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Orthodoxy and Heresy

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Since relativism, like a cancer, has eaten its way through most of modern society, the only “orthodoxy” today is that there is no orthodoxy and the only “heresy” is the belief that there is such a thing as heresy. To use such words as “heresy” is viewed today as a social blunder as well as an intellectual oddity.

In the name of multi-culturalism, everything and anything is tolerated *except* biblical Christianity. The only ones for whom modern humanism has no tolerance are orthodox Christians. As Gordon Clark pointed out:

This twentieth century usually considers a heretic as a hero, a man to be admired, and imitated by all who have the courage to do so. A heresy-hunter, on the other hand, is the most depraved of all scoundrels, much worse than the Mafia, the drug addicts, and the prostitutes.¹

One example of this is the Episcopal Bishop John Spong. While willing to tolerate the most outrageous beliefs and conduct from witchcraft to sodomy, he has no toleration whatsoever for orthodox Christianity. In his book, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, Spong states:

A literalized myth is a doomed myth. Its truth cannot be rescued. Literalism is not even a benign alternative for contemporary Christians. It is, in the modern world, nothing less than an enemy to faith in Jesus Christ.... Literalism is a claim that God’s eternal truth has been or can be, captured in the time-limited concepts of human history.... The day has passed for me when, in the name of tolerance to the religious insecurities of others, I will allow my Christ to be defined inside a killing literalism.²

Even though most liberals are not as open about their intolerance as Spong, most of them ridicule Christian fundamentalists at every opportunity. To accept the Bible at face value is labeled “naive” and “ignorant.” To believe that Jesus was God manifested in the flesh is deemed something that only “idiots” would believe.

¹ Gordon H. Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 240.

² John Spong, *Born of a Woman* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 11–12.

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The Psychology of Heresy

In an age of religious pluralism, it is assumed that the word “heresy” is an “emotive” word which expresses someone’s negative feelings towards those who disagree with him. Its psychological origins are identified as fear, insecurity, ignorance, conceit, hatred, prejudice, and racism. Anyone who dares to call any doctrine “heresy” and those who teach it “heretics,” will feel the wrath of those who feel that it is “unkind,” “unloving,” and downright “mean” to use such terminology.

The contrast between orthodoxy and liberalism could not be greater than What it is today. Liberal theologians since the days of Ferdinand Bauer (1792–1860) have assumed, as part of their dogmatic structure, a reinterpretation of Church history in which Hegel’s dialectic and Darwin’s evolutionism is applied to the history of Christianity.³ Thus it is assumed for *a priori* reasons that there was no original faith, just as there may have been no original Jesus. They have rewritten Church history to conform to what it “ought to be,” instead of what it really was.

The Sharp Contrasts

The following chart illustrates the sharp contrast between orthodox Christianity and religious liberalism.

CHRISTIANITY	LIBERALISM
God is the measure of all things, including orthodoxy and heresy.	Man is the measure of all things including orthodoxy and heresy.
Orthodoxy and heresy are, thus, absolute and objective terms.	Orthodoxy and heresy are, thus, relative and arbitrary terms.
The Bible limits and defines what is orthodoxy and heresy.	Man limits and defines what is orthodoxy and heresy.
There was, from the beginning, a revealed body of beliefs which constituted the orthodox faith.	There was no original “faith” at the beginning. Everything slowly evolved through the centuries.
Heresy arose as a reaction to orthodoxy. Thus, orthodoxy was chronologically first.	Orthodoxy arose as a reaction to heresy. Thus, heresy was chronologically first.
Orthodoxy and heresy remain the same, regardless of the cultural or ecclesiastical context.	One man’s heresy is another or man’s orthodoxy. It is all relative. To the cultural or ecclesiastical context.

³ Harold. O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 25–26.

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The chart above reveals that modern humanism in the form of religious liberalism has taken the exact opposite position of Christian orthodoxy. That *they* are rejecting orthodoxy is self-evident. Thus, they will have to admit that their particular heresies are a reaction to a previously existing orthodoxy.

One example of the modern relativistic approach to orthodoxy and heresy can be found in David Christie-Murray's book *A History of Heresy*. He begins by stating:

Heresy, a cynic might say, is an opinion held by a minority of men which the majority declares unacceptable and is powerful enough to punish.⁴

It is, thus, no surprise to find that, according to Christie-Murray, orthodoxy and heresy are issues decided by the principle of "might makes right." In effect, what is orthodoxy in one age can become heresy, in the next. Everything is relative, including heresy.

