

# 3 Quick-and-Easy Ways to Abuse Scripture

(and how to avoid them)



## LESSON ONE

### To Treat the Bible Like Something It's Not

#### WHY THIS CLASS?

##### The Place of Scripture

Christianity and the Bible go together. Almost all Christian churches affirm positions that speak about the importance of Scripture. The Bible therefore plays a significant role in the faith and practice of all Christians. Here are at least three assertions about the Bible that most all segments of Christianity would have no problem making.

- **The Bible Is Authoritative.** In other words, Christianity believes that God exercises his authority over his people through Scripture. That's not to say that the Bible is the only source of authority for Christians, but it is a crucial one. In fact, Anglicans and other Protestants believe that the Bible is the church's final authority on matters of faith and practice.
- **The Bible Is the Word of God.** Christians believe the Bible to be inspired by God. The term *inspiration* is used to describe the relationship between the divine and human roles in the writing of Scripture. Christians believe that the divine aspect of the Bible is inseparably and mysteriously interwoven into every verse.
- **The Bible Is the Words of Humans.** Inspiration also means that as God directed human authors to write Scripture, he did so in a way that incorporated their different abilities, experiences, styles, and cultural situations. Christians believe that the human aspect of the Bible is also interwoven into every verse.

##### The Challenge of Interpretation

While the church clearly cannot live without the Bible, it definitely has a hard time living with it. Disagreements as to what the Bible teaches about particular matters of life and faith continue to splinter the church into various groups, denominations, and even cults. Christians everywhere believe the Bible is authoritative and inspired, but how it should be interpreted is another matter. Two obstacles in particular make this a challenge.

- **The Nature of Scripture.** The historical and cultural distance between modern readers and the Bible is enormous. The Bible consists of sixty-six ancient documents that were written over a 1500-year period, by more than forty authors, on three separate continents, in three different "dead" languages, and in a variety of literary genres. These facts alone make reading and understanding the Bible in its original context a major challenge.

- **The Nature of the Reader.** The challenge of interpretation is compounded by the fact that modern-day readers approach the biblical text with their own biases, preconceptions, prior understandings, cultural baggage, and experiences, all of which make it difficult to arrive at a proper understanding of the Bible in its original context.

## The Abuse of Scripture

The place of Scripture as the inspired, authoritative document of the church combined with the challenge of interpretation makes Scripture vulnerable to rampant abuse. When the Bible is not read properly, church leaders and teachers, and even popular authors and everyday Christians interpret and apply the Bible in questionable and irresponsible ways. As a result, abuse is often done. The Bible has been used

- to support slavery
- to perpetuate attitudes of racism in much of Western culture
- to pressure wives to remain in abusive marriages
- to promote an explicitly materialist “prosperity gospel”
- to justify violence and war
- to shield leaders from accountability
- to marginalize women
- to devalue the “non-spiritual” (physical bodies, the environment, social concerns, etc.)
- to judge others according to legalistic standards

## The Purpose and Preview of this Study

A commitment to Scripture’s authority and inspiration calls the church to a high level of accountability with regard to proper interpretation. If we are a “people of the book,” then we must take seriously the task of reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible carefully and humbly, utilizing the proper tools and resources at our disposal.

The purpose of this study, then, is (1) to identify the primary ways people abuse Scripture so that (2) corrective principles of interpretation can be explored and applied more effectively. Here is a preview of *Three Quick-and-Easy Ways to Abuse Scripture*.

- **To Treat the Bible Like Something It’s Not.** This will be a *macro-level view* of Scripture, exploring how we read the Bible *as a whole*.
- **To Read the Bible As If It Were Written to Us.** This will be a *mid-level view* of Scripture, exploring how we read the Bible *book by book*.
- **To Take a Passage or Two Out of Context.** This will be a *micro-level view* of Scripture, exploring how we read the Bible’s *individual passages*.

## WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

### Common Ways of Using the Bible

Yes, the Bible is God's Word. Yes, the Bible is authoritative. Yes, the Bible is a two-part library consisting of sixty-six separate books. But as a whole, what is it? What are we reading? How can one make sense of the whole? How should the Bible primarily be read? Here are some common ways people use the Bible as a whole.

