

Sermon Notes - Heresy, Apostasy and Apathy

Sunday 2nd March 2003

Let us look at a set of related subjects often shied clear of... that some regard as almost "unchristian", and others might see as causing contention.

Apostasy, Heresy and Apathy.

I believe that they are linked in practical terms, as well as in Biblical principle.

Apostasy

is the abandonment of one's religion or party. From the Greek apo + stasis "standing off" or "standing away" Strong says G575, G4714 apo usually denotes separation, departure, cessation, completion, reversal, etc

Heresy

is opinion contrary to accepted doctrine on any subject, usually Christianity, but also politics, according to the Oxford English dictionary. From the Greek haireisis meaning "choice". Strong G139 - a party or a disunion, a sect.

Apathy

is insensibility, indifference, mental indolence, from the Oxford dictionary, from Greek a + pathos "not + suffering" - perhaps through choosing not to suffer by pretending it either isn't important or it has no relevance to us.

These three words are seldom used these days in many churches, because of political correctness ☺

In our individual search for Biblical truth we need to examine where each of us is - in relation to this - and to many other topics - because otherwise we run the risk of being accidentally led up the wrong track - either through following other peoples' opinions, or by our own thoughts - as we struggle to live in this world without conforming to it.

We should really look at some of the ways in which man has in the past allowed himself to be led by the nose away from God's word and His will, and how and why this has happened, to get a feel for how easy it is to be distracted.

Perhaps the classic example is the Golden Calf incident. Remember that God led the people out of captivity in Egypt, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, so that they would not forget Him.

While Moses and the real God were away up on a mountain top, the people set up a management committee and instructed Aaron make for them a substitute for worship. They had song and dance, they declared a feast, and created not only false worship of a false god, but had a false communion while worshipping. Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me... Hmmmmm.

God's reaction was to zap the principals - and then make those left walk around the desert for forty years until they dropped dead from exhaustion - yet before their

shoe leather wore out. Amazing. You really would have thought they would have learned from that, but they didn't.

Another instance can be found in the recovery of the Ark of the Covenant from its theft by the Philistines, and its transportation back to its rightful home from Canaan.

The leadership of the day decided to move it according to their own good ideas - they loaded it upon an ox cart which lurched as it moved through pot-holes in the road, and one of the chaps travelling with it put his hand out to steady it when he thought it was going to fall - a good idea according to man's thinking. God zapped him too.

So they then had a change of plan - this time they did it God's way, instead of man's - with the Ark slung on long poles through the rings built into the sides - and the poles were carried by priests - the only ones allowed by God to handle it.

They actually did learn at that point in time, but it wasn't long before they stuffed up again. And again. And again.

Now, I can hear you saying "Fine, that was in Old Testament days - we live under grace now". I ask... How valid is that response?

Paul made a number of important statements about this subject. I'll mention just two.

First. He told the Corinthians that grace did NOT allow one to continually do the same unacceptable things time and time again in our lives.

It was not a licence to deliberately sin, and then to give lip service to saying we were sorry - and doing them all over again.

Second. He talked about us following another gospel - rather than the one he and the other apostles consistently preached everywhere.

Presumably this "other gospel" had to have had a foundation of truth as well as the lies that were insidiously worked into it. Why?

Simple answer, if it wasn't convincing to those who heard it, they - being good Christians - would have rejected it out of hand. We come back to this later.

Think about this a moment. When the abominable church of the harlot Babylon - also known as the "church of the Anti-Christ" or the "end-times church" - arrives at God's appointed time, it will have to look like the real thing, and be almost indistinguishable from bona-fide Christianity.

Why? Because "good" Christians in the end of this - the final - dispensation will not be fooled otherwise, will they? If it is a church that describes itself as the "Church of the Anti-Christ", it's pretty obvious that "good" Christians won't join it.

By "good" Christians, I mean Christians who are struggling hard to come to terms with the world's attitude towards everything, and who know they should

desperately want to live as Christ commanded, and to believe the things He taught. Like you and me.

Now in this particular situation the apostle was talking about the Judaisers' heresy.

