

"Whatever Happened to Heresy?"
Article #3: "A Biblical Approach in
Dealing with Heretics"

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We concluded our second article in this series by suggesting that our next article will look at several contemporary "sons of the church" who have gone astray.

However, it seems wise to tackle that aspect of the subject at a later time. In this installment, we want to look at the biblical material on identifying and responding to those who teach heterodoxy (material which is "other than" orthodoxy). First we will notice some of the factors as to how heresy happens, then we will look at some of the biblical descriptions of false teachers. Last we will examine how heretics can be prevented.

How Heresy Happens

In our first article, we suggested that the proliferation of choice might be one reason why some choose to go with aberrant, rather than biblical, teaching. We should never underestimate our innate desire to go our own way, to twist the truth of God, to abandon the doctrines of the faith. As we

will see later, those who lead the people of God have the responsibility to warn the people of God to be faithful to the "once-for-all-delivered-to-the-saints' faith" (Jude 3).

Several biblical passages give us further insight into the why of false teaching. For example, we read in II Thessalonians 3:14 that there were some who refused to listen to the Apostles as they taught the truths of God. Paul writes, "If anyone does not obey our instructions in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed." This turning away from biblical authority is an act of disobedience. That person is not to be ignored, but taken note of. In fact, Paul commands that the believers not fellowship with him (as if things were fine), but rather refuse to associate with him. Why would Paul give such a command? The purpose is not to be cruel, but to bring that erring brother (or sister) to their senses, that they might realize that they are teaching things contrary to sound doctrine, "in order that he may feel ashamed."

There is much to be said about a recovery of a biblical sense of shame (Gen. 2:25; Job 10:15; Ps. 25:3; 34:5; 53:5;

119:78; Prov. 13:5, 18; Is. 42:17; 45:16; 54:4; Jer. 3:3; 6:15; 17:18; 23:40; Dan. 12:2; Rom. 1:26-27; I Cor. 1:27; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 12:2; Rev. 21:27). Have you noticed that sometimes we feel shame where we shouldn't and no shame where we should?

I recently talked to a brother in Christ who was struggling with shame for teaching a different view on what I would consider a distinctive area of doctrine. Not all doctrines are of equal weight,¹ and this was not an essential of the faith (no, I won't tell you what the issue was). He was embarrassed and felt he had to apologize to the congregation for even *suggesting* an alternative view to the one commonly held. I did not try to correct him, but was saddened that he felt shame in an area that ought to be open to various viewpoints by sincere believers.

Paul is not dealing with such a matter here in II Thessalonians 3:14. This person is rejecting apostolic authority, shown by his life of disobedience. The brother here is to be regarded not as an enemy, but rather warned as a brother (v. 15). It appears clear from this text that **heresy begins as a turning way from biblical authority.**

¹ When we view all doctrines as non-negotiable essentials, then all alternative position to ours must be thought heretical. Do we really want to say that our charismatic friends (if we are non-charismatic) are *heretics*?

A second factor as to why heresy happens is found in I Timothy 1:6. There we read, "Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk." The "these" from which these teachers have wandered away are listed in the preceding verses as love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith (v. 5). Heresy happens when people **wander away from the truth.**

Do we notice and go after wanderers in our congregations? A gradual slipping away from biblical orthodoxy is not innocent -- and believers ought to watch out for each other.

In his classic text, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis has said, "If you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?"²

Later in this article we will suggest steps that we can take to minimize heretics, but here we see a responsibility to recognize those who are slipping away from biblical truth.

Although there are certainly other factors as to why heresy happens, a third factor must not be overlooked. We read in

² (bk. 3, ch. 11).

I Timothy 4:1, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." This text certainly seems to be saying that **an openness to demonic influence** will mark some teachers and they will become instructors for the Evil One. What makes us think that all theological error comes only from fallible human beings and their own thought processes? If there is indeed a fallen, rebellious archangel who hates God and despises the people of God, then it is reasonable to expect him to continue his propaganda campaign through those open to his influence.³

Satan discloses himself in Genesis 3 as one who wants human beings to question the Word of God, to doubt God's goodness, and to choose for themselves how they will conduct their lives. His methods have not changed all that much in the long history of our planet. Why should they? Human beings seem quite pliable to his perversions of God's truth.

