

## LESSON 6: INTERPRETIVE FALLACIES

### I. Introduction

Type “top ten mistakes” into an internet search engine and you will receive endless results ranging from love to driving to gardening.

- Why is there such a public fascination with mistakes?
- How can identifying mistakes be helpful?
- Why is it important to identify mistakes people make when interpreting the Bible?

One of the best ways to avoid making mistakes in any area is to know in advance what kind of mistakes are typically made. While we will never learn to interpret the Bible correctly by simply avoiding mistakes, an understanding of common interpretive fallacies can help us to see when we are going astray. In this study we will survey various interpretive fallacies so that you can avoid them in your own study of the word.

### II. Common Interpretive Fallacies<sup>1</sup>

#### A. Taking Passages Out of Context:

1. **Prooftexting:** Stringing together an inappropriate or inadequate series of Bible verses to prove our theology.

Example: Advocates of the prosperity gospel may quote John 14:14, ***“If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”*** From this verse they assert that Jesus promised that as long as you ask in His name, God will answer all our requests – provided you have enough faith. They fail to consider what other Scriptures teach about prayer. How do the following verses nuance Jesus’ above quote?

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<sup>1</sup> All of these fallacies are described in greater detail in Richard Mayhue’s excellent book “How to Study the Bible.”

1 John 5:14-15 *This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.*

1 John 3:22 *and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.*

James 4:1-2 *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? <sup>2</sup> You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.*

In addition, further study on what it means to pray in Jesus' name will show that "in Jesus' name" is not a mere incantation to add to the tail end of the prayer; it is essentially Jesus' signature on our prayers. We should pray for requests which Jesus Himself would pray for.

2. **Isolationism:** Failing to interpret a single Scripture in light of its context.

Example: Matthew 18:19-20 *"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. <sup>20</sup> "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."*

- Does this passage promise that God will answer any prayer as long as two or three believers agree?
- Look up and read what comes before and after these verses. How does the context of this passage inform our understanding?

B. **Adding to Scripture:** The practice of bringing truths out of Scripture which were not there to begin with.

1. **Spiritualizing:** Reading a spiritual or historical truth into a text rather than extracting truth from it.

Example: Richard Mayhue shares the following story.

*A recently married couple approached a Southern California pastor for help with their troubled marriage. As a part of the initial interview, the pastor asked, "What convinced you that you should marry?" The husband recounted how he had gone to his pastor, seeking to know the will of God for himself and his girlfriend, now his wife. That pastor reminded the young man of how Joshua and the Jews had marched around Jericho several times and how the walls collapsed (Josh. 6:15). Then the pastor suggested that the boyfriend literally walk around his girl seven times. If the walls of her heart collapsed then he could be sure God wanted him to take her for his wife.*

- How did the pastor misuse the text of Joshua?
- How can you guard against such spiritualizing? (Hint: Remember the discussion we had about the purpose of communication.)

2. **Nationalizing:** Seeing one's own country as the recipient of national promises made by God in the Bible to Israel.

Example: Earnest believers, shocked and appalled by the social degradation in the church, issue the call of 2 Chronicles 7:14, ***"If My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land."***

- Does this promise apply to America? Why or why not?

- C. **Editing God's Mind:** The practice of revisionism in which the interpreter seeks to make the Bible conform to the novel teachings of a modern theory. The interpreter's aim is to dismiss or re-imagine those portions of Scripture which do damage to their own pet theory.

1. **Embellishing:** Reading current thinking into the Bible and straining the natural reading of the Scripture to make it fit.

Example: After Darwinian evolution became the default explanation of origins, many have sought to tweak the meaning of the Hebrew word for *day* (*yom*) in the creation account to mean age, span, or simply a poetic device. However, in doing this they ignore the following factors:

- a. The Hebrew word for *day* (*yom*), when accompanied by a numerical adjective like “first,” is never used figuratively.
- b. The Hebrew plural for *days* is never used figuratively in the Old Testament.
- c. The phrase “morning and evening” is never used figuratively in the Old Testament, and always describes a twenty-four-hour period.
- d. Within the creation account itself Genesis 1:5 specifies a *day* as a period of light and darkness.

