



Well Intended Heresies

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What do we mean when we speak of heresy in the church? The English word comes from the Greek word for choice (*hairesis*), when one takes sides, hence choosing an opinion in opposition to a commonly held doctrine or rejecting a prescribed belief. Paul laments to the Corinthians that there are divisions (*schismata*) among the people when they come together for the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:18-19). They developed factions (*haireseis*), each claiming God's approval. Again Paul expressed strong judgment against factionalism when he wrote to the Galatians: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions (*dichostasiai*), factions (*haireseis*), and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (5:19-20). Paul's concern in both letters is that there be unity in the Spirit.

Throughout his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul pleads for agreement so that there may be no divisions and that the members of the congregation "may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1:10); quarreling is a sign of worldliness (3:3), for God is not a God of disorder but of peace (14:33). Paul also concludes his Letter to the Romans by urging them to watch out for those who cause divisions (*dichostasiai*) and put obstacles in their way, contrary to the teaching they have learned (16:17). And even to the peaceful congregation at Philippi, Paul pleads for being like-minded and one in spirit, requesting Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord (Phil 2:2; 4:2).

The word "heresy" occurs again in 2 Peter 2:1 and Titus 3:10. The author of 2 Peter warns against false teachers secretly introducing "destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them-bringing swift destruction on themselves." The author of Titus admonishes his readers to "warn a divisive person (*hairetikon anthronon*) once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him." Both of these passages are interesting in that they tell us what should be done with heretics. They should be left alone because they will destroy themselves. In their divisiveness they cut themselves off from

the living body and die like leaves in autumn while the tree lives on. There is no suggestion of punishment or persecution.

Differences of opinion and diversities of style are not heresies unless they result in schisms and disruption of the unity and order of the Christian community. What is at stake is not only acceptance of, or agreement with, a doctrine (2 Peter 2:1, Rom 16:17), but like-mindedness (1 Cor 1:10; Phil 2:2), unity in the Lord (Phil 2:2; 4:2), and oneness in spirit because of the ruling presence of the Holy Spirit (Jude 19). Therefore we may say that the New Testament speaks of

heresy as divisiveness of mind and spirit due to a choice which lacks the Spirit and denies Christ. Much pleading is enjoined for unity, but finally heretics are abandoned. It is expected that they will destroy themselves.

I. NEW TESTAMENT HERESIES

What were the New Testament heresies? The Gnostics and the Judaizers stand out above all. There were, of course, many different kinds of dissension in the early church. The church in Corinth was a veritable cesspool of disruption. Thus the congregation was reprimanded because it did not discipline a man guilty of gross immorality. Some members were dragging each other before secular courts to settle their disputes instead of resolving them in the spirit of Christ. Some broke the harmony of the community at the Supper of the Lord by irreverence, gluttony, and uncharitable behavior.

Some members of the congregation were committing fornication with prostitutes and justifying their actions by arguing that the body only was involved in such conduct and not the spirit. This was clearly a Greek dualistic notion that belonged to the great Gnostic heresy. There were also factions which denied Christ by exalting the wisdom and leadership of Paul or Cephas or Apollos so that the unity of Christ was destroyed. There was disorderly and unedifying behavior in the worship of the congregation in which some claimed gifts of the Spirit which were divisive. Paul had to remind the Corinthians, which he did with both profound irony and pastoral compassion, that any so-called gift that lacks love is a worthless denial of Christ and the Spirit. And finally at Corinth, some people denied the resurrection of Jesus and the possibility for the resurrection of anyone. This struck at the very heart of the Christian faith because the resurrection is the sign that reveals to us God's victory over sin, death, and the devil. All these quarrels derive from a Gnostic view of reality and result in a factious separation from the body of Christ.

The Gnostic heresy is also condemned in the Letters to the Colossians and the Hebrews, the Gospel of John, 1 John, and 2 Peter. The references in Colossians, John, and Hebrews (Col 1:16; John 1:3; Heb 1:2) to the creation of the world by Christ as the Son of God who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth are unified witness to the lordship of Jesus in diametric contradiction to the Gnostic spiritualism which denies the goodness of creation. The author of 1 John warns against false prophets and says: "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God" (4:2-3). Second Peter is also an epistle of faithful truth in the face of falsehood.

