

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you
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Heresy and Choice

by Bob DeWaay

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.” (2Peter 2:1)

“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.” (2John 1:9)

The New Testament presents the body of teaching to which the apostles expected Christians to adhere. It is heresy — *“airesis”* in the Greek, meaning “to choose”¹— to depart from the truth that was once for all delivered to the saints (**Jude 1:3**). Anyone who decided not to abide in the teaching of Christ and His apostles and instead chose his own course of belief and practice was to be considered a heretic. For example: *“Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.” (Titus 3:10,11)* “Factious” in this passage is the Greek *“airetikon,”* which is “heretic.”

The problem today is that heresy has lost its Biblical connotation because modern thought processes have so twisted and obscured people’s understanding of truth. Those who correct erroneous teachings are now branded “witch hunters” and those who teach heretical doctrines keep getting richer and more popular. It is

ironic is that the primary “heresy” today is to label any teaching “heretical,” or to stand against heretics. The root of the problem, in my opinion, is the ascendancy of “choice” as a primary value in our modern society. It is taken for granted that to have more choices is good and to restrict one’s choices is bad. Since the Biblical word for “heresy” means “to choose,” and choice seems to be the mandate for the 1990’s, let us explore choice as it relates to truth.

The Ascendancy of Choice

Sociologist Peter Berger wrote a book in 1979 entitled, The Heretical Imperative.² His thesis is that modernity has created a situation in which religious authority and tradition have been so gutted and overturned, that people are forced to pick and choose their beliefs from a plurality of options. For much of history, the range of beliefs from which people had to choose was greatly restricted by their communal and religious situations (I am not arguing for socially constructed “reality,” but only commenting on changes brought on by modernity). For good or for bad, their options (Berger talks of “plausibility structures”) were rather limited compared to our current situation. Berger writes, *“Modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.”*³ We in America witness the exalted place “choice” has in our society. We are told that to have more choices is good. For example, abortion advocates use the term “pro-choice” because they assume that Americans will accept as “good” anything that gives them more choices.

But as Peter Berger and others have pointed out, if all of life is a choice (with no foundational ethical or moral absolutes to guide one in making choices), the result is

confusion and social degeneration. Now, who is born, when and how to die, what “gods” to follow, what gender to continue in, what gender of person to be sexually involved with (not to mention whether marriage is necessary), whether or not to work to provide for one’s self, whether to allow the people who have loved and raised one to be one’s parents, what to believe and what to do in every conceivable situation of life has become a **choice!** It is questionable whether human beings can survive this onslaught of choice. It is clearly destructive to children who are increasingly being forced into choices that they have neither the knowledge or maturity to make — and these challenges at younger and younger ages.

Defining certain choices as “wrong” elevates the value of choices and makes human life more meaningful. Conversely, defining all of life as a series of whimsical choices with no moral connotations devalues all choices and thus human existence. For example, we honor as heroes people who choose to risk their own safety to see to the well being of others. We despise those who through cowardice or selfishness abandon those who depend upon them the most to seek their own pleasures. This is part of our uniqueness as humans bearing God’s image. Would it be better if all choices were equally valid? If so, there would be no qualitative difference between a heroine like Corrie Ten Boom who risked her life to save Jewish people and Hitler who murdered millions of them.

Some people go so far as to embrace the logical absurdity that they can “choose” their own reality. I have talked to a number of people who say, “that’s your reality” as if the world that God created does not objectively exist, but is only a dim illusion in the consciousness of the individual. What ought to be obvious is that if there is no changeless, real, objective truth that every individual must face up to, there can be no orthodoxy and

consequentially no heresy. Everything is at the same time both true and false, depending on one's subjective choice. Jesus claimed that a discipleship relationship of submission to Him and His teaching would lead one to liberating truth.⁴ Choosing one's "reality" turns out to be horrible, dehumanizing bondage.

It is bondage to suppose that everything in life is an individual choice. To do so sets man up to be what he can never be — God! We are finite and fallen and do not even know what our true needs are. Faith in God means entrusting one's self entirely to God who loves us and has our best interests in mind. The fear that doing so will restrict one's options causes many to choose lesser "gods." They, on the surface, appear less restrictive. The God of the Bible said to the ancient Israelites, "*You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves*" (**Exodus 20:23**). Home made "gods" are disposable and unlikely to tell us what we do not like to hear! Now that modern man has taken to himself the "right" to choose gods, is it any surprise that those chosen "gods" tell people what they want to hear?

God's Nature and Truth

God revealed Himself to Moses as the great "I am." The New Testament shows that Jesus, as the second person of the trinity, shared God's nature. For example, "*And He was saying to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins'*" (**John 8:23,24**). In this passage and others, Jesus equated Himself with "I Am." This is a claim of deity (the "he" is not in the Greek). God's eternal existence simply **is**. God is dependent on nothing outside of Himself for His eternal being or attributes.

