

CHAPTER 8

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS

Theological threats to the church

As Francis L. Patton, the first president of Princeton Theological Seminary, once wrote, “We need discernment not only in distinguishing between truth and error but also between the truths of greater and those of minor importance” (*Fundamental Christianity* [1926], p. 141). We are commanded to fellowship with other believers in Christian unity. On the other hand, we are commanded to separate from and oppose those who teach false doctrine. In order to determine our own course of action in a particular situation, or in order to determine whether a church division is justified or is sinful, we must know which theological issues are involved. We must understand both the cause and nature of theological divisions, and the biblical teaching concerning schism, heresy, and religious apostasy.

This chapter of notes will show the Scriptural description of fundamental theological truths, and that the inspiration of Scripture and the implications of that inspiration are indeed fundamental to the Christian faith. It will also show how various other truths rank in importance for individual Christians and churches and denominations.

NT terms for schism and heresy

There are two major terms employed in the NT to describe a division in the visible church, “schism” and “heresy.” These terms reveal two different causes for division in the church.

Schism

sci/sma *schisma*, occurs 8 times in NT

“Splits in the community caused by personally motivated disputes” (*TDNT* 1:183)

- Used literally, “tear” in material (Matt 9:16 = Mark 2:21)

- Division of opinion (John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19)
- Division in a local church (1 Cor 1:10; 11:18)

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Cor 1:10)

“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.” (1 Cor 11:18)

We note here that the divisions in the church of Corinth do not seem to be based on doctrinal differences, but on personality conflicts and personal loyalties to the various leaders (Paul, Peter, Apollos, “Christ”).

- Divisions in the church in general (1 Cor 12:25)

“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” (1 Cor 12:24-25)

God’s goal in forming the church is that it will not have these divisions, but will be united in its exercise of the various spiritual gifts, with each member seeking to help the others.

It appears that a schism is the result of personal pride and worldly attitudes on the part of the members. Instead of seeking to help each other, they are seeking their own pleasure or prominence. If other members do not recognize them and follow their lead, they are ignored or rejected, thus introducing this division in the church.

In today’s context this principle still holds. When a church is divided because of personality conflict or frustrated attempts at leadership or other jealousies, the division can be called schismatic. Church membership today is taken too lightly. There are too many churches anxious to take in disgruntled members of other churches, without demanding efforts at reconciliation. The schismatic spirit of the day is making our churches competing clubs, resulting in worship which seeks to entertain and please man, rather than to glorify God.

Heresy

ai{resiv *haireisis*, occurs 9 times in NT

From ai`re/omai *haireomai*, to choose

- In Acts, as in Josephus (*Life* 12) and elsewhere, the term is used in the neutral sense of “school” (related to the Hebrew /y1m *miyn*)

Acts 5:17, sect of the Sadducees

Acts 15:5, sect of the Pharisees

Acts 24:5, sect of the Nazarenes

Acts 24:14, which they call a sect (Christianity)

Acts 26:5, the strictest sect of our religion (Pharisee)

Acts 28:22, this sect (Christianity) is spoken against

- In Paul’s epistles the term has a more negative connotation. Here it never describes Christianity as a whole, as Tertullus did in Acts, but a particular party within Christianity claiming to be Christian. This is division introduced into the church on the basis of false teaching or doctrine, the idea of a sect or party.

1 Cor 11:19, “there have to be differences (heresies) among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (this use parallel to schism in v. 18)

Gal 5:20, “acts of sinful nature . . . selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (heresies)”; these people are lost (v. 21)

Titus 3:10, “Warn a divisive person (ai`retiko/v *hairetikos*, heretic, personal noun form) once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.”

- Peter speaks of those who teach non-Christian doctrines in terms of the result of those teachings:

“There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.” (2 Pet 2:1)

The article in *TDNT* (1:183) shows that heresies are more serious than schisms: “The greater seriousness consists in the fact that heresies affect the foundation of the church in doctrine (2 Pet 2:1), and that they do so in such a fundamental way as to give rise to a new society alongside the church.”

“These (heresies) were more serious than the temporary partyism that sprang from attachment to favorite leaders (1 Cor 1:12). They represent real differences in the point

of view from which the new faith was apprehended” (Hastings *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* 6:615).

In essence, a heresy would destroy not only the unity of the church, but the ground of that unity. It would make the church itself a party.

“And so we believe in a Church which is holy but which is also Catholic. For heretics and schismatics also give the name of churches to their assemblies. But heretics, because of their erroneous doctrines about God, do harm to the faith, while schismatics, through their malicious divisiveness, abandon fraternal charity, despite believing what we believe. For this reason a heretic does not belong to the Church, because he loves God, nor does a schismatic, because he loves his neighbor.”

