

# HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

## Lecture 1 - TRUER THAN TRUE!

### INTRODUCTION

I welcome you to this course of study on ancient and modern heresies. After some introductory material that is foundational to this topic, my goal will be to provide information on a heretical movement from the past, starting with the first Century and then showing how it appears in its various forms in our contemporary culture. A very important aspect to this course will also identify where these fragments of heresy can actually show up in our thinking. It's one thing to spot a religion of works; it's another thing to spot segments of it in our own thinking!

At the end I will list the books that have been helpful to me in this study.

Each class lecture will be taped, and the audio portion and my lecture notes will be posted on the church website. I will provide a lecture outline for each class. As much as it is possible, I will allow questions and comments AT THE END OF THE LECTURE. You can always text or email me a question also and I will attempt to answer the question to you or in some cases in a future class.

Obviously missing a class will depreciate your understanding of the topic. Not all classes will be "stand alone" and will be a continuation and building block of a previous talk. If you miss a class, I encourage you to catch up by using the website resources.

Normally, at this stage of a lecture, one would give the reasons why the topic is important. That is the lecture today. I am covering what the topic is and why it's important. I'll do that by asking such questions as: What is heresy? What is a heretic? And I will conclude with some practical points to consider and take home with you.

### WHAT IS A HERESY? WHAT IS A HERETIC?

I've entitled this series of lectures based upon the title of a book, first published in 1948, by J. Oswald Sanders. John Oswald Sanders (October 17, 1902—October 24, 1992) was a general director of Overseas Missionary Fellowship (then known as China Inland Mission, founded by Hudson Taylor). His title is **HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN**. Our first task this morning is to come to grip with what is a heresy and what is a heretic. These nouns must be used with precision. Not everyone who has an inaccurate understanding of the Christian faith is a heretic. (Otherwise, we'd all be heretics!) Not every disagreement within Christian doctrine can be called heresy. So, what is heresy?

### Heresy is the Opposite of Orthodoxy

Now at this point, you might think I'm playing games with you, but the truth is that we cannot understand what heresy is unless we understand orthodoxy. The word orthodoxy **is from the** Greek ὀρθοδοξία (orthodoxia). *Ortho* means right or true and *doxa* is a word familiar to us that means such things as *praise, approval, acclaim*, etc. So, the noun orthodox (as opposed to the religion) means simply *praise* or *honor* to what is true. Harold O.J. Brown would say that the "orthodox doctrines are those that honor God rightly."<sup>1</sup> Immediately you ought to recognize the necessity of be "orthodox". As Christians we want to give honor and praise to God. The Bible teaches that there are some ideas and philosophies that fail to give honor and praise to God. Paul was very forthright on philosophies that don't do that. He wrote, "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God . . ."<sup>2</sup>

It is given then that *heresy* as opposed to *orthodoxy* falls within that camp where truth is not honored or praised. Justin Holcomb writes that "Literally, heresy means "choice" — that is, a choice to deviate from traditional teaching in favor of one's own insights."<sup>3</sup>

Holcomb's statement is important. A heretic makes a choice. The Greek word means an act of choice. Brown notes that "early in the history of the first Christians, however, 'heresy' came to be used to mean a separation or split resulting from a false faith."<sup>4</sup> This is the common trajectory of heresy as the Apostle John recounts: "*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*" (1 John 2:19, ESV).

### Does the Bible Address This Topic?

It should be obvious, but someone must ask, "Does the Bible address this topic of heresy?" Let us be clear, the New Testament especially expresses a deep concern for "false doctrines" ("*As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,*" (1 Timothy 1:3, ESV); "*Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.*" (1 Timothy 6:1, ESV); and "*If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness,*" (1 Timothy 6:3, ESV)).

In Galatians 1:9<sup>5</sup> Paul wrote his strongest words against heresy – those who distort the Gospel. Peter himself, warns against such people in 2 Peter 2:1 (ESV),

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 1

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (2 Co 10:5). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>3</sup> Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics* (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 11). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 2

<sup>5</sup> "*As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*"

*"<sup>1</sup> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction."*

### So What are Heretics?

Irenaeus was a Greek bishop noted for his role in guiding and expanding the Christian church in the development of a concise theology in the combat of heresy and thereby the defining of orthodoxy. Irenaeus was mentored by Polycarp who was the last living connection with the Apostles. It is believed he took over the church in Ephesus from the Apostle John. He is best known by his work, *Against Heresies*<sup>6</sup>. In that work he defines a heretic. Let me paraphrase what he wrote (the original is in the Endnotes<sup>1</sup>):