However, as with many anecdotes in the Bible, there are usually at least two legitimate interpretations capable of being drawn from the passage; I firmly believe that Paul was also speaking generally, and that he was warning ALL Christians against ANY gospel different from that preached by him and the other apostles.

Some folk may well shrug this off and say "ah, that verse is all about the Cults, like the LDS and the JW's". While they indeed DO have different gospels from main-line Christianity, and therefore they cannot by definition be described as Christian, most COMMITTED Christians are aware of that.

Unfortunately, and in contrast, there are many who think they are Christians - who do not have a proper grounding in what they believe, or why they believe it. It is they who form the recruitment pool for the cults - for example the Latter Day Saints claim that 80 percent of their converts come from mainline Christianity.

It is NOT those forms of heresy I'm addressing. And while we do not usually single a group out and preach against them, I ask your indulgence just to make the point that KNOWN heresies are far easier to see, and combat, than the hidden ones which creep in through the crack under the door, like an army of tiny ants whose home has been disturbed by building construction work.

That is like the situation where I'm now living. I bought a brand new pressure pack of Mortein just before moving house and I'm using it several times a day. You and I need spiritual Mortein to fix the heresy around us, and in which we stand unwittingly, like in the middle of a floor seething with tiny ants, so small as to be barely distinguishable from the marks on the tiled floor.

The heresy I'm talking about is WITHIN the Body of Christ. [9-30]

"What???" I hear you say, "That can't be true... the Body of Christ is comprised of believers, Christians like you and me - not heretics".

Okay. Please think about other areas of unbelief described in the New Testament society. Here's a thought about a "different" gospel. Paul, in writing to Timothy said about the church existing then...

2Tim 3:12 - 18 Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

ALL scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

How do we discover whether or not what we believe, or what we are told to believe, is the real gospel? Whether what we hear is preached by those with itching ears?

We have a choice - the first is by using what the Bible contains as being the source of truth. The second is by using the traditions that man has built up over centuries.

If and where there is a difference, the traditions have resulted in and from beliefs and practices that are not supported by the Bible account.

This is a key reason that an event hundreds of years ago called "The Reformation" took place. That historical period has been avoided by schools in civilised societies for thirty or forty years; this means several generations have grown up since it was dropped from the curriculum and are now totally unaware of the persecution across Europe, including horrible deaths, inflicted on those who rejected tradition in favour of the Bible account. That is huge numbers of people - perhaps millions.

Where there is a difference, only one can be valid. Either the Bible. Or tradition.

In a nutshell, the Reformation demonstrated the need seen by thinking mankind at that time to get back to God's teachings, away from centuries of traditions. I remember in the 1970s, learning on a Scout leader training course that "Traditions are a bad master, but a good servant". What has the Bible has this to say on the subject?

Listen to Jesus speaking to the religious leaders of the time...

Matthew 15:3b, 6b, 7-9 Why do you also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? ... In this you make the commandment of God ineffective by your tradition.

Hypocrites! well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying, "These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honour me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." [14-03]

Now here is a specific scenario which is one of several different gospels I have personally found within Christianity.

There are many Christians who will solemnly and soberly tell you that only parts of the Bible can possibly be taken literally - they say that a lot of it is allegorical, a lot

is there purely to paint a picture to explain to those of limited understanding what the gospel message is - and was never intended to be taken literally.

They teach that much of the Bible is just stories written to illustrate points, for example the waters of the Red Sea parting - which they say never actually happened.

Let's look at this concept, and how it works. It means we allow ourselves to presume to decide which bits of the Bible DO NOT contain God's word because another person says so. It allows us to presume to say that some of the authors of Biblical books are lying, or applying writer's licence which is merely a nice way of saying they are lying.

Now surely that is, at best, rather dangerous - when we apply it to our own salvation. How much more so if we then go and teach this concept to others?

Remember, the Bible says if what WE do or say causes our brother to stumble, WE (as the teachers) shall be held responsible on the day of judgement. What better way to make someone stumble than by teaching false doctrine?

Mind you a lot of those honest, well meaning, unbelieving Christian folk have reservations about the day of judgement too.

