

The Methods of False Teachers

False teachers most likely do not think they are teaching falsely, or they would stop doing it. However, zeal for what we believe can sometimes cause us to fail to examine ourselves (Rom 10:1-3; 2 Cor 13:5, 6). Spirited involvement is not sufficient unless coupled with truth. Truth with no motivating spirit is not a good thing, but false teaching, by definition, occurs when truth, at least in part, is missing, yet a motivating spirit is present (Phil 3:4-7; Jn 4:23, 24). The will of God ultimately demands the sacrifice of our own will for the sake of truth, but at times it seems that there are few who truly take to heart the meaning of a crucified self (Gal 2:20). Too commonly, some begin to search for a new interpretation of scripture rather than to simply surrender to God's will.

When men within the church begin teaching falsely, the eldership needs to recognize it and patiently deliver a gentle but firm admonition. This is why the Holy Spirit has stipulated that elders be solidly grounded in doctrine without bias and be able to refute error with temperance (Tit 1:7-9). If the false teaching persists, the church will eventually need to sharply rebuke (Tit 1:13) and mark those individuals as heretics and withdraw (Rom 16:17).

Serious problems can insidiously result if the elders themselves fail to exercise restraint in their power and do not hold to sound doctrine. Paul warns the Ephesian elders that from among the elders themselves false teachers are going to arise. No wonder he admonishes them to first be on guard for themselves (Acts 20:28-30). Ironically, the strongest area can become a weakness; the same influence to keep false doctrine out can easily become the most efficient path for error to come in. If this occurs, it is time for the church as a body to deliver a rebuke (1 Tim 5:19-21). Such action requires great courage, particularly if the elders are sternly reminding the congregation that they must submit to their rule (1 Tim 5:17, 18; Heb 13:17). A congregation accustomed to following the elders must be willing to step up to responsibility, obeying God rather than men (Acts 5:29). This is not a call to oust men over judgmental matters or treat elders with contempt or disrespect. Instead, it is a call to firmly defend the truth in patience and expose false teaching no matter who is involved and no matter what is the cost (Phil 1:16; Jude 3, 4).

The process by which false teaching typically comes to fruition is observable and is virtually predictable, as God reveals to us this process in His word. This writer has observed each one of the tactics presented here put into action.

1. Demonstrate self will

The starting point of all sin is when a man decides what he thinks is right in himself based entirely upon human reasoning or what he simply wants to believe (2 Tim 4:3; Jas 1:14). Once a thing is intuitively taken to be axiomatically true, the scriptures are then consulted with bias to find the defense for what has already been assumed. This process is somehow reverse of what it should be. It is for this reason the Holy Spirit ordains that elders be "not self-willed" (Tit 1:7). W. E. Vine relates that "self-willed" describes "one so far overvaluing any determination at which he has himself once arrived that he will not be removed from it." The man possessing this attitude will declare that he does not need to study certain Bible topics because he has already studied them, and he knows he is right.

If an elder declares that there is nothing others can say that could make him change his mind, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

2. Change word meanings

When a false assumption is compared to the actual truth of God's word, a conflict results. To resolve the conflict, the false teacher will distort the truth rather than abandon the false assumption (2 Cor 4:2). This is easily seen by illustration. Calvinism claims that, since salvation is a free gift unobtainable by works, and since it is intuitively obvious that baptism is a work, baptism is therefore not essential to salvation. The result is that every clear statement in God's word regarding baptism is distorted to fit the premise. Tritely, if a square steel peg is forced into a piece of wood having a round hole, the wood around the peg must deform to fit it.

Most commonly, the distortion of scripture is accomplished in redefining Bible words. Some examples will make this clear. On the matter of withdrawal, "disorderly" (ATAKTOS, 2 Thess 3:11) is redefined as "lazy," which limits those from whom we should withdraw. On divorce, "put asunder" (CHORIZO, Matt 19:6) is redefined as "inject strife," which means an abuser is actually doing the divorcing when he is being divorced. On remarriage, "fornication" (PORNEIA, Matt 19:9) is redefined as "lasciviousness," which means one can divorce a spouse for indecent talk or viewing pornography.

