

What Have Heretics Done for Christianity?

Dr. Justo L. González



Credo House
Oklahoma City, OK
January 25, 2013

What Have Heretics Done for Christianity?

Allow me to begin with a short anecdote. In German, the word for “candle” is *Kerze*, and the word for “heretic” is *Ketzer*. Thus it is easy to understand the confusion caused by a friend who was studying theology in Basel, Switzerland, and decided he wanted an Advent wreath. He went to a store and asked for five candles. But what he actually said was that he wanted five heretics *Ketzerei*. The perplexed clerk was not sure he had understood right, and so asked what he wanted them for. To which our friend replied: “To burn for Advent!”

The word “heretic” immediately brings to mind images of the medieval inquisition, the drowning of Anabaptists, the burning of Servetus and many others. To this day, in church circles, there are few things one can call someone that are worse than “heretic.” Quite often, when church leaders wish to dismiss someone or some new idea, they simply cry “heresy,” and that seems to be the end of the matter.

But in a modern world in which the newest is usually seen as the best, the word “heretic” tends to have a positive connotation. Science and technology would not advance were it not for those who break with conventions, who question what is given —or, as we say today, who “think outside the box.” Without such “heretics,” we would have no computers, no electricity, and no fire!

All of which could lead many to the conclusion that, in matters of religion also, it is good to be a heretic. Heretics are free-wheeling sorts who create new ideas. And there is no doubt that the church is in need of new ideas!

However, before we get to carried away by that, there are two important points that must be taken into account:

First, as Christians we believe that our faith is grounded in history —specifically, in the historical events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This means that, while Christians must be always open to the future, there is a past that is normative, a past with which we cannot dispense. And as a result innovation for the mere sake of innovation is not always a positive thing. Our technological society may think that all that is newer is better; but Christians are convinced that nothing is better than this Jesus of Nazareth who lived on this earth twenty centuries ago.

Secondly, free-wheelers are by definition loners. They go out on a limb. They are sure of their own opinions, and are ready to stand against the world. But by definition the Christian faith is communal. John Wesley put it quite pointedly when he declared that there is no Christian religion that is not social, and that the notion of a solitary saint is just as self-contradictory as the notion of an adulterous saint. Our society may admire lone wolves and solitary explorers; but as Christians we know that it is not enough to be a solitary explorer.

Since heresy has to do with doctrine, it may be best to begin by clarifying what doctrines are and what their function is. At their best, doctrines are not an attempt to say exactly how God is and what we ought to believe. Doctrines are rather guidelines that tell us within which limits we ought to move.

Allow me to illustrate this. Suppose a tribe lives on a high plateau, surrounded by cliffs on every side. Some of these cliffs are abruptly clear, and there is little risk that any but the most daring will fall off them. But in other cases the edges are in the midst of lush and attractive vegetation, or the ground is crumbly, so that you may fall when you did not even suspect you were close to the edge.

As years and generations go by, the tribe learns where the dangerous cliffs are. It learns mostly because some of its members fell over the edge. In order to prevent this from happening again, the tribe puts up signs and fences that will warn people of danger. The fences are not there to keep people from moving around, nor to tell people exactly where to go. On the contrary, they are there precisely to give them more freedom of movement. Thanks to the fences, people are free to move practically from one edge of the plateau to the other. Some may prefer the northern regions of the plateau, and some the south; but all will know what dangers to avoid. Thus the fences, rather than limiting their freedom, allow them to exercise that freedom in safety. Even more, precisely because there are fences, they will feel free to move about in confidence.

The function of doctrines is similar to this. They are not attempts to describe exactly how God is, nor to determine what everyone must believe. They are rather warnings of the dangers that lie along some paths, and of crumbly ground on which one must tread carefully. And, just as the fences on the plateau give greater freedom to the inhabitants, so do doctrines, rather than restricting freedom, provide the guidelines that allow us to exercise our freedom more widely and safely.

As I look at the history of the church, and rapidly survey those who have been declared heretics, I find three very different sorts of people. First, there are the adventurous souls enamored of what they think is their great individual discovery. Many of these are people who believe that they have suddenly found the key to the whole thing. There have always been such people. Back in the early days there was someone who decided that Israel and the church had it all wrong, that the good guy in the Bible was the serpent, and that therefore all of Scripture was to be read in exactly the opposite way to the one that Israel and the church proposed. Today there are countless people who can give us the exact date of the final consummation by some sort of Biblical mathematics which they claim gives them a clue that no one has known before. Or there are those who suddenly discover that the key to the whole thing is in this particular verse of Jeremiah, or in another verse in Revelation, or in a combination of both. It would seem that for such people the Bible, rather than God's revelation, is like a crossword puzzle that God has given people to try to figure out.

