

How the Misuse and Abuse of Scripture is Replacing its Proper Use in our Time

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We have before us an old, old problem with some brand new twists. “Twists,” in fact is the keyword in the title of a brand new book on the enduring problem. Those of you on the mailing list of *Book Newsletter*, the house organ of Augsburg Publishing House will have noted some weeks ago the blurb on this book.¹ It is James Sire’s *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible*.²

The reference to the blurb prompts several comments. For one thing, Augsburg assumes its main constituency, the clergy of the American Lutheran Church, will be responsive to its advertising of the book it reviews. A resort to the well-used argument “from the lesser to the greater” could be attempted at this point. The ALC, despite its strong 1960 constitutional affirmation of scriptural inerrancy, merits no kudos for any actual strong stand on the subject. In 1966 President Schioltz ordered a transfer of the inerrancy attribute from the text to the truth.³ His once-removed successor is even less bashful in his disavowals of inerrancy as he shepherds a clergy far removed from the old positions of parent church bodies.⁴

If the ALC clergy can be assumed to be interested in the theme of “Scripture Twisting” with twenty variations, then the same theme ought to be that much more relevant and important in this gathering. It is that, even if there will necessarily have to be a diminution in the number of the “twists” and in the words allotted to those left after the cut.

Sire spells out the 20 twistings in a book of 177 pages. Time limitations being what they are you are only to have presented to you 6 such twists. The shrinkage in pages is even greater.

Are you getting short-changed? Monetarily speaking, no! Sire’s “Scripture Twistings” costs \$4.95. This essay is, as far as your pocketbooks are concerned, a freebie. Enjoy it, freebies aren’t available every day. Some of you may even be inclined at this point to think, “What I’m getting isn’t costing me one red cent—and it’s probably worth just what it’s costing.”

To rise above mundane money considerations, are you getting short-changed in content? The Sire book on the same subject, but limited to cults, runs on for 177 pages. This essay on a broader theme is much shorter. Not having had the chance to read Sire’s book, the essayist cannot fairly downgrade it. He will simply have to resort to the old ploy of pointing to the advantages accruing to the hearers when the subject cannot or is not completely covered by what they hear. In such instances the opportunities for a lively and productive discussion period are enhanced so much that group discussion yields greater dividends than what was originally presented for discussion. This, one can be sure, will be the case at this gathering.

An additional preliminary point should be made. Instructions to the essayist from the District powers that be suggested two emphases: the negative rather than the positive and the contemporary rather than the historical.⁵ We are urged to “be subject unto the higher powers.” So be it.

The negative will be accentuated and the positive, the proper use of Scripture will more or less be assumed to be understood and practiced and will receive its due mostly by way of contrast to the abuse and misuse under discussion. Also, the abusers and misusers referred to will be of the present century, in the main, and current, whenever possible.

The emphasis on the current and contemporary suggests the style of the essay outline

inserted here in brief form to aid listening and to channel discussion.

- Introduction: A. An Enduring Problem with New Twists
B. A Broad Topic with a Selective Approach

How the Misuse and Abuse of Scripture is Replacing its Proper Use in Our Time

- I. The Scam
A. Claimed Devotion to Scripture
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- Conclusion: A. Spurn the Suggestions of Foes Around Us.
B. Stem the Surfacing of Weaknesses Within Us

Part One: The Scam

Behind the assignment of this topic and behind this fulfillment of the assignment rests the assumption that the outspoken scoffer is for the believers a lesser danger than the errorist who claims to lie a Bible believer but in the process of his theology becomes an abuser and misuser of Scripture. The historical record substantiates this assumption.

The earlier church was able to cope with the blatant errors of Pelagius and opt for Augustine.

It was not able to stem the tide of a watered-down version of the original error. Closer to our own time, the conventional liberal theology was fairly easily recognized and rejected by Bible believers. Coping with the claimed cure of neo-orthodoxy has been less easy. Coping with the more major Biblical surgery of a so-called "fundamentalism" may prove even more difficult in the long run.

The problem is the disguise, the scam, intentional or unintentional. Just as an "Abscam" served to mislead and entrap and incriminate, so a scam by those claiming to be loyal to the Scriptures, but failing to be that in actual fact, could deceive and damage and even destroy those who have the best of intentions in the matter of upholding the Word of God.

