Heretics and Heresy: Did They Exist Before Irenaeus?

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Irenaeus inherited a region torn apart from barbarian invasions, persecutions, and religious sectional strife when he took his position as Bishop of Lyons in the late second century. These local difficulties created a need for him to strengthen his own position of authority and led him to formulate his own conception of orthodoxy, which for him, eliminated all differing opinions. He continued Justin Martyr’s method of pointing out apostates based upon a self-perceived orthodoxy and worked to spread his viewpoints to the rest of the Christian world. Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* as a way to label and define various sects of Christians (especially that of Valentinian Gnosticism) as heretics or members of an apostate group that did not believe or practice the rule of faith defined by him.

The negative usage of the term *hairesis* has persisted into modern times, and it is still viewed in an anti-orthodox light, providing a sense of right or wrong in its application. It is therefore difficult to discuss this topic because of our definitional bias, problems associated with ecclesiastical foundation and orthodoxy (determining who was able to apply the heretical label), and what it actually meant in early Christianity when the word was used. Understanding early Christians’ conceptions of sectarian deviants will thus allow for a better comprehension of

2. For example, Irenaeus wrote to Bishop Victor in Rome to remove Valentinian Christians from the church. Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 389.
3. Elaine Pagels discussed the commonly held opinion that “heresy” was invented by Justin Martyr, using *Dialogue with Trypho* 35.1–3 as the usual proof for this claim. She however, argued that Irenaeus faced a different situation entirely and was indeed the architect behind defining different heretical groups, not just lumping them all together as Justin did. She also pointed out that Irenaeus was not as concerned with differing opinions of doctrine, rather, with different forms of practice and ritual. “Irenaeus, the ‘Canon of Truth,’ and ‘The Gospel of John’: ‘Making a Difference’ Through Hermeneutics and Ritual,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 56 (November 2002): 339–47.
the evolution of the church. This paper aims at determining if the negative usage of *hairesis* existed before Irenaeus, by examining its definitional usage and textual frequencies in texts before his expansive project to remove these falsehoods from the church. Heresies existed as early as the apostolic age (with some aspects of Irenaeus’ definition), but they must be viewed in the proper relation to church structure and definitional context, without Irenaeus’ meaning presupposed.

**Defining αἵρεσις**

Irenaeus would have agreed with Bart Ehrman’s sarcastic statement, “Orthodoxy was the original form of Christian belief, held by the majority of believers from the beginning, and heresy was a false perversion of it, created by willful individuals with small and pestiferous followings.”4 Irenaeus’ main target was Gnosticism and wrote his work on heresies mostly as a way to counter their doctrines, thus protecting the unsuspecting Christians lured in by their lies. He called out twenty-one heretical groups by name and based his doctrine on apostolic grounding, claiming that the heretics lacked any link to apostolic foundations.5 He took liberty in defining hairesis, but it did not always denote the same meaning as he viewed it.

The term *hairesis* comes from the verb *haireō*, which literally means “to take with the hand,” “seize,” or “to take for oneself.”6 The middle-passive usage of the verb is translated as “making a choice,” whether in politics or other circumstances. Both the active and middle-passive aspects of this verb carried over into the term hairesis. The lexical entry for this word can mean “a taking,” “a choice” (political or otherwise), and “a sect,” whether philosophical or religious by nature.7 In book 2 of Polybius’ *Histories*, he used the term as a single policy chosen by the Achaean League by which it would conduct its affairs in the Mediterranean.8 Later, he used the term in context of choosing the proper methodology of conducting historical inquiries and in another location, how the Aetolians had two choices in which to secure peace.9 Philo also used this term in context of how God chose priests to carry out sacrifices on behalf of the people.10

Ancient authors also commonly used *hairesis* to discuss a sect clinging to a particular set of ideas. Philo did not limit his definition of *hairesis* to making choices, but also used this word in terms of defining a particular way of think-

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ing (i.e., a philosophy or sect). Strabo used this same definition in describing the Apollodorean sect, a following of the rhetorician Apollodorus. Josephus continued this aspect of *hairesis* by using this word to describe the sect of the Pharisees in a discussion about Hycanus. These authors were close in terms of time to the early Christian writers and help establish how this word was used anciently, especially Josephus and Philo, who were contemporaries of the earliest Christian writers. The “sect” definition had exacting effects on early Christianity, as various sects surfaced and clung to their views of a correct doctrine. The formation of sects ultimately led Irenaeus and others to define and label other groups as incorrect. The desire of a universal church thus paved the way to destroy other challenges to the realization of the proto-orthodox goal.

