



Is Heresy Possible? Yes, Unfortunately.

TIMOTHY F. LULL

Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I. PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

Is heresy possible? Yes. Certainly. At least I hope so. A church that cannot experience heresy probably doesn't have any commitments, any identity, any character. The possibility of heresy is simply the negative expression of a church's having a confession of faith. Most churches have wanted to affirm something, even if that has been an anti-creedal creed like "We have no creed but Christ."

Is heresy possible? Unfortunately. I say this because the defining and maintaining of the boundaries of the community is one of the church's most delicate tasks, and one that can easily be handled in away that brings shame or even scorn on the church itself. It calls for deeper wisdom and greater political skill than the human institution is generally able to muster.

That is why heresy has a sad, troubling sound, and why readers of this issue may even groan over the choice of this topic. It is also true that in some churches and in some parts of our society today, legitimate freedom and openness in the church is so little established that talk of the necessity of heresy can be heard with quite understandable fear.

Still, my guess is that the editors of this journal are aware that in many church settings any notion of heresy as a current problem for the church (rather than as a problematic aspect of church history) can seem quite startling. But this is a dangerous situation. It suggests that while creeds are recited in worship, and confessions are studied in seminary, the church in its actual life has become nervous of drawing any kind of boundaries whatsoever.

Powerful forces in American thought only reinforce the notion of the obsolete nature of the concept. There is a general sense in American religion of skepticism about theological content anyway, and when this is combined with a current relativism that all opinions are of equal value, the notion of the church setting limits to what can be believed (or, more likely, publicly taught and proclaimed) would quickly be denounced by many church leaders as "oppressive."

My own church—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—can be taken as an example. While the church's official constitution is full of diverse claims about theological norms, even the most central of these (say, faith in the Triune God, the bondage of humanity to sin, the two natures of Christ, and justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith) don't seem especially binding on its leaders and spokespersons.

This probably has the good effect of allowing a certain freedom of thought that has not always flourished within the Lutheran community. But it may also be a sign that this

church—like others—really has little of a theological nature that binds it together. It strikes me that this “thin glue” may be even directly related to the weakness of this church’s impact on matters of personal and social ethics.

For those very “liberals” who would be most opposed to the church’s enforcing in some real way the doctrines of the Trinity or justification are the same persons who regularly call for the church to take a progressive view of family and sexual matters and a compassionate, activist approach to poverty and war. Yet there is such weak theology at the very heart of the church’s life (if any theology at all), that it is hardly surprising that no one needs to feel pressed to change her or his way of living in light of what the community believes and what it hopes. We expect others to become more like us because there is no common center of belief that puts pressure on us all.

“Conservatives” have a different problem in regard to heresy. They are often all too ready to heed the call to rally to the tradition. They do not see that this must be done carefully, not only to preserve legitimate freedom in the church, but even more so because doctrines are not tame realities, which will leave us unchanged and unchallenged. These persons are likely to favor “orthodoxy” in a dangerously nostalgic way, failing to see that all these doctrines protect and affirm the sovereignty of that God who judges all persons, and who is most unlikely to dismiss those who come into God’s presence with so simple a blessing as “keep up the good work” or “just stick to the old ways.”

The other worry that I have about those too quickly enthusiastic about a revival of the concept of heresy (however this might be institutionalized) is that they often fail to see how much damage can be done in a church when penal measures are used to enforce belief. Of course at times the church will have to draw the line sharply, even with disciplinary action, because persuasion has been exhausted and/or because the heart of the faith is so deeply threatened. But even then the “heretic” has a kind of victory in having set the agenda for the church.¹

The public’s perception of such a church can be most unfortunate when it comes to mission. The Reformation controversies about the Eucharist were serious indeed, and they have not completely been resolved today, even after some very fine ecumenical work in biblical foundations, history, and the

¹Kierkegaard saw this danger clearly: “The church ends, as it were, with the first century, since its history after that is designated by the names of the heretics.” Quoted from *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (7 vols.; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1967-78) 5:123.

theology of the sacraments. But to outsiders, with the passing of time, some quarrels about the Supper can appear less a way to confess right faith in Jesus Christ, and more a form of Christian pettiness.²

Therefore it seems clear that all parties in the church would do well to suspend immediate reactions that the term “heresy” conjures up and instead think together about how a community centered in the gospel can protect its message and have a common life based on that faith without having to submit to some form of heteronomous tyranny—whether of bishops and clergy, theologians, or church officials and boards.

