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## False Dilemma

*(also known as: all-or-nothing fallacy, false dichotomy\*, the either-or fallacy, either-or reasoning, fallacy of false choice, fallacy of false alternatives, black-and-white thinking, the fallacy of exhaustive hypotheses, bifurcation, excluded middle, no middle ground, polarization)*

**Description:** When only two choices are presented yet more exist, or a spectrum of possible choices exists between two extremes. False dilemmas are usually characterized by “either this or that” language, but can also be characterized by omissions of choices. Another variety is the false trilemma, which is when three choices are presented when more exist.

### Logical Forms:

*Either X or Y is true.*

*Either X, Y, or Z is true.*

### Example (two choices):

*You are either with God or against him.*

**Explanation:** As Obi-Wan Kenobi so eloquently puts it in *Star Wars episode III*, “Only a Sith deals in absolutes!” There are also those who simply don’t believe there is a God to be either with or against.

### Example (omission):

*I thought you were a good person, but you weren’t at church today.*

False Effect

False Equivalence

Fantasy Projection

Far-Fetched Hypothesis

Faulty Comparison

Gadarene Swine Fallacy

Galileo Fallacy

Gambler's Fallacy

Genetic Fallacy

Hasty Generalization

Having Your Cake

Hedging

Historian's Fallacy

Homunculus Fallacy

Hot Hand Fallacy

Hypnotic Bait and Switch

Hypothesis Contrary to Fact

The Fallacies: Id-Mu <

The Fallacies: Na-Ri <

The Fallacies: Sc-Wi <

**Explanation:** The assumption here is that if one doesn't attend church, one *must* be bad. Of course, good people exist who don't go to church, and good church-going people could have had a really good reason not to be in church -- like a hangover from the swingers' gathering the night before.

**Exception:** There may be cases when the number of options really is limited. For example, if an ice cream man just has chocolate and vanilla left, it would be a waste of time insisting he has mint chocolate chip.

It is also not a fallacy if other options exist, but you are not offering other options as a possibility. For example:

*Mom: Billy, it's time for bed.*

*Billy: Can I stay up and watch a movie?*

*Mom: You can either go to bed or stay up for another 30 minutes and read.*

*Billy: That is a false dilemma!*

*Mom: No, it's not. Here, read Bo's book and you will see why.*

*Billy: This is freaky, our exact conversation is used as an example in this book!*

**Tip:** Be conscious of how many times you are presented with false dilemmas, and how many times you present yourself with false dilemmas.

**Note:** Staying true to the definitions, the *false dilemma* is different from the *false dichotomy* in that a dilemma implies two equally unattractive options whereas a dichotomy generally comprises two opposites. This is a fine point, however, and is generally ignored in common usage.

**References:**

Moore, B. N., & Parker, R. (1989). *Critical thinking: evaluating claims and arguments in everyday life*. Mayfield Pub. Co.

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Paul Wright

Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 01:32:25 PM

Would this be a false dilemma... a denomination teaches "We speak where the Bible Speaks, and are silent where the Bibles is silent." Meaning if the bible does not say you CAN do something, then you must not. However, would it also be just as valid to say that where the Bible does not speak, you have freedom to choose?

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5 replies

0 votes

Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 01:42:33 PM

I would say that the interpretation (Meaning if the bible does not say you CAN do something, then you must not.) of this statement creates a false



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

dilemma. The Bible does not say you can fly in airplanes, watch TV, use the Internet, etc. I would think "We speak where the Bible Speaks, and are silent where the Bible is silent" means that where the Bible does not say something clear, the denomination has no opinion/view on it (i.e., you choose). Either way, this is a wildly simplistic and problematic doctrine.

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0 votes



Paul Wright

*Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 01:59:09 PM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD: Thanks for your reply. I agree it is indeed problematic, and a curious one. They would add, if one is to "go" preach the gospel, then any means is inferred. Plane car or train.

Does the addition of such inference have any additional meaning?

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0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

*Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 03:31:47 PM*

@Paul Wright: Nothing as far as fallacies, but again, simplistic reasoning that is problematic. Can one steal a car to preach the gospel? Can one kill people who stand in their way of preaching? More importantly, what is the "rule" here (or exception)? Any activity/behavior that helps one preach is allowed? Again, these "rules" never work out. Life is not this simple.

