

When many churches or ministries explain their beliefs about the Bible they often say something like “the Bible is the **infallible** and **inerrant** Word of God and the Bible **alone** is the final, infallible authority.”

Let’s define these three descriptors often used to explain the nature of the Bible and what it represents to us:

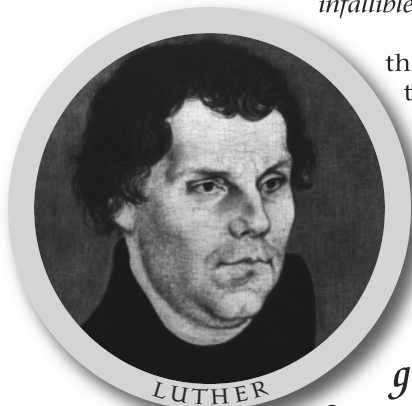
Alone = *Separated from others, exclusive of anything or anyone else: ONLY, INCOMPARABLE AND UNIQUE.*

Inerrant = *free from error: EXEMPT FROM ERROR.*

Infallible = *incapable of error: NOT LIABLE TO MISLEAD, DECEIVE OR DISAPPOINT.*

Surely God **alone** is **inerrant** and **infallible**—so in using these terms of something or someone less than God religious institutions have questions to answer. For example, apart from the claim that a book is *inerrant* and *infallible*, do you know anyone regarded as the *only (alone), inerrant* and *infallible* authority?

Roman Catholics speak of the Pope as infallible, that is, they believe it is impossible for him to make an error in

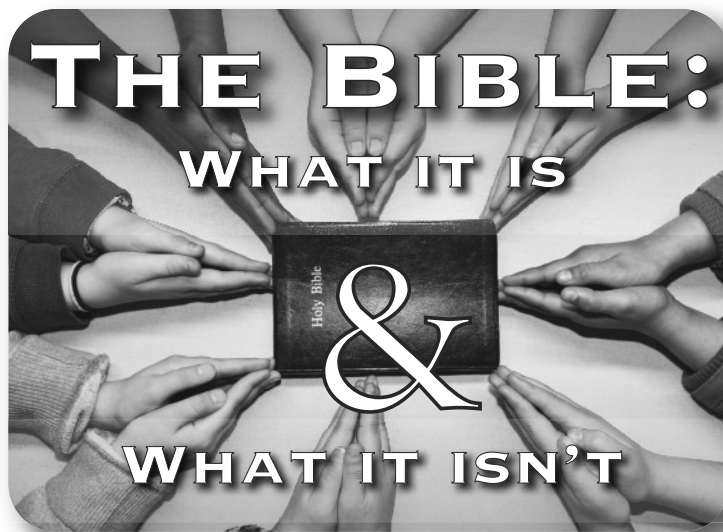


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terms of his supreme authority over the teachings and doctrines of the Catholic Church. In the Reformation those who eventually became known as Protestants reacted against the abuses of human authority evidenced in fallible men who occupied the supreme authority of the Papacy. The Reformers instituted many wonderful reforms, but sadly they did not go far enough, and in the case of the Bible it seems that they simply jumped into another ditch.

The Protestant Reformers addressed religious legalisms and rituals when they insisted on *sola fide*, *sola gratia* and *sola Christus* (the source of our PTM phrase, “faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone”). With yet another “sola” they



BY GREG ALBRECHT

seemed to give due deference and worship to God in their statement *solī Deo gloria*—to God alone be the glory.

But, the fifth “sola”—*sola scriptura*—can be problematic. When the Reformers pointed out the obvious error of giving honor and reverence to any man that occupied a religious office, instead of insisting on “to God alone be the glory” they exalted a collection of individual books we call the Bible as the supreme authority to replace the Pope they had

correctly demoted. *Sola scriptura*, however well-intentioned it may have been, takes us from the ditch of an “infallible” man to an “inerrant/infallible” book. Instead of an **infallible human** the Reformers insisted on an **infallible book**.

By elevating the Bible to any status that allowed the words **infallible**, **inerrant** or **alone** to be used to define it, the Protestant Reformers simply put the Bible on the throne from which they dismissed the Pope. In effect, when Protestants speak of an **infallible Bible** or of the **Bible alone** having supreme authority they have merely replaced a human pope with a paper pope.