— Augustine, *Faith and the Creed*, in *On Christian Belief* 10.21 (*The Works of Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 1/8, p. 171)

Words showing the essence of heresy: unbelief, apostasy

Heresy is grounded in a rejection of the Christian apostolic tradition. This rejection may be outright, in the form of unbelief, or subsequent to profession, in the form of apostasy. In either case, the result is false doctrine or practice which, if permitted in the church, necessarily will divide the church.

Unbelief

- Verb form *a'pisteu/w apisteuo*, to not believe, used 5 times in NT plus 2 times in long ending of Mark

Can refer to not believing people or facts:

[Mark 16:11], did not believe Mary

Luke 24:11, did not believe the women

Luke 24:41, did not believe for joy

Can refer to not accepting or believing the gospel:

[Mark 16:16], those who do not believe will be condemned

Acts 28:24, some believed not

Rom 3:3, some [of the Jews] have not had faith

Can refer to Christians doubting:

2 Tim 2:13, if we do not believe, he remains faithful

- Noun form *a'pisti/a apistia*, unbelief, 11 times in NT plus 1 time in long ending of Mark

Matt 13:58; 17:20; Mark 6:6; [16:14]; Rom 3:3; 11:20, 23, all these refer to the Jews' not believing in Jesus

Mark 9:24, father of boy with deaf and dumb spirit

Rom 4:20, not true of Abraham (therefore justified, v. 22)

1 Tim 1:13, Paul before his conversion

Heb 3:19, the Jews in the wilderness (cf. professing Christians falling away, Heb 3:12)

- Adjective form *a)pistov apistos*, unbelieving, 23 times in NT

Matt 17:17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41, unbelieving generation of the Jews

Luke 12:46, wicked servant: disregards his master's return; assigned a place with the unbelievers

John 20:27, doubting of Christian; Jesus to Thomas, "stop doubting"

Acts 26:8, Paul to Agrippa: incredible that God should raise the dead?

1 Cor 6:6; 7:12, 12, 14 (twice), 15; 10:27; 14:23, 24; 2 Cor 4:4; 6:14, 15, all these passages refer to non-Christians in general

1 Cor 14:22 (twice), those without faith in God

Rev 21:8, the unbelieving and others cast into hell

The usage of these words relating to belief or faith proves that faith is a prime requirement for salvation and participation in the church (cf. Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 15:11; Heb 11:6). "Kerygma and faith always go together" (*TDNT* 6:209). In some of the usages Christians have unbelief, but in each case it is not rejection of Christian doctrine, but doubt as to their circumstances. These lapses in the Christian are viewed as temporary and incomplete. In most cases unbelief denies the person the right to be even considered as a Christian.

Apostasy

This is a rather wide-ranging term which can refer to simple departure to religious or political rebellion.

- Verb form a'fi/sthmi *aphistemi*, depart, used 14 times in NT plus 1 time in a variant reading in 1 Timothy:

Luke 2:37; 4:13; 13:27; Acts 12:10; 15:38; 22:29; these references describe physical departure; in some cases (involving the devil in Luke 4, hypocrites in Luke 16, John Mark in Acts 15, and the tormenters in Acts 22) the departure is not necessarily a friendly one

Luke 8:13, spiritual apostasy in parable of seed on rocky soil; in time of temptation they fall away

Acts 5:37, Gamaliel speaks: draw away disciples (in revolt)

Acts 5:38, Gamaliel again: leave men alone

Acts 19:9, after Jews in Ephesus synagogue oppose gospel, Paul departs from them, takes disciples out to lecture hall of Tyrannus

2 Cor 12:8, prayer for disease to depart from Paul

1 Tim 4:1; Heb 3:12 (cf. 2:1); these verses speak of departing from the true faith, capitulating to false beliefs and heretics; in Hebrews this spiritual apostasy is the result of “a sinful, unbelieving heart”

1 Tim 6:5, many later MSS add the injunction “from such as these turn away” (UBS omits with an {A} rating); this usage of the word would be similar to Acts 19:9, above

- Noun form a}fixiv *aphiksis*, departure, 1 time in NT

Acts 20:29, “after my departure,” may refer to Paul’s leaving, or to his death

- Noun form a'postasi/a *apostasia*, departure, rebellion, 2 times in NT

Acts 21:21, Jewish accusation against Paul: “you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses [lit. ‘you teach apostasy from Moses’], telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs”; accusation of apostasy from the law of Moses

2 Thess 2:3, man of lawlessness not to be revealed unless the “apostasy” comes first; NIV, ESV: “rebellion”; probably refers to Antichrist’s attempt to displace God

Some understand this passage to be referring to the “departure” of the church at the Rapture, referring to 1 Thess 4. However, this interpretation seems unnatural, and is rejected by even most pretribulationists. The negative idea of rebellion against God is more in keeping with the context.