In this essay we pass by the professed gainsayer, the blatant blasphemer who urges: "It's high time for a come-of-age world to move beyond a simple trust in an old, old book that has

long ago worn out any usefulness it may or may not have once had. It isn't as though there aren't such types around any more. There are more of them around in 1981 than ever before. It isn't as though their approach to our Bible is anything less than damnable. We pass them by because they readily identify themselves for what they are, Bible foes. We pass them by in our concern about a more subtle and sinister danger.

Instead of presenting us with an outright and obvious attack on the Scriptures, the scammers will assure us of their love for and loyalty to the Scriptures at the outset. Then, however, they busy themselves in an "abuse and misuse of Scripture" that negates the alleged love and loyalty.

Their pitch falls into a familiar word pattern. The pitch and pattern can be reproduced in this form: "You and we are both concerned about the Bible. In these clays of wholesale unbelief and apostasy the Bible needs friends who will join their effort in the common cause and who will aid one another. Let us help you become better battlers for the Bible. Let us give you our insights in interpretation. Try them! You'll like them."

The scam succeeds more often than one might expect it to. It does in the world of the crooks and con men in the realm of the double and triple crosser operating in the employ of government agencies. It does that also in the religious realm.

The term *scam* suggests duplicity and even hypocrisy. Its use in this essay does not necessarily imply that connotation. Many misusers and abusers of Scripture are honest and sincere. At least, one will in charity make that assumption. Ultimately, sincerity and hypocrisy are heart issues, best left to the one and only infallible reader of hearts.

Intent, however, is not the issue. We are concerned about the "proper use of Scripture" and about the deviations and deviants. We are concerned about the objective body of truth in Scripture graciously presented to us by God. We are concerned about the *fides quae*, not in the first instance the *fides qua*.

An educated guess might risk the assumption that most of the present "misuse and abuse of Scripture" stems from a sincere desire to advance the cause of the Bible in our bad days. Be that as it may, the fact to be faced here is that sincerity in religion is no guarantee of verity. Sincerity is a heart quality, praiseworthy and even indispensable as an attribute of the belief and confession of the Bible believer. What is believed and confessed, however, must pass the objective muster of the Bible's standards.

Running the risk of repetition, the point should be underscored—our considerations question no person's sincerity or intention and can only serve to deal with the outcomes of those impulses that can be measured and evaluated. This too is to be emphasized the yardstick is the Word itself. The Word will be its own witness and accuser and judge of all scammers and of all other misusers and abusers.

Part Two: The Squelch

In the first rank of these misusers and abusers are the historical-critical Bible interpreters. Their recent infiltration of the remnants of the former Synodical Conference makes them a suitable section of this essay. Actually the historical-critical interpreters are as old as Johann Semler. That puts us two centuries back in time. The Semler influence, however, lingers and enlarges.

Gerhard Maier in his sturdy book, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, reminds us of Semler's old, old dictum: "The root of the evil (i.e. in theology) is the interchangeable use of the terms "Scripture" and "Word of God."⁶ The quotation may be two hundred years old but it is

an in-tune harbinger of the monotonous motif of a current spiritual descendant, Paul Bretscher with his essay that disturbs the Lutheran Church today.

For that matter, it is just this historical-critical separation of Scripture and Word of God that has for a last half century set off ULCA-LCA Lutherans from others in the American branch of the denomination. Back in 1938 the ULCA's Baltimore Declaration made a similar distinction between Word and Word.⁷ The position is winning more and more favor as time goes on. It should be noted, however, that Bretscher can be accounted a pioneer only in respect to his strange relationship to today's Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Long before him, a parent body of the LCA was firmly and flatly affirming a similar positive position. If any human is to be called its pioneer let it be Semler. Of him Maier affirms that he:

is usually designated as father of the technique which not only handled the Bible as an object for historical scrutiny and criticism, but also as a book little different from one no more holy than any other, and surely not to be equated with the Word of God. Very plainly he was saying that he rejected the divine inspiration of the text.⁸ This was but a symptom of his total theological stance, a tip of the iceberg so to speak. His was really a revolt against miracles and the supernatural in general, and against Heaven in particular. God's supernatural activity in history simply was not in Semler's "book." Not unexpectedly, under his and others' hand, the Bible text and content suffered deliberate vivisection. The surgery was quite often radical and overt, without benefit of anesthesia for those directly affected by it in the churches.⁹

Let it be noted that Semler and all his breed of descendants always appeared before the believers with the plea: "We are for you, not against you. Just let us help you in our common endeavor of understanding and appreciating and applying the Word better than before."