The epistle begins with a forthright statement of the truth of God as it is based upon both the prophetic Word and the witnessed Word. It warns against false teachers who try to substitute human words for this divine Word. It exposes the irony that those who cry loudest about the Spirit wallow deepest in the licentiousness of the flesh. Only the assurance of Christ's coming will destroy this evil world and bring a new heaven and earth.

The Judaizing heresy is most clearly exposed in the Letters to the Galatians, the Romans, and the Colossians. The Gnostic heresy lays claim to salvation by a pretense of knowledge; we are saved by knowing God and the truth. The Judaizing heresy lays claim to salvation by a

pretense of behavior; we are saved by what we do. Legalistic adherence to circumcision and ritual behavior were required by factions in the Galatian and Colossian churches (Gal 2:12; Col 2:11). Although Paul had not yet come to Rome when he wrote his letter, he must have been aware of the need for instruction on the liberation of the gospel and justification by grace through faith. Against all legalism the gospel proclaims the liberating good news that the God who judges us is the same God that justifies us. All people are condemned as sinners so that God may have grace on all (Rom 11:32). The gentiles sinned without the law, and they shall perish without the law. The Jews sinned under the law, and they shall perish under the law. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (3:10). The unrighteousness of humans is not overcome by the righteousness of humans but only by the righteousness of God. While humans are not excused from establishing justice (1:19-21), they are totally unable to procure justification and freedom from their bondage to sin. Even the best in human justice, even the highest human wisdom, government, science, art—indeed all things human, good or bad—are judged to be wanting, sinful, and doomed to decay. Neither a style of behavior for individuals nor a utopian scheme for society will bring us into the kingdom of God. Grace is as absolute as the God who gives it.

II. HERESY TODAY

What are the well intended heresies today? I speak of well intended heresies because, unlike apostasy, heresy always intends to be on the side of God. We do not burn heretics at the stake anymore, but should we let any teaching flourish even when it was repudiated centuries ago? Do we have to invent the theological wheel over again in each new generation? Practice is firm and slow to change, but the winds of doctrine blow hot and cold in all directions with quick and easy changes. Today it is far more dangerous to charge someone with heresy than to be charged. It must be said, however, that if the gospel liberates us from the tyranny of the law in practice and piety it also liberates us from rigidity of doctrine and theological construction. Therefore we can say that there are no heretical questions. The veil of the temple has been rent, and all things may be investigated. But there are nevertheless some things that are not edifying (1 Cor 10:23), and if these opinions deny Christ and the Spirit and also divide the believing community, they are heretical. The following six movements—literalism, historicism, deconstruction, liberation theology, feminism, and charismatic piety—have all disturbed the unity of the church. Do they

deserve to be called howling heresies, or are they merely partial truths that need not divide the church and may even help to reform it?

1. *Literalism.* With regard to literalism it seems evident that we must find a third position which will avoid a univocal hermeneutic for Scripture on one side and recognize the limits of deconstruction on the other. One of Luther’s distinctive reforms was the rejection of the hermeneutic of the medieval quadriga (the four meanings of a text: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical) and the affirmation of the plain, simple, historical, and grammatic sense of the text. It was good to avoid the “monkey tricks” of the quadriga, but Luther never fell into a wooden literalism that required a single meaning for every text, nor always a meaning that must be tied to the framework of history as empirically experienced. Since Luther did not contend with either scientific criticism or deconstruction, it is unfair to quote his denunciation of the quadriga to

establish literalism. Luther insisted that everything in Scripture, Old Testament and New, must be understood in terms of the story of Christ, and Christ is God's Son and Mary's son.¹ The story of God's Son has dimensions prior to history, above history, alongside history, and beyond history. The story of Mary's son is historical and is subject to canons of scientific criticism. But insofar as Jesus' story enters into the story of Christ, those canons cannot apply, because we are in the realm of faith and not sight. There are texts in the Gospels which signify things that are not historical. The baby in the manger is historical, but the virgin birth is not; the empty tomb is historical, but the resurrection has a dimension that goes beyond history. "[Christ] was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen" (Acts 10:41).

