

Who is a False Teacher?

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Introduction:

1. My task (implied by the question) is to define a false teacher and discuss how we determine he is one.
2. This is discussed in the context of “fellowship”. Whether one is labeled as a “false teacher” or not has everything to do with having (or continuing to have) fellowship with him.
3. Surely no one would deny that there are false teachers today. But, are there any who could be labeled as “false teachers” among brethren?
 - a. Jesus warned of false teachers (Matt. 7:15-20).
 - i. They do exist.
 - ii. They do not appear as false teachers.
 - iii. They are known by their fruit.
 - b. Peter answered the question clearly (2 Pet. 2:1-3).
 - i. There were false prophets in the Old Testament time.
 - ii. Likewise, there are false teachers today.
 - iii. There are false teachers among brethren.

I. Abundant Warnings about False Teachers

- A. *There have always been many false teachers.*
 1. In the Old Testament
 - a. Psa. 119:128 – false way is in contrast to the precepts – thus, teaching contrary to the precepts of God is false teaching.
 - b. Jer. 6:13-14 – there were prophets who dealt “falsely” saying peace where there is no peace.
 - c. Jer. 8:8-11 – the pen of the scribe works falsehood.
 - d. Jer. 14:14 – the prophets prophecy lies and false vision.
 - e. Jer. 23:32 – there those who prophecy false dreams and “cause my people to err by their lies.”
 - f. Jer. 29:9 – prophecy falsely.
 - g. Lam. 2:14 – false and deceptive visions...false prophecies and delusions.
 - h. Ezek. 22:28 – prophets who plaster with untampered mortar... false visions and lies.
 2. In the New Testament
 - a. Matt. 7:15-20 – false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing.

- b. Matt. 24:11, 24 – many false prophets will arise and deceive many.
- c. Acts 13:6 – on first missionary journey encountered a false prophet, Bar-Jesus.
- d. Col. 2:8 – advocates of the “Colossian heresy” could easily cheat the Colossians through philosophy and empty deceit.
- e. 2 Pet. 2:1-3 – are false teachers today just as in the Old Testament times.
- f. 1 John 4:1-6 – many false prophets in the world, thus test or try them.
- g. 2 John 9-11 – if one comes and doesn’t bring the doctrine (truth) do not receive him.

B. There are even false teachers among brethren

- 1. Acts 20:29-30 – the elders at Ephesus were warned men would arise:
 - a. “From among yourselves”
 - b. “Speaking perverse things”
- 2. 2 John 9-11 – surely it is possible for a brother to “go onward” and not abide in the doctrine of Christ. If not, why not?
- 3. 2 Peter 2:1-2 – there will be “false teachers among you” who bring in “destructive heresies.”
- 4. 1 John 4:1-6 – does “test the spirits whether they are of God” only apply to teachers among non-Christians?

C. The danger of false teaching

- 1. False teaching leads men to commit sin (Matt. 15:1-15; 1 Cor. 15:33).
- 2. False teaching leads men to deny Bible doctrines (Col. 2:4, 8, 18, 21-23; 2 Thess. 2:10-12; 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18).
- 3. False teaching spreads like a leaven (Matt. 16:6-12; Gal. 5:9).
- 4. False teaching causes division (Rom. 16:17-18).
- 5. False teaching troubles churches (Gal. 1:6-7; 5:10-12; Acts 15:24)

II. Defining “False Teacher”

A. One who teaches what is false

- 1. Question is: Does his message or his character determine if he is a false teacher?
- 2. Surely, a man’s message (what he teaches) is the major determining factor.
 - a. Were the advocates of Judaism, Gnosticism, and the Colossian heresy all men of despicable character? Is that why they were dangerous? Is that the reason for the warnings?
 - b. What about a man who is sincere in what he teaches – is he a “true teacher” regardless of his teaching?
 - i. What if he taught that Jesus is not the Son of God?
 - ii. What if he taught that the perfect righteousness of Christ is transferred to us?
 - iii. What if he taught that the guilty party can remarry?

