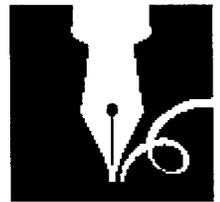


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

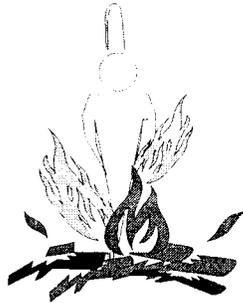
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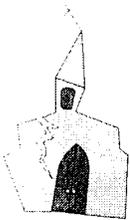
Heresy is making a comeback

Few church members today spend much time thinking about heresy. We may vaguely recall that people were burned at the stake for heresy long ago. We may remember some biblical warnings about false teachers. But most of us worry very little about heresy in today's church.

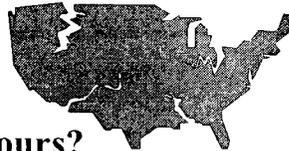


Witch hunts are tearing us apart

Some of today's Christians, however, are *very* concerned about it. They label worship practices pagan if those practices aren't what they're used to. They want to require everyone to see God as having only male characteristics. They don't want to let God call anyone to ministry whose sexual orientation differs from theirs. These Christians shout "Heresy!" whenever other Christians' experience of God differs from theirs.



Their witch-hunting threatens to wreck some of our churches and even our nation. They are displaying arrogance and meanness that are not Christian. They're trying to limit God.



Is heresy God's idea or ours?

I seriously doubt that God has any list of what is heresy and what isn't. I strongly suspect that the

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? ... Each of us will be accountable to God. ... Resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. ... The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.
—Romans 14:10, 12-13, 21

concept of heresy is strictly a human invention, reflecting only our desire to feel sure that our beliefs have God's stamp of approval.



(continued on page 2)

What is heresy?



Heresy means deliberate rejection of whatever beliefs the authorities within a group or institution have declared to be the group's beliefs. In the church a related concept is apostasy—rejecting Christianity and becoming a non-believer.

The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally considered heresy to be the sin of deliberately denying the truth of the doctrinal statements that the Church calls dogma. For Catholics, heresy can bring excommunication. Protestants have generally considered heresy to be merely any deliberate rejection of biblical truth.

Identifying heresy is getting harder

In recent centuries, identifying such rejection has become harder because many Christians have come to believe that "biblical truth" is the essence of the Bible's message rather than any specific verbal statement of it.

If we want to say what is heresy, we're faced with the problem of saying what is orthodoxy, which means correct belief as opposed to error or heresy. Orthodoxy can also mean the beliefs that are held by most members of a denomination, or the main beliefs that have traditionally characterized the denomination.

No words can fully capture God's truth

Trying to define heresy and orthodoxy raises the larger problem of defining and stating truth. Can we capture all of truth within any collection of words? Can we capture the Christian faith or the Bible's message in any set of words? Can any verbal statement measure whether or not someone qualifies as a Christian? Some Christians say yes, but I don't think so.

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."
—John 14:6

The question of heresy also raises questions about authority. Does any human individual or group have the God-given authority to say exactly what people must believe in order to qualify as Christians?



We need to become informed about the issues these questions raise. They have become urgent questions in today's churches, yet many church members apparently don't realize that they have. We need to oppose efforts to adopt answers that may not be God's answers.

(Heresy is making a comeback, continued from page 1)

We don't agree on what is heretical



I'm especially concerned about the heretic-hunters who want the church to forbid all worship services, seminary classes, and other church-related events that include any statement or religious practice that some group of self-appointed thought police doesn't consider Christian.

The problem with trying to apply such restrictions is that Christians don't agree about what should be forbidden. I rarely attend a worship service without seeing or hearing something that I consider inconsistent with the Bible's message. However, some of what I consider unchristian, other Christians consider essential. Does either of us have any right to label the other a heretic? I don't think so.



Jesus didn't demand uniformity

I don't believe God wants us to search for heretics, because I don't see Jesus doing that or telling anyone to do it. In fact, the gospels show him telling a group of disciples *not* to try to stop others who

[Some slaves asked,] "Where did these weeds come from?" [Their master] answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" He replied, "No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest ..."

—Matthew 13:27-30

also claim to be his disciples but who evidently are ministering or preaching in a different way.

Of course, other New Testament books urge Christians to weed out what they consider false teaching. However, these books may reflect the same human urge that we're seeing now—the desire to feel sure that our own beliefs are the correct ones.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him ... Whoever is not against us is for us."

—Mark 9:38-40



The early church wasn't perfect

Like the current church's efforts to discern and obey God's will, some of the early church's efforts

Heresy-hunting in the UMC

A self-appointed group of United Methodists currently calls itself the Confessing Movement. In using this name the group claims a resemblance to the Confessing Church movement through which German Christians declared their opposition to Hitler.

These United Methodists, who include some of the best-known UMC clergymen, are promoting a statement of what they consider orthodox Christian belief. They want the 1996 UMC General Conference to adopt their statement as the United Methodist standard for measuring what qualifies as correct Christian belief and practice. They want to keep United Methodists from expressing any views that the Movement supporters consider heresy. I find that extremely dangerous.



DANGER

A demand and a response

The Confessing Movement's statement uses only masculine words for speaking about God. It emphasizes Jesus' maleness rather than simply his humanness. It demands uniformity in worship practice and in understanding and expressing Christian beliefs. In trying to restrict the UMC to these narrowly defined positions on issues that faithful Christians have sincerely differing views about, the Movement departs from John Wesley's pol-



icy, "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand." It says instead, "You're not a real Christian unless you see God exactly as I do." I find this inconsistent with the Bible's overall message and with Jesus' example.

