

***Introduction to Biblical Interpretation***  
Course Developed by Ron Habinski in 2006/2007  
for  
An Adult Bible Class, at Alta Vista Baptist Church, Ottawa

***Unit #4 – Common Interpretive Errors***

- The history of Biblical interpretation illustrates the fact that there are many, many ways of misunderstanding the Bible.
- Much the same can probably be said about many other books that people have subjected to intense, detailed study.
- The skeptic's reaction to the difficulty of understanding the Bible, and widespread disagreement among students of the Bible, is to dismiss the entire subject as pointless and inconclusive.
- Skeptics sometimes say things like, ***“That is just your interpretation. It all depends how you understand it. One person's opinion is as good as another's. The Bible means whatever you take it to mean.”***
- Similar remarks can be made about the interpretation of almost any important document.
- A more constructive and profitable approach is to study common, well-recognized interpretive errors, with the intention of learning to recognize them easily and thus to avoid making them or accepting them when others make them.
- Many interpretive errors fall into certain broad categories or types that we can learn to recognize and avoid.
- In this lesson we will be examining a number of common types of interpretive errors.
- Hopefully this will make us better able to recognize and avoid them when they rear their ugly heads.
- The list of common errors that I want to examine with you is not an exhaustive one, and you may think of other types of errors that we should add to our list of errors to avoid.
- The errors we will be examining are in no particular order.
- I will try to sum up each type of interpretive error with a short statement about how we can avoid it.

1. ***Distinguish between particular messages and teachings that can be generally applied to anyone or to any member of a specific group.***

- **READ Isa 38:1-4** and discuss whether it is a general or a particular teaching.
- Do the same for **1 Chron 4:9f; Mt 6:25f; Mt 16:16-19; John 2:5.**
- Some passages are less clear-cut than the examples we have examined together.
- Some passages may have general applicability to a group of people, that we believe we are included in.
- **READ** the example **Mt 27:16-20** and discuss.

**Q: How would you explain to someone the danger of claiming a particular teaching**

for himself by saying, “God has given me this verse.”?

**Q: Have you any questions or comments about the importance of distinguishing between particular messages and teachings that can be generally applied to anyone or to any member of a specific group?**

2. Distinguish between descriptive teachings and normative teachings.

- **READ 1 Chron 4:9f** and discuss whether it is a descriptive or a normative teaching.
- Do the same for **Mark 16:8; Mt 6:1-4.**

**Q: Can you think of any other passages that this principle could help us to understand properly?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

- Some passages may be a little less clear cut when we try to decide whether they are descriptive or normative.

- When you come up against a passage like that you have to put on your thinking cap and exercise sound judgment.

- Here are two examples that require the exercise of personal judgment.

- **Consider 1 Tim 5:23.**

- This verse is not an ethical command that it would have been sinful for Timothy to disobey, but an bit of loving advice given by a concerned friend who was like a father to Timothy.

- It is also a particular teaching intended for Timothy's benefit, not a general one.

- However, the principle it implies seems to be generally applicable.

**Q: What is the principle implied by this verse?**

**A: Look after yourself.**

- **Consider Pv 31:6.**

- These words describe specific advice given by a specific mother to a specific individual, her son, Lemuel.

- At the time, Lemuel was a reigning king, although no one knows what he was king of.

- What we have here is particular or specific teaching given by a specific individual to another specific individual.

- This looks very much like a particular teaching rather than a general one.

- But in spite of the very specific character of this verse, it is clearly intended to be generally applied.

- I say that because this bit of advice is included in a collection of prudential sayings that everyone can and should learn from.

- It is clear that it was believed to be a generally applicable teaching rather than a particular one.

**Q: But is this a truly normative teaching, an ethical commandment that it would be sinful not to obey and apply on every possible occasion?**

**A: No, this bit of counsel is good advice or a counsel of prudence, and not an ethical commandment or law.**

**- It would not be sinful to disregard this advice, and in that sense this passage is not truly normative.**

- But if we go so far as to disagree with the wisdom of the advice given by this verse, or reject its advice, we are probably demonstrating a bias that we have absorbed from the Christian culture in which we have lived.

