



Baloney Detection 101

Tools for Separating Fact from Fiction

by Jerry Griffin

I couldn't believe my eyes! Right there in a Christian pamphlet, of all things, was one of the most blatant examples of false information I had ever seen. The subject was the famous Council of Nicaea of A.D. 325, which condemned the teachings of a preacher named Arius.

The pamphlet, however, felt that Arius had been given a raw deal. And as evidence, it offered the exact words spoken on the council floor by Arius and his opponents. In the exchange, Arius exposed his opponents' deception by revealing that they had secretly inserted a forged verse into the Bible to disprove his views. This, the pamphlet contended, clearly shows that the original proceedings had been a sham, and that Arius now stands vindicated after all these years.

To the unsuspecting reader, it all sounds so convincing. After all, there's the exact quote of a historical figure at a historical event. What more proof does one need? Well, there's just one little problem with this scenario. It's a complete fabrication!

All known information about the Council of Nicaea comes to us from the written records of several eyewitnesses and a handful of ancient church historians. And there

is absolutely nothing in any historical document that even remotely hints that Arius ever made such an accusation. There's no such speech, no quote, no forged verses, nada! Ironically, the only forgery here is the pamphlet's own attempt to fracture the facts and rewrite history in its favor.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated example. Manipulation of the facts has been going on as far back as the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, who aggrandized their accomplishments and whitewashed their failures. Fast-forward to our electronic age and the problem is more pervasive than ever. On a daily basis we are bombarded by all sorts of misinformation: e-rumors and urban legends on the Internet, sales gimmicks and false advertising claims, political spin, slanted news reports and, yes, even skewed religious teachings.

Compounding the problem is our own human nature. We humans like a good story, and for the most part, we trust that we are being told the truth. But we also have a tendency to embellish information and pass it on. What one person offers as conjecture, the next accepts as fact. What starts out as hearsay, in time, becomes the

unquestioned truth. We also tend to view information subjectively, rather than objectively, especially if it comes from someone we know. Given these tendencies, is it any wonder that we are so susceptible to misinformation?

The Fundamentals

So what are we to do? How can we separate fact from fiction and avoid swallowing a lot of baloney, especially when it's served on a religious platter? For starters, here are some basic tools that should be part of everyone's baloney-detection kit.

1 Examine the methodology. Ask yourself, "How do I know what I know? On what am I basing my understanding, and how valid is the reasoning?"

2 Verify the information. Don't rely on assumption, hearsay, conjecture, wishful thinking, propaganda, fibs or half-truths. Check it out.

3 Keep learning. Separating fact from fiction requires ongoing study, research and reading.

In essence, these basic tools have also been expressed in the Bible. For example, consider the following principles:

a. Be diligent to handle correctly the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)—methodology.

b. Establish every matter by two or three witnesses (2 Corinthians 13:1)—verification.

c. Prove all things, and hold on to the good (1 Thessalonians 5:21)—methodology and verification.

d. Search the scriptures daily, like the open-minded Bereans, to find out whether these things are so (Acts 17:11)—ongoing study and verification.

In a word, our best protection against misinformation is *scholarship*—the personal responsibility that each of us has to examine and express information as accurately as possible. Such a responsibility is crucial, especially for Christians, since those who claim to have the ultimate truth should always strive to tell the truth in all things. In fact, they are under a moral imperative to not bear false witness, either by commission or omission. Is there really any moral difference between the Christian who is lax with his facts and the accountant who fudges his figures? The reliability and integrity of both are on the line.

Unfortunately, some folks react negatively to the word “scholarship,” associating it with ivory-tower elites, stodgy professors or boring lectures. But, in reality, scholarship is not just for academic professionals. It’s a set of skills we all can use on a daily basis—skills, such as, how to think critically and sort through today’s information overload. Think of it as a common sense approach for gathering, analyzing and presenting information in an organized and accurate fashion. Without its checks and balances, we would be cast adrift in a sea of subjectivity, tossed about by every wind of doctrine, with no objective standard by which to measure what is true or false.

Additional Guidelines

To flesh out the fundamentals of scholarship in more detail, here are some additional tools for your baloney-detection toolbox.

4 Always go to the original sources in any field of study to obtain or verify information. For example, if the question involves an event in church history, such as the Council of Nicaea, then read the original historical accounts. Don’t simply rely on someone’s opinion or on what you’ve always heard or been taught. If you don’t have access to the original sources, then read what scholars, who have studied the primary documents, have written on the subject. But keep in mind that data is often subject to interpretation, so try to read a cross-section of opinion, both pro and con. Regardless of the material, always stay alert. The mere fact that a statement, claim or opinion appears in print doesn’t automatically make it true. Follow the principle of confirming every point by two or three reliable witnesses.