In this year of our Lord the plea is still resounding and gaining acceptance in the least likely of places. We are urged in the interest of biblical commitment to make advantageous use of the good products of a hermeneutical method even though we reject its basic assumptions. Our reply could begin by quoting Laocoon: *Timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes*.¹⁰ Before it ends it should also quote Matt. 7, 17 and its statement on the corrupt tree's fruit.

Within the framework of this larger historical-critical method lies a special New Testament and Gospels squelch of the Scriptures, that of the disavowal of the historical Jesus presented in the Gospels. Again, this is not new. It dates back in this century to Schweitzer's 1906 book. The title of the original writing was *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*. This implies that *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and consequently the separation of that Jesus from the Christ of the Scripture and the creeds, dates back 250 years. The birth and death dates of Reimarus are 1694 and 1768.

The old is still new. Books on the "new quest" and "continuing quest" of the historical Jesus abound. One case in point of many such is a 1965 publication under the title, *Continuing Quest for the Historical Jesus*.¹¹ We may have new questors and new quests that allow New Testament Gospel evidence a bit more standing than Schweitzer did, but the end-result is too much more of the same old and tired abuse and misuse of Scripture.

Permit this essayist to quote himself. Some years ago he wrote words that are applicable to the point under discussion. The quotation warns that those:

discounting a historical Jesus and espousing a Christ of faith are in danger of losing their Savior, their brother, and winding up with the dim figure of a distant cousin about four times removed. It is true that the biography and history of Jesus without faith will save no one. But that does not explain how there can be saving faith when there is no recognition of that biography and history. The Christ-of-faith approach gives us, at best, a Savior created in our image on the basis of an image created in those whose testimony we have and who may or may not have seen or heard something of Jesus.¹²

The historical-critical approach and the quest of the historical Jesus have been with us a long time. Neither the one nor the other has brought us any nearer those pot-of-gold biblical interpretations they claim lie there at their rainbow's end. What they think of as rainbow is an illusion, a mirage that lures to destruction in the desert of disbelief.

Historical-critical interpreters and questers of the historical Jesus are scammers too, the worst of the scammers. Claiming a goal of better understanding of the Bible and of closer acquaintance with Jesus, they actually lead their fans and followers farther and farther from the Word of salvation and the Savior.

There is no room for any compromise here, any hope of salvaging good from a so-called "neutral" method or from some lucky by-product of a bad method. Others may say and do what they will, Lutherans will reject historical criticism and a Jesus of history that fails to resemble the Christ of a Bible-based faith. Lutherans have long ago taken their stance on a *sola scriptura* platform. Lutherans know that anything that moves them off that platform spells disaster.

Over against the squelch of the historical interpreters Lutherans simply say, and keep on saying, *scripsit*. They are not uninterested in Bible study and better interpretation. They are, however, committed, to a historical-grammatical hermeneutical approach that lets the Word have its own say, instead of submitting the Word to the squelch that at the outset rejects its inspiration and inerrancy, its authority and clarity.

Part Three—The Splice

Squelchers are actually saying, "We are for the Bible but..." Splicers vary the theme, but only slightly. They claim, "We are for the Bible and..." Our consideration moves to those who in our day abuse and misuse Scripture by adding to it extraneous items while affirming a loyalty to the original matter. The subject at this point is not the *sola scriptura* subdivision of "all of Scripture" but the counterpart, "nothing but Scripture."

Actually and again, this business of splicing has been going on for a long, long time. After flirting with the splice for centuries and frequently compromising itself in the process at matter much more overtly, Rome wedded itself firmly to the process at Trent.¹³ The Reformed, likewise, have long since committed themselves to a splice of the reasonable to what Scripture plainly says. This splicing in the doctrine of the second sacrament and the union of natures is as well known as Rome's tradition aberrations. Neither needs elaboration.

