

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## Rx FOR A HEALTHY CHURCH (Part 2)

2 John 7-13

By

Steven J. Cole

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2 John Lesson 2

## Rx for a Healthy Church (Part 2) 2 John 7-13

The word *heresy* sounds outdated nowadays. It smacks of arrogance, because to accuse someone of heresy implies that *I am right* and *he is seriously wrong*. It also assumes that there is such a thing as definable truth and error in the spiritual realm. But in our day, spiritual "truth" is subjective and relative. If it's true for you, that's cool. But I have my own spiritual "truths" that work for me. So who are you to accuse me of heresy?

But before we put *heresy* in the museum as a relic from the past, we need to think carefully. There is one huge factor that renders *heresy* a valid concept, namely, the fact that *God is* and that He has revealed Himself to us through His written Word. If God exists, not as a projection of men's minds, but as the eternal Sovereign Creator of the universe, then He is the ultimate and final standard of truth. And if He has spoken to us in His Word, then as Jesus said, His Word is truth (John 17:17). Either Jesus was mistaken or lying, or God's Word *is* truth. Any deviation from His Word on core matters, such as the person and work of Jesus Christ or the way of salvation, is heresy.

Several years ago, I read an interesting book by an Episcopalian bishop, Fitzsimons Allison, titled *The Cruelty of Heresy* [Morehouse Publishing, 1994]. He wrote,

We are susceptible to heretical teachings because in one form or another, they nurture and reflect the *way we would have it be* rather than the *way God has provided*, which is infinitely better for us. As they lead us into the blind alleys of self-indulgence and escape from life, heresies pander to the most unworthy tendencies of the human heart. It is astonishing how little attention has been given to these two aspects of heresy: its cruelty and its pandering to sin. (Italics his.)

As we saw last week, the apostle John was very concerned about the truth. He uses the word five times in 2 John 1-4. I believe that John wrote this short letter to a church under the cryptic

salutation “the chosen lady and her children.” His main concern was false teachers who were traveling around, posing as Christians, but denying core truth about the person of Christ. John calls them deceivers and antichrists (v. 7). The danger was that the churches might welcome these men into their midst and provide hospitality for them. John intended to visit this church in person, but before he came he wrote this short letter to warn them against welcoming these dangerous men.

His letter gives us a prescription for a healthy church. Last week we saw (2 John 1-6) that for the church to be healthy, she must be sensitive to the life within. This involves making sure that all in the church have come to a personal saving relationship with the Father through the Son. It also involves walking in the truth, in love, and in obedience to Christ’s commandments. In 2 John 7-13, John goes on to show that...

For the church to be healthy, she must be on guard  
to the dangers without.

These false teachers originally arose from within the churches, but they had left, showing their true colors (1 John 2:19). Now, they were coming back to recruit followers. Invariably, every false cult that goes under the banner of “Christian” veers from the truth on the person and work of Jesus Christ. They may deny His humanity or His deity or His substitutionary death on the cross for sinners. Every cult denies that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So false teachings lure us in by appealing to our pride, telling us that we can save ourselves. Since pride is our prevailing sin, we are especially vulnerable. John gives us four ways to be on guard against these dangers without:

1. To be on guard to the danger of heresy, we must be realistic about the deceptive nature of it (v. 7).

Twice John calls these false teachers *deceivers* (v. 7). They didn’t come into the church with nametags identifying them as “John Doe, False Teacher.” They didn’t have an evil glint in their eyes that warned you, “This guy is evil!” They were subtle and they probably used the Bible to back up everything they said. Their explanation of things seemed to “make more sense” of doctrines that were difficult to understand.

They said, "Doesn't the Bible say that the flesh is bad? Then how could Jesus Christ have come in the flesh? That would make Him evil! So He really didn't come in the flesh. It just *seemed* that way. What actually happened is, He was just a man who was especially close to God. At His baptism, "the Christ" came upon Him. It departed from Him just prior to His crucifixion. Doesn't that make more sense than this teaching that nobody can adequately explain or understand, that Jesus is God in human flesh?"

