HERESIES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Why it matters what Christians believe

Edited by
Ben Quash and Michael Ward

Foreword by Stanley Hauerwas

BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Baker Academic edition published 2012
ISBN 978-0-8010-4749-7

Previously published in 2007 by Hendrickson Publishers in the United States and SPCK in Great Britain
Hendrickson ISBN 978-1-59856-013-8
SPCK ISBN 978-0-281-05843-3

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data for the original edition is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

BEN QUASH

Ideas achieve the status of heresies in Christian tradition because they are thought by the Church to be wrong rather than right teaching, or 'doctrine'. A heretic is a baptized person who obstinately denies or doubts a truth which the Church teaches must be believed because it is part of the one, divinely revealed, and catholic (that is, universally valid) Christian faith.

To our modern liberal ears an interest in the rights and wrongs of doctrine may sound a bit of a pedantic interest to have – and even a recipe for intolerance and persecution. We tend to think that people's beliefs, and especially their religious beliefs, are their own business, and should be respected as such. But there is a very good and positive reason why Christianity has been so concerned about orthodoxy, or right belief. From its very beginnings, Christianity said that neither your race, nor your sex, nor your social class, nor your age could ever be a bar to full membership of Christ's body, the Church. Anyone could be a Christian: you didn't have to be born in the right place at the right time to the right parents. Christ's salvation was offered to you whether or not you were a Jew or a Gentile, a slave or free person, a woman or a man. This was radical stuff. What, though, was left to mark a Christian out from a non-Christian? The answer was: your faith – what you believed in, as embodied in your practices and confessed with your lips. The Church's identity and integrity were expressed in orthodoxy: the confession (and enactment) of a collective belief. Christianity was open to anyone, but it had definite convictions. That's why heresy was a matter to be taken seriously, because it called those

convictions into question. It threatened a crucial thing that bound the Church together and made Christians Christians.

Irenaeus of Lyons (*c.* 130–*c.* 200) was perhaps the first really great *catholic* theologian of the Church (both East and West) – and his massive principal work recognized exactly this point, namely, that from a Christian point of view heresies are not to be taken lightly, and can be positively dangerous to the community of faith. His great work, *Against Heresies*, was devoted to a vigorous and detailed engagement with all that threatened the delicate and saving coherence of Christian truth. It asserts the power of that truth to liberate the believer from error and the self-serving projection of things we *want* to be true (perhaps because they suit us better, confirm our prejudices, or are somehow easier to accommodate).

The language of attack he uses is vigorous, but there is a curious recognition in what he says that the heretics' real menace is not their out-and-out hostility to the convictions and teachings of the true Church, but the insidious way they assimilate themselves to Christian orthodoxy. Heretics, for example, frequently make use of Scripture – drawing on the same sources as the orthodox in most cases. This is a big part of the problem: what they produce looks so plausible, so legitimate:

> They endeavour to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. (*Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter 8, paragraph 1)

In the chapters that follow, you will see how time and again scriptural interpretation is at the core of disputes between positions that would eventually be declared orthodox and those that would eventually be declared heretical. Though Irenaeus is not inclined to generosity on this matter – too much, for him, was at stake – it emerges that in many cases the

heretics-to-be were positively anxious to be true to Scripture; they were scrupulous in their use of it. The citation of passages from Scripture at the beginning of each chapter in the present book acknowledges this fact – so that sometimes the passages illustrate key texts appealed to by the orthodox to refute the 'peculiar assertions' (as Irenaeus would put it) of the heretics, but sometimes they are there because they were adopted as key platforms for heretical argument.

One thing this should probably teach us is that 'proof-texting' (citation of fragments of the Bible out of context) is never enough in the application of Scripture to Christian doctrinal issues. But there is a further lesson to be learned from the history of heresy – not unrelated – which is that individual doctrinal issues themselves cannot be considered in a stand-alone way. Exclusive and narrow focus on one issue can take one's eye off another, and begin to have distorting effects on it. There is no better illustration of this than the tight integrity of the historic responses to the first four heresies treated in this book (all of them concerned with the person of Jesus Christ). Anna Williams shows helpfully in the opening paragraphs of her chapter how there is 'an order to heresies' – and to these in particular. Each doctrinal affirmation in the series of four needs the others to balance, correct and contextualize it, and together – as was also recognized by the great Anglican theologian Richard Hooker (*c.* 1554–1600) – they are exquisitely poised. Take one away, and the others are rendered more prone to misinterpretation – and the recurrence of old heresies in new forms at later points in history demonstrates how the mind of the Church needs to be kept alert to all of them. Hooker writes:

> There are but four things which concur to make complete the whole state of our Lord Jesus Christ: his Deity, his manhood, the conjunction of both, and the distinction of the one from the other being joined in one. Four principal heresies there are which have in those things withstood the truth: Arians by

