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**The Negative Effects of Abusive/Legalistic  
Biblical Interpretation**

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**Introduction**

Biblical interpretation holds tremendous possibilities for individual and societal transformation. On the other hand the task of Interpreting the Bible is also a risky and dangerous venture. This is because the Bible if not properly interpreted can be used as an ideological weapon of oppression and repression. Besides, individual and communities have been brought to ruin because of wrong interpretation of the biblical text. For example, according to Zuck the Mormon leader Brigham Young justified his having more than 30 wives by pointing to the fact that Abraham had more than 1 wife, namely Sarah and Hagar. The Mormon practice of being baptized for dead relatives and others is based, they argue, on 1 Corinthians 15:29.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://ui.edu.ng> and [kledada@yahoo.com](mailto:kledada@yahoo.com).

Some people handle poisonous snakes, based on their reading of Mark 16: 18. Whether women should teach men is based on how one interprets 1 Corinthians 11:5; 14:34-35; and 1 Timothy 2: 12.<sup>2</sup> From these examples it is evident that proper interpretation of the Bible enhances its effective application.

The basic concern of this paper is to critically examine the negative effects of abusive and legalistic interpretation of the Bible. However, to meaningfully address the issue at stake it is expedient for us to examine some key words in relation to the issue at stake. These are ‘abusive and legalistic biblical interpretation’. We have to define them not because we are ignorant of their meanings but it is expedient to agree on what the rest of the exercise is all about. Abusive biblical interpretation is one in which the premeditated interest of the interpreter is to insult or offend another person, group or race, which may ultimately lead to psychological and even physical abuse and domination. Legalistic biblical interpretation is somewhat related to the abusive biblical interpretation. It is the interpretation of the Bible within a defined parameter. This type of interpretation does not go beyond the boundary posed by the text. In other words, an interpretation of the text exists already and any reading of this text that takes place simply reinforces that interpretation; because the texts are read on their own terms and because any outside influence is disregarded from the outset this form of biblical interpretation can lead to Bible idolatry and fundamentalism.<sup>3</sup> To effectively examine the negative effects of abusive/legalistic biblical interpretation, we shall examine factors that inspire or motivate the interpreters involved in this form of interpretation, the negative impact of their activities will also be discussed and how to avoid the pitfalls of abusive/legalistic biblical interpretation will also be made the focus of the paper’s searchlight.

### **I. Factors That Inspire Abusive/ Legalistic Biblical Interpretation**

Some of the people and Christians involved in abusive/legalistic biblical interpretation are often motivated by one factor or the other, these would be examined below:

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Zuck *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Gerrie Snyman, *The Ethics of Reading The Bible* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2002), v-vii.

1. In some Christian traditions, attempts are made to devalue the importance and necessity of rigorous principles of biblical interpretation. These Christians believe that the meaning of the Bible can be mediated through the help of the Holy Spirit. A Christian who is therefore in tune with the Holy Spirit can therefore be guided to the true meaning of the text. Although one may not contest the vital role the Holy Spirit plays in the process of interpretation, but there are some basic hermeneutical rules which cannot be ignored. Caution should be sounded that the popular application of Biblical passages picked at random to fit random human situations, has little or nothing to do with serious biblical hermeneutics or interpretation of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>
2. The need to address by all means possible the debilitating social-political situations can also motivate abusive and legalistic interpretation of the Bible. In most third world countries, poverty, hunger, diseases and war are living realities. Attempts have been made by some Christian leaders and preachers to address these debilitating conditions. For example the emergence of *prosperity gospel* in Africa is perhaps a reaction to the pervasive poverty in the continent. The basic thesis of prosperity gospel is that God's plan for all believers is to have them free from sickness and material poverty. The proponents of prosperity gospel believe that poverty, disease and other forms of deprivation are some of the consequences of the fall of man according to the biblical account (Gen. 3). Jesus is however believed to have through his death brought redemption not only from sin but material poverty.<sup>5</sup> This position was further articulated by one of Africa's leading prosperity preachers, David Oyedepo:

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<sup>4</sup> J.O.Akao, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles and Practices* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 2000),42.

<sup>5</sup> A.O.Dada, "Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Context: A medium of Social Transformation or An Impetus for Delusion?" *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* XXXVI/1-2 (June & December, 2004),96.

