

VI. TESTING OTHER PEOPLE'S INTERPRETATION

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Interpretation is a community effort. In practice, Christians do not just individually interact with the scripture; they interact with each other as well. For biblical interpretation purposes, we need to understand how language works both in studying scripture and in teaching and hearing the way of the Lord more perfectly. Theology as a community effort includes studying the history of Christian thought; it provides another resource for biblical understanding. It identifies the appropriate role of tradition as teacher rather than authority. Christians are church theologians, never professional theologians; they do something with what they learn (education for use), and they do it in community with other people inside and outside the body of Christ.

Understanding the truth itself is not the hardest part. The difficulty lies in (a) getting to that truth and in (b) keeping truth distinguished from similar ideas. The sheer number of views gets bewildering at times. For these reasons reading the Bible needs to happen with other Christians who can make us aware of viewpoints and ways of thinking that are crucial to proper understanding.

When people discuss their variant understandings of a text, they can be like two universes passing through each other or two ships passing in the night. There is no meeting of minds because neither person understands the other on their own terms, but hears them in terms of their own categories, presuppositions, understanding of words, and patterns of thought. When pride gets added in, interaction proves fruitless. On the other hand, people can be too easily swayed by another person's viewpoint and arguments for it. As a result, the honest interpreter must listen both critically and openly. The tests below strike a medium between being gullible and being unchangeable.

[Note: An asterisk before capital letters means something unique in testing other people's interpretation.]

A. The burden of proof rests on the affirmative.

The first point about evaluating any viewpoint is keeping the burden of proof for it on the affirmative. Other observations below take place within this principle. An interpretation is not true because it cannot be disproved. It is not legitimate (1) to make a claim and challenge other people to show what is wrong with it. It is also not legitimate (2) to appeal to silence as a way of escaping the positive burden of proof or relieving contradictions created by one's scheme of interpretation. (cp. *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 142-43.) The Great Dilemma is often handled this way when another interpreter tries to appeal to God's sovereignty to escape having to explain the implications of 2 Peter 3:9: God's desire for all to come to repentance plus God's decision to enable only some to come. It is not appropriate to say that scripture does not tell us how this dilemma is resolved (= appeal to silence), to appeal to divine sovereignty, to chastise someone for wanting revelation to conform to human pride (supposedly indicated by the desire for biblical harmony). People must use sanctified imagination at least to suggest ways for relieving difficulties created by their own interpretation.

Within this framework, the pattern of working through an issue is as follows: (a) a claim made, (b) evidence given for it, (c) testing whether the evidence requires that interpretation.

Accepting the positive burden of proof contrasts with:

(a) making a claim that is considered established unless someone can disprove it. People are doing this when they say, “*Why not?*” This problem comes up, for example, in applying the doctrinal test to people who claim to be prophets.

(b) making a claim that is considered established unless someone can propose an alternative explanation. People do this when they say, “*What else could it be?*”

(c) making a claim that is considered established because people have provided evidence that fits with that explanation. People do this when they say, “*Doesn't this support it?*”

We should not feel pressured to disprove other people's doctrinal claims. At most our task is to show that the basis is inadequate. Then we can propose our own claim with adequate evidence for it. Seldom can an interpretation be disproved satisfactorily. Showing that one position is true eliminates all other positions including the one originally presented. Sometimes, of course, one person's understanding amounts to an aspect of another's view or *vice versa*; so they are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes each idea comprises a different part of the same complete picture; so the difference is resolved, not by absolutizing one or the other, but by making them complementary.

Below are three techniques for dealing with evidence from passages misused to get mistaken positions:

(a) Show that another way exists for understanding the passage. To eliminate any concept, a person needs only to provide another reasonable alternative. If a passage fits more than one viewpoint, it does not establish either of them. It becomes secondary, or confirmatory, evidence (see below). One reason for seeing whether the data can be accounted for by more than one reconstruction is that if it could either way, it eliminates treating it as primary evidence for either position. It becomes as a matter of opinion, or another starting point for the view must be found. If no other starting point can be found, the matter stands unresolved.

