

ESCAPE ROUTES:

TEN WAYS TO ESCAPE DIFFICULT TEXTS

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We as believers have a way of escaping difficult texts, particularly when they upset the applecart of our prized theology. We each have a theological “swim lane” where we tend to float along comfortably, at least until we encounter a troublesome text that seems contrary to our theological camp. What follows are ten ways to cheat such meddlesome texts of their meaning. I have used all of them. To be clear up front, each one of these “escape routes” is perfectly valid if the blinders of bias are removed. But too often, these are just clever escape routes that help us keep our theology neat and tidy, which I have found to be nearly impossible. So say a little prayer, and ask the Lord if any of the following hermeneutical* gymnastics play a major role in your interpretation of the Bible. This may prove to be emotionally challenging, but you will sleep better.

*(*Hermeneutics refer to the general principles of interpreting the Bible. Biblical interpretation through hermeneutical principles help bridge the gaps between the biblical authors and ourselves.)*

1) CONTEXT: This is a valid hermeneutical principle when employed properly. However, we may find ourselves using it to get around a text that stands in the way of a cherished belief. I have often read a commentary that has

a particular theological slant that leverages the principle of context to explain away a monkey-wrench verse. I can't help but think of all the clever hermeneutical gymnastics used to explain away the obvious meaning in order to get the predetermined results of our baseline theology.

2) ORIGINAL LANGUAGE: Whenever I hear two believers debating an issue or a pastor trying to persuade his people of his view, invariably Greek or Hebrew become the best tools to make their point. Here again, I want to make it clear that original language is a valid place to go to get to the real meaning of authorial intent, but it is also a great place to run from the real meaning because your theological view is being challenged. Since you know your view is right, then the answer must lie in the original language, and come hell or high water we're going to find it.

3) TRANSLATIONS: I have often heard it said even from the most scholarly pastors that a better translation of the text is in the NASB rather than the NIV. Though that may be true, the question I have is how does he know? Is he a textual critic? Has he sifted through all the manuscript evidence or did he go fishing for a commentary that would recommend the translation that best suits his view? Again, this can be a legitimate way of looking at a text, but it can also be a detour so as to avoid what might otherwise prove to be a difficulty for your confessional view.

4) PRESCRIPTIVE VS. DESCRIPTIVE: Many believers, while reading scripture, fail to see if what they are reading is simply the description of an event or a principle to apply and follow. We need to be very careful or we might claim a truth that was only for an individual at a particular time in history. Will blowing a trumpet really knock down the walls of a building that I want destroyed? Or was that only for Joshua and his people? Not too hard to figure out. But what about Paul at Mars Hill and the way he witnessed to the idolatrous gathering? I have no doubt that God has let us see how he presented the gospel in a very dark setting. But can we claim this as a divinely inspired method? Is it prescriptive? If so, what about other areas that are recorded in Paul's life such as using handkerchiefs to heal people? What is descriptive and prescriptive can be most helpful in understanding a scripture and can just as effectively be use as an exit ramp to skirt the real truth.

5) OLD TESTAMENT VS. NEW TESTAMENT: I really wish I knew when I could borrow from the Old Testament. Certainly there are some very obvious commands that were given only to Israel and are now fulfilled in Christ. But there are a number of thorny issues that are not as friendly to our hermeneutic. However, if we play our cards just right, we might be able to pull off a very clever sleight-of-hand to get just the interpretation we are looking for. I know all this sounds harsh but most of us have seen our opponents do this and we call this foul play. The question on the table is, have we ever done this?

6) LITERAL VS. FIGURATIVE: If there was ever a place to pull the theological rabbit out of the doctrinal hat, this is it. Revelation is the perfect setting for this. At one point it is very obvious to us that John's terms are literal, and at another point, they are figurative. Have you noticed that those from another theological camp will reverse the order? Why? Because there is a predetermined baseline from which we operate. If you are premillennial, then you will use this to your advantage when it fits and if you are amillennial, then you will do the same, only reversing the usage. Are we consistent and honest?

7) CUSTOMS: When trapped by a text that runs counter to what you believe, tapping into the customs of the day can prove very helpful. "Turn the other cheek" and other troubling expressions about head coverings can be dealt with by studying the customs of the day. This can often be very helpful as there were many customs during biblical times that we are unfamiliar with today. "Greet one another with a holy kiss" goes over well in Italy, but not so much in the U.S. If you don't like to raise your hands in church, then you will explain away the texts that speak to that issue and vice versa if you are partial to raising your hands. The question is honesty as we approach any portion of scripture.

8) COMPARING SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE: This is one of the first things a student learns in Bible college or

seminary. Do not go looking for a text to support your point without considering all the Bible says about that subject. This is one of the most fundamental hermeneutical principles. The dishonesty arrives when we walk our people through scripture selecting a path from Old to New Testament, but avoiding those passages which become little pests that must be overlooked in order to hold a predetermined position. This is known as proof-texting. I believe we all do it intentionally or unintentionally.

9) DEAD SAINTS: Those great saints of the past have a way of resurrecting themselves when we need them. If you want to support the use of alcohol, then just let everyone know about your patron saint of booze, Martin Luther. If you are a teetotaler you can bring back from the dead another saint who opposed alcohol or just say that what Luther drank was watered down. Somehow, the great saints of the past held to the doctrines we believe in, therefore our view is validated. What we don't want made known are all the weird things they believed which today we pronounce as heresy.

10) ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS: When all else fails when trying to protect your baseline then just say the troublesome text you are arguing about "is not found in most original manuscripts." It may be disingenuous, but at least the monkey is off your back.

Let me repeat again that all of the above are not only valuable, but *necessary* tools for the proper interpretation of any portion of scripture. But while each can be used in genuine, humble ways to discern the mind of God, each can just as effectively be wielded in complete dishonesty. Utilize them, but check your motives. When difficulties arise in the text, tweak your system of theology based on scripture, and don't bend the scripture based on your prized system.