- This verse recommends one particular way of providing emotional relief or comfort to the hurting, namely: alcoholic beverages.

- Of course, there are also many other ways of comforting people.

- But this specific example implies a general ethical principle.

**Q: What is that principle?**

**A: The duty of comforting and sympathizing with the hurting.**

- Comforting and sympathizing with the hurting is a generally applicable ethical duty.

- That principle is only implied in this verse and not clearly stated.

- However, it is clearly stated in other scriptural passages.

**Q: Have you any questions or comments about how to determine whether a passage is descriptive or normative?**

- Now let's look at a Biblical example where the two interpretive principles that we have just studied are very helpful in understanding and applying the text.

- [READ Acts 2:1-13].

- The most rapidly growing part of the Christian church is Pentecostalism, in its many forms.

- Pentecostalism's objective is to make every worship service as much like what happened in this passage as possible.

**Q: When you read the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, does the record sound like particular teaching, describing what happened to a specific group of people at a specific time and place in history, or general teaching that describes the ordinary ongoing experience of all Christian congregations at all times throughout the period preceding the return of Christ?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

**Q: When you read the account of what happened at Pentecost, does the passage just describe what happened to a specific group of Christians, or teach that what happened to them should serve as the normal pattern and expectation for all Christians at all times in history?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

- In February of 2007 I heard a charismatic Roman Catholic priest speaking about Pentecost on television. He said that Jesus only died once and was raised once, so we celebrate His death and resurrection at one time of the year only. He then contrasted this once-a-year pattern with Pentecost, by saying, "*But Pentecost is for every day of the year!*"

- Clearly, the point that the priest was making flies in the face of the hermeneutical principle we have been examining.
- Of course, it could be pointed out that *the enduring effect of Pentecost was the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and His presence remains a continuing reality for all believers.*
- But *the death and resurrection of Jesus have also had an enduring impact* on the world, and especially on all who call on His name.

**Q: Who took the initiative at the Pentecost described in this passage?**

**A: [DISCUSS]** The Holy Spirit did.

**Q: Did the early believers seek this experience or do anything to make it happen?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

**3. Accept ethical teaching that comes to us on the authority of Jesus, either directly or through His apostles.**

**Ethical teaching that was provided in the Mosaic Law, under the Old Covenant, but is not taught on the authority of Jesus does not have authority to command our obedience.**

- Many Old Testament laws do not apply to us today because they are not taught in the New Testament.
- In previous classes we have examined much of the Biblical evidence that the followers of Jesus are not required to obey the Laws of Moses, but we are required to obey the ethical teachings of Jesus.
- We will not review that mass of evidence now, but we will look at one passage that indicates that most of the Old Testament laws have no authority over us, and followers of Jesus are only asked to obey four of the commandments included in the Law.

**READ Acts 15:1-20.**

- We would do well to question and reject the ethical teaching of any who base it on the Old Testament if they cannot demonstrate that it is part of the ethical teaching of the New Testament.

**- Consider Exodus 20:8; 21:12, 15, 17; 22:3, 18, 19, 20; 23:14; Mal 3:8-11.**

**- Consider Mt 5:33-37.**

**Q: Have you any questions or comments about our acceptance of the teachings of Jesus as our ethical authority?**

**4. - The interpretive principle we are going to examine next is a little difficult to explain, but I will do my best.**

The principle is, **Neither ignore nor over exaggerate the importance of the original languages of the Bible.**

- Most of you have never studied Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek the three languages in which the Bible was originally written, so you may wonder what relevance

this interpretive principle has to you?

