

09/03/2017 – Different, Yet Related: “Heresy” Sunday!

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Scripture: Matthew 24; Hebrews 13

Matthew 24

*<sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>5</sup>For many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Messiah!” and they will lead many astray. <sup>6</sup>*

Hebrews 13

*<sup>9</sup>Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace*

What is “heresy”? The textbook definition is ‘*any deviation from traditional and orthodox belief*’. I have ‘heresy’ in quotation marks because the definition creates questions like: *Who gets to decide what is traditional and orthodox belief?*

To declare heresy, your church or organization must be absolutely convinced of its perception of Truth. Only with a hard idea of ‘the Truth’ can you tell what has deviated from that Truth.

Let’s look at Congregationalism for a moment, who had their share of heresy trials in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Congregationalists are Protestants. Protestants are the product of **the** heresy trial, when Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church. This motivated King Henry VIII to separate the Catholic Church in England from Rome and become **the** Church of England. This is two separations away from the original heresy trial with Luther. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, the Puritans arose in the Church of England. Most of them just wanted to reform the Anglican church. But a few wanted more extreme changes. They were tried as enemies of the state, or *heretics*, and imprisoned. They became known as Separatists. Separatists became Pilgrims, and Pilgrims became Congregationalists.

Thus, a group that is 5 degrees removed from the great heresy trial of Martin Luther, is deciding who is a heretic? How does that work?

That is why I put ‘*heresy*’ in quotation marks. The question, as we have seen throughout our series, is one of authority. Or more accurately, “*Who put us in charge?*”

Even so, I believe it is important to understand that there are ideas and ways of being as individuals and churches that begin to trend toward something like ‘heresy’. There are two ways of thinking about how Christian faith presents itself. The first way is called ‘*closed revelation*’. This means God’s pure revelation is set in time and is mediated by Scripture. Revelation comes from one source, or is judged by a single source, which is Scripture. This is the traditional Protestant view. New revelations of God’s presence in the world closed when the disciples died and when the last book of Scripture was written. And so all revelation, all knowledge of God, is mediated through Scripture, even our personal relationship with Christ.

The second way the Christian faith presents itself is called ‘*continuing revelation*’. This means that the Holy Spirit continues to unfold new ways of seeing and being which conform to Scripture, but also

reach beyond Scripture. Many new religious movements are the result of this '*continuing revelation*', often in the form of visions and other mystical '*receptions of the Spirit*'.

These are not strict categories. As we saw last week with the Pentecostals, there is some closed and continuing revelation happening. The Spirit reveals herself through the gifts of the Spirit, but the gifts of the Spirit are governed by Scripture. Heresy is easier to determine if you have a single point of reference, Scripture, but much more difficult if the Holy Spirit is still revealing new truths beyond Scripture. Once a group or person determines they 'have the Truth', Heresy is whatever contradicts or opposes either that Tradition or the Tradition's interpretation of Scripture.

Radical deviations from orthodoxy and traditional belief is pretty clear in groups like The Mormons or Branch Davidians or Jim Jones.

Today, I am more interested in groups that may trend towards heresy so we can see some categories of different kinds of heresy. My question about heresy is always, "*what is the boundary?*"

Or, "*At what point is something outside the bounds of discernable Christian faith?*"

I will share three categories that trend toward heresy with you. These are often hard to see. And then I will give you a fourth example that clarifies the other three.

The three categories are *a person, a doctrine, and a complete reorganization of observable reality*. My examples for each have direct connections to Maine.

### ***A Person:***

A Christian movement might be trending toward heresy when it is focused on a single person and the claims they or others make for that person. The Shakers were, and still are, a branch of radical Quakers (if there can be such a thing).

The Shakers<sup>1</sup> began in the early 1770s with Mother Ann Lee. Lee was a part of the '*quaking Quakers*', who would shake when the Holy Spirit fell upon them. Mother Ann had a vision that the Holy Spirit wanted pure souls to be the vessel of Christ in world. She was led to reject sexual intercourse and marriage, to live separate from the world, and to confess sins regularly. Thus, the Shakers were born. The Shakers didn't get their name until Mother Ann Lee's second vision in 1774, in which she saw a pure land for the little group of followers in America. 9 Shakers came to America in 1774 and set up a commune in Watervliet, New York. The group grew quickly and at the height had 20 Shaker communities around the NorthEast primarily. Three of those communities were in Maine. Only one Shaker community exists now at Sabbathday Lake Village, which was established in 1783 in New Gloucester, Maine.