This is the first sort of heretic. Their attitude would be similar to someone on our plateau who suddenly decides that he has discovered a secret path that leads to a better plateau, and therefore disregards the signs and the fences that have been erected over generations, only to fall down a cliff, probably taking others with him. Although there have been heretics of this sort throughout the history of the church, they have become more numerous in our time, in part because our time values daring, creativity, and imagination, and in part because the explosion in communications has made it easier for such people to disseminate their supposed discoveries. At any rate, heretics of this sort have done very little for the church beyond creating confusion, making a name for themselves, and making Christianity a subject of ridicule.

Then there is a second kind of heretic. These are those who are declared heretics by ultraorthodox people who believe that any who do not agree with them on every detail are heretics. In the twelfth century, Peter Waldo was declared a heretic because when asked by a theologian if he believed that Mary was the mother of Christ he said "Yes," when according to the theologian he should have said "No, Mary is the Mother of God." In seventeenth century Germany, there were those Lutheran theologians who insisted that God had inspired the Massoretic points that Jewish scholars had added to the text of Scripture beginning in the fifth century in order to make it easier to read the ancient Hebrew text, which only had consonants. According to these theologians, any who did not believe that those points were divinely inspired were heretics condemned to eternal damnation. Something similar happened among Dutch Calvinist theologians who declared that any who did not affirm the five doctrinal points of the

Synod of Dort were heretics.

This is the second kind of heretic: those who have been made such by the overzealous vigilance of the orthodox. Their contribution to Christianity, even though unwittingly, has been mostly in providing a corrective against the witch-hunting zeal of those who believe that every I must be dotted, and every t crossed, and that there is no mercy for those who are not able to do so.

Returning to the image of the plateau, what has happened in such cases is that some people, seeing that fences were beneficial, have begun multiplying them, and bringing them ever further away from the edges, so that the movements of the inhabitants are increasingly limited. In such cases, the fences that were supposed to be protective have become restrictive, with the natural and foreseeable result that the most adventurous feel justified in ignoring them. Those who jump the fence are then dubbed heretics by those who built the fences. And this may have both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, these fence-jumpers called heretics have greater freedom to explore the plateau and enjoy its beauty and its fruit. On the negative side, since fences are now to be disregarded, many of these fence-jumpers fall over the edge of a cliff.

This is the second sort of heretic: those who, even though being well within the limits of safety on the plateau, are declared heretics by fence builders —by those who declare themselves to be guardians of the faith.

Then there is a third sort of heretic. It is particularly about this sort of heretic and their contribution that I would like to speak about tonight. These are not people seeking to innovate for the mere pleasure of saying something new, or to prove how insightful they are, or to go beyond the plateau where their tribe lives. On the contrary, most of these are people who are deeply committed to the tribe, but who are afraid of the direction in which the entire tribe seems to be moving. They are afraid that people are moving too far in one direction, and therefore, as a corrective, they explore what they hope will be fertile lands in the opposite direction. If they feel, for instance, that the tribe is moving too far west, as if there were no cliffs in that direction, and ignoring the eastern regions of the plateau, they move east, exploring lands that the rest of the tribe seems to have ignored. Quite often the result is that in their very zeal to explore new territories, they themselves fall off a cliff.

Some of this third type of heretics are also people so profoundly affected by their culture that the edges between that culture and the Christian faith were blurred. As a consequence, such people have allowed culture to determine what elements in the Christian faith are to be retained, and which relinquished. Quite often this is done unconsciously. This was the case, for instance, with most of the heretics of the second century. They lived in a radically dualistic culture, for most philosophies and most religions of the time believed that the contrast between spirit and matter was such that only the spiritual was good, and matter must be rejected or surpassed. Significantly, the most common heresy of the time was precisely denying that creation was good, and that Jesus had a physical body such as ours. In this case, such

heretics fell off the cliff because its edges were obscured by cultural mists and fogs.

