

## Why do some people call you a heretic?

To answer that question carefully, because it's important, I need to embed it in a few other questions.

- First, *what* is a “heretic”?
- Second *who* calls me a heretic?
- *Why* do some call me a heretic?
- *Am I* a heretic? What do I believe?

**1. What is a heretic?** These days, “heretic” has become a pejorative term, thrown around liberally and used as a synonym for “false teacher” or “false prophet.” Those who call their opponents heretics are often referring to anyone who doesn't agree with their own—they make themselves their own standard of orthodoxy. Worse, they often assume their targets are not Christians at all. To them, “heretic” means “heading to hell and taking others there with them.” And so I've been told.

But as Fr. Michael Gillis explained to me, in the ancient world, “heresy” was not such an angry expletive. History shows it usually referred to *in-house errors among certain bishops and priests*. In other words, the heretics were regarded as brothers and sisters in Christ—even leaders in Church—who had made a serious mistake. These mistakes were usually specific to Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” and occurred as various Christian teachers worked out their theology of the nature of Christ and of the Trinity. These mistakes needed to be corrected and orthodoxy defined, but the early church still generally considered “the mistaken” to be Christians and sought to reconcile with them rather than excluding them. Fr. John Behr points out that the church was a very big tent and typically, heretics were more apt to say, “My way or the highway” than were the orthodox. They would slam the door behind them more often than being kicked out. Yes, their teachings could be anathematized as heresies (mistakes), but usually only by authorized councils. In those days, even “excommunication” did not mean “kicked out,” but rather, asked to abstain from communion for a time while they continued working through their issues. But what's so important for this discussion is to understand *who defined orthodoxy and heresy*, and *who today stewards that theological tradition*.

Those who framed orthodoxy through the councils and creeds, and corrected the heretics, are called the early church fathers or patristic fathers. Famous among them are St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Hilary of Poitiers, St. Basil the great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory the theologian, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Isaac and St. Ephraim of Syria and St. John of Damascus, to name a few. Their teachings have been preserved and embraced in the West by the Roman Catholic Church and without interruption in the Eastern Orthodox, where I make my theological home. This is not to say they have always applied the fathers aright. But even through turbulent periods of church compromise and corruption, the patristic fathers, councils and creeds were preserved as the standard of orthodoxy. So, *if we're going to talk about heresy, it should be with reference to those who*

*defined orthodoxy and heresy to begin with, and those who steward that tradition today.*

**2. Who it is that calls me a heretic.** Not many folks have actually publicly called me a heretic, but a few have been very aggressive and effective online. Unfortunately, morbid curiosity tends to drive their posts up the search engines. I cannot judge their motives, for some may believe in good faith that spreading the word about my supposed heresies is an act of faithfulness. But in fact, I regard it as an obvious example of “bearing false witness.”

Those who call me a heretic self-identify as either “cessationist” (the belief that God does not speak today), anti-contemplative (opposed to contemplative practice) and/or “neo-reformed” (committed to Calvinist penal substitution). Their theological heroes have a reputation for denouncing others and mobilizing zealous disciples to follow their example.

When I say some have been aggressive, it took the form of posting accusations on internet blogs, tracking my travels, and contacting my hosts (or their board members) to warn them that I’m a false teacher. They send them links to the posts they or their network have written, encouraging the hosts to “do their research.” This has led to cancellations when the host feels threatened by controversy and wants to avoid division, which the opponents sowed in the first place.

In a few cases, my name or my teaching has been condemned from the pulpit, in every case by pastors who’ve never had a conversation with me. In the case of the bloggers, after careful inquiries by the people I’m accountable to, we discovered that they are *not* accountable to any pastor or ministry board with whom we could initiate mediation (and we did used to try).

What is notable is that none of the structures to whom I’m accountable regard me as a heretic (so far). Today, these include the Canadian Diocese of the Orthodox Church in America (where I’m an ordained reader), the Christian Minister’s Association (where I am a licensed minister), Westminster Theological Centre and Saint Stephen’s University (where I teach), and CWR Magazine (where I am editor-in-chief).