The general sense of seizing or grasping something must not be forgotten in discussing the usage of this word. A sect, defined as a *hairesis*, is in its simplest usage a group that seizes upon a certain doctrine, way of life, or other distinguishing feature. This definition does not denote a false or a correct meaning, but rather qualifies a certain group in terms of what they hold close. Irenaeus turned the term *hairesis* into something evil and thus changed the more general usage to fit his theological purposes, helping to establish proto-orthodox supremacy. These sects challenged his authority and theology, so he articulated the negative connotation of the word and used it to define these apostate groups. Ancient authors had already established this term as something that separated a group or individuals and it only needed the seedbed of self-proclaimed true doctrine to give it a bad image.

**Church Structure: Orthodoxy?**

The importance of determining if there was an ecclesiastical position in which to base claims of heresy upon (at least in terms of Irenaeus’ definition) is just as essential at looking at the proper definitional context in which the word *hairesis* developed. Various groups of Christians existed in the early centuries of the church, but this does not mean that they looked upon each other as non-Christian just because they shared different opinions. When these groups started to view each other as non-Christian or apostate (as in Irenaeus’ case), the definition of *hairesis* began to change, as righteous and evil attributes became attached. The refinement of doctrinal opinions coincided with an establishing church authority (i.e., the advancement of proto-orthodoxy). The question must be discussed whether there was an emerging central authority in Christianity before Irenaeus which could examine doctrines and label some false. This does not mean that there was a catholic church during Irenaeus’ lifetime, but to be able to label a group as apostate there had to be something or someone to apply this label, if we are going to retain his definition. Orthodoxy had not yet

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12. Strabo, *Geographica* 13.4.3.16.
conquered the other sects of Christianity and correct doctrine was a matter of personal opinion (or of a group). Irenaeus mostly helped define what was not true rather than trying to state proper theology. If there was no central authority (or at least one perceived on an individual level) in which to base a heresy claim, the usage of hairesis cannot line up with Irenaeus’ definition. This does not negate the existence of heresies. It only shows that the definition changed with varying levels of church structure (real or perceived).

Two general time periods must be addressed—apostolic and apostolic fathers. These two periods line up with the textual examples that are available to examine the heresy issue. The apostolic age deserves special attention because there are various scholarly opinions that explain what the ecclesiastical structure was in the early church. Unfortunately, there is a limited amount of data to be able to draw any certain conclusions about church structure in the first two centuries. This paper will provide no definitive answer to the authority question, since it would require a lengthy discussion and would lack firm argument. It will however demonstrate that there was some type of church structure during the lifetime of the apostles and by the time of the apostolic fathers, that structure became murky.

The Gospel of Matthew has readily been used to discuss early church structure since Christ delivered authority to Peter (Matt 16:18–19 KJV). Peter (or at least the rock) was the foundation to build *mou tēn ekklēsian* (my [Christ’s] church) and he was given *tan kleidan tēn basileian* (the keys of the kingdom) with the purpose of furthering Christ’s work when Christ left mortality. This alone is not enough evidence to draw any certain conclusions, but it does show that Peter had influence in early Christianity, since he drew his authority from Jesus Christ. In Peter’s epistles, he also spoke as though he had authority, using his title as an apostle to address his audience. Paul likewise appealed to his office to show that he had authority to instruct various churches to adhere to sound doctrine. This is quite different from what we find in the writings of the apostolic fathers. Some may claim ties to apostolic foundations, but they are not able to use the same title or authority in their exhortations.

There are also two accounts in Acts that enable an early structure to surface. As the church grew, temporal matters of the church were handed

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14. Bart Ehrman argues that orthodoxy was not created in the apostolic age but was a later development centuries later. For him there was no firm structure in which to hold an orthodox doctrine. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 170.

15. For example, there were 15 to 20 house churches in Rome, which led to further fractionation as argued by Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 364.

16. All Greek New Testament quotations will be from UBS4.

17. This is also shown in how some of the major centers of Christianity, such as Rome and Antioch, claimed their authority through Peter or other apostles. It seems that the early church fathers looked back to a time when authority existed and rode on the apostles’ coattails to affirm their own position.

18. 1 Pet 1:1, *Petron apostolon Iēsou Xristou* (Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ), and 2 Pet 1:1.