3. A “false teacher” is the opposite of a “true teacher”
 - a. If not, why not?
 - b. What is a “true teacher”?
 - i. Is the man who is honest and sincere a true teacher (regardless of his teaching)? If so, he could teach evolution or deny the deity of Christ and still be a true teacher!
 - ii. It is a man whose message is true. He preaches the word (2 Tim. 4:2).
4. What about the man who teaches truth, but is dishonest?
 - a. Some of Paul’s enemies taught the truth, but had a sinful attitude. They were not sincere (Phil. 1:15-16).
 - b. How were they viewed? They still preached Christ (Phil. 1:18). They were not viewed as false teachers, but teachers of truth with sinful attitudes.

B. Redefining “false teacher”

1. The redefinition: A false teacher is not the one who teaches a doctrine that is false, but one whose character is “false.” He is dishonest.
2. Why is this redefinition necessary?
 - a. This is all about whether we can continue to have fellowship with the man who some would call a “false teacher”.
 - b. This came to light during the Homer Hailey controversy (25-35 years ago), though it was advocated long before that.
 - c. If we labeled him a “false teacher,” we should not have fellowship with him.
 - d. If we say he is not a “false teacher” (even though we disagree with him), we can continue to have fellowship with him. He, after all, is an honest man!
3. Quotes from those who redefine “false teacher”:
 - a. Leroy Garrett: “A false teacher is a liar, and he knows he’s a liar; or he is so corrupt of mind and heart that he no longer distinguishes between right and wrong...It is unthinkable that such a characterization as this should be laid upon any sincere, well-meaning, God-loving person, however misled he may be on some ideas. One may even be caught up in the clutches of an insidious system and still not be a *pseudo-didaskalos*. The nun that marches her girls in front of you as you wait at the light does not necessarily deserve the epithet of *false*, whatever judgment you make of Romanism” (*Restoration Review* [1976], p. 264).
 - b. Ed Harrell: “Finally, I find it particularly offensive the easy use of the label ‘false teacher’ with reference to Homer Hailey. As I have already noted, the presumption that one becomes a ‘false teacher’ on the basis of holding one doctrine that I judge to be erroneous is loaded with consequences that none of us would accept. A false teacher is surely one whose dishonest motives and/or ignorance distinguish him from the sincere who has reached an

erroneous conclusion” (Homer Hailey: False Teacher?, *Christianity Magazine*, November 1988, p. 8).

- c. Wallace Little: “Basically, I understand false teachers to be identified NOT by their doctrine, but by their attitude, behavior, or both. I go to 2 Peter 2:1ff for this” (Mars-List, September 15, 1997).
- d. Charles Pledge: “‘False’ teacher is a use of false in its primary meaning: a deceptive person who deliberately teaches what is known to be untrue. This is the way Scripture uses the concept from Matthew through Revelation....Every mention of the false teacher either directly states, or implies a character deficiency” (*Hammer & Tongs*, March-April 1999, Vol. VIII, Number 2, p. 7).
- e. Bob Owen: “The term ‘false teacher’ has sometimes been interpreted to mean, huh, if anybody teaches anything not right. And taken on the surface, that’s what those two words mean, isn’t it? But the term ‘false teacher’ is used in Scripture very sparingly and its not used in the context of just somebody who teaches something you don’t agree with, or that is wrong.” (Sermon on Fellowship, Temple Terrace, FL, September 2, 1993).
- f. Bob Owen: “In 2 Peter 2, there’s a whole chapter directed to some that are called ‘false teacher.’ But listen carefully. Everybody that teaches something that I think is false does not meet the description of these people in 2 Peter 2. Those false teachers in 2 Peter 2 were hypocrites, who would lie, who would deceive, they were people who took advantage of others for filthy lucre’s sake”, (Sermon in Concord, NC., February 19, 1995).
- g. Today there are many who may not use the same words or same arguments, but the same principle is still alive and working among us. There are some among us who would refuse to call one who advocates institutionalism, imputed righteousness, etc. a false teacher!

C. Would other terms be more acceptable?

- 1. Would “those who cause divisions and offenses” work better (Rom. 16:17-18)?
- 2. Would “those whose message is like a cancer” work better (2 Tim. 2:17)?
- 3. Would “teacher of error” work better (1 John 4:1, 6)?
- 4. Would “those who cheat through philosophy and empty deceit” work better (Col. 2:8)?

D. What really matters

- 1. I am willing to discuss who or what a false teacher is. However, I am not willing to argue all day about whether the terms “false teacher” is the proper terms to apply to brother _____.
- 2. I’m more interested in whether his doctrine is true or not!
- 3. I’m more interested in whether his doctrine leads people into sin or error.
- 4. Is it not still true that error causes people to be lost?

