

Manfred T. Brauch

ABUSING SCRIPTURE

THE CONSEQUENCES OF
MISREADING THE BIBLE



 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

CONTENTS

Preface	9
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15
1 THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE	23
2 THE ABUSE OF THE WHOLE GOSPEL	33
3 THE ABUSE OF SELECTIVITY	46
4 THE ABUSE OF BIBLICAL BALANCE	81
5 THE ABUSE OF WORDS	119
6 THE ABUSE OF CONTEXT: <i>Literary and Theological</i>	160
7 THE ABUSE OF CONTEXT: <i>Historical Situation and Cultural Reality</i> .	202
8 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES	250
APPENDIX A: <i>The Gospel of Personal Salvation and the Social Gospel</i> . .	257
APPENDIX B: <i>Views of Women in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity</i>	261
APPENDIX C: <i>Just-War Theory</i>	266
APPENDIX D: <i>Letter to President Bush from Evangelical Leaders</i>	268
APPENDIX E: <i>Expanded Translation/Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33</i>	272
Bibliography	274
Scripture Index	285

INTRODUCTION

ON THE ABUSE OF SCRIPTURE

I have a deep concern. It is about the integrity and viability of our Christian witness in today's world, a witness that is frequently undermined and distorted by the abuse of Scripture. By "Scripture abuse" I mean interpreting and applying the Bible in questionable or irresponsible ways. For example, when we interpret a text without proper regard for its literary or historical context in order to justify a particular theological position, or when we apply Scripture to a current political issue in a way that it was never intended to be applied, we abuse Scripture.

I very deliberately chose the term *abuse* to point to the serious nature of misreading the Bible. I am well aware that the word *abuse* conjures up the terrible images of children burned, beaten and neglected, or of women battered, verbally demolished and psychologically scarred. In light of these images, my use of the word is an intentional decision to drive home the point that abuse—in the sense of "doing violence to"—is precisely what happens when Scripture is misinterpreted and misused: violence is done to its message and meaning. Victims of physical abuse are often beaten so severely that their

true identities are unrecognizable, or they are scarred so deeply in their psyches or spirits that their true selves cannot emerge. Similarly, this is what happens when we misinterpret and misapply Scripture. The meaning and message of Scripture becomes obscured, its authentic nature cannot easily be recognized, it is not allowed to speak its deepest truths, and its voice is muted, throttled or silenced.

Abuse can be both intentional and unintentional. Much of what I identify throughout this study as the abusive reading and application of Scripture is not the result of deliberate, intentional abuse for the purpose of manipulation or control. These unintentional abuses are often the result of letting our backgrounds, preconceptions, or biases influence and control the way we read and apply Scripture. The analogy of abuse in human relationships is instructive here. The abuser in a parent-child relationship, or in a spousal relationship, can often be totally oblivious to the fact that he or she is committing abuse. This is especially true in cases of excessive preoccupation with work (or even ministry!) that can result in the abuse of neglect; or through the learned patterns of communication from one's family of origin, a child or a spouse may be put down, marginalized or demeaned; or abuse may occur when, through (superior) rational argumentation, the feelings and emotions of the other are unwittingly silenced, their voices not heard and their gifts ignored. However, whether in relationships or in the reading and application of the Bible, abuse is abuse, whether inflicted intentionally or unintentionally.

I am particularly concerned about the abuse of Scripture within the tradition of the Christian faith that upholds the Bible as the unique Word of God and affirms its divine inspiration and authority. This tradition, which is generally identified as evangelical and of which I consider myself a part, transcends denominational and confessional boundaries. It seeks to honor the text of Scripture, claiming it as the irreducible foundation of the faith "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Nevertheless, on a regular basis, in our interpretation and application of the Bible, we grievously abuse Scripture; we do violence to its message and meaning.

Why am I focusing primary attention on the abuse of Scripture within this tradition? Because I believe that such a commitment to Scripture's inspiration and authority calls us to a much higher level of accountability with regard to trustworthy interpretation than a view of Scripture that does not affirm its divine inspiration and authority in the same way or to the same extent. Thus

when the content of Scripture is seen to primarily be inspired human thinking and believing, or the collected faith traditions of particular faith communities, all kinds of interpretations of the biblical texts become possible and can be legitimized as consistent with such understandings of the Bible.