This means that God's existence is non-contingent — He depends on no one or no thing; nor is His eternal plan uncertain or contingent. Human

beings can choose to believe what they will, but they cannot thereby alter reality. It is heretical to claim that God is other than He has revealed Himself to be. As finite creatures, we only know God through the means He has chosen to make Himself known. These means include general revelation (the evidence seen in the creation — **Romans 1:20**) and specific revelation (what God has spoken to man through the Scriptures and the person of Christ — **Hebrews 1:1,2**). Human choices do not alter reality, they only alter one's relationship to ultimate reality. The ultimate truth to be known is God Himself. To know Him (relationally as well as cognitively) is to find the meaning and purpose of one's own existence.

However, to claim that truth,

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God's truth, is exclusive is an affront to modern consciousness. Modern man reserves the right to choose his own "reality." The idea of a transcendent God who demands the worship and honor due His name just rubs contemporary people the wrong way. The responses of the Bible to those who choose to question God's ways are also considered unsatisfactory by those who are immersed in the thought patterns of modernity. For example, "*May it never be!* [that man's unbelief alter's Gods faithfulness — **Romans 3:3**] *Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, 'That You may be justified in Your words, And prevail when You are judged.'*" (**Romans 3:4**). Or consider another answer Paul gave to this issue: "*On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?'*" (**Romans 9:20**). We have the choice of honoring God for who He is or being judged for not doing so, but we do not have the choice of proving God "wrong" or

changing His eternal, changeless nature because it does not suit our own sensibilities.

The Original Choice

I cannot help but think that this "need" to choose goes back to the original sin. God created humans with the ability to choose, therefore choosing is not evil in itself. For example, "*The Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;'*" (**Genesis 2:16**). Adam and Eve had many choices, they could "freely" eat as they saw fit. Man was also given the power of naming the animals (**Genesis 2:19**). But, there was one choice that Adam and Eve were not allowed to make without horrible consequences:

"but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (**Genesis 2:17**). It turns out that

the one forbidden choice signified more than a minor restriction of freedom in the midst of seemingly limitless choices. It stood as a clear testimony that God's glory and sovereign majesty cannot be taken by anyone's choice. Man's choices are limited.

The temptation to eat of the tree was couched in terminology that suggested that God's eternal nature and knowledge of all things was actually accessible to others. "*And the serpent said to the woman, 'You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'*" (**Genesis 3:4,5**). They hoped to sin and not die, gain secret knowledge, and become like God — all in one simple choice! The first humans rejected who God made them to be (creatures made in God's image with the capacity to fellowship with God and honor Him) in the hope of becoming who they by nature could never be — the eternal, non-contingent God who has all knowledge and power. They made a

choice and imbibed of the first heresy that in spirit lies behind all heresies — they chose to put self in the place of God.

After this choice and the ensuing curses, the whole human race was plunged into alienation and ultimate death. Each individual is born filled with desires and potential that go with bearing the image of God, though now marred and distorted by sin. People want desperately to choose for themselves anything that shows potential for meeting their perceived needs. Yet the cruelty and tyranny of sin is such that sinners are deceived, even about the matter of what they really need. Grasping for autonomous godhood, they hardly manage to live up to reasonable expectations for finite humans. The things that seem to give the most momentary pleasure turn out to be cruel taskmasters bent on destruction.

Here we should contemplate what we ought to expect from our dear

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friend “choice.” I once spoke to a homeless man who told me what a superior life he had to others. He said, “I come and go as I please, I have no boss, I am not tied down to anyone else, I make all of my own choices.” On the surface, he had a point. No one told him when to get up in the morning. He could not let anyone down, since no one depended on him. He told me that he would not even stay in homeless shelters, because they had “rules” and he refused to submit to anyone’s rules. He scavenged for everything he had. He was seemingly as close to autonomous as one can get in this world. There is one problem, God did not create us to be independent from Himself and other people. Even if one survived happily being a vagabond with no purpose, he will one day face God the Judge. Choosing to live without God is

choosing to ultimately die because knowing God is eternal life. To be without God is to be spiritually dead and facing eternal death. We eventually run out of “choices.”

God’s Choices

God chose to create man in His image. God chose to allow man to make wrong choices and suffer death as the consequence. God also chose to rescue out of the mass of lost humanity, a people who would glorify His name. This is reason enough to love Him and accept the choices He has made for us. This does not mean that we are determined or lacking real, moral choices. It means that we cannot save ourselves, and having been saved by God, we cannot claim for ourselves the right to believe or do whatever we might fancy.

This can be seen in the Old Testament: “*For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a*

people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were

more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

The people of Israel had a relationship with God because of His choice, not because of their innate superiority to all other people. However, this truth did not relieve them of their responsibilities. On the contrary, God’s choice vested His people with more responsibilities. The New Testament repeats this theme: “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into*

His marvelous light” (1Peter 2:9). We cannot “proclaim His excellencies” by continuing to walk in darkness.

God is a covenant keeping God (**Deuteronomy 7:9,10**) who also punishes those who hate Him. Those chosen by God have moral responsibilities to keep: “*Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them” (Deuteronomy 7:11).* Those chosen by God do not have the choice to believe or do just anything. God has given them an authoritative body of truth to which they must be committed. In other words, their “freedom of choice” has been curtailed. But, the good news is that God’s grace gives us a heart to love God and do His will.