So one of the principal consequences of sin was poverty. No wonder when the son of God came, He made it part of His business to restore the dignity of wealth back to humanity... Man became naked immediately he fell. Now that he has entered into righteousness, should he still remain naked? No he must be clothed with the glory of God. That is why the Bible says, “He became poor that we, through his poverty might be made rich”.<sup>6</sup>

From the quotation above it is evident that the preacher engages the selected text abusively. Perhaps out of the genuine concern to address the problem of poverty prevalent among in his congregation and continent. He wrongly appropriated II Cor. 8:9 because he misunderstood the basic element of the text. “Rich” in the passage can be understood in the sense of Christ’s share of His father’s glory. However, “he became poor” can be understood in the light of his incarnation, which is given a fuller description in Phil. 2:6-9. Paul in II Cor. 8:9 does not refer to the poverty of the earthly life of Jesus, but rather to his willingness to leave heaven, limit himself to a human body, and to die for man’s sin on the cross. Also, in the same vein a Christian becomes rich on the basis of the salvation Christ gives to him through his incarnation and death on the cross at Calvary.<sup>7</sup> Salvation should not be utilized as it is being done in the interpretation of some prosperity preachers.

1. Another factor that engenders abusive biblical interpretation is the attempt by some people to subjugate, control and manipulate others in order to gain social, economic and political advantage. In Africa and elsewhere, the Bible has been used as an ideological tool to suppress and keep some people in perpetual subjection. In order to achieve this goal, different race and ethnic groups are portrayed as the descendants of race and ethnic groups cursed and therefore not worthy of freedom and civilization.

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<sup>6</sup> David Oyedepo, *Covenant Wealth* (Lagos: Dominion House, 1992),26-27.

<sup>7</sup> H. Bernard, “The Second Epistle to The Corinthians” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* Edited by W.R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961),86-87.

2. The emphasis on supernatural experiences of the interpreter in some quarters can also contribute in no small measure to abusive/ legalistic interpretation of the Bible. In some Christian traditions undue emphasis had been laid on supernormal experiences like vision, dream, trance, audition, etc, with the Bible regarded as secondary. Interpreters from such traditions often approach the text with a preconceived bias of the meaning of the text. The text has always been interpreted to support and reinforce the facts of their religious experiences. For example in some African Indigenous Churches there has always been undue stress on angels. This has therefore made angelology the prism or the interpretative framework. In some of these churches angel are equated with Christ.

## **II. The Negative Effects of Abusive/ Legalistic Biblical Interpretation**

The negative effects of abusive/legalistic biblical interpretation are quite pervasive. This is because; the physical, emotional, and mental aspects of the human life are affected. This is so because interpretation is a process, in which the cognitive, affective and the psychomotor domains are affected. In view of this, the negative effects of abusive biblical interpretation will be examined below.

1. One of the negative effects of abusive biblical interpretation is that it inspires and encourages division and strife. For example, one of the areas where Christians are fiercely divided today is on the issue of speaking with tongues. Some Christians have from their own interpretation of the Bible insist that everyone that has experienced the second birth must be baptized with the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in a strange tongues. This teaching has caused a lot of divisions in the Church. Those that are not comfortable with this teaching on the other hand have labeled the others extremists and fundamentalists. These therefore have created ill-feelings among Christians and have affected the peaceful co-existence and unity in Christendom all over the world.

2. Abusive and legalistic interpretation of the Bible can also lead to unethical conduct and practices. Some preachers today based on their legalistic interpretation of the Bible affirmed that everybody must be rich. In other words that from their study of the Bible it is evident that it is the right of every Christian to be rich. One of the effects of this form of prosperity teaching is that it brought unwholesome pressure to prosper by all means on the people under the influence of such teachings. It is not therefore a surprise to see some Christians getting involved in unethical conduct and practices in order to be counted as rich and prosperous. Recently, two men were arrested for stealing a huge sum of money, in their place of work. However, to chagrin of the people they confessed to have stolen in order to support the ministry of a popular and well known African charismatic preacher. They further went ahead to tender as exhibit the receipts given to him to acknowledge the money paid to the ministry of the “Man of God”.<sup>8</sup> The one sided teaching that equated prosperity to financial buoyancy must have been responsible for the misconduct of the fellow whose experience was recounted above. A sound understanding of prosperity from the biblical perspective reveals that it is a multidimensional thing. And also financial or material prosperity is not an indication of divine approval. After all the “the rich fool” in the gospel of Luke was condemned for the poverty of soul that was his lot. The richest person is one in Christ, because such a person has an imperishable inheritance.