A good example is the use of a Marxist understanding of social constructs and economic realities as a grid through which to interpret biblical texts in some liberation theologies. Similarly, a radical feminist perspective can legitimize its rejection of the Bible's understanding of the distorted Creator-creature relationship and God's redemptive, atoning work in Christ because it sees the Bible as reflecting ancient cultural concerns about appeasing angry gods through sacrificial offerings. If Scripture is not affirmed as the divinely inspired revelation of the human condition as "lost" and in need of "salvation," then those aspects of the biblical story can easily be set aside. In some liberal traditions of Christian faith, parts of Scripture are primarily understood as providing inspired human insight about God and life. They can therefore be mined for lofty, general ethical principles (such as "tolerance," "inclusion," "love") while ignoring or relativizing biblical teachings about sexual morality or the sanctity of marriage.

From the perspective of historic, orthodox, evangelical views of Scripture, such readings and uses of Scripture are clearly abusive; they distort the Bible's meaning; they do violence to its message. While from their presuppositions about the Bible these interpretations can be legitimized, they can also be critically engaged and challenged.¹

Those who affirm the Bible as the Word of God, inspired and authoritative for Christian faith, life and presence in the world, must be true to those convictions when interpreting and applying the Word. The apostle Paul wrote that we are "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1). He then went on to say that "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:2). Paul was certain that "God's mysteries" had been fully disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 2:1;

¹See, e.g., N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), who responds to misreadings of the Bible on both the left and the right (especially pp. 106-13). Other recent examples of critical engagements with abusive interpretations on the liberal end of the theological spectrum are Timothy P. Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Barth Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 2007); and Luke T. Johnson's *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

Eph 3:1-10). For us, by extension, “trustworthy stewardship” of this revealed mystery in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:5-6) certainly includes Scripture—that vehicle in and through which God’s redemptive and transforming purpose for the world has been transmitted to us.

On the basis of commitment to trustworthiness in stewarding the whole truth of God’s mysteries—beginning with the creation accounts of the Old Testament and climaxing in the vision of a redeemed creation in the book of Revelation—we must refuse, with Paul, “to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word” and instead give allegiance to “the open statement of the truth” (2 Cor 4:2). This stance and commitment with regard to the interpretation and application of Scripture must characterize Christian presence and witness.

The tragedy, however, is that many who most passionately and stridently proclaim allegiance to the Bible and love for the inspired, authoritative Word of God often interpret and apply Scripture in ways that are abusive, thus distorting its meaning and message. Consequently, instead of releasing the transforming power from God and the treasure of God’s Word into the world in and through the earthen vessels of our presence and witness (2 Cor 4:7), we contribute to brokenness and abusiveness in our world. How do we do that? A few examples should suffice to illustrate the serious problem of Scripture abuse.

1. We affirm that the Bible is the vehicle of the gospel, the good news of God’s redemptive love. And then we use it as an instrument of bitter warfare, both within our own circles and against outsiders: we condemn, judge, malign, demean and reject. What does this say about the validity of the central message of Jesus—loving not only brothers and sisters but also neighbors and adversaries?
2. We announce that the Bible speaks the truth from God about human life and relationships, but then we undermine our commitment to that truth by using all kinds of biblical proof texts—often out of context and not in keeping with their original meaning or intent—in an effort to “prove” to those with whom we disagree that we are “on the Lord’s side” and they are of the devil (or at least very wrong!). Is this attitude and practice compatible with the spirit and teaching of the Jesus of the Gospels?
3. We use biblical texts selectively to build arguments for particular theo-

logical doctrines or biblical teachings, while conveniently ignoring biblical texts that stand in tension with our views. Or we employ sophisticated (and often deceptive!) “exegetical gymnastics” to eliminate tensions between and among diverse texts, or we reinterpret texts that are inconvenient and do not support our dearly held convictions or doctrines. What does this say about integrity in the work of interpretation?

4. We invest tremendous energy and time on matters that our Lord told us were not to be our primary concern (such as timetables of the end times) and spend too little time and energy on matters that both God’s prophets and our Lord, as well as his earliest followers, placed very high on their agendas—such as a passion for justice, peacemaking, concern for the poor and righteousness in human affairs. Does this not undermine our claim that the *whole* Bible is our authority?
5. In the midst of the confusing and distorting voices about human sexuality in our time, we champion Scripture’s call to holy living and morality, grounded in creational intention and covenant commitment. And so we must. But at the same time we often blithely set aside or ignore the cancers eating away at the communal life and witness of our churches—such as strife, bitterness, gossip, backbiting, greed, divisiveness—all named in New Testament texts as incompatible with kingdom values (1 Cor 6:9-11; Eph 4:25-32; 5:3-5). Are we then not guilty of distorting the Bible’s claim on *all areas* of human life and community?

