864 - Bid'ah Hasanah ("Good Innovations")

the question

I have a question in the area of what is and isn't Bidaa. Over and over again I hear people terming certain actions as Bidaa. I am however confused. Correct me if I am wrong, but isn't there a hadith by Prophet Muhammed that says that anyone who introduces a new helpful hadith will be rewarded. If this is true, then why are all new inovations frowned upon.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly, we should know what "bid'ah" means according to Islamic teaching.

It is defined as: any invented way in religion that is aimed at worshipping or drawing closer to Allah. This means anything that is not referred to specifically in Sharee'ah, and for which there is no evidence (daleel) in the Quran or Sunnah, and which was not known at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his Companions. At the same time, it is quite obvious that this definition of religious inventions or innovations, which are condemned, does not include worldly inventions [such as cars and washing machines, etc. - Translator].
If your confusion has to do with an apparent contradiction between the hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah and the hadith narrated by Jareer ibn 'Abdullaah, then let us examine these two reports and find out what they mean:
Jareer ibn 'Abdullaah al-Bajali (may Allah be pleased with him) said: "The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'Whoever starts a good thing and is followed by others, will have his own reward and a reward equal to that of those who follow him, without it detracting from their reward in any way. Whoever starts a bad thing and is followed by others, will bear the burden of his own sin and a burden equal to that of those who follow him, without it detracting from their burden in any way.'" (Reported by al-Tirmidhi, no. 2675. He said, This is a

saheeh hasan hadith)

There is a story behind this hadith, which will explain what "whoever starts a good thing" means. Imaam Muslim reported this story from Jareer ibn 'Abdullaah, who also narrated the hadith itself. He said: "Some people from the Bedouin came to the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), wearing woollen garments. He saw that they were in bad shape and in desperate need, so he urged the people to give them charity. They people were very slow to respond, and it could be seen in his face (that he was upset). Then a man of the Ansaar brought a package of silver, then another came, and another and another, and his face was filled with joy. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'Whoever starts a good thing in Islam, and others do likewise after him, there will be written for him a reward like that of those who followed him, without it detracting in the least from their reward. Whoever starts a bad thing in Islam, and others do likewise after him, there will be written for him a burden of sin like that of those who followed him, without it detracting in the least from their burden.'" (Reported by Muslim, no. 1017)

Further explanation may be found in a report recorded by An-Nasa'i, also from Jareer ibn 'Abdullah, may Allah be pleased with him, who said: "We were with the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) early one day, when some people who were almost naked (not dressed properly) and barefoot, with their swords by their sides, came to him. Most, if not all of them, were of (the tribe of) Mudar. The Messenger's face changed when he saw how poor they were (i.e., he became upset). He went into (his house), then he came out and ordered Bilaal to give the call to prayer. He led the people in prayer, then he addressed them, saying: 'O people, "be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person, and from him He created his wife, and from them both he created many men and women, and fear Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship)" [al-Nisaa' 4:1].

"Fear Allah, and keep your duty to Him. And let every person look to what he has sent forth for the morrow" [al-Hashr 59:18].

Let a man give charity from his dinars, his dirhams, his clothing, his wheat or his dates - even if it is only half a date.' A man from the Ansaar brought a package which he could hardly carry in his

hand, then another and another came, until there were two piles, of food and clothing, and I saw the face of the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) beaming with joy. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'Whoever starts a good thing in Islam will have his own reward and a reward equal to that of those who follow him, without it detracting in the least from their reward, and whoever starts a bad thing in Islam will have to bear the burden of his own sin and a burden equal to that of those who followed him, without it detracting in the least from their burden. (Reported by An-Nasa'i in al-Mujtaba: Kitaab al-Zakaat, Bab al-Tahreed 'ala al-Sadaqah).

From the context of the story, it is clear that what is meant by the words "whoever starts a good thing (sunnah hasanah) in Islam" means: Whoever revives a part of the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), or teaches it to others, or commands others to follow it, or acts according to it so that others see him or hear about it and follow his example. This is also indicated by the hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah, may Allah be pleased with him, who said: "A man came to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), and he urged the people to give him charity. A man said: 'I have such-and-such,' and there was no person left in the gathering who did not give something in charity to him, whether it was a large amount or a little. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'Whoever starts something good, and others follow his lead, will have a complete reward and a reward like that of those who followed him, without it detracting in the least from their reward. Whoever starts something bad, and others follow his lead, will bear a complete burden of sin, and a burden like that of those who followed him, without it detracting in the least from their burden. (Reported by Ibn Maaajah in al-Sunan, no. 204)

It should be clear from the above, with no room for doubt, that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was not allowing innovation in matters of deen (religion), nor was he opening the door to what some people call "bid'ah hasanah," for the following reasons:

1. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) stated repeatedly that: "Every newly-invented thing is a bid'ah (innovation), every bid'ah is a going astray, and every going astray will be in the Fire." (Reported by An-Nasa'i in al-Sunan, Salaat al-'Eedayn, Baab kayfa

al-Khutbah). Reports with the same meaning were narrated via Jaabir (may Allah be pleased with him) by Ahmad, via al-'Irbaad ibn Saariyah by Abu Dawud and via Ibn Mas'ood (may Allah be pleased with him) by Ibn Maajah.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) used to say, when beginning a khutbah (sermon): " The best of speech is the Book of Allah and the best of guidance is the guidance of Muhammad. The worst of things are those which are newly-invented, and every innovation is a going astray" (reported by Muslim, no. 867)

If every bid'ah is a going astray, how can some people then say that there is such a thing in Islam as "bid'ah hasanah"? By Allah, this is an obvious contradiction of the statement and warning of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

2. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) stated that whoever innovates something new in the deen (religion) will have his deed rejected, and Allah will not accept it, as is stated in the hadith narrated by 'Aa'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her), who said: "The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'Whoever innovates something in this matter of ours that is not a part of it will have it rejected.'" (Reported by al-Bukhaari, Fath al-Baari, no. 2697). How can anybody then say that bid'ah is acceptable and it is permitted to follow it?
3. When a person innovates something and adds to the deen something that does not belong to it, he is implying a number of bad things, each worse than the last, for example:

- That the religion is lacking, that Allah did not complete and perfect it, and that there is room for improvement. This clearly contradicts the statement in the Quran (interpretation of the meaning): " This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion" [al-Maa'idah 5:3]
- That the religion remained imperfect from the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) until the time when this innovator came along and completed it with his own ideas.
- That the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was "guilty" of either of two things: either he was ignorant of this "good innovation," or he knew about it but concealed it, thus letting his ummah down by not conveying it.

- That the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), his Companions and the righteous salaf (early generations) missed out on the reward of this "good innovation" - until this innovator came along and earned it for himself, despite the fact that he should say to himself, "If it was truly good, they would have been the first to do it."
- Opening the door to bid'ah leads to changing the deen (religion) and opens the way for personal whims and opinions, because every innovator implies that what he is introducing is something good, so whose opinion are we supposed to follow, and which of them should we take as a leader?
- Following bid'ah leads to the cancelling out of sunnah practices and the ways of the salaf. Real life bears witness that whenever a bid'ah is followed, a sunnah practice dies out; the reverse is also true.

We ask Allah to save us from the misguidance of personal whims and from all trials whether they are open or secret. And Allah knows best.