

## How to Handle Heresy In House Churches (Detecting & Dealing With Serious Error)

**Intro:** Heresy is a scary word. It conjures up images of the torture rack, the Spanish inquisition, and burning at the stake. The title of this lesson is really more cute than helpful. What we are really going to focus on is how to spot really serious error and the provisions God has made for the church to deal with it. False teaching is an active problem of which every church needs to be wary:

**PPT>>> Jesus:** NAS **Matthew 7:15** Beware of the **false prophets**, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. *There is such a thing as a false prophet.*

**PPT>>> Paul:** NAS **Acts 20:29** I know that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock . . . *This is an active problem: wolves are offensive, an invasion of trouble.*

**PPT>>> NAS Hebrews 13:9** Do not be carried away by **varied and strange teachings** . . . *How do you know a strange teaching when you hear one? (Rhetorical).*

**PPT>>> ESV 2 Corinthians 11:13-15** speaks of men who are “**false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ**. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, **disguise** themselves as servants of righteousness.” *How easy is it to detect a false, deceitful worker in disguise?*

**PPT>>> ESV 2 Corinthians 11:26** warns of “danger from **false brothers** . . .”

**PPT>>> ESV 2 Peter 2:1** . . . there will be **false teachers** among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies . . . And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.

**Count on this:** Bad theology will get washed up on your deck. **Will you be able to recognize it? What are you going to do about it? How will you handle it?**

We all need the equivalent of a Geiger counter for detecting theological error. Every type of church (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, House Churches, etc.) has to be concerned about the influx of heretical teachers and teachings. But, we in the house church movement, *in particular*, have even greater reason to be concerned:

**1. Our Culture:** Western Christianity is so associated with **church buildings** that the normal Christian, when he hears about **house church**, will give it about as much attention as he might a piece of junk mail he gets in the mail box. Thus, when you begin house churching, you are already fishing from a pool of people who think outside the box. This can be both good and bad. On the bad side, sometimes those people who are willing to take a second look at house church are already outside the traditional church for all the *wrong* reasons: they have **poor social skills** and can't get along with anybody, or they are **disgruntled**, or they are **rebels against authority**, or they have **bad theology** (their beliefs are eccentric or aberrant) and so they've been squeezed out of the traditional church.

The simple fact that we practice house church (alternative church) attracts a higher percentage of heretics (those with alternative theology). The last thing we need in theology is creativity!

**2. Open Meetings:** The danger of heresy is compounded by the fact that we have **open, participatory meetings**. This can be like a beacon to those with eccentric beliefs. They see it as an opportunity for them to come and try to convince the rest of us that their unique interpretation is true. To the heretic this can seem like open season for the propagation of error. **Are you prepared to deal with this when it happens? How can you head it off at the pass and keep it from happening in the first place?**

Being involved in a house church is not like going to a **Sunday School picnic**. The devil hates God's people, hates the church, and is going to see to it that his earthly agents find your church. If you have not had any trouble from the devil, maybe it is because you are going in the same direction that he is! Just turn around, go the other direction and you'll probably run right into him!

If our house churches were just like little row boats out on **Lake Placid** for an afternoon outing, it might not be so necessary that we be prepared to handle heresy. But, it is not like that. The better analogy is that we are out on the High Seas and we will encounter storms of all types. The possibility of getting swamped is very real. Count on this: bad theology will get washed up on your deck. **How will you handle it? What are you going to do about it? Will you be able to recognize it?**

Today, we want to specifically look at what provisions God made to help us deal with heresy.

-----

**PPT>>>** **What is the difference between just being wrong and heresy?** It is a matter of degree, a matter of importance. We all believe things that are false (we think they are true, but we are mistaken). I always think I'm right, but I don't think I'm always right. I know that I might be wrong. An erroneous belief is just something that is wrong, but it is not necessarily heresy. Whenever Christians have difference views on a topic, somebody is wrong.

We should respect each other in disputable matters.

**Disputable Examples:** Is **election** conditional or unconditional? Does the **rapture** happen before, during or after the tribulation? Is pre, post or a-**millennialism** the right view? Should we **baptize** believers or babies? Should Christians go to **war**? Is Sunday a **Sabbath** day? Is **tithing** required under the New Covenant? These are intramural debates. These are important topics, but I would not categorize the "wrong" side as heresy.

A heresy is a major doctrinal error. A heresy is a false teaching about something fundamental, something really basic, something that goes against the overwhelming consensus of the whole church at large. It is not simply error, it is **serious error**.

**Heresy Examples:**

- A distortion of the Gospel message would clearly be heresy: salvation is by faith plus works.
- Teaching something false about the person and work of Jesus would be heresy: Jesus is not God or Jesus' death on the cross did not pay for sins.
- An easy heresy to spot is when someone directly contacts something that the Bible clearly teaches: Jesus did not rise from the dead in bodily form; Jesus was not born of a virgin. Jesus will never come back again in person.

