



## MISUSING SCRIPTURE: ASSOCIATIVE JUMP

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### Introduction

Scripture often is misused. It happens in a variety of ways: misreading, misquoting, misinterpreting, misapplying. Let us consider one type of error to which our generation is particularly susceptible: UNWARRANTED ASSOCIATIVE JUMP.

“Unwarranted associative jump” is the formal name of an exegetical fallacy. The name is awkward or inelegant, but it is the name that has been used, so I am stuck with it. But since we have identified it as a fallacy, for this article, we can at least shorten it by omitting “unwarranted.”

### Definition

Carson gives a tight or strict definition of associative jump. It “occurs when a word or phrase triggers off an associated idea, concept, or experience that bears no close relation to the text at hand, yet is used to interpret the text.”<sup>1</sup>

This error is shockingly easy to commit in textual preaching, overlooking the old adage that a text without a context becomes a pretext for a prooftext.<sup>2</sup>

Carson’s oft-cited definition is not a bad starting point. From instances we see in practice, however, his definition could with do with a bit of loosening or broadening. The trigger does not need to be:

- A. A word or phrase in the text. It could be something broader about the text.

- B. Anything about the text all. It could be something the reader brings to the text that is not even present in or associated with the text.

The trigger, while important, is not the essence of associative jump. The essence is that, regardless of what acts as the trigger, the jump is unwarranted. It is unwarranted because, really, there is no association or only an insignificant association between the text and the matter to which the reader jumps.

The association the reader makes could be a sheer imposition upon the text, which is what makes it a misuse – and sometimes an abuse – of the text.

## Easy Illustrations

Let us look at some easy illustrations of associative jump. These are easy because they are so *abusive* (*ab*, Latin: away from, separation, outside of, distant, opposite to) that they strike us as ridiculous. They do not require analysis to be recognized as errors.

Consider a favorite Bible verse, one that often is quoted and applied to all sorts of things: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” (NKJV) or “I can do everything through Him who gives me the strength,” (AAT-Beck). (Philippians 4:13)

What are these “all things”? What is this “everything”?

- Jumping over the moon?
- Integrating complex mathematical equations in one’s head?
- Turning sand into gold?
- Flying through the air like a comic book hero?

We laugh. But let us bring our examples a little closer to the realm of reality.

- Corporate climbers storming the organization and taking over leadership positions.
- Seminarians taking their exam on New Testament Introduction.

How about some pious-sounding ones? Christians:

- Healing a sick person.
- Smuggling Bibles into China.

Still easy. It is meant to be, because so far, we are just illustrating the definition and we want the illustrations to be simple for that purpose.

## “I can do all things”

Why aren’t those matters associated with the verse? Because Paul means “all things” *that I presently am talking about*. He means “everything” *that I was just saying*. What was he just saying?

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. (Philippians 4:10-14)

Paul is in prison. The Christians in distant Philippi are concerned for Paul deeply. They suffer anxiety about Paul's condition. All along they would have liked to send him help. They themselves, however, are under persecution. They cannot just do whatever they want. That is Paul's reference when he says, "you lacked opportunity." Lacking opportunity dragged out and aggravated their anxiety for him. Now recently, as soon as they had an opportunity, they have helped him. They sent Epaphroditus with a gift. Epaphroditus performed his work of ministry with such self-forgetting devotion that "he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life." (Philippians 2:30 ESV)

This is the context not only of verse 4:13. It is the context of the whole letter. Paul is writing because he has received Epaphroditus and the Philippians' gift and now he is sending Epaphroditus back to them in Philippi. He gives this letter to be carried by Epaphroditus to them. He does not want them to be too distressed by his suffering. That is why he says, "Not that I speak in regard to need." Why not? "For I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress."

This does not mean, "I can get out of prison with Christ who strengthens me." It does not mean, "You can get out of persecution with Christ who strengthens you." It means I can be content in prison and I urge you to be content in persecution, just as you have been, as evidenced by your lavish gift to me. "All things" is what he had just been talking about, what his whole letter is about.