- **Rulebook.** For some the Bible is a massive collection of laws to be used for prescribing right and wrong behavior. Yet while there are plenty of laws and commandments scattered throughout Scripture, it does not present itself primarily as a rulebook, or even a manual for living.
- **Theology Book.** For others the Bible is like a puzzle of proof-texts that needs to be put together into a well-organized theological system. Yet while the Bible is indeed theological in nature, it does not present itself primarily as a theology book, or even a list of propositions to be affirmed.
- **Devotional Guide.** For some the Bible is a devotional guide offering morsels of blessings and promises to help get through each day. Yet while there are plenty of promises scattered throughout Scripture, it does not present itself primarily as a devotional guide, or even a book of promises.

### The Bible as Story

Though the Bible is made of sixty-six separate books that vary in author, literary genre, and historical and cultural setting, as a whole it presents itself as a story—the true story of God, his people, and his world. Its primary theme is the kingdom of God, revealing how God is working to reestablish his kingdom over creation. This overarching narrative holds all the disparate pieces of the Bible together. It can be divided into six acts.

- **Creation.** Through the act of creation, God establishes his kingdom and appoints humankind to develop his creation into a glorious civilization.
- **Fall.** But humankind rebels against God's rule allowing sin and death to invade the world, infecting every aspect of creation.
- **Israel.** God initiates the world's redemption by choosing the nation of Israel to reestablish his kingdom, but Israel continually fails to live in obedience to God.
- **Jesus.** The kingdom of God is finally inaugurated and made possible for the world in the person of Jesus Christ, through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.
- **Church.** The kingdom of God spreads to every part of the world through the mission of the renewed community of the Holy Spirit called the church.
- **New Creation.** God ultimately deals with evil and death, and the restoration of the world is finally realized and completed in the new creation.

## HOW DO YOU TREAT THE BIBLE AS A STORY?

### **The Power of Story to Provide Meaning**

Stories have the power to provide meaning. Events, for example, only make sense in the context of a story. The phrase, “it’s going to rain,” is meaningless a part from an overarching storyline. Individuals as well are only known in the context of a story. The most natural way for two people to get to know one another is to tell their stories rather than provide a list of disconnected facts like height, weight, hair and eye color, or age. Stories, then, have the ability not only to shape one’s understanding of reality, but one’s place within it. Each person intuitively looks and longs for the grander story of which his own is a part.

*“A story is the best way of talking  
about the way the world actually is.”*

*N. T. Wright*

### **The Biblical Story as Worldview**

A story that offers answers to the fundamental questions of life and existence is called a *worldview* (also known as a *metanarrative*). There are many worldviews that compete for attention in public life, ranging from atheistic naturalism to pantheism, from modernism to the American Dream. To treat the Bible as God’s true story of the world means that a believer’s worldview is shaped and informed by the biblical story.

- How did everything get here?
- Who am I?
- Where am I?
- What’s wrong with the world?
- What’s the remedy?
- How do I relate to the world?
- Where is history going?
- What role should I play?

### **The Biblical Story as Unfinished Script**

The biblical story has yet to come to a completion, which means that the church today finds itself living within this story. In this sense, the Bible can be compared with an unfinished script. While the believer holds the script’s earlier acts as well as the final one, he also finds himself living in the next to last act. The challenge, then, is to move the story along in the present by living in a way that is compatible with what comes before and yet anticipates what is to come. This requires both a commitment to the story’s trajectory as well as a willingness to improvise.

- **Follow the Trajectory.** In order to faithfully live out the biblical story today as an unfinished script, Christians are not called to reenact past scenes of the biblical narrative, but to follow the trajectory set by the script's previous acts. The themes that emerge help guide the church in moving the story toward its final act. Some of these themes include
  - Following the way of Jesus Christ above all
  - Making disciples of all nations
  - Developing God's creation into a glorious civilization
  - Working toward racial reconciliation
  - Protecting the vulnerable and promoting justice
  - Advocating international peace over war
  - Caring for those who are hurt and in need
  
- **Improvisation.** Moving God's story forward also requires imagination and creativity. The exact situations of earlier scenes will never be duplicated, nor should they be, since the biblical plot moves on. God's people instead are called to bring about God's purposes in the present in fresh ways and in their own unique contexts. This requires a degree of improvisation as God's people listen to the Spirit and discern how to demonstrate and proclaim the gospel most effectively in today's world.

### **Recommended Reading**

To learn more about what it means to read and live out the Bible as the true story of God and his world, consider any of the following books.

- *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama*, by Michael W. Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, 2009, 176 pages.
- *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*, by Scot McKnight, 2008, 214 pages.
- *The Bible as Improv: Seeing and Living the Script in New Ways*, by Ron Martoia, 2010, 199 pages.
- *Scripture and the Authority of God*, by N. T. Wright, 2011, 200 pages.