

Absolute truth exists. Postmodernism is wrong to deny objective truth and moral absolutes. Still, postmodernism is right about at least one thing: people often have their own agenda in making truth claims. Christian apologists must face squarely the many ways that biblical truths have been distorted and misused. This article grapples with such problems.

Hijacking the Truth

By David Feddes

This is the story of the drunkard and the rosebush.

Once upon a time there was a man who woke up with a hangover after a night of heavy drinking. When the alarm clock went off, his brain almost exploded. He buried his face deeper into his pillow and groaned something that sounded like “crawl the octopus.” His wife had heard that sort of mumbling before and knew it meant, “Call the office.” So she called the place where her husband worked and left a message saying he was sick and couldn’t make it. At the breakfast table she repeated the story to her children: Daddy was sick and wouldn’t be eating with them. She then drove the kids to school and headed off to work herself.

About noon the drunkard finally woke up again and dragged himself out of bed. He staggered to the place where he kept his liquor and spent most of the afternoon drinking. Then he decided to go for a walk in the backyard. That’s when he saw the roses.

There was a thriving rosebush out behind the house, and a number of lovely, red roses were blossoming. When he saw the roses, he got an idea. “I’ll show my wife what a good husband I am. I’ll surprise her with a bunch of fresh-cut roses. I may not be a perfect husband,” he told himself, “but she could do worse. She’s gonna love these flowers!”

He hurried back into the house and got a sharp knife out of the kitchen drawer. On his way back out the door, he grabbed a bottle and took a few extra swallows to keep his strength up for the task ahead of him.

When he reached the rosebush, he grabbed one of the stems. Immediately he jerked his hand away. Blood was seeping in several places where thorns had pierced the skin. He hesitated a moment, then grabbed the stem again. The thorns jabbed him again, but he hung on. He hacked away at the stem until finally the stem came free in his hand. He tossed it aside and grabbed another, again drawing blood. Thanks to the alcohol, however, the thorns didn’t hurt much.

He kept at it for several minutes and was just cutting the last stem when he heard a car pull into the driveway. His wife and children were back. Hurriedly he gathered the roses in his arms, scratching and pricking his arms and chest. Then he took one last swallow from the bottle and strutted back into the house to give his wife and children a wonderful surprise.

He thrust the roses at the startled children and said, “Hey, kids, look what I got for your ma!” Then he swept them into his arms, squeezing them along with the roses.

“Ouch!” the children squealed as the sharp thorns poked their skin. “Let go, Dad! You’re hurting us!”

“Whassa matter?” cried the drunk. “Don’tcha love your dear ol’ dad? C’mon! Gimme a hug!” As they tried to squirm loose, he squeezed the children all the harder and drove the thorns deeper.

They screamed some more, until finally he let them go and turned toward his wife. He waved the roses in her face and asked, “Waddaya think, honey? Purty nice, huh?” He stepped

toward her but tripped and fell against her. The thorny stems scratched her face and poked her neck. She gasped in pain and pushed him away.

“Get away from me!” she shouted. “You’ve been drinking again, haven’t you? This is the night we’re supposed to go to a ball game as a family, and here you are, drunk again.”

The drunkard’s sloppy grin turned to a scowl. “I’m not drunk,” he grumped. “I just had a little pick-me-up. I slave away getting flowers for you, and this is the thanks I get! C’mon,” he said, thrusting the thorny bundle into her face once more, “give ‘em a sniff. Nice, huh? You know, ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. ‘A rose is a rose is a rose...’”

“You fool,” his wife shrieked, jerking her face away in pain. “Don’t talk to me about roses. If you want to quote fancy sayings, try this: ‘A drunk is a drunk is a drunk.’ Or how about this: ‘A drunk by any other name would smell as bad.’”

That’s not a very uplifting story, is it? Well, it’s just a story I made up—though similar things do happen. I tell you this story to bring to life a word picture in the Bible.