Literalism uses the text to support preconceived notions of reality and, therefore, ironically does not read the text in its contextual meaning. This is true for "scientific creationists," Zionists, and moralists who proof-text passages on homosexuality, among others. While science must necessarily be literalistic in its precision, there is nothing scientific about the biblical story of creation. All claims for special election and political privilege—whether Jewish, Muslim, British, Nazi, or American—or partisan—for the poor, the rich, Blacks, women etc.—are nullified by the Word of the Lord through the psalmist: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (24:1). Jesus said the sin of Sodom was inhospitality, not homosexuality (Matt 10:15); and Paul spoke not against homosexuality but against male prostitution (1 Cor 6:9) and against heterosexuals who idolatrously violate their own nature (Rom 1:24-27).

2. *Historicism*. It is interesting to see how extreme opposites among conservatives and liberals meet. Literalism and historicism become the same heresy. Conservatives want to reduce everything they believe to historical fact; liberals will not believe anything unless it can be demonstrated as historical fact. Faith becomes credibility, and the Spirit is denied. In this search for credibility theology has become indigent, borrowing ideas from neighboring disciplines in a frantic attempt to sustain its discourse and to masquerade as a science with pretense for intellectual respectability. This syncretism causes theology to draw

¹Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 22:339.

sustenance from secular visions. It began with the *logos* christology borrowed from Platonism and the substance metaphysics of Aristotle. It is prevalent today with liberation theology drawing from Marx, process theology from Whitehead, and narrative hermeneutics from deconstructionism. This is not necessarily bad, but there are limits when the secular discipline sets the agenda and makes the final judgment. In past time the secular categories were ancillary to theology, and their contributions were helpful, but today the dominance of the secular spirit has put theology in the service of secularism. Thus Tillich used psychological categories to redefine sin as anxiety and forgiveness as acceptance. Holding to an Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction as absolute, he denied the incarnation when he said: "The assertion that 'God has become man' is not a paradoxical but a nonsensical statement."² Bultmann did a similar thing when he redefined salvation as an existential decision.³ It all goes back to Schleiermacher who reduced christology to anthropology when he said: "For...as certainly as Christ was a man, there must reside in human nature the possibility of taking up the divine into itself, just as did happen in Christ."⁴

Feuerbach's charge against Schleiermacher still stands. As Barth said, you cannot speak of God by talking about man in a loud voice. You will have then only a *Brockengespenst*. Existence in itself is no basis for self-understanding. Only relationship with God in Christ, who is not myself, can give me knowledge of myself. Revelation, not intuition, is what we need. Revelation comes crashing in on us from without; intuition wells up from within. And when intuition is confused with concrete empiricism in order to refute obscurantist fideism, the absurdity of Dale Kohler's pursuit of a computerized proof of the existence of God in John Updike's novel, *Roger's Version*, is a typical result.

3. *Deconstruction*. Deconstructionists have developed a narrative hermeneutic in protest against both literalism and historicism. Deconstruction is the shattering of language as the mirror of nature.⁵ It is the insight into the metaphoricity of all discourse and the substitution of polysemic hermeneutics for univocal literalism. Since the text does not mirror reality, there is only a trace of reality signified in the text. Reality is always "other" than the text. For example, the word "dog" is governed by a code different from the life and force of the dog itself. The semantic dog can be mythological, biological, anthropomorphic, or divine; i.e., the meaning can be a celestial orb, my collie Tasha, Snoopy, or a graven image, but none of these meanings look, sound, or feel like the real dog. Yet the reality, repressed in the text, can always return through the seams and fissures in the text when the text is deconstructively displayed. The display is a dialectical performance overspilling the semantic achievement. The creation of meaning can be transformed into a dialectical theater by drawing the semantic achievement aside and displaying the reality that is necessarily repressed in the text. Memory and imagination come into play here. One can recover force only by violating the text and seeing in it what has been repressed, by seeing in the

²Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951-63) 2:94.

³Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 39.

⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 64.