**Heresy Defined** – Heresy is not necessarily a denial of the gospel (though it could be that), but anything that is contrary to the general consensus of the church as a whole. Any teaching or belief that is unorthodox by historic creedal standards, and of course that goes against what the Bible itself teaches, is heresy.

**Historical Example:** Back in the early 1900s, theological liberalism infiltrated almost every denomination and many seminaries and bible colleges. To begin to combat this, believers across denominational boundaries (Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Wesleyans, etc.) gathered in a series of meetings. These believers drew up the **five fundamentals of the faith** (all things the liberals had denied):

**PPT>>>**

- **The Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ**
- **The Virgin Birth**
- **The Blood Atonement**
- **The Bodily Resurrection**
- **The Inerrancy of the Scriptures**

As an example, if you meet someone who denies one of these basics, that may be an indicator of something worse lurking in the shadows.

-----

**PPTs>>> Insight:** Heretics will often sail under the banners of **love, and truth, and unity**, to disguise their error to make it more palatable, to get you to swallow it or tolerate them. And, they'll almost always swear supreme allegiance to the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.

They throw up a screen of **love** so that you will not reject them: "If you love us, you'll continue to accept us, despite our beliefs"

They claim to only seek the **truth**, even if it leads them against what the church has always believed. They cast themselves as sincere truth seekers.

They are big on proclaiming **unity**: "We are one in Christ, how can you reject us?" or "Doctrine divides, Christ unites".

Heretics are often really nice guys. They smile, they are friendly, they have families and cute kids, but they are wolves in sheep's clothing. Once you get to know them, you may start to like them and it will be hard to discipline them. Similarly, the kings of Israel were cautioned against taking foreign wives lest their love for their wives cause them to worship foreign gods (like Solomon did).

-----

Obviously, some of these theologies and practices are worse than others. **But, what should we do about it? What provisions has God made for us?**

**Solutions:**

- 1. The ministry of Gifted Leaders, Such as Elders.**

**PPT>>>** **What solution is mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-14?** Christ appointed certain gifted men to help the church become mature, stable, not tossed about by every wind of doctrine. There are apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers.

Though Bible generally is written to entire churches, and the consensus process is greatly emphasized, yet the church also has clearly recognized and gifted leaders, and part of their job is to mature the sheep through sound teaching. Leaders have an important role to play.

Your church needs qualified elders. If you don't have any, you are lacking an important weapon in the fight against darkness. We've had 2000 years of pastors studying God's Word; this is a great advantage. We must stand on their shoulders.

**What is true of false teachers, based on Ephesians 4:14?** They are cunning and crafty and use deceitful scheming. It takes theological maturity and shrewdness in dealing with people to spot guys like this. Virtually every cult or false teacher will claim to be using the Bible and the Bible only; that his teachings are derived from the Bible. (That's almost by definition what it means to be a wolf in sheep's clothing).

**According to Titus 1:7, 9-11, what is the role of elder in silencing false teachers?**

**PPT>>>** NAS **Titus 1:7-11** "the overseer must be . . . holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach . . ."

**PPT>>>** **Example:** During the Battle of Midway (World War II), a lone American torpedo air squadron discovered and attacked the Japanese flotilla. Tragically, the squadron attacked without fighter escort. It proved suicidal. All but one of the airmen were killed. Elders are to the church what the US fighters would have been to the bombers: protection. Elders offer protection from savage wolves in sheep's clothing. They also provide direction, and teaching, and help the church to achieve consensus and to grow into maturity.

So, elders are one important ingredient to squelching heresy. If your church does not have anyone in it who is truly qualified to be an elder, you are like a bomber without fighter escort, sheep without a shepherd (who has a rod). It is a dangerous situation to be in.

---

## 2. The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Church (Throughout History and the World Over)

**PPT>>> In John 16:7, 12-15, why did Jesus say that it was to our advantage that He go away?** Jesus originally spoke these words to the Twelve, to the Apostles, and it is part of the basis for the inspiration of the New Testament. But, it applies to us, and the whole church, in a secondary sense. The Holy Spirit is at work in the church, and has been throughout the past 2,000 years.

**PPT>>> 1 Corinthians 3:16** “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?” This is a reference to the church as a whole (the “you” is plural: *y'all*).

God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the church for the past two thousand years, and Christ has sent the church pastor-teachers and elders to help mature the church in the truth. The Holy Spirit has not been out to lunch; He is not asleep on the job!

So, the Spirit's work in the church throughout the past 2,000 years must be factored in. When we look at the church throughout history, when we look at the church the world over, and we see consensus about certain basic theology, that is significant, that becomes normative, that is authoritative.

