

Straw Man Arguments

Some years ago, I attended a church service in which the speaker spent about half an hour refuting the “L” or TULIP, “Limited Atonement.” (In case you are unfamiliar with them, TULIP is an acronym which makes it easier to remember the five points of Calvinism. If you don’t know what they are, I encourage you to look it up.) Without going into any detail, what the speaker did was give a rather distorted version of what “Limited Atonement” is and then went on to say what it wasn’t biblical. I agreed with him that his version of Limited Atonement wasn’t biblical because what he had said Limited Atonement was is not what it is. He would have had a much more difficult time refuting Limited Atonement had he actually defined it correctly.

A few decades ago, several well-respected theologians in the Christian Reformed Church engaged in a conversation with some Roman Catholic theologians to talk about Lord’s Day 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the one that calls the Roman Catholic mass a “condemnable idolatry.” In their conversations, the Roman Catholics stated quite clearly that the way the Heidelberg Catechism describes the Roman Catholic mass is incorrect. The Roman Catholic theologians said that if what the catechism said was what the Roman Catholic Church taught, they too could agree that the mass is a condemnable idolatry. “But that is not what we believe or teach,” they said. As a result, the Christian Reformed Church, while not removing the suspect statements in the Catechism, did bracket them and place a footnote under them saying what they are incorrect and we should make ourselves aware that they have misrepresented Roman Catholic teaching.

What I have just described are two examples of a “straw man argument.” A “straw man argument” is one in which we distort or weaken another’s position so that we can argue against it. By misrepresenting someone else’s beliefs or teachings, we can easily refute them and quickly condemn them. Arguing against someone after first distorting their belief is called “attacking a straw man.”

It’s a fairly apt description. If we take a bunch of straw and pack it into Samuel’s clothing and we put Samuel’s face on our creation, we are building a straw man. We might name that straw man “Samuel,” and we might then proceed to attack it with bayonets, saying that we are “killing Samuel.” Of course, we aren’t killing Samuel, for the straw man is not Samuel. We are making ourselves look foolish if we continue to say that we are attacking Samuel.

When we do this in a debate situation, the same thing happens. Instead of accurately representing Samuel’s position, we create one that looks a lot like Samuel’s position but is missing some significant components. It is easy to attack Samuel’s position because it is not what Samuel said. The problem is this: while it is easy to see the difference between a straw man and the real Samuel, it is often harder to see that the argument presented is not Samuel’s but, rather, a misrepresentation of Samuel’s argument. We might be inclined to join in the attack against Samuel’s argument and so attack Samuel himself. Unless someone points out that what we are attacking is not Samuel’s argument but a fictitious misrepresentation, Samuel’s credibility will be destroyed.

Sometimes within the Christian church, we cannot be bothered to spend the time to develop a misrepresentation of another's argument so that we can more easily refute them, so we simply use a short cut and label them as "liberal." In many circles, that label is enough to destroy someone's credibility immediately. In calling someone a "liberal" without having taken the time to hear what they have to say, we have created a straw man, and we feel that we can attack that individual without hesitation because, after all, we don't want liberals to ruin the church. Naming someone as a liberal without ever really engaging them in conversation is the most egregious form of a straw man argument, at least in our circles.

As Christians who seek truth, we should recoil in horror at the very idea of setting up and attacking a straw man. Not only will we eventually look foolish, but we may even destroy the reputation and integrity of one of God's children. That goes against the very core of who we are.

It is true that there will be people we disagree with and sometimes we disagree on very important points. However, before we write them off a "liberal," the most egregious straw man argument or misrepresent them by distorting their argument, we must first listen carefully so that we understand. In fact, we have not listened well enough if we cannot accurately reproduce their argument. It is only then that we can give answer to what they believe, carefully using Scripture to guide us in our refutation of their argument. This whole process can be rather frightening, for we might find that when we truly understand someone's position, we might find that we have to change our own. None of us does that easily. But, if we are going to be people of integrity and honesty, we cannot set up straw men and attack them so that we are never challenged in our beliefs. There is also the real possibility that when we engage people in their beliefs, and if their beliefs do not align with Scripture, we can bring them around. But that will only work if we have honest discussions and are willing to listen first.

It was difficult for me to listen to the speaker who attacked Limited Atonement by first misrepresenting it. As someone who holds to the five points of Calvinism, I wanted him to represent what I believe fairly so that I could hear his argument against it. Because he built a straw man first, I found that I could not engage him in conversation. I found myself frustrated and even a little angry because what I believe was misrepresented, and if I had announced that I believed in the doctrine of Limited Atonement, I would have been condemned as believing a non-biblical teaching.

The CRC was right in listening to the Roman Catholic theologians. And it is good that a few lines are bracketed and noted that they do not inaccurately describe someone else's supposed position. While the CRC might not agree with the Roman Catholic position on other things, at least on this one, we are being honest.

Being honest does not weaken our position; it strengthens it. If we have integrity, we will be able to have good discussions with others, and, most likely, we will all become more aligned with the teachings of Scripture. If we set up straw men and attack them, we will never help those who we perceive are straying, and we will look foolish in the process.

Pastor Gary