

Heresy, Power, and Personal Revelation

Heresy, like beauty, is very much in the eye of the beholder. The Greek root of the word, *haireo*, simply means "to choose" (something different), so anyone who holds beliefs different than others can be considered a heretic. And heresy, like sin, isn't much in vogue these days. In our relativistic, pluristic emerging post-modern society, one choice is often considered as valid as another. But in the first three centuries of the church, heresy was a major topic with different groups claiming to be Christian trading charges and counter-charges, often with little evidence of the love commanded in the church.

There were many flavors of Christian belief and practice in those early centuries, but the primary battle lines were drawn between those who considered themselves "orthodox" (from the Greek meaning "right teaching") and those referred to as Gnostics (from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning knowledge). There were important theological distinctions between these groups but ultimately the core issue boiled down to authority and power. This is hardly surprising since most human conflict is about authority and power.

Modern cynics will argue that the only reason the Orthodox group is so called is because it beat the Gnostics for control of Christianity, but the reality is that the Orthodox group was far more correct than the Gnostics. Being human, however, there were certainly things the Orthodox group got wrong.

In this issue of ET&N, we'll look at the Orthodox-Heretical conflict from the perspective of a battle for power and examine the implications of the Orthodox victory—both Then and Now.

Then

Authority and Power in the Early Church

Sometime late in the first century, **Clement**, bishop of Rome and possibly the Paul's co-worker in Philippians 4:3, wrote to the church in [Corinth](#) addressing a leadership crisis he called a "detestable and unholy sedition." According to Clement, "a few headstrong and self-willed persons" (*1 Clement* 1) had rebelled against the leaders of the Corinthian church and "set themselves up as leaders in abominable jealousy" (14).

After a long treatise on the negative affects of jealousy, Clement cites the Pauline instructions about [church government](#), writing "So preaching everywhere in country and town, [the Apostles] appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe." He then suggests that successors to leaders be appointed "by other men of repute with the consent of the whole Church" (44) and asserts that they may not be removed as long as they have administered "unblameably and holily." (44)

"Therefore," Clement concludes. "it is right for us to give heed to so great and so many examples, and to...take our side with them that are the leaders of our souls" (63). Nowhere, however, does Clement suggest dictatorial authority, and he clearly uses the term bishop (Greek, *episkope*, meaning overseer) and elder (Greek,

presbuteros) interchangeably, as does Paul. Unfortunately, he laid a foundation for a hierarchical system of church governance when he compared church leadership to Roman government: "All are not prefects, nor rulers of thousands, nor rulers of hundreds, nor rulers of fifties, and so forth; but each man in his own rank executeth the orders given by the king and the governors" (37).

About ten years later, **Ignatius**, bishop of Anitoch, highlighted the growing hierarchy in a series of letters written as he was transported to Rome for execution—both establishing a three-level deacon-presbyter/elder-bishop system and elevating the authority of the bishop:

"There is one altar, as there is one bishop, together with the presbtery and the deacons my fellow-servants..." (*Ignatius to the Philadelphians* 4:1)

"Let no man do aught of things pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it." (*Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans* 8:1)

Ignatius claimed absolute authority for the bishop, comparing that office to Christ and banning independent thought: "attempt not to think anything right for yourselves apart from others..." (*Ignatius to the Magnesians* 7:1) In warning the church at Magnesia about what were apparently some reservations about the youth of their bishop, Ignatius wrote "but give place to (your bishop) as to one prudent in God; yet not to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, even to the Bishop of all." (*Ignatius to the Magnesians* 3:1)

Iranaeus, bishop of Lyon and writer of the voluminous *Against Heresies*, went even further, railing against those "who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say,] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops." (*Against Heresies* 3.2.2) In this statement, Iranaeus claims the authority of the Roman church, establishes the succession of bishops, and extends authority even to meetings of Christians.

In his seminal *Church History*, **Eusebius** dedicated a great deal of his writing to identifying bishops in numerous cities, particularly Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome, although only his Roman list is complete to his day. The notion of authority based on apostolic succession lacks biblical justification, but without documentation, the emerging Catholic (universal) church could not claim authority on its basis.