Besides, the link between the blessing of God and the experience of material abundance is neither automatic nor mechanical. It is possible that God’s blessing will include material abundance, and the Bible gives examples of people who experienced it in that way. But it is not necessarily so, and even in the Bible it certainly is not always so. Moses was more intimate with God than any other character in the Old

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<sup>8</sup> The men involved in the fraud are members of Pastor Chris Oyakhilome’s Christ Embassy Church in Lagos, Nigeria. Oyakhilome is one of the popular televangelists in Africa.

Testament and undoubtedly experienced the blessings of that relationship, but we are never told that he was materially rich, or wanted to be. Prophets and psalmists all experienced God's blessing, yet some of them, like Jeremiah, clearly suffered greatly.<sup>9</sup>

3. Another consequence of abusive/legalistic interpretation of the biblical text is that it has resulted in death and bodily harm of some people. For example in some quarters the Bible has been abusively and even legalistically interpreted to establish illness or disease as something caused by evil spirits, which pervades the human world. Also, disease is seen as a consequence of sin committed by the sick at one time or the other. Disease is therefore given existential as against medical explanation.<sup>10</sup> Different verses of the scripture that has bearing on faith and divine healing have been abusively interpreted. Such verses include; Is.53: 5; James 5:14-16 etc. These verses have been interpreted in such a way that the use of medication and the practice of medicine are condemned and discouraged. In some faith homes in Africa, there are reported cases of pregnant women who lost their lives because they depended solely on prayer and on the basis of this refused to seek the needed medical attention. These unwarranted deaths might have been avoided if the pastors and prophets operating such homes have a holistic understanding of healing from the biblical perspective. The use of medication and the practice of medicine were not condemned in the Bible.

In another instance, in the city of Ibadan, Nigeria, recently a Youngman brutally machete his mother to death, upon interrogation he claimed to have premised his actions on his literal interpretation of Exodus 22: 18 "You shall not permit a witch to live". According to him, his mother was a witch, because he felt she was responsible for all the misfortunes that befell him. All his effort to make her change

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Wright, *Salvation Belongs To Our God: Celebrating The Bible's Central Story* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press,2007),79-80.

<sup>10</sup> J.K. Ayantayo, "Interplay Between Faith Healing and Modern Medical Practices" *Orita:Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, XLII/2 (December, 2011),28.

proved abortive. Hence, he had to carry out the scriptural injunction that an identified witch must be killed. People who engaged in such literal interpretation of the scripture often come out with abusive interpretations that can lead to fatal consequences as exemplified in the Youngman's story highlighted above.

4. Abusive/ legalistic hermeneutics also can also lead to oppression and suffering. Today, in some Christian traditions, the exclusion of women from public ministry has been motivated by the legalistic interpretation of some texts in Pauline epistles. For example in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 Paul said "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." Some Churchmen ignoring the historical contexts of the text and refusing to let other areas of studies influence their interpretations have interpreted this text to keep women out of the public ministry. However, intertextual<sup>11</sup> readings of Pauline letters reveal that women can take an active part in public ministry. For example, in Galatians 3:28-29 Paul affirmed "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female, for you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise". From this verse the fact could be established that Paul was not against Women's involvement in public ministry. After all he acknowledged two women as his co-workers- "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life". Besides, other women have also served as Evangelists (Prisca) and Deacons (Phoebe). Attempt to relegate women to the

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of intertextuality involves the task of investigating the relationships that a text can have with others. See R.B. Hays, S. Alkier & L.A. Huizenga, eds. *Reading The Bible Intertextually* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009), 3.



background in Christian ministry does not have a scriptural support and mandate.

