

As the 2024 campaign heats up, be wary of politicians who ‘textjack’ the Bible

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(CNN) — Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont, was in the thick of his campaign for the presidency in 2004 when he committed a verbal gaffe that was literally biblical in proportion.

No, not his infamous “Dean Scream.” Dean was courting “values voters” and was boasting about his knowledge of the

Bible when a reporter asked him to identify his favorite New Testament book.

“The book of Job,” Dean responded. “But I don’t like the way it ends ... in some of the books of the New Testament, the ending of the Book of Job is different ... there’s one book where there’s a more optimistic ending, which we believe was tacked on later.”

There was one problem with Dean’s answer. The story of Job, which tells the story of a prosperous and pious man who refused to curse God despite facing one calamity after another, is found in the Old Testament.

Dean circled back to reporters an hour later to apologize for his blunder, but the incident was widely reported. He dropped out of the presidential race a month later.



Shaun Heasley/Getty Images/FILE

Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean rallies supporters in the snow prior to the Des Moines Register Democratic Presidential Debate on January 4, 2004, in Johnston, Iowa.

Dean’s blunder has largely disappeared from public memory, but instances of politicians bungling scripture are still quite visible. As the 2024 presidential campaign heats up, some politician will inevitably make the same mistake as Dean — they will twist the original meaning of some biblical passage to score political points, a practice known as “textjacking.” Some will even blatantly lie about scriptural meanings to justify their positions or court voters.

This practice is a bipartisan affair. It’s not confined to one party or any one era. But it gets particularly heated during campaign season when scriptural references and allusions sprout like mushrooms on the campaign trail.

One theologian, however, is providing the public with a biblical sloppiness detector. Kaitlyn Schiess, author of the new book, “The Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go from Here,” offers some notorious examples from US history of politicians abusing the Bible.





Kendra Sharrard/Brazos Press

Kaitlyn Schiess, author of "The Ballot and the Bible."

Though church attendance is declining, Schiess says the US remains a "Bible-haunted" nation. Citations and allusions to scripture from leaders still carry weight and adorn our public buildings and ceremonies. The Bible is a potent political weapon, but many Americans remain theologically unarmed—they don't know enough scripture to tell when they're being played, she says.

So Schiess has some advice for anyone who hears a politician quote a scripture.

"The first thing they should do is find a Bible and see what verses come before and after the verse, and whether or not the reference makes sense within the larger story of the whole canon," she says.

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Schiess is one of several religious scholars who have spotlighted how politicians misused the Bible throughout US history. It's such a common practice that it's almost become a political ritual.

Here are three of the most notorious examples.

Describing America as a 'shining city on a hill'

In this year's first Republican presidential primary debate, a moderator alluded to President Reagan's description of America as the "shining city on a hill." The phrase, popularized by Reagan most notably in his farewell address, is commonly used to describe the US as an exceptional nation filled with people who are optimistic about the future.

The phrase has become so common that many Americans mistakenly believe Reagan coined the term. He didn't. The original phrase comes from Jesus during his Sermon on the Mount. In [Matthew 5:14](#), Jesus says to his followers, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."



Ron Edmonds/AP

President Ronald Reagan, seen shortly after he delivered his farewell address to the nation from the White House on January 11, 1989.

The phrase was later evoked by John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, in his [1630 treatise](#) "A Model of Christian Charity": "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill."

The verse has nothing to do with making any nation's citizens feel good about themselves, Schiess and others say.

Jesus, of course, wasn't talking about America – nor was he telling his audience to feel pride in their own goodness or optimism about the future, Schiess says. Jesus was using the phrase to urge God's people to live for the sake of the larger world.

"It has become almost entirely unmoored from the original context that comes initially from Jesus giving a picture to his followers of faithful witness in the world, a witness that would involve suffering," Schiess says. "Only a few verses before that, he was talking about how the poor and persecuted are blessed."

The historian Robert Tracy McKenzie [uses](#) even stronger terms to denounce how "the city on a hill" has been misused.

McKenzie says that when Winthrop, a Puritan leader, used the phrase in a 1630 sermon to his followers, it was not meant to puff up their pride but "send a chill down their spines." He pointed out that the Puritans had left England with many of their enemies hoping that they would fail in their settling of a new continent.

"Far from claiming that the Lord had chosen the Puritan migrants to serve as a glorious example to the world, Winthrop was instead reminding them that it would be impossible to hide the outcome if they failed," McKenzie wrote. "Their massive departure had unavoidably attracted the attention of the countrymen they left behind. They would be watching,

many of them hoping that the Puritans would stumble.”

Using the Bible to justify atrocities

There are still people who argue that slavery wasn't the primary cause of the Civil War. Some say the primary cause was “state's rights” or that it was fought over tariffs. Historians reject those claims.

Here's part of their proof. One of the primary documents they cite is a particularly odious speech given by a politician. It's called the Cornerstone speech, and it was delivered by Alexander Hamilton Stephens, vice president of the Confederate States of America at the beginning of the war, to justify secession.



Hulton Archive/Archive Photos/Getty Images

Alexander Hamilton Stephens (1812-1883) was an American politician who served six terms in the Georgia State legislature, was appointed vice president of the Confederate States of America and was the governor of Georgia from 1882-83.

