

# DOCTRINAL DISERNMENT

## Part Three

### “Heresy and Orthodoxy”

#### I. Review

- **Part One: Doctrine and Discipleship**

The term “doctrine” means “teaching” as well as the “content of what is taught”

It is used over 45 times in the New Testament, including the Great Commission, where we commanded to make disciples, which includes teaching

There is no discipleship without doctrine

- **Part Two: Doctrine and Salvation**

While doctrine doesn't save us, (faith in Christ alone saves us), sound doctrine is an essential part of the Christian gospel because sets forth the truth, the facts, or the “notitia” of saving faith

Holding sound doctrine is essential for us, because: (1) Not everyone who acknowledges Jesus as Lord will be saved; (2) Many who claim to acknowledge Jesus actually believe in "another Jesus," and are thus “deceived”; (3) Not everyone who is zealous about religious matters are necessarily saved; (4) No human being truly seeks for God unless God's Spirit draws that person; therefore, those that appear to seek for God but do not come in God's way are not seeking for God at all; (5) 5. Anyone who truly desires to know the truth about God and His way of salvation above all else can and will be saved.

Point #5 means that we must never hold the precious doctrines of predestination, election and effectual calling in such a way: (1) that dulls our responsibility to preach the gospel to everyone; (2) that disheartens or discourages the lost or any who are “seekers”; (3) that causes us to forget for a moment that all who truly seek the Lord with all their heart will be saved

In the end, all the elect will be saved, (the doctrine of “perseverance of the saints”) because of the faithfulness of God and not ourselves

In this final session, we will consider the importance of doctrine for the believer and the need to be able to discern between orthodoxy and heresy.

## **II. Doctrinal Discernment of Orthodoxy and Heresy**

### **A. New Testament Warnings**

1. The New Testament contains many “warnings” about the dangers of false apostles, false teachers, and false prophets; beginning with the Lord Himself.

**For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.**

#### **Jesus in Matthew 24:24**

- a. The “elect” of God cannot be ultimately deceived (unto damnation)
- b. Nevertheless, the warning is real

2. The Apostle Paul sounded other warnings:

**For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.**

#### **2 Timothy 4:3-4**

a. Paul warns of a day when people will not continue in “sound doctrine”, or “orthodoxy”, (which means “right belief”).

b. Not everyone in the church is the true church. There are those who will follow their own desires instead and seek out teachers that suit them.

**For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will reject the truth and chase after myths.**

**2 Timothy 4:3-4 New Living Translation**

c. There are 2 reasons false teachers exist in the church; the first is here; false believers demand them! (See the 2<sup>nd</sup> reason below)

**“The mind will always justify what the heart chooses.”**

**Dennis Peacocke**

- If the heart chooses greed, it will seek out teachers who justify greed
- If the heart cannot think of God one who requires holiness and commandment-keeping, it will seek out teachers who assure them they are right
- If the heart chooses sexual perversion, it will look for pastors who justify sexual perversion (Entire denominations in our day have now openly embraced the LGBT community and agreed that “Gay is OK”!)

3. The Apostle Peter gives one of the strongest warnings of all:

**For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who secretly shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingers not, and their damnation will not slumber.**

**2 Peter 1:21-2:3**

- a. False teachers will come
- b. They will secret damnable heresies within their messages
- c. Many shall follow them (they will be popular)
- d. These false teachers are motivated by greed; through their deceptive teaching, they will “make merchandise” of the people; they will use the people for personal gain

e. Above we saw the 1<sup>st</sup> reason there are heresies in the church; people demand false teachings that justify their own desires. And here is the 2<sup>nd</sup> reason there are heresies in the church: “prophets for profit”!

4. With all these warnings, (and there are others), surely we can see the need for doctrinal discernment! Especially relating to discernment between orthodoxy and heresy.

## **B. Definitions**

1. Robert Coleman, in his excellent essay on the subject, points out the importance of knowing the definitions of important words relating to doctrine.

