

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16, 2006

## What is heresy?

Heresy is a term used either too much or too little in Christian circles. Either Christians call everything they disagree with a heresy, or they are so afraid of offending or excluding someone that they are unwilling to employ it even when its appropriate.

I think that some of the problem with our misuse of the term heresy comes from an misunderstanding of what heresy is. The word heresy comes from the word for "faction" or "party." Heresies are parties within the church that make one doctrine or one perspective on a doctrine the centerpiece of the faith to the exclusion of the rest. Thus, heresy is not exactly the opposite of orthodoxy ("right teaching"), but is more precisely the opposite of catholic ("universal, complete"). Accordingly, **heresy is best defined as substituting part of the truth for the whole.** This is why heretics are not completely wrong and often have much truth to share. The problem with heresy is not its utter falsity, but its one-sidedness.

How might this change our attitude toward heresy? Heresies are not extra-Christian viruses to be eradicated, but intra-Christian parasites that feed off the truth. The solution to heresy is not to push it out, but to draw its one perspective back into the whole truth of the Christian faith. In other words, **heresy is to be redeemed.**

Let me give an example.

In the 5th century, a certain party called **the monophysites claimed that Christ had only one nature:** the divinity of Christ subsumed his humanity so that the humanity was rendered divine. This heresy witnessed to the truth that Christ was not a schizophrenic half-man/half-God, but one single person, the Son of God become man. Unfortunately, they did so at the expense of the complete humanity of Christ.

Simultaneously, there was another party who bore the brand name of **Nestorians who claimed that within Christ there were really two**

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**persons:** the divine son of God and the human son of Mary. This heresy witnessed to the truth that both the divinity and humanity of Christ were complete and unaltered. Unfortunately, they did so at the expense of the integrity of Jesus Christ as one single person.

At the council of **Chalcedon** (451), the church affirmed the truth on both sides of the argument: **Christ is one person with two natures**. The heresies were not so much rejected as assimilated into a larger whole. The truth on both sides was affirmed, while the error was left behind. In other words, these heresies were redeemed.

#### Any thoughts?

How does viewing heresy this way help us to approach views other than our own?

Do you have any other examples of heresy being redeemed?

Are there any heresies that come to mind that seem "unredeemable"?

How do we practice the art of redeeming heresy without becoming misled ourselves?

Labels: [Heresy](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 11:16 AM

[14 comments](#)

#### 14 Comments:

At [12:10 PM, August 16, 2006](#), [Kurt A Beard](#) said...

Would this view of heresy work with a more Lutheran understanding of the church? If the church is marked by the Gospel rightly preached can a heresy be a group within the church or does this view slide them outside of the church each time their truth is substituted. What I am saying is that a heresy group cannot be part of the Holy Church (invisible) (their heresy prevents it). Does this affect the definition or are you approaching it from more from a sociological (visible) Church dynamic?

At [12:15 PM, August 16, 2006](#), [Kurt A Beard](#) said...

*This post has been removed by a blog administrator.*

At [12:16 AM, August 17, 2006](#), [Jason](#) said...

I think I'll amplify Kurt's point. It seems like we may need to differentiate between "heresy" per se and a heresy.

"Heresy" per se, then, might be what is described above, the sociological and theological state of separation from the catholic church in favor of theological one-sidedness.

A heresy, though, is the concrete expression of that. So, Nestorianism and Monophysitism are heresies. They exist as things (both in the past and in the present) that are merely ideological or

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theological differentiations from the catholic norms of the Church.

When "heresy" becomes a heresy, it loses (to some extent) its sociological aspects, i.e., it can live apart from those contexts. For example, the Monophysites and the Nestorians are all dead; yet their ideas still live quite apart from them and without their genesis in them. In other words, one can have a heresy without it falling under the definition of heresy per se; but one may not have heresy per se without an embodied heresy living underneath its banner.

At [8:02 AM, August 17, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I think under this definition the Holiness movement has, at times, teetered on the bring of heresy. We have taken one core doctrine and emphasized it to fault in some situations and ignored doctrines that would have given us more balance. We became a separate religion and we made our converts out of other churches instead of sinners. Not quite the same and not universally true but I don't think you would have to work to hard to find concrete examples.

At [3:25 PM, August 17, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

It is the redemption of heresy that I feel we have missed most throughout the history of the Church. Can redemption truly happen simply by stating "this is the right doctrine to teach...and not that over there...?" Most of the time, we correct the teacing with a grand council or encyclical statement, and shrug off our burnings stakes in the background.

