

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Adult Education
Heresy and Heresies

What is the subject matter of heresy? A statement of faith may be a statement of *dogma*, *doctrine*, or *discipline*.

- *Dogma* is a confession of faith that cannot be questioned absent apostasy (denial of the Lord) or heresy (false teaching about God). For example, that Jesus rose from the grave is a dogmatic statement. The statements found in the Creed are dogmatic.
- *Doctrine* involves a proposition of faith which can be argued. For example, it is a dogmatic statement that Jesus atoned for our sins, but *how* this happened is a matter of doctrine, with theologians and churches taking different positions.
- *Discipline* involves how we do things. Do we use a prayer book, or not? Can a priest be married, or not? Can women be ordained, or not? Most argument between denominations is over matters of discipline or over what is discipline.

In other words, when we speak of heresies we restrict our discussion to teachings of dogma.

What is heresy? Heresy is the formal denial or doubt of a dogma as universally accepted in the Church.

- To have *doubts* means that we have questions, and this is healthy. Doubt cannot arise to the level of heresy unless it arises to the level of denial that there can *be* an answer to what is doubted.

Heresy differs from *apostasy*. The apostate abandons wholly the faith of Christ either by embracing another faith (*e.g.*, Judaism, Islam, Paganism), or simply by falling into naturalism and complete neglect of religion. The heretic always retains faith in Christ.

Heresy also differs from schism. Schismatics are those who of their own will and intention separate themselves from the unity of the Church. The unity of the Church consists in the connection of its members with each other and of all the members with the head, Christ.

- Heresy is opposed to faith; schism is opposed to charity (Christian love). All heretics are schismatics because loss of faith involves separation from the Church, but not all schismatics are necessarily heretics, since one may (*e.g.*, from anger, pride, ambition) separate from the communion of the Church and yet believe all the Church proposes for belief. Such a schism involves rebellion against authority but not heresy.

The “H Bomb” Within the Church to accuse another of heresy is considered by many to be an act of aggression, a breaking of community. Every one of us has at some times subscribed to belief that is in error, and to point out another’s error is, in fact, an act of Christian love. But to immediately label all error as heresy does not build up the Body of Christ, as we thus must be careful in correction.

Terminology The word “heresy” comes from the Greek *‘airesis*, meaning choice or thing chosen. It was originally applied to different schools of philosophical thought. In Jesus’ time this could be applied to the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes. The word, however, could

also take on a negative connotation as found in 1 Corinthians 11.18-19; “*For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be **factions** (‘aireseis) among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine*”.

Even the Apostle Paul and the early Church itself was considered ‘heretical’ when it was regarded as a sect of Judaism. In Acts 24.5 an attorney presenting against Paul to the Roman Governor Felix said, “*We have, in fact, found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the **sect** (‘areseos) of the Nazarenes.*”

From the end of the first century onwards the word heresy came more and more to be used regarding theological error. From the earliest days, the Church has claimed teaching authority and consequently condemned heresy, following Christ’s command from Mtt. 18.17, “*If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*”

Positive results Refuting heresy stimulated the formation of Orthodox Christian doctrine. This is why, for example, the Nicene Creed is so much longer than the older Apostles’ Creed. Most heresy found its roots in erroneous attempts to understand the nature of the person of Christ, or the nature of the Trinity, or both. These heresies about the godhead were condemned at the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. (*See the attached glossaries.*)

The Nicene Creed is much more specific in what it recites because it is designed to defend right belief in the face of heresy. The Nicene Creed is designed to recite who God is and how He relates to His creation through His three Persons of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It is designed to teach that these Persons are not merely “modes of action”. Because this Creed was written in response to disputes within and attacks upon the Church, the formulation used in the original is “We believe ...” rather than “I believe ...,” for by this we recite how we come together as a Church that is *one, holy* (instituted and guided by God), *catholic* (universal in time and place), and *apostolic* (confessing the faith once-delivered by the witnesses originally commissioned by our Lord to bear His Gospel).

Is mistaken belief heresy? Heresy is the obstinate denial, after Baptism, of a truth “which must be believed with divine and catholic faith.” That’s the Roman Catholic definition. The definition is useful, however, because it points to the need for belief to be held knowingly and in the face of correction.