- Orthodox Doctrine: Teaching that adheres to the accepted or traditional and established faith.

**Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.**

### **Jude 3**

- Heretical Doctrine: Teaching which compels true Christians to divide themselves from those who hold it.

a. The New Testament word for “heresy” literally means “division”; “heretics” therefore, refers to “those who divide”.

2. Our first task is always to discern the difference between orthodox doctrine and heretical doctrine.

**Either a doctrine is such that those who hold it should be accepted as Christians (in which case it is orthodox), or it is not (in which case it is heretical). This might seem to imply a black-or-white approach in which all doctrine is either completely orthodox or completely heretical-unfortunately things are more complicated.**

a. 1<sup>st</sup> complication: Because any single doctrine never stands in isolation from other doctrines; each particular doctrine is part of a system or network of beliefs.

**And sometimes that system of beliefs includes many doctrines which are orthodox as well as some which are heretical. For example, a religious group might hold that the Bible is the Word of God, that there is only one God, that Jesus was born of a virgin and rose from the dead, and yet deny the deity of Jesus Christ. Such a group's belief *system* is heretical, even though it contains many true beliefs.**

**Robert Coleman**

b. 2<sup>nd</sup> complication:

**The second sort of complication to be noticed is that people often hold conflicting beliefs. Because people are often inconsistent, in some cases they may hold to orthodox beliefs but also hold to beliefs that undermine or contradict their orthodox beliefs. The difficulty presented in such cases is to sort out whether the belief system is basically orthodox or not.**

3. Remember that not all heretical doctrines are created equal.

a. There have always been, and always will be, heresies (also translated “divisions”) within the Church; as in Corinth...

**18 For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions (schisms) among you; and I partly believe it. 19 For there must be also heresies (sects) among you that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.**

**1 Corinthians 11:18-19 KJV**

**18 First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. 19 But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized!**

**1 Corinthians 11:18-19 NLT**

b. The issues dividing the church in Corinth were serious, but of a lesser nature than what Peter calls “damnable heresies”.

**But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily (secretly) shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.**

**And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of.**

**2 Peter 2:1-2 KJV**

4. Who among us would make that claim that we ourselves hold no false doctrine or unorthodox belief? But some are more serious than others. There are essential and non-essential doctrines relating to our salvation.

## C. Discerning Essential and Non-Essential Doctrine

1. Throughout the history of the Church, Christians of good-will have disagreed over many doctrines which, though important, are non-essential as conditions of fellowship:

- Baptism: Dip or sprinkle?
- Nature of man: Dual or Triune?
- System of Salvation: Calvinistic or Arminian?
- Charismatic gifts of the Spirit: Have they ceased or not?
- Eschatology of the End-times: Pre, Post, or Amillennial?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ: Pre or Post-Tribulation?
- Church Government: Congregational, Presbyterian or Episcopalian?

(Be ready to share the “non-essential” doctrines you have noticed divide us)

2. All these doctrines are important! Each belief within each topic is part of a system of beliefs and thus affects everything else. Nevertheless, none of these doctrines are essential to salvation nor should we allow to divide us. Differing opinions on these subjects are not “heretical”.

3. On the other hand, there are certain orthodox doctrines that are essential; there are fundamental doctrines that define authentic Christianity.

4. In his helpful essay on this, Robert Coleman offers this rule of thumb:

**“Whatever teachings and practices are sufficiently faithful to Christian principles that Christians should accept as fellow-Christians those who adhere to them.”**

**Robert Coleman**

5. The key here is knowing the “Christian principles” (or guidelines) to apply when testing any doctrine.

**“Discerning orthodoxy from heresy should be done on the basis of solid principles, each of which must be based on the teaching of God’s word.”**

**Robert Coleman**

6. Coleman suggests that there are 4 principles (or guidelines) which should be used together to distinguish sound from unsound doctrine.