⁵Charles E. Winquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 65. Also cf. Edgar V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

text an otherness that is absent. This is what happens when we call God Father. It is his name, not an attribute. The word conveys both what God is and what he is not. Thus we must avoid the simplistic reduction of literalism. This deconstructionist hermeneutic recognizes that we are living in a post-Enlightenment world whose reality has been described by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. When Marx said evil means one thing for the rich and another for the poor, and when Nietzsche said good means one thing for the strong and another for the weak, and when Freud said what appears to be rational is really a product of subliminal drives, they set the stage for deconstructionist hermeneutics.⁶

Unfortunately this otherwise salutary narrative hermeneutics has been used by deconstructionists like Thomas J. J. Altizer and others to foster the theothanatology of Nietzsche and the mysticism of Blake. There is nothing in narrative hermeneutics that requires attachment to deconstructionist mysticism. Nor do we have to adopt a structural phenomenology when we use narrative linguistics. Without losing the truth of a story construct of reality, we must find a way to avoid slipping into the secular heresies of the past century. If Christians want to speak to

our day with convincing force we must expose both the error of pious literalism and historicising secularism, and this can be done by proclaiming Jesus Christ the way Luther did, dialectically as the God-man. Thus the distinctive Lutheran contribution to heal these heresies is the dialectics of sin and grace, law and gospel, letter and Spirit, *deus absconditus-deus revelatus*, kingdom on the left and kingdom on the right, realized and future eschatology, *finitum capax infiniti*, and *simul iustus et peccator*.

Although we cannot go backward in history, we can revive what was healthy in our heritage. We are in a post-modern, post-critical era. The Enlightenment ran its course through Kant and Hegel to Whitehead. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud radically called into question “the great chain of being.” Our categorical agreement with being, affirmed in the Genesis creation story, is now denied. Not only is God declared dead, but the goodness of being is negated as well. Hence lying is affirmed by Marx, destruction by Nietzsche, and the subconscious by Freud. And in theology the deconstruction of Altizer, Derrida, Aicheles, McKnight, and Winqvist leads to the mystical negation of the difference between good and evil.

4. *Liberation Theology*. Political liberation theology has a variety of exponents ranging from the Black theology of James H. Cone and the universal humanist theology of Dorothee Soelle to the partisan Latin American theology of people like Gutierrez, Bonino, and Segundo. They all call for anew hermeneutic which finds meaning in Scripture from the particularity of the social, economic, and political situation. Gutierrez says, “The Latin American Church must make the prophetic *denunciation* of every dehumanizing situation, which is contrary to brotherhood, justice and liberty....In Latin America this denunciation must represent a radical critique of the present order, which means that the Church must also criticize itself as an integral part of this order.”⁷ Repeatedly Marx is quoted as saying that the business of philosophy is not to interpret history but to change it. Orthodoxy is therefore derived from ortho-

⁶Charles Winqvist, *Epiphanies of Darkness*, 63.

⁷Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973) 267.

praxis, and since there can be no pious waiting for justice in heaven, a revolution is needed to establish the liberation of people who are locked into a political and economic system that denies human dignity. How can one reconcile violence with a gospel of love? Segundo argues that real love in a sinful world must necessarily be selective. The violence that is necessary in establishing justice is not hatred, but a necessary mechanism “until we hit upon another combination of energy that will enable us to broaden our circle of love and bring new ‘neighbors’ into it.”⁸ This is the hermeneutic that justifies the revolution of the proletariat poor against the bourgeois rich in order to find a wider circle of love.

One salutary contribution of liberation theology is the renewal of the biblical understanding of the organic unity of the human person and the need to provide liberty to work out our salvation in wholeness. Another aspect, however, arouses a quarrel similar to that between Barth and Tillich: Do we begin with revelation or the human situation in formulating theology? Juan Gutierrez Gonzales faults Gustavo Gutierrez for beginning with historical praxis instead of the faith which comes from revelation.⁹ It should be obvious from the history of this quarrel that we have here a false dilemma. We cannot simply rest with either revelation or praxis. We must consider both since we are inevitably bound to the hermeneutical circle; but it makes a

difference which direction we travel in the circle, and the Lutheran must begin with the revealed Word of God.

Another problem concerns the dependence of liberation theology on Marxism. It has been said that the use of Marxist analysis of history and society is just as legitimate for our day as the use of Aristotle by Thomas. This may be true, but Marxism is militantly atheistic and it substitutes history for God in its hope for the future, confusing justice with justification. This truncates eschatology to an expectation of a temporal utopia. The mordant cynicism of Marx is here coupled with a jejune naivete.

5. *Feminism*. Not all female theologians are feminists, and many feminists intend to be fully orthodox. Feminist theology has also taken a variety of turns, but all forms derive from a common awareness of the historical oppression of women and anew protest against androcentrism. They say that our notions of God and humanity, the church and its ministry, are all shaped by a male bias because of our historically conditioned patriarchal social system.