Since most liberal theologians today do not believe that Christ was God, if we apply Christie-Murray's definition of heresy to this issue, then a denial of the deity of Christ becomes the new orthodoxy and the deity of Christ now becomes a heresy! Christie-Murray ends his book by saying:

Perhaps the orthodoxy that the centuries are shattering may be replaced by another, more embracing and closer to ultimate truth; perhaps the greatest heresy is the existence of any dogma at all. Mankind may be only at the beginning of the road to understanding, let alone certainty ... The true Nicea of the Christian Church may be future millennia away.⁵

This explains why Christie-Murray could argue that Unitarians are Christians although they deny the Trinity:

... are Unitarians who reject the doctrine of the Trinity but who sometimes magnificently follow the Christian ethic and ideal not Christians?⁶

Belief in the Trinity is no longer a test of Christian orthodoxy, according to Christie-Murray. As long as you are sincere and "follow the Christian ethic," you can believe whatever you want. Of course, this does not apply to orthodox Christians who disagree with him.

⁴ David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

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The Early Church

Did the early Christians share Christie-Murray's relativistic understanding of heresy? Did they have a "faith" which was clearly defined? Was this faith so commonly agreed upon that any doctrine which contradicted it was rejected? Or, was the faith of the first Christians so fluid and open that any and all ideas were allowed to compete freely within the Christian community?

A Fundamental Distinction

In order to answer these questions we must begin with a fundamental distinction between the "orthodoxy of Scripture" and the "orthodoxy of community." The failure to grasp this basic distinction has resulted in much confusion. The following diagram illustrates the differences between these two meanings of the word "orthodoxy:"

<u>ORTHODOXY OF SCRIPTURE</u>	<u>ORTHODOXY OF COMMUNITY</u>
absolute	relative
objective	subjective
eternal	temporal
transcendent	cultural
immutable	mutable
unity	diversity

By "orthodoxy of community" we simply mean that a church may require *more* of its members than what the Scriptures require. To be "orthodox" in this sense has more to do with conformity to the traditions and beliefs of a certain church or faith community than to the Bible. It is, thus, primarily *ecclesiastical* in nature.

This basic distinction explains how Baptist and Presbyterian churches can view each other as "orthodox" and yet disagree with each other over such things as infant baptism and church polity. Their unity flows from their mutual commitment to the orthodoxy of Scripture, while their diversity arises from the orthodoxy of their respective communities.

On certain issues there is a tacit agreement that everyone is free to make up his own mind. Two different faith communities can view each other as being part of the same orthodoxy of Scripture while recognizing that they do not hold to the same orthodoxy of community. This is why and how we have diversity between different orthodox denominations.

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In contrast, the “orthodoxy of Scripture” has to do primarily with conformity to the clear teachings of the Bible. It is thus primarily *intellectual* in nature.

When we later label such theological systems, i.e., Arianism, as “heresy,” we do not want to be misunderstood. Arianism is not a heresy in a *relative* sense because it does not fit in with the traditions and beliefs of our particular faith community. What we mean is that Arianism is heresy in an *absolute* sense because it contradicts the orthodoxy of Scripture.

While the orthodoxy of Scripture is fixed, the orthodoxy of community is fluid. A church may change its doctrinal position, but the Word of God does not change.

Our main concern throughout this entire work on the Trinity is not the traditions and beliefs of various faith communities, East and West. We believe that there is such a thing as the “orthodoxy of Scripture” because the evidence supports that position. The liberal assumption that the only orthodoxy is the relative “orthodoxy of community” needs to be overturned before we can proceed any further.

The Orthodox View

We must return once again to our basic epistemological question: *What must be in order for what is to be what it is?* If there is such a thing as the “orthodoxy of Scripture,” then what kind of things would we expect find in the New Testament?

1. We would expect to find references in the New Testament to an already established body of doctrines which constituted “the faith” of Christians.
2. We would expect to find this “faith” expressed in creedal and hymnal form as well as in didactic form.
3. There would be only “one faith” as opposed to multiple faiths.
4. We would expect to find that the New Testament itself was written in the context of this “one faith” and is thus not its creator. This has great implications for Werde’s idea that Paul created Christianity. If “the faith” was already established *before* the Pauline epistles were written, how and in what way could Paul be its creator?
5. We would also expect to find that when someone taught a doctrine which contradicted “the faith,” he and his doctrine would be rejected as spurious, false, and heretical.