The kind of authority claimed by Ignatius, Iranaeus, and others is antithetical to the teachings of the New Testament. When Salome asked Jesus for a special position for her sons James and John, **Jesus** was very specific about the type of leadership to be exercised in the Kingdom and the church:

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. **But it is not this way among you**, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man

did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45, emphasis mine; see also Matthew 20:25-28, Luke 22:25-27)

It is not surprising, therefore, that there would be those who objected to the concentration of authority in a single man in each city (bishop), much less in the world (pope). It is this hierarchical, dictatorial structure to which that many heretical sects most objected. The writer of the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Peter*, for example, says "there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgment of the leaders. Those people are dry canals." Most heretical leaders refused to submit to the hierarchical authority established by the Orthodox church, as did the leaders of the Reformation.

When Martin Luther appeared at the Diet of Worms in April of 1521 and was directed to recant his view of salvation by grace alone, he replied "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

Therein lies the difference between Luther and the Gnostics—Luther appealed to Scripture, while the Gnostics invented all sorts of strange doctrines based on their personal revelations. Many Gnostics then proceeded to justify their views by perverting or rejecting Scripture. Had they limited their objections to "Scripture and plain reason," perhaps the history of the pre-Reformation church would have been much different. Furthermore, if early reformers/heretics had access to the entire corpus of the New Testament, which was yet to be finalized, perhaps they would have found the justification for their complaints there and not felt compelled to counter Orthodox arguments with invented theologies.

Fundamentally, most Gnostics made the same mistake the Corinthian church did in Paul's time: they elevated one gift of the Holy Spirit over others. Gnostics touted salvation through knowledge (*gnosis*), and their brand of *gnosis* was secret and experiential, not learned through careful study and instruction. Some members of the Corinthian church considered themselves more spiritual because of an exhibition of charismatic gifts (primarily tongues), and Paul minced no words in correcting them. "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels," he wrote. "But do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." (1 Corinthians 13:1)

He went on to address knowledge: "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge (*gnosis*); and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:2) And earlier in the same letter, Paul wrote "Knowledge (*gnosis*) makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know." (1 Corinthians 8:1b-2).

Gnostic condemnation of the hierarchical church was generally far from loving—it was not patient and kind; it was frequently arrogant and unbecoming; and it frequently sought its own (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-5). To be fair, the other side was at least equally uncharitable.

In response to the rigid ecclesiastical order of the Orthodox church, most Gnostic sects offered equality. According to both Gnostic and Orthodox sources, Gnostic groups had little or no organized authority within them. One group is even said to

have selected assembly roles by lot at each the beginning of each meeting. Lacking recognized leaders, they had no mechanism for communication between groups and organized resistance to the Orthodox Church, which had built a substantial communication network.

An interesting passage from Tertullian's *Prescription Against Heretics* tells us a lot about the role structure of the Orthodox church in his day (late second/early third century):

"...how frivolous [the conduct of heretics] is, how worldly, how merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed. To begin with, it is doubtful who is a catechumen, and who a believer; they have all access alike, they hear alike, they pray alike--even heathens, if any such happen to come among them... Their ordinations, are carelessly administered, capricious, changeable. At one time they put novices in office; at another time, men who are bound to some secular employment... And so it comes to pass that to-day one man is their bishop, to-morrow another; to-day he is a deacon who to-morrow is a reader; to-day he is a presbyter who tomorrow is a layman. For even on laymen do they impose the functions of priesthood." (*Prescription Against Heretics* XLI)

Valentinus

The two largest heretical sects (and those that therefore engendered the strongest Orthodox response) were founded by Valentinus and Marcion, both of whom had Christian roots. Valentinus was an Egyptian, educated in Alexandria, who achieved considerable notoriety in the Roman church in the middle of the second century. Tertullian, who himself joined a heretical sect (Montanism) late in life, but whose writings remained respected among the early fathers, calls Valentinus "an able man both in genius and eloquence," who when he failed to be elected bishop "applied himself with all his might to exterminate the truth" (*Against the Valentinians* 4). Recognizing perhaps that the Orthodox church claimed its authority from the authority of the creator God, Valentinus invented a different cosmology.

