

## **Heresies in the Early Church**

*Heresy* comes from hetero, *choosing* or *choice*, as in *heterodox* as opposed to *orthodox*. Typical punishment for heresy was excommunication, which involved cutting the offender or group off from eucharist and attendance at worship. Worse was anathema, which meant complete separation from the church.

**Adoptionism:** Jesus was a human being adopted by God at his conception; at that time, Jesus developed a divine nature. In another version of adoptionism, first, God granted certain powers to Jesus; then, he adopted Jesus as a son when John baptized him.

**Apollinarianism:** Jesus was neither a real man nor a divinity. Although Jesus possessed a human body and a human soul, his mind was part of the eternal Logos. Jesus's divine will overshadowed and replaced any human will.

**Arianism:** The most serious of all heresies for the early church, Arianism regarded Jesus as a being specially created by, and subordinate to, the Father for man's salvation. Most Goths were Arians and brought Arianism from the East to Italy, Spain, and Africa.

**Docetism:** From *dokesis*, which means "to seem," docetists believed that although Jesus may have seemed human, he never was and never had a human body which suffered. Jesus was totally divine.

**Donatism:** The validity of the sacraments depended entirely on the character of the minister; e. g., sacraments administered by an impure or a corrupt priest or pastor were invalid. This sect valued asceticism and martyrdom and found lapses of faith, even under torture or threat of death, inexcusable.

**Ebionitism:** The Ebionites believed in partial acceptance of Jewish law, rejected entirely the apostle Paul and gentile Christianity, accepted only one gospel (Matthew), and were adoptionists (see above).

**Gnosticism:** Salvation required special, secret knowledge conveyed by God to the individual. Gnostics were typically dualists seeing the world and the individual as constantly struggling between good and evil as represented by God and Satan. Gnosticism continues to exert influence in modern times.

**Kenosis:** In order to live and die on earth, Jesus willingly surrendered his divine attributes. *Kenosis* means “self-emptying”: Jesus emptied himself of his own will in order to surrender entirely to God’s will.

**Manicheanism:** Founded by the Persian thinker Mani, this heresy was actually a powerful religion blending, Gnosticism, Mithraism, Neo-Platonism, and Buddhism; throughout the Aramaic-Syriac world, it offered a major threat to Christianity. Manicheans believed in a dualistic world: a world of light and good in constant struggle against a world of darkness. For Christians lured by Manicheanism, Jesus represented that world of light—against the threat of Satan’s dark world. This heresy strongly influenced the Bogomils in the Balkans and the Cathars in France.

**Marcionism:** The Old Testament God was unloving and cruel, even evil; the New Testament God was good and loving. Marcion believed God sent Jesus to save humankind, and Paul was his chief apostle. Marcionists rejected the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew God; their canon included only 11 books. The world was dualistic—good vs. evil, with evil as an active urge and energy (not merely as the “absence of good” in orthodox Christianity).

**Modalism:** God was still one person though he appeared in three modes or essences: God the creator, Son the Savior, Holy Spirit the Comforter. Same as Sabellianism.

**Monarchianism:** God was one person. All supposed essences of God belonged to the Father. There was no trinity comprising three beings existing consubstantially and coeternally.

**Monophysitism:** From the Greek for “one body,” Monophysists contended that at incarnation, the eternal Logos and the human Jesus joined. His two separate natures as Jesus and as Christ existed in one body, which was divine.

**Montanism:** From Montanus in Phrygia, this heresy emphasized high ethical character and spontaneous response to the Holy Spirit, including trances and glossolalia. It continues to exert influence among charismatics, Pentecostals, and apostolic reformers.

**Novatianism:** Following their leader Novatus, the Novatians denied the Lapsi any return to the church after they had denied their Christian faith or made sacrifices to pagan gods during the persecutions of Emperor Decius.

**Nestorianism:** Though not born of a virgin, Jesus had two natures—man and God—which remained separate throughout his life on earth.

**Patripassionism:** Because the Father became incarnate in Christ, not Jesus, but the Father suffered on the cross.

**Pelagianism:** Pelagius believed that no original sin passed from Adam and Eve to all subsequent human descendants. The Fall had no effect on humankind; despite the so-called Fall, we can keep all of God's laws. We do not need baptism. We can achieve "salvation" through our own efforts and do not need God's grace.

**Priscillianism:** This Gnostic-Manichean heresy began with Marcus, an Egyptian, but dominated much of the Iberian peninsula. Priscillians posit a dualistic universe divided, again, between a kingdom of light and one of darkness. Angels and human souls become separated from the deity. Meant to conquer the kingdom of darkness, the human souls actually fall and become part of this dark kingdom. The good is represented by the Twelve Patriarchs; the evil, by the signs of the zodiac.

**Sabellianism:** Also called "modalistic monarchianism," this heresy finds the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three modes or roles of a single God. Jesus

was purely divine, therefore, without humanness and could not have truly suffered and died.

**Semi-Pelagianism:** Compromising between Pelagianism and orthodox Christianity, Semipelagians argue that man and god cooperate to achieve man's salvation; man is essential to grace. The urge to repent and seek God comes from man's free will; the subsequent increase in faith, from God.

**Socinianism:** A form of Arianism with a name taken from the word for "companion," Socinianism contends Jesus was an extraordinary man. This heresy continues amongst Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

**Subordinationism:** The Son and the Holy Spirit are lesser in nature and power than the Father, their being entirely subordinate to his will.

**Tritheism:** The so-called cosmic trinity is not monotheistic, but is three entirely separate gods.