Look at it deeper; it is far more than just that WE are dumb if we believe it ourselves; while it is presumptuous for us to pick and choose which bits WE think (or which someone has told us to think) are untrue, it is actually highly arrogant to assume that those we are teaching are too dumb to be able to work out what bits not to believe in.

Let us refer back to what Paul said in his letter to Timothy...

ALL Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. [16-44]

So let's move on to a discovery of a startling lack of real teaching in the wider church.

I would like to quote here from the writings of the American Anglican Bishop John Shelby Spong, who is regarded by many as a heretic.

In the epilogue to his book "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism" he points out that we can see how far the church has degenerated in lack of Biblical knowledge, and that it isn't there in society itself, either. I'm not quoting his theology, I'm quoting his observations on the world around him. And he is dead accurate. He wrote this book ten years ago, so the scenario has to be worse now.

This senior churchman in probably the next largest denomination after the Roman Catholics states... and I quote...

I also write to challenge mainline church members to take the Bible seriously.

I find Biblical ignorance that marks the lives of churchgoers to be beyond my capacity to exaggerate.

In preaching today, the speaker cannot illustrate with a biblical example without telling the story in full detail because the knowledge of biblical content is no longer something that permeates the lives of even churchgoing individuals in any meaningful way.

He goes on to comment that in preaching to a congregation of 180 folk on the subject of the "Ten Commandments", he asked "how many of you think they are important?"

"Ah... (they said) they are the standard of ethical behaviour in society, so they have to be very important..."

But, he writes that those 180 Christians in that church could not collectively name all ten of those commandments!

Of the 180 attendees at Spong's preaching, surely even a few would have had to have been communicant - or full - members of the Episcopalian church of America - meaning they should have been familiar with their catechism, or amplified statement of faith taught in confirmation classes, and learned word by word, phrase by phrase?

Okay... Let me put us here on the spot right now... let me ask... without opening your bibles...

WHERE do we find the Ten Commandments?

Just give us the name of the book, the chapter and verse aren't that important, as we shall look at them directly...

Answer: Exodus 20:1-17

Deuteronomy 5:6-21 too

Now. What about their content in general, not using word-for word recital?

1-4 relational about God...

1 no other gods before me.

2 not make any image, or likeness... not bow down, nor serve them.

3 not take the name of the LORD God vain.

4 keep sabbath day holy.

5-10 relational about other people...

5 Honour parents, remembering that God gave you the land you live in.

6 Don't murder... ratsach:H7523

H7523. ratsach, [953d]; a prim. root; to murder, slay:-- kills(1), manslayer(19), murder(7), murdered(2), murderer(13), murderers(1), murders(1), put to death(1), slain(1), slew(1).

7 nor commit adultery.

8 don't steal.

9 nor lie, in general, but specifically about others.

10 nor become obsessed about others' possessions.

Spong goes on to say...

There is clearly a gulf between the values to which we give lip service, and the values in which our lives are invested.

The Bible for most of us is, I fear, in the same category as the Ten Commandments were to that congregation.

We say it is an important book and worthy of respect. Yet our lives are not organized in such a way as to demonstrate that we really hold this sacred text in either honour or high esteem.

Many a church adult Bible class is little more than the pooling of ignorance. Few clergy that I observe are willing to give the time necessary to become competent teachers of the Bible in their congregations...

By not doing the hard task of teaching, the clergy have relegated our holy book to either oblivion, or to the "Babylonian captivity of the fundamentalists". I use this expression, aware that those who do not know anything about biblical history will also not understand it.

Spong didn't pull any punches, did he? Are OUR lives organized in such a way as to demonstrate that we really hold this sacred text in either honour or high esteem? Please don't answer, but ponder this question in the privacy of your own heart - and remember that although the rest of us can't see into there, God can.

While I do not agree with Dr. Spong's theology, I think the very strong words of his observations are as valid in our country as his. I totally sympathise with his despair at the state of HIS church as described, and be assured that I do not draw such a comparison with the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

So, what is the problem with the clergy to which he refers. Here in Adelaide, there is a combined theological training college, jointly operated by Anglicans, Catholics and the Uniting Church - and this is a rather strange grouping of bed-fellows when one looks at the historical reasons of how and why the Reformation took place.

