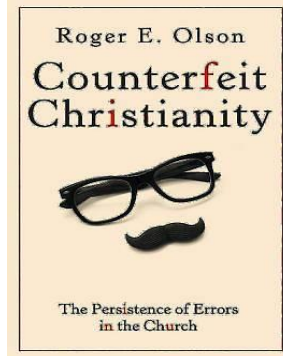


2025 Summer Virtual Study



“Counterfeit Christianity”

By Professor Roger E. Olson

Session 1: Understanding Heresy and Orthodoxy

Background on the Author/Video Leader...

Roger E. Olson was the Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. He is the author of many books. An expert in historical theology, he is a frequent preacher, teacher, and speaker for local churches and organizations.

Introduction...

- Why learn about heresies? – Counterfeit Money Sermon illustration
- “Many pastors would like their congregants to be more interested in studying the Bible and sound doctrine than in learning about “cults”.” (p. 1)
 - 1960’s – 1990’s – rise of spiritual movements alternative to Christianity – concerned of being “swayed”
 - “Alternative” doctrines can easily slip into the church
 - “Many Christians are gullible when it comes to being persuaded by smooth-talking purveyors of false doctrines. Others are simply not equipped to recognize false doctrines when they encounter them. Sometimes it’s difficult to tell the difference between truth and error, especially for the non-theologian or non-biblical scholar.” (p. 2)
 - This is why we need to study both heresy and orthodoxy!

Opening Prayer

Session 1 Video – “Understanding Heresy and Orthodoxy”

Video Follow Up...

- **Key Point**
 - Heresy trials or inquisitions not necessary; Christian discernment is!
- **Key Definitions**
 - *Orthodoxy – theological, doctrinal correctness – right belief*
 - Key Books to understand orthodox Christian beliefs – *Mere Christianity* (CS Lewis), *Orthodoxy* (GK Chesterton)
 - *Heresy – teaching (not just mistaken belief) that denies orthodoxy*
 - Serious, not minor, doctrinal error
 - Strikes at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ

Understanding Heresy

Why Study Heresies?

1. **We live in a world full of *counterfeit Christianities* – belief systems and doctrines that claim to be Christian and very seriously conflict with the gospel of Jesus.**
 - a. God cares what we believe about Him.
 - b. Some beliefs dishonor Him by distorting His nature and what He has done for us in Jesus Christ.
 - c. Some beliefs inflate our human nature, another way to dishonor God.
2. **Studying false doctrines is a way of protecting the church.**
 - a. Its health and well being depends partly on believing in God rightly.
 - b. Paul urged the church to be of one-mind – united in the mind of Christ. We should agree on the basic truths about God.
3. **Studying heresies can help us understand and appreciate sound doctrine.**
 - a. More often, studying heresies will drive us back to orthodoxy.

Counterfeit Christianity?

- Historical Examples – “German Christians”, The Confessing Church and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; American “White Supremacist” Ideology – KKK
- “All heresy is cruel” – it turns people away from truth and toward illusion; distorts relationship with God
- Christianity’s scarred past with “heretics” – degrees (drowned, burned)
- Today – gentle, loving pastoral correction – another way, better way
- “Counterfeit Christianity” is a bit more difficult to identify in our modern culture, but it still exists; tolerance does not mean acceptance
- “...there is such a thing as counterfeit Christianity and that nearly every form of it has been around for a very long time. The heresies early Christians faced and dealt with are still challenging the gospel and Christian communities – from within and without. Live heresies are mostly ancient ones that just keep taking new forms.” (p. 5)
- “...if Christianity is compatible with anything and everything, it is nothing.” (p. 5)

Valid and Invalid Meanings of Heresy

- Heresy depends on orthodoxy.
- *Informal heresy* – belief most people consider seriously wrong
- This book – **formal heresy** – belief that is wrong by some agreed-upon standard (in our study, we will talk about in terms of all Christianity – basic, orthodox beliefs – not denominational different beliefs; these are “ecumenical Christian beliefs”)
- Our focus – those heresies that reject or deny these basic beliefs (“ecumenical heresies”)
- “Denominational heresies” – beliefs that contradict distinctive doctrines of particular denominations of Christians (ex. Infant baptism)
- Descriptive – describing or labeling a doctrinal teaching as heresy (simply saying that is what Christianity/Church has considered it to be)
- Prescriptive – describing a belief as heresy and saying that it ought to be a heresy (we often see this with “sectarian groups” – only my way)