### III. 4 Principles for Discerning Orthodoxy and Heresy

#### A. The Protestant Principle (*Sola Scriptura*)

1. The great division in Christian history was the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's; the split was over *doctrine*.

2. One of the lynchpins of the Reformation was the establishment of scripture as the final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice.

a. The Reformers adopted the Latin term “*Sola Scriptura*”, which means “scripture alone”, to describe this principle.

#### The Protestant Principle

**The Bible alone is the written Word of God, and as such is the infallible definitive standard in matters of controversy within the church. R.C.**

3. This may seem a “no-brainer” to you and me, but church history proves that this has not always been the case.

- The Church of Rome held that the final authority on matters of doctrine was the Pope, the heir of St. Peter, the “Vicar of Christ”, the “Holy Father.” Church dogma held that whatever doctrinal ruling the Pope decreed “*ex cathedra*” (which means “from the throne”), was the right interpretation and that all the members of the Church were to obey and follow
- One distinguishing characteristic that is shared by all the “Christian” cults is that each has a book (or books) that they hold as equivalent to scripture for interpreting the Bible and interpreting what it means. (The Christian Scientists have the writings of Mary Baker Eddy; the Church of the Latter-Day Saints has the Book of Mormon and the writings of Joseph Smith; the Jehovah's Witnesses have the writings of Judge Rutherford and the Watchtower Publications; certain sects within the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists hold the writings of Ellen G. White as equivalent to scripture, etc.)
- Today, Liberalism within some denominations completely denies the authority of scripture and judges matters of doctrine according to human reason

3. We must always hold to the Protestant Principle, considering the written Word of God as the final authority on all matters of doctrine, as our primary starting place for discerning orthodoxy and heresy.

## **B. The Evangelical Principle**

1. We use the term “Evangelical” Christianity today to distinguish it from other expressions of the Gospel that differ from the Reformation’s understanding of the Gospel.

### **The Evangelical Principle**

**Whatever is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be rejected as heresy.**

2. This principle seems to tolerate differences in doctrinal interpretation on other matters as of less importance than misinterpretations of the Gospel itself.

3. The Evangelical principle places the essence of the Gospel, that we are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, as the most essential doctrine of the Church and that any re-interpretation is fundamentally heretical.

a. It does not mean other matters of unimportant; just not essential

## **C. The Orthodox Principle**

1. Coleman states the guideline this way:

### **The Orthodox Principle**

**The creeds of the undivided church should be regarded as reliable expressions of the essential truths on which they speak.**

2. From the earliest days of the Church, the Church fathers recognized the importance of determining and defining the essentials of the faith and being in unity about orthodoxy.

3. Down through the centuries, various church councils were held that resulted in the formulation of “Creeds”, or statements of faith regarding doctrines they considered to be essential.

- The Apostle’s Creed (appearing in several forms during the first 300 years of the Church) and today cited by a wide variety of denominations including the Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and even *Roman Catholics!*
- The Nicene Creed (325 A.D.)
- The Chalcedon Creed (451 A.D.)



4. These creeds (or “confessions”) are carefully worded statements that summarize and define orthodox Christianity and as such, carry great authority when it comes to identifying heresy.

5. We should be familiar with all these great historic creeds; they are all valuable. But I will include the most familiar one here:

### **The Apostle’s Creed**

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

6. Any doctrine that directly contradicts any detail in this confession may be judged as heretical.

### **D. The Catholic Principle**

1. As in the Apostle’s Creed above, the term “catholic” does not refer to the denomination known as the Roman Catholic Church.

2. The term “catholic” means “universal”; it refers to the unity of the world-wide Church of Christ in the “true” Church.

