Theological Fallacies
How NOT to Approach Bible Doctrine

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Bad doctrine arises from bad foundations. This is true of every belief system, really, whether connected to theology or not. But it is especially important to recognize this in theology, because it concerns the Word of God. This deserves a quality consideration for how we will approach it. Sadly, most have failed to examine their approach, because consistence and self-discipline in thought have lost significance in 21st Century Western culture. We need to understand not only *where* people go wrong in their doctrine but *why*. This will help us in two ways: (1) It will help us to avoid the same mistake. (2) It will help us to identify the deeper issues of different beliefs, even when the surface claim seems legitimate.

Fallacies of Approach

Emotionalistic Approaches. One main error we find in Christianity today is what can be called emotionalism. This is the formation of one's belief based on what is emotionally appealing, rather than what is consistent with Scripture and logic. Humans are creatures of sense experience, driven by what satisfies flesh-based inclinations. Therefore, to the carnal mind, what feels good is right, and what offends is wrong. One could also call this error *subjectivism*.

How do we see it today? In many ways this is the very battle cry of the Charismatic movement; the more experiences one can have of God, no matter how ridiculous they may be, the better. The idea of being "drunk in the Spirit" is obviously Satanic, but it sells, because it brings euphoria. But this mentality has also crept into how people view the local church. Does Scripture have clear parameters for how it should look? Absolutely. Yet in spite of the clear lack of warrant in Scripture, Evangelicals have no problem introducing a "worship" band as one of its main attractions, because it fits preference and makes "church" more of a welcoming concept. Furthermore, emotionalism can be seen in most heretical movements today, such as those who subscribe to universalism, the "Prosperity Gospel," and annihilation. Paul obviously foresaw these kinds of errors when he said to Timothy, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, wanting their ears tickled..." (2 Tim. 4:3). Do we want our ears tickled, like most today? Or do we want truth?

Unbalanced Extremism. Another approach that will lead to error is what we might call unbalanced extremism. In this, one may hold a certain doctrine tenaciously without any proper regard for its balancing counterpart, (i.e. election and responsibility, Christian Liberty and Christian obligation, truth in love and love in truth, etc.). One of the worst things a theologian can do is develop a "pet doctrine." This practice has the tendency to obscure equally beautiful truths in Scripture. And if it is handled badly, then perhaps another extreme will be developed

from opposition which overemphasizes the counterpart. For instance, too often in battling compromise, people drift into legalism. But often people facing legalism often slip into compromise. Whatever area the theologian deals with, he must "turn not to the right hand or to the left."

The Lord Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees for only emphasizing their "pet doctrine," which evidenced their hypocrisy. He said in Matthew 23, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these you ought to have done, and not to leave the other undone." Similarly, we find in Galatians 5 these words "For, brethren, you have been called unto liberty [one aspect of the truth]; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another [Its balancing counterpart]." Sometimes we will not be able to find the correlation between two doctrines which seemingly oppose each other; but this is a fault on our side, not God's. In this situation, we must research two things: (1) what specific areas each doctrine is emphasized in and applied to, (2) whether we have the right understanding of what the doctrine really means.

The Merely Academic Approach. While we have seen that some can be extreme or overly emotional in some approaches to theology, there is also the danger of doing theology merely for the sake of academics. Theology is about knowledge, yes, but not stagnate knowledge. We want to know God! When theology is approached as a science rather than divine revelation, error is sympathized with and truth taught less emphatically. But when we see it as being from God, we are burdened for it, and it becomes a living reality in our lives. We must understand the difference between textbook theology and Scriptural theology. God's Word must be central in everything. Sadly, in academic circles this is frowned upon. Liberals who reject the infallibility of Scripture are still, for some reason, called "theologians." Ecumenists who associate with and tolerate Roman Catholicism, even in its denial of Biblical justification, are still given credibility. This is what happens when we approach theology as if it were about academics or philosophy. But it is really about the glory of God; thus it must be done with passion and pursuit toward Him. This may mean sacrificing some credibility in the liberal academic circles and separating from dead orthodoxy, but it is necessary. As Paul could say, "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God... But we speak the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 2:4-7).

Incompetence. The opposite error to mere academics would be approaching Scripture with incompetence, that is, having no academic discipline at all in studying Scripture – only using it for inspiration, not doctrine. For example, in Christian book stores today, it is the "inspirational" book that sells: people want to better their lives and self esteem with ten easy steps. This is also exemplified in surface-level Bible reading, seen in a few examples, like reading plans followed only for maintaining status quo and not for spiritual food, or Bible journaling which focuses more on the art than the verse, or the underlining of a verse without regard for its context. It is wonderful to read daily and find ways to meditate upon Scripture, but we must do so with thought. Anyone knows how to find an inspirational quote, but only

God's people know how to find the true meaning of a passage as the Spirit of God directs them. Other examples could include one-minute devotionals as a substitution for true Bible study, programs to "Know the Bible in 10 Days" when it takes far more than that, as well as reversion to loose Bible translations in which the actual words of God are not maintained (e.g. the Message, the NLT, or even the NIV in many cases).