5. Psychological and emotional disempowerment is also one of the negative effects of abusive and legalistic interpretation of the biblical text. In world history and that of interpretation of the biblical texts, some people have used the Bible to denigrate and psychologically abuse the other. During the apartheid<sup>12</sup> period in South Africa, some Afrikaners have abusively interpreted the biblical texts to reinforce their supremacy and justification for the apartheid. Such interpretation of the texts affirmed that the indigenous Africans were the descendants of Ham who was cursed by Noah, while the white settlers were the descendants of Shem who received the blessings of Noah. This therefore gives them the mandate to suppress the indigenous African people. The same interpretive schema was used to justify slavery in the Americas and the oppression of the African- Americans. The effects of this type of interpretation on the affected Africans are tremendous. Even after independence these Africans still find it difficult to fully unleash their potential for development and progress. Such ideological interpretations of the biblical texts emphasizing the supremacy of one race over the other are not only morally wrong but hermeneutically incorrect. The Bible should be interpreted in such a way that it will enhance peace and the oneness of humanity.
6. Another consequence of abusive/ legalistic interpretation of the biblical text is that personal experiences are often substituted for the truth of the Bible. Some people have been misled by some queer interpretation of the Bible arising from

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<sup>12</sup> Historically, Apartheid was a policy of racial segregation formerly followed in South Africa. The word *apartheid* means “separateness” in the ‘Afrikaans’ language and it described the rigid racial division between the governing white minority population and the nonwhite majority population. The National Party (NP) introduced apartheid as part of their campaign in the 1948 elections, and with the National Party victory, apartheid became the governing political policy for South Africa until the early 1990s.

the personal experience of a leader of a movement or even Church. For example some members of the African Indigenous Churches espoused faith healing without the use of medicine, this position was reinforced by the personal experience of some their leaders, arising from their understanding and interpretation of certain biblical texts. Some of the adherents of these Churches therefore depended only on the use of water, olive oil and some other concoctions prepared by the leaders. Western medicine and other forms of beneficial traditional medicinal practices are often condemned as not in tandem with the teachings of the Bible. As a result of this some of the members of such Churches have lost their lives to preventable diseases and disasters. In one remote village in Southwest Nigeria, a member of one of such Churches was bitten by a snake and instead of seeking immediate medical attention, resulted to prayers and application of sanctified olive oil prepared by his prophet. The sad fact is that the man died on the third day. If he had sought medical attention this unwarranted death must have been prevented. This is because the village's clinic was stocked with snake anti- venom.

### **III. Guiding Against Abusive/Legalistic Interpretation of the Bible: Factors for Consideration.**

Realizing the extent of the effects of abusive/legalistic interpretation of the Bible, it is expedient to explore ways it could be prevented or minimized. In the light of this the following are suggested:

1. Attention should be paid to rigorous study of the biblical texts. The most common method of interpretation of the Bible is called intuitive approach. This method is found in devotional and popular preaching and literature where the emphasis is on the immediate personal application of the text. The intuitive approach assumed that the situation of the contemporary reader is similar to the situation of

biblical text.<sup>13</sup> In some instances the situation of the reader may be similar to that of the biblical text, but not all the time. There are differences of culture, history, custom and time frame the Bible was written. Hence to understand the meaning of a biblical passage it is expedient to understand the different contexts in which the Bible was written. These include the literary, cultural, historical, geographical, and sociological contexts of the biblical texts. It is only when these contexts from which the biblical texts were written are properly understood and their bearing on the message of the texts are established can we effectively applied the text to our context. The problem with abusive and legalistic interpretations of the Bible is that the literary, cultural, geographical, and socio-political contexts of the biblical texts are often neglected. The context of the reader or interpreter is therefore imposed on the text. This therefore could lead to error because the text is not allowed to speak rather it is the interpreter speaking on behalf of the text. This could also have serious and at times fatal consequences as it has been highlighted in the area on effects of abusive/legalistic interpretation of the Bible.