## **The Catholic Principle**

**Any doctrine that contradicts what the church as a whole (in all times and places) has regarded as essential to the faith should be regarded as heretical.**

3. This last guideline is a generalization, not a definitive test. (R.C.)

**“...by the whole church I do not mean every last individual in the Church...but what the vast majority of those who have participated in the churches’ worship, in all its various branches and denominations, and who have upheld the faith as defined by the orthodox principle, have regarded as essential or basic to their faith.”**

**Robert Coleman**

4. This is an especially useful principle to apply when “new” doctrines sweep through the Church!

### **E. Aberrations**

1. As we do the work of discernment, we will learn the difference between orthodoxy and heresy; but we will also discover doctrines that fall into a third category: “aberrations”.

### **Aberration**

#### **Deviating from a standard**

2. Aberrations are doctrines (or systems) that vary in degree of seriousness.

3. They may or may not be heretical; but they differ from established norms.

4. There will be occasions where “new” teaching or “doctrines”, especially of a topical nature, will seem to sweep through the Body of Christ. These are “aberrations” and should be carefully examined in the light of the 4 principles stated above and judge according to their overall content.

a. Examples of aberrations since 1970: Spiritual authority in the “Discipleship Movement” of the 70’s; the “Faith” message; the current “Hyper-Grace” movement”.

5. Doctrinal discernment is the responsibility of every believer!

## DOCTRINAL DISCERNMENT

Robert Bowman

### Part 3

#### Defining Heresy and Orthodoxy

So far I have argued that we ought to distinguish between truth and error in doctrine. Now I wish to address the question of orthodoxy and heresy more directly. What is orthodox doctrine, what is heretical doctrine, and what's the difference?

#### Inadequate Approaches

It is tempting to say that whatever doctrine is biblical is orthodox and whatever doctrine is not biblical is not orthodox. But this is too simplistic. For example, assuming that only one of the several views (there are at least four) on the Rapture is biblical, it does not follow that the views that are not biblical are therefore heretical. There are some doctrines which, while not in agreement with the Bible, are not so wide of the mark that they must be regarded as heretical.

Another approach that has been taken is to measure doctrines by the doctrinal confessions of some particular denomination. This is fine so long as what is being determined is not orthodoxy but confessional fidelity. That is, if someone wishes to be an ordained minister of a particular denomination, then that denomination is within its rights to ask that such a person agree with its doctrines. If someone does not (e.g., if someone disagrees with the denomination's position on speaking in tongues or predestination), then that person should not expect to be ordained in such a denomination. Given the present diversity of denominations, this should be expected.

On the other hand, it is lamentable that the church has allowed itself to be divided over nonessential issues. Thus, adherence to a denomination's particular distinctives should not necessarily be made the test of Christian orthodoxy. Of course, some of the doctrinal stands taken by a denomination may be basic to orthodoxy (e.g., a confession of the deity of Jesus Christ). In such cases, the denomination's confession and orthodoxy coincide.

What, then, should be the standard of orthodoxy? And how should it be determined? Perhaps most troublesome: *Who* should determine the standard?

Certainly I do not claim to have any particular authority to determine by what standard orthodoxy shall be judged. I claim no special anointing beyond that which all Christians have ([1 John 2:20](#) ↗, [27](#) ↗). I make no claims to apostolic or prophetic authority. I am not even an ordained minister. Who, then, am I to judge who *is* and *is not* orthodox? Who am I to call anyone a heretic?

My answer to these questions is twofold. First, *I am a Christian*, and as such have a responsibility to avoid heresy. I can hardly do so if I do not have some idea as to what heresy is. Second, *I am a teacher*, called by God to the ministry of teaching my fellow Christians sound doctrine. That gives me no special authority or mantle of divine sanction, and I would not want anyone to assume that whatever I say is true. But it does mean that God has given me a special responsibility, and if I am faithful He will use me to guide other believers into a more complete and accurate understanding of His truth. If I am truly faithful, those who are open to God's truth will know that what I say is true — not because I say it, but simply because I have led them to see what has always been in God's Word, the Bible.

#### Toward Definitions

What, then, is orthodoxy, and what is heresy? First of all, I wish to point out that the term "orthodoxy" is not in the Bible. That does not mean that the concept itself is unbiblical, but that we cannot read off its meaning from biblical texts.

