



The Bible says...(or does it?)

Introduction

Quoting the Bible is a powerful influencer when teaching spiritual concepts. The Bible is God's unerring and holy word. The Bible is the ultimate spiritual authority for all Christians. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching" (2 Timothy 3:16). Thus, we often hear: "The Bible says..."

Since all Scripture is useful for teaching, this means misuse of Scripture is useful for teaching; but teaching false doctrine. "Men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them" (Acts 20:30). There is no better way to lead others into false doctrine than to pervert and quote the Bible. With the authority of the Bible underpinning a false teaching, simply saying "The Bible says..." might be enough to lead others astray.

Don't be fooled. The Apostle Paul writes, "Test all things; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The moment someone quips, "The Bible says...", be cautious. Test the quote to ensure the message is sound and the use of the Bible is sound. Watch out for these heretical ways the Bible is used in support of false doctrine.

Quoting out of context

Quoting out of context occurs when a verse or passage is removed from its surrounding text to distort the intended meaning. This can be done intentionally to misrepresent the text, or accidentally by failing to provide the full context. In either case, it's important to test the context of biblical quotes to avoid false teachings.

Checking context means examining the quote's circumstances, audience, and purpose to discern its true meaning. Context should be tested by examining: 1) surrounding verses, 2) overarching themes throughout the Bible, and 3) the author's intended use. Here are a few examples.

*** The Bible says...When the end-times and tribulation comes, we must flee to the mountains...(or does it?)

"When you see the desolating abomination spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Matthew 24:15-16). This verse is quoted by end-times survivalists to justify plans to flee to the mountains and live in caves when the tribulation comes. Let's examine the context of the surrounding text to test the message.

Matthew 24:1-2 records Jesus foretelling the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. The disciples then asked Jesus a two-fold question, "When will this happen, and what sign will there be of your coming, and of the end of the age?" Jesus began by talking about the calamities and tribulations that would come before the fall of the temple. Then, Jesus addressed the second part of their question with a dissertation about his second coming. There were two distinct events Jesus spoke of in this chapter: the destruction of the temple and the end times.

The context of Matthew 24:15-16 is clearly concerning the destruction of the temple, not the end times. "Let the reader understand" was written for the immediate audience, not all future readers. Jesus said, "those in Judea must flee." Survivalists conveniently leave out this part to give the impression the instruction to flee to the mountains applies to all Christians. It doesn't.

In his work titled *Ecclesiastical History*, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 260 - 340) documents a great flight out of Jerusalem during the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66 – 73). The Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The prophecy of Jesus concerning the destruction of the temple and flight out of Judea has already been fulfilled.

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The end-times survivalists will counter by citing the flight of Lot (Genesis 19:17), the flight of Daniel (1 Samuel 23:14), and the flight of Joseph and Mary to Egypt (Matthew 2:13) as additional evidence to their theory of fleeing to the mountains. Let's examine the context of these verses as intended by the authors.

The Bible contains passages that are instructional (such as the Beatitudes), prophetic (such as Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple), and historical (such as the birth of Jesus). Passages intended as historical serve to reveal how God has worked throughout history to bring about his ultimate plan. Historical verses are not intended to be used in a prophetic sense. If every event recorded in the Bible was intended as prophecy, then we all should start building arks. The verses referenced above are intended as a record of historical events. They cannot be used as prophecies to support false claims of fleeing to the mountains.

No...the Bible does not teach that Christians should be prepared to flee to the mountains and live in caves.

*** The Bible says...Catholic tradition is contrary to the Bible...(or does it?)

"They teach as doctrine the precepts of men. You have disregarded the commandment of God to keep the tradition of men" (Mark 7:9). This verse is quoted as evidence against Catholic tradition. Let's first examine the context of surrounding verses.

Mark 7:1-13 documents the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees about tradition. Jesus reprimands the Pharisees for setting aside God's commandment for the sake of tradition. He specifically cites the commandment to honor father and mother. The confrontation climaxes with Jesus saying, in verse 13, "You nullify the word of God in favor of your tradition." The context is clear. Jesus never said all tradition is wrong. Jesus said that tradition which nullifies God's law is wrong.

We can test the context further by examining the overarching message throughout the Bible concerning tradition. The word *tradition* occurs thirteen times in the New Testament. No occurrence implies tradition is wrong. In fact, if there was any doubt as to the context of Mark 7:9, the Apostle Paul clears up the matter in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours."

No...the Bible does not teach that tradition, and specifically Catholic tradition, is wrong.

*** The Bible says...Salvation is by faith alone, works aren't needed...(or does it?)

This one is tricky. The Bible is very clear that salvation is a free gift from God and we cannot earn salvation through works. Jesus said that if we confess him before others we will have eternal life (Matthew 10:32), and the Apostle Paul wrote, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9-10). The issue isn't about salvation being a free gift from God. The issue is the inference that works don't matter, that we can just sit back in faith and wait until we are called to heaven.

