

The Problem of Heterodoxy

By Irwin J. Habeck

The specific problem to which we intend to address ourselves is the problem caused by someone in our fellowship who has developed heterodox leanings. Is such a one to be regarded in every case as an impenitent sinner? Is termination of fellowship with such a one always tantamount to excommunication? The identification of these two terms has caused some to hesitate to terminate fellowship with one who is set in a heterodox position because he still confesses Jesus as the Son of God and his personal Savior. It has led others to read more into the termination of fellowship than was actually involved.

We have chosen to use the term heterodox to cover adherents of any form of false doctrine. We trust that it is broad enough to forestall the attempt which is frequently made to distinguish between error and heresy in order to justify more tolerance for error than for heresy.

In general we shall restrict our comments to the heterodox who arise in an existing Christian fellowship. They are described by the apostle in these words: "Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Ac 20:30). The contrast is to those operating outside the fellowship, of whom he says: "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock" (v 29).

May we expect that in our fellowship there will be problems caused by members who express heterodox views? In his Theses on Open Questions Dr. Walther has this to say in Thesis 5: "The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one."¹ The context makes it evident that this is no plea for laxity. Rather, it acknowledges the realities which exist among human beings corrupted by the fall. Human reason will want to sit in judgment, human frailty will fail to distinguish clearly, opinions of those who are not grounded upon the truth will leave impressions, with the result that very few, if any, Christians are perfectly clear on every point of doctrine. Sometimes their heterodox views may never surface, and they who hold them may do so in ignorance without having any intention of abandoning the orthodox position in any point.

Now it is not the business of a pastor to be a heresy hunter. When we consider that our Seminary students spend some 330 periods in the study of dogmatics, it becomes evident that it would be practically impossible for a pastor to quiz every member of his flock to determine whether he is clear and correct in every point of doctrine. Somewhere some heterodox opinion may be lurking which may never be uncovered. This, we believe, is the thrust of Dr. Walther's thesis.

Heterodoxy becomes a problem when a heterodox view is expressed or an orthodox truth is questioned. A pastor may be admonishing a member who has not been receiving the Lord's Supper and discovers that the member does not believe in the real presence. A member may mention quite casually that he cannot see how there can be three gods if there is only one God. A pastor told me recently that in the interpretation and application of his text he had referred to the doctrine of election. When he greeted the members as they left church, one man commented, "I always thought that we were not to believe in predestination." In such cases, and examples could be multiplied, the pastor is faced with a problem.

What is he to do? Trot out a series of invectives against heresy and threaten dire consequences? God forbid. He will refrain from judging the man or his motives. Lovingly, patiently he will show him from the Bible what his God says about the matter in the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:25: "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth." He will take into consideration the character and competence of the one with whom he is dealing. If he is high strung or has a short attention span, the pastor may have to be satisfied with telling him, "This is what the Bible says and I know that you believe what God tells you," and let the matter rest when he receives an affirmative reply. If he is capable of receiving only the milk of the Word, the pastor will not try to force him to digest the meat, but

¹ *Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (1970), p 53.

again aim at only a simple acceptance of the pertinent words of Scripture. We may have to be content with a minimum of understanding, but dare never grant heterodoxy equal status with orthodoxy.

Our Lord Jesus on more than one occasion encountered what we might call heterodox opinions on the part of His disciples. In no case did He allow such opinions to remain unchallenged or grant them equal status with the truth. Sometimes He simply set forth the truth and thus corrected the erroneous thinking of His disciples. Such was the case when they revealed that they were expecting the establishment of a visible kingdom (Ac 1:6–8). Sometimes He became quite sharp with them, for example, when they revealed that they still did not have their priorities straight (Mt 16:8–12); or when they revealed that they had the wrong ideas about greatness (Mt 20:24–28); or when James and John showed that they thought that sometimes force was the answer when there was no voluntary acceptance of their Lord (Lk 9:54–56). When Peter tried to argue for his wrong idea about the course which Jesus had to follow, Jesus set him straight in no uncertain terms by calling his error devil-inspired (Mt 16:23). But having confronted error with the truth and having found acceptance for the truth, Jesus did not break with His disciples but rather continued His patient training and promised to continue and complete this training through the Spirit whom He would send to guide them “in all truth” (Jn 16:13).

The situation changes when the one who has revealed heterodox views insists upon his right to hold them and to champion them. It is interesting to notice that in the two passages in which *ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖν* occurs (1 Tm 1:3; 6:3) those who were guilty of heterodoxy appear as holding to views which “minister questions” and lead to “perverse disputings.” In other words, they made their views known, defended them, and were challenged.

