

Critical Issues Commentary

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Heresy and the Doctrine of Christ 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)

These passages show that for the apostles, the key truth — that must be affirmed by orthodox believers but is denied by heretics — is the teaching of Christ. Accepting Christ and His teaching is essential to authentic Christianity. Who the “Christ” (Messiah) is and what constitutes His revealed teachings defines orthodoxy and exposes heresy. In terms of our last article, we are not free to make our own “choices” about beliefs and actions that have been prescribed for us, once for all, by Christ.¹

This is essential: we must properly denote who Christ is and what true, Biblical Christianity is. One of the difficult problems of apologetics is distancing ourselves from false teachings and practices that have carried the title “Christian.” For example, “if Christianity is true, why did the Christian church murder innocent people during the Crusades”? Who has not heard the question, “Why has so much evil been done in the name of Christianity”? The fact is that many horrible crimes have been committed in the

name of Christ. What follows will explain how we can adequately answer these questions.

What is Truly Christian?

The only way to answer this objection is to distinguish between what is called “Christian” and what is truly Christian in essence. First we need to determine if it is valid to make such a distinction or whether to do so involves the logical fallacy called “special pleading.” I contend that it is always valid, even necessary, to determine what a thing is its essence in order to differentiate it from other things that may inappropriately be assigned the same title.

For example, a triangle is defined as three non-linear points, connected by three straight lines. There is nothing to stop a person from calling a four-sided figure a “triangle” or one with no corners a triangle, but they would be wrong in doing so. They would be using the term “triangle” but failing to validly communicate the idea of a triangle.

In a more complex example, but more closely analogous to our attempt to define what is genuinely Christian, associations of people that take on a proper name also have characteristics that define them. Occasionally we hear someone say, “That is un-American.” What do they mean? Not that the person saying or doing what is being objected to is not an American citizen by birth or naturalization, but that the issue at hand is not in keeping with the historical ideals of our country. These ideals are those characterized by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Therefore, white supremacists who publicly demand that the rights of other Americans be taken away can properly be called un-American in their perspective while still retaining citizenship. Likewise, it is proper for Americans who want to portray what our country

is supposed to be about to distance themselves from such virulent hate groups.

Similarly, it is valid for Christians to look to historical, written designators to show what we are in order to distinguish what is truly Christian from anything that simply uses the name. Nothing could possibly serve this purpose better than the person and teachings of Christ, since “Christian” must at least denote a “follower of Christ.” Hence, if Christ taught that a politically powerful, hierarchical structure should be created that would take up arms and kill Jews, Moslems, and dissident Christians, then the “Crusade” objection to Christianity is valid. However, Christ taught no such thing. Therefore, those who did this were betraying the very One they claimed to serve.

We must look to Christ and His Word to understand the essence of Christianity and to determine whether people and teachings using the name are true Christians. If not, they are heretics. They have chosen to create their own set of designators and attach them to a name that has already been defined in other terms. They are trying to call a four-sided figure a “triangle.”

Who is Christ?

2John 1:9 (cited above) says that failing to “abide in the teaching of Christ” disqualifies one from claiming a relationship with Christ or the Father. There is a grammatical question about whether this means the teaching **about** Christ or the teaching Christ gave.² Either way it at least includes the teaching about the person of Christ because this was one of the key things Christ taught. One could not logically deny who Christ claimed to be (God come in the flesh) and then claim to abide in the teachings of Christ. Tragically, that is the very error many have fallen into. They say that Christ was just a good teacher, not God Incarnate. But how could he have been a good teacher and have lied about the most important matter — His own identity?

Who Christ is and the content of

His teachings are both essential to define the meaning of the term “Christian.” Peter warned that heretics would arise who deny the “Master.” One cannot tamper with the doctrine of the person and work of Christ without rightly bringing the charge of heresy.

For example, the early church fought for several hundred years against the teachings of Arius and his followers. The theme of Arianism was, “there was a time when He [Christ] was not.” The Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon were directed at correcting this and other errors that were circulating about the person of Christ. Claiming that Jesus was a created being was *defacto* a rejection of His deity.

Deity is by definition eternal and non-contingent. If the pre-existent “Logos” (John’s term in **John 1**) was not co-eternal with the Father, but came into being at a point in time, then He (the *Logos*) could not rightly be considered God. Yet Jesus claimed to be the great “I AM” (see **John 8:23, 58**) and accepted worship on several occasions. He claimed to have the authority on earth to forgive sins, which authority his critics said

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God cannot cease being who He is nor be construed in anyway as depending on something outside of Himself.

to God (**Mark 9:2-6**). Healing the paralytic showed that He had the authority that only belonged to God, thus He is God.

Therefore, those who deny the deity of Christ are rightly labeled heretics. Arianism lives on today through the Jehovah Witnesses and other cults. Mormons claim to be “Christian” but are not because they also transgress the Biblical doctrine of Christ. They claim that “godhood” is something that can be achieved, not only by Jesus, but by other male persons. This claim is false, not only because it contradicts the Bible, but because it equivocates on the

term “God.”