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6. We would expect to find that there was only one understanding or interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ allowed. Thus only “one Jesus,” “one Lord” and only “one gospel” would be viewed as the “true” doctrine and any “other” Jesus, Lord or gospel would be condemned.

The Modern Liberal View

On the other hand, if the modern liberal view is a faithful description of the early Church, what would we expect to find? As Harold Brown pointed out in his book *Heresies*:

If we postulate that the New Testament is relatively late in origin and in general use among Christians, and even that it sometimes contradicts itself, then we will not expect to find in it the “faith once delivered.”⁷

1. We would, therefore, expect to find no references in the New Testament to an already established body of doctrines which constituted “the faith.” After all, if no “one true faith” existed at that time, then there could be no references made to it.
2. We would expect to find a toleration for many different Jesuses, Lords, and gospels.
3. Since there was no “orthodox” view, there could not be any heresies.
4. We would expect to find no distinctions made between what is acceptable or unacceptable doctrine. The early Christians would be “open” to new views.
5. We would expect to find that no one was ever condemned on the basis of teaching false doctrine.

What the Evidence Reveals

When we turn to the New Testament, what do we find? Do we find what we would expect to find, if the traditional view of orthodoxy is true? As a matter of fact, we do! We find that “orthodoxy” and “heresy” were already operating as categories of thought in the apostolic Christian community long before the New Testament itself was written. The exegetical and historical evidence is all solidly against the liberal view.

The New Testament is quite clear that there was a clearly defined body of doctrines which constituted “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). By a

⁷ Brown, 73.

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“common confession” (1 Tim. 3:16) all Christians worshipped “one Lord,” shared “one faith” and participated in “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

Throughout the New Testament we find so many references to “the faith” that one would have to be blind to miss the point—the early Church had a well defined body of beliefs which constituted the Christian “faith.” The following texts demonstrate this clearly:

Acts 6:7; 13:8; 14:22; 16:5	Col. 1:23
1 Cor. 16:13	1 Tim. 1:2; 3:9; 4:1; 5:8; 6:10, 21
2 Cor. 13:5	2 Tim. 3:8; 4:7
Gal. 1:23; 6:10	Tit. 1:13
Eph. 4:5, 13	Jude 3
Phil. 1:25, 27	Rev. 2:13

The “faith” of the early Church was not something it invented as it grew. Jesus identifies it as being “[His] faith as opposed to having its origin in any other source (Rev. 2:13). This “faith” was once and for all of time given by special revelation to the saints of the first century (Jude 3). To contradict it was to depart from the faith, which is apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1; 5:8; 6:10, 21; 2 Tim. 3:8).

How early did the Christian community understand that there was to be a set body of beliefs which constituted the one true faith? When the Church was born at Pentecost, the first converts “continually devot[ed] themselves to the apostles’ teachings” (Acts 2:42). Thus, from its very inception, the Church was exclusive—not inclusive. It was closed—not open. There was a set body of doctrines called “the apostles’ teachings.”

Religious Pluralism

Was religious pluralism tolerated in the new Church? No. Those who contradicted the one true faith (Tit. 1:9) were described as:

false prophets (Matt. 7:15)	ministers of Satan (2 Cor. 11:14–15)
false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1)	dogs and evil workers (Phil. 3:2)
savage wolves (Acts 20:29)	false circumcision (Phil. 3:2)
deceitful workers (2 Cor. 11:13)	blasphemers (1 Tim. 1:20)
false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13)	evil men and impostors (2 Tim. 3:13)

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heretics (Tit. 3:10)	followers of deceitful spirits (1 Tim. 4:1)
liars (1 John 2:22)	antichrists (1 John 2:22)

These “heretics” were teaching doctrines which were in *contradiction* to an already established body of doctrines and which split the church (Gal. 1:6–9). You cannot contradict something that is not already established. The standard or rule by which a doctrine was accepted or rejected was “the apostles’ teachings.” This is what we mean by the “orthodoxy of Scripture.” Whatever contradicts this rule is what we mean by “heresy.”

False Prophets and Their Doctrines

The doctrines which “false apostles” taught were described by the authors of Scripture not only as “the elementary principles of the world” (Col. 2:8) and “opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20), but also as follows:

perverse things (Acts 20:30)	philosophy (Col. 2:8)
another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4)	empty deception (Col. 2:8)
a different Gospel (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6)	the traditions of men (Col. 2:8)
a distorted gospel (Gal. 1:7)	myths (1 Tim. 1:4)
a different spirit (2 Cor. 11:4)	endless genealogies (1 Tim. 1:4)
speculations (1 Tim. 1:4)	blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:20)
doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1)	a different doctrine (1 Tim. 6:3)
damnable heresies (2 Pet. 2:1)	

New Testament Christology

To what degree was the faith of the early Church defined? For example, did the early Christians have a clear and definite view of the person and work of Jesus Christ? In other words, had they worked out a basic Christology?

