

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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What Is Heresy?

(Jerry Fite)

How do you know if you are a heretic? Is it when you cross the line of current opinion? Are you a heretic simply because you do not go along with what the majority believes?

The word “heresy” conveys such negative tones, that it can be used to destroy an opposing view. Just call it heresy, and you do not have to say anymore. Lazy and undiscerning minds will avoid it like a plague. But minds seeking the truth will demand more criteria than just a verbal label.

When we turn to the Bible, we see that “heresy” does exist, and can be so labeled. Our English word “heresy” is a transliteration of the Greek word, “hairesis.” Vine’s definition of the word helps us see the concept of the word, and its negative connotation: “*HAIRESIS denotes (a) a choosing (from haireomai, to choose); then, that which is chosen, and hence an opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects...*” (p. 217).

In the New Testament, the word occurs nine times. Five

of these times the word is denoting a “sect” or groups of people, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees and in a negative way, even the early church, who have certain beliefs that distinguish them from other groups (*cf. Acts 5:17, 15:5, 24:5, 14; 28:22*).

Paul defuses the negative charge of being a sect by replying, “*But this I confess, that after the Way which they call a sect, so serve I the God of our fathers, believing all things which are according to the law, and which are written in the prophets*” (*Acts 24:14*). Paul chose to believe the way of revealed truth. Some called it merely a sect; he called it the Way.

“Submission to the power of truth” is what some are unwilling to do. The choice to not submit to the truth is what God calls “heresy.” When teachers taught that men could be saved by the grace of God without dying to self and serving the Master with holy lives, they taught a false doctrine. Their error, which encouraged lasciviousness, are “*destructive heresies*” (*2 Peter 2:1, Jude 4*). Their heresy results in destruction upon them and their followers.

A man is factious, or a heretic when he makes himself and his opinion the focus, instead of the truth (*Titus 3:10*). Such a man, departing from the truth, has sinned. After a second admonition, if he is determined to continue to hold to his false belief, he stands self-condemned. His conscience has been taught from God’s revealed truth. It is not you who is condemning him, but he has condemned himself. Such a person is to be avoided at that point.

God teaches us to also look at heresies in a positive light. When heresies occur, we should view them occurring “*that they that are approved may be made manifest among you*” (*1 Corinthians 11:19*). Like a rock reappearing from a receding tide, God’s approving truth prevails.

We could not determine heresy, if we could not first determine objective truth. Without such reality, “heresy” is only a subjective label for any out of favor opinion. God teaches that objective truth exists (*cf. John 8:32, Eph. 5:17*). Applying the truth of the gospel, we can determine what is heresy, who is the heretic and those who are approved in the sight of God.