Instead of such glaring and entrenched abuses and misuses of Scripture more recent instances of splicing will receive attention. Two examples immediately suggest themselves, Mormons and Adventists. Both may antedate the present century but both, at the same time, are currently debated within the circles of the adherents. They merit brief consideration.

In the case of the Mormons it is plainly a matter of splicing a rope and a thread with expected results. One would have to be a Mormon himself to swallow the cult's claims of friendliness to the Bible. The use of the term cult says it all. Mormonism is a cult just because it

has spliced so fully and so freely on a scriptural thread. The thread has been lost in the weaving process. It is unseen and unnoted.

With Seventh-day Adventism one cannot be quite so abrupt and conclusive. The big splice in this case has been the writings of Ellen Harmon White, a prolific writer if there ever was one.

Way back when William Miller's second dating of the millennium fizzled, it was followers like Ellen and her husband who revitalized the moribund movement. The cost was first misuse of and then abuse of Scripture, not that Miller himself had not been guilty of both.

Soon an "investigative judgement" by him we hold an intercessory High Priest was being splice upon the Daniel 8 sanctuary cleansing.¹⁴ Much worse, the spurious splicing had to be upheld by much more of the same. An Ellen White canon developed with its many publications.

Today there is some hope that the whole unwholesome splicing is unraveling, perhaps only fraying. A *Shaking of Adventism*, Paxton says, is occurring and repudiation of the equating of White writings with Scripture is one of the basic issues.¹⁵ What the eventual outcome will be, remains to be seen.

The effects of these splicing endure into our time. They are not the only current instances. of that abuse and misuse of Scripture. In our own time we have had to suffer an up-to-date version of the canonization of cult leaders that reiterates what was done .in the case of Ellen White and Joseph Smith and many others in their time.

Curious cults abounded on the American religious scene back in the middle of the previous century. None have made it as big or lasted as long as the spiritual descendants of Smith and White. But even the scanty and short-lived cults were experts in the art of the splice. They blindly followed their blind leaders who claimed equality for their words with the Word and who were granted the claim by their inspirationalist disciples.

Mother Lee supplied the Shakers with the queer tenets that guided their communal settlements. Father Rapp's visions directed the wanderings of his followers to places with such names as Harmony, New Harmony, Economy. Barbara Heinemann led the Community of True Inspiration based at Amana, Iowa.

These few instances of many others from the past are mentioned in a paper dealing with Scripture misuse and abuse "in our day" only to provide background for a mention of their counterparts on the present religious scene. As then, so today many curious cults abound.

Among their common characteristics is the willingness to place implicit trust in a leader claiming and deemed to have the gift of inspiration.

In an essay, "The Appeal of the Cults," a sketch of seven modern cult leaders, such as the Children of God's David Berg and Love Family's Paul Erdman, is introduced by the description, "Each of these 'leaders' is some kind of self-styled Messiah or Elijah who has been sent by God with new revelations for modern man. His message is always more relevant than any 'old-time' religion."¹⁶

In the summary of the sketch of the cult leaders that follows is found this revealing statement,

They are characterized by the strong claims they make about themselves. In every case they have assumed a position of direct relationship with God that dare not be questioned by their followers. They are God's authority on earth. There is no salvation for anyone outside of their own cult or in any other way through the programs and principles which they outline for their followers.¹⁷

Members of our congregation lured by such cults—they are often in the younger years devoted to religious experimentation but devoid of maturing experience—must be made to realize that flirtation with such cults inevitably involves a splice of the words of men on the Word of God and destroys the very foundation of faith. How many specific doctrines are upheld or denied by the cult in question does not effect this basic issue of the splice. Where that exists nothing is safe.

Part Four: The Slice

Is there any more difference between the splicer on and the slicer from Scripture than between Tweedledum and Tweedledee? Perhaps not in the matter of the extent of the error and the danger involved. Any tampering with Scripture is error and endangers spiritual well-being.

The difference, however, is more than a variation in the first and last two letters of the terms. A whole new method of misuse and abuse of Scripture is involved. Splicers add to Scripture and thereby weaken the cable of faith attached to the anchor of hope by interweaving weak and foreign elements. Slicers cut into and detach more or less of that cable and end up with a slimmer and thinner attachment to the sure and steadfast anchor.

