

'I Just Believe the Bible' Doesn't Make You Orthodox

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Witch trials in Salem. The Council of Toulouse in the 13th century, employing men whose sole purpose was to hunt out human kindling for the Inquisition's flames.

The word "heresy" evokes such images. And while these and other events in Christian history remind us of the dangers of heresy-hunting, few Christians today realize the debt they owe to those who had the courage to call heresy by its proper name, in spite of the repercussions.

So what is heresy? It is any teaching that directly contradicts the clear witness of Scripture on a point of salvific importance.

In other words, some teachings may be strange, such as Benny Hinn's suggestion that before the fall, Adam could fly and for hours remain underwater. Other teachings we may regard as clearly contrary to the biblical texts. But since they don't touch on a key doctrine of God, human nature, Christ's person and work, the Holy Spirit, or salvation, they may be erroneous, but they are not heretical.

For centuries, theologians have distinguished between formal heresies—the persistent and stubborn denial of a fundamental doctrine, even though one has been instructed in the truth—and material heresy, when one embraces a doctrine that is itself heretical, but embraces it in ignorance.

For nearly two millennia, creeds, confessions, and catechisms have provided the necessary constraints against ignorance and instability.

Heresy brings with it not only error, but also particular vices: arrogance, a rejection of all authority, and self-will. Today we see these vices sometimes regarded as signs of special enlightenment or novel insights that have escaped the darkened wits of past generations.

Who Decides?

Anyone who denies the existence of heresy denies the possibility of a religion having any boundaries. And if a religion doesn't have any boundaries, distinguishing Christianity from Hinduism or atheism is meaningless.

Still, we're left with the question of what separates heresy from orthodoxy. **The answer is certain: the Scriptures.** Consider the Bible's own creeds used in weekly worship. In the Old Testament, we find the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Monotheism—belief in one Almighty God—is affirmed in both testaments. In the New Testament, likewise, we find passages used in early church liturgy, such as Colossians 1:15, 20, which set the standard for orthodoxy.

God's Word is the source and judge of all truth it addresses. When Paul warned Timothy about heresy in the last days, he charged him to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

Many modern Christians, especially in America, have a deep-seated distrust of authority. Sometimes this means they pit their personal reading of the Bible against the research and wisdom of those who have gone before them. But that's not what Paul tells Timothy to do. **The fact is, no one goes "directly" to the Bible if by that one means that it's possible to read any literary text without ignorance, bias, or presuppositional stubbornness.**

No one goes 'directly' to the Bible.

Indeed, heretics often go "directly to the Bible." How do we know, then, they've fallen into heresy? Because we've learned the Bible from previous generations, going all the way back to the apostles. They teach us the systematic teaching of Scripture on the essentials, from Genesis to Revelation. Otherwise they will fall prey to a clever communicator who can isolate verses and force them to say something that, in context and in relationship to the whole teaching of Scripture, they cannot be saying.

So Many Pages

So Paul says the Bible, being God-breathed, is the only infallible authority for determining truth (2 Tim. 3:16). And he also adds that Timothy ought to remember his catechism and his teachers (2 Tim. 3:14).

A friend from Holland asked an American pastor about the creed, confession, and catechism of his church. "Just the Bible," the pastor replied, to which my friend responded, "But it has so many pages." To be sure, the Bible is our sole rule for faith and practice, but it has so many pages.

Peter noted that Paul's letters "contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16). It's not that the Bible is incomprehensible, or that its writers are contradictory. But it does contain difficult passages that lend themselves easily to distortion based on ignorance and instability.

For nearly two millennia, creeds, confessions, and catechisms have provided the necessary constraints against ignorance and instability.

Aren't Creeds Fallible?

Are the creeds infallible? No. But the universal confession of the whole church since its beginning, despite other divisions, is that the Bible clearly teaches that the affirmations we find in the Apostles', Nicene, Chalcedonian, and Athanasian creeds are essential for our salvation. Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox believers are united in their commitment to these essentials.

They're not true because the church says so; the church says so because they're true. The tradition of calling the universal church for a council began among the apostles themselves, with the Council of Jerusalem to combat the Judaizing heresy (Acts 15).