If you deny that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, then you also have denied His atoning death on the cross. In order for His death to pay for human sins, Jesus had to be fully human, but apart from sin. For His death to pay for the sins of the human race, Jesus had to be the eternal Son of God. As Bishop Moule once said, "A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end."

John here refers to these false teachers as "deceivers" and antichrists (see also, 1 John 2:18, 22). Four main New Testament texts refer to the antichrist, although not all the texts use the term (summarized in Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John* [Erdmans/Apollos], pp. 99-100): Matthew 24/Mark 13; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 & 2 John; and, Revelation 12-13. From these passages, we can conclude that there will be an end times, world-dominating figure called "the Antichrist." In Revelation he is called "the beast" and he is given frightening power over all the earth. But before he is revealed, there will be many lesser antichrists. These religious figures deceive people so that they will not believe the truth about Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:9-12).

We need to be careful before we label someone as a false teacher, deceiver, or antichrist. It is a difficult call sometimes, because there are various levels of deception, related to the level of the consequences for those deceived. To be deceived about something related to eternal salvation is most serious, because those who fall for this deception will spend eternity in hell!

Other levels of deception may have serious consequences that fall short of eternal judgment. For example, false teaching may lead couples to divorce when sound teaching could have prevented it. False teaching about child rearing can lead to rigid, legalistic practices that damage children emotionally and spiritually. These are serious matters, because the enemy uses all levels of false teaching

to damage people. But the most serious false teaching involves the person and work of Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. We must be on guard to the danger of such deceptive teaching.

2. To be on guard to the danger of heresy, we must watch ourselves, to abide in the teaching of Christ (vv. 8-9).

There are a couple of minor textual variants with the pronouns in verse 8, but the reading of the NASB is probably correct. John urges his readers to watch themselves, “that *you* do not lose what *we* [the apostles] have accomplished, but that *you* may receive a full reward.” When John refers to “anyone who goes too far” (v. 9), he is probably alluding to the heretics. They claimed to have superior knowledge that could take you farther in your Christian life than the teaching of the apostles could do. John is sarcastically saying, “Yes, in fact the false teachers have gone so far ahead that they have left God behind them!”

“The teaching of Christ” could refer to the teaching that Jesus Himself gave us, or to the teaching of the apostles regarding Christ. But these two are really the same thing. Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and bring to their minds the things that Jesus had taught them (John 14:26). Jesus Christ is the focus of both the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament we have the essential apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ and the way of salvation through Him. If someone comes along and claims to have some “new” teaching that cannot be supported by the New Testament, he is not holding to the teaching of Christ. We need to be on guard against any so-called “new” teaching, including the recent “new perspective on Paul.”

People who do not abide in the teaching of Christ, John says, do not have God at all. By way of contrast, “the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.” Since “the teaching” refers to the truth that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine, John is saying that those who deny these essential truths about Jesus, but claim to know God, are either lying or deceived. You cannot deny the deity of Jesus and have the Father also (1 John 2:23).

John also may have had in mind Jesus’ words (John 14:23), “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love

him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.” When you embrace heresy, you necessarily abandon close fellowship with the Father and the Son. Orthodoxy is not just a matter of holding to biblical truth, but also of walking in fellowship and obedience. Since false teaching appeals to our pride, especially the pride of superior “knowledge,” embracing it invariably means falling into sin. Often false teachers embrace their erroneous views to justify their sinful habits. Embracing the truth would require repentance, which they don’t want to do.

