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## The Bishop Discovers Heresy?

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Several years ago, Methodist theologian Thomas C. Oden announced a most unusual quest: “I am earnestly looking for some church milieu wherein the sober issue of heresy can at least be examined,” he declared. He added, “I am looking, like Diogenes with his sputtering lamp, for a church or seminary in which some heresy at least conjecturally might exist.”

As Oden acknowledged, his announced quest was deeply ironic, for in the world of mainline Protestantism heresy has become an almost absent category. With so many alternative theologies, revisionist doctrines, and radical conceptions of Christianity, heresy has become the norm, rather than the exception. As Oden explained:

*I have sought for some years to find a theological dialogue where a serious methodological discussion is taking place about how to draw some line between faith and unfaith, between orthodoxy and heresy. But almost everywhere that I have asked about the subject I have found that the very thought of inquiring about the possibility of heresy has itself become marked off as the prevailing archheresy. The archheresiarch is the one who hints that some distinction might be needed between truth and falsehood, right and wrong.*



In other words, the only heresy recognized in much of liberal Protestantism is the heresy of believing in the possibility of heresy. This is not only a matter of observation — it is a declaration proudly made by many, who declare the categories of heresy and orthodoxy to be both out of date and out of style.

All this makes recent comments by Dr. Katherine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, all the more interesting. In her opening address to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting this week in Anaheim, California, the Presiding Bishop raised, of all things, the issue of heresy.

In the history of Christian theology, the word heresy has been most properly applied to what the church has recognized as false and unbiblical teachings concerning the doctrines most closely related to Christ and the Trinity. The word *heresy* should properly be reserved for teachings that directly reject what the Bible reveals and the Church has confessed concerning the person and work of Christ and the reality and integrity of the Trinity. There are any number of false teachings and erroneous doctrines, but the term heresy should be restricted to those most central to the Gospel itself.

The bishop raised no shortage of eyebrows when she ventured to use the word heresy — a word hardly common to recent Episcopal discourse. As Bishop Jefferts Schori offered her remarks, her church was entering its General Convention after suffering the defection of many churches and several dioceses. As she acknowledged in an understatement, her denomination is in crisis. In light of this crisis, she offered her diagnosis of the problem. Here is the paragraph that encapsulates Bishop Jefferts Schori’s diagnosis:

*The crisis of this moment has several parts, and like Episcopalians, particularly the ones in Mississippi, they’re all related. The overarching connection in all of these crises has to do with the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God. It’s caricatured in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of being. That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention.*

There it is — that word so recently denied entry into any discussion. But note carefully that the Bishop identified as heresy what the church — throughout all the centuries and in every major tradition — has recognized as central to the Christian faith. The confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” has been central to biblical Christianity from the New Testament onward. In every tradition, some individual profession of this “specific verbal formula” has been understood to be essential to Christian identity.

Interestingly, the bishop’s comments could, in other contexts, have been directed at a legitimate concern more commonly known among evangelicals. A good number of American evangelicals press a simple formula often known as the “sinner’s prayer” as an instrument of demonstrating conversion. The use of such a formula can be a way of reinforcing a convert’s understanding of the Gospel and of assisting a convert to articulate the Gospel in a way that makes sense and expresses the new convert’s faith.

On the other hand, the sinner’s prayer can be used in a mechanistic and manipulative way in order to insinuate — if not outright to declare — that the repeating of these words in itself constitutes the experience of salvation. Had the Presiding Bishop been concerned about evangelistic excesses and confusions in her church, her concern might have been both timely and legitimate. Regrettably, this bishop has made clear that her concern is something altogether different.

Indeed, her assertion of heresy was directed to the very idea of individual conversion to faith in Christ — the faith that has always and everywhere defined authentic Christianity. In her address, she made her views clear: “I said that this crisis has several elements related to that heretical and individualistic understanding. We’ve touched on one — how we keep this earth, meant to be a gift to all God’s creatures. The financial condition of the nations right now is another element. The sins of a few have wreaked havoc with the lives of many, as greed and dishonesty have destroyed livelihoods, educational possibilities, care for the aged, and multiple forms of creativity — and that’s just the aftermath of Ponzi schemes for which a handful will go to jail.”

Don’t miss this — the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church openly lamented a focus on evangelization that would seek conversions for such a focus would divert the attention of her church from ecological, economic, and other political imperatives. This was the main thrust of her address, with this central theme indicative of her larger episcopal agenda.

The bishop is simply not concerned with seeing persons come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. She has made this clear over and over again and her convictions were well-known when she was elected as the denomination’s Presiding Bishop. Shortly after her election, she spoke to *TIME* magazine concerning Jesus Christ: “We who practice the Christian tradition understand him as our vehicle to the divine. But for us to assume that God could not act in other ways is, I think, to put God in an awfully small box.” She explicitly denies that conscious faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, and has done so on multiple occasions.

The irony of all this was not lost on many Episcopalians and other observers. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church finally summoned the determination to apply the word heresy — and then applied this most serious term of odious rejection to the Gospel itself.

Of course, this reality is far more tragic than ironic. It does not take long for a church that is severed from Scripture to move from recognizing genuine heresy and denouncing it, to denying the very possibility of heresy at all, and then to reclaiming the word only to use it as an instrument of attacking the very heart of the Christian faith.

Eighteen centuries ago, Irenaeus (a bishop who sought to defend the faith against false teachings) warned his church and explained that heresy is often “craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself.” Well, heresy has taken off its disguise in the case of Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori. Here we see heresy — true heresy — in its most undisguised form.

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Sources:

Opening Address by Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Anaheim, California, July 7, 2009. [[read here](#)]

Thomas C. Oden, "Can We Talk About Heresy?," *The Christian Century*, April 12, 1995. [[read here](#)]

The image is an iconic rendering of Bishop Irenaeus.

As always, let me know what you are thinking. Write me at [mail@albertmohler.com](mailto:mail@albertmohler.com). Follow me on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler](http://www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler).

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