"Can do" does not mean can pass the New Testament Introduction test or smuggle Bibles into China. It means "can do contentment." He expressly says, "I have learned . . . to be content." That is the topic. He is talking about his topic. Topicality matters.

After all:

- Paul wanted to go to Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prevented him (Acts 16:7).
- Paul wanted to go to Thessalonica, but Satan hindered him (1Thessalonians 2:18).
- Paul wanted to keep false teachers from the church in Ephesus where he ministered for three years, his longest in one place, loving them deeply, but he predicted that wolves would arise from among the elders themselves. (Acts 20:28-31)
- Paul had great grief over his countrymen's rejection of the Gospel, but he could not change it even by wishing himself accursed from Christ for them. (Romans 9:1-5)
- Paul wanted to be rid of the thorn in his flesh, but he was not. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

## Health and Wealth

The Beatitudes typically begin “Blessed are” these or those people. The word “blessed” is used as a trigger for an associative jump.

Our generation associates “blessed” with “happy.” In his *New York Times* bestseller, *The Be (Happy) Attitudes*, Robert Schuller said, “Blessed literally means ‘happy.’”<sup>3</sup> Many modern Bible translations even render the Beatitudes “Happy are those who” or the like.<sup>4</sup> Whole ministries, movements, denominations, and genres of Christian literature are based on the associative jump from the Beatitudes (and other texts) to the error that God mainly wants you to be happy.

Maybe He does. And maybe the Bible says that in some verse or other. But Jesus did not say that in the Beatitudes. We might say, well, since it is true, even if not from these verses, what is the harm in taking these verse that way. When our association rules the Word of God:

1. We force the Word to say things God did not say in the given text. If He did not say it in any other text either, we are putting words into God’s mouth.
2. While our association over-talks the text, we plug our ears from hearing what God did say. We do not receive what God really is saying.

That is the harm; missing what He *is* saying, besides believing something He did *not* say. God wants you to have the highest good, but sometimes happiness is not the highest good.



The associative jump creates a self-reinforcing loop. We read our association *into* Scripture, then we think we are reading out association *out of* Scripture. We think we are reading what we wanted as if it were God’s Word, so the Word endorses our desires. The function of Scripture changes from engaging us with God’s Law and God’s Gospel into an echo-chamber for our own ideas.

In a crass form, this abuse of Scripture justifies the selfish name-it-and-claim-it religion or the health-and-wealth gospel. In less crass forms it might be about psychological calmness, respectful children, or recovery from the wounds of divorce. Crass or subtle, it is error.

## A Healed Nation

God said to Israel, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Corinthians 7:14)

In the United States, there are plenty of people who apply this directly to modern-day democracies. God said this to Israel when it was a theocracy. Even the phrases “my people” and “called by my name” refer to those who were citizens of the Hebrew theocratic state, partakers of the Mosaic covenant. But we want – so badly do we want – God to fix our nation that we make the associative jump to the American Republic. Doing this, we are not hearing God’s Word for what He says but putting words into God’s mouth.

This is not to say that God would not bless a godly nation. The Bible very well might teach that. It is not to say that the Scriptures about theocratic Israel are not “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” (1 Timothy 3:16) They certainly are, just as are all Scriptures. It is to say, *this is not the verse that teaches it*. To be Bible-believing is to believe the Bible for what it does say, not for what we want it to say. If the Bible says God will bless America if we are godly, fine. Find the verse that says that. Do not abuse a verse that says something else.

When we abuse a verse just because what we are making it say might be true and might be taught elsewhere in Scripture:

- We condition ourselves to misread the text.
- We model misreading for everyone who sees us do it.

After we make it a habit of mind, how will we know when we are in the truth and not piously self-deceived with what we imagine to be God’s endorsement?

## Come unto Me: Sin and Salvation

Let us look at an extended case study. Jesus says:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

What labor? Heavy laden by what? What is the rest Jesus gives? How is his yoke easy? How is his burden light?

Let us look at this first as it is taught truly though commentaries, sermons, the confessions, and the Catechism. We will see:

- The call of sinners to repentance, which is contrition and faith. Here we have Law and Gospel, sin and salvation.
- The call of sinners to the Sacrament of the Altar.

