

AN EVALUATION OF ROBERTO BOWMAN'S ARTICLE ENTITLED  
"A BIBLICAL GUIDE TO ORTHODOXY AND HERESY"

by  
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Robert Bowman has done a valuable service in his two-part article on orthodoxy and heresy. Rarely is the area of theological error approached so calmly and irenically, as does Mr. Bowman.

Mr. Bowman's presentation shows the care of one who not only loves the Lord, but one who loves His Word. He is clearly a thoroughgoing evangelical who desires to minister through his articles.

Nevertheless, his thesis concerning orthodoxy and heresy is fatally flawed. He has slipped into the mistake of thinking that one can determine which doctrines of the Bible that everyone will agree are essential to orthodoxy. Furthermore, while he denies that he has done so, Mr. Bowman is guilty of forming a dual canon of Scripture. Finally, in the opinion of this writer, Mr. Bowman misunderstands the New Testament use of the word "heresy" as it relates to the believer.

Essential Vs. Non-Essential Doctrines

Mr. Bowman maintains, "This principle (the evangelical principle) implies that not every misinterpretation or departure from the Bible is equally damaging to authentic Christian faith. Misunderstanding the relationship between the Millennium and the Second Coming, for example, is not as serious an error as misunderstanding the relationship between faith and works." Evidently by "faith and works" Mr. Bowman is referring to the distinction between salvation by faith or works. If this is so, he has fallen into the mistake taken by many today that somehow initial salvation is a more important or essential doctrine than, for instance the doctrine of Christian living. This doctrine is rooted in the Calvinistic idea of a "covenant of grace" that overrides all other Scriptural doctrines.

Certainly we agree that salvation is the most basic of all doctrines. One cannot enjoy any relationship with God through Jesus Christ unless one is saved. However, one searches the Scriptures in vain for one verse that actually teaches the primacy of the doctrine of salvation in the sense that Mr. Bowman presents. The idea that salvation is the most important doctrine is usually taken from the statement in Galatians one concerning the "heteros" gospel for which Paul proclaims the proponents anathema. However, the gospel of Galatians one is undoubtedly not limited to initial salvation, but includes the great doctrine of sanctification by grace and faith. It is clear from Galatians 3:1-2 that the primary problem of the Galatians was not that they had been led from a correct gospel of salvation, but that they had accepted a false gospel of sanctification. They had indeed begun well, but they were attempting to continue through application of the Mosaic code. (See Romans 16:25 where Paul refers to "my gospel" meaning the truth in Christ concerning the building up of the saints. The word "gospel" does not necessarily mean the gospel of salvation in Paul's writings.)

This brings us to the consideration of the millennium relegated to second-class status by Mr. Bowman. The major reason why premillennialism must be maintained over either amillennialism or postmillennialism does not deal simply with eschatological certitude. Both amillennialism and postmillennialism are at fault for applying to the Christian life non-grace methods of living the Christian life. Rather than maintaining a consistent distinction between those passages which are addressed to believers in the body of Christ versus those believers related to the kingdom of God, a- and postmillennialists happily apply those passages to Christian living which were not meant for us in this "dispensation of the grace of God."

In so doing, we believe, they are guilty of the very thing that Paul is standing against in Galatians one. And into such a mire does one walk when attempting to defend the idea that certain doctrines are essential and others are not.

A Dual Canon

Mr. Bowman clearly understands the problem of holding to a dual canon. He correctly states, “On the other hand, this principle can be misapplied by treating the gospel as a ‘canon within the canon’ such that some parts of the Bible become more authoritative than others.”

Without being harsh, let us say that Mr. Bowman has fallen into this mistake, although inadvertently. One simply cannot hold that some doctrines are essential to some supposed “orthodoxy” while others are not, and not be guilty of holding a dual canon. It is precisely in these “non-essential” areas that evangelicals disagree most heartily. Most major denominations were formed over issues that are not deemed “essential” in the sense that Mr. Bowman recognizes. The problem is that one evangelical’s “heresy” is another’s bread and butter.

The solution to the problem does not lie in attempting to determine which doctrines are essential or non-essential, but in attempting to determine why evangelicals (and others) disagree. For some, denomination dogmatics has overtaken personal Bible study. In some denominations one cannot grow spiritually personally because of the constraint of the creed of that denomination. Others accept the findings of their favorite theologian or historical figure to be essentially equivalent to biblical authority. (I knew a fellow once who held that if a doctrine was not found in the Westminster confession, it was heresy.)