***A heretic takes what the Bible says is true and calls it false. They seek to draw away believers under the notion that they have a superior knowledge. Using all the tactics of deceit and persuasion they try to lure people into their system, but they ultimately destroy them through their blasphemous and dishonoring viewpoints.***

### Is Everything Wrong, Heresy?

It is also clear from the New Testament that the Apostles were not unwilling to name names; to call out false teachers, or anything that threatened orthodoxy. We should be aware though that they treated theological inaccuracy and imprecision on a different level (e.g. Apollos in Acts 18:24-28<sup>7</sup>). "It is important to bear these distinctions in mind as we discuss heresy, since there are those who think that heresy is anything that does not agree with their own interpretation of Holy Scripture. These people fail to differentiate between the primary and secondary elements of the Christian faith and make every belief they have into a pillar of Christianity."<sup>8</sup>

In my next lecture, I will cover this issue of primary and secondary issues.

### Why Might A Heretic Succeed?

Why might a person, raised in *orthodoxy* fall for false and destructive doctrines? Irenaeus is so helpful here. This quote from reading his book was most insightful for me. I want you to look at it so carefully. He wrote,

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<sup>6</sup> St. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* (p. 1). Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> "Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus." (Acts 18:24–28, ESV)

<sup>8</sup> Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics* (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 17). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

“Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself.”<sup>9</sup>

To the well taught Christian this ought to ring a bell in your memory. Do you remember what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:13–15 (ESV),

*“<sup>13</sup> For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.”*

There is such deceit and such a level of attraction to heresy, that it appears “more true than truth itself”. Never forget that.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER AND CONSIDER

1. The appreciation and study of Biblical truth – doctrine – is not an academic exercise. It is an act of praise and adoration to the God of truth. Showing contempt for orthodox doctrine is dishonoring to God. The pursuit of precision in Biblical orthodoxy is an act of doxology. “When we have a flawed image of God, we no longer relate to him in the same way.”<sup>10</sup>
2. Heresy is a choice – a choice to believe “I know better than God”. Heresy is idolatry. Heresy is a moral, spiritual problem, not an intellectual problem. To look clearly at what is plain and true in the Bible and to say, “I disagree. I have a better understanding” is nothing short of moral delusion.
3. When well-meaning Christians differ, they strive for unity and understanding. Heretics divide and seek to destroy. Listen to Paul’s final words to the Ephesian elders: *“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”* (Acts 20:29–30, ESV).
4. The Bible treats heresy seriously and decisively. The Bible names names. “. . . among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” (1 Timothy 1:19–20, ESV) (Cf: 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17; 3:8; etc.) In this course we will name names.
5. The demonic power of heretics enables their brand of teaching to appear *truer than true* to some. Don’t expect heretics to appear in satanic or demonic attire. They always, always, always

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<sup>9</sup> St. Irenaeus. Against Heresies (p. 1). Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 20). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

appear as Christians. This means that when someone says they are a Christian you must ask more questions. Expect to be tricked. This is war!

Lastly, we want to leave with an understanding of why we should even bother to study the heretics. From C.S. Lewis' book, *The Weight of Glory*, he writes:

*"If all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. **To be ignorant and simple now -- not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground -- would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen.**"<sup>11</sup> [emphasis mine]*

Lewis' insight is so important. Stated otherwise, we study heresy in response to God's command to love our neighbors. To fail to expose what is lifted against God, is to fail to love God and fail to love one another. I hope this settles the motivation for you, once and for all.

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#### Reading Credits

1. Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988
2. Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977
3. Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2)*. Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
4. Rose Publishing. *Creeds and Heresies*. Rose Publishing. Kindle Edition.
5. Sanders, J. Oswald, *Heresies Ancient and Modern*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., London, England, 1957
6. Schaff, Philip. *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 1 - Enhanced Version (Early Church Fathers)*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Kindle Edition
7. St. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition.

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<sup>i</sup> "These men falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation. They also overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretence of [superior] knowledge, from Him who rounded and adorned the universe; as if, forsooth, they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal, than that God who created the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein. By means of specious and plausible words, they cunningly allure the simple-minded to inquire into their system; but they nevertheless clumsily destroy them, while they initiate them into their blasphemous and impious opinions respecting the Demiurge."

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards, Bruce L., *C.S. Lewis – Life, Works, and Legacy*, Volume 4, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT., 2007, Page 13

