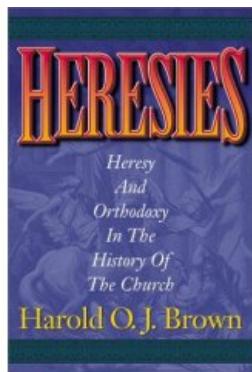


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Why Heresy Matters — A Remembrance

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The concept of orthodoxy requires the concept of heresy. If we are warned by the Apostle Paul to “follow the pattern of sound words” [2 Timothy 1:13], there must be a pattern of *unsound* words that we are to avoid. The very concept of truth requires the concept of error.

This principle is often a casualty of our postmodern times, when the very notion of truth as an objective reality is often denied. In theological circles, liberal thinkers often scoff at the very idea of heresy — and at the idea of orthodoxy as well, of course.

That’s why Harold O. J. Brown’s 1984 book, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, was so important . . . and why it remains so today.

Professor Brown, an evangelical scholar with four Harvard degrees who taught for many years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, bravely identified himself as a believer who, while deplored the fact that heretics were once punished with “torture, fire, and sword,” nevertheless believed that the contemporary church had lost the ability to recognize and correct heresy in its own midst.

As a young doctoral student in theology, I found his book very helpful. Now, more than twenty years after its release, it remains the only book of its kind.

As Professor Brown explained:

The Christian religion has produced more heresies than any other religion, and the heresies it produces are more tenacious than those of any other religion. In fact, it sometimes seems that the most vigorous, committed, and rapidly multiplying Christians in any age are those we like to call heretics. Why is Christianity so productive of divisive opinions, held with great conviction, that lead to splits in the church and charges and countercharges of heresy? The reason is simple: Christianity consists of a message that claims to be absolutely true and that is at the same time deeply and perplexingly mysterious.

Christianity is a doctrinal religion. As Professor Brown observed: “For many religions, the cardinal test is right conduct or right observance; for Christianity it is right faith. Christianity is full of specific doctrines.”

Heresies is a profoundly important book about a profoundly urgent concern for the church. Professor Brown was keenly aware that our Christian responsibility is to receive the faith and then to pass it on to the next generation of believers.

Professor Harold O. J. Brown served the church by reminding us all of this great responsibility and by his defense of doctrinal orthodoxy. Dr. Brown died July 8 after a recurrence of cancer. His recent death should remind us all of the responsibility he so bravely fulfilled in this book — to defend the faith against all heresies.



—Dr. Harold O. J. Brown was also an early leader in the pro-life movement, founding the Christian Action Council in 1975. The organization is now known as [Care Net](#) and a tribute to Professor Brown can be found [here](#). A tribute from his Trinity colleague John D. Woodbridge can be found [here](#).

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