

Damnable Heresies

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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Today, the largest body of the true church of God is rapidly being swept away by damnable heresies from the faith once delivered. Christians are warned of destructive and blasphemous doctrines being brought into the church in II Peter 2:1-3:

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive [*damnable*, KJV] heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

It is instructive for us to study these verses more closely because they show us in a general way that traitors will come from within the church and subvert many to following their carnal ways.

Peter uses the word "but" to provide a contrast with the preceding section about the "sure word of prophecy" (II Peter 1:19, KJV). These traitors to the faith are not led by the Holy Spirit as were those God inspired to write the prophecies (verse 21). The apostle immediately warns that these "false teachers" will come from within the church, or as Peter writes, "among you." The implication is that "forewarned is forearmed"! Therefore, be on guard!

In II Peter 2:2, "destructive" or "pernicious" (KJV) is more accurately translated "lascivious." *Lascivious* means "to excite to lust or lewdness." These heresies will seem to provide something we carnally consider very desirable for our well-being. But all the while the liberties (verse 19) they promise in their false teachings will be so destructive that they only serve to deny Jesus Christ (verse 1).

We find in verse 3 that the false teachers are themselves driven by covetousness. They desire to get something for themselves—power over people, possibly the perception of being a scholar, maybe popularity or money. With that motivation, they prove they are not led by the Holy Spirit.

Why are false teachings so deserving of condemnation? False teaching perverts the direction and outcome of our lives, unless we reject or repent of it, if we had once accepted it. On the other hand, possessing *true* doctrines and beliefs is of exceeding importance because what a person believes determines his attitude and conduct. Right thoughts precede right actions. Our beliefs express themselves in social relations, daily work and home life.

Alarming as II Peter 2:1-3 is, Peter neither tells us what heresy is in general, nor indicates what the future heresies will be. Besides these, he does not identify the *real* source of heresy either.

Heresy is the translation of the Greek *hairesis*—meaning literally "choice" or "selection"—which has an interesting secular as well as biblical history. Until its biblical use, it had no evil connotation. Even in the Bible, it is mostly used to refer to a party or a philosophy with which a person had chosen to identify or ally himself. Thus, *hairesis* is frequently translated "sect." In Acts, Luke applies

it to the Sadducees (5:17) and the Pharisees (15:5; 26:5). Outsiders also used *haireisis* in Acts 24:5, 14 and 28:22 to identify the Christian church.

However, when Paul and Peter's writings began circulating, *haireisis* meant a destructive element within the church that creates division through consciously formed opinions and ideas in disagreement with the orthodox teachings of the apostles. Paul condemns it in Galatians 5:20 as one of "the works of the flesh." Sometimes it is translated "factions" or "party spirit," but regardless of its translation, Paul says that people who practice such things ***will not inherit the Kingdom of God*** (verse 21)!

In the ordinary course of secular life, heresy was of little consequence; one person's opinion or choice about most things in life is just as good as another's. A person can be given any number of alternatives, any one of which he may be perfectly free to believe. However, in Christianity we are dealing with revelation, with God-given truth, with absolutes. When God's truth comes to men, we either have to accept or reject it. Thus, a heretic is a man who believes what **he wishes** to believe instead of accepting the truth of God that he *ought* to believe.

The Real Source of Heresy

From the Bible's point of view, a heresy is a lie. No matter how attractively it may be wrapped or how appealing it may be to our vanity, it is a deviation from the truth of God that promotes or actually produces schism—division—in the church.

Lies and division within the church make it very easy to identify the real source of heresy. In John 8:44 Jesus says of the Devil, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." John adds in Revelation 12:9, "So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world."

Satan introduced heresy into human life through Adam and Eve when he induced them to sin by telling them, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). They believed this perversion of God's truth, and upon sinning, the destructive course began. By being cast from the Garden of Eden, they were almost immediately separated from God. They did not live and prosper as Satan's cruel perversion led them to believe. Instead, the Devil exploited them through their innocence and desires, and through sin they became his slaves. Hundreds of years later, they died just as God said they would.

The Devil's attempts to deceive through false teaching have never stopped. Jesus warned in Mark 13:22 that, as we approach the end, it will be especially intensive; "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect." He warns that, if it is possible for us to be deceived, we will be deceived by false doctrines.

The source of false doctrine is demonic. Paul writes in I Timothy 4:1-2:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.

Paul is writing of men who listen to, consider, follow and then teach doctrines twisted from their biblical base (II Peter 3:16).

He adds in II Corinthians 11:13-15 that, though the false doctrine comes through a man, the real source is Satan. The man is just a servant:

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if *his ministers* also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works."

As far back as Leviticus 17:7, God warned through Moses that, when the Israelites sacrificed before an idol, they were really sacrificing to demons. The apostle Paul picked up on this, using it to express his concern over the behavior of some in the Corinthian church:

But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. (I Corinthians 10:20-21)

To use Paul's analogy, our spiritual diet must not be a mixture of true and false doctrines. In this area of life, a mixture produces nothing good (James 3:11-12). We must make every effort to separate the true food from the false if we are to grow and qualify for the Kingdom of God. This is a responsibility that falls on each of us—we *cannot leave it to others!* We *must* acknowledge the source of the false teaching—Satan, his demons and his false ministers—to truly appreciate the seriousness of heresy.

