

# Tertullian's the prescription against heretics



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The early Church was birthed through perseverance against intense persecution: (i) physical persecution by the governments of the time which lauded the oppression, imprisonment, torture and death of Christians for their new religious doctrines; and (ii) intellectual persecution by opposing religious sects who sort to denounce the doctrines of Christianity. The Prescription Against Heretics was written in response to the latter - to defend the tenets of Christianity against the false teachings of heretics and religious-based philosophers.

Heretics promoted controversial views which were in opposition to those offered by Christian doctrine, with the intention of creating followers of their beliefs. Religio-philosophers were quasi-Christians who promoted the use of intellect and logic to understand Christianity and in doing so, never becoming Christians. Tertullian saw the end of philosophy as heresy and categorizes both as the same. Tertullian defends Christianity by describing heresies as powerless, fallible and only expressive of a lack of faith; he therefore provides a rule of faith as a measure and the authority for Christianity.

Tertullian was born in the city of Carthage, North Africa, around 160 C. E. He was raised as a pagan, was able to read and write in Greek and Latin and received an excellent education in grammar, literature, philosophy, law and rhetoric. He became a Stoic but later converted to Christianity at the age of forty years. Within medieval Christian history, Tertullian is classified as an Apologist - a theologian who, during the era of violent persecution of Christians, used writings to defend Christianity against its challengers.

His apologetic writing, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, reads as a legal defense argument against philosophers and influential heretics such as Marcion, Plato, Valentinus, Zeno and the Stoics. Many of these were using logic to question Christianity and created doubt in some of the believers, which attracted Christians away from the Faith. In chapter fourteen of *The Prescription*, Tertullian stated that he felt morally obligated to counteract the teachings of heretics.

This was perhaps because he had firsthand experience with the flaws of religio-philosophical reasoning and now, through his conversion, experiencing the personal joys of faith in Christianity. Tertullian's first line of defense against heresies was to show that they are indeed powerless and inconsequential to the strength of Christianity. In doing so, he is able to circumvent the trepidation that the early Christians may have had regarding heretical influences. Any advance of a heretical teaching against the Church would be only temporary and unsuccessful; much like a short-lived, passing illness.

According to Tertullian, heresies are only powerful in appearance because of the few individuals who were already weak in their faith and allowed themselves to be ensnared in the whims of false teachings. For these individuals to be drawn away has no effect on the veracity of Christianity. Airing confidence in his argument, Tertullian says, "Heresies derive such strength as they have from the infirmities of individuals - having no strength whenever they encounter a really powerful faith", his new found faith, Christianity.

As a shepherd expects and accepts that wolves will attack his flock and in fact capture a few, in like manner Tertullian parallels the existence of heresies in Christendom. He uses this allegory to encourage the second century Christians with the view that not only did the Lord forewarned the Church that heresies will arise and believers some will indeed be lost but also that they should celebrate their proven faithful to God by not allowing themselves to be trapped by the heretics.

Continuing to promote the authority of Christianity, Tertullian asserts that heresies only exist because God is using them to train and strengthen the faith of the believers. Other than that, they are simply "foolishness". Tertullian clears the slate of all the popular supposed intellectuals by revealing their fallibility - no matter how well-intended, all of their teachings amount to the same questions repeated in different ways by different men, but producing the same answer - that is, there will never be an answer until you accept the overarching authority of the Scripture of God.

Tertullian asked the question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?", to point out that philosophical methods of inquiry have nothing to do with teaching by the authority of scripture and the church alone has the authority to declare what is and what is not orthodox Christianity. Perhaps Tertullian had discovered this reality in his personal search for truth based upon intellectualism and saw that he had to relinquish his intellect to the ultimate authority of God and in doing so he found fulfillment.