The words "heresy" and "heretic" *are* in the Bible, and are used in somewhat varying senses. The Jews called Christianity a "heresy" ([Acts 24:14](#) ↗), probably meaning they considered it a sect under God's condemnation. But Paul referred to the various factions among the Corinthian Christians as "heresies," that is, "divisions" ([1 Cor. 11:19](#) ↗). Here he seems to regard some of these divisions as distinguishing true believers from false believers, but other divisions as simply unfortunate expressions of sinful disunity among Christians, without suggesting that all who belonged to these different factions were lost. Elsewhere, though, Paul referred to "heresies" or divisions as works of the flesh ([Gal. 5:20](#) ↗) and said that a "heretic" — a man causing divisions in the church — is perverted and self-condemned ([Tit. 3:10-11](#) ↗). Finally, Peter speaks of destructive "heresies" in the sense of doctrines which deny Christ the Lord ([2 Pet. 2:1](#) ↗).

From this survey it is evident that a "heresy" in biblical terminology could be merely an unfortunate division among Christians, but in a stricter sense is a divisive teaching or practice destructive of genuine faith and deserving of condemnation. The looser sense corresponds roughly to our modern denominations, while the stricter sense applies most clearly to groups which reject basic Christian doctrines and set themselves apart from the historic church in its many forms. But a "heresy" in the latter sense can have its start, at least, within the church. Whenever heresies in this strict sense arise, Christians are called to separate themselves from those who persist in holding them.

We may therefore define "heresy" in the strict sense as **“a teaching or practice which compels true Christians to divide themselves from those who hold it.”**

Note the difference here: a "faction" or heresy in the looser sense is an unfortunate division separating Christians from one another, and Christians are called to do whatever they can to overcome these divisions ([1 Cor. 1:10 ↗](#)). But a heresy in the stricter sense is a division separating Christians from non-Christians (or, at best, from Christians who are persisting in grave error), and Christians are called to draw the line and refuse to have spiritual fellowship with those who cross over it. This is not to say that Christians should not show genuine love, compassion, and personal respect for heretics; too often in church history "heretic" has been a hate-word.

How, then, should we define "orthodox"? We might define it as

**“Whatever teachings and practices are sufficiently faithful to Christian principles that Christians should accept as fellow-Christians those who adhere to them.”**

To put it simply, whatever religious teachings and practices are not heretical are orthodox, and vice versa.

Notice that we have not said that all members of churches which teach heresy are lost. This is no more true than saying that all who are members of churches which teach orthodoxy are saved. In saying that people are heretics, or that they are following heresy, we are not pronouncing judgment on their eternal souls. We *are* saying that if they follow those heresies consistently, they will certainly be lost. Conversely, in saying that someone is orthodox we are not saying that they are necessarily true Christians with the assurance of eternal life. We *are* saying that if they follow orthodox doctrine as the basis of their life (and thus trust in Christ alone for right standing before God) they will be saved.

### **Aberrational Christianity**

It might seem that doctrinal discernment should be a fairly cut-and-dried procedure of determining whether a doctrine is orthodox or heretical. After all, we have defined orthodoxy and heresy in such a way that they cover all possibilities. Either a doctrine is such that those who hold it should be accepted as Christians (in which case it is orthodox), or it is not (in which case it is heretical). This might seem to imply a black-or-white approach in which all doctrine is either completely orthodox or completely heretical.

Although doctrinal discernment would be a lot neater and simpler if this were the case, unfortunately things are more complicated — in at least two distinct ways. First, a single doctrine is never held in isolation from other doctrines, but rather is always part of a system or network of beliefs held by a person or group. And sometimes that system of beliefs includes many doctrines which are orthodox as well as some which are heretical. For example, a religious group might hold that the Bible is the Word of God, that there is only one God, that Jesus was born of a virgin and rose from the dead, and yet deny the deity of Jesus Christ. Such a group's belief *system* is heretical, even though it contains many true beliefs. Moreover, a group's heretical beliefs generally lead them to misunderstand or misapply even those true beliefs they do confess, since the beliefs tend to be interdependent and thus mutually affect one another. Thus, one of the tasks of doctrinal discernment is to sort out which beliefs in a heretical system are actually heretical, which are not, and how the non-heretical beliefs are misapplied because of the heretical system in which they are held.