> bending themselves against the Deity of Christ; Apollinarians [Docetists] by maiming and misinterpreting that which belongeth to his human nature; Nestorians by rending Christ asunder, and dividing him into two persons; the followers of Eutyches by confounding in his person those natures which they should distinguish. Against these there have been four most famous ancient general councils: the council of Nicea to define against Arians, against Apollinarians the council of Constantinople, the council of Ephesus against Nestorians, against Eutychians the Chalcedon council. In four words . . . *truly, perfectly, indivisibly, distinctly*, the first applied to His being God [versus Arianism], and the second to His being Man [versus Apollinarianism], the third to His being of both One [versus Nestorianism], and the fourth to His still continuing that one Both [versus Eutychianism], we may fully by way of abridgment comprise whatsoever antiquity hath at large handled either in declaration of Christian belief, or in refutation of the foresaid heresies. Within the compass of which four heads, I may truly affirm, that all heresies which touch but the person of Jesus Christ, whether they have risen in these later days, or in any age heretofore, may be with great facility brought to confine themselves. (Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V, Chapter 54, paragraph 10)

There is an order to heresies, and a coherence in the rules that were developed for helping us to avoid them. The structure of this book is partly lent to it by that order which is in the heresies and that coherence which is in the reactions. A series of moves and countermoves in relation to understanding the person of Jesus Christ generated the Church's grammar of orthodoxy in its Christology or doctrine of Christ (Chapters 1 to 4) and, indeed, in its doctrine of the Trinity (the belief that God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in one substance). The Church was then equipped to respond decisively to the aftershocks of earlier Christological controversies that continued to be registered in heresies like Adoptionism and Theopaschitism (Chapters 5 and 6). These heresies and

the responses they provoked make sense as a group. And if they have in common a focus on what is *saving* about Jesus Christ (among other things), the second group of heresies are responses to the question: 'What must *we do* to be saved?' These (Chapters 7 to 11) circle, often overlappingly, around the desire to refine, purify, even rarefy Christian Scripture, tradition, knowledge and practice. Here too there are identifiable strands of concern that relate the heresies and reveal consistency in the orthodoxy they offend.

The key task for orthodoxy, it seems, is to keep a sense of what the larger shape of Christian belief is – a shape which, if contemplated patiently and sensitively and with a concern to find its maximum integrity, will unlock its inner persuasive power, and display its glory. Irenaeus uses the memorable image of a mosaic to fix in the minds of his readers this concern with the integrity of the 'whole picture'. He says of the heretics that in seeking the 'air of probability' that they so desire for their assertions they disregard 'order and . . . connection':

> Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found,

> to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions. (*Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter 8, paragraph 1)

By contrast, contemplation of the true shape of Christian belief – which can never be traced apart from constant reference to the person of Jesus Christ – can be a training in knowing what 'fits' and what seems somehow inapposite when proposed as a claim to Christian truth. Those undertaking this training must always remind themselves to look large as well as to peer close – to develop a sensitivity to the integrity of the whole and not just of individual pieces of the picture. And of course, the training never ends, and no individual has unerring judgement about it. It needs a community of people who pray, serve and study together: who are disciples of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The breadth of this discerning community is witnessed to nicely in the range of ecclesial traditions represented by the authors of this volume, encompassing Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Quakerism. The persuasive power of historic orthodoxy is acknowledged in all these traditions, and others too, and the variety of the authors' backgrounds is evidence that the conciliar statements which have united the Church historically can and do unite it still – even across very significant denominational boundaries. That said, all the authors would I think recognize that the discerning of heresies and the construction of conciliar statements is not in itself a safeguard of unity, but a way to deepen a unity which is ultimately God's gift alone. The activity of distinguishing heresy from orthodoxy is not adequately understood if understood only as a tool for ecclesial social integration; the purpose of the activity is to help believers to love God better, and to be better Christians in the world. It is for this reason that Chapter 12 gives a more positive celebration of what orthodoxy is for: our transfiguring illumination as creatures in relationship with God the Holy and Triune One; our advance from glory to glory.

Before concluding these introductory words, it is important to admit that, notwithstanding the ire they elicit from Irenaeus and others down the ages, heresies (and heretics) aren't *all* bad. Even if we grant that too often heretics allowed a good point they wanted to make to get out of proportion, and to have a deforming effect on the larger picture painted by Christian teaching as a whole, nevertheless it may already have begun to become clear that many heresies were sincerely proffered as attempts to clarify the belief of the Church and inform the lives of believers. Many of those who proffered them regarded themselves as orthodox and catholic believers. We can afford to listen to them generously in many cases. They are the losers in the history of Christian doctrine, and the victors, as Marcus Plested will remind us in his chapter, usually write the history books in a way that is unfavourable to those they have beaten. So heresies often haven't been given an entirely fair press. And just as what we call dirt is often something capable of being useful except for the unfortunate fact that it has turned up in the wrong place – and just as what a mother calls mud on her child's sports kit while reaching for the washing powder is something a gardener would call soil and grow things in – so heresies often had some good points to make. The problem is they didn't always do so in the right way or in an appropriate context. Or in a good number of fascinating cases – highlighted in the chapters that follow – they just *didn't go far enough.* Heretics have often been shy of the full radicalness of orthodox Christianity, such that their alternatives have been almost rather common-sensical by comparison. All of the first three authors in the book use words like 'radical', 'amazing' and 'shocking' – and use them of *orthodoxy* not of *heresy*. This puts paid to any idea that orthodox belief is some sort of easy way out of intellectual hard work; heresy is more often the easier option.