These are examples of abuses that undermine the integrity of our Christian witness. They raise serious questions about our claim to be bearers of the truth from God. They marginalize the potential significance and impact of our proclamation of the gospel, relegating it to the backwaters of our culture’s increasingly secular and neopagan mainstream.²

AVOIDING SCRIPTURE ABUSE

How can such abuses of Scripture and its message—both in our interpretation and application—be avoided? How can we be more trustworthy stewards of the treasure of Scripture, “rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15)?

²For a contemporary analysis of negative perceptions of the Christian faith and of Christians, based on extensive research by the Barna Research Group, see David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Un-Christian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

My response to these questions begins with an analogy from the field of behavioral sciences, specifically from the perspective of family systems theory. Dysfunctional and abusive patterns in marital and family relationships must be identified, recognized and acknowledged before corrective intervention can begin the process of healing. In the same way, abusive interpretation and application of Scripture must be identified and acknowledged before corrective intervention can alter it. In other words, we need to be self-critical, honest and clear. We need to call a proverbial spade a spade by acknowledging the many ways in which Scripture is abused among us—wittingly or unwittingly, intentionally or unintentionally. Thus in each chapter we will focus our attention on a specific way that Scripture is commonly abused and discuss a variety of examples to illustrate each particular form of abuse. This identification and acknowledgment will be accompanied by affirmation of and reflection on guidelines and principles of interpretation—broadly recognized in Christian scholarship and biblical hermeneutics—that must be observed in our reading, study and application of God’s Word. Only close and consistent attention to those guiding perspectives and principles, and their use in our study of biblical texts, will mitigate the abuse of Scripture.

As indicated in the book’s title, my central concern is the reality that the abuse of Scripture, in both interpretation and application, has consequences. Some abuses of Scripture have consequences that are relatively benign. They may affect doctrinal nuances, or various Christian understandings of the end times, or relatively inconsequential theological positions, or formal-structural aspects of ecclesiastical life that are perhaps important to us “insiders” but do not, in any way, threaten essential doctrines or impact and undermine the veracity of Christian witness and presence in the world. However, there are other abuses of Scripture that have serious negative consequences, both for the health and vitality of congregational life and for the way the Christian message is heard and experienced by outsiders. These are the primary focus of this book.

In light of the central concern and primary focus articulated above, there are three matters—among several dozen that are addressed throughout this study—that emerge repeatedly, in multiple chapters, as illustrations of various kinds of abusive interpretation of biblical material. They are (1) the use and justification of force and violence in human affairs; (2) the relationship between men and women in home, church and society; and (3) the concern

for justice and the sanctity of life in all areas of human relationships, institutions and culture.

There are several reasons for this. First, using a particular issue several times to illustrate various ways that Scripture is abused reveals that abusive interpretations of Scriptural texts or ideas are often interrelated and influence each other. Second, I believe that abusive interpretation and application of Scripture in these areas has had, and continues to have, very serious negative consequences for the viability of Christian witness and presence in our world. Third, abusive readings and applications of biblical material in these areas continue to shape Christians and Christian communities who, often unknowingly and unintentionally, contribute to: (a) the fallen human tendency to opt for the use of force and violence in human relationships and in national and international affairs; (b) the tragic abuse and brokenness in male-female relationships; and (c) the all-too-pervasive attitudes and actions that perpetuate injustice and the demonization of “the other” in human and social relationships and institutions. And fourth, I believe that these three broken and distorted areas of corporate human life are core areas of “the dominion of darkness” in our world, which the reign of God (kingdom of God) in Jesus’ life and ministry confronts and which the followers of Jesus, individually and collectively, are called to engage and transform.

However, as important as these foci are for Christian life, presence and mission in our world, their repeated appearance throughout our study is primarily illustrative and should not distract from the issue that they, and the several dozen other examples, illustrate. Namely, that the misreading of Scripture within and by the Christian community not only calls into question the credibility of Christian proclamation and presence but contributes to the brokenness of human life.