

7 Heresies Inside the Church

For a pastor, the way to deal with bad theology in his church is always to preach the Word.

Just hang in there, year after year, teaching and preaching God's unchanging truth. The changes in your people will come as you remain faithful.

The word *orthodox* means "right thinking." Straight shooting. Sound doctrine. Solid reasoning.

We think of heresy as something the bad guys do, the "spiritual gift" of cults and the aberration of the rebellious. After all, aren't all heretics nuts?

(We interrupt to recommend a book. A half-century ago, Walter Nigg wrote *The Heretics* to establish that the great heresies in church history were the result of some pretty smart people with real grievances, and not nuts. Reading it was life-changing for me. I checked and just now. A used copy or two is available, and new reprints are expensive. However, this is a great investment, and the book will be a keeper.)

As Walt Kelly's comic-strip possum Pogo once noted, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

There is enough heresy inside the walls of your church to start 12 new cults by breakfast.

In a half-century and more of churchmanship—pastoring, assistant pastoring and denominational involvement—I have seen these heresies, or beggars riding in kings' chariots, as the saying goes:

1. "If you are having trouble in your Christian life, clearly it's because you are not saved." You struggle with temptations, with disciplining yourself to a daily time of prayer and the Word, with controlling your temper, and a

thousand other things. Obviously, you have never been saved.

The solution is for you to this time, get it right. So, you go through all those spiritual contortions—praying, seeking, crying, pleading and performing autopsies on yourself—hoping that this time it takes. You ask the pastor to rebaptize you because you think, “If I was not saved before, it was not real baptism.”

Right thinking—orthodoxy—says it would help a great deal if you knew the Word. Christians struggle with temptation. They war against wickedness in high places. They fight a never-ending battle to conform their desires to the mind of Christ. Anyone teaching otherwise is a deceiver.

Background: In my first church following seminary, a congregation that ran 140 when I arrived and 240 when I left three-and-a-half years later, we baptized an average of 60 people a year. Impressive? It was, until you checked to see whose baptisms those were. Some were the same people every year, trying to “get it right this time.” As the young and inexperienced pastor, I went along with it, even knowing it was wrong.

2. “If our church is struggling and always having a hard time keeping our head above the water, it’s the pastor’s fault.”

Year after year, we have a hard time making the budget, there is constant dissension among the congregation, and we can’t seem to agree on anything. Clearly, if we had a good preacher, we could be like that wonderful church across town.

Their solution: Fire this preacher and find one that fits.

Right thinking (orthodoxy) says these people should get their eyes off the preacher and ask, “Lord, is it I?” Meanwhile, let the pastor keep preaching the Scriptures.

Background: Been there, done that, and have the scars to prove it.

3. "A steady diet of prophecy—conferences, classes, sermons—will produce a great and godly church." These people get tired of studies in Ephesians and classes on soul winning. They grow impatient with ministries to the children of prisoners and clamor for prophecy experts to get our minds off the problems of today and spread out their charts and tell us about the grand tomorrow that is coming for us and people like us.

Their solution is to find a pastor that will pull this off. Naturally, his views will need to jive with the official ones of the church leaders as well as the denomination.

Right thinking suggests 1) there is no church in the New Testament that did that, 2) only a few books of the New Testament devote much space to prophecy, 3) good and godly Christians disagree on prophecy interpretations and 4) churches in the past have committed 10,000 errors trying to identify antichrists, the abomination of desolation, and the time calendar. Let them proceed with care.

Background: I have had a few church members through the years who clamored for me to preach prophecy and bring in those prophetic powerhouses. When I refused, they became bitter and antagonistic. Likewise, I've seen good, solid churches taken over by new pastors who had gone to seed on prophecy. Other than illustrating that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1), a quarter of a century later, I see no good that came from it. In fact, such an emphasis could have even been destructive to the extent it diverted the Lord's workers from their God-given work in their church and community.

Question: Isn't prophecy in the Bible? It sure is. The problem is pastors and churches that major on something the Bible does not. Furthermore, teaching this subject is a field of landmines all waiting to maim the unwary and naive. Let the teachers proceed with caution.

4) “Getting people saved is more important than discipling them. At least they’re going to heaven.” This thinking says if we can just get people to pray the sinner’s prayer, we have rescued them from hell.

