"Take heed of being too forward in imposing on others": orthodoxy and heresy in the Baxterian tradition

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Abstract: First paragraph: 'No particular Words in the World are Essentials of our Religion'. This startling pronouncement was made by the Puritan divine Richard Baxter during a conference convened in London in late 1654 to define the limits of tolerable religious orthodoxy under the Protectorate. What lay behind these words was a deep-seated suspicion of creedal formulae, confessions and platforms which to Baxter's mind simply 'multiply controversies, and fill the minds of men with scruples, and ensnare their consciences, and engage men in parties against each other to the certain breach of Charity'. Since 'the Christian world will never have Concord, but in a FEW, CERTAIN, NECESSARY things', to insist on subscription to any form of words is a recipe for divisiveness. 'The great cause of our uncharitable censures and divisions, hath been our departing from the Antient simplicity of Faith, and also from the sufficiency of the holy Scriptures, to be the Rule and Test of Faith'. 'Did the Primitive church require Subscription to all our 39 Articles?' he pointedly asked.

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Heresy differs from schism in that the heretic sometimes remains in the church despite his doctrinal errors, whereas the schismatic may be doctrinally orthodox but severs himself from the church. The Greek word hairesis (from which heresy is derived) was originally a neutral term that signified merely the holding of a particular set of philosophical opinions. Once appropriated by Christianity, however, the term heresy began to convey a note of disapproval. This attitude of hostility to heresy is evident in the New Testament itself. The Roman Catholic church, too, draws a distinction between those who willfully and persistently adhere to doctrinal error and those who embrace it through no fault of their own, e.g., as a result of upbringing in another tradition. The traditional Christian view is that orthodoxy emerged to codify and defend the traditions inherited from the Apostles themselves. Hurtado argues that Ehrman’s “proto-orthodox” Christianity was linked to, and reliant upon, the earliest Christian expression of the faith in the Apostolic Age. Heresy, in Eusebius’ understanding, is always necessarily by definition “a late, derivative, corrupt, minority view”, while “orthodoxy is the original truth, that was held by the majority of churches at all times.” (9:48). In other words, calling somebody ‘orthodox’ in the 4th century makes sense, because by that time, Christians had decided what the dominant form of belief would be. Christian orthodoxy and heresy both have a long history. But is either right; and who decides? In the Jewish world of Jesus and His disciples, on the other hand, identification with a group was normally established by behavior based on unity of belief. What, then, defined the early followers of Jesus? They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, had been resurrected from the dead, and had called people to walk as He walked. But if we fast-forward to the late second century, we find the term heresy taking on a new meaning. Now it has acquired the sense of false teaching and is used to characterize those who teach contrary to the emerging “orthodox” understanding. So, the concept of heresy as we use the term today, is—like orthodoxy—largely a second-century development.