It’s idolatry to give reverence and worship to anyone or any-

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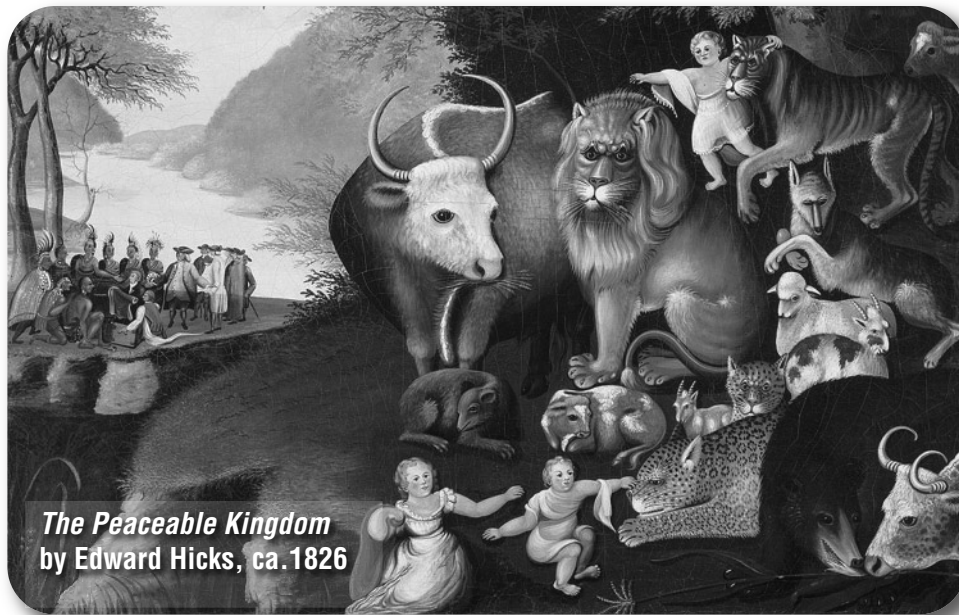


POPE LEO X

thing that competes with or replaces God. God alone is supreme—God alone is on the throne. *Solī Deo gloria*—to God alone goes the glory—not to any fallible human or fallible book.

When the Bible is defined as **inerrant** that means the Bible is without error, and when it is defined as **infallible** that means this collection of paper and ink is not only without error, the Bible cannot have any errors. I remember an old joke about followers of religion and who/what they recognize as infallible. According to the joke, Jews don’t recognize Jesus as the infallible Son of God, Anglicans don’t recognize the Pope as the infallible leader of Christianity and Baptists don’t recognize each other in the liquor store.

How could either a person or a book be without any error, or even more incredible, incapable of error? But hold on a second, this is a religious issue—so we have to suspend logic and reason, for emotion often holds sway in



The Peaceable Kingdom
by Edward Hicks, ca.1826

...is the intent of the Bible, in such poetic descriptions, to highlight the spiritual transformation of our hearts, or is it a literal, physical description of a transformed flora and fauna of our world?

such discussions. As religion enters the discussion, for the purpose of clarity, let's add another definition:

Religion = Any system or methodology that pretends to grant relationship or improved relationship with God via careful adherence to its dogmas, dictates and doctrines.

Christ-less religion fulfills a felt need, a craving in human beings. Humans desire security and to be assured that God is happy with them. It's an established fact of history that humans will quickly discard freedom for someone (or something) who will promise them security and freedom. History is littered with examples of people who were willing to exchange their freedom in return for bread to eat. The Israelites were redeemed from slavery by the blood of a Passover lamb, only to find freedom in the wilderness to be somewhat unnerving. They yearned for the security of three square meals a day that slavery in Egypt provided.

Humans desire dogmatism and absolutes, so that they may know right and wrong, good and evil in every twist and turn they encounter on the road of life. One might say this is essentially the choice illustrated in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. God's grace (the tree of life) was rejected in favor of knowing certainty, absolutes and dogmas (the tree of knowledge of

good and evil). Many who insist on the Bible being an *inerrant, infallible* book fail to see the problem with Adam and Eve's choice because they too are making a similar choice!

Jesus Alone is Inerrant and Infallible

I believe the Bible is a human product inspired by God. However, I also believe that by God's design, the Bible has a substantial human component (writing, editing, translating, preserving, publishing) and therefore the Bible is a book that is absolutely fallible.

When God determined to convey a special written revelation to humanity and use human beings to help him in this project he determined that the end product would be fallible. Because God decided to use fallible humans, he laid aside absolute perfection as the final product. God used imperfect humans to write, edit, preserve and translate the Bible—and in so doing determined that the Bible, as a book, would be a divine-human undertaking.

One of the initial stages of the written revelation involved Moses, through whom God gave the law (John 1:17). But the one and only (John 1:18) revelation of grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17), the one and only Son. NOTICE! The Gospel of John insists that the one and only revelation, the *alone, infallible and inerrant* revelation

is Jesus Christ, rather than the law or rather than a book. Jesus Christ alone is the full, infallible and inerrant revelation of God, the final authority.

Had God desired that the Bible be *inerrant* and *infallible*, then he would have bypassed human middlemen. He would have dictated the Bible to angels, who would have then set the heavenly presses running, so that at the end of the press run Bibles in every conceivable language would have been available for distribution. Then, somewhat like storks who are believed by some to deliver babies from heaven, God would have delegated squadrons of angels to parachute huge quantities of the Bible all over the world. Perfect books would have rained down from the heavens. But that obviously didn't happen.

Some Christians are in the habit of referring to the Bible as the Word of God. According to the evidence and testimony of the Bible itself, Jesus is the Word—not a book (John 1:1). As Christ-followers we can capitalize "Word" when we call the Bible God's Word, but we really should not call the Bible "the" Word of God—because that title belongs to the Word, the second person of the divine Godhead, whom we know as Jesus Christ. Thus, the written word of God is fallible—but the Word that's *infallible* is divine, rather than a book. Further, while most Bible publishers place the word "holy" on the cover of Bibles, in the ultimate sense, God alone is holy.

So What is the Bible Then?

In some non-specific way we can never know, God inspired the writers of the Bible. God chose to use human authors but he used them in their human fallibilities. That is, God's choice of human authors included their own personality and training—which he did not over-ride by causing the authors to fall into a trance and receive "divine dictation" (as some actually believe). Further, the message God inspired was either inspired in a particular literary genre, or the writer chose a genre to convey the general inspiration God gave them. In addition, each biblical author brought their own cultural ideas and beliefs to the task of conveying what God inspired them to write.

Those who fail to read and understand the Bible in the manner in which it is written often, at the very

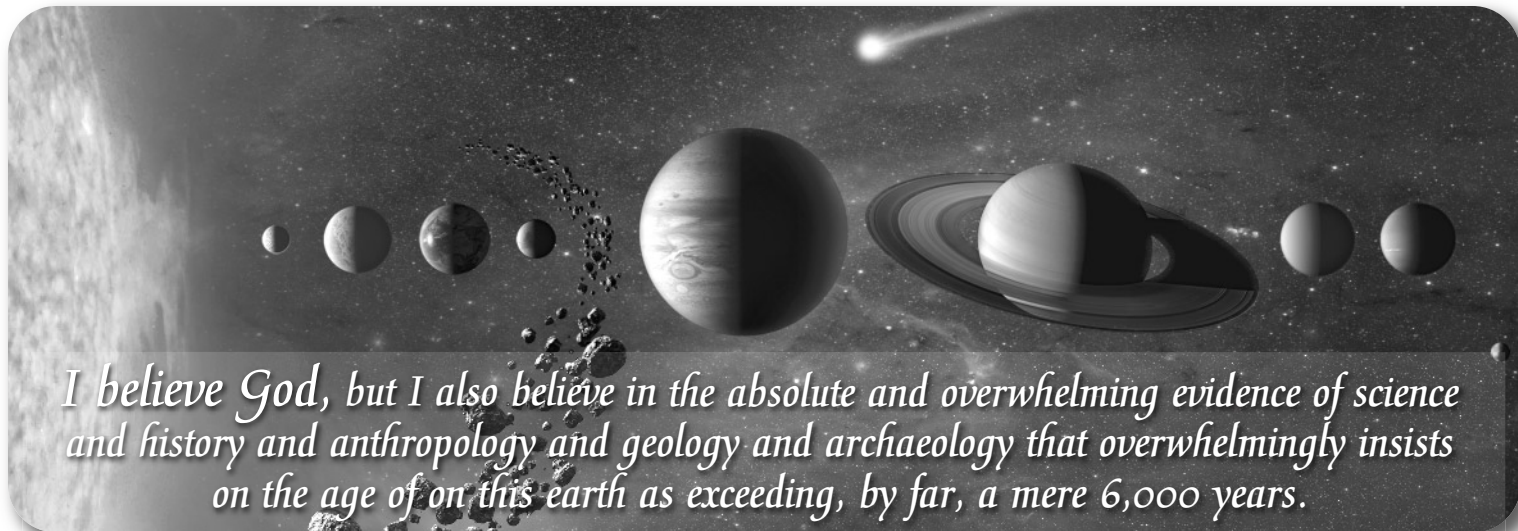


IMAGE COURTESY OF NASA

least, misunderstand it, and beyond that, some actually twist and distort its meaning. "Literal" interpretation of the Bible is a major stumbling block (which we will discuss in other places in more detail) for many. Those who favor "literal" interpretation say that the Bible should be read and understood literally—and they preach and teach that failure to do so is diminishing and dishonoring the Bible.