Let me illustrate this principle with another example. In a Christian magazine article, an author quoted Acts 9:5 from the King James Version: “...I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee [Paul] to kick against the pricks.” Knowing that most English translations omit the last phrase of this quote, the author remarked: “Newer versions lose flavor here!” The author used this little jab to cast doubt on modern versions. At worst, they are out to subvert the Word of God and, therefore, can’t be trusted. At best, they are inferior to the King James; only it has “flavor.”

The author’s comment creates an artificial controversy, unfortunately. It focuses attention on the translations themselves, as if that is where the problem lies. We must remember, however, that the translations are secondary sources. The primary or original sources, in this case, are the Greek manuscripts from which the translations are derived. We must, therefore, go to the original sources for a solution. Nothing will be achieved by pitting the KJV against the newer versions, except perhaps the exposure of our own biases.

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When we look at the Greek manuscript evidence, we will find that the kick-against-the-pricks line is not present in Acts 9. Textual scholar, Bruce Metzger, comments: “So far as is known, no Greek witness reads these words at this place; they have been taken from 26:14 and 22:10, and are found here in codices of the Vulgate.... The spurious passage came into the Textus Receptus when Erasmus translated it from the Latin Vulgate into Greek and inserted it in his first edition of the Greek New Testament (Basel, 1516)” [*The Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, p. 362].

In other words, the book of Acts contains three accounts of Paul’s conversion experience, all having a difference in wording. The tendency of later scribes was to harmonize similar accounts by blending the wording together so that all accounts read the same. This is what happened in the case of Acts 9:5 as copied in the Latin Vulgate and then carried over into the King James Version.

So which English versions have the “flavor” after all? And which one has had “flavor” added to it? The author of the article needed certain words to be in his version so he could use them as a springboard for his particular point. However, he should have chosen Acts 26:14 where those words are in the Greek text, instead of Acts 9:5 where they

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are not. Because the wording of the KJV has a familiar ring, when we encounter an anomaly between it and modern versions our first inclination is to assume that there must be something wrong with the modern versions. And so it doesn't dawn on us that the apparent problem and its solution might lie in the underlying Greek or Hebrew manuscripts. Remember, always go to the original sources in any field of study to obtain or verify information!

5 Be careful with generalizations. Avoid extending a particular to the whole (example: the terrorist in the news was a Muslim, so all Muslims must be terrorists). Also, avoid applying the whole to a particular (example: most Arabs are Muslims, so that Arab must be a Muslim).

Here's a more subtle example, again from a Christian magazine. The author of an article on "Christ's Coming Kingdom" offered this comment: "Scholars tell us that premillennialism was the first view of the church and the predominant view of believers from the first to the third centuries."

Some scholars do, in fact, say that, but not *all* scholars. Those who do base their view primarily on the comments of several early church leaders who express belief in a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ in Jerusalem. These include such notable names as Papias, Irenaeus,

Tertullian, Hippolytus and Justin Martyr. No doubt many early Christians held this view. But what is not always mentioned is that many did not. Even Justin Martyr admits that belief in a literal millennium was not universal. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Martyr states: "I admitted to you formerly [Trypho], that I and many others are of this opinion, and [believe] that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; *but, on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise*" (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I*, Roberts and Donaldson, editors: Eerdmans, 1953, p. 239; emphasis added). I suppose that even scholars can overgeneralize.

6 Avoid the fallacy that fails to recognize distinctions. For example, someone may argue that because *a* and *b* are alike in some respects they are alike in all respects. Or one may try to argue the reverse: because *a* and *b* are different in some respects they are different in all respects.

This all-or-nothing argument is another form of generalization. In Christian theology, it often shows up in debates over such polarized issues as law and grace, the nature of Christ or the old and new covenants. A common mistake is to over simplify an issue by basing one's position solely on one set of Bible verses to the exclusion of others, or by focusing only on the similarities in spite of the differences, or vice versa, instead of recognizing and holding such distinctions in tension.

7 Guard against the selective and prejudicial use of evidence, especially background material. Selective evidence does not constitute proof. For example, someone may cite a limited example (say, a verse of Scripture) as proof of his point, while excluding other examples (verses) that contradict his point. D.A. Carson comments: "As a general rule, the more complex and/or

emotional the issue, the greater the tendency to select only part of the evidence, prematurely construct a grid, and so filter the rest of the evidence through the grid that it is robbed of any substance. What is needed is evenhandedness...." (*Exegetical Fallacies*: Baker, 1988, pp. 98, 99).

