

How to Study the Bible

Unit 7: Logic and Argumentation – Lesson 1: Common Fallacies

Course Goal: To equip the believer to “Rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

At the conclusion of this lesson, the believer should be able to:

- Know when to use an ancient Hebrew or Church Father commentary
- Understand the various types of Reformer or contemporary commentaries
- Know when to use a Reformer or contemporary commentary

A Brief Review

We have been introduced to how to study the Bible by using various tools:

- Bibliology: the doctrines of Scripture (general rules, guidelines, and parameters)
- Observation: the local, book, author, testament, and overall biblical contexts
- Setting: the extra-biblical context (geographical, historical, religious, political, etc.)
- Grammar: word studies (translations, interpretations, concordance, lexicons, etc.)
- Theological context: topic studies (the passage should conform to a systematic theology)
- Genre: various literary styles assist in discovering the originally intended meaning
- Commentaries: Develop your own commentary first, and then consult the thoughts of others

Logic

1. **Definition:** From the Greek word λογος (meaning “reason”), the science that deals with the principles and criteria of validity of inference and demonstration; the science of the formal principles of reasoning”.¹ “The set of relationships that must apply if any knowledge... and if any communication of propositional knowledge is possible.”²

2. **Importance:** From the definition, useful knowledge is impossible without logic, and this includes knowledge about God and His creation. Additionally, “A basic understanding of the rules of logic is crucial to sound hermeneutics. Logical fallacies, both formal and informal, are found in every field of study, and biblical exegesis is no exception.”³ Therefore, by studying logic, a student of Scripture may avoid common traps in interpretation, and be alerted to the mistakes made in others’ commentaries.

3. **Use:** Sound thinking about a topic involves, “...the ability to formulate and assess arguments for various claims to truth... an argument in the philosophical sense is a set of statements which serve as premises leading to a conclusion.”⁴ So if you want to arrive at a correct conclusion about anything, you need (1) true premises, and (2) a sound set of valid rules (i.e., logic) to lead from one true premise to the next, finally arriving at a true conclusion. Here is an example from everyday life:

Premise 1: If it is raining, then the sidewalk is wet.

Premise 2: It is raining.

Conclusion: The sidewalk is wet. [sound, based on the valid form of *modus tollens*]

This may seem elementary, but it is surprising how many times people violate this simple argument flow. For example, it is common to hastily conclude:

Premise 1: If it is raining, then the sidewalk is wet.

Premise 2: The sidewalk is wet.

Conclusion: It is raining. [**unsound**, based on the fallacy “affirming the consequent”]

Even though the premises are true, other factors could make a sidewalk wet. The conclusion is unreliable.

¹ Merriam-Webster.

² Carson, D. A., *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 89.

³ Kostenberger, Andreas, “Logical Fallacies”, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/logical-fallacies/>.

⁴ Moreland, J. P. and Craig, William L., *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003), 28.

Premise 1: If it is raining, then the sidewalk is wet.

Premise 2: The sidewalk is not wet.

Conclusion: It is not raining. [sound, based on the valid form of *modus ponens*]

Premise 1: Either A or B is true

Premise 2: A is true.

Conclusion: B is not true. [**unsound**, based on the fallacy “affirming the disjunct”]

Even though the premises are true, B could be true or not true. Therefore, the conclusion is unreliable.

4. A Few, Common Argumentation Fallacies.⁵

a. *Ad Hominem* (“to the person”): After an eloquent presentation for the new tax system, Sally’s opponent asks the audience if they should trust anything presented by an unmarried woman.

b. *Tu Quoque* (“you also”): After Jim accused Steve of committing a logical fallacy, Steve replies only by highlighting Jim’s earlier logical fallacy.

c. *Non Sequitur* (“does not follow”): I washed my car yesterday, therefore it will rain today.

d. Appeal to Authority: When Betsy challenged Fran on a Church doctrine, Fran responded with “You disagree with a stance that has been around for over 100 years?”

e. Unwarranted Associative Jumps: “Because of God’s promise in Philippians 4:13, I can own that Maserati I saw at the dealer.” But Phil 4:13 does not refer to jumping over the moon, turning sand to gold, etc. Its intended context is contented living only.⁶

f. False Statements: The genuine teacher claimed that John 20:21 states, “As the Father has sent (*apestalken*) Me, so I send (*apostello*) you; so an *apostolos* is one who has been sent on a mission.” The only problem is that John 20:21 uses *pempo*, not *apostello*.⁷

Class Exercise

1. Some Calvinists like to use John 10:11 as a proof text for the doctrine of Limited Atonement (i.e., Christ died for the sins of the elect alone, and no atonement was provided for the reprobate). Using the discussion on sound argument flows, do you agree or disagree? Why?

The argument could be stated as:

Premise 1: (A) The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (or B) The good shepherd lays down his life for those who are not sheep.

Premise 2: (A) The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep

Conclusion: Therefore, NOT (B) [the inverse of B, i.e., “The good shepherd lays down his life for those who are not sheep” is false]

This is a fallacious argument. But John 10:11 makes no statement about whom Jesus did not die for, only about whom He did die for. In other words, we can make no positive assertion from John 10:11 that Christ didn’t die for someone because that someone is not one of His sheep. Therefore, John 10:11 is not a proof text for Limited Atonement.⁸

2. For each scenario, write the letter of the appropriate Argumentation Fallacy (from above):

⁵ Others could be discussed, such as emotive appeals, the strawman argument, selective evidence, etc.

⁶ Carson, 115-116.

⁷ Carson, 116-117.

⁸ Cone, C., <http://www.drcone.com/2013/09/22/logical-errors-of-affirming-a-disjunct-in-john-10/>.

___e___ The World Council of Churches claimed, “The authority of the ordained minister is rooted in Jesus Christ, who has received it from the Father (Matthew 28:18), and who confers it by the Holy Spirit by the act of ordination.”⁹

[The text says nothing about Christ transmitting His authority to a Christian whom we label “ordained”]

___f___ “Isaiah 47:10 says ‘your wisdom and your knowledge have deluded you’, so stop being watered down and return to the pure direction of the Lord.”

[This teacher clearly confused “deluded” with “diluted”, therefore (unwittingly) making a false statement]

___d___ Although Peter demonstrates error in Scripture, Roman Catholic scholars defend the doctrine of his infallibility after the first Easter, and consequently, that of the pope, in whom Peter’s office is perpetuated.¹⁰

[The sole defense presented is the authority of Roman Catholic scholars]

___c___ The World Council of Churches established, “Since ordination is essentially a setting apart with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the authority of the ordained ministry is to be understood as... a gift for the continuing edification of the body in and for which the minister has been ordained.”¹¹

[They did not show the relevance of the Holy Spirit’s donation of authority to their conclusion that the body’s edification is the goal. The conclusion “does not follow” from the premise, regardless of the premise’s truth.]

⁹ Carson, 116.

¹⁰ Carson, 122-123.

¹¹ Carson, 118.