Like Peter, Paul warns about heresies within the church: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (I Timothy 4:1). The Greek word *planos*, translated as "deceiving" (NKJV) or "seducing" (KJV), is the same word from which we derive the English word "planet." It conveys the idea of wandering. To the astronomers of ancient Greece, the planets appeared to wander in a heaven populated by other, relatively fixed lights. Thus, evil spirits induce people to wander from the true path of God's Word. These are the principalities and powers against which we wrestle (Ephesians 6:10-12).

Heresy is not always easily detected because Satan usually camouflages the lie with a large measure of truth. He is a master of deceit. Because the world is so ignorant of God, Satan can tell them virtually anything, and they will believe it. But with us he generally does not directly challenge or obviously and blatantly misquote Scripture. His confrontation with Jesus in Matthew 4 is a classic example. He subtly twists the intent of a scripture to bend it into a wrong application or understanding. At other times, he will appeal to our vanity to get us to react to his suggestions without thinking.

The Bible gives only a few specific doctrines with which seducing spirits, heresy or false ministers are directly associated. However, do not be fooled that so few doctrines are directly mentioned with the word "heresy" attached. No doctrine is sacrosanct to demons. They will attack the people of God in *any* spiritual area. The Bible makes it very clear that demons are our major, major enemies, and deception that leads us into sin is their game!

Heresy and Apostasy

Some think that, when someone accepts heresy, he will "leave the church." That may occur on some occasions, but this confuses *hairesis* with *apostasia*. In II Thessalonians 2:3, *apostasia* is translated "falling away" in both the KJV and NKJV, giving the impression that it refers to leaving an organization. But *apostasia* means "to depart from truth"! One can remain in an organization and be departing from truth all along.

This is vitally important to us living at the end time! Notice what Paul writes in II Thessalonians 2:9-12 about this:

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the **love of the truth**, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who **did not believe the truth** but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Loving the truth so intensely that it motivates us to pursue it carefully and diligently—so much that we make it an operative part of our everyday life—will prove to be the difference between being saved and perishing in the next few years. Each of us will have to be concerned enough about the spiritual teaching we receive to search the Scriptures prayerfully and diligently to verify it (Acts 17:11). Proving all things (I Thessalonians 5:21, KJV) is so much better than lazily accepting the word of someone who *appears* to be trustworthy.

The Bible plainly indicates the thrust and purpose of Satan's heresies. The first and clearest example is shown in the account of his seduction of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1-5). His opening parry (verse 1) cast doubt on the veracity of what God had directly told them: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Genesis 2:17). When he detected they were wavering, he countered by skewering them with a bald-faced lie (Genesis 3:4).

The key is *getting a person to doubt*. It removes conviction and replaces it with uncertainty. Doubt stifles courage and promotes fear. By sinning, Adam and Eve immediately showed their faithlessness to God.

Paul writes in II Corinthians 11:3, "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." *Simplicity* means single, without ulterior motive, pure, sincere and unambiguous. *Vincent's Word Studies* (vol. 3, p. 346), defines it as "single-hearted loyalty." It is the opposite of deceit, guile, error and wandering.

Some things in God's Word are difficult to understand (II Peter 3:16), but the Bible nowhere tries to produce doubt, confusion or division by any means (I Timothy 6:3-5; II Timothy 2:14). Even Balaam knew that "God is not a man, that He should lie" (Numbers 23:19)! Jesus says, "[God's] word is truth" (John 17:17). The doctrines of God follow a logical and true sequence, locking together like a picture puzzle to comprise the true gospel.

Another factor in most heresy is that it offers something appealing to human appetites or vanity. Notice the heady appeal in the heresy Satan taught Adam and Eve:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)

Their imagination and desires built upon Satan's subtle suggestion that God was not being totally honest. If they followed the serpent's teaching, they could possess the benefits God was withholding.

We find these same basic elements in Satan's temptation of Jesus. But here the Devil also challenges Jesus to put God's Word to the test to get something for Himself (Matthew 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12). Satan is saying, "You say You believe that God cannot lie, that He will indeed do what He says. Go ahead—test Him!" Never mind that Satan twisted the spirit of Psalm 91:11-12 into what amounts to tempting God through an evil motivation.

Satan's Plan of Attack

These examples clearly show the *modus operandi* of the father of lies (John 8:44). Because he is leading, guiding and inspiring his ministers, they will be using the same basic approaches, even though they appear as angels of light. Satan hates God's law because it is the way of righteousness (Psalm 119:172). This is why the carnal mind of man is not subject to the law of God (Romans 8:7). Through his ministers' false teaching, Satan will make every effort to deceive people to break God's laws.

From what has occurred within the church of God, we can see how Satan has attacked and continues to attack through heresy.

