



CROSS-EXAMINED

Reading
the Bible
in Times
of Division

Gender equality

LGBTQ+ inclusion

Christian Nationalism

Weaponizing the Bible

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Weaponizing the Bible

In 2004, MGM released a film called *Saved!* a satirical comedy focused on evangelical culture. Needless to say, the film was met with mixed reactions, especially among the group being satirized, a group to which I belonged at the time. I was probably in the minority, but I thought the film was good—funny, challenging, even smart. More than that, it rang true to my own experience, which I had begun to question at the time.

In one particular scene, the central characters experience a dramatic conflict that encapsulates so much of the entire film. Let me set it up briefly. The central plot of the movie revolves around Mary, a teenage girl who discovers that she is pregnant, all the while attending an evangelical Christian school. While at

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this point the pregnancy is unknown to anyone else, Hilary Faye, the most popular and (self) righteous student at the school, senses something shifting with Mary. The only solution, Hilary Faye decides, is to stage not an intervention but an exorcism. As you might expect, Mary doesn't want to participate, which leads to the following interaction.

HILARY FAYE: Mary, turn away from Satan.
Jesus, he loves you.

MARY: You don't know the first thing about love.

HILARY FAYE, *throwing a Bible at Mary*: I am filled with Christ's love! You are just jealous of my success in the Lord!

MARY, *holding up the Bible*: This is not a weapon! You idiot!

Yes, the scene is over the top and extreme; that's satire for you. Most Christians don't throw Bibles at other people. However, it also speaks to a real problem that we cannot ignore. The Bible is far too often used as a weapon. While physical copies of Scripture are not being chucked around, the contents of the Bible are used by some to shame, exclude, and harm those who don't fall into whatever version of orthodoxy is being used as a litmus test.

In my role as a pastor, it is almost daily—and that is not an exaggeration—that I talk to someone who has been on the receiving end of the Bible's weaponization. Generally, these dear humans who fashion a weapon from the text are not people who hate the Bible. In fact, often they are folks who grew up with the Bible and have loved the Bible so much they studied it intently, even memorizing large chunks of it. When I talk to them, the grief and pain they have experienced are palpable. There's a feeling of betrayal, for sure, but what always stands out to me is the grief and sense of loss. They feel the Bible has been taken from them only to be turned around and used against them. Perhaps the most unbearable fact of all is that most of the people I talk to, even after being victimized by the quoting of Scripture, still grieve the loss of the Bible. They do not hate Scripture even now; as exiled and estranged as they might feel, they still miss the Bible.

All that leads me to ask a series of important questions: How can words of life, hope, and healing be used to inflict such pain, despair, and wounding? What causes people who would ordinarily be kind and compassionate to flip a switch and start doing the verbal and emotional equivalent of throwing a Bible at others? In short, how did we get here, and is there anything we can do about it?

You might ask what weaponizing the Bible looks like practically if it's usually not an actual Bible being thrown at someone. The Bible is weaponized anytime it is quoted and

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used to limit, exclude, and malign the flourishing of any God's children. Some followers of Jesus are drawn to the idea of seeing Scripture as a sword (Ephesians 6:17) to use on others, instead of a scalpel intended to perform needed surgery on our own hearts (Hebrews 4:12). Both images are in Scripture, and we must decide which leads to a more Christlike approach to the Bible.

I'll introduce a few examples that we will explore in more depth in the rest of this book. To begin with, people weaponize the Bible against women by ignoring texts that affirm the leadership capabilities and equality of women, opting for texts that seek to diminish and silence their voices and contributions.

I vividly remember hearing a woman in one church being told that she was not allowed to share her perspective on a particular issue because of 1 Timothy 2:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

(1 Timothy 2:11-14)

Just think about how much the Christian tradition has lost and missed by not listening to the voices of women, who bear God's image just as fully as men.

We can also see the same pattern in how many Christians view the LGBTQ+ community. Some quote texts that seem to

call homosexuality sinful (“seem” being the key word here) while ignoring other texts that refute their interpretations. These segments of the Bible, often called “clobber passages,” are quoted in order to condemn and deny belonging to others. Texts like Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 1:26-27 are often referenced to prove that LGBTQ+ people are “sinful” and “unnatural.”

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

(Leviticus 18:22)

For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

(Romans 1:26-27)

Sadly, the church has brought so much harm to our LGBTQ+ siblings, who long to participate fully in the life and ministry of the church but have been largely denied by the vast majority of churches and denominations. They have also experienced hate, bigotry, and vitriol from pastors in pulpits and congregants in pews. The weaponization against this community has garnered a literal body count and is not grounded in divine will but human bias.

Further, people have cited Scripture as a source of legitimization for racism, xenophobia, and nationalism. The Bible

has been cited and quoted to excuse slavery, segregation, and injustice against non-white people, ranging from the treatment of the Native peoples of North America to the Atlantic slave trade to the vilification and mistreatment of immigrants and more, people have found a chapter and verse to support all kinds of heinous behavior toward those they deem outsiders. Texts like Genesis 4:15 and 9:25, respectively focused on the “mark of Cain” and the “curse of Ham,” have been distorted and twisted to excuse the mistreatment and justify the inequality of non-white people. Sometimes, this practice is referred to as *prooftexting*, which means using specific Bible passages to support a position, often without regard for the fuller historical and literary context of the biblical book being invoked.

