

WHAT IS HERESY?

We live in a time when this word is seldom heard, much less explained. Living in the twenty-first century, most have forgotten the bitter struggle that our forefathers went through to preserve doctrinal purity. Perhaps the climate has become one in which none dare call false doctrine heresy. But heresy still exists as a problem, and churches still, as the church has always had to do, must address problems of theological error and heresy.

No theological issue in all of church history has produced such an explosive and divisive situation as that of justification by faith alone. Some in our twenty-first century would like to erase this explosive debate from the church history books, but in reality it is still an issue that we must not compromise on.

One thing is certain. Though the historical context and even the issues themselves may change from century to century, the gospel itself cannot change. We may seek to change it. We may seek to revise it. We may alter its content, but then it is no longer the gospel. And when it is no longer the gospel, it is heresy.

We must remember Paul's teaching regarding Christian behavior in the contexts of disputes. Paul tirelessly urges Christians to be gentle, kind, forbearing, and charitable with each other. Too, he admonishes Christians not to be quarrelsome, backbiting, contentious, and divisive. For Paul, the disruption of Christian unity and the peace of the church was no small matter. But, when Paul touches on matters he regarded as essential to doctrinal purity, he leaves no room for tolerance. Tolerating the intolerable was something Paul would not put up with.

It is difficult to find in Paul's letters stronger rebuke or sharper admonishment than what he wrote to the Galatians. In his letter to the Galatians, he does not hesitate to use strong language concerning his defense of the gospel. He moves quickly in chapter one to address his deep concern about the Galatians situation: "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed [devoted to destruction]. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed [devoted to destruction]" (Galatians 1:6-9).

We regard as unthinkable the hypothesis of Paul preaching another gospel, because we believe Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and was an agent of divine revelation. But Paul said that if by some means he should ever alter the gospel he had already preached, that he be accursed. Then Paul mentions the hypothetical case of another gospel being proclaimed by an angel from Heaven, Paul knew full well that the only angel who would pervert the gospel would come from Hell, not Heaven.

Paul's point is clear, "if anyone" man or angel, preach another gospel, they are not to be tolerated! Status, credentials, authority, prior credibility means nothing when it comes to the purity of the gospel. The text says, "any man" and this means that no source is to be tolerated when the gospel message is perverted, or downplayed.

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