

Historic Heresies

Some of the Ways Men Have Distorted Christian Truth Over Time



It Was Bound to Happen

Over the course of Christian History, sincere men have often found themselves on the wrong side of the truth. We know that in a world where objective truth DOES exist, each of us has an obligation to do the best we can to find that truth and share it with others, especially if the truth that we hold is truly a cure for what ails the world. This is the nature of the Christian Claim; as Christians we hold not only what we believe to be true about the nature of God, but also what we believe to be true about the nature of what saves us from death. If what we believe to be true actually IS true, we ought to share it with a dying world.

Many sincere believers have been less than careful about the Christian truth claims that are described in the Bible. Sincere believers have been sincerely wrong, as they have misinterpreted the scriptures for one reason or another. HERESY is simply the misinterpretation of the Bible, leading to a FALSE understanding of what is being taught by the Scriptures (More on that [HERE](#)). Peter wrote and told us that those who have been CAREFUL in their interpretation of the Bible have come to a correct and true interpretation of the Scriptures:



1 Peter 1:10-12

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.

It takes more than sincerity to be correct; it takes CAREFUL study. History has shown us that sincere believers are often sincerely wrong. But more than that, there were often times throughout history when men have allowed their own desire to drive them to alter the truth to satisfy their base nature. In essence, many have simply lied to serve themselves. Paul actually warned us that this would happen. Look at what Paul wrote to Timothy:



2 Timothy 4:3-5

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.

So, let's take a look at some of the historic ways that men have altered or misunderstood the Christian Truth Claims, related to the nature of God the Father, Jesus His Son, the Family of God, or the Nature of Man. Remember that these distortions are either the result of sincere efforts that were less than careful, or insincere efforts that reflect the desires of men who "turned aside to myths".



Heresies Related to the Nature of God

Over the centuries, believers have struggled to understand the triune nature of God. After all, God is consistently described as being "ONE" in nature, yet, God

the father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are all described as having the same nature and are attributed the same characteristics. Here are some of the historic misinterpretations of how the three persons of the Godhead exist in one Divine Being, or about how the God of the Old Testament can be reconciled with the God described in the New Testament:



Marcionism (2nd Century)

This heresy rejected the entire Old Testament and taught that Christianity was something that was completely distinct from Judaism. Marcionites had no love for the God of the Old Testament and they followed their leader's cue by rejecting all Gospels but the Gospel of Luke, and even this Gospel had been redacted to omit any connection to Judaism. Marcionites believed that the God of the Old Testament was a God of Wrath and judgment who could not be reconciled with the God of mercy described in the New Testament.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Marcion of Sinope at Rome (110 – 160AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Tertullian wrote a five-book treatise against the heresy called, "Adversus Marcionem"



Monarchianism (2nd and 3rd Century)

This heresy is derived from the Greek words, "mono" ("one") and "arche" ("rule"). It taught that there is only one God and He exists as one person, the Father. Monarchianism teaches either that the Father is God and that the Son (Jesus) is only a man (Dynamic Monarchianism), or that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are never present at the same time, instead they are simply different 'modes' of the same God (Modal Monarchianism).

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Theodotians (190 AD) and Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch in Syria (260AD) taught Dynamic Monarchianism, and Praxeas (200AD), a Roman priest from Asia Minor, taught Modal Monarchianism

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Tertullian wrote against this heresy in his tract, "Adversus Praxean" (213AD)



Sabellianism (3rd Century)

This heresy, a form of modalistic Monarchianism, taught that God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit are different modes of one God (in relationship to man), rather than three distinct persons (in objective reality). Jesus Christ and God the Father were not thought to be distinct persons, but two aspects or offices of one person.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Sabellius, a Roman priest and theologian (215AD?)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Tertullian and Demetrius (Patriarch of Alexandria) wrote against the heresy



Manichaeism (3rd Century)

This heresy is a merging of a number of world religious systems, including Gnostic Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. It is a form of religious dualism in that it proposes that there are two eternal principles, good and evil, and they are of equal power. It was much like Gnosticism in that it claimed that the gnosis could be discovered intellectually or as it was revealed by messengers like Buddha, Jesus and Mani (the founder of the heresy). Jesus is not God, he is just another source of gnosis. Mani declared himself to be a disciple and apostle of Jesus and said that he was the “Paraclete” (the ‘comforter’ or ‘helper’) that Jesus promised.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Mani, of Babylon (210 – 276AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Roman Emperor Theodosius I declared it to be heretical and Augustine of Hippo (who was once himself a Manichaean, wrote against it.