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0 votes



Paul Wright

*Saturday, June 02, 2018 - 04:11:41 PM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD: Interesting, and I agree. My Master's is in Theology and the denomination that teaches this has always puzzled me. They are, under most circumstances highly logical. Thanks for your insight.

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0 votes



Adelere  
Adesina

*Monday, September 17, 2018 - 07:13:11 PM*

I suppose the question was not given clearly enough, Dr Bennett. It would have been proper if Mr Wright had stated the additional premises of the so-called denomination on this question. The question is better framed thus:

In matters of Christian religion, the Bible says it has complete instructions on what may be done or what may not be done as directed in passages such as Colossians 3:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Pet. 4:17; James 1:25; 2 Pet. 1:3. Alongside this, the Bible mentions that NO OTHER INSTRUCTION outside of the Bible be used in matters of Christianity as is found in passages such as 1 Tim. 1:3, 2 Tim. 4:3-4.

In addition, whoever claims Christianity does so by reference to the authority of the Bible. Since the Bible, which authorizes someone to be a Christian by specific instructions therein also authorises one to do those things specified in it within the operations of the Christian religion or lose God, can we call the statement, *'Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent'*, a false dilemma? Note also that the Bible states specifically that to do **'more'** than what it has specified in itself with respect to Christianity is to violate God's commandment with utter condemnation, 2 John 9-10; Gal. 1:6-9.

I am assured, Dr Bennett, that with the excluded premises now revealed it becomes clear why this assertion is not a fallacy. To apply your words, sir, this conclusion is certainly not a fallacy of false choice because of the exception rule, *'It is also not a fallacy if other options exist, but you are not offering other options as a possibility.'* It is just a perfect replica of the example you provided of a mother and Billy. The Bible is in the place of the mother here, with its authority to determine what options a person has in Christianity: either to use the pure doctrine of Christ/instructions of the Bible and be on God's side in Christ or to use anything in addition and be against God and without Christ. If a person refers to this situation, he has made no fallacy because other options are left out by the authority in this case.

To point a particular instance where it becomes clear that this stance is not a fallacious one in this respect, people get converted to Christianity by the authority of the Bible or by the instructions of the Bible. It is not disputed that applying this same statement thus, 'Any other instruction contrary to or not in likeness to the one stated in the Bible on a person's conversion to Christianity does not make a person a Christian if followed,' does not make a black and white fallacy. Why? It is not because there are no other options people can 'claim' to have made them Christians; it is because the Bible, which is the authority for Christianity, restricts the options to its own instructions. In fact, it is a fallacy to 'speak where the Bible is silent' in matters of Christianity because then one 'appeals to authority' without evidence (whereas the Bible speaks that its instructions are evidence of what Christians do, Heb. 11:1; cf. Rom. 10:17).

Mr Wright, I hope that the clarification is clear on why the assertion, 'Speak where the Bible speak and be silent where it is,' is not a fallacy. Meanwhile, I would like to encourage you, sir, to attempt to state all important facts/assumptions of a particular argument in order that sound conclusions may be arrived at.

Thank you.

Regards,  
Adelere Adesina

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Krista Neckles

Hello again Sir,

Would the following line that has been used in some anti-bullying commercials targeting bystanders: "If you are not part of the solution you are part of the problem" an example of the false dichotomy? I would like to know what you think.

Thank you.

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4 replies

0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Thursday, April 05, 2018 - 07:01:05 AM

I despise that saying. There are literally millions of causes in the world and most of them worth while. We all can't be part of every solution—this is simply an impossibility. This is rhetoric using guilt. Is it a false dichotomy though? People who spew this nonsense generally believe that if you are not helping then you are part of the problem. If this were true (debatable) then it would not be a false dichotomy. What makes it difficult is that this claim is a perspective or an opinion rather than something we would call a "fact." Because of this, I wouldn't call this a "false dichotomy," but I would point out the fact that, by the same logic, they are part of millions of other problems (e.g. not actively doing something to save the *Panthera tigris jacksoni*.)

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Krista Neckles

Thursday, April 05, 2018 - 08:25:41 AM

@Bo Bennett, PhD: Hello Sir.

Thank you for providing your general stance about the saying. Do you feel the same way though when that saying is used about bystanders of bullying in particular? Suppose somebody sees a classmate being teased, and does nothing about it. I know that there could be reasons why a bystander does not do anything (maybe out of fear or not wanting to make the situation escalate).

