

# Voices: How should Christians confront false teaching?

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Scripture repeatedly warns against false teaching, false teachers and false prophets (Matthew 7:15; Colossians 2:8; 2 Peter 2:1-3). The New Testament also charges the church—especially its leaders—to uphold “sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

So, what do you do if you fear a sister or brother in Christ has fallen into false doctrine? I believe the Apostle Paul’s engagement with the Corinthian church is instructive for us and in many ways serves as a helpful paradigm.

## Conflict at Corinth

Not long after Paul left the city of Corinth after planting a church there, the congregation fell into disarray. They struggled with severe doctrinal and ethical confusion, compounded by the invasion of certain false teachers seeking to undermine Paul.

When Paul learned of this, he promptly began a correspondence with the Corinthians that involved several letters and even a few in-person visits. Of those numerous letters, only two survive, which we have labeled 1 and 2 Corinthians.

First, and most fundamentally, Paul regards the Corinthian congregation as a genuine church. Paul recognizes that most—even all—of the people to whom he’s writing are his brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:1-9; 2 Corinthians 1:1-2). Despite their numerous severe flaws, Paul does not write them off or treat them as his enemies.

John Calvin puts it well: “Among the Corinthians it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted; there was not one species of sin merely, but a multitude, and those not trivial errors, but some of them execrable crimes ... Does [Paul] seek separation from them? Does he discard them from the kingdom of Christ? Does he strike them with the thunder of a final anathema? He not only does none of these things, but he acknowledges and heralds them as a Church of Christ, and a society of saints” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.14).

Paul loves the Corinthians, even if they exasperate him and he must rebuke them sternly. Paul’s primary focus is on their spiritual well-being and faithfulness to Jesus Christ, not on Paul’s own reputation or influence within the congregation (2 Corinthians 2:4; 12:19-21).

Second, Paul prioritizes transparency and honesty. He addresses matters directly and openly, not in secret. He insists on being utterly open about his life and ministry to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 6:11). And as he prepares for the “final showdown,” Paul insists “every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (2 Corinthians 13:1).

## **Principles of confrontation**

These two principles ought to serve as the bedrock of any confrontation we undertake against false teaching in Christ’s church.

First, we must operate out of genuine love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, not out of selfish ambition or a desire to “be right.”

Second, we must prioritize truth. We should not run off half-cocked, making misinformed accusations. We ought to get all our facts straight. Nor should we participate in clandestine meetings and backdoor political maneuvering in order to “win.”

Why are these two principles so important, besides being found in Scripture? The truth is, many “heresy hunts” are motivated by selfishness, ambition and malice, rather than a desire for other Christians’ spiritual well-being. And these hunts often are based on half-truths, rumors, hearsay and outright lies.

Such heresy hunts do far more damage than good. Numerous churches, parachurch organizations and even denominations have been splintered by misguided quests to “expose false doctrine” and “drive out false teachers.” Many Christians have had their lives and ministries severely damaged or even ruined by false accusations and misrepresentations. I myself have seen this [happen](#) to people and institutions I love.

Should we reject false doctrine and refute those who teach it? Absolutely. Should we be willing to implement church discipline and break fellowship with others over doctrinal matters? Yes, sadly, sometimes we must do so.

But the process is vitally important to the final goal. If we compromise the integrity of the process, we jeopardize the legitimacy of the result. What if we ruin the ministry of an innocent person? What if we fracture a church over a mere misunderstanding?

## **Practical applications for Baptists**

Different Christian traditions address these matters in different ways. Many denominations have a formal “trial” system built into their polity, for example. However, Baptists do not have a single, monolithic approach.

Since we Baptists do not have a strictly defined formal system, here are some guidelines I would propose.

First, we should remember the local church is the center for handling these disputes. While other Baptist congregations may offer advice and choose to

remain in or break fellowship with us, they cannot directly adjudicate our doctrinal conflicts.

Second, Baptist congregations should have a clear understanding of what role confessions play in their life and in the life of their association(s). Is there an official confession? How strict of conformity to the confession is required for fellowship? There are a [variety](#) of approaches to confessionalism in Baptist life. Be proactive and figure out the approach embraced by your local congregation and association(s).

Third, we must seek to cultivate appropriate doctrinal priorities. I have [written](#) in the past concerning the differences between primary, secondary and tertiary issues. Before addressing doctrinal disputes, we should make sure we have our doctrinal priorities clearly outlined.

Confronting false teaching is never fun or easy. But Scripture gives us no option to avoid it. When we must confront false teaching, we must strive to do it well.

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