

Editorial: Power or fear: What drives biblical interpretations?

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NOTE: If you have been sexually abused, this editorial contains content that may be difficult to read.

While the SBC deals with sexual abuse, racism and the gender of preachers, some argue the problem is power. The essence of their argument is that those who hold power in the SBC want to protect their positions by keeping sexual abuse, non-whites and women quiet. It's pure, simple and cynical power.

Some suggest [demographic shifts](#) will settle the score. As the old guard gives way to younger generations and as minority populations grow, the balance of power will shift to those who will not protect the power interests of old white men.

But if the SBC really is a grassroots body, factors other than positions of power and demographic shifts need to be considered. One significant factor is genuinely held interpretations of Scripture.

As has been suggested by [others](#), things like silencing sexual abuse, maintaining racism and the submission of women are rooted in biblical interpretation. As shaped by American pragmatism as Baptists are, we still hold to the authority of Scripture and cherish our interpretations of it.

Let's consider a few examples of the Bible's relation to important issues before Baptists now. What follows is not exhaustive or new but illustrates how Baptists have understood Scripture at various times.

Sexual abuse in the Bible

The Bible includes several stories of sexual violence. These are the stories we *don't* teach in church very often—if at all. Among these stories, one that parallels sexual abuse stories of today is Amnon raping Tamar (2 Samuel 13).

Though Tamar's rapist did not go unpunished, her father and brother kept silent. The church also has tended to be silent about sexual abuse—often out of shame—but not because the Bible explicitly teaches us to be silent about it.

Silence must be the result of something else at work. Some say this something else is power. I say this something else is fear.

"I heard you [looking for me], and I was afraid," Adam told God (Genesis 3:10).

Racism in the Bible

Differences between people in the Bible are less about race than they are about ethnicity, nationality, religion and family. Yet, in the United States, white people subjugated black people and others, relying on the Bible as their authority to do so.

Some Baptists interpreted passages like 2 Corinthians 6:14 to oppose interracial marriage and Genesis 9:25 to justify enslaving black Africans. Such interpretations eventually led to the separation of Baptists and the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention by Baptists who argued that the Bible doesn't prohibit slavery.

Eventually, power did end the legal enslavement of people in the United States. Jim Crow and convict leasing took its place. Though both now are

illegal—thanks to certain powers at work—human trafficking continues unabated, and racism remains a potent social force still justified by some according to their interpretation of the Bible. This is an area where demographic shifts very well may determine the outcome.

Some say racism and the discrimination and oppression it spawns are an expression of power. I say it's an expression of fear.

“Look, they've become too numerous,” said Pharaoh about his slaves. “We must deal with them, or they will get the better of us” (paraphrase of Exodus 1:9-10).

Leading women in the Bible

Sexual abuse and racism seem like a cinch to us today. Clearly, we oppose sexual abuse and expect it to be dealt with justly, though we may quibble about what exactly constitutes “justice.” We no longer believe the Bible justifies enslaving African Americans and publicly abhor racism, though privately we still may think other races are inferior, disgusting or dangerous.

But women leading in the church? Even though we went through this whole debate years ago—with some Baptists separating over the ordination of women—we're debating again. Some Baptists interpret Paul's teaching about women in church—as in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14—as a prescription for all people for all time. Other Baptists interpret Paul's words—in passages like Romans 16—as signaling cultural and temporal instruction not intended to be universally binding.

Some say the teaching that women must remain quiet in church and must not hold authority over men is an expression of power. And maybe it is. Or maybe it's an expression of fear.

More important than power or fear

Maybe ... no, this is crazy. Maybe ... no, it's too cynical, too ornery. Maybe ... are you ready for this? Maybe some people are afraid Eve will lead them into sin again, that they'll lose a shot at perfection and be cursed again. It sounds crazy, but I've heard some people truly believed black Africans were descended from Ham and deserved to be enslaved.

More charitably and probably more accurately, many are afraid that if they concede their interpretation of Scripture could be fallible, then they have abandoned the authority of Scripture, and the dominoes begin to fall.

More important than power or fear is love. Fear causes us to think, believe and do drastic things. Fear also causes us to clamor for security.

“But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18).

Oh, Lord, help us find perfect love. Help us find our security in you.

We should not form or hold to our interpretations of Scripture on the basis of securing our eternal destiny or our temporal power. Nor should we determine our interpretations according to demographic trends. Our interpretations of Scripture—and the way we treat one another as a result—should be determined and held to on the basis of Jesus Christ, who lived among us in the flesh and was crucified for sin as an expression of God's love.

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