

All About Heresy

by Michael S. Horton

The sermon explores the concept of heresy, its biblical basis, and the importance of creeds, confessions, and catechisms in understanding the Scriptures.

Scripture: Genesis 3:15, Matthew 22:29, Luke 24:27, John 5:39, Acts 7:51, Acts 8:26, 1 Corinthians 11:19, Galatians 5:20, Colossians 1:15, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 3:16

Topics: "Christian Doctrine", "Heresy Detection"

Description

Michael S. Horton delves into the concept of heresy, tracing it back to the rejection of the Messiah by the nation of Israel and the importance of understanding the Old Testament in light of Jesus Christ. He highlights the dangers of heresy-hunting throughout Christian history and emphasizes the need for Christians to recognize and uphold fundamental doctrines of the faith. Horton explores the origins of heresy from Adam and Eve's rebellion to the early Church Fathers' battles against Gnostic, Arian, and Pelagian heresies, pointing out the significance of creeds, confessions, and catechisms in safeguarding the truth of Scripture.

Transcript

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.

The Concept of Heresy: Is It Biblical?

Judaism began when the nation of Israel rejected the Messiah. After all, our Lord himself asserted that the whole of the Old Testament refers to him (Jn 5:39). He scolded the religious leaders for not even knowing their own Scriptures (Mt 22:29). After his resurrection, Jesus taught the disciples the meaning of it all: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Philip took the same approach with an Ethiopian who was reading the Book of Isaiah. He was reading the fifty-third chapter, concerning the Suffering Servant who would give himself as a sacrifice for many. "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus," and immediately the Ethiopian was baptized (Acts 8:26-36). This is why I say that

Judaism began in the first century, as the Jewish nation finally rejected Christ. It is not the case that Judaism adheres to the Old Testament, but Christians embrace both. Rather, Judaism rejects the promises of the Old Testament and their fulfillment in Christ. Our Lord insisted that it was impossible to truly understand the meaning of the Old Testament apart from seeing him as the reference point. Stephen, in his bold defense of the faith before the leaders, rehearsed the history of their unfaithfulness to the truth. Why should they believe in Christ, Stephen asks, if they had a history of stoning the very prophets who pointed forward to him? "Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One" (Acts 7:51-52).

We can even take the matter of heresy or apostasy back to the very beginning. Adam and Eve engaged in rebellion and plunged the race into rebellion because they embraced a heresy. Convinced by the serpent's sophistry, they actually believed that they could become gods themselves by spiritual enlightenment. (It is interesting that ancient pagan, Gnostic, and contemporary New Age groups, referring to this very event, make it their creed instead of recognizing it as heresy.) Down to the present, this Gnosticism pervades modern society, as scholars from diverse backgrounds have pointed out (Munich's Eric Voegelin, Yale's Harold Bloom, and Philip Lee). But the heresies didn't stop there. After all, it was Cain who murdered Abel over a point of theology. The question was, "What sacrifice does God require?" God showed what sacrifice pleases him when he rejected the plant covering that Adam and Eve had sewn together. Instead God sacrificed an animal and covered them with its skins. Abel placed his faith in the coming Messiah, who was promised to Eve in Genesis 3:15, by offering an animal sacrifice. But Cain brought plants as his sacrifice. Men and women have always been seeking to appease God themselves. Their consciences tell them that they are sinners and that God must judge sinners. But instead of turning to him for mercy, they set up their own righteousness and worship. Cain murdered Abel over the definition of the gospel; Cain became the father of church persecutions throughout history. This is even clearer in Hebrews 11, where we are told that Abel was accepted because he trusted the promise by grace alone through faith alone.

Throughout the Old Testament, truth was often in the minority, and it is clear from the canonical texts that the Jews often rejected the unambiguous teaching of their own scriptures. Even when Moses was receiving the Law of God, after the redemption of Israel from Egypt, the people below were worshiping the golden calf. World history is divided between those who will worship God in Spirit and in truth, and those who will invent a form of worship and a creed from their own imagination. And then we come to the final exile, when the nation itself, with many very notable exceptions, refuses the gospel and returns to its own methods of salvation. At this point, the Jewish people apostatized from Christianity. After all, as Jesus himself insisted, even the Old Testament consists of Christian writings. They have Christ as their reference point throughout and the only way that the ceremonial, sacrificial, and theocratic institutions of Israel make any sense is through their fulfillment in Christ—our prophet, priest, and king.

