

# The Anatomy of Heresy



By Bryan C. Ross

## Heresy Defined

The Apostle Paul writes the following in I Timothy 4:1-2, “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; 2) Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.” While one cannot know for sure whether we are living in the last days of the dispensation of grace, it is clear that the incidence of believers departing the faith has increased in recent days. Regardless of the issue-house church, annihilationism, universalism, timing of the rapture, titles for leadership in the local church, or the outright abandonment of dispensational truth for covenant theology - the cause of all departures from the faith is the same, i.e. the work of the flesh.

Paul teaches, in Galatians 5:19-21 that all heresies stem from the work of the flesh:

- 19) **Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these;** Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,
- 20) Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, **heresies,**
- 21) Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

*Strong's Concordance* offers the following definition of the Greek word translated heresies in Galatians 5:20: “a body of men following their own tenets, or dissensions arising from diversity of opinions and aims.” The Greek word “*hairesis*” is found nine times in nine verses in the King James Bible, of which five times it is rendered “sect” in English:

- Acts 5:17—Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the **sect** of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,
- Acts 15:5—But there rose up certain of the **sect** of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.
- Acts 24:5—For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the **sect** of the Nazarenes:
- Acts 26:5—Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest **sect** of our religion I lived a Pharisee.
- Acts 28:22—But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this **sect**, we know that every where it is spoken against.

The word “sect,” according to *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*, carries the following meaning:

A body or number of persons united in tenets, chiefly in philosophy or religion, but constituting a distinct party by holding sentiments different from those of other men. Most *sects* have originated in a particular purloin, who taught and propagated some peculiar notions in philosophy or religion, and who is considered to have been its founder. Among the Jews, the principal *sects* were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. In Greece were the Cynic *sect*, founded by Antisthenes; and the Academic *sect*, by Plato. The Academic *sect* gave birth to the Peripatetic, and a Cynic to the Stoic.

In addition, to its usage in Galatians 5:21, the remaining three occurrences of the Greek word “*haireisis*” are translated as heresies or heresy by the King James translators:

- Acts 24:14—But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call **heresy**, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets:
- I Corinthians 11:19—For there must be also **heresies** among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.
- II Peter 2:1—But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable **heresies**, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

Heresy, according to *Webster’s 1828 Dictionary*, is “a fundamental error in religion, or an error of opinion respecting some fundamental doctrine of religion.” Consequently, according to the Bible, fundamental errors in religious thought or belief (heresies) lead to the establishment of sects which are characterized by shared tenants of false doctrine. As a result, it seems to follow that heresies are the intellectual foundation for sects.

The sect of the Sadducees identified in Acts 5:17 stands out as a clear Biblical example of the connection between heresies and sects. It has often been said that the Sadducees were “sad you see” because they denied the resurrection of the dead. Luke 20:27 states, “Then came to him certain of the Sadducees, **which deny that there is any resurrection**; and they asked him.” The heretical beliefs of the Sadducees centered around their denial of resurrection. This constitutes their fundamental error in religious belief and doctrine. Unfortunately, this error was widespread as there was an entire faction or sect within Israel’s leadership that held this heretical view. Since all heresies are the work of the flesh according to Paul, it is imperative to realize that pride or the possibility of self advancement motivates those who hold spurious doctrines to promote their views in an attempt to draw away disciples unto themselves, thus forming sects.

This pattern mirrors Paul’s warning to the Ephesians elders in Acts 20:28-30:

28) Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

29) For I know this, **that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.**

30) Also **of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.**

Paul issues two warnings in this passage. First, in verse twenty-nine, he cautions these overseers about outsiders seeking to enter their midst with the objective of sowing discord and confusion amongst the brethren. Second, in verse thirty, he warns about men from within their own assembly that would arise speaking untruth in an attempt to create their own personal following. Sects are formed as men are drawn away from the truth by those speaking perverse things, i.e. heresies. After Paul left the region of Galatia, the Judaizers came in and sought to bring them back under the bondage of the law. In Galatians 4:17, Paul reveals the true motives of these people when he writes, “They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them.” It seems that the fleshly desire for disciples is one of the main motivators for those who would teach heresy.

