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WHAT ARE WE TEACHING ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE SCRIPTURE CORRECTLY?

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Any student of Christian apologetics knows that cults and aberrant groups that are offshoots of Christianity thrive on misinterpretations and misapplications of Bible verses—their leaders crank them out, and their members blindly accept them. In fact, the JOURNAL has a whole department that is devoted to correcting their interpretive errors.

I would like to shine that same spotlight for a moment on the Christian church's own handling of Scripture in its popular preaching, teaching, and books. I hope, by doing so, to call attention to two practices that I believe adversely affect the church's ability to interpret the Bible correctly and to distinguish itself from the cults in this regard.

First, over the years, I have observed a growing disregard of biblical context in the church's preaching and teaching. It is not uncommon for a preacher, teacher, or author, even a well-respected one, to cite a verse that has little if anything to do with the principle or point he or she is teaching. I am not talking about those instances when a preacher or teacher offers a reasonable interpretation or application of a verse that happens to be different from what you've heard before. I am talking about those instances when you read the cited verse *in its context* and ask yourself, "What in the world does *this* verse have to do with *that* point?" It is often the case that the principle or point being "proven" is good or true, and it might even be supported by other passages of Scripture, but it simply is not supported by the particular verse being cited when one considers the verse in its historical and grammatical context. The "proof text" is simply ripped from its context in order to support what is being taught. The connection between what is being taught and the proof text is at best a loose one that is based on some word or phrase in the verse, or on the verse isolated from its context.

In each instance, Christian preachers, teachers, and authors should be concerned not only with communicating a correct principle or point, but also with communicating a correct method of arriving at that principle or point. What is communicated about how we are supposed to handle God's Word matters as much as the principle or point itself. Ignoring the context of a verse to support the principle or point, even though it might be a good one, teaches listeners or readers that this is an acceptable practice. This mishandling of Scripture not only sets a bad example, it damages the church's ability to criticize, or even recognize, the faulty interpretive methods of cults and aberrant teachers. (See Chris Welborn's article in this issue of the JOURNAL for examples of how the cults use "proof texts.") The fact that a principle or point being taught happens to be orthodox does not justify using a faulty interpretive method to arrive at or support it. The end does not justify the means.

The poor example that that some Christian leaders are modeling in this regard is one reason so many church members remain ignorant of how to interpret the Bible correctly despite the abundance of books on biblical interpretation that are available today. Some, for example, learn to use loosely connected proof texts in the same way that their favorite preacher uses them. Others don't really see the connections that their preacher makes between his points and his proof texts and conclude that they must lack his "gift" to "interpret" the Bible. These results would be unlikely if Christians regularly heard (and read) popular preachers, teachers, and authors handling Scripture correctly.

At the same time, Christian listeners and readers need to be more discerning in this regard. Many believers would benefit from a healthy dose of skepticism and curiosity. Whenever a passage is cited as supporting a principle or point, we should read the context to see for ourselves whether or not this is true. (Hint: Not everything in the Bible was written *to* us or *about* us, even though it was all written *for* us.) The evangelist Luke commended the Bereans for doing this even with the Apostle Paul's teaching (Acts 17:11).

The second practice that I have observed is an increasing misuse of modern translations of the Bible. We have been blessed—in most cases—with a number of good English Bible versions; but, as James R. White explains in his article in this issue of the JOURNAL, not all Bible versions are created equal. Christian preachers, teachers, and authors who claim to uphold the Word of God undermine their claim when they use a weak translation or paraphrase of a verse simply because the particular wording in it suits their purpose. I have heard entire sermons that were based on a word that appears in a verse in a particular paraphrase but is nowhere to be found in the original Greek text or in any of the more literal, word-for-word versions. The “looser,” more dynamic versions, and especially the paraphrases, are sometimes helpful, but they are not always true to the original biblical text and contain a greater amount of interpretation (vs. translation) than the more literal versions. Again, the principle or point being communicated might be relevant and true, but what does the opportunistic use of these versions communicate about our view of the Word of God? It is not beneficial to communicate by example that the original text can be ignored if a word or phrase in a weak or incorrect Bible version “works” better to make a point. Again, the end does not justify the means.

In this regard listeners and readers should always ask themselves, “Is the rendering of the verse being cited in this version both *helpful* and *trustworthy*?” Most believers, equipped with a basic understanding of the different kinds of Bible translations and one or more of the more literal, word-for-word versions, can discover the trustworthiness of a verse in a particular version. (See White's article for a fuller explanation of this.)

The Christian church today may be communicating relevant messages (although some Christian thinkers such as Os Guinness question whether this is true), but if it continues to do so through these faulty interpretive practices, any benefits of those messages will come at a great cost in terms of its members' ability to handle God's Word correctly. Moreover, if it does not correct these practices, it will not be taken seriously when it points out the faulty practices of others.

— Steve Bright