

The Need For A Spirit of Broad Fellowship.
What shall we do with the Heretics?

Earl Clement Davis

February, 1923¹

Lancaster, PA

The story of Demetrius, the silversmith as told in the 19th Chapter of Acts is the classic tale of heresy hunting. Never was the case stated more ungently. It deserves thoughtful reading. Yet in spite of the wisdom involved in this story, and almost countless fruitless experiences in the effort to suppress heretics and heresies, we still find ourselves today engaged more or less half-heartedly and sheepishly in the old method of branding a person as a heretic and attempting to drive him from the fold. As a whole we do not seem to be able to grasp the issue or the principle involved.

In the year 1900, Feb. 17, the scholars of the world gathered in the City of Rome, for the purpose of dedicating a monument to Giordano Bruno. Upon the very spot where the monument was erected, this same Giordano Bruno had been burned at the stake on Feb. 17, 1600, because he had taught certain ideas concerning the Universe, that are now taught in every public and private school and college in America, and, as far as I know, in the world. That is really the essence of this heresy business. Bruno flung back at his judges one of those sentences that has become classic, "You pronounce the sentence with greater fear than I receive it, perhaps."

That was a very keen remark. The spirit of the heresy hunter is at bottom, the spirit of fear and dread, the spirit of a deadly doubt as to the truthfulness of the orthodoxy that the heresy hunter would defend. It reveals a tragically faithless soul, a person whose belief rests upon external revelations and teachings. He has no faith of his own, he has not seen god, a life whole and free. He only knows that someone has believed in god, and prescribed a scheme of salvation. If anything should happen to destroy his belief in that particular event, his whole faith is gone. He becomes a soul adrift on the sea of life. He is filled with fear and dread, like a man who has staked his

¹ According to a handwritten notation on the manuscript by Earl Davis, he also read this sermon in Petersham on September 25, 1949

whole fortune in some industrial scheme, not his own, but which he has accepted on the recommendation of another. He begins to suspect the integrity of the thing because he has seen someone criticize it. He knows nothing about it. He must depend upon what his friends tell him. It is that attitude of dread and fear that is in the background of the heresy hunter's mind. Bruno hit at the heart of the issue.

At the present time we are witnessing an epidemic of heresy hunting in all circles of life's interests, state as well as church are involved, education and industry, as well. The immediate case in our minds is the controversy between the Rev. Percy Stickney Grant, for 30 years rector of the Church of the Ascension, New York, and Bishop Manning of the Diocese of New York. This is of public interest for two reasons. First because it touches upon matters that concern all Christian fellowships. Second because those concerned have made it a public issue by handling it through the newspapers.

Bishop Manning publicly called upon Mr. Grant either to recant or resign from his parish. Among other points upon which it is claimed that Mr. Grant holds and teaches views that are at variance with the accepted teachings of the Church with which he is associated are those of the deity of Christ, the Miracles, the Apostles Creed etc. Mr. Grant's views upon those and other points seem to be those commonly held [by] a large number of preachers, teachers and laymen in all Protestant denominations. There is nothing alarming about them. They were heretical about one hundred years ago, but the time has nearly come for erecting monuments in memory of the first heretics that held those views.

The real point is that the protestant denominations are so honeycombed with the ideas that Mr. Grant has expressed that the more conservative in those fellowships are filled with fear and dread, hence the cry of heresy. This cry is raised in spite of the fact that for more than a generation men with views similar to those held by Dr. Grant have been permitted to talk without being disturbed. But just now the differences are being sharply emphasized with very interesting possibilities in store for the future.

The difficulties involved are very great because of the changed view of the world. Whatever may be said to the contrary the fact remains that the general proposition of evolution, both of nature and man, is the accepted assumption of all education today, of all effective thinking, and action. It is the assumption back of all instruction in our schools and colleges.

Even in those places where the effort is being made to deny education the right to teach evolution, the effectiveness of all such efforts is destroyed by the fact that the heresy hunters themselves are saturated with ideas that are valid only on the assumption that evolution is true.

That such a change in our general view of the world is bound to influence our ideas of religion is apparent. The current disputes are evidences enough that the change is taking place. The Catholic Church provides for the incorporation of change into its system of thought and practice by its doctrine of the interpretive powers of the papacy. The pope is the authority provided by Christ (or God) to pass upon these differences. The priest has no original power. He teaches as the Church instructs. That is logical and sound, provided the premises of the Catholic Religion are accepted. But the essence of modern thinking is a denial of the premises of the Catholic Church. The essence of modern thinking is the synthesis of Heresy said that papacy 15 or more years ago. The papacy acted, and modernism was crushed.

