

Where Does the Bible Belong in Christian Faith?

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The following was delivered on March 17, 2009, as my address upon my installation as Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. Two developments in the intervening six years, one internal and the other external, have taken place which affect the content. First and internally, my experience teaching over these years has caused me to rethink some of the ideas expressed in this document. While the substance has not changed, I would express things a little differently. Thus, I have exercised some of my prerogative in editing or deleting some of the statements included in the original which I would either not espouse or would express quite differently. Thus the text below is not precisely what was delivered on the occasion of my installation.

Second and externally, the 27th General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene, held in Orlando, Florida, USA, in 2009, included the first challenge to the Church's Article of Faith on the Holy Scriptures since the Article was first agreed to in the early 20th century.¹ The proposal, sent in by a very conservative district in the USA, would have altered the Article of Faith from its present text (see below) to one espousing a strict inerrancy view. The General Assembly voted to refer this matter to the Board of General Superintendents, which commissioned a Scripture Study Committee to evaluate this proposal, along with some others, and report back to the 28th General Assembly, in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, in 2013. The committee returned a comprehensive, though not universally accepted, rejection of the proposals.²

¹ I thank the Church of the Nazarene's denominational archivist, Dr. Stan Ingersol, for the information noted here (personal email dated 31 January 2015).

² "Report of the Scripture Study Committee to the 28th General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene," *Didache* 13:1 (Summer 2013). <http://didache.nazarene.org/index.php/volume-13-1/892-didache-v13n1-01-scripturestudycommitteereport-king1/file> (Accessed 10 March 2015).

The daily journal of the General Assembly reported, "The Scripture Study Committee

I do not believe in God because I believe in the Bible;
 I believe in the Bible because I believe in God.

The Bible, I think, represents one of the greatest paradoxes of the Christian faith. This is so because, on the one hand, the Bible is a document assembled by countless hands over thousands of years. On the other hand, it is the unswerving testimony of historic Christianity that the Bible is the clearest written record there is of the Word of God. Both of these statements, as anything we might say in theology, require careful precision of language.

The lack of such precision—that is, the unwillingness or inability to maintain the tension—has led to at least two generally fallacious resolutions of the paradox. According to the first, the fact that the Bible does not mention for example, dinosaurs or China—both of which had existed or were still existing when the Bible was written—renders the Bible false for all time. Related to this is the assumption that since the Bible condones slavery, which has been at least officially condemned throughout the modern world, then it must be set aside as an irrelevant or, indeed, evil relic of a bygone age. Both of these assumptions commit the anachronistic fallacy, refusing to engage the Bible on even terms. In other words, we must not judge the veracity of the Bible on the basis of modern knowledge or sensibilities. The second incorrect attempt to deal with the paradox of the Bible commits the all-or-nothing fallacy, suggesting that everything in the Bible must be literally true or else none of it can be true—literally or otherwise. It is this last that will occupy our attention in this essay.

In what follows, I intend to sketch out something of a way of believing the Bible that does not concern itself with the jots and the tittles, with the *hireqs* and the *yodhs*. A sustainable Biblical faith in the 21st century must be able to assimilate information that the Biblical writers could not possibly have anticipated, without thinking that Biblical faith is therefore de-

itself included two biblical scholars, a systematic theologian, pastors, district superintendents, and regional directors, with representatives from five of the church's six world regions." It appears that the region without representation on the committee was Asia-Pacific, where the author serves. "28th General Assembly legislative actions, Thursday, June 27, 2013, Indianapolis, Indiana," <http://www.ncnnews.com/nphweb/html/ncn/article.jsp?id=10012713> (accessed 10 March 2015).

stroyed. Rather than firing burning arrows from the slits in the walls of a fearful orthodoxy that isn't worth defending in the first place, the call I issue today is rather to stand down the archers, lower the drawbridge across the moat, and invite the erstwhile attackers into the fortress. Indeed, what we must do in this time, with cultures at once being drawn together by the global village and being ripped apart by deep ideological struggle, is continually expand our fortress of orthodoxy, our fortress of knowledge. It simply will not do to retreat into our walls under the cover of "The Bible says this," or "The Bible doesn't say that."