(b) Show that the idea is foreign to the flow of thought. An idea relevant to the context is more likely correct. In offering alternatives and noting an idea's irrelevance, an interpreter is showing that there is no basis for introducing the proposal into the picture.

(c) Show that the interpretation is contradictory to the near or distant context or to the nature of the case. Here an interpreter is disproving the idea by shouldering the negative burden of proof and can thus show reason for removing the proposal.

Different interpretations usually cannot be proved or disproved from individual passages, because that is not where they came from. They came from general viewpoints based elsewhere. From a practical standpoint, the task may be first to remove each piece of evidence by providing another legitimate interpretation. Next comes the call for justifying the general perspective from which inference was made about this passage. To be

effective and efficient though, interpreters do better to state evidence for the underlying perspective, because no resolution of specific interpretations can occur without doing that.

The burden of proof always rests on the affirmative because the test of an interpretation is the test of consistency, which is another expression for the “law of harmony”; positions not capable of positive demonstration become opinion. Because more than one interpretation might satisfy the consistency test, interpreters must shoulder their burden of proof when they choose one affirmation over another.

Minimum affirmation corresponds with positive burden of proof. We should not claim more than we can substantiate. The positive burden of proof relates to the law of parsimony. If six factors can seemingly account for a process, that does not disprove there are more than six; it means only that a seventh factor need not be introduced. If, for example, laws of nature can account for the present world, God is not necessary even though his existence is not disproved.

From available information, we may not be able to disprove there are men on Mars, but that does not mean we have to believe somebody’s claim to that effect without adequate evidence. A wife might accuse her husband of being unfaithful. He is not apt to succeed at disproving her claims and quieting her fears. In general, accusations of moral turpitude are especially insidious because they involve private sins where there are no witnesses. So, jurisprudence operates on the principle that a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

Some issues associated with Holy Spirit matters put us in this position. Someone who claims to speak with tongues may try to get us to try it, saying that it will be a self-authenticating experience. One person cannot deny another person’s experience, but the second person is in as good a position as the first when it comes to equating that experience with what the New Testament means by tongue speaking or the “baptism in the Spirit.” There is often the claim that all Christians truly converted will speak in tongues as a sign of God’s accepting them. All we can do in such cases is ask for the biblical evidence; ambiguous experiences do not qualify as evidence.

Other examples that cannot individually bear the positive burden of direct proof include the following:

- the belief that feet washing is an ordinance of the church.
- that sex is for procreation always, never for marital pleasure alone.
- that after divorce God still views the former spouse as the divorcee’s spouse even after one or both remarry.
- that a person’s day of death is prescribed by God (note Job 14:5).
- that each person has a specific task God wants that person to do in the kingdom.
- that fasting can be only for religious purposes.
- that Jesus was a created being.
- the perpetual virginity of Mary (Matthew 1:25 “till” does not work well; cp. 28:20).

the official administration of baptism.
a second type of tongue speaking.

These items and most others that seem never to get resolved are really implications of general ideas that are not recognized, and there is no hope of solving the specifics without dealing with the general ideas.

For an illustration of how bearing the positive burden of proof applies to the form of Christian baptism, see *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 322-39.

Maintaining the positive burden of proof is especially important in dealing with positive commandment because a person cannot check his work against the nature of the case. Matters of positive commandment do not arise from the nature of the case. (Note *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, p. 396.)

Maintaining the positive burden of proof is also important in evaluating views of predictive prophecy. That is the case because the hearer cannot verify the view by experience. A major problem with systems of eschatology is that they are not falsifiable because they deal with the future so they must be held as opinions. More of the total system comes from the interpreters than from the biblical materials they cite.

The point regarding evolution vs. creation is not whether a person can believe in evolution despite the fossil evidence. The question is whether there is adequate evidence for any position that can then be defended against “holes” in the evidence or against “apparently conflicting information.”

The moralizing view of history is hard to disprove from life experience itself.