5. Does someone have to intend to mislead for his teaching to be dangerous or harmful?
6. Suppose two men teach the same doctrine that is not true (guilty party can remarry). One honestly believes that doctrine. The other knows it is wrong but advocates it anyway. Each one convinces a couple they can remarry and they do. Which couple is in adultery? Is it only the couple who was misled by the brother who knew he was teaching error?

III. Misuse of 2 Peter 2

A. *How the text is misused to redefine “false teacher”*

1. 2 Peter 2:1 is the only passage that uses the phrase “false teacher”.
2. It is argued that *psuedodidaskalos* means a teacher with an impure motive.
3. What does *psuedodidaskalos* (“false teacher”) mean?
 - a. BDAG: “**false/bogus teacher, quack teacher**, of someone in the Christian community who pretends to be a qualified instructor, but whose teaching is contrary to the generally accepted tradition.”¹
 - b. Louw-Nida: “one who teaches falsehoods—‘false teacher, teacher of what is a lie.’ In rendering *ψευδοδιδάσκαλος*, it is important to avoid an expression which will simply mean that a person pretends to be a teacher and is not. What is important here is that the individual teaches what is not true.”²
 - c. Mounce: “*a false teacher, one who teaches false doctrines*, 2 Pet. 2:1.”³
 - d. The opposite of a “false teacher” is a “true teacher.” Is it merely a man who is sincere and honest without regard to his message? A “true teacher” is one whose message be true!
 - e. In 2 Cor. 11:13 – “false” and “deceitful” both are used. Why mention both if they are essentially the same?

B. *The context*

1. The chapter begins with “but” showing a contrast to the previous point – holy men of God spoke by inspiration (2 Pet. 1:19-21). There were also false prophets among the people.

¹ William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1096.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 415.

³ William D. Mounce, [*Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1314.

2. Immediately *before* our text there is emphasis on the need to heed the message of truth (2 Pet. 1:12-21).
3. Immediately *after* our text there is emphasis on the need to heed the message of truth (2 Pet. 3).

C. Overview of the chapter

1. There will be false teachers (vv. 1-3)
2. False teachers will be destroyed (vv. 4-9)
3. Characteristics of these false teachers (10-19)
 - a. The character of their heart (vv. 10-16)
 - i. Revile against authority (vv. 10-12)
 - ii. Revel in pleasure (vv. 13-14)
 - iii. Revolt against the right way (vv. 15-16)
 - b. The content of their message (vv. 17-19)
 - i. Wells without water (v. 17)
 - ii. Clouds carried by tempest (v. 17)
 - iii. Great swelling words of emptiness (v. 18)
 - iv. Promise liberty – yet are in bondage (v. 19)
4. Later end is worse (vv. 20-22)
 - a. Had escaped (v. 20)
 - b. Again entangled (vv. 20, 22)
 - c. Later end is worse (vv. 20b-21)

D. Key is these false teachers bring “destructive heresies”

1. “Heresy”
 - a. W. E. Vine: “denotes (a) ‘a choosing, choice’ (from *haireomai*, ‘to choose’); then, ‘that which is chosen,’ and hence, ‘an opinion,’ especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects...”⁴
 - b. Louw-Nida: “the content of teaching which is not true—‘false teaching, untrue doctrine, heresy.’”⁵
 - c. A.T. Robertson: “is simply a choosing, a school, a sect like that of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17), of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), and of Christians as Paul admitted (Acts 24:5).”⁶
 - d. Thus, it refers to the choice of their own doctrine that creates sects.

⁴ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr., [*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*](#) (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996), 303.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 414.

⁶ A.T. Robertson, [*Word Pictures in the New Testament*](#) (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 2 Pe 2:1.