For the fact of the matter is, when the Bible disagrees with modern, postmodern, rational, secular, scientific, political, cultural, physical, ideological, sociological, anthropological, psychological, astronomical, geological, and archaeological ideals, statements, beliefs, mores, understandings, suggestions, theories, hypotheses, investigations, conclusions, distinctions, contradictions, arguments, debates, and predictions, perhaps we need not attempt to resolve the dilemma, calling one right and the other wrong. The Bible is not—is not!—a compendium source book of all knowledge for all time. This brings us to the inescapable conclusions at which we should already have arrived if we were paying attention—that, first, there are many things for which and to which the Bible cannot say anything at all; and, consequently, the Bible should not in any way be the only book one reads if one wants to be anything resembling a well-rounded, responsible individual and an effective minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.³ The Bible is a prisoner of its age just as I am a prisoner of my age. All of the cultural and sub-cultural and sub-sub-cultural identifiers which I attach to myself—male, white, American, Generation X, intellectual, religious, Christian, Protestant, Wesleyan, Evangelical, Nazarene, Biblical scholar, professor, missionary—alone and in connection with others, necessarily, inescapably, affect how I read the Bible and how I interact with my world, and how I connect what I read in the Bible with what I

³ John Wesley himself indicated something along these lines when, in the *Minutes* for the year 1766 (Q. 30), he responded to the statement "I need nothing but the Bible," with the caustic words, "This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul." See Randy Maddox, "How John Wesley Read the Bible: Biblical Studies, Wesley, and the Methodists," <http://www.catalystresources.org/how-john-wesley-read-the-bible/> (accessed 10 March 2015).

read in the world. And when they do not go together, as they more often than not do not, even the adjudication I make between the differing and competing and contradictory claims is necessarily, inescapably affected by all of the things that make me me.

The Bible is Literature in Translation

Why should—indeed, why *must*—the Bible not be the only book that you read? Well, certainly you are familiar with the little tune, “The B-I-B-L-E, / yes, that’s the book for me! / I stand alone on the Word of God, / the B-I-B-L-E.” For children this may suffice, but not for adults. For I agree with the Apostle when he said, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (1 Cor 13:11 NIV). As Wesleyans, as Christians, as religious people, as thoughtful people, we do not stand alone on the Bible, though the Bible does stand in the most prominent position.

However, we might not even want to stand on the Bible at all, if by “standing on the Bible” we mean “believing everything the Bible says.” It is simply untrue that disbelief in this or that small or large point that the Bible affirms means that one does not believe in the Bible. There are many things in the Bible which I cannot affirm today: slavery, subjugation of women, genocide, killing children for talking back to parents, to name only four. Maybe those things represented the best wisdom of their day, but they are simply wrong today. No one is really a literal follower of the Bible.⁴ In practice, one literally follows the things with which one agrees (keep the Sabbath Day holy) and ignores the things which one finds distasteful (cut off your hand if it causes you to sin).

I do not believe in God because I believe in the Bible. I believe in the Bible because I believe in God. This means that, should the Bible be proven inaccurate in this or that respect, my faith need not be set aside. It does not present any sort of problem for me that the walls of Jericho did not come down as Joshua 6 reports they did, for archaeology has conclusively demonstrated that Jericho had lain in ruins for nearly two hundred years

⁴ An American journalist named A. J. Jacobs attempted to follow the Bible completely literally for one full year and chronicled the results in *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

before Joshua is supposed to have gotten there. It does not present any sort of problem for me that, in reality, Kings Omri and Ahab of Israel were far more powerful, far more effective, far more influential than the book of 1 Kings gives them credit for being. It does not present any sort of problem for me that Adam and Eve may not have existed, that the Garden of Eden was not a real place, that Methuselah couldn't possibly have lived to be 969 years old. I do not own slaves; I do not believe people should be killed for adultery; I do not believe it is an abomination to wear a shirt made out of two different kinds of fabric. Many things in the Bible were necessary to say for their own time, but they simply are not relevant for today.

