

The Way Which They Call *Heresy*

by Shaun Willcock

“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”
(Acts 24:14)

In Acts 21, when Paul was in Jerusalem, the Jews stirred up the people against him, laid hands on him, and tried to kill him. But because the whole city was in an uproar over this, the Roman chief captain took soldiers and rescued Paul, then bound him. And under armed Roman guard Paul was taken to Caesaria, to be tried by the Roman governor, Felix. The Jewish high priest, Ananias, and the Jewish elders, came to Caesaria as well, to accuse Paul before Felix. Their accusations are recorded in Acts 24.

Afterwards Paul was permitted to speak in his own defence before Felix. And it was during this speech that he said to the governor: “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” (v.14).

What is “Heresy”?

It is a word used only once in our English Bible, in this verse. But the word “heresies” is used three times, and the word “heretic” is used once.

A “heresy” is a doctrine held in opposition to the orthodox doctrine; a *false* doctrine, in other words. But it also means a “sect”; and a “sect” is a divisive faction, or divisive party: a group of people who hold to a particular set of doctrines which would be considered false by those deemed to be orthodox (whether rightly or wrongly).

1 Cor. 11:18,19 says, “For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.” Verse 18 speaks of “divisions”, and verse 19 speaks of “heresies”. It is clear, then, that in this place, “heresies” refers to “divisions”. In fact, as the marginal note shows, “divisions” in verse 18 can be rendered as “schisms”, and “heresies” in verse 19 can be rendered as “sects”.

But it is also evident that these divisions or schisms, these heresies or sects, may be caused by *doctrinal error*. For when men, professing to be Christians, hold to false doctrines, this causes divisions between them and the *true, orthodox* Christians.

Gal. 5:19, 20 lists various “works of the flesh”, and two of these are “seditions, heresies”. The Greek words used here can also be translated as “divisions, sects”. And verse 21 says that those who indulge in such seditions and heresies “shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” Heresies, then, are a very serious matter! And again it is obvious that those who create divisive parties, or sects, do so based on *false doctrine*.

2 Pet. 2:1 says, “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”. Plainly, “heresies” here refers to *false doctrines* which, when held, are of such a serious nature that they will damn a person to hell! For

example, in this same verse the heresy of “denying the Lord that bought them” is given. And even if we take the word to mean “sects” or “divisions”, these are sects or divisions based on false doctrine. For merely being a divisive man would not be damnable. It is being divisive by maintaining and promoting *false doctrine* that is damnable. And this is also shown by the fact that such heresies are proclaimed by *false teachers*: they teach damnable doctrinal errors, which leads to men holding to these damnable doctrinal errors – and then divisions and sects naturally follow, based on these damnable doctrinal errors.

No wonder, then, that Paul writes to Titus as follows: “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Tit. 3:10).

Returning, then, to Acts 24:14: when Paul said, “after the way which they call heresy”, he was saying, “after the way which they call a sect”. For the Jews, who believed Christianity to be a heresy, called it “the *sect* of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). Therefore when Paul said, “after the way which they call heresy, or a sect”, his meaning was, “after the way which they call a divisive sect, *based on what they believe to be false doctrine*”.

What is “The Way Which They Call Heresy”?

We have seen what Paul meant by the word “heresy”. Now what did he mean when he spoke of “the way which they call heresy”? What is “the way” which he was referring to?

Acts 19:9 says, “But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them”. By “that way” was meant *the Gospel*, the divine doctrine which shows the way of salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ! When it says they spoke evil of that way, it means they spoke evil of the Gospel; of the way which Paul preached to them. The Gospel is the way of *life* – for Christ Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6); it is the way of *faith* – for the Gospel is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16). It is *God’s* way to eternal life, and there is no other way!

In its narrower meaning, then, it is the Gospel; and in its broader meaning, we could say that “the way” refers to the *entire Christian faith*: all the doctrines, practices, and ordinances of the Christian faith.