In 2 Timothy 2, Paul tells Timothy to "Be diligent to shew yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, <u>rightly dividing the word of truth</u>." Timothy was called to be competent with the Scriptures. As well, in Hebrews we find these words,

> "For when for the time <u>ye ought to be teachers</u>, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For <u>every one that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe</u>. But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

All of us start out on our spiritual journey with little capacity to understand the great themes of the Bible, but let us not expect this stage to last long. Let us move into "solid foods" like adults and be diligent in our handling of Scripture. Bible study is hard work, but it is certainly doable work.

Unreasonable Approaches. Then there are just plain silly approaches to Scripture that are unreasonable at their core, such as trying to determine a date for the Rapture. When one lacks logical consistency in forming his beliefs, not only does he hurt his own reputation, but sadly the reputation of theology as a whole. Proverbs 3:21 calls us to "Keep sound wisdom and discretion" and "Let them not depart from [our] eyes." Sometimes it doesn't take a long theological treatise to disprove a theory. God has given us minds to reason with, especially when we are saved; thus we must use them.

Experiential Approaches. Finally, this approach says, "The Bible says [something], but my experience tells me otherwise. I will believe what I have experienced." While one may not say this with his mouth, often it is said with the heart. For instance, many Christians have fallen into the trap of thinking that people are generally reasonable and good, even in their unconverted state. Why? Not because Scripture tells them, but because they have experienced traces of kindness amongst the world. But Romans 3 clearly describes unregenerate man as being wicked to the very core. While all may not exhibit this wickedness as much as some, the fact that fallen man is wholly depraved cannot be compromised. Isaiah 64 says even the righteousness of wicked people is like filthy rags. We might not see this visibly, since the Devil wants to make the world look appealing; but does God's Word stand less true on account of our own deception? A Christian who does theology well is a Christian who is thoroughly Biblical in his beliefs. Experiences may deceive us; but His Word stands forever true and unquestionable. "And this voice which came from heaven <u>we heard</u> *[they had an experience]*, when we were with him in the holy mount. <u>We have also a more sure word of prophecy</u> *[Scripture was more sure than their experience]*; <u>whereunto ye do well that ye take heed</u>, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts." (2 Peter 1:18-19). Thorough

spirituality and thorough Biblical literacy are the only cures to these false approaches. We must thoroughly be people of the book!

Fallacies of Text

True theology is always a result of properly handling the Scriptures. Sadly, many treat the Bible as a "free-for-all," thinking its meaning can be subjectively modified. But God's Word must be approached with consistency, reason, and balance. Every science is governed by rules of study; while we would not degrade theology to a simple science, it too is a study which must be governed by basic principles. We must be faithful and diligent in how we approach Bible texts. The following are ways *not* to approach the text of Scripture.

Mysticism: No Text at All. This is the claiming of truth/revelation through an extra-biblical source, particularly the inner workings of the mind or the ethereal claims of a teacher. It does not see the text of Scripture as a final revelation or a once-delivered faith, but envisions God revealing new truth even today. Thus there is the Charismatic movement with its claims to "encounters with God" and such. Timothy was warned against this concept of subjective revelation when Paul said, "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to your trust [Timothy had a definite revelation to preach], avoiding profane and vain babblings [theories that waste time and have no spiritual substance], and oppositions of what is falsely called 'knowledge' [subjective claims to a higher plane of understanding]." (1 Tim. 6:20-21). It is obviously of no help to study theology while avoiding its very basis. We need to use the text at all before knowing how to use it rightly.

Proof-Texting. This is the citation of one verse, without regard for its context or true meaning or relationship to other Scriptures, to prove one's faulty theological claim. For instance, some would use Ecclesiastes 1:4 to say that the earth will not be destroyed and replaced by a new earth. "The earth abides for ever." But the context says this is a contrast with passing generations; thus the thought is permanence rather than everlasting existence. The Devil is good at quoting single proof-texts too. This is what happened in Matthew 4, "[Satan] said unto Him, If You be the Son of God, cast Yourself down: for it is written, 'He shall give his angels charge concerning you: and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone.'" The Lord responded with another text, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Anyone can cite a verse reference; but for it to have theological significance, it must be properly applied. On the flip side, there is another extreme related to this: demanding that every theological statement be backed up by a single text or word. We do not find "Trinity" in the Bible, nor do we find a full development of it in a single text. Rather it is based on multiple passages and clear interpretation of Biblical texts and principles. Often this will be the case in theology, which requires a wide range of Biblical knowledge and competence in applying it.