19. Eph 1:1 and Gal 1:1 are examples of this.
over to seven men, allowing the apostles to preach and travel as Christ had commissioned them (Acts 6:1–8). Likewise, there arose a need to discuss the matter of Gentile conversion in the church and a council was convened to come to an agreement on how to handle this new aspect of growth (Acts 15:1–29). Again, these examples by themselves are not enough to prove that a universal church structure existed, but it does show that there were individuals, namely apostles, that had authority to issue instruction in terms of doctrine and other ecclesiastical necessities.

The writings of the apostolic fathers are quite different from their predecessors in terms of authority. Clement, writing to the Romans, advised the people to *dexasthe tēn symboulēn hēmōn* 20 but did not give any indication that he had the authority to force his opinions on the members in Corinth. He only gave what he thought would benefit them, but he failed to possess any authoritative stamp like the epistles of Peter or Paul. Ignatius also stayed away from claiming authority over the various cities in which he addressed. In his letter to the Ephesians he made it clear that he could not command them the same way the apostles did. 21 Later, in his letter to the Trallians he again stated his lack of authoritative base to give commands to these Christians. 22 He was not an apostle and did not attempt to exist on the same authoritative level with them. Lastly, in his letter to the Romans, he continued to support his other statements on authority explaining that *ouch ōs Petros kai Paulos diatassomai humin, ekeinoi apostoloi.* 23 Polycarp likewise mentioned that the Philippians only invited him to speak and did not attempt to justify his claims of correct doctrine through authority. 24

**New Testament Evidences**

The New Testament provides the earliest documents to discuss the first decades of Christianity and the issue of heresy under scrutiny. Although the frequency of the term *hairesis* in the New Testament is low, the few instances that exist still provide an excellent window into this discussion. *Hairesis* had two general connotations in the text. The first had a strong foundation in the other ways that this term surfaced in ancient writings. Soon after Christ went back into heaven, the apostles preached and caused a stir amongst the leadership of the Jews. In one instance where the leaders imprisoned the apostles, the high priest and those of his entourage were described as sect of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17). 25 Paul, while recounting his life to Agrippa, also used this term as he described that he lived after the strict sect of the Pharisees.

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20. Clement, 1 Clem 58.2 (Ehrman, LCL). He translated this as “take our advice.”
22. Ignatius, *To the Trallians* 3.3.
23. Ignatius, *To the Romans* 4.3: “Not as Peter or Paul do I command you. They were apostles.”
These instances show how certain sects existed, but were still very much Jewish. There was no labeling of apostasy, but rather a coexisting of differing opinions. It is also convenient that the New Testament writer most competent in the Greek language also contained the majority of hairesis found in the New Testament.

It is even more interesting to see how the New Testament named Christians. In the Jerusalem Council, two major camps developed in terms of opinions about circumcision. The account mentioned that those that supported the mandatory circumcision of Gentile converts were of the believing sect of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5). They were still in the conference and were Christians, but they clung to a different ideal or philosophy concerning circumcision. This distinction concerning Gentile converts would eventually cause more problems, but at least for now, the two groups were not separate and each had standing in the council.

Two other instances of this word showed up in Acts and gave some inclination to a negative usage when Jews or Pagans described the Christian sect. In the very last chapter of Acts, the people came to Paul to ask him about his religious convictions. “But we desire to hear of thee . . . as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against” (Acts 28:22). Earlier, in the process of Paul’s arrest, he is accused by Tertullus of being a leader of the sect of the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5). The sect “spoken against” was the Nazarene group, which was still apart of Judaism but had started to challenge basic tenets. The last reference demonstrates the negative title that was associated with the Christian sect and how Paul disrupted Judaism through his preaching. Still, he attracted the gaze of the Jewish leaders, showing that they still saw him as a Jew. If the “Nazarene sect” was completely separated from Judaism, they would not have been concerned with him nor attempt to try him under their law.

The references mentioned so far deal explicitly with hairesis defined as a sect with some negativity permeating from the Jews, who felt that the Christian sect was becoming dangerous. The remainder of the occurrences of hairesis that are found in the New Testament deal with Christian leaders addressing groups that begin to form in the very earliest days of the church. These groups attracted a negative light, since they held doctrines that were not implicit in Christ’s original message (at least from the apostolic standpoint). The first of these is found in 2 Peter 2:1 where he warned the people that some “shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that brought them, and bring

26. Ἡτί κατὰ τὴν ἀκριβεστάτην ἱαρεσίν τῆς ἑμετέρας θρησκείας εἶχα Φαρισαῖος (According to the strictest sect of our worship I lived as a Pharisee).