Though these facts may not comport with modern scientific notions of the origins of the cosmos, they must be seriously considered in any faithful interpretation of the Genesis text.

- Can you think of other ways people force modern thought upon the Bible? (Hint: How do people distort the second great commandment in Mark 12:31, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*”?)

2. **Methodologizing:** Interpreting the Scripture by means of an unproven theory about the Bible’s literary origin. Scholars, especially in liberal circles, first hypothesize about how the Bible came to be, and then interpret the text in light of those hypotheses.

Example: It is suggested that the true, anonymous authors of Matthew and Luke plagiarized from Mark, then attached the big names to their gospels in order to gain wide readership in the early church. Working under this assumption, scholars seek to read between the lines and note the differences that give us clues about the “true” agendas of the original authors.

- How does this approach regard the inspiration of Scripture and the historicity of the events?

- D. **Modernizing the Bible:** The practice of adjusting the message of Scripture to fit modern sensibilities.

1. **Accommodation:** Viewing Scripture through the lens of human reason.

Example: Many homosexual advocates will take a modern understanding of homosexuality and read it back into the Bible. Consider their treatment of Romans 1:26-27, ***For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,<sup>27</sup> and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.*** Accommodationist scholars assert that in this text Paul is condemning certain homosexual *acts*, not the homosexual orientation, or the homosexual person, or the responsible practice of homosexual behavior. They say though Paul may not have known it, we now know that some people constitutionally prefer members of the same sex and experience no attraction to members of the opposite sex. Therefore, we must distinguish between *inversion* and *perversion*. Perverts are those who engage in homosexual practices although they are heterosexuals, or they commit heterosexual acts though homosexuals. Inverts, on the other hand, are constitutionally gay. Their sexual orientation is the inverse of heterosexuals, so for them, engaging in homosexual acts is normal and not perverted. In Romans 1 Paul is not condemning inversion, but merely perversion, for these are sinners who abandoned the natural use of their sexuality for that which was unnatural or against their own nature. Thus, Paul only condemns homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.<sup>2</sup>

- How does this exemplify accommodation?

In response we would say that there is simply no way this is what Paul meant to communicate. Even today there is no proof of a genetic condition leading to inevitable homosexual orientation, but this interpretation clearly requires that. Further, even if such a condition were to exist, would that normalize the behavior in Paul's mind, or would it just be further evidence of the degradation of mankind after the fall?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 197

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. S. 198

This is a classic case of eisegesis and anachronism. Pro-homosexual scholars, seeking to silence one of the clearest teachings against their position, impose distinctly modern thoughts upon the theology of Paul. This would be equivalent to saying that “the poor in spirit” in the Beatitudes are those with low self-esteem, even though such psychological concepts did not exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

2. **Culturalizing:** Limiting a text to a specific time in history or culture, when in reality the text demands a wider application in time – OR – extending a past practice or culture into our time which in fact should have been limited historically. We often see this play out in the area of gender roles.

Example: 1 Timothy 2:12 Paul says, ***But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.*** Consider the following explanation:

*Paul was not giving a universal order to all women of all time not to teach nor have authority over a man, but was ordering that women do not assume superiority over men or promote false teachings. Women should learn first, being educated in the faith before they teach. It is clear from Paul's other letters that Paul supported women teachers and leaders. Priscilla was a minister of the Gospel who taught a man, Apollos (Acts 18:26), and in 2 Timothy, Paul asks Timothy to greet Priscilla and Aquila (4:19). Surely, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is not prescriptive to women for all time if Paul also commends women leaders and teachers.<sup>4</sup>*

Closer scrutiny of this argument will demonstrate that there is no conclusive evidence that any woman in the given examples ever taught men in a public setting (e.g. a church service). Also, consider the significance of the very next verses which provide the basis for the command, <sup>13</sup>***For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve.*** <sup>14</sup>***And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.***

- Does the appeal to creation imply a “limited” application of the prohibition for women not to teach men? Why or why not?

