

False Dichotomies

by Gardner Hall

A **false dichotomy** is treating two different principles or ideas as mutually exclusive when they are not, or an issue or group of issues as the only options when there are others. In a controversy the use of false dichotomies often involves a demand to choose one principle or the other when both are useful or even required! Examples...

- ➔ **“We’re saved by grace, not by obedience.”** However, both are essential elements depending on the context of salvation being discussed, provision or acceptance. I saw this error in reverse on a meme a few years ago – “Noah was saved by works, not by grace.” It made me grimace.
- ➔ **“We should preach love and not authority.”** Why not both? Isn’t respect for authority a product of love?
- ➔ **“We shouldn’t deal with what I think are picky issues, but only with what I think are weightier.”** Jesus says, *“These are the things you should have done without neglecting the others”* (Matt. 23:23).
- ➔ **“Do you want freedom or law?”** Much depends on the context here, but generally there is no freedom without some kind of law or restraint. You wouldn’t be free to drive in New York City without traffic laws. You wouldn’t be free to drive very long anywhere without brakes!
- ➔ **“Men should control their minds so that women don’t have to worry about scanty clothing.”** Why can’t both men and women do their part to help each other in this area? Isn’t that the way of love? (Yes, I was raked over the coals with this one not long ago.)
- ➔ **“1 Timothy 2:9 deals with luxurious overdressing, not with scanty clothing.”** It deals with both when you apply the attitudes that are to accompany the clothing.
- ➔ **“I love my child too much to punish him.”** But if you love him you will punish him (Prov. 13:24).
- ➔ **“Preachers need to preach expository lessons, not topical.”** Why not both?
- ➔ **“We need to preach Jesus and not issues.”** This one is often given with a scolding tone – “Enough of this talk about issues! While souls are dying in the world, here we are talking about using a piano in worship” (or another similar issue). Though it is true that preaching about the Lordship of Jesus and his love needs to be taught first (something that admittedly often hasn’t happened), loving Jesus also means being concerned about presumption and other dangers that affect God’s people. Jesus addressed various issues among the Jews.

Though it may be legitimate to make comparisons such as those above to emphasize priorities, they shouldn’t leave the impression that important ideas and concepts as mutually exclusive.

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