In the area of divine guidance, it is hard to disprove from experience or the Bible that God has a specific will for each person at each point along the way.

There is the idea that religious fasting is not a deliberate act but a natural response only.

The six-day, 24-hour understanding of Genesis 1 is a case where the burden of proof can get shifted from the positive to the negative. People who are not convinced that is the point of Genesis 1 are called on to disprove the 24-hour reading. Along with this pattern of thought goes the questionable principle of taking literal over figurative unless the literal is not possible—another example of calling for the negative burden of proof. The real primary interpretation principle is authorial intent.

The only way to deal with such issues is to let their advocates attempt to sustain their position and then show that each point of their evidence can consistently be understood differently.

The positive burden of proof must be borne by *primary proof vs. confirmatory evidence*. Primary proof means what must be the conclusion; confirmatory evidence means what may be the conclusion. In popular parlance, confirmatory evidence is often expressed by saying that something “supports” or “is in keeping with” a viewpoint. Conclusions built on primary evidence are matters of faith and fact; conclusions built on confirmatory evidence are matters of opinion. Any ambiguous situation can serve to illustrate secondary evidence. For example, a neighbor once carried our garbage cans up from the curb and put them a few feet from our house. The cans had been by the curb for two days. Was he being helpful, or was he expressing disapproval of our leaving the trash cans out there too long? The situation was unclear, so we did not make inferences.

Primary proof and confirmatory evidence correlate with *faith* and *opinion*. *Opinion* refers to what cannot be shown for certain. In the interests of Christian unity, it may be well to add at least another category and call it “fact” so that the total set becomes *faith*, *fact*, and *opinion*. Fact can refer to matters that are clear but are not such that would affect salvation, fellowship, or ministry. One obvious justification for saying that things equally true are not equally important comes from Jesus’ own teaching in Matthew 5:19: “*Whoever breaks one of these least commandments . . . will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*” The same implication applies to the terminology “First” and “Second” Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40). Confirmatory evidence correlates with silence and opinion.

As matters that are hermeneutically certain include faith and fact, so also matters that are hermeneutically uncertain (opinion) include personal preference and cultural pattern.

One complicating factor here is the *Semitic tendency not to distinguish primary proof and confirmatory evidence*. Readers must determine which type of evidence a statement is. For example, Jesus said that a true prophet does not make merchandise of people. Possibly a false prophet might have a selfless demeanor even though his teaching is not true. It is one thing to say that a true prophet has this characteristic; it is quite another to say that one who has this characteristic is a true prophet. The qualification seems to be, not a final test, but a negative test to be laid alongside others. Other possibilities are that Jesus was stating a general observation rather than an absolute rule or that he was talking about right attitude rather than right content. As a technique for determining whether evidence is primary or confirmatory, see whether the point appealed to can fit with another viewpoint.

A person can use the *argument of silence* legitimately against a failure to present primary evidence. In such a case, argument from silence observes that there is no primary proof in the data. Silence can point out the lack of primary proof. Silence can eliminate proposals that violate the nature of the case. In organizational theory, for example, silence about offices other than the ones specified eliminates them *de facto* if the body of literature provides a complete picture and if New Testament church organization, for example, was intended to set precedent.

When we speak of the positive burden of proof, *we are speaking of the position taken rather than the form of the statement made in taking it*. A proposition may be either positive or negative as far as verbiage is concerned. But when someone verbalizes it, the one who makes a claim bears the responsibility for showing it is true.

Some things may not be directly falsifiable. In bearing the positive burden of proof, we must often establish the basis for it by proving the logically prior point(s) on which it rests; so, the person must at least be able (a) to assimilate more of the data into his system harmoniously than other options can do, (b) to point out the inadequacies of alternative views, or (c) to show that the data for alternative positions are capable of other interpretations.

