

What is Heresy? What is a Heretic?
Circular Letter 2019
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2 Peter 1:16-2:3 (NKJV)

¹⁶For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” ¹⁸And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private ^[i]interpretation, ²¹for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. ²And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

“He that errs in any fundamental point, or in an essential of salvation, is an heretic, and without repentance cannot be saved.” Benjamin Keach, *An Exposition of the Parables*, 476.

The Word of God

The Scriptures are direct and explicit when they describe heresy to us. It is destructive and dangerous and must be exposed and resisted.

The Greek word translated *heresy* in our English Bibles has two senses in the New Testament. On the one hand, it describes a sect or party distinct from another group. For example, in Acts 5:17 the Sadducees are called a *sect*; in Acts 26:5, the Pharisees are designated in the same way, and in Acts 24:5 it is applied to Paul as a leader of the *sect of the Nazarenes*; he even acknowledges this in Acts 24:14. When Paul meets with Jewish leaders in Rome, they indicate that the Christian *sect* is “everywhere spoken against” (Acts 28:22). While the term may be used simply to describe a group (Acts 26:5), based on its use in Acts 5:17, 24:5, 28:22 and perhaps 1 Corinthians 11:18-19, it also seems to carry a negative connotation: the *sect* is a faction, separated from the main body over doctrinal or practical issues. The Sadducees divided over the doctrine of the resurrection, and Christians were distinct from Judaism by virtue of their faith in Jesus as Messiah. Opponents used the term to describe those who differed.

The other sense is strongly negative. Peter speaks of *destructive heresies*. In this case, heresy is malignant and deadly. It works its way into unsuspecting congregations and wreaks spiritual havoc in the lives of believers. Ultimately, it devastates churches. It is like a cancerous tumor which must be excised or death will inevitably result.

In our text, Peter contrasts the holy prophets of the Old Testament with false prophets, and indicates that, just as in the old covenant era, so now false teachers or prophets will invade churches with their terrible errors. We may notice three important features of Peter’s argument. First, he reminds his readers that he and his fellow apostles did not follow *cunningly devised fables* but were themselves *eyewitnesses of His majesty*. Their testimony about Jesus Christ is true, and should be received as factual, despite what opponents may say. Secondly, the Scriptures are confirmed. They were written by holy men who were moved by God’s Holy Spirit to record all that they contain. For this reason, they are trustworthy, and believers may with certainty receive and believe all that they say. Thirdly, these truthful Scriptures are not to be interpreted according to an individual’s private opinion, but publicly, according to

the voice of the Spirit speaking through them. The Scriptures teach one system of doctrine, not many. There is correct doctrine, and there is error or heresy, without any mixture.

For Peter, *destructive heresy* must be avoided and removed whenever it appears. It is taught by men who, like the false prophets of old, secretly bring in counterfeit doctrine, seeking to lead believers astray. Their dogmas only lead to destruction. These men seem to have plausible ministries, presenting themselves as Christian teachers, but they are especially dangerous and must be exposed. In his commentary on 2 Peter, William Ames contrasts the true prophets of 1:21, who followed the Lord and were instruments of revelation, with the false prophets who promoted heresy. Parallels in apostolic churches existed: there were true apostles who told the truth according to the Lord's words, and there were false apostles who led people astray. In the following verses, false doctrine always leads to licentious living.ⁱ

Is there a way to identify these men and their doctrines? Peter's contrast is the first and best way—we should ask, do their doctrines fit the teaching of Scripture? In this case, the false teachers undermine Scripture and its teaching about the Lord. They cleverly twist God's Word, bringing in their own personal interpretations. Peter points us to the deceptive ways of the false prophets of the Old Testament. Those men promoted idolatry and idolatrous worship in Israel, so much so that God's people were led to bow before the idols of the nations around them, forgetting and then rejecting the Lord who bought them and brought them out of Egypt by His powerful arm. The history of Israel is often an account of the success of false prophets. Peter says: "take heed and learn." This is the same message preached by our Lord Jesus: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15), and "many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (Matthew 24:11).

