

Heretic! 4 approaches to dropping H-bombs

Imagine that you're talking to a Christian friend of yours, someone with a lot of theological opinions. He says something, and you think to yourself, "That sounds *off* to me; I never heard *that* before." You even start to wonder, "Is this guy a heretic?" And eventually, your trigger finger starts to itch. You start to ask yourself, "Should I tell this guy he's a heretic, or publicly denounce him as a heretic?" I suggest that first you should ask yourself why and how such an accusation might make sense.

Let us start with a few definitions. *

A heretic is one who commits the sin of heresy.

Heresy (claim or belief) is that because of which a heretic is such.

A heretic commits heresy (sin) by means of a heresy. (claim or belief)

The primary concept or idea here is that of a certain kind of sin - heresy as an action which is sinful. But what does it take to commit that sin? We need to know the definition of this sin of

“heresy.” What this definition is, and whether or not it is well-defined, is going to vary by the Christian group. *

For their part, Roman Catholics have an official and carefully considered definition. According to this, ***heresy is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same...**¹

First, notice that only a baptized Catholic can commit this sin. Protestants and other non-Catholics - sorry, you can't commit the sin of heresy, so you can't be heretics! You can commit the sins of apostasy and schism, but those are a story for another day. Second, note the all-important term “obstinate.” What does it take to have a belief or doubt obstinately?

I take it that one must have been confronted by a bishop or his representative, and refused to budge. Sociologist Rodney Stark has observed in a couple of books the practical aspect of this. If the Roman Catholic church doesn't consider you or your teaching or your group to be a threat, it will simply decline to confront you. And because they have not confronted you, you are not a heretic, you have not committed the sin of heresy. In this way, the Roman Catholic Church has simply absorbed many people in its churches and monastic communities who believed and taught things contrary to official doctrine. It chose

¹ And: “apostasy is the total repudiation of the Christian faith; schism is the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him.”
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGL104/___P2H.HTM
Canon 751 (cf. Catechism section 2089)

not to make them heretics by choosing not to confront them. By their official definition, no one is a heretic until after they're confronted, and then only if they refuse to yield.

The lay Catholic lacks the authorization to declare anyone a heretic. If you're a Roman Catholic, and you want to go by the book, it looks like all you can do is to complain up the chain of command. Tell your priest, or write a letter to your bishop.

But maybe you're Catholic and you don't want to go by the book. In fact, there is another unofficial but longstanding tradition, begun around the end of the second Christian century. This is to listen to your friend, the one with strange theological opinions, and then consult a manual of heresiology, find a claim which sort of, more or less sounds like him, and then denounce him using the provided label. He'll end up being a "Sabellian," an "Arian," a "psilanthropist," and so on. Never mind whether or not you really understand those terms, or the disputes in which they were coined by those who ended up on the Catholic side of the argument.

But beware. These manuals were and are assembled by self-appointed heresy-hunters, self-appointed protectors of the universal faith. * The first known heresiologist was the Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon, writing his *Refutation of Knowledge Falsely So Called* in about 180. Patristic scholar Dr. Mark Edwards says about this book of heresies that it is "perhaps the only one from the patristic age whose arguments against the rejected doctrines are not wholly devoid of intellectual or forensic merit." (*Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church*, p. 42) These manuals provide an illusion of understanding and completeness. All the heresies, they suppose, derive from named heresiarchs, are obviously wrong, and are easily refuted. The problem is, historians now know, these stories about the origins of heresies are often

inaccurate and distort the teachings of the people in question. Essentially, this method is pigeonholing every theological opinion you disagree with using traditional but unclearly defined terms derived from alleged heresiarchs.

This is not the way of sober truth-seeking. It is a way for the intellectually lazy to convince themselves that they've mastered the range of all allegedly Christian teachings, and that they've acquired the skill of distinguishing the true from the false. And it's a way for the ambitious and the contentious to cause a ruckus by denouncing people using loaded traditional language. This genre usually stays within the realm of polemics, which is to say, the realm of typically mean, unfair, and poorly-argued public controversy. In any case, the Catholic church has not left the matter of making heretics to self-appointed heresy hunters.