Modern liberals assume as their *a priori* that the early Church did not decide which model of Jesus to adopt until much later. Thus, the early Church did not have “a” Christology, but enjoyed a wide range of different “models” of Jesus.

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On the other hand, orthodox Christians assume that the early Church had a basic understanding of who Jesus Christ was and what He had accomplished by His life, death and resurrection. The central facts of his virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection and ascension were non-negotiable.

While there was room for development and refinement within the scope of these doctrines, no denial of these things was allowed. Thus there were no competing “models” of Jesus in the early Church because they remained steadfast in the apostles’ teaching on such things. Any other interpretation of the person and work of Christ was strongly opposed and openly condemned.



Whose *A Priori* Is Right?

Once again we are back to a battle of *a priori* assumptions. The only way to decide who is right is to review the evidence. What does it show? A survey of the New Testament reveals that the early Christians had already worked out a very detailed Christology before the New Testament was written. This is why we find the authors of the New Testament quoting previously existing Christological hymns and creeds (i.e., Phil. 2:5–11; 1 Tim. 3:16).

Since much of this Christology was already worked out to a great degree before the New Testament was written, this is why the authors could state that there was only one true doctrine of Christ (2 John 9) and Christians must reject any “another Jesus” or “different gospel” (2 Cor. 11:4). The orthodox doctrine of Christ included the following:

1. the pre-existence of Christ (John 1:1, 2; 1 John 4:1–2)
2. the deity of Christ (John 1:1, 18; 20:28)
3. the incarnation of Christ (1 John 4:2)
4. the humanity of Christ (Acts 2:22)
5. the vicarious atonement (1 Cor. 15:3–4)
6. the bodily resurrection of Christ (Rom. 10:9)
7. the Lordship of Christ (1 Cor. 12:3)
8. Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22)

This “doctrine of Christ” was so firmly held that if someone showed up at a house church holding to some other doctrine, he was denied entrance to the meeting (2 John 9–10). The

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early Christians were, thus, “closed” to any other interpretation of the person and work of Christ than that which came from the words of Jesus Himself (1 Tim. 6:3–5) or from the Apostles (Acts 2:42).

They condemned outright any view of Jesus which either fell short of or was in contradiction of “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). They particularly rejected the idea that they derived their understanding of the person and work of Christ from myths or legends (2 Pet. 1:16).

The emphasis in the New Testament is that the Church’s understanding of the person and work of Christ came from first hand eyewitnesses who actually saw and heard Jesus Christ (Matt. 13:16; Luke 1:2; John 19:35; 21:24; 2 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 1:1–2). They *knew* who Jesus was and what He did on the cross from the Apostles who had lived with Jesus.

The Meaning of the Terms

Having seen that the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy were already established before the New Testament was written, what about the terms themselves? While the term “orthodoxy” was a later development, the words “heresy” and “heretic” are found in the New Testament.

The word *orthodoxy* comes from two Greek words meaning “right” and “honor.” We *honor* God when we accept Him as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. To accept the biblical God is the *right* thing to do. But if we turn away from the Bible to our own speculations (Rom. 1:21), we dishonor God and do that which is wrong.

The Greek words αἰρέσεις (heresy) and αἰρετικὸν (heretic) have a long history of discussion. The root meaning of these word refers to the *intellectual choice* one makes when choosing to believe something. It soon went from the choice to what was chosen to the chosen who accepted it. Thus, it referred, in the extra-biblical literature, to a group of individuals who associated with each other because they had freely chosen to accept the same opinions on certain issues.

It is in this sense that the word αἵρεσις first appears in the historical section of the New Testament. To those *outside* of the Church, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Christians were all various Jewish “sects” (αἵρεσις) in the sense of a group of people joined together by a common belief (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:14; 26:6; 28:22). To the outsider, each “sect” was just another way to God.

But for those *inside* the Church, they did not view themselves as just one more “sect” within Judaism. No, the Church was not a “sect” as some called it, but “the Way” to

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eternal life (Acts 24:14). Thus, the early Church did not view itself as just one more form of religious pluralism or inclusivism. It was seen as exclusive from its very birth.

