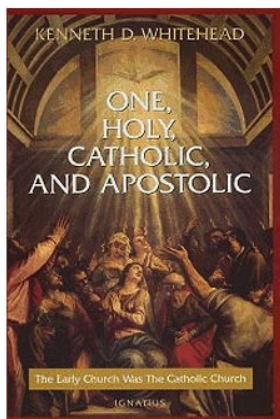




## A Short Guide to Ancient Heresies | Kenneth D. Whitehead

Very often in the history of Christianity, "reformers", by whatever name, have aspired to return to "the early Church". The Church of their own day, for whatever reason, fails to live up to what they think Christianity should be: in their view there has been a falling away from the beautiful ideals of the early Church.



In [\*One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic: The Early Church Was The Catholic Church\*](#), Kenneth Whitehead shows how the early Church has, in fact, not disappeared, but rather has survived and persisted, and is with us still. "Reformers" are not so much the ones needed by this Church as are those who aspire to be saints—to follow Christ seriously and always to fulfill God's holy will by employing the means of sanctification which Christ continues to provide in the Church.

Whitehead shows how the visible body which today bears the name "the Catholic Church" is the same Church which Christ established to carry on and perpetuate in the world his Words and his Works—and his own divine Life—and to bring salvation and sanctification to all mankind. Despite superficial differences in certain appearances, the worldwide Catholic Church today remains the same Church that was originally founded by Jesus Christ on Peter and the other apostles back in the first century in the ancient Near East. The early Church, in other words, was always!—nothing else but—the Catholic Church.

This helpful list of heresies in the early Church is excerpted from the appendix of *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*.

**Adoptionism.** Adoptionism held that Jesus was not really God but merely a man to whom special graces had been given and who achieved a kind of divine status at his baptism. This idea that Christ as a man was only the "adopted" son of God proved to be a persistent heresy. It was condemned by Pope St. Victor 1, who excommunicated Theodotus of Byzantium for Adoptionism. The same heresy was condemned in 785 and again in 794 by Pope Adrian 1. Revived by Peter Abelard in the twelfth century, Adoptionism was again condemned by Pope Alexander III in 1177.

**Anomeanism.** A radical variant of Arianism (see below), Anomeanism held that the Son was "unlike" (Greek: *animoios*) the Father.

**Apollinarianism.** This heretical doctrine of Apollinaris (310-390), bishop of Laodicea in Asia Minor, held that Christ had a human body but only a sensitive soul—and no rational human mind or human free will, these having been replaced in Christ by the divine Logos, or Word of God. This theory was condemned by Roman synods in 377 and 381 and by the ecumenical Council of Constantinople in the latter year.

**Arianism.** A major heresy that arose in the fourth century and denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. First effectively advanced by Arius (256-336), a priest of Alexandria, who denied that there were three distinct divine Persons in God. For Arius, there was only one Person, the Father. According to Arian theory, the Son was created ("There was a time when he was not"). Christ was thus a son of God, not by nature, but only by grace and adoption. This theory logically evacuates the doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Christ of all

meaning: if God did not become man, then the world has not been redeemed and the faith itself eventually dissolves. Arianism was formally condemned in 325 by the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea, which formulated and promulgated the original version of the Nicene Creed; but Arianism and Semi-Arianism (see below) nevertheless continued to prevail in its original form in many areas for more than a century. Arianism was combatted by the great St. Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373) among others; but the heresy nevertheless persisted, especially among the barbarians, for several centuries.

**Donatism.** A fourth- and fifth-century African heresy holding that the validity of the sacraments depends upon the moral character of the minister of the sacraments and that sinners cannot be true members of the Church or even tolerated by the Church if their sins are publicly known. Donatism began as a schism when rigorists claimed that a bishop of Carthage, Caecilian (fl. ca. 313), was not a true bishop because he had been ordained by a bishop who had been an apostate under the Diocletian persecution. The Donatists ordained their own bishops, one of whom was Donatus, for whom the heresy is named. Donatism was condemned by Pope Miltiades (311-314) and by the (local) Council of Arles in 314, but it nevertheless persisted in North Africa until the Muslim conquest in the seventh century. The great St. Augustine (354-430) wrote extensively against Donatism.

**Gnosticism.** The heretical theory that salvation comes through some special kind of knowledge, usually knowledge claimed by a special elite group. Gnostic theories existed before Christianity, and the Gnostics adapted the Gospels to their own views and for their own purposes, even composing pseudogospels, embodying their particular ideas and doctrines. Gnosticism held matter to be evil and hostile to the human spirit; it also essentially denied the truths of Christian revelation. Secular historian Jacob Burckhardt described the Gnostics as "speculative enthusiasts" who embraced Christianity only as a platform for Platonic and Oriental ideas. Gnosticism as an organized sect or body of beliefs has long been extinct, but Gnostic ideas persist and surface in some form in nearly every major heretical version of the Christian faith.

**Macedonianism.** A heresy named after Macedonius, an Arian bishop of Constantinople (d. ca. 362,) whose followers denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit was declared by them not to proceed from the Father but to be a creation of the Son. Macedonianism was condemned in 381 by the ecumenical Council of Constantinople, which added to the Nicene Creed an affirmation of belief in the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son.

**Marcionism.** A second-century heresy of Marcion (ff. ca. 140) and his followers, who rejected the Old Testament and much of the New Testament, except for the Gospel of Luke and ten of the Letters of St. Paul. The Marcionists claimed to preach a purer gospel after the manner of St. Paul; for them Christianity was purely a gospel of love to the exclusion of any law. Only virgins, widows, and celibates were baptized by the Marcionists; married people could not advance beyond the catechumenate.