Peter's emphasis on the truthfulness of Scripture and clear understanding about the Lord is constantly repeated in the New Testament. Elsewhere, the same idea is present, even though the specific word *heresy* is not used.ⁱⁱ Like Peter, John writes about false prophets in chapter 4 of his first epistle,

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God,³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.ⁱⁱⁱ And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

These are strong words! To deny Christ's true humanity is the doctrine of Antichrist (see also 2 John 7-11). It is heresy.

Many of the epistles identify heresies. 1 Corinthians 15 speaks against a denial of the resurrection (cf. 2 Timothy 2:18). In Galatians, any attack on the purity of the gospel must be resisted. Salvation is without works, includes no personal merit, and is based solely on grace through faith in Christ and His work. Mingling anything with this pure gospel is heretical. In Colossians, mixing strange beliefs and religious rites from pagan religions or Judaism destroys the gospel. The Pastoral Epistles instruct Timothy and Titus to beware of attempts to mingle Judaism, mysticism, and idolatrous practices with wholesome faith (2 Timothy 1:13). Jude, like Peter, is full of warnings identifying heresy, and the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3) pinpoint serious profanations of truth. The Scriptures frequently describe the danger of heresy.

Our Confession of Faith

It will be no surprise that our Confession speaks against heresy. Two places deserve special notice, and they have a close relationship with each other.

In Chapter 25, *Of Marriage*, we read

25.3 It is lawful for (*e*) all sorts of people to Marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent; yet it is the duty of Christians (*f*) to marry in the Lord, and therefore such as profess the true Religion, should not Marry with Infidels, (*g*) or Idolaters; neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are wicked in their life, or maintain damnable Heresy. (e) Heb. 13. 4. 1 Tim. 4, 3. (f) 1 Cor. 7. 39. (g) Neh. 13. 25, 26, 27.

After teaching us that marriage is between one man and one wife, and that God gave it to us for our benefit, the Confession identifies the proper subjects for marriage. It is an institution that belongs to all people, and yet, for Christian believers, it involves some restrictions. They are to “marry in the Lord” and not with “infidels” or “idolaters.” The same provisions are then mirrored: those who profess faith must not marry anyone “wicked in life” or who maintain “damnable heresy.” These four commands follow something of an ABBA pattern.

A Infidels
B Idolaters
B' Wicked in life
A' Maintain damnable heresy

Infidels (A) in more modern language are unbelievers and largely parallel with those who hold “damnable heresy” (A'). They reject the truth and believe lies. “Idolaters” (B) are those who are “wicked in life” (B'). We remember that idolatry throughout the Bible is the root of sin—wickedness. Believers are forbidden to marry heretics.

Chapter 26.2 uses similar language to teach us who may be members of gospel churches. In essence, the same standards for Christian marriage apply in the church.

26.2. All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the Gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ, according unto it; not destroying their own profession by any Errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, (*b*) are and may be called visible Saints; (*c*) and of such ought all particular Congregations to be constituted. (b) 1 Cor. 1.2. Act. 11.26. (c) Rom. 1. 7. Eph. 1. 20, 21, 22.

In this paragraph, the canons for church membership are described, this time in an ABAB pattern:

A “Visible saints” are persons “professing the faith of the Gospel”
B And persons professing “obedience to Christ”
A' not destroying their profession by “errors everting the foundation”
B' or “unholiness of conversation.”

Those who meet these criteria are the constituents of “particular congregations.” The first two qualifications are positive and the second pair negative. If someone is able to express faith in Christ through the gospel and gives evidence of living in obedience to Christ, that person ought to be a church member. “Professing the faith of the gospel” points to an intelligent understanding of the foundational truths of the faith,” and “obedience to Christ” refers to a life seeking holiness. Conversely, if he or she holds heretical views—“errors everting the foundation,” or walks in a manner unworthy of Christ, that person must not be allowed to become a church member. The mirror image is plain. A church member must intelligently speak the faith of Christ without rejecting foundational doctrines and must live godly without a sinful lifestyle. The principles for Christian marriage and church membership are effectively the same.