It is when people fall off the edges they are dubbed heretics —and not without cause, for what they taught and said went beyond the limits of the plateau, and there is the risk that others will fall off the same cliff. The tribe then builds a new fence, saying something such as “Danger! So and so fell off a cliff here! Go no further! Do not follow in his footsteps!”

Even though rejected as heretics, and even in spite of having fallen off a cliff, such heretics have made a double contribution to the rest of the tribe. First, as was their purpose, they have warned the tribe of the dangers lurking in the opposite direction. And second, although this was not their purpose, they have alerted the tribe to the need to raise a fence warning of the cliff where they themselves have fallen.

This is why I say that heretics —this sort of heretics— have made a significant contribution to the life of the church.

Allow me to explain this by means of a concrete example. Early in the second century, in the city of Sinope on Pontus —in what today we call the Turkish coast of the Black Sea— there was a young man by the name of Marcion. Marcion’s father was the bishop of Sinope, and from all that we can tell, Marcion himself was a firm believer in Christianity. He was not just a church goer. On the contrary, he seems to have been very concerned with the direction in which he saw

Christianity moving, and decided to put a stop to it.

Apparently Marcion's concerns were essentially two. First, he was concerned over the decidedly legalistic turn that Christianity was making. It seemed to him that the message of a loving and forgiving God of grace was being lost amid laws and rule of conduct, often coming to the point where it appeared that God was like a strict bookkeeper, keeping tally of each person's good and evil deeds, in order then to reward the good and punish the evil for their deeds.

Marcion had plenty of reasons for feeling that way. When one reads most of the Christian writers of his time that have survived, it is clear that the notion of grace was being obscured, and there was the danger that Christianity would become a set of laws determining what actions God would reward, and what to do about those actions that God would reward. Thus, roughly at the same time as Marcion, the son of the bishop of Sinope, was dealing with these concerns, Hermas, the brother of the bishop of Rome, wrote a book which we now call *The Shepherd*. His main concern there is what to do about sins committed after baptism.

Apparently, he felt that in baptism God's grace forgives all sins previously committed. But, what of those who fall after they have been baptized. After struggling with that subject, and through a series of visions, Hermas comes to the conclusion that there is one more opportunity for repentance, but after that second chance those who sin will "hardly be saved" —unless they die as martyrs, in which case they will certainly be saved. Furthermore, Hermas believed that it "If you do something good beyond the commandment of God, you will gain greater glory for

yourself and you will be more honored before God than you would have been.”

Such a legalistic, almost mechanical system of laws, and of rewards and punishments, Marcion saw as a denial of the good news of salvation by the grace of God.

Marcion's second concern had to do with the newness of the Gospel. Is the Gospel just the continuation of what was going on before, in what sense is it good news? Has nothing new happened in Jesus Christ?

On this point, Marcion was concerned over a tendency among some Christians, who emphasized the point that God had been preparing for the coming of Jesus but found it difficult to see how the Gospel is new. Vis-à-vis Greco-Roman culture, this was done by affirming that ever since the beginning of time God had made all things according to an eternal and divine reason, and that this reason has become incarnate in Jesus. From this perspective, all past history is a witness to Jesus, and therefore Justin Martyr can declare that Heraclitus and Socrates were Christians! And, vis-à-vis the Hebrew tradition, Justin can likewise claim that Abraham was a Christian!

Marcion would have none of that. The Gospel must be a message of grace. And something about it must be radically new. On both of these counts, he was right.

But then his reaction went so far that the rest of the church had no doubt that he had fallen off a cliff, and fences were needed to prevent others from doing likewise.

Let us look first at what Marcion proposed, and then at the fences that the church erected, and their value for today.

On the matter of grace, Marcion insisted that a loving God would not judge nor punish.

Therefore, the God of Christians, the Father of Jesus Christ, cannot be the God of Israel and of its Scriptures. According to Marcion, the God of what we now call the Old Testament is a God of justice, vengeance, and even wrath. In contrast, the God whom Jesus revealed is a God of love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. This is not to say that the OT is not divine revelation. It certainly is. But it is the revelation of an inferior god, of this Yahweh who gives a Law by which all will be measured, and who can hardly wait to punish those who disobey it. This is not the message of the gospel, which is one of grace and love. This God of love, this Christian God, stands high above Yahweh, whose vindictiveness does not allow him to acknowledge the High God.