Examining the overarching message of the Bible concerning faith and works debunks the idea that works are unnecessary. We read:

- Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:18)
- A person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24)
- Faith without works is dead (James 2:26)

Some think that maybe Paul and James were at odds when it came to the concepts of faith and works. They were not. Their messages were intended for two different audiences and served two different purposes. Both messages, however, were intended to bring the intended audience to a single truth.



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Paul's dissertations concerning faith were intended to enlighten Jews and Gentiles that obedience to the law and "being a good person" could not lead to salvation in Jesus. James, on the other hand, was writing to extremists who used the doctrine of justification through faith as a screen for moral self-determination (a practice still rampant today). There may appear to be a dichotomy between faith and works, but the two work together.

Faith alone leads us to our initial conversion to Jesus and salvation. We cannot get to heaven through works or by being a good person. Works, on the other hand, confirm our profession of faith. When we turn to Jesus as Lord and Savior, our lives must change, and we accomplish all the works set before us by our Lord. If we don't follow our profession of faith with works, it just goes to prove our faith is dead and will not save us. Not all who say "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:21-23).

No...the Bible does not teach that faith alone, without works, brings salvation.

Jumping to a conclusion

Jumping to a conclusion occurs when the Bible conveys a truth, but doesn't clarify its meaning. False teachers can fill in the missing information with opinion and unrelated evidence, leading others to their desired conclusion. To vet out false conclusions, look for other teachings in the Bible related to the subject, and be sure the conclusion doesn't conflict with the overall message of the Bible. Here are a couple examples.

*** The Bible says...Be prepared for the end times. We need to store up food and supplies...(or does it?)

"So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come" (Matthew 24:44). This is another favorite verse of end-times survivalists. It is a biblical fact that Christians need to be prepared for the end times. However, Jesus doesn't explain how to prepare. Survivalists, on the other hand, are happy to lead us to their conclusion on what we must do. Let's test their conclusion by determining if it aligns with other biblical teachings.

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus begins "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink." The rest of the passage is a continuation of his theme concerning dependence on God alone. In the *Lord's Prayer*, we ask "give us this day our daily bread." Nowhere in the Bible does it instruct believers to build bigger granaries to store food and supplies. The Bible's teaching concerning faith and dependence on God is clear.

Some survivalist theories include storing guns and ammo for protection against would-be thieves. This conclusion directly contradicts Scripture. "Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise" (Luke 3:11). And let's not forget: "Thou shalt not kill."

No...the Bible does not teach that we should store food, supplies and guns for the end times.

*** The Bible says...The Holy Spirit leads us to all truth. Each person can interpret the Bible themselves...(or does it?)

"When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). This verse is the primary justification for self-interpretation of Scripture. Self-interpretation has been widely accepted by Protestant denominations since Martin Luther wrote, "I can read Holy Scriptures, and they cannot" in *An Open Letter on Translating* (1530). The entire concept falls apart at the seams on so many levels.

Jesus prayed, "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one" (John 17:20-21). The Apostle Paul frequently wrote about unity in the church (see 1 Corinthians 1:10, Romans 12:16, and Philippians 2:2). For all Christians to be unified and of one mind, there should only be one Spirit and one truth. After five hundred years of self-interpretation, there are over forty-four thousand Christian denominations. Self-interpretation has caused division within Christianity, and in some cases hatred.



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There are many passages in the New Testament concerning the appointment of leaders (presbyters, bishops and deacons) over local churches. The leaders were charged with upholding the faith and “holding fast to the true message as taught so that he will be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to refute opponents” (Titus 1:9). It was the task of the church leaders to discern and refute false doctrine. If all Christians were capable of being inspired by the Holy Spirit, church leaders set up to uphold the faith would not have been needed.

Here’s an interpretation test...Ask a hundred Christians the simple question, “How many are saved?” The answers will be all over the spectrum from few to some to many to all. Every person with an answer to the question can find a verse in the Bible they can quote to support their answer. It’s obvious self-interpretation doesn’t work.

Here’s a challenge question...If the Holy Spirit leads all Christians to the truth, why do we need study bibles?

No...the Bible doesn’t support self-interpretation and doesn’t suggest church leaders aren’t needed for guidance.

Generalization

Generalization occurs when a person incorrectly associates a concept or theme from one passage in the Bible to another passage of the Bible, in order to alter the second passage’s intended meaning. False teachings from generalization all have one thing in common...there is never any evidence within the context of the passage, or anywhere else in the Bible, to back up the claim.

*** When Jesus spoke of his body and blood, he was speaking figuratively, not literally...(or was he?)

The theory goes...Jesus often spoke in parables and sometimes spoke figuratively. For example, Jesus doesn’t literally mean we should cut off our hands when we sin (Matthew 5:29-30). Not everything Jesus said can be taken literally. When Jesus said “this is my body” (Matthew 26:26), he was speaking figuratively, not literally. This generalizes the concept of parables and metaphors, then applies it to an unrelated passage.