The word is found in 1 Corinthians 11:19 and Galatians 5:20 where αἰρέσεις (heresy), “came to be used to mean a separation or split resulting from a false faith.”⁸

Paul had warned the elders at Ephesus that:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, *speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.* (Acts 20:29–30)

From this text and others, such as Tit. 3:10, it is clear that heresy was so perverse because it threatened the unity of the church. Heretics not only taught false doctrine, but they drew people away from the Church.

Liberal theologians assume that a basic dichotomy exists between schism and theological error. According to them heresy only occurs where and when, schism takes place and has nothing to do with theological error *per se*. Thus, as long as the theologian remains a member of his church, he cannot be deemed a heretic no matter how erroneous his theology becomes. As long as he does not leave the church, he can teach whatever he wants. This is why Pike and Spong could remain in the Episcopal Church even though they openly denied the Thirty Nine Articles.

While the distinction between schism and false teaching serves to keep liberal theologians in power, Oosterzee points out:

This whole distinction rests upon an arbitrary antithesis between truth and love, faith and life. In swerving from the purity of the Apostolic teaching, the heretics became also schismatics.⁹

This is also pointed out by Nevin who stated:

Heresy and schism are not indeed the same, but yet they constitute merely the different manifestations of one and the same disease. Heresy is theoretic schism; schism is practical heresy. They continually run into one another, and mutually

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ J. J. Oosterzee on Titus 3:10 in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 2:22.

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complete each other. Each heresy is in principle schismatic; every schism is in its intermost constitution heretical.¹⁰

Gordon Clark pointed out in his comments on 2 Pet. 2:1:

What is heresy? Is it partisanship, schism, and nothing else? Is it immoral conduct? Or is it theological and intellectual in nature? The anti-intellectuals, of course, who favor either the first or second meaning, wish to deny that heresy is a matter of doctrine, for they hold that doctrine is unimportant in Christianity. Of course their conduct was iniquitous, and Peter condemns it severely, as we shall see. But basically the trouble is the intellectual content of their message. Furthermore, a short survey of the word heresy in the NT will show that it is essentially intellectual.¹¹

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Thus, we must not artificially pit schism against error, as if the two were not organically connected. Heresy is the *root* while schism is the *fruit*. As one writer put it, "Division is the fruit of heresy."¹²

When we turn to the lexicographical material on the words αἵρεσις (heresy) and αἰρετικὸν (heretic), we find almost complete agreement among Greek authorities. Thayer defines the word αἵρεσις as "an opinion varying from the true exposition of the Christian faith (heresy): 2 Pet. 2:1."¹³ Balz and Schneider state:

For Paul, then, αἵρεσις are dissensions based on false teachings which threaten the Church's unity.... The αἰρετικὸν ἄνθρωπον of Titus 3:10 is, therefore, the *heretic* who has turned aside from "true doctrine."¹⁴

The two pivotal passages on this subject are Titus 3:10 and 2 Pet. 2:1. It might be helpful to examine these passages to establish the New Testament concept of heresy.

Titus 3:10

A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject.

¹⁰ Quoted by Richard Chevenix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 391.

¹¹ Gordon H. Clark, *2 Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 35.

¹² James Spencer, *Heresy Hunters* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1993), 44.

¹³ *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), 16.

¹⁴ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:40.

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In order to understand what Paul meant by the word a αἰρετικὸν, the context of the book as a whole must be taken into account. The book of Titus is found in the Pastoral Epistles because it gives us a description of the qualifications for eldership. Those men who desire the office of elder must be:

holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance the teaching, that he may be able to both exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach. (Tit. 1:9–11)

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An elder must be a courageous apologist when error arises, just as much as he is to be a faithful teacher to the saints (Tit. 2:1). Paul clearly has in mind the task of refuting any teaching which “contradicts” the gospel, especially the Judaizers who tried to mix works with grace and law with faith.

These false teachers were involved in “foolish controversies and genealogies” which produced endless “strife and disputes about the law” (Tit. 3:9a). The elders of the church must not be trapped into endless debates with those who do not want the truth. This would prove “unprofitable and worthless.” (Tit. 3:9b). Therefore, Paul recommends, that after a false teacher has been rebuked for his false doctrines on at least two occasions, he is to be labeled an αἰρετικὸν. From that point on, the congregation is to be warned that this αἰρετικὸν is “perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned” (Tit. 3:11).