Acts 19:23 says, “And the same time there arose no small stir about that way.” It is the same as in verse 9: “that way” refers, in its narrower sense, to the Gospel; and in its broader sense, to the entire Christian faith. It is a way, because the Gospel presents the only way to God, and that way is by faith in Christ; and it is a way, because the Christian faith is an entire way of life; the way wherein all must walk; the way of holiness; the right way, the good way, the way to rightly worship God, the way to rightly serve Him; the way to keep from evil; the way to overcome Satan!

Who Were “They” Who Called This Way Heresy, and Why?

By “they”, Paul meant the Jewish religious leaders; for they were the ones who had tried to kill him, and who had now come to the Roman governor Felix to accuse him of heresy.

But *why* did they call what Paul preached, and the way he lived, “heresy”?

The answer is found in what the orator, Tertullus, said in Acts 24:5,6, when he informed the governor against Paul on behalf of the Jewish religious leaders: “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: who also hath gone about to profane the temple”.

The accusations brought against Paul were as follows:

First, he was accused of being a “pestilent fellow.” This means he was accused of being a plague!

And this is what the marginal note says. He was accused of being destructive; deadly; poisonous; harmful to their religion and to morality; like a deadly disease or plague. The Gospel of Christ was heresy to them, then, because they believed it was a false sect within Judaism which would spread like a plague and do great harm to their religion and their followers.

Second, he was accused of being “a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world”. “Sedition” means violent rebellion, or incitement to such rebellion. This was a very serious crime in the eyes of the Romans, who brutally stamped out any rebellions against the authority of Caesar. Tertullus, on behalf of the Jews, made the accusation that Paul was the instigator of many violent rebellions throughout the Roman Empire, and therefore a troublesome rebel.

In truth it was the *Jews* who often raised a violent mob against Paul – never the other way around! But they blamed Paul for the very riots they were often guilty of instigating. And they declared this to be part of his heresy, because they were accusing him of establishing a violent, rebellious religious sect or faction governed by false teachings, which caused men to become rebels and seditious persons against the civil authority.

Third, he was accused of being “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” Jesus was known as Jesus of Nazareth; and so, as the Christian message spread and many became Christians – followers of Christ – the Jews referred to them as a sect, by which they meant a divisive party, based on false doctrines: a sect which attached itself to the hated Nazarene, the man Jesus whom they had put to death some years before.

And they held this to be heresy, because they wanted the people to believe that Jesus of Nazareth had been a false messiah, a liar and deceiver, who had lived a sinful life. It was heresy, to them, that Paul and so many other Jews followed Jesus.

Fourth, Paul was accused of having “gone about to profane the temple”. This was a lie as well, but they charged him with it, because some Jews falsely claimed he had brought a Gentile into the temple (Acts 21:27-29). This was heresy to them, because a Gentile in the temple would profane it.

Why Was This “Way” *Not*, in Fact, Heresy?

Why was this way – the way of the Gospel, the way of the true Christian faith – *not*, in fact, heresy? Paul said, “After the way which *they call* heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers”. The Jewish leaders *called* it heresy, but Paul denied the charge, saying it was *not* heresy. Why was it not?

The answer is given in Paul’s words to the governor:

Firstly, the way in which true Christians worship God is *true worship*. “After the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers”. Others may call it heresy, but it is in fact true worship!

Secondly, Christians are *Bible believers*. They believe all things which are written in the Word of God. “After the way which they call heresy, so worship I..believing all things which are written in the law and the prophets”. Paul only mentioned the law and the prophets, because the writing of the New Testament Scriptures had not yet been completed. When he said this, the Holy Scriptures were the writings of what we call the Old Testament, divided by the Jews into the law, the prophets, and the writings, and sometimes (as here) into just the law and the prophets. We of course also have the New Testament, and so believers today would testify that they believe all things which are written in the Old and New Testaments!

True Christians are Bible believers! In saying what he did, Paul was in fact saying that the Jewish religious leaders were *not* Bible believers. They claimed to be, but they were not. For the Old Testament Scriptures spoke constantly of Christ – and yet they rejected Him when He came! The Old Testament Scriptures spoke of the very doctrines which Paul preached and which all true Christians

held: such glorious doctrines as the Holy Trinity; the eternal Sonship of Christ; the death of Christ to atone for sin; the resurrection of Christ; regeneration; salvation by grace through faith and not works; justification; the calling of the Gentiles into the Church to be fellow-heirs with the Jews; and so much more. All of this is found in the Old Testament; yet the Jewish religious leaders rejected it and held to their own human traditions above the Word of God. How, then, could Paul be the heretic? How could the Christians be the heretics? The heretics, in fact, were the Jews! For they rejected the teaching of their own Scriptures, whereas the Christians believed them, loved them, and obeyed them. And not just some of them, but all of them!