One needs to ask if those churches are now committed to return to the one universal "Holy Mother Church" that the Reformation struck into pieces? Be assured that the original church will never change it's view on anything... so that means the others will have to, if they are to unite.

This is not the place to be critical of the administration of that seat of learning which provides an enormous number of new Ministers of the Word to South Australia. Again I offer my point purely as an illustration, and I accept that some may say it is flawed.

What one can learn from this little parable (if you will) is that those three denominations today share the concept that the Bible "contains" the word of God, rather than "being" the Word of God. While a small proportion of their clergy share our view, that the Bible needs to be taken at face value, others have very honestly stated - and such honesty is to their credit - that they have immense difficulty in believing that the Resurrection actually took place, that the Virgin Birth was a biological impossibility, and Creation and Fall were just a myth by way of

illustration, really being the result of millions of years of evolutionary stuff after a big bang.

Indeed some even admit to being unsure of the value of prayer, preferring an inward sort of meditation.

I find that this is rather sad.

If one was to remove those major things from the gospel as preached by the apostles, what does that leave? Very little. No wonder there are so many self-styled Christians who don't think Jesus was God as well as man. That He didn't actually die on the cross but was resuscitated, then married and had children. That there is little point in their practicing living in the way taught by Jesus because we shall all go to heaven anyway - because God is totally love and wants to bless our socks off.

That is called universalism. It is also heresy.

What that approach does appear to encourage is that their graduate students taught in this way, who are subsequently appointed by their denominations, teach these same thoughts to their flocks, without their having had to personally resolve what they don't recognise as areas of unbelief. This I say in a loving manner, not being at all critical of the people, but rather of a system that allows it.

You see, heresy is always comprised of a number of little things which in themselves don't undermine the gospel very much. Like the ants marching across my kitchen floor in their jackboots. And we are probably all heretics to some degree.

Maybe we should also consider that Gross Heresy is only comprised of a larger number of little bits and pieces of regular heresy, which still, in themselves, don't do much to the undermining of the gospel.

But, when added together, they do produce "another gospel".

Have not the foundations for that "great and abominable church" I mentioned earlier already have been laid, if the earth is going to come to the end of its tether as quickly as most ecological scientists will say? Amusingly, scripture supports the ecological view.

I think those anti-Christ church foundations need to include four things which have popular support in order to be effective - and surely, without popular support they won't get off the ground.

And since when has the gospel of Christ received any awards for popularity?

It needs a common leadership training programme. A common youth training programme. A common home group teaching programme. A common music and worship programme.

It also need the atmosphere of political correctness to operate, where one dares not say what is on our minds.

We need to open our eyes, I believe. Those have all been set up for a while.

I'm not saying that the organisation described in the Revelation is actually here. But like terrorists' sleeper cells, it will be activated at the right time by the enemy.

This is a sobering thought, with which you may disagree... but that is your privilege, because we are not quite yet in the world of "thou dare'st not speak thy thoughts".

Gal 1:1-9 Paul an apostle -- sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead -- and all the members of God's family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel -- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!

As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! [28-35]

So, can we as a part of the Body of Christ, actually do anything about this?

Yes, indeed we can, if we have the honest desire to do what he also refers to as "speaking the truth in love" - literally in the Greek "truthing in love".

Ephesians 4:15-16 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

John Shelby Spong's is a tradition which deliberately separates the church into "we" and "they", particularly through the wearing of robes and all the rest of the pageantry and pomp that came from the pre-Reformation Middle Ages.

While we don't have time to look at the Reformation in detail, this is essentially accurate. Apart from Luther's reforms, the Swiss, Scottish and Dutch reformers were all totally opposed to separation of clergy into a separate class from laity.

While the official church in England didn't want to be subservient to Rome for human and political reasons rather than from a "get back to the Bible" stance, they desperately wanted to keep their "status quo" system that worked to their own clergy's benefit, a system that fallible men had modified from the gospel as taught by the apostles centuries before.

However they did actually do a considerable amount of reforming as can be seen by carefully reading the many successive prefaces to their Prayer Book.