To go deeper into the question of heresy today, I want to summon one of the great church theologians of the twentieth century—Karl Barth—to see what advice he might offer about

dealing with heresy. Then I want to return briefly to the practical question of how churches today might work with this dilemma.

II. KARL BARTH: FAITHFULNESS NECESSITATES DOGMATICS

Karl Barth struggled throughout his theological career against both dangers that we know today—undefined Christian identity, and fearful holding onto past orthodoxy. It was Barth's fate to be denounced by liberals as a foe of Christian liberty and by conservatives as a dangerous, revisionist theologian.

Barth treated the possibility of heresy in greatest detail in the second part of Volume 1 of *Church Dogmatics*. Especially in section 23, "Dogmatics as a Function of the Hearing Church," Barth spoke of the necessity of dogmatics for the church's life (and, in relation to this, of the negative possibility of heresy—a rejection of that faithful norm).

The glory of Barth's presentation is that he senses that the task of dogmatics (testing proclamation) is a heavy and often unhappy one for the church. It rests not in any special wisdom or capacity in the church, but in the need for faithfulness, which is guaranteed finally only by the promise of the Holy Spirit. And he knows that those who challenge the adequacy of the church's teaching generally cannot expect to be awarded a prize or thanks, but will find their efforts resented:

It is natural for man, and also for the church, to prefer to remain undisturbed in their proclamation....How can the Church like being told that at the first, or at latest at the second stage, it becomes guilty of a deviation, and therefore needs to pause and change direction from teaching to listening?³

To listen is the key verb for Barth in his entire presentation, for it reminds the church immediately that it is not a free, mature agent in dealing with the content of its proclamation, but at best the servant of the Word. Therefore the heart of dogmatics (and of the struggle against heresy) is a continual return to the Word, not only to specific key verses, but to the broad question of the con-

²Those who have forgotten Swift's description in *Gulliver's Travels* of the tensions between the kingdoms of Lilliput and Blefuscu over which end of the boiled egg to eat first are urged to remedial reading of "A Voyage to Lilliput" as soon as possible.

³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-69) 1/2:805.

tent of the Christian gospel. If the church aspires (as it should) to be a teaching church, that possibility is grounded in its being first, and continually, a listening church.

And this task of listening to the Word critically is one given to the whole church, not simply to theologians. Barth expects pastors to be concerned with dogmatics of listening and then teaching. The congregation is not excused from lack of competence. "What a misuse it is of the idea of the congregation to understand by it a ground of mere spectators privileged, or disqualified, as such!"⁴

In the second part of section 23 Barth goes on to indicate the marks of faithful listening that go with proper tending of the dogmatic norm. Listening to the Word is central, but this is not

a simple matter. Barth insists that true proclamation must have “a biblical character.”

By this he means that it is necessary to take the posture of the *witness* as distinguished from such other possibilities as observer, reporter, dialectician, or partisan. The burden of the message has not come from inner genius but from without. It is laid upon the church as a word that must be spoken, rather than a task freely, even lightly, undertaken.

This is difficult enough for the church. But in addition to hearing the Word in the Bible, the church must also maintain a “confessional attitude”:

The confessional attitude of dogmatics and Church proclamation means fidelity as required by the Word of God to the fathers and the confession of the Churches as the voice of those who were in the Church before us.⁵

This can never mean for Barth that a second principle—dogma and confessions—has equal standing alongside the Word. It is simply that those who read the Word rightly do so as part of a community, and do not seek the freedom to elevate their own views or age above that which has gone before. They are not “emancipated individuals” but part of “the hearing church.”

And this listening church must not only hear the Word with and through fathers, dogmas, and confessions. It must also listen to the church today in its concrete struggles and questions. It must be *church* dogmatics that results, rather than the free, unconnected work of individuals:

Seeing the problems, concerns, difficulties and hopes, which in this present hour claim and absorb the attention of Church administration (in the broadest sense), it must realize its absolute solidarity with the latter and think and speak from out of this absolute solidarity.⁶

Now what are the implications of this understanding of the positive dogmatic task for the negative necessity of struggling against heresy? The church, busy with the articulation of the faith for proclamation, will admit that heresy is possible, but it will spend *most* of its energy countering such a possibility through its struggle to articulate the gospel and help the preaching church. It will be slow to pronounce the words “heresy” or “heretic” and modest enough

⁴Ibid., 798.

⁵Ibid., 828.