Allegorical/Spiritualized Interpretation. This disregards the importance of a grammatically and historically consistent interpretation and replaces it with a spiritual or moral sense (subjectively defined by the reader). This traces its roots to the ancient Alexandrian school and much of its philosophy-based approach. Just as with forms of Gnosticism, the spiritual meaning

had the highest value, the moral meaning less so, and the literal meaning the least of the three.

Allegorization can also be seen in Covenant Theology and is necessary to arrive at its Amillennial conclusions. Thus, when Old Testament prophecies speak of Israel and a literal earthly Kingdom, these are really just pointing to the Church and Christ's spiritual reign. At least, this is what some would claim. The problem is, this highly compromises the exegetical value of the Old Testament; it also confuses the idea of drawing a *type* from the Bible and interpreting a *prophecy* in it. The subject is too broad to develop here, however.

What we need to understand is how the New Testament authors approached the Old Testament. There were three main ways: (1) *literally*, as the Lord in the synagogue showed in Luke 4:16-20 and as Paul showed in Romans 11 with his treatment of Israel and its future. (2) *in application*, since "These things were written for our learning." (3) *as a type*, as the book of Hebrews shows concerning the priesthood. We need to be diligent in knowing these different uses of the Old Testament; this will help us avoid the trap of seeing it as a mere source of helpful allegories.

Application-First. Just as we cannot simply allegorize certain Bible passages to apply to us, so we cannot jump to applying Scriptural lessons before we interpret the initial meaning and setting of the text. For instance, when we read the Imprecatory Psalms and the curses which their authors called down on their enemies, we need to understand that we cannot imitate this kind of praying. This was in a specific context: the nation of Israel, which had earthly heritage, earthly promises, and earthly manners of dealing. This is also why the Conquest of Canaan cannot be repeated today. The idea that we can repeat such things is what justified the Crusades in centuries past. We must understand the place of Scriptural texts before we apply them. These are just examples, but the principle carries throughout Scripture. We don't have the authority to flip tables in ungodly religious circles because the Lord Jesus did, but we can take the principle from that event that anger is appropriate toward hypocrisy. We imitate the principle, but stop before the practice. This is something a good Bible interpreter knows how and when to do. He understands a passage and which ways are legitimate to apply it. As a rule of thumb, we need to remember: Everything in Scripture is written *for* us, but not necessarily *to* us. We need to understand a passage's *meaning* before we understand its *bearing* on our lives.

Typology-First. Similarly, there is a wrong approach which uses apparent types in Scripture to prove a false doctrine. Types and shadows in Scripture serve a very distinct purpose: to reveal, in seed form, a doctrine that will be developed in the New Testament. But if a doctrine from an Old Testament shadow is developed that contradicts New Testament teaching, it simply has no place. As an example, consider this hypothetical claim: "Issac is clearly a type of Christ; thus the fact that Isaac did not die on account of the ram proves that Christ did not die on the cross, while someone took His place." This is obviously an utter heresy. The body of Christian truth which we subscribe to is fully revealed in Scripture. There is no room for additional doctrine from supposed shadows. If the shadows are not of truth in the New Testament, they are not shadows at all. It is perfectly legitimate to see shadows of Christ in the offerings, because we find these things in other Scriptures. Outside of this approach, we have no authority to develop doctrines based on our subjective opinion of what an Old

Testament shadow means.

System-Related Fallacies

　　Humans are, by nature, peer-persuaded. In other words, they like to have the approval of a group, regardless of how right the group is. Thus cliches exist like "go with the flow," "peer pressure," and "mob mentality." However, groups in and of themselves are not always bad. A country is a group. A family is a group. A business is a group. There are both negative and positive connotations to these entities, depending on what person is assessing them. At times these are things we can appreciate. At other times, these are things we need to be cautious of. What makes the difference? Truth, character, and consistency on the part of the entities. This is the same with religious systems. We do need a community of Christians to gather and associate with; some would wrongly deny the centrality of this. On the other hand, any community we associate with is not infallible; some would rely on it too heavily, as if it were. So then, we need to be aware of these things and avoid false approaches that come with Christian systems and influences.

