

When teaching about the organic church, a question I am asked more than any other is how we handle the threat of heresy. I understand this concern and want to address it in an intelligent and articulate manner because it is very important. The organic church movement is not going to last if we simply ignore the challenges it faces. But I also believe that the issues that are raised in response to our movement can find solutions that are not only satisfactory but even better alternatives to the way the church has addressed these issues in the past. If the organic church movement is not a move forward toward better health and wholeness, then it is not worth pursuing at all.

The common understanding is something like this: if we rely upon uneducated leaders and teachers, won't we allow heresy to run rampant in our churches? Of course this is a risk, but I believe there are simple ways to lower the risk of such an infection. A healthy body with a strong immune system fights off infection better than a sick one. It is a natural function of the body inherent in its very makeup. I will suggest in this article that there is a better immune system for the body of Christ than the one we have been comfortable with for so long.

What is the true threat?

In reality there is not a way to eliminate heresy 100% from the church. Jesus told us that there would always be false teachers (Matt. 24:4-5, 11). The enemy is a liar (John 8:44) and he works in clandestine ways to infiltrate our ranks (Jude 4, 10-13). If the liar can input something other than truth into our minds, then he can keep us from being all that the resurrected Christ intended for us. Unfortunately, I fear he has succeeded to do just that, ironically under the banner of avoiding false doctrine.

The best solution to heresy in the church is not to have better-trained leaders in "the pulpits", but better-trained people in "the pews". While many will say that the key to better-trained people are leaders who equip them, this unfortunately is most often not the reality. It is true that we need better leaders who empower and equip common Christians to know the truth, spread the Word and do the work of ministry (Eph 4:11 ff.), but that is very different than the sort of leaders who screen all beliefs and are the gatekeepers of God's Word. As long as our leaders are considered the gatekeepers of truth we leave the majority of God's people in the dark and they are susceptible to leaders who do the thinking for them-because that is what they have been trained to do. It is ironic that the very thing we think will prevent heresy actually feeds the problem.

There is no gatekeeper for God's Word. While the apostle Paul was behind bars, held in place by a keeper of the gate, he said these words: "the Word of God is not imprisoned" (2 Tim. 2:9). I do not need to protect God's Word, it protects me! People have been attacking God's Word in every generation. Entire empires have launched full-scale war against God's Word and fallen, yet the truth of God's Word stands. The thought that God's Word needs my help is truly foolish. Men have not kept God's Word pure; it is God's Word that has kept men pure. We are sadly lost if we ever lose sight of this fact. We need God's Word more than it needs us.

The Word of God in the hands of His people is not a dangerous thing! Such an idea just reeks of Satan does it not? Why are we afraid of such a thing? Keeping the Word out of their hands is a very dangerous practice, which is something we need to repent of immediately! Good men and women throughout history have lost their lives for the right of others to have God's Word freely. Let us not cheapen their sacrifice.

Are men capable of twisting the Word of God to suit their own purposes? Of course they are, and of course they will. Satan has done that from the very beginning (Gen. 3:3) and he will not stop until he is in the lake of fire. However, I do not put my trust in men; I put my trust in God and His Word. Do we actually think that the way to protect the church from human frailties is to make sure that they rely on other frail men to think for them? That is like trying to solve a problem with more of a problem? It is like trying to put out a fire with a bucket of kerosene.

Perhaps the church of the West has sacrificed the power we need because we have not trusted in the power and the purity of God's written revelation. Instead, we have placed our trust in the ability of certain men to interpret, teach and systematize the Bible. There is no power inherent in men or in their systems. God's Word stands alone and we must learn again to trust in it. We have sacrificed the power of God's Word for the impotence of men's teaching about God's Word and wondered why the people of God are ineffective in influencing society. The sad irony is that all this is done out of a twisted respect for God's Word.

Many feel that when we have leaders who are not seminary trained we are open to all sorts of bad teaching. The reality is that many heresies were born in seminary. Some would argue that the whole fundamentalist movement was born out of a reaction to the liberal and heretical teachings coming out of many of the seminaries, particularly in Germany during the early 20th century. We have been trained by our seminaries to think that we are incapable of holding off heresy without their help. Seminary as an institute for higher learning, however, is a relatively new phenomenon in church history and I would venture to guess that we have not had less

heresy since its invention.