Valid and Invalid Meanings of Heretic

- Heretic – not everyone who believes in a “heresy” is a heretic! Merely being wrong about a belief accidentally, unwillingly, or unconsciously. (“Heretic” term often thrown around...)
- What makes a person a true heretic?
 1. A person must be teaching heresy to others.
 2. A person must know what they are teaching is heresy to their own faith community.
- It’s not that easy to be a heretic! Being a heretic is ALWAYS presumptuous – never accidental or unconscious!

Examples of Ecumenical Heresies

- Irenaeus – one of the first Christian leaders to use the term “heresy” (mentor was Polycarp, whose mentor was John, Jesus’ youngest disciple) – adept at settling controversies between Christians of differing opinions
- One of earliest church controversies/heresies – Gnosticism (we will talk about it in more detail next week!) – have higher spiritual knowledge than appointed apostles of the church and successors – Jesus – God and human?
- Irenaeus – wrote *“Against Heresies”* – 5 volumes, warn church about Gnostic beliefs, first Christian systematic theology; word *heresy* meant “independent thinking”, viewed suspiciously; 1000’s were seduced into Gnosticism, has continued as a shadow of orthodox beliefs even until today
- Montanus – 3rd century – prophet speaking directly from God, equally authoritative with the prophets; be celibate – led followers to a town in Asia Minor to await Christ’s return
- Marcion – 2nd century – Old Testament – not inspired scripture, rejected many writings of the apostles as “too Jewish”, world not created by God

- Praxeas – 3rd century – denied the Trinity; Christian Tertullian wrote against him and his beliefs (also against Marcion) – modalism, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons of the Godhead, but only “modes” of the one person who is “Yahweh” – this became and remains one of the most common false views of God among Christians today
- Heresies and false doctrines have always been around!

Problematizing the Concept of Heresy

- Two reasons why some modern Christians reject the whole idea of heresy...
 1. Many modern people are allergic to anything they perceive as intolerance; tolerance, especially of ideas, is almost a fetish or idol for modern people.
 - Relativism – not just permitting people to have ideas, but mean acknowledging all beliefs are equally true.
 - To empty Christianity of truth claims – orthodox beliefs – is to destroy it – turns it into a “spirituality” or a “folk religion”.
 - “Tolerance does not necessarily mean accepting every truth claim, even in religion, as equally true. And saying that some truth claims are mistaken, even seriously in error, is not intolerant.” – (p. 16)
 2. The proliferation of Christian denominations and individualism.
 - Many people tire of Christianity being treated as devoid of objective content and kind of “free for all” in which anything goes and must always be accepted as Christian.

Identifying and Dealing with Heresies

- Our focus will be on describing past heresies and how these ideologies may still be prevalent today.
- Each one described in the book arose in the first couple centuries of Christian history – among Christians!

- The individuals/heretics who espoused these ideologies challenged the consensus about fundamental Christian beliefs – promoted a “different gospel”
- While the Bible had not been canonized yet, the basic beliefs were understood and being taught across Christendom.
- Every one of these individuals/heretics saw themselves as “reformers”, quoting scripture to support their views; their views were judged incorrect by the majority of Christians
- All those early Christian heresies have continued to appear in different forms under different names throughout Christian history. Even today, they are seen in some Christian “sects”, cults, or alternative religious organizations.
- What should we, the Church, do about it? As a layperson, if you identify a heresy being taught in a church, talk with the pastor or church leadership about it.
- What if a church in your community is promoting heresy? Caution is advised. Dialogue should come first. Remember, most often the individuals within a church community may be nondiscerning to the teachings and orthodox beliefs. Try to assist someone from falling into it.

Questions to Ponder...

1. God cares about what we believe. What are three things ESSENTIAL to your Christian faith?
2. Discernment is a key spiritual gift. How can it help us examine what is true?
3. How might studying false doctrines help us protect the church and our witness? What might have happened to Christianity if early Christians had never come to a standard set of beliefs?
4. How might trying to be tolerant and inclusive make it difficult for others to know what to believe?

