

# Biblical Heresy

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## Introduction

Clearly, in the church in America, we have perfected (in one unfortunate sense) denominationalism. We have splits and divisions over any number of issues. Much of this relates to our consumer mentality with regard to the church. We think of church just like we would when looking for a hotel where we are primarily concerned with our own comfort and the amenities of the hotel.

There have been attempts to fix the divisions within the church in recent decades where the truths of Scripture are set aside or diminished in the name of unity. Now, it is true that although all things in the Bible are equally true, not all things are equally important. Some doctrines have preeminence over others. But the idea that doctrine is the problem causing our divisions is misguided. How are we to know when we should divide and when we should unite? One aspect of the answer is that we must know how to differentiate between heresy and simple doctrinal error.

We have always been a church that believes in the unity of all true believers. Those who have lived, are living and will live are part of the Bride of Christ and one day we will see Her unified. The process of sanctification is frequently messy and difficult but nonetheless, necessary. There are some doctrinal differences which make locking arms and working together more difficult but no one ever said reformation was easy. It is our responsibility to maintain unity of the Spirit and pursue unity of mind. In order to do this correctly, we need to know how to spot heresy.

## Heresy is a Work of the Flesh

*<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies,<sup>21</sup> envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21*

- Notice here that heresies are one of the fruits of the flesh. Our word heresy is a transliteration of the Greek word. In many modern translations, this Greek word is translated as divisions or factions but it is more than just having a party spirit. Although not all doctrinal errors are heresies (which would make every believer a heretic) all heresies are at their core doctrinal errors. These doctrinal divisions come from our fallen flesh and until we are made new, we will need to guard against such sins.

## Heresy Grows Up Inside the Church

*But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.<sup>2</sup> And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.<sup>3</sup> By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. 2 Peter 2:1-3*

- Notice these false teachers who bring in heresies will come from among us. We see here that heresy is something that is peddled within our midst. Hinduism, for example is not within the church and is therefore not a heresy. Although it is wrong in its understanding of who God is, it is not presenting itself as a Christian religion and is therefore not a heresy.

## Holding a Heresy is Voluntary

- The Greek word “hairesis” ( hah’-ee-res-is) comes from another Greek word “haireomai” (hahee-reh’ om -ahee) and this verb means “ I choose”. These heresies are not something that has been forced upon someone against their better senses, these factious beliefs have been embraced voluntarily. Down through the centuries there have been those who have been threatened with death if they did not reject biblical truths and espouse a heresy. This would not make someone a heretic although it may make them a coward (it depends on the situation).

## Heresy is the Substitution of Darkness for Light

*<sup>3</sup> For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;<sup>4</sup> and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. 2 Timothy 4:3-4*

- Heresy is not just the presence of doctrinal darkness. It is in fact the attempts to replace light with darkness. Here there are those who do not continue in sound doctrine and they turn away from truth to falsehood and then gather teachers around them to satisfy their hunger for the darkness.

- “ Notice in 1 Peter 2:9 we see that the work of God is bringing light to where there was once darkness. This process of spreading heresy goes in opposition to the work of God, bringing darkness to where there was once light.
- “ It is critical that we understand these two works and attempt to determine what direction the individual is heading. Is someone who holds this doctrinal error heading more toward light or is he heading toward ever increasing corruption? It is important that we strive to understand what direction someone is heading before we conclude that they are a heretic.

### **Heresies Are Not Privately Held**

*<sup>17</sup> Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.<sup>18</sup> For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. Romans 16:17-18*

- “ Dissent and heresy are not the same thing. It has been said that there two bonds that tie Christians together—love and doctrine. Dissent is an assault on love by pitting Christians against each other over matters which charity ought to cover. This can include matters of preference, taste, style, opinions etc. Heresy is an assault on the second tie by bringing in doctrines which are stumbling blocks contrary to that which has been clearly seen to be true.
- “ So as we have said, heresy is not simply a doctrinal error. Here we see those who cause divisions and the heart of the division is doctrinal. These doctrines are manifested publicly and notice that they are self serving. If someone is holding a doctrine in their head and it is in error, they are not a heretic, they are just muddled in some doctrine. But a heretic holds to a doctrinal error and then tries to spread it and garner a following. See also Titus 3:9-10
- “ Notice how the NT teaches us to separate from a divisive person. Our modern conventional wisdom says that we are guilty of the same offense as the heretic. We will think, “shouldn’t we love him more or demonstrate that we accept him?” We should strive for unity with the divisive man, but after he has rejected unity we are to put him out and avoid him. This shows us that we need to change the way we think in order to be more in conformity to the Scriptures.

### **Creeds and Confessions are Critical for Identifying Heresy**

- “ Frequently with heretics you will see an imbalance submission to the scriptures. Sometimes you will find people who say that they believe in the whole Bible and talk about how wonderful it is but they don’t read it carefully and their exegesis is very sloppy. Others will dig down to the jot and tittle of a verse and cling to it in order to establish some premise despite other clear verses. Just as in any language, there are rules for interpreting something said. Otherwise we would not be able to understand each other. The same is true for interpreting the Scriptures. There are rules for interpretation called hermeneutics. These rules are designed to constrain our interpretation so that we are honest to the intent and meaning of the author.
- “ Creeds and confessions have shown historically to be a good way to highlight and identify heresy. They are more precise than simply saying we believe in the whole Bible, and yet confessions (the good ones) take into consideration all the verses that may pertain to a particular topic.

### **Heresies Are Typically Held Factly**

*<sup>25</sup> “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.<sup>26</sup> “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.<sup>27</sup> “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.<sup>28</sup> “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.<sup>29</sup> “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.<sup>30</sup> “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.<sup>31</sup> “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. Acts 20:25-31*

- “ As suggested earlier, these doctrinal errors come from within the church, they are publicly held or taught and here we see further that they are taught so that they can drag away the flock into following them. Paul warns the Elders of Ephesus to be on their guard and watch for such teaching. The only way to watch and identify is to be students of the Word of God , strive for unity, and be willing to exercise discipline on those who are heretics.

### **Why does God allow these heresies to spring up in the church?**

Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 1 Corinthians 11:17-19

## Questions for Younger Saints

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- 1) What does it mean to have divisions within the Church?
- 2) Write down in your own words what heresy means.
- 3) Heresy is a work of the flesh. Can you list the works of the Spirit (Gal:5:22-23)
- 4) What things have your parents taught you to do in order to get along with other people?