Let me explain. Philosophically, if God exists He must be considered “uncaused.” Either there is a supernatural, eternal cause for the universe or something not eternal came from nothing, which is impossible. This is a brief statement of the cosmological argument for the existence of God — a powerful argument that atheists have no valid means of refuting.³ All agree that if there is such an eternal, non-contingent, all-powerful creator of the universe, that being is “God.” Any created “god” does not have the essential attributes of deity and therefore does not deserve the title. Deity is never something obtained, it is either something always possessed or something that can never be gained.

This also means that deity is something that cannot be lost. If God exists at all, He is always God, not in the process of becoming something less. Why? Because whatever attributes make God who He is — eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, etc. — God has always had. He did not get them from some source outside of Himself, otherwise that other source would be God. Therefore, these attributes are eternally God’s from eternity past to eternity future. God cannot cease being who He is nor be construed in anyway as depending on something outside of Himself.

When Jesus claimed to be God, He claimed that in regard to His deity, these things are true about Him. Some heretics claimed that deity was conferred upon Jesus at His baptism. Obviously this is impossible, or He would never had been God and could never become God. Remember, becoming God is a contradiction of terms. Modern heretics of the so-called “Word of Faith” ilk have claimed that Jesus “lost” His divinity on the cross and became a mere man (no longer possessing deity) to be tortured by the devil. They say Jesus died spiritually on the cross.⁴ Deity that can be gained or lost is no deity at all. Thus

they are teaching heresy.

The Humanity of Christ

The other side of this issue is Christ’s Incarnation. This means that the pre-existent Son of God was born of a virgin and lived a sinless, human life. Gnostic heretics who believed that the material realm was evil, claimed that Jesus could not have had a real body, or else He would be evil. **1John 1:1-2** is a clear refutation of this heresy: “*What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life-- and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.*” The New Testament makes the facts of Jesus’ human life, including his death, burial and resurrection uncompromisable and indispensable elements of orthodoxy. Why? Because these events actually happened.

Listen to Paul:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

(1Corinthians 15:3-8)

Would the **idea** of a resurrection suffice? What about a “myth,” a storybook “resurrection” that inspires people but is uncumbered by historical considerations. Some assert that myths can supply meaning and purpose but need not be critically examined in the light of historical fact. By making these

clever shifts some, who would admit privately that they do not believe Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, keep celebrating “Easter” and even preach nice sermons every year about it. For some liberal versions of “Christianity,” this is like reciting the creeds with one’s fingers crossed behind their backs.

Paul places himself firmly outside of this category. He asserts, “*For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins*” (1Corinthians 15:16,17). The apostle Peter, one of the eyewitnesses to the life of Christ and who spoke to Him after His resurrection, strongly asserted that Christianity was not based up myths: “*For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty*” (2Peter 1:16). Any denial of the facts of Christ’s humanity, His sinless life, His atoning death and resurrection and His bodily ascent into heaven is rightly labeled heretical. Such would be a deviation from what Christianity is in its essence. Affirming these things but relegating them to the category of “myths” or “stories” that do not relate to concrete history is just as heretical.⁵

Who is a Christian?

A Christian is a person who believes in and is committed to follow Christ and His teachings. A Christian has confessed the Lordship of Christ and truly believes in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead (Romans 10:9). A Christian refuses to teach or preach any other Gospel than the one that was once for all delivered to the saints through Christ and His apostles (Galatians 1:8 & Jude 1:3). As shown in the first part of this article, any denial of either the deity or humanity of Christ is heretical and constitutes a denial of Christ. A Christian has been joined to the body of Christ by a supernatural act of God.⁶ Since Christ taught the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures and autho-

alized the writing of the New Testament, Christians are committed to the whole counsel of God as revealed in the Bible. This is orthodoxy.

A sad development in church history changed this understanding of orthodoxy and the body of Christ. Ultimately, this led to the hatred and persecution of Christians in the name of Christ. The development involved a redefinition of the church to mean a self-perpetuating, hierarchical, authoritarian organization that claims to be established by successors of the apostles, starting with Peter. This came to be called the Roman Catholic Church. Under its auspices, heresy was broadened to include anyone who was not a part of them, in spite of such a person’s Biblically defined orthodoxy.

The first clear case of this concerned a church leader in the third century named Novatian. Novatian wrote a document now called The Trinity that is one of the finest writings about the Biblical doctrine of God that came from that era. He wrote it before the Council of Nicea and laid down accurate ideas about the nature of the Godhead that were unrivaled in clarity elsewhere in the early church until many decades later. In this writing he refuted a number of heresies. Ironically, however, Novatian was branded a heretic.