Both Christianity (and Judaism) and Gnosticism center on the recognition that something is very wrong in the world, but while Judeo-Christian teaching attributes the problem to human sin, Valentinus attributed it to the creator. The world, according to Valentinus (and other Gnostics) was created by a rogue lesser god (the demiurge) in rebellion against the great unknowable God. This demiurge was frequently portrayed as an ignorant sinner. The *Apocryphon (Secret Book) of John*, purportedly the secret teachings of Jesus to the Apostle John, spins this tale about the creator god:

"And the Sophia...wanted to bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit...and something came out of her which was imperfect and different from her appearance, because she had created it without her consort...And when she saw (the consequences of) her desire...she cast it away from her, outside that place, that no one of the immortal ones might see it, for she had created it in ignorance... And she called his name Yaltabaoth. ...He removed himself from her and moved away from the places in which he was born. He became strong and created for himself other aeons... And he is impious in his arrogance which is in him. For he said, 'I am God and there is no other God beside me,' for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come... But by announcing this he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?"

In some Gnostic systems, humans were created by the demiurge, but the great Unknowable sprinkled elements of Light into our souls. In others, humanity pre-dates the creator god. They are souls stolen from the cosmos and imprisoned on the world, unaware of their true nature until released by gnosis (self-knowledge). Even this would not be possible, however, if not for the heroic actions of the serpent, who freed Adam and Eve from their ignorance by showing them the Tree of Knowledge.

The problem for humans, according to Valentinus is not sin, but our lack our self-knowledge while we live in a self-created, Matrix-like world. The secret of salvation, taught by the Christ, the messenger of the Great God, is to unlock the "redemptive potential resident in the soul of every human being" (*Valentinus: A Gnostic for All Seasons*, Stephan A. Hoeller, www.gnosis.org/valentinus.htm). Not only did many Gnostic groups malign the creator god, they also created complex cosmologies consisting of multiple layers and many gods. The self-redemptive concept is highly reminiscent of Buddhism and the cosmologies of Hinduism—not at all surprising since pre-Christian Gnosticism had its roots in eastern religions and mysticism.

Regardless of the theological bankruptcy of Valentinianism, it can be viewed as a rationale for defying the authority of the Orthodox church. If all those bishops, presbyters, and deacons are serving the inferior creator god (demiurge), after all, Gnostics were completely justified in ignoring their directives since Gnostics claimed to serve the ultimate God. Valentinus viewed the Orthodox church as, at best, a first step toward gnosis and resultant liberation from servitude to the creator god. Again, it's not surprising that elements of Valentinian thought find their way into modern psycho-therapy, which also strives for self-knowledge. When Gnostic apologists claim that the Judeo-Christian concept of sin "permanently affixes to the human psyche an element of titanic guilt," (Hoeller) they may be right about the flawed human institution that some consider the church, but they are dead wrong about God's concept of the ekklesia. Cleansed of sin through the sacrifice of one sinless man, we are also cleansed of our guilt.

Marcion

Marcion, the son of the Bishop of Sinope on the Black Sea, was not Gnostic himself. His doctrine carries none of the mystical cosmology of Valentinus and others, nor of a secret knowledge that frees the soul. Instead, Marcion was an extreme extension of the Apostle Paul. Because Marcion could simply not accept any connection between the God of Hebrew Scriptures and the God who sent Christ Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice, he totally rejected the Old Testament and those portions of emerging Christian literature with any reference to Judaism. He accepted only one Gospel—Luke, exorcised of the nativity stories and other Jewish references. The rest of his canon consisted of ten of Paul's letters (also heavily edited). To justify the elimination of God the creator from consideration, he too made the creator a lesser god who was petty, jealous, and vengeful. Again, Jesus was sent by the unknowable Good God or Stranger God. Christ's crucifixion, according to Marcion, was the work of the demiurge in response to Jesus' abolition of the demiurge's laws. Marcion, however, also adopted the docetic view of many Gnostic sects. The docetic (from the Greek *dokeo*, to seem) argument held that Jesus only seemed to die on the cross or seemed to be human because the agent of the Stranger God could not possibly merge in any way with the creation of the demiurge.

