

On Heresy

from Memorials of the ministry of G. V. Wigram.

Vol. 2, Part 1, Ecclesiastical.

Fifth Edition

Heresy is not departing from the figure of truth, but from the Spirit of truth, and it is the spirit of the heretic we are called upon to judge as a work of the flesh more than *the fruit in the form* of doctrine.

The Scriptures are given to us by God as "a complete depository and standard of truth"; they contain all we need to know as Christians, and by them every error may be detected.

But who is the interpreter of Scripture? I answer, "The Holy Ghost." As the Lord Jesus Christ is more or less directly the subject of all Scripture testimony, so is the Holy Ghost the only authorised and infallible interpreter of it. True, He gives to each babe in Christ the unction whereby to know all things, and gives, too, various measures of capacity in understanding; He may also give teachers to the Church, and gifts of *wisdom* and *knowledge* as blessed links of connection between Himself, the Interpreter, and the children whom He teaches; diligence and carefulness of study, and a pure conscience undefiled have also their place in the learner. But still the Holy Ghost Himself alone is the Interpreter; to Him, as God, the plans of God and the glory of Christ are fully known and precious, and it is His ability, and willingness, and faithfulness which constitute the security that each humble soul shall receive its own measure of truth. In honouring Him the saints find great power and enlargement and unity in the truth; and the reverse is true if they dishonour Him. May He guide us whilst considering "heresy."*

*The word *haireisis*, heresy, means a choice; the verb *hairtizo*, to heretise, occurs in Matthew 12: 18, "my servant whom *I have chosen*." There is another word akin to it, *haireomai* in Philippians 1: 23, "What *I shall choose* I wot not." 2 Thessalonians 2: 13, "From the beginning *chosen* you." Hebrews 11: 20, *Choosing* rather to suffer."

The most insidious way in which this is done is setting the gifts above the Giver; trusting to the teacher or his wisdom, or to the divine mind in ourselves, and its measure of development, and thus really to forget the Person and agency of the Holy Ghost, without whose present energy everything will only work ruin.

The first thing I would observe is that heresy is said to be a work of the flesh (Gal. 5: 20), "the works of the flesh are . . . seditions, heresies, envyings." Whether the flesh is here looked at more immediately as the root whence heresy in the principle of it arises, or as the energy of the sects and factions in which heresy displays itself, matters not; both are true. If anyone, instead of looking for the Holy Spirit's guidance, dabbles with his own mind in Scripture, he will see either something in the book which is not there, or the contents of the book out of their proper order and relative importance, etc., and here heresy begins. He has, unconsciously perhaps, dishonoured the Holy Ghost, and honoured himself. The leaven of heresy, it may be, is now at work in him; if so, and if he does not judge himself, the leaven will by-and-by show itself. He will either broach things which are not at all in the book, or he will broach a connection of things which is not true, or he may diminish the importance of foundation truth, or magnify unduly the importance of some item or point of superstructure truth. How the captiousness shows itself matters not. He will deal with the truth not as a Spirit-led man would. Moreover, when the enemy is working by heresy, he rarely takes as instruments those who are offensive to human nature, yea, many natural beauties and ornaments may cover the plot; but the

puffing and breaking of the bubbles within will soon call on the saints for judgment. If they do not anticipate the evil, it will rise and fall over; he will draw away disciples after him; a sect will be formed round himself, and the man is a heretic (Titus 3: 19); the progress of the work will, unless grace prevent it, be, through the lowering of trust in Christ, and in the personal presence of the Holy Ghost, to destruction of the whole batch. (1 Peter 2: 1.)

Observe, heresy is a moral evil, and is inside the Church; it begins in a man interposing self in the place of the Holy Ghost as to the interpretation or apprehension of truth . . . the captiousness of the human mind becomes evident, and the evil works on to the schism of the body into sects. Thus heresy, it is to be observed, becomes in practice a denial of Philipians 3: 15-17.

Brethren, it is a solemn word: "*There must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.*" (1 Cor. 11: 19.) The Holy Ghost assures us that it is God alone who can and who will preserve His own; but the saints should watch. The poor of the flock I beseech to notice, that heresy has a great deal more to do with the spirit in which things are held and taken up, and propagated, than with the thing itself which is held or propagated, Every Christian, however simple, can watch the spirit in which friends hold and set out their views. Is it Christ-like? Is it like the apostles? Does it keep truth in its place and proportion?

Is conscience, and not only intellect, drawn into action? are questions the simplest can apply.

Observe, the words heresy and sect are in the Greek both *hairesis*. The word is correctly rendered (Acts 5: 17), the sect of the Sadducees, and (Acts 15: 3) of the Pharisees, and (Acts 26: 5) the straitest sect of our religion. These were parties or sects formed by Jews whose minds had played with the Jewish religion. That the common thought of Christ's religion was formed by a comparison of it with these sects is plain (see Acts 24: 5), where Tertullus accuses Paul before Felix of being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes," and (v. 14) Paul admits "that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I," and (Acts 28: 22) "as concerning this sect we know that it is everywhere spoken against," said the Jews at Rome to Paul.

