The Use and Abuse of the Bible

by Ronald D. Witherup, S.S.

As I stood in line at the grocery store, the tabloid headline grabbed my attention: “Bible system to win lottery!” The article proposed a way to use the Bible in order to win money—in any lottery.

When I went to the local bookstore, I saw a large advertisement for a new book in which the author suggests that a code has been found in the Hebrew Bible (only in the original Hebrew language, mind you) that demonstrates the foretelling of events that are happening in our day.

In the wake of the terrible torture and killing of a gay college student in Wyoming in October 1998, religious anti-homosexual protesters were seen with signs such as “God hates fags—Rom 9:13.” Ironically, the passage has nothing to do with homosexuality!

Driving in my car on a long trip, as I searched for good radio stations, I happened on several Christian fundamentalist programs. Enthusiastic preachers were spouting what they supposed was God’s Word about how near the end of the world is because of the approaching year 2000. Certain signs were recounted, such as the fall of Russia, that allegedly were predicted in the Bible.

For centuries the Bible has been used in many different circumstances to promote one idea or another, to justify one action or another. It provides a convenient text for such purposes. It is, after all, God’s Word. A higher authority is hard to find. Especially as we approach the millennium, we see an increasing tendency to invoke the Bible for all kinds of issues, especially doomsday predictions. Sadly, in many instances the Bible is not being used properly. In fact, it is being abused. This issue of Scripture from Scratch will explore how Christians can properly use the Bible and how, all too often, they misuse it.

The Bible Speaks, Everyone Listens?

At the heart of many examples of the use and abuse of the Bible is the question, What authority does the Bible have?

All Christians accept that the Bible is God’s inspired Word. That invests it with a reverence accorded to no other literature. The Bible is a sacred canon (from the Greek, kanon, “measuring stick”), a means of determining how we measure up to God’s standards.

But Christians are split on just what this perspective means. Biblical fundamentalists interpret it to mean the Bible is inerrant, containing no errors whatsoever, whether scientific, historical or spiritual. Catholics and many
Protestants, however, acknowledge that the Bible might contain errors in historical or scientific data, but not in matters of faith or spiritual teaching.

The former position promotes a literal interpretation of biblical passages. The latter recognizes that the literal sense does not always apply in every age in some one-to-one correspondence. For example, during the 1970s, some suggested that the Watergate affair during the Nixon presidency was predicted in the Bible on the basis of the mention of the “water gate” (see Nehemiah 3:26; 8:1). Such a reading is not only inaccurate, it trivializes the Bible into some sort of ouija board or crystal ball. The Bible—s authority stems from the Church—s belief that while we do not know how biblical inspiration works, the Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can guide our lives in areas of faith and morals.

**Context, Context, Context**

The real estate maxim is, “Location, location, location.” Where your property is situated is its most valuable asset. In biblical interpretation, the biggest danger is ignoring the context of a passage.

Context means three different things. I will use an example from the tradition of St. Paul. Some Christians interpret a passage on marriage in Ephesians (5:21-24) as a divine universal model to justify why men are superior to women in a marriage relationship. It might even be used to justify abuse of women in marriages. How can context put the passage in perspective?

First, most narrowly, context means what goes immediately before and after a passage. Paul writes that “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22). This may seem like a universal principle. But he says in the verse immediately preceding, “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). The same verb is used. One cannot validly make verse 22 into a universal principle without searching out how it relates to the entire passage. How does the same verb apply in both circumstances?

A second level of context is the larger context of the individual book of the Bible. The passage is part of a larger presentation. The entire chapter five of Ephesians is directed by a principle that goes from more general to more specific notions. The general principle is found in the first verse: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us...” (5:1). The most important challenge for all, women and men alike, is to imitate God in the way we live and love. As the chapter proceeds, what is meant by this narrows to more specific examples. It leads to Paul—s use of marriage as an important image of how Christ loves the Church. Not only is this the chapter—s context, but the entire Letter to the Ephesians is largely about how Christ relates to the Church. This larger context, then, helps direct our understanding of the more specific issue, how marriage reflects this relationship.

The third level of context is the context of the Bible itself. Ephesians is not the only place in the Bible to use the image of marriage. How its particular use of the image connects with other biblical texts is important. Overall, we learn that marriage in the Bible is structured largely according to cultural norms that existed in different time periods. For example, in Genesis, the patriarchs had multiple wives and sometimes strange customs associated with marriage (e.g., Gen 12:10-12; 16:3; 25:1). The Song of Songs provides a very different Old Testament picture. It exalts the love of man and woman as modeling God—s love of Israel. This is similar to Paul—s use of marriage as a model of Christ—s love of the Church. In this case, two different images from two different time periods seem compatible. Only holding in tension the larger context of the entire Bible, or the entire canon of sacred Scripture, helps us see this truth. The Church ultimately makes decisions about the relative relationship of one passage to another, but paying attention to this larger context helps us avoid misreading the Bible.

The most damaging way to interpret a biblical passage is to rip it from its context. Taking a passage literally and cutting it out of its natural “home” almost always leads to abusing the Scriptures. The late Father Raymond E. Brown, S.S., one of the greatest Catholic biblical scholars of the 20th century, used to say, “A biblical passage is only biblical when it is in the Bible.” You can—t go wrong looking carefully at the context.