In Proverbs 26:9 the Bible says, “Like a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.” Can’t you just picture it? A drunk staggers around waving a bunch of thorny branches, thinking he’s great, but hurting himself and those close to him. That, says the Bible, is what it’s like when a fool goes around quoting wise sayings. He does more harm than good.

Dangerous Bible

Sharp insights become dangerous when the wrong person is using them. This is true even of the Bible itself. God’s Book is perfect in every way, but it can still do a lot of damage—not because anything is wrong with the Bible, but because something is wrong with some people who quote the Bible. Just as roses are lovely except when a drunk is waving them around, so the Bible is wonderful except when a fool is waving it around.

Maybe you know what it’s like to be wounded by someone who hurts you and then makes it worse by quoting Bible verses to you. Or maybe you are guilty of this yourself: you misuse the Bible in a way that harms other people and yourself as well. This is more common than we’d like to think. Some drunkards use Bible verses about wine to defend their drinking. Some men hit their wives and then quote Bible verses about submission, or parents abuse their children and quote verses about children honoring parents. Nasty critics cut others down and then quote biblical proverbs about how good and helpful a rebuke can be. Perverted people break every command in the Bible, but the moment anyone challenges their behavior, they quote the words of Jesus, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” The list goes on and on. For almost every statement in the Bible, there’s a fool somewhere who can find a way to misuse and abuse it.

The results are so devastating that we can’t begin to measure the damage. We can’t begin to count all the people who walk away from the church because of parents or church leaders or other hypocrites who quoted the Bible even as they committed horrible sins. We can’t begin to count all the people who not only hurt others but destroy themselves by quoting Scripture and using their Bible knowledge as an excuse for sin. We can’t begin to imagine how it grieves and angers God to see the holy words of his Book misused to cause so much harm and pain.

Sad to say, some folks blame God for the way in which people misuse the Bible. But is God to blame? Would you say that roses are bad just because some drunkard was waving them around and hurting himself and other people? Or that God was bad for creating roses? Of course

not. So we shouldn't blame the Bible, either, for the way foolish people have misused it. Instead, we should ask how we can understand the Bible rightly and use it properly as God intends.

The Bible can be dangerous, but is that because it is full of lies? No, it's because the Bible is full of truth. Lies can be dangerous, but truth can be even more dangerous. The more certain a truth is, and the higher the authority that stands behind it, the more dangerous it becomes when we misuse it. That makes the Bible the most dangerous book there is, because it is backed by the authority of God himself. It speaks with such authority and its truths are so powerful that when we misuse those truths to serve our own preferences and prejudices, we can do horrid things and feel confident that we have the full support of God himself.

I've already said that drunkards and wife beaters and slanderers and perverts can find Bible verses that they twist to suit their own evils. Besides these and many other individual sins, I could add a number of large-scale social sins that have been committed by Bible-quoters. How many people have been butchered in religious wars, or tormented by a slave driver's whip, or endured horrible discrimination and cruelty from groups of people marching under a cross and quoting the Bible?

When you see all the damage that can be done by religious, Bible-quoting people, you may be tempted to reject the Bible. You may be tempted to reject any notion of absolute truth altogether. You figure that it would be better to see everything as just a matter of opinion. If nobody would believe in such a thing as absolute truth, then nobody could use it against others. If there were no binding moral standards, maybe we can all just get along and respect each other. A growing number of people seem to feel that the only solution to misuse of truth is to explode the idea that there is any such thing as absolute truth.

But that's like trying to prevent the hijacking of airplanes by blowing up all airplanes. Sure, it's terrible when someone hijacks an airplane, but don't blame the airplane. Blame the hijacker. Don't destroy all airplanes. Guard against hijacking.

That's what we need to do when we face the fact that truth can be hijacked and used to harm others or hold them hostage. Don't blame the truth; blame the person who is hijacking the truth. Don't deny the truth of the Bible; instead, try to help those who have been injured by misuse of the Bible and then try to guard against misuse of biblical truth in the future.

