

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 7: Interpretive Fallacies

I. Introduction:

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

- A. Why is there such a public fascination with mistakes?

- B. How can identifying mistakes be helpful?

- C. Why is it important to identify mistakes people make when interpreting the Bible?

One of the best ways to avoid mistakes is to know what kind of mistakes to avoid. While we will never advance in our understanding of how to interpret the Bible correctly by simply avoiding mistakes, an understating of interpretive fallacies can be instructive. Therefore, in this study we will survey various interpretive fallacies so that you will avoid them in your own study and intake of the Word.

II. Interpretive Fallacies:¹

A. Taking Passages Out of Context:

1. **Prooftexting:** This occurs when we string together an inappropriate or inadequate series of Bible verses to prove our theology.

For instance, many who advocate the prosperity gospel will cite:

John 14:14 “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

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

They believe that Jesus is teaching that so long as you ask in *Jesus' name*, God will answer such a request – provided you have enough faith. However, we must consider some of the other passages which teach about prayer. What qualifications do the following scriptures provide?

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. ¹⁵ 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? ² 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 "Jesus' name" is not so much an incantation to add to the tail end of the prayer. It is essentially Jesus' signature on your prayer. You should pray for requests which Jesus Himself would pray for.

2. **Isolationism:** This is failure to interpret a single Scripture in light of its context.

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. ²⁰ "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 where two or three believers agree? How does the greater context of this passage inform our understanding?

B. Adding to Scripture:

This consists 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.

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.

- a. How did the pastor use the text?
 - b. How can you guard against such spiritualizing (remember the concept of reading)?
 - c. Why is it important to distinguish between strict interpretation and possible applications?
2. **Nationalizing:** Seeing one's own country as the recipient of national promises made by God in the Bible to Israel.

A classic example is the use of **2 Chronicles 7:14** by earnest believers who are shocked and appalled by the social degradation of believers:

2 Chronicles 7:14 and 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 apply to America? Why or why not?

C. Editing God's Mind:

This is the process of revisionism where the interpreter seeks to make the Bible conform to a modern theory of novel teachings. The aim of this fallacy is to dismiss or re-imagine those portions of Scripture which do damage to the pet theory in question.

1. **Embellishing:** Reading current thinking into the Bible and straining the natural reading of the Scripture to make it fit. For instance since the onset of Darwinian evolution, many have sought to tweak their understanding of the Hebrew word for day (*yom*) in the context of the creation account. However, we must weigh the following factors:
 - a. The Hebrew word for day, when accompanied by a numerical adjective is never used figuratively.
 - b. Looking beyond the creation account we see that the Hebrew plural for day is never used figuratively in the Old Testament.
 - c. The terms morning and evening are never used figuratively in the Old Testament, and always describe a twenty-four-hour period.
 - d. *Genesis 1:5* designates a day as a period of light and darkness.

Such data may not comport with modern scientific notions of the origins of the cosmos, but must seriously be considered when interpreting this text.

- Can you think of other ways in which people seek to force modern thought upon the Bible? (Hint: How do people mangle *Mark 12:31* "*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*")

2. **Methodologizing:** Interpreting the Scripture by means of an unproved theory about the Bible's literary origin. Scholars hypothesize about how the Bible came to be, and then use this methodology to interpret the text. We see this in liberal circles where they suggest among other things that the authors of Matthew and Luke plagiarized Mark. These authors attached the name of these formidable men to their gospels, so that they would gain wide readership in the early church. Thus, scholars seek to read between the lines and note the differences which may highlight the theological ideology of the original authors.

- What kind of regard does this perspective have for the inspiration of the Scripture and the historicity of the events?

D. Modernizing the Bible

This is the process of accommodating the Bible to modern sensibilities.

1. **Accommodation:** Viewing Scripture through the lens of human reason. For instance, 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,²⁷ 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.

They believe that Paul is condemning certain homosexual *acts*, not homosexuality, or the homosexual, or the responsible practice of homosexual behavior. Whether he knew it or not, we now know that some people constitutionally prefer members of the same sex. They experience no attraction to members of the opposite sex. Therefore, we must distinguish between the *invert* and the *pervert*, between *inversion* and *perversion*. Perverts are not genuinely homosexual. They 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, and for them, engaging in homosexual acts is normal. In *Romans I* Paul condemns perversion, not inversion.

Support for this view is adduced from Paul's claim that those he discusses changed or left the natural use of their sexuality for that which was unnatural or against nature. Thus, Paul only condemns homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.²

- How does this exemplify accommodation?

In response we would say that there is no proof that there is a constitutional homosexual for whom homosexual acts follow from a genetic condition, but this interpretation clearly requires that. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that even if such a condition exists, Paul knew of it and refers to it here.³ In a classic case of eisegesis pro homosexual scholars are guilty of anachronism - imposing 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. Such psychological concepts did not surface until the 20th century.

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

³Ibid. S. 198

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 in gender issues, for instance in *1 Timothy 2:12* we read:

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.⁴

Closer scrutiny of this argument will demonstrate that there is no conclusive evidence that the furnished examples ever taught men in a public setting (i.e. a church service). Also, consider the significance of the following passage which provides the basis for the command:

1 Timothy 2:13-14 For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. ¹⁴ 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:

This consists of distorting Scripture beyond what the original audience would recognize.