The second sort of complication to be noticed is that people often hold conflicting beliefs. Because people are often inconsistent, in some cases they may hold to orthodox beliefs but also hold to beliefs that undermine or contradict their orthodox beliefs. The difficulty presented in such cases is to sort out whether the belief system is basically orthodox or not.

For example, many professing Christian groups today confess belief in one God, but also speak of human beings (usually Christians in particular) as being in some sense "gods." This verbal contradiction may or may not betray a real contradiction in the substance of their beliefs. Making matters even more difficult is the fact that these different groups mean vastly different things by calling believers "gods." In some cases it is evident that they really do not believe in one God at all. In other cases it is clear that they are using the word "gods" of believers in a figurative sense such that their confession of one God is not contradicted at all. In still other cases a real tension exists, and it is difficult to avoid concluding that the group in question holds conflicting views.

In order to accommodate this phenomenon, it is helpful to speak of religious doctrines which undermine or are in tension with a group's orthodox beliefs as aberrational. Holding such aberrational views is a serious problem, and those who do so must be considered as being in serious sin and should be treated accordingly. Specifically, those advocating such errors should not be allowed to teach or minister in the church, and those refusing to keep such aberrant views to themselves should be excommunicated.

The charge that a person or group's beliefs are aberrational is a serious one that cannot be made easily. It is arguable that at one level any incorrect belief is at tension with or undermines orthodox beliefs. By aberrational, however, I am referring only to false beliefs which do serious damage to the integrity of an orthodox confession of faith.

The sum of the matter is that doctrinal discernment is a difficult task -- one which requires sensitivity, a sense of proportion and balance, and a deep understanding of what is essential and what is not. New heresies and aberrations are constantly arising, as well as new insights into biblical truth, and discernment is needed to tell the difference. Thus, the task of doctrinal discernment is an ongoing necessity in the Christian church.

Having shown that doctrinal discernment is necessary, I have yet to say very much at all about how it is to be done.

**How do we discern truth from error, sound doctrine from unsound doctrine, orthodoxy from heresy?** How do we discern when a doctrine is fully heretical and when it is only aberrational?

In [Part One](#) of this two-part article I presented a case for doctrinal discernment as a necessary ongoing task of the church. In this concluding part I will suggest some guidelines for carrying out this task in a way that is faithful to Scripture.

## **Principles For Identifying Heresy**

Discerning orthodoxy from heresy should be done on the basis of sound *principles*, each of which in turn must be based on the teaching of God's Word. I begin, then, by discussing four principles which the church ought to utilize as tools to identify and expose heresy. Although they are subject to misunderstanding and abuse, all four — properly interpreted — are valid and should be utilized together in doctrinal discernment.

● **The protestant principle.** Here I am not referring to an exclusively Protestant position, but rather to a principle that will be especially agreeable to Protestants (particularly evangelicals). According to this principle:

**The Bible alone is the written Word of God, and as such is the infallible, definitive standard in matters of controversy in the church.**

This principle follows from the teaching of Jesus Christ Himself, who taught that while human tradition and religious leaders are fallible, Scripture is the Word of God and never errs ([Matt. 5:17-20](#) ↗; [15:3-9](#) ↗; [22:29](#) ↗; [John 10:35](#) ↗). Since to be a Christian means, minimally, to be a follower of Jesus Christ, no person or group can claim to be truly Christian that does not at least acknowledge this special authority of the Bible.

