

GUEST EDITORIAL

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A Review of *Contending for the Faith: The Rise of Heresy and the Development of the Truth*

Herman C. Hanko

Jenison, MI; RFPA, 2010

Hardback, 373 pp. + xvi

Contending for the Faith is a study of heretics and their heresies, a fascinating part of the church's history. Heresy is closely tied to Christ's promise: "Howbeit, when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). That guidance does not occur, however, as theologians repose on velvet cushions speculating in ivory towers about the deep truths of God. That guidance occurs as the Spirit of Christ thrusts the church into the battlefield, so that she is forced to fight to the death in order to hold on to the truth. And with each new battle, the truth unfolds just a little bit more, so that in the way of defending the truth, the church develops the truth. *Contending for the Faith* is the story of that battle, the battle of the ages, the battle of the truth of God versus the lies of Satan, a thrilling story of heroes and villains, of bitter and fierce struggles, and of the cut and thrust of theological warfare.

In a previous volume, *Portraits of Faithful Saints*, Hanko told the history from the perspective of the heroes, the orthodox, the defenders of the truth; in this volume, he recounts the history from the perspective of the villains, the enemies of the truth, those men whom the devil has seduced away from the truth, and whom the father of lies has used to corrupt the gospel. The devil has not been idle these last two millennia. Hanko arranges the material according to five historical periods: the Ancient Period, the Medieval Period, the Reformation Period, the Post-Reformation Period and the Modern Period. The devil has two weapons: persecution and deception, the latter more dangerous than the former. Satan is indeed a roaring lion, a cruel, bloodthirsty dragon, but more, he is a sly serpent, who disguises himself as an angel of light. The devil's favourite tactic is deception; he loves to twist Scripture and

to pervert the gospel because he knows that there is nothing more precious than God's truth.

It is vitally important for the modern Christian, living centuries, sometimes millennia, from the times when these battles were fought, to remember that we are in the same war. There is one Christian army; we fight one war against our great enemy, and we are all called to wear the same armour and employ the same spiritual weapons (II Cor. 10:3-6; Eph. 6:10-18; Jude 3). We must not imagine that the heresies and heretics listed in *Contending for the Faith* have nothing to do with us. We must not be guilty of independentism, a scourge of modern evangelicalism, with its despising of creeds and confessions and its disdain for church history. For example, when the church fought Arius and developed the truth of the Trinity, we, in organic connection with the church of the past, fought Arius; we are the rich heirs of that victory. We must not despise the early church and then attempt to develop our theology from scratch. Do we think that we can develop the doctrines of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ and the relationship between those two natures in the hypostatic union in a few hours of Bible study by ourselves? Our brethren in the early church were involved in battles with Sabellius, Arius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutychus and others for centuries. They were embroiled in "fierce and bitter struggle[s] which nearly tore the church to pieces" (34)! It is thanks to them that we have the precious and precise theological language to express what we believe about God and Christ.

We must never learn the truth of God independently of the church in her history. God is pleased to lead the church, not simply individuals, into all truth. The church as a body learns, defends and develops truth. Invariably, Hanks demonstrates, the heretic has been a "theological lone ranger." On this point, as a warning against extra-ecclesiastical theological independentism, *Contending for the Faith* is especially useful. Writing about Desiderius Erasmus, Hanks remarks,

Freedom to live as one pleases, to write and teach without any constraint, to be independent of any institution or country, may seem to some like an idyllic life, but it is wicked for all that and is rooted in pride. The simple fact is that, especially in the church, God gives us the communion of the saints

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for a good purpose. Every one of us needs the others in the household of faith. We may not and cannot be independent. If we insist on our independence, we will go astray. The church of which we are a part, our responsibilities in it, our work on its behalf, our labours with others in the church: all act as a check on our natural tendency to dart off in this theological direction or that moral error. Erasmus' pride was also his intellectual downfall (154).

Or consider this penetrating assessment of Michael Servetus:

One ought to recognize that the Bible is God's Word to his whole church, and that countless thousands of saints, of equal or greater ability, and frequently with greater spirituality, have also made the Bible the object of their most intent scrutiny and meditation. We may never come to Scripture alone, but must always come as a part of the church to which we belong with a great throng of other saints. We study Scripture in the context of the church that for hundreds of years since Pentecost has had the Spirit of Christ, who leads the church into all truth. We benefit from their studies, learn at their feet, find treasures in Scripture discovered earlier by them, and thus experience in a real way the communion of saints with those who have now joined the company of just men made perfect. Further, in our studies we subject ourselves to the preaching of the gospel and we test our ideas with fellow saints with whom we share our faith. All this requires an attitude towards Scripture of humility and willingness to hear what God says to us.

When we go to Scripture on our own, we reveal a towering arrogance that will lead to heresy and ultimately to hell. We despise our fellow saints, pull up our noses at people of God of earlier years, and slap the Spirit of Jesus Christ in the face. Who can ever learn what Scripture says while doing these things? That is, however, what Servetus did. He believed he could ignore all that anyone else had ever said about Scripture,

learn on his own the truth, and produce his discovery as the last word on God's revelation. This is a pride that makes any child of God cringe (206-207).