Stephens dispenses with any pretense about why the Southern states were breaking away from the union. He explicitly rejected the claim in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. He said:

“Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”

What made this speech so diabolical was its heavy use of Biblical scripture to justify the torture, rape and enslavement of other human beings. Stephens cited the Curse of Ham, a twisted version of a story about Noah from the book of Genesis (9:18-28), and another verse from Genesis alluding to Adam and man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, thereby condemning some (hint, enslaved people) to live “by the sweat of his brow he should eat his bread.”

The Curse of Ham was a go-to scripture for many slave masters. Gibson wrote in her book, Politicians and slave masters

The Curse of Ham was a go-to scripture for many slave masters, Schiess wrote in her book. Politicians and slave masters would use other scriptures like the New Testament admonition from the book of Ephesians, “slaves obey your masters,” but the Curse of Ham was a favorite, Schiess wrote.

Stephens based the central image in his speech on the capstone, an image that was used to describe Jesus in the New Testament. In Mark 12:10, Jesus was described as the cornerstone or capstone of a building (“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”).

America’s bloodiest war was unleashed in part by a politician who cleverly used the Bible to turn Jesus into an enslaver who mocked the Founding Father’s claims of equality.

Using the Bible to take children away from their parents

There were several occasions when politicians referenced the Bible under questionable circumstances during the Trump administration. There were the copious Biblical scriptures that some White evangelicals used to justify their support of Trump. And Trump’s decision to use the Bible as a photo prop outside a church near the White House during the 2020 George Floyd protests was also widely criticized.



Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images/FILE

President Donald Trump holds up a Bible outside St. John's Episcopal church in Washington on June 1, 2020, after days of anti-racism protests against police brutality that erupted into violence.

But arguably the most notorious example of a politician using the Bible during the Trump administration came when former US Attorney General Jeff Sessions cited a passage in Romans 13 to justify the administration’s policy of separating parents from children at the Mexico border.

In 2018, Sessions was giving a speech to a group that included law enforcement officers when he cited a scripture from

the Apostle Paul in Romans 13: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God” (Romans 13:1 New Revised Standard Version).

“Illegal entry into the United States is a crime — as it should be,” Sessions said. “Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you to the apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.”

Sessions faced immediate blowback from theologians and others who said he had misread the Bible. More than 600 members of the United Methodist Church, of which Sessions was a member, issued a formal complaint against him, including a charge that he had misused Romans 13.

Then-White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders defended Sessions, saying, “It is very biblical to enforce the law.”

Scholars point out that Romans 13 has been used by political leaders to justify all sorts of oppression, from Jim Crow segregation to the German state church’s acceptance of Hitler’s Nazi Party to support of South Africa’s apartheid regime.

The Journal Gazette/AP/FILE

Then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions speaks about immigration in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on June 14, 2018. Sessions cited the Bible in defense of his border policy that resulted in hundreds of children being separated from their parents.

Of Romans 13, Schiess writes in her book that, “The gospel leaves no room for nationalism or blanket approval of whomever wields the most power.” She says that anyone who knew anything about the Apostle Paul’s life would be suspicious of Sessions’ use of that scripture. Paul was routinely imprisoned by Roman authorities for breaking their laws, she says.

“It’s pretty impossible to interpret Romans 13 as meaning that you have unquestioning support of whatever government you find yourself in when the Apostle Paul that Christians believed in was imprisoned and later killed by Roman authorities,” Schiess told CNN.

When politicians use the Bible in a good way

There also have been plenty of politicians who have wielded the Bible not as a political weapon but to uplift people and to heal.

One of the most adroit users of the Bible, according to one author, was former President George W. Bush.

In “Thumpin’ It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today’s Presidential Politics,” Jacques Berlinerblau argues that Bush was a master of using the Bible in political settings because he used it in “ornamental” as opposed to “substantive fashion.”

In other words, he talked in biblical generalities without getting too specific.

Politicians who dare to use the Bible should follow a similar script, Berlinerblau writes: keep references sparse, positive, vague, shallow, and “not too Christey.”

“Save special circumstances, citing chapter and verse is generally a no-no,” Berlinerblau writes. “The politician who opens with the words ‘As we read in 2 Chronicles 2:14 ...’ is running a variety of risks ranging from inducing tachycardia among church/state activists and the liberal media, to boring the audience to tears, to prompting Bible thumpers roll up their sleeves, crack open their Scofields, and scour the candidate’s interpretation for evidence of doctrinal purity.”

Some scholars say the president who evoked the Bible best was Abraham Lincoln.

His speeches were filled with rich Biblical metaphors and apt citations of scripture. Most importantly, he used scripture to not only elevate America but to chastise the country for its failings, as he masterfully did in his Second Inaugural Address. He quoted the Bible four times, mentioned God 14 times and summoned prayer three times in the famous speech.

He, like Alexander Stephens, alluded to the Genesis verse about men living by “the sweat of their brow,” but in a far different way:

“Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered – that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

But, of course, Lincoln was extraordinary. Few other presidents have reached his rhetorical heights.

Yet that won’t stop politicians from textjacking the Bible. It’s embedded in our politics.

In the 2024 race and beyond, politicians should approach using the Bible with fear and trembling. And listeners should be wary.

John Blake is the author of “More Than I Imagined: What a Black Man Discovered About the White Mother He Never Knew.”