

# Heresies of The Early Church

## HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

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### What is a heresy?

The word "heresy" has a rich and complex history, rooted in the ancient Greek language. Derived from the Greek word "αἵρεσις" ("hairesis"), a feminine noun stemming from the verb "hairéomai," it initially conveyed the sense of "personally selecting or choosing." This fundamental meaning implied the act of making a conscious and decisive choice based on individual preference or judgment.

In its early usage within the Greek context, "hairesis" was employed to describe a wide range of situations involving the act of choosing. This could include joining a philosophical school, or adopting a particular way of life. In this sense, "hairesis" did not carry any inherently negative connotations; rather, it simply denoted the process of making a deliberate choice.

In early Christian communities, as various churches gathered to deliberate on matters of faith and doctrine, differing opinions inevitably emerged. These deviations from the prevailing consensus were commonly labeled as "heresies." Initially, this term simply denoted an alternative viewpoint or opinion held by a particular group or individual. However, as Christianity spread and solidified its institutional structures, the concept of heresy evolved to encompass more profound theological implications.

Consequently, the labeling of certain beliefs or practices as "heretical" became a powerful tool for defining and policing the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Heretical ideas were seen as defying the integrity of the faith and undermining the authority of the established church. As a result, individuals and groups deemed heretical were often subjected to ostracism, persecution, and even excommunication.

According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, heresy came to be understood as "adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma." This definition reflects the growing significance of orthodoxy and the establishment of standardized beliefs within the Christian church.

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Opinions that diverged from the officially sanctioned doctrines were deemed heretical, challenging the unity and authority of the church.

## **What does the Bible say about Heresies?**

Throughout human history, mankind's innate tendency to form opinions and beliefs has often resulted in the unsettling phenomenon of heresies. These distortions of religious doctrines have a long and tumultuous past, dating back to the dawn of written scriptures. Even during the time of the apostles, the original followers of Jesus Christ, heresies emerged and posed a significant threat.

The apostles, being eyewitnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus, understood the importance of maintaining the purity of the gospel message. They recognized that any deviation from the truth could lead to confusion, division, and spiritual harm. As a result, they actively confronted and warned against the spread of false teachings.

But why would such seemingly minor deviations in belief or seemingly trivial details warrant such severe responses? St. Peter provides a clear answer in his second letter: *false teachers would emerge, secretly introducing destructive heresies that would deny the Lord and lead many astray. "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber."* (2 Peter 2:1) These false teachers could appear with seemingly minor deviations in belief or seemingly trivial details, but their teachings would have severe consequences. The presence of false teachers would cause division within the church as believers would be torn between the truth and the lies being propagated by these deceivers. Furthermore, the way of truth would be blasphemed as those outside the church would use the false teachings of these teachers to discredit Christianity.

Moreover, St. Peter clarifies that oftentimes these false teachers exploit others through covetousness and deceptive words, with their judgment looming over them like a sword hanging by a thread. Heresies have the insidious ability to divide communities and undermine the unity that is essential for any group to thrive. As our Lord proclaimed, "no kingdom divided against itself can stand." Therefore, it is imperative to address heresies swiftly and decisively. Heresies challenge the established beliefs and values that provide a common ground for church members. When these foundations are shaken, confusion and uncertainty prevail, eroding the sense of purpose and direction.

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St. Titus echoes this sentiment, urging believers to reject divisive individuals after repeated admonitions. He recognizes that such individuals are warped and sinning, condemning themselves through their actions. “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” (Titus 3:10-11) The approach to heresies, then, must be unwavering and uncompromising. The goal is not to persecute individuals but to safeguard the integrity of the faith and protect the community from harm. This firm stance is necessary to preserve the unity and truth that form the foundation of any religious community. The goal is to preserve the unity and truth that form the foundation of the church. By rejecting divisive individuals, the church can maintain its focus on the teachings of Jesus Christ and continue to grow in love and fellowship.

## **Type of Christian Heresies in the Early Church**

When it comes to heresies, these dogmatically different opinions that must be corrected, those referring to God is of greatest importance. When speaking to the Samaritan woman, the Lord clarifies the importance of true worship: “You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:22-24) Accordingly, when it comes to the character and person of God, many heresies have been critical to correct such that we worship in spirit and truth, worshiping that which we know. Without this unity in dogma can we truly say we know Him if we all have different definitions of who He is? Let us then visit the heresies of God through four different sections. Heresies on God the Trinity, heresies on the Father, heresies on the Son and heresies on the Holy Spirit.