Contending for the Faith shows us that the truth is developed only through struggle and controversy, and it spurs us on to fight the same battle today. Every generation brings a new version of an old heresy. We must refuse to sell the truth, any part of the truth, developed, preserved and delivered to us, for any price (Prov. 23:23). The church has always been tempted to compromise. Is it really worth it? Ought we argue over theological niceties? The answer is yes! We must. They are not merely theological niceties. They are our life! Writes Hanko, "The salvation of the church lies in her intolerance—intolerance of all that is contrary to God's truth. Our salvation lies in the truth of God's Word" (21).

Sadly and shamefully, that is not the attitude of many theologians and churchmen today. Peace at any price! Better have heresy than divide the church! Let us not rock the theological boat! Where would we be today if the church of the past had done that? Arius, again, is a case in point. Did you know that the truth came down to one Greek letter, the smallest, the iota? *Homoiousion* versus *homoousion*! The orthodox were willing to engage in bitter theological struggle over that iota. Does the modern church look askance at that, as if those saints were mad? Shame on them! The very fact that the arch-heretic Arius was willing to sign a creed with the word *homoiousion* but not *homoousion* made the orthodox insist on that very word (40-41). Doctrinal precision was the key. Doctrinal precision is still the key. Had the church followed the advice of Constantine or the attitude of modern day ecumenists we would not have the *Nicene Creed* and the beautiful orthodoxy of the Trinity and the Deity of Christ. Hanko puts it so well: "Church controversies are not solved by diplomacy" (38). How often in our modern tolerant age have we not seen ecumenical compromisers hail, with the spirit of Neville Chamberlain, "[Theological] peace in our time," because various ecclesiastical bodies have come together to sign a deliberately vague theological statement! Ecumenical dialogue between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals produced a statement along these lines: "We confess together that we are justified by grace through faith." A breakthrough we were told. Rome agrees with us on justification by faith! Notice the glaring omission: there is no "alone!" If the orthodox at

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Nicaea could not accept *homoiousion* instead of *homoousion*, neither can we accept “justification by faith” without the crucial word “alone.” The modern church, especially in light of the pernicious Federal Vision heresy, does not need polite dialogue. It needs fighters. Listen to Hanko:

The church needs neither learned scholars ... nor nice people who discuss with mutual respect for each other various differing viewpoints in quiet and hushed voices. Such are to the detriment of the church and the truth of God, for they deal with God’s truth itself as if it is nothing but an interesting theological question. In times of apostasy, the church needs trumpet blasts, sharp unambiguous language, men willing to “say it as it is,” fearless men who love God and His word above all else (158).

Finally, what makes a heretic tick? Why does a man become a heretic? *Contending for the Faith* is extremely insightful into the characteristics of heretics. It is a sobering warning to us all: all heretics are characterised by pride and dishonesty.

Pride is their number one vice. Of Jerome Bolsec, Hanko observes, “It is impossible to teach God’s truth to proud man” (199). Of Michael Servetus, he writes, “Servetus’ towering pride more than anything else was his undoing” (210). Nestorius was a “proud and arrogant man who was a religious fanatic of the worst sort” (56). The list goes on and on.

Hanko explains heresy this way:

Man is too proud, as a general rule, to admit his wrong. He defends vigorously the error he has made, so that what was first a mistake now becomes stubborn support of a wrong position. This happens repeatedly in the church ... [Heretics] consider themselves more important than the truth of God’s word. They set themselves above the truth. The name, fame, reputation and honor that they acquire for themselves are more important to them than God’s truth and God’s glory (3).

Second, heretics are deceitful. They are not sincerely misled. Perhaps they begin that way, but as they develop in pride, they become more dishonest in

propagating their views. Many heretics are nice; they come with smiles, but beware of that false facade. Pelagius was a liar inspired by the father of lies:

As is so characteristic of heretics everywhere, [Pelagius] equivocated, used ambiguous terminology, tried to present his views in the best possible light and in agreement with the accepted doctrines of the church, and never forthrightly stated what his own position was (66).

Arminius was more subtle. Hanko describes him thus:

[Arminius] was a charismatic man to whom people were easily attracted, and he was noted for his camaraderie, especially with his students. Nevertheless, all these favourable traits mean nothing in the light of his dishonesty. He was not a man of integrity. He knew that he was teaching ideas contrary to the Reformed faith. He knew that his views were contrary to the adopted confessions of the church. In spite of this, he attempted to introduce his views in secret and in unethical ways. He clothed his views in seemingly Reformed terminology so as to deceive people. He taught his views in secret, even when he had promised not to do this. He lied without compunction and was not afraid, hypocritically, to call on the name of God in defence of his abhorrent actions. In short, he was what heretics frequently are (220-221).

The reader will find this the “Who’s Who?” of heretics. It is very comprehensive. Some may even be taken aback by some of the men and movements included, but few major heresies, if any, are omitted. All are fairly evaluated by Holy Scripture. Let us take heed that no man deceive us. Let us treasure the truth which came to us at great cost.