

**“Discerning Error and Confronting Heresy”****I. Orthodoxy**

Jude writes of “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (NAS-v3). He instructs believers to “contend earnestly for the faith” (NAS). Clearly what is understood as the orthodox Christian faith has a substantive content that can be identified and confirmed through Scripture and the traditions of the church. The late Harold O.J. Brown wrote:

“From the very beginning, Christianity has taught that salvation and eternal life come by faith, and that faith consists in believing certain things about one historic individual, Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ. The details of the message about his life, death, resurrection, and impending return and what each means are of life-and-death importance to the individual Christian.”

With the above in mind, we will identify a core of beliefs that all orthodox believers have embraced throughout the history of the church.

A. Read the following scriptures and identify the doctrinal truth referenced.

II Timothy 3:15-16; 2 Peter 1:20-21

Matthew 1:21-23; John 14:7-9; Colossians 2:9

II Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 Corinthians 15:3

1 Corinthians 15:4, 12-19

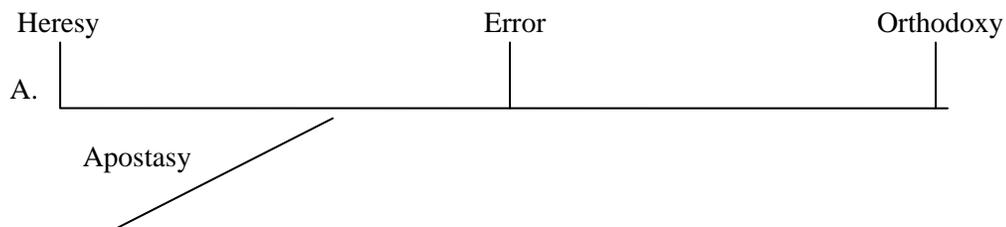
Matthew 24:4-5, 27; Mark 13:26-27; Luke 21:27

The five biblical truths above have been called the *fundamentals* of the faith. G. Gresham Machen commented that these *fundamentals* were the bare minimum of essential truths a person must believe in order to be considered Christian. He did not deny that men may continue to be religious while rejecting one or more of these truths. However, he made the important point that one can be religious and not be Christian.

*Note: There is some danger in attempting to reduce the essential truths of the orthodox Christian faith to some sort of minimum. Notwithstanding that, it is often necessary to have concrete particulars in mind as we try to make sense of what various groups and sects profess to believe. While no man can judge another man’s heart, we can certainly make judgments regarding whether or not a person identifying himself as a Christian believes what other orthodox Christians have believed since the earliest days of the Church.*

## B. Error vs. Heresy

There is a valid distinction to be made between error and heresy. Error is found in all churches. To understand this is to acknowledge that believers are fallible (though God's Word is not) and thus liable to misunderstanding or wrongly applying what the Bible teaches. Heresy occurs when *an essential or vital* Christian doctrine is rejected or distorted, or when extra-biblical writings (writings apart from the bible) are viewed as authoritative in the same way as the Bible. The continuum below reflects the difference between orthodoxy, error, and apostasy.



As we move left on the continuum, we cross over from error into heresy, or we fall into apostasy. (Apostasy means *falling away* from the faith.)

Read the following statements and comment on whether or not each reflects an *error* in doctrine, *heresy*, or *apostasy*.

1. The bible is without error when it speaks of salvation, but when it addresses historical, geographic, or scientific truths, it often is wrong.
2. The doctrine of election is simply that God looked forward in time, recognized who would respond positively to the gospel and who would not, and declared those who would trust Christ as the elect.
3. Jesus is the spirit brother of Lucifer and thus at the top of the hierarchy of angelic beings.
4. In order for a believer to live a victorious life and have access to the power of the Holy Spirit, he must be baptized with the Holy Spirit as a separate and subsequent experience to conversion. Those who are baptized with the Holy Spirit will speak in tongues.
5. The resurrection of Jesus ought to be understood as a spiritual rather than physical resurrection, giving men hope as they face the challenges of life.
6. Only adult believers who understand and can clearly articulate their faith can be baptized, and their baptism must be through total immersion in water.
7. The elements of bread and wine are literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ during administration of the Lord's Supper.

8. The second coming of Christ will be preceded by a period of seven years called the Great Tribulation. Prior to this period, faithful Christians will be secretly raptured into the air with Christ.
9. God continues to speak through divine revelation to the church by specially gifted individuals. These prophetic utterances are to be understood as *thus sayeth the Lord* and absolutely reliable.

C. **The Importance of Sound Doctrine**

Many Christians avoid explicit or definitive doctrinal statements and positions because they believe doctrine is divisive. The word *doctrine* simply means *teaching*. The result of this avoidance of explicit doctrinal statements handicaps the church. It makes sound teaching difficult if not impossible. It ultimately leads to greater divisions in the church as every believer approaches Scripture as an individual revelation from God (2 Peter 1:20-21).

What are some other reasons Christians might avoid or disdain explicit doctrinal positions and statements?

How would you respond to someone who said that he didn't need creeds or confessions, only the Bible?

Is it possible to study the bible in a group setting with Christians of different denominations and church affiliations and be able to avoid conflict?

What is a cult?

What is the more serious error: rejecting the doctrine of predestination or ordaining women to the office of Elder?