These texts and others are combined and then come to expression in the kind of Christian nationalism that is sweeping the United States as I write these words. Some readers of the Bible conclude that texts like Matthew 28, known as the Great Commission, give them cover to spew misinformation and hate, force others to accept their specific understanding of Christianity, all while they seek to turn their misinterpretations into law.

A brief disclaimer is in order before we continue. I have been on both sides of this conversation. Thirty years ago, I was a high school student who read the Bible compulsively and took the random verses I found that seemed applicable as calling out the “sin” of a friend or classmate. Today, I am a pastor providing care to those who are recipients of the same kind of

irresponsible approach to the Bible. From this experience, as both a weaponizer of Scripture and now as someone who seeks to deweaponize it, I have learned that this conversation comes down to our understanding of the Bible—both where it comes from and what it actually is.

Growing up, I had no frame of reference for these questions. From where or from whom did the Bible originate? As a kid I just assumed that the Bible was somehow dropped from the sky, leather-bound and with gilded edges, my name embossed on the cover, and in the King James Version, of course. Our position was that if the KJV was good enough for Jesus and Paul, then it was good enough for us. I had no idea, no frame of reference for the fact that the world and people that produced the Bible were not my own, or that the Bible was a process, not a product of one particular time, place, or author. In this instance, fact is far more interesting than fiction. To put it succinctly, the Bible did not parachute down from the heavens. It is the product of real people living in real contexts, and what they wrote was significantly shaped by when and where they lived.

To begin with, the Bible is not a book; it is a library. The very meaning of the Greek word *biblia*, from which we get the English word *Bible*, means “books.” That’s plural. Not one book, but books. Like me, you might be surprised to learn that there is more than one version of this library. Many of us are familiar with the Protestant canon that includes sixty-six books—thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New. *Canon* here comes from the Greek meaning “rule” or “measuring

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stick” and is used to refer to texts that have been understood to have authority.

What might not be as familiar is the fact that not every Christian group or tradition has the same collection of sacred texts. For example, if we were to peruse a Catholic version of the Bible, we would find those same sixty-six books, with an additional seven books known as the *deuterocanonical texts* (which means “second canon”). These are books that were part of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, called the *Septuagint*, but are not part of the Hebrew Bible or the Protestant canon. When Catholics talk about the Bible, they are referencing this canon, which contains seventy-three books, not only the sixty-six known to Protestants. But it doesn’t end there. The Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches have more than eighty books in their canon. This means that when someone says “the Bible,” it means different things to different groups of people.

Further, the Bible was written over a period of around one thousand years. Think about how much has changed in America in our less than 250 years as a country. We could even limit that conversation to the last decade, and we’d still have a lot to talk about! Now imagine the process of the Bible, written over a thousand-year period (roughly from 1000 BCE to 125 CE) and referring to events that are even further in the past. This means the Bible doesn’t have *a* context (singular) but contexts (plural). It was written under the rule of multiple, successive empires that each had their own unique impact on Israel, Judah,

and the early Christian community, respectively—Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome all played a major role in the development of these texts.

Additionally, if the Bible is a library, and I believe it is, then that must play a role in how we understand what it is and how it should be engaged. While not as popular as they were in the past, how many of us have ever benefited from the use of a public library? Probably most of us, right? Have you ever walked into a public library expecting uniformity, that all the books in that library would be from the same author, time period, genre, or perspective? Of course not. Libraries are diverse, and the Bible as a library is too. The collection of texts in a library reflects the growth and change of our understanding over time, and so does the Bible.

A couple of examples of this might be helpful here. First, notice this passage from Deuteronomy, which focuses on generational sin:

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.
(Deuteronomy 5:9-10)

The meaning here is plain. In the understanding of this author, God will punish children for the sins of their parents for as many as three or four generations. This reflects the idea of generational curses, that children and grandchildren

Does the Bible really say that women shouldn't lead in the church or that the LGBTQ+ community can't be included in the church? Does the Bible support racism, white supremacy, and Christian nationalism? Do we have to choose between an understanding of the Bible that has been weaponized for harm and exclusion or not engaging the Bible at all? This book explores what the Bible is and what it does (and, maybe more importantly, doesn't) say about these important questions. The answers might surprise you.

Through thoughtful analysis and personal transformation, Josh Scott invites you to rethink dominant interpretations and uncover new possibilities for justice, inclusivity, and generosity in faith. Perfect for those seeking a deeper connection with their beliefs or grappling with these pressing issues, *Cross-Examined* serves as both a guide and a conversation starter. Open your heart and mind to an alternative understanding of faith, and join the movement toward a future of hope, justice, and unity.

Scott evokes the image of a lawyer in a courtroom in his new book *Cross-Examined*. While he clearly makes the case for a more compassionate, inclusive vision of Christianity, it at times feels more that he is acting as a surgeon, delicately trying to remove the cancerous cells of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and nationalism from the ailing body of Christ. Still, there are other times where the book feels like watching a steady-handed explosives expert defusing the land mines littered along the landscape of American Christianity. Whichever metaphor you choose, what Scott offers is a call for a courageous faith that stands against those voices that would distort the life-giving message of Christ.

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