- e. What was the heresy (false teaching) under consideration in 2 Peter 2?
 - i. Included the denial of the deity of Christ (2:1)
 - ii. Included disrespect for authority (2:10-12)
 - iii. Included being given to sensuality (2:14)
 - iv. Included a denial of second coming (3)
 - v. Clinton Hamilton: “Another aspect of the background of the book was the doctrines of the Gnostics and the antinomians, and the taunts of those who apparently believed that the delay of the coming of Christ put in question the reliability of this promise. Evidently, teachers after these persuasions had crept into the society of Christians and had begun to unsettle them. This letter was written to counteract these false doctrines.”⁷

2. “Destructive”

- a. Used four times in verse 1-3.
 - i. Two point to the teacher facing destruction (vv. 1b, 3).
 - ii. Two point to the hearer (who follows) facing destruction (vv. 1a, 2).
- b. The warning is not just about their character, but the teaching that endangers souls!
- c. Not all incorrect teaching is destructive (leads to sin).
 - i. J.W. McGarvey: “Shall we think, then, that every man who believes a lie in regard to God’s will shall perish? I think not. If a blind man is guided by another blind man along a smooth road, where there is no ditch, I don’t think either of them will fall into a ditch. It is only when there is a ditch in the way that they will fall into it. So, if this young prophet had been told to do almost anything else than what he was told to do, we have no reason to think it would have been fatal. If, for example, the old prophet had said, An angel sent me to tell you to get from under this tree and run for your life, and not to stop until you get home, the young man would have been scared, and would have run himself out of breath; but the lion would not have killed him. In like manner, I can imagine a man believing some lies in religion, which, though they may injure him some, and I suppose there are very few that would not, might yet fall far short of proving fatal to him.”⁸
 - ii. Some examples: The dating of the book of Revelation, the author of the book of Hebrews, the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), etc. What you put here depends on the side of that issue you are on.

⁷ Clinton D. Hamilton, *2 Peter and Jude*, Truth Commentaries, xxiv

⁸ J. W. McGarvey, *McGarvey’s Sermons*, 333-334.

- E. *Must one have all the characteristics of the teachers of 2 Peter 2 to be a false teacher?*
1. If so, one would be hard pressed to find any false teacher today.
 2. If one has some, but not all these characteristics, does that mean he is not a false teacher? Is his doctrine (that is not true) not a “destructive heresy”?
 3. If one has only one characteristic missing, could he still be called a “false teacher”? If so, why could he not be missing more?
 4. If one can be called a “false teacher” without all these characteristics, how many must he have?
 5. What if a man taught error (guilty party can remarry or imputed righteousness, etc.) but didn’t have this quality:
 - a. Didn’t work secretly but openly (v. 1) – would be a false teacher?
 - b. Didn’t have many to follow but only a few (v. 2) – would be a false teacher?
 - c. Not forsaken the right way or gone astray because he never has been right (v. 15) – would be a false teacher?
- F. *“False teacher” is parallel to “false prophet” in our text (v. 1)*
1. Were all false prophets (in OT) men of despicable character?
 2. Was the problem that they knew they were telling lies or was it the lies that they told?
 3. Were the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18) to be included among the false prophet mentioned in 2 Peter 2:1? It seems that they were sincere in their actions. Were they still among the “false prophets”?

IV. **Conclusions and Caution**

A. *Conclusions*

1. If the redefinition of “false teacher” is correct:
 - a. Error is not dangerous if the motive is pure.
 - b. It would be hard to detect a false teacher since we can’t read the heart or motives.
 - c. We should not draw lines of fellowship over what is taught, but only if the teacher’s character is bad.
 - d. There just may not be any false teachers among us today.
2. If a “false teacher” refers to one who teaches a destructive heresy:
 - a. A man should be labeled a “false teacher” if his doctrine leads to sin.
 - b. Those who listen and follow the false teaching are led to destruction, whether the teacher is honest or not.
 - i. Was the man of God slain because the old prophet was dishonest (1 Kings 13)?
 - ii. Was Saul any less a blasphemer because he was honest (Acts 23:1)?

B. Caution

1. Must not charge every brother who disagrees with me as a “false teacher.”
 - a. We have differences in conscience (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8-10).
 - b. We differ on what a Christian can do or is forbidden to do (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8-10).
 - c. We will differ in interpretation or application of a passage.
2. We must understand that we may draw lines at different points and different times.
3. To ask a brother “Would you call _____ a false teacher?” may be a catch-22 question.
4. I’m not ready to mark and label every brother that I may feel uncomfortable about (i.e. may not feel comfortable having him for a meeting).
5. But neither do I want to be so cautious in the use of “false teacher” that I fail to label one who is!