Besides, you can't destroy the truth even if you want to. Truth is truth no matter what. You can deny it and ignore it, but you can't destroy it. The Word of God stands forever. And so you might as well face the fact that the Bible is true from cover to cover and get on with finding out what it takes to use God's Word rightly instead of wrongly.

Five Principles

What does that involve? Here are five basic principles for using the Bible in a healthy way, and all five are connected.

The first is this: *Get right with God*. When you read the Bible, you won't get its message right unless you are right with the God who authored the Bible. To really grasp the truth, it's not enough to have truth speak to you from the outside. You need truth on the inside. There's a prayer in the Bible that says, "Surely I was sinful at birth... Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:5,6,10).

To get right with God, you need to be changed on the inside. Right after Proverbs 26 talks about the drunkard with the thornbush, it makes a graphic and rather gross statement: "As a

dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly” (v. 11). A dog can’t help acting like a dog, and a sinful fool can’t help acting like a sinful fool. He needs to become a new person. But for that to happen, he first needs to realize how much he needs to change. The very next verse after the one about the dog and his vomit says, “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (v. 12).

Think again of a drunkard waving roses. He thinks he’s wise and oh-so-smooth, but he’s hurting himself and his family. His outer problems result from an inner problem: he’s drunk. And because he’s drunk, he doesn’t really know what he’s doing. He can’t think straight or control himself properly. In order for him to behave properly, he first needs to get sober and realize how foolish he’s been. He needs to change inside.

That’s not just true of drunkards. It’s true of us all. We need to be made right on the inside. We need God’s Holy Spirit to give us a new spirit and heart. We need to get right with God.

The second thing in making right use of biblical truth is, listen to the whole Bible. Don’t just focus on a verse here or there. God’s truth isn’t a collection of isolated sayings. It is a unity. The moment we isolate one part of the Bible’s teaching from the rest, we distort it and misunderstand its true meaning.

For example, the Bible says that children need discipline and punishment—perhaps even physical punishment in some cases. The child abuser focuses on this truth as he beats the daylights out of his children and claims the support of the Bible. But he conveniently ignores the passages which show that discipline must be applied in love and only with great restraint. A verse like Colossians 3:21, “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” goes in one ear and out the other.

Here’s another example of listening to some biblical statements and ignoring others. The Bible says wonderful things about God’s love. But if you take only those statements about love and ignore other parts of the Bible which speak about God’s wrath, you end up with a sentimentalized view of God. You don’t take his warnings of judgment seriously, and you don’t really have a clue why Jesus had to die. Only when you take the statements about God’s love and the statements about his wrath seriously will see you that Jesus died to suffer God’s punishment against your sin, and only then will you repent of your sins and trust in Jesus alone for your salvation.

That brings us to the third and central thing to keep in mind as we read the Bible: *Focus on Jesus*. I’ve just pointed out that we need to see God’s truth as a unity, not as a bunch of isolated fragments. But why is the truth a unity? Because all the truths of the Bible form a personal unity in the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything we learn in the Bible is intended by God to draw us closer to Christ and to make us more like him.

You need to focus on Jesus in order for the Bible’s truth to come into focus. You’ll misread and misuse what the Bible says unless you see it in relationship to Christ. Jesus once told some religious leaders that all their Bible study was useless because they refused to see that the Scriptures were pointing to him. Everything in the Bible is there to fill your heart with faith in Jesus, fill your minds with thoughts of Jesus, and fill your life with the character of Jesus.

In fact, as you read the Bible, hear it as the voice of Jesus, and talk with Jesus while he talks to you. Make your Bible reading a dialogue with Jesus, listening to him and praying to him, seeking to stay in touch with Jesus and in tune with him.

A fourth principle for healthy use of the Bible is this: *Apply it to yourself personally.* Don't use the Bible only as a weapon against other people. Some of the worst misuses of the Bible come when you are so busy applying it to someone else that you miss what it says to you.