If Bible words are being made to change their meaning, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

3. Call doctrine opinion

When a false teacher misrepresents scripture in an attempt to defend his assumed doctrine, a brother is likely to call it into question. Typically, more scriptures are then distorted by the false teacher to harmonize the other previously distorted scriptures, which only results in more false doctrine (2 Tim 3:13). Eventually, the false teacher will resort to simply calling it a matter of opinion as described in Romans 14. Now if the false teacher happens to be an elder, he may think that God has given him the authority to make such a judgment and that others simply need to submit. However, doctrinal truth is not established on the word of one who happens to be ruler (1 Pet 5:3). An elder's function is not to dictate what is true but to defend what is true; he is an overseer, not a potentate.

Almost all false teachers use the "opinion" argument. Disagree with a denominationalist about instrumental music in worship, and he will say it is just your opinion. Disagree with an institutional brother about church-supported missionary societies, and he will say it is just your opinion. Calling a thing a matter of opinion does not make it a matter of opinion. Romans 14 is sorely abused today as a shelter from accountability and a license for false teaching. In the first place, the opinions of Romans 14 are of those who are weak in faith (Rom 14:1, 2; 15:1), not the spiritually mature or leaders in the church. Second, Paul makes clear that the things that are opinions are matters of indifference: things not wrong if you do and not wrong if you don't (vs 3 - 6).

The convenience of this for a false teacher is that, once a false doctrine is decreed to be only opinion, a reasonable scriptural defense for it is no longer necessary. To illustrate, suppose a weak brother believes he should not eat a certain meat or that he should regard a certain day holy (Romans 14:2-6). It doesn't matter what kind of illogical notions or silly ideas he uses to reach his conclusions, because he does no wrong either way, as long as he doesn't violate his conscience (vs 23). This is only valid, of course, if a thing is actually a matter of indifference in the first place. An elder, above all, must be able to discern what things belong to Romans 14 and what things belong to 2 John 9.

Certainly, those who are spiritually mature will also hold opinions on various matters of indifference, however, Romans 14 is not about them. Besides, if a thing is truly a matter that is neither here nor there, we should be able to discuss it openly without fear, as the apostle Paul did on occasions, clarified as such (1 Cor 7:25-28).

If an elder stresses the point without qualification that we all have the right to believe whatever opinion we want to believe as long as we keep it to ourselves, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

4. Discourage open Bible study

The next conclusion of convenience for the false teacher is that, since he is not to preach his opinions, he is presumably relieved from his obligation to publicly preach on such a matter or try to convince all others. Instead, he will teach it only privately to a limited number of people. Then, if anyone calls the false teaching into question, he can be chastised for gossiping, since it is a private matter, or chastised for seeking to bind opinions. Moreover, since the doctrine is not publicized, either by spoken or written word, it is more difficult to reprove, since there is no tangible evidence of it. This is such a cowardly tactic.

There is no such thing in scripture as some doctrinal truths that are to be taught openly and other doctrinal truths that are only to be taught privately. The gospel preacher does not get to make this choice; he must openly teach it all and to all (Matt 10:27; John 18:20; Acts 20:27). False teachers will attempt to defend this right by misapplying Romans 14:22: "The faith that you have, keep between

yourself and God" (RSV). They claim to keep the opinion to themselves, divulging it to others only when asked. First of all, as previously established, the context indicates that this faith is some personal conviction that is neither right nor wrong in itself. Second, this scripture states no exception to keeping the matter to oneself "unless someone asks." Keep it to yourself means keep it to yourself. According to this reasoning, the false teacher needs only to call his heresy "opinion" and opportunistically wait for some unsuspecting soul to voluntarily ask a question concerning it, and he can then freely teach him his false doctrine without accountability for his actions. If an elder or preacher could do this, anyone should be able to do this. This is absolutely ridiculous.

