



FALSE TEACHING IN THE CHURCH

False teaching has bombarded the Church for almost 2,000 years. In recent decades, this deception has come in like a tidal wave through publishing and broadcast media. Surprisingly, false teaching has received credibility in the Christian world by its echoes from pulpits and teaching positions in churches, schools, and seminaries around the globe. The present and long-term effects on the Body of Christ are profound. Millions of professing believers, without realizing it, have accepted false teaching as truth and have placed error on a level equal to Scripture.

RECOGNIZE BIBLICAL TRUTH

Critical to identifying false teaching is a correct recognition of biblical truth. Just as government treasury agents do not focus on recognizing counterfeit currency but, instead, concentrate on knowing authentic currency, so should believers be motivated to know biblical truth. Biblical truth is reality from God's perspective as revealed in His written Word. Realizing that the Bible is unchanging, verifiable, and completely trustworthy, believers should place a daily priority on the reading and study of God's written Word.

(For a more complete study on divine truth, see [*Truth: The Measurement for All Aspects of Life and Relationships*](#).)

Logically, every aspect of "perceived truth" must *be* Truth. God's Word makes that claim about itself in Psalm 119:160, "The sum of your word is truth." In other words, when every part of Scripture is added together, the result is "Truth." Any deficiency or error in any part of the Bible would negate its claim of complete truthfulness.

Except for the Bible, what other written work dealing with life and relationships can rightfully claim to be error-free? Furthermore, can any person, belief system, or printed work be considered "true" to biblical teaching if it contradicts the Bible? Obviously, if two viewpoints contradict each other, both cannot be true.

Even though errors concerning life and relationships are presented by believers and unbelievers, scripturally equipped believers can recognize the difference between false teaching and divine truth.

DEFINITION OF FALSE TEACHING

False teaching, as defined in this article, is any perspective or statement that claims to be truthful yet contradicts what the Bible teaches.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FALSE TEACHING

False teaching exalts human wisdom and avoids or diminishes divine wisdom. When one accepts false teaching, God's unfailing, infinite wisdom is rejected and the natural, finite wisdom of fallible humans is embraced. Basically, the conflict between biblical truth and false teaching is a battle over what "source" (authority) is to be trusted. A person's authoritative source of truth for life and relationships will either be from humans (natural wisdom, typically disseminated via books, public presentations, and broadcast media) or from God (divine wisdom stated in Scripture and portrayed by Jesus Christ).

Some areas of false teaching may initially be difficult to perceive. Other subjects of false teaching are easily recognizable, especially when terms birthed by natural wisdom describe them. For example, some terms associated with false teaching are:

the "child within"
self-actualization
the "god" within you
all truth is God's truth
trust your feelings
at-one-ment
forgiving yourself
Word faith ("name it and claim it")
"truth is in the eye of the beholder"
"many roads lead to heaven"

the need for good self-esteem
the necessity to love one's self
forgiving God
healing of memories
visualization
what you think you will create
generational curses/sins
speak your desires to the universe
psychological tests reveal spiritual health
people are basically good

These and many other avenues of false teaching either originate outside the Bible or are birthed by distortions of the

scriptural text. Paradoxically, in spite of their unbiblical roots, some false perspectives claim to augment scriptural truth. This “integration” of natural wisdom and divine wisdom assumes that, somehow, God’s Word is deficient. Some extra-biblical teachings that attempt to “integrate” with Scripture are typically associated with “Christian psychology,” New Age thought, 12-step programs, and secular counseling beliefs and practices (such as psychotherapy).

SCRIPTURE IS SUFFICIENT

In spite of efforts by human wisdom to “improve” Scripture, any integration of false teaching and the truth of God’s Word is automatically deficient. Just like adding water to gasoline does not improve the quality of gasoline, nothing can be added to God’s Word to “make it better.” The Bible claims perfection and total sufficiency to deal with all aspects of life and relationships; so nothing can be added to improve its quality or benefits, as the following verses indicate:

2 Timothy 3:16-17, All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent (or complete), equipped for every good work.

Psalms 19:7-11, The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

2 Peter 1:3-4, His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

It is not surprising that God’s Word is far superior to opinions and perspectives of natural wisdom, since the Bible reveals God’s thoughts and ways.