And yet, I believe the Bible. As everyone who has taken any of my Bible classes has already heard me say, there is a distinction that must be drawn in the question of how the wisdom and thought of the Bible relates to the wisdom and thought of the postmodern, post-Enlightenment world. It was one of the characteristics of the Enlightenment to go back to the original sources, to desire to prove the things that could be said, to propose hypotheses and design tests for verification or falsification. Those things which could not be verified—which, for the scientific mind, meant achieving the exact results under the same conditions in a different laboratory—were discarded as human knowledge grew by leaps and bounds. Thus in the post-Enlightenment situation, there is a direct equation between truth and factual accuracy. But such an equation is foreign, even illogical, to the thought-world of antiquity in which the Bible came to be. The Biblical writers were simply unconcerned with factual accuracy in the way we understand it. Thus, when the book of Joshua reports that all persons in a given place were killed by the invading Israelites, one realizes that ancient writers were not concerned with counting bodies in the way that modern historians are. In fact, even today, tribal societies such as those found in parts of Papua New Guinea operate in much the same way as the Biblical histories, hyperbolically suggesting that a victory meant the death of every enemy combatant.

Severing the connection between factual accuracy and truth has implications for the other side of Biblical interpretation as well, namely, not just what the Bible says but what we can say on the basis of, and on behalf of, the Bible. It has long been recognized that the Bible is literature in

translation. It comes down to us in a language different from those in which it was composed, and our society and worldview, as has already been shown, are markedly different from those in which it was composed. Thus it requires significant work of interpretation to discover what it means. In the present scholarly situation, there are two overarching approaches to Biblical interpretation and, as one might expect, the peace between them is not an easy one. On the one side is the older historical-critical scholarship, which contributed in no small measure to the disproving of many of the Bible's historical claims. This in turn led to a reaction in the churches which was at times rather vigorous, with the most extreme form perhaps coming in 20th century fundamentalism. On the other side are the postmodern, reader-centered approaches, arising over the last five decades or so to rock Biblical scholarship at its very foundation, even claiming that such a foundation does not exist. No longer, so this side claims, is objective meaning to be located in the text, but rather ever new meanings can and must be constructed in the interaction between text and reader. I myself locate somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, though perhaps a bit closer to the literary, reader-centered approaches than to the historical, text-centered approaches.

To sum up, the Bible is true, but it is not factually accurate. It is not necessary to believe everything the Bible says in order to believe the Bible. It is perfectly fine to ask someone if she believes the Bible. But one must never ask that person, "Do you believe everything in the Bible?" For this is a question loaded with intellectual dynamite. If it is answered in the affirmative, the questioner may then detonate the bomb by bringing up the question of slavery, or the subjugation of women, or any number of other things. For it is certainly true that a number of dastardly—and, indeed, even bastardly—things have been done with the full support of a "literal" reading of the Bible. What the Bible says may indeed represent some of the best thinking of its time, but that is simply not the case today with a good deal of what the Bible affirms. This is in no way a deficiency of the modern situation, but merely a recognition that the modern situation and the ancient situation are different. There is a Hebrew proverb that runs, "Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in

a different time.”⁵ Truer words perhaps have not been spoken, and indeed we should not confine ourselves to the literal word of the Bible—that is, the words of our ancestors—for we and they were born in a different time.