The Character of Heretics

There are six biblical texts which we will look at which describe false teachers

³ It is interesting that two major religions of our day, Mormonism and Islam, both connect their origins to angelic appearances experienced by their early leaders.

and their character. I Timothy 1:19 says that they reject "faith and a good conscience" and have shipwrecked their faith. **Heretics deny an external biblical creed and an internal God-given conscience.**

I've never experienced a shipwreck, although I once capsized my brother's brand new sailing boat. My wife-to-be and I were dressed in our Sunday clothes when my brother insisted I take her out to the middle of the lake, to impress her, I assume. I did not know how to sail a sailboat. As soon as a stiff wind came along, I held onto the rope thingy, and we were upside down in the middle of the lake faster than you can say Ted Turner. We treaded water, righted the sailboat, and somehow got back to shore. I knew she was the one for me because she didn't get furious at what I had done. We've been treading the waters of life for the last forty years together.

False teachers wreck *their own lives!* They capsize their Christianity by turning away from the faith.

I Timothy 4:2-5 also speaks to the issue of the character of false teachers. There we read, "2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. 3 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. 4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."

Paul certainly does not mince words as he chastises these who have abandoned the faith and follow deceiving spirits (v. 1), does he? He refers to these men as hypocritical liars who have seared consciences and legalistically forbid God's people from enjoying what God has given to be enjoyed (marriage and food). Their rules may *sound* religious, but they are really ungrateful power-plays to manipulate the church of God. **Their consciences are insensitive to what really matters and overly sensitive to what God's goodness has given to His creatures.** It is not difficult to find cults today which go way beyond the Scriptures in their twisted views of celibacy and marriage or adopt dietary laws which are not biblical commands.

A quarrelsome spirit and a focus on finances are characteristics brought out in I Timothy 6:3-10. There we read, "3 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree

to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, 4 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 5 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. 6 But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 9 Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

There are times to fight over words (remember our discussion of the diphthong in our previous article?), aren't there? G.K. Chesterton made a great point when he said, "Why shouldn't we quarrel about a word? What is the good of words if they aren't important enough to quarrel over?" But these false teachers are not quarreling over critical issues.

We read that theirs is an "an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words." And their unhealthy interest results "in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind." We Christians are notorious for fighting over the things that don't matter and not fighting over the things that do.

I understand that the 19th Century British politician Mr. David Lloyd George once said, "The Church to which I belong is torn with a fierce dispute. One part says it is baptism *into* the name of the Father, and the other that it is baptism *in* the name of the Father. I belong to one of these parties. I feel most strongly about this. I would die for it, but I forget which it is."⁴

I Timothy 1:6 tells us that false teachers are time-wasters (they have "turned to meaningless talk"). II Timothy 2:14 says that they are word-wranglers -- they are to be warned "against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen." Life is too short to waste it listening to those who **teach falsehood or who fritter away minutes on religious minutia.**

⁴ My doctoral dissertation, "The Pneumatology of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)," Drew University, 1985, points out a number of areas of minor disputes among the early Brethren and their repercussions.

We learn in I Timothy 6: 20-21 something very significant about false teachers. There we read, "20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, 21 which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith." It seems to be a universal truth that **error wants to present itself as newly-discovered, secret information which must be added to one's faith.** The early church faced the challenges of gnosticism, a heresy that emphasized a special knowledge *in addition to* the gospel. In fact, gnosticism was an aggressive philosophy which compromised the truth of the gospel and the reality of Christ's humanity. It matters greatly what one believes and Paul tells Timothy here that these heretics are engaged in "godless chatter" and "have departed from the faith."⁵

The last characteristic we want to point out in this section concerns the **evangelistic fervor** of false teachers. They don't want to be alone in their heresies! We read in II Timothy 2:17-19, "17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and

⁵ A fascinating study is to read I John from the perspective of knowledge. Note how often John reminds his readers of their knowledge of Christ and His truth.

Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. 19 Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'"

Their false teaching is contagious, like a severe case of gangrene or a malignant cancer. They want to infect others. And, unfortunately, some Christian publishers seem to have no qualms about publishing the latest books from these who deny the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

A Prescription to Minimize Heretics

The church need not be victimized by false teachers and their Bible-denying, infectious diseases. There are at least **eight steps** which churches can and should take to combat the proliferation and success of such threats to orthodoxy. None of these steps involve militant action against them,⁶ but rather emphasize the

⁶ One can't help but think of John Calvin who apparently suggested that green wood be used in the burning of the heretic Servetus, suggesting that the slower burning wood would give the heretic more opportunity to repent of his anti-Trinitarian view.

responsibility of believers to know and defend the truth.

The first step that occurs to me from Scripture is that we must **test those who would be teachers**. We read in I Timothy 3:10 that deacons "must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." We sometimes think that deacons are responsible only for the physical facilities in a local church. But I Timothy 3 indicates that deacons "must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith" (v. 9). In I Timothy 6 Paul gives Timothy a high charge to ". . . pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you 14 to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To

him be honor and might forever. Amen.”
Making a good confession certainly involves more than, but certainly not less than, verbal orthodoxy.

Some churches, in looking for Sunday School teachers, require only that their teachers be warm and breathing. Training teachers and overseeing them is absolutely critical -- if we value our children!⁷

A second step in minimizing heretics involves **being vigilant in guarding godly doctrine**. This is a prominent theme in the Pastoral Epistles. We read in I Timothy 1 that those who spread “contrary doctrine” are in the same category as “the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious” (v. 9). They are classified with those who kill their fathers and mothers and are lumped together with murderers, adulterers, perverts, slave traders, liars and perjurers (vv. 9-10)! The gospel is described as “the gospel of the blessed God” and Paul speaks of it as that which “he entrusted to me” (v. 11). Paul commands Timothy directly to “guard what has been entrusted to your care” (I Timothy 6:20). He is obviously referring to the gospel, for he speaks of those who have “wandered from the faith” (v. 21).

⁷ Some churches have found great help in the curriculum known as *Network: The Right People, in the Right Places, for the Right Reasons, at the Right Time* by Bruce Bugbee to train believers to serve out of their giftedness.

Elders, Paul says, "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Sound doctrine has a two-fold function: the encouragement of the saints and the refutation of the non-saints!

Heretical doctrine, Scripture emphasizes, is not merely a verbal sin. Not only are we to test those who would be teachers and be vigilant in guarding godly doctrine, we should also **challenge ungodly conduct**. We read in II Timothy 3 about the behavior of those who give us biblical belief: "1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. 6 They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, 7 always learning

but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. 8 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. 9 But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone."

What is the ungodly conduct of false teachers in this passage? First, they are "lovers of themselves" (v. 2). There is a biblical kind of self-love, but this isn't it. Their self-love manifests itself in a boastful and proud attitude, an abusive disobedience to their parents, and a mistreatment of others ("without love, unforgiving, slanderous," etc.). They have chosen to love pleasure more than the God who gives pleasure (v. 4).⁸ They have an appearance of godliness, but it is bogus. They "worm their way into homes" (v. 6) and go after the weak in Christian society (the "gullible women" of v. 6). They are marked by opposition to God-appointed leadership (v. 8). Their behavior betrays their "depraved minds" (v. 8) and their foolishness will eventually be made clear to everyone (v. 9).

⁸ Philip Yancey's excellent article, "The Problem of Pleasure," makes a strong case for the existence of God from the perspective of the presence of pleasure. This essay is found in his *I Was Just Wondering* (Eerdmans, 1998).

We should test those who teach, guard godly doctrine, and challenge ungodly conduct. Notice that we should also **warn, warn again, then shun such teachers.** II Timothy 2:23-26 says, "23 Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. 24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. 25 Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." Timothy is told to have nothing to do with foolish and *stupid* arguments. Don't you just love the word "stupid"? We don't use it nearly enough when it comes to false teachers and their gospel-denying nonsense!

Attempting to gently instruct doctrinal opponents is commendable. But what happens when they will not listen? What should happen when they refuse to "come to their senses" and aren't interested in escaping "the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (v. 26)?