Some feminist theologians, like Rita Gross, want a paradigm shift from androcentrism to androgyny.¹⁰ Gross assumes that all religion and culture have been androcentric. What is female collapses into the male because male is the norm and this makes female into an object. This is evident, she says, in language when we use masculine words generically, not only with reference to human relations but also when we speak of God. She wants to call God androgynous because she thinks people are androgynous. But her heresy is that she is creating God in our image because she has fallen into a hermeneutic of univocal literalism. Gender in language, of which there are three, can never apply literally to sex in reality, of which there are two.

⁸Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1976) 159.

⁹Juan Gutierrez Gonzales, *The New Liberation Gospel* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1977).

¹⁰Rita Gross, ed., *Beyond Androcentrism* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977) 7-21.

Mary Daly goes further and tries to develop a transcendental methodology which will extricate God from all anthropomorphism, both male and female.¹¹ She wants to define God as the Ultimate, as the ontological ground of Being. Moreover, she finds it extremely problematic for the transcendent Ultimate to incarnate itself in the person of Jesus, a male. Her Gnostic, antitrinitarian mysticism is obviously in line with Tillich and Boehme.

Naomi Goldenberg wants to return to a pragmatic polytheism which will restore worship of goddesses.¹² The congregation then becomes a coven, and liturgy is witchcraft. The old English word *wicca* means to weave, bend, or twist; and hence witches are wise women who weave spells and bend the world to their wills. While Goldenberg allows male deities in her pantheon and human males in her coven, she is clearly concerned to win a place of power for women. If power is the issue at stake in feminist theology, it has only a waxing and waning future. The gospel must necessarily liberate people from every kind of oppression, but if feminist theology and liberation theology are to have a lasting effect on the future they must be more than a political slogan. The love of God in Christ and the provoking guidance of the Holy Spirit bring prior protest and a truly liberating announcement which genuinely shapes our destiny within history and beyond. This means that when we construct our theology we must not make God in our image, male or female, rich or poor, as if God chose the Israelites because they were in bondage or as if he now chooses the poor because they are poor. God wants all—male and

female, rich and poor, Jew and gentile—to be saved from sin and death.

6. *Charismatic Piety*. In America the charismatic and fundamentalist evangelicals comprise the largest number of dissenters from what used to be called mainline Christianity. The ravenous and fraudulent voice of Simon Magus is heard again from the charismatics. They have much in common with the Gnostic trouble-makers of Corinth. Unlike the medieval clamor for indulgences and the apocalyptic fervor of the *Schwärmer* in Luther's day, the contemporary enthusiasts are grossly materialistic. They are not asking how to get a gracious God. They are not interested in justification by grace. They are asking how do I get health, wealth, and power here on earth. These religionists and the secularists are playing the same game, only one plays it with prayer at the PTL Club and the other plays it with blue chips on Wall Street. Falwell, Roberts, Swaggart, and Robertson are latter-day Tetzels selling material success. The reward for purchased prayers is not heaven but the satisfaction of earthly desires. Coupled with a highly individualistic personal piety, many of the electronic preachers have a strongly conservative political agenda. Their pitch is not a revolutionary appeal to the poor; they seek to conserve middle-class values and to sanctify the capitalist economic system. The blasphemy is not alone in seduction by the pitchmen; it is also in the religious zeal and greed of the millions of devotees. It is ironic that the same religious fervor should motivate the rich of North America and the poor of South America for opposite political goals.

¹¹Mary Daly, ed., *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 19.

¹²Naomi Goldenberg, *The Changing of the Gods* (Boston: Beacon, 1979).

It is possible that different political and economic systems will suit different countries because of a variety of circumstances. Such differences should not disrupt the unity of the people of God. So long as justice and peace are sought among people of good will according to the light of right reason, divergent methods of accomplishing these goals should not only be tolerated but encouraged. Heresy occurs only when people try to manipulate God, whether by prayer or by revolution, because such arrogance robs Christ of his grace.

But after all this has been said, perhaps the greatest heresy is the heresy of heresy, the choice of choice, the willingness to accept divisions in the church so that we can be comfortable in our several isolations. The need today is for all Christians to speak with one voice against the disrupting forces in both the church and secular society and for the redeeming power of grace through Christ.