Why do some husbands know exactly what the Bible says to their wives about submission, and pay so little attention to what it says to them as husbands about love and self-sacrifice? Why do some sharp-tongued wives give their husbands lectures on what the Bible tells husbands to do but ignore the fact that the Bible also says, "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day" (Proverbs 27:15)?

Why do people with a good job and plenty of money quote Bible passages to the poor about laziness causing poverty and ignore passages which warn the rich against exploiting others and refusing to share with others? Why do some people who are indeed lazy and abuse the welfare system quote Bible verses about helping the poor and ignore statements like, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10)?

Almost all of us act like experts on straightening out the sins of others rather than dealing first with our own sins. But, as Jesus says, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:4-5).

So whenever you read the Bible, don't ask first what it says to someone else. First ask Jesus what he is saying to you in the Scripture. If you're a husband, make sure you're obeying what the Bible says to husbands before you start quoting the Bible to your wife. If you're a wife, listen to God's instructions for wives before you start correcting your husband. If you're rich, make sure you hear the Bible's warnings to rich people, not its warnings to the lazy. If you're poor or in trouble, make sure you haven't brought it on yourself before you start blaming it on the oppression and discrimination of others. Apply the Bible to yourself personally before you apply it to anyone else.

The fifth principle to guide your use of the Bible is this: *Always use Scripture with love.* This takes us right back to the fact that Jesus is the focus of Scripture, and that ultimate truth is not just a thing but a Person. Because truth is personal, and because it is grounded in Jesus—in the God who is love—we need love to hear what God is saying, and we need love to communicate God's truth to others. We need a heart that loves God in order to hear what he tells us without resenting it, and we need a heart that loves others in order to speak God's truth to them in a way that builds them up and doesn't tear them down.

Those are five basic principles for using the Bible properly instead of brandishing it like a drunkard with a thornbush. First, get right with God. Second, listen to the whole Bible as a unity. Third, focus on Jesus. Fourth, apply Scripture to yourself personally, not just to others. And fifth, always use Scripture with love. These aren't five separate things. They go together. To the degree that you use the Bible this way, God is bringing you closer to him and to his truth. You experience blessing in your own life, and you become a blessing to others.

If, however, your heart isn't right with God, if you're picking and choosing Bible verses that suit you, if Christ is not filling your heart and directing your mind, if you're using the Bible verses as a weapon against others instead of letting it rebuke and correct you, if you're not motivated by love for God and others, then you and your Bible become a curse rather than a blessing. The only way to reverse this is to realize what you've been doing and to repent and turn back to God. Stop acting like a drunkard waving roses. Stop your sinning. Stop your excuses.

Stop misusing God's precious truth. Stop defiling his holy name. Ask God to forgive you for Jesus' sake and make you a new person.

Dealing With Wounds

And now a word for those of you who have been wounded by someone else's misuse of the Bible. Maybe they quoted some part of the Bible and twisted its meaning to justify their wrongdoing. Or maybe they simply claimed to be Bible-believing Christians but did rotten things anyway. We can pray that God will change such people—and he does change many—but there will always be some hypocrites around, and even people who are true Christians will sometimes use the Bible wrongly. The question is, How are you going to deal with it if you're the one who's been hurt?

It's terrible when such things happen, but don't double the tragedy by letting someone else's foolishness make a fool of you. Don't let the wounds inflicted by someone else keep you from God's Word in the Bible and in Christ. Remember, God hates the misuse of the Bible even more than you do. Why else would he say, "Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool"? Don't let a fool's misuse of the truth turn you against the truth, or you become a fool yourself.

Instead, believe in God. Believe that even if every man is a liar, God is true, and that even if people misuse God's Word, his Word is true. Believe the Bible. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome his Holy Spirit to live in your heart. Leave behind the memories of hypocrites who abused the Bible, and learn to enjoy the truth that God himself gives you. Leave behind the wounds of anyone who handled biblical truths like a drunkard waving roses, and enjoy the lovely roses that God himself gives you. Accept his precious gift of new life in Jesus. Breathe in the sweet smell of God's goodness. Enjoy the beauty of his love and truth.

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