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0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Thursday, April 05, 2018 - 08:42:34 AM

@Krista Neckles: This would be my opinion so we are leaving the area of fallacies. I think this is the difference between what some refer to as *moral obligations* vs *moral opportunity*. Because one would put themselves at some level of risk, I view this as a moral opportunity—an opportunity to help another person at the risk of your own well being. This requires a rather quick evaluation of the situation to compare the benefits with the risks. I feel that we have no right to demand people jeopardize their own well being for the benefit of another. Overall, the net effect could be negative (i.e., a "hero" stopping a mugging and getting killed when if they didn't intercede the victim would just be out a couple of bucks).

So in short, we should encourage people to stop bullying just like we should encourage people to help with any social good. But encouragement should not be confused with demanding a moral obligation and labeling that person "part of the problem" for their choice not to intercede.

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1 votes



Krista Neckles

*Thursday, April 05, 2018 - 09:24:49 AM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD: Thank you very much for your insightful reply. Have a good day Sir.

[login to reply](#)

0 votes



John

*Tuesday, March 20, 2018 - 06:39:03 AM*

What if someone genuinely doesn't know the other options, are they still committing this fallacy?

[login to reply](#)

1 reply

0 votes



Bo Bennett, PhD

*Tuesday, March 20, 2018 - 07:49:47 AM*

Ignorance is generally not an excuse for fallacies. In fact, this fallacy is based on ignorance... the person making the statement being ignorant of the other choices or the person evaluating the statement being ignorant of the other choices. If the person knows there are other choices but is not offering them, this is more of a form of manipulation.

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0 votes



Krista Neckles

*Sunday, March 04, 2018 - 02:19:49 PM*

Excuse me Sir,

Can you please explain how Billy's mother did not in fact commit the false dilemma fallacy?

Thank you.

[login to reply](#)

3 replies

1 votes



Bo Bennett, PhD

*Sunday, March 04, 2018 - 02:36:31 PM*

For one, it is not in a context of argumentation (not really). Second, one person in power is offering limited options to another person who must choose between those options.

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1 votes



Krista Neckles

*Sunday, March 04, 2018 - 05:29:19 PM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD: Thank you Sir,

On another note I heard a claim today that sounds so foolish. One person(whom I do not know the name of) argued that the reason why some people are watching Black Panther(the movie) over and over again is related to witchcraft. In other words, the person is arguing that witchcraft is part of the movie's allure. I recognize that this argument is a fallacy. What would the fallacy be though?

Sorry to bother you again,

Krista Neckles

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0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

*Sunday, March 04, 2018 - 05:34:26 PM*

@Krista Neckles: It's not a fallacy; it is simply an unsupported claim.

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0 votes



Joe Walker

*Saturday, January 21, 2017 - 03:41:11 PM*

One more exception needed - "You are either with God, or against him" - God explains this by saying that everyone knows He exists by nature, that He wrote in our hearts and in their minds. To suppress this knowledge is denying the truth / God - by denying what you know, the truth / God then you are against Him. There are only two options according to God.

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2 replies

0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

*Saturday, January 21, 2017 - 04:46:40 PM*

God is committing a fallacy.

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2 votes



Ben

*Tuesday, January 09, 2018 - 09:22:26 AM*

your starting with the assumption that god exists. You first must validate this. Then you must validate that the god that exists is the god of the bible and the bible is inspired by God. Thirdly you must demonstrate that "everyone knows He exists by nature, that He wrote in our hearts and in their minds."

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0 votes



Munstrumrid  
cully

*Monday, March 06, 2017 - 10:44:31 PM*

I have a question: can a moral hypothetical dilemma be a false dilemma? I ask because I asked a pro life person who said zygotes have as much moral value as child and I asked if he was in a fertility clinic on fire and had a chance to only save some frozen zygotes or a child, what does he believe is the most moral choice. He refused to answer and insisted it was a false dilemma. As I understand it, such hypotheticals intentionally limit choices only as a what if, and cannot be false dilemmas.

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10 replies

0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

*Tuesday, March 07, 2017 - 06:28:21 AM*

I agree. Hypotheticals such as that one cannot be false dilemmas. You are not claiming that those are the only possibilities; you are asking what the person would do IF those were the only possibilities.

