

Behold, the Heretic!

by Robert F. Turner

The Greek word *hairesis* is translated “heresy” and “sect” in the New Testament. The close relative of the word is used in Matt. 12:18 — a quotation from Isaiah concerning Christ — with no bad connotation. But *hairesis* obtained a bad character because of the harm done by self-willed choice — stubborn determination to “have my way or bust — something!!”

Vine’s Expository Dictionary says. ‘Denotes (a) a choosing. choice; then that which is chosen, and hence, an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects.... Such erroneous opinions are frequently the outcome of personal preference or the prospect of advantage.’ (See “Heresy”)

Heresy implies a standard or norm. The Jews called Paul an heretic, and from their point of view so he was. (Acts 24:5, 14). But with truth as the standard, Paul’s teaching was certainly not heretical. In fact, it was the “sectarian” concept of the Jews that led them to call Paul a heretic. We have accepted the very root of sectarianism when we call heresy all which does not conform to “our” party doctrine, or is not in “the mainstream of our movement.” (2 Cor. 10:12-ff)

Heresy has to do with doctrinal error — but, it is not simply an honest difference in understanding, even though the one differing be in error. We do not say this to excuse the error, nor to say that because it is “honest” it is no error. We just say that the error is not heresy while an honest, objective search for truth continues and the attitude is humble and submissive. Nor will a sect be formed while such attitudes prevail.

There is a vast difference in the opinionated, self-willed ravings of the sectarian spirit, and the firm conviction of an honest truth-seeker. Nor is “raving” a part of the definition. Many sectarians simply withdraw into their smug party shells, thinking to avoid the searching light of God’s truth. But final judgment will roll the rocks (Rev. 6:16-ff), and then “Behold, the Heretics!!”