Slicers fall into two broad categories. Some wield a cleaver to chop off a generous cut of the Scriptures, measured either quantitatively or qualitatively. Others prefer to use a scalpel that enables them to separate from the rest a thin bit, to which they, then can attach undue importance.

First, the cleaver wielders. Outstanding among them are the Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses are the loudest in claiming allegiance to the Scriptures. Their emissaries can recite repetitively selected Bible passages at our doorstep by the minute and by the hour and the hour and the hour. The recitation is so pat we can easily overlook the repetition.

An outspoken foe of the Witnesses claims that they actually concern themselves with only 6.5 percent of the total Scriptures. No numbers debate is desired, but the point is inescapable. Large and vitally important sections of the Bible are totally ignored so that erroneous tenets of the cult can be espoused without challenge. Somehow in the process, however a loyalty to the Bible is alleged.

The Witnesses stand as prime examples of those employing the slice technique. They also represent a host of others of that ilk who may differ in degree, but not in kind. Not all can be singled out for attention but several, especially significant on the contemporary religious scene, merit mention.

A most dangerous threat to the well-being and tranquility of that scene is the growing influence and popularity of "Situation Ethics," or "New Morality." The slice in these instances actually represents a 33 percent reduction in the Bible's requirements for God-pleasing ethics and moral morality.

The retained 67 percent gives the approach certain respectability and appeal. There is much emphasis on the doer of the deed in this moral scheme that seems to correspond to the Bible's claim that it is only the Christian, never the unbeliever, who can perform a work pleasing to God. An even greater emphasis on the love motive suggests a similarity to what Paul says in I Corinthians 13.

Somehow, however, the third dimension of the truly good work is ignored or and denied, sliced away and cast aside. That dimension is conformity to God's immutable will. By this slice justification for any sin is provided, be it abortion or adultery, bribery or bestiality, civil disobedience or cursing, draft-dodging or divorce, euthanasia or eroticism—the list could specify 42 more instances, if time and space permitted.

After some years of the selling of this kind of slicing by Fletcher and others many, in the name of a “higher” ethic, are finding the end-result most uninhibiting and enjoyable.¹⁸ Most regrettable is the fact that we have only seen the beginning. The bottom line has not yet been written. The worst is yet to come.

Even more apropos is the slicing currently occurring in the Bible’s injunctions regarding that most basic of the Creator’s arrangements, the family and the man-woman role in the realm of creation. The former represents the crucial problem confronting our country. The latter is calling for careful concern on the part of our church.¹⁹

The slicing here may involve a rebellion against a clear Bible teaching, in favor of a human idea whose time seems to have come. The slicing may be another historical critical disavowal of Bible statements. The slicing may be motivated by a desire to attract and adhere members to the church at any and all costs. Whatever the motivation, a slice of clear Bible doctrine is occurring. A good chunk of what Scripture says on the subject is cut away.

It is easily conceivable that the essay at this point could become so mired that any progress would be precluded in the interest of a present and pressing problem. To avoid the undesirable, a reference is made to writings that treat the subject far better than this essay could.²⁰

By its own definition, the “Fundamentalist” movement—so dominant in the early and recent decades of this century—must be viewed as a slicing operation. The “all” of *sola scriptura* is replaced by a “fundamentals.” The quantity of the slicing will vary from decade to decade and denomination to denomination. Again, a difference in degree, not in kind.

True Lutherans are aware of this kind of approach. George Calixtus was advocating it with his *consensus quinquesaecularis* three centuries ago.²¹ Under the leadership of Abraham Calov they voiced their disavowal then.²² They should be following suit today over against a new breed of spiritual descendants of Calixtus.

Whether the fundamentalization involves some sort of “five points,” including Scripture, virgin birth, atonement, resurrection and miracles, as in the case of the Fundamentalists in the earlier third of the present century, whether some other fundamentalist limitation of our day is under consideration, the ultimate issue is the same. A severe slicing of Scripture is involved.

Perhaps no other issue is of greater importance for our kind of Lutherans in our time. We share so many concerns with those called “fundamentalists” in this decade: loyalty to Scripture, concern for doctrine, commitment to moral absolutes—the listing could go on and on. We dare not share their inclination to slice Scripture and let it end up with something less than *sola scriptura*.

