
Don't be so right you're wrong

Many of our discussions of theology are really heresy games where players seek to win prestige, power, or advantage over each other.

by Paul G. Hiebert

The Sunday school class settles down, and someone reads aloud the Scripture assigned for study. Then the teacher asks, "Would anyone like to share any new thoughts on today's Word?" All week you've been considering the passage, so you volunteer the original interpretation you came up with last night.

It's a little bit out on a limb, and you're not too sure of it. But the class urges you on, until suddenly you've gone too far. Someone cries *heretic* or words to that effect. Without being aware of it, you've been caught in the middle of a *heresy game*.

What is heresy? The word (from the Greek *hairesis*, a "choice") has three primary meanings in the New Testament: (1) a chosen course of thought

and action; hence a party or sect such as the Sadducees (Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22); (2) dissensions arising from diverse opinions and aims (Gal. 5:20; 1 Cor. 11:19); and (3) doctrinal departures from revealed truth (Tit. 3:10). It was heresy of this third type against which the apostles vigorously warned the church (Acts 20:29; Phil. 3:2).

In contrast to this serious concern for the preservation of the truth, there is what we may call the heresy game.

We often use social relationships in order to play games, as Eric Berne, Thomas Oden, and others have pointed out. These are characterized by two levels of interaction. On the surface, the discussions appear to be adult, serious, and task oriented. But hidden beneath is another agenda—a game in which the players seek to win personal gain in prestige, power, or advantage over one another. The ostensible goals in games are straightforward: to solve problems, deal with issues, or build relationships. The real goals are personal victories of one-up-manship.

Is it possible, in our deep concern to be right, that we Christians are caught up in heresy games? What do they look like?

Look again at the Sunday school class. If you're that unwary student, you now have two courses of action open to you. You were out on a limb; now you may grab the trunk of the "Sunday school tree" and reaffirm your orthodoxy, tacitly denying your new idea. Or you may continue to explore it. In the latter case the members of the class will most likely cut off the limb and ostracize you as a deviant. Again two courses of action are open. Confess your error and be allowed to return to the tree, or become tired of playing the game and leave.

Why do people play heresy games? Perhaps an adventurous student wants to gain a reputation as a thinker or may be looking for some form of catharsis. Others might just participate for the excitement. The real winner is the person who first cries "heretic"; he presents himself as the defender of the faith.

So the lesson of the class, when games are played, is that it's dangerous to think. The classroom, as a result, becomes a setting in

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Too many cries of heresy are directed more to the audience than to the persons accused. They attempt to show the attacker as defender of the faith.

which little learning takes place. Even if the teacher's initial question appears to be sincere, it is, in fact, an invitation to play the heresy game.

How can we detect the difference between biblical concern for heresy and the game in which participants are so right they're wrong? Here the Bible provides us with clear guidelines.

First, a genuine concern is redemptive in nature. While rejecting the heresy, it seeks most to win the person back to orthodoxy. Leon Morris writes that Jesus "made himself responsible and gathered up into his own personality all the misery resulting from sin." There is no joy at the deviation of a brother or sister, only the deepest of sorrow and a sense of our own failure when someone leaves the faith.

Behind a genuine concern for heresy, then, is the desire to redeem the person back to Christ. In heresy games, on the other hand, there is an inner glee at the fall of the heretic, a feeling that we have finally got him or her.

Second, a genuine concern for truth extends to an active per-

sonal effort to win the other. Jesus said,

"If your brother commits a sin, go and take the matter up with him, strictly between yourselves, and if he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he will not listen, take one or two others with you, so that all facts may be duly established on the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he

refuses to listen to them, report the matter to the congregation" (Mt. 18:15-17, NEB).

But such an approach is opposite to the practices of the heresy game in which the greatest personal advantage is gained by attacking—mildly or ferociously—another in public. The attack, in fact, is addressed less to the person accused than to the audience. It shows them that the attacker is playing the role of defender of the faith.

We are warned to be on guard against those who would lead the church astray (2 Thes. 2:9ff.) and this must be our deep concern. But we must guard, too, lest we play heresy games that divide the church unnecessarily and bring glory to ourselves rather than to our Lord. ○

For further reading

Caring Enough to Confront by David W. Augsburger (Regal, 1980) \$3.95. On handling conflict lovingly.

Caring Enough to Forgive by David W. Augsburger (Regal, 1981) \$4.95. Forgiveness as the beginning of reconciliation.

Faith and Its Counterfeits by Donald Bloesch (InterVarsity, 1982) \$3.95. There is such a thing as heresy both blatant and subtle. This is a field guide to the latter: legalism, formalism, humanitarianism, enthusiasm, eclecticism, and heroism.

Games People Play by Eric Berne (Ballantine, 1978) \$2.75 and *When God Says You're O.K.* by Jon Tal Murphree (InterVarsity, 1974) \$2.95. Berne presents both the technical theory and some key examples of transactional analysis, while Murphree offers a Christian context for using Berne's theory.