

# Scripture Twisting: Read me First!

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This is the first in a series of occasional short essays on "Scripture Twisting." The purpose of these very brief essays is to challenge certain popular interpretations of the Bible that really have little or no basis.

## **Abusing Scripture, Abusing God**

Evangelical Christians base their lives on the Bible. We believe that the Bible is God's Word and that it is therefore authoritative for us in matters of faith and practice. The Bible indicates the great truths of who God is, how we can relate to him, how we can understand ourselves and the world. In short, the Bible contains the words of life. Believers use it to guide them in discerning God's will, from the monumental to the mundane. We read it to gain hope as well as to glean truth. It affects our beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. In short, the Bible is our pipeline to heaven: without it, we are adrift, unprotected in a hostile place.

### **Reason One: Lack of Respect**

One of the curious phenomena of recent times is *how* Christians have been using the Bible. Rather than recognize that it is a book made up of 66 books, each written to a specific people for a specific reason, we tend to wrench verses right out of their contexts because the *words* agree with what we already believe. Sometimes believers say silly things like, "God gave me a verse today." What's wrong with that? Two things: First, this approach to Scripture does not honor the *divine* authorship of Scripture. God gave the verse at least 1900 years ago. You may have discovered it today, but it's been there all along. To say that God *gave* a verse today is really an existential statement, as though the Bible didn't become alive until we read it a certain way. But revelation has ceased. It's all there in the Book. This manner of speaking almost sounds as if revelation continues. But the work of the Spirit today is decidedly not on the cognitive level: he is not bringing us new revelation. His work in relation to the Bible is primarily in the realm of conviction: he helps to drive home the message of the Bible, once it is properly understood. Second, this approach (i.e., the "God gave me a verse today" approach) to Scripture does not honor the *human* authorship of the Bible. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he wrote a coherent, holistic message. He never intended for someone a couple millennia later to rip verses out of their context and wield them any way they so chose! Certainly we have a right to quote verses of Scripture; but we do not have a right to ignore the context, or to make them say what the language cannot say. Otherwise, someone could come along and say "Judas hanged himself"; "Go and do likewise"! Hence, one reason for the abuse of Scripture is due to a lack of respect for the Bible as a divine and human work. In this approach it becomes a magical incantation book--almost a book of unconnected fortune cookie sayings!

## Reason Two: Laziness

Part and parcel of this abuse of Scripture is *laziness*. That is, most people simply don't take the trouble to read the context or to do their homework on the meaning of the Bible. And even when they are confronted with overwhelming evidence that is contrary to their view, they often glibly reply, "That's just your interpretation." This kind of response sounds as if all interpretations are up for grabs, as though all interpretations are equally plausible. Such a view is patently false. Take the following sentence as an example: "My mother likes climbing vines." One interpretation of these words is not just as valid as another. This sentence cannot mean "My father is an auto mechanic." "Mother" does not mean "Father"; "likes" does not mean "is"; "climbing vines" is not a synonym for "auto mechanic." Language cannot be twisted in this manner. Now, without a context, there are, however, two distinct options for the sentence in question. Either "My mother likes vines that climb" or "My mother likes to climb vines." Which is the right view? The only way to tell is to look at the context of the utterance--or to ask the author of the sentence! Both things are done in biblical interpretation. Sometimes the context solves the problem; other times, the more we know about an author, the better able we are to determine his meaning. But one recipe for missing the meaning of the text is to be too casual about it. After all, did not Paul tell Timothy, "Study to show yourself approved"?

## Reason Three: Dishonesty

Another reason for Scripture twisting is simple *dishonesty*. Peter reminds his audience that Paul wrote things that are hard to understand, which the unstable and wicked twist to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16). I'm afraid that this approach to Scripture represents the attitude of far too many folks. Not just heretics, either. Too often preachers fall prey to the temptation, "Can it preach?" rather than following the conviction, "Is it true?" Years ago, I was working at a church, preparing a message for the single adults. The pastor was preparing a message for the whole congregation. It was a Saturday night. He came to my office and asked me how I understood a particular word. I told him the options that I thought the Greek text allowed, giving reasons for my particular preference. His response was, "So, you don't think it can mean 'X'?" I answered that X was not an option; the Greek couldn't be twisted to mean that. He then declared, "That's too bad. I've already prepared my message, and one of the fundamental points I am making is based on taking this to mean X. It's too late to change now." I was astonished. Here was a man who was going into the pulpit the next day, knowing that he was going to preach things that were not true! To be sure, teachers of the Word don't have all the answers. There are many things that we have questions about in the midst of our instruction. (I have long advocated that one of the things teachers of the Bible should model is humility when they don't know. Usually, however, that's when the pulpit gets pounded all the louder!) But this is quite different from *knowing* that we are in error and teaching it any way. To cross that ethical line has certain consequences. Did not James write, "Not many of you ought to become teachers, since you will incur a greater judgment"?

We cannot always divine the reasons why some folks use the Bible in a way it was never intended to be used. But we do have the responsibility to be good stewards of the Word. Should not our attitude be the same as the Bereans? When the Bereans heard the gospel that Paul preached, Luke tells us that they were more noble-minded than the Thessalonians because they received the things that Paul said with joy, but also searched the

Scriptures to check him out (Acts 17:11)! We should listen to the Word being taught with a critical ear and a smile on our face.

In the coming months, I will explore some verses that have often been twisted. These essays are intended to be very short. Although it is true that part of our purpose is to correct some bad instruction, the texts selected usually have a profound point to make that needs to be listened to. We don't often hear their message, however, because we have been instructed in the popular interpretation so long that we can't recognize the true meaning of the text. We'll close with one example. Often at weddings, a verse out of the book of Ruth is quoted: "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16, NRSV). The words are spoken by the wife to her husband. It's a great sentiment, and one that every husband would be happy for his wife to utter. But Ruth didn't say these words to Boaz. She said them to Naomi, her mother-in-law! To read these verses at a wedding is to wrench them from their context. To do so may be for a good cause, expressing a romantic sentiment, but it is Scripture twisting nonetheless.

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