

Church Discipline: Lesson Five

Heretics

By Benjamin J. Williams

In our prior lessons, the sinner has always been approached gently before more severe steps were taken as necessary. We compared this to correcting a child caught in an innocent mistake. However, in our final two lessons, we consider what needs to be done when the sin threatens the church in a pressing way. If a child is about to burn down the house, you do not patiently correct the child. You save the house. The heretic is a sinner whose sin threatens the entire congregation and every wasted moment puts the congregation in greater jeopardy.

The term “heresy” is defined from the Greek language as a party, faction, sect, or the spirit that leads to such. A “heretic” is then the schismatic person who creates these factions of sects. While the word is not found in our opening passage, the description of the heretic is clear. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. [18] For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17-18).

The heretic is not an honest person making an honest mistake. The heretic is a deliberate offender who does not serve Christ first. They may try to serve Christ second, but always the heretic first serves themselves. It is the god of their own belly that is the lord of their life. They may even speak the words that we expect to hear from faithful brethren with eloquence and a feeling of conviction, but they do it to deceive the hearts of the simple. The simple here are those that listen to the words without considering the character of a man. The heretic may teach the truth on many or all matters or teach nothing at all. However, the heretic uses his words as a means to an end. They are tools by which to obtain a following of disciples to fulfill his lust.

What Is the Danger?

The danger of such a man is that he strikes at the heart of Christianity. The first Christians were with one accord, but the heretic hinders that unity. We are strengthened by that which every joint supplies (Eph. 4:16), but the heretic weakens that bond by pitting brother against brother. Christians are to be united in one kingdom with one cause against one enemy, but the heretic distracts us with battles both spurious and necessary so that our real adversary carries out his wicked plans unharmed.

Heresies and factions hinder everything that we do. “From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? [2] Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. [3] Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. [4] Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. [5] Do ye think that the scripture saith

in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?" (James. 4:1-5) When our allegiance is not first to Christ, everything that we do in His service suffers for it.

The ultimate victory for Satan is when a congregation is completely split by a heretic. In this way, an entire community suffers because a once strong congregation is divided into two weakened parts and their influence is consequently diminished. Neither has the influence, finances, work force, or energy that the one single congregation had when they were standing together for truth. Well spake our Lord, "... Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." (Matt. 12:25).

What Are His Tools?

The tools of the heretic are many. Consider James 4:1-5 again. There, the brethren fought out of their own lusts. By turning their focus to personal gain, the heretic was able to produce a serious fight and hindrance to the work. Notoriety can be used by broadening one man's importance and elevating ourselves by our association with him. This was done in Corinth when some bragged of being of Paul and others of Apollos. Paul put this in proper perspective, saying, "And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. [21] Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; [22] Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; [23] And ye are Christ's; and Christ *is* God's" (I Cor. 3:20-23).

Even good deeds can be used as cause for division. The Corinthians again serve as a fine example of this problem as they found ways to squabble over who had the best miraculous gift. Paul replies, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. [5] And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. [6] And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. [7] But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. [8] For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; [9] To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; [10] To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another *divers* kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: [11] But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. [12] For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also *is* Christ" (I Cor. 12:4-12). The miraculous gifts were given to serve Christ, not to elevate self. Today, we do not have miraculous gifts, but if we use our natural abilities and talents to serve ourselves instead of the Lord, we fall into the same trap.

A third and very important way to cause division is through doctrine. A man can gain powerful status by being the strongest proponent of a particular doctrine. He can use that power to gain a following very easily, precisely as described already for us in Rom. 16. This particular kind of heretic is called a false prophet or false teacher in the Bible and we will devote more time to him in our next lesson.

What Do We Do?

With a threat this serious, we would expect the Bible to have an answer. We are not disappointed. The Bible gives us several passages dealing with this particular threat. “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; [11] Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Tit. 3:10-11). If the person in question is in fact a heretic, they are already of a hard heart and corrupt of character. While it is slightly possible for such a one to repent, it would take a complete change of character, and while you were mildly trying to change his character, he is destroying the church. Thus, the command is to admonish once and not more than twice. It is my view that even these admonitions may not be necessary. The passage does not say “You must admonish him twice”, but rather says, “If you admonish him do it no more than twice”. Heretics are dangerous and are therefore not accorded the courtesy we offer to other brethren that sin. In other cases, we are trying to save the brother that sinned. In the case of the heretic, saving his soul is secondary to saving the church that he threatens.

The rejection described in Titus is the withdrawal of fellowship which is further described in Romans. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. [18] For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17-18). No place is given for subtle correction or even patience. Because of the dire threat that they pose to the congregation, they are to be marked and avoided. The marking is public, because his threat is to everyone. A person uninformed of the man’s character is a person who is more likely to fall to the man’s heresy. Hence, all are to be notified that they may avoid him.

Some may think that we are righting off this individual entirely. We are not. We are simply taking precautions that are safest for the church as a whole. Furthermore, the Bible explains that a sharp rebuke is better for the hard hearted than a gentle admonition. Speaking of heretics, Paul says, “... Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith;” (Tit. 1:13). When the heart is hard and the situation dangerous, a sharp rebuke is required by our Lord. This is the only way to save the flock and to possibly save the heretic.

Why Is This So?

Tit. 1:10-11 For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: [11] Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.

While we will speak more of false teachers later, the principle given to elders in Tit. 1:11 applies to all heretics. Their mouths spew forth poison that will harm our brethren. All along we have said that discipline is out of love. This is no exception. If we love our brethren, we will shut the mouths of those whose words are so harmful to us all. We will not let the body for which Christ bled be divided without a fight.