- The answer is that it can help to guide your listening and reading when Christian teachers or writers underplay or exaggerate the importance of the original languages of the Bible.
- It is important to recognize and defend the adequacy and substantial accuracy of most common Bible translations.
- Some people seem to think that if you cannot read the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek you really cannot grasp very much of what it teaches.
- It is important not to romanticize the Hebrew and Greek languages as some have done, by describing these languages as perfect instruments, uniquely expressive and more suitable for expressing important ideas and communicating subtleties than any other language.
- There are many other languages that are just as effective as communicative instruments, languages such as Latin, English, French, Chinese and Russian.
- Occasionally, subtle nuances of meaning may be difficult to preserve when translating from one language to another.
- If you have ever heard someone whose first language is not English trying to tell a joke that makes no sense in English, you will know what I mean.
- And some concepts can really be difficult to translate from one language to another.
- For example, it is hard to translate the words *sheep* or *shepherd* into a language that has no word for sheep.
- The people who speak a language with no word for sheep will not know what sheep are like or how they are cared for.
- Substituting for the word *sheep* the name of another animal known to the language group, such as the *pig*, is a solution of sorts, but it does not convey quite the same complex of ideas as the word *sheep*.
- ***But in spite of minor challenges like the word sheep, most things translated from one language into another convey the sense of the original fairly well.***
- That is true of most English translations most of the time.
- Knowing the original languages of the Bible does help, but the help it gives is very seldom, if ever, a matter of life or death.
- There are no perfect Bible translations, but there are many very good ones.
- Just about all of the time you can trust standard, modern Bible translations such as the NASB or the NIV to give you an accurate translation of the original text of the Bible.
- Modern Bible translations are better than older ones for three reasons.
- Modern translations are based on more ancient Greek and Hebrew manuscript evidence and they benefit from improved knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the scriptures.
- I should probably say a few words about the King James Version of the Bible.
- Those who believe in the inspired King James translation, may think that there is little or no value in consulting the Hebrew or Greek texts of the Bible or more modern

translations.

- They could be asked how they came to know that the King James and no other English translation has had this special blessing bestowed upon it.
- People who sing the praises of the King James version occasionally speak about the wonderful translators who produced this masterpiece.
- However, it is really difficult to tell how good they were as translators, because they did so little of it for themselves.
- One estimate that I have read concludes that about 95% of the wording of the King James translation was simply copied, word for word, from other, earlier English translations of the Bible, translations such as the one made by Tyndale, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible and the Bishops' Bible.
- In fact, the committee of 60 men who worked on the King James Version were instructed to follow the wording of the Bishops' Bible to the extent possible.
- We will never know what sort of translation they would have produced had they been given a free hand in their work, instead of being told to try to follow the Bishop's Bible whenever they possibly could.
- It may be helpful to remind people that the translators of the King James Bible thought it was worthwhile to work with the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, even though there were already several adequate English translations of the Bible in existence.
- It would be a mistake to suggest that Christians should entirely ignore the Bible's original languages.
- Some knowledge of biblical languages can help us to recognize invalid interpretations.
- Some of the mistaken interpretations advanced by Jehovah's witnesses are difficult to unmask without some knowledge of the original Greek language of the New Testament.
- We should certainly be suspicious of any new doctrine that is not tested against the Bible in its original languages.
- My personal knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible has often helped me to select or reject a specific interpretation of a verse of the Bible.
- But I should also say that on the many occasions when I have heard teachers and preachers quote the original Greek or Hebrew text of the Bible it has often seemed to me that they were mistaken in the conclusions they were drawing from the original text.
- A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and many who quote the original languages of the Bible know too little about them to be helpful to themselves or others.
- Usually they have devoted fairly little time and energy to the study of those languages, and when they speak about them they are often misled and misleading because they do not know their subject very well.
- The knowledge of the original languages of the Bible does not lead to huge doctrinal discoveries or world-shaking insights that are forever hidden from readers of English translations of the Bible.
- The knowledge of the original languages of the Bible makes possible an appreciation of some fine points and nuances of meaning.

- But in order to get those nuances of meaning from the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, a student has to have a very detailed and in-depth knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of those languages, and few students ever get to that point.
- In fact I would suggest that unless you can devote years and years of study to Biblical languages, you are probably better to not study them at all.
- Instead, rely on some of the standard English translations such as the NIV and the NASB, and if you would like further insights into the meaning of the Scriptures make use of Bible commentaries written by real biblical scholars.
- Christian bookstores stock many excellent one-volume commentaries on the Bible such as the New Bible Commentary (Inter Varsity Press), and if you want more detailed information on individual books of the Bible, the Tyndale Bible Commentary series is very readable and written by scholars who have a good enough knowledge of Biblical languages to provide reliable help.
- To sum up then, standard modern translations of the Bible can be trusted, and you should be suspicious of the accuracy of any teacher who explains a passage in a way that clashes with the obvious meaning of such a translation.
- Finally, feel free to borrow or purchase Bible commentaries when you would like more information about what the Bible means.