I said that this teaching is not held exclusively by Protestants, though it is especially agreeable to them. Both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (the other two main branches of Christianity) teach that the church's traditions are infallible and authoritative, a teaching with which Protestants cannot agree. Thus, these branches of Christianity do not adhere fully to the protestant principle as defined here. On the other hand, Catholicism and Orthodoxy do teach that the Bible is the *norma normans* — that is, the norm by which all other norms are to be judged. Thus, at least in some sense, the view of all major Christian traditions is that Scripture has the final word. But evangelical Protestants have upheld this principle more consistently than Christians in the Catholic or Orthodox traditions.

On the other hand, liberalism — which began in mainline Protestantism and has virtually engulfed it, and which has now made significant inroads in Roman Catholicism — completely denies the protestant principle. Liberalism presumes to judge the teachings of the Bible according to the canon of human reason. Accordingly, it should be rejected as apostate by true believers of all major Christian traditions.

The protestant principle has often been summarized by the Protestant Reformation motto *sola scriptura* ("only Scripture"). Taken in its true sense, this means that only Scripture is an unerring verbal expression of the mind of God for the church prior to Christ's return. But this should not be interpreted to mean that truth can be found *only* in Scripture or that all traditions are based on falsehood. Nor should it be interpreted to forbid using words not found in the Bible to express biblical doctrine. For example, the idea that the Bible is a "canon," or rule of faith, is biblical — even though the word "canon" is not found in the Bible. The idea that God is "self-existent," meaning that His existence depends on nothing other than Himself, is biblical — even though the word "self-existent" is not in the Bible. This is an important qualification to the protestant principle, violated by many heretical sects.

● **The evangelical principle.** In Europe, "evangelical" is virtually synonymous with "Lutheran," and the principle I enunciate here will be especially agreeable to that tradition, though certainly transcending it. According to this principle:

**Whatever is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be rejected as heresy**

This principle is based directly on such passages as [Galatians 1:6-9](#) ↗ and [1 Corinthians 15:1-4](#) ↗. Here, "the gospel" refers not to the Bible in its entirety, but to its central message of reconciliation of human beings to God through the redemptive work of Christ.

This principle implies that not every misinterpretation of or departure from the Bible is equally damaging to authentic Christian faith. Misunderstanding the relationship between the Millennium and the Second Coming, for example, is not as serious an error as misunderstanding the relationship between faith and works. Denying that Jonah escaped alive after being inside a large fish for three days is not as bad an error as denying that Jesus rose from the grave after being dead for three days. Whether the errors are clear-cut or debatable from our perspective, it remains true that some errors are worse than others.

On the other hand, this principle can be misapplied by treating the gospel as a "canon within the canon" such that some parts of the Bible become more authoritative than others. While we may draw more directly on the Gospel of John or the Epistle to the Romans in our presentation of the gospel, our understanding of the gospel should be shaped by the entire Bible. Some extreme or aberrant groups have lost sight of this and have argued that only one part of the Bible — say, the Book of Acts — presents the gospel of salvation. Besides being contrary to the facts (e.g., Paul rehearses the basics of the gospel in [1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#) ↗), such an argument undermines the unity of Scripture.

Moreover, even seemingly less important errors can be symptomatic of outright heretical beliefs. For example, while some variant views on the Millennium are tolerable among Christians, other views should be regarded as heretical, such as the view that the Millennium will be a period in which unbelievers will be raised and given a second chance to save themselves by doing good works. Clearly this view is heretical because of its bearing on the doctrine of salvation. The belief that Jonah was not swallowed by a fish and then set free three days later might be symptomatic of a prejudice against all miracles. On the other hand, some Christians who freely confess that God could have done such a miracle hold that the Book of Jonah is a parable and was simply not intended as history. The latter view may be wrong, but it is not anti-Christian in the way the former view clearly is.

Finally, it should be noted that in mainline [denominations](#) heavily influenced by liberalism, the "gospel" has typically been reinterpreted and watered down to the point of no longer being the biblical gospel at all. The evangelical principle must always be tied to the protestant principle and not pitted against it, as is the case in liberal Protestantism.