It is fascinating to consider how all those who depart the truth of God’s word rightly divided find it necessary to berate and disparage those who hold the mid-Acts position. For many mid-Acts dispensationalists who depart the faith, the entire focus of their ministry becomes to assassinate the character and beliefs of their former allies as they actively promote the scriptural authority of their new found system of belief. Under the guise of demonstrating the error of their former theological system, they activity promote their new paradigm in an attempt to rescue the deceived from error. What is the primary force motivating this type of behavior? It is the flesh’s desire for importance and significance. Paul makes it clear that the main goal of false teachers is to draw away disciples unto themselves.

Historically, those who have entered into heresy may have been convinced they were correct or more accurately articulating the precepts of the faith. In theory, one does not believe something unless there is good reason for doing so. For example, I have often been accused of believing I am right on a particular issue. To which I offer the following rebuttal, “Duh, I would not believe something if I thought it was wrong.” In reality, since no one is omniscient or infallible we all possess thoughts about scripture that are not correct. This mere fact alone does not make someone a heretic. Over the past ten years, I have changed my position on many issues that I had taught publicly. Recently, I used the word vicarious when I meant to say precarious which changed the meaning of what I was saying. If that makes me a heretic, then every preacher who has ever misspoke, mispronounced a word, or later changed his mind must also be branded a heretic.

So then, what makes someone a heretic? First, they must hold some doctrinal belief or position that is contrary to the clear teachings of God’s word rightly divided. Notice that scripture is the final authority in this case and not the church. On occasion, I have been

uncomfortable with my mid-Acts brethren who cite “the collective wisdom of the group” as justification for a particular doctrinal position. Let me be clear lest I be misunderstood. We ought to hold those who have long labored on behalf of the truth in high regard. I respect the views of my co-laborers in the ministry and would have to seriously and prayerfully consider any grave points of doctrinal divergence. However, group think cannot replace scripture as our final authority. In the end, every man is accountable to the word of God and his own conscience.

Having established that we all hold beliefs that may not be correct, what makes someone a heretic? Biblically, it seems that heretics not only hold spurious beliefs but actively promote those beliefs with the goal of establishing followers. One betrays their motives when they depart one doctrinal position only to begin ordaining men in a new one. In such cases, truth was never the motivator for personal action: personal position, prestige, and adulation were.

## There Must Be Heresies Among You

Having observed in the previous section that heresy is one of the works of flesh it behooves all Bible believers, teachers, and preachers to acknowledge that all of us are only a couple fleshly decisions away from heresy at all times. As we have seen, the Biblical definition of heresy is multifaceted, consisting of both false beliefs (doctrines) and their propagation with the intention of removing disciples away after oneself. Having its root in our natural flesh programming, heresy has the potential to be just as common as hatred, strife, wrath, or envy in the believer's life. Consequently, heresy is not something that we should view as a rarity. In contrast, we should acknowledge heresy as an ever present threat to any community of believers.

The Apostle Paul instructed the Corinthians that heresy would continually be present within their midst. Paul penned the following in I Corinthians 11:19, "For **there must be also heresies** among you, that **they which are approved may be made manifest** among you." Not only does Paul speak to the common frequency of heresies within their assembly, he also teaches that their very presence would be an opportunity for the Corinthians to see who was approved and who was not. We learn two things from this verse. First, heresy, as a work of the flesh, would be both common and necessary. Second, the reason heresies are necessary is because without them it is difficult for believers to know who is approved and who is not.

Moreover, it is interesting to connect the word "approved" in I Corinthians 11:19 with the word "approved" in II Timothy 2:15. This connection between heresy and who the approved of God are must not be overlooked. II Timothy 2:15 states, "Study to shew thyself **approved unto God**, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." The approved of God do not need to be ashamed because they rightly divide the word of truth in their study. In short, the approved of God are workman who have no reason to be ashamed because of how they approach the study of God's word.

By comparing I Corinthians 11:19 with II Timothy 2:15, important conclusions about the anatomy of heresy emerge. First, the presence of heresies in a local church is common because it is a work of the flesh. Second, the existence of heresy is necessary because it serves as an occasion for the approved of God to be made manifest to an assembly. Third, the approved of God are those who rightly divide the word of truth and are thereby able to answer the heretical teaching. Therefore, heresy in Paul's view is any doctrine that is contrary to the word rightly divided.