As heresy begins with the natural mind playing with truth, so its mode and means of success are the getting the saints upon hard points and questions, and a *thinking* instead of praying. Paul communicated his gospel privately to them of reputation (Gal. 2: 12); the heretic does it privately also, but to the weak, and especially to women (2 Tim. 3: 6); and so in a twenty years' experience have I always found it, and this is obvious, because the simple, on the one hand, are often puzzled about conceits, for pressing which heretics have been excommunicated, and yet these are not heretics; they mourn over their own perplexities in secret, and trouble no one with them. On the other hand, they would oft, through ignorance, deny what the heretic would deny through wickedness. I press this because such is the only safe and sure test, and every Christian may use it; no other test, indeed, can apply, because while few have large a knowledge of history as to know in what forms of error as to doctrine heresy has been displayed, none can know the forms which it may hereafter take; and, besides, "error does not constitute heresy;" and again (as we shall see) the worst heresies grow out of *truths misapplied*.

As every man in sound mind intuitively feels it to be his duty to take care of human life, so every Christian is responsible to guard against heresy. Of course, in doing this great watchfulness must be kept over our own spirit. A man may be very positive in holding, and heady in pressing, fancies; such, for instance, as that "the world" in John 3 means "the elect world," or that all men are pardoned, though believers only are saved; or that the temple in Revelation 11 means the literal temple; or the overweening bias, the crotchet, might be devotedness; the great tribulation,* the sudden rapture, etc.

His manner of holding and pressing his views might be as bad as his doctrine was defective, and yet grace might see that there was no sanction of evil — bitter herbs are not leaven — and the things after all may be kept in a subordinate place.

*I conceive saints in our days should mark and discountenance the way in which many, who hold opposite views on the subject, hold and press the point, Where will the Church be in the great tribulation? So far as man goes this way marks real mental disease, and to the spiritual mind it is heretical in tendency at least. And what is the effect of their dragging everyone after the same point, and giving it an under place as though (all-important as it is in connection with our hope) it formed part of our foundation? The Lord will neither hasten, nor delay, nor change, His movements because of our thoughts; neither will He teach concerning His movements those who will argue and think out truth, instead of praying it out as they were wont to do. When truth becomes a matter of argumentation, naughty arguments are sure to be had recourse to, inferences and consequences, and tradition, and threats perhaps used. They that do such (Rom. 16: 17, 18), one has well said, "to the man who will systematise it, the Bible says, 'I am none of your sort.'" Canons of interpretation and human standards are poor things in sanctuary light.

Some heresies have been formed upon the denial of foundation doctrines, as Arianism, and some upon points of superstructure, as Anabaptism. But of all kinds of heresy, I conceive the worst is that which is so formed upon truth as to make truth appear to be on one side, and the Holy Ghost opposed *to it* on the other. If God saw me (for example) separating myself in spirit, affection, thought, or action, from the members of Christ now on the earth, to a section of it which was characterised either by knowledge of truth, or by supposed freedom from error, or if He saw me trying to form such a party, He would, I judge, see marks of incipient heresy. In both cases I should be opposing truth to the Holy Ghost; in the former case I set the Holy Ghost in life in the members, below knowledge or freedom from error; in the latter case, I, in practice, oppose knowledge, etc., to the Holy Ghost in *His mode of working*; for His aim is not to form schools well taught, or free from defect and error, but to build up the living members of God's household in separatedness to God and in brotherly love. If such a thing worked out into a sect it would be pre-eminently evil.

And it is to be observed, that not only is a sect which takes a truth for its basis, and opposes it to the Holy Ghost, the worst form of heresy; but also that the intensity of the evil increases directly as the purity of the truth; for example, a sect built upon a correct view of an ordinance would be bad; but a sect built upon a correct view of resurrection and glory, or any points about them, would be worse; yea, *worst of all* would be a sect built upon such a truth as the power of the Holy Ghost, through the blood of Christ, to give present peace with God, and this might easily be the case; it might result thus, because I hold assurance to be of the essence of faith, I might refuse to accredit as Christians those who had not assurance, and might form a sect on that most blessed and precious truth, rending an inflamed limb from the sickly and enfeebled body, because I mistook the feverish state for the warmth and glow every member of the body when in health should possess, whereas the Holy Ghost has united in one all who know the blood of Jesus as salvation.

Heresy is in principle the playing of the flesh with truth, and is the sending into parties those who should be one. May the Lord keep His saints watching and praying.

The sum of what I say is this, God has given us a *standard of truth*, and a Guide for *the understanding and use of it*. Heresy is not, as some take it to mean, some undefined error in doctrine, but consists in the flesh setting aside *the Guide*, and itself attempting to use the *standard*, the end of which will be sects as one of old, Augustine, said.