**Time, Culture and the Bible**

Granting the Bible spiritual authority does not mean rejecting or ignoring the impact of time and culture on its formation. The Bible came into existence over thousands of years through oral, written, edited and collected traditions.
Passages from the prophetic literature may be most vulnerable to abuse. Many Christians think of prophets as fortunetellers. They saw into the future, predicted what would happen, and it came to pass. Often fundamentalist preachers speak as if the prophets were only talking about the late 20th century. This is a sinister corruption of the authority of the Bible. What does such a position imply about preceding generations of Christians (and Jews!) who used God’s Word for spiritual enrichment?

Passages in the Bible that concern the endtime developed for historical reasons. In the period prior to Jesus’ birth, a type of literature arose that is called apocalyptic (from Greek apokalypsis, meaning “unveiling” or “revelation”). It focused on the endtime because the present tyranny, oppression, violence and persecution were so difficult to endure. Apocalyptic literature, found in both the Old and New Testaments, reflects God’s response that gave hope for a distant future when all wrongs would be made right and all hurts would be undone. Inevitably, this situation led to speculation about the details of such end times (see Zephaniah 1:15-16; Daniel 7:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Jesus himself was influenced by these teachings (see Mark 13:5-8). Yet even he admits that no one knows when God’s ultimate justice will occur: “But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:32; cf. Acts 1:7). If Jesus does not know, but only God his Father, how can some claim today that they know?

Even a passage with apparent details about the endtime, such as Paul’s apocalyptic vision (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), needs to be understood with care. The details come from typical Old Testament passages about God’s final judgment of the world (Zephaniah 1:14-16; Zechariah 9:14). Paul expected the end of the world in his own lifetime, but he also warned that no one knew the timetable for these events (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2). He is not providing a road map but a vision of hopefulness that God’s victory will arrive one day.

Some may wish to flee into a mysterious apocalyptic world in order to escape from their daily troubles, but using the Bible to justify arcane theories about exactly how, when and where God will choose to act to bring the kingdom to its fullness is a waste of time and an abuse of the sacred word.

Interpreting the Bible Faithfully

How then can you read the Bible for your own personal enrichment? You can read the Bible faithfully and be nourished by its teaching, but I also caution that interpreting the Bible is not a mere one-to-one correspondence between the sacred text and our day. Modern interpretation still requires that we honor the nature of the text we seek to understand. Let me give a few general principles.

1) The Bible is God’s word in human words. Calling the Bible God’s inspired text does not alter the human dimension of that word. Remember that culture, historical setting and means of expression all influenced how the Bible came to be and needs to be read.

2) Not every passage is equally applicable in every age. The Bible contains apparent contradictions (compare, for example, Isaiah 2:4 and Joel 3:10 which give opposite advice). God’s word in a given circumstance may not apply in exactly the same way at another time in history.

3) The literal meaning is not the only meaning. The meaning of any given biblical passage is multilayered. The literal meaning cannot legitimately be ignored or contradicted, but to get to the deeper spiritual meaning of some passages requires a more thorough understanding of the historical and cultural background.

4) There is no one foolproof method of biblical interpretation. Each passage must be handled on its own in its various contexts.

5) Your personal interpretation is not the interpretation. This is why Bible study is so important and why it is necessary to consult respected commentaries for guidance.

6) The Bible does not contain every detail for living an ethical life. Strict fundamentalists would disagree with this statement. But from a Catholic perspective, the Bible alone does not give us every detail of God’s revelation. Many modern ethical dilemmas (nuclear arms, genetic engineering, cloning, etc.) are not specifically addressed in
the Bible, even if it contains basic principles from which we can deduce proper ethical directions. The Church, through its magisterial teaching, provides an authentic guide to discerning God’s will through the Bible.

7) *The Bible concerns as much what happens in this life as what takes place in the next.* Despite the popular urge to speculate about heaven and hell, angels and devils, end-of-the-world timetables and catastrophic events, these issues are treated in only a small percentage of the Bible.

8) *Some biblical passages reflect an earlier moral perspective no longer acceptable.* The acceptance of slavery or the total annihilation of an enemy, essentially genocide, is not part of our moral fabric today even if the Bible assumes or condones such practices in some passages. As the faith has grown, so has our moral perspective.

9) *Nothing in the Bible justifies hatred of others.* Even passages that speak of God’s destruction of Israel’s enemies (Joshua 8:24-29) or of condemnation for sinners (Jude 7) do not permit humans to act violently against one another. Nor can the Bible be used to justify the superiority of one race over another, such as some hate groups have asserted. Controversial passages, such as those on homosexuality (like Romans 1:27), also do not justify intolerance and persecution. Jesus’ command to judge not, lest we be judged (Matthew 7:1; cf. Romans 2:1-2), takes precedence over any such warped interpretation. In instances of true sinfulness, we are still called to hate the sin but love the sinner (Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32).

10) *Some parts of the Bible remain a mystery.* Even for scholars, the wording of some passages is so ambiguous, or the background so obscure, that no one can be said to have the final word on interpretation. If a passage does not make sense to you, move on to an easier passage. We need to apply the sacred text faithfully to our own lives, but we must do so with careful attention to context, history and literary form. To use the Bible is admirable, to abuse it is to wield a weapon to achieve our own warped ends. There is a fine line between these two poles. With the Holy Spirit’s guidance and a willingness to expand our knowledge, we need not worry about which pole will be our guide.