That one is persisting in a heterodox position can be established only when he has been confronted by the orthodox position, rejects it, and insists that he will continue to hold to his views and propagate them. Even then the conclusion that he is persisting in heterodoxy is not hastily to be drawn. Sinful human nature is proud; no one likes to be corrected. So the first reaction to correction can be one of stubbornness. Instead of barreling in upon one who reacts in this way it is the part of love and wisdom to allow him time to cool off and think things over in the hope that upon calm reflection he may still abandon his heterodox position. The Lord points us to this course when He speaks of “the first and second admonition” of the heretic (Tt 3:10). But where no progress is being made, further action is called for.

Our dogmaticians have taught that a heterodox position may involve either fundamental or non-fundamental doctrines. Fundamental doctrines are those without acceptance of which saving faith cannot exist. F. Pieper defines them as the doctrines which presuppose and include faith in the forgiveness of sins for Jesus’ sake.² He includes among them the doctrines of sin; of the person of Christ, including that of the Trinity; of the work of Christ; of the word of Christ; of the resurrection.³ The one who rejects any one of these doctrines has lost the saving faith and is outside the pale of the Christian church. While the rejection of any of the other doctrines of Scripture is spiritually dangerous, it is still possible because of what the dogmaticians call a “felicitous inconsistency” to retain the saving faith in spite of the heterodoxy which is involved.

Another factor which comes into consideration is the attitude of the one who holds to a heterodox position. That there is a distinction appears from the use of the term “deceiving, and being deceived” (2 Tm 3:13). There will be those who by deliberate choice, whatever the motive may be, propound a doctrine which does not agree with the Word. Since it is not given to us to know what is in the heart of man, we may be hard put to determine who is a deliberate deceiver. But if anyone were to say, “I don’t care what the Bible says, this is what I believe and I’m going to stick with it,” we would be justified in considering him a deliberate deceiver and his sinful attitude evidence of impenitence.

Others may hold to a heterodox position because they have been deceived into thinking that it is orthodox. They may have been deceived because they have tried to master the revealed truth with their own reason, “imagination, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:5), so

² Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1924), I, 91.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 91–95.

that they have become confused and unable to distinguish truth from error. Or the same condition may have resulted from listening to the “good words and fair speeches” of deceivers (Ro 16:18). And then there are the wiles of the devil who can cause men to become befuddled doctrinally (this is the implication of the *ἀνανήψωσιν*, sober up, in 2 Timothy 2:26). If we had to know what is in a man’s heart before we knew whether we should act or not, we would be immobilized. But this is not the case. There is a call for action whenever a man takes a heterodox position, and that is determined by setting what he holds over against what the Scriptures say.

We have already indicated what we are to do in the case of a weak brother who becomes involved in heterodoxy. In the case of one whose heterodoxy involves the abandonment of a fundamental doctrine, and saving faith cannot exist when such is the case, we owe it to him to let him know where he stands. Through Peter the Lord tells us: “There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pe 2:1). We shall tell such heterodox that because of their position they are doomed to that swift destruction. In such a case termination of fellowship is tantamount to excommunication.

The same would hold true in the case of one whose heterodoxy may indeed involve a non-fundamental doctrine, but who defiantly expresses his determination to hold to his error no matter what the Lord has to say. In this sense we would interpret the use of the word “sinneth” in Titus 3:11, for the reason for its use is given by the words which immediately follow: “being condemned of himself.” He knows better, knows what the Lord has to say, but defiantly insists upon maintaining his heterodox position. In such a case our emphasis would shift from discussion of his error to admonition concerning his defiant attitude over against the Lord. The issue would be not only heterodoxy, but also impenitence. And persistent and established impenitence leads to excommunication.

But what is to be done in the case of one who is not heterodox in a fundamental doctrine nor evidently impenitent? In the past two decades Romans 16:17 has received a lot of attention as indicating the course of action—and rightly so. There we have the Lord’s directive to “avoid them.” Avoid them if they come at you from outside, avoid them if they arise within your own midst. That means remaining separate in the first instance and terminating fellowship in the second.