⁶Ibid., 840.

to know that while it is necessary, the task of judging does not fall to dogmatics itself, but to the whole church, using every form of wisdom at its disposal.⁷

In other words, the best defense against heresy is a vigorous dogmatics. Woe to that church that feels that Gnosticism, or Arianism, or any of the other classic heresies are ancient history—far from us and impossible today! But the best defense against this possibility is not the structuring of some powerful teaching office, but the regular work of criticizing what the church proclaims:

We may boldly affirm that if dogmatics had always been on the watch and its

claim had always been heeded, there would have been no need for councils, anathemas, reformation and schism....In other words, the existence of an orderly church dogmatics is the unfailing, effective and only possible instrument of peace in the church.⁸

But Christians should not expect peace in the church at any price! Karl Rahner agrees with Karl Barth in acknowledging that the church owes much both to the various heresies and to the struggles to combat them. It is through this process of drawing limits that “the church learns to know more clearly its own truth by hearing and rejecting contradiction of its own truth.”⁹

III. SOME PROPOSALS TO THE CHURCHES FOR HERESY PREVENTION

Most readers of this essay probably have no official duties that would seem closely connected to the struggle with heresy in the church. A few are teaching theologians, of course, and some may be members of boards or commissions with doctrinal responsibility. But even if this paper will not propose new structures to deal with heresy in the various churches, it is possible to give some suggestions of how we might work to prevent heresy.

1. *Let the church value faithfulness rather than cleverness.* Kierkegaard suggested long ago the crucial difference between a genius and an apostle. Yet all too often the churches reward precisely those who attack the church’s teaching rather than those who defend it in an honest, open, and helpful way. Barth and Rahner were both theologians who helped the churches to see richness, depth, and fresh possibilities in the dogmatic tradition itself.

Many pastors’ groups could use a better balance of topics in their annual meetings, so that what is “new” in theology or in the church would not always be the focus of attention. All of us need to work throughout our lifetimes to continue to appropriate the doctrine of the Trinity or that of justification.

2. *Press public ministers more vigorously as to their knowledge of the dogmatic tradition and loyalty to it.* Recent ordination exams, at least in the Lutheran Church in America, have explored everything else but this commitment. It cannot be assumed that “seminaries take care of this.” Many of the most basic doctrines of the creed are under sustained attack in some church seminaries.

⁷Ibid., 811-12.

⁸Ibid., 807.

⁹Karl Rahner, “Heresy,” *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. K. Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975) 608. Rahner has written extensively on heresy; an especially helpful piece is “Heresies in the Church Today,” *Theological Investigations* (20 vols.; Baltimore: Helicon; New York: Seabury; New York: Crossroad, 1961-81) 12:117-24.

Barth is right to say that this task of faithfulness in teaching is too important to be committed to the clergy alone. But given the historical development of Christianity in the West, with the doors wide open to all who will come, public ministers must meet a high standard and exert themselves if there is to be any continuity in teaching.

3. *Try to learn from disagreements.* This is not easy. Only a few of us thrive on conflict. There is a kind of churchly fighting that soon destroys the delicate fabric of the church’s life. But in many denominations today the opposite danger prevails. There is such a sense that any real

controversy would be damaging to the church as institution that no attempt is made to rally persons beyond a common vision, even on the central doctrines of the faith.

Stephen Sykes has suggested that part of the fault here may lie with theologians themselves. Their work includes unacknowledged power dynamics which can lead them to expect the church to accept their proposals meekly rather than to disagree and debate their merits.¹⁰ Theologians cannot play the double game both of wanting to be able to make radical proposals (whether of a traditionalist or modernist sort) and of expecting that others who are committed to the faith of the church will necessarily agree.

4. *Let the church take theological proposals seriously.* There would be something strange about ending on a note of blaming theologians for the lack of conflict and vigorous discussion of basic questions in the church. While they do play into the problem in some of the ways that Sykes suggests, nevertheless their own illusions of theological control are generally met by an even more powerful reality of theological indifference.

It seems to me that churches with bishops, or their equivalents, must expect such leaders to play a particular role of seeing that discussion is not silenced. Such leaders may have a need to be peace keepers and limit setters at times, but they also bear part of the responsibility for apostolic continuity. This cannot be fulfilled simply by preventing trouble.

For in the end, in the strange working of the Spirit, the heretics have helped the church, although always at the price of conflict. But I cannot see another way. Neither church history nor life in the church today are really for the squeamish. Those who have come to understand that the church bears witness to *truth* (and not just to private or group experience) will be forced to admit that the topic of heresy is a crucial one. They will soon come to disagree, but must strive to do this in love and charity.

¹⁰Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), especially chapter 3.