To illustrate this point, I'll share an anecdote. At a pastoral care meeting which a minister in what used to be called the Dutch Reformed Church and I both attended, he mentioned ongoing problems with ministering to some of a particular group of people whose Christian tradition was that of robes and stuff like that, including the prayer book liturgy. They became quite desolated that he would not put on robes to preach - and amazingly, that was their biggest problem!

This lovely chap made the point that he came from the Protestant side of the Reformation, which discarded all that sort of stuff, as opposed to the Anglican and Catholic side which retained it.

Another point, if I may; in 1949 my parents lived in a tiny little village called Beyton in the English county of Suffolk. Our local rector was Mr. Walton. The boarding school which I attended in the adjoining county of Norfolk had a chaplain who was the local rector, Mr. Blathwayte. Neither were called "father" or "reverend", nor were any others we came across.

There have been changes since. The first time I ever encountered Anglican ministers being referred to as "priests", and called "father" was when I went to Western Australia in 1968.

So what about the clergy who Spong says aren't doing their job? Well in his tradition it appears that a large proportion of the parish work is always done by those who wear the uniform. In contrast, we "evangelicals" understand that God's plan is actually for a priesthood of all believers.

That was also God's plan for his chosen nation Israel at the time He called them out of Egypt. They were to have both the kingly and priestly aspects of the nation He chose as His own... We read in Exodus 19...

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel:

'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.

And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

Due to their apostasy, heresy, and backsliding, God took away first of all the priestly aspect from them, giving that to just a select few - and this appears to be the pattern followed by many churches and groupings of these days.

Then, in the time of Samuel, God allowed their further apostasy into having a king "like unto the other nations", rejecting not Samuel the prophet, but God's kingship and the system of judges He had set up.

Friends, there is much in the New Testament to show that God wants each one of us, His people, to be kings and priests... but not without the accompanying accountability - it is because of lack of accountability that heresies spring.

We have our own shepherd in Aman. Biblically based, we have a GROUP of elders, of which Aman is part. I acknowledge their oversight; each of them has wisdom, experience, and the mind of Christ, praise God!

The C&MA are unlike the Presbyterians who distinguish between "Teaching" elders and "Ruling" elders. I think that John Knox probably didn't make that distinction, it's more likely a "good idea" someone came up with later on.

That is NOT biblical; if we read the requirements for elder in what Paul wrote to Timothy, we see that they were all equal; none of them was more equal than another, to misquote George Orwell in his excellent 1948 satirical book "Animal Farm".

I don't single out the Presbyterians, by the way, I am just explaining how things can move away from the biblical, while still appearing to be "good" and "right".

We can learn much about ministry from careful reading of scripture... and there is an account about an elder who presided over an un-named congregation in Asia Minor.

This suggests to me that he was a solo minister who enjoyed control, or perhaps he was supported by yes-men - a concept that could easily end up with the same result.

Let me quote the only thing in the Bible written about this elder - whose name was Diotrephes - well described by the apostle John in the King James translation as 'he who loves to have the preeminence' ...

3John:9, 10 I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.

The false doctrine promoted by Diotrephes was two-fold. It happened in a regularly constituted church, established by the apostles. It happened because an ordinary human being like me was "in charge".

First of all, he stood against the will of his supervising brethren - that is to say he rejected the need for his accountability to anyone. Not only that, he lied about them.

If he told lies about the apostles, would he have any qualms in lying about his local brethren? By local brethren, one can understand other elders, and those in the congregation, who he was supposed to be shepherding.

Second, of course, was the form of manipulative oversight exercised by this local leader who went so far as to excommunicate those who fed and housed people sent by the apostles. One suspects he likely “put out of the church” many for minor disagreements with him over his misuse of authority.

Control is very hard to excise from a church or congregation once it becomes established, and is a spiritual condition that can take over a group of well meaning Christians. It is a tool of our common enemy. Control is what the end-times church of the anti-Christ will be all about.

Time is up. This is an enormous subject, and not possible to look at in one go. I pray that my words have been useful, and meaningful, and I leave them with you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our Mediator with God the Father.

01-03-03 13:44