**Q: Have you any questions or comments about a proper emphasis on, and use of, the original languages of the Bible?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

5. **The history of a word should never be confused with the meaning of that word.**

- The study of the origin and development of the meaning of words is called *etymology*.
- Etymology can be a fascinating subject and students of ancient languages cannot avoid it.
- The reason they cannot avoid it is that in any living language the meanings of individual words change over time, and if you study documents from various times in history the meanings of words used in them will be different depending on when they were written.
- If you are reading one of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, *it is important to know the meaning that a word he used had, at the time when he used it.*
- It may be interesting to a student of languages to know what the basic or root meaning of that word was five hundred years before Paul used it, when it was used by Homer.
- ***But the historical root meaning of the word does not really matter if your task is to understanding how Paul used it.***
- In fact it could be very misleading to speak about the root meaning that the word had centuries earlier, if that meaning was not the meaning Paul intended when he used the word.
- This sort of interpretive error is called *the etymological fallacy, because it confuses the history of a word, or its etymology with its meaning at a certain point in time.*

- Most people know very little about the history of their own language, and can easily be surprized to learn that a word they commonly use once had a very different meaning.
- For example, the word *prevent* now means *to stop something* as in *only you can prevent forest fires*.
- But the word *prevent* used to mean *to preceed* or *go ahead of someone else*.
- For example: “*Frank and I both wanted to visit London England last month, but he prevented me. He got there two days before me.*”
- If you grew up with the King James Bible you needed to know this obsolete meaning of the word *prevent* because the King James uses it.
- But in order to communicate with people around us today we do not need to know how the meanings of words we use now have changed over the centuries.
- We only need to know how people use those words now.
- When speaking with young people or English speakers from a different part of the world even that can be difficult!
- Many published studies of words used in the Greek New Testament or the Hebrew Old Testament get into lengthy discussions of the root meaning of individual Biblical words.
- These discussions can be misleading and very unhelpful to people trying to understand the Bible.
- As an example of this point, let us pretend for a moment that you are a Canadian scholar living in the distant future.
- You are studying an issue of the Ottawa Citizen published five hundred years in the past, in the year 2007.
- Right now you are translating into your modern language an article from that issue that uses the word “*gay*”.
- From ancient English dictionaries that you have consulted, and from the context in which the word is used, you are convinced that this word refers to someone who is attracted to members of the same sex.
- But you have just read a research report that proves that the original meaning of the word *gay* was *happy*, and that the word's root meaning had no sexual significance whatever.
- Should you revise your translation of the article in the Ottawa Citizen?

**[DISCUSS]**

- The root meaning of the English word *pledge* is *a security deposit*, but most of the time when we use the word *pledge* the meaning we have in mind is *promise* as in *a pledge of allegiance*, and knowing the root meaning of the word *pledge* is irrelevant to understanding our meaning.
- When we use the word *resume* we usually mean *to begin again* and it is completely unhelpful to be told that the the word *resume* used to mean *to take back*, because that is not how we use the word today.
- Here are a couple examples of *the etymological fallacy* that involve improperly explaining the meaning of New Testament Greek words.