Opinion and confirmatory evidence bring up the point that the theological task has two aspects: (1) determining positively what we ought to believe and (2) establishing the boundaries of variation in what we should believe. That is so because the Bible student cannot always decide what the truth is on some questions. There is no primary proof in some cases; they are matters of likelihood. In such cases, the theological task is not over with the verdict that no conclusion can be reached. The task remains of calculating the possibilities that do not infringe on things that are certain. One boundary is pragmatic: when a view

implies behavior contrary to God's express command, it has pushed past the acceptable boundary of variation. To whatever level of exactness scripture speaks, theology is free to go; at whatever level of exactness scripture speaks, theology is responsible for establishing the range of variation.

*B. Illustrations do not prove.

The fact that an illustration can be thought of does not mean it proves anything. A distinction between *illustration* and *example* applies here. An example is a case that serves as a specimen. An illustration is something of a different kind that shares certain characteristics with the matter of interest. "*He is as strong as an ox*" illustrates how strong someone is; it does not say anything about his intelligence. Finding some parallels between two things does not mean the second is an example of the first.

**The trinity is like a triangle or an iceberg with three parts sticking out of the water.

**The New Testament canon is like a walled city. But someone may say, "*But cities have suburbs,*" with the implication that there are degrees of canonicity. The first person could respond, "*This is an eastern city: outside its walls there is nothing but desert.*" That kind of banter settles nothing about the canon. It may show what each person thinks, but it does not show that either idea is right.

**Jesus made a statement about not taking food for the children and giving it to the family's dog. The Syro-Phoenician woman responded by saying that the dogs can at least have the crumbs. Her comment carried forward the legitimacy of her request because Jesus' response did not prove he should not help her.

Changing the "terms" of another person's illustration does not discredit his point any more than the use of the illustration proves it. Illustrations create an affective impression, convey a cognitive point about the unknown, or make something concrete. Illustrations do not prove; they illustrate. Illustrations show what the presenter means, not whether it is true. For example, someone might illustrate the notion of moral imperative by saying that a craftsman making bookshelves ought to use nails instead of glue. The listener has not disproved the moral imperative by saying, "*But he could have used screws.*" The listener has simply changed the "terms" of the illustration, not disproving the truth of the illustrate.

So much arguing about scripture amounts to a battle of wits over illustrations.

*C. Check to see whether the right model is being used.

Comparison between two different things mean there are some likenesses and some differences. One common thinking problem comes from transferring from the model an element that does not correspond with an element in the thing modeled. An apparent argument rests on an aspect that is unlike the thing pictured.

Effective presentation appeals to an example in people's experience (a real thing) rather than appealing to an illustration of one kind of thing by another (an ideal thing).

**Human beings can take only so much; when they break, they are irreparable. They are like a tree uprooted by a strong wind and cannot be set upright again.

*D. Do not decide the correctness of an interpretation by whether it fits with what you already believe.

Getting into that habit conditions us to agree with what we already believe. If we are wrong, we multiply our errors and get accustomed to sloppy thinking. Other people will notice this tendency and be more cautious about listening to us.

**Someone that believes in single-action immersion should not, for example, use the expression “one baptism” in Ephesians 4:5 to argue against trine baptism or multiple modes of baptism.

**To avoid belief in modern-day tongue speaking, many people have accepted the view that “the perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:10 refers to the completed canon, an idea foreign to Paul’s line of thought in the text. That same motive has caused them to use Acts 8:18-24 to argue that only the apostles could pass on the ability to impart supernatural gifts.

E. Check to see about the intended reference.

Frame of reference can be a problem of part-to-whole confusion. An example is Paul’s use of the Old Testament in connection with (a) veil-wearing or (b) the female-deference principle. Frame of reference can also be a problem of two categories terminologically connected. Baptism can be looked on as a legal-category matter or an interpersonal-category one. Reading texts about baptism does not automatically clarify whether the act is in one category or the other. We must decide that from considerations elsewhere.