Understanding Orthodoxy

Heresy the “Mother of Orthodoxy?”

- Orthodoxy – correct Christian belief – arose largely in response to the challenge of heresies
- However, to say that Christians did not have an “informal” orthodoxy about God, Jesus Christ, and salvation before heresies arose would be incorrect
- Present Day example – The Constitution – separation of church and state, teaching about religion or praying in schools; Supreme Court extrapolating from the original meaning/intent
- Church Example – the Trinity, beliefs definitely before Constantine (Justin Martyr, Theophilus, Tertullian, Origen)
- In between the informal orthodoxy and formal orthodoxy came the early heresies – challenged the informal so the formal had to be formulated

Orthodoxy Protects Mystery

- One common misunderstanding/criticism of the formal orthodoxy of the universal creeds is that the formulators were trying too hard to peer into mysteries of God that should be adored rather than understood.
- Instead, they were trying to protect the mysteries of the faith from heresies that overrationalized them
- “The heresies all made Christian faith too simple, too rational, too comprehensible to finite and fallen human thinking. Orthodoxy is not irrational, but it is suprarational; it does not claim to explain the mysteries of the faith. It only claims to express the mysteries correctly and protect them from being reduced to finite dimensions of thought as if God were an object that could be studied and comprehended like something in nature.” (p. 23)
- The result of all heresies is loss of transcendence – God’s otherness.
- Humans are like beings living in a two-dimensional reality whereas God is three or four dimensional. We can begin to comprehend the complete idea of the Trinity, yet it is what scripture reveals. Heresy attempts to confined it to our understanding – a two-world reality.

The Facets of Christian Orthodoxy: Early and Ancient

- “Ecumenical Orthodoxy” – mere Christianity (CS Lewis), “Nicene Christianity” (Christopher Seitz, others), Basic Christianity (John Stott) – we will be studying orthodoxy by looking at its denials – its heresies
- We are looking at the singular, universal – not denominational (denominational orthodoxy = ecumenical orthodoxy + doctrines specific to a denomination’s traditions)
- One Key, Ecumenical Orthodoxy Belief – Jesus Christ is God and Savior
- How do go about identifying “ecumenical Christian orthodoxy”?
 - “Vincentian Canon” (Vincent of Lerins) – A Christian ought to believe what has been believed by all Christians everywhere and always.
 - Issues – “all Christians” – maybe should be “most”, “committed”
 - Take a Step Further – Examine the “rules of faith” one finds in the early theologians (like Irenaeus and Tertullian) – set up brief teachings of orthodox beliefs in opposing early heresies
 - Interesting note – Irenaeus and Tertullian’s “rules of faith” are very similar, even though they did not know each other
 - These rules of faith can be found on pages 26 and 27 in the book
 - A few elements: deity of Jesus Christ, Trinity, humanity and deity of Jesus
 - These “rules of faith” led to many heresies rising that denied some of these crucial doctrines – leading to the need for the bishops in the fourth century to formalize the “rules of faith” in ecumenical creeds

The Facets of Christian Orthodoxy – Later and Ancient

- The third century was a difficult time for Christianity – war and persecutions; but there was tremendous growth of the church
- Christian leaders were not permitted to meet, so not much done on formalizing ecumenical orthodoxy; heresies were simmering, but dealing with them were difficult
- When Constantine became Emperor of Rome in 311, and then signed the Edict of Milan in 313 – extending freedom to Christians, there was

great growth in writing, theology, and influence across the major cities of the empire