So, one might say that Judaism was the first Christian heresy in the New Testament era. Like Unitarianism, Mormonism, or Islam, it contains pieces of the truth, but suppresses, distorts, and denies the saving truth of Christ as he is revealed in both testaments of Holy Scripture. It must also be said, however, that, just as Unitarians, Mormons, and Moslems can still be saved, so too, God is bringing many Jews to faith in Christ. Gentile believers are themselves only grafted into the vine of Israel by God's mercy. Furthermore, when I refer to "Jews" in this context, I am not thinking of ethnicity, but religion.

Another heresy we find recorded in the Scriptures is described in Acts 8:9 and following. Simon the Magician had been performing signs and wonders, astonishing the crowds. When he saw and heard Philip as he was preaching and baptizing, he wanted to add this to his collection of power encounters: "And he

followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw" (v.13). This is an important point, because heresy often is accompanied by signs and wonders. Even when the disciples performed signs and wonders, the record is not concerned with them, but with the fact that, "when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (v.12). Not content with his own level of spiritual power, Simon the Magician actually offered the apostles money for the ability to confer the Holy Spirit. Peter, the fisherman-apostle, replied, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!" And again, although miracles may have been performed, this record concludes, "When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages" (v.25). Heresy almost always creates and accents its own sensationalism, but the truth relies on proclamation of the gospel for its success. Greed often accompanies heresy as well, as Peter declared in 2 Peter 2:3.

The early Church Fathers connected this same Simon historically to the religious syncretism that produced the Gnostic heresy of the second century, about which you will read in a very interesting article in this issue. Suffice it to say, in Scripture alone we have recorded the recurring heresies: Gnosticism (achieving deity or oneness with deity through spiritual enlightenment), Arianism (the denial of Christ's eternal deity), and Pelagianism (the goodness of human nature and salvation by self-effort).

What Is Heresy?

The first question proposed in the title of this article 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 under water, 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. The Greek word *hairesis* literally means "that which is chosen by and for oneself," and Paul employs it concerning false teachers who bring division (1 Cor 11:19 and Gal 5:20). In other words, 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 in the title, "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. 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." 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 Tm 3; 4).

There are a few things to note in this passage. First, 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. Of course, Timothy had the advantage of having an apostle as a mentor in his later years, but as the NIV note observes, "A Jewish boy formally began to study the Old Testament when he was five years old. Timothy was taught at home by his mother and grandmother even before he reached this age." Therefore, 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.

Second, Paul mentions that part of Timothy's confidence is that he realizes the authority of those from whom he learned this message (3:14). Many Christians today think that they can refute heresy or teach the truth without any reference to teachers. "No creed but Christ," "I just believe the Bible." These are the naive assertions of brothers and sisters who fail to realize that they read the Bible with their own distorted, sinful prejudices and biases. 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. It took a lot of time and frustration before I finally gave in to the biblical doctrine of predestination. Why was it a difficult concession? Was the Bible unclear? The problem for me was that it was entirely too clear. No, it was a case of being educated in the church to believe the very opposite, and, as a sinner, being naturally hostile to such a concept.

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.

A friend of mine from Holland asked an American pastor what was 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 Pt 3:16). It is not that the Bible, for its many pages, is unclear, nor that its writers are contradictory, but that it contains difficult passages, which 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.

For example, I think of the difficulty I had in a college Shakespeare course. The *Tempest* was so difficult to understand that I ended up reading a synopsis of the play in a guide to English literature. At last, I saw the big picture. Then I could go back to the play directly and understand the bits and pieces. In the same way, creeds and confessions no more add to the Scriptures than that synopsis added to *The Tempest*. Or, to use another example, think of the difficulty of finding an archaeological site in the middle of a forest. It is easy to become disoriented on the ground, but a satellite can pinpoint the target and direct the archaeologists to the site safely. Instead of competing for authority, creeds and confessions lead us by the hand to the God-breathed Word. That is why our confessions and catechisms of the Reformation have Scripture proofs for nearly every sentence. They point out that the Word of God is the authority, not the document's author.