People of the Book

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have often been described as religions of the book, whether the book be the *Tanak* (the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament), the Bible, (Old Testament + New Testament), or the Holy Quran. Our theological ancestor, John Wesley, proclaimed himself to be *homo unius libri*, a man of one book. By this he did not mean that he worshipped the Bible—far from it! Rather, he meant that it was here, and in no other written document, that the God of all the world, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, had left the instructions on how to get to heaven and enjoy eternal fellowship with God. Whatever we can say about the method and the extent of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of the Bible, and whatever we can say about the somewhat sophistic distinction between the statements, “The Bible is the Word of God,” and “The Bible contains the word of God,” the relationship between what we believe about God and what we believe about the Bible is a close and important one. Again, as was pointed out, religious and theological statements require a great deal of precision, for what we say in one area affects not only what we will say in all other areas, but indeed what we *can* say in those other areas. For example, if one’s understanding of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit on the writings of the Bible tends toward the absolute end of the spectrum, then one is forced to claim that there cannot possibly be any error in the production, copying, transmission, or reception of the Biblical text. Such a position has to contend with all manner of discrepancies and contradictions in the text in its final form, and those who have adopted this position have dealt with these problems in more or less creative, more or less satisfying, ways.

Most unfortunate is when such a complete theory of inspiration hardens into the statement that if there could be shown to be one error in the Bible, then nothing is true in the Bible, including what it says about God

⁵ Quoted in Leonard I. Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic* (Dayton, OH: Whaleprints, 1991), 5.

and salvation. In the simplest terms possible, this hardened statement can be described as “I believe in the Bible, therefore I believe in God.” But this is not the faith-statement of historic Christianity with regard to the Bible. In fact, you will be hard-pressed to find, in any of the ecumenical creeds, any statement of the belief in the inspiration of Scripture, pervasive or otherwise, verbal or otherwise. If the earliest Christians had a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, they did not feel the need to articulate it, which more than likely means it was never a point of contention. This is in contrast to much more important, much more central doctrines like the co-eternality of God the Son with God the Father, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, and so on. In other words, our statement of faith is not, and should not be, “I believe in the Bible, therefore I believe in God.” Much more accurate, much more Christian, is the statement, “I believe in God, therefore I believe in the Bible.”

Where Does the Bible Belong?

The second floor of the building, as it were, is the main point at which I am driving in this speech. Where does the Bible belong in the Christian faith? Aside from being the written record of the Word of God, aside from being the more-or-less faithful historical account of the traditions of faith once delivered to the saints and handed on down to us, what is the importance of the Bible for Christian belief, faith, practice, and theology in the 21st century? Article IV of the Articles of Faith of the Church of the Nazarene defines the parameters of acceptable statements of belief in Scripture made by Nazarenes in the following manner:

We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith.

The first thing to be said in explicating this statement is that it is properly placed within the Articles of Faith. As I endeavored to show previously, belief in Scripture must be grounded in belief in God. This means that all statements of faith that place the Bible and its supposed inerrancy in first position should be reevaluated, for they have the order precisely

backwards. Yet there is something more to the value of placing the doctrine of Scripture in fourth place, behind the doctrines of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This makes clear, above all else, that the Bible is not to be worshipped as the fourth member of the “Tetranity,” nor is it to be put in a higher place than God.

But perhaps the most important point of this Article of Faith on Scripture is that it expresses confidence that God has so inspired the Bible to lead us faithfully and without error into fellowship with God. You will notice that, just as the Article itself is properly placed after those on the Trinity, so also it does not suggest that the reliability of our knowledge of God is founded on the reliability of Scripture, but instead that the reliability of Scripture is founded on the reliability of God and God’s promise of salvation. This is a most important point, and that which John Wesley was driving at when he sang his praise to God for revealing in a book—this Book—the way “to land safe on that happy shore,” the shore of Heaven.

There is perhaps no better way to conclude this essay than to quote the passage from Wesley to which I have made allusion a couple of times. It is from his preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, in which John Wesley sets out in succinct form his view of the sufficiency of Scripture:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen, I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing: the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of [people]. I sit down alone—only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book for this end, to find the way to heaven.⁶

So then, where does the Bible belong in the Christian faith? At the very heart! In spite of all of its confusion, its disagreements, and its culturally-specific problems, it is the Book of God. While it may not point to

⁶ Quoted in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 88.

the reality of God by itself, God points us the way to God through it. I want that book too. I believe in the Bible, because I believe in God.

Amen.

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