### **1. Against the God the Trinity (Existence and Hypostasis)**

When looking at heresies on the Trinity, there are a few different way the TRinity is attacked. From one perspective, the objections may come with regards to his existence, such as atheists and agnostics. Alternatively, other objections come with regards to the hypostasis of God, whether he is 1 person, changing or unchanging or how each person of the Trinity interacted. Let us review each in more detail.

Throughout history, this doctrine has been a focal point of theological debate, giving rise to a myriad of heresies and objections. These challenges to the orthodox understanding of the Trinity can

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be broadly categorized into two main areas: those that question the very existence of God and those that grapple with the nature of God's triune being.

### Challenges to the Existence of God

This category encompasses objections raised by atheists and agnostics. Atheists fundamentally deny the existence of any divine being, including the Triune God of Christianity. Agnostics, on the other hand, maintain a position of uncertainty, asserting that the existence of God is unknowable.

- **Atheism:** Atheism is a belief system that rejects the existence of any gods or supernatural beings. Atheists argue that there is no evidence to support the existence of deities and that the concept of god is a human invention. Atheism can be contrasted with theism, which is the belief in the existence of one or more gods.
- **Agnosticism:** Agnosticism is the view that the existence or non-existence of any gods or supernatural beings cannot be known or proven. Agnostics argue that there is not enough evidence to support either the existence or non-existence of deities and that it is therefore impossible to make a definitive statement about their existence. Agnosticism can be contrasted with gnosticism, which is the belief that certain knowledge about the existence of deities or supernatural beings is possible.

### Challenges to the Nature of the Triune God

This category encompasses a wide range of heresies that have arisen throughout Church history. These heresies primarily focus on the concept of God's "hypostasis," a Greek term referring to the distinct persons within the Godhead.

- **Monarchianism:** Monarchianism is a theological movement that emphasizes God as one indivisible being.
  - a. **Adoptionist | Unitarianism:** These monarchians believe that there is only one God and that Jesus Christ is not divine but rather a created being.
  - b. **Modalism | Sabellianism:** This heresy proposes that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons but rather different modes or manifestations of a single divine person. Modalism essentially denies the plurality of persons within the Trinity.
- **Tritheism:** This heresy, in contrast to Modalism, goes to the opposite extreme by asserting that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate and distinct gods. Tritheism compromises the essential unity of the Godhead.
- **Subordinationism:** This heresy, while acknowledging the plurality of persons within the Trinity, maintains a hierarchy among them. Subordinationists typically view the Son and the Holy Spirit as subordinate to the Father in terms of their being or authority. This view challenges the co-equality of the persons within the Trinity.
- **Marcionism/Dualistic:** Marcionism is a theological movement that teaches that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament. Marcionites argue that the God of the Old Testament is a wrathful and vengeful deity, while the God of the New Testament is a

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loving and merciful deity. Marcionism can be contrasted with Trinitarianism, which teaches that there is only one God who is both wrathful and merciful.

## The Orthodox Response

Throughout the centuries, the Church has responded to these challenges by formulating and refining its understanding of the Trinity. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, as affirmed by the major Christian creeds, upholds the following key tenets:

- **Monotheism:** There is only one God.
- **Trinity:** This one God exists in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- **Equality:** These three persons are co-equal and co-eternal.
- **Distinctness:** Each person possesses a unique role and function within the Godhead.
- **Unity:** The three persons are inseparably united in essence and will.

Some early Christian thinkers wrestled with how to reconcile the belief in one God with the distinct roles and identities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as revealed in Scripture. The development of Trinitarian doctrine was a dynamic process, marked by intense debate and theological reflection. Church councils, such as the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Constantinople and the Council of Ephesus, played a crucial role in formulating the orthodox understanding of the Trinity, which has been passed down through the centuries.

While engaging with these historical challenges can be intellectually stimulating, it's crucial to remember that the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely an abstract theological concept. It lies at the heart of Christian faith and shapes our understanding of God's nature and his relationship with humanity.

## 2. Against the Father (Suffering)

Patripassianism, a controversial theological doctrine that emerged in the 2nd century AD, challenges the traditional Christian understanding of the Trinity. Unlike mainstream Christianity, which distinguishes between the Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit as distinct persons within the Godhead, Patripassianism asserts that God the Father, not just God the Son, suffered and died on the cross during the Passion.

