

Heresies and Responses

I. Heresies

A. Introduction

1. Meaning

- a. Originally, causing a division or schism
- b. Evolved to mean an erroneous teaching, which usually causes divisions (cf. “damnable heresies” in I Pet. 2:1).

2. Nature

- a. Heresies tend to rationalize, to make mysteries mundane (e.g., Trinitarian and Christological heresies)
- b. Heresies most often err concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ (cf. cults)
- c. Heresies by definition begin Christian (cf. I John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us”)
- d. Ancient view: Heresy an intentional subversion

B. Gnostic Heresies

1. Background

- a. Influential philosophical system
- b. Syncretistic—borrowing elements of Persian dualism, Babylonian astrology, Hellenistic philosophy
- c. Study spurred by discovery of Nag Hammadi texts in Egypt (1945-46)

2. Tenets

- a. Dualistic: Material is evil; the spiritual is good. The body is a prison, weighing down the spirit, which longs to be free
- b. Emanations (angels or “eons”) between God and the Creation, because God can have no contact with material. The universe is the creation of a lesser emanation (Demiurge).
- c. Christology
 - 1) Often Docetic (i.e., Christ only *appeared* to be human, was more of ghost)
 - 2) Sometimes Dynamic—a “power” came to rest on the man Jesus (probably at His baptism) but left before the crucifixion
- d. Salvation comes through freeing the spirit from the body through a secret knowledge (a mystical illumination)
- e. Ethically, Normally ascetic but could lapse into libertinism
- f. Summary: They reject the orthodox Christian teachings of creation, Christ, and the OT, and profess magic and occultism

3. Early Leaders

- a. Traditional founder: Simon Magus in Acts 8
- b. Cerinthus: NT era? (cf. writings of John)

4. Modern Debate

- a. Reflected in modern New Age teaching, sometimes consciously
- b. “Christian” Revisionists: Gnosticism represents one of many versions of Christianity and is, in fact, close to Christ
 - 1) Claims a greater “gender equality” in early Christianity
 - 2) Charges a repressive conspiracy by the Great Church
 - 3) Religion is not right belief about doctrines but self-discovery

C. Marcion

1. The son of a bishop in Pontus who came to Rome in the middle of the second century; led the first major schismatic church
2. Sometimes viewed as Gnostic, but despite similarities, seems to have developed his own unique system
3. Teachings
 - a. Dualistic (Righteous God of the OT vs. the loving God of the NT; Judaism vs. Christianity; Law vs. Gospel; flesh vs. spirit)
 - b. Compiled his own canon, accepting only some of Paul's epistles and an edited version of Luke's Gospel
 - c. Rejected everything Hebrew → Judaism was *not* preparation for Christianity
 - d. Christology: Christ, who was not truly human (Docetic) descended full-grown from heaven
 - e. Professed asceticism, forbidding marriage, meat (except fish), and wine.

D. Montanism

1. Founded c. 150 in Phrygia by Montanus (a converted pagan priest)
2. Assisted by two prophetesses: Priscilla and Maximilla
3. Main idea was the inauguration of a new era of the Holy Spirit through revelations to Montanus and the prophetesses
4. Tenets
 - a. Generally orthodox, so that it is more a protest movement than a heresy
 - b. Continuing gift of prophecy and other miraculous gifts—sometimes called “The New Prophecy” and cited by modern Charismatics
 - c. Imminent return of Christ
 - d. Rigorous code of ethics (e.g., opposed easy forgiveness for sin & remarriage)
 - e. Universal priesthood (including women)
 - f. Replaced “horizontal” authority of Scripture or the church with the “vertical” gift of the Spirit (Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*)
5. Famous Adherents
 - a. Tertullian (discussed later)
 - b. Perpetua
 - 1) Martyr in North Africa (Carthage) AD 203
 - 2) Earliest writing by a Christian woman
 - 3) Montanist identity debated

E. Monarchianism

1. Attempts to protect the unity (“monarchy”) of God by denying individual persons in the Godhead
2. Dynamic (“adoptionism”)
 - a. Jesus received a “power,” which “adopted” Him at His baptism, but which departed before death
 - b. Advocate: Paul of Samosata
3. Modalistic
 - a. Father, Son, and Spirit are merely different “modes” of the same person; Christ is the Father veiled in flesh
 - b. Advocate: Sabellius.
 - c. Sometimes called “Patripassianism,” because the Father died on the cross

d. Teaching still exists w/ “Oneness”/“Jesus Only” Pentecostals (T. D. Jakes)

II. Responses

A. Canon of Scripture

1. Important concept of *recognizing*, not *selecting*, the canon. The church did not, as Catholics argue, give the Scripture and is not superior to the Scripture.
2. Establishes source of doctrine by c. AD 200 (from Brown)
 - a. Against Marcion (subtracting from the authority)
 - b. Against Montanus (adding additional authority)
3. “Tests” used in recognizing canonicity (from H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*)
 - a. Apostolicity—whether it was associated with an apostle
 - b. Spiritual character of the contents—excluding the ridiculous
 - c. Universal acceptance—some writings were popular in some regions but not others
 - d. Marks of inspiration—most important, but most difficult to judge

B. Apostolic succession

1. Idea that orthodoxy is guarded by bishops who trace their ordination (hence their authority) back to the apostles
2. Views of Episcopacy (rule by bishops)
 - a. Collegiate: Bishops superior to other clergy but equal to each other (from 3rd cent. to early Middle Ages)
 - b. Monarchial: Bishops are in a hierarchy with the pope on top (from early Middle Ages)
3. Pragmatically safe: Heretics normally broke with the bishop, and bishops in the early years tended to be orthodox
4. Important when Scripture was not readily available to check
5. Erred in granting authority to an office and heightening gap between laity and clergy; it claims apostolic authority where there is none.
6. Dangerous: The “glue” of modern ecumenism

C. Creeds

1. From *credo* (“I believe”)
2. Summarize essential truths
3. Creeds are always *subordinate standards*, i.e., they have authority only as subordinate to the Scriptures
4. Creeds may state essential doctrines, but they are usually bound by their historical purpose.
5. Apostles’ Creed: Most important early creed