27. F. C. Baur and others have argued that Acts was an attempt to combine two very different modes of Christianity and therefore concluded that it is unreliable. Still, it is the only history for this time-period that has survived. Its contributions to the heresy question are therefore important for this discussion. Ehrman, Lost Christianities, 171–2.

28. Ἐχανέσαν δὲ τίνες τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς ἱαρεσίας τὸν Φαρισαίον πεπίστευκος . . . (And some of those from the sect of the Pharisees, which had believed, rose up . . .)
upon themselves swift destruction.” This is an important passage because Peter uses the adjective *apōleia* to describe *hairesis*. This term literally means “destruction” and this adjective connotes the type of heresy. Does this mean that there were non-damnable heresies? We cannot answer that question fully from only one verse, but it is safe to say that Peter felt that these heretical teachings would cause spiritual destruction.

The final place where the term *hairesis* is used in the New Testament is within the Pauline corpus. The uneasiness that Paul felt toward the doctrines and opinions of James and Peter have been debated by scholars, but he still presented himself at the Jerusalem Council and had no grievance with the decision there. This paper will entertain the thesis that he did have authority in the church (however disconnected it may seem to some) and his negative views of heresies can be seen as reliable. Paul listed the “works of the flesh (as) adultery, fornication . . . idolatry, witchcraft, hatred . . . seditions, (and) heresies” (Gal 5:19–20). Thus, Paul listed heresies as something equal to the category of sexual immorality. The negative connotation of *hairesis* cannot be denied.

Some of the justification for the negative opinion is found in 1 Corinthians. Apparently there were divisions in the church at Corinth and Paul wrote to them to admonish them to be united (also a prevalent theme for Clement and Ignatius). In chapter fifteen, we see that the Corinthians began to teach that the resurrection of Christ did not happen, a tenant of faith most explicitly stated by Paul. “And if Christ be not risen . . . and your faith is also vain” (1 Cor 15:14). He heard of this *schismata* in the church and therefore concluded that *dei gar kai hairesis en humin einai* (1 Cor 11:18–19). The word *schisma* comes from the verb *schizō*, which means “to split.” This same connotation is used by Paul to show how there were sects or factions that either led to the schisms or were resultant from them. In either case, the formation of multiple sects in the church in Corinth was problematic for Paul. In chapter twelve, he used a similar term *diairesis, hairesis* with the prefix *dia-* - This word comes from the verb *diaireō*, and means “to distribute” or “divide.” Instead of using this word to describe the negative divisions of the Corinthians, Paul used it to describe the “diversities of gifts (spiritual) . . . of administrations . . . (and) diversities of operations” (1 Cor 12:4–6) that God possessed but how he was still unified. He obviously disliked divisions within the church but used the root hairesis in two different ways, showing that the word itself did not denote correct or incorrect implications.

There are other evidences in the New Testament that do not use the word *hairesis*, but adhere to the general definition of clinging to various doctrines or practices. Already mentioned above, Paul corrected the Corinthians for preach-

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29. 2 Pet 2:1.
31. In 1 Cor 1:10: “For there must be heresies among you.” *Schismata* is also used to discuss the division that is occurring in the church in Corinth.
ing the non-existence of the resurrection of Christ. This does not provide enough information to determine the full Christological aspects that existed in Corinth, but it does show that different Christologies existed and caused divisions in the church there. One major problem that the apostles faced was a Christology that claimed that Jesus only seemed to have flesh and bones, completely denying the crucifixion. John condemned this false Christology and stated "every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God" (1 Jn 4:2–3). He labeled those that taught only a spiritual Christ antichristos because they went against what the apostles and Christ himself taught, even apostles that scholars claim held different viewpoints.