Given the context, is there any doubt that the αἰρετικὸν is a false teacher (i.e., heretic) who has caused division in the church by his false doctrines? It is his *theological error* that has led to his being a factious person.

This was the understanding of the classic commentators, such as Thomas Taylor:

Who is a heretic? A heretic is he who, professing Christ, yet invents or maintains any error against the foundations of religion, and holds such error with obstinacy. A heretic must profess Christ. Jews, Turks, or pagans cannot properly be heretic, though they fight against Christ and all religion in its foundations. These are more properly called heathen, infidels, and atheists, without God in the world. But the person with whom Titus has here to deal, is done within the church, who is cast off from a foundation upon which he seemed to stand.¹⁵

The modern Lutheran scholar, R.C. Lenski pointed out:

¹⁵ Thomas Taylor, *Exposition of Titus* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1980), 525.

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A αἰρετικὸν is one who holds an αἵρεσις or a number of them, a chosen view of his own apart from the teaching of the Scripture. In Acts 24:14 Paul denies the charge that he holds to an airesis, and he does that because he believes all things written in the Law and the Prophets (i.e. the Old Testament) and has no opinion of his own on a single point. We thus have no difficulty in understanding the adjective. Paul says that a man is *hairetekos* who holds to such things as the myths, the genealogies, and the ignorant teaching of law mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:4–11, empty, ignorant, fantastic, vain though they were. Thus any teaching that forsakes Scripture and certainly such as contradicts Scripture stamps a man as *hairetikos*. He chooses for himself what the church, by choosing Scripture, must repudiate and disown. Whether this be little or much makes little difference since to the extent to which he chooses his own ideas to that extent the person concerned is *hairetikos*.¹⁶

Dr. Kenneth Wuest, one of the finest Greek scholars of the 20th century, commented on this passage:

“Heretick” is *hairetikos*, from the verb *haireo*, “to take, to take for one’s self, to choose, prefer.” The noun means, “fitted or able to take or choose, schismatic, factious.” A heretic is one therefore who refuses to accept true doctrine as it is revealed in the Bible, and prefers to choose for himself what he is to believe.¹⁷

The great Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield, warned in his own day that the root of all heresy is the acceptance of man-made opinions in opposition to the clear teachings of Scripture:

It is plain that he who modifies the teachings of the Word of God in the smallest particular at the dictation of any “man-made opinion” has already deserted the Christian ground, and is already, in principle, a “heretic.” The essence of “heresy” is that the modes of thought and tenets originating elsewhere than in the Scriptures of God are given decisive weight when they clash with the teachings of God’s Word, and those are followed to the neglect or modification or rejection of these. In a time deeply marked by “concession,” at all events, it is worth our while to remember on the one hand that “concession” is the high road to “heresy,” and that “heresy” is “willfulness in doctrine”; and on the other, that God has revealed his truth to us to be held, confessed, and defended and give due force to the whole circle of revealed truth. We are “orthodox” when we account God’s declaration in

¹⁶ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretations of St. Paul’s Epistles to Colosians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 942.

¹⁷ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 2:201.

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his Word superior in point of authority to them, their interpreter, and their corrector. We are “heretical” when we make them superior in point of authority to God’s Word, its interpreter, and corrector. By this test we may each of us try our inmost thought and see where we stand—on God’s side or on the world’s.¹⁸

Peter’s Testimony

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We now turn to the testimony of the Apostle Peter who warned the Church of the destructive teachings of false prophets:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2 Peter 2:1)

This is perhaps the clearest passage in the New Testament which establishes the intellectual nature of αἵρεσις. As pointed out by H.A. Whaley in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*:

[The] NT usage closest to the technical theological meaning [of heresy] is found in 2 Peter 2:1, where false teachers can be expected to “bring destructive heresies, even denying the Master...” This implies willful departure from accepted teaching.¹⁹

Dean Alford commented on this passage:

αἵρεσις here rather in the sense in which we now understand the word, new and self-chosen doctrines, alien from the truth; not sects (vulg.), which may be founded, but can hardly said to be introduced.²⁰

The Expositor’s Greek Testament states:

Clearly αἵρεσις here is used in the original sense of “tenet.”²¹

¹⁸ B.B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and reformed, 1973), 2:677.

¹⁹ See H.A. Whaley in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 3:122.

²⁰ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 4:402.

²¹ *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:133.

