



32. What Is Heresy And How Is It Different From Schism?

Heresy may be defined as the holding or teaching by someone who purports to be a Christian of a belief at odds with a basic doctrine of the Church.

In the earliest days of the Church, doctrine was not clearly defined, and there were many different currents of opinion. It could happen that a believer was baptised into a his local, thoroughly orthodox church, and remain a believer of the doctrines taught their all his life, only to discover that, due to a redefinition of doctrine he had unknowingly become a heretic.

From the first century onwards, we hear of many heretical sects, as the mainstream of the Church defined and redefined what was regarded as 'Orthodox'. That is the function of the various creeds, particularly the Nicene. Thus the 'Docetists' denied that Jesus was really present on earth in the flesh (his body was only an appearance or '*Dokesis*'; the 'Montanists', whom we would probably call extreme Charismatics, were given to wild prophesyings and deliberate courting of martyrdom, something the mainstream Church deprecated.

The 'Gnostics' of which there were innumerable varieties, held that salvation depended on the possession of secret knowledge ('*gnosis*' in Greek) that Jesus imparted to certain selected disciples after his death.

The most famous early heresies arose while the Church was attempting to define the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. To go into detail about this here would be tedious, particularly as most of the controversies depend upon minute shades of meaning that cannot be translated from Greek into Latin, let alone English. However, I should mention 'Modalism' - God was first God the Father, then God the Son, then God the Holy Spirit, and Arianism - as a father lives before a son, so God the Father must have existed before God the Son.

Monophysitism (the belief that the nature of Jesus was wholly divine, not human, for a while seemed likely to prevail, at least in Asia. Again, Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, objected to the title 'Mother of God' for the blessed Virgin, but was incautious enough to admit that he had no objection

to the title 'Mother of Christ'. His opponents in the Church leapt on this as proof that he did not believe Christ to be God, and had him declared a heretic and exiled.

Manicheism, which teaches that matter, particularly the 'flesh', is evil and impure, is really a separate religion, although one that keeps popping up as a Christian heresy. The Cathars or Albigensians of Southern France were really Manichees. Sadly, the Ebionites of Judaea, who were in fact the original Jewish Christians, were eventually declared heretics and disappeared from history.

'Schism' is not the same as heresy, though heresy may lead to schism. A schism arises when one part of the Church ceases to recognise the authority of another. In the early days of the Church, this usually happened after a period of persecution, when the survivors emerged from hiding and discovered (for example) that their bishop had compromised (for example) by purchasing a certificate that he had sacrificed to the Emperor, or had surrendered some sacred books. The diehards would refuse to recognise the bishop's authority, and elect another (schismatic) bishop of their own.

This happened in Egypt and in North Africa, where it inflicted long-lasting damage on the Church. Famous schisms were the rift between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches over the insertion in the Nicene Creed of an affirmation that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father, and the Great Schism of the Middle Ages following disputed Papal elections, as a result of which there were at one time three Popes.