The generous contention of most authors in this book is that the Church, and orthodox believers, have reason to be grateful to heresies because they have forced us to think our belief out

more deeply and thoroughly – whether by their misguided attempts to clarify it, or by challenging it. They have been provocative stimuli, catalysts for energetic thought. Indeed, it was in this generous spirit that the following book had its first origins. Appreciative inquisitiveness was the premise for devoting a term-full of sermons in Peterhouse Chapel, Cambridge (where the editors of this volume serve as Anglican priests) to great heresies, and the majority of essays in this volume were first delivered as sermons in that series – intended not to be excessively encumbered with scholarly apparatus, but to be informed and accessible accounts of how these ancient debates still have much to say to Christians today as they try to make sense of their faith in thought, word and deed. The huge interest in the sermons took us by surprise, and the idea was hatched of making them available to a wider audience by publishing them in a book.

The positively instructive aspect of heresies can perhaps best be compared to the value of parodies in literature or art. This is to offer a counterbalance to Irenaeus's image of the mosaicized fox and king, whereby the rearrangement of pieces to form the fox makes it simply impossible to see that there was ever a king there beforehand. By contrast, we can learn a lot from parodies about the original being parodied, and come to appreciate it in new ways. Heresies are a bit like this: closely imitative of the real thing, forcing us to ask what makes the real thing real and the parody a parody. They are examples of what Rowan Williams in his essay 'Making it Strange' has called 'near-misses' of religious utterance (in Jeremy Begbie's *Sounding the Depths: Theology Through the Arts*, 2002), and such near-misses can be valuable. To see something translated into a different framework and then to ask what has significantly changed for better or for worse is a way of heightening one's pitch of attention to what is under one's nose and assumed to be normative for most of the time. And our appreciation of some things can best be enhanced through contrasts (think of Paul's famous

passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13, which is a tour de force of statements of what love is *not* before it declares what love positively *is*).

The language of orthodoxy, as of piety, can be used thoughtlessly when faced with difficult questions, as a stock way to answer, neutralize or suppress them. Perhaps this is evidence of a sort of laziness. Or perhaps the instinct at work is to offset a perceived danger (the danger of being unsettled in one's faith, or lured from the right path). But the killing of lively thought is a much greater danger. In the end a thoughtless recycling of 'what the Church says' will make the narratives and doctrines of orthodoxy stale. As Rowan Williams suggests, 'perhaps theology . . . needs excursions into the mirror-world of what it is *not* saying in order to find out what it *is* about'. Things that are vaguely taken for granted need to be made strange – to be made 'something of a question' – in order that full-blooded orthodoxy may retrieve itself again. 'Mere incorporation in the orthodox Christian fold' will not neutralize all the dangers, or make the questions go away.

This book aims to contribute to such liveliness of thought, to assist the 'avoidance' of heresy not just through strategies of denial and censure, but through adventurous detours through the 'what-ifs?' proposed by orthodoxy's ancient debating partners, so that the pitfalls and limitations of heresies can be better appreciated, and orthodoxy more wholeheartedly celebrated. Such adventures open up the breathtaking hinterland of the dry-seeming formulations of orthodoxy; they reawaken us to the fact that the Creeds (the Church's official statements of belief) that we recite, and the definitions that have been handed down to us from the early Church Councils – some of the most important of which are laid out in the next few pages – are the product of an intense drama. Such adventures in the hinterland reveal the hidden voices in the history of Christian doctrine, and, it is hoped, display what John Sweet in his chapter calls 'the fascination and excitement of the full story'.

The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Chalcedonian Definition

The Apostles' Creed

The so-called 'Apostles' Creed' is an elaborated version of the 'Old Roman Creed' which is known to have been in use at the end of the second century as a formula of belief recited by those receiving baptism. The earliest surviving Latin text is found in the writings of Priminius, the first abbot of Reichenau, dating from between 710 and 724. The version that follows comes from the English Book of Common Prayer (1662):

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried:
He descended into hell;
The third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy Catholick Church;
The Communion of Saints;
The Forgiveness of sins:
The Resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Nicene Creed

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (more commonly called the Nicene Creed) dates from the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, held in 381. It builds on an earlier Creed formulated by the First Ecumenical Council, held at Nicea in 325. The version given here is again from the English Book of Common Prayer (1662).

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one Catholick and Apostolick Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Chalcedonian Definition

The Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon in 451, declared the following to be consistent with orthodox Christian belief; it has become known as the 'Chalcedonian Definition':

> Following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer [*theotokos*]; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence [*hypostasis*], not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

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