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These “false prophets” are said to introduce “*destructive* heresies.” The word ἀπωλείας is more properly translated as “destructive” as opposed to the KJV’s “damnable.” The most famous Southern Baptist Greek scholar, A.T. Robertson comments:

Destructive heresies (*haireisis apoleias*). Descriptive genitive, “heresies of destruction” (marked by destruction) as in Luke 16:8.... These “tenets” (Gal. 5:20) led to destruction.²²

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The Apostle Peter states that those who teach heresy and those who believe it are both doomed to eternal conscious punishment.²³ The seriousness of theological error is based on the fact that what you believe will determine your eternal destiny.

Sufficient Demonstration

Just these two passages are sufficient to demonstrate that modern liberal theology cannot really lay claim to the word “Christian.” This was exactly what Dr. Gresham Machen’s pointed out in his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*. This was true in his day and is even more true today.

We Must Not Abuse This Truth

Does this mean that any disagreement over any doctrine in general throws us immediately into the realm of heresy? No. As John Calvin warned:

We have to exercise moderation in not immediately making a heretic of everyone who does not agree with our opinion, for there are some matters on which Christians may disagree among themselves without being divided into sects. Paul himself makes this point elsewhere when he bids them wait in unbroken harmony for the revelation of God (Phil. 3:15).²⁴

While it is true that Apostolic teaching as recorded in Scripture is what we mean by “orthodoxy” (and, thus, “heresy” is any doctrine which contradicts that teaching), we must also take into account that it is not always clear as to what the Apostles’ taught on an issue. This is not only true for us today, but it was also true for those who lived during the days of the Apostles.

²² A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), 6:160.

²³ See our discussion of such words as ἀπόλλυμι in *Death and Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984). 108f.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 387–388.

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This is why the church council described in Acts 15 took place. Two opposing sides went together to Jerusalem because both sides claimed to be following apostolic teaching. This would have never happened if everything were crystal clear.

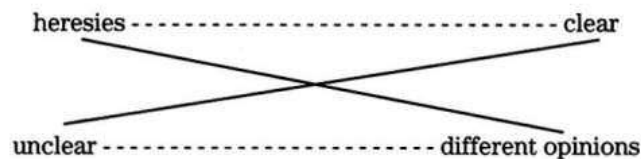
But, once the Apostles died, it was no longer possible to decide unclear issues by seeking an interview with them. And despite the claims of popes, the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, etc., no individual or group of individuals has the right to decide issues by divine fiat as if *they* were living Apostles. The only infallible guide today is the Written Word of God.

But we must hasten to point out that inspiration and infallibility do not automatically guarantee clarity (2 Pet. 3:16). Thus, orthodox Christians frequently disagree on those issues which the New Testament does not clearly decide. The finer points of eschatology, church polity, baptism, etc., are issues which will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction this side of heaven. This is why the Reformers made the distinction between essential and non-essential doctrine. As Jacobs pointed out in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

In the fixed ecclesiastical sense that it ultimately attained, [heresy] indicated not merely any doctrinal error, but "the open espousal of fundamental error" (Ellicott on Tit. 3:10), or, more fully, the persistent, obstinate maintenance of an error with respect to the central doctrines of Christianity in the face of all better instruction, combined with aggressive attack upon the common faith of the church and its defenders.²⁵

Non-Essential Doctrines

Non-essential doctrines are those issues over which good and godly Christians can disagree. The following diagram illustrates that just as there is a sliding scale of clarity when it comes to the Apostle's doctrine, there is also a corresponding sliding scale when it comes to theological disagreements. The word "heresy" should be reserved for contradictions of clear biblical truths. The further you go up the scale in clarity, the higher the probability of heresy.



²⁵ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 3:1377.

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We must be careful not to be too narrow or too broad in our definition of orthodoxy.²⁶ First, we must not confuse orthodoxy with salvation. While you cannot be saved without being orthodox, you can be orthodox without being saved. Nowhere in the Bible is someone said to be a Christian simply because he believes in orthodox doctrines. The demons believe in monotheism (James 2:19) and they have an orthodox understanding of Jesus (Luke 4:34). Does this mean they are Christians? No.

