

# The Vanishing of Heresy

Several months ago I read Phil Sanders' book, *A Faith Built on Sand: The Foolishness of Popular Religion in a Postmodern World*. This is a sequel to Phil's 2000 book, *Adrift: Postmodernism in the Church*. Both are deserving of a serious read by all who would be aware of what is taking place in the contemporary world of Christendom.

Chapter 8 is titled "The Vanishing of Heresy." Phil begins the chapter with a 1987 quote from J. I. Packer:

"The net result of all these impulses to pluralism is that ... there are just about as many theologies as there are theologians to devise them; the concept of heresy has almost lost its meaning; and loyalty to the institutional church has for the most part taken the place of loyalty to the faith once for all delivered to the saints, for no one is quite sure any more what the essence of that faith really is" (p. 89).

Packer's (and Phil's) point is that—speaking facetiously—heresy is now a thing of the past. It does not exist today! The only "heresy" that exists in our postmodern world is the assertion that something is heresy! Every cockeyed notion, theory, doctrine, practice, and belief is to be uncritically accepted. No one is to be told that they are wrong. Interestingly, however, one postmodernist recently told me, "The Bible is wrong about many things!"

Later in the chapter Phil observes: "The preaching in churches of Christ has changed in the last generation. Over time the church has become afraid to say much of anything with conviction. Preachers preach much love but little truth, much grace but little repentance, much salvation but little obedience, and much on relationships but little on relating responsibly to God Himself. Some speak much on believing and confuse their listeners by speaking little on what to believe" (p. 100).

The notion exists in many quarters that preachers ought not to emphasize doctrine "because doctrine only divides." The idea is that we should "preach only Christ." But to preach Christ is to preach "doctrine." It is "doctrine" to affirm that Christ alone is "the way, the truth, and the life," and that no one comes to the Father except through Him! (John 14:6). But there are multiplied millions who do not believe that Christ is the only way to God. Therefore, Christ Himself is divisive. He said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

What does it mean to preach Christ? Can we preach Christ without preaching what He taught? Can we preach Christ without preaching the doctrine of Christ? Philip the evangelist preached Christ to the Ethiopian eunuch and the eunuch asked to be baptized (Acts 8:35-39). How did the eunuch know that he needed to be baptized unless in preaching Christ to him Philip had told him what Christ said one must do to be

saved? Jesus said: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

The apostle Paul did not subscribe to the idea that doctrine is not important or that there was no such thing as heresy. He named "heresies" as one of the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-22). He further warned that "the time will come when they [the professed people of God, hf] will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn away their ears from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (II Timothy 4:3-4). In this respect, the ones of whom Paul spoke were like the wayward people of God in the Old Testament who said, "Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things..." (Isaiah 30:10). Translation: Don't tell us what we need to hear; tell us what we want to hear. Don't rebuke us for our sins; rather, show us how we can continue in our sins and still be good church members. Show us how we can be religious without having to be righteous! Make us feel good about ourselves! Such are the times in which we live.

Hugh Fulford