Socinianism (16th and 17th Century)

This heresy denied the Triune nature of God. It claimed that God was one and that the Holy Spirit was simply God’s power. It denied the pre-existence of Jesus, His incarnation and deity (it taught that Jesus was just a man who was deified, and therefore deserved worship as a lower god). By this view, Jesus did not save us on the cross, but simply served as an example of self-sacrifice to all of us.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Laelius Socinus (died 1562AD) and Faustus Socinus (died 1604AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Another form of Psilanthropism (teachings that advocate that Jesus was merely a man), heresies such as Socinianism were condemned in the First Council of Nicaea in 325AD



Heresies Related to the Nature of Jesus

Believers have also struggled to understand the nature of Jesus. The Bible describes Him as having all the power of God, and the Gospel of John tells us that he existed before the universe began (He is, in fact, the CREATOR of the universe). At the same time, we see from the Bible that Jesus was fully human and died on the cross. Here are some classic and historic misinterpretations of the nature of Jesus, the God-Man, fully divine and fully human:



Adoptionism (2nd Century)

This heresy denies the pre-existence of Christ, and therefore denies his deity. It teaches that Jesus was simply a man who was tested by God and after he passed the test he was given supernatural powers and adopted as a son (this occurred at his baptism). Jesus was then rewarded for all that he did (and for his perfect character) with his own resurrection and adoption into the Godhead.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:
Theodotus of Byzantium

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:
Pope Victor (190-198AD)



Docetism (2nd Century)

This heresy is coined from the Greek word, “dokesis” which means “to seem”. It taught that that Jesus only appeared to have a body and was not really incarnate. Docetists viewed matter as inherently evil, and therefore did not want to believe that God could actually appear in bodily form. By denying that Jesus did not truly have a body, they also denied that he suffered on the cross and rose from the dead.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:
Attributed to Gnostics and promoted by the Gospel of Peter

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:
Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus refuted it was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD



Apollinarianism (4th Century)

This heresy denied the true and complete humanity of Jesus, because it taught that he did not have a human mind, but instead had a mind that was completely divine. The heresy lessened the human nature of Jesus in order to reconcile the manner in which Jesus could be both God and man at the same time.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:
Appollinaris the Younger (bishop of Laodicea in Syria), 360AD

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:
The Council of Constantinople in 381AD

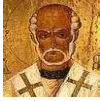


Arianism (4th Century)

This heresy taught that Jesus was a “creature” who was “begotten” of the Father. Only God the Father is “un-begotten”. In this view, only the Father is truly God. He was too pure and perfect to appear here on earth, so he first created the Son as His first creation. The son then created the universe. God then adopted Jesus as a son (because, after all Jesus and God are not supposed to have the same nature in this view). Jesus is worshipped only because of his preeminence as the first creation.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:
Arius of Alexandria Egypt (250-336AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:
The Council of Nicaea in 325AD. The Nicene Creed was written to respond to this heresy.