First, he inspires a steady stream of small changes called "adjustments," "clarifications" or "refinements" to revealed and established doctrines. Several of these may slip by without notice, but the overall effect will be to begin to cast doubt on what was previously believed. Careful and disciplined submission to God will begin to slacken as people become uncertain about what is right. For a member who is becoming aware of the threatening nature of the "refinements," this is a critical juncture. He may either opt to scrutinize the changes more closely or to ignore them.

At this point Satan's ministers may "adjust" a fairly important doctrine to test the reaction of the membership. The doctrine may not be critical to salvation, but may nonetheless shed important light on the process.

Second, he inspires his ministers to make a "refinement" to the overall message of Jesus Christ and the apostles. In altering the focus of the teaching from what the Master plainly said is the message He brought from God, Satan redirects the church toward a teaching essential to salvation but not the overall goal.

Third, he moves to obscure the nature of God. This, combined with altering God's purpose, will cast a member into deep confusion about how he is supposed to conduct his life. In the Bible's first chapter, God clearly states that He created us in His image (Genesis 1:26-27), and the New Testament makes clear we are being transformed into the very image of Christ (Romans 8:29; II Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:21). But the "new" teaching changes what the Father and Son are like, and thus changes how a Christian conducts his life.

No wonder God was so angry when Israel, just after leaving Egypt, made a golden calf! "These be your gods, O Israel," they proclaimed (Exodus 32:4). The Israelites redefined the nature of God according to their own imagination! Because they felt more comfortable with a god with the nature of a calf, they rejected Genesis 1:26 in favor of a form more acceptable to the masses.

Fourth, if people are still accepting the heresies, Satan begins teaching that we no longer need to keep some of God's laws. This is especially effective if the laws chosen are ones that *seem* to give members more immediate control over their time, money and destiny. On the surface, at least, such teachings give people more freedom to make choices and appeal to their devotion to God.

Most will accept these major changes, if they are announced under the right conditions:

- When they are made at the end of an extremely long, rapid-fire sermon.
- When members are practically brain dead from too much information at one time.
- When members cannot follow the argument closely in their Bibles because of the dim light and rapid delivery.
- When the argument is camouflaged by much that is indeed true, leading the people into an agreeing attitude.

In the cold light of reality, these changes would make God look bad. Some members would question why these doctrines had never been adequately explained before. Others would wonder why God had not been powerful enough or cared enough to institute them before. Instead, they would reason, He had allowed His end-time church to suffer for generations without these wonderful teachings. But Satan lays the blame on the shoulders of the former administration which was not nearly as "scholarly" or "understanding" as the present one.

First-Century Heresy

This is exactly what happened in the first century! Notice what Paul says in II Corinthians 11:1-4, 13:

Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly—and indeed you do bear with me. For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it. . . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.

What had happened? Paul had to deal with the Corinthian congregation because they had fallen under the sway of false apostles! These false ministers had convinced many of the brethren that they knew more and better than the apostle through whom they had heard, believed, learned and been converted to the gospel. They were in the process of throwing aside what they had learned from Paul in favor of what they were hearing from these new "apostles."

Paul was not the only apostle who had to confront this problem. John writes this toward the end of the first century:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. (I John 1:1-5)

Notice his frequent use of "we" and "our." What is John doing? He was establishing his authority for what he was teaching! He is saying that what he writes in this epistle he received firsthand from Christ! During his day, false teachers were contacting Christian congregations claiming that John was a one-hundred-year-old fuddy-duddy who was "out of touch" with reality. What they were teaching was the truth, they said. John later labeled these people as antichrists (I John 2:18). His first epistle is an exhortation to reestablish their faith in the original beliefs and doctrines by and into which they had been converted.

Finally, Jude makes it abundantly clear what was happening within the first-century church:

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 3-4)

The lesson is written in the Book, recorded for our admonition. Is it being repeated, now, in our time? I think there is only one answer to that.

The Dangers of Heresy Today

A major part of the church of God is losing its uniqueness. It is blending back into the world from which it was once separated. It is no longer capable of making a witness to the world because there is nothing different for the world to hear in its message and observe in its conduct. Our distinctiveness lies in the fact that *we really do believe God, love Him and show it by keeping His commandments*—including the Sabbaths. We also show our distinctiveness in that *we really do love each other* in a warm, family relationship.

The apostatizing portion of the church is putting itself in very grave danger. Notice God's warning in Revelation 13:16-17:

[The false prophet] causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

Later, He adds:

"And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name." Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. (Revelation 14:11-12)

The mark of the Beast identifies those who are devoted to the Beast. They have given their lives in worship and obedience to him, and have received his mark. The Beast will be the leader of the new world order now forming. And ironically—tragically—members of God's church are now being led back to that world and away from keeping His commandments.

Our responsibility remains clear, however. God's Word identifies the distinctive difference between those who worship Him and those who worship the Beast. ***Those who worship God keep His commandments*** . We must do everything in our power to keep from sinking into the same spiritual vortex that has already swallowed so many. Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good! Keep God's Ten Commandments—all of them!