This is clearly demonstrated by considering the context of II Timothy. Immediately following Paul's admonition to rightly divide the word of truth, Timothy is instructed to ". . . **shun profane and vain babblings**: for they will increase unto more ungodliness."<sup>i</sup> Timothy is given the same instructions that the Ephesians elders were in Acts 20, namely, not to listen to those speaking profane, vain, or perverse things. In II Timothy 2:17, Paul identifies Hymenaeus and Philetus as the source of these profane and vain babblings and compares the effect of their teaching to that of a canker. According to *Webster's 1828 Dictionary* a canker is "a virulent, corroding ulcer; or any thing that corrodes, corrupts or

destroys. Sacrilege may prove an eating canker.” Paul compares heresy to having a corrosive disease that eats away the very structures of ones faith.

Verse eighteen identifies the specific details of the heresy being promoted by Hymenaeus and Philetus. These men were teaching that “the resurrection is past already.” Herein we see the first component of heresy according to our working definition, the false belief that the resurrection had already occurred. Furthermore, it is clear that these men fulfill the second part of our definition by seeking to draw away disciples after themselves. This is obvious because they publicly promoted their error to the extent that they overthrew the faith of some.

How does one combat destructive doctrinal errors of this nature? The answer is clear, by rightly dividing the word of truth. Who rightly divides the word of truth? Approved workmen who need not to be ashamed. Why must there be heresies according to I Corinthians 11:19? So that “they who are approved might be made manifest”. Once again, Paul’s definition of heresy is any doctrine that subverts the word of God rightly divided. Likewise, only the rightly divided word can demonstrate the spurious nature of heretical beliefs and motives.

Heresy is not something that was determined by church councils or the Roman Catholic Inquisition. We need to remember that Paul wrote his epistles and identified heretics in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, over one hundred years before the organized church identified any of the traditional heresies associated with the Christian faith. Therefore, we should not allow church tradition to form our definition of heresy. Furthermore, while believers are admonished to instruct those who oppose themselves in meekness “that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will,”<sup>ii</sup> heresies are not to be tolerated indefinitely. Titus 3:10 states, “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject.” After two unsuccessful attempts to share the truth with those who hold spurious views, Paul teaches that they are to be rejected, marked (identified as in the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus), and avoided.<sup>iii</sup>

Simply stated, a heretic is one who believes and promotes heresy. A short investigation into the word heretic in Titus 3:10 yields important insight into the behavior and motives of heretics. According to *Strong’s Concordance*, a heretick is defined as one who is schismatic, factious, or a follower of a false doctrine. *Websters’s 1828 Dictionary* defines someone who is factious as being:

- 1) Given to faction; addicted to form parties and raise dissensions, in opposition to government; turbulent; prone to clamor against public measures of men. No state is free from factious citizens.
- 2) Pertaining to faction; proceeding from faction; as factious tumults; factious quarrels.

Recalling from chapter one the relationship between heresy and the formation of sects, one should not be surprised to learn that a heretic is given to faction and dissention since that is fundamentally what they are attempting to do. Heretics seek to cause division by

rallying people to their cause in support of false beliefs. In addition, they vehemently attack those with whom they disagree. In doing so, they also demonstrate numerous other works of the flesh identified in Galatians, namely variance, strife, and seditions.



## Heretical Breeding Ground

Over the past couple of weeks, we have been discussing the issue of heresy as a work of the flesh. Before leaving this subject, there are a couple more issues that merit discussion. Last week, we saw in I Corinthians 11:19 that heresies would not only be prevalent but also were necessary for manifesting the approved of God within a local church.

In II Timothy, one can observe the extensive impact that the proliferation of heresies had upon the preaching of the word of God rightly divided. At the end of his life and ministry Paul wrote, “This thou knowest, that **all they which are in Asia be turned away from me**; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes.”<sup>iv</sup> The apostasy and departure from the truth was in full effect while Paul was still alive. When one considers the churches that Paul either personally established or instructed in the region of Asia (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Ephesus, and Colossae), his statement in II Timothy 1:15 demonstrates how quickly heresy can spread.

II Timothy 4:3 offers further insight into the mindset of those who would teach and give ear to heresy. Paul states, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; **but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers**, having itching ears.” Thus far, we have Biblically defined heresy as the teaching of false doctrine with the goal of establishing a personal following of disciples. II Timothy 4:3 is important to our discussion for two reasons. First, it tells us that heresy cannot exist without people who are willing to listen to false doctrine. Second, it demonstrates that those who heap teachers unto themselves “having itching ears” are motivated by their own lusts, thereby clearly associating heresy in either the mind of the teacher or the hearer with the work of the flesh. In short, heretics cannot prosper without an audience of willing participants. The end result, of heresy is clearly stated in II Timothy 4:4: “And they shall **turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.**” People are turned away from the truth through the telling of stories, which constitutes the bulk of modern preaching.

One thing is clear from the verses we have looked at over the past few weeks. Heresy finds its roots in the flesh’s desire for importance and prominence. During the course of preparing these blog entries on *The Anatomy of Heresy*, I have been forced to evaluate my own ministry motives. Frankly, why do I write this blog? Am I writing it as a means of promoting my own abilities and advancing my own standing within the greater group of mid-Acts teachers? I would like to think I write to advance the truth in some fashion by clearly articulating in written form the precepts of the mid-Acts position. Personally, this study was a wake up call to constantly evaluate my motives for ministry. Paul writes the following in Galatians 1:10, “For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.” As soon as we find ourselves being motivated by a desire for the praise and adulation of men we are on the brink of heresy.

A few years ago, a respected older pastor shared with me his belief that every preacher needs to be aware that his flesh based ego desires attention and adulation. According to this brother, our pastoral ego is what drives us to stand up and publicly teach the word of God. As a young minister, I know this is true. I have a burning desire to be the best teacher of God's word that I can be. I want, "all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth." I want to teach the scriptures clearly and powerfully. Here-in lies the danger of heresy as one of the works of the flesh. Jeremiah 17:9 teaches, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperate wicked who can know it." The flesh has the capability to deceive the minister as to the purity of his own motives. At one point in my study on this subject, I actually considered the possibility that I needed to leave the ministry because I was continuously being motivated by the flesh. Then it occurred to me that the adversary would like nothing more than to silence me as a minister of God's word rightly divided. The bottom line is this: we all need to be skeptical of our own motives and seek to continually realign ourselves with God's word, according to Romans 12:2.

I worry sometimes that we have created a culture that is destroying the greater mid-Acts community of believers from within. I fully support the continued study of the Scriptures with the goal of recovering further truth and insight into the word rightly divided. However, I fear a situation has developed where some jockey for position and influence by striving to demonstrate either their deep understanding as evidenced by some great new truth or their preaching prowess. If honesty is the order of the day, I have found myself being pulled in this direction on multiple occasions. If personal advancement in the mid-Acts community depends on being perceived as weightier in word and doctrine than someone else, then we have created a breeding ground for heresy since the flesh will always desire a greater position of prestige than the one it currently possesses.

Another work of the flesh identified by Paul in Galatians 5:20 is emulation. According to *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*, emulation means:

The act of attempting to equal or excel in qualities or actions; rivalry; desire of superiority, attended with effort to attain to it; generally in a good sense, or an attempt to equal or excel others in that which is praise-worthy, without the desire of depressing others. Rom. 11. In a bad sense, a striving to equal or do more than others to obtain carnal favors or honors.

- 1) An ardor kindled by the praise-worthy examples of others, inciting to imitate them, or to equal or excel them.
- 2) Contest; contention; strife; competition; rivalry accompanied with a desire of depressing another.

Since Paul is discussing the works of the flesh in this passage, he clearly has the negative aspect of this definition in mind. When preachers strive to out perform their colleagues with the goal of obtaining carnal favors and honor, heresy is lying in wait.

While some might not like my candor on this subject, I feel it is accurate. While calling out people individually may not be productive, we need to have an honest understanding of the forces at work within our midst. Incidentally, many of my friends in the ministry have echoed many of the sentiments discussed in this posting. As ministers of the gospel of the grace of God, we need to walk in the spirit so that we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. In the end we must always remember, “but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, **that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.**”<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> II Timothy 2:16

<sup>ii</sup> II Timothy 2:26

<sup>iii</sup> Romans 16:17

<sup>iv</sup> II Timothy 1:15

<sup>v</sup> II Corinthians 4:7