- The assurance of sinners who worry about secret counsels of God in his election unto eternal life.

Lenski says:

“All those laboring” . . . are all those who are trying to work out their own salvation, and the more serious they are, the more they will toil. “All those who have been loaded down” . . . are all those who have let others load them down with what the latter think will secure salvation.<sup>5</sup>

This interpretation matches Jesus’ words later in Matthew, “For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.” (Matthew 23:4)

Similarly, Kretzmann says:

Full of both authority and kindness is His call, going out to the fatigued and the burdened, to the poor sinners whose weight of transgressions is bowing them down to earth, who can find no solace or relief in all the wide world.<sup>6</sup>

In accord, G. Jerome Albrecht and Michael J. Albrecht say:

The weary and burdened are the ones to whom Jesus chooses to reveal the Father. These are the same people Jesus has described as the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who acknowledge their sinfulness and realize that it is a burden too heavy for them to bear, that this load will drag them down to hell if they must bear it by themselves—they are the ones to whom Jesus promises rest. And this rest is his gift. “I will *give* you rest,” Jesus says.<sup>7</sup>

Luther preaches:

You “who labor and are heavy-laden,” that is, with the law, with sin, with anxiety and affliction, and with whatever also may burden the conscience. . . . So whoever feels his sinfulness and who knows his inability to fulfill the law of God, let him come confidently and boldly; he will be helped. “I will give you rest,” he says to those who are oppressed, as it were, with hard labor and toil.<sup>8</sup>

This interpretation is a matter of confessional principle in the Lutheran church, for we confess it in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

Christ says, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Here there are two parts, the “labor” and the burden signify the contrition, anxiety, and terrors of sin and death. To “come to” Christ is to believe that sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. When we believe, our hearts are brought to life by the Holy Spirit through Christ’s Word. Here, therefore, are these two chief parts: contrition, and faith. In Mark 1:15, Christ says, “Repent and believe in the gospel.” In the first clause He convicts of sins, and in the second He comforts us and shows the forgiveness of sins. Believing the Gospel is not the general faith that devils also have, but in the proper sense it is believing that the forgiveness of sins has been granted for Christ’s sake.<sup>9</sup>

Luther says:

The yoke that Christ lays upon us is sweet, and His burden is light. When sin has been forgiven and the conscience has been liberated from the burden and sting of sin, then a Christian can bear everything easily.<sup>10</sup>

So, Jesus is talking about sin and salvation, guilt and forgiveness, Law and Gospel, unbelief and faith, self-righteousness and the righteousness of Christ given to us by his Word and Sacraments. This understanding is both confessional and catechetical for Lutherans, for Luther makes the connection between the call of Christ in Matthew 11:28 and the Sacrament of the Altar in his *Large Catechism*. While speaking of Christ's words, "This is my body, which is given for you" and "This is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," Luther says:

Here He offers to us the entire treasure that He has brought for us from heaven. With the greatest kindness He invites us to receive it [the Sacrament of the Altar] also in other places, like when He says in St. Matthew 11: 28, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."<sup>11</sup>

Luther uses this as motivation to move people to come to the Sacrament. He continues:

Because of your distress, this command, invitation, and promise are given to you. This ought to move you. . . . He means those who are weary and heavy laden with their sins, with the fear of death, temptations of the flesh, and of the devil. If, therefore, you are heavy laden and feel your weakness, then go joyfully to the Sacrament and receive refreshment, comfort, and strength [Matthew 11:28]<sup>12</sup>

This teaching also is given in the article on "The Holy Supper" in the *Formula of Concord*:

Some Christians have a weak faith and are shy, troubled, and heartily terrified because of the great number of their sins. They think that in their great impurity they are not worthy of this precious treasure and Christ's benefits. They feel their weakness of faith and lament it, and from their hearts desire that they may serve God with stronger, more joyful faith and pure obedience. These are the truly worthy guests, for whom this highly venerable Sacrament has been especially instituted and appointed. For Christ says: Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28).<sup>13</sup>

The *Formula of Concord* also uses this verse when teaching our Lutheran faith and confession concerning election unto salvation.