But, you say, "I'm not Catholic, but Protestant."* Protestantism, we all know, doesn't have some one organization, or one set of ruling bishops. Thus, Protestants can't define the sin of heresy as essentially defying the correction of the bishops. A Protestant Christian might be in defiance of one ruling body, say the Southern Baptists, but not another, say the United Methodists. And thus, one might be a heretic relative to one but not the other. If a heretic is one who commits a sin of heresy, and this is essentially defying the correction of some leadership, then relative to one organization, one may be a heretic, but not relative to another organization. But this whole tradition of talking about heresy and heretics doesn't grant that heresy is relative to a group. Irenaeus, for instance, didn't grant that they was a heretic relative to the Marcionites or the Valentinians.

Thus Protestants, it seems to me, tend to make the concept of a heresy as a claim or belief (or lack of belief) primary. Talk of a person as a heretic or as committing the sin of

heresy only makes sense in a judicial context, for instance, in a heresy trial conducted by a denomination. These are fairly rare. Confrontation by a church official largely drops out of Protestant thinking, or at least, it is not front and center. Protestants, generally, prefer to think that a person is a heretic simply by teaching or believing (or not believing) certain things.

Also, it seems to me that the main bulk of Protestants have in practice embraced the pigeonholing method, the approach of heresiology, which is so hopelessly polemical. They tend to adopt the same heresy-labels as were developed by bishop-ruled catholic Christianity in mostly the third through the fifth centuries. Thus, they in practice rely on heresiologists, be they seminary professors, independent apologists, or enthusiastic jousters on the internet. And frankly, this includes traditions of slandering and hating these targets of denunciation. These traditionally went hand in hand with brutal governmental persecution of alleged heretics, but in modern times both Catholics and Protestants have come to believe in freedom of religion. Thank God for that!

Speaking of enthusiastic jousters, Protestants are also painfully aware that heresy-hunting easily gets out of hand. Certain people love to accuse, and habitually go off half-cocked. Accusations serve to burnish the image of the accuser as a Defender of the Faith, and a person will get a self-righteous thrill at calling out the alleged intellectual sins of others. Human evil is all too quick, experience shows, to seize onto traditions of dropping H-bombs use them to devastate and divide Christian communities.

Because of this great danger, nearly all-Protestants realize that not just any false teaching should count as heresy. Maybe a person has his own idiosyncratic scheme of

reconstructing Jesus' life, and believes that Jesus was 45 when he was crucified. This, most thoughtful Protestants would think, is false, but not worth denouncing as heresy. After all, to declare someone a heretic has another practical aspect; you are saying that this person, unless they repent of their serious sin, should be excluded from Christian fellowship. Roman Catholics will, when they choose, excommunicate a heretic. Protestants will kick a declared heretic out of their church or denomination.

Heresy, then, is deadly serious business. It concerns our intimate friendships with fellow Christians. And it may concern the salvation of the heretic or those whom he teaches. * The common move here by Protestant theologians and apologists is to distinguish essential from non-essential doctrines. It is only by not believing or denying an *essential* doctrine that one becomes a heretic. The idea is that one may err concerning non-essential beliefs and still be a Christian in good standing. But as to the essential ones, they all must be believed, and none may be denied. In this way, we won't have to declare every person with an oddball opinion to be a heretic, but we can root out the dastardly so-and-sos mentioned in traditional heresiologies.

* But what does "essential" mean? It does not merely mean "important." An "essence" of something is a defining feature of it, a feature without which that sort of thing can't exist. It is essential to a triangle to have three sides. Arguably, it is essential to a quantity of water that it contains hydrogen and oxygen atoms. An essential feature or property is one that its owner can never, in principle, exist without having. It is a defining property. A thing may come into existence, or go out of existence, but at every moment of its existence, it must have all of its essential properties. This is just part of the idea of an essential property.

* Thus, if a doctrine is *essential* to Christianity, then no one is a Christian unless he believes that doctrine. And as long as there has been any Christian community, it has taught that essential doctrine. Christianity, the system of belief, the true theology, contains it as a core, defining part, if it is an essential doctrine. And any group that ceased to teach, or taught against that doctrine would be at best defectively Christian, if not pseudo-Christian.