- You have probably heard that the Greek word translated into English as *church* is the word *ekklesia*. Jesus used this word when He said, “*I will build my church.*”
- The meaning of the word *ekklesia* is often explained as follows.
- The word comes from a preposition meaning *out of (ek)* and a verb meaning *to call (kalein)*.
- In ancient Greece the word referred to *people who were called out of their homes to participate in an official business meeting of the citizens of their Greek city-state*.
- Consequently, when this word is applied to God's people, it means the group of people called out from among the world at large by God, - called out to be His people and do business for Him.
- The problem with this etymological explanation is that by New Testament times the original or older meaning of the word had probably been forgotten by the ordinary Greek speakers who used it, and the word *ekklesia* could refer to *any gathering, crowd or mob*.
- For example the lynch mob gathered in the temple of Diana in Ephesus out of concern that Paul was discrediting their idol manufacturing industry is referred to as an *ekklesia*.
- [READ Acts 19:27-32]**
- This gathering was not a duly called and assembled business meeting of the citizens of the city of Ephesus, but a confused and unruly mob, and many of those present had no idea why they had come together.
- The root meaning of the word *ekklesia* does not tell us much about what the word *church* means in the New Testament when it is applied to Christian congregations.
- Another interesting Greek word is the verb *hupomenein* a verb that means *to be patient*.
- I and many other teachers have mistakenly attempted to explain the meaning of this word in terms of its etymology, the meaning that it had hundreds of years before New Testament times.
- I have taught classes that the word comes from the preposition *hupo* meaning *under* and the verb *menein* meaning *remain or stay*. Consequently, I have explained that the root meaning of the word is *to remain voluntarily under a difficult, heavy load that you would like to remove from your shoulders*.
- This explanation may be an interesting historical fact about what the word once meant, although in fact it is just a wild guess, because nobody knows for sure what the word meant when it first came into use.
- This explanation may also serve as a pretty illustration of what patience sometimes involves, but it is not what the word *hupomenein* means in the New Testament.
- What it means there is *to be patient*.
- It does not mean *to remain voluntarily under a difficult, heavy load that you would like to take off your shoulders*.
- It is wrong to confuse the history or etymology of a word with its present meaning.
- If someone with very little knowledge of the English language asked you to explain the

meaning of the English word, *understand* would it be helpful to that person if you explained that the word *understand* originally comes from two words, *under* and *stand*?

- I don't think so!

- Does it help to know that the English word *revulsion* originally comes from two words meaning *to tear away*?

- Again, I don't think so!

- The history or etymology of a word and its original or root meaning are usually entirely irrelevant when you are studying a living language or a document from some point in the past.

- All that matters is what meanings the word had at the time the document was written.

- Our only task as students of the Scriptures is to determine the meaning the author attached to a word when he used it in a specific Biblical writing.

- When you hear someone speaking about *the root meaning* of a Hebrew or Greek word, *be on guard and be suspicious*.

- Bible teachers and preachers often delight in explaining the root meaning of a Greek or Hebrew word used in the Bible and explaining how that meaning fits in a specific context.

- When I say this I speak from experience.

- Preachers and teachers who do this undoubtedly mean well, but often what they have to say is irrelevant and misleading, no matter how profound it sounds.

- Knowing the root meaning of the word is often irrelevant to understanding its meaning in a specific context in the Bible.

- It is much more important to know what the word meant at the time when the Biblical writer used it.

- That is exactly what a modern Bible translation will tell you by the translator's choice of words.

- If a teacher does not deal specifically with this question, the meaning of the word when the Biblical author used it, do not be quick to accept what he says about root meanings and the historical origins of the word.

**Q: Have you any questions or comments about the danger of reading the root meaning of an ancient word into a document whose author may not have used the word with that meaning in mind?**

6. *Most of the time, a specific word used in a document has a specific meaning intended by the author.*

- In English, Greek and Hebrew, individual words can have a number of different meanings in different contexts, and the perceptive reader immediately recognizes which meaning is intended by the author.

- For example, in English the word *port* can refer to *a type of wine, a place where ships are safely parked when they are not being used, an opening in the side of an internal combustion engine (an intake or exhaust port) or the act of moving*

*something from one place to another.*

- The possible meanings of a specific word are referred to as the word's *semantic range*.

- If a book describes a ship as moving into *port*, we immediately recognize that the word *port* refers to a safe harbour and not to a bottle of wine or a hole in the side of an engine.

- On the other hand, when a book on winetasting mentions *port*, we immediately deduce that the word is referring to a type of wine.

- In other words, the context really helps us to choose the meaning intended by the author and eliminate meanings that the word might have in other contexts, but does not have in this context.