Whoever would be saved should not trouble or torment himself with thoughts about God's secret counsel, about whether he also is elected and ordained to eternal life. Miserable Satan usually attacks with these thoughts and afflicts godly hearts. But they should hear Christ, who is the Book of Life, and hear about God's eternal election to eternal life for all of His children. Christ testifies to all people without distinction that it is God's will that all people should come to Him "who labor and are heavy laden" with sin, in order that He may give them rest and save them [Matthew 11:28].<sup>14</sup>

Why would we trade in these treasures for trinkets?

## Come unto Me: Swiss Army Knife for Life Situations

Having set this Scripture straight and in accord with the exegetical, homiletical, confessional, and catechetical teaching of the Lutheran church, consider how Matthew 11:28-31 sometimes is misused.

Suppose someone who has been divorced is asking about how soon to start dating again. The person wants to fill the part of the heart that has been left empty. The person yearns for love, or at least affection, or at least attention.

Suppose a counselor says, “You need to allow a time for mourning. You need healing for bereavement. Remember, Jesus says, ‘Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’ (Matthew 11:28-30) In Christ, we seek to fill our hearts with what only He can offer: healing.”

What just happened?

Words like heavy, gentle, heart, and rest trigger an associative jump to empty hearts, mourning, bereavement, and healing. Is this associative jump warranted? Was Jesus calling divorce mourners to healing so that, being healed, they could date again?

Suppose God wants a divorced person to be healed of the bereavement. Fine. But does “Come unto me” say that? What is Christ’s topic? What is He talking about? Suppose God wants some divorced person to date again. Alright, but does Jesus say that *in these verses*?



If He is saying that in these verses, how does that impact what Lutherans have believed from these verses exegetically, homiletically, confessionally, and catechetically? What becomes of these verses inviting people to Communion? What becomes of these verses giving assurance about election and predestination? Saying it is both-and, not either-or, solves nothing, because then we make a smorgasbord of it, eating platefuls of desserts and not our vegetables. The one elbows out the other. The popular eclipses the orthodox. If you don’t believe it, go to the Christian bookstores and compute the ratio of this kind junk food to wholesome nutrition.

We are making “Come unto me” a Swiss Army Knife, the multitool for all purposes. Is this our go-to verse because we cannot be bothered to look through Scripture to find where it clearly says something about our particular life situation? “Come unto Me” is handy because we make it vague enough to cover the ground of any felt need?

Is “Come unto Me” about bereavement and mourning from a broken relationship with a former spouse, or is it about sin before God and salvation that gives us standing before the throne of God?

The counselor needs to be asked, how did you get from the text of Jesus’ words to the application you are making? The counselor needs to be asked, can you confirm this teaching by other texts of Scripture,



ones more clearly and directly about my life situation? Is this glossy, fuzzy, diluted reading of this one text all you have got?

There had better be more. Otherwise, this is not materially different from health-and-wealth, name-it-and-claim-it. It is the subtle Schullerization of Lutheran teaching. This is trading treasures of “Come unot Me” for trinkets of associative felt needs.

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Robert Schuller, *The Be (Happy) Attitudes* (Irving, TX: Word, Inc., 1985), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Common English Bible, Amplified Bible, Good News Translation, International Children’s Bible, J. B. Phillips New Testament, New Life Version, Worldwide English (New Testament), Young’s Literal Translation.

<sup>5</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 456-457.

<sup>6</sup> Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible: New Testament*, vol. I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 65.

<sup>7</sup> G. Jerome Albrecht and Michael J. Albrecht, *People’s Bible Commentary: Matthew*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 171.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, Sermon on St. Matthias’ Day, February 5, 1525, *Luther’s Works: Sermons I*, vol. 51, John W. Doberstein, ed. & trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 129.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Melancthon, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, XIA.44-46, Paul Timothy McCain, Ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 163.

<sup>10</sup> AE 26:133.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Part V, The Sacrament of the Altar, Paul Timothy McCain, Ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 438; LC V.66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 439; LC V.71-72.

<sup>13</sup> Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Paul Timothy McCain, Ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 573-574; SD VII.69-70.

<sup>14</sup> Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Paul Timothy McCain, Ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 611-612; SD XI.70.