Right thinking says, “Show me that in the Word.” Jesus did not send His people to get people to pray a loaded prayer but to make disciples of all nations.

Background: A pastor in our city printed the sinner’s prayer on a card that he handed out to all his members. They were charged to get friends and family, co-workers, anyone, to pray that prayer. Their goal was a thousand people a year. Meanwhile, their church continued along, running 25 each Sunday. What’s wrong with this picture?

Question: Isn’t it important to get people saved? You bet it is. But the goal is to bring them into the body as a disciple (learner) who will grow in Christ and become a worker in the kingdom. We are not sent to make friends or converts, not “likes” or supporters, but to make disciples! (See Matthew 28:18-20.)

5. “Doing evangelism wrong is better than nothing. After all, the unsaved can’t get any more lost than they already are.” This thinking says anything we do is better than nothing. Even the “Holy Ghost-shouting con men” of which revivalism in America has produced too many or the manipulative masters of emotions and purveyors of feel-good theology which have filled our church rolls with names but left the pews vacant—even these are better than nothing, according to this thinking. After all—and I have heard this said—“We can’t get the lost any more lost than they already are.”

Right thinking wonders about this, whether we would have done better to have left people to be lost than to mess them up but good for eternity. Perhaps they are far more unreachable now than had we not poisoned them against the real thing. Jesus

spoke of people being made “twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matt. 23:15). The proselyte duped into a bad religious profession will hereafter be twice as hard to reach for Christ as his deceiver, who knew precisely he was teaching error.

Background: I once knew a lapsed Jehovah Witness who would drop by for counsel from time to time. She had grown disillusioned with the lies and false prophecies of her religion—she and a million others had bailed out after the leaders had prophesied 1975, I think, as the year of Christ’s return—but she would not attend any other church. She admitted to me that her former faith had poisoned her against all Christian churches.

Someone will give account before a holy God for this.

6. “If you are not speaking in tongues, you may not be saved and are definitely not mature or godly enough to be a leader in the church.” A few days ago, a man told me of a preacher saying to him, “If you do not speak in tongues, you will go to hell.” He answered, “Man, what Bible are you preaching from?” Good answer (as far as it went).

This kind of thinking exalts one spiritual gift (and a minor one at that) above all others and makes it the test of everything, something Scripture does not come close to doing. I suspect the culprit is the ingrown theology of such groups, as they close their system and study only what they themselves have said, then focus on minute interpretations of their own “revelations.” Such a system is fraught with error and dangerous to live with.

Orthodoxy—right thinking—says, “Teach the Word. Even the book of the Bible that speaks most about tongues-speaking (1 Corinthians) sets limits, establishes barriers, and gives guidelines to rein in this kind of maverick theology.”

7. “This is our church. You preachers come and go. Do not

meddle with how we do things." This kind of thinking is found primarily among small and fossilized churches, those one generation from dying. After all, this kind of thinking is what will kill a church quicker than Jim Jones' Kool-Aid.

Right thinking opens the Bible to Matthew 16:18, where the Lord says, "I will build My church." It's His church and not mine, nor yours. And He builds it.

Pray the Lord does not cancel your franchise, church leader. If He does, only the spiritually aware will notice. The rest of the people will go right on as before, doing their little activities and playing their little games. The only difference is that God will be nowhere to be found and no lives will be changed as a result of worship or faith.

Teach the Word, Pastor

There is no error that the Word will not address in one way or the other. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Author of this book, to know the correct applications for your people.

Preach the Word from the pulpit, and teach it in your leadership classes, in deacons' meetings, in committee meetings, in groups large and small. Teach the Word to your youth and to your children. Teach it to old and young, newcomers and old-timers.

Never stop. Teach it with love and with full assurance that "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

Go into the ministry believing that God's people do not need your most clever ideas, but to know the Word of God. They do not come to church starving to know how the latest schemes from the business world apply to them, but hungering to know God and His Word.

Teach and preach the Word with the full assurance that:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Is. 55:10-11).

Dr. Joe McKeever writes from the vantage point of more than 60 years as a disciple of Jesus, more than 50 years preaching His gospel and more than 40 years of cartooning for every imaginable Christian publication.

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