I know that all these structures certainly want me to mature in Christ and improve my articulation of faith. They also initiate correction when needed, to which I willingly submit. But so far, my orthodoxy is not in question and as best I can tell, I serve in submission to them. They find it strange that those who are not accountable to them (or seemingly to anyone) should make it their mission to pan me as a heretic. Indeed, my hierarchs regard them as heretics (defined as mistaken Christian brothers). And that’s how I would see them.

**3. But why do they call me heretic?** Three main charges have come up through the years. The first began in 2003 when I began teaching that **God speaks today**. In my book, *Can you hear me? Tuning in to the God who speaks*, I wrote about what the Bible says on the voice of God, how we hear it, and how we discern God’s voice from competing voices. It included elements of classic contemplative practice and applied it to inner healing ministry. The then-director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada wrote that the book was “biblically, theologically and

spiritually sensitive and full of conviction.” And he summarized it this way: “Jersak reintroduces us to Jesus as a real person with whom we may enter into genuine communion.” The book was well-received by charismatics, contemplatives and evangelicals.

But there were some who certainly called it heresy. First, they were the cessationists, who do not believe God speaks today except indirectly through the Bible. And second, those who reject the charismatic and/or contemplative traditions of the church. But these have never been condemned as heresy except by sectarians.

The second charge relates to my **rejection of penal substitutionary atonement** as I was taught it and once preached it. Specifically, I was raised to believe that on the Cross, the wrath of God had to be appeased through the punishment of Jesus as our substitute. While there are now some nuanced versions of penal substitution that I can understand, what I specifically rejected was this notion of wrath-appeasement through divine violence. N.T. Wright calls that version ‘paganizing the gospel’ because it rewrites John 3:16 into “God so hated the world that he killed his only Son” (Wright’s words, not mine). That is *not* a strawman. It is the dominant evangelical understanding of atonement. It is what I was taught, wrote (in my M.A. thesis, “The nature of Christ’s suffering and substitution”) and preached as a young pastor/evangelist. Like many of my peers and certainly the neo-reformed (e.g. Gospel Coalition) today, I believed penal substitution was not only an atonement theory, but the gospel itself.

Today I believe my default version of PSA was a mistake. And my Orthodox teachers regard it as a heresy. And so, those who make that same mistake tend to think that I’ve abandoned the faith. That I’m the heretic. They’ve publicly called me an “enemy of the cross.” I find that very hateful. But I want to point out that penal substitutionary atonement in this form is less than 500 years old, made popular in the West by evangelical revivalists like Jonathan Edwards, and is now totalized as ‘the only way’ by the neo-reformed movement. Many in that camp believe that anyone who does not embrace their version of penal substitution is not even a Christian. This seems odd to me, when the Eastern orthodox church—350 million of us—has never embraced wrath-appeasement because they do not see it anywhere in the teaching of the church fathers (proof-texting by opponents aside). Bear in mind, these are the stewards of the orthodox tradition and its defenders against all things heresy. In other words, **for the accusers, orthodoxy is heresy.**

The third charge that comes against me is that I am a **universalist**. That is worthy of a response. First, in virtually everything I’ve written on the matter, I clearly say I am *not* at universalist. Rather, the best label for my position is “hopeful inclusivist.” See for example my articles “[Permit Me To Hope](#)” and “[Who You Callin’ a Universalist?](#)” The great Catholic theologian Hans Von Balthazar and the Orthodox Metropolitan Kallistos Ware represent this ancient tradition, which you also see in some of the great church fathers such as St. Isaac the Syrian and St. Maximus the confessor.

