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### **“What was meant by a heretic in New Testament times?”**

This question is written in the past tense and the implication at first sight is that a heretic in N.T. times would be different in some way from a heretic in the present time. I do not say that the questioner would necessarily have had this in mind, but nevertheless that possibility must be examined. We can only establish the facts concerning this by exploring the meaning of the word as it was used, and by measuring the actions and conduct of people today in order to see if the original definition can be applied to them.

#### **What is a Heretic?**

Paul says to Titus, “A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject: Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Titus 3:10, 11). A heretic by definition, is one who practices heresy, and heresy is that which comes by self-choice of the individual, and hence, is an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion. This self-opinionated approach tends to be substituted for the truth, and if persisted in may lead to strife, division, and the forma-

tion of sects; it is the fertile soil in which breed factions and the party spirit.

As the Titus passage is the only one in which the word 'heretic' is found, it might help us if we looked at some versions and translations, other than the King James Version, in order to draw out the full meaning. "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time" (N.I.B.). "As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him" (R.S.V.). "If a man disputes what you teach, then after a first and second warning, have no more to do with him" (Jerusalem Bible). "If a man is self-opinionated, warn him. But after the second warning you should reject him" (Phillips). "If anyone is causing divisions among you, he should be given a first and second warning" (Living Bible). So we see that a heretic is a person who is self-opinionated, factious, divisive, a disputer of sound doctrine.

### The New Testament Evidence

There is conclusive evidence in the N.T. as to how harmful heresies can be to the saints; as a matter of fact, Peter says that they can be destructive, "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction to themselves" (2 Pet. 2:1). Peter then goes on to indicate the extent of the defection, "Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute" (v2). There is even a revelation of the way that these false teachers will operate, "In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up." (v3).

The fact that the party spirit infiltrated the Church should cause us no great surprise, because the people were familiar with sects and parties; Luke reminds us of this in Acts of Apostles. "Then the high priest and all of his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy" (Acts 5:17). "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said ..." (Acts 15:5). The Jews brought a charge against Paul and before Felix said, "He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect" (24:5) Paul in his defence said, "I admit that I worship the God of our fathers, as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect" (25:14). When he was before Agrippa, Paul said, "They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee" (26:5). So it is plain that the party and the sect were well known features of religious life even before and during the lifetime of our Lord.

Paul even identifies the source from which the heretic will operate. Speaking to the assembled elders from Ephesus he says, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from *your own number* men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard" (Acts 20: 29, 30). Then, as if to underline the pervasive powers of subversion, and the importance of 'guarding the deposit' as he called it, the apostle said, "Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (v 31).

In his first letter to the saints in Corinth, Paul returns to the theme of divisions in the Church. He exhorts them to speak the same things and not to foster the party spirit. He emphasises the unity which should embellish the preaching of Christ, and he condemns the divisive attitudes which were tending to subvert the truth and harm the Body of Christ (Read 1 Cor. 1:10-17).

### How did it Happen?

Quite easily. There are some men (and women) who are so self-opinionated and who state their opinions so forcefully and fervently, that they draw away disciples unto themselves. They even appeal to the truth which they are subverting in order to make that truth appear to support the opinions they are expounding. Never underestimate the power of the skilled and fervent orator to draw disciples unto himself.

Then there are those who see the Church as the vehicle for realising their own ambitions. Paul warns Timothy against those who used the Church for financial gain, but I am persuaded that there are those who see the Church as the gateway to promotion in their jobs, etc. Such abuse is quite cynical and should not be tolerated if it is known to exist. (Read 1 Tim. 6:3-8).

We should also beware of cliques in the Church. They have been and still are potentially dangerous. Someone once remarked to me concerning a particular family, 'Prick one of them, and they all bleed'; this can be true in the nature of cliques. If someone in a clique is spreading sedition and is rebuked for it, then the other members of the clique will invariably rise in defence, not of the truth, but of the clique.

### Could there be Heretics today?

In view of the true appreciation of what a heretic is, I think the answer must be an unqualified yes. I think the really important point for us to understand is that the heretic is not one who *attempts* to form a party or sect in the first instance, but one who insists in promoting *his own* opinions, irrespective of whether or not those opinions conform to the truth. Those opinions, if persisted in, can *then* lead to the formation of a party.

What is the remedy? There is only one; a correct understanding of, and a fervent desire to uphold at all cost, the truth. We need to keep before our eyes always the injunction given by Paul to Timothy, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (All questions, please to Alf Marsden, 377 Billinge Road, Highfield, Wigan).