But what is meant by "literal" interpretation? The fact is that God inspired writers to use different literary genres when they wrote their portions of what we today know as the Bible. If we naively think that every word and every verse of the Bible should be taken "literally" then:

mean that the person using this expression is trying to minimize and diminish the force of the rain or is the person adding a colorful illustration that adds strength to the reality of the downpour?

- We may miss profound spiritual significance regarding our relationship with God. If we think that Jesus literally means he was and is physical bread to be eaten, like the manna eaten by Israel in the wilderness, we will completely miss the reality of his risen life which he will live within us. Jesus is truly the Bread of Life come down from heaven which means, once that spiritual Bread abides within us, we will never die (John 6:48-51).

- We might jump to conclusions

the earth itself will only be 6,000 years old when Jesus returns. Many, if not most, who believe in an end-of-the-week, seventh-day 1,000 years of peace and tranquility do so because the theology they have been taught insists upon a 1,000-year period of time called the millennium, just after the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

So, because they have accepted a certain "truth" then they are more likely to believe in a literal interpretation of a passage that seems to support "their truth." Those who believe that a seventh-day sabbath must be observed and "kept" (on Saturday) are more likely to believe in 6,000 years of human history for man to do his work and then 1,000 years when physical men and women will live "at rest" on this earth during an idyllic seventh-day Sabbath. Because they believe a literal, 24-hour period of time each week is "holy" they quote 2 Peter 3:8 in support of their beliefs, without taking much notice of the word "like"...*But do not forget one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day.*

Theological beliefs can therefore warp and twist Scripture, as those who hold certain beliefs near and dear try to find and interpret (almost always literally) passages that will prove their beliefs to be accurate and true. Those who believe that the Second Coming of Jesus will commence a literal 1,000-year utopian-like world are also likely to literally interpret the prophet Isaiah when he poetically speaks of a kingdom when the very nature of animals will change, so that natural predators will no longer threaten animals that they once would have killed (see Isaiah 11:6-9).

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- We may conclude that God is a rock, or that he has wings.

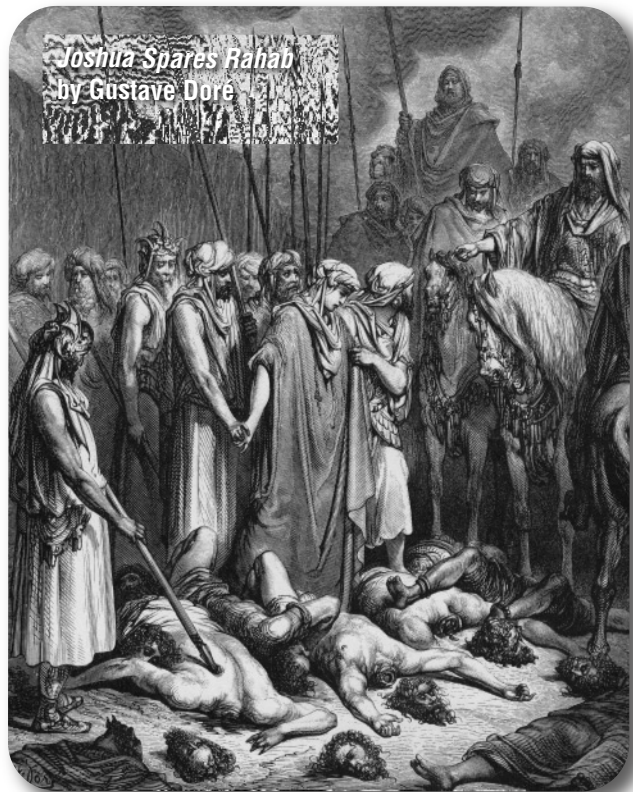
- We may conclude that we should cut off our hands if they offend us.

- We may miss deeper insights and truths of much of the poetic portions of the Bible (at least 1/3 of the Bible is written in poetic style). For example, if I say that my wife's eyes sparkle like diamonds, by not insisting that her eyes are literal diamonds, am I emphasizing her beauty or diminishing it? Rain may be falling in an incredible downpour, so that someone will say it's raining "cats and dogs." Of course, no cats or dogs are coming down out of the sky, so does that

that lead us to absolute determinations when the Bible does not supply such absolutes. For example, did God create the world in seven days of 24 hours...or, given the fact that they are written in a poetic style, are the first two chapters of Genesis more likely to be using figurative language than literal? And if these two chapters of Genesis are more poetic than literal, does that make them any less true?