We are now facing the same issue in the protestant Churches. But we have no mechanism, no policy, no real standards, not one to speak with authority, no court of high appeal. The reason is that we have really thrown overboard the whole system of authority religion, or religion as a supernatural revelation.

Now what happens? Dr. Grant in the process of his life comes to see that some of the old interpretations of religion are not adequate, indeed not true to reality. They represented a certain period of thought and interest. They no longer seem adequate. He honestly tells the congregation and others what he believes to be true, and why he so believes. Along comes the Bishop and tells him either to recant or resign.

Of course he cannot recant. No man can recant. Once a teacher has shown himself willing to present as truth what he no longer believes to be true, he has destroyed his efficacy as a teacher. Upon him ever after rests the suspicion as to whether he says what he says because he believes it to be true, or because someone has told him to say it. He cannot recant.

May he resign and leave the Church and fellowship in which he has grown up? That raises a question which I will state but upon which I can give only an opinion as to what I believe would be right for me. I do not care to pass judgement upon another's

problem because in the nature of the case I cannot know all the facts involved. But given a Church, a group of men and women who hold to certain beliefs that they consider very important and very precious. They are ministered to by a clergyman, who holds to beliefs which at bottom undermine all the formal ideas that the congregation cherishes. Has the clergyman a right to modify or change the teachings of the Church to which he ministers? Perhaps but only with a clear understanding of all concerned as to what he is doing. There must be no evasions, no dust-throwing, no playing with words. The language must be Ya, Ya, and Nay, Nay. Religion is the most precious value in life. There can be no playing fast and loose with it. Whether the man resign or not is a matter between him and the Church with which he is affiliated. But his teaching must be plain and straightforward, with no quibbling, no covering, no evasion.

Now many Churches have formal creeds, survivals of ancient controversies and conflicts. They are interesting, but they have no significance beyond that of being expressions of the beliefs and opinions once held by a group of men and women.

These are the sources of most of the contentions, and about which the heresy hunters gather. Four hundred years of protestant history has demonstrated that the half way measures of sectarian creeds land us in utter disintegrations, and confusion. Our hundred or more protestant sects, competing and quarrelling over words and creeds, and those hundred sects now facing still further division and conflict, do not present a spectacle particularly reassuring or dignified.

What we have been moving towards for four hundred years has been the acceptance of the principle that was fundamental in the protestant reformation, and the application of that to religious life and practice. Let the creeds of the past stand as interesting historical documents. Let the Bible stand on its merits. The value of Christianity for the world does not depend upon its origin but upon its contents and its purposes. What we need today is the spirit of Broad Toleration that will permit and encourage fellowship amid the widest diversities of opinions and beliefs. Let us widen the circle so that it will include the erstwhile heretic, and instead of trying to brand him as an outcast and person to be shunned, let us seek him out that we may learn what he has to tell us of life. After all had it not been for the heretic we would still be living in caves, victims of fear and superstition. Along the pathway of history the paths have been blazed by the heretic. Is it not time that we were intelligent enough, even if we are not generous enough to give

him his full place. The heretic of today we need. If protestant Churches are ever to attain that freedom, that intellectual honesty, that spiritual courage that is so sadly wanting and so much needed in the religious life of the times, the only way out is to boldly take the full responsibility of complete freedom of investigation and interpretation of their religious experience. Relegate to their proper place as interesting and valuable documents the creeds and other divisive standards. To make a creed, that no one but a trained and widely read scholar can understand, the basis of church fellowship, or an integral part of public worship is but to continue the process of disintegration which has so impoverished Protestantism, and its mission. If we are going to have creeds and authority religions let us have the real thing as set forth in the Roman Catholic Church, and not these small makeshifts. The time is here not for the revision of creeds, but for the abolition of creeds from ecclesiastical machinery, and a fellowship based upon broad toleration, with a frank and full recognition of differences of opinion and belief bound by a common tie of purpose.

"In the love of Truth and in the spirit of Jesus Christ we unite for the worship of God and the service of man."²

² This is the "Ames Covenant," written by Unitarian minister Charles Gordon Ames (1828-1912) in 1880 when he was minister of the Spring Garden Unitarian Society in Philadelphia.