- E. **Twisting Scripture:** The practice of distorting the meaning of the text beyond what the original audience would recognize.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cbeinternational.org/?q=content/1-timothy-211-15>

1. **Redefining:** Giving historically accepted biblical words new definitions to support one's own theology.

Example: One popular author redefines sin as "Any human condition or act that robs God of glory, by stripping one of his children of their right to divine dignity." This definition allows the author to maintain his self-esteem theology and ignore any notion of sin which may harm a person's positive self- image.

2. **Anglicizing:** Reaching inaccurate conclusions by drawing theology from the English text alone. You may see this in certain fundamentalist camps who insist, "If the King James Version was good enough for the Apostle Paul, it's good enough for me!" They would be wise to understand that the *original* text is inspired, and not a four-hundred-year-old translation.

Example: The Wesleyan teaching that the Christian can be perfect and sinless in this life, based on the King James translation of Phil. 3:15, ***Let us, therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.***

3. **Mysticizing:** Finding hidden meanings in Scripture that can be understood only by one who knows the "secret code."

Example: Anyone who sat through the 1999 film, *The Omega Code*, would remember that the plot centered around prophetic secret codes lifted from the Bible by carefully counting letters in a complex 3D matrix. This is just a modern parroting of a practice advocated by the mystical Kabbalah sect of Judaism, in which numerical values were assigned to Hebrew letters.

- How would you answer someone who said, "The secret prophetic codes embedded in the Bible prove that it's a supernatural book!"?

- F. **Over-Literalizing:** The practice of failing to interpret the Bible according to the normal conventions of spoken and written communication.

1. **Letterism:** Ignoring figures of speech and drawing woodenly literal conclusions.

Example: Catholics often use John 6:53 to prove that the communion wafer is the Lord's actual body, and the wine is his actual blood: ***So Jesus said to***

***them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.”***

- How does John 6:35, spoken in the same context, help us make sense of what Jesus really meant? ***Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.”***

2. **Legalizing:** Overemphasizing the letter of a command or precept in God’s word at the expense of its true spirit or purpose.

Example: A home church movement surveyed various biblical passages (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 12:12; 20:20; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2; 2 Jo. 10) and concluded that a home was the *only* acceptable place for worship, legalizing these texts and ignoring the rest of Scripture. While homes can be wonderful venues for worship, the Bible cites other places as well such as hills (Luke 6:12, 17), seashores (Matt. 13:1-2), riversides (Acts 16:13), and public buildings (Acts 3:1). Nowhere in the Bible is there a list of acceptable and unacceptable places to meet for worship.<sup>5</sup>

So how do we guard against this? We’ll consider the passage about head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:5.

- a. *Distinguish between the desired end and the means to that end.* What is the purpose behind the command? Is Paul sanctioning certain attire or to promote an attitude of submission?
- b. *Distinguish between outward forms and inward motives.* What is your “heart” behind wanting to make this an absolute command? Is it mere external conformity, a means of easing the conscience, a path to self-righteousness? Or is it a heart of worship?
- c. *Determine whether the outward expression or observance is cultural or absolute.* The prohibition of women teaching men in 1 Tim. 2 is rooted in creation, not culture. But the rampant feminism inside the Corinthian church may have led Paul to encourage certain cultural expressions of femininity in 1 Cor 11 that carry no meaning today..

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<sup>5</sup> Mayhue p. 153.

G. **Reversing Interpretation:** The practice of making the Bible say what you want it to say.

1. **Generalizing:** Assuming that any specific historical experience reported in Scripture is a valid, general experience for today.

Example: Some may claim that if there were apostles in the early church, then there is no reason why there can't be apostles today. However, an examination of Acts 1:21-22 indicates that it would be impossible to have living apostles today. *Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—<sup>22</sup> beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.* Similarly, it would be utter folly for a father driving a minivan full of kids to assume that God will part the river like He did for the Israelites so that his family can return to their “promised land.” Joking aside, This fallacy can turn serious when people insist that God still heals in the same way as He did in the early church, and encourage sincere believers to refuse medical care.