When is it best to teach biblical interpretation skills?

Do I teach Scriptural interpretive skills in our movement? Yes, I do, but it is not the first thing I do. First I set the saints to reading the Scripture without any middleman. Once the sheep hear the Good Shepherd's voice they will follow Him for life. There is a significant "imprinting" that needs to take place from the very beginning of a new life. In the natural world there is a bonding that occurs with a new born to its mother. All of the memory of the creature is forever shaped and influenced by the connection to the first creature they see. This is sometimes called "imprinting". Like the baby ducks that will follow their mother, new disciples must connect with God's voice early in their new life. Instead, most people in the church of America have imprinted upon the booming voice of their pastor preaching about God's Word rather than God's Word itself. As they mature they are told to read the Bible but rarely develop an appetite for it. I hear the common "mantra" of, "I try to read my Bible, but I never understand it. It makes so much more sense when I hear my pastor explain it." These are sheep that know their pastor's voice, but it is not Jesus' voice.

People will ask me, "Then are not the disciples going to misunderstand Scripture?" Yes, of course they are. And so did I when I was a young disciple. Maybe we need to realize that we will spend the rest of our lives trying to understand an infinite book that has no end to its depth of understanding. Perhaps we should allow people the freedom to make a few mistakes, leave with a few questions, and learn as they grow. I remember my first Bible study that I ever taught-it was heresy! And I managed to utter a four-letter word in it as well. I am glad someone gave me a chance to do better the next time. I am still embarrassed by my first sermon. If you held me to every thing I believed in my first pastorate, I would be a stagnant and stunted disciple who is not learning. I now understand things better than I did at first and I am hopeful that in ten years I will see even more clearly.

I think that if you were a careful student of church history you would be surprised by some of the strange ideas that our historic heroes believed. God still blessed them, used them and uses them still, but they did not have a complete picture of all of God's Word. Perhaps we are also a little blind to our own doctrinal faults and these errors will be more evident in the decades and centuries to come.

So why not let people who are new believers make mistakes early in their development, which

is how we all grow? If we have to be perfect in our understanding from the very first day of our Christian life then none of us are worthy. No wonder so many are afraid of opening their Bibles, if they have to understand everything correctly all the time it is a rather intimidating venture to merely open it up and read.

An attitude that is humble and aware of its own inadequacy is a safer attitude to reinforce when it comes to Scripture interpretation than the one that is so confident that it knows all that is truth and puts every belief in its appropriate mental "box". This latter attitude is more of a heresy than we realize. It is contrary to Scripture and produces a dull and unlearned church. A teacher who has many questions is far more desirable than one who has "all" the answers.

The Jehovah's Witness who comes to my door with a clear explanation for all there is to know about their god does not impress me. It shows me that they have a very small god that I would not want to follow.

St. Jerome once said of the Scriptures, "They are shallow enough for a babe to come and wade in without fear of drowning and yet deep enough for theologians to plummet its depths without ever touching the bottom."

I do teach basic Bible interpretation skills, but I wait until the disciples emerge as leaders and are preparing to teach others. When they are responsible for other's learning, then I teach them basic interpretive skills. But here is the amazing thing: when I teach interpretive skills for the first time to a new leader it is usually a refresher course for them. Because they have been reading an abundance of Scripture from the beginning, and reading entire books of the Bible repetitively and as a whole (a habit as part of the Life Transformation Group System we employ), they have already picked up much of the rules of interpretation intuitively. I have found that the Holy Spirit is an outstanding teacher and that the best interpretive rules are really common sense. By the time I am showing these rules to emerging leaders they have already figured out much of it on their own.

What is real heresy anyway?

The church has also been trained to think that the greatest threat she faces is heresy. That is why this is one of the first and most frequent questions asked of the organic church movement.

When speaking to a crowd about this, I will often take a spontaneous survey and consistently have the same results. I ask the audience to raise their hands if they know someone personally who has gone astray and actually began a cult. Usually two or three people will raise their hands. I then ask them to raise their hand if they know a Christian leader who has fallen into immorality and everyone in the room raises their hands. My point is, "Why are we so afraid of heresy?" It seems that there are other, more formidable problems in our body.