I’ve also spelled this out in detail in my book, [Her gates will never be shut](#). Specifically, I propose in that book that the Scriptures include passages that appear to promote eternal conscious

torment, other texts that seem obviously conditionalist, and still others that appear to espouse full-on universalism. I believe it is not possible to harmonize all these sets of texts without marginalizing some of them. Therefore, my conclusion (following Ware and Balthasar) was that we cannot say dogmatically that all will be saved or that any will be lost. Rather, we hope, pray and preach for God's will to be done, which the New Testament tells us is the salvation of all. And we place our hope in Jesus Christ for his will to be done. My hope is not mere wishful thinking, but rather a "blessed hope" in the mercy of Christ who will sit as the merciful judge and who renders the final verdict. Even after all of that, one of my accusers spread news that I was being "slippery." I can only regard that charge as willful slander. But since that individual is not accountable to anyone (he's set himself against the churches in his city), there's nothing to be done, despite his success in convincing hosts to cancel me from a number of events.

**Most importantly,** I can sincerely bless him and his partners in disparagement for their volunteer work as my personal assistants, filtering out invitations from places where I would not feel safe ministering. For that, I am truly thankful. There's certainly no need to curse him, for I cannot think of a more frustrating, futile and fitting 'punishment' than feeling compelled to obsess about me! Lord, have mercy!

But back to eschatology. In the ancient church, as in the Bible, there was no consensus about the nature of the afterlife. Neither infernalism, conditionalism, nor universalism were universally regarded as either dogma or heresy. In fact, Gregory of Nyssa, the great defender of orthodoxy and opponent of heresy, was himself a universalist. When he finalized the Nicene Creed, the Church's eschatology was summarized to allow for any of these three streams of interpretation without condemnation. In other words, there was freedom of thought and discussion around it because how eternal destiny works was not a doctrinal certainty. They concluded only that Jesus would "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." And they "looked forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come." In other words, beyond those tenets, the ancient church did not regard any particular eschatology as either dogma or heresy. So, those who charge me with heresy for being the universalist are wrong on two counts. For one, I am not a universalist. And second, my "evangelical universalist" friends, such as Robin Parry, are not heretics either, because that position was within the realm and boundaries of the Orthodox tradition.

**4. Am I heretic?** If we define heresy according to the rules set out by those who made them, then I don't believe I'm a heretic. Yes, I make mistakes. No, I don't believe I'm infallible. However, I can tell you what I do believe with full conviction:

I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of  
God, begotten of the Father before all ages;

Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten,  
not created, of one essence with the Father  
through Whom all things were made.

Who for us men and for our salvation  
came down from heaven and was incarnate  
of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,  
and suffered and was buried;

And He rose on the third day,  
according to the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father;

And He will come again with glory to judge the living  
and dead. His kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Creator of life,  
Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the  
Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, Who  
spoke through the prophets.

In one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

I look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the age to come.

Amen.

While my opponents may disagree with me, I do not believe I can formally be called a heretic, because as far as I'm aware I adhere to every point of that Creed, and those with the authority to name me a heretic have not done so. If others have added requirements and conditions of orthodoxy to that creed in a way that excludes me, then we might ask who's playing the role of heretic. By what right have they composed new dogmas to supplement those of the ancient Councils and Creeds? That would be heresy—by which I mean a mistake.

**5. How to deal with accusers?** I am learning to bless them and pray for them *by name*. When I am troubled by their shenanigans, I pray for them *daily*. I pray this: "Lord, judge them with the same mercy that I want for myself." I believe Jesus when he said we are judged by the measure with which we judge others. I want the feather, not the hammer, so I ask God to use the feather on them too.

But more than that, I *need* them. They are beloved enemies of my ego, who assist me in working out my salvation by crucifying the stuff in me that my friends don't have the nerve to assault. They sharpen me where I'm sloppy and nuance things where I'm crass and sculpt my character where it's still so immature. I don't like them, but I need them, and bless them and pray for them, as I wish and hope they pray for me...seeing as we'll spend eternity together anyway. Lord have mercy.