A teaching, then, can't be brand-new, only recently minted, if it is an essential doctrine. If it's really essential, it must have been there, right at the very heart of the faith, right in the beginning, and in the minds of true believers ever since. The early theologian, apologist, and heresiologist Tertullian of Carthage understood this point, and used it as a weapon against the gnostics in the first half of the third century. Their teachings, he argued, were newly minted, but mainstream Christian teachings have been taught since the apostles, since there have been Christians, which is shortly after Jesus' resurrection. Unfortunately for Tertullian, he was, as Shakespeare said, "hoist with his own petard," which is to say, roughly: fragged with his own hand grenade. Many of Tertullian's own central teachings about God and Jesus were not taught in the earliest days. But the same point applies to present-day Catholic or Protestant apologists who argue that the Trinity or the two natures of Christ are essential doctrines, which therefore have always been taught by Christians. This is demonstrably not so. No Christian confessed belief in a tripersonal god until some time in the 4th century. And no Christian confessed the two natures of Christ in its official, required form until the council of Chalcedon in 451, although clashing speculations about Christ being divine and human began in the second Christian century.

Still, it is surely correct that Christians may disagree about some things, and not only styles of music or politics but even theological matters. And surely, there is, in the “faith once delivered to the saints” a core, a set of essential teachings, the acceptance of which is the basis for Christian community.

But notice that we’ve only made a formal point, that in theory, some teachings will be essential and others not, and only the essential ones are required to be in our community. Fine. But which teachings are those, exactly? The second we ask this, we will realize that it will be controversial which beliefs are and are not essential, and it will be immediately unclear who gets to make this decision.

My experience is that when Protestant theologians say that heresy is denial of some essential doctrine, they are faking it. They have no list of such, nor any procedure, really, for deciding what claims are in the essential group. And they are aware that there are serious disagreements about such. For instance, some evangelicals strongly insist on biblical inerrancy, and various other evangelicals and other Protestants deny that inerrancy is essential, or even that it is true. Frankly, many of them will just boldly make things up about about what is essential, or how heresy should be understood. *

In a recent book Anglican theologian Dr. Alister McGrath ventures to assert this:

So what is heresy? Heresy is best seen as a form of Christian belief that, more by accident than design, ultimately ends up subverting, destabilizing, or even destroying the core of the Christian faith. (11-12)

As a definition, this is as clear a mud. But notice that it is essentially a practical definition. A “heresy” is construed as a belief or teaching which sooner or later turns out to be harmful to Christian “faith” - either belief or living, I take it. But this definition is idiosyncratic; it is unique to Dr. McGrath. As we’ve seen, the traditional catholic (both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) approach is to treat the concept of heresy (that is, the sin) as fundamental, which is essentially defying the bishops when they confront you about matters of Christian belief. McGrath, like a great many Protestant theologians, doesn’t recognize the authority of current-day Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox bishops. But, strangely, they in practice think it unconscionable for a Christian to depart from the pronouncements by meetings of such bishops at Constantinople or Chalcedon.

In any case, who judges that a teaching is a “heresy” in his sense? That is, who decides that a teaching is long-term unhelpful or unhealthy for Christianity? He tells us, “the whole Christian church, not a party within that church” (p. 216) But, of course, many seemingly Christian groups have ignored or denied or denied some of the things insisted upon at the councils of 381 or 451. With present day ecumenical fashions being what they are, he will not lift a finger to help you decide what is included in and excluded from the true Church. In the end, in his book Dr. McGrath is just reassuring mainstream believers that the traditional condemnations are the correct ones. He gives unthinking, shallow brush-offs to serious Christian thinkers who would dare depart from the ancient creeds, pigeonholing them mere revivers of ancient mistakes, brazenly ignoring their many carefully wrought theological and exegetical arguments.

Now, all of this may give you a big, fat Protestant headache. Who's to say what counts as heresy? And doesn't a Christian have a right to his or her convictions? Maybe we should have no doctrinal standards, or maybe we should just point at the Bible and say that we as a group adhere to *whatever* is taught in the New Testament. * This approach has been tried, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in America, and it is what turned American unitarian Christianity into a non-Christian movement, eventually becoming what we know as Unitarian Universalism. I call it the "free" that is to say, in the older sense of the word, "liberal" tradition.