Isaiah 55:8-11, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

The above passage could not be clearer. God’s perspectives and actions are infinitely higher than any aspect of natural wisdom. Those who expose false teaching, however, are often seen as heretical or divisive to even suggest that well-known and accepted perspectives originating from natural wisdom are not from God. Actually, from a biblical viewpoint, those who believe in and promote various aspects of false teaching are the ones promoting heresy and contributing to division.

Sadly, in the battle for biblical truth over the past 50 years, there seems to be a diminishing desire in the Body of Christ to expose false teaching, even though erroneous teaching always exalts itself above the completely sufficient truth of God’s Word. Believers need to remind one another of God’s exaltation of His Word, which was aptly stated by the psalmist thousands of years ago.

Psalms 138:2, I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.

Some Bible translations have the last phrase of the above verse stating, “For You have magnified Your word above all Your name.” Can mere human wisdom improve on what God has revealed in and by His Word? The obvious answer is “no”. . . but that has not stopped those exalting human wisdom from bringing false teaching into the church.

EXAMPLES OF FALSE TEACHING

Three examples of false teaching that have made significant inroads into the church are: (1) the “need to forgive one’s self” (2) the importance of “loving yourself” and (3) the need to possess a “good self-esteem.” Although there are no verses in Scripture that authenticate these viewpoints, many believers accept these errors as if they were scriptural and a necessity for spiritual growth.

(The errors of “forgiving one’s self,” “needing good self esteem,” and “loving yourself” are exposed on the Downloads page of

The people who teach and disseminate these three errors are some of those who “speak twisted (perverse) things” and “draw away the disciples after them,” as the Apostle Paul warned church leaders many centuries ago:

Acts 20:28-30, Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

WARNINGS AGAINST FALSE TEACHING

It is not surprising that Satan’s strategy is to bombard millions of unsuspecting Christians with worldly philosophies and self-oriented teaching. What is astonishing is the lack of discernment that believers and, especially, Christian leaders have exercised in the face of this onslaught of unbiblical teaching. Instead of opposing false teaching, many Christian leaders have embraced false teaching and have enthusiastically proclaimed it as “truth” to others.

No matter if false teaching is blatantly obvious or cleverly disguised as “truth,” the writers of the New Testament warned that believers should be on guard against such an assault. In addition to the Apostle Paul’s warning (above in Acts 20:28-30), the Apostle Peter indicated that false teaching is to be expected as a result of people discarding or distorting the word of God.

2 Peter 1:19-21, And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

False teachers have always made inroads into the church by distorting or avoiding scriptural truth. In their greed, they exploit their unsuspecting followers.

2 Peter 2:1-3, But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality; and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

What Paul and Peter warned about in the first century is running rampant in the church world today. “Savage wolves” from without (avowed opponents of Christianity) are now firmly entrenched in the church through the acceptance of their unbiblical, humanistic teaching. There are even “wolves resident within the church” who are masquerading as teachers of scriptural truth.

WHERE IN THE BIBLE DOES IT SAY THAT?

Even with the continuing avalanche of false teaching bombarding the Body of Christ, any believer can unmask errors masquerading as truth by the simple inquiry, “Where in the Bible does it say that?” Specific verse(s) that may be given by those teaching falsely to try and answer that question can be evaluated for accuracy with regard to:

- Context
- Word definitions, as defined in the original languages of the Bible
- Grammar, as used by the original authors of Scripture
- Comparison with other verses on the same subject

In 1989, the simple question, “Where in the Bible does it say that?” was a classroom “life-preserver” for about a dozen students who attended one of the most prestigious and well-known Bible colleges in America. One of the professors taught a “biblical counseling” course, relying primarily on the so-called truth of “secular counseling theories.” The students, many of whom were serious Bible students, did not know how to refute their professor biblically or to introduce scriptural perspectives into the discussions.

The students were asked, “What book was on your desks throughout the course?” They replied with the name of their course textbook, a book based primarily on secular psychology and psychotherapeutic practices. When asked about the location of their Bibles while they were in the classroom, they answered, “Under our desks.” Even though these

students carried their Bibles to every class, the professor did not reference specific verses and did not assign any homework using the Bible in the “biblical counseling” course. In an effort to bring class presentations back to Scripture, the students eagerly committed to start asking the professor, “Where in the Bible does it say that?” when he stated things that seemed to be in conflict with Scripture. The students recognized that this simple question was a great tool to encourage the use of Scripture to evaluate any subject related to life and relationships.