**PPT>>> Venn Diagram.** Imagine a mathematical venn diagram. Each denomination has its own statement of faith. They clearly differ from each other in some areas. Yet, there are certain basic areas where they all line up together in agreement. Those areas should get your attention. The fact that they differ makes their agreement all the more significant.

**PPT>>> How likely is it that someone is going to see a new truth in the bible that the Holy Spirit failed to reveal for 2,000 years?**

**PPT>>> Or that the whole church has been wrong about something for 2,000 years and someone just now discovered that error?**

**Is the Spirit that inept?**

**Is God such a poor communicator?**

One of the things we argue for is government by elder-led consensus. We also argue for interpretation by consensus of the whole church universal. If the Roman Catholics and the Greek Orthodox and all the Protestants and the Baptists and the Anabaptists and the Charismatics all agree that the Bible teaches a certain thing (like the Trinity, deity of Christ, future return of Jesus), then that ought to get our attention!

**PPT>>> Charles Hodge** put it this way: “If the Scriptures be a plain book, and the Spirit performs the functions of a teacher to all the children of God, it follows inevitably that they must agree in all essential matters in their interpretation of the Bible. And from that fact it follows that for an individual Christian to dissent from the faith of the universal Church (i.e. the body of true believers), is tantamount to dissenting from the Scriptures themselves.”

**PPT>>> Michael Horton:** “Nobody goes to the Bible alone, but carries with him or her a host of influences. It is infinitely easier to distort the Word of God when we cut ourselves off from the consensus of other Christians across time and place.”

**Personal Example:** Growing up, I was a fourth generation Methodist. Often in church we could recite the apostle’s creed, part of which read, “I believe in the holy catholic church”. Catholic means universal. This refers to Christians across time and place.

So, the second blessing God has given us to help detect heresy is:

**The work of the Holy Spirit in the church throughout history and the world over. We need to accept the theology of the holy catholic church!**

-----

### 3. The Written & Oral Apostolic Traditions

**PPT>>> What overall topic was Paul dealing with in 2 Thessalonians 2?**  
Eschatology; prophecy.

**PPT>>> What did Paul want the Thessalonians to do, based on 2:15?**

**What are “traditions” (2:15)?** A tradition is an inherited pattern of thought or action.

**In this context, what “traditions” (2:15) did Paul have in view?** Paul had in mind the tradition of his teachings on prophecy.

**Why do you suppose the NIV renders this “teachings” (2:15)?** Because the tradition referred to was a tradition of a certain teaching.

**According to 2:15, how had the apostles conveyed their teaching to the Thessalonians?** They conveyed them both by letter (the Scriptures) and by word of mouth (verbally, orally).

**THE POINT:** The apostles passed theology on to the churches via both written letter **and** word of mouth (personal visits). *This is very important.* The 3<sup>rd</sup> blessing God gave the church to combat heresy is: **Both Written & Oral Apostolic Traditions (Teachings).** The Bible means what the apostles said it meant.

**illustration:**

**Did each congregation in first century have its own copy of a complete New Testament?** No. There were only scattered letters from the apostles combined with personal visits from apostles themselves.

**Object Lesson:** Pretend to be an apostle and 'visit' various sections of the room (let each represent an early church, such as Rome, Philippi, Ephesus, Corinth or Colossae); tell each that "Jesus is God in the flesh" and leave; then write them back a letter (hand each "church" a scroll of paper). Repeat this process all over, one time being Paul, then Peter, then John, Jude, etc.

As a New Testament believer, you did not have whole New Testament, maybe you only had one book (Philippi), maybe not even that (Antioch). But what you did have was the personal teaching of an apostle or apostolic worker (Timothy, Titus, Barnabas). You had an *oral tradition*. **Example: 2 Thessalonians 2:15.**

**PPT>>> Example: A Child's drawing** was found on floor after one our church meetings. It was a drawing of some type of building. But what type of building? A dog house? A home? A business? The Leaning Tower of Pizza? Who is to say? The author was long gone. But happily, this drawing had a historical context. On it was writing that read: "To Eden From Audrey." The artist, Audrey, had gone home by the time I found the drawing, but my daughter Eden was still around. So suppose I say to Eden, "Look! A drawing of a dog house!" She: "No! That is *our* house." Me: "How do you know?" Eden: "Audrey told me so." There you have it. A written communication interpreted by an oral tradition, a living memory. I was not really in a good position to interpret the artwork, but my daughter was because she knew the artist and had talked directly to the author.

So, let's say that Paul went to Philippi and said "Jesus is God in the flesh." Then he left. But he later wrote a letter back (we call it "Philippians"). Several years after that, a new person joins the church at Philippi. This new guy never met Paul or heard him teach. This new person reads Paul's letter, says, "It looks like to me like this letter from Paul teaches that Jesus is not god". **What would the church at Philippi say?** "No so! Jesus *is* God, come in the flesh." New Guy: "How do you know?" Church: "Paul told us so in person when he was here. We knew him. We remember."