Sometimes the Scripture slicing takes a different turn: a small portion, a single passage is cut away from the whole. What is thus isolated is then magnified out of all proportion and made to mean what it does not say. This is not to say such Scripture portions are unimportant and uninspired. *Sola scriptura* means that the single passage and the short portion must be allowed to have their say and sway.

What is being emphasized is the sound hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. The *sedes doctrinae* is the sum of the relevant passages, with the clearer shedding light on the more difficult. A single passage might, standing alone, admit of more than one translation, but those that clash with other passages treating the same subject will be rejected by the faithful translator.

All this means that the slicer who does his thing, not to chop off and discard, but to retain and use must be careful of overemphasis and misapplication. Such misuse and abuse of Scripture also abounds in our day. Several instances will serve as examples of many others.

The millennialists deserve first mention. They are often fundamentalists in their basic stand to Scripture. What they, however, do is lift certain well-known prophetic and figurative passages out of their context, and then give them a literal rendering that is at variance with clear Scripture teaching on the subject. The result is the crassest millennialism involving extra returns of Christ and rapture of the faithful.

Charismatics rely on passages describing a special time in the history of the New Testament and elevate them to an abiding and mandatory type of Christian living. In the process, they pass by so much else the Bible says about the sanctified life. Even scriptural cautions about the employment of special gifts of the Spirit are ignored.

Whether we like it or not, we should include in this slice section manifestations occurring close to home. What separates us from the Church of the Lutheran Confession? The best answer to that difficult question, it would seem is suggested by the part of the essay before us. One passage of the Bible on the treatment of errorists is separated from the others and is so applied that the other passages get short shrift. That was the difference that arose in the 1950's and it remains the basic disagreement between them and us.

What separates us from the Protestant Conference? Again, the best answer to that even more difficult question, it would seem, is suggested by the part of the essay before us. More than anything else it is a preoccupation with the few Bible passages on obduracy that has created a gulf between them and us.

Asked by students what specific doctrinal differences exist between Protestants and WELS, this essayist first points without hesitation to fellowship and then admits to an unwillingness to follow where Protestants lead on the hardening trail.

There is dispute that Scripture reveals a doctrine of obduracy that warns sinners against a self-hardening that God must, short of employing an irresistible grace, eventually recognize. There is no dispute that God's inspired prophets could and did proclaim self-destruction to the obdurate. There is no dispute that we all do well to heed the Bible's warnings.

Difficulties arise when hardening becomes the basis for a total theology, for a denominational existence, for an ultimate judgement. The Protestants have committed themselves to the position that the Wisconsin Synod is in a hardened state and has lost the Gospel. Their prophet of obduracy who was proclaiming the message even before a Protestant Conference existed has been nearly canonized. A student once showed me a letter with the Protestant claim that the greatest Lutheran theologian since Luther was Karl Koehler.

Such preoccupation with the doctrine of obduracy and such certitude regarding the application of the doctrine to WELS explains why efforts at discussion fail and why separation continues. A section of Scripture has been sliced from the rest. The awesome warning of God has become the final judgement of men. To that judgement we do not submit.

Part Five. The Screw

Another common and current misuse and abuse of Scripture occurs when its clear intent is twisted into the very converse of itself. The "Screw" is the word for it. Under that heading we point to two major instances: the social gospel twist and the legal twist.

Nothing could be clearer and more compelling than Christ's mandate to his church that it is to preach the Gospel. Somehow, however, this gospel mission is twisted into a social gospel

assignment. Though this is done in the name of Scripture, it remains the most flagrant and large-scale abuse and misuse of Scripture during the last half century.

Back in 1922 certain objections to membership in the Federal Council of Churches were voiced at a convention of a Lutheran denomination. The argument stated that such membership should be avoided because the FCC “was inclined to set up machinery seeking to have the world follow Christian principles without being converted to such principles.”²³

This clear rejection of the social gospel motif was not voiced at a convention of the Synodical Conference or of its member synods or of some other conservative Lutheran body in the midwest of that time. This was a resolution of the third convention of the United Lutheran Church in American, the parent body of the very activist Lutheran Church in America.