This stance was, frankly, an aberration, and was driven by the early American cultural disdain for authoritarian traditions. It was an over-reaction to the state-controlled churches of Europe then current. I will deal briefly with it. First, it is impractical, if your aim is to live in Christian community. With no standards, or with only gesturing at the Bible and saying "We all accept that, however understood," what defense do you have when your pastor or a teaching elder stops believing in a personal God? Or asserts that the only essential message of the Bible is love of one's neighbor. Or when he deems baptism no longer necessary? These things actually happened, in America. And the "free," creed-less churches simply chose human autonomy over fidelity to apostolic teaching. Second, this stance is hypocritical. Any like-minded religious community in fact has its own standards about what can be taught therein, even if they pretend not to. Try going into a Unitarian Universalist congregation and teaching that wives should submit to their husbands, that any sex outside of heterosexual marriage is a sin, or that George W. Bush was an excellent president. You will soon find yourself unwelcome. But most importantly, this approach goes against apostolic practice.

They did not simply accept any teaching, or pretend to have no doctrinal standards, or opine that it'll all work out if we just let everyone find his own way. To the contrary, they were capable of ferociously opposing some teachings, and of ejecting people from membership in a church. And they nagged us to hold tightly to the traditions they taught us.

* In my view, we need, like the brave Protestants of the sixteenth century, to go back to the sources, to the books of the New Testament, and carefully re-think our approach to dropping H-bombs. The Reformation came up short in this area. Mainstream Protestants have traded the old Catholic approach for one which raises only further questions and invites confusion and unjustified speculations. We must continue to reform, to revise human traditions until they conform to divine revelation.

The New Testament doesn't have a lot to say about heretics, heresy as a sin, or heresy as a claim. But it warns of repeatedly of false teachers. And when looked at as a whole, I think it provides a fourth and better way of thinking about false teaching and false teachers. For lack of time, I'm going to present only my conclusions about the NT perspective on these issues. You will have to be a good Berean, and search the scriptures for yourself, to see whether or not these things are so.

As I see it, there are three relevant features of apostolic tradition. * First, there is what I call minimalism about essential doctrines. Remember, an *essential* doctrine must be one that you can't be a Christian without believing - even if you are a child, if you are uneducated, or have are mentally handicapped. We should be afraid of adding to or trying to change the deal, the new covenant proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles. We dare not make it harder for people to be saved. A strong case for this is argued by the great Christian philosopher John

Locke. He was disturbed the acrimonious disputes of his day between Calvinists and Arminians, and trinitarians and unitarians. He knew that in many cases mere theories, well-intentioned speculations, were being foisted on Christians as essential beliefs. Being a Protestant, in the winter of 1694-5, he sat down and carefully searched the New Testament to find out what was really essential, to find out how much or how little is required to be a Christian. This is what he found:

“This was the great Proposition that was then controverted concerning Jesus of Nazareth, whether he was the Messiah or no; And the assent to that, was that which distinguished Believers from Unbelievers.”

In the New Testament, the belief that separates believers from unbelievers is acceptance of Jesus as Messiah. I would add that this is more a confession, a kind of public summary of basic Christian teaching, than it is a single belief. If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that is, God's Messiah, then you must also believe in the one God of Israel, who sent and empowered Jesus to teach us about God, and to willingly give himself as a once and for all sacrifice for sin. You must also believe that Jesus, a real man, God's anointed, died and was raised back to life, and then was raised to God's right hand. All of this is, I would say, in the job description of the Messiah, as provided by the prophets. So confessing in Jesus as Messiah, or in Jesus as the exalted Lord, really means believing these things as well. And also included, I think, is that people are saved by believing in Jesus, that he was who he said he

was, the Son of God - and so not by keeping the Law of Moses. And if Jesus is really God's agent, exalted now and destined to rule, then he must also be the boss of you.

Locke makes a powerful case, based on the whole New Testament, that this - acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, with all that means - is all that was required to be a Christian. I can't summarize his case there, but I commend his book to you. In support of this minimalism about essential doctrine, let me just make two points. First, there is the near constant practice of Christians through the ages. Most of us have always thought that children, the uneducated, and the slow can be believing Christians, and those of us who hold to believers' baptism do baptize such folk - because, they can accept Jesus as their Lord, as the risen Messiah, the mediator between God and humans. We don't quiz them first on the Athanasian creed, the communication of attributes, or the particulars of the definition of Chalcedon, and it would seem obscene to require such things for a person to gain entrance to the Christian community.

