

Pastor's Corner – 2-24-2018
Correlation and Causation

James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

This past week I have been reading a book about the history of nutrition science in our country. It traces the development of the research and policies that have brought us to today where everyone knows that "fat" is the bad guy, "carbs" are the good guys, and people are overweight simply because they consume more than they expend. What's fascinating to me is that this well known "fact" wasn't always accepted as such and that there is a lot of contradictory research that has either been ignored or ridiculed to irrelevance. It seems that in the realm of nutrition science that once the "fat is bad" hypothesis was accepted that any new research that might contradict the consensus is automatically discarded without even receiving a fair hearing.

This is a kind of confirmation bias where we only consider evidence that supports our position and ignore anything that might challenge it. Nutrition science isn't the only place where this happens. In many areas of life, our pre-conceived ideas can negatively impact our ability to see the truth.

Take the appearance of soft tissue found in some T-Rex bones. There are two underlying assumptions that paleontologists have when it comes to fossils. The first is that they are very very old. The second is that it is not possible for soft tissue to survive intact for millions of years. Cognitive dissonance was created when it was verified that some scientists had dug up T-Rex bones that actually contained non-fossilized soft tissue. The question then became, which underlying assumption would give? Would scientists conclude that the bone really wasn't all that old (undermining all of evolutionary theory), or would they speculate about a way to explain the presence of soft tissue in an ancient artifact. They landed on the latter because the belief that dinosaurs lived millions of years ago is so ingrained in scientific thought that to consider any alternative... well it's just not possible.

There could be a mountain of evidence for a young earth and most scientists would simply ignore it because it doesn't fit their already established beliefs. The same thing is true with nutrition science, and the same thing can be true of Bible study as well.

There is a great temptation when we study the Bible to find only the things we are already looking for and we have to guard against reading into the text stuff that isn't actually there. I had an interesting conversation with someone recently who said that God introduced meat into the human diet after the flood so that it would shorten man's lifespan. This wasn't the first time I've heard this argument. Occasionally this interpretation will appear during "the health talk" in an evangelic series.

The reason we use this argument is because it fits in nicely with our vegetarian emphasis. If we're trying to convince people to give up their meat we need all the evidence we can get. The problem is that the Bible doesn't actually say this, or even infer it. So how do folks justify the conclusion that God gave us meat to shorten our lives?

It's quite simple really, they confuse correlation with causation. The Bible records that people living prior to the flood lived for hundreds of years. After the flood there is a rapid decrease in longevity until it quickly settles down to something similar to what we see today. We note that in Gen 9 (after the flood) God introduced meat to the diet. So we see a correlation between the introduction of meat into the diet and decreased longevity. Here's the problem, correlation does not equal causation.

When it comes to diet, the flood, and longevity there may be a number of different explanations for why longevity decreased. Not the least of which is that the flood itself radically altered the planet in ways we cannot possibly imagine. And beyond that, even if we could prove causation between meat and decreased longevity we couldn't assume God's intent unless he specifically told us (which he doesn't).

So to say that God introduced meat to shorten the human lifespan is a straight up fabrication, something that is entirely made up from our own imagination and unfounded by the Biblical text. But we keep saying it because it fits our belief that the best diet is the Eden diet.

This illustrates the need for extreme care whether we study the Bible, nutrition science or anything else. We need to be careful to not jump to conclusions just because they seem to line up with what we already believe. We need to make sure we don't read things into the text that aren't actually there. When we study, let's do so with an open mind, let's not ignore contradictory evidence, and let's pray for wisdom to find the truth.

And let's all remember – correlation does not equal causation.

One more time – correlation is not causation.

Happy Sabbath

Pastor Tyler