The New Testament letters were interpreted by the early church, based on the oral teachings of the apostles themselves (the men who wrote the letters). They knew the authors. The Bible means what the apostles said it meant.



- The Bible alone is inspired and infallible; not the church.
- The Bible is the ultimate authority, not any one person and not the church.
- But, the Bible was originally interpreted by the community of faith according to the oral tradition of the original apostles and as led by the Holy Spirit.

**If you, as an individual believer back in the first century, wanted to read and study the entire New Testament for yourself, could you have done so?** No, impossible, letters were scattered all over, and not compiled yet into one book.

**So, without a New Testament, how did you know about God and His ways?** You knew about Jesus and what He taught from the oral tradition of the apostles (if you were in Antioch) or from one or a few letters written to your church (as in Corinth or Philippi). (You may also have had access to the entire Old Testament).

**When were the letters of the New Testament finally compiled into one book?** Around A.D. 397 (lay down a scroll tied up with ribbon), at the Council of Carthage.

**Even at that point (in the 300s), did you, as an individual, have access to a whole New Testament?** No, you did not. Maybe the elders of your church did, but it was hard for each individual person to have an entire New Testament. It was just too expensive, not practicable, since everything had to be copied by hand. But what you did have was this oral stream, a verbal tradition, of what the apostles taught. And, your elders taught from the letters of the apostles.

**PPT>>>** This oral tradition was called the *regula fidei*, the “rule of faith.” It simply meant that the Bible must be interpreted according the verbal teaching of the apostles.

**Real Life Historical Example:** A church leader, Arius, in the A.D. 300s, taught that Jesus was *not* god. He used the Bible to support his belief. The church met to deal with this. Church leaders from all over the Roman Empire came. These elders were the real deal, not denominational fat cats. Christianity had not been legalized long; these men had endured years of persecution. In dealing with Arius, they of course used Scripture to show Arius his error, but he always had a come-back, some unique, individualistic interpretation. They had verses, he had verses. Finally they asked, “Who in the church, before you, back through the past two hundred years and closest to the time of the apostles, can you site to support your views?” They wanted to examine the *regula fidei* on this issue. Arius had a hard time coming up with a credible tradition. In contrast, all the churches in the cities that the elders had come from had a living memory of the apostles’ teaching that Jesus is indeed God in the flesh. Finally, the church declared Arius to be in error, and they drew up the Nicene Creed. In drawing the creed up, they were careful not to say, “We have decided”, but rather “Here is what the church has always believed.” Therefore, they reasoned, Arius could not be correct (based on Scripture and the rule of faith; That is, based on the written teachings of Scripture and

the oral tradition of the apostles, and the general consensus of the churches everywhere).

**Fact:** Both the early church of the Roman Empire and then later the medieval church held to the “rule of faith,” or the *regula fidei* as the right way to interpret the Bible. What this meant was that the correct interpretation of the Bible is what the apostles orally said that it meant (as reflected in early church ecumenical councils and creeds), and by looking at all the churches everywhere to see what they all agreed upon as Christian theology. It was the consensus of the whole church. This is partially represented in such ecumenical creeds as the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed.

**PPT>>> Tradition I.** If the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of God’s people guiding them into all the truth, and if the Holy Spirit has gifted pastor-teachers for the equipping and maturing of God’s people, **then** whatever the corporate church agrees upon is sure evidence of the Spirit’s work. Universal consensus was seen as a secondary and uninspired authority (the primary authority is the inspired Bible), but an authority none-the-less. This has been called ***Tradition I***

It is obvious that the early Christian writers (during the time of the imperial Roman Empire) held to this idea and also the church of the Middle Ages held to it (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Cyril of Jerusalem, etc).

**PPT>>> Tradition II.** This view of *Tradition I* did not change until the **late** Middle Ages when the Roman Catholic Church erroneously began to claim that the later teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and in particular the Pope, were **equal to Scripture** as a source of inspired authority. This has been called *Tradition II*. They elevated church tradition to the level of Scripture. They said there were **two sources of divine revelation**.

At this point, a number of loyal Catholics balked. They protested. We call them Protestants. The Reformers (Calvin, Luther, etc). rejected *Tradition II* and called for a return to universal consensus of the whole church of the ages (not just the Pope), *Tradition I*. They denied that church tradition is equal to Scripture and they denied that church tradition is inspired.

**PPT>>>** This was called *sola scriptura*, meaning **only scripture** was inspired and infallible. But the Reformers did not reject the oral tradition of the apostles as it had been preserved by the universal church in such statements as the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed. They still held to *Tradition I* as an interpretive basis. *Sola Scriptura* means that only the **Bible** is inspired and infallible, yet it still holds *Tradition I* as a secondary authority (the general interpretations of the community of faith).