At [3:26 PM, August 17, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

So, with that stated, JOHN, how does one "redeem" heresy?

At [6:46 PM, August 18, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

Can much of anything truly be labeled heresy by the Protestant side of the church (except for extreme cases)?

This is an honest question. I am not trying to stir up controversy because according to the last number I heard, there are suppose to be nearly 30,000 Protestant denominations. Are not most of these caused by splitting congregations over splitting hairs over certain issues, like focusing too much on one part of the truth over the whole truth?

At [2:25 PM, August 19, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

Absolutely fascinating post to me John. And the comments were just as intriguing. IF heresy is defined this way, it certainly does cause problems for the kind of denomination that almost solely focuses on its "distinctives." If I understand you correctly, it is exactly those distinctives which put us in danger of approaching heresy (part truth at the expense of the whole.) Is that what you are saying, or did I

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miss your point?

And I echo the question John, how DOES the Church redeem heresy at a pragmatic level?

How would that apply to the 30,000 denoms? Or does it at all?

At [12:02 PM, August 21, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

One nuance to this discussion might be that heresy is perhaps crucial to theological development. The early church fathers honed their theological swords in the battle against heresies.

Perhaps we should thank the heretics.

And I think this applies today to whatever heresies we think are developing in the church. In the end they help us...

If we hone our theological swords, that is.

-David

At [3:54 PM, August 21, 2006](#), [Scott David Hendricks](#) said...

Amen, David.

I've heard that St. John Chrysostom was a big opponent to excommunication . . . which made me love him all the more. I also read one of his sermons against the Anomoeans (Arian-gnostic descendants who believed they knew the essence (ousia) of God). At the end of the homily he talked about how we would not win any heretics for Jesus by cutting them down with our sharpened swords (not criticizing Dave's post, but merely borrowing his language). He said we would have to win them back to the truth by brotherly love.

After I read that, I thought, "John Chrysostom truly is a holy man!"

At [11:47 PM, August 21, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

Random thoughts:

(1) Apparently Madonna is on her way to being excommunicated by the Catholic Church for her "heretical and blasphemous displays" in her recent concerts. Heretical displays, hmmm...

(2) It is heresy that helps us define and further examine our current positions. Sometimes, we may even find out that we are just as heretical, but it took another heresy to point it out. Well said David. I think we see this over and over again in the early Fathers and Church councils.

(3) McLaren's new book [along with a few other notable authors, including Donald Miller I believe (?)] is entitled "A Heretics Guide to Eternity." Any thoughts on the brashness in which we should use the word? I was labeled a heretic nearly every week in theology class. How often should we throw this word around? When is it a badge of honor versus a scar of shame if it tends to help us in the end?

At [2:50 PM, August 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

I think Kurt and Jason bring up an important distinction: between heresy as a sociological phenomenon and heresy as an idea. I would agree that my analysis in this post leans toward the sociological in its language. Even the notion of redemption implies the redemption of heretics as people, not heresy as idea.

However, my intention is aimed toward heretical ideas. Heresies are ideas that substitute the part for the whole (as in my examples, which certainly can persist beyond the lives of their promoting groups). The Church itself has a good track record of redeeming heresy ideologically (as Chalcedon example shows), but has a terrible record of redeeming heretics (as Chalcedon also shows, with its schism-creating politics and exiles). Although this discrepancy bothers me ethically, it is a distraction from the main point: heretical ideas are to be thought through in terms of the partial light they shed on the whole of the Christian faith and thus should not simply be rejected. That is what is "looks like" to redeem heresy: analytic and synthetic reasoning about the faith in conversation with the narrow yet insightful suggestions of so-called heretics.

At [2:59 PM, August 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Sniper brings up a practical question of the frequency with which we use the label "heresy." From a certain point of view, this is a tactical matter: use it only when it applies and always with a measure of grace and love.

But at a strategic level, we ought to wonder how heresy should be used by the church in general. For instance, is it reserved for the worst offences? Or should it be used as a warning goad against all deviations? Furthermore, should the term heresy be used only for explicit commitment to previously condemned views? Or should the term be used more broadly to describe ideas with heretical implications, even if the intention is not there? I think these are critical questions, which I hope to address in part in my follow up post.

At [4:18 PM, August 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Be sure to check out the August 24th follow-up to this post and continue this great dialogue there.

<http://drulogion.blogspot.com/2006/08/christianitys-natural-heresies.html>

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