Nestorianism (5th Century)

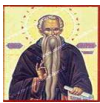
This heresy taught that Mary only gave birth to Jesus' human nature. The founder of the heresy, Nestorius, did not even want Mary to be called "Mother of God" but instead wanted her to be called "Mother of Christ". In essence, the heresy maintained that Jesus was really two separate persons, and only the human Jesus was in Mary's womb. If that was true, then Jesus was not God incarnate while in the womb.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Nestorius of Antioch (Bishop of Constantinople in 428AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

The Council of Ephesus in 431AD



Eutychianism [Monophysitism] (5th Century)

This heresy taught that Jesus' humanity was absorbed by his divinity. This heresy is Monophysite in nature, derived from the Greek words "mono" ("one") and "physis" ("nature"). In essence, the heresy claimed that Jesus had only ONE nature and was something new and different than the divine or human nature that God and humans have (respectively). Instead, this heresy taught that a THIRD nature was possessed by Jesus and this nature was something new and unique; a blend or mixture of the human and the divine.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Eutyches of Constantinople (380 – 456AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

The Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451AD. The Chalcedonian Creed addresses this heresy.



Monothelitism (7th Century)

This heresy actually came about in response to the Monophysite heresy (see above), but it too taught something that is denied by the Scripture. The name is derived from a Greek root that means "one will", and Monothelitism taught that Jesus had two natures but only one will. Instead of having two cooperation wills (one divine and one human), Jesus had one divine-human "energia".

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Patriarch Sergius I of Constantinople (610 – 638AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

The Third Council of Constantinople; the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680 – 681AD)



Heresies Related to the Nature of Salvation

Misinterpretations about the nature of how we are saved are typically connected to misinterpretations about the nature of Jesus. Did He die for us? Can we save

ourselves? Here are some historic misinterpretations:



Gnosticism (1st and 2nd Century)

This pervasive early heresy is named after the Greek word “Gnosis”, meaning “Knowledge”. It seems to pre-date Christianity and many don’t even regard it as a Christian heresy, but rather, as a movement of it’s own. But Gnosticism did eventually lay claim to Jesus as a special teacher and it did make claims about the Christian faith. The heretical movement was very diverse, but generally taught that Salvation was achieved through a special knowledge (usually concerning the relationship between a believer and the divine being called God). The heresy sees matter as evil, so anything material is also seen as evil. Pure spirit is of the highest value, and the Gnostics believed that they could be delivered from their evil material form through special knowledge revealed to them by Gnostic teachers. Jesus played an important role in this because he was the greatest of all teachers, who, as the redeemer, was sent with special knowledge for those who wanted to escape the material prison. Gnosticism denies that Jesus is the incarnation of God, because notion material could be holy or divine in this worldview.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

A variety of leaders in a variety of regions, including Valentinus, who founded his own school of Gnosticism in both Alexandria and Rome

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian and Origen wrote against it. Many believe that John the Apostle also wrote about Gnosticism in 1 John.



Ebionism (1st Century)

This heresy involved a Jewish sect of believers called Ebionites. The word is apparently derived from an Aramean word meaning “the poor ones”. They taught that the Jewish Law must be followed in order to be saved, denied that Jesus was born of a virgin or was God Himself, taught that Paul was an apostate. They only used the Gospel of Matthew as their Gospel text.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Of Unknown origin, their teaching was very similar to that of Cerinthus and Carpocrates

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen and Eusebius all wrote and taught against the heresy



Albigenses (13th Century)

This heresy merged many non-Christian ideas and taught that there were two gods; a good god of light (Jesus as He is referred to in the New Testament) and a god of evil and darkness (Satan as he is referred to in the Old Testament). The human spirit was created by the good god, but the body was created by the evil god, and was therefore considered to be bad. All spirits were required to be freed from their evil bodies. For this reason, having children was a great evil, because it would cause yet another soul to be imprisoned in a body. Marriage was forbidden, and all sorts of

bodily denials (like fasts and poverty) were encouraged. Salvation was dependent on good works, those who were not good enough were to be reincarnated as lower animals.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

William IX, duke of Aquitaine protected believers who arose in the Albi region of Southern France

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Pope Innocent III (had them to be completely destroyed by 1229AD)



Heresies Related to the Nature of Man

If salvation does NOT require the work of God through Jesus' death on the cross, an assumption must exist related to the nature of man's ability to save himself. In fact, most of the above listed heresies usually have some misunderstanding about the nature of man. But there is a pervasive heresy related to humans that continues to plague the church:



Pelagianism (5th Century)

This heresy taught that man's human nature is basically good, and that man did not inherit original sin from Adam. The heresy taught that humans only actually LEARN how to be bad from the bad examples of their own community. In essence, this heresy taught that we are all neutral in our nature and have the ability to come to faith and attain heaven under our own powers and without the Grace of God. This worldview denied that we became righteous in the eyes of God through the work of Jesus on the cross, but instead claimed that our own ability to imitate the life of Christ was all that was needed.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Pelagius (354 – 440AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

The Councils of Carthage (412, 416 and 418AD) condemned the heresy, but many other councils also condemned the teaching throughout history.



Heresies Related to the Nature of the Church

In addition to misinterpretations of the nature of God, Jesus and Salvation, there have been many historic misinterpretations of just what it is that the family of God should be or should be doing. Here are a few of them:



Montanism (2nd Century)

This heresy was an apocalyptic movement, predicting that the end of the world was eminent and claiming that it's three leaders (Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla) were able to receive revelation directly from the Holy Spirit. In fact, Montanus claimed to be the "Paraclete" (the 'comforter' or 'helper') that Jesus promised. Montanus' movement also focused on the continuance of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, ecstatic utterances and prophecy.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Montanus and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla. Even Tertullian converted to Montanism later in life

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Jerome wrote a letter to a woman named Marcella denouncing the Montanists, and Justinian, ordered John of Ephesus to lead an expedition to Pepuza to destroy the Montanist shrine in the 6th Century



Encratitism (2nd Century)

This heresy is named after the Greek root word, “enkrateia” which means “continence”. Encratites were ascetics who denied themselves alcohol, animal products and sex. This denial was a requirement for Salvation, as Encratites interpreted the story of Adam and Eve and passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:3-6 to support the idea that humans must not engage in sexual intercourse. They taught that people were to be married to God, not to each other.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Tatian (the Assyrian Christian leader, 120-173AD)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Hippolytus wrote against the heretical group, and Theodosius pronounced an Edict condemning the group in 382AD



Donatism (4th Century)

This heresy glorified appeared after the fierce persecution of the Roman Empire. It glorified those who stood firm in their faith and died as martyrs and taught that only morally ‘worthy’ individuals could perform church functions and rituals. Only the most ‘sold-out’ Christians were seen as true believers, and a person’s ‘holiness’ was the determining factor in whether or not they could hold an office. As a result, if a believer’s baptism was performed by someone who had a serious sin in their past, the baptism was seen as invalid. In a similar manner, if the Lord’s Supper was performed by someone who had this kind of sin in their past, it was also seen as invalid.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Donatus the Great (Bishop of Casae Nigrae)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Augustine of Hippo rejected the teaching and eventually influenced the Donatists to abandon their belief



Iconoclasm (7th and 8th Century)

This heresy states that it is sinful to make pictures or statues of Jesus (or any other believers or ‘saints’). The name comes from the word that means literally, “icon smashers”, and arose initially in the east where the Eastern Church had to deal with the influence of Islam and the Muslim dislike of imagery.

Leader(s) in the Heresy:

Emperor Leo the Isaurian and Constantine (Bishop of Nacolia)

Corrector(s) of the Heresy:

Pope Gregory II and Gregory III (who called a Synod at St. Peter's in 731AD)



So What is the Truth?

Now that we have looked at some of the issues that have been misinterpreted over the years, you might find yourself asking, "So, what is the truth, and on what are we to base this truth?" Funny you should ask that. Over the course of history, believers have come to list out the truth that they believe in the form of lists of accurate essential beliefs. They've called these lists, CREEDS. As Christians, we need to take God's truth seriously enough to understand, to the best of our ability, just what it is that the Bible teaches. That's why we've developed a portion of our site that seeks to understand the creedal truth as it is related to the nature of God, Jesus, Salvation, Man and the Church. Join us in the search for truth [HERE](#).