

In Light Of Logic

Attacking a Straw Man

Attacking a straw man is a fallacy of logic that occurs when an opponent's position is misrepresented in order to make it more easy to refute. This is very hard to avoid, and points up the need for dialogue with those with whom we disagree. Even if we cannot agree, we can at least represent each other's position fairly and rebut it honestly. This is a large part of what constitutes intellectual honesty.

The political opponents of Jesus engaged in this fallacy when they accused him of threatening to "destroy the Temple." Such an accusation was designed to turn the Jewish people against him, since obviously to recommend the destruction of the Temple would have been an outrageous offense according to the Hebrew Scriptures. If they had cared to find out what he really meant, they could have asked. It was obvious that he was employing figurative language to bring attention to the fact that he was to be crucified and killed. Ironically, the very thing that he prophesied would happen to him came to pass in large part because of the false accusations of these "witnesses."

In appendix K in *One God & One Lord*, we identify the use of the straw man argument when it is employed by traditional Christians against our view of Christ. We write:

Often, when Trinitarians hear our argument that Jesus is not God, they immediately respond by assuming that we are saying that Jesus is a "mere man." This is a straw man argument because it is easy to refute the claim that Jesus was merely a man like the rest of us. On the contrary, the Gospels are full of evidence of his uniqueness as the *monogenes* ("one of a kind," traditionally translated "only-begotten"). It is not demeaning to be made a man in the same way that Adam was made a man in the original creation. He was the crowning achievement of that Creation. The issue is whether Jesus is to be compared to a *fallen* man, with the implication that he is then a partaker of man's sinful nature. He had a fully human nature because God originally made man in His image. Man was made to reflect God's life and goodness, and share in His attributes. So for Jesus to be "the image of God" is to say that he is completing the destiny originally designed for Adam in the original creation, which Adam forfeited. There is nothing "mere" about that!

So why are we fallen humans so prone to employ this fallacy? Clearly, our insecurity is so great concerning the truth of our own position that we do not fairly represent the other persons views. If we were secure in our own convictions, we would be content to be accurate in our reporting of the other's views. But if we must resort to the fallacious tactic of creating a straw man, does that not indicate a strong possibility that our own arguments are weak and in our hearts we know it? If we can only win the argument by diminishing the other argument by misrepresenting it, we are not loving our neighbor. In fact, we are actually bearing false witness against him.

Better by far to represent accurately the other person's point of view in such a way that he would agree that you are saying what he is saying. Then level your argument at a real foe, and not a fictitious one. It may not be the most comfortable way, but is the one most rational, loving, and, in the end, most serving of the truth.