

# *It Is Written*

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## *False Teaching 101*

By Steven Harper

In the religious realm, there are some men who would have us believe they are speaking the truths of God's Word but would be more properly identified as the "false teachers" they are. I know that is a 'label' that some individuals do not like to hear, but it is a Scriptural one (cf. II Peter 2:1). It seems the problem some have in calling anyone a 'false teacher' comes from an apparent misunderstanding about what makes one a 'false teacher,' but it is rarely a problem of identifying the content of what he is teaching. Right now, some are arguing that we can only know a 'false teacher' if we know his motives, but if that were true then we mere humans could never identify one as a 'false teacher' since no man can know the motives of another unless they reveal it themselves. [And when is the last time you heard anyone stand up and say, "Before I begin, I just want everyone to know I have ulterior motives behind the words I am about to say"?)]

I believe honest men will admit that a "false teacher" is not so hard to identify as some might think, but that will not be the point of today's study. Today, I would like us to consider some of the tactics of those who are propagating error. I believe this is an important study because it seems many unbelievers and even brethren are being led astray by some of the tactics we will discuss today and are apparently unaware they have been deceived or, more correctly, duped. Some are unwittingly helping foster and propagate error, believing it to be the truth!

The apostle Paul warned the Corinthian brethren to forgive and reaffirm their love for the brother whom they had chastened for wrongdoing, as Paul himself had already done, "lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices" (II Corinthians 2:6-11). Something as 'simple' as discipline can be used by Satan to divided brethren unnecessarily and, if that is true, how much more when he uses false teaching to divide brethren unnecessarily? We would do well to know how he and his ministers operate so we can more easily recognize them, expose them, and take precautionary steps to avoid them.

### **Device #1: Redirect attention to the one who questions what is being taught.**

[This can be done in several ways.] If the false teacher's doctrine is being questioned, he might say, "You are only teaching the traditional teachings, not Scripture," or [stated another way], "That's a church of Christ doctrine." He will call truth [Bible teachings and Bible passages quoted verbatim] "tradition" to try to get people to believe it is of human invention and does not come from God, diverting attention away from the fact his teaching is without Scriptural basis. This is a common fallacy of argument [diversion] and provides an easy way out of having to explain and defend one's own teaching [get the audience to look at someone else]. I have noted from my own experience that this is a favorite tactic of those who teach errant positions on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I also find it very revealing that they only make that accusation on this subject and not on any other, such as baptism, stealing, or murder. I can't recall anyone accusing another man of teaching "the traditional position on murder" but I have seen several men accused of teaching "the traditional position on marriage, divorce, and remarriage" [whatever that is]. Often, they will not even give a straight answer or a defense for what they are teaching — just accusations about what others are teaching. That is no way to find the truth!

Another way attention may be diverted to the questioner is by the false teacher impugning the

motives of the questioner and attacking his character. This, too, is a fallacy of argument [ad hominem] which diverts attention away from the subject of dispute and prevents anyone from reaching a reasoned understanding of truth. Often, at the same time the false teacher is impugning motives and calling names, he complains about the questioner impugning his motives [when only the doctrine he teaches is mentioned] and calling him names [even when it is his actual name]. To see brethren resort to these strategies is an outright shame and should be disgusting to true believers!

### **Device #2: Call the opposition 'extremists'**

This is a favorite tactic in political circles, and one being used more frequently among brethren. Why? Again, it is an easy way to divert attention away from the subject of dispute or the false teacher himself, and onto those questioning the content, application, or consequences of his teachings. If someone disagrees with teaching or practice and sound reasons are given, those who teach the false doctrines [knowing they cannot defend their teaching or practice from Scripture] will simply label the opposition as 'extremists' who are on the outer fringes of sanity and reason. This was used by brethren 40-60 years ago when they tried to defend church-supported institutions and I have found that some brethren today are now using the same tactic when they seek to defend privately-supported human institutions that are doing the work of the local church. Why can't we simply discuss the issue and leave the name-calling out of it? That will never help anyone to reach a sound and reasoned conclusion! It is a source of division and bitter feelings between brethren, though!

### **Device #3: 'I'm still studying it'**

If I teach on any subject, I would expect that some might disagree with something I have taught. I might even mistakenly teach error, though I do not intend to do so or plan on it ever happening. But if someone ever challenged me about what I was teaching, I would imagine no one would be satisfied with the response, "Well, I'm glad you asked, but I'm not going to get into a discussion on this subject because I'm still studying it." Sadly, I have heard this very response on a couple of occasions by men who had been propagating error but who also did not want to take responsibility for what they were teaching, or didn't feel they owed anyone an explanation about what they had taught; they simply wanted to teach their errors and go about their merry way, moving on and refusing to answer any further questions. Friends and brethren, this is nothing but a "cop-out." It is deception, pure and simple because while they have been "studying" for decades, they continue teaching their doctrines the whole time as if they were convicted it was the truth. Only when they are questioned do they suddenly feel unsure, and then claim the high ground of "not wanting to cause division." Meanwhile, the men who question them are maligned as "divisive" for simply trying to get a straight answer. For shame!

Friends and brethren, the tactics we have covered today are not new, and they will not go away anytime soon. As often as truth is taught, there will be someone to preach error right alongside it, but the false teacher [God's label, not mine] will always try to present himself in a favorable light while simultaneously trying to slander, malign, and impugn those who question him. Micaiah was called a "troubler of Israel" by King Ahab — the real troublemaker (I Kings 18:17, 18); the Sanhedrin accused the apostles of wrongly blaming them for the death of Jesus when they gladly welcomed it at the time (Acts 5:28; Matthew 27:25); and Paul and his cohorts were accused of turning the world upside down and rebelling against the Roman government by envious and unbelieving Jews (Acts 17:5-7). Please note that in all cases mentioned, the false teachers and persecutors were not interested in sitting down and having a rational discussion so all could come to a reasoned conclusion and discover the truth!

We should not be surprised at the tactics of false teachers because Peter has revealed some of their ways (II Peter 2). Our duty is to expose them for what they are and keep standing for the truth.