To ignore creeds and confessions is the height of modern arrogance. Simply because we have microwaves and Novocain, we assume that ours is the wisest, most self-sufficient age in history. And yet, technological sophistication does not equal wisdom; know-how is not the same as knowledge. Christians have fallen into this modern arrogance by assuming that they do not need the teachers that Paul commended to Timothy. Nor do they need catechetical instruction. "I just believe the Bible" is no defense against cults, superstitions, apostasy, and heresy, since nearly every sect for the last two thousand years has claimed the Bible for support. The answer is not to make the church's teachers infallible interpreters of Scripture, as in Rome, nor to ignore the church's teachers, as in contemporary evangelicalism, but to have the humility to recognize that "iron sharpens iron" and that it takes the wisdom and insight of many interpreters over many centuries to help us to see our blind spots. Only a fool would ignore the accumulated wisdom of nearly twenty centuries.

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 are not true because the church says so; the church says so because they are 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. 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 right 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?

Are the Reformation declarations of faith infallible? Certainly not, as each confession explicitly states. Nevertheless, they go beyond the things that are essential to believe to be "catholic," (that is, creedal affirmations), to the things that are essential to believe in order to be considered "evangelical." The confessions of the Reformation clearly explain, from the Scriptures, where evangelicals must depart from Roman distortions. They set forth positively the biblical teachings concerning salvation that Rome had obscured and, on many points, finally denied.

Are the catechisms--the question-and-answer manuals that teach the Scriptures to children and adult converts - infallible? Certainly they are no less fallible than modern Sunday school curricula. So then why do we have catechisms, since we already use Sunday school curricula in so many evangelical churches today? "Fallible" and "fallacious" are two different things: "Fallible" refers to the ability of something to contain errors, to which everything but Scripture is subject; "fallacious" refers to the actuality of that possibility. Along with many ministers today, I am often outraged by the Sunday school materials that make their way into our classrooms. There is so little discretion and discernment even in churches that claim to be heirs to Reformation Christianity. Very often I have seen Christian education directors and teachers purchase materials from Arminian sources which, instead of teaching the key questions and answers of Scripture concerning the great truths of the faith, inculcate moralism and entertain to death. Children, who in our churches today are pasting felt hats on the faces of paper pilgrims at Thanksgiving were, at the same age, just a few generations ago, learning the catechism that would prepare them to read the Scriptures intelligently, so that, unlike "the ignorant and unstable" about whom Peter was so concerned, they would be prepared to give to everyone a defense for the hope that they had. The Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura did not mean that each individual interprets the Bible for himself. "For that would mean," said Luther, "that each man would go to hell in his own way." Rather, the Reformation included the whole church, the laity as well as the clergy, in the discussion. Confessions and catechisms represent the common voice of the whole congregation, not just the dictates of a religious elite. The Reformation ideal, and the biblical ideal, is to learn the Scriptures together, as a church, and not by oneself. If the imagination is an idol-factory, then surely individualism is the gristmill of heresy.

Creeds are the constraint for maintaining a "catholic" interpretation of Scripture, which is shared by Protestants, Rome, and Orthodoxy. Our Reformation confessions keep our interpretations within the parameters of "evangelical" soundness, and our catechisms instruct us in the truths that have received assent from our particular churches. If one denies a fundamental "catholic" tenet, as the church has witnessed to it in the creeds, that person is not a Christian, but a heretic. If one denies a fundamental "evangelical" tenet, as the church has witnessed to it in the Reformation confessions, the line separating error from heresy becomes a bit more difficult to discern, but a formal denial of the cardinal doctrine of evangelicalism-justification by grace alone through faith alone, is surely a fatal denial of the gospel. Lutherans and Calvinists may disagree with each other over important matters, but where they agree, that agreement defines the doctrinal parameters of "evangelical" Christianity. By defending these, we are in fact defending Scripture, and by employing them once more in our churches, we will be following Paul's counsel to Timothy to withstand those in every age who seek to gather teachers to tickle their ears and lead them from the truth they have known since they were children.

May God preserve us from witch-hunts and from being bewitched. May we see a new crop of Athanasian heroes to stand against the world, for the world and its salvation.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/michael-s-horton/all-about-heresy/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net