The Last Supper wasn’t the only time Jesus spoke of his body and blood. “The Bread of Life Discourse” in John 6:22-66 provides context indicating Jesus was speaking literally when he said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

After Jesus gave this message, many disciples walked away from him. The message wasn’t taken figuratively by the people who heard it. Jesus didn’t stop them from walking away, but then asked the apostles, “Do you also want to leave?” One has to ask the question, “Would Jesus, trying to start a church, ask his disciples if they wanted to leave because of a metaphor?” The message Jesus gave about his body and blood was both clear and serious, and not something indicative of a figurative speech.

Some might say this isn’t proof Jesus was speaking literally. But then again, where is their proof he was speaking figuratively? There is no indication of a figurative meaning to either passage. Since there is at least a hint of evidence leading to a literal explanation, that should be what we believe.

Combining generalization with the excuse of self-interpretation is simply a tactic to disagree with the Bible without denying the Bible’s authority. One simply changes the meaning of the Bible, and claims they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. If one doesn’t want to believe in the body and blood of Christ, simply call it figurative. If one wants to believe in Jesus coming on the clouds, call it literal and a matter of faith.

No...the Bible does not suggest Jesus was speaking figuratively about his body and blood.

Misusing the authority of Scripture



The Bible says...(or does it?)

Scripture is truth and the ultimate authority in matters of Christian faith. No doctrine of faith should conflict with what is written in Scripture. Christians all believe scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching. But some abuse the authority of the Bible to create false teachings.

*** The Bible says...Scripture is our sole source of truth and faith...(or does it?)

"All your words are true" (Psalm 119:160). "Your Word is truth" (John 17:12). It is truth (2 Samuel 7:28, Psalm 119:43, John 17:17, Colossians 1:5). What else besides God himself is called truth, except his Word? This is the justification for many to follow the false ideology: "If it is not written in The Bible, I will not believe it," also called *sola scriptura*.

Scientific journals explain a concept called *gravity*. Throw a rock into the air and it returns to earth. The word *gravity* never appears in the Bible, yet we believe in gravity. The Bible wasn't written to be an encyclopedia containing all truth. The Bible was written for one purpose...reveal Jesus to the world and lead the world to Jesus.

God's word is written in the Bible, but God's word transcends what is written on paper. God is alive, and his word is alive. To say all truth resides in the Bible is to put one's entire faith in a book and not in God. Otherwise, how can mankind know the truth concerning whether or not Artificial Intelligence and cloning are evil or good. God must continue to reveal truth as the world evolves.

The phrase "inspired and useful for teaching" doesn't imply exclusivity of the Bible in determining truth. Those who claim all truth must be written in the Bible can produce no verse in the Bible which instructs us to use only the written word of God as truth.

As a matter of fact, oral tradition is both justified and required according to the Bible. "Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Those who claim the Bible to be truth should acknowledge the Bible's instruction to follow oral tradition. But in order to deny oral tradition without denying the Bible, they apply a false context to the word *tradition* and claim self-interpretation by the Holy Spirit. Then, they can reject any concept they don't want to believe, like Purgatory, by saying "It's not in the Bible."

No...the Bible does not say it is the only source of Christian faith and truth.

Guard against false doctrine

Paul warns against following those who "pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6-9). He also warns against those who "make a pretense of religion" (2 Timothy 3:5). Perverting the gospel of Christ to lead others astray is both effective and rampant today, especially on open forums such as YouTube. There is a common axiom, "Don't believe everything you hear." This is never truer than when it comes to hearing someone quote The Bible.

As we continue to seek the truth, it's critical to follow only teachers who are grounded in both the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church, which has stood the test of time for two thousand years. "Many will come in my name" (Matthew 24:25) is stark warning to be discriminating before following even ministers, pastors, priests, deacons, bishops and theologians. Not all people who have something spiritual to say are led by the Holy Spirit.

Know the credentials of the person behind the teaching. A good yardstick is exactly what Jesus says, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:15-20). Don't follow or heed teachings from anyone whose life shows signs of deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, or sloth. Teachings out of anger and hatred have no place with Christ. Superstitions and religious practices unsupported by the Church must be discarded. Don't heed persuasive words. Test everything, and only hold on to what is truth. Truth will always align to the entire the Bible.



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We also guard against false doctrine by checking our pride and self-justification at the door. 2 Timothy 4:3 refers to people who reject sound doctrine and seek out teachers who tell them what they want to hear to satisfy their own desires. Don't be one of those people. God's word is a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12), and isn't always easy to follow.

Conclusion

How to interpret the Bible...simply put, don't.

The Bible is our ultimate truth. But not every teaching that quotes the Bible, nor every interpretation, is truth.

Follow the Catholic Church as leader and authority in spiritual interpretations, not teachings that tickle the ears. Jesus promised, "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it [his church]" (Matthew 16:18). His promise means he will guide and protect the church from false doctrine. There have been and will continue to be weak individuals within the church who go astray. But individuals are not the Church, and do not represent the Church. The Church itself will always prevail in truth.

"Watch out that no one deceives you" (Matthew 24:4).