Literal Interpretations Often Follow Already Accepted Beliefs

Those who believe that God created planet earth in seven 24-hour periods of time are likely to also believe that



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and seven literal 24-hour periods of time during which God created this earth, I understand the dogmatic and absolute way in which those who have such views believe them to be true. When I tell a person who believes in a young earth (by definition, less than 6,000 years old, because of course Jesus has not yet returned) that I believe that God created all things but I believe the earth to be several billions of years old, they will often dismiss me as a liberal evolutionist who doesn't "even" believe in God. But I take exception to such a judgment.

I believe in a billions-of-years-old universe and at least many tens-of-thousands-of-years-old planet earth—AND I believe in God just as fervently as someone who believes in a young, not quite 6,000 years old earth does. I believe God, but I also believe in the absolute and overwhelming evidence of science and history and anthropology and geology and archaeology that overwhelmingly insists on the age of this earth as exceeding, by far, a mere 6,000 years. I believe the biblical record of creation (Genesis 1 and 2) to be true and accurate, but I do not believe this account to be literally interpreted, as some do. More than that, I have deep concerns that many "literal" interpretations may unwittingly twist and distort the Bible so that it conforms with religious dogmas and traditions!

Did God Order the Slaughter of Innocent Babies and Animals?

Many people believe that God is angry with human beings, and his anger with you and me was the reason for the cross of Christ. Many sincere, church-going folks believe (because they have been told it is true) that God felt that his holiness and justice had been so offended by sinful human beings that he demanded human blood (as it turned out, the

blood of Jesus) so that his justice and his good name could be cleared. They believe in a God of wrath, who is more interested in vengeance and retribution than reconciliation and forgiveness. Many within Christendom believe in a God who is more like a "hanging judge" than a loving heavenly Father.

Based on what they "know" about God, believing in a "literal" interpretation of an *inerrant, infallible* Bible, they believe that God ordered the Old Testament nation of Israel to ruthlessly carry out an "ethnic cleansing" of the land of Palestine so that it would be fit for them to live in.

I don't for one minute doubt that (with the exception of Rahab and her family) Joshua's army destroyed "every living thing" in the city of Jericho, "men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys" (Joshua 6:21). But I do not believe God insisted on this unspeakable barbarism.

Jesus came to reveal the Father. Jesus, God in the flesh, came to demonstrate the love of God by willingly accepting human hatred and violence in such a way that he, the Lamb of God, allowed humans to crucify him! The New Testament clearly identifies Jesus, the second divine Person of the Godhead, as the Creator—and that he is the eternal Word of God. So was he "alive and well" during all of this bloodshed going on in the name of God by the nation of Israel?

Jesus insisted that we pray for our enemies and that we turn the other cheek and that we harm no one. Jesus was God in the flesh—so what about the biblical stories of a bloodthirsty Old Testament God whom the biblical writers describe as violent and angry? Are they *infallible* stories?

As Christ-followers, let's read the fallible, written revelation of God from an *infallible*, Christ-centered perspective. Let's study the Bible, but let's not try to make it conform to our trusted religious traditions—let's read and understand it as it is written! May we worship Jesus **alone**, for Jesus **alone** is **inerrant** and **infallible**.

This belief has been believed for centuries, leading to the many, famous artistic renditions by the Quaker artist Edward Hicks (1780-1849) of a "peaceable kingdom" when he believed, based on his understanding of the Bible, that the physical order to things as we experience it would be completely reversed.

But is the intent of the Bible, in such poetic descriptions, to highlight the spiritual transformation of our hearts, or is it a literal, physical description of a transformed flora and fauna of our world? And if we are to insist on a literal interpretation of the kingdom of heaven, does that mean that God intends for us to believe all of the descriptions of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21 and 22) to be literal, or did he intend such hyperbolic language as *streets of gold, gates of pearls, and a river running down the middle of a street* to be spiritual descriptions that are even more breathtaking than any literal descriptions could convey? And if these descriptions of the New Jerusalem, the New Heavens and the New Earth in the 21st and 22nd chapter of the book of Revelation are figurative and metaphorical, how then can we insist the 1,000 years of a "millennium" mentioned in the 20th chapter of Revelation to be literal?

Having once absolutely believed in a "seven-thousand-year plan of God"