**Titus 1:12

**Hebrews’ use of Psalm 110:4

**Baptism for remission of sins: Hebrews 8:10-12 (10:15-18) + Colossians 2:10-12.

F. Do not feel that you must accept someone’s explanation because you cannot think of another one.

**Psalm 51:5

**John 10:28

**Acts 11:18 (2 Corinthians 7:10)

**Romans 9:22

**Ephesians 2:8

**Ephesians 2:10 (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Ezekiel 18:21)

**1 John 3:9

G. Your inability to explain a difficulty between scriptures does not mean they contradict.

On the assumption that scripture does not err, reaching a conclusion that creates contradiction serves warning that something has gone wrong in the interpretation process. The situation calls for tracing back through our work to discover the fallacy. Contradictions can represent lack of internal consistency or lack of correspondence with external facts. These problems can be “corrected” by assigning them to transmissional error or hermeneutical mistake.

Imagination, creativity, speculation, and such serve a positive role by removing hindrances to believing and obeying. (a) Speculation does not establish the truth itself but makes it believable to honest hearts. (b) Speculation does not have to find the answer to apparent discrepancies; it needs only to propose a credible solution that restores confidence in the biblical record and the Christian worldview. (c) Speculation does not establish tests of fellowship, because the postulations of sanctified imagination are extra-biblical content and therefore matters of opinion. Speculations are developed to relieve one’s own mental conflict and to help others who accept them for their own confidence about the Christian faith. Sanctified imagination justifies God to his servants.

1. Contradictions are resolved by appealing to first principles (nature of the case). The reality itself (referent) provides the criteria for sorting through models and word meanings. In our efforts at carrying out systematic theology, we have relied many times on the characteristics of interpersonal relationship.

a. *Words have multiple meanings.* Interpreters create contradictions by equivocating terms that mean different things in different contexts. We can resolve apparent discrepancies by checking context to make sure that the same subject is in view, that the same time period is referred to, that the same people are addressed.

**Luke 12:51: “*Do not think that I came to give peace in the earth.*” +
John 14:27: “*My peace I give you.*”

**Galatians 6:2: “*Bear one another’s burdens.*” +
Galatians 6:5: “*Each person will bear his own burden.*”

b. *Words may be used figuratively.*

There are two levels of usage with a word: (a) it may refer to one idea in contrast to another (Does “for” [ὑπέρ, *hyper*] in connection with the atonement, e.g., mean “as a substitute for” or “in order to help”?); it may refer to the thing itself or to something analogous.

**Revelation 14:10 says the wicked will be tortured in the presence of the angels and the Lamb; yet God will wipe away all tears from the eyes of the righteous (Revelation 7:17; 21:4). The passage brings up incompatible imageries. How could the righteous saved have no tears at seeing evil loved ones tortured? This case may be an example of imprecatory apocalyptic (cp. the imprecatory Psalms). The idea involves exaggerated imagery to stress the negativeness of the situation.

**Hell contains fire and brimstone (Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8); yet hell elsewhere is comparable to darkness outside (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Besides,

the resurrected body is a spiritual body. Incompatible figures can refer to compatible realities.

**Relative to atonement theory *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 68-69, shows how incompatible metaphors can refer to compatible realities.

**See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, p. 26, for an application of figurative interpretation as a way of avoiding contradiction created by the concept of inherited guilt.

2. Contradictions can be resolved by putting disparate items in a *larger frame of reference*.

The apparent contradiction can come from taking something as an absolutely that was meant relatively—within a limited framework. The larger frame of reference sufficiently qualifies the individual statements that they become compatible.

3. Contradictions are resolved by using sanctified imagination.

A person postulates ways to resolve seeming contradictions but does not make such postulations binding on other people.

**God had promised Abraham that in Isaac his seed would be called (Genesis 21:12). Later, he commanded Abraham to sacrifice him on an altar atop Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1-19). Abraham used sanctified imagination to justify God for issuing a command that contradicted a promise. He supposed that after he sacrificed Isaac, God would resurrect him from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

**The problem of free will vs. foreknowledge and predestination (cp. *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, p. 181.)

4. “contradiction” between scripture and experience

Somewhat akin to contradictions are cases of apparent conflict between the Bible and experienced reality.