- If you have ever read a book in a language other than your first language, you have probably had a lot of practice in selecting the most appropriate meaning of a word that you had to look up in a dictionary.

- In the same way, the reader of the Greek New Testament or the Hebrew Old Testament must choose the correct, intended meaning of an individual word from among the range of meanings listed in a dictionary, meanings that the word can have in various contexts.

- Of course, the context helps the reader with these choices.

- But sometimes Bible teachers do what the Amplified Bible does.

- Instead of identifying the correct meaning of a word, the meaning intended by the author in a specific context, they list several meanings that the word can have, leaving the confusing and ridiculous impression that each and every one of these meanings was intended by the author.

- Now if the various meanings listed are synonyms, each having the same meaning, why not just choose one of them, and avoid multiplying words?

- And if the listed meanings are quite different, why not choose the correct one instead of confusing the reader by mentioning several possible alternative meanings?

- Consider the Amplified Bible's translation of John 3:16:

“For God so greatly loved *and* dearly prized the world that He [even] gave up His only-begotten (unique) Son, so that whoever believes in (trusts, clings to, relies on) Him may not perish – come to destruction, be lost – but have eternal (everlasting) life.”

- *Loved and dearly prized* do not mean quite the same thing.

- What did the author mean?

- *Only-begotten* and *unique* do not mean the same thing.

- What did the author mean?

- **Believes in, trusts, clings to** and **relies on** express two, three or even four different meanings.

- If *believe in, trust* and *rely on* convey the same meaning, why use all three of

them?

- And if they express different shades of meaning, why not choose the closest one and discard the others?
- And if what the Greek word really means is *cling to*, why confuse us by mentioning *believing, trusting* and *relying on*.
- What did John mean or intend for us to understand?
- This translation may be well intended, but it simply does not tell us what John meant.
- Instead, it gives us several choices as to what he *might* have meant.
- My comment is that if the translator can't decide what John meant, how on earth is the reader of his translation supposed to decide after reading such a confusing translation?
- Perhaps we are supposed to think that John continually intended multiple meanings to be understood by his readers, but is that likely or plausible?
- Sometimes Bible teachers do the same sort of expanding, but in a more detailed way.
- They may point out that a certain word can have several different meanings in the New Testament.
- Then they list each of those meanings and cite passages in which each of those meanings is intended.
- They then go on to explain *how each of these meanings could fit in the passage being explained*, giving the impression that the author intended each and every one of those possible meanings to be taken from his words.
- The net result is to thoroughly confuse the listener, or leave him thinking that the author of the passage being studied had multiple personalities or schizophrenia.
- ***Most of the time, a specific word used in a document has a specific meaning intended by the author.***
- Is this not just obvious good sense?
- The task of a good translation or a good teacher is to explain which meaning was intended by the author in a specific context.
- Is that asking too much?
- Isn't that what we expect from translations and teachers?
  
- Another more serious error of the multiple-meaning type is made by Bible teachers who do not like the obvious meaning of a passage of the Bible.
- They begin by saying so or by arguing with the text or with the way it is generally understood.
- Then they point out that a key word in the verse can have several different meanings.
- The next step is really interesting.