The origins of Patripassianism can be traced back to early Christian thinkers such as Sabellius, Noetus of Smyrna, and Praxeas. These theologians argued that God is a singular being who manifested himself in different ways at different times. According to Patripassianism, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separate entities but rather different modes or aspects of the one true God.

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One of the central tenets of Patripassianism is the belief that the Father, who is traditionally understood as transcendent and immutable, actively participated in the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. This notion contradicts the orthodox Christian view that the Father remained impassible and unaffected by the events of the Passion. Patripassians argued that the Father's love and compassion for humanity compelled him to enter into the human experience fully, including enduring the pain and suffering associated with crucifixion.

Patripassianism also challenges the traditional understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. In Christianity, the Father is seen as distinct from the Son, with the Son acting as the mediator between God and humanity. However, Patripassians contend that the Father and the Son are inseparable and that it was the Father himself who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. They emphasize that the Father did not merely send his Son to suffer and die but that he actively participated in the redemptive act of the cross.

Patripassianism gained some followers in the early Church, but it was ultimately condemned as heretical by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. The Council established the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, which affirms that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons within the one God. This doctrine emphasizes the unity and diversity of God's nature while preserving the distinct roles of each person in the Godhead.

In modern times, Patripassianism has found renewed interest among certain theological movements that emphasize the unity and simplicity of God. These movements, such as "Oneness Pentecostalism" and "Modalist Monarchianism," argue that the traditional Trinitarian understanding is too complex and contradictory. History repeats itself.

### **3. Against the Son**

A large majority of heresies in the early church were directed against the Son. Some heresies attacked the hypostasis, others His divinity, while some argued against his Humanity and finally others compromised His nature. Let's delve deeper into the complex landscape of early church heresies, focusing on those that challenged the understanding of the Son, Jesus Christ. These heresies were not merely abstract theological debates; they struck at the very heart of Christian identity and salvation.

#### **Heresies Against the Hypostasis of the Son**

- **Ehionism | Adoptionism:** Adoptionists proposed that Jesus was a mere human who was "adopted" by God as his Son at his baptism or resurrection. This view diminished the unique divine nature of Jesus, reducing him to a status of exceptional, but ultimately created, being.

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- **Manicheanism:** Manicheanism, a religious and philosophical system founded by the Persian prophet Mani in the 3rd century CE, shares similarities with Ebionism. It teaches that the universe is divided into two opposing realms: the realm of light, associated with good and God, and the realm of darkness, associated with evil and matter. According to Manicheanism, Jesus Christ was a manifestation of the divine light who came to earth to liberate humanity from the forces of darkness. The Paulicians, a Christian sect that emerged in the 7th century CE in the Byzantine Empire, adopted many Manichean beliefs, including the view that Jesus was a created being and not eternally divine. Both Manicheanism and Paulicianism were considered heretical by the established Christian Church and faced persecution throughout their existence.

### **Heresies Against the Divinity of the Son**

- **Arianism:** Arguably the most influential of the early heresies, Arianism asserted that Jesus was created by God the Father and was therefore subordinate to him. Arius, the proponent of this view, famously declared, "There was a time when he was not." This directly contradicted the orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus as co-eternal and co-equal with the Father.
- **Semi-Arianism:** Semi-Arians attempt to find a middle ground between Arianism and Trinitarianism. They suggest that the Son is similar or like the Father (homoiousian) rather than being of the same substance (homoousian), as the Nicene Creed affirms. Some Semi-Arians argue that the Son is a created being, but that he is the first and highest creation of God.
- **Anomoeanism:** Anomoeanism represents an extreme form of Arianism, asserting that the Son is entirely different and unlike the Father (anomoios). Anomoeans deny any inherent similarity or likeness between God the Father and Jesus Christ. They argue that Jesus is not divine in the same sense as the Father and that the idea of the Trinity is false.
- **Subordinationism:** While not as extreme as Arianism, subordinationism maintained a hierarchy within the Trinity, placing the Son in a subordinate position to the Father. This view undermined the concept of the Trinity as three co-equal and co-eternal persons.

