the return of Christ can often be an aberration that stops short of heresy. The practice is certainly unbiblical, and in the context of heretical systems of doctrine such date-setting can itself be regarded as heretical. But in some cases, teachers have argued more modestly that Christ *might* return on a certain date, admitting the very real possibility of error, and urging only intensified obedience to God's Word. Even this sort of teaching should be regarded as more or less aberrant, since it compromises the biblical warnings against making predictions of this sort; but it is not of itself heretical.

## Applying The Standards

How shall the identification of heresy be carried out in practice? And who shall be involved in the process of identifying and responding to heresy? Here I wish simply to give some brief suggestions as guidelines that seem to me to be in keeping with the teaching of Scripture.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## *Who Should Judge*

I have already argued in [Part One](#) that the Christian church as a whole is responsible for exercising discernment or judgment concerning heretical teachings, and that such judgment should not be left solely in the hands of trusted religious leaders, no matter who they are. Here I wish to sharpen this point somewhat.

Ultimately, only God can judge human hearts, since only He knows infallibly what people are thinking and feeling. We do not even know our own hearts infallibly ([Jer. 17:9-10](#)). Therefore, when we speak about judging heresy, we are *not* claiming to know the hearts of those espousing the heresy. We are not setting ourselves up as arbiters of their eternal future, deciding who will be saved and who will not.

What the church is called to judge is whether certain teachings should be allowed to be propagated in its midst, whether certain practices should be condoned, and whether certain individuals espousing heretical teachings or immoral practices should be allowed to remain in the community of faith. This kind of judgment is to be exercised by the whole church, although some persons in the church will play a more direct role in the process than others.

There are commands in the New Testament directing all Christians to exercise discernment ([1 Cor. 5:9-13; 14:29; 1 John 4:1](#)). Yet, some Christians are more gifted or skilled in such discernment than others. God gives some Christians special [gifts](#) of discernment concerning spirits ([1 Cor. 12:10](#)). God gives some Christians gifts enabling them to be teachers ([Rom. 12:6-7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11; James 3:1](#)). God has also called some Christians to be in positions of leadership in the church — such as pastors, elders, overseers, deacons — and they will clearly have a more direct role in carrying out the judgment of the church concerning heresy ([Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-3](#)). For this reason, such Christian leaders should inform themselves and consult with gifted Christian teachers to make sure that mature discernment is exercised in their congregations. And the leaders and teachers should work together to instruct the church body as a whole in sound doctrine and in the practice of discernment, so that the whole body will indeed be of one mind in its discernment.

## *How Should We Judge?*

At last we come to the "nitty-gritty" of discernment. Just what should we do in order to exercise sound doctrinal discernment? How should we go about becoming more mature and skilled in discernment? The following guidelines are not exhaustive, but they are especially critical.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

1. **Learn to exercise discernment while growing as a Christian in faith, love, and holiness.** I would like to assume this is obvious to everyone, but it bears emphasizing and even placing first on the list. The Christian life is not an intellectual game in which the object is to prove that you are right and to ferret out everyone who is wrong. Discerning orthodox from heretical teaching is only one aspect of the Christian life, though it is an important one. Moreover, doctrinal discernment itself should involve prayer, fellowship with other Christians, ministry to other Christians and to the lost, as well as doctrinal study. May I also say that I am preaching to myself here more than to anyone else! As one whose lifetime ministry and career is concentrated in the practice and communication of doctrinal discernment, I (and my colleagues in discernment ministry, as well) am more apt to forget this than other Christians.

On the other hand, let me also emphasize the word "growing" in the above statement. There is not some minimum standard of spiritual achievement that must be reached before one may begin exercising discernment. Rather, the exercise of discernment is one function in the Christian life in which all believers should be growing throughout their Christian experience.

2. **Develop a thorough and sound grasp of Scripture.** Other things being equal, the better one understands the Bible, the better one will be able to discern truth from error. Not every Christian can be a Bible scholar, but virtually every Christian can study the Bible in depth and gain a profound understanding of its teachings.

There are various ways in which one can study the Bible, and all of them are important. Read the Bible itself — read whole books of the Bible, and read the whole Bible (though not necessarily in any particular order). Commit portions of Scripture to memory. Study the Bible topically, searching through Scripture and reading what it says on particular subjects (see [Acts 17:11](#)). Use study aids, theological textbooks, and the like (though discernment will be needed in choosing and using such works). Study the Bible by yourself and in groups. Find competent teachers and learn as much as you can from them. The point is to use every resource possible to increase your understanding of Scripture.