This very kind of private teaching is accurately described in scripture of those who would "secretly bring in destructive heresies" (2 Pet 2:1-3 NKJ), and it is outright condemned. Bear in mind, a heresy dressed up as an opinion is still a heresy. Peter further warns that many will be deceived and follow, being exploited. Now when a member who is privately taught such doctrine openly puts it into practice, the congregation becomes bound in fellowship with the so-called opinion. The congregation may never know what error is actually being taught and practiced among them unless they make critical inquiry. No wonder Peter declares of these false teachers, "For a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber."

If there is ever a Bible topic on which the elders shun open discussion and discourage Bible studies, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

5. Withhold information

The next logical step in the development of false doctrine grows out of this idea that elders by virtue of the office held are involved in privately disseminated information more than regular members would be. This could be especially prevalent if the elders begin serving the church also as financial advisors or marriage counselors, thinking that doing more than teaching what the Bible teaches on these subjects is part of their function as elders.

The duties of elders are well defined in scripture, and the focus is primarily upon spiritual things: overseeing the work, teaching the word, refuting false doctrine (1 Tim 3:2; 5:17; Tit 1:9-11; 1 Pet 5:1-2). Paul commissions the Ephesian elders to watch over and feed the flock (Acts 20:28). It is not with physical food that elders are to feed but with the spiritual food of God's word. In Acts 6, the apostles are devoted to ministry in the word while the appointed servants are devoted to benevolence among needy saints. This is often referenced as a guidepost for the primary distinction in function between elders and deacons. There will certainly be some pragmatic overlapping in functions, but sometimes the primary roles get confused. When only the elders are allowed to know the details concerning benevolent distributions of the church's treasury, accountability can become lost (1 Tim 5:19, 20; Heb 13:17).

If there are doctrinal decisions made in the church concerning things which the elders claim the specifics cannot be divulged, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

6. Cast doubt and confusion

The false teacher will also attempt to confuse and complicate (1 Tim 6:3, 4). In virtually every doctrinal matter in the Lord's church we can find intense debate, whether it be concerning elder qualifications, communion, withdrawal, divorce, women's roles, instrumental music, institutionalism, and so on. Whatever the issue, it can be made to look so ambiguous in the light of debate that the false teacher declares the matter cannot be known with absolute certainty. Anyone who would take a stand is considered dogmatic by those unwilling to critically investigate.

Without doubt, there are many doctrinal things which require deep study to understand. Notably, it is not merely the easy things but the hard things to understand in particular that men are condemned for distorting (2 Pet 3:16). This suggests that God expects us to understand those difficult things, and if we truly understand, we will understand alike.

If an elder or preacher suggests that there are many gray areas in doctrine and things that are not so black or white, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

7. Appeal to emotions

Further confused about his role, an elder might think that his main function is to shield the congregation from controversy rather than to openly refute error and defend truth. Presuming that controversy will cause some to become emotionally upset and leave, in the interest of maintaining numbers, controversial discussions are avoided to keep peace in the congregation. However, it is not controversy that will destroy a church but the failure to maintain sound doctrine (2 Pet 2:1-3). Working to promote peace among brethren can lead us into doctrinal error, if we allow purity of truth to be compromised in the pursuit of compassion and harmony (Jas 3:17).

Many doctrinal issues in the church are highly emotionally charged, such as withdrawal from the unruly and especially divorce. These issues affect people at their very core, and daily life for some may be utter turmoil. However, brethren who are unwilling to bend the truth even a little to allow a favorable ruling for another in duress are considered heartless and void of compassion. Although truthfully, the most compassionate thing of all will be to hold all parties to the requirements of God's law (Jam 5:19, 20). The unanimous verbal consent is that God's way is the best way, but people are too often unwilling to surrender to that concept in actual practice. Incidentally, in every divorce situation, two parties are involved, not just one. If false doctrine allows a favorable ruling for one, the other is disregarded, and that is hardly an act of compassion (Jam 2:9).