While councils may err and have erred to the point of even contradicting each other in the Middle Ages, the early ecumenical councils carry the assent of all Christians everywhere and have up to the

present. Why should we tolerate as shepherds among us anyone whose teaching fails to conform to the clear consensus of the whole Christian church from its earliest days?

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[Second overlapping article by Michael Horton]

The Making of a Heretic

Michael Horton Monday, 20 August 18

Witch trials in Salem. The Council of Toulouse in the 13th century, employing men whose sole purpose was to hunt out human kindling for the flames of the Inquisition.

These are images evoked by that word, "heresy." A nasty word, it suggests more about the accuser, who is considered intolerant, bigoted, and ignorant, than about the accused. But while there have been historical events in Christian history to remind us of the dangers of heresy-hunting, very few Christians today realize the debt they owe to those who had the courage of their convictions to call heresy by its proper name, in spite of the repercussions.

What is heresy?

The first question proposed is, "What is heresy?" The answer is, "Any teaching that directly contradicts the clear and direct witness of the Scriptures on a point of salvific importance ."

In other words, there may be teachings that are strange, such as Benny Hinn's suggestion that before the Fall, Adam could fly and remain for hours underwater, or teachings that we may regard as clearly contrary to the biblical texts. But since they do not touch upon a key doctrine of God, human nature, Christ's person and work, the Holy Spirit, or salvation, they may be erroneous, but they are not heretical.

For centuries, theologians have distinguished between formal heresy, which is the persistent and stubborn denial of a fundamental doctrine, even though one has been instructed in the truth, and material heresy, in which one embraces a doctrine that is itself heretical, but embraces it in ignorance.

Heresy brings with it not only error, but a particular spirit or attitude: arrogance, a rejection of all authority, and self-will. These have always been considered the vices of heresy, but in modern liberalism and evangelicalism, they are often regarded as signs of special enlightenment or novel insights that have escaped the darkened wits of past generations.

Anyone who denies the existence of such a thing as heresy denies the possibility of a religion having any boundaries. If a religion does not have any boundaries, distinguishing Christianity from Hinduism or atheism is meaningless.

Who decides?

To the second question proposed, "Who decides?," the answer is certain: the Scriptures. This topic requires serious reflection.

We must realize that the Bible itself contains creeds that were used in weekly worship. [Cf. Roots prepared by Patrick J. Griffiths]

In the Old Testament, we find the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Monotheism, that is, belief in one Almighty God, lies at the heart of both testaments. In the New Testament, we find passages that were used in the liturgy of the early church. Sometimes, these creeds were sung. (Compare Col 1:15, 20.)

Once we are convinced that the Bible is, in fact, the Word of God, it follows that it is the source and judge of all truth that it addresses. When Paul warned Timothy about heresy in the last days, his charge was to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"(2 Tim. 3:15). And then the familiar passage:

- All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Because of this, "I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 3:16-4:4)

There are a few things to note in this passage.

- ✓ **Paul reminds Timothy of his catechetical training.**

In other words, children were brought up just as they had been in the synagogue, with regular doctrinal instruction in the home and in the church. Paul saw this rigorous catechetical instruction not as a damper on spiritual zeal-as many Christians today seem to view doctrinal instruction-but as the very thing that in later life Timothy is to rely on in refuting heresy as a minister of God.

- ✓ **2) Paul mentions that part of Timothy's confidence is that he realizes the authority of those from whom he learned this message (2 Tim. 3:14).**

Many modern Christians, especially in America, have a deep-seated distrust of authority and they assume that they go directly to the Bible, while "traditional religionists" refer to the wisdom and

research of those who have gone before them. But the fact is, no one goes directly to the Bible if by that one means that it is possible to read any literary text without ignorance, bias, or presuppositional stubbornness.

Heretics often go "directly to the Bible." If Christians are not familiar with the systematic teaching of the Scriptures on the essentials, from Genesis to Revelation (for which catechetical instruction is designed), they will be prey to a clever communicator who can isolate verses from their context and force them to say something that, in context and in relationship to the whole teaching of Scripture, they cannot be saying. So Paul says that the Bible, being God-breathed, is the only infallible authority for determining truth, and yet he adds that Timothy ought to remember his catechism and his teachers.

Adapted from Michael S. Horton, "All About Heresy" Modern Reformation, Jan/Feb 1994. Used by permission.

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