**PPT>>> SUM:** The Protestant Reformers emphasized that “Scripture was the sole source of revelation and the sole infallible authority. However, they continued to teach that this authoritative Scripture must be interpreted in and by the Church within the hermeneutical context of the rule of faith.” (Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, p 151).

-----

**When was the printing press invented?** It was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450. (Lay down copy of printed Bible.) Before that, you almost certainly would not have had your own copy of the bible.

**PPT>>> Tradition 0.** About the time of the Reformation (1500s) a new way of interpretation developed: **Tradition 0**. Those who advocated *Tradition 0* ignored over a millennia of church theology. Their approach was:

**PPT>>>** “Just me and my Bible.”

The general consensus of the church gave way to the judgments of the individual believer.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment (1600s) was this: “Dare to use your own understanding.”

**PPT>>>** This applied especially to religion, summarized by author James Byrne: “No generation should be bound by the creeds and dogmas of bygone generations.” — James M Bryne, *Religion and the Enlightenment*

Instead of the **general consensus** of the universal church being the final interpreter (Tradition I), instead of the **Pope** being the final arbiter (Tradition II), the **individual believer** was held up as the final judge (Tradition 0). The Pope was replaced by the individual believer. *All you have done is to trade one Pope for another (you!)*. Is that really any better?

This was originally popularized by the Anabaptists. The Protestant Reformers argued against the Roman Catholics for making their recent church traditions equal to Scripture but they also argued against the Anabaptists for rejecting all tradition from the previous 1500 years.

Today we take it for granted that we all have Bibles. It is a tremendous blessing! But, for most of history, the average Christian has not had a Bible (it was practically impossible before the printing press).

**PPT>>>** Today modern American Evangelicals have **redefined** Tradition I’s *sola scriptura* into Tradition 0’s **SOLO scriptura** (just me and my Bible).

Yes, we should study our bible as individuals, but we should not study it individualistically.

**Is *SOLO scriptura* really what God intended?** Most of God's people throughout history have been without their own copies of the Bible, so *solo scriptura* would have been impossible.

Sometime we act as if the Bible just dropped out of the sky (Poof!) and that the church had nothing to do with it.

**Did you know there is a man-made creed printed in every Bible in this room?** (Guaranteed). There's a creed in your English bible! Before the Word of God in Genesis 1:1 is the word of the church in The *Table of Contents*. It dates from the A.D. 300s.

**Do you know what the word 'creed' means?** From *creedo*, which is Latin for "I believe." A creed is merely a statement of what the church believes.

The TOC is a creed that you probably all accept. **How can we trust the church's judgment for what Books belong in the bible (TOC is a credal statement) and not accept the church's essential theology?**

**The Reality of the Matter:** Creeds are unavoidable. Either you'll accept the creeds of the historic church or you'll make up your own.

The Question is, **Do you really have the authority to do that alone? How wise is that?**

*Tradition 0* seeks to interpret the bible **apart** from the church of history, **apart** from the ancient rule of faith (*regula fidei*).

*Tradition 0* says it is wrong to adhere to the credal formulations of historic Christianity.

*Tradition 0* elevates private judgment above the corporate judgment of the church. It is pure individualism, and IMHO is a recipe for theological chaos.

Now factor in **American individualism**. The typical American evangelical finds it self-evident that the priesthood of the believer means religion **of** the people, **by** the people and **for** the people. They call for a populist hermeneutic premised on the inalienable right of every person to understand the New Testament for himself.

Thus we have enlightenment rationalism combined with democratic populism giving rise to *SOLO scriptura*.

This, it seems to me, is a dangerous position to be in. You are loosed from the moorings of historic theology, you have cut yourself off from 2000 years of the Spirit's leading in His people, you essentially discount the ministry of pastor-teachers over the past millennia, and it disregards the early oral tradition of the apostles.

**PPT>>>** When you do this, you are out in the woods with the wolves. This is not good company to keep. (Bad company corrupts good morals).

### The Problem:

Every cult will try to divorce the Bible from the creeds and the church of history. Every cultist claims to go by the Bible and the Bible alone. **Examples:**

**PPT>>>** Ed Stephens (**Hyper Preterist**): “We must not take the creeds any more seriously that we do the writings and opinions of men like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, the Westminster Assembly, Campbell, Rushdoony, or C.S. Lewis”. *If Stehens is right, then Christians should not take the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity any more seriously than we take some idiosyncratic doctrine of Alexander Campbell or C.S. Lewis.*

**PPT>>>** A.B. Grosh, **Unitarian Minister**: “In religious faith we have but one Father and one Master, and the Bible, *The Bible*, is our only acknowledged creed book.” *Grosh had disconnected from historic orthodoxy*