- Evidence of different thoughts about Jesus emerged across various parts of the empire – some of these outright heresies – very serious denials of the ancient Christian rules of faith and of scripture itself
- 325 to 451 AD – considered the formative era of ecumenical Christian orthodoxy
- “Jewel” of this period – Nicene Creed – first written in 325, revised to its final form in 381
- Council of Nicaea – decide on a unified Christian doctrine
- Ecumenical Orthodox Beliefs...
 - Jesus and God the Father are of the same substance (*homoousion*)
 - Jesus (the Word, Logos, Son) and Father are One
 - At the later council (381), Holy Spirit was included as same substance and as One – Trinity (one being, three distinct persons)
 - Jesus is God incarnate
 - Jesus is equal with the Father as to his deity and equal with us as to his humanity (yet without sin) – incarnation, hypostatic union – fully human, fully divine – this was later spelled out in the “Chalcedonian Definition” from the Council of Chalcedon in 431 AD
- Nicene Creed – found on page 30-31 of the book.
- “The Nicene Creed means that Christians are to believe in a God who is “one *what* and three *whos*”. The Chalcedonian Definition, hypostatic union, means that Christians are to believe that Jesus Christ is “on *who* and two *whats*”.” (p. 32)
- The Chalcedonian Definition says that the two natures of Jesus are “without division, without separation” and “without confusion, without change.” – two complete and distinct natures, one human (ours) and one divine (God’s), and these must not be regarded as separate, making him a double personality, or as mingled, making him a hybrid of deity and humanity.

Another Facet of Ancient Orthodoxy: Salvation by Grace Alone

- At the same time, church leaders were dealing with heresies about sin and salvation – is God's grace absolutely necessary or can humans attain salvation on their own
- Council of Ephesus (431 AD) – one issue was dealing with the relationship between grace and good works – the council declared that good works alone cannot save a person; all are sinners and can be saved only by the grace of God through Jesus
- In 529 BC, at the Second Synod of Orange, bishops condemned as heresy the idea that a sinner has the moral ability to initiate a saving relationship with God apart from God's grace ("Semi-Pelagianism")
- These councils tie into an important orthodox belief – "original sin"
- "Original Sin" – often misinterpreted by the church; it does not mean that humans are born evil or with an evil nature; instead, it means that we are born as "damaged goods" such that willful, rebellious, presumptuous disobedience to God is inevitable
- **SCRIPTURE FOCUS – Romans 3:23, Romans 10:3**

Other Beliefs of Christian Orthodoxy

- Three Great Doctrines: (1) Deity and Humanity of the one person Jesus; (2) The Trinity (God is one being, substance existing as three distinct persons); (3) Salvation is by grace alone and cannot be earned)
- One other commonly accepted belief – Reality of miracles, especially the resurrection of Jesus (bodily resurrection of Jesus)
- Another accepted belief – Jesus's death on the cross objectively reconciled God and humanity – an "atoning" death
- Another commonly held belief – Jesus Christ will return to earth to raise the dead and judge the living and the dead – the second coming of Christ; a new creation (the Parousia)
- Other small, but commonly held beliefs: creation out of nothing, humans being created in God's image and likeness, God's sovereignty over history, and the church as the body of Christ

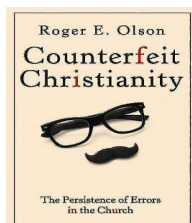
The Sources and Criteria of Christian Orthodoxy

- Where did these orthodox beliefs come from?
 - First 4 ecumenical Church Councils
 - Influential Church Fathers and Theologians – writings
 - Christian “consensus” – one source and criteria for true belief
 - Ultimate Foundation: Revelation – the Holy Spirit speaking through inspired scripture, the prophets and apostles and the writings they left for later generations and that God preserved for our inspiration, guidance, and teaching
- In understanding orthodoxy, we need to view the Bible as the inspired Word of God.
- Most Catholic scholars view scripture and tradition as equal, working hand in hand. Protestants, however, place scripture over tradition. *Sola Scriptura* – primacy of scripture over all biblical traditions – it DOES NOT mean “Bible only”
- *Via Media* View – scripture is “above” tradition, but also that the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy must never be discarded, ignored, or set aside when studying the Bible for truth about God, Jesus, salvation.

Follow Up Questions...

1. Heresies make God too simple and too rational. How important is the mystery of God for you?
2. Do you see the person of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, and salvation by grace alone as the three basic and key tenets of your Christian faith? Are there others that you would consider equal? Replace?
3. Do you understand the resurrection of Jesus as historical fact or in a nonliteral way? Can a person be a Christian and not believe in the resurrection?
4. How do you understand the role of the Bible as faith’s foundation? How does that understanding differ from the “Bible only” or the “Bible alone” approach? What is the role of the Bible in your life and daily faith practices?

Closing Prayer



Session 2: The Mother of All Heresies

(Chapters 3 and 4 in the Book)

Tuesday, July 8

6:30 PM

Facebook Live