Thirdly, Christians have a sure hope in the *resurrection of the dead*. In verse 15 Paul said that he had “hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” Since, in this fundamental matter, the Christians believed precisely as the Jews did, how could the Christians be heretics?

Fourthly, receiving the Gospel of Christ issues in a *clear conscience*. Paul said in verse 16, “And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.” A clear conscience, a conscience that does not condemn us, is a very precious thing; and embracing the Gospel of Christ produces just such a clear conscience. How then can this be heresy? Rather, it was those religious Jews, whose consciences often condemned them, who were the real heretics – for the receiving of the blessed Gospel will produce a clear conscience before God and men! (1 Tim. 1:5; Tit. 1:15,16; Heb. 9:9,14).

And fifthly, receiving the Gospel of Christ produces *good fruit*. This is seen in Paul’s words in Acts 24:17-20, where he explains how he had brought alms to his nation, and offerings, and he lived quietly and peacefully. These are some of the fruits, the good works, which are produced by, and follow, saving faith. A true Christian lives a godly life in the world. The enemies of the Gospel will call true Christianity a heresy, but in truth, that which produces such fruit cannot be heresy! Its effects are good effects, and only God, the holy and good God, could produce such fruit in one’s life. “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Tit. 2:11,12).

Of course, the things of which Paul spoke here, to prove that he was not a heretic, are not the only things that could be produced to prove this. Much more could have been said by him, and much more than this could be said by any true believer as well.

For example, on another occasion when he was answering accusations against him, Paul said: “Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22,23). Paul stated that he preached nothing other than those things which the prophets and Moses said would occur, pertaining to Christ’s death and resurrection, and the Gospel going to the Gentiles. In Acts 24 Paul did not mention the death of Christ, but spoke of worship; but in Acts 26 he did not mention worship, but spoke of the death of Christ. On this occasion, also, he did not mention his belief in all the Scripture, nor anything about his clear conscience; but in Acts 24 he did.

The point being made is that the marks of orthodoxy, given in Acts 24:14-20, are not the only evidence that one is not a heretic. But on that occasion, in that setting, they were sufficient to prove that he was no heretic, but a man who loved, worshipped and served the true God.

We have thus seen that this way – the way of the Gospel, the way of true Christianity – was not, and is not, heresy. And with that, we must come to the application of this portion of Scripture to true believers today.

This Way is *Still* the Way Which Men Call Heresy

It has always been so! True Christians have *always* been called heretics. Study Church history; go through the long centuries that have gone by since the Lord Jesus walked on earth until today; and what will you find? Over and over, time and time again, the Lord's little flock has been called heretical, by the enemies of the Lord and His true Church.

As we have seen, the Jews called the Christians heretics during the apostolic age. The Jewish religious leaders believed they were the orthodox ones, whereas in truth they were the heretics! They claimed to follow the Scriptures, and yet they denied those very Scriptures by their evil works, their hypocrisy, and their man-made traditions. The Christians lived in accordance with those Scriptures, and lived godly lives pleasing to the Lord – and yet the heretical Jews called *them* heretics!

Then think of the first few centuries of the Christian era. In North Africa there were Christians who were known as Donatists. But men such as Augustine, a Papist, hated them, fought against them, and called them heretics. And they were persecuted greatly for their faith in Christ.

Then think of the Dark Ages: that dreadful era when the Papacy ruled over Europe with an iron fist, and gross spiritual darkness covered the land. During this time, there were isolated groups of Christians here and there in Europe, known by various names to their enemies: Waldenses, Albigenses, Anabaptists, etc. And what happened to them? They were persecuted unto death by the madness and hatred of the popes of Rome! They were hunted down and massacred whenever they could be caught! And why? – because the Papists believed they themselves were the orthodox, and these others were the heretics, when in truth it was the other way round: the *Papists* were the heretics! For they held to doctrines of devils, pagan teachings, and vile works. They denied the true Gospel, rejected it, and believed a lie.