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1 votes



Munstrumrid  
cully

*Tuesday, March 07, 2017 - 09:45:47 AM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD: thank you for your reply, I thought so but could find no resources online dealing with my question :)

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0 votes



Bill Shaw

*Wednesday, March 08, 2017 - 01:37:32 PM*

Unrelated to the false dilemma but pertinent to your challenge: while I don't believe a zygote has the same value as a person born there is a simple answer to your challenge. We would all save the child, not because we necessarily believe that they have more intrinsic worth but their value to loved ones is so significant. The child is a part of someone's life. Additionally we all instinctively perceive a greater value in a living, breathing person than a fertilized egg, even if we believe there is a sameness to their theoretical value (vs perceived value).

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0 votes



Eric

*Wednesday, October 18, 2017 - 02:38:51 AM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD:  
Ben Shapiro debates this here:  
<https://youtu.be/BgxyqX0kf7I>

I think he brings the point that the issue isn't the actual choice but that

what the choice represents is a false dilemma.

If you choose the child somehow that automatically means that zygotes have less value than a human being outside the womb. But, that because someone does choose the child for whatever reason that does not necessarily lead to the opposite conclusion.

What are your thoughts Dr. Bo?

[login to reply](#)

0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

*Wednesday, October 18, 2017 - 07:01:13 AM*

@Eric: Without watching the video, I would say that we need to be clear on what the choice does or does not represent. To me, the choice does represent what has more *value to the person making the choice*. So if my house is on fire, I am going to get my dog first, then my bird, then my hard drive (I am assuming my wife got out on her own :) ) It is reasonable to conclude from this that I value my dog over my hard drive.

To go back to Munstrumrid's OP, I do think that the scenario he presented could not establish "moral value" but rather is an example of a subjective *emotional or practical value*. To illustrate, I think most people would agree that the life of a 80-year-old man has equal "moral value" to a 5-year-old boy. But if you can only save one, most would choose the 5-year-old boy because of the *emotional or practical value* of the boy.

I think this "test" doesn't hurt the pro-life person's position if they choose the boy. Why? Because to them, both the boy and zygotes have equal *moral value*, but the boy also has additional *emotional or practical value*. So saving the boy is the rational choice—for everyone.

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0 votes



Eric

*Wednesday, October 18, 2017 - 01:30:09 PM*

@Bo Bennett, PhD:

The clarity is important. But, I'm not sure about the fallacy involved, if there is one. Because like you said there are two different values involved. And, we know that this question is presented to show that if a person is willing to save the boy, then the eggs have less value so then we are justified in killing them aka abortion. But, just because you save the boy doesn't mean the eggs have less value.

Ben, in the video, uses another example of you standing at the train tracks where it splits into right and left tracks with a switch to change the direction of the tracks. On the right track there are 5 people tied down and on the left there is one person tied down. Who do you save?

The answer/choice doesn't show any less moral value either way, but I think like you said, more practical value saving 5 vs 1 life.

So, there is a dilemma involved with the choice. But it sounds like the issue lies with in the possible interpretations of the answer. If you answer X therefore Y has less value. This sounds like a false dilemma to me.

If I don't go to church then it is automatically assumed I'm a bad person. The choice was whether or not to go to church. The assumption of that choice, from the presenter, because I didn't show up, is that I'm a bad person. How is this not the same as the above?

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0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Thursday, October 19, 2017 - 06:27:25 AM

@Eric:

“ If you answer X therefore Y has less value. This sounds like a false dilemma to me.

But that's not a false dilemma. It might be *equivocation* (using "practical value" but implying "moral value"). It might be a *non sequitur* (the conclusion does not follow). Sure, if one really tries, they can lay down one implication after another to get to some informal fallacy. But when other fallacies are far more clear, use them. Fallacies are fallacies.

[login to reply](#)

0 votes



Eric

Thursday, October 19, 2017 - 05:27:43 PM

@Bo Bennett, PhD:

I'm still learning!

Thanks for your time Dr. Bo, I really appreciate it!

[login to reply](#)

0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Monday, October 23, 2017 - 05:02:04 PM

@Eric: I found this interesting enough to research it and do a full article/podcast episode on it:

<https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/bg/Bo/LogicalFallacies/rPbFd4zR/If-You-Could-Only-Save-One--Would-You-Save-a-Child-or-a-Thousand-Embryos>

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0 votes

Tuesday, December 05, 2017 - 09:26:49 PM



Eric

@Bo Bennett, PhD: I saw that, it was great. Thank you!

[login to reply](#)

0 votes



Prabhat Poudel

Monday, October 30, 2017 - 02:33:18 PM

What about examples like:

A rock can either be alive or dead.

God can either exist or not exist.