Another thing that I question is what people label as heresy. Often what is heresy for one segment of the kingdom is orthodox in another. Most claim that their doctrinal belief is closest to the historic and orthodox doctrines.

One thing that always angers me is to have a Christian leader attacking another Christian leader publicly using extreme examples to build his case, all because they disagree over a minor theological component. It is good to have a conviction regarding doctrine and even to have a lively discussion over your convictions, but to slanderously attack a brother is perhaps a greater sin than the faulty interpretation itself.

How do we screen people doctrinally?

This raises a question of whether or not we should screen people over doctrines. In our movement it is what we consider the DNA of Christ's body that is the code that dictates life, health and fertility. The DNA is Divine Truth, Nurturing Relationships and Apostolic Mission. We want to see the DNA evident in every cell of the Body. It is what holds together our movement. That said, Divine Truth is crucial for health and unity in the church and in our own unique movement. So holding firmly to God's Word is of the utmost importance. Currently our movement consists of church planting that is associated with over 15 denominations (from Reformed to Vineyard) and five parachurch ministries. Now the question is which beliefs are important and which are not as crucial. Is there a point when we exclude fellowship with certain people over doctrine?

One of the ways that we keep unity among our diverse movements is to run people through what we call the "bullet test". We ask, "If someone held a gun to your head and said, 'Renounce this doctrine or I will shoot', if you say, 'pull the trigger' then it is a bullet doctrine. We must agree on bullet doctrines. We can hold to doctrines that are not bullet doctrines, and even teach them with conviction, but we don't exclude or attack brothers and sisters over non-bullet doctrines. They are secondary doctrines that are enlightening but not worth dying over and certainly not

worth killing over.

For us, the bullet doctrines have consistently been the following:

We believe in...

- One true God in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- The deity and incarnate humanity of Jesus and his redemptive work evident in His death, burial, resurrection, ascension and imminent return.
- Salvation is by grace through faith and not ever the results of our own works.
- The inspiration and power of God's written Word in all of its revelation, without error in its original manuscripts.

- All believers are redeemed to be significant in the cause of God's kingdom and granted the empowerment necessary to do so.

Of course, this is not meant to be a fixed and static screening process. It is only a beginning to a relationship that will grow over time built on much more than cognitive assent to a set of stated beliefs.

We understand that this is also not a fool-proof method of screening out heresy. There were over nine hundred people in 1978 in Guyana who took a "Kool-Aid test" over the wrong doctrines and gave their lives for false teaching. History is littered with people who have given their lives for a lie, so this is not considered a mistake-proof method by any means. This is just a starting point for those who have the Spirit of God and listen to His voice and join together over uncompromising truth.

So how do you keep heresy from exploiting the organic church movement?

We have an excellent antibody system in the organic church movement. In fact, I believe it to be better, much better, than the solution in the traditional church system.

Heresy usually emerges because of three things: 1. a strong opinionated leader who wants the most followers he can rally. 2. A Biblically illiterate group of Christians who will follow him. 3. Scriptures are used out of context to construct a false doctrine.

With the Life Transformation Group (LTG) strategy [you can find out more about LTGs here on our Simple Church website] we have addressed all of these issues at the cellular level of church life. This is where the war against infection is won or lost in the body.

In an LTG men or women meet with one or at the most two others. This is hardly an attractive following for a future cult figure. All those in an LTG are reading large volumes of Scripture (25+ chapters/week) and each in the group are reading the same book, in context, in entirety and repetitively. This is not a biblically illiterate following. And it is very hard to take the Scripture out of context because all three in the group who have the Holy Spirit in them are reading the same book in its whole context repetitively.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that the organic church movement is not just tolerating heresy or taking a step down in combating it. In reality, I am convinced that we have a better way of addressing the problems of heresy in the church without reverting to static controls or gatekeepers of God's truth. Perhaps the very thing we have been threatened by most-releasing the Scriptures into the hands of common Christians-is indeed the very thing that will slow the threat of heresy.

Martin Luther once said, "The two goals of my life are to get the Scripture into the language of every man and to get a hymnal into their hands. Set them loose and the flame will spread on its' own." I say, "Let the flames rage".

By Neil Cole

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