This also helps Marcion with the matter of the radical newness of the gospel. The High God of grace was not known until the coming of Jesus. Christ is a divine messenger sent from the highest heaven to rescue humankind from the grip of Yahweh. What Christians are to proclaim, and the gospel on which they are to rejoice, is precisely that God is not like Yahweh of old, but is rather a loving and merciful father who forgives whatever we do.

Marcion's emphasis on the radical newness of the gospel is such that Adolph von Harnack was justified in calling his message "das Evangelium vom fremden Gott" —the gospel of the alien God.

The High God is alien to this world, which is the creation of the lesser Yahweh. All that we see around us is indeed a divine creation; but it is not the creation of the God of Christianity. It is not clear whether Marcion believed that Yahweh made this physical world out of malice or out of ignorance. But whatever the case might be, the world is not good. In Genesis, we are told that Yahweh looked at creation and saw that it was good. But it is not so from the point of view of the true God of love. Thus, in emphasizing the radical newness of the gospel, Marcion comes to deny that God —the High God of love and grace— has anything to do with this material world. On this score, Tertullian, one of his most articulate opponents, sarcastically asked him: "Tell me, what was this God of yours doing before the birth of Jesus? Was he not able even to make a measly cucumber?"

The consequences of ascribing creation to a lesser god are far-reaching. They include the denial of the incarnation, for if this material world is not the creation of the Most High God, then it makes no sense to say that God took flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus did not have a true physical body such as ours. He was pure spirit. His flesh was mere appearance. This is the doctrine known as "docetism," from a Greek word meaning to seem, to appear. And Marcion carried this doctrine to the point of declaring that Jesus was never born, but simply appeared as a grown

man.

Having set aside the doctrine of creation, Marcion has to set aside also the Scriptures of Israel, which until that time were read and commented on in church. Having discarded the canon of the OT, he was forced to make a new list of books to be read in church. These had to be books whose message was of grace and forgiveness, and not of justice and wrath. To that end, Marcion proposed a list that consisted of the epistles of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. According to him, it was only Paul, among all the early Christian teachers, that properly understood the message of grace. This is why Paul insists on salvation by grace, and not by obedience to the Law. Therefore, the core of the canon or list of books to be read and commented on in church are the epistles of Paul. To this is to be added the Gospel of Luke, for Luke was Paul's companion, and therefore it was he who heard the proper interpretation of the teachings and the significance of Jesus.

AETH

But, what are we to say of the many passages in which Paul and Luke quote the Scriptures of Israel —the Scriptures of the vindictive Yahweh? Actually, neither Paul nor Luke ever wrote such words. These were later interpolations, the work of "Judaizers" who wanted to show that Paul believed in the God of Israel.

Having said all this, it should be clear why I say that Marcion, while attempting to underscore the newness of the gospel of grace, fell off a cliff. And, as so often happens in such falls, he

seems to have been gathering speed as he bounced from rock to rock!

But even so, in a negative way, Marcion's contribution to the Christian church was enormous, for it led the church to set up fences that stand to this day. The two most important ones are the canon of Scripture and what we today know as the Apostles' Creed.

The early church asked a few questions about the canon of Scripture. In their services, Christians simply read and commented on the same books that were read in the synagogue, to which were added, in a somewhat informal manner, a number of Christian writings. Roughly at the same time as Marcion was proposing his canon, another Christian writer tells us that in their gatherings Christians read "the memoirs of the apostles" —which seem to be the gospels. We also know that the letters of Paul, and other early Christian epistles, were copied and circulated among neighboring churches. Apparently, particular Gospels were most common in different areas —John in Asia Minor, Luke in Antioch, Mark in Rome. But, as Christians traveled and communicated with each other, they would share these various accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, as well as some of the letters that a church would have and another did not —in particular the Epistles of Paul. But there was no attempt to make a list.

It was Marcion who first proposed such a list, and in so doing forced the church to follow suit. This was not done immediately, nor was there a gathering of leaders to determine which books should be read in church and which not. What actually happened was that a consensus soon

emerged—a consensus that was not entirely clear at the edges, but that from the beginning included the ancient Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Epistles of Paul and a variety of Gospels—in some cases, particularly in the West, three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but soon also John.

