

KINGDOM COMMUNITY: Are We Heretics?

The way that other Christians relate to us and talk about us and pull back when we tell them we've come out of the church system shows that they are treating us as 'less than desirable' associates. I've heard the expression 'dangerous person' spoken to me by a local church leader, when referring to a person who is 'out there', who has attitudes that are different to mainline charismatic tenets.

The number of people pulling out of connection with me is continuing, so the thought comes, “Do they think we're heretics?”

So what is a heretic anyway?

Most Christians would say that a heretic follows teaching that disagrees with orthodox Christian teaching. But with over 33,000 different independent Christian organisations and groups worldwide, what is orthodox teaching – we all differ at some point? Some think Calvinism¹ is a heresy, some that Armenianism² is a heresy, and others that Roman Catholicism³ is a heresy. Interestingly, most 'fundamentalist' groups specifically reserve the term 'orthodox' for people who agree with every one of their distinctive beliefs and practices – even though they don't label others as heretics.

How do we define a heresy if we're all differing from each other? And does the difference matter?

The terms 'heresy' and 'heretic' as applied today are not biblically correct, so our use of them is actually inaccurate.

The Greek word *hairesis* translated as 'heresy' according to Strong⁴, is a 'choice'; that is, specifically a '**party**' or abstractly 'disunion' and therefore a '**sect**'.

Thayer⁵ adds: 'taking' or 'capturing' (e.g. a city); & '**a body of men following their own tenets**' (e.g. Pharisees & Sadducees⁶).

This is why Paul writes to the Corinthians: “For there must also be heresies among you, that the approved ones may be revealed among you.”⁷ In modern English this translates to: “Factions have to exist in order to make it clear who the genuine believers among you are.”⁸

So, a heretic was someone who caused divisions, dissension or factions. This is the same meaning as the word schism (*schismata* Gk) in the verse before: “For first of all, when you come together in the church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I partly believe it.”⁹

“[H]eresy wasn't the equivalent of false doctrine. Heresy was a specific practice, and a fleshly one at that. According to Paul of Tarsus, to be a heretic meant that you formed a schism within a local body of believers. Thus, what qualified someone to be considered a heretic wasn't what they believed, but how they acted with their beliefs. If a person divided a genuine church, they were guilty of heresy. Consequently, a person could be a heretic with the truth!”¹⁰

1 - See “Calvanism” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism>)

2 - See “Armenianism” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arminianism>)

3 - See “What is so Wrong About Romanism?” (<http://antipas.net/16faq.htm>)

4 - (www.eliyah.com/cgi-bin/strongs.cgi?file=greeklexicon&isindex=139)

5 - 'Heresy' – MySword for Android (www.mysword.info)

6 - (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5; 14; 26:5; 28:22)

7 - 1 Corinthians 11:19 (MKJV)

8 - GW translation

9 - 1 Corinthians 11:18 (MKJV)

10 - Frank Viola “Read This Before You Drop the H-Bomb ('Heretic') on a Fellow Christian” [part 1] (www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Articles/Re...)

What's the problem?

Being a heretic who causes a heresy (split) in the local church was regarded by Paul as non-spiritual – even if the truth was involved. He called heresy a work of the flesh¹¹, and was dead against any form of contention or quarrelling¹². He instructed Titus to "warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them."¹³ Strong words: have nothing to do with them – i.e. avoid them.

The problem with heresy is that it divides the local assembly, not whether or not the beliefs (doctrines) at the basis of the division are right or wrong. Heresy divides Christ¹⁴, so that the unity of the Body is lost – not the uniformity of belief, but the unity of community, of oneness. Some heresy is based on false teaching which causes division, but not always. Peter warns of this: “false teachers will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing on themselves swift destruction.”¹⁵

Peter’s epistle includes a warning that many will follow their depraved conduct and therefore bring the Way of Truth into disrepute.¹⁶ It's not clear from this whether the act of heresy or the depraved nature of the teaching will bring the local church into disrepute, when people speak evil of it¹⁷.

If false teachers bring false doctrine into the local church, it's only the false teaching that's wrong. It's when the proponent of the teaching, or the opponents, use the teaching to cause division that it is wrong (i.e. heresy).

What does it mean for us?

“In this light, we may say that a person who embraces a doctrine that we believe is false is misinformed (at best) or deceived (at worst). We may even consider them to be a potential heretic. But unless they use their belief to divide a body of believers by causing others to follow them and their false doctrine, they do not fit the biblical definition of a heretic. So, if we wish to be biblical in our use of the word 'heresy' or 'heretical', we should not refer to them as 'heretics'.”¹⁸

A heretic can even be someone who espouses something good, but who does so in a divisive way. So, if what we say or believe causes others to generate a schism because of us, we are not heretics, they are. Therefore, biblically, we are heretics only if we work to create divisions in the local church.

Where do we go from here?

I suggest that it is appropriate when there is any new doctrine (teaching), whether it is from revelation or a better understanding of scripture, or a correction of current doctrine, that:

- It needs to be aired and considered discerningly by everyone, especially those in leadership.
- There should be no frustration from those who agree with the new teaching while it's being evaluated.
- There should be no underhanded jockeying to encourage others to agree or disagree.

11 - Galatians 5:20

12 - 1 Corinthians 1:11-13

13 - Titus 3:10

14 - 1 Corinthians 1:13

15 - 2 Peter 2:1

16 - 2 Peter 2:2

17 - Blaspheme (blasphēmō): to vilify; specifically to speak impiously; defame; rail on; revile; speak evil of. (Strong's Concordance: MySword for PC)

18 - Frank Viola “Read This Before You Drop the H-Bomb ('Heretic') on a Fellow Christian” [part 3] (www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Articles/Re...)

- No judgements should be made against those who agree or disagree.
- Unity of community must be maintained.
- No splits should be considered to maintain truth.

“Keep in mind that we aren't saying that simply leaving a church (especially if it's truly a sect or is teaching false doctrine) isn't acting divisively. Nor is it divisive for a church to excommunicate someone based on unrepentant continued sin after many attempts have been made to urge them to repent (see Matthew 18). We aren't speaking about such situations.”¹⁹

Further, following this investigation into heresy, I believe that we should:

- Not label others as heretics unless they fit the criteria that the NT uses.
- Not desire to cause or encourage church splits.
- Encourage others to maintain unity of community with their local church group.
- Advise others to change groups if they are unable to maintain unity with their church community.
- Support those who come out of the church system.

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15-4-2015

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19 - Frank Viola “Read This Before You Drop the H-Bomb ('Heretic') on a Fellow Christian” [part 5]
(www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Articles/Re...)