● **The orthodox principle.** I call this principle the "orthodox" principle because it will be especially agreeable to Christians in the Orthodox (Eastern) tradition. According to this principle, **the creeds of the undivided church should be regarded as reliable expressions of the essential truths on which they speak.**

This principle follows from the biblical teaching that the Christian faith was delivered once for all to the saints ([Jude 3](#)) and that the gates of Hades would not prevail against the church ([Matt. 16:18](#)). These texts (see also [Matt. 28:20](#); [John 14:16](#); [Eph. 4:11-16](#)) make it inconceivable that the whole church could establish *as normative* what is in fact aberrant or heretical.

Thus, the [creeds](#) formulated by the early church before it split into Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism, and accepted by *all three branches* of Christianity, should be regarded as reliable standards by which heresies may be exposed. Such creeds as the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds — which speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God (the [Trinity](#)), and of Jesus Christ as uniquely God and man (the Incarnation) — expressed the faith of all Christians when they were written, and have unified all Christians against heresy for centuries. They are therefore deserving of respect and should be honored as tools for identifying and exposing heresy.

Note that I am not saying that Christians cannot choose to disagree with some of the precise wording of these creeds. After all, they are not infallible, inspired documents. Nor am I saying that those churches which choose not to use the creeds, or which have little or no regard for creeds as such, are heretical. Rather, I am simply saying that a doctrine or belief should be regarded as heretical if it departs from the essential, substantial teachings of these creeds. I am therefore adopting a more flexible form of this principle than is actually held by Eastern Orthodox Christians themselves. I am also pleading with my anticreedal brothers and sisters in Christ to rethink their rejection of these fine expressions of orthodoxy.

● **The catholic principle.** By "catholic" I do not mean specifically Roman Catholic, but simply "universal" (which is what the Greek word *katholikos* means). The notion of "catholicity" has been much abused, but it has also been ignored; both are unfortunate. The catholic principle is:

**That any doctrine that contradicts what the church as a whole (in all times and places) has regarded as essential to the faith should be regarded as heretical.**

This principle also follows from the biblical teaching mentioned above that God will keep the whole church from heresy.

It should be noted that this principle is a generalization, not an absolutely definitive test. I say this because by the "whole" church I do not mean every last individual in the church, as if the dissent of one or a few professing Christians could negate a doctrine's status as "catholic." The principle rather seeks to uphold what the vast majority of those who have participated in the church's worship, in all its various branches and denominations, and who have upheld the faith as defined by the orthodox principle, have regarded as essential or basic to their faith.

Moreover, the catholic principle — properly understood — presupposes the protestant principle. That is, when we speak of "the church" in all times and places, we are speaking of that community of faith which regards the Bible as the supreme norm of its faith. We are thus excluding from the outset those segments of Christendom that have abandoned faith in the Bible as the Word of God. It has only been in the last two centuries that large segments of Christendom within both Protestantism and Catholicism have denied absolute biblical authority. And in the vast majority of such cases, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement have been rejected as well. These segments of Christendom must be regarded as apostate, having fallen away from the faith.

These considerations are helpful in making more precise the notion of appealing to the position of the "historic Christian church" as a litmus test of orthodoxy. What we ought to mean by this expression is the Bible-believing community of faith as it has existed continuously throughout the centuries. Those segments of Christendom which have introduced new doctrinal revelations, or which have rejected biblical authority, are by this definition not part of the historic Christian church.

Finally, note that not everything that has been believed by most Christians falls under the catholic principle, but only those things that the church has held to be *essential*. For the first fifteen centuries of church history, virtually all Christians held that the earth was at the physical center of the universe. But by no means does this make that erroneous belief part of the "catholic" or universal Christian faith. Here the "evangelical principle" is a valuable corrective to a possible misapplication of the catholic principle.