3. **Study Christian doctrine from a variety of traditions within orthodox Christianity.** As you become fairly clear on the essentials of the faith, you should seek to become familiar with some of the different perspectives on Christian doctrine within the household of faith. You will want to acquaint yourself with different views held by Christians on such controversial doctrinal matters as baptism, the Millennium, spiritual gifts, predestination,

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and the like. Understanding the different perspectives held by orthodox Christians on these doctrinal matters will enable you to appreciate better the difference between essentials and nonessentials of the faith, as well as to gain a more mature and biblical position on them.

4. **Learn as much relevant information as possible about a questionable teaching or religious group before making any judgment.** Scripture says, "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov. 18:13). It is sin for Christians to judge someone's beliefs as heretical on the basis of less than adequate information.

There are a variety of strategies you can use to gain information about a group. You can inquire about religious affiliations — the denomination or religion of a teacher or group — though in some cases certain organizations or persons may deny their controversial religious affiliations. You can ask for information about their history or leaders, as sometimes this is illuminating. You can consult standard reference works, dictionaries, or encyclopedias that list religious groups and organizations and describe their beliefs. In most cases, except with very new or small groups or teachings, these strategies will give you adequate information.

5. **Base your understanding of a questionable doctrine on what those who espouse it say about it themselves.** This follows directly from the above principle and from the Golden Rule ([Matt. 7:12](#)). Just as we would not want someone to label us heretics or accuse us of other evils (Matt. 5:11) on the basis of what others say about us, so we should not criticize others' views without being sure that we have heard them firsthand. This does not mean that every Christian must personally read the primary literature of a heretical group before concluding that it is indeed heretical. Rather, a Christian critique of a supposedly heretical group should be considered less than adequate to the extent that the accusations made are not backed up with accurate quotations from the authoritative leaders of the group.

In questionable cases where no adequate Christian analysis or evaluation has yet been done, it is very important to gain primary source information about the group's doctrines. One approach that is often helpful is to ask for a doctrinal statement. However, keep in mind the following two observations: **(1)** Some groups that have no doctrinal statement are nevertheless orthodox. **(2)** Doctrinal statements of heretical groups are often kept as orthodox-sounding as possible to avoid easy criticism. Other publications may be more revealing of the group's true colors.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

6. **Do not assume that the use of orthodox language guarantees orthodox beliefs.** As I have just suggested, unorthodox and aberrant groups are often not straightforward and honest about the true nature of their beliefs. They will frequently use biblical language and sound very evangelical in order to avoid criticism. This is exactly what the New Testament warns us about (e.g., [2 Cor. 11:4](#)).

In the case of groups that are dishonest about their true beliefs, gather as much information about their beliefs as possible and compare what they say *to the public* with what they say *to one another*. This may involve attending their meetings and asking questions without seeming critical (see [Matt. 10:16](#)) or obtaining in-house literature normally available only to members. Generally, such investigations should be carried out by those with some experience and training in doctrinal discernment, such as those involved in discernment ministries. In some cases, ex-members may be the best source of such information and materials.

7. **Treat the information supplied by ex-members with respect but due caution as well.** Every heretical group eventually begins generating ex-members in greater or lesser quantities, and these persons can be invaluable resources. Often their most important contribution is their access to publications and recordings unavailable to the general public. Their personal testimonies can also be very informative and helpful.

One of the marks of a heretical or aberrant group is that its ex-members are all dismissed as disgruntled or envious or immoral persons with an axe to grind. Of course, this may be true of some ex-members. Yet, if a religious group loses a large number of people, and these ex-members consistently tell the same story, their testimony should be given due credence. If an ex-member can back up his (or her) story with documentation or corroborative testimony from other ex-members, that will serve to reinforce his testimony.

Occasionally, certain individuals will present themselves as ex-members of a group and tell sensational stories about their involvement. Great caution must be exercised in such cases, as increasingly there are instances of persons doing this who either were never part of the group in question, or were never as deeply involved as they claim. Whether such individuals perpetuate such deceptions for financial gain, media attention, personal antagonism toward the group, or for more subtle reasons, may not always be clear. In any case it is important that sensationalistic accusations against a group not be accepted on



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the basis of the testimony of one person or couple apart from corroborative evidence.