In addition to its NT usage, this group of words is found frequently in the LXX, where the idea of rebellion against God or other authority is common (see *TDNT* 1:512-13). Here are some OT types of usages:

- Political revolt or rebellion

Gen 14:4, revolt of five kings against four

2 Chr 21:8, revolt of Edom against Judah

- Religious apostasy

Deut 32:15, Song of Moses: “Jeshurun . . . abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior”

Josh 22:18-19, 23, accusation against 2½ tribes after building altar, “if you rebel against Yahweh . . . do not rebel against Yahweh or against us”

Dan 9:9, Daniel’s confession: we have rebelled against God

Isa 30:1; Jer 3:14, used as adjective, “rebellious children” of Israel

- Equivalents to apostasy in the text:

Deut 7:4, serving other gods

Deut 9:23, being disobedient to God’s commands

Deut 32:15, forsaking God

Thus the two terms “unbelief” and “apostasy” show in their use the cause of division due to heresy. There is at base a disloyalty to God and his Word. By its very nature this rebellion against God is contrary to a Christian testimony.

Reaction to heresy in the NT

Since the word “heresy” was related in its usage to the Jewish or Greek philosophical schools, it was natural that the term would be applied in a negative way to false doctrine coming into the church from those quarters. Jewish schools tended to deny the deity of Christ (cf. the Ebionites), while the Greek schools tended to deny his humanity (cf. the Gnostics, esp. the Docetists).

In the NT there were several types of heresy exposed and warned against. These beliefs, if accepted, would negate the Christian faith.

Denial of the deity or humanity of Christ

While some features of the Gnostic heresy were developing in NT times, it was not full-blown until the second century. Even so, those features that were present were soundly condemned in the NT, and were considered not a variety of Christianity, but anti-Christianity.

In general the Gnostics believed that spirit was good and matter was evil. Hence they denied the human nature of Jesus Christ. They often rejected the OT and parts of the New Testament; however, they added their own texts, including the so-called Gospel of Thomas. Their attitude toward matter led them to practice either asceticism or wanton indulgence.

In Paul’s time some of these ideas were attacking the churches in Asia, and Paul wrote against such ideas as “secret knowledge” for Christians, the mystery cultus idea, and the practice of asceticism/license:

Col 2:8, 16-23; cf. 1:15-23; 2:15

Eph 1:19 - 2:6; 3:9-10; 4:14

John the apostle attacked them even more vigorously at the end of the century:

1 John 1:1-3, belief prerequisite for fellowship

1 John 2:18-27, esp. v. 22

1 John 4:2-6, esp. vv. 2-3

2 John 10-11; cf. v. 7

We note that John considered these teachers as antichrists, of the same nature and impelled by the same spirit as the coming Antichrist. What we know from Polycarp and Irenaeus about John’s attitude toward the heretic Cerinthus, fits with his scriptural warnings (*Against Heresies*

3:3 [ANF 1:416]). Irenaeus remarks in that passage that the apostles and their disciples would refuse even to converse with heretical teachers.

Different way of salvation

Paul's warnings to the Colossians, referred to above, included the dangers of seeking circumcision as a means to please God. However, his strongest denunciations are in Gal 1-2 (cf. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, pp. 21-25; expanded in his *Notes on Galatians*). In this section, those who teach a way of salvation which is contrary to the gospel are called "anathema." They are not to be received in Christian fellowship. Christians are not even to receive an angel from heaven, or even Paul himself, if he comes with "another" gospel. In fact, Paul says he wishes these false teachers were "cut off" (5:12). Any false gospel which, if followed, would lead a sinner on to hell, must be opposed might and main. There can be no compromise in this area.

Denial of the future resurrection

Some misunderstood some of the details and timing of the future resurrection; these ones Paul taught patiently (1 Thess 4). Others were shaky in their faith or understanding, and questioned whether there could be a resurrection, and if so, what kind of a resurrection it would be; these ones Paul taught strongly, showing that the alternative was the destruction of the whole Christian religion (1 Cor 15).

While Paul showed patience in teaching those who had questions or misunderstandings about the resurrection, he had no patience for those false teachers who denied the future resurrection. Rather, he named them and exposed these false teachers, so that the saints would not be led astray; the resurrection was a central part of the gospel (2 Tim 2:8, 17-18).