The matter of the variety of Gospels merits some discussion. Marcion proposed a single Gospel—one from which he had deleted all references to the god and the Scriptures of Israel. At about the same time, a number of other writings were appearing, each claiming to be *the* true gospel of Jesus Christ, and rejecting all others. Thus, a certain Valentinus wrote a book called *The Gospel of Truth*, which his followers took to be the one true Gospel. The same is true of the Gospel of Thomas and the now famous Gospel of Judas. And there were several others. All of these had two points in common: first, each of them claimed to be the only true Gospel, rejecting all others; second, they all agreed on a docetic view of Jesus, whose flesh was not real.

Over against such Gospels, the church developed a canon consisting of several Gospels, all of them different, but all of them rejecting the docetism of Marcion, Valentinus, the Gospel of Judas, and others.

Thus, Marcion, no matter how abrupt his fall off the cliff, made a significant contribution by stimulating the process whereby we came to have the canon of the Bible.

Something similar happened in the case of the Apostles' Creed. The legend that this was

composed by the apostles deserves no credence. In fact, the gist of what we now call the Apostles' Creed developed in Rome precisely at the point of Marcion's heyday. Like all the ancient creeds, it developed as a baptismal affirmation of faith, and it therefore organized around the baptismal formula "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." In its earliest form, it was interrogatory, for the person being baptized was asked, "Do you believe in God the Father almighty," etc. To which one was to respond "I do."

If we had the time to analyze the entire Creed, we would note that most of its affirmations are anti-Marcionite. In other words, the Creed is designed as a fence to insure that those being baptized will not fall off Marcion's cliff —or perhaps one should say cliffs. So, let a couple of examples suffice: According to the Creed, God is "maker of heaven and earth." There is only one Creator, whose creation is good. Jesus is *his* Son —that is, the Son of the Creator. He was born of the Virgin Mary. He was really and physically *suffered*, and was *crucified, dead, and buried*. And, just in case any believe that the message of Jesus is one of love and grace, with no judgment, he *will come again to judge the quick and the dead*.

Thus, even though the church at large declared Marcion to be a heretic, Marcion did much for the church. Among other things, he made an important contribution to the development of the canon of Scripture and to the formulation of the Apostles' Creed.

Something similar may be said of other heretics. Arius, often considered the heretic par

excellence, the great enemy of the full divinity of God the Son was responsible for the creation of the Nicene Creed, to this day the most widely accepted Creed in Christianity —a creed designed specifically as a fence and a warning against Arianism. And it was also thanks to him that the precedent was established to try to resolve great matters by convening a general council of the entire church —a custom that prevailed for centuries, and whose echoes may be heard in the Second Vatican Council, not quite half a century ago.

And the same is the case with a less known but equally influential document, the *Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon* in 451. No matter whether they refer directly to that document or not, most Christian churches affirm its Christology, which declare the full humanity and the full divinity of the Savior. And that Definition evolved through a long process of building fences on one side and the other, rejecting views that emphasized the divinity of Jesus to such a point that his humanity was obscured, and also rejecting views that emphasized the humanity of Jesus to such a point that his divinity was obscured.

What have heretics done for the Church? They have done much, mostly by leading the church to build fences and provide warnings that have been valid for generations: the canon of the New Testament, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon, and many others.

This is not to say that heresy is good, or that we should praise heresy, or that we should become

heretics. It means that heresy is not always the pure evil we deem it to be. It means that the God who could use Cyrus in order to guide the life of Israel somehow has used Marcion, and Arius, and many others to guide the life of the church. Perhaps we should be grateful for those heretics who, seeking to preserve and to emphasize what they saw as an important point in the faith, or seeking to counteract what they saw as dangers to that faith when so far in the other direction that they fell over a cliff —or, if I may be allowed to switch my metaphor from land to sea, they went overboard.

What does all of this mean for us? It certainly means that, living in a culture that is highly individualistic, and where success in life is measured in economic terms, we should take heed from the experience of those who have been so immersed in their own cultures that they have allowed the unseen influences of that culture to undermine some of the essential elements of the Christian faith. It also means that Christian doctrine would become liberating once we understand their origin and purpose, doctrines, not as prescriptions for orthodox belief, but rather as fences guarding us from error and therefore allowing us to move freely within the realm of truth. And therefore it means finally that not only have heretics done much for the church in times past, but also that knowing them can do much for us in today, as we seek to discover what it means to be faithful in our day.