

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

It seems to me that you can prove absolutely anything from the Bible, so someone quoting the Bible in support of their position (whatever it might be) does not persuade me in the least. What do you have to say about that?

I agree that the Bible has been interpreted in many ways over the centuries. Everybody believes the Bible supports their group's positions and quotes the Bible in theological disputations. But does that mean that every use of the Bible is as valid as every other, that biblical interpretation is an entirely subjective affair and that "you can prove absolutely anything from the Bible?" I don't think so.

You can make the Bible say whatever you want, but only if you take verses entirely out of context and ignore everything in the Bible that doesn't support your views. The classic example is Psalm 14:1 — "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" If you ignore the first half of the sentence and just quote the words, "There is no God," you can say the Bible teaches atheism. But if you look at the whole verse

and the whole Bible, you cannot conclude that.

In fact, I contend that there are some basic, unambiguous convictions shared by the biblical writers:

- That God exists and made the entire universe;

- That God revealed Himself to Abraham and promised Palestine to his descendants;

- That under the leadership of Moses, God brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt;

- That at Mt. Sinai, they entered into a covenant with God;

- That God chose Jesus to be the agent of salvation for humanity;

- That, righteous though he was, Jesus was arrested and executed "a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world;"

- That God raised Jesus from the dead to a new glorified existence, and;

- That Jesus will return at the end of time, when all wrongs will be righted and all good deeds rewarded.

Of course, there are hundreds or even thousands of lesser matters over which Christians disagree, even if they agree with the above statements. Each group quotes the Bible in support of their beliefs. Are all those appeals to Scripture equally valid? Or can we distinguish between more and less valid interpretations of the Bible?

There are ways of evaluating theological positions and how Scripture is used to support them, though it is not easy or simple. There isn't space today to begin that subject other than to suggest that one issue in bibli-

cal interpretation is relevance or applicability. After all, in the legal arena, not every appeal to a legal precedent is accepted by a judge. If the judge thinks the present case and the supposed precedent are not analogous, then the judge will reject the lawyer's argument. Relevancy is likewise an important issue, though by no means the only one, in biblical interpretation.

For now, we will have to be content with having established that biblical interpretation is not entirely subjective, that there are some matters about which the biblical tradition is unambiguous, and that the Bible cannot be made to teach absolutely anything.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH