

BOOK REVIEW

of

D.A. Carson,

Exegetical Fallacies, second edition,
Baker Books, 1996 [ninth printing, August 2004].

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

First of all, it should be stated that this book was written not to convince us that we don't know how to read or interpret the Bible ourselves and that we should leave it to professionals! Rather, it was written to help us properly read the Bible and to detect erroneous interpretations by others. There are many common errors in interpretation, and this book helps us to recognize them. A more general value of this book is in helping us to think critically and clearly in general, by helping us to ask the right questions. The value of this book to a general Christian audience, I think, is indicated by the fact that it is in a second edition and that second edition is in a ninth printing. This would not likely be the case unless a general Christian audience found it valuable perhaps beyond what the publisher originally thought. As stated by Thomas Schreiner in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* from the back cover, "This book . . . is a must for teachers, pastors, and serious Bible students. Carson's methodological approach is full of wisdom, it is penetrating, and it is clearly expressed." Also from the back cover, Jeff Guimont stated in the *Grace Theological Journal*: ". . . well written, easy to read, and thought provoking. It is highly recommended to all who truly desire to handle accurately the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15)." Carson writes in the Introduction: "The essence of all critical thought, in the best sense of that abused expression, is the justification of opinions. . . . where immensely profitable conversations have taken place, there has always been on both sides a growing ability to distinguish a good argument from a bad one, a strong argument from a weak one."

Exegetical Fallacies has less than 150 pages and but 5 chapters after the Introduction: Word-Study Fallacies, Grammatical Fallacies, Logical Fallacies, Presuppositional and Historical Fallacies, and Concluding Reflections. Carson lists many exegetical fallacies in this book, far more than can be individually commented on here. However, below are a few that seemed most impressive to me.

In chapter 1, Word-Study Fallacies, Carson indicates that the word root fallacy is one of the more pervasive. "One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually *has* a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word." Carson claims that all "of this is linguistic nonsense." He goes on to give examples. He continues: "The search for hidden meanings bound up with etymologies becomes even more ludicrous when two words with entirely different meanings share the same etymology." Carson also encourages care in interpreting the meaning of a word by realizing that the usage of a word can and often does change with time. Carson writes that this "fallacy occurs when a late use of a word is read back into earlier literature." The reverse can occur when "the interpreter assigns to a word in his text a meaning that the word in question used to have in earlier times, but that is no longer found within the live, semantic range of the word." Carson also encourages the interpreter to be aware of his or her own prejudices, presuppositions, and particular approach to theology. "In this fallacy, an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning – a meaning usually derived either from a subset of the evidence or from the interpreter's personal systematic theology." Carson continues: "I am referring to the kind of appeal to selective evidence that enables the interpreter to say what he or she wants to say, without really listening to what the Word of God says."

In chapter 3, Logical Fallacies, Carson claims that false disjunctions are one of the most common logical fallacies: "false disjunctions – a false either/or requirement when complementarity might be acceptable – are extraordinarily common and potentially very destructive of fair-minded, evenhanded exegesis." Again, Carson writes on selective evidence, this time in terms of logical fallacy: "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, along with a greater desire for fidelity than for originality in the interpretation of the Scriptures."

At the end of chapter 5, Concluding Reflections, Carson concludes his book in a way that is most appropriate to conclude this book review: "A little self-doubt will do no harm and may do a great deal of good: we will be more open to learn and correct our mistakes. But too much will shackle and stifle us with deep insecurities and make us so much aware of methods that we may overlook truth itself. I have no easy answer to this dilemma. But we will not go far astray if we approach the Bible with a humble mind and then resolve to focus on central truths. Gradually we will build up our exegetical skills by evenhanded study and a reverent, prayerful determination to become like the workman 'who correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15, NIV)."