Tertullian is covering every argument that a heretic may use to justify himself, especially in their passion for attempting to juxtapose philosophy with Christianity, and using scripture to support their continual questions. He

is using his legal background and training in rhetoric to give support to the Church. In The Prescription, Tertullian directly identifies the “ seek, and ye shall find” scripture (Matthew 7: 7) as a prominent passage misunderstood and misused by heretics to justify their continual questioning of the Word of God.

He argues that heretics take this scripture out of context and interpret what was meant literally for the Jewish community of Jesus' time as the same for the heretics of his day. Tertullian supports this argument from the position that, like him, the heretics are Gentiles and in the time of Jesus, Gentiles did not have access to salvation. Therefore, they had no knowledge of what to seek, where to knock or who to ask. This access only came through the instruction of the apostles by virtue of the Holy Ghost.

His conclusion was that this Scripture was only to be used as a figurative example for the heretics and therefore they should cease to question divine scripture. This misinterpretation only adds to the unreliability and the inadequacy of the human intellect of heretics as sources of truth compared to the church which has access to Divine Truth. According to Tertullian's argument, because heretics continue to seek it means that they have found what they were looking for, if they have not found, they cannot believe and if they do not believe, they are not Christians.

And if they are not Christians then they have no right to quote or discuss the Bible - inside or outside the Church. To separate his intellect from those of the heretics and to show himself to as a true Christian with divine permission to use the Bible, Tertullian draws many of his examples directly from the Scriptures. Tertullian argued that Christians and heretics use the Bible for

different reasons. Christians use it to access truth in God and to increase their faith while oppositely, it was the use of philosophy which drove heretics to continual curious inquires of the Scripture.

But, in reality these inquires amounted to a lack of faith by the philosophers. His position was that once an individual had sought and found truth in the teachings of Christ, that person need not seek anything further and should fully believe in that which he had found. To keep seeking meant that the individual had not believed or had faith in what they had found in Christ. This would be core measure between a Christianity and heresy. A Christian seeks the word of God, finds it and believes - this is faith and this is therefore a Christian.

For a heretic, he goes into the scripture without knowing what he is looking for and questioning everything he finds in the scripture - this is a lack of faith and this is not a Christian. For Tertullian, the solution was a complete expulsion of philosophers because they will never know for what they are seeking, where they are knocking or to whom they are asking, and to have them around would only give possibilities for them to destroy the Church. He urges Christians to not get involved in discussions with philosophers and heretics and to only discuss matters related to Christ with other Christians, without weakening the rule of faith.

He offers a summary of the Christian creed, the rule of faith, as the basis for inquiry and once an individual had found truth in the rule regarding the role of God, The Son and the Holy Spirit, there should be no further searching. In his writing, Tertullian uses Luke 18: 42 to assert that it is the faith of individuals that would save them and not their ability to debate Scripture.

The truth of their belief lies in the rule of faith and to go outside of the rule would be to enter into heresy; which inevitably will lead to destruction.

In this period of questioning and persecutions, Tertullian felt that all Christians must know what they have obtained through God and through the scripture. With this faith, they will not be shaken by threats of violence from the government and the threats of corruption by the heretics. Tertullian's position in the separation of Christianity from philosophy and heresies is that the latter two have no connection with the former. Philosophy is not based upon faith but rather distracts away from it and induces heresies.

In turn, heresies induce further heresies and it is the intention of these heretics to seduce Christians away from their original doctrinal beliefs. He illustrates this by purporting that intellect cannot understand the spiritual and the people who believe in intellect cannot be considered a part of the church. To unite the two polarities, Christianity and philosophy, would be to create a polluted doctrine. Christians must not allow themselves to be swayed by the religio-philosophical practice of using scripture.

He also offers that there is nothing more enjoyable than Christianity and because of the pleasures from Christ's teachings there was no need to search for anything further. Whether in sympathy or in condemnation, Tertullian attempts to use his Prescription Against Heretics as an uncontested argument in defense of his Christianity against the vices of heretics and religio-philosophers. According to Tertullian, everything that an individual needs can be found in the rule of faith - the most enjoyable belief, which he has discovered and now vigorously defend.