2. The Church should also pay the needed attention to its teaching ministries. In contemporary times, especially in the Southern hemisphere where the growth of Church is phenomenal, attention is paid more to miracles, prayers and other existential needs of the people. With little or no attention paid to the teaching ministry of the Church. The consequences of this are better imagined that related. In Africa today for example the Church is said to grow one thousand mile wide but an inch deep. The immaturity that characterizes such growth will definitely have a rippling effect on the forms of biblical interpretation available. Abusive/legalistic can thrive in such environment where

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<sup>13</sup> Ashish Kumar, “ Dalit Reading of the Bible: A Quest for Dalit Hermeneutics: *Indian Journal Of Theology* 53: 1&2 (2011),35.

people don't have access to sound teachings of the Bible. As Wilhoit and Ryken observed:

Part of the problem is that the Church has failed to equip laypeople to study and teach the Bible. Without intending to do so, it has handed over the task of interpreting the Bible to the ministers. Ministers themselves feel more comfortable in the pulpit than in front of a class. They lavish their time on their sermons and by comparison may feel that anything is good enough when it comes to teaching the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

3. Theological training must be emphasized as a prerequisite for Church leadership because much of the abusive/legalistic interpretations of the Bible have been promoted by untrained leaders of the Church. In other words, leaders who are not theologically trained. In some Christian traditions today, attempts are made to devalue the importance and necessity of theological education. Three factors may be responsible for this. The first is that some people believe that anyone called into the Christian ministry only needs the teaching and direction of the Holy Spirit. This can be mediated through long prayers, fasting and other forms of spiritual exercises. In view of this since Jesus and his disciples did not attend any theological institution yet performed excellently, theological education is of no use. On the other hand, some stake their aversion for theological education on the fact that it engenders spiritual pride and arrogance. Paul's statement in II Cor. 3:6 "for letter kills, but the spirit gives life" are regarded as axiomatic in this sense. According to the last category, theological education can lead people astray from the faith. The examples of Jannes and Jambres are often used to back up their claim (II Tim3; 7-8).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J.C. Wilhoit & L. Ryken *Effective Bible Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012),ix.

<sup>15</sup> A. O. Dada, "An Evaluation of the Value of Theological Education in The Old Testament in the Context of Contemporary Nigeria" *Africa Theological Journal* 30:1 (2007),87.

In spite of the rejection of theological education in some Christian circles its importance cannot be overemphasized. Jesus subjected his disciples to a three year theological training and orientation. As the master teacher he realized that for them to handle the scriptures and perform the work of the ministry effectively, theological education is inevitable. Therefore he did all he could to ground them theologically through his teaching and works. No wonder in the book of the Acts of the Apostles the wisdom and profundity of the disciples of Christ was acknowledged by the religious leaders and scholars of their time, because of the new insight they brought into the interpretation and application of the scripture (Acts 4: 13). For leaders to effectively guide their followers in their daily interpretive activities, they also needed to be grounded in theological education.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible remains the principal reference point in drawing agenda for individual and socio-political transformation. That it has been abusively/legalistically interpreted with disastrous consequences does not diminish its positive relevance. This fact is better articulated by Brueggemann when he observed that:

To be sure, the Bible in our society has been utilized in coercive, oppressive, and ideological ways- for instance, as a law to keep minorities and women in their respective places, and as a lever against all sorts of “objectionable” people in the public arena (such as homosexuals). Nonetheless, it has been the Bible and its derivative traditions that have provided impetus and power for restorative notions<sup>16</sup> of personal health and social humanness. Characteristically, liberation movements in our time have found their central images in the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

If we are to continue to witness the positive relevance of the Bible in the private and public spheres, then the Church and the readers of the biblical text must guard against abusive and legalistic interpretation of the Bible. This can best be done by encouraging rigorous study and teaching of the Bible. The principles and methods of interpretation must be strictly adhered to. The admonition of Paul the apostle in II Timothy 2: 15 are apt in this direction: “Do your best to present

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<sup>17</sup> W. Brueggemann, *The Books That Breathe New Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 13.

yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the words of truth.”

Moreover, to sustain the relevance of the Christian faith we have to continually recast our basic convictions, derived from the biblical witness, into forms which make sense to modern consciousness. This is because the “patterns of thought” within which some phenomena alluded to in the Bible has changed. We no longer ascribe epilepsy to demon possession, nor do we believe that God is located above the clouds and stars. All biblical texts were composed in a pre-scientific idiom. Due to scientific advances made our interpretation of the Bible must also be dynamic and not remain static in order to be relevant contemporary socio-cultural situation.<sup>18</sup>



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<sup>18</sup> Klaus Nurnberger, *Biblical Theology in Outline: The Vitality of the Word of God* (Pretoria: C B Powell Bible Centre, 2004), 7.