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Seven Common Fallacies of Biblical Interpretation

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**1. Preunderstanding fallacy**: Believing you can interpret with complete objectivity, not recognizing that you have preunderstandings that influence your interpretation.

There is no such thing as a “white-coat” interpreter. In other words, there is no one who comes to the text as a scientist who objectively interprets the data. We all are influenced by many things including our upbringing, culture, personality, and others preunderstandings. Once we recognize this, we are better equipped to interpret the text honesty. Otherwise, our preunderstanding will always rule over our interpretation.

**2. Incidental fallacy**: Reading incidental historical texts as prescriptive rather than descriptive.

While the Bible teaches us truths, not every incidental detail is meant to teach these truths. Much of the Bible is made up of information that is important to the overall story, but is not important in isolation to the rest. We must understand the difference between “prescriptive” and “descriptive” material.  Prescriptive: information that provides the reader with principles that they are to apply to their lives. Descriptive: incidental material that describes the way something was done but is not necessarily meant to encourage the reader in the same action. A good example of this is the Apostles casting lots to elect a new Apostle to replace Judas in Acts 1. This is not meant to teach us how to elect church leaders, it is just the way it was done at that time.

**3. Obscurity fallacy**: Building theology from obscure material.

Much of the Bible is very clear and understandable. Some of it is very difficult to understand. Do not build theology and doctrine from passages of Scripture that are not clear. For example, it is very difficult to understand what Christ was talking about in John 3:5 where He mentions being “born of water.” “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” Because of its obscurity, one should not build a theology that places too much weight on what being “born of water” means. The Bible speaks clearly on many issues concerning salvation in other places. It is best to take the obscure passages and interpret them in light of the clear passages. In doing so, the interpreter can create an interpretive framework upon what these obscure passages cannot mean, even if discovery cannot be made with certainty about what they, in fact, do mean.

Obscure passages can be the most dangerous teachings in Scripture. Sadly, it is often the case that many people and traditions take obscure passages and pack their theology into them since there is no definitive way to say that they are wrong in their interpretation. This is a common fallacy committed among “Christian” cults. In other words, there simply is no more fertile ground for cults and false teaching than obscure passages of the Bible.

**4. Etymological root fallacy**: Looking to the root etymology of a word to discover its meaning.

The problem with this is that etymology can often be deceiving, such as in the English word “butterfly” taken from “butter” and “fly.” An etymological study of this word only confuses the current usage. The same can be said of the word “good-bye,” which is taken from the Anglo-Saxon, “God be with you.” When someone says “good-bye,” it does not necessarily (if ever) mean that they are calling a blessing of God’s presence to be with you.

From D.A. Carson’s *Exegetical Fallacies*:

“One of the most enduring fallacies, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is by the roots of a word.  How many times have we been told that because the verbal cognate of *apostolos* (apostle) is *apostello* (I send), the root meaning of “apostle” is “one who is sent.”?  In the preface of the New King James Bible, we are told that the literal meaning of *monogenes* is “only begotten.”  Is that true?  How often do preachers refer to the verb agapao (to love), contrast it with *phileo* (to love) and deduce that the text is saying something about a special kind of loving, for no other reason than that *agapao* is used?

All of this is linguistic nonsense.  We might have guessed as much if we were more acquainted with the etymology of English words. Anthony C. Thistleton offers by way of example our word ‘nice’, which comes from the Latin *nescius*, meaning “ignorant.”  Our “good-by” is a contraction for Anglo-Saxon “God be with you.” It is certainly easy to imagine how “God be with you” came to be “good-by.”  But I know of no one today who in saying that such and such a person is “nice”  believes that he or she has in some measure labeled that person ignorant because the “root meaning” or “hidden meaning” or “literal meaning” of “nice” is ‘ignorant’.”

**5. Illegitimate totality transfer**: Bringing the full meaning of a word with all its nuances to the present usage.

Take the Greek verb *phileo*. The UBS dictionary of the Greek New Testament lists these possible meanings: have deep feeling for; love; like (to do or be something); kiss. Some interpreters would commit an ITT by using all of the nuances that the word *phileo* has when, in fact, it usually only carries one meaning that is determined by the context.

**6. Selective use of meaning**: Selecting the meaning you like best.

This is like the illegitimate totality transfer in reverse. Instead of the word carrying all the possible nuances, the interpreter will select which nuance he or she likes best. We must remember that the context determines the nuance, not the interpreter.

**7. Maverick fallacy**: Believing that you don’t need anyone but the Holy Spirit to interpret the text.

This is a common fallacy among Evangelicals and Fundamentalists who believe that the Holy Spirit works in isolation from the community of God, both living and dead. Here, people believe that the Holy Spirit reveals the meaning of text to the individual as he or she attempts to discern the voice of God coming through the Scriptures, regardless of what the historic body of Christ has said. The basic problem with this fallacy is that God has always worked in community as the Body of Christ functions together. God most certainly expects the interpreter to draw from other people’s giftedness since we don’t possess all the gifts ourselves. Ultimately, this is a fallacy of arrogance. Use outside resources and you will be discovering the power of the Holy Spirit in the community of God. Work alone and you are probably working in your own power.