The Nicolaitans—idolatry and immorality

The exact teaching of this group, condemned by Jesus and John in Rev 2:6, 15-16, is not known certainly. It appears in the context of these letters to Ephesus and Pergamum to be a group which taught and practiced that it was permissible to eat food offered to idols and to commit immorality; the letter to Pergamum also mentions allowing the "teaching of Baalam." This seems to be related to the condemnation given to the church in Thyatira for allowing "Jezebel" to teach in their church (Rev 2:20). In this case, strong condemnation is given to those churches which tolerate teaching and practice which is immoral or compromises with idolatry. The church which "hates" such false teaching is praised (2:6). A good example of turning from idolatry is the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess 4:1-3).

Note the aspect of the Apostolic Tradition in 1 Thess 4, regarding the Christian life, shown by the Greek words *paralambano* and *parangellia*. (The *para* prefix intensifies

the words, referring to officially receiving the conveyed instructions, recognizing the resulting official authority of those instructions).

“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” (1 Thess 4:1-3)

Denial of the apostolic tradition or apostolic authority

Paul often mentions the gospel and the Christian way of life as a “tradition,” which a true Christian must accept. This includes, of course, the authoritative Scriptures (OT, and NT as it was being written; cf. 2 Pet 3:16). It also includes the official teaching or “tradition” (Greek noun *para/dwsiv paradosis*), which was “handed down” and “received” (Greek verbs *paradi/dwmi paradidomi* and *paralamba/nw paralambano*). This teaching contains the gospel truths (1 Cor 15:3-8; 11:23), and the Christian ethics (1 Thess 4:1-2; Col 2:6). Those who denied this apostolic authority are severely censured (e.g., Gal 1, 5; 3 John 9-11).

Summary

Those doctrines which are adequate cause for opposition and division which are named in the NT can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Doctrines which teach an inadequate view of Jesus Christ, as the God-man (esp. 1 John 2)
- 2) Doctrines which deny the need for salvation, or which deny the true way of salvation (esp. Gal 1, 5)
- 3) Doctrines which deny the second coming of Christ and the resurrection (1 Cor 15; 2 Tim 2)
- 4) Doctrines which approve idolatry or immorality (Rev 2-3)
- 5) Doctrines which deny the authority of Scripture, either OT or the apostles in the NT (esp. Gal 1-2 and 3 John)
- 6) In other words, doctrines which would lead their followers to hell (2 Pet 2:1-3)

It should be noted that this list does not include any possible heresy. The principle applies that other doctrines, equally important, also qualify as essential to orthodox Christianity, and that their denial would constitute heresy.

Comparison with denominational distinctives

While we are told to avoid and oppose heretics, we are also commanded to have fellowship with true Christians who are obediently serving God. Since we have many denominations of Christians today, we must distinguish those differences which are allowable from those which are caused by heresy. A balanced approach is offered in the *Form of Government* of the Bible Presbyterian Church, ch. 2:2-4:

“2. The catholic visible Church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.

“3. This catholic visible Church has, in God’s providence, become divided into bodies commonly termed denominations or churches. Such bodies, whether local, national, or international, which in their creed and practice hold fast to the historic Christian faith, which require for admission into their communion what Christ requires for salvation, and which subordinate their authority to that of the Word of God are true Churches of Christ, despite differences in government or in matters not essential to the faith which may have caused their separation from others.

“4. The Bible Presbyterian Church declares itself to be a branch of the catholic visible Church of Christ and further declares its willingness to hold Christian fellowship with all other such branches of the Church.”

Note the qualifications for a true church mentioned here:

- 1) Hold historic Christian faith
- 2) Salvation required for admission
- 3) Subordinate their authority to Word of God

Although many churches qualify on these three points, yet there still are many differences which the denominations have. These differences can be caused by a number of factors:

- History, culture, language
- Doctrinal differences in Bible interpretation

An interesting example of the underlying unity among competing evangelical theologies is shown by B. B. Warfield’s remarks as he reviews and criticizes Hastings’ *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*. He blasts the Pelagianism and liberalism shown in the articles of some Presbyterian writers, and continues: “We

have sometimes fancied that it is the men of these better traditions who have fallen most hopelessly under the newer ‘reduced’ influences. We were glad, accordingly, to see that the article on the Freedom of the Will has been committed to a good Wesleyan, Prof. W. F. Lofthouse. When we read it, we were gladder still. We may not agree with everything Prof. Lofthouse says; but there is nothing shallow here. The article is written not only with solid learning but with true insight, and at least touches the full truth. Prof. Lofthouse knows not only his own philosophy but his Paul. His article is like an oasis in a dry land.”

(*Critical Reviews, Works* 10:452)

- Church government differences
- Differences in worship

Regardless of these differences between evangelical denominations, there is an underlying unity of the fundamental Christian faith and submission to Scripture. We can be thankful that God does maintain his church, in spite of our sins and failings. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* expresses this wonderful truth as follows (25:4-5):

“4. This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

“5. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will.”