We learn in II Thessalonians 3:14-15 that false teachers are to be taken special note of in light of their refusing to obey

apostolic instruction. These believers are commanded: "Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed." (v. 14). However, such people are not to be considered enemies, but to be warned "as you would a fellow believer" (v. 15).

One other text deals with this issue of warning false teachers. In Titus 3:9-11 we read, "9 But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. 10 Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. 11 You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned." I call this text the "three-strikes-and-you're-out" command. These teachers are majoring in foolish controversies and arguments and quarrels which are unprofitable and useless. Titus is to warn such false teachers twice; after that, he is to "have nothing to do with them" (v. 10).

One might ask, "What is meant by 'have nothing to do with them'?" We can certainly say that their divisive teaching should not be ignored or that we can have fellowship with them, even though we have different "opinions." No! "Have nothing to do with them" clearly means not to let

them get away with their useless disturbing of the saints. And it would appear that *any meeting* with these individuals ought to have one and only one matter on the agenda: a confession of their error for the purpose of a repentant return to God's people.

What other steps are given us in minimizing heretics? Texts such as I Timothy 1:20 indicate that **we are not to allow false teachers to remain anonymous**. Paul is not hesitant to name names. He writes that among these false teachers "are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." Why are we so reluctant to name false teachers, to call them out and challenge them to return to biblical orthodoxy? Is it because we are not sure what biblical orthodoxy *is*? Do we have no courage to name names and warn the saints about those who display wolf-like qualities and are seeking to gobble up God's sheep (see Acts 20)?

A sixth step in minimizing heretics is that **we should not underestimate the cancerous effect of contrary doctrine**. We read in II Timothy 2:17 that "Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus" Notice that Paul names these two men and describes their teaching as a spreading

gangrene. Leaving them alone is not an option for those who care about the spiritual health of the Body of believers.

A seventh step may sound strange, but I believe the Bible teaches that **we should beware of the ailment known as "aural psoriasis."** Here I am thinking of II Timothy 4:3-5 where we read, "3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry." Although there is much in this passage, please notice the expression "itching ears" in verse 3. That's what I mean by "aural psoriasis." One of the great occupational hazards of those who preach and teach is that they will speak only on the topics that people want to hear, scratching only where people think they itch. I appreciate the preacher who described his job as comforting the afflicted, and *afflicting* the comfortable!

In the Brethren assemblies, I would suggest we have great potential for making sure we proclaim the whole counsel of God.

If we hold to a plurality of elder-leadership, then there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors. And those who are serving as shepherds can provide guidance to those who speak and teach that they would not preach only on comfortable subjects.

The eighth and final step in minimizing heretics, I would suggest, is **don't forget to use the power of excommunication, if necessary**. We read in I Timothy 1:20 that Paul had "handed over" Hymenaeus and Alexander "to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." Wow. Most commentators suggest that Paul is referring to excommunication here. Hymenaeus and Alexander are told to leave the church and are delivered over to the realm of the Evil One, the world. This action of excommunication here is not merely punitive; it is intended to be educative. Paul's expectation appears to be that, separated from the spiritual protection of the local church, these two false teachers would recognize their evil speaking (blasphemy) against the Lord and come to their senses, repentantly rejoining the believers in fellowship. Similarly II Timothy 4:14-15 speaks of Alexander the metalworker (the same Alexander as in I Timothy 1?) who did Paul a "great deal of

harm." Paul states that "the Lord will repay him for what he has done." (v. 14). Timothy is instructed to be on his guard against Alexander's teaching which opposed Paul's gospel.

Someone has humorously said, if you're Catholic and you do something bad, you will get excommunicated. If you're Baptist and you do something bad, you will get disfellowshipped. But if you're from the assemblies and you do something bad, you'll get disassembled! It's a little difficult to laugh at that illustration too much for the history of our movement is littered with the corpses of Brethren who were "disassembled" for minor issues or personality clashes. But the errors of our past should not blind us to the necessity of taking false teaching so seriously that sometimes we will need to ask someone to leave our fellowship.

In our next installment we will look at several "sons of the church" who have either abandoned the faith, or are close to doing so.