



Getting it Right: Against the Heretics

October 1 / 2, 2025

I Timothy 4, 6:1-16; II Timothy 4:1-5; Jude
Gonzalez, Chapters 8-9

Irenaeus of Lyons

“Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress... in order that, by its outward form, it may seem to the inexperienced to be truer than the truth itself.” (Against Heresies, 1.2)

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

I. The Apostolic Warnings

a. From the very beginning, the church knew that false teaching would be a threat.

The New Testament itself contains repeated warnings:

- i. 1 Timothy 4:1–2 – “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.”
- ii. 1 Timothy 6:3–5 – Paul warns of teachers “conceited and understanding nothing” who cause controversy for the sake of gain.
- iii. 2 Timothy 4:3–4 – Paul predicts a time when people will “gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”
- iv. Jude 3–4 – “Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints... for certain men have secretly slipped in among you.”

b. These passages highlight two themes:

- i. Heresy is not a surprise but a constant reality.
- ii. The church must be vigilant to preserve the “faith once for all delivered to the saints.”

II. Historical Context

- a. As Christianity grew from a small, persecuted sect into a movement that spread across the Mediterranean, it encountered competing philosophies, religious systems, and internal distortions.
- b. The church was forced to define itself theologically and organizationally in response to error.
- c. Justo González reminds us: “The history of theology in the early centuries is largely the history of the struggle against heresy.”

III. Major Early Heresies and Responses

- a. Gnosticism (2nd Century)
 - i. Teachings: Claimed salvation came from secret knowledge (*gnosis*). Saw the material world as evil and the spiritual as good. Often denied Christ’s true humanity.
 - ii. Leaders: Valentinus, Basilides, Marcion (to some extent).
 - iii. Danger: Undermined creation, incarnation, and redemption. If matter is evil, then the incarnation of the Son of God was impossible.
 - iv. Orthodox Response:
 1. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote *Against Heresies*, emphasizing the unity of Scripture and the goodness of creation.
 2. Affirmed Christ as fully God and fully man.
 3. The “Rule of Faith” (early creed) was used as a standard.
- b. Marcionism (mid-2nd Century)
 - i. Teachings: Marcion rejected the Old Testament and claimed the God of Israel was a lesser, wrathful deity distinct from the God revealed in Jesus.
 - ii. Danger: Split Christianity from its Jewish roots, denied the continuity of salvation history.
 - iii. Response:
 1. The Church affirmed the Old Testament as Christian Scripture.
 2. The need for an authoritative canon of Scripture became clear. The four Gospels and apostolic writings were affirmed.
- c. Montanism (late 2nd Century)
 - i. Teachings: Founded by Montanus, with prophets Prisca and Maximilla. Claimed to bring a new age of prophecy beyond Christ and the apostles. Demanded extreme asceticism.
 - ii. Danger: Undermined apostolic teaching and Scripture’s sufficiency.
 - iii. Response:
 - iv. The church acknowledged the ongoing work of the Spirit but insisted prophecy must align with apostolic witness.
 - v. Helped clarify the role of bishops and the canon of Scripture.
- d. Docetism
 - i. Teachings: Docetism was an early Christian heresy that denied the true humanity of Christ, teaching that Jesus only *seemed* (from the Greek *dokein*, “to appear”) to have a physical body, and that his suffering and death were illusions. Marcion and certain early Gnostic leaders who viewed matter as evil and therefore incompatible with the divine.

- ii. Danger: Undermining of the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection: if Christ did not truly take on flesh, then he could not truly suffer, die, or redeem humanity.
 - iii. Response: The Church countered this teaching by emphasizing the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, as seen in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, and later in the creeds [Nicene Creed (325) and the Chalcedonian Definition (451),] which affirmed that Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, fully God and fully man, the only sufficient Savior of the world.
 - 1. *“Be deaf, therefore, when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David, who was the Son of Mary, who truly was born, who both ate and drank, who truly was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who truly was crucified, and who truly died... He truly rose from the dead.” (Ignatius, Letter to the Trallians, 9)*
- e. Arianism (4th Century)
 - i. Teachings: Arius of Alexandria taught that the Son was not eternal but a created being—“there was when he was not.”
 - ii. Danger: Denied Christ’s full divinity, which meant salvation itself was at stake.
 - iii. Response:
 - 1. Council of Nicaea (325): Condemned Arianism. Affirmed that the Son is *homoousios* (“of the same substance”) with the Father.
 - 2. Nicene Creed became the standard of orthodoxy.
- f. Apollinarianism (4th Century)
 - i. Teachings: Apollinaris taught that Jesus had a human body but not a human rational soul; the divine Logos replaced the human mind.
 - ii. Danger: Denied Christ’s full humanity. “What is not assumed cannot be healed.”
 - iii. Response:
 - 1. Condemned at the Council of Constantinople (381). Affirmed that Christ was fully human and fully divine.
- g. Nestorianism (5th Century)
 - i. Teachings: Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, emphasized the distinction of Christ’s two natures to the point of separation. Rejected the title *Theotokos* (“God-bearer”) for Mary.
 - ii. Danger: Split Christ into two persons, undermining the unity of salvation.
 - iii. Response:
 - 1. Council of Ephesus (431): Affirmed Mary as *Theotokos* because she bore the one person of Christ, fully God and fully man.
 - 2. Condemned Nestorius.
- h. Eutychianism / Monophysitism (5th Century)
 - i. Teachings: Eutyches taught that Christ’s human nature was absorbed into his divine nature—leaving “one nature” (*mono-physis*).
 - ii. Danger: Denied Christ’s true humanity.
 - iii. Response:

1. Council of Chalcedon (451): Declared Christ is “one person in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”
 2. Chalcedonian Definition became a central standard for Christology.
- i. Pelagianism (5th Century)
 - i. Teachings: Pelagius denied original sin and taught that humans could choose the good apart from grace. Salvation by moral effort was possible.
 - ii. Danger: Made the cross unnecessary, denied the need for God’s grace.
 - iii. Response:
 1. Augustine of Hippo defended the doctrine of original sin and the necessity of grace.
 2. Council of Carthage (418): Condemned Pelagianism.
 3. Augustine’s thought shaped Western Christianity’s view of sin and grace.
- IV. Lasting Impact: The struggle with heresy shaped the church in crucial ways:
- a. Defined Orthodoxy – creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedonian) became boundary markers of the faith.
 - b. Clarified Christology and Trinity – the person and work of Christ were articulated in precise, biblical language.
 - c. Developed Canon of Scripture – heresies like Marcionism forced the church to affirm the Old Testament and recognize authoritative apostolic writings.
 - d. Strengthened Leadership – bishops, councils, and creeds provided unity and continuity.
 - e. Emphasized Grace – Augustine’s battle with Pelagius reaffirmed that salvation is by God’s initiative, not human merit.
- V. On the Edge: Tertullian and Origen
- VI. Conclusion: Contending for the Faith
- a. The early church did not invent truth in the face of heresy—it preserved and clarified the truth already revealed in Christ and the apostles. Jude’s command still resonates: “Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude 3)
 - b. The legacy of these centuries reminds us that the church is always one generation away from forgetting the gospel. The vigilance of the early Christians is both a warning and a gift to us.