In both chapters, a denial of the cardinal truths of the faith disqualifies a person from marriage with a believer and/or membership in a Christian assembly. But this requires asking the question, what are “damnable heresies” or “errors everting the foundation?” How may we determine and identify them?^{iv}

Our Fathers in the Faith

The circumstances of the publication of our Confession of Faith in 1677 contribute to our discussion.^v Prior to its publication, several elders from London Particular Baptist churches sought to rescue a former colleague, Thomas Collier, from serious heresies. One part of their efforts was to write a letter which identified the means by which to recognize heresy.^{vi} It states:

We think it necessary in a few words to give an account from the Scriptures what Heresie, or an Heretick is, and to consider whether *T.C.* hath not been proved guilty thereof.

For the first, We conceive that he is an Heretick that chooseth an Opinion by which some fundamental Article of the Christian Religion is subverted, which Religion before he profest, but now persisteth in this Opinion, contrary thereunto, notwithstanding proper means for his conviction hath been made use of; this description of an Heretick confirmed thus:

1. That it is the choosing of a new Opinion, the signification of the word *Heresie* doth evince, which is derived from a word that signifieth Election of Choice.

2. That it is not every new Opinion, but that only that is subversive of a fundamental Truth, will easily be granted, otherwise Men must be rejected for every mistake that they are not presently convinced of: which is contrary to the rule of Christ, and that love and forbearance Christians ought to exercise towards one another.

3. He only is properly termed an Heretick, that hath formerly profest the Christian Religion, because such a one is self-condemn'd, though perhaps not always in the present judgment of his Conscience, yet at least by his former Profession.

4. It is the persisting of such a Person in such an Heresie, after proper means hath been used for his conviction, that doth denominate a man to be an Heretick; for a weak Christian may possibly be surprised by Temptation, and the subtilty of Deceivers, into such an Opinion, as obstinately maintained, would destroy the faith of the Person, who yet flies from the Snare as soon as it is discovered to him.^{vii}

This balanced perspective is very helpful and shines light on the language of the Confession. A heretic deviates from the faith of the church by choosing a new opinion contrary to the received doctrine he has previously professed. Not every error is a heresy, only those which undermine foundational truths of the Christian faith. Those who persist in holding novel doctrines show, by their actions, that they are heretics.

The London elders proceed to identify some of Collier's heresies: he “subvert[s] the faith concerning the person of Christ,” denies that “the defilement of our nature is our sin” and the “true notions of sin and grace,” and “overthrows the fundamental article of eternal judgement” by asserting, among other errors, that eternal damnation only applies to those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, and that the punishment of some sinners “may perhaps not exceed an hundred years” along with many other strange notions. For these men, errors regarding the person of Christ (1 John 4), the nature of sin and grace (all of Galatians) and a rejection of eternal judgement (2 Thessalonians 2:3 ff.) are attacks on the foundations of Christian faith.

Another London Particular Baptist pastor, Benjamin Keach, lists some of the “great fundamentals of Christianity:”

The saving knowledge of God in Christ, the holy doctrine of the blessed Trinity, the mystery of the incarnation of the second Person, or hypostatical union of the two natures of the person of Christ, the great doctrine of Christ's satisfaction, reconciliation, and of justification by the

imputation of his righteousness to all that believe; or that the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone, (excluding all works done by us, or righteousness wrought in us) in the matter of our justification before the holy God; ... that it is Christ's obedience and righteousness only that is their title to heaven, though it is our inherent righteousness, and the sanctification of the Spirit, that tends to make us meet for it.^{viii}

In a different place he calls the distinction between justification and sanctification a "great fundamental truth of the gospel."^{ix} Describing one who stands before God on the Day of Judgement, he puts these words in his mouth:

I had right notions of the great fundamentals of the gospel; I saw that all men were lost in the first Adam, and that they were under wrath and the curse of thy holy law; and I saw no way to be saved, but by thy righteousness, and by the merits of thy blood; and thou didst give a full satisfaction to the justice of God, and that all that believed in thee should not perish, but have eternal life. Lord, I believed these things, I owned thee to be the Son of God, equal with thy Father, and understood wherefore thou didst become man, or assumed our nature.^x

The London pastors seeking to oppose Collier's errors, along with Benjamin Keach, reflect the teaching of our Confession and of orthodox post-Reformation theologians. A contemporary Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin of Geneva, after a long discussion of the importance of fundamental articles, provides a very similar list.

Fundamental articles can be derived from the declaration of Scripture. For those would certainly be considered fundamental the knowledge of which is called necessary and saving, and the ignorance or denial deadly. Such are the articles concerning the one and triune God, both positively (John 17:3) and negatively (1 Jn. 2:23); concerning sin (1 Jn. 1:10, Eph. 2:1); concerning the person, nature and offices of Christ (1 Cor.3:11; Acts 4:12; 1 Jn. 4:3; Eph. 2:11,12); concerning the gospel (Rom. 1:16, 17; Gal. 1:8,9); concerning faith (Heb. 11:6, Mk. 16:16); concerning justification without works (Rom. 3:27; Gal. 2, 3); concerning sanctification and the worship of God (Eph. 2:10; Heb. 12:14); and concerning the resurrection and eternal life (1 Cor. 15:14; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rom. 10:9).^{xi}

These observations assist us in understanding our Confession. Christian marriage and church membership must be restricted to those who confess these truths and walk according to them. Our fathers were not indicating that everyone must understand each of them, but rather that they must confess each of them without opposition or rejection.

When applying these principles, however, care must be taken. As expressed by the London elders, not every doctrine carries the same weight. Benjamin Keach recognized that there might be diversity in secondary matters: "Speak well of all your brethren who hold the head, or are sound in the faith, in respect of all fundamental principles, though not in every thing of your opinion in some points of religion: for peace among ourselves ought not to be restrained only to the members of that church we belong unto, but to all the saints, let them be Presbyterians, Independents, or Baptists."^{xii}

Conclusion

Scripture, our Particular Baptist fathers and Reformed theologians all recognized the deadly danger of heresy. It was not a matter to be treated lightly. Scripture condemns false prophets and teachers in no uncertain terms. Not every error should be considered heretical, but any that undermine the foundational truths of Scripture and Christian theology must be named heresy. Since it is deadly to souls, we do harm to multiple people when we fail to resist it. Allowing heresy to flourish is just like allowing a deadly

disease to spread through the population. It is a Typhoid Mary, infecting unsuspecting souls with lethal spiritual bacteria. As Paul says in Ephesians 5,

⁸For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹(for the fruit of the Spirit *is* in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), ¹⁰finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. ¹¹And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them*. ¹²For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. ¹³But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. ¹⁴Therefore He says:
“Awake, you who sleep,
Arise from the dead,
And Christ will give you light.”

Heresy is believing and promoting doctrines contrary to the foundational truths of Scripture, and a heretic is anyone who obstinately believes or promotes such doctrines. In obedience to the Word of God, we must be diligent to expose, refute and oppose heresy in every appearance.

For further reading:

Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

Appendix: George Gillespie on Heresy

George Gillespie, a Scottish Presbyterian commissioner to the Westminster Assembly published the following in his 1649 book *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions*. It is a helpful, careful summary of seventeenth century Reformed thinking on this matter. It reflects the same ideas present in our Particular Baptist fathers. The spelling has been modernized in this quotation.