The next set of evidence also comes from the writings of John. In his epistle to Gaius, he discussed how Diotrephes, “who loveth to have preeminence among them, receiveth us not . . . prating against us with malicious words” (3 Jn 9–10). We do not have much to illustrate this event, but it does show how even leadership issues began to manifest in the apostolic age, potentially from individuals clinging to opposing doctrines from what the apostles taught. John continued to call out difficulties in various churches in Revelation. He wrote (as commanded by Christ) to the church in Ephesus and stated allē echō kata sou hoti tēn agapēn sou tēn protēn aphēkes (But I have something against you because you left your first love; Rev 2:4). Although he praised them for not accepting the works of the Nicolaitans, he still called them to repentance for deviating from what they had previously been taught. In his address to the church of Smyrna, he was not as kind and pointed out two sects that needed a call to repentance. They apparently allowed “the doctrine of Balaam” and held “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (Rev 2:14–15). The Old Testament reference to Balaam implied the selling of priesthood pronouncements, which shows problems within church liturgical leadership.33 The Nicolaitans were a sect of Christianity that (at least according to heresiologists such as Irenaeus) practiced promiscuity and probably derived from a Jewish background.34 John also chastised Thyatira for allowing the priestess Jezebel to convince Christians there to pollute themselves (Rev 2:20). John pointed out various deviations from apostolic doctrine but these churches were still Christian and thus deserved his exhortation (i.e. they were worth bringing back to the fold). This study is not long enough to entertain a scholarly discussion on these factions, but they show that there were individuals adhering to varying doctrines.

Apostolic Fathers

The early leaders of Christianity, after the apostles were all gone, faced the same compulsory need to correct different congregations of false teachings and of-

33. See Numbers 22.
fer other practical advice. These, as shown above, did not speak with apostolic authority, nor claimed any such power to make an orthodox doctrine. Clement addressed the church in Corinth because they had rebelled against their bishop and placed another in his stead. \(^{35}\) He called the division an *anosiou staseōs* \(^{36}\) and chastised the people for allowing such a mess. It is interesting that Clement used *staseōs* when other words were available to describe the separation in the Corinthian Church. This word typically refers to a faction within a governmental system that seeks to overthrow the current leadership but it can also refer to a party, company, or sect. \(^{37}\) In both senses of the word, Clement described a group that sought to put into effect their own viewpoints in terms of leadership and probably doctrine as well. He stated that *ē ouchi hena theon echomen kai hena Christon kai hena phseuma* \(^{38}\) and advocated the cure would only come from having the church unified and religious *stasis* removed.

Ignatius also made it his mission to correct doctrines or ideas that he viewed negatively. Of the three fathers discussed, he is the only one to use the term *hairesis* in his writings. He advised the Christians in Ephesus that *hoti pantes kata alētheian zēte kai hoti en humin ou demia hairesis katoikei.* \(^{39}\) In context, this line refers to spurious teachers and doctrines that were circulating among the members of the church at Ephesus and *hairesis* in this instance, definitely had a negative slant. He continued this aspect of *hairesis* when he used eating as a symbol to describe the difference between Christian and heretical food. \(^{40}\) He made it clear that they were to avoid bad food (i.e., heresy), since *hoi heoutois paremplesin Iēsoun Xriston kataxipisteuomenoi.* \(^{41}\) These false opinions, circulating with partial truths of Christ, were of great danger to Ignatius’ conception of doctrine. Those he addressed mostly avoided these factional teachings, but it still showed that there were different doctrines in circulation that Ignatius combated. \(^{42}\)

Ignatius mostly concerned himself with two groups: the Docetists and the Judaizers. The first of these especially presented a challenge to Ignatius’ Christological conception. \(^{43}\) He said those who taught the doctrine that Christ only appeared to suffer and die were atheists, and confirmed that Christ was

35. Clement, 1 Clem 3.3.
36. Clement, 1 Clem 1.1.
38. Clement, 1 Clem 46.6: “Do we not have one God and one Christ and one spirit?”
39. Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 6.2: “That you all live according to truth and that no heresy is found at home among you.”
41. Ignatius, *To the Trallians* 6.2: “Those professing to be faithful mix Jesus Christ [with poison].”
42. Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 9.1.
43. On an interesting note, Michael D. Goulder argues “‘docetism’ is a modern misunderstanding for a form of Ebionism.” “Ignatius’ ‘Docetists,’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 53.1 (Feb 1999): 16. This is plausible since the Ebionites held an adoptionist Christology, denying Christ’s physical suffering.
born, ate, drank, and was crucified. He told the church in Smyrna that he was protecting them from wild beasts in the form of men but also showed some hope of repentance for these false teachers. The imagery of wild beasts in human form is highly reminiscent of Acts 20:29, which used “grievous wolves” to describe false teachers that would drive away some of the flock from the true doctrine of Christ. Ignatius continued this symbol to drive the point that the Docetists were ferocious in their attempts to ravage the church (whose church is still debatable). Ignatius told the church in Smyrna to pray for them and accept the possibility of repentance if it occurred. This is a crucial aspect in understanding who these Docetist individuals were in Smyrna. Ignatius’ response shows that these heretics were once apart of the church there (or maybe even still apart of it) and were worthy of being received back into the church if they gave up their false views. At the time though, they were a factional group and problematic to Ignatius.