**PPT>>>** Jeremy Belknap, **liberal theologian**: “Lay aside all attachment to human systems, all partiality to names, councils and churches, and honestly inquire, ‘what saith the scriptures.’” *Belknap had an agenda and it did not include the faith once of all delivered to the saints.*

**PPT>>>** Liberal pastor **Charles Beecher** denounced “creed-power” and called for “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” *Beecher had departed wholesale from the Truth.*

**PPT>>>** The **Jehovah’s Witness’** in *Let God Be True* wrote:

“To arrive at truth we must dismiss religious prejudices from heart to mind. We must let God speak for himself . . . To let God be true means to let God have the say as to what is the truth that sets men free. It means to accept his word, the Bible, as the truth. Our appeal is to the Bible for truth” This same publication spurs creeds as “man-made traditions,” “the precepts of men” and “opinions”. This is a form of Tradition II, except they traded the Pope for the Watchtower.

**Sum:** The most zealous opponents of the creeds have generally been heretics. Their first goal will be to convince potential converts that there are no binding doctrinal boundaries within Christianity.

**Example:** A wily young man wants to have his way with a young woman, but the father is there to protect her from guys like him. So what is his task? To get dad out of the way. “Is Dad perfect? Does Dad ever make mistakes? Is Dad ever wrong? Then dad is not qualified to be an authority in your life.” He tries to cull her out, away from dad’s authority.

Similarly, the church is not perfect, the church makes mistakes, but the church is God's appointed authority. The scripture is the final, infallible authority, but the church is a secondary authority none-the-less. Cults always try to separate the Bible from the church of history, to drive a wedge between the two.

**Key Point:** The Spirit-inspired Scriptures and the Spirit-indwelt church exist together in a reciprocal relationship. The Bible was not compiled in a vacuum.

**PPT>>>** "A creedless church, like a creedless Christian, is a ship tossed to and fro, carried about by every wind of doctrine, compelled to consider every contradictory theological fad and novelty that comes along as long as the one proclaiming it assures his audience that it is simply what the Bible teaches." (Keith Mattison, p 342)

**Smoke Detector:** Every heretic in Christendom is ready to declare his simple allegiance to the Bible, and he'll do it as loudly and as frequently as the most orthodox church. The ecumenical early creeds help us to define and detect heresy. The creeds are like smoke detectors; they'll help sniff out heresy.

**Rhetorical: Who is the ultimate arbiter for interpreting Scripture?** A single Church (Catholic Pope), each individual believer (*SOLO scriptura*) or the corporate consensus of the church as a whole throughout the world and across time (*sola scriptura*)?

**Example:**

### THE NICENE CREED

This authoritative statement of Christian orthodoxy was the consensus of church councils that met in Nicea (A.D. 325) and Constantinople (A.D. 381). The wording of the Nicene Creed comes largely from the New Testament. It is the most widely accepted and used brief statement of the Christian Faith.

- We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
- We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

- We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.
- We believe in one holy catholic\* and apostolic Church.
- We acknowledge one baptism\*\* for the forgiveness of sins.
- We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

\* In this context, “catholic” means “universal.”

\*\* “For” here means “because of” as in “She cried for joy.” Just as circumcision was the outward seal of the righteousness that Abraham had already received by faith (Ro 4), so too water baptism is the outward sign of the salvation every believer already has because of his faith in the risen Lord Jesus and the work that He did for His people on the cross.

-----

Brothers, we have an obligation to defend the flock false teaching.

Those seeking to undermine the historic faith in the participatory meeting must be silenced.

Those seeking to subvert Orthodoxy via private dinner meetings must be exposed and dealt with.

Scriptural commands to squelch certain heresies:

**PPT>>> 1 Timothy 1:3** As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer.

**PPT>>> NIV Titus 3:10** Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.

### **Applications:**

**1a.** *You need elders. They need a statement of their faith: The Elder’s Position. I find that the **1st London Baptist Confession of 1646** suites me nicely. Do you know what shepherd’s carry those big sticks? To hit things (like wolves) with!*

**Example:** For the elders to have a known, published, public statement of faith serves the same effect as a when a homeowner puts a sign in his front yard, “Protected by Brinks Security.” That alone is enough to divert trouble.

**1b.** If you don't have men qualified to be elders, how about someone qualified to be deacon?

**PPT>>>** NAS **1 Timothy 3:8-9** Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

I can't play the piano, but I know a good piano player when I hear one (or a bad one!). Similarly, a deacon may not be gifted to teach or refute heretics, but he can sure detect one when he hears one, and call in for reinforcements from a local nearby elder.

**2.** If you really believe that the Spirit has been active in the church for the past 2,000 years, then your church needs to philosophically align itself with the church of history and the church universal. You need to hoist the flag of historic Christian theology over your congregation, and state so on your church web site. Be sure any potential visitors and new-comers know this. Don't hide it!