St. Thomas Aquinas defines heresy as "a species of infidelity in men who, having professed the faith of Christ corrupt its dogmas".

- There are, therefore, two ways of deviating from Christian faith:
 - Refusing to believe in Christ Himself, which is the way of infidelity, common to Pagans and atheists.
 - Restricting belief to certain points of Christ’s doctrine selected and fashioned at pleasure, which is the way of heretics.

So, who gets to decide? In Anglicanism we define faith to be founded on Scripture, Reason and Tradition. *Scripture, Reason and Tradition are not to be used independently of each other.* They each comprise a form of revelation, with Scripture and much of Tradition being defined to be “special revelation,” and Reason being defined as “general revelation”.

- Scripture is a higher authority than Tradition, in the sense that Tradition cannot contradict Scripture.
- Both Scripture and Tradition are considered consonant with Reason (with general revelation), but to the extent that Reason cannot reveal to us the mysteries of faith (*e.g.*, the working of miracles, the final judgment), Reason is considered incomplete.

Note that the hierarchy of authorities does not include the individual teachings of the faithful, even of noted theologians and revered saints.

- Individual teaching which is consonant with Scripture, Tradition and Reason is considered to be “pious opinion,” but it is not binding.
 - The faithful may disagree with pious opinion without having this disagreement understood to be heretical. Individual teaching may constitute pious opinion or heresy (from the same author), with this being determined in relation to Scripture.
 - Individual teaching may be adopted within Tradition. For example, the *Te Deum laudamus* was composed in A.D. 387 by St. Ambrose of Milan and St. Augustine of Hippo, at the latter’s baptism, but has become part of the formularies of the Church. The *Gloria in excelsis Deo* has many origins, but was rendered in its final form by St. Hilary of Poitiers (d. 366). It is part of Tradition within the western Church, but is not used in the East. The *akathist* hymns in the East are not used in the West. Tradition may be seen, therefore, to be at times particular, but it is never so particular as to include pious opinion which has not been adopted within the wider Church.

Belief is not a smorgasbord, but choice is involved. The believer accepts the whole deposit as proposed by the Church; the heretic accepts only such parts of it as commend themselves to his own approval.

- Causes for the heresy may be ignorance of the true creed, erroneous judgment, or imperfect apprehension and comprehension of dogmas.
 - In none of these does the will play an appreciable part. Therefore, the necessary condition of sinfulness—free choice—is absent, and such heresy is merely *objective*, or *material*.
 - On the other hand the will may freely incline the intellect to adhere to propositions declared false by the Church. Motives for such a choice are many: intellectual pride or exaggerated reliance on one's own insight; the illusions of religious zeal; the allurements of political or ecclesiastical power; the ties of material interests and personal status; and perhaps others more dishonourable.
 - The freely-willed choice to reject a dogmatic statement of the Church is called *formal* heresy, because to the material error it adds the informative element of “freely willed”.

Historically, this formal heresy is a grave sin. Heresy is a sin because it is destructive of the virtue of Christian faith. Faith is our most precious possession, the root of his supernatural life, the pledge of eternal salvation. Privation of faith is the greatest evil, and the deliberate rejection of faith is the greatest sin. As stated by St. Thomas Aquinas:

All sin is an aversion from God. A sin, therefore, is the greater the more it separates man from God. But infidelity does this more than any other sin, for the [unbeliever] is without the true knowledge of God: his false knowledge does not

bring him help, for what he opines is not God: manifestly, then, the sin of unbelief (*infidelitas*) is the greatest sin in the whole range of perversity.

Importantly, you can't pick and choose what you want to believe in and hope that the correct beliefs will outweigh the incorrect beliefs. Disbelieving one thing will have an effect on other things. For example, in faith there is no room for private judgment sorting essentials from non-essentials: any such selection disturbs the unity of the Church; it strikes at the very source of faith.

Glossary of Terms for Heresies and Heretics

Adoptionism – The Christological heresy, first proposed in the 3rd century, that Jesus was merely a human being who was elevated (adopted) to the status of deity because of his obedience.

Apollinarianism – 4th century Christological heresy which taught that in the incarnation Christ's body and soul were fully human but His spirit (rational faculty) was fully divine. Condemned by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381)

Arianism – The theological heresy that arose in the 4th century, led by Arius, who denied the ontological equality of the preincarnate Christ with God the Father. The position was condemned at Nicea and Constantinople but has repeatedly surfaced throughout the centuries in quasi-Christian and heretical sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses. Arius argued that Jesus was a created being, albeit the highest created being. His partisans campaigned singing a sort of jingle "There once was a time when Christ was not."