To guard against this we need to examine each practice or phenomenon in its scriptural or historical context. Secondly, we need to ask ourselves whether there is anything in the text to suggest that it should still be practiced today. Thirdly, do other passages affirm that this experience or practice is normative? And finally, we must recognize that while God can do anything, He does choose to act in different ways at different times.

2. **Experientializing:** Reasoning that if any experience has occurred in Scripture, and I have a similar experience, then it must be from God (i.e. using experience to validate Scripture instead of vice versa).

Example: Since many prophets had visions, my own visions (or dreams) must be of the Lord as well. The same precautions for Generalizing apply to this fallacy as well.

H. **Over-Systematizing:** The practice of engaging in circular reasoning, or using an assumption to “prove” a premise. This would be like a student saying, “You can't give me a C because I am an A student.” This argument falls flat since merely claiming to be an A student does not make someone an A student, but scoring 100% on a test does prove the claim.

Example: Robert Thomas comments on how people abuse the “analogy of faith,” the idea that the Bible never contradicts itself, there is harmony of doctrine across all of the Scriptures. While true, this can be abused. For instance, some reason that since Christ will come back and immediately establish the “eternal state,” the 1,000 year millennium described in Revelation 20:1-4 would be an impossibility. Thomas quotes an amillennial theologian and then explains what is wrong with this thinking:

*‘When a doctrine is supported by an obscure passage of Scripture only and finds no support in the analogy of faith, it can only be accepted with great reserve. Possibly, not to say probably, the passage requires a different interpretation than the one put on it. Cf. Rev. 20:1–4.’ This affords a good example of misusing the general analogy of faith. The ‘obvious scope and import of Scripture teachings as a whole’ allows no place for a thousand-year kingdom, so it is automatically written off without due consideration of what Rev 20:1–4 says. <sup>6</sup>*

When a passage of Scripture challenges our preconceived theology, it is important that we adjust our theology to fit the Scripture rather than adjust the Scripture to fit our theology. The analogy of faith is really a checking principle: if our interpretation seems to contradict another passage, we should pause and do the extra work of reexamining *both* passages to reach a fully biblical conclusion.

### III. Thought Questions

- A. Why is it important to be mindful of potential fallacies when interpreting the Scriptures?
- B. What do all of these fallacies teach us about the level of effort and thought we need to exert in the study of Scripture?

### IV. Application

Exegetical fallacies remind us that it is indeed possible to misinterpret Scripture. Believing that the intent of the original author is the driving force of biblical interpretation, we must be careful to enter into his world and understand his thoughts.

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<sup>6</sup>Robert Thomas, “*A Hermeneutical Ambiguity Of Eschatology: The Analogy Of Faith*.” (1980; 2002). *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Volume 23 (23:47). The Evangelical Theological Society.

Only then can we cautiously apply the message to our modern world. Reading a story of Jesus healing a blind man (John 9) should not lead us to conclude that eye doctors are unnecessary, but that passage *does* have application for us today! We can always ask the following questions as we seek to apply the word:

1. What do we learn about God?
2. What do we learn about man?
3. What do we learn about how God relates to man or man relates to God?

So, what applications do we glean from the account in John 9? 1) Jesus is the Son of God as proved by the miracle, and He is compassionate and gracious. 2) The formerly blind man's parents did not confess Christ because they were afraid of being put out of the Synagogue (John 9:22)--fear of man hindered faith in God. 3) God has compassion on us in our weakness and in our suffering. Knowing that Christ is the Son of God should lead us to openly worship and follow him regardless of the cost.

## V. Homework

1. Carefully write out your interpretation of **Titus 3:4-7** using the knowledge you acquired from your study.
2. Answer the following questions and then list several possible applications.
  - What do we learn about God?
  - What do we learn about man?
  - What do we learn about how God relates to man or man relates to God?

*Preaching Assignment: Write your sermon by filling in your homiletical outline.*

## VI. Conclusion

In 2 Timothy 2:15 we read, ***Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*** Before we rush into applying any passage to our lives or to the lives of others, we must remember that the Bible student's goal is to accurately understand what God has said in His word. This requires painstaking effort on our part, but it is well worth it when we consider the blessing of a clearer view of God through a right understanding of His word.