Among serious evangelical Bible students the most common reason for disagreement doctrinally, in this author’s not inconsiderable experience, is because of a lack of hermeneutical and Bible study skills. One student began seriously to doubt the deity of Christ because he was under the mistaken impression that the phrase “Son of God” somehow meant that Jesus Christ was only a secondary deity. When he discovered through teaching of the language and culture of the New Testament period that the word “son” in the New Testament did not refer to subordination but equality he quickly “came around” to the correct understanding taught in Scripture.

Is it not at this preliminary stage where evangelicals and others must begin the discussion as to what the Bible actually says? And perhaps it is in the area of hermeneutics that serious biblical error begins as well. Several hermeneutical works have been published recently that point away from normal hermeneutical methodology in studying the doctrines of Scripture.

### The Meaning of Heresy in the New Testament

Mr. Bowman indicates early in his first article that he has examined each use of the word “heresy” in Scripture. This inductive methodology is clearly the correct approach that one must take in order to determine the meaning of words. Mr. Bowman clearly shows that the Greek noun “hairesis” has more than one meaning, and that those meanings are distinct. Many years ago the author did his own inductive study of this word and came to somewhat different conclusions about the use of the word in the New Testament.

It is easy to see why it might readily be thought that the word “hairesis” means to hold to doctrinal error. First, the word’s basic meaning is “a choice” and by extension a choice between two alternatives. As a result, the word came to mean “opinion.”<sup>1</sup> Eventually the word became associated with a group who held an opinion and was translated “sect” as Bowman observes. As such, the word did not have a necessarily negative meaning.

However, the word took a theological “right turn” in the writings of Paul. It is listed as one of the “works of the flesh” by Paul in Galatians five. As such it came to mean not to hold to an opinion so much as to be divisive because of the opinion held. The word took on it the meaning of divisiveness whether the opinion held was a correct one or not. In Paul’s writings heresy was the work of the flesh, a spiritual problem of divisiveness, rather than an error in doctrine. It is with this sense that Paul uses the word in 1 Cor 11:19, where the word is translated “factions” in the New King James Version. The factiousness of the Corinthians was not primarily doctrinal. They had divided up by following different

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<sup>1</sup> George Abbott-Smith. *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1936), 12.

teachers, who were in substantial agreement doctrinally. The problem in Corinth was clearly carnality (1 Cor 3:1-3) and not doctrinal error per se. In Titus 3:10 the word is translated “divisive” man because of the attempt to divide believers. This man was not to be admonished, in the opinion of this author, because he was in doctrinal error, but because he was divisive.

This is not to say that “heresy” could not be caused by doctrinal error. It surely could, as the carnal mind will use whatever device available to it to promote the divisions of the body of Christ. But to make heresy primarily doctrinal error appears to be missing the point.

#### Summary

It seems inappropriate to consider heresy as primarily doctrinal error. The problem of the New Testament believer was one of carnality. The idea that some doctrines are essential and some non-essential is a dangerous position. It leads one into the mire of attempting to explain why something is essential to one person, but not to another. It also tends to lead to a dual canon, even though one may intellectually deny the fact.

The solution to the problem of doctrinal error comes in the relationship between individuals. As a believers it is our responsibility to approach each one with respect and to discuss our differences openly. The reason for these differences are usually seen to be rooted in the hermeneutical science. Baring carnality and the unwillingness to even discuss the Scriptural evidence, believers can often learn from one another in the areas of these differences. Otherwise we must agree to disagree agreeably!

#### A Personal Note

The author has spent his adult life studying biblically-based theology. He has had the opportunity to teach theology to several hundred students on the high school, college, and seminary level. It has been his experience that, with the exception of those few students who are carnal or unwilling to discuss the issues of Scripture, the discussion of doctrinal differences can be rewarding and even spiritually beneficial. It is our responsibility to lay the ground work, and to allow the Spirit of God the teach others from the word. It is often said that no one believer has all the truth. It could also be said that each of us shares in some amount of doctrinal error. It is not, in this author’s opinion, the error that is damaging, but the attitude with which we approach it. Openness to the authority Word of God as interpreted using normal rules of the grammatical/historical hermeneutical science is the great issue of our time.