　　Detached-from-History. A common error we see in approaching doctrine is doing so without any historical attachment whatsoever. In other words, they care nothing for the contributions of a past generation, even though Psalm 78 shows the clear value of older generations in their value to rising generations. The "wheel" of Biblical orthodoxy needs to be reinvented, in this case, every forty or so years, instead of being built upon already-established conservative doctrine. In one way, 21st Century Christianity is not unique: we are not more spiritual or insightful into Scripture than previous believers were. We have the same Bible and the same doctrine to uphold as they did. In another way, today's Christianity is unique in that we have the advantage of foresight into theological controversies. With both of these factors, we find that history is absolutely essential to consider, or at least moderately be aware of, when studying theology. Paul was a man with a vision for the future. He told Timothy, "What you have heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." (2 Tim. 2:2) Doctrine is not a discovery; it is a responsibility to be passed on from generation to generation. We cannot disregard our heritage; we cannot afford ignorance of who or what we are learning from.

　　Detached-from-Teaching. Similarly, some would also detach themselves from teaching, whether oral or written. "It's just me and my Bible under a tree" as it were. But notice the emphasis on teaching which the author of Hebrews brings out: "For when for the time you <u>ought to be teachers</u>, you have need that one <u>teach you again</u> which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat." (Heb. 5:12). If the Christians were unlearned, they were to be taught. If they were learned, they were to be teachers. The local assembly is by design a "pillar and ground of the truth." Scripture is not simply for personal inspiration; it is for collective upholding by the people of God. Being Biblical transcends a daily reading plan; it entails a concerted effort, centering around teaching, to uphold a collective standard. To be part of that standard and fulfill our responsibility we need to surround ourselves with solid teaching as well as contribute to it any way we can.

Theological Intimidation. The above errors are formed around having too little system or community in theology. But there are also deadly errors that come by having too much regard for a system. One error could be rightly entitled "theological intimidation," that is, seeing an error popularized and being drawn to it on account of its popularity, who holds it, or the consequences of rejecting it. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses have this problem in their cult: they fear being ostracized should they reject or even question the Watchtower's teachings. This is probably something we are all guilty of at some point; after all, isn't it easier to believe what the "smart Bible students" are saying than to critically assess their message? And we also ask ourselves "How can they be wrong, since they have the same Bible?" These are real issues. However, we cannot subscribe to a teaching because we are intimidated by its teachers or the number of its followers. Peter said, "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And <u>many shall follow</u> their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." (1 Peter 2:1-2). Error exists; sometimes smart people and large systems subscribe to it. Regardless, today it is the truth that holds authority, not systems or teachers. Paul acknowledged this in Galatians 1: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than what we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." It is the truth that matters, not the prominence of its advocates.

Positional Theology. Another error which makes too much of a system could be called "positional theology." For instance (and this is not a promotion of Reformed Theology; it is only an example from it), one could call himself "Reformed," because he was born as a Presbyterian, but not care about any of the Reformation doctrines such as *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, etc. He would be part of a system nominally, but not in heart. In these cases, there is no concern for Scripture, but only surface participation in a system. People feel good when part of a group effort, even without actually caring for the effort. Such is too often the case in Christendom. Paul warned Timothy of these kinds of people when he said "Men shall be lovers of their own selves... <u>having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof</u>; from such turn away." (2 Tim. 3:1,5). The difference here is between nominal Christianity and convicted Christianity. Truth matters, and we must respond to it, not with nominal adherence, but deliberate conviction.

The Traditionalist Approach. Apostolic traditions are necessary to uphold. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul says, "Now I praise you brethren that you keep the traditions as I delivered them unto you." But there are other traditions that are man-made. The Pharisees rejected "the commandment of God, that [they could] keep [<u>their] own tradition</u>." (Mark 7:9). These were unfounded religious traditions. But traditions can also be philosophical: Paul warned the Colossians to "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the <u>tradition of men, after the first principles of the world</u>, and not after Christ." (Col. 2:8).

When one is a traditionalist, he holds his convictions higher than or on par with Scripture. He doesn't necessarily have a reason for believing them; he just believes what his

teachers believe, without checking their claims. "It's the clergyman and his Bible under a tree, and I just listen to what he says about the Bible." This is a dangerous, yet all too common, mentality. Such is seen in Roman Catholicism and even in Reformed theology with the antagonism many have toward "four-point Calvinists" as if the TULIP acronym was inspired. Believers are called to discern all traditions by Scripture. In fact, this is a noble thing. "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:11) Do we actively search the Scriptures, or passively accept our traditions?

There are many ways to wrongly approach Bible doctrine, and admittedly it is difficult to avoid these wrong approaches. Most of them stem from human nature: certainly it is difficult to avoid that! But we must be diligent in these things. Scripture calls us to "Buy the truth and sell it not." Sometimes truth comes at a cost to ourselves, yet that makes it all the more valuable to search out. Let us be competent in our doctrine. "Take heed unto yourself and unto your doctrine."