

Looking for Heretics or Making Converts

This article has been adapted from an article that was originally published in Pastor Ouellette's 'Preacher's Page' Publication in 1996.



Dr. R. B. Ouellette

Michael Kinsley, a liberal news commentator, once said that the difference between liberals and conservatives was that liberals were looking for heretics while conservatives were looking for converts. In other words, the liberals were eager to criticize others liberals for not being liberal enough, while the conservatives were trying to bring people to their way of thinking and convert them to their philosophy.

The same phenomenon exists in fundamentalism. There are some whose particular delight seems to be in finding fault with another fundamental brother; while others are eager to bring people to a Biblical philosophy and convert them to the right position.

There appears to be a slight difference. Those who are looking for heretics and those who are looking for converts are very similar.

- ☐ Both point out error.
- ☐ Both warn of dangerous trends.
- ☐ Both caution of the consequences of wrong behavior.
- ☐ Both use strong terms to explain their concerns.

There is actually a significant difference. In the Rocky Mountains, there is a place known as the Continental Divide. A person hiking across the Continental Divide would not know when he went from one side to the other if it were not marked by a sign. There is no discernible geographical distinction or boundary. And yet the water which falls on one side of the Continental Divide ultimately ends up in the Pacific Ocean while the water falling on the other side ultimately ends up in the Atlantic Ocean. The difference in where the water lands may be only a few feet. The difference in where it ends up will be thousands of miles. So, too, those looking for heretics and those looking for converts; while seeming to be very close, will end up at a very different place.

The purpose of those looking for heretics is different than those looking for converts. Those looking for heretics look to condemn. Those looking for converts wish to correct. Those looking for heretics wish to criticize. Those looking for converts wish to convince. Those looking for heretics wish to prosecute. Those looking for converts wish to persuade.

The product between the two is significantly different. Those who look for heretics often correctly identify people with the wrong position. They also often drive people away whose positions have not been formed; who are what the book of Proverbs describes as simple ("unpleated" i.e., still able to be influenced). Those looking for converts, while they must be careful that they do not tolerate wrong, can end up bringing sincere people to the right position rather than driving them away from the truth.

What is our response?

We are commanded to handle heretics but not to hunt for them. (Romans 16:17; II Timothy 2:17, 18; II Thessalonians 3:6) The Bible requires us to deal with those who depart from truth. It does not require us to become heretic-hunters, combing people's files for contradictions, inspecting their bookstores for questionable authors, scrutinizing their sermons for doctrinal deviations and investigating their itineraries for unacceptable associations. There is plenty crossing our paths which we must handle without us looking for additional trouble.

We are commanded to make converts. Obviously, Scripture commands us to win people to Christ (Mark 16:15) It also commands us to bring people to a Biblical position (I Timothy 4:6; Galatians 1:10). The Epistles are clearly written to correct error, convince the churches of the truth and cause them to go a right direction.

Scripturally, the dominant emphasis is clearly on the making of converts. The Bible tells us that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). It is no joy to our God that He must punish evildoers. The Lord Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23:37) While we may correctly feel anger towards the sin, we must demonstrate anguish toward the sinner. While it is our job to identify that which is wrong, we must inspire everyone we possibly can to do right.

When Dr. Curtis Hutson pastored the Forrest Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, he had occasion to deal with workers who were not living up to the standards which were required of them. As he dealt with them, he always said, "I am not after your resignation. I am after your consecration."

Some thoughts:

It seems to be that all of us are prone to become heretic-hunters instead of makers of converts,. It seems very righteous to take a bold stand against sin and kill a few brothers on the way. One well-known fundamental leader who still takes a strong stand for righteousness and a clear position against wrong, said this of his past behavior: "I would see something move in the bushes, so I would turn and shoot. Then a wounded brother would walk out."

We need to be careful that we are convert-makers and not heretic hunters:

- ☐ As we deal with our children. The word "discipline" carries the idea of producing correct behavior, not simply punishing wrong behavior. It is easy for us as parents to become so zealous in pointing out error that we discourage the doing of right.
- ☐ As we deal with disgruntled church members. The heart of the shepherd is never to drive away the sheep. Some may leave. Some will be killed by the wolves. And on a rare occasion, for the good of the rest of the flock, some must be removed. Our heart, however, must always be to help correct the problem if that is at all possible.
- ☐ As we who are strong deal with a weaker brother. "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." (Galatians 6:1)