Half a century can make a world of difference. Keep on ignoring what the Bible tells the church to do, twist its directives to individual believers into mandates for the grouping of believers, contort pronouncements of the prophets in a theocracy into a system of social engineering, and you can swivel the thought and stance of a church body to the converse of itself in a relatively short time. “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”²⁴

In the area of mission activity the twist and contortion is even more visible and violent. The crisp and clear mandate to march and the edict to evangelize with which the first two Gospels close are strangely convoluted into an ever-enlarging liberation theology. Again, it is just half a century since *Rethinking Missions* set the spiral in motion.²⁵

An even worse twist occurs when the gospel is turned into law. That is the classic misuse and abuse of Scripture. It is ancient and it is modern. Long ago Luther pleaded in the preface of the *September-testament*, “See to it, therefore, that you do not make a Moses out of Christ, or a book of laws and doctrines out of the gospel, as has been done heretofore.”²⁶ In 1981 what had been done “heretofore” already in 1522 is still going on unabated. The *opinio legis* will endure with the Antichrist to the crack of doom.

Observing the activities—sometimes antics—of the current moral majority as they seek to influence national legislation and foreign policy, one wonders which is the lesser of evil: a moral majority or a liberal leadership. The former may promise short-term gains in domestic tranquility, national prestige and responsible citizenship. On the larger and longer scale of eternal values the latter may measure out as the lesser evils. The undisguised tempter is easier to recognize and reject than the devil masquerading as an angel of light.

In this timely and vital issue we must realize that we are dealing with the old, old legalism of Reformed theology. Having rejected the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, this theology must supply its substitute, another gospel that is no gospel. Calvinist theology forces the uncertain sinner to find his certainty in manifested works. Arminian theology prompts the sinner to achieve salvation. Which of the two is better? The only right answer is, “A plague on both your houses.”

Part Six: The Sting

There is an easy transition from the twist that turns gospel into law to the sting that snatches the gospel from us. This is the climactic, the ultimate misuse and abuse of Scripture. It is that because there is tampering in this case with what is the church’s *articulus stantis et cadentis*, the doctrine of justification.

The clear scriptural teaching of the justification of the sinner by grace alone, through faith alone is constantly being made into “a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.”

This was done in Galatia. This was done in Rome. This is being done with a vengeance in our time.

It seems as though Satan has saved some of his trickiest anti-gospel delusions just for these last bad times. The master magician projects an appearance of real concern for the sinner's well-being and the Savior's cause. Then comes the sting and "no gospel" is that is left. That is the pattern of the most popular theological vogues on the religious scene of today.

Decision theology turns attention from the objective promise to the subjective reaction and it can hardly any longer be a matter of "by grace alone." Huge conversion counts and claims can be recorded. They are not, however, that final accounting where only "by grace alone" counts.

All power to the useful activity of a life of faith. The church wants and needs much more than is presently available. When the activity, however, becomes activism for its own sake, busyness for the sake of self-satisfaction, then "by grace alone" is threatened. The Formula of Concord's Article IV and the Amsdorf lapse are not being overlooked. What is objected to is the confusion about the necessity of works that caused the Amsdorf lapse.

Charismatics have a place in this subject area. Is their theology even at its best, anything else but a doctrine of salvation by grace and gifts? Without the latter, there is no true gospel comfort for the sinner in their theological scheme of things.

With all their variations in style and substance, all objectors to "cheap grace" are, in the final analysis, also objectors to "by grace alone." No one from Osiander to Bonhas ever invented the formula that maintains "justified by grace alone" through a different gospel. Each of their different gospels is really no gospel at all. The victim of their sting is left in each and every case holding the empty bag.

The abuse and misuse of Scripture is even worse when the biblical basis for this justification by grace alone, through faith alone, the proclamation of objective justification, is under attack. Calvinists are old and familiar attackers, of course. When they gain allies in the Lutheran camp, there is special cause for concern and regret. When a fifth column surfaces within the most conservative wing of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the time has come to sound and heed the cry, "*Hostes ante portas!*"

Let that cry echo warnings from the past about the dangers involved, reminding us: One cannot oppose any doctrine of God's Word with impunity...But whoever molests the doctrine of justification stabs the gospel in the heart and is on the way of losing entirely Christian doctrine and personal faith and of falling into the arms of heathenism, even if he ever so much emphasizes justification through faith.²⁷

While on the watch for this ultimate in stings we will not overlook the words that introduce it, "One cannot oppose any doctrine of God's Word with impunity. Each and every abuse and misuse of God's Word—be it a scam or squelch, a splice or slice, a screw or sting—is to be resisted to the utmost.