CHURCH LEADERS SHOULD EXPOSE FALSE TEACHING

Church elders (pastor-teachers) are to provide protection from false teaching by upholding the Word of God at all costs (Acts 20:28-30). However, in many churches, elders (or pastor-teachers) have not fulfilled their biblical mandate to protect the flock of God from false teaching.

Elders/pastors can be faithful in this regard by being oriented fully to Scripture in their own lives and warning the flock about particular subjects of false teaching. In addition to exposing these errors, church leaders should also alert fellow believers about specific people or organizations that consistently contradict scriptural truth. Many of these “error distributors” (various pastors, evangelical personalities, teachers, authors, professors, television stations, churches, and publishing companies) are adversely impacting the Body of Christ around the globe. Church leaders who responsibly protect the family of God from false teaching are not to be seen as “heresy hunters.” Instead, these leaders need to be recognized as “truth protectors.”

In alerting fellow believers, church leaders should warn about the characteristic lack or misuse of Scripture in false teaching. When those teaching falsely attempt to use specific verses, they will use them out of context, redefine words differently from their scriptural setting, disregard key grammar aspects of the original languages, and fail to present other verses that contradict their viewpoints.

A BELIEVER CAN BE EQUIPPED TO CHALLENGE FALSE TEACHING

Even though the deluge of false teaching is almost drowning undiscerning believers, it is possible for individual believers, along with church leaders, to effectively oppose unbiblical teaching. Each believer should be ready to “contend for the faith” as has been necessary down through the centuries.

Jude, verses 3-4, Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

If a believer will enter into the battle for scriptural truth, personal spiritual growth is a prerequisite. First, one needs to be a doer of the Word. This practice not only counteracts delusion (James 1:22-25), but spiritual discernment is developed (Hebrews 5:14). Biblical obedience in everyday life is basic to accurately test every teaching by God’s Word.

James 1:22-25, But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Hebrews 5:14, But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Next, followers of Christ need to test every teaching by Scripture instead of trusting the popularity or seeming “success” of teachers to be the benchmark of truth. Often, believers quote a well-known teacher/pastor/author to validate a specific viewpoint, failing to realize that divine truth’s authentication rests in God’s Word, not human perspectives. Almost 2,000 years ago, those in Berea used Scripture to evaluate teaching by no less a teacher than the Apostle Paul (Acts 17:11). This model of examining the Scriptures to determine truth also demonstrates the practical benefits of believers studying the Bible together on a regular basis.

Acts 17:11, Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Bereans, then and now, realize that Scripture is trustworthy, accurate, and completely sufficient for all matters of life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4, text printed earlier). Authentic Bereans know that any teaching that tries to “go beyond what is written” in Scripture is to be avoided, as the Apostle Paul reminded the believers in the Corinthian church.

1 Corinthians 4:6, I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

Believers who “contend for the faith” should not underestimate the formidable opposition that Satan uses to try and dilute biblical truth. For example, some television and radio stations, publishers, and other distributors are often guided simply by greed. These outlets of false teaching produce and distribute what will make them a profit. That is a marketing principle, admittedly, but with people's tendency to gather to themselves what is “naturally” appealing, these business entities are detrimental to unsuspecting and often undiscerning believers. Remember Paul's warning in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”

SPECIFIC STEPS FOR BELIEVERS TO OPPOSE FALSE TEACHING

On a personal level, any believer can oppose false teaching. If an unbeliever or a secular organization presents teaching contrary to Scripture, this teaching can be refuted publicly, either verbally or in print. Furthermore, any printed work or material communicated through the broadcast media can be evaluated by anyone.

When evaluating material for a more public refutation (especially to fellow believers), a discerning believer should specifically identify where teaching contradicts Scripture, citing chapter(s) and verse(s). It is important to remember, however, that unbelievers who present false teaching do not esteem the Bible as authoritative; so citing Scripture will make little, if any, impact on them if they continue to reject Christ. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

On the other hand, believers have God's Spirit resident within them so that their understanding can be quickened to discern truth from error. Jesus reminded His disciples of the Holy Spirit's ability to guide them into all truth that brings glory to Him.