Marcion's rebellion against the authority of the Orthodox church took a very different form than Valentinianism—instead of complete equality, he set up a hierarchical structure virtually identical to the Orthodox church with the same rites and rituals. In some localities, in fact, Marcionites and Christians met side by side. Following the

death of Marcion, his followers adopted more Gnostic beliefs and his church, rivaling the size of the Orthodox church for a time, quickly disappeared.

Gnostic/Marcionite use of Scripture

Both Gnostics and Marcionites used some biblical passages to support their views. Marcion is said to have used Matthew 9:16-17 to "prove" the incompatibility of the Old Testament God and the God of Christ:

"But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

Both Gnostics and Marcionites viewed Paul as their personal Apostle. Marcion went so far as to suggest that the Twelve had reverted to legalistic Judaism soon after Christ's ascension, necessitating God's appointment of a better ambassador, one who understood that the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) were irrelevant in the Christian era. Gnostics appealed to some of Paul's more esoteric statements and experiences, each of which they filtered through Gnostic glasses. For example:

"Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood.." (1 Corinthians 2:6-8)

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one." (1 Corinthians 2:12-15)

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

Montanus

A third rebellious, non-Gnostic second century leader bears mentioning. Montanism is best understood as a protest movement within the church based on the personal revelations of its founder, Montanus, in the middle of the second century. Claiming the gift of prophesy, Montanus along with his consort prophetesses Prisca and Maximilla, protested the laxity of the Orthodox leadership in dealing with sin. In ecstatic visions, Montanus foresaw the impending establishment of the Second Coming. His tendencies to severity could therefore be viewed as proper preparation of the Bride of Christ. Because Montanus believed the Holy Spirit to be the very essence of the church, he challenged the authority of the episcopacy, which earned him excommunication and the inappropriate label of heretic.

Conclusions

In Gnostic-Christians, Marcionites, and Montanists lie the earliest resistance to unbiblical practices that emerged very early in the church. But this resistance failed,

due largely to prevailing cultural norms but perhaps caused by God's knowledge of the historical imperative. In consolidating power, like-thinking leaders bolstered the hierarchical structure of the church and embued power in the few, in direct contradiction of biblical teaching. Despite the fact that Gnostics, Marcionites, and Montanists were correct in challenging such authority, each were obviously deemed incapable to carry forward God's message. Gnostics and Marcionites altered both His and His Son's nature. Montanists claimed the necessity of divine appendices to the message of the Cross.

Despite the errors of the hierarchical church, God was capable of preserving His message to humanity. Planted within the pages of the canon, largely formalized by that church, lay the seeds of its successor. The teachings of Jesus and Paul regarding servant leadership, the differential gifts of the Spirit, the priesthood of all believers, the equality of the Trinity, the feminine aspects of God, the significance of women in the early church, salvation by grace, the mysteries of God, the validity of any meeting of Christians, and others all, to some degree, contradict the doctrines of the orthodoxy that eventually became the Roman church. Furthermore, early writings that could easily have been included in the New Testament canon, were rejected, despite the fact that some (like 1 Clement and the letters of Ignatius) justified the hierarchical concept. Both Clement and Ignatius are historically credited with direct association with Apostles, the test that permitted Mark, Luke, James, and Jude to be included in the canon; yet they were excluded.

Such exclusions and inclusions by leaders of the Orthodox church, in contradiction to the self-interest of those same leaders underscores the miraculous nature of the New Testament and the faithfulness and power of God,

But why did God allow a few powerful men to monopolize and sometimes distort His Word for a long time (in human terms)? I'm not sure, but perhaps it was because as the Roman Empire crumbled in the fifth century, it was only an authoritative, powerful church that was able to protect some vestige of the historical Christian faith, which could then be restored when the time was right. As the world emerged from the medieval to modern times, God again shone the light on his message, permitting the leaders of the Restoration to challenge the dictatorial authority of the Roman Catholic Church. And as time as gone on, and men and women have searched the Scriptures for the Truth, the emphasis on freedom and grace has slowly re-emerged.

Now

Things haven't really changed much in almost 2000 years. Conflicts continue within the church, often over power and authority although they frequently masquerade as theological or ecclesiastical issues. This is not to say that the various divisions that have occurred since the beginning of the Reformation are heretical in the sense the Gnostic and Marcionite movements were. We live in a time of unbridled religious pluralism and fluidity. If Christianity is a journey for individuals, it is no less so for the Church. The boundless expressions of faith existent in the Church today hold in them the value of history and the prospect of coalescing into a thoroughly authentic Bride of Christ. Some are undoubtedly much closer to God's Truth than others, while some are clearly outside the boundaries, not primarily because of their practices but because of their beliefs.