Verses 8 & 9 show that there are two categories of people in view. In verse 8, John refers to those who lose part of their reward, but the implication is that they are truly saved. In verse 9 he refers to those who do not have God at all, and thus are not saved. Salvation is God’s free, unmerited gift to all that will receive it. It is not a reward for anything (Rom. 4:4-5). As John wrote (1 John 5:11-12), “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”

If you have received God’s gift of eternal life in Christ, the Bible teaches that there are rewards for serving Him. Jesus talked about those who have used well what He entrusted to them. They will be rewarded with more at the judgment (Matt. 25:14-28). Paul talks about those who build with wood, hay, and straw, as opposed to those who build with gold, silver, and precious stones. The wood, hay, and straw will be burned and the person will suffer a loss of rewards, “but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15).

In order to receive the full reward, John commands, “Watch yourselves....” This needs to take place on two levels. On the church-wide level, the elders are charged with guarding the flock from destructive teaching. Paul gives as a requirement for a local church elder that he hold “fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

He charged the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28), “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” He went on to warn them (20:30)

that even “from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” He wrote this to the very church that John addressed his first epistle. Paul told Timothy (1 Tim. 4:16), “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; ...” Again, there is a close relationship between sin and false teaching. If you don’t pay close attention to yourself, so that you fall into sin, you will be prone to fall into false teaching.

This means that if you have a desire to be an elder, you must also have a desire to study and know sound doctrine, so that you do not go astray and so that you can keep careful watch over the flock. This is one reason that I have taught the systematic theology course here, to help equip men who have a desire to be elders. If a man does not know the truth well, he will not be able to guard the flock from the many errors that Satan tries to introduce. Elders *must* be men who continually study God’s Word, so that they will not fall into false teaching. Elders must guard the flock.

On the personal level, you are responsible to be on guard for yourself against false teaching. Fathers (and mothers) must be on guard for their children. I am sometimes amazed at the way Christian parents allow their children to be exposed to all sorts of bad teaching, without any word of caution or any discussion about how this teaching contradicts the Bible. They let them watch movies with New Age or pantheistic concepts. Some Christian parents even send their kids to religious schools that teach a false gospel! While we cannot shelter our children from all errors, we must be diligent to teach them biblical discernment.

I’m also amazed at Christians who have no concern for sound doctrine. Some argue that since doctrine is controversial or divisive, we should not study theology. Some even think that studying theology could damage your devotion to Jesus! Years ago, I mentioned to an elder (no longer here) that another pastor and I were reading and discussing Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*. He said, “Look out! That stuff can be dangerous!” I was dumbfounded! Needless to say, that elder should not have been an elder!

Thus John says that for the church to be healthy, we must be on guard to the deceptive nature of false teaching. We must be on guard for ourselves, to abide in the teaching of Christ.

3. To be on guard to the danger of heresy, we must be careful not to encourage false teachers (vv. 10-11).

Remember, John is the apostle of love, who has just re-emphasized the need for us to love one another (v. 5). But now he says that we should not receive a false teacher into our house or even give him a greeting, because if we greet him, we participate in his evil deeds (which refers especially to his false teaching). If this letter was written to a church, then "house" may refer to the gathering of the church. But it also may have reference to showing hospitality to these false teachers by giving them food and lodging in the homes of Christians.

We need to clarify several things here. First, in that day there were inns, but they were often places of ill-repute, not suitable for the average traveler. So the church would extend hospitality to these traveling teachers. According to the norms of hospitality, the host was not only giving the guest food and lodging, but also providing patronage, guaranteeing the rest of the community that the guest was a worthy person (Kruse, pp. 213, 215-216). If you provided hospitality, you were changing the stranger's status from being under suspicion as an outsider to being a trusted guest.

Thus John says that we should not even give such teachers a greeting. To say, "God bless you," or, "Have a good day," or to call a false teacher, "brother," imparts a blessing or word of encouragement that we should not give. John is talking about those who promote damnable heresies, not to fellow believers who disagree with us over some non-essential doctrines.

