**Heretic!**

Since I went public with the fact that I believe in the ultimate restoration of all mankind, a number of people have said or implied that I am a heretic, and I’m sure many others think it. I would have to say that my belief does fit the dictionary definition of *heresy*:

dissent or deviation from a dominant theory, opinion, or practice; adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma (Merriam-Webster)

opinion or doctrine at variance with the orthodox or accepted doctrine, especially of a church or religious system; any belief or theory that is strongly at variance with established beliefs, customs, etc. (dictionary.com)

any opinion or belief that is or is thought to be contrary to official or established theory (World English Dictionary)

A belief or teaching considered unacceptable by a religious group (The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy)

Yes, the belief that God will ultimately redeem all mankind (not just the “elect” or not just those who trust Christ before they die) does go contrary to centuries of church dogma and is considered unacceptable by the majority of Christians today. So by definition I am guilty as charged.

But let’s go a little deeper. The term *heresy* is a loaded word, so let’s look very carefully at what it means, what it implies, and what our response should be. What does the Bible say about heresy? What has the word come to mean? Who is a heretic? How should such a person be treated?

The words *heresy* (Greek: ς*hairesis*) and *heretic* (Greek: ς*hairetikos*) come from a root meaning “to choose.” In the New Testament the word ς often refers to a religious sect or party that has separated itself from the mainstream, like the sect of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17), the party of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5), the Nazarene sect (Acts 24:5), or the Christians (Acts 28:22).

Paul himself was part of a group deemed a “heresy”:

However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect (). I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets (Acts 24:14, NIV).

Paul was considered a “heretic” by the religious leaders of his day, though he believed “every­thing that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets”! And lest anyone accuse me of leaving out the rest of his words, let me be the first to quote the whole passage:

However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man (Acts 24:14-16).

Someone might say, “Aha! He believes in the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. You don’t believe that the wicked will rise to face eternal condemnation.” No, I don’t believe that the wicked will be forever damned, but I do believe there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. I want to be the kind of “heretic” Paul was—someone who worships God as a follower of the Way, who believes everything in accordance with Scripture, who hopes in God, who looks forward to the final resurrection, and who strives to keep a clear conscience before God and man.

But sometimes the word *heresy* or *heretic* is used in a more sinister way. Paul included heresies among the acts of the flesh, which disqualify a person from inheriting the kingdom of God:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (ς) and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

Paul also warned Titus about divisive or factious people in strong terms:

But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division (θ), after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Tit. 3:9-11).

He calls such people warped and sinful and self-condemned, and told Titus to have nothing to do with them. In this context it seems that “heretics” are those who cause division in the body of Christ. Apparently they were undermining the important message that Paul was trying to emphasize in the preceding verses:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people (Tit. 3:4-8).

### Peter also warns about false prophets and false teachers and the heresies they introduce:

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies (ς), even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping (2 Pet. 2:1-3).

These people are guilty of “denying the sovereign Lord who bought them,” following “depraved conduct,” bringing “the way of truth into disrepute,” and acting with greed and deception. This passage connects the idea of heresies with the false prophets and false teachers who introduce them, so we should also look at the biblical teaching on false prophets and teachers.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament issues severe warnings against false prophets. Jesus said to watch out for them because they might look like sheep but inwardly they are ferocious wolves (Mt. 7:15). He said that in the endtimes many false prophets would appear and would deceive many people (Mt. 24:11). John also warned of them and told how to recognize them:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (1 Jn. 4:1-3).

It seems that false teachers were a problem in Timothy’s church, because Paul mentions them several times in his letters to the young pastor, beginning with the opening of 1 Timothy 1:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm (1 Tim. 1:3-7).

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain (1 Tim. 6:3-5).

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith (1 Tim. 6:20-21).

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people…. [T]hese teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone (2 Tim. 3:1-8).

As the introduction to 1 Timothy in the ESV Study Bible points out, “false teachers are the primary occasion for the letter,” but the exact nature of the false teaching is not identified. What really matters is the fruit:

Paul’s real concern is with the results of the false teaching—for example promoting speculations (1:4; 6:4), arrogance (6:4), and greed (6:5-10). Paul addresses the content of the false teaching only in passing but focuses on the fact that true Christianity is evidenced by lifestyles shaped by the gospel. Those whose lives are not shaped by the gospel show that they have turned away from the faith (ESV Study Bible, p. 2322).

With these passages and observations in mind, how can we identify heretics, false teachers, and false prophets? Not all of them will have all of the characteristics, but here are some red flags: divisiveness, immorality, foolish quarrels, depraved conduct, lack of love, seared conscience, arrogance, slander, selfishness, denial that Jesus has come in the flesh, denial of His work on the cross, abandonment of the faith, greed, exploitation, maliciousness, hypocrisy, deception. One tip-off as to whether a teaching is false is that it maligns the name of Christ and His work on the cross. Another is that it produces ugly fruit in one’s life.

So how can we evaluate Evangelical Universalism against the biblical understanding of heresy? I’ve already acknowledged that I fit the dictionary definition of a heretic, and I *want* to be a “heretic” in the same way that Paul was. But am I a heretic in the biblical sense of one who has departed from the faith and bears bad fruit? Judge for yourself—from what I have written, and for those who know me, by the way I live.

Like most Evangelical Universalists, I hold a very high view of Scripture, a very high view of the character of God, a very high view of the Person of Christ, a very high view of the cross, a very strong view of sin and judgment, a very strong desire to live a godly life, and a very strong desire to share the gospel. You would be hard-pressed to find anything I have written that has no basis whatsoever in Scripture. I have made every effort to base my beliefs not on my own feelings or thoughts or wishes but on God’s revealed Word. You may disagree with my interpretation, my emphasis, or how I put it all together, but you can’t deny that I have taken the Bible as my source of authority. As [Robin Parry](http://evangelicaluniversalist.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=45&t=1523) has stated, the debate between those who hold to a traditional view of eternal damnation and those who believe that God will reconcile all to Himself “is not a debate between Bible-believing Christians (traditionalists) and ‘liberals’ (universalists). It is, to a large extent, a debate between two sets of Bible-believing Christians on how best to understand scripture.”

As Parry recognizes and as I wrote in “[Heaven: We Have a Problem](http://blogs.christianpost.com/ambassador-of-reconciliation/heaven-we-have-a-problem-what-does-the-bible-say-about-heaven-and-who-goes-there-7290/),” there are seemingly contradictory threads in Scripture: some that seem to affirm universalism and some that seem to deny it. Those who do not think the Bible is inspired can pick and choose which ones to believe, but as Parry says, those of us who believe in the inspiration of Scripture have different ways of holding these truths in tension:

At the heart of the biblical debate is how we hold these two threads together. Do we start with the hell passages and reread the universalist texts in the light of them? That is the traditional route. Or, do we start with universalist passages and reinterpret the hell texts in the light of them? That is what many universalists do.

I know how to subordinate my own thoughts and desires to God’s Word; I did it for decades with respect to eternal damnation. It never felt right to me, but I learned to suck it up and just believe it because I thought you *had* to believe it in order to be faithful to Scripture. I am so thankful that I no longer need to squelch my God-given sense of reason, justice, and compassion. I still do not let my mind, my conscience, or my heart override God’s revealed truth, but now that I believe God will accomplish complete restoration of His creation, my faith has soared and my heart is at peace. If I get called a heretic for it, so be it.

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