**“*Pray without ceasing*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) is not possible. In this example we could redefine the word *pray* to “*being in an attitude of prayer*,” where supplicants could enter into prayer at any moment without finding it incongruous with what is happening in their lives. It would amount to doing everything with a vertical implication so that prayer becomes the whole of life. Better, the reader could play on the aspect of action in the verb; it would mean iterative action—a Christian should maintain a regular practice of prayer *vs.* continuing prayer.

**The lack of supernatural experience—resurrection—does not invalidate the possibility of it if there is sufficient causation beyond the natural realm (note larger frame of reference). Since experience is not universal, sometimes we can reread experience to make universal knowledge compatible with that experience (omniscience).

In summary, apparent contradictions may be resolved by checking to see

whether

- a. the word has shifted meaning.
- b. one statement is figurative and the other literal.
- c. the statements address different people.
- d. the comments appear in different dispensations.
- e. one statement is practical advice and the other theological commandment.
- f. both statements are in contrast to the same thing.
- g. one statement is a generalization, the other an absolute uniformity; one may be a degree matter that is worded in absolute terms.
- h. there is a manuscript problem.
- i. there is a difference between English and biblical idiom at this point.

*H. Understanding another person does not mean agreeing with the person.

What is understandable is not necessarily true. There is a natural series comprised of knowing about, understanding, believing, and doing. Being understandable requires internal consistency, but it does not require conformity to reality.

Willingness to listen is prerequisite to being able to correct someone (or to be corrected), because listening is prerequisite to understanding. People tend to accept what they understand. Knowing this, they are afraid to listen for fear that if they understand, they will accept what they do not believe now and end up being led astray.

For practical purposes, there may be a difference between the pattern of presenting an idea to someone else and the pattern of getting to that idea. We do not want to adopt for our own exegetical pattern the presentation pattern used in teaching. A presenter often states the conclusion and spends time describing it before offering the reasons for it. As hearers, we need to distinguish these two patterns.

I. Do not try to refute while you are trying to understand (cp. John 8:37).

*J. Evaluating an interpretation is largely the same process as coming to our own conclusion.

1. The basic question is whether a viewpoint represents a valid derivation from this passage.
2. The second question is whether a viewpoint is consistent within itself and with other sure facts.
3. The third question is whether it is practical, that is, whether it fits with experience, whether it will work.

K. Distinguish between truth and getting it from this passage.

We tend to accept an interpretation if the idea makes sense. We need to distinguish between what is true and what is meant in this passage. We should not agree with an argument for a conclusion because the conclusion is true; such thinking fosters imprecise thinking, and that will “catch up with us” later because we will not be corrected if we are

wrong. So much “interpretation” is merely attaching ideas people think are right to passages that have nothing to do with them. This can happen when people try to “pad their proof.” It does not help a viewpoint to multiply proofs by adding numbers of irrelevant passages.

Getting in the habit of associating true ideas with irrelevant passages allows us to get sloppy in his thinking. The time will come when an idea read into a text is not in fact true, but it is a comfortable idea that sounds like a biblical one; and so it is acted on and passed on to other people. It is like the notion that a belief or practice is true and good if “it intends to honor Jesus.”

**“Mutual submission” may express an important attitudinal principle in interpersonal relationships, but it is more than doubtful that Ephesians 5:21 has this in view. In fact, it is likely the opposite of Paul’s point. Mutual submission would better come from Philippians 2:3, “*... in lowliness of mind, each counting the other better than himself.*”

**We might argue that Acts 1:6 is an imperatival future, “*And you will be my witnesses. . .*” Jesus does command his apostles to preach to the uttermost parts of the earth; but it is more likely that this text simply makes a prediction, because the statement combines with a prediction about receiving the Holy Spirit.

L. Distinguish between what makes sense and what scripture teaches.

Interpretation gets a message from the text and deals with how we do it. People simply describe what they believe rather than show why a text means that. Description does not prove. The catch is that what a person thinks is true may not be true. It may make sense to say that water applied one way rather than another has no ability to wash away sin, but that is not the issue. What God intended the action of baptism to be is the issue. Baptism is a positive commandment; consequently, the reason for applying water one way rather than another cannot necessarily be given. Interpretation does not deal with the power of an idea or even its accuracy, but with the intended meaning of a text. The issue is not how reasonable something seems, but why it is true. Apologetics should not be confused with hermeneutics.