### **Heresies Against the Humanity of the Son**

- **Apollinarianism:** Apollinaris of Laodicea proposed that Jesus had a human body but a divine mind or soul. Apollinaris argued that the divine Logos took the place of the human soul in Jesus Christ, and that therefore Jesus Christ did not have a complete human nature. This view was condemned as heresy by the Council of Constantinople in 381, and Apollinarianism was subsequently suppressed by the Byzantine Empire. This view was seen as compromising the full humanity of Jesus, which was essential for his role as a savior and representative of humankind.
- **Gnosticism | Marcionism | Valentianism:** A diverse set of religious movements that flourished in the early centuries of Christianity, Gnosticism held a variety of beliefs, but all shared the common belief that there is a profound distinction between the material world and the spiritual world. Both Marcionism and Valentinianism shared a common Gnostic thread in their emphasis on secret knowledge as the key to salvation. They also both expressed a certain dissatisfaction with the material world, viewing it as flawed or even evil, accordingly denying Christ's physical incarnation. They believed that matter was inherently evil, and therefore, a divine being could not have truly taken on a material form.

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- **Docetism:** This early heresy questioned the true humanity of Jesus, suggesting that his physical body was an illusion. Docetists believed that matter was inherently evil, and therefore, a divine being like Jesus could not have taken on a true human form. This challenged the core Christian belief in the Incarnation, the belief that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

### **Heresies Compromising the Nature of the Son**

- **Eutychianism:** This heresy, also known as Monophysitism, asserted that Jesus had only one nature, a divine nature that absorbed his human nature. This was seen as a threat to the understanding of Jesus as fully human and fully divine.
- **Nestorianism:** Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, emphasized the distinction between the human and divine natures of Jesus to the point of suggesting two separate persons. This view was condemned as dividing the person of Christ.
- **Pelagianism:** Though not a direct heresy on the Nature of God, the heresy undermined the work of God in salvation and diminished salvation through grace. Pelagianism is a Christian theological doctrine that emphasizes the role of human free will in salvation. It was developed by Pelagius, a British monk, in the 5th century. Pelagius argued that humans are born with the ability to choose between good and evil, and that they do not need the grace of God to be saved. This view was condemned as heresy by the Council of Carthage in 418, and Pelagianism was subsequently suppressed by the Byzantine Empire.

### **4. Against the Holy Spirit**

Heresies did not spare the Holy Spirit. Just as the Father and the Son were vehemently attacked, the Holy Spirit too was subject to a variety of heresies throughout Church history. These heresies often stemmed from misunderstandings or deliberate misrepresentations of the Holy Spirit's nature, role, and relationship within the Trinity. Let's delve deeper into some of these heresies.

- **Macedonianism | Pneumatomachi:** This heresy, named after its proponent Macedonius, Bishop of Constantinople in the 4th century, denied the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. The term "Pneumatomachi" literally means "fighters against the Spirit." Macedonians argued that the Holy Spirit was a created being, subordinate to the Father and the Son. The Macedonianists based their arguments on various scriptural interpretations and theological speculations. They pointed to passages in the Bible that seemed to suggest that the Holy Spirit was not on the same level as the Father and the Son. For example, they emphasized verses that described the Spirit as being "sent" by the Father or the Son, implying a hierarchical relationship. The Macedonianists' teachings sparked intense theological debates and controversies within the early church. Their views were vehemently opposed by many prominent church leaders, including Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. These theologians argued that the denial of the Holy Spirit's divinity diminished the Spirit's role in the salvation and sanctification of believers. This contradicted the orthodox Christian understanding of the Trinity, which affirms the equal divinity and co-eternality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Macedonianists were condemned as heretics by the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.
- **Montanism:** While not solely focused on the Holy Spirit, Montanism, a 2nd-century

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movement, emphasized the continuing revelation of the Holy Spirit through prophets and prophetesses. They also believed that the Spirit could empower believers to live a life of holiness and power. Montanus, the founder of the movement, claimed to be a mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit, delivering new prophecies and teachings. This challenged the authority of the established Church and its understanding of the completion of revelation in Jesus Christ.