Trinity UMC in Atlanta has developed a response statement opposing the efforts of the Confessing Movement. The Trinity statement advocates maintaining the diversity and inclusiveness that have characterized the UMC throughout its long history. The statement also advocates continual re-examination of our beliefs, to keep measuring them against our best current understanding of what God is calling the church to do.



Christians need to be informed

Similar efforts are being made in many denominations, so these documents may interest you even if you're not a United Methodist. However, UMs especially need to know about them. You can get the Confessing Movement Document from Frazer Memorial UMC, 6000 Atlanta Highway, Montgomery AL 36124, or at this Internet address: <http://www.holli.com/~dmullens/umsources/confess.html> For Trinity UMC's response, contact Trinity UMC, 265 Washington St., Atlanta GA 30303, 404-659-6236, or get the documents at this Internet address:

<http://user.www.service.emory.edu/~eande01/call-abr.html>
It's time to become informed and to oppose this witch hunt.

were undoubtedly misguided while others reflected correct understanding of what God was like and what God wanted the church to do.

Jesus' example is what counts

Because we believe that Jesus is the unique model for how God wants us to live, we need to follow Jesus' example instead of other biblical advice that might contradict it. The gospels tell about some words and actions of Jesus that were merely part of being human and living in 1st-century Palestine, of course, and we don't need to imitate those—the clothing he wore, for example, and the language he spoke. His overall message and actions, however, need to be our standard for measuring what is Christian and what isn't.

Jesus said ...
 "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."
 —John 14:9

We won't all come to exactly the same conclusions about which is which. Still, if we've made our best effort to discern God's will, and if we stay open to new God-given insight, we can't afford to let contrary views keep us from acting. We need to act on our best current insight, and to let other Christians act on theirs. ❖

We all decide for ourselves



Many Christians want their denomination to have official statements specifying exactly what all Christians must believe and do.

They claim that refusing to enforce such statements means denying that any absolute truth exists. It means, they claim, that we believe every individual is free to decide for himself or herself what is true and what is false, what is good and what is evil. These Christians reject that belief.

However, deciding for ourselves is actually unavoidable. Even though absolute truth exists, each of us has to decide what we think it is. Even though as Christians we believe that Jesus Christ fully expresses God's truth, we still must choose which picture of Jesus Christ to rely on. We may choose the one given by favorite Bible verses. We may choose the Apostles' Creed. We may choose to accept what the founder or leader of our de-



A debate about heresy

A recent issue of *The Christian Century* magazine (April 12) includes a thought-provoking debate about heresy by two prominent theologians. Thomas C. Oden, a professor at Drew University Theological School and a supporter of the current Confessing Movement among United Methodists, wants the church to reclaim what he understands to be the original teaching of the apostles. Lewis S. Mudge, dean of the faculty at San Francisco Theological Seminary, emphasizes the importance of expressing the meaning of traditional Christian doctrine in contemporary ways.



A line between faith and unfaith

Oden feels that many contemporary theologians and church members have done away with all of the Christian faith's rules and boundaries, and even with all the ways of asking where the boundaries are. He wants us to recognize a definite line between faith and unfaith, between orthodoxy and heresy. In his view, the line was drawn once and for all by the group he calls the apostles. Evidently that doesn't include any women or anyone who lived very long after the church began.

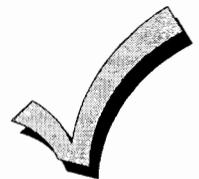
I find Oden's views unconvincing because he rejects the God-given experience of countless Christians. He smugly claims that his way of understanding and experiencing God is the only way. He wants to limit God.



Tradition plus interpretation

Mudge points out—rightly, I believe—that expressing the Christian faith effectively today depends, just as it did in earlier days, on knowledge of the tradition but also on our interpretation of it. He reminds us, too, that Christian tradition—even that of the earliest church—includes a lot of variation, localism, and the heavy influence of politics, culture, and other human factors.

In Mudge's view, we must learn from tradition but we must also measure it by the Bible's overall message, including parts that many Christians have previously overlooked. "We commit the worst heresy," Mudge believes, "when we use an orthodox theological position to aid, comfort or defend what is unworthy of our faith's best moral insight."



I share that view. What about you?

nomination tells us, or what an official church governing body decides. We may accept our parents' or friends' or spouses' beliefs. We may rely on our personal religious experience. Supporters of the current Confessing Movement in the UMC



evidently choose to rely entirely on what certain Christians did and said in earlier centuries. But whatever sources of information and authority we choose to rely on, we each make the choice. We may not make it deliberately or even consciously, but we can't avoid making it, and we make it individually.

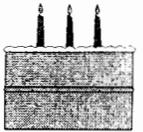
None of us can see all of God's truth, and we all get some wrong ideas about what God is like and what God's will is. Besides, God doesn't call us all to do exactly the same things or communicate with us all in exactly the same way. It's futile, therefore,

to waste our time and energy trying to make every Christian conform to any one way of experiencing, understanding, or expressing the Christian faith. Instead, we need to be proclaiming and demonstrating what we understand it to be, while letting God's Holy Spirit keep giving us a clearer vision of it. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

Looking back and looking ahead . . .
beginning the 4th year of *Connections*



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Heresy

From the cowardice
that dares not face new truth,
from the laziness
that is contented with half truth,
from the arrogance
that thinks it knows all truth,
Good Lord, deliver me. Amen.



— A prayer from Kenya
The United Methodist Hymnal, #597
(The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989)

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