**Modalism.** A form of Trinitarian heresy of the second and third centuries, Modalism held that there is only one Person in God, who manifests himself in various ways, or modes. Sabellianism (see below) was a form of Modalism, as was Priscillianism (see below).

**Monophysitism.** A fifth-century heresy holding that in Christ there is only one nature (Greek: *mono*, single; *physis*, nature), a divine nature. Thus, Monophysitism denies the true human nature of Christ; this human nature is absorbed into Christ's divine nature, according to Monophysitism. This heresy arose primarily in reaction to Nestorianism (see below). Monophysitism, though condemned by Pope St. Leo the Great in his famous Tome Of 449 and by the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, persists to this day in parts of the East.

**Monothelitism.** A heresy that arose in the seventh century as a result of Byzantine imperial efforts to accommodate the Monophysites (see above). Monothelites accepted the orthodox doctrine of the two natures,

divine and human, in the Person of Jesus Christ but held that these two natures had only "one will" (Greek: *monos*, single; *thelein*, will). This heresy was condemned by the Sixth General Council of Constantinople in 681.

**Montanism.** A second-century heretical movement that professed belief in a new "Church of the Spirit". The Montanists believed they enjoyed the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This claim meant that their fanatically rigorous views concerning morality superseded the authentic revelation of Christ that had been handed down in the Church. The heresy of Montanism, which claimed the great Tertullian (160-220) himself, was condemned by several Eastern synods and, finally, by Pope Zephyrinus around the year 202.

**Nestorianism.** A fifth-century heresy claiming that there are two distinct Persons in the Incarnate Christ, one human and one divine. The Church teaches that Christ was and is a divine person who took on a human nature. According to Nestorianism, it is unthinkable that God was born, crucified, and died; nor could Mary really have been the mother of God, but only the mother of a human being conjoined to God. Nestorianism, which took its name from Nestorius, a bishop of Constantinople (d. ca. 451), was condemned by the ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. Overemphasizing the humanity of Christ, Nestorianism is the opposite heresy from Monophysitism (see above), which overemphasized Christ's divinity.

**Novatianism.** A schism that became a heresy. It originated with Novatian, a Roman priest who became an antipope, claiming the papacy in 251 in opposition to the true pope, St. Cornelius. The Novatianists adopted a moral rigorism similar to that of Donatism (see above). Those guilty of grave sin were excluded from the Church permanently, and absolution was refused to those guilty of the sins of murder and adultery.

**Pelagianism.** A heretical doctrine on divine grace taught by Pelagius (355-425), a monk from the British Isles who first propagated his views in Rome in the time of Pope Anastasius I. Pelagius argued that the Church's teaching that in order to do good, divine grace in the soul was necessary. This canceled human free will. Pelagianism included a cluster of other beliefs and essentially entailed a denial of the Church's doctrine of Original Sin. It was condemned by local councils in Africa in 416 and 417, and also by Pope St. Innocent I in the latter year. It was condemned again in 418 by his successor, Pope St. Zosimus. Semi-Pelagianism, a related heresy, was condemned by the local Council of Orange in 529 but has long persisted among those who question Original Sin and the supremacy of divine grace.

**Priscillianism.** A fourth-century heresy originating in Spain and combining forms of both Modalism and Gnosticism (see above). It denied Christ's divinity and real humanity, holding that human souls were united to bodies in punishment for their sins.

**Sabellianism.** A third-century heresy named after a theologian, Sabellius (fl. ca. 215). The Sabellians believed that there was only one Person in God, with three "modes", or aspects, of manifesting himself as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. It was thus a form of Modalism (see above). Jesus Christ was merely a temporary manifestation in the flesh of the eternal God. This heresy was also known by the name of Patripassianism, since it held that it was the Father who suffered on the cross. It was condemned by Pope St. Callistus I, but as a form of Modalism it has persisted in history in connection with other heresies.

**Semi-Arianism.** A modified form of Arianism (see above) that flourished after the Council of Nicaea had condemned Arianism in 325. The Semi-Arians were often "moderates" who wanted to forge a "compromise" between those who held to the Church's strict teaching concerning the divinity of Christ and Christ's consubstantiality with the Father and those tempted by Arianism to deny many great truths. Sometimes referred to as Arianizers, the Semi-Arians also included those who wished to substitute *homo-i-ousios* ("of like substance") or *homoios* ("similar") for the orthodox Nicene *homo-ousios* ("one in being" or "consubstantial") with the Father. There were a number of differing positions that fell within the general category of Semi-Arianism; their common theme was an unwillingness to accept that the Nicene term *homo-*

*ousios* was necessary to the Church's orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

**Subordinationism.** A general name for all the fourth century heresies that admitted only God the Father as God. See the entries above for Arianism, Anomeanism, Macedonianism, Modalism, and Semi-Arianism; all of these heresies are forms of Subordinationism.

**Valentinianism.** A form of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism (see above) based on the teaching of one Valentinus, who lived in Rome between 136 and 165. The Valentinians claimed that the visible world had been created by the God of the Old Testament but that only the invisible world was real. According to them, Christ came to deliver mankind from its bondage to matter and the physical world; most of mankind, however, wholly engrossed in matter, would nevertheless end in eternal perdition. The great St. Irenaeus (ca. 125-ca. 202) inveighed against Valentinianism in particular in his magisterial work *Against the Heresies*.

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**Kenneth D. Whitehead** is a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education. He has authored or coauthored several books, as well as many articles for leading Catholic periodicals, and is the translator of some twenty published books.

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