8. **In uncertain or borderline cases, give the benefit of the doubt to the person or group in question.** The principle of "innocent until proven guilty" applies here. Some Christians involved in discernment ministries raise "red flags" or, to change the metaphor, "cry wolf" whenever there is the slightest hint of possible heresy. Such a practice brings reproach upon discernment ministries and divides Christians.
9. **Begin with foundational matters.** In inquiring into the orthodoxy of a religious group, much time and energy can be saved and mistakes prevented by asking foundational questions about the group's attitude toward the Bible and religious authority. Do they regard the Bible as the absolutely infallible, [unerring](#) Word of God? Do they regard the Bible as the final authority in religious matters, or do they look to something else (their leaders, a modern prophet, another book, etc.) as an indispensable authority by which the Bible is interpreted? If their answers to these questions are satisfactory, then in most cases they will be orthodox; if not, they will usually be heretical. Keep in mind that some heretical groups profess complete confidence in the Bible and appear to have no other doctrinal authorities; thus, this guideline should be treated only as a rule of thumb.
10. **Consult with reputable discernment ministries who honor biblical principles of discernment.** No human being is infallible, nor is any organization, including Christian discernment ministries. Nevertheless, if you agree that the principles discussed in this article are biblical, then you should consult with discernment ministries who seek to base their work on these principles.

## The Challenge of Discernment

In conclusion, I would like to offer a challenge to those who agree that doctrinal discernment of the kind discussed in these articles is necessary. Begin to do something to contribute to the ongoing task of discernment. Encourage your church leaders to preach and teach on doctrinal discernment. Support one or more biblically based discernment ministries, especially any that may be in your local area. If you are a parent, teach sound doctrine to your children. Pray for sound Christian teachers and preachers, and pray that heresies and aberrant doctrines would lose their appeal. Every Christian can and should be doing something to contribute to the church's discernment of sound doctrine.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Recommended Reading

Bowman, Robert M., Jr. \*The Dominion Debate: Kingdom Theology and Christian Reconstructionism in Biblical Perspective\* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, forthcoming). A case study in doctrinal discernment, distinguishing orthodox, heretical, and aberrational varieties of "dominion theology."

Bray, Gerald. [Creeds, Councils and Christ](#) (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984). Historical study which defends the creeds as faithful expressions of biblical teaching.

Brown, Harold O. J. [Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988). A survey of church history focusing on orthodox responses to heresy.

Davis, John Jefferson (ed.). \*The Necessity of Systematic Theology\* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1978). A collection of essays on the importance of doctrine to the lay Christian.

Erickson, Millard J. [Christian Theology](#), 1-volume ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988). Currently the best complete evangelical systematic theology textbook.

Frame, John M. [The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship](#) (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1987). On theological and apologetical method.

Miller, Elliot. "The Christian and Authority," in 2 parts, \*Forward\* 8, 1 (Spring 1985):8-15; 8, 2 (Summer 1985):8-11, 24-26. Argues that the church, reason, and experience are all important but subordinate to Scripture in authority.

\_\_\_\_\_. [A Crash Course on the New Age Movement: Describing and Evaluating a Growing Social Force](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989). A model critique of a non-Christian religious philosophy that avoids sensationalistic or exploitative exaggerations.

Onken, Brian. "Dangers of the 'Trinity' in Man," \*Forward\* 8, 4 (Winter 1986):26-28. The dangers of making a sharp separation between the mind and the spirit.

Poythress, Vern S. \*Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology\* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House -- Academic Books, 1987). Distinguishing substantive disagreement from different but complementary perspectives.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Credits

### COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION LIMITATIONS:

This data file is the sole property of the Christian Research Institute. It may not be altered or edited in any way. It may be reproduced only in its entirety for circulation as "freeware," without charge. All reproductions of this data file must contain the copyright notice (i.e., "Copyright 1994 by the Christian Research Institute"). This data file may not be used without the permission of the Christian Research Institute for resale, or the enhancement of any other product sold. This includes all of its content with the exception of a few brief quotations not to exceed more than 500 words.

If you desire to reproduce less than 500 words of this data file for resale or the enhancement of any other product for resale, please give the following source credit: Copyright 1994 by the [Christian Research Institute](http://www.ChristianResearchInstitute.org), P.O. Box 500-TC, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92693.

---

Robert M. Bowman is an evangelical Christian apologist, biblical scholar, author, editor, and lecturer. He has lectured on biblical studies, religion, and apologetics at Biola University, Cornerstone University, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Rob is the author of over sixty articles and the author or co-author of thirteen books including *Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions: Examining the Foundations of Christianity and Mormonism*, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*, co-authored with J. Ed Komoszewski, and *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith*, co-authored with Kenneth D. Boa. Dr. Bowman holds the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in biblical studies from Fuller Theological Seminary and South African Theological Seminary. He is widely regarded as the leading evangelical scholar addressing the uses and interpretations of the Bible by such religious groups as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

© Copyright 1994 by the Christian Research Institute. Retrieved August 25, 2022.  
<https://apologeticsindex.org/d01.html>