

WHAT IS HERESY?

What is heresy?

Anyone reading the New Testament even casually will soon notice a common theme stretching from the Gospels to Revelation. Although the central message of the New Testament is the good news of the salvation of God wrought through Jesus Christ, there is a parallel message which consists of warnings about the corruption of the Gospel message and the person of Jesus. A few examples are as follows:

Matt. 24: 11, *"And many false prophets will appear and deceive many people".*

Acts 20: 30, *"Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them".*

1 Tim.4: 1, *"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons."*

Titus 3: 10-11, *"A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself." (KJV).*

2 Pet.2: 1, *"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them - bringing swift destruction on themselves."*

1 Jhn.2: 19-26, *"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. ...Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. ...I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray."*

Jude 3-4, *"Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."*

Rev. 2: 14-16, *"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."*

From the few examples above it is clear that the Bible takes sound doctrine very seriously. Doctrine surrounding the person and work of God which is false is what is normally termed heresy. There are, however, many shades of meaning to this word.

The Bible, of course, is not a theological treatise. It is a book about real life situations that occurred in history and contains matter of a theological nature that can be systematized into formal doctrinal statements. It is noteworthy that before the New Testament canon was fixed that the Bible itself says that the infant church "... *continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*" (Acts 2: 42 KJV). It was therefore the Apostles who established the doctrinal content of their message in the absence of the written New Testament as such. With the passing of the Apostles and the formation of the New Testament, however, came the next stage in doctrinal development. With the writings of the Apostles now generally accepted as canonical by the end of the second century (although it was only fixed in the fourth century), together with the Apostolic tradition which had been verbally transmitted, the Church was in a position to formulate its beliefs both in the light of Scripture and in the face of heresy. This it did in the great Councils and Creeds that were established to define the faith.

The term translated "heresy" (Gk. *hairesis*) as used in the N.T. originally referred to both schisms within the church as well as to false doctrine within the church. From the late second century, however, the term was applied exclusively to false doctrine within the church. It is sometimes referred to as "heterodoxy" to distinguish it from "orthodoxy". Heresy then may be defined as, "*A teaching which claims to be Christian and yet denies the true meaning of Christianity.*"

What is the nature of heresy and how does it operate?

Bearing in mind the above definition of heresy, Friedrich Schleiermacher in his *The Christian Faith* (1821), outlined the psychology of heresy as follows:

1. The basic tenet of Christianity is centred round the REDEMPTION wrought by JESUS CHRIST Who is the ONLY Saviour of sinful mankind.
2. Heretical movements will accept the above statement, BUT, due to a lack of understanding will either define human nature in such a way that redemption cannot be accomplished, or will define the Redeemer in such a way that He cannot accomplish redemption.
3. Hence, all heresies will basically in some way deny either the sinful nature of man or the Person of Jesus Christ.
4. Heresies that deny the sinful nature of man cannot explain the need for redemption outside of fallen humanity itself. If man needs redemption, then he needs someone outside of fallen humanity to save him, otherwise we could redeem ourselves. Likewise, if there is a sinless, perfect Saviour who offers us redemption and we refuse Him, then we cannot be redeemed. Heresies such as Pelagianism deny the sinful nature of man and teach salvation by good works.
5. Heresies that deny the Person of Jesus Christ do so because they fail to recognize Who He is. If He is the Redeemer who reconciles sinful man to God, then He must be

a unique Person like no other in that He must be able to identify with sinful man and simultaneously identify with a Holy God. No ordinary man can fulfill this office, only a man without sin, otherwise he himself would need to be redeemed. So then, two things about Christ become obvious. Firstly, if He is so totally different to sinful man that He cannot identify with him, then He is not able to mediate on man's behalf before God because He will not have that point of contact with man that would justly and legally allow Him to be man's representative. On the other hand, if He is just a man then He would also be in need of redemption and consequently could not be the Saviour of mankind. Heresies such as Docetism fail to recognize that Christ was fully human (yet without sin) while heresies such as Ebionism deny that Christ was fully God (yet in a body of flesh).

Heresy, then, involves both a misunderstanding of God's nature and His divinely revealed plan of salvation as well as an inflexible mind that is no longer able to discern the truth. The Bible, speaking of ancient man, states in Rom.1: 28 that *"Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done"*. This bespeaks the fact that for many heretics there is a point of no return when God will abandon them to their own foolish imaginations because of their constant rejection of the truth. I Tim.4: 1-2 speaks of those who have departed from the faith *"...whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron"* - in other words, they have been permanently damaged beyond repair, while Titus 3: 10-11 says *"A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."* (KJV).

The Bible, then, views heresy in an extremely serious light. This is because any rejection of God's revealed truth results in a lie and originates with the father of lies, the Devil (Jhn.8: 44). At this point it becomes important to understand how lies work. A lie is not the opposite of the truth as so many suppose. Rather, it is a mixture of the true with the false, its purpose being to deceive. In other words, a lie is truth distorted. A good liar is someone who can temper the truth in such a way as to make it mean something else than that which it was originally intended to convey. A statement that is originally 100% true can become a lie just by the addition or subtraction of a mere 1% of its words. Hence, many heresies are appealing to those who are not sufficiently able to discern the element of falsehood they contain. The hundreds of cults that call themselves "Christian" today are testimony to this. Many of these cults have developed their theology around a single heresy, and once people are in its grip they cannot easily escape from it. The fact that there are so many of these cults all claiming to be the only true church is sufficient warning in itself to tell any sensible person that they cannot all be right and therefore they should all be treated with equal distrust. There can only be one truth - all other claimants are lies.

When assessing ancient heresies and heretics one should remember that most of the historical evidence in existence consists of what their opponents said about them. Very few of their actual writings survive. It is also important to assess whether what was condemned as heresy really was heretical and not just schismatic, e.g. Montanism, Novatianism and Donatism.

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Questions:

1. What is a definition of heresy?
2. What are the two major things that heresies deny?
3. What kind of mind does an heretic have according to the Bible?
4. How do lies (untruths) work?