- **Filioque:** The Filioque controversy centered on the question of whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from both the Father and the Son. The Western church held that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, while the Eastern church held that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. At the heart of the controversy was the interpretation of a passage in the Gospel of John (15:26), where Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as being sent by both the Father and himself. The Western church, particularly the Latin-speaking theologians, interpreted this passage as evidence that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son. This view, known as the "Filioque" (Latin for "and the Son"), became widely accepted in the West. On the other hand, the Eastern church, primarily represented by Greek-speaking theologians, held a different understanding. They argued that the Holy Spirit proceeds solely from the Father and that any addition to the Nicene Creed, which defined the core beliefs of Christianity, was unacceptable. They believed that the Western interpretation undermined the Father's unique role as the source of divinity and compromised the unity of the Trinity. This difference in belief led to a schism between the Eastern and Western churches in the 11th century. The issue has never been fully resolved, and it remains a point of contention between the two branches of Christianity.
- **Donatism:** Donatism was a movement in early Christianity that emphasized the importance of holiness in the clergy. Donatists believed that Christian clergy must be faultless for their ministry to be effective and their prayers and sacraments to be valid. They rejected the idea that the church could tolerate sinful clergy, and they argued that the church should be purified of all unrighteousness. Donatism was condemned as heretical by the early church, but it continued to exist as a separate movement for several centuries.

The Church's response to these heresies was crucial in shaping and solidifying Christian doctrine regarding the Holy Spirit. Through councils and the writings of theologians, the Church affirmed the full divinity, personality, and co-equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. The Nicene Creed, formulated in the 4th century, explicitly states that the Holy Spirit is "the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified."

## Taking the time to ponder

Why is dogma important to learn and preserve? Take the time to ponder on the question. The dogmas of a church are those doctrines which it declares to be the most essential contents of Christianity. Was fighting all these heresies necessary? Where would the church be today should all have these heresies been individually considered minor? Dogma is a form of the abiding vitality of the deposit of faith in the church which itself remains always the same.

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Dogmas serve as the guiding principles and benchmarks for the church's understanding and interpretation of Scripture, tradition, and theological reflection. They provide a framework for comprehending the mysteries of faith and articulating them in a coherent and consistent manner. Through dogmas, the church establishes a common ground for its members, fostering unity in belief and practice.

In essence, dogmas are living expressions of the church's faith. They reflect the dynamic interaction between tradition and innovation, continuity and change, as the church seeks to remain faithful to the Gospel while addressing the needs and aspirations of its members in a changing world.



### *Review Questions*

1. Which of the following is not a type of Christian Heresies in the Early Church?
  - a. Against the Trinity
  - b. Against the Nature of the Son
  - c. **On the Nature of the World**
  - d. Against the Hypostasis of God
2. What is Agnosticism?
  - a. A person who believes that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God
  - b. A person who denies the existence of God
  - c. A person who believes the material world is evil
  - d. A person who believes in God
3. Which heresy denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ, claiming he was a created being?
  - a. **Arianism**
  - b. Nestorianism
  - c. Monophysitism
  - d. Docetism
4. What heresy asserted that Jesus Christ had only one nature, which was divine, and that his human nature was absorbed by his divinity?
  - a. Arianism
  - b. Nestorianism
  - c. **Monophysitism**
  - d. Docetism
5. Which heresy proposed that Jesus Christ had two separate persons, one divine and one human?
  - a. Arianism
  - b. **Nestorianism**
  - c. Monophysitism
  - d. Docetism

6. What heresy taught that Jesus Christ only appeared to be human and that his physical body was an illusion?
  - a. Arianism
  - b. Nestorianism
  - c. Monophysitism
  - d. **Docetism**
7. Which heresy denied the full personhood of the Holy Spirit, considering Him a created being?
  - a. **Macedonianism**
  - b. Gnosticism
  - c. Pelagianism
  - d. Donatism
8. What heresy promoted the idea that salvation could be achieved through human effort and good works, downplaying the role of divine grace?
  - a. Gnosticism
  - b. Donatism
  - c. **Pelagianism**
  - d. Macedonianism
9. Which heresy claimed that the sacraments administered by sinful or unworthy priests were invalid?
  - a. Gnosticism
  - b. **Donatism**
  - c. Pelagianism
  - d. Macedonianism
10. What heresy emphasized secret knowledge as the key to salvation, often leading to esoteric and mystical interpretations of Christianity?
  - a. **Gnosticism**
  - b. Donatism
  - c. Pelagianism
  - d. Macedonianism
11. Which heresy asserted that God the Father suffered on the cross?
  - a. **Patipassianism**
  - b. Sabellianism
  - c. Adoptionism
  - d. Apollinarianism
12. What heresy taught that matter is inherently evil and that the physical world is a corruption of the spiritual realm?
  - a. Docetism
  - b. Arianism
  - c. Pelagianism
  - d. **Gnosticism**



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