According to the New Testament, you must accept Christ as your personal Savior and Lord in order to be a Christian (John 1:12). Orthodoxy in doctrine does not necessarily translate into personal salvation. The famous Anglican Bishop, J. C. Ryle, comments:

The mere belief of the facts and doctrines of Christianity will never save our souls. Such belief is no better than the belief of devils. They all believe and know that Jesus is the Christ. They believe that He will one day judge the world, and cast them down to endless torment in hell. It is a solemn and sorrowful thought, that on these points some professing Christians have even less faith than the devil. There are some who doubt the reality of hell and the eternity of punishment. Such doubts as these find no place except in the hearts of self-willed men and women. There is no infidelity among devils. "They believe and tremble." (James 2:19)²⁷

Second, we must not reduce orthodoxy to the absolute *minimum* of truth which must be believed in order to be saved. The orthodoxy of Scripture encompasses far more doctrines than what is stated in the simple gospel message found in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. Much harm has been done by the naive attempt to reduce orthodoxy to the bare bones of the gospel. B.B. Warfield explains:

It probably requires to be confessed that the form which has been taken by much recent apologetics has played into the hands of this "concession" habit, and may therefore be held responsible for some of the "heresy" in the Church of the day. Apologetics is in its nature a conciliatory science, and it is often the best apologetics to find and stand on the *minimum*. This is often the best, we say, but not always; and it can never be good apologetics to lead men to suppose that the *minimum* is all, or all that is worth defending, or all that is capable of defense. Yet it is undeniable that some recent apologetics has left on the minds of men some such impression. Perhaps we may even say that some recent apologists have been emphatic in proclaiming that this *minimum* is the entirety of defensible Christianity. At its best, however, this method of apologetics needs to be warily used; when it becomes a fixed habit of mind, it is very liable not only to be abused

²⁶ Joel Parkinson, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Alliance, OH: Alliance Christian Center, 1991), 2.

²⁷ J.C. Ryle, *Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 1:12.

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but to prove the prolific parent of many evils. For one thing, it is found, in practice, that he who is accustomed to defend only the *minimum* is singularly apt to come to undervalue the undefended *maximum*. A truth not worth defending very soon comes to seem to him not worth professing. For another thing, the *maximum* left undefended is very apt to be also forgotten, and the defended *minimum* pierced out into some sort of apparent completeness, with scraps borrowed from the tenets elsewhere originating than in the Word of God; so a "perversion of Christianity" arises, "an amalgamation with it of ideas discordant with its nature." For still another thing, he who only defends the *minimum* renounces the strongest and best of all the evidences of Christianity which springs at once from an apprehension of it as a whole, as a perfect and perfectly consistent system of truth; the evidence of the gospel itself as the grandest scheme of thought ever propounded to the world, is entirely lost. So that it may not unnaturally happen sometime that the defense of the *minimum* alone will turn out to be the *minimum* defense of the gospel.²⁸

Not Just the Minimum

Too many Evangelicals today blindly accept anyone as a "Christian" if he says, "I believe in God." It is assumed that merely saying this kind of thing is the *minimum* needed for salvation or orthodoxy.

It really does not matter to them if the "god" he believes in is not the God of the Bible. His god could be an ever evolving finite "happening" who is devoid of the omni-attributes of God. It could be the poor pathetic struggling deity of Process Theology who is not omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, perfect, etc. But, all that does not matter. As long as the fellow says, "I believe in God," he has fulfilled the *minimum*. It would be unloving and unkind to ask in what kind of god the man believes.

It is thus no surprise to find that many today no longer regard such doctrines as the omni-attributes of God, the foreknowledge of God, the dual nature and deity of Christ, His bodily resurrection, eternal conscious punishment, the inerrancy of Scripture, original sin, the vicarious atonement, the virgin birth, the lost condition of the heathen, the Second Coming, etc., as essential to orthodoxy.

It is assumed that if a doctrine is not essential for salvation, then it is not part of the gospel. And, if it is not a part of the gospel, then it is not necessary for orthodoxy. They have in effect confused the requirements for salvation with the ingredients of orthodoxy and misunderstood both of them.

²⁸ Warfield, 2:677-678.

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Conclusion

How does this apply to the doctrine of the Trinity? It is assumed by cultists and liberals alike that while the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly a part of the orthodoxy of the Christian community, it is not a part of the orthodoxy of Scripture. They claim that the doctrine of the Trinity was “invented” by the early Church. These early Christians derived this doctrine from Greek philosophy and not from the Scriptures. Thus we can safely jettison it as unnecessary baggage.

Evangelical theologians assume the exact opposite. Because the doctrine of the Trinity is a part of the orthodoxy of Scripture, it became a part of the orthodoxy of the Christian community. The doctrine of the Trinity was derived from Scripture and is an essential truth. The only way to discover who is right is to examine the Bible to see which position is borne out by the evidence.²⁹

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²⁹ Morey, R. A. (1996). *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*. Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 37-57.