Second, look at what is preached to people who are converted in the book of Acts, specifically in chapters 8, 10, and 16. These conversions seem to happen in matter of hours; not much instruction is given. What is preached, seem to be the facts of Jesus' life, as fulfilling the predictions of the prophets - his ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation. Period. No two natures, no deity of Christ, no eternal generation and procession. Also, no precise theory of atonement, no exact biblical canon, no resolution of the problem of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human free will, no theories about divine eternity or simplicity, no Reformed doctrine of Grace. In chapter 16 the jailor wants to know how to be saved, and is told "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved;" before the night is

over, he and his family are baptized! Apparently, in that length of time, they acquired the beliefs strictly necessary to being Christians. And Cornelius and his friends received the necessary teaching in one afternoon, which is summarized by Luke in ten verses. If you examine it, you won't find any subtle metaphysics of the divine nature there, or really any theology or christology, in the theoretical sense. Rather, the facts of Jesus' career are laid out, and they are urged to believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness of sins through him. A third grader could understand this sermon, and I suppose that many have.

Now, a deal is a deal. You can't enter into a contract agreeing to do only A, B, and C, and then later get brought to court for breach of contract because you didn't *also* do D, E, and F. Beliefs which are not necessary to enter the community don't magically become necessary to staying in it later. If you dare to pronounce someone not a Christian because they don't believe in the creed of Constantinople, then to be consistent you must now refuse to consider anyone a Christian who doesn't believe, or *say* they believe, that creed, even a third grader. "Sorry kid!" But in apostolic tradition, the essentials are simple, and they are third-grader friendly.

A second observation is that a Christian deliberately going against the teaching and practice of Jesus and his apostles is in sin. God sent them to lead and instruct us, and to go against them is to defy God. But the typical remedy is gentle and careful correction by reasonable and scriptural teaching, not denunciation, not the dropping of H-bombs. We who are in obedience must correct in gentleness and humility, and taking care that we too are not tempted. Maybe I'll go to correct this sinner and find that it is instead I who am missing the mark. Yes, as Jesus outlines in Matthew 18, things can escalate. If the person continues in

their sin after you talk with them privately, the matter may have to be made public, and the assembly as a whole may even disinvite the person, as Paul says, handing them “over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Cor 5:5)

Finally, when I look at the New Testament, I see functional unity as a central Christian value. We should be genuinely afraid of causing strife, hate, and division between Christians over non-essential beliefs, however important we think they are. We should be afraid of what used to be called “party-spirit” - that is, of being a factionalist. When the New Testament talks of “heresies” it sometimes means false teachings, but more often it means sects, that is religious groups (without any negative connotation), but sometimes it really means factions, divided and mutually opposed groups, no doubt, organized around dominant personalities. (1 Corinthians 11:18-19) These are a great evil, and we must take care to avoid factions.

The New Testament contains many of what I call oneness slogans, which are meant to emphasize the unity of all who believe in Jesus as Messiah. Trinitarians love to emphasize the ones which mention Father, Son, and Spirit together, as if this hints that they somehow compose the one God. But really, the idea in such passages is all Christians have one God, one Lord - the exalted man, Jesus - and one anointing, one empowering from God. Instead of those triadic passages, I'll quote a oneness slogan that trinitarians often ignore, as it mentions more than three. In Ephesians 4, we read that

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4-6, NRSV

One faith. One faith. If you believe in Jesus as Messiah, you have that one faith. You may also combine it with various speculations, some of which may not really be consistent with elements in that one faith. But even so, you have that one faith. But then, so does many a Catholic, many a Calvinist, many a trinitarian, and many a person who doesn't know what to think about trinitarian and unitarian theologies. Yes, even the evangelical who thinks that Jesus is God himself, and also, that God is someone other than Jesus. God is merciful to us in our confusions. That's why he made the deal simple. Little is required by way of belief. More is required when it comes to repentance and obedience, of course. And there are many truths God has revealed which are very important, even though they are not essential to being a Christian.

* I have argued that H-bombs are a legitimate weapon, but only against real opponents of the gospel, that is, those among us who oppose the minimal, saving, core message. We are not to drop H-bombs, surely, on those who merely theorize differently than we do, in trying to make sense of it all.

Now one may argue that disarmament is better than a strict policy for use. Should we ban the bomb? One might argue that the language of heresy and heretics has become too poisoned by contempt, by our long history of mean, ugly, unthinking denunciations. Perhaps we could just talk about essential beliefs and about false teachings which contradict those,

and lay this traditional denunciation-language aside. We would still be forced to label some as “false teachers.” In any case, if we must use these weapons, we must avoid the tragedies of friendly fire.