There are those like the young men in Corinth who don't like something church leadership is doing and openly revolt. In my own tradition, the church of Christ, we see that in church splits over such relatively petty issues as Sunday School, the

numbers of loaves and cups in communion, eating in church, and instrumental music. Sometimes our young men and women, justifiably disillusioned by the legalism, arrogance, and judgmentalism exhibited in our congregations, seek to plant new churches rather than work within congregations that are genuinely seeking God.

There are also those like Valentinus and other Gnostics who claim personal revelation adding novel elements to Scripture. The Mormons are perhaps the best example of these. In 1830, Joseph Smith claimed that the angel Moroni led him to a set of buried tablets containing a later testimony of Jesus Christ and established the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons). Emphasizing the continuing efficacy of personal revelation, Smith and his successors continued to add to Mormon theology. It wasn't long, however, before Smith recognized that he couldn't let just anyone have personal revelations, so he had a revelation that only his revelations were valid. Like the Gnostics, Mormons have invented many strange doctrines, most notably their claim that God was once a man on another planet who earned the right to rule Earth, just as they teach that good Mormons (defined by works) can rise to become gods themselves.

There are also those like Marcion who have difficulty accepting the traditional teaching of the church on one issue or another. Unitarians, for example, deny the trinity, and there are many who essentially remove parts of the Bible by ignoring them. While not a church, the members of the Jesus Seminar sit in judgment over the portrayal of Jesus and His sayings in the New Testament. Their publications ([The Five Gospels](#) and [The Acts of Jesus](#)) determine by voting what Jesus really said and did. Marcion operated from a worldview that rejected the supremacy of the Creator God. The Jesus Seminar members operate from a worldview that rejects the supernatural, and their conclusions are therefore pre-determined. Paradoxically, some Jesus Seminar members and fans actually promote Gnosticism despite its more complex supernatural overtones. It's not that they actually believe Gnostic tenets--it's nothing more than a cynical attempt to undermine the foundations of Christianity.

And there are those like Montanus who, through personal revelation, come to a "higher" understanding of God. They often remain in the church but consider their brand of Christianity more pure. Anyone who claims to be the "one true church" qualifies as a successor to Montanus.

And like the doctrinal wars of the early church, today's theological debates often lack the gentle, loving instruction mandated by Scripture. One only has to look at the some of the attacks on such current thinkers as [Rubel Shelly](#) (in the Restoration tradition) and [Brian McLaren](#) (post-modernism and Generous Orthodoxy) and John Sanders (Open Theism) to see that the broad Christian community continues to persecute those on a journey to understand God. (To see how these men are sometimes treated, google their names.) The simple truth is that there is no one who has complete knowledge of God: "If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2).

The ancient examples of Valentinus, Marcion, and Montanus and the modern examples of Charles Taze Russell (Jehovah's Witnesses) and Joseph Smith (Mormons) demonstrate the problem with personal, divine revelation. Once the cork is out of the genie's bottle, who can put it back in? There are three possibilities about continuing personal divine revelation:

- Personal revelation is available to many,

- Personal revelation is available to one, or
- Personal revelation has ended.

I personally come down on the side of no present-day divine personal revelation for two reasons: (1) there is no need for further revelation after Christ—He is the ultimate statement from a loving and merciful God and (2) there is really no way to assess the validity of one claimed revelation from another. One might reasonably claim that revelation can be judged on the basis of its consistency with Scripture, but if that's so, what does it add to the written record?

This does not deny the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but inspiration and divine revelation are not the same thing. God continues to reveal Himself through His creation every day, and His living Word continues to inspire people daily with its prescription for His children. The Gnostics believed that salvation came through self-knowledge, and they were right. But it is not a self-knowledge that elevates man to god-like status on his own, but a self-knowledge that recognizes our helplessness. It is only the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus that offers us the opportunity to be reconciled with our holy God.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Christian Politics (November 2)

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