8 Context is key; always pay attention to it when reading the Bible or any reference material. Read with the flow of thought in mind. And read with a critical eye: Who is saying what to whom, and why? What is going on? What are the underlying factors? What are the issues? What are the basic assumptions? What is the nature of the author's arguments, and how does he argue his points?

9 Avoid purely emotional appeals. Showing emotion or being passionate about what one believes is certainly appropriate. But using emotional appeals as a substitute for evidence or logic is not. Emotional appeals often deteriorate into sarcasm and are a cheap way of dismissing other views without dealing with their content.

10 Recognize and avoid a host of other fallacies, such as:

a. Arguments from silence—When the publishers of the bogus story about the Council of Nicaea were challenged to document their account, they replied, "Just because there is no historical evidence for Arius' speech, that doesn't mean it still couldn't have happened." That's a bit like saying that just because pigs don't have wings doesn't mean they still couldn't fly. Arguments from silence offer only hypotheticals, not proof.

b. Either-or arguments—"Either you believe this, or you're an idiot." Most likely, those are not the only two options.

c. Stringing disconnected facts together illogically, arriving at an absurd conclusion—"Why are fire engines red? They have four wheels and eight men. Four plus eight is twelve. Twelve inches make a ruler. A ruler is

Queen Elizabeth. Queen Elizabeth's navy sails the seven seas. The seven seas have fish. The fish have fins. The Finns hate the Russians. The Russians were once called reds. Fire engines are always rushin'. So that's why they're red."

d. Attacking the person instead of addressing his point—"Look who's talking—a known thespian who was once seen matriculating in public!"

e. Guilt by association—"He claims to be a conservative, but you can't believe a word he says because he went to one of those eastern, liberal schools. Yale, I believe."

f. Circular reasoning—"If America is a Christian nation, then all Americans are Christians."

g. Invalid arguments—"Christians are to follow the example of Jesus. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. Therefore, Christians must be baptized in the Jordan River." The conclusion is invalid because the first two premises assume that Christians are to imitate everything Jesus did. This assumption does not distinguish between the Bible's use of descriptive and prescriptive language (e.g., everything Jesus did versus what Christians are specifically commanded to do). The fact that the apostles baptized people in locations other than the Jordan River (and not always in rivers with running water for that matter) demonstrates that they understood the location of Jesus' baptism to be descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Conclusion

Given human nature, accurate information has always been hard to come by, and the problem has only intensified in our age of instantaneous communication. Weapons of mass distortion threaten our ability to separate fact from fiction as never before. And these weapons are just as destructive to society as the explosive kind—maybe more so, because they influence how people think and then behave towards one another.

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The war over truthfulness has two battlefields, and each one of us stands on the frontlines. On the first battlefield we must protect ourselves from the onslaught of incoming false information. We can do that by carefully analyzing what we see and hear with the tools mentioned above. The second battlefield concerns our own behavior—how carefully we handle the truth and what kind of information we pass on. If, one by one, we would win the internal battle, then the external battle may take care of itself, or at the very least we would diminish the ranks of those contributing to the proliferation of misinformation.

Are you ready to take a personal stand? If so, then become a committed scholar and make the following code of ethics your battle plan:

- Always do your best.
- Pay attention to detail.
- Be impeccable with your facts.
- Don't assume; verify. And then, double check.
- Don't take honest differences of opinion personally.
- Stay humble. We all make mistakes, and we all have much to learn.
- Always tell the truth. It will please some people and astonish the rest.

I believe Mark Twain is responsible for that last statement. But I'm not completely sure. Is anyone willing to do the research? □

Jerry Griffin, a former seminary teacher, is currently a freelance writer.

Recommended Reading:

1. *Exegetical Fallacies* by D.A. Carson: Baker Book House, 1988.
2. *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren: Touchstone (Simon & Schuster), 1972, especially the chapters on how to read history and philosophy.
3. *Why People Believe Weird Things* by Michael Shermer: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1998, especially the 25 fallacies in chapter 3, "How Thinking Goes Wrong."



Understand?

The Bible has been used and abused to justify just about anything, Bible misunderstandings almost always lead to false teachings—with disastrous consequences. Before you read the Bible—you need to know how to read it. This free booklet, *Understanding the Word—Tools for Better Bible Study*, explains a Christ-centered, grace-based approach to reading Holy Scripture. You'll discover:

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