Those they called heretics lived godly lives, something even their Popish enemies acknowledged. They held to the true apostolic faith, as their confessions of faith show. They worshipped God after the way which the Romanists called heresy! *Who then were the true Christians, and who were the false ones?*

Then came the period just before the Protestant Reformation, when men such as the Lollards preached the Gospel. They, too, were branded as heretics by the Papacy; and yet they held to the Bible, preached it, and sought to live holy lives in accordance with it, harmless before all men, with love in their hearts for their enemies. After the way which the Romish system called heresy, so worshipped they the Lord!

And then the Reformation occurred. And in various parts of Europe, men threw off the yoke of Rome and were converted to Christ; and the Papists said they were heretics, and persecuted them unto death. But again, *they* were the true Christians, and the *Roman Catholics* were the heretics – for it was the Roman Catholics who had rejected the Gospel truth, and who taught and believed devilish lies!

And so it has continued, right down till today. Those who are true Christians, the Lord's little flock, saved by grace through faith alone, are still considered to be heretics today, by the Roman Catholics. Nothing has changed. Oh, it is true that Rome is very subtle in our day, and has changed her tactics. She prefers not to use the word “heretics” when speaking of Christians now. This is, after all, the ecumenical age, and the Mother Whore of Rome wears a smiling face today, although the old hatred still burns like fire in her heart.

So instead of calling Christians “heretics” to their faces, she now uses other terms. For example, she prefers to speak of all Protestants, including true Christians, as her “separated brethren”. But in using this terminology she is saying, deceptively: “The Church of Rome is the true Church, the Mother Church; but sadly some of our brethren separated from us, and we would love for them to return to the bosom of Holy Mother Church.” It is very subtle, and very clever – but it is a lie! Rome is *not* the

“Mother Church”, and true Christians are *not* her “separated brethren”. For the Roman Catholics are children of darkness, and true Christians are children of the light. Believers are not brethren with those who worship idols and devils, as they do!

True Christians must never be taken in by her lies. She still believes all who are not Papists are heretics! And as official documents issued from Rome in more recent times have made very clear, Rome still maintains that Christian churches are not true churches, and that she is still the “one true Church”. It is thus all just deception on her part when she refers to Christians as “separated brethren”.

But in truth, today, things are *even worse* than in centuries past. For not only are Bible believers viewed as heretics by Rome, but many “*Protestant*” institutions now view them as heretics as well! They have departed so far from what they once were, they are now so full of doctrinal error, that they, too, are heretical – yet just like their Roman mother, they view the true Christians as the heretics!

Frequently, Bible believing churches will be referred to as “Protestant sects”, “fundamentalist sects”, or some such name. When these giant “Protestant” monstrosities view the remnant of faithful believers in this world today – those who remain separate from them, have no fellowship with them, do not follow their lies, and have their own, independent local churches – they call them factional, and schismatic, and sectarian. In a word, they call them heretics!

They are the real heretics. They vastly outnumber true believers in Christ, for there are tens of millions of them. They meet in big, ornate, expensive buildings. Their preachers are often wealthy, often influential in the world, etc. Their people are the respectable ones of the earth. They are involved in all kinds of ecumenical and even interfaith ventures.

Compare them with true Bible believing Christians: few in number, frequently poor in this world’s goods, often meeting in houses, with none of the trappings of worldly success which they value so highly; preaching separation from the world, and separation from false “churches” as well; calling on men to live holy lives, without compromise; and maintaining doctrines which these false “christians” rejected long ago, and which they now call “old-fashioned” or “divisive”: whether it be such doctrines as the Trinity, Christ’s virgin birth, His bodily resurrection, His ascension; salvation by God’s grace alone; separation; labelling the Roman Papacy as the biblical Antichrist; insisting on a male-only pastorate, and refusing to accept sodomites as Christians until they repent of their sodomy and forsake it. All these things, and much more, make them hate those who love the Bible and the God of the Bible, and brand them as heretics, sectarians and evildoers!

