



WHAT I ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW BUT WAS AFRAID TO ASK. . .

ABOUT HERESIES

What Does “Heresy” Mean?

The word *heresy* means ‘to choose’ and refers to the preference of false or wrong teachings. The Church uses *heresy* to denote those opinions or schools of thought which contradict the orthodox (true) teachings and doctrines about God and the Church.

The Church does not use the word *heresy* lightly, and reserves it for those teachings most offensive and misleading.

What Major Heresies Did The Church Endure?

The Church has struggled against heresies since her earliest days after Pentecost. Some more prominent heresies have been Gnosticism, Arianism and Nestorianism.

The teaching that there was a special knowledge of God (Greek “gnosis”) that would be revealed to a few, and that the world was in constant struggle between the material (evil) and spiritual (good) forces, **Gnosticism** was prominent in the second century. Body and spirit were separate, Gnosticism taught, and the body was evil while the spirit was good. This was in direct contradiction to the Christian teaching that body and spirit were a unity, and that the whole material world, including the human body, were created by God out of love, and that it was *good*.

Arianism was the 4th century heresy that proclaimed that Jesus Christ, the Son, was not God. If Jesus was not God, then it followed that the members of the Trinity were not equal to each other. And if Jesus was not God, it also meant that our salvation is impossible, for a human being cannot save us, only God can. The Church’s answer to Arianism was that Christ indeed was God, “... of the substance of the Father,” co-equal and co-eternal with the Father.

Nestorianism taught that Jesus Christ was not both fully human and at the same time totally God. For Nestorius and his followers in the middle of the 5th century, the issue came to the fore over the use of the term *Mother-of-God*, or ‘Theotokos,’ for St. Mary. Nestorius taught that Jesus Christ could not be God the Son because God could not be born and Jesus was born of St. Mary. And, Nestorius continued, the Second Person of the Trinity did not die on the Cross, only Jesus the man. This faulty reasoning struck at the very

heart of Christian teaching, that God became man and died for us. The Church countered Nestorius' position by reiterating the total humanity and total divinity of Jesus Christ, and by sanctioning the use of the term 'Theotokos.' The words to *Soorp Asdvadz*, the Trisagion, also became a means for restating the Church's position.

How Were Heresies Settled and True Faith Arrived At?

Heresies were resolved by Church Councils. The major heresies of Arianism and Nestorianism required a general Church Council, or Ecumenical Council, of bishops from every jurisdiction. The Mind of the Church was arrived at by deliberation and discussion and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Council of Nicaea in 325 denounced the Arian heresy and provided the Church with a statement of faith, the Nicene Creed; the Council of Constantinople restated the position of Nicaea and also dealt with a heresy known as Apollinarianism; and the Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Nestorianism. The Armenian Church had representation only at the Council of Nicaea, but ratified the decisions of the Second and Third Ecumenical Councils.

Are There Any Heresies in Existence Today?

Heresies still abound today and tempt people away from the orthodox faith of the Church. Groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Moonies, Worldwide Church of God, Unity School of Christianity and others are our twentieth century heretics. These heresies should be as great a concern to us as the aforementioned were to the Church in another era.