As we have seen, there is an inseparable connection between truth and love. Biblical love seeks the highest good of the one loved. If a false teacher is actively involved in deceiving people about the truth, so that they go to eternal condemnation, then we are not acting in love to do anything to encourage such scoundrels in their evil deeds. John Stott observes, "If John's instruction still seems harsh, it is perhaps because his concern for the glory of the Son and the good of men's souls is greater than ours, and because 'the tolerance on which we pride ourselves' is in reality an 'indifference to truth'" (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 214; the quote within the quote comes from Neil Alexander, *The Epistles of John, Torch bible commentaries* [S.C.M. Press]). He adds (pp. 214-215),

“False teaching ... is not just an unfortunate error; it is a ‘wicked work’ .... It may send souls to eternal ruin.”

Christian leaders especially must be cautious about any behavior that would endorse or encourage false teachers. Sadly, Billy Graham has not been careful over the years about this. He has had those who deny essential doctrines sit on the platform with him at his crusades. No doubt his motive was to try to reach them, but the impression is that he endorses their ministries. I have heard him and other Christian leaders give glowing endorsements to Robert Schuller, who denies the gospel. This is the sort of thing that John is explicitly forbidding.

Should you invite Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons who knock on your door to come inside and talk? If you do, you had better be armed with the truth, because they are well-armed with error! Also, do not say or do anything to encourage them in what they are doing. They are actively recruiting souls for hell, and it would be wrong for you to give them any reason to think that you appreciate what they’re doing. I usually tell them, “I am a pastor and I know the Bible well. If you are seeking the truth, I’d be glad to talk with you. But if you’re trying to convert me, you’re wasting your time and mine.” Not many want to talk further!

John’s final word is his closing greeting, but it gives us a positive word on how to be on guard to the dangers without:

4. To be on guard to the danger of heresy, we must maintain fellowship with others who are God’s elect (vv. 12-13).

John mentions his desire to visit these brethren in person and he sends them greetings from “the children of your chosen sister” (the church from where he wrote). His aim in visiting and speaking with them face to face was “so that your [some manuscripts read “our”] joy may be made full.” There is great joy in genuine Christian fellowship, when we share in the things of God with those who have experienced His grace, mercy, and peace (v. 3).

The point is, we don’t want to become so paranoid about the dangers without that we cut ourselves off from other churches or individual Christians that love Christ and the truth. If they have come to know Christ in a saving way, then we are members of the same body. We impoverish ourselves and bring dishonor to Christ

when we draw the lines of separation too narrowly. We should accept all that Christ has chosen as His own (Rom. 15:7).

I should add that there is a difference between fellowship on an individual level and linking an entire church with other churches. For example, on the individual level, I may have fellowship with a godly Episcopalian. But it would be wrong to link our church with a denomination that endorses homosexual pastors or bishops. So we must pray for discernment in all of these situations.

### Conclusion

I conclude by giving you two practical applications. First, *familiarize yourself with the historic creeds and confessions of faith*. Many of these arose out of the need to define sound doctrine in the face of serious errors. To our detriment, Baptists typically have not been oriented towards creeds or confessions. But you should read the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Shorter and Longer Catechisms, and the London Baptist Confession of 1689 (a modern English version is on our book table, *A Faith to Confess*). Teach yourself and your children a good catechism (Spurgeon's or John Piper's: [http://www.desiringgod.org/library/what\\_we\\_believe/catechism.html](http://www.desiringgod.org/library/what_we_believe/catechism.html)).

Second, *read some books on sound doctrine*. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan] is clearly written and very helpful. Or, read Calvin's *Institutes*. Don't let the length scare you. Make it a year-long project and chip away at it. You will help immunize yourself against the destructive heresies that Satan still uses against the church.

### Application Questions

1. What criteria should we use to determine if an error is heresy or not? Where do we draw the lines?
2. How would you answer a Christian who said, "Doctrine is divisive; we should just focus on love"?
3. When we know the truth, how can we avoid the sin of pride?
4. How can we know where to draw the line of unity versus separation? How does this differ on individual and church levels?

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