

# Citing Scripture: **BUTCHERY or SURGERY ?**

by Bernard Ramm



ld Bill Shakespeare put his scalpel on a raw nerve when he wrote: "In religion, what damned error, but some sober brow will bless it, and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament" (*Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene 2).

My study Bible has 1512 pages. Some place in these 1512 pages I can usually manage to find a text to damn or bless anything or any person I want.

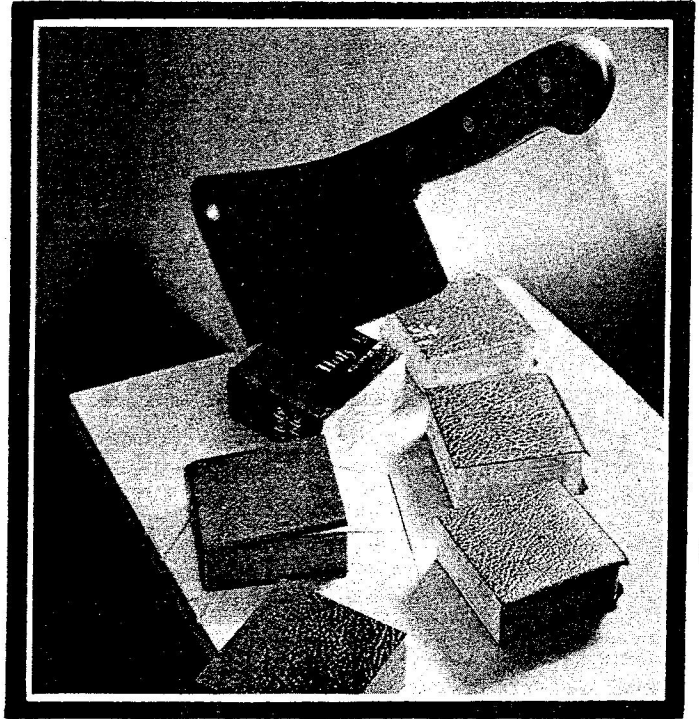
Unfortunately, the history of the church is filled with tragic episodes where gross sins, cruel practices, or silly rules have been approved with a text. No wonder that one of the accusations theologians wish to avoid at all costs is to be called a "proof-texter."

Yet all the great confessions which came out of the Reformation say in one wording or another that the Holy Scripture is the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and practice. How can we use the Holy Scripture as such a final authority and at the same time avoid the odious charge of being a proof-texter?

We do not wish to say an unkind word about butchers. It is a skill to be able to carve up an animal or fowl the proper way for cooking. Butchers and surgeons have in common knives and bodies. But what a world of difference separates them! The butcher never loses a case! He does not bury his mistakes. Life is not at "stake" when he carves the "steak."

With the surgeon life is at stake! If the surgeon is careless or sloppy or inept or too hasty, then his surgery slips into the classification of butchery! When is citing Scripture surgery and not butchery?

To use Scripture properly is to treat Scripture as a good surgeon of the Word of God. To use it any other way - of which there are many - is to be a butcher of the Word of God.



Proof-texting is not wrong in itself. Scholars of the classics of Greece and Rome do it all the time. All the great definitive editions of the Greek and Latin texts are divided up into chapter and verse so that scholars may cite them. No classical scholar can affirm that Plato taught this or that Tacitus said that without giving the documentation. Proof-texting from ancient documents is nothing more than what we moderns call documentation. The sure sign of a doctoral dissertation is its endless, needless glut of documentation!

But why is proof-texting so acceptable among the scholars of the classics and so odious in theology? In general, the number of butchers among the classical scholars is very few, but among students of the Holy Scripture there are very many.

Unfortunately laymen do not know the difference between a butcher and a surgeon in the citation of Scripture, so to them all "authoritative" Bible teachers

are surgeons!

In a brief bit of space let me suggest the difference between a butcher and a surgeon in the citation of Holy Scripture.

(1) The surgeon always does his homework. By homework I mean the careful study of the text using good commentaries and other scholarly resources.

The certain mark of the butcher is that he passes up this necessary step of doing one's homework. Cultists are the real butchers! Spend a half an hour with any of their prime works and you will note how the great commentaries and resource materials of Biblical scholarship are systematically by-passed. That is one reason they are butchers and not surgeons!

The accusation is that the commentaries replace the Word of God. Instead of saying, "Thus saith the Lord", we say instead, "Thus saith the commentaries." No, commentaries are not inspired. But neither are butchers and fools. If nothing else commentaries prevent us from uttering a lot of nonsense or unloading our highly personalistic views as the truth of God.

(2) The surgeon views the context of each single text to be the entire Holy Scripture. The butcher sees a text standing as it were as one isolated eternal truth which he thinks he may cite as the final truth of God on that subject.

The great Reformation motto that "Scripture interprets Scripture" means that the mind of God on any point is to be found in the sum of the entire Scriptural revelation more than in isolated texts. Every text is thus "relativized" by the context of all of Scripture. Surgeons know this and treat each text in the scope of the entire Biblical revelation; butchers do not know this and "absolutize" texts and cite them as if they stood independently from the rest of Scripture.

Granted, the great theologians have always taught that there were great "seat of doctrine" passages. A passage is a "seat of doctrine" passage if the theolo-

gians believe that a given doctrine is given a major treatment. Hence, Romans 3 and 4 are seats of doctrine about justification; and Philippians 2 is the great seat of doctrine passage about the Incarnation.

Even so, theologians have never treated the "seat of doctrine" passages as if the total revelation of God on a given subject matter could be found in that one given passage.

The meaning of a text is to be found in connection with all other texts. No text may in and of itself be the court of final appeal. How much authority we give any text must be determined by its place in the total range or organism of divine revelation. This stance separates surgeons from butchers.

(3) Surgeons know that the Scriptures do not intend to speak exhaustively on any topic. Butchers think the Scriptures speak a final, exhaustive word on many topics.

Consider baptism. How little Scripture says about the precise details of the method. How much we must improvise in any baptismal service. Consider ordination. How little is really said about it in Paul's writing. Again most of our ordination services are our improvising. Or consider divorce. When we look at all the details about the subject in a modern book of law and the materials we have in Scripture we discover how many types of cases are not even mentioned in Scripture. Is it adultery and therefore a basis for divorce if a homosexual (male or female) marries solely to conceal the nature of their sex life?

Surgeons know that divine revelation is a partial revelation given for pilgrims for their light, guidance, food and support in passing through this life. Butchers think the Bible is an exhaustive handbook and cite it that way. Surgeons can always spot butchers! Surgeons know the ground-rules; butchers do not. 