If the elders suggest that your heart of compassion should tell you a certain thing is right, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

8. Show favoritism

Emotional bias can prevail even more if the doctrine in question becomes a personal matter to the one who would presume to teach falsely. Special considerations might then be given for close friends or family members. Gospel preachers sometimes teach a certain doctrine for decades and then change their view when it finally becomes personal. There's nothing disgraceful about changing one's mind when objectively convinced by sound reasoning, but we sell out the truth if we subjectively change because of personal bias. Jesus emphasizes the need to stand for truth, regardless of the situation of those close to us (Matt 10:34-38). The epistles also contain numerous warnings against showing partiality (James 2:1-9; 3:17; 1 Timothy 5:21).

If a preacher should feel the need to state that a certain doctrinal matter currently involves someone close to him, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

9. Appeal to common ground

A false teacher will enumerate the many things on which the parties agree, as if this should satisfy the opposition. Again, most false teachers do this. A denominationalist will say that since we both believe in Jesus, there is sufficient grounds for fellowship. An institutional brother will say that since we both believe in the same plan of salvation, there is sufficient grounds for fellowship. False doctrine almost always contains partly truth, however, partial unity is unacceptable before God (1 Cor 1:9, 10).

The false doctrine of unity in diversity finds a footing here. For example, there are some who claim there is a difference between gospel and doctrine. "Gospel," as it is explained, includes the more important teachings of Christ: things concerning the plan of salvation and the atoning power of Christ's blood. These are the things on which we must agree. "Doctrine," as it is explained, includes things of lesser importance: things relative, subjective, and more elusive. These are things on which we may differ. There is no foundation for this in scripture (1 Tim 1:8-11; 2 Tim 3:16). The appeal to common ground is a step in this direction.

If there is no scriptural basis for calling one thing a matter of fellowship and another thing a matter of tolerance, then our system of belief is arbitrary and wholly a product of human judgment. As a man-made religion, there would be no legitimate basis for defending anything as actual truth or refuting anything as actual error. Therefore, one church really would be as good as another. However, if we reject this, then we must accept that there is scriptural basis for making the necessary distinction on matters of fellowship.

If the elders proclaim that unity only on the so-called "important things" is enough, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

10. Counter with derision and accusations

Finally, when a false teacher sees he is unable to deliver a correctly applied scriptural defense for his position, a common diversion tactic is to attempt to discredit and defame a brother who would oppose. One who would call a teaching into question is then labeled a troublemaker and is said to be causing strife (1 Kings 18: 17, 18). Instead of listening, the false teacher dismisses the brother's warning for his perceived harshness and disagreeable ways.

Almost inevitably, the false teacher charges the one who is merely challenging the doctrine with making a "personal attack." Intending to garner sympathy from others, he further announces how shocking it is that a long-time friend could do such a thing (though a true friend will try to admonish his erring brother). Ironically, the one claiming to have been personally attacked is usually the only one making personal attacks. In self defense, he dredges up every past instance carefully committed to his memory where the challenger ever slightly raised his voice, spoke disparagingly, was party to suspicious circumstances, or otherwise used poor judgment. However, note that when the council falsely accuses Stephen, he defends not himself but the truth (Acts 7: 1, 2). Attacking only their sins against the Holy Spirit, Stephen's words are perceived by the council as a personal attack, because they have no valid answer. Besides, a teacher ought to be able and willing to defend his doctrine, regardless the disposition of a challenger (1 Pet 3: 14-16).

If, instead of addressing the teaching in question, a preacher complains about personal attacks or an elder claims some are disrespecting his office, there is a strong chance false doctrine is in process.

False teaching will find its ultimate end in complete apostasy.