Not only has our simple application of Romans 16:17 been attacked as being too all-inclusive, but there has also at times been the veiled insinuation that this is the only passage in the entire Bible which we could find to support our doctrine of church fellowship. However, in the Pastoral Epistles alone a number of verbs are used to show the attitude which we are to assume and the action which we are to take where heterodoxy in one form or another becomes manifest. *παραιτέομαι* (Thayer: “to avert by entreaty, deprecate, refuse, decline, shun, avoid”)⁴ is applied to the perpetrators in Titus 3:10; to what they offer in 1 Timothy 4:7 and 2 Timothy 2:23. *ἀποτρέπω* (Thayer: “to turn away from, shun, avoid”) is applied to the perpetrators. *περίστημι* (Thayer: “to turn oneself about (sc.) for the purpose of avoiding, avoid, shun”) is applied in 2 Timothy 2:16 and Titus 3:9 to the matter, but with the context showing that this involves also the perpetrators. The negative of *προσέχομαι* (Thayer: “to cleave to”) in Titus 1:14 is applied to the matter, but again with the context clearly showing that the perpetrators too are meant. *ἐκτρέπω* (Thayer: “to turn away from, shun, avoid meeting or associating with”) in 1 Timothy 6:20 is applied to the matter. This cumulation of evidence shows that in the case of those who persist in their heterodoxy the Lord’s will is that there be the opposite of toleration and church fellowship—that there be a termination of church fellowship.

In the life of the church it will usually happen that one who has committed himself to heterodox teaching will of his own volition terminate his membership in an orthodox fellowship. This was the case even in the apostolic age. Paul wrote to Timothy: “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tm 4:3–4). And John writes: “They went out from us, but they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out,

⁴ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889).

that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us” (1 Jn 2:19). All that can be done in such cases is to warn the offender of the spiritual danger involved in the course which he has chosen. On the part of a congregation the course of action will be to acknowledge the status that exists and to remove the name from its membership roster.

We are then treating the relatively exceptional case of a member who has embraced a heterodox position and insists that he still intends to retain his membership in an orthodox fellowship. The church today can cite more than one example of those who have in one way or another abandoned the orthodox confessional position of their body and still contend for co-existence for themselves and their views. As has been indicated above, the first step will be to assume in charity that one is dealing with a weak brother. But if the course of admonition reveals that he is determined to abide by his error, the course to which our Lord directs us is to terminate fellowship.

If termination of fellowship is looked upon as being identical with excommunication, an orthodox group may hesitate to declare it. We have already indicated that the two may in effect be identical if the heterodoxy involves a fundamental doctrine or reveals sinful defiance of the Lord. But when neither of these conditions prevails and the one who is involved in heterodoxy confesses faith in Jesus as his Savior, the question may be asked, “How dare we excommunicate someone like that?” But the fact of the matter is that termination of fellowship in such a case is not excommunication. It is a declaration that one cannot be identified with a heterodox position and at the same time with an orthodox confession.

Is the declaration of termination of fellowship an easy way out? Not if the process which led to this final step was carried on in the fear of the Lord. This involves a positive confession of the truth and an earnest warning against the spiritual danger in believing and teaching otherwise. It reflects loving concern for the one who is enmeshed in heterodoxy. But if fellowship must be terminated, it is a matter of wanting to be honest in facing the situation as it is and of wanting to obey the Lord by doing what He says ought to be done.

Rather than thinking only of the tragedy involved in the termination of fellowship, the other side of the coin ought also to be considered. It is a tragedy not to obey the Lord. It is a tragedy by actions to tell the heterodox person that what he is doing is not serious, no matter how emphatically the words spoken to him may say differently, for actions speak louder than words. Furthermore, the orthodox group which holds back from terminating fellowship with the heterodox is exposing itself to grave danger. In warning against tolerating heterodoxy the Apostle Paul cites the axiom: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Ga 5:9). Not only will the offender go from bad to worse, but also those with whom he insists upon retaining fellowship will receive the impression that heterodoxy is not serious, embrace it as an option, and lose their own orthodoxy. In 2 Timothy 2:17 the same apostle likens the word of the heterodox to gangrene. Surgeons will amputate a gangrenous member of the body because only such extreme measures will prevent its spread and the eventual loss of life which will otherwise follow. This telling analogy shows why termination of fellowship with the persistently heterodox is necessary for the wellbeing of the orthodox body.

We have already shown what is the Lord’s will in this matter. To disregard His will is something of which no sincere believers will want to become guilty. This alone is enough to silence any sentimental objections or rationalizations about terminating fellowship if such a course becomes necessary. To supply us with a club to curb the old Adam when he suggests a course contrary to that which the Lord points out the Lord issues threats. We find Him employing a threat against taking a soft attitude toward heterodoxy in the letter to Pergamos: “I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam....So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes....Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Re 2:14–16). We don’t want to incur His wrath. In our love for Him we shall want to obey His will which shows us the course which true love both for Him and for the heterodox is to take in dealing with the problem of heterodoxy.