Your church needs a basic **statement of faith** that clearly aligns you with Orthodoxy, such as the Nicene Creed. Make it clear to all who visit or become a part of your church that no teachings or promotions to the contrary will be tolerated. That it will be seen as divisive.

**3.** You need to buy into the true idea of *sola scriptura* and reject *SOLO scriptura*.

Stephen E. Atkerson

[www.NTRF.org](http://www.NTRF.org)

Revised 10/31/11



*AD for Session:*

*How to Handle Heresy in the House Church*

Heresy is a scary word. It conjures up images of the torture rack, the Spanish inquisition, and burning at the stake. The title of this lesson is really more cute than helpful. What we are really going to focus on is how to spot really serious error and the provisions God has made for the church to deal with it. False teaching is an active problem of which every church needs to be wary.

The simple fact that we practice house church (alternative church) attracts a higher percentage of heretics (those with alternative theology). The last thing we need in theology is creativity!

Western Christianity is so associated with church buildings that the normal Christian, when he hears about house church, will give it about as much attention as he might a piece of junk mail he gets in the mail box. Thus, when you begin house churching, you are already fishing from a pool of people who think outside the box. This can be both good and bad. On the bad side, sometimes those people who are willing to take a second look at house church are already outside the traditional church for all the *wrong* reasons: they have poor social skills and can't get along with anybody, or they are disgruntled, or they are rebels against authority, or they have bad theology (their beliefs are eccentric or aberrant) and so they've been squeezed out of the traditional church.

What is heresy?

**How will you be able to recognize it?**

What are you going to do about it?

**How will you handle it?**

What provisions has Jesus made to help keep His church safe?

**What is the difference between just being wrong and heresy?**

*What is sola scriptura all about?*

**Are creeds good or bad?**

*What is the difference between sola scriptura and solo scriptura?*

**Is it true that doctrine divides but Christ unites?**

-----  
*Test/Optional Material:*  
-----

Some real life, actual **Examples of bad theology** or **goofy practices** I've encountered or talking to people about. At least I consider these things to be wrong. (I hope you do too!).

1. What is wrong with this statement?

**PPT>>>** "It is our belief that heterosexual relations, when practiced as God ordained and intended between consenting adults, are a pure and natural wonder of God's creation, and permissible according to Scripture."

<http://www.thefamily.org/en/about/our-beliefs/sexuality/>

These people (The Family) are saying that consensual sexual **relations outside of marriage** are okay (!) — free love within the church for willing participants & also a new approach to effective evangelism: by sex (Heavenly Hookers).

This obviously is a moral problem. A group of these folks tried to infiltrate our church. They showed up with guitars and joined in with our singing and were really nice. It took us a week or so to realize who they really where and what they advocated (they were not forthcoming with it).

So, this first category is fundamentally a moral problem, backed up by bad theology.

-----

2. People with **unbalanced theological agendas** (they have one theological hammer and everything looks like a nail), and the sad part of it is that that one theology they've latched onto may be true! This is a personality problem; a lack of judgment.

**Limited Atonement:** To deny Ltd Atonement is to deny the gospel. Every week it was the same emphasis.

**Saturday Sabbath Keeping:** To meet on Sunday is the mark of the beast. Over & over this was emphasized. A related topic is **Sunday Sabbath Keeping**.

**Pacifism:** People who are pugnacious over pacifism. They don't respect that other believers, equally sincere may have a different view of things. One pacifist I knew had an explosive temper (I'm glad he was a pacifist!); he came in late for Bible study one night, all disheveled and upset; he told us the police might be there shortly to arrest him because he had gotten into a fight at the gas station on the way to the study!).

**Rabid Arminianism:** Anyone who believes in predestination is lost and preaching a false gospel and worshipping a false God. As an Arminian said to a Calvinist, "Your god is my devil".

Or at the opposite extreme, the idea anyone who believes in or preaches free will is preaching a false gospel. "If you take communion with Arminians you are eating meat sacrificed to idols and liable to church discipline."

**KJV Inspired Translation:** don't need to study Greek and Hebrew, just use the KJV! All other translations are Satan's masterpieces. Fairly harmless, but spinning your wheels (distraction). There is a lot of this among fundamentalist Baptists.

**Conspiracy Theorists:** Consumed with the Illuminate, IRS unconstitutional - don't pay your taxes; the government has concentration camps and kidnaps dissenters in the middle of the night; don't use the internet (antichrist will use to track and destroy us before taking over the world!). Such folks often gravitate to house church because it appears underground and unregistered with the government.

**Protestant Purgatory:** They'll give endless arguments for why this is so and should be considered.

**Torah-compliant house churches:** "We need to follow the Law of Moses in our churches." This is a misuse of the law (legalism). They are modern Judaizers, seeking to put Gentiles under the law of Moses.