Akin to confusing interpretation and truth is confusing what God can do and what he does do. What he does do relates to the interpretation enterprise because interpretation deals with statements like promises. People learn what God promises by interpreting his word aright. For example, the question is not whether God can heal all Christians from their diseases, but whether he has promised to do so.

M. Do not adjust your own interpretation of a passage so it will eliminate someone else’s unacceptable view on something else.

Adjustment can come in the forms of overreaction, overkill, and “eisegesis,” which means reading into a passage something the interpreter needs to find somewhere. **Extremism is one big plague in biblical interpretation.** Ulterior motives create the pendulum effect; and the results do not increase understanding but confusion. Forced interpretation is like having shoes on the wrong feet.

Reactionary exegesis illustrates the pendulum effect. It is not to be confused with the principle that truth tends to lie between the extremes. We should not let ourselves get into “grasping for straws,” “reaching,” and “overdoing it.”

**To avoid the use of 1 Corinthians 14 to advocate modern tongue-speaking, some have suggested that the gifts exercised in the Corinthian church were not legitimate manifestations of the Spirit. Instead of coming right out and calling them illegitimate activities, Paul supposedly dealt with them pastorally—a form of accommodation. He laid down such guidelines for their use that these pseudo “gifts” could not be continued.

**Some especially extreme views have been proposed for “baptism for the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15 to avoid the admitted misuse of that text to baptize living people for dead ancestors. Salvation is personal.

**To avoid the conclusion that baptism is associated with salvation (rather than, say, church membership or testimony to others), exegetes have put forward several curious interpretations for the expression “born of water” in John 3:5. “Water” supposedly refers to amniotic acid that surrounds the unborn baby, to male semen, to a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit.

**The idea is proposed that the “cross” was a stake, so as to avoid using it as an object of adoration. The idea may have come from the ancient derogatory description of Jesus as “the son of the stake.”

**Originating the idea that “*husband of one wife*” meant that elders and deacons had to be married came up in Alexander Campbell’s debate with a celibate Roman Catholic bishop in Cincinnati.

**“*Baptism in the Spirit*” is said by some to have occurred only at Pentecost and at the household of Cornelius, which avoids certain evangelical and Pentecostal views associated with the term.

**Non-instrumentalists have developed the concept that silence in matters of worship equals prohibition primarily, it would seem, to eliminate what they consider excesses. During the Reformation, Calvin did something of the same thing in contrast to Luther.

**ERA advocates have developed in response to discrimination in the job market and have in the process created more confusion than the good they could otherwise have done.

**Acts 8:18 evidently provides an illustration of overreaction. Those looking for arguments for the cessation of miracles at the end of the apostolic age read this verse as a generality statement: the transmission of miraculous gifts comes only through the imposition of apostolic hands. However, Simon the sorcerer saw only this one occasion; so it is not clear that Luke is reporting Simon’s observation as a generality.

**Reaction against child abuse has brought into vogue objecting to corporal punishment in any form or degree. Christians who have attempted to assimilate this idea into their child-rearing philosophy are faced with the clear proverb usually paraphrased, “*Spare the rod and spoil the child*” (Proverbs 13:24; cp. 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15). One attempt to get around this has been to say that the rod was used by shepherds to guide the sheep along as they drove them from place to place; so the passage, taken figuratively, says that a child needs to be guided as he grows up; and if he is, he will not depart from that guidance later (Proverbs 13:24; cp. 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15).

