

3 Quick-and-Easy Ways to Abuse Scripture

(and how to avoid them)



LESSON THREE

To Take a Passage or Two Out of Context

QUICK REVIEW

“Just Read the Bible, and Do What It Says!”

This is a recipe for disaster and a formula for abuse. This cliché and others like it sound good and noble until one actually begins to read the Bible. Before long, one discovers that Christians fail to do much of what the Bible says.

- *Whoever does any work on the Sabbath, must be put to death.*
- *If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.*
- *Women must remain silent in the church.*
- *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.*
- *Let no debt remain outstanding.*
- *Change your laughter to mourning.*

The Bible is not honored as God’s Word when it is read and applied in a straightforward and simplistic manner. Reading and applying the Bible is a complex and formidable challenge that requires hard work, careful thought, and much humility. Why are these commands no longer obeyed? What makes the church today apply these verses differently? Exploring these questions and others like it can equip individuals to read and apply the Bible more effectively, and in a way that protects others from abuse.

Lesson One: What Is the Bible?

How one views and understands the Bible as a whole will determine how the Bible is ultimately treated. Many Christians wrongly view the Bible as a rulebook, theology book, or devotional guide, often leading to abusive ways of using the Bible. But the Bible presents itself as a story—the true story of God working to reestablish his kingdom over creation. Foundational, then, to biblical interpretation is to treat the Bible as such.

Lesson Two: To Whom Was the Bible Written?

The Bible is the true story of God and his world written by a variety of different authors, at different times, to different audiences, in different genres, and for different reasons. It is extremely important, then, to recognize that the Bible was not written directly to the modern-day church. To be faithful to the way God gave the Scriptures is to read it first in its historical context in order to determine its original meaning.

WHAT DETERMINES THE AUTHOR'S MEANING?

A Review of Authorial Intent

Since the Bible was first written to ancient audiences, discovering the original meaning of what a passage says is the first step of biblical interpretation. Recall that the meaning of a biblical text is not created by the reader, but placed there by the author. The goal, then, is to discover what the author intended to communicate to his or her original audience. The Bible can never mean what it never meant. So how do modern-day readers go about determining what the original author meant?

Context Determines the Author's Meaning

Without a context, words are meaningless, which is why that without a context, one can make the Bible say whatever he or she wants. Likewise, and contrary to first glance, phrases like “it’s going to rain,” “she likes climbing vines,” and “the two towers fell” are meaningless without a context. It is context that determines meaning. When dealing with the Bible, or any other literary work for that matter, three types of context are essential to explore if the author’s meaning is to be determined.

- **Historical-Cultural Context.** As described in lesson two, to discover the author’s meaning of a particular text, the interpreter must seek to share the author’s world as much as possible. Therefore, certain historical-cultural factors must be considered such as the identity of the author, the audience, the author’s purpose in writing, geography, social customs, political dynamics, economic issues, etc.
- **The Context of Literary Genre.** As mentioned in lesson two, each book of the Bible is written in a particular literary genre, and each genre comes with a different set of rules for interpretation. Paying attention to those rules will keep readers from making common interpretive mistakes.
- **Surrounding Literary Context.** Each word in the Bible must be understood within its own phrase, each phrase within its own sentence, each sentence within its own paragraph, each paragraph within its own section, each section within its own book, and each book within the biblical story as a whole. Paying attention to these contexts is necessary for determining a text’s original meaning.

“The most important principle of biblical interpretation is that context determines meaning.”

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays

HOW TO TAKE A VERSE OUT OF CONTEXT

Is It Okay to Take a Verse Out of Context?

Quoting a verse from the Bible is always dangerous business for at least three reasons: (1) it can treat the Bible like something it's not; (2) it can imply that the verse is written directly to the reader; and (3) it automatically extracts a verse from its context. Despite the danger, though, it is not really feasible to refrain from quoting Scripture or from allowing certain texts to be personally significant. The challenge, then, is not to avoid quoting a verse, but always to take into consideration the context of the quoted verse.

How to Keep the Context in View

Keeping the context of a verse in view requires not only a shift in thinking, but also constant attention. Lesson two discussed ways to consider the historical-cultural context as well as the context of literary genre. Just as important as these is paying attention to the surrounding literary context. Here are a few suggestions rooted in the overall goal of seeking to identify how an author's thought flows through each part of the book.

- **Outline the Book.** Analyze the parts in light of the whole.
 - Read the book and divide it into sections.
 - Summarize the main point of each section with one sentence.
 - Divide each section into smaller units of thought.
 - Summarize the main point of these subdivisions with one sentence.
- **Mark Up a Passage.** Give high priority to a passage's immediate context.
 - Analyze the grammar and syntax.
 - Identify and define key words.
 - Identify figurative language.
 - Explain how the passage relates to the surrounding contexts.
- **Step Back Again.** Constantly reevaluate the whole in light of the parts.

LIVING OUT THE BIBLICAL STORY TODAY

A New Way of Thinking about Application

Based on lesson one, recall that application should be done in view of the Bible as an unfinished script. However, this presents a problem with the word "application," which can suggest a kind of "do what the Bible says" approach, reinforcing the view that the Bible is a rulebook to be straightforwardly "applied." But how do you apply a story? Perhaps a better way of speaking about application, then, is "living out the biblical story." This changes the question of application to something like this: How is the church to live out the biblical story today?

Living Out the Biblical Story Today

The church is not called to mimic this or that part of the Bible, but rather to learn to live out the biblical story in today's world in a way that is faithful to its past trajectory and anticipates its future conclusion. And yet this process must always be rooted in proper interpretation, that is, in the text's original meaning. How, then, might this process of learning to live out the biblical story look like?

- **Within Community.** Living out the biblical story is a community project. Since the Bible is the church's book, and since the Spirit of God is among the people of God, then listening to and learning from one another is an essential aspect of proper application. This is especially true in three areas.
 - **Tradition.** The church has been living with and living out the Scriptures for two millennia. The contemporary church must not ignore this reality, but instead listen carefully and critically to how the church has read and lived Scripture in the past.
 - **Scholarship.** Biblical scholarship allows the church to go deeper into the meaning of Scripture, often questioning entrenched interpretations and opening up new possibilities as to what the text actually meant. The church, then, must learn to listen carefully and critically to academia.
 - **Worship and Prayer.** The primary place where the church hears Scripture read and proclaimed is during corporate worship, reminding the church of the story in which it is a part and giving the church the opportunity to ask God's Spirit for strength to move his story forward together.
- **By Keeping the Whole Story in View.** Living out the biblical story is never as simple as applying the meaning of one text, but rather of allowing the meaning of one text to be integrated with the themes of the entire biblical narrative, and then asking how that might play out in today's context. The more one gets a sense of the driving forces that run throughout the biblical story, the more one is ready to ask better questions about living the Scriptures today.
- **Through the Lens of the Main Theme and the Main Character.** While secondary issues are important, the main theme and character of the biblical story must guide the church's application. The reestablishment of God's kingdom over all creation is paramount in the Bible, and the clearest revelation of God is found in the person of Jesus Christ. This dual lens must shape all attempts at living out the biblical story today.
- **With Humility and Grace.** A common temptation is to turn certain applications into universal dogma for the whole church. The Bible is a complex book, and its application is a messy process that often differs from person to person and from church to church. With humility and grace, the church should always be slow to speak and quick to listen.