This idea that God’s choosing us diminishes the range of our choices is illustrated by the marriage covenant. Both the Old and New Testaments use the marriage relationship analogously referring to God’s relationship to His covenant people. When one enters into a marriage, he or she does so out of a heart of love and commitment to a spouse. This relationship is so desirable that a person is willing to give up many freedoms to enter into it. A married person clearly has a smaller range of available choices than a single person. Every decision now has to be made in the context of another person’s needs, choices, and concerns. Comings and goings are not as “free” as they once were. But the joy of the love relationship makes it well worth it.

This has three important implications. First: a covenant relationship with God means that He is to be the primary object of our love and affection. Second: some choices that those who do not know God make without a second thought may not be legitimately available to us. Third: our relationship with God is so meaningful and fulfilling, that to not “enjoy” these choices is a small thing. Clearly there are still strong temptations from the world, the flesh and the devil. But they should be viewed as just that, temptations to be

avoided, not valid “choices.”

If God has called us to Himself, and we have confessed the Lordship of Christ in our lives, then we cannot choose to believe or do whatever strikes our fancy. Some may mock this as “Lordship Salvation,” but failure to humbly submit to Christ’s legitimate Lordship proves false the mere utterance of the words “Jesus is Lord.”⁵ That would be no more legitimate than a husband agreeing to marriage and then living as if his wife did not exist. This just simply cannot be. This is not salvation by works since our willingness to submit our beliefs and practices to the Lord is a result of regeneration, not the cause of it.

Jesus said, “*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*” (**John 14:15**). Heresy is saying, “I choose otherwise.” The following Old Testament passage also shows this idea: “*Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments*” (**Deuteronomy 7:9**). Heresy can involve choosing other gods and other loyalties to one’s own demise.

If this choosing is due to inattentiveness or ignorance, the one in error will gladly repent if shown evidence of the truth. However, if it is due to a willful lack of concern about the truth, then it is a rejection of the covenant relationship. This distinction is understood in the Scripture. For example, “*But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people*” (**Numbers 15:30**). The previous passages (**Numbers 15:22-29**) describe the means of atonement for those who sinned “**unintentionally.**”⁶ This does not mean that they were not responsible for their sin, but that they agreed that it was sin and needed atonement. The defiant ones would make no such concession. Loving the One who chose us includes rejecting heretical

beliefs and practices, thus honoring the gift of salvation.

A man came to our fellowship for a short time a couple of years ago. I noticed that he would seek out people to “indoctrinate” if he could get them to listen to him. He seemed quite eccentric, but at first he did not say anything that was blatantly wrong. Finally he came to a Bible study I was teaching and the doctrine of Christ came up. He claimed that Jesus was a created being and that the trinity consisted of three male persons dwelling in a certain geographical location in the universe. As I began to correct him by bringing appropriate Scriptures to his attention, he pronounced the “curse of God” on me and the church and marched out, never to return. I have met others who have poorly developed ideas about the biblical doctrines of Christ and the trinity, but they were eager to learn the truth and give up any erroneous teachings once they saw the weight of biblical evidence. That illustrates the differences between defiant heresy and ignorance or inattention that yields to the truth.

Avoiding Heresy by Embracing the Truth

The New Testament warns that false teachers will introduce “destructive heresies” (**2Peter 2:1**). We are commanded to contend for the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (**Jude 3**). Each of us must take these matters seriously even if it means risking popularity and “success” in the eyes of a religious world that mocks any absolute truth claims. The fact is that God has called us to Himself and has spoken authoritatively to us about the nature of that relationship. The body of the faith is unchanging and non-negotiable. We cannot choose what to believe.

We still have many choices. God has not dictated the minutiae of life. The Bible does not dictate every matter of life. God allows us many decisions to make. These make life interesting and give us opportunity to act as rational bearers of His image.

But His Lordship means that we are no longer our own, and we have the joy and eternal pleasure of living by His grace and for Him. Loving Him means loving the truth. No Christian ought to see the truth as a threat to his or her freedom. The truth is liberating to those who love it.

Sadly, every age has those who choose for themselves what to believe and refuse anyone the right to correct them biblically. I have talked to many, even pastors, who have questioned why it matters what is or is not true. Many see biblical truth and those historical creeds that accurately describe biblical truths about the nature of God and His relationship to us to be needless restraints on their freedom to choose and experiment with religious matters. This is heresy and deserves the title.

How this is applied to our lives in concrete ways is an important matter. As church history progressed, heresy became more of an issue of one’s relationship to the hierarchical structure of the church than to biblical truth. This sad development had many damaging consequences. It eventually reached the point where people who had the audacity to preach the Scriptures publicly to the people in their own languages were hunted down and killed as heretics. We will discuss these and other practical implications in the next issue.

End Notes

1. Joseph H Thayer, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, s.f. αἵρεσις, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 16.

2. Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative, (Anchor Press: Garden City, 1979).

3. *Ibid.* 28.

4. **John 8:31,32.**

5. As shown by **Matthew 7:21.**

6. This distinction is also found in the New Testament warnings about apostasy such as **Hebrews 10:26-28** which is clearly an allusion to **Numbers 15.**