Heresy is neither to be so far taken at large, as to be extended to every error, which may be confuted by Scripture, although happily such an error be too tenaciously maintained. Nor yet is it to be so far restricted, as that no error shall be accounted Heretical, but that which is destructive to some fundamental Article of the Christian faith, if by a fundamental Article, you understand such a truth without the knowledge and faith whereof, 'tis impossible to get salvation. When *Peter Martyr* defines Heresy, he makes no mention of a fundamental error, but of an error contrary to the Scriptures, *loc: com. class: 2. cap: 4. § 50*. So *Calvin: Instit: lib: 4. cap: 2. § 5*. understands all such to be Heretics, as make a breach in the Church by false Doctrines. *Walaeus, tom: 1. pag: 57*. saith, Heretical Churches do either err in the foundation, or only in some other things built upon the foundation. When *Peter* speaks of such Heresies, as take away the very foundation, *Jesus Christ*, he thinks it too little to call them simple Heresies, but he calls these *damnable Heresies*. But if you understand by fundamental truths, all the chief and substantial principles (I do not mean only the first Rudiments, or A, B, C, of a Catechism, which we first of all put to new beginners, but I mean all such truths as are commonly put in the confessions of faith, and in the more full and large Catechisms of the reformed Churches, or all such truths, as all and every one who live in a true Christian reformed Church, are commanded, and required to learn and know, as they expect in the ordinary dispensation of God to be saved,) in this sense, I may yield that Heresy is always contrary to some fundamental truth. 'Tis one thing to dispute of the absolute sovereign power of God, and what are the truths, without the belief whereof 'tis absolutely, and altogether impossible that one can be saved: Which question (I doubt) is hardly determinable by Scripture, nor do I know what edification there is in the canvassing of it: sure I am 'tis a question much abused. 'Tis another thing to dispute what are these truths, which in a Church where the Gospel is truly preached, all and every one, (come to years of knowledge and

discretion) and having means and occasions to learn, are bound to know, (and according to the revealed will and ordinary dispensation of God) must learn, as they desire or expect to have a true fellowship with Christ in the Sacrament of the Lords supper, or to be accepted of God, and saved eternally.^{xiii}

ⁱ William Ames, *An Analytical Exposition of Both the Epistles of the Apostle Peter* (London: Rothwell, 1641) 187-88.

ⁱⁱ We must be careful not to fall into the Word-concept fallacy. This error says that if a specific word, such as *heresy* is not present, the concept is not present either. But this fails to recognize that most terms have synonyms. The content of a sentence determines its meaning, not the presence of a particular word.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a textual variant here. The ESV reads simply “every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” Since verse 2 clearly includes language about Jesus’ incarnation, it is certain that verse 3 refers to the same thing, even with the textual omission.

^{iv} George Gillespie, a Scottish Commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, addressed the relationship between fundamental articles and a Confession of Faith. Because of the length of the quotation, it has been placed in an appendix.

^v See Samuel D. Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018), 174-181.

^{vi} Another means was the publication of Nehemiah Coxe, *Vindiciae Veritatis* (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1677) and the final measure was the publication of our Confession of Faith, also in 1677.

^{vii} “A Brief and true NARRATIVE of the unrighteous dealings with Thomas Collier, a Member and Minister of the Church usually assembling at *Southwick* in the County of *Wilts.*” Congregational Library, London. Transcribed by James and Lynne Renihan, November 18, 2014, 13-14.

^{viii} Keach, *Exposition of the Parables*, (London: Aylott, 1858 reprint) 262.

^{ix} Keach, *Parables*, 600.

^x Keach, *Parables*, 549.

^{xi} Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* Translated by James T. Dennison. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992) 1:52.

^{xii} Keach, *Parables*, 300.

^{xiii} George Gillespie *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh: Lithgow. 1649) 110 ff. Gillespie’s references are somewhat obscure. For Peter Martyr Vermigli, cf. The Peter Martyr Vermigli Library, Volume 1, *Early Writings* (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press and Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1994), 172; for Calvin see *Institutes* Book 4, Chapter 2, Paragraph 5; Waleus has not been translated into English. Both Vermigli and Calvin rely on Augustine.