There are only two surviving Shakers now, but on any given Sunday, there are 25-50 worshipers who gather to testify to the presence of the Spirit in their lives.

Why do Shakers trend toward heresy? Mother Ann Lee was seen by her followers as the incarnation of Jesus Christ in this world. They called her 'Mother Lee' while she was alive for this reason. She never denied the designation. Like many who believe themselves to be an incarnation of Jesus Christ,

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<sup>1</sup> Information on Ann Lee comes from a few websites, but this one primarily: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/hns/cities/shakers.html>. Also from information gleaned from a visit to Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine.

Mother Lee believed the end of the world was coming very soon. This is part of why the Shakers are celibate.

I highly recommend you make the trip to New Gloucester and tour the Shaker village. They fascinate me, like all the groups we will talk about today. I can't figure out why more people aren't attracted to the Shaker community, though. The land is beautiful, the people are friendly, open and progressive, and the focus on community and humble faith is incredibly attractive. To me, anyway.

When someone or a group of people begin to raise a person up to be another Jesus Christ walking the earth, you might be trending toward the heretical. Jesus alone is Jesus Christ, now and always.

### ***A doctrine:***

Ellen White was born in Gorham, Maine on November 26, 1827. She was baptized by Methodists in Casco Bay on her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. As a young adult, White began having visions of the end of the world. She also was given a revelation that honoring the Sabbath, the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, was the most important commandment. Ellen came to believe that Christians honored the Sabbath on the wrong day. The correct day to honor the Sabbath was Saturday, not Sunday. White's visions were confirmed as valid by her husband and several other committed Christians. And so a new movement was formed by Ellen and her husband.

The end of the world is sometimes called the Advent of the coming of the Lord, so one who believes Christ is coming soon is known as an Adventist.

And the Sabbath is always the 7<sup>th</sup> day – thus 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists. The 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists are Biblical literalists, believing strongly in a 7-day creation. They take Paul seriously when he says in 1 Corinthians 6 that the body is a temple, and so they follow strict dietary rules. They believe the end of the world is coming soon, but they don't go out of their way to predict it.

There is much that is attractive about 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, though. They are extremely healthy and large health studies will use them as a control group because they know they aren't eating and drinking weird things. The 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists are very egalitarian, like the Shakers, and Ellen White was friends with Sojourner Truth. And they know their Bible.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist movement is small and formed around a single doctrine, when to celebrate the Sabbath. That singular focus is potentially a sign that things may be headed toward heresy. If there is a single doctrine that rises to the surface in Scripture, it is God's love for us, not behaviors based on a single rule.

### ***A Reorganization and Revision of Observable Reality***

Mary Baker Eddy was born in New Hampshire in 1821. Her family were devout Congregationalists and her father was a strict disciplinarian who expected his children to know the Bible well. Mary Baker had many health issues as a child which continued into her early adult years. She was also subject to visions.

For many years, she sought healing from many different doctors. Maine is a hotbed of new ideas about religion and alternative healing. Several movements come out of Maine that revolve around faith healing and magnetism. One of the great proponents of the new healing arts was a man with the

great name, Phineas Quimby. Quimby practiced mesmerism and faith healing out of Belfast, Maine, and is responsible for what is known as the New Thought movement. New Thought says that God is a sort of, in the words of sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick, Vast Active Living Intelligence System that is responsive to our requests and actions.

In other words, if I can align my spirit and thoughts with the intelligence of God, then the intelligence of the body will heal itself.

Mary Baker Eddy traveled to visit Phineas Quimby and was healed of her pain through his work. They became great friends. Quimby sometimes called his work '*Christian Science*'. While Quimby became popular in the Spiritualism movement, which was also huge in Maine (visit Temple Heights Spiritual Center for more insight), Mary Baker Eddy became deeply influenced by infusing her Christian faith more deeply into Quimby's work.