In the first place, this interpretation fails to distinguish the rod from the shepherd’s staff (“*Thy rod and thy staff comfort me*”). The crook on the end of the staff was what the shepherd would use to corral errant lambs. The rod would be used to beat off

predators. But more importantly, the interpretation assumes the uniform meaning of words in different specialized settings. In a statement about child-rearing, “rod” does not mean the same thing as it does in a statement about shepherding. The only rod involved in child-rearing is the rod used for corporal discipline. The only rod involved in shepherding is the rod used for protecting the sheep. Neither specialized context indicates any intention of connecting one setting with the other. People who start from a non-biblical frame of reference often stand distant from the biblical material they try to use to reinforce their presentations.

******Another example of overreaction is the denial of individual predestination as a way of reacting against Calvinistic predestination.

******1 Corinthians 13:8-10 has been overused by both sides of the Pentecostal controversy. The “perfect” has been defined as the completed New Testament canon by opponents of tongue speaking and as the second coming of Christ by those who practice glossolalia. Apparently “the perfect” refers to features of the next life *vs.* the features of the present one, features that begin at an individual’s death.

To eliminate a false view of an ambiguous passage, we do not have to present an alternative. All that is necessary is to propose a view equally fitting the words without necessarily advocating it. To avoid a false viewpoint derived from an ambiguous text, we need only to show that the position is unnecessary, not that it is false. The temptation is to make the meaning more different from our own belief than the passage allows. “Polemic expediency” means creating arguments against a position by applying irrelevant observations as if they belonged to the discussion. Extremes beget extremes.

Keeping the burden of proof on the affirmative avoids the overreactions in M. Overreaction gets the dogmatic question ahead of the exegetical one. A person puts a conclusion out ahead of the reasoning pattern and then works toward it.

N. Do not get *the practical problem ahead of the exegetical one*.

The exegetical question comes first because exegesis does not deal with truth itself but with the meaning of communication. In our zeal to solve a practical problem, we may misread texts in the direction of our need.

O. Do not accept a view because of the people that hold it—people with education, a friend, people who has admirable Christian life quality, people that are famous, people that are eloquent (1 Corinthians 1:18-31), people that can get their material into print. Likewise, do not adopt an idea because it is a majority viewpoint or a popular belief.

P. Make a certain amount of allowance for people mis-expressing themselves. What they say may be false understood as their words should be taken, but experience shows that people do not necessarily mean what their words say.

Q. Be willing to listen to people who have previously been wrong on other points.

Being wrong about one thing does not mean being wrong about everything. In Acts 18:24-28, Apollos needed to know the way of the Lord “more perfectly.”

R. Do not demand a specific verse for every item of Christian understanding.

Viewpoints often come from combinations of passages or from necessary inferences from other factors. Demanding chapter and verse makes an inappropriate demand for proof. The Bible is not a reference book—dictionary, encyclopedia, catechism, or fix-it manual, which does not depend on context for meaning. So, a person’s view can come from a stream of thought not expressed “in a nutshell.”

S. Distinguish between describing an idea and proving it.

Describing an idea is different from showing that it is true. Giving information that fits with an idea is different from getting to the idea in the first place. Showing the practical value of an idea is different from showing that the Bible teaches it.

For practical purposes, there may be a difference between the pattern of presenting an idea to someone else and the pattern of getting to that idea. We do not want to adopt for our own exegetical pattern the presentation pattern often used in teaching. For clarity purposes, a presenter may state the conclusion and spend time describing it before he offers the reasons for it. As listeners, we need to distinguish these two patterns so we can listen accordingly.

A general difficulty in evaluating the ideas of other people is keeping a proper connection between the idea and the source of that idea. On the one hand, we do well to be cautious about ideas brought forward by people whose positions in general are suspect; their inaccuracies in other matters may provide the foundation for this one. Examples include interpretation by theological liberals, by quasi-Christian groups, by unbelievers, or by people from widely different theological persuasions from our own. On the other hand, we should not overlook other people’s insights just because they are not formally educated in biblical studies or are not especially gifted.

In general, we cannot let people scare us into ideas by their authority or their threats. We must not let them pressure us into doing and believing things by haranguing or putting undue urgency on the matter. We must avoid letting others exhort us into ideas by their winsome personality or emotional appeal. We dare not let them exhort us before they convince us.