- The teacher chooses another one of the possible meanings of the word in question and boldly says that this is the meaning the author intended in this context.
- Of course, the meaning chosen completely changes the meaning of the verse in a way that the teacher thinks it should be changed.
- Needless to say, the interpreter gives no contextual reason for preferring the meaning that he wants the word to have in this verse.
- We are to accept the new preferred interpretation just on his say so.
- But ***a dictionary of New Testament Greek is not a supermarket.***
- In a supermarket the shopper is presented with a great number of possible choices, and can choose whatever he or she wants.
- A dictionary of New Testament Greek is not like a supermarket.
- The responsible use of a dictionary in Greek or Hebrew or English or any other language involves identifying the correct meaning of a word, the meaning that best fits the context, the meaning intended by the author who wrote the passage.
- Unfortunately, Bible teachers occasionally use dictionaries of Greek or Hebrew as though they were supermarkets where the user is completely free to choose whatever meaning he or she likes, and can read that meaning into any verse of the Bible.
- This is completely irresponsible.
- Let me share with you a specific example of the supermarket approach to the meaning of words.
- Turn with me to **Ephesians 5:22 – 25** [READ].
- The traditional interpretation of this passage, the one held by the Church without any differences of opinion for almost two thousand years, is that Paul is speaking about the authority that God intends the husband to have over his wife within the marriage relationship.
- That is the common sense way of understanding this passage and the passage reads the same in Greek as it does in English.
- But some people, in this day of women's lib, do not like that interpretation of this passage, and have tried very hard to get around it and find another interpretation that they could live with and not be seriously irritated by.
- They use a number of interpretive tricks to try to find a new way of understanding this passage, but I want us to focus on just one of their strategies, their understanding of the word **head** <Greek: **kephale**> in verse 23 [READ].
- Now in the Bible this word **head** can have three different meanings.
- It usually means ***the thing at the top of your neck.***
- ***When that meaning does not fit but the word refers to living things, the word always refers to superior rank or authority.***
- The Hebrew word for **head** is <**rosh**> and it often has this meaning as well.
- When the word **head** is used ***with reference to inanimate things***, the word

refers to the *uppermost part or top end*, because for most people the head is at the top of the body.

- So a *head corner stone* means the stone at the top where two walls meet.

- Of these three possible meanings, the only meaning that fits this context in Ephesians is the one that means *superior authority*.

- That meaning is unacceptable to people of a women's lib persuasion, so some of them have gone to dictionaries of secular Greek in their hunt for an acceptable meaning for the word *head* in this verse.

- In their search, they found the expression *the head of a river*, meaning *the headwaters or source of a river, the place where the river starts*.

- This is really just an example of meaning three, *the top end of an inanimate thing*.

- But they say, “No, *source* is a different meaning that the word *kephale* can have, and we like the way that meaning fits in this verse in Ephesians.

- What we think Paul meant was that man is the source of woman, because Eve was formed out of a rib taken from Adam's side.

- Paul was not saying that a man has authority over his wife but that the woman is derived from the man as a source.

- In the same way, Jesus is the source of the Church, not the one who has authority over it. He has created it, giving it life.”

- Now I want you to notice that this way of understanding the word *head, kephale*, is an example of the supermarket approach to using dictionaries.

- Keep looking until you find a meaning in a dictionary somewhere that you can live with, and say that this meaning is what the author intended.

- Make no attempt to show how the meaning *source* fits in this context, a context where Paul is obviously speaking about authority, submission and obedience, a context where the meaning *superior authority* is the obvious choice.

- Make no attempt to examine how Paul uses the word *kephale* in other passages, or how it is used elsewhere in the Bible.

- It is true that Eve was formed from a rib taken from Adam's body as a source, but *that has never been true of any wife except Eve*, and it makes no sense to say that a man is the source of his wife in this sense.

- If a man could marry a woman derived from his own body, we would call it incest!

- If all men had to get a wife the way Adam got his, there would probably be a lot more confirmed bachelors in the world than there now are!

- *Most of the time, a specific word used in a document has a specific meaning intended by the author.*

- The task of the responsible interpreter, translator or teacher is to discover the meaning intended by the author in a specific context, not to find a clever way of making the author say what he thinks the author should have said.

- *Be wary of teachers who try to read a number of different meanings into a specific word in a verse.*
- *Occasionally an author may intentionally use a word that has two meanings that both apply, but this would be a rare exception.*
- *Be even more wary of teachers who try to get around the obvious meaning of a passage by finding an unusual or obscure meaning for a key word in the passage and telling you that this is the meaning the author intended, without providing any contextual evidence for this opinion.*
- *Be on guard against accepting multiple meanings for specific words, or looking for creative ways around the obvious meanings of words or passages.*
  
- *Most of the time, a specific word used in a document has a specific meaning intended by the author.*
- *It is the task of the student of Scripture to discover the meaning intended by the original author.*
- *Translations generally do this quite well, and when they leave questions unanswered good Bible commentaries can be relied on to fill in some of the blanks.*

**Q:** Have you any questions or comments about how this principle should be applied in trying to understand the Scriptures?

**A:** [DISCUSS]