

Orthodoxy and Heresy

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Many Christians no doubt believe that after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Good News spread like wildfire around the Mediterranean. The disciples were united in their understanding of what Christianity was and was not, and their preaching was harmonious and consistent. It was the orthodox version of Christianity – the only correct, true Christian message. Over time, people with different opinions and perspectives began spreading alternative doctrines and promoting practices that were not approved by the disciples. Those ideas were considered heresy, and early Christians had a very difficult time suppressing and eradicating those false teachings and their promoters. The process culminated in the Inquisitions, a messy but necessary process of cleansing and purifying the true Christian message.

It didn't happen that way. Not by a long shot.

Leaders in the Church spent centuries in a desperate, often comical, ultimately futile attempt to make sense of the relatively new Christian fiction. They did so by making stuff up as they went along. But more often than not, the stuff they made up required them to make up even more stuff to make sense of the first stuff.

Inevitably, not everyone agreed on which direction the evolving Christian fiction should take. Different groups with different opinions were pitted against each other in bitter disputes that often lasted for centuries. Inevitably, the competing factions often felt so strongly about their own ideas that they felt compelled to kill members of the opposition. For the glory of God, of course. You know, the God that is all loving and forgiving.

What we think of today as orthodox Christianity was initially just one of many competing versions of the religion. During the first three centuries, there was no dominant form of Christianity, and there was no canonical New Testament to refer to as the final authority. It was a free-for-all, a brawl, a fight to the finish for dominance. What we think of today as orthodox Christianity was in those early years just another heresy. Whatever a person believed was orthodoxy from his

point of view, and everything else was heresy. That's the way it was until the fourth century CE.

Also during that period, there was no efficient way of copying Christian texts or books. The job of copying was typically assigned to whatever member of the Christian local community could manage to find the time to work as a scribe. These amateur scribes were notoriously inaccurate in their work. They were also perfectly willing to change the texts as they copied them if it helped clarify what they *knew* to be the real meaning or true intent of the author. Most changes were accidental and not very important, but some were intentional and significant.

Scribes were typically motivated to change texts by their devotion to their own view of orthodoxy, and their strong desire to marginalize or debunk competing views. They didn't act out of spite. They weren't being malicious or dishonest, from their point of view. And they typically didn't expect to actually change a lot of minds. They hoped to make the texts more acceptable to their community and help blunt some of the extremes of competing views. They felt they were doing God's work.

Sometimes they found it difficult to refute one doctrine without seeming to support another, which they often did not want to do. For example, some people thought Jesus was human, not divine. Others thought he was divine, not human. The view that eventually came to dominate and become orthodoxy was that Jesus was both human and divine, yet one being, not two. Those Christians had to maneuver carefully between the other camps.

When the dust settled, supporters of the victorious view of orthodoxy were finally in a position to make sure their views would continue to prevail. They acquired the political power to force their views on everyone else. They stopped copying texts that did not support their views. Eventually they were able to sell the notion that their view of orthodoxy had been dominant all along. It was all a very human process, not one inspired by God.