Like the con men they really are, perpetrators of the abuse and misuse appeal to us with fine-sounding phrases, assuring us of their best intentions and offering us rich returns for a slight investment and involvement. Worst of all, our ears are inclined to itching and listening.

There is only one course to follow, the path of most resistance. This is the path that takes us again and again into the sanctuary of God where his Word abounds and where his Spirit trains us in its proper use. For the pastor that sanctuary is his study room.

That sanctuary is the place to repeat the prayers that rose to the throne of grace in Lutheranism's first time of trial:

Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ,
Weil es nun Abend worden ist;
Dein Gottlich Wort, Das helle Licht,
Lass ja bei uns ausloschen nicht.

In dieser letzt'n betrubten Zeit
Verleih uns, Herr, Bestandigkeit,
Dass wir dein Wort an Sakrament
Rein b'halten bis an unser End.

Notes

1. Augsburg Publishing House, *Book Newsletter* No. 493, September-October 1981, p. 6.
2. James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1980)
3. F. A. Schiotez, "The Church's Confessional Stand Relative to the Scriptures," pp. 6-7. This is a 1966 pamphlet prepared for distribution by the Office of Public Relations of the American Lutheran Church.
4. Christian News, October 11, 1976.
5. The reference is to President Voss' letter of February 19, 1981. The essayist's interpretation, expressed in a March 1 reply was not refuted.
6. Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, translated from the 1974 original by E. Leverenz and R. Norden, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977) p. 15
7. ULCA *Minutes*, 1938. pp. 472-474.
8. The separation of the text from the truth of the Word is a very real and current problem in the ALC.
9. The quotation is on p. 8 of the writing cited in Note 6.
10. Virgil's *Aenied*.
11. Jacob Jervell, *The Continuing Search for the Historical Jesus*. translated by Harris E. Kaasa Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965.
12. E. C. Fredrich, "Twentieth Century Reformed Thinking Analyzed and Evaluated *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXXII (Jan. 1975), p. 41.
13. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1905) p. 241. Charter 11, "Of Revelation," of "The Dogmatic Decrees of the Vatican Council Concerning the Catholic Faith and the Church of Christ. A.D. 18870" supplies the matter to which reference is made.
14. Daniel 8: 13-14.
15. A *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* "News and Comments" item in the 1982 Winter issue can be consulted for more extensive treatment of this issue.
16. Roger Fleming, "The Appeal of the Cults," an unpublished essay delivered to the Southeastern Wisconsin District's Metro-North Conference recently. The quotation is on p. 8.
17. See pp. 9-10 of the essay cited in Note 16.
18. Joseph Fletcher's *Moral Responsibility* demonstrates clearly the implications of "situation ethics."
19. What our 1981 synodical convention resolved is known. Not yet known is the location of the pertinent resolutions in the as yet unpublished proceedings.
20. The reference is to recent *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* articles on the subject, all in Volume 70 (April—Kuske: July—Balge, Decker, Panning: October—Kuske, Panning, Lawrenz).
21. For Calixtus only doctrinal agreements reached in the first five centuries of the Christian era were fundamental and binding. There could be agreement to disagree about subsequent doctrinal developments, even about the basic issues of the Reformation.
22. Calov also espoused a "consensus," *Consensus Repetitus Fidei Vere Lutheranae*. It can be found in the Seminary library in *Consilia Theologica Witebergensia (Frankfurt am Mayn, 1664)* pp. 928-995.

23. ULCA *Minutes*, 1922, p. 76. The quotation was shortened for clarity sake by omitting “in its organisms” and “in those organisms.”
24. 1 Corinthians 10:12.
25. The reference is to the Hocking report, popularly referred to by that title, but more accurately identified as *Rethinking Missions. A Laymen’s Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York, Harper, 1932)
26. LW XXXV, 360.
27. August Pieper, “*Ohios neuer Angriff auf die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung*,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (then *Theologische Quartalschrift* III (April 1906) 120, quoted by John Meyer in “Objective Justification,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* XXXVII (April 1940) 122.