You can either eat the ice cream or not eat the ice cream.

Are these false dilemmas?

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3 replies

0 votes



Bo Bennett, PhD

Monday, October 30, 2017 - 03:10:15 PM

All are different.

“ A rock can either be alive or dead.

There is no full-agreed upon definition of life. For example, some say viruses are living, and some say they are not. So perhaps what constitutes "life" is not a point on a spectrum, but a section of the spectrum.

“ God can either exist or not exist.

"Existence" is pretty clear legitimate binary. I have yet to come across someone who claimed something can "kinda" exist.

“ You can either eat the ice cream or not eat the ice cream.

What about one lick of the ice cream? What about taking a bite and spitting it out? If we agree on a binary definition of eat, then this is a legitimate dichotomy.

Overall, the context in which these phrases are uttered matter as well, because meaning is often more important than the words used. All of the phrases you mentioned are reasonable dichotomies. I would never call "fallacy" on any of those.

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0 votes



Prabhat  
Poudel

Monday, October 30, 2017 - 03:44:01 PM

@Bo Bennett, PhD:

Thanks for responding right away.

The example with the rock is one that was classified as an Illicit Observation or false dilemma on another website that I visited to sort my confusion between false dilemmas and the law of excluded middle. The justification being that the terms alive and dead are not contradictories; they are, instead, contraries. Thus, a rock is neither alive nor dead because "dead" assumes a prior state of being alive. I wanted to know what you thought about it.

I'll reword the second example: You can either believe in God or don't believe in him. Would this qualify as a false dilemma? I suppose you could mention agnosticism, but would that by any chance violate the law of excluded middle?

Seems like I'm asking way too many questions and bringing in irrelevant stuff so I will stop here.

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0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Monday, October 30, 2017 - 04:06:20 PM

@Prabhat Poudel: I don't mind the questions at all :)

I think calling a rock "dead" rather than "not alive" is more of issue having to do with definitions, rather than logic and/or reason. If the definition of dead requires something to have been alive, then it is simply a misuse of the term.

The belief in God issue opens a big philosophical can of worms. First, no fallacy here. Very smart people disagree with the idea that you either believe something or don't. I think the confusion arises with the difference between "no belief" and "disbelief." For example, I am holding a coin in one of my hands now. Do you believe that it is in my right hand? Do you *not* believe that it is in right hand? Think about this "not belief" and what it means. Now, if I **showed** you that it was in my LEFT hand, and **told** you it was in my RIGHT hand, you would still technically "not believe," but this means something very different.

When it comes to God, there are people who really have no idea if God exists or not. God is like the coin that might or might not be in the right hand—they have not examined the evidence nor have they given any thought to it, or perhaps, they have find evidence to support both propositions (that he exists and does not exist) and are simply unconvinced either way. Skeptics (like myself) like to say that we suspend belief until we have evidence, but this doesn't mean that default state is disbelief or even non belief—it is, for a lack of a better word, *agnosticism*.

---

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1 votes

Friday, May 26, 2017 - 04:43:29 PM

“ Billy: That is a false dilemma!  
Mom: No, it's not. Here, read Bo's book and you will see why.

Billy would *not* see why it is not a false dilemma, because you do not *explain* why it is not a false dilemma.

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0 replies

0 votes



LJ



Bill Shaw

Wednesday, March 08, 2017 - 02:29:53 PM

I don't get the explanation of the church example. Isn't the unstated assumption "good people go to church" not "bad people do not go to church"?

All good people go to church.

You were not in church.

You are not a good person (like I thought you were).

The missing alternatives make sense: Good people may not be in church for good reason. Going to church is not what makes one good, some bad people go to church, etc.

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1 reply

0 votes



Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Thursday, March 09, 2017 - 06:45:05 AM

Fictional characters in my examples say stupid things. It makes it easier to demonstrate the fallacies :)

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0 votes



John Woods

Monday, February 13, 2017 - 07:00:06 PM

IMHO "I thought you were a good person, but you weren't at church today" is not a false dilemma. You've stated the enthymeme as "bad people don't go to church" but that is more like a generalization. An enthymeme of "There are just two kinds of people, bad people and those who go to church" seems a bit less likely. I'm sceptical of the the suggestion that all false statements of the form "(not X) implies Y" can be considered false dilemmas of "(X xor Y)". I think there's a stronger claim that the enthymeme behind this ("not good = bad") is actually the false dilemma,

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