The next group that Ignatius targeted was the Judaizers, who retained Jewish aspects that went against Ignatius’ religious mold. The initial converts to Christianity were Jewish and some resisted the change to leave the Mosaic Law, which centered on legalistic interpretation, for a grace centered Gentile focus. To the Magnesians he wrote, “it is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and practice Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity.” Earlier in the epistle, he reasoned with the Magnesians that if they were to keep Jewish elements, they were actually denying the grace of Jesus Christ. He admonished the Philadelphians to avoid listening to anyone attempting to share Jewish doctrine, since it was better to learn from a Gentile about Christ than a Jewish Christian. These troublemakers were apart of Christianity, although they professed their own views of the doctrine of Jesus. Ignatius saw them as a threat to his opinion of dogma and warned the Christians in his epistles to avoid those that coexisted with his version of Christianity.

The last writing of this age to discuss is Polycarp’s letter to the Phillipians. Polycarp continued Ignatius’ zeal to warn against Docetistic teachings by professing that if someone denied the appearance of Christ in the flesh they were an antichristos. He also warned against individuals that took the teachings of Christ and distorted them to teach against a resurrection or judgment to appease their theological goals. Such a warning again demonstrates that there were varying

45. Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 2.1: “Those that seemed to be!”
46. Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 4.1.
47. Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 10.3 (Ehrman, LCL). He translated this as “it is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and practice Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity.”
50. Polycarp, *To the Philipians* 7.1. One cannot miss the similarity with 1 Jn 4:3.
opinions in the church concerning fundamental aspects of the faith. Even Valens, a presbyter, was not strong enough to endure righteous living but gave into sin.\footnote{52. Polycarp, \textit{To the Philipians} 11.1.} Rather than completely separating Valens and other sinners from the flock, he taught that these members needed to be treated as though they were sick and needed a good physician to bring them back to full health.\footnote{53. Polycarp, \textit{To the Philipians} 11.1.} These individuals were still Christians and not some apostate group that no longer retained Christian heritage or the value of being taught true doctrine. These Christians still held to different opinions within the church but were not yet out of the church.

### Conclusion

Irenaeus defined the word \textit{heresy} in terms of right and wrong, righteous and wicked. This does not necessarily articulate the meaning of the word \textit{hairesis} in a literary background. Its literal interpretation is a group or individual that clings to (or seizes upon) a particular doctrine, philosophy, or way of life. This definition is thus much broader than the version that Irenaeus used to describe and define apostate groups that went against his definition of true doctrine. The question analyzed in this paper was if heresies existed before Irenaeus made his leap into definitional history. The New Testament demonstrated elements that pointed to a church structure in which to both label heretics and apply a negative meaning, but without more data, this conclusion is circumstantial. Of course, whenever someone labels a heretic in a religious setting, their opinions are the “truth,” while the other group is obviously deviant. Regardless of how authoritative semantics played out, the New Testament evidence showed that there were various opinions of doctrine within the apostolic age and thus heresies did exist. These heresies were not always viewed negatively (as in defining a sect of the Pharisees or Nazarenes) but a derogatory sentiment arose which labeled certain groups as disconnected from true doctrine and therefore harmful. These heretics were still Christian, though, demonstrated by the drive to correct their false opinions through exhortation.

The writings of the apostolic fathers also showed that heresies existed from the standpoint of the older definition but they also fought against doctrines from sects that they viewed to be false. These leaders professed a lack of authority in their writings and made no effort to define and label the problematic groups as Irenaeus, who argued a much clearer rule of faith, but was still by no means the orthodox victor. Still, these writers expressed the possibility of repentance for these groups and continued the exhortation method of their predecessors, thus demonstrating the closeness of the problematic groups discussed within the Christian community. These groups could still be called Christians, but some leaders saw their doctrines as spurious. In summary, heresies existed before Irenaeus because there were various doctrines that early Christians clung to while Christianity was evolving and growing. Irenaeus’ negative application was not
completely applicable until greater strides existed to remove competing doctrines from the church as orthodoxy emerged. Irenaeus labeled apostates and gave the ammunition to remove other Christians from the “true church,” but previously, *hairesis* was not a means to segregate apostates from the real faith but rather to point out necessities for repentance.