**The mark of the beast:** taking grape juice in communion. Or, the U2 singer Bono is the antichrist!

**Football Games:** Any Christian who goes to a football game is in sin; that is what the world does. It glorifies the man and all about ego and pride and money.

**TV Sets:** Any Christian who owns and watches a TV set is in sin.

**Savings Accounts:** Any Christian who has a savings account is not trusting God. At the end of every month, you should zero out your checking account by giving whatever is left over to the poor.

**Altered Canon of Scripture:** They claim what we really need are 69 books or only 59 instead of 66 we now have.

*The issue in all of these instances is more of a personality problem than it is theological.*

**KJV Titus 3:10** A man that is an heretic\* after the first and second admonition reject . . .

**NIV Titus 3:10** Warn a divisive\* person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.

**Word Study:** “Heretic” (KJV) and “divisive” (NIV) is from *hairesikos* and literally means factious, schematic, causing division. In this sense man can be a heretic with the truth, if he uses it as a wedge to divide brothers. Those who are heretics in the sense of promoting false doctrine also seek to cull off followers for themselves from the church body.

-----

**3. False Gospels:** There are those who deny that Jesus’ work on the cross was propitiatory (theological liberals), or who deny that Jesus’ resurrection was bodily (Jehovah’s Witnesses), or who teach that salvation is the result of faith + works (Mormons).

**PPT>>>** “People want to be 'saved.' But how? Simply attending religious services? Salvation cannot be earned by attendance at meetings or in any other way. It is free, a gift from God. Yet Jehovah God does require efforts on our part if we are to receive his gift of everlasting life. What are they? For one, vigorous exertion in his service!”

— Watchtower, Jan. 15, 1986, p. 10 (**Jehovah’s Witnesses**)

**PPT>>>** “...a most pernicious doctrine - that of justification by belief alone...Yet in spite of the plain word of God, dogmas of men have been promulgated to the effect that by faith alone may salvation be attained...”

— *Articles of Faith*, p. 107-108  
(**Mormons/Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints**)

**PPT>>>** “We believe that through the atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.”

— *Articles of Faith #3 (Mormons)*

**PPT>>>** “Salvation is universal. People are capable of infinite improvement...When we raise ourselves on a higher moral and spiritual plane, through living the exalted precepts of our religion, we are achieving our own salvation.”

— *Introducing Unitarian Universalism* p. 16

**PPT>>>** “...it is by grace we are saved, after all we can do.” — 2 Nephi 25:23  
**(Mormons)**

**PPT>>>** “A priest does not have to ask God to forgive your sins. The priest himself has the power to do so in Christ's name...The penitent must atone for them by performance of good works...Stress is placed on the fact that any sin not confessed is not forgiven...But even after a penitent has received pardon, a large, but unknown amount of punishment remains to be suffered in purgatory.”  
— *Salvation According to Rome (tract) (Roman Catholicism)*

Important: But there are plenty of non-Mormons who teach this too, people who charade around as evangelical Christians but who are wolves in sheep's clothing.

**Indicator:** These same people are usually dead set against Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc. calling them heretics and denying that they were Christians.

Bible says we are saved **by** grace **through** faith **unto** good works

**PPT>>>** **ESV Ephesians 2:8-9** . . . by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

A false Gospel insists on faith + works in order to be saved.

**PPT>>>** **ESV Romans 4:4-6a** Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the

ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works . . .

A false Gospel of the first century said: We are saved by faith + circumcision.

**PPT>>> ESV Acts 15:1** . . . some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

**PPT>>> ESV Galatians 5:2** Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

In my humble opinion, a modern version of this is that we are saved by faith + baptism (the Church of Christ proclaims this).

-----

#### **4. Serious Doctrinal Error** (not a false Gospel, but fundamental error).

**Hyper Preterism:** 2nd coming already happened; & the whole church has missed it! The Jews missed the 1st coming and the church missed the 2nd coming. The resurrection of dead has already happened: all is metaphysical or other-worldly. All New Testament prophecy was fulfilled in A.D. 70. Satan is already in the lake of fire, so there is no more spiritual warfare; no need to put on the full armor of God.

Hyper-preterists ask, "Who are you going believe, Jesus or the creeds?"

**Unitarianism and Arianism:** They do not believe in the Trinity. The H.S. is an impersonal force, Jesus is God's son, not God.

Jesus is not God. He is god's image, like a picture is your image, but he is not God, no more that a picture is actually you.

**Theological Liberalism:** Bible not trustworthy, not fully inspired, Paul was prejudiced against homosexuals and women, Jesus' death on the cross was not propitiatory ("Bible says God so loved the world, not God so hated the world").

**Universalism:** *Everyone* is going to be saved, regardless of if they believe in Jesus or not in this life. Big right now with Rob Bell.

There is **no hell**. The lost who die are annihilated.

-----