Docetism – A Gnostic heresy already evident in the 1st century. It argued that Jesus only seemed or appeared to be human but was not truly manifest in flesh. The word derives from the Greek verb *dokein* ("to appear").

Ebionism – Early heretical sect of ascetic Jewish Christians which stressed obedience to the Mosaic Law and believed Jesus was not divine but became "Son of God" when the Holy Spirit descended upon him at His baptism. An earlier and more specific form of Adoptionism.

Eutychianism – The 5th century Christological heresy that held that Jesus had only the divine nature, by which His human nature was absorbed.

Gnosticism/Gnostic – A constellation of religious movements that stressed salvation by means of some esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*). Gnostics believed that all physical matter was evil. For a time Christian versions of Gnosticism became serious rivals of orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism was in many ways parallel to the New Age movement of the late 20th century.

Heresy – A belief consciously chosen in contradistinction of the official teaching of a Church body and understood to be dangerous to the spiritual health of the Church. The most serious heresies surround the doctrine of the Trinity and the person and work of Christ.

Macedonianism – A 4th century sect deriving from Macedonius, an Arian bishop of Constantinople, who denied that the Holy Spirit was divine. Also called *Pneumatomachi* (“spirit fighters”).

Manichaeism – A Persian religious movement with Gnostic overtones founded by Mani in the 3rd century that featured a dualism of good and evil expressed in a perpetual struggle between kingdoms of light and darkness. It exalted asceticism and advocated celibacy as means for salvation and became a major religious force. Prior to his conversion, St. Augustine of Hippo was a Manichaean.

Marcionism – 2nd and 3rd century radically anti-Jewish Christian heresy with Gnostic tendencies. Marcion and his followers rejected the Old Testament and accepted only Paul (minus the pastorals) and an edited version of Luke. The heresy forced the Church to deal with the extent of the canon.

Modalism – A view of the Trinity considered heretical by the early Church. It believed that the one God was revealed at different times in different ways and thus has three manners (modes) of appearance rather than being one God in three persons.

Monarchianism – A movement that flourished during the 2nd and 3rd centuries as the doctrine of the Trinity was being formally developed. It emphasized the rulership of one God, as opposed to polytheism and even Trinitarianism. It took two forms:

Modalistic Monarchianism – there are not three eternal personal subsistences in the Trinity, but the three Trinitarian persons are three successive historical revelations of the same God. God revealed himself under the image of the Father in the Old Testament, Son in the Gospels, and Spirit in the present age.

Dynamic Monarchianism – The man Jesus was endowed with the power (*dynamis*) of God that came upon him either at his birth or at his baptism and left him prior to the crucifixion.

Monophysitism – the heretical teaching that Christ had only one nature. It arose after the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)

Monothelitism – The heretical teaching that Christ had only one will, the divine. It arose after the condemnation of Monophysitism.

Montanism – 2nd century heretical Christian ascetic sect that stressed the advent of the age of the Spirit and the renewal of prophecy through the agency of Montanus. The sect continued into the 6th century.

Nestorianism – The Christological heresy that saw the union of the human and the divine in Christ as moral rather than organic. Condemned by the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431). Nestorian churches still exist in the Middle East.

Orthodox – From the Greek meaning “right belief”. Antonym: heterodox.

1. Beliefs that are common to all Christian traditions. Also referred to as historic orthodoxy or historic Christianity.

2. That which is accepted as correct or proper belief and teaching by the Church.

Patripassianism – A 3rd century heretical view that the Son (Jesus Christ) is a form of the Father and that therefore the Father actively suffered on the cross in the death of Jesus. A form of modalism; also called theopassianism.

Pelagianism – Late 4th/early 5th century heresy that denied human depravity and the absolute necessity of the work of Christ for salvation. Pelagianism denied original sin, made freedom of the will absolute, and taught the plenary ability of man to please God apart from divine intervention. Opposed by Augustine, who argued for original sin, total depravity, total inability, and predestination.