Novatian’s crime was that, out of concern for purity and a rather rigorous approach to re-admitting the lapsed (those who had fallen away during times of persecution), he disagreed with Cornelius the Bishop of Rome⁷ and set up a separate fellowship in Rome. Cyprian of Carthage wrote scathingly against Novatian, declaring him a heretic. Cyprian viewed the unity of the church to be essential, and that this unity included one world-wide, visible organization. All those outside of that organization he considered lost. Cyprian’s most famous statement was, “He can longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother.”⁸ He called those who for any reason separated themselves from the prevailing organizational church, “blasphemers, adulterous, insane,

wicked, faithless, enemies, etc.”⁹

Given that mind set, it is no surprise that he railed against Novatian. He wrote of Novatian, “For which reason Novatian neither ought to be nor can be expected, inasmuch as he also is without the Church and acting in opposition to the peace and love of Christ, from being counted among adversaries and antichrists.”¹⁰ He was answering a question about heretics and included Novatian: “[A]s to whether, among other heretics, they also who come from Novatian ought, after his profane washing, to be baptized, and sanctified in the Catholic Church, with the lawful, and true, and only baptism of the Church.”¹¹ Those who did not receive baptism from the Catholic Church, Cyprian considered to be without the Holy Spirit.¹² How were people to be saved? — “And therefore, in order that, according to the divine arrangement and the evangelical truth, they may be able to obtain remission of sins, and to be sanctified, and to become temples of God, they must all absolutely be baptized with the baptism of the Church [those] who come from adversaries and antichrists to the Church of Christ.”¹³

Unfortunately, Cyprian’s teaching about the nature of the church was expanded upon and became normative for later Roman Catholicism.¹⁴ He thought that no matter how orthodox a person may be in presenting the Biblical doctrine of Christ, if he is not a part of “us,” he is a heretic. Cyprian’s justification for this included an allusion to Korah’s rebellion in the Old Testament.¹⁵ The idea was that Korah was a Jew who believed in the Law, but was judged because he did not accept Moses’ authority. By analogy, Novatian and company were considered under the judgement of God because they did not submit to the authority of the Catholic Church as it was at the time.

Novatian was at least as orthodox as those who branded him a heretic. What happened with Novatian is important because it laid a theological precedent for later persecution of Christians who resisted the Catholic

Church because of its unorthodox teachings and practices (ones not in keeping with those of Christ and His apostles).

Conclusion

We cannot choose for ourselves what to believe. The truth of God has been once for all delivered to the saints. Those who are truly Christian will confess and practice this truth. However, orthodoxy is not a political issue so much as a spiritual and theological one. Those who remain within the auspices of political organizations that long ago may have been founded on Biblical principles are not automatically orthodox Christians by reason of political affiliation. Conversely, those outside of old, huge religious political structures are not automatically heretical.

One's relationship to the person and teachings of Christ either validates or invalidates his or her claim to being Christian. One's relationship to organized religions bearing the name "Christian" is not the determinative factor.

End Notes

1. see "Heresy and Choice," Critical Issues Commentary, Issue 38, January/February 1997.

2. see Simon Kistemaker, "James and I-III John" New Testament Commentary, (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1986) 382. The genitive in the Greek can be either objective or subjective.

3. see Normal Geisler, Christian Apologetics, (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1976) 238-250 for a detailed description of a valid form of the cosmological argument.

4. see D. R. McConnell, A Different Gospel, (Hendrickson: Peabody, MA, 1988) 119-121 in a section entitled "Faith Christology: Spiritual Death and the Born-Again Jesus." McConnell does a good job in exposing the sources and errors of this movement.

5. Francis A. Schaeffer, The God Who is There, (Intervarsity: Downers Grove, IL) 92-99.

6. see "Why Ecumenism Cannot Produce the Unity of the Faith," Critical

Issues Commentary, Issue 37, Nov./Dec. 1996; where I give a comprehensive definition of the church.

7. Catholics call him Pope Cornelius, although when he was bishop of Rome in 250 AD the papacy as understood in later Catholic teaching did not exist.

8. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids) Vol. 5, 423. *The Treatises of Cyprian 1.6*

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. 397, *The Epistles of Cyprian, LXXV. 10*

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid. 400, *Epistles LXXV. 10*

13. Ibid., *Epistles LXXV. 11*

14. However, the matter of rebaptizing was later adjusted. The early church eventually decided that being baptized by an unrighteous bishop did not affect one's salvation. Sadly, even Novatian was confused on the matter of salvation through baptism. Novatian, Cyprian and nearly everyone else at the time had a very heightened view of baptism's efficacy for salvation. This was to have very damaging effects as church history progressed. They thought baptism saved a person, but then were unsure what to do when people sinned after being baptized. Some even waited until being on their death bed to be baptized. The Catholic church eventually developed the whole system of penance, and people lost any assurance of salvation other than through trying to do everything the church told them to do. To top it off, the Roman church came up with the idea of purgatory since by their own system hardly anyone was sure of his salvation. Purgatory supposedly gave them another chance to work things out.

15. Op. Cit. Ante-Nicene Fathers, 399. *Epistles LXXV. 8*

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