John 14:16-17, And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

John 16:13-14, When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

With the truth of God's Word at stake, believers can also respond in a more personal manner to professing believers who teach contrary to scriptural truth. The following is based on the church discipline procedures outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. The steps described below in relation to false teaching may or may not be an actual church discipline and restoration process. That assessment would need to be made by believers in a local church concerning a person in their fellowship who was perceived to be teaching falsely. The guidance provided by the passage in Matthew chapter 18, however, presents a “road map” by which difficulties in the Body of Christ can be addressed.

Matthew 18:15-17, If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

If you, as a believer in Christ, know of an author, teacher, pastor, or fellow believer whom you believe teaches falsely, you can take a number of steps. First, judge yourself to determine that your motives for correcting another are to bring glory to God and be of benefit to your own spiritual development.

1 Corinthians 10:31, So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Matthew 7:1-5, Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Next, pray consistently for the person or organization teaching falsely.

Philippians 4:4-7, *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Additionally, just like the Bereans of the first century, join with other believers to study Scripture to determine if a specific teaching is unbiblical.

If a specific teaching is determined to contradict Scripture, offer to meet with the person who is perceived to be teaching falsely. It is understood that a meeting with an inaccessible person is next to impossible. When a meeting is not feasible, then write/email the person who is perceived to have taught falsely. Your written communication is to follow the same plan as a personal meeting. In your communication, be specific about the statements and perspectives that you believe are contrary to Scripture. Then ask, "Where in the Bible does it say that?" Prior to sending your inquiry, ask other believers to preview what you have written in order to insure Christ-honoring communication.

If you receive an answer from the professing believer who has taught falsely, you may note a lack of specific verses to support statements or perspectives based on natural wisdom. If there is no reference to any verse(s), write/email again and ask, "Where in the Bible does it say that?"

If you receive an answer that lists verses but uses them out of context, take time to reply and explain the lack of contextual accuracy. Courteously encourage a reply from the person whom you are writing. The Lord may use you in a very specific way to help another believer come back to the truth of God's Word.

If you do not receive an answer to your initial inquiry, re-submit your communication and respectfully ask for a scriptural defense of what you perceive to be false teaching. If there is still no answer, submit your correspondence to other mature believers (especially elders/pastors) and ask them to write the teacher in question to ask for the specific scriptural basis that supports his/her teaching.

If your understanding on a particular issue is affirmed to be biblically correct and you receive no response from the person teaching falsely, then other maturing fellow believers can also become involved. Individually, or as a group, they can write the teacher, publisher, school, organization, or church involved in false teaching. Such communication should focus on the error and the specific verses that contradict the false viewpoint. In love, urge those who may be able to stem the tide of false teaching to do their part in doing so. Those oriented to God's Word will respond accordingly.

James 5:19-20, *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

Those who choose to continue in false teaching and/or help spread this error should be avoided.

Romans 16:17, *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.*

Titus 3:10-11, *As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

The purpose of contacting those who teach from an unscriptural basis is to encourage them to be accountable to God's Word. When you do this, you will be doing your part to bring Scripture back to its rightful place as the sole written authority and guide for all of life and relationships. Obviously, taking specific steps to counteract false teaching will not be easy in today's culture but, with God, all things are possible. Plus, in response to the proliferation of unscriptural teaching, a discerning believer has the responsibility to protect fellow believers by exposing false teaching and identifying those who propagate it. If you or fellow believers become hesitant to refute false teaching because of a lack of training or position, remember that it is God's power (not your own) and His Word (not your verbal skills) that accomplish results for His glory.

2 Corinthians 3:5-6, *Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

2 Corinthians 4:7, *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

Romans 15:14, I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

In the process of confronting false teaching in the Body of Christ, you may ask, “What happens if elders or pastors in my church family will not be a part of the process of encouraging those teaching falsely to return to scriptural truth?” This possibility is very real, but it gives you the privilege of reminding elders and pastors that it is their biblical mandate to guard the flock from those who teach falsely. This step of loving admonishment can be a turning point for church leaders to realize the importance of their spiritual oversight of those placed under their care. On the other hand, if church leaders abdicate this responsibility, you will have to prayerfully decide whether you can remain associated with “leaders” who are more considerate for their position and, perhaps, popularity than with the Lord and His Word. Whatever decision you make in this regard must be prayerfully accomplished in love and for God’s glory, with not even a hint of self-righteousness.

As a believer in Christ, may God grant you wisdom, forthrightness, patience, mercy, and love in exalting His Word over any teaching that distorts or disregards His divine Truth.