Sabellianism – (Also **modalism**, *see* **Modal Monarchianism**) – The teaching of Sabellius in the early 3rd century who taught that God has one nature and is one person with three names: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This view of the Trinity was considered heretical by the Church, which taught that the Godhead consists of three persons.

Subordinationism – A theological term for the view that the nature and status of Jesus Christ is less than that of God the Father; or that the Holy Spirit is inferior to the Father and the Son. These positions were rejected by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381).

Additional Terms

Enlightenment, the – A period in 18th century Europe marked by the intellectual and philosophical conviction that truth could only be obtained through the powers of human reason, observation, and experiment.

Liberalism – Properly, the theological tradition that originated with 19th century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. It attempted to reformulate theology in light of the Enlightenment critique of revealed religion. It focused on religious experience at the expense of objective truth, elevated reason, taught essential human goodness and the continuity of the human with the divine. Theologically, liberalism denied every key doctrine of historic orthodoxy. As a theological movement it was discredited by the experience of WWI and by Karl Barth's critique.

Liberation Theology – A variety of theologies that see the Gospel primarily in terms of liberation from social injustice and oppression in various forms (economic, gender, race, political, spiritual, sexual) rather than in terms of personal sin and redemption. Stress in these movements is on praxis (practical application) as opposed to doctrine, and priority is given to social activity rather than individual spirituality. Black theology, feminist theology, and Latin American liberation theology are manifestations of liberation theology.

Modernism – A theological movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries among Protestant and Roman Catholics who sought to interpret Christianity in light of modern knowledge.

Moralism – The belief that one can obtain salvation acting according to moral principles. The concept of salvation in classical liberalism is moralistic.

New Age – A constellation of spiritual movements that gained prominence in the 1970's. They share common themes, including reincarnation, astrology, holism, and self-fulfillment

Occult – The belief and practice of contacting the invisible spiritual powers for guidance and power. All occult practices are condemned both in the Bible and by the Church.

Pelagianism – A late 4th/early 5th century heresy that denied human depravity and the absolute necessity of the work of Christ for salvation. Pelagianism denied original sin, made freedom of the will absolute, and taught the plenary (complete) ability of man to please God apart from any divine intervention. Opposed by Augustine, who argued for original sin, total depravity, total inability, and predestination (the activity of God foreordaining that certain events will come to pass).

Semi-Pelagianism is the position that the human condition has been injured by sin and that man is spiritually sick and needs rescuing but retains some measure of freedom to turn to God apart from the prior work of the Holy Spirit.

Pluralism – the diversity of religions and cultures in which each is to co-exist without enforcing hegemony (superiority, supremacy) over competing understandings.

Post-Christian era – A term used by some to indicate that by the late 20th century, Christian beliefs and values had become obsolete and thus Christianity's influence was diminished.

Postmodernism – The contemporary intellectual and theological climate that has rejected Enlightenment claims of the universality of truth and knowledge. Instead, it insists that all knowledge is relative and arises out of the perspective of the community in which one is a participant.

Rationalism – Human Reason is the arbiter of truth. Rationalism denies the necessity and possibility of supernatural revelation, although it may allow for the existence of God. It sees religion as a cognitive phenomenon.

Reincarnation – The non-biblical belief that after death one is born again into a new physical body. Also called the transmigration of the soul.

Relativism – Most generally, it is a philosophical term for the belief that no absolutes exist. It is also used for the view that all knowledge is relative to the knower. In ethics the term indicates the view that no criteria for ethical judgments can be claimed and that morality varies with the culture.

Scientific Materialism – The worldview that asserts the material universe is the entirety of reality and that it can be understood through science alone without reference to any deity or transcendent spiritual reality.

Socinianism – The rationalist theology espoused by Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) who disavowed the Trinity and the deity of Christ and the atonement, as well as other cardinal Christian doctrines. American Unitarianism reflects the Socinian theological perspective.

Syncretism – A blending of two or more ideas to form a third. The term is used of the blending of Christian and non-Christian elements into a view that compromises the Christian faith at crucial points.

Synergism – (Literally means working together) In theology, the concept of synergism as advocated by Arminians and Semi-Pelagians, holds that initial salvation is a cooperative effort between the divine will and the human will.

Unitarianism – The belief that God is only one Person and thus rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Universalism – The view that all persons will ultimately receive salvation from God.