Through her visions and deepening work in her spiritual life, the Christian Science church began to form through Mary Baker Eddy. Mary Baker Eddy was a powerhouse, as were Mother Lee and Ellen White. Unbelievably smart and well-read, Mary Baker Eddy toured the country with her new ideas. Christian Science became very popular, especially in the NorthEast, as people were healed of illnesses and congenital problems.

Here is the issue with Christian Science: Christian Science requires the complete dismissal of the existence of the material world. For Mary Baker Eddy, only the spiritual world exists. The physicality of our lives is a complete illusion. The barrier to healing are those things which we perceive as physical, and that which we perceive as physical is illusion, created by a mind full of desire and separated from God. Only *right thinking and right faith* can bring about healing and reconnection with God.

If the faith you are exploring requires you to reject observable reality, you may be trending towards heresy. God reveals God's self through the physical and material world God created for our pleasure and enjoyment, guided by God's love for us and God's creation.

These three movements seem relatively harmless to me. They are generally not controlling people's behavior, there is flexibility in discourse, people can leave the movements and they won't be hunted down and dragged back,

they don't require a complete separation from everyone or everything else in a person's life. These movements are strict in their own way, but that is known going in. There is no secret held closely.

Are they really any more heretical than we are, Separatist visionaries that we come from? They are unusual, for sure, but when we see trends toward heresy in one group, it is also a sign to look for those signs in ourselves as well.

### ***Groups that Cause Harm:***

The last category that points hard toward heresy is any group that causes harm. In October 1911<sup>2</sup>, the racing sloop *Coronet* drifted into the harbor of Portland, Maine. A ship that was supposed to carry 30 people had 60 malnourished, sick people on board. Captaining the boat was Frank Sandford, who, in

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<sup>2</sup> Information about Frank Sandford and The Kingdom comes from <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1901-2000/the-story-of-shiloh-11630697.html>, and also the book *Fair, Clear and Terrible: The Story of Shiloh, Maine*. British American Publishing, 1989.

a vision to bring healing to the world through prayer, took 66 of the members of his Christian commune in Shiloh, Maine on a *world prayer cruise* with no preparation nor enough provisions. 6 of his crew died from starvation. Sandford was convicted of manslaughter and served 7 years in prison. Sandford believed he was the incarnation of King David.

Sandford was a graduate from Bates College, and went to the Moody missionary training center in Massachusetts. Before his education was completed there, he was called to pastor a Free Baptist church in Massachusetts. Eventually, through a series of visions, he was called back to his birthplace in Durham, Maine. There, he started a live-in Bible school called *The Holy Spirit and Us Bible School*. People from around the Northeast came to join the growing school. Sandford eventually bought some land on a hill outside Durham in Shiloh, and built The Kingdom community.

To be a part of the community, you had to give up all your worldly possessions and money. Sandford was very strict and very charismatic. Somehow, in 1903, he evaded a manslaughter trial for the death of a young boy on his property. In the 1920s, the school came up for another manslaughter trial.

And yet, even through all this, Sandford's group – The Kingdom – lasted all the way up until 1998. He was revered even beyond his death. The Shakers require those who join to give up all earthly possessions, and people saw Mother Ann as a second Christ. The 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists are also quite strict with behavior, and people follow this willingly. Mary Baker Eddy would lead small groups on grueling preaching tours, praying for others. But the Shakers, the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, and Christian Scientists are not like The Kingdom, Sandford's group. What is the difference? Frank Sandford is the difference.

Each of these groups provide clues to when we might be led astray in faith, down rabbit holes of personality, doctrine, or rewrites of reality. Shakers, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, and Christian Scientists are not in and of themselves dangerous. But Frank Sandford was dangerous. He caused direct harm several times to his followers. And, if nothing else, where a person, doctrine, or view of reality causes direct harm, that is 'heresy'.

When the love and care of God is superseded by the need for power, control, and ideology, we are in the realm of heresy.

*May the Lord hold us close to the Lord's vision for each of us. May the love of Christ lead us and the presence of the Holy Spirit form our hearts and minds toward one another and God.*

Amen