1. **Redefining:** Giving historically accepted biblical words new definitions to support our theology. For instance, one popular author redefines sin as “Any human condition or act that robs God of glory, by stripping one of his children

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

of their right to divine dignity.” This helps him to maintain his self-esteem theology, which ignores any doctrine 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. Another example would be the Wesleyan teaching on perfectionism from the King James translation of *Phil. 3:15*.
3. **Mysticizing:** Finding hidden meanings in Scripture that can be understood only by the one who knows the “secret code.” Those of you who actually sat through “The Omega Code” would be familiar with the plot line which centered upon prophetic secret codes lifted from the Bible by carefully counting letters in a complex 3D matrix. This is merely parroting a practice advocated by the mystical Kabbalah sect of Judaism, where they assigned numerical values to Hebrew letters.
 - How would you answer the assertion, “The secret codes embedded in the Bible which foretell the future prove that it’s a supernatural book!”?

F. Over-Literalizing: This speaks of a failure to interpret the Bible normally. We need to allow the Bible to use metaphors and figures of speech.

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

For instance, many in the Catholic persuasion will use the following verse to prove that the communion wafer is the Lord’s actual body, and the wine is his actual blood.

John 6:53 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 the following passage help us make sense of what Jesus really meant?

John 6:35 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 God’s Word at the expense of its spirit.

For instance, 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; 2Jo. 10*) and concluded that a home was the only acceptable place for worship.

While homes are 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 places.⁵

So how do you guard against this?

1. *Distinguish between the desired end and means to an end.* What is the “heart” behind the command. For instance, is the point of the command to wear head coverings (*1Co. 11:5*) to sanction certain attire or to promote submission?
2. *Distinguish between outward form and inward motive.* What is your “heart” behind obeying the command? Is it merely external conformity, a means of easing the conscience, a cause of self-righteous celebration, or the heart of worship?
3. *Determine if the outward expression or observance is cultural or absolute.* For instance, the prohibition for women to teach in *1 Tim. 2* is rooted in creation, not the culture. However, the rampant feminism of the Corinthian church may have led Paul to encourage cultural expressions of femininity.

G. Reversing Interpretation

This speaks 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. For instance, people would claim that if there are 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—²² beginning with the

⁵ Mayhue p. 153.

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.”

In addition, it would be unwise for a father driving his 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.”

This fallacy can turn serious when people advocate that God can heal as He did in the early church, and encourage sincere believers to refuse medical care.

To guard against this we need to examine the practice or phenomenon in its scriptural or historical context. Secondly, ask yourself if there is anything in the text which suggests that it should be practiced today. Thirdly, do other passages affirm that the experience or practice is normative? Finally, recognize that while God can do anything, he does choose to do different things at different times.

2. **Experientializing:** Reasoning that if any experience has occurred in Scripture, and I have the same experience, then it must be from God, i.e. using experience to validate Scripture instead of vice versa. For instance, many conclude that since many prophets had visions, their visions (or dreams) must be of the Lord as well. The same precautions which apply to generalizing apply to this fallacy as well. For instance, while the Bible does not promise visions, it does repeatedly promise joy (*John 15:11*) and peace (*Phil. 4:7*).

H. Over-Systematizing:

This takes place when the interpreter engages in circular reasoning. By circular reasoning I mean using an assumption to “prove” a premise. For instance, you can’t give me a C because I am an A student. This argument falls flat since claiming to be an A student does not make someone an A student. But scoring 100% on a test does prove the claim.

Robert Thomas comments on how people abuse the “analogy of faith,” the idea that in Scripture there is harmony of biblical doctrine found in all of the Scriptures. The Bible never contradicts itself. While true, this can be abused. For instance, some reason that since Christ will come back and establish and immediately establish the “eternal state,” a 1,000 year millennium as described in *Revelation 20:1-4* would be an impossibility. Beginning with a quote from an amillennial theologian Thomas reports of this mistake:

‘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.⁶

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 then do the extra work of reexamining *both* passages to reach a conclusion.

III. Thought Questions:

- A. Why is it important to be mindful of potential fallacies when interpreting the Scriptures?
- B. What does the presence of all of these fallacies teach us about the level of effort and thought we need to exert when we study the Scripture?
- C. Why do many people want to rush into their biblical interpretations?

IV. Application:

The presence of fallacies reminds us that it is indeed possible to misinterpret the text. Driven by the conviction that the intent of the original author is the driving force of biblical interpretation, we should seek to enter into his world and then painstakingly apply the message to our modern world. This means that we should be cautious in our application of the passage. For instance, when we read about Jesus miraculously healing the blind man (*John 9*) we should not conclude that we should expect him to fix our eye sight. Rather, we should seek to ask the following questions before we apply it to our world:

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?

From the account in *John 9* we learn that Jesus is the Son of God as proved by the miracle. We learn that He is compassionate and gracious. We also learn about how the formerly blind man's parents did not confess Christ because they were afraid of being put out of the Synagogue (*John 9:22*). The list goes on. Knowing that Christ is the Son of God should lead us to worship and follow him. Understanding that Christ is

⁶Robert 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.

compassionate should lead us to show compassion to others as well as come to Him as a compassionate King. Finally, the negative example of the formerly blind man's parents should lead us to confess Christ before men.

V. Homework:

1. Carefully write your interpretation of *Titus 3:4-7* using the knowledge you acquired from your study.
2. Answer the following questions and then list out 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?

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 it to our lives we must remember that the goal of any Bible student is to accurately understand what the Word says. This takes 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.