Truly, nothing has changed! True Christians *still* find themselves “without [outside] the camp” with their Lord, bearing the reproach which *He* bore when He ministered on earth (Heb. 13:13).

In Acts 24:5,6, Tertullus accused Paul of many things: “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: who also hath gone about to profane the temple: whom we took, and would have judged according to our law.”

Compare this with what the world is now saying of true believers in Christ:

They are referred to as “pestilent fellows”: accused of being destructive; poisonous; harmful to religion and morality, like some deadly plague. Just as the Jews believed the Gospel of Christ was a false sect within Judaism, so the Papists and false “Protestants” believe that the Gospel which Bible believers hold to, and profess, is a sect within Christianity. But it is *true* Christianity! And *theirs* is the heresy and the false religion!

They are accused of being “movers of sedition” in the world”. True Christians are today often accused of being rebels, violent against sodomites (for example) or others, stirrers, trouble-causers, right-wing fanatics, dangerous to society! Even in the once-Protestant West, true Christians are being labelled as dangerous fanatics, harmful to society because of their so-called “intolerance”, etc.

They are still branded as “the *sect* of the Nazarenes”. Just as the Jews referred to the Christians as a

sect, a divisive party, based on false doctrines, so the Papists and false Protestants today call true Bible believing Christians “fundamentalist sects”, a fringe group, the lunatic fringe of society, dangerous, not to be trusted, proclaiming “hate” and “division” and “intolerance!”

And they are accused, even today, of “profaning temples”. It is a lie, but they are often charged with it. For when they declare that Romanism is a false religion, or any of the other false religions of our day, they are accused of “profaning their temples”, so to speak: of being “intolerant”, “unloving”, “disrespectful” of other religions!

How Then Should Christians Live?

The answer is given by Paul in Acts 24:14-20:

He said, “But this I *confess* unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy”. From this we learn that believers are to *confess* to men that *this* way – the way which the false “christians” call heresy – is the *true* way! They are not to be ashamed of it, but to confess it, profess it, maintain it, hold it fast, defend it, with all their hearts and souls.

Next he said, “after the way which they call heresy, so worship I God”. It is often the case that true Christians are to worship God in precisely the way which the enemies of the Gospel declare to be heretical – because what they call heretical is so often in accordance with the truth of His Word!

Then we see Paul adding, “believing all things which are written in the” Holy Scriptures; and this must be true of all believers as well. The enemies of the Gospel call it heresy to be Bible believers; but Bible believers know it is right! Those who reject the teachings of the Bible are the real heretics. Those who love the Word of the Lord seek to live by it; and as Jesus said in Matt. 28:20, they seek to observe *all* things, whatsoever He has commanded His people.

The next thing Paul said is that he believed and firmly maintained the doctrine of the resurrection. And we can broaden this out to mean that Christians are to firmly maintain the great doctrines of the faith, the great saving truths, and not let one of them fall. They are to hold them fast, for they are the great saving truths of the Gospel.

Then also, we find Paul saying he always exercised himself to have a clear conscience before both God and men. And the *true* faith of Christ produces this clear conscience in all true believers, because their sins are washed away, and they seek to live godly lives, so that their consciences do not rise up and condemn them.

And lastly, we see how Paul adorned the doctrine of God his Saviour with good works: living a peaceful life, not causing tumults, living such a blameless life that his enemies could only *invent* charges against him, for they had nothing real to pin on him, as he himself challenged them to do (Acts 24:12-13,18-21).

The Lord’s people, viewed as heretics by the world, must live blameless lives, so that even their enemies have nothing real to hold against them! These wicked men must be forced to testify of true Christians, as the Papists had to do of the Waldenses long ago, that their lives are above reproach. Then indeed, true Christians will adorn the Gospel by their lives, and this will add to the condemnation of the wicked on the Day of Judgment, because of their lies and false accusations against the children of the Lord.

Let